



The History of Voting Rights

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Since the Constitution was ratified, the United States has moved closer and closer towards a system of equality in which all people have the right to vote regardless of sex, race, or ethnicity. While there are still problems in today's voting system, there have been significant advances over the last two centuries to help transform the voting population from white, male landowners over 21 years of age to a system in which almost all citizens over the age of 18 can vote freely.

A Timeline: Who Could Vote

1776: White males at least 21 years old, but most states included property or even religious requirements. In New Jersey, Connecticut, and Pennsylvania free black men can vote.

1856: White males at least 21 years old, no longer any property or religious requirements.

1870: The 15th Amendment in theory extends the right to vote to all races; however, poll taxes, literacy tests and grandfather clauses eventually prevent most black males from voting.

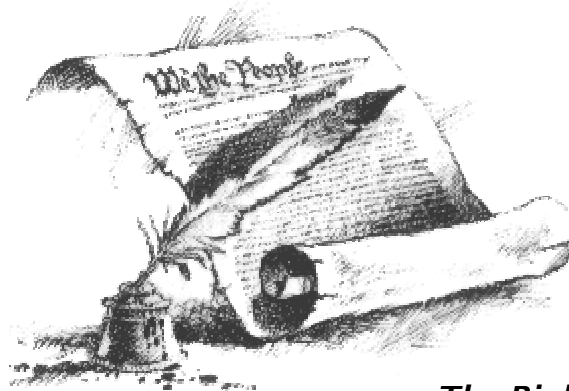
1920: The 19th Amendment expands the franchise to women.

1924: Congress passes legislation extending citizenship, and therefore voting rights, to Native Americans, but many states continue to deny these voting rights.

1943: Congress ensures Chinese Americans have the right to vote by repealing the Chinese Exclusion Acts.

1961: The 23rd Amendment provides citizens of the District of Columbia with the right to vote for President and Vice President, but not for Congress.

1964: The 24th Amendment prohibits the use of poll taxes for federal elections, ending a practice that still existed in five states when the amendment was passed.



1965: Congress passes the Voting Rights Act that outlawed barriers to political participation by racial and ethnic minorities such as literacy tests and discriminatory districting and registration practices.

1970: The 26th Amendment expands the franchise by lowering the voting age from 21 to 18.

1975: The Voting Rights Act is amended to provide assistance for language minority citizens.

1982: The Voting Rights Act is amended to allow assistance for blind, disabled or illiterate voters.

2006: The Voting Rights Act is renewed for twenty-five additional years by Congress.

The Right to Vote Today:

- The right to vote is still not held equally by all U.S. citizens. For example, residents of Washington, DC have no representation in the House of Representatives or the Senate. A person with a felony conviction may or may not have the right to vote depending on the state in which he or she lives.
- There is still no right to vote in the U.S. Constitution. Although most democratic constitutions, including those in Afghanistan and Iraq, guarantee an equal right to vote for all citizens, the U.S. has only the haphazard system described above.

What We Can Do:

- Participate in our democracy. Those of us that are able to vote have the obligation to those who do not to make voting an equal right for everyone. To this end, we are launching a program to register all high school students before they graduate. We are asking all high school students to register to vote and to become involved in a program to register others.
- As a voting citizen, ask your Congressperson to support the Right to Vote Amendment (H.J. Res. 28).