

What is Suffrage?

by Gwen Perkins, edited by Abby Rhinehart

"Suffrage" means the right to vote. When citizens have the right to vote for laws and leaders, that government is called a "democracy." Voting is one of the most important principles of government in a democracy.

Many people think that everyone in the United States has always had the right to vote. That is not true.

When the United States was founded, only white men who owned land could vote. Who has been able to vote in United States history? How have voting rights changed over time?

1789: Religious Freedom

When the United States was formed, several colonies did not allow people with some religions to vote or be politicians. This included Jewish people, Quakers, and Catholics. In 1789, the United States got rid of these rules about religion.

1870: Men of All Races Get the Right to Vote

In 1870, United States gave all men in the United States the right to vote. That meant that men of all races could vote. This sounded good, but there was a catch.

To vote in many states, people still had to own land. This stopped many African Americans and poor people from being able to vote. Some states also created other ways to stop African Americans from voting. For example, many states forced people to pay money to vote. This was called a "poll tax."



Washington State History Museum Suffrage Curriculum
4th grade
Created 2019

Footer images, left to right: "Woman forever march," Washington State Historical Society Catalog ID Number: 2010.151.4; "Woman's suffrage pin," Washington State Historical Society Catalog ID Number: C2008.0.132; "Votes for women: official organ of Washington Equal Suffrage Association," Washington State Historical Society Catalog ID Number 2000.104.38.14

1920: Women Get the Right to Vote

Many states gave women the right to vote, including Washington State in 1910. In 1920, all white and black women in the country got the right to vote. But after that, some states passed laws to stop most African American women from voting. Native Americans and immigrant women were still not allowed to vote. The United States did not think of them as citizens.

1924: Native Americans Become Citizens

In 1924, all Native Americans who had been born in the United States got citizenship. But even after that, many Native Americans could not vote because of state laws that stopped them. Finally, in 1948, all Native Americans got the right to vote.

1964: Poll Tax Removed

The United States made poll taxes illegal. Poll taxes had made people pay to vote. This made it easier for poor people and people who were not white to vote.

Suffrage - Only a Beginning?

Getting the right to vote doesn't guarantee equality for all. Suffrage gives citizens a voice. It lets them make laws and elect people to represent them in government.

Getting the vote has not been the end of struggle for many groups of people. That struggle continues today.



Washington State History Museum Suffrage Curriculum
4th grade
Created 2019

Footer images, left to right: "Woman forever march," Washington State Historical Society Catalog ID Number: 2010.151.4; "Woman's suffrage pin," Washington State Historical Society Catalog ID Number: C2008.0.132; "Votes for women: official organ of Washington Equal Suffrage Association," Washington State Historical Society Catalog ID Number 2000.104.38.14

You may choose to ask students to read the introduction, then learn about just 1 event in small groups. Then you can come together to make a class-wide timeline. If you do that, you can cut up events using the template on this page.

1789: Religious Freedom

When the United States was formed, several colonies did not allow people with some religions to vote or be politicians. This included Jewish people, Quakers, and Catholics. In 1789, the United States got rid of these rules about religion.

1924: Native Americans Become Citizens

In 1924, all Native Americans who had been born in the United States got citizenship. But even after that, many Native Americans could not vote because of state laws that stopped them. Finally, in 1948, all Native Americans got the right to vote.

1870: Men of All Races Get the Right to Vote

In 1870, United States gave all men in the United States the right to vote. That meant that men of all races could vote. This sounded good, but there was a catch.

To vote in many states, people still had to own land. This stopped many African Americans and poor people from being able to vote. Some states also created other ways to stop African Americans from voting. For example, many states forced people pay money to vote. This was called a "poll tax."

1964: Poll Tax Removed

The United States made poll taxes illegal. Poll taxes had made people to pay to vote. This made it easier for poor people and people who were not white to vote.

1920: Women Get the Right to Vote

Many states gave women the right to vote, including Washington state in 1910. In 1920, all white and black women in the country got the right to vote. But after that, some states passed laws to stop most African American women from voting. Native Americans and immigrant women were still not allowed to vote. The United States did not think they were citizens.



Washington State History Museum Suffrage Curriculum
4th grade
Created 2019

Footer images, left to right: "Woman forever march," Washington State Historical Society Catalog ID Number: 2010.151.4; "Woman's suffrage pin," Washington State Historical Society Catalog ID Number: C2008.0.132; "Votes for women: official organ of Washington Equal Suffrage Association," Washington State Historical Society Catalog ID Number 2000.104.38.14