

Who Votes?

U.S. Voting Rights

When the Constitution was written, only white male property owners (about 10 to 16 percent of the nation's population) had the vote. Over the past two centuries, though, the term *government by the people* has become a reality. During the early 1800s, states gradually dropped property requirements for voting. Later, groups that had been excluded previously gained the right to vote. Other reforms made the process fairer and easier.

- 1790** Only white male adult property-owners have the right to vote.
- 1810** Last religious prerequisite for voting is eliminated.
- 1850** Property ownership and tax requirements are eliminated by 1850. Almost all adult white males can vote.
- 1855** Connecticut adopts the nation's first literacy test for voting. Massachusetts follows suit in 1857. The tests were implemented to discriminate against Irish-Catholic immigrants.
- 1870** The Fifteenth Amendment is passed. It gives former slaves the right to vote and protects the voting rights of adult male citizens of any race.
- 1889** Florida adopts a poll tax. Ten other southern states will implement poll taxes.
- 1890** Mississippi adopts a literacy test to keep African Americans from voting. Numerous other states—not just in the South—also establish literacy tests. However, the tests also exclude many whites from voting. To get around this, states add grandfather clauses that allow those who could vote before 1870, or their descendants, to vote regardless of literacy or tax qualifications.
- 1913** The Seventeenth Amendment calls for members of the U.S. Senate to be elected directly by the people instead of State Legislatures.
- 1915** Oklahoma was the last state to append a grandfather clause to its literacy requirement (1910). In *Guinn v. United States* the Supreme Court rules that the clause is in conflict with the Fifteenth Amendment, thereby outlawing literacy tests for federal elections.
- 1920** The Nineteenth Amendment guarantees women's suffrage.
- 1924** The Indian Citizenship Act grants all Native Americans the rights of citizenship, including the right to vote in federal elections.
- 1944** The Supreme Court outlaws "white primaries" in *Smith v. Allwright* (Texas). In Texas and other states, primaries were conducted by private associations, which, by definition, could exclude whomever they chose. The Court declares the nomination process to be a public process bound by the terms of Fifteenth Amendment.
- 1957** The first law to implement the Fifteenth amendment, the Civil Rights Act, is passed. The Act sets up the Civil Rights Commission—among its duties is to investigate voter discrimination.
- 1960** In *Gomillion v. Lightfoot* (Alabama) the Court outlaws *gerrymandering* (dividing an area into political units to give special advantages to one group).

- 1961** The Twenty-Third Amendment allows voters of the District of Columbia to participate in presidential elections.
- 1964** The Twenty-Fourth Amendment bans the poll tax as a requirement for voting in federal elections.
- 1965** Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., mounts a voter registration drive in Selma, Alabama, to draw national attention to African-American voting rights.
- 1965** The Voting Rights Act protects the rights of minority voters and eliminates voting barriers such as the literacy test. The Act is expanded and renewed in 1970, 1975, and 1982.
- 1966** The Supreme Court, in *Harper v. Virginia Board of Elections*, eliminates the poll tax as a qualification for voting in any election. A poll tax was still in use in Alabama, Mississippi, Texas, and Virginia.
- 1966** The Court upholds the Voting Rights Act in *South Carolina v. Katzenbach*.
- 1970** Literacy requirements are banned for five years by the 1970 renewal of the Voting Rights Act. At the time, eighteen states still have a literacy requirement in place. In *Oregon v. Mitchell*, the Court upholds the ban on literacy tests, which is made permanent in 1975. Judge Hugo Black, writing the court's opinion, cites the "long history of the discriminatory use of literacy tests to disenfranchise voters on account of their race" as the reason for their decision.
- 1971** The Twenty-Sixth amendment sets the minimum voting age at 18.
- 1972** In *Dunn v. Blumstein*, the Supreme Court declares that lengthy residence requirements for voting in state and local elections is unconstitutional and suggests that 30 days is an ample period.
- 1995** The Federal "Motor Voter Law" takes effect, making it easier to register to vote.
- 2003** The Federal Voting Standards and Procedures Act requires states to streamline registration, voting, and other election procedures.

Source: <http://www.infoplease.com/timelines/voting.html>