



## The History of Voting in the United States

By Meghann Parkinson



**VOTE:** a FORMAL indication of a CHOICE between two or more candidates or courses of action, expressed typically through a BALLOT or a show of hands or by voice...The right to vote is the foundation of any DEMOCRACY (a system of government by the whole population or all the eligible members of a state, typically through elected representatives).

*Spell:* FORMAL      CHOICE      BALLOT

*What are we talking about today?* VOTING

*What is one way that a vote can be expressed?* BALLOT; SHOW OF HANDS; VOICE

*The right to vote is the foundation of what?* DEMOCRACY

*What is a democracy?*

A SYSTEM OF GOVERNMENT BY THE WHOLE POPULATION OR ALL ELIGIBLE MEMBERS OF A STATE. THROUGH ELECTED REPRESENTATIVES.

Once upon a time, Chief Justice EARL WARREN wrote:

“The right to vote freely for the CANDIDATE of one’s choice is of the essence of a democratic society, and any restrictions on that right strike at the heart of REPRESENTATIVE government. [...] Undoubtedly, the right of SUFFRAGE (right to vote) is fundamental in a free and democratic society. Especially since the right to exercise the FRANCHISE (right to vote) in a free and unimpaired manner is preservative of other basic civil and political rights, any alleged

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INFRINGEMENT (violation) of the right of CITIZENS to vote must be carefully and meticulously scrutinized.”

*Spell:* CANDIDATE REPRESENTATIVE CITIZENS

*Who wrote the quote above?*

CHIEF JUSTICE EARL WARREN

*In what year was the quote written?* 1964

*How many years ago was 1964? Show your work.*

2020 - 1964 = 56 YEARS AGO

*There were two words Warren used in his quote to reference the right to vote. What is one of them?* SUFFRAGE; FRANCHISE

*Do you know what else was taking place during this time?* THE CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT

JUSTICE HUGO BLACK shared the same sentiment by stating in 1964: “No right is more precious in a free country than that of having a voice in the election of those who make the laws under which, as good citizens, we must live. Other rights, even the most basic, are ILLUSORY (imagined) if the right to vote is UNDERMINED (threatened; compromised).” But with both of these powerful statements, the right to vote came with a few PREREQUISITES (required needs).

*Spell:* JUSTICE ILLUSORY

*Who said the above quote we just read?* JUSTICE HUGO BLACK

*What word that I mentioned means imagined?* ILLUSORY

*What is another word for undermined?* THREATENED; COMPROMISED

*What does it mean when I say “the right to vote came with a few prerequisites”?*

While voting would seem fundamental in a democracy, voting rights in the U.S. have long been CONTENTIOUS (debated; argued). The Constitution makes no STIPULATIONS (prerequisites) concerning who can vote. Instead, it is left to the STATES to decide, and they have often tried—with varying degrees of success—to limit voting.

*Spell:* STATES RIGHTS LIMIT

*What word did I mention means debated or argued?* CONTENTIOUS

*The Constitution makes no \_\_\_ concerning who can vote.* STIPULATIONS

*Who gets to decide who gets to vote?* THE STATES

*What have states often tried to do, with varying degrees of success?* LIMIT VOTING.

Initially, states allowed only a select few to cast a ballot, enacting (making) PROPERTY, TAX, RELIGION, GENDER, and RACE requirements. In the first presidential election in 1789, voters were almost all LANDOWNING WHITE PROTESTANT MALES. Movements to end various

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restrictions subsequently began... and grew. In 1792 NEW HAMPSHIRE became the first state to remove its landowning requirement, though it took until 1856 for the last state (NORTH CAROLINA) to drop property demands for white men. And while the Constitution decreed that no officeholder should be subjected to a RELIGION TEST, various states continued to require one for voting until 1828, when MARYLAND allowed JEWISH people to enter the ballot booth. By the 1860s white males largely enjoyed universal suffrage in the U.S.

*Spell:* PROPERTY RELIGION MALES

*Tell me one requirement that was enacted initially when voting.* PROPERTY; TAX; RELIGION; GENDER; RACE

*In what year was the first presidential election?* 1789

*At this time, who were the voters?* LANDOWNING WHITE PROTESTANT MALES

*Which was the first state to remove its landowning requirement?* NEW HAMPSHIRE

*Which was the last state to remove its property demands for white men?* NORTH CAROLINA

*The Constitution decreed that no officeholder should be subjected to what?* A RELIGION TEST

*What happened in 1828?* MARYLAND ALLOWED JEWISH PEOPLE TO ENTER THE BALLOT BOOTH.

But while voting rights were expanding for some areas of the population, states began enacting laws that BARRED (stopped) WOMEN, AFRICAN Americans, NATIVE Americans, and many IMMIGRANTS from casting ballots. The New Jersey constitution of 1776 gave voting rights to “all inhabitants,” and in the 1797 state legislative election, a number of women voted. However, the threat of a “GOVERNMENT OF PETTICOATS” led the legislature to pass a law in 1807 that barred women from the polls. *While voting rights were expanding for some areas, other states began enacting laws that barred who from casting ballots?* WOMEN; AFRICAN AMERICANS; NATIVE AMERICANS; IMMIGRANTS

*The New Jersey constitution gave voting rights to whom?* ALL INHABITANTS

*What led the legislature to pass a law in 1807 that barred women from the polls?* GOVERNMENT OF PETTICOATS

*Tell me what that means in your own words.*

*What do you think was so threatening about women voters?*

In 1821 New York amended its constitution to require BLACK VOTERS to own property worth an amount that effectively banned them from the ballot booth. Other examples of efforts to limit voting included the CHINESE EXCLUSION ACT (1882), which prevented Chinese immigrants from becoming citizens and thereby blocked them from the polls.

*New York amended its constitution to require \_\_\_ \_\_\_ to own property.*

BLACK VOTERS

*In what year was this?* 1821

*However, what effectively banned black voters from the ballot booth?* THE COST OF THE PROPERTY REQUIRED TO VOTE.

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*What act occurred in 1882?* THE CHINESE EXCLUSION ACT

*What did the Chinese Exclusion Act do?* PREVENTED CHINESE IMMIGRANTS FROM BECOMING CITIZENS

After SLAVERY ended, a campaign was launched to secure voting rights for African American men. This was seemingly fulfilled with the RATIFICATION of the FIFTEENTH Amendment in 1870, which guaranteed the right to vote to all MEN, regardless of “race, color, or previous condition of servitude.” However, Southern states subsequently suppressed the black vote through INTIMIDATION and various other measures—such as POLL TAXES and LITERACY TESTS. The tests often required perfect scores and were frequently designed to be confusing; in one LOUISIANA test, the person was told to “Write every other word in this first line and print every third word in same line (original type smaller and first line ended at comma) but capitalize the fifth word that you write.” Uhhh...what? Did you get that? Neither did I. Such efforts proved so effective that by the early 20th century, nearly all African Americans had been DISENFRANCHISED (deprived of the right to vote) in the South.

*After \_\_\_ ended, a campaign was launched to secure voting rights for African American men.*  
SLAVERY

*Or → When was a campaign launched to secure the voting right for African American men?*  
AFTER SLAVERY ENDED.

*What did the ratification of the 15th amendment guarantee?* THE RIGHT TO VOTE TO ALL MEN, REGARDLESS OF RACE, COLOR OR PREVIOUS CONDITION OF SERVITUDE.

*What is one way the Southern states suppressed the black vote?* INTIMIDATION; POLL TAXES; LITERACY TESTS

*Which state had the confusing literacy test we just talked about?* LOUISIANA

*What word means “deprived of the right to vote”?* DISENFRANCHISED

During this time, WOMEN were demanding the right to vote. The women’s suffrage movement in the U.S. began in the early 19th century and was initially linked with ANTISLAVERY efforts. Backed by FORMIDABLE activists—notably ELIZABETH CADY STANTON, LUCRETIA MOTT, LUCY STONE, and SUSAN B. ANTHONY—the movement slowly made progress (let’s keep in mind though, these were white women. Racism was still running rampant despite efforts for voting rights). In 1890 WYOMING became the first state to adopt a constitution that granted women the right to vote, and by 1918 women had acquired equal suffrage with men in 15 states. However, it was realized that a CONSTITUTIONAL amendment was needed, and in 1920 the NINETEENTH Amendment was ratified when TENNESSEE approved the measure by one vote, becoming the 36th state to pass it; the victory was ensured only after a 24-year-old legislator changed his previous vote at the request of his mother, who told him “to be a good boy.”

*What began in the early 19th century?* WOMEN’S SUFFRAGE MOVEMENT

*It was linked with \_\_\_ efforts.* ANTI-SLAVERY

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*Name one of the “formidable activists” mentioned, that backed the movement.*

ELIZABETH CADY STANTON; LUCRETIA MOTT; LUCY STONE; SUSAN B. ANTHONY

*What did all of these women have in common?* THEY WERE WHITE WOMEN.

*Why is it important for us to keep in mind that these activists were white women?*

The women often left out of that movement, or at least the public eye, were some remarkable women who fought for their rights to vote as black American women. Some important names to remember are MARY ANN SHADD CARY, who became a lawyer in her lifetime and an activist for the women’s suffrage movement. FRANCES ELLEN WATKINS HARPER, who was a prominent abolitionist and leader in the suffrage movement. MARY CHURCH TERRELL who was the first black woman to earn her college degree. NANNIE HELEN BURROUGHS, who was an educator. And DAISY ELIZABETH ADAMS LAMPKIN, a woman who would become the President of the Lucy Stone Woman Suffrage League in 1915.

*Name one of the black women mentioned who fought for their right to vote.*

MARY ANN SHADD CARY; FRANCES ELLEN WATKINS HARPER; MARY CHURCH TERRELL; NANNIE HELEN BURROUGHS; DAISY ELIZA

*After naming your suffragette, tell me what she did.*

In the ensuing decades, other groups—such as Native Americans (1957)—gained UNIVERSAL suffrage. For African Americans, however, their vote continued to be SUPPRESSED. By the mid-1960s fewer than 7 PERCENT of blacks were registered to vote in MISSISSIPPI. With the CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT, efforts were renewed to enforce the rights of African American voters. In 1964 the TWENTY-FOURTH Amendment was adopted, prohibiting poll taxes in federal elections. The following year the VOTING RIGHTS ACT was signed. The landmark legislation banned any effort to deny voting rights, such as literacy tests.

*In what year did Native Americans gain universal suffrage?* 1957

*Whose vote was still being suppressed?* AFRICAN AMERICANS

*What had renewed the efforts to enforce the rights of African American voters?* THE CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT

*What was adopted in 1964?* THE TWENTY-FOURTH AMENDMENT

*What is one thing this amendment did?* PROHIBITED POLL TAXES IN FEDERAL ELECTIONS.

*What was signed the following year?* THE VOTING RIGHTS ACT

*What did this do?* BANNED ANY EFFORT TO DENY VOTING RIGHTS, SUCH AS LITERACY TESTS.

We’ve come a long way since the beginnings of voter rights, and for that we should be proud! But there is still growing conflict in the United States, even to this day. The fight is only just beginning, but what this should prove, is that we shouldn’t stop until our voices as United States citizens are heard! Are you registered to vote? There are a lot of resources to help you, and information on the candidates that are running that you may be interested in! Learn as much as you can before you make your decision. You can do this by reading news articles from

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a trusted and legitimate source, watching the news, researching the policies by both the republican and democratic parties, etc. This is YOUR decision to make, and no one else's. Let your voice be heard!

**Creative Writing:**

*With this history of voting in the United States, what can you know about America today?*

*What is an important issue to you, that you think the US government should be focusing on?*

*How would you describe your ideal presidential candidate?*

*What does it take to be a good president/leader?*



Meghann Parkinson is an S2C Practitioner at [Growing Kids Therapy Center](#) and an I-ASC Mentor. Over the last year, she has garnered an interest in the truth in American History and teaches "Woke History" at GKTC. Meghann likes visiting historical oddities and landmarks off the beaten path.

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