

# Barriers to Voting: Poll Taxes

**Grade Level:** 8-12

**Time:** 1-2 hours

**Goals/Rationale:** In this lesson, students consider the impact of the poll tax as a barrier to voting by examining four primary sources.

**Essential Question:** What barriers to voting have citizens confronted throughout American history?

## Learning Objectives

Students will be able to:

- discuss how poll taxes created an impediment to voting.
- analyze primary sources relating to poll taxes.
- do a close reading of a primary source with cursive writing.
- discuss whether voting is a right or a privilege.
- describe the impact of current local, state and federal laws that might limit voter participation and make an argument either for or against those limitations.

## Historical Background

The framers of the US Constitution left voter qualifications, for the most part, to individual states. In the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, many states limited voting to property owners. Some of these states moved from property ownership to a poll tax requirement for voting. By the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, however, most states did not limit voting by property ownership or poll taxes. After the ratification of the 15<sup>th</sup> Amendment, in an attempt to limit Black voter registration and turnout, many states re-established poll taxes. The combination of poll taxes, literacy tests, White primaries (permitting only Whites to vote in primary elections), intimidation, violence, and disqualification of people convicted of felonies succeeded in reducing Black voter participation.

Though the re-establishment of poll taxes was meant to disenfranchise Black voters, they also affected participation of all people with limited means. A poll tax of \$2 in 1962 would convert to approximately \$17 in 2020 dollars. If two heads of a household were to vote, that would mean the household would have to pay \$34 in current dollars. This would be a major burden for people with low incomes.

By 1962, only five states continued to require poll taxes: Alabama, Arkansas, Mississippi, Texas, and Virginia. In his 1962 State of the Union Address, President Kennedy put the issue on the national agenda when he called for the elimination of poll taxes and literacy tests, stating that voting rights “should no longer be denied through such arbitrary devices on a local level.” The proposal to ban literacy tests did not make it past a Senate filibuster, but after debating the substance of the proposal to end the poll tax and whether or not the tax should be eliminated by a Constitutional amendment, Congress passed the 24<sup>th</sup> Amendment, abolishing poll taxes in federal elections on August 27, 1962. Kennedy then urged governors and legislators to move ahead with ratification. The Amendment was ratified after his death, on January 23, 1964.

However, even with the passage of the 24<sup>th</sup> Amendment and the Voting Rights Act of 1965, which outlawed discriminatory voting practices such as literacy tests, African Americans

experienced impediments to voting. In January 1966, civil rights activist Vernon Dahmer was killed after publicly offering to help African Americans in his hometown in Mississippi pay their poll taxes, legal in state and local elections, at his store. Mr. Dahmer had been working to secure African Americans' voting rights for many years, including his role as a witness in the 1961 voting rights case *United States v. Theron Lynd*.

On March 24, 1966, the Supreme Court ruled in *Harper v. Virginia Board of Elections* that poll taxes could not be collected in any election, including state and local elections, since they violated the 14<sup>th</sup> Amendment's Equal Protection Clause.

## Materials

- Background reading: "Barriers to Voting: Poll Taxes"
- [1955 poll tax receipt from Lee Carr](#)
- Excerpt of a 2015 [oral history interview](#) with civil rights activist Ellie Dahmer, who recalls her husband's actions to help African American in his community pay their poll taxes at his store, leading to his subsequent murder by the KKK
- February 24, 1962 letter from Janet Ciaccio to President Kennedy ([page 1](#), [page 2](#), [page 3](#))
- [March 21, 1962 response to Janet Ciaccio from Ralph Dungan, special assistant to the president](#)

## Procedure

1. Have students read for homework "Barriers to Voting: Poll Taxes" and answer the reading comprehension questions.
2. As an ice breaker for the entire class, ask students if they think voting is a right or a privilege for US citizens. What would it mean to citizens if voting is a right? What would it mean to citizens if voting is a privilege? Ask them to consider whether or not they believe people convicted of felonies should be allowed to vote or whether or not the voting age should be lowered to 17.
3. Provide students with the poll tax receipt from Mr. Carr with these guiding questions:
  - a. What information is being collected by the State of Texas on this form? (*date, name, address, sex, race, age, occupation, number of years in residence, whether voter was born in the US or naturalized, place of birth, who paid, precinct, who received payment*)
  - b. How much did Mr. Carr pay to vote? Have students use the Internet to translate what that would mean in current dollars. (*\$1.50 is approximately \$14.50 in 2020 dollars.*)
  - c. What do you know about Mr. Carr from this receipt? (*He was a 34-year-old African American male railroad worker who lived in the same county and city in Texas his whole life. He paid \$1.50 on January 31, 1955 in order to vote.*)
4. Provide students with a transcript excerpt from a November 30, 2015 oral history with Ellie Dahmer, widow of Vernon Dahmer, and have them watch the video from 35:20 to 39:03.

Guiding questions:

- a. When Mrs. Dahmer said that African Americans would be more comfortable paying their poll tax at her husband's store than "going into Hattiesburg," what do

you think she meant? *(Answers might include: At that time in Mississippi, African Americans were intimidated when they tried to vote. Paying the poll tax at an African American-owned store with an African American store clerk whom they might know would make that step less intimidating.)*

- b. What does Mrs. Dahmer say that shows she and her husband understood the risks of promoting voting among African Americans? *(She and her husband had been threatened with physical violence for a while and had been preparing themselves should their home be attacked. Those threats escalated when Mr. Dahmer spoke about the poll tax on the radio.)*
  - c. Mrs. Dahmer shows a copy of the poll tax receipts that she paid for her son Harold and herself on January 25, 1966. What is significant about when she paid the tax? What are some reasons she might have saved a copy of these receipts for so many years? *(Mr. Dahmer was killed 1/10/1966, so she paid the poll tax 15 days after his death—a death caused by promoting voting among African Americans. Mrs. Dahmer paid the poll tax for herself and her son to vote. This appears to have been a very brave act, and the symbol of that act—the poll tax receipts—she may have deemed worthy of keeping.)*
5. Provide students with the letter from Mrs. Ciaccio to President Kennedy and the response from Ralph Dungan with these guiding questions:
- a. At what age did Mrs. Ciaccio become eligible to vote? *(age 21)*

**Additional points for research and discussion:** When did the minimum voting age change in the US? *(1971)* What was happening in the world at the time the 26<sup>th</sup> Amendment was ratified? *(Vietnam War)* Why do you think the voting age changed at that time? Research the history of the 26th Amendment to provide an answer.

- b. Does Mrs. Ciaccio call voting a right or a privilege? Based on this letter what do you think the word “privilege” means to her? *(She calls it a privilege. She mentions that, as a child, when she saw her parents voting she looked forward to reaching the age when she would have the privilege to vote. So, she sees voting as a privilege for Americans who reach the current voting age of 21, but she also sees it as an important act that should be free of charge.)*

**Additional point for discussion:** Does she use the term “privilege” in the same manner you discussed that word in the icebreaker?

- c. How much does she say she must pay in order to vote in 1962? *(\$2)* What does she believe is the reason she is being charged to vote? *(She says she has not found a satisfactory explanation for the poll tax.)*
- d. What is her response to needing to pay this tax? *(The ability to vote should not be determined by how much money one has.)* Do you find her arguments persuasive? If so, why? If not, why not?
- e. What more information would you like to know about Mrs. Ciaccio, having read her letter? *(Answers might include; Did her husband vote? How much money did her family earn?)* As a class, brainstorm sources students could seek to find some of that information.

- f. Why does Ralph Dungan suggest Mrs. Ciaccio discuss with her local officials budgeting information from the state of Texas? *(Poll taxes are a state issue and are used by states to pay for their needs. Local officials might be able to explain to her how those tax dollars are spent.)*

### **Assessment**

Have students research current local, state and federal laws that might limit voter participation and make an argument either for or against those limitations. For example, students might want to consider Voter ID laws or prohibition of voting for people who had been convicted of felonies, including the demand to pay legal fees first. In their arguments, students should consider whether they view voting as a right or a privilege.

### **Extension**

Have older students research why President Kennedy advocated for the “hard way” in abolishing the poll tax through a Constitutional amendment instead of passing legislation to abolish the tax.

## "Barriers to Voting: Poll Taxes"

What qualifies a US citizen to vote and what steps should a citizen have to take in order to vote? What happens if voting isn't free of charge?

Voting is often discussed as a right of US citizenship. But, the right to vote is not guaranteed in the US Constitution. The Constitution only says that citizens cannot be prevented from voting on the basis of race (15<sup>th</sup> Amendment, ratified 1870) or sex (19<sup>th</sup> Amendment, ratified 1920), and that voters must be at least 18 years old (26<sup>th</sup> Amendment, ratified 1971, which lowered the voting age from 21 to 18).

Throughout US history, there have been many laws that have created limitations to voter participation. Some of these limitations have included wealth (owning property or paying poll taxes which require citizens to pay for the privilege of voting), residency (living in one state or election district for a certain period of time), literacy, and criminal conviction.

The framers of the US Constitution left voter qualifications, for the most part, to individual states. In the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, many states limited voting to property owners. Some of these states moved from property ownership to a poll tax requirement for voting. By the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, however, most states did not limit voting by property ownership or poll taxes. After the ratification of the 15<sup>th</sup> Amendment, in an attempt to limit Black voter registration and turnout, many states re-established poll taxes. The combination of poll taxes, literacy tests, White primaries (permitting only Whites to vote in primary elections), intimidation, violence, and disqualification of people convicted of felonies succeeded in reducing Black voter participation.

Though the re-establishment of poll taxes was meant to disenfranchise Black voters, they also affected participation of all people with limited means. A poll tax of \$2 in 1962 would convert to approximately \$17 in 2020 dollars. If two heads of a household were to vote, that would mean the household would have to pay \$34 in current dollars. This would be a major burden for people with low incomes.

Supporters of the poll tax used different arguments to maintain the status quo. Though some supporters blatantly praised the tax as a way to help maintain white supremacy, others said that the tax did not discriminate on the basis of race, that voting was a privilege for those who showed enough interest in an election to pay a tax, and that the tax helped states pay for schools.

By 1962, only five states continued to require poll taxes: Alabama, Arkansas, Mississippi, Texas, and Virginia. In his 1962 State of the Union Address, President Kennedy put the issue on the national agenda when he called for the elimination of poll taxes and literacy tests, stating that voting rights "should no longer be denied through such arbitrary devices on a local level." The proposal to ban literacy tests did not make it past a Senate filibuster, but after debating the substance of the proposal to end the poll tax and

whether or not the tax should be eliminated by a Constitutional amendment, Congress passed the 24<sup>th</sup> Amendment, abolishing poll taxes in federal elections on August 27, 1962. Kennedy then urged governors and legislators to move ahead with ratification. The Amendment was ratified after his death, on January 23, 1964.

However, even with the passage of the 24<sup>th</sup> Amendment and the Voting Rights Act of 1965, which outlawed discriminatory voting practices such as literacy tests, African Americans experienced impediments to voting. In January 1966, civil rights activist Vernon Dahmer was killed after publicly offering to help African Americans in his hometown in Mississippi pay their poll taxes, legal in state and local elections, at his store.

On March 24, 1966, the Supreme Court ruled in *Harper v. Virginia Board of Elections* that poll taxes could not be collected in any election, including state and local elections, since they violated the 14<sup>th</sup> Amendment's equal protection clause.

Individual states still have the power to regulate voter registration practices and voting procedures—for example, requiring specific voter identification documents during registration or at the polls, or limiting mail-in ballots. These practices and procedures can be controversial if the regulations restrict voter participation of a particular group or groups of people.

Please answer the following questions:

1. If a "right" is something you can do because you are a citizen or a member of society, and a "privilege" is something you can do that other people may not be able to do, does the US Constitution guarantee that all citizens have the right to vote? Explain.
2. What Amendments to the Constitution increased the number of potential voters in the US? What groups did these Amendments add to the voting public and when were they ratified?
3. What is a poll tax?
4. What combination of voting procedures were adopted by states after the Civil War in order to prevent African Americans from voting?
5. What did the five states that continued state and local poll taxes after 1962 have in common?
6. What happened to Vernon Dahmer in 1966?
7. What justification did the Supreme Court use in 1966 to eliminate the poll tax in state and local elections?

## "Barriers to Voting: Poll Taxes" (Answer Key)

1. If a "right" is something you can do because you are a citizen or a member of society, and a "privilege" is something you can do that other people may not be able to do, does the US Constitution guarantee that all citizens have the right to vote? Explain.

*(Answers might include: The Constitution does not guarantee the right to vote to all citizens because each state may set up rules that limit who and how people can vote. There is also a federal minimum age of 18 for voting. The Constitution only specifically says people cannot be barred from voting because of their race or sex.)*

2. What Amendments to the Constitution increased the number of potential voters in the US? What groups did these Amendments add to the voting public and when were they ratified?

*(15<sup>th</sup> Amendment, ratified 1870 - added non-White voters*

*19<sup>th</sup> Amendment, ratified 1920 - added women*

*26<sup>th</sup> Amendment, ratified 1971 - added people between the ages of 18 and 21)*

3. What is a poll tax?

*(A poll tax is a requirement that people must pay a fee in order to vote.)*

4. What combination of voting procedures were adopted by states after the Civil War in order to prevent African Americans from voting?

*(Poll taxes, literacy tests, White primaries (permitting only Whites to vote in primary elections), and the disqualification of people convicted of felonies.)*

5. What did the five states that continued state and local poll taxes after 1962 have in common?

*(They were all Confederate States during the Civil War.)*

6. What happened to Vernon Dahmer in 1966?

*(He was killed after publicly offering to help African Americans in his hometown in Mississippi pay their poll taxes at his store.)*

7. What justification did the Supreme Court use in 1966 to eliminate the poll tax in state and local elections?

*(The Supreme Court, in Harper v. Virginia Board of Elections, cited the Fourteenth Amendment of the Constitution which guarantees citizens equal protection under the law.)*

ORIGINAL

1954

# POLL TAX RECEIPT

STATE OF TEXAS  
COUNTY OF HARDIN

No. 1176

WARD \_\_\_\_\_

DATE

1-31 1955

PRECINCT NUMBER

14

RECEIVED OF  
ADDRESS  
STREET AND  
HOUSE NO.

Lee Carr  
Gronburg Tex

R. F. D.

BOX

AGE	Length of Residence			CITIZEN	Born in (State or Foreign Country)	Occupation
	years	years	years			
34	34	34	34	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Native-Born <input type="checkbox"/> Naturalized	Tex	Rail Road
				SEX	<input type="checkbox"/> Male <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Female	
				RACE	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> White <input type="checkbox"/> Colored	Paid by Self

The sum of ONE and 50/100 Dollars, in payment of POLL TAX for the year shown above. The said Taxpayer being duly sworn by me says that the above is correct; all of which I certify.

By

*Chas. Collier* Deputy.

**STOUT COLLIER**

Tax Assessor and Collector



## Oral History Interview of Civil Rights Activist Ellie Dahmer November 30, 2015

On the night of January 10, 1966, Ku Klux Klan members firebombed the house and country store of local NAACP leader Vernon Dahmer, killing Dahmer and injuring his children. That day, Dahmer had been on the radio, urging African Americans to vote and offering to help pay their poll tax at his store.

In this oral history excerpt (recorded 11/30/2015), Dahmer's widow, Ellie Dahmer, interviewed by Emily Crosby, speaks about the poll tax and recalls threats she and her husband faced because of their activism.

To view the video excerpt, watch from 35:20 - 39:03 this [Library of Congress video](#).

The full transcripts of the oral history can be found [here](#).

This Civil Rights History Project interview was completed by the Southern Oral History Program under contract to the Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of African American History & Culture and the Library of Congress.

(Start at: 35:20)

EC: Yeah. So I've heard that he went on the radio.

ED: He did. They allowed him and other people to take the poll tax book out to the store. You could pay your poll tax. You had to pay poll tax before you could even make out an application to register and vote. You had to have that with you. They had to know you had paid them poll tax. They allowed — he wasn't the only one they allowed to take it out to the store. There were other people in Hattiesburg that kept poll tax books at the store.

EC: So was it Black and White, or, well, it was Whites and then they allowed you?

ED: I don't know what the White people had allowed, but they had other Blacks had them, their businesses. They allowed them for the Blacks to go there and pay poll tax. That's what he went on the radio to tell them, that he had the book at the store where they could pay their poll tax, and they didn't have to go all the way into Hattiesburg.

EC: I've always understood from reading that he believed people would be more comfortable coming to him than going into Hattiesburg.

ED: Well, naturally they would. You would have to be. Anybody's more comfortable when you got friends and friendly faces smiling at you rather than mean faces looking at you.

EC: You showed me a copy of a poll tax receipt earlier. What was it like, for you, when you paid your poll tax when he was still living? Would you go down to the courthouse?

ED: We'd go down to the courthouse and pay them. We paid. I paid the poll tax and the property tax at the same time, one place. It was when you could pay the property tax at a place where you paid the poll tax and paid them all at the same time. That's what he did when he was living, he paid them all at the same time.

EC: And, if—

ED: Now, see, Harold wasn't down there when I filled that out. I just paid it for Harold.

EC: Can you hold that for a second? So this is a copy of a poll tax receipt, and the date is January 25th, 1966, and that's for Mrs. Ellie J. Dahmer and Harold C. Dahmer, paying the poll tax. What's the significance of this particular poll tax for you?

ED: This is the one we had left. The others got burned up. We had had the poll tax receipts before, but everything was burned up in the house.

EC: So tell me what happened after Mr. Dahmer went on the radio.

ED: We was already getting threats, but we got more threats after he went on the radio. They was coming in, saying, "N-word, you're going to get killed. You want to be White. You want your children to go to school with White people." And he would answer back, "When you come to get me, I'll be ready for you." We thought we were ready for them. Two carloads came around here. Four White men would sit at the store, and four would be at the house. They worked for two people, three people, there weren't that many. Dennis could shoot well. Harold could shoot well. Betty and I hadn't learned to shoot then.

EC: You hadn't?

ED: No.

EC: You didn't think you needed to?

ED: Yes, I know now we should have learned how. But there wouldn't have been nothing we could do. When we waked up —. We stopped getting threats. By the end of, by Christmastime in 1965 we stopped getting threats. From Christmastime on up, we stopped sleeping in shifts. We thought it was over with.

EC: You thought that with the passage of the Voting Rights Act?

ED: It was over with. They were going to let us alone.

EC: You'd won, and it was going to be peaceful.

ED: Yes. See, when they came that night, I was the first one to wake up that night...

(End at: 39:03)

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Political  
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1109 East Main Route 1  
Denison, Texas  
February 24, 1962

Dear Mr. President of the United State:

Tonight as I begin to write you this letter I am very much unsure of myself. Wondering if this is the proper way to call your attention to a very important problem.

I fully realize that your days are very busy and that your time is very precious. So I will understand if you will be unable to answer this letter.

Briefly I will state my problem. I became eligible to vote 5 years ago. During this period I have lived in Texas because it is my husband home town. And we are very much stable here.

I always felt proud of my parents



because when the election come around they had the opportunity to vote. I was then to young. I looked forward to the day when I too, would be able to practice such a great privilege. But that day has never come for me, because here in Texas you pay a fee to vote. They call it here Poll Tax. I always believed that voting was free whether you were rich or poor you had that privilege of voting. I have read numerous articles on this subject trying to understand why they impose this fee to vote. As yet, I have not found a satisfactory answer.

Tonight as an American in writing you this prolong letter because I don't believe in this poll tax. If the state of Texas needs this two dollar fee, then lets include it with some other form of tax.

Then many of peoples will truly

feel free to practice such a great privilege.  
Just like the air we breath we can say  
that it is free.

Please excuse my English and grammar.  
I thank God for your leadership  
at this time of greatest crisis.

Thanking you for your kind  
attention to this urgent matter -

Respectfully yours,  
(Mrs) Janet A. Ciccio  
Ciccio



GENERAL ①

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PL 2

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March 21, 1962

Dear Mrs. Cisccio:

The President has asked me to thank you for your letter. While all that you say about your constitutional right to vote is certainly appreciated, I must explain that voting qualifications do vary from State to State, and Texas happens to be one of the five States in which payment of a poll tax is a requisite. Although the President does not favor the levying of poll taxes, this is a right of individual States, and the funds accrued from the assessment of such taxes are used for State needs. Perhaps it would be helpful if you could discuss this matter with one of your local officials who could explain to you the requirements of your State budget and the apportionment of your tax dollars.

With the President's appreciation for your interest in this matter and for your confidence in his leadership,

Sincerely,

Ralph A. Dungan  
Special Assistant  
to the President

Mrs. Janet A. Cisccio  
1109 East Main  
Route 1  
Denison, Texas

RECEIVED  
MAR 23 1962  
CENTRAL FILES

Info from World Almanac, State of Union address.

lmb