



Literacy Tests and Poll Taxes

Evaluating Sources

AIM

How did literacy tests and poll taxes undermine the civil rights of African Americans?

Historical Context

Directions: Read the document below and answer the analysis questions that follow.

15th Amendment to the US Constitution,

drafted by US Congress in the session of the 40th Congress (1867 - 1869), ratified 1870

Section 1. The right of citizens of the United States to vote shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any State on account of race, color, or previous condition of servitude—

Section 2. The Congress shall have the power to enforce this article by appropriate legislation

Analysis Questions:

1) Sourcing: Who wrote this document?

2) Close Reading: What does Section 1 of the 15th Amendment mean?

3) Analysis and Contextualization: What do you know about the social and political atmosphere in American society at the time that would have made this law difficult to enforce?

Primary Source Document Analysis - Literacy Tests

Directions: The following is a political cartoon. Review it carefully and then fill out the chart below the image. When you are done, answer the analysis questions on the next page.



Source:
Harper's
Weekly
January
1870

Eddikashun qualifukashun. The Black man orter be eddikated afore he kin vote with US Wites, signed Mr. Solid South.”

[Translation:
Education
Qualification. The
Black man ought
to be educated
before he can vote
with US whites,
signed Mr. Solid
South]

Uncle Sam

Caption:
The color line
still exists - in
this case.

Observations	Inferences
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● I notice or I see.... ● _____ stands out 	<p>“Because I see _____ I think that _____”</p>

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Primary Source Document Analysis - Literacy Tests

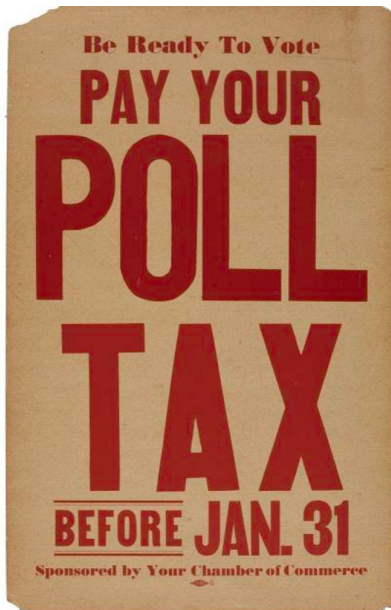
- 1) Contextualization: This cartoon refers to an “education qualification” for voters. This is alluding to literacy tests, which were often given to voters after the 15th Amendment was passed; failing this test would make you ineligible to vote.
 - *What do you know about the educational attainment and literacy rates of former slaves? How might these tests have impacted African Americans and their right to vote?*

- 2) Close Reading: Based on the observations and inferences you have made, *what do you think is the main idea or message of this political cartoon?*

- 3) Analysis: How did literacy tests or education qualifications undermine the civil rights granted to African Americans by the 15th Amendment?

- 4) Analysis: How does the illustrator use *irony* to support his main idea?
 - *Note: Irony is defined as a literary technique where the author chooses to use a set of words to express something other than, and especially the opposite, of the literal meaning.*

Document Analysis - Poll Taxes



Begun in the 1890s as a legal way to keep African Americans from voting in southern states, poll taxes were essentially a voting fee. Eligible voters were required to pay their poll tax before they could cast a ballot. A “grandfather clause” excused some poor whites from payment if they had an ancestor who voted before the Civil War, but there were no exemptions for African Americans.

Source: National Museum of American History

1. What were “poll taxes”?

2. How did poll taxes attempt to prevent African Americans from voting?

3. Why were African Americans not exempt from voting requirements via the “grandfather clause”?
