

# What is Suffrage?

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

Many Americans think voting is an automatic right, something that all citizens over the age of 18 are guaranteed. But this has not always been the case. When the United States was founded, only white male property owners could vote. It has taken centuries for citizens to achieve the rights that they enjoy today.

Who has been able to vote in United States history? How have voting rights changed over time? Read more to discover some key events.

## 1789: Religious Freedom

When the nation was first founded, several of the 13 colonies did not allow Jews, Quakers, and/or Catholics to vote or run for political office. Article VI of the Constitution was written and adopted in 1789, granting religious freedom. This allowed white male property owners of all religions to vote and run for political office.

## 1870: Men of All Races Get the Right to Vote

At the end of the Civil War, the United States created another amendment that gave former male slaves the right to vote. The 15th Amendment granted all men in the United States the right to vote regardless of "race, color, or previous condition of servitude."

This sounded good, but there was a catch. To vote in many states, people were still required to own land. This prevented many former slaves and poor people from being able to cast a ballot. Some states also had what was known as a "poll tax," meaning people had to pay money to vote. People created ways to stop African Americans from voting, including literacy tests, threats of physical violence, and hiding poll locations. Many states passed what became known as "Black Codes," which made some of these intimidation tactics legal.

## 1920: Women Get the Right to Vote

The 1848 Seneca Falls Convention was the first big event in American women's fight for suffrage. At that Convention, a group of three hundred men and women united to discuss equal rights for women and men. Many conference attendees believed in equal rights for all citizens, regardless of race or gender. Women began to campaign for the right to vote.

There were many black suffragists. But not all women wanted to include African American women in the parades and marches. They worried that racist legislators would deny women the right to vote if they included African American women.



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Many states passed women's suffrage, including Washington state in 1910. But people still fought for a nationwide law for women's suffrage. When the 19th Amendment passed in 1920, all white and black women got the right to vote. In the next decade, several Southern states passed laws to stop most African American women from voting. The 19th Amendment also did not cover other groups of women, such as Native Americans and immigrants. These women were not considered citizens.

### **1924: Native Americans Become Citizens**

It wasn't until 1924 that all Native Americans who had been born in the United States got citizenship. But even after 1924, many Native Americans could not vote because of state laws that restricted them. Finally, in 1948, all Native Americans got the right to vote in local and federal elections.

### **1964: Poll Tax Removed**

The 24th Amendment prevented poll taxes, which had required people to pay to vote. This removed a major barrier to voting for many people.

### **1965: The Voting Rights Act**

African American voters received protection from the harsh Black Codes when the Voting Rights Act was passed in 1965. This act guaranteed the voting rights that people had been officially given in 1870. It also prevented states from discriminating against minority voters. This helped many minorities -- not only African Americans but Latinx Americans, Asian Americans, and others.

### **Suffrage - Only a Beginning?**

Getting the right to vote doesn't guarantee equality for all. What suffrage does is give citizens a voice. It allows citizens to make laws and elect people to represent them in government. For groups that have fought for suffrage, getting the vote has not been the end of struggle. Instead, it was just the first stage in getting political and social equality, a struggle that continues today.



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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