Barriers at the Ballot

How state voting rules kept eligible citizens from the polls

USH.C.2.2.D "Describe continued attempts to disenfranchise African Americans through the use of poll taxes and literacy tests by some state governments."

NAME _____ DATE _____

1 READ AND MARK

Read it twice

YOUR JOB Underline each voting barrier, then circle details showing how it could keep eligible citizens from voting.

Rules That Blocked the Vote

1 After the Civil War, the Fifteenth Amendment, ratified in 1870, barred denying a citizen the vote because of race. Yet some Southern state governments sought rules that did not name race but still kept Black citizens from voting. In 1890, Mississippi adopted a new state constitution that required a poll tax and a test of reading or understanding part of the state constitution. These rules placed decisions about voting in the hands of local officials. Other states adopted similar barriers. A person could be legally eligible to vote and still be stopped at registration.

2 A poll tax was a fee a person had to pay to vote. For a farmworker who earned little money, even a modest fee could mean choosing between voting and buying necessities. Some states also required voters to show proof that they had paid. Although the tax did not mention race, officials used it within a larger system designed to reduce Black political power. It also prevented some poor white citizens from voting. Because voting happened repeatedly, the fee could keep people away from elections year after year, not just on a single election day.

3 Literacy tests added another barrier at registration. An official might ask an applicant to read and explain a section of a state constitution, then decide whether the explanation was acceptable. Officials could judge Black applicants harshly while passing white applicants, and some states exempted certain voters through loopholes. Thus the same written rule did not always produce the same result. Black citizens and allies challenged these restrictions for decades. The Twenty-fourth Amendment banned poll taxes in federal elections in 1964. The Voting Rights Act of 1965 attacked literacy tests, and the Supreme Court barred state poll taxes in 1966.

2 ANSWER WITH EVIDENCE

Use the passage

1. How could Mississippi's 1890 voting requirements keep an eligible Black citizen from voting despite the Fifteenth Amendment?

2. Why could a poll tax prevent someone from voting in more than one election? Who else, besides Black citizens, could be affected?

3. How could officials use a literacy test to treat Black and white applicants differently under the same written rule?

4. Which later actions challenged poll taxes and literacy tests, and what does their timing show about these barriers?

3 YOUR TURN

Your own words

Write a five-sentence reply to a fictional lawmaker who says voting rules are fair if they never mention race. Use the passage to explain both barriers, then propose one safeguard for fair voting access.

ANSWER KEY

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HIGH SCHOOL · USH.C.2.2.D

PART 1 · READ AND MARK

Underline each voting barrier, then circle details showing how it could keep eligible citizens from voting. Accept any marking that follows this job and points at the right text.

PART 2 · ANSWERS

#	QUESTION	ANSWER
1	How could Mississippi's 1890 voting requirements keep an eligible Black citizen from voting despite the Fifteenth Amendment?	**The state required a poll tax and a reading or understanding test. An eligible citizen could be unable to pay or could be rejected by an official at registration.**
2	Why could a poll tax prevent someone from voting in more than one election? Who else, besides Black citizens, could be affected?	**A voter had to pay to vote, so the cost could remain a barrier across elections. The tax also kept some poor white citizens from voting.**
3	How could officials use a literacy test to treat Black and white applicants differently under the same written rule?	**Officials could reject a Black applicant's explanation of a constitution passage while accepting a white applicant's explanation.**
4	Which later actions challenged poll taxes and literacy tests, and what does their timing show about these barriers?	**The Twenty-fourth Amendment banned poll taxes in federal elections in 1964, the Voting Rights Act of 1965 attacked literacy tests, and the Supreme Court barred state poll taxes in 1966. The barriers persisted for decades after the Fifteenth Amendment.**

PART 3 · YOUR TURN (SAMPLE ANSWER)

A rule can shut people out even if it never names race. Mississippi's poll tax could block people who could not afford to pay, including Black citizens. Its test let officials reject Black applicants' answers while accepting white applicants' answers. These rules kept eligible citizens from voting despite the Fifteenth Amendment. A fair system would register eligible voters without charging a fee or requiring a literacy test.

Accept responses that explain how apparently race-neutral rules could block Black voters through cost or unequal enforcement. For the open task, look for five sentences that address both barriers and propose a safeguard.