

## Who Gets to Vote?

At the time of the Civil War, suffrage was very narrowly restricted. The following activity will assist students in gaining an understanding of how our democracy functioned during this era.

Begin by asking students what suffrage is and who has a right to vote in public elections in America. Explain that this was not always the case and that many battles for voting rights were fought and won. Ask students to delineate who they think could vote at the time of the Civil War. Do not tell them if they are correct; merely list all their ideas on the board.

Next, pass out identify cards which you have made in advance. Each card has the name of a person and that person's occupation. (See list at the end.) Have the students research their assigned occupations at the time of the Civil War and develop their identify. Then, have students write a sketch describing themselves and their lives. These fictional accounts should be rich with detail, but historically accurate.

Have the students stand next to their desks and give a short summary of their identity. When the student is finished, allow him or her to remain standing if his or her identify would be allowed to vote. Do not, at this point, tell the students what the criteria for voting was. Instead, have them try to discover it. In order to vote in the Commonwealth of Virginia at the time of the Civil War, one needed to be a white, male landowner.

After, conduct a whole group discussion using the following questions:

1. How many people are in our class? How many identities would be allowed to vote? What fraction is this? What percentage?
2. What impact would this restrictive right to vote have had during the Civil War Era?
3. How might things have turned out differently if blacks, women, and poor people could have voted?

4. What do you think the arguments for voting restrictions were?  
How would you counteract these arguments?
5. Do states have the right to restrict voting today?
6. When were voting rights finally afforded to everyone over the age of eighteen?

Mr. John Randolph  
plantation owner

Mrs. Willa Jefferson  
widow of plantation owner, Peter Jefferson

Mamie Washington  
house slave

Nathaniel Harris  
storekeeper

Jacob Williams  
carpenter

Daniel Roberts  
blacksmith shop owner

Willie Adams  
apprentice

Amy Jones  
milliner

Dr. James Payner  
apothecary shop owner

Chief Massaquot  
Chief of Virginia Indian tribe

Dr. Thomas Wilson  
country doctor

Rev. Thomas Payne  
minister of St. Pauls' Episcopal Church

Mr. David Jackson  
professor at Washington College

Mary Elizabeth Bates  
dress shop proprietor

Clara Parton  
nurse

Elizabeth Worth  
midwife

Justin Hughes  
laborer in the Ironworks in Richmond

Kenneth Cromer  
overseer on a plantation

Paul Anderson  
silversmith

John Walston  
sawmill owner

Mike Godsey  
owner and operator of a general store

Andrew Robb  
lawyer in Arlington

Robert Mabry  
miller

Donald Martin  
sharecropper