

The Fight for Voting Rights

Journalism, Social Studies, US History, Black History, Women's History, American Government

This lesson plan can span three days or be contracted to one class period, depending upon grade level and instruction time available.

Learning Objectives:

- To demonstrate connections between our contemporary world and historical movements for social and political change
- To analyze a range of primary sources including Fannie Lou Hamer's famous 1964 Democratic National Convention Testimony and a variety of newspaper articles
- To critically consider how historical context shapes beliefs
- To advocate—with reasons and evidence—on behalf of one's beliefs

Provided Materials:

- [Mitchell, Jerry. "Miss. Group Helped Lay Groundwork"](#)
- [Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party \(MFDP\) Timeline](#)
- Questions for the MFDP Timeline
- [Fannie Lou Hamer's 1964 Democratic National Convention Testimony Before the Credentials Committee](#)
- Newspaper Articles related to MFDP Seating: [One](#), [Two](#), [Three](#), and [Four](#)

Background Knowledge:

Depending upon your familiarity with Fannie Lou Hamer and the 1964 Democratic National Convention, you might find this [Biographical Sketch of Fannie Lou Hamer](#), this [background information about the 1964 MFDP Challenge](#), and this [timeline of the struggle for voting rights in the US](#) helpful. For contemporary connections, you might consider reading Michelle Alexander's [The New Jim Crow](#) and watching Ava DuVernay's [13th](#), especially considering the way in which felon laws disenfranchise Black voters.

Day One

Instruction Steps

Step One: Before students enter the classroom, write these core questions on the board:

In what ways was Barack Obama's nomination and presidential election historic?

What factors made this election possible?

How did Fannie Lou Hamer impact the election of Obama?

Once the students arrive, distribute Jerry Mitchell's article, "Miss. Group Helped Lay Groundwork." Encourage students to read the article with the questions on the board in mind. Once they are finished reading, lead a discussion of these core questions in a manner that works backward, as Mitchell does, from more current events to events that occurred in the 1960s.

Based on this discussion, ask students to collaboratively generate a list of further questions. You can provide examples to help spark student curiosity: Why couldn't Black people vote? Why was voting so important? Who was Fannie Lou Hamer? What was the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party (MFDP) and why was it significant? What happened at the 1964 Democratic Convention? What did the the Voting Rights Act of 1965 seek to accomplish? Refrain from answering these questions now, rather compile a list of student curiosities to explore further.

Step Two: If there is time in class, you can distribute the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party (MFDP) Timeline and accompanying questions. If there is not time in class, you can assign these materials for homework.

Day Two

Step Three: Encourage the students to write a journal entry, reflecting on the MFDP Timeline and accompanying questions. What were you most surprised to learn?

Step Four: Lead a discussion of the questions about the timeline, working through each question in turn. When you finish with question nine, pause and play Fannie Lou Hamer’s testimony for the students to experience. The speech is eight minutes and ten seconds long. The transcript is available [here](#), if you would like to distribute it to the class.

Following the testimony, invite students to respond to its impact more fully based on their experience of listening to Mrs. Hamer’s speech.

Day Three:

Step Five: Distribute the four newspaper articles related to the seating of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party. Break the students into four groups and instruct each group to consider each article, summarize it, and report back to the large group about it.

While the students report out, help them make connections about how this historical moment unfolded and emphasize the importance of using primary source documents to more fully understand the past.

Assessment of Student Learning: Pose the big question: “How are voting rights restricted today” to the class. This could include discussions on race, citizenship status, gender, age, or other factors. You might ask students to read or listen to [this NPR story](#) on Florida’s recent law restoring voting rights to felons. You might share [this story](#) about Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi’s recent support for lowering the national voting age to 16, or [these arguments](#) for doing so by the National Youth Rights Association.

Find Your Voice Highlights

Students recognize how voices have been silenced in American History and today. Students are also inspired by examples of resistance to this oppression—Barack Obama, Fannie Lou Hamer, and the MFDP. Students are also encouraged to find their own voices by speaking out against contemporary voter disenfranchisement.

Depending on the time you have to devote to answering this complex question, students could research allegations of voter disenfranchisement within their region and generate essays, supported by examples, in response to the question.

Or, you might ask students to write their own editorial columns that speak out against some type of disenfranchisement.

These could also be submitted to the school (or local) newspaper for publication. [This presentation](#) is a good starting point for teaching editorial writing, and [here](#) are some student editorial exemplars that have won awards at the national level.

Another option would be to have students work collaboratively in small groups to create class presentations addressing the same prompt. Here you might draw upon your background knowledge of The New Jim Crow and 13th and encourage students to consider how Felon Laws disproportionately affect black voters.

Lesson Plan Author: R.J. Morgan

R.J. Morgan currently serves as executive director of the Mississippi Scholastic Press Association and teaches writing and reporting courses at the University of Mississippi (Ole Miss). He earned his undergraduate and master’s degrees at Mississippi State University and previously taught history and journalism at Starkville High School, where he received honors including STAR Teacher, Third Congressional District Teacher of the Year, the Paul Cuicchi Innovative Educator Award, and the MSPA High School Journalism Adviser of the Year (three times). His media experience includes freelance writing for The Associated Press, Sporting News magazine, The Oxford Eagle, The Commercial Dispatch, The Northeast Mississippi Daily Journal and The Memphis Commercial Appeal. Morgan is the recipient of the 2018 Elizabeth Dickey Distinguished Service Award from the Southern Interscholastic Press Association, has earned Certified Journalism Educator status from the Journalism Education Association, and is currently pursuing his Ph.D. in K-12 education leadership. He is also researching the impact of the 1963 Delta Folk Jubilee on the civil rights movement in Greenwood, Miss., for a future book.





Questions for MFD Timeline

1. By the end of 1963, what percentage of Black people in Mississippi had the right to vote?

2. All the elected officials in Mississippi belonged to which political party?

3. Describe the types of delegates Mississippi usually sent to national conventions.

4. Who was the President of the United States running for re-election in 1964?

5. Why did Mississippi Democrats oppose the President?



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6. In your own words, what were the four arguments the MFDP made for being Mississippi's "real" delegates to the national convention?

7. How many Black people in Mississippi tried to register to vote during Freedom Summer? How many succeeded?

8. How many delegates did the MFDP send to Atlantic City? Who was their leader?

9. How did the President use the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) against the MFDP?

10. Why do you think Fannie Lou Hamer's testimony was so powerful?



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11. How did the President react to Fannie Lou Hamer's testimony?

12. What "compromise" was offered to the MFDP?

13. How did Martin Luther King, Jr. feel about the compromise?

14. Did the MFDP accept the party's compromise? What did Fannie Lou Hamer say about it?

15. In your own words, why does John Lewis say the MFDP challenge was a real turning point for the civil rights movement in the United States?