



# THE U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES AND THE GAG RULE

## Introduction

The House of Representatives used the “gag rule” to end discussions and debates about petitions calling for an end to slavery. Southern members of Congress were concerned about the increasing opposition to slavery. Representative John Quincy Adams fervently opposed the rule because he felt that it was a restriction on free speech.

This activity engages students in analyzing documents, participating in discussions and conducting research to determine the outcome of using the gag rule and Representative Adams’ role in ending it.



## National Standards

Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts, grade 8

Reading Informational Text 1, 2

Speaking and Listening, 1, 4

Common Core State Standards for Literacy in History/Social Studies, grade 8

Reading 2

Writing 2, 4

U.S. History National Standards

United States Era 5: Standard 1—The Causes of the Civil War

National Standards for Civics and Government Content Standards, grades 5-8

Standard III: How Does the Government, Established by the Constitution, Embody the Purpose, Values, and Principles of American Democracy?

Strand F: How does the American political system provide choice and opportunities for participation?

Standard V: What are the Roles of the Citizen in American Democracy?

Strand B: What are the rights of citizens?

## Learning Skills

Reading, building vocabulary, analyzing documents and images, group discussions, presenting and research

## Essential Question

What is a gag rule? Why was a gag rule imposed by the House of Representatives? What are the implications for the country if the House of Representatives should pass other gag rules?

## Documents and Materials Needed

- Background Information
- Document Analysis worksheet
- Vocabulary worksheet
- 4 copies of anti-slavery petitions sent to the House from Ledger of the 24th Congress, Volume 28
- Petition from Women of Brookline, MA 1836



- Representative John Quincy Adams' motion denouncing the gag rule against anti-slavery petitions as unconstitutional, May 27, 1836
- “Gag Rule” Resolution, December 21, 1837 and transcript of document text
- Portrait of John Quincy Adams
- Cane given to Adams in commemoration of his gaining enough votes to end the gag rule

## Suggested Activities

### Optional Warm-up Activity

**Vocabulary Worksheet:** Distribute a worksheet to each student. Use the worksheet as a tool to familiarize them with the words or phrases they will encounter in this activity.

### Analyzing Documents

1. Distribute to each student a copy of the Document Analysis worksheet.
2. Divide the students into small groups of 4-5 students.
3. Distribute to each small group a document to analyze and discuss. Do not distribute the portrait or image of the cane. Have each group select a recorder for notes and a reporter to share with the larger group what their smaller group discussed.
4. In small groups, have students respond to the following:
  - Describe the content of the document using the *document analysis worksheet* as a guide.
  - Describe who or what group created the document and for what purpose.
  - What was the major concern or issue presented by the document?

### Reading

5. Read to the students or have student read in small groups the background essay describing the purpose and implementation of the House gag rule.

### Discussion

6. After reading the essay, have the students return to their document and discuss how the House gag rule affected their document and why.

### Presentation

7. Have each group present to the class at large their document and what they learned. Refer the students to the essential question when presenting.

### Analyzing Primary Sources and Discussion

8. Following the presentations, share with the students the image of John Quincy Adams and his cane. Through whole class discussions have the students describe their observations and answer the following question:



- What can you learn about Adams from your observations of the images of the portrait and cane?

### Research and writing

9. As a research project have the students write an essay about Adams in Congress and the significance of the cane as a gift to him.

### Recommended Reading

Burgan, Michael. *John Quincy Adams*. Compass Point Books, New York, NY. March, 2003. A biography of the sixth president of the United States, focusing on his lifetime of public service, including his years in the Senate and House of Representatives and his time in foreign service

### Websites

U.S. Capitol Visitor Center

<http://www.visitthecapitol.gov/civilwar/html/theme0.html>

U.S. House of Representatives

[http://history.house.gov/People/Listing/A/ADAMS,-John-Quincy-\(A000041\)/](http://history.house.gov/People/Listing/A/ADAMS,-John-Quincy-(A000041)/)



## Background Information

The gag rule is a parliamentary procedure, sometimes called “rules of order,” used to limit or stop debates of a particular topic. Rules of order are the guidelines followed by a governing group such as Congress, state legislatures or school boards to conduct business or meetings. Such rules are intended to maintain order and respectability, to consider the will of the majority, to preserve the rights of the minority and to facilitate the orderly transaction of the business of an assembly. In Congress, the House of Representatives used the “gag rule” to prohibit discussions and debates of the anti-slavery petitions. In the late 1830s, Congress received more than 130,000 petitions from citizens demanding the abolition of slavery in Washington, D.C. and other federally-controlled territories. As antislavery opponents became more insistent, southern members of Congress were increasingly adamant in their defense of slavery.

The Speaker of the House James K. Polk of Tennessee, appointed a committee to address how best to handle the petitions. The committee included several southern congressmen who recommended that all petitions regarding slavery should automatically be tabled and that no further action should be taken upon them. With these recommendations, the House passed a resolution that all abolition petitions must go to a subcommittee with instructions that Congress could not interfere with slavery, including in the District of Columbia. The gag rule was adopted at the beginning of each Congress in 1837, 1839, 1841, and 1843, making it a standing rule of the House. At first, only a small group of congressmen, led by Representative John Quincy Adams of Massachusetts, opposed the rule. Adams shouted during a roll call vote, “I hold the resolution to be a direct violation of the Constitution of the United States.” Adams fervently fought against the gag rule, declaring it a restriction on free speech.

Adams used a variety of parliamentary tactics to try to read slavery petitions on the floor of the House. One of Adam’s tactics was to present petitions from women praying for the abolition of slavery. Women, as non-voters, were not banned from petitioning by the gag rule. As Adams attempted to protest the gag rule, an influx of petitions came to Congress not only opposing slavery, but also protesting the House’s use of the gag rule. Gradually, as antislavery sentiment in the north grew, more northern congressmen supported Adams’ argument that whatever one’s view on slavery, stifling the right to petition was unconstitutional. Adams protested each renewal of the rule until he gained enough votes to repeal the gag rule in 1844.

Source:

**U.S. House of Representatives Website: Historical Highlights**

<http://history.house.gov/Historical-Highlights/1800-1850/The-House-of-Representatives-instituted-the-“gag-rule”/>



### Written Document Analysis Worksheet

1. TYPE OF DOCUMENT (Check one):

- |                                     |                                        |                                               |
|-------------------------------------|----------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Newspaper  | <input type="checkbox"/> Map           | <input type="checkbox"/> Advertisement        |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Letter     | <input type="checkbox"/> Telegram      | <input type="checkbox"/> Congressional record |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Patent     | <input type="checkbox"/> Press release | <input type="checkbox"/> Census report        |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Memorandum | <input type="checkbox"/> Report        | <input type="checkbox"/> Other                |

2. UNIQUE PHYSICAL QUALITIES OF THE DOCUMENT (Check one or more):

- |                                                 |                                           |
|-------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Interesting letterhead | <input type="checkbox"/> Notations        |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Handwritten            | <input type="checkbox"/> "RECEIVED" stamp |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Typed                  | <input type="checkbox"/> Other            |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Seals                  |                                           |

3. DATE(S) OF DOCUMENT:

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4. AUTHOR (OR CREATOR) OF THE DOCUMENT:

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POSITION (Title):

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5. FOR WHAT AUDIENCE WAS THE DOCUMENT WRITTEN?

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6. DOCUMENT INFORMATION (There are many possible ways to answer A-E.)

A. List three things the author said that you think are important:

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B. Why do you think this document was written?

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C. What evidence in the document helps you know why it was written? Quote from the document.

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D. List two things the document tells you about life in the United States at the time it was written:

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E. Write a question to the author that is left unanswered by the document:

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*Designed and developed by the Education Staff, National Archives and Records Administration, Washington, DC 20408*



### Vocabulary Building Worksheet: The US House of Representatives and the Gag Rule

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Word or Phrases	I know the word.	If you know the word, use it in a sentence.	I don't know the word and need to research its meaning. Record the meaning below.
Congressional Committee			
Petitions			
Slavery			
Civil War			
Abolition			
Debates			
Gag Rule			
Parliamentary Procedure			