

It's a Thick Book DVD Teacher's Guide

It's a Thick Book is a short documentary created by Lewis Lehe to take a look at the history and present-day issues surrounding Alabama's 1901 Constitution, our state's governing document. Two versions of the film appear on the accompanying DVD; simply select "Play" on the DVD menu to watch the 45-minute version, or choose "Shorter Version" to watch the 27-minute version.

The following is a guide to It's a Thick Book, based on the film's framework, with questions for each section. Teachers might want to pause the DVD periodically to help students think through the issues as they are watching it; teachers will want to adapt the material to meet their needs. The questions below are treated in both the 27-minute and 45-minute versions of the film.

As an educational tool, this film can be used to generate discussion or projects, particularly in social studies or citizenship classes. State objectives considered in this film are marked in italics for 12th grade Economics, 12th grade Government, 11th Grade U.S. History, 10th Grade U.S. History, 7th grade Geography, and 7th grade Citizenship. Please visit our website at www.constitutionALreform.org for additional information and resources.

Start by guiding students in reflecting on the following:

- List the characteristics of a democracy.
- What is a constitution?
- How can looking at history help us understand a current problem?

I. *History (11th grade U.S. History state objectives 1, 2, 12; 10th grade U.S. History state objectives 4, 7, 11; 7th grade Geography state objectives 1, 2)*

A. Background

- Describe the three political parties in Alabama in the late 1800s and place them in relationship to one another.
- Explain the role of the Populist Revolt in Alabama history, particularly with respect to the calling of the 1901 constitutional convention.
- Describe the historical character of the Black Belt region and explain the role the region played in the ratification of the 1901 Constitution.

B. Disfranchisement

- Describe the political and social atmosphere in Alabama leading up to the constitutional convention of 1901.
- What was the stated purpose of the constitutional convention of 1901?
- The Fifteenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution prohibits racial discrimination in voting; explain how the framers of the 1901 Constitution avoided violating this amendment by instituting poll taxes and literacy and property requirements.

C. Illegitimacy

- Paying attention to the role of the Black Belt region in the vote, explain why it seems unlikely that the vote to ratify the 1901 Constitution was legitimate.

II. Local Government (12th grade Government state objectives 1, 2, 3; 7th grade Citizenship state objectives 3, 4)

A. Home Rule

- Define home rule.
- What is Alabama's procedure for making a bill into a law?
- Name some potential obstacles to bringing a bill into law. How might home rule limit this process?

B. Length

- What is the function of an amendment?
- Explain why the length of Alabama's amendment-heavy constitution (at present, in October 2007, there are 799 amendments) is a hindrance to the lawmaking process.

C. Local Constitutional Amendments

- How is it limiting for the state's governing document to include bills about bingo halls and spraying for mosquitoes?
- How does having the whole state vote on local issues limit local economic, social, and political initiatives?

IV. Taxation (12th grade Economics state objectives 6, 9; 12th grade Government state objectives 4, 6)

- What is the purpose of taxes?
- How can the way in which people are taxed be more important than the amount they are taxed?

A. Taxation and the Constitution

- List some reasons it might not be a good idea to embed the tax structure in the state constitution.

B. How We Tax

- Describe the relationships among the three kinds of tax. Why do experts say it is important to balance the three kinds of tax?
- Define the term regressive tax. How does a sales-tax-based state economy "create serious problems"?
- What creates proration and how does it affect school systems?
- Why should public services be paid for with property taxes rather than sales taxes?
- What is earmarking? What are the benefits and limitations of this practice?

V. Conclusion (12th grade Government state objective 12; 7th grade Citizenship state objectives 5, 9)

- Earlier in the film, the narrator says, "As you learn about taxation and local government issues, contemplate their roots in a convention of landowners and corporate lawyers protecting their interests." What do you think she means?
- What are some actions you can take to exercise your rights and responsibilities as a citizen?