

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

1790 Only white male adult property-owners have the right to vote.

1800

1810

1810 Last religious prerequisite for voting is eliminated.

1820

1840

1850 Property ownership and tax requirements eliminated by 1850. Almost all adult white males could 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.

1860

1870 The [15th Amendment](#) is passed. It gives former slaves the right to vote and protects the voting rights of adult male citizens of any race.

1880

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.

1900

1910

1913 The [17th 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 15th Amendment, thereby outlawing literacy tests for federal elections.

1920

1920 The 19th Amendment guarantees [women's suffrage](#).

1924 Indian Citizenship Act grants all [Native Americans](#) the rights of citizenship, including the right to vote in federal elections.

1930

1940

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 15th Amendment.

1950

1957 The first law to implement the 15th amendment, the Civil Rights Act, is passed. The Act set up the Civil Rights Commission—among its duties is to investigate voter discrimination.

1960

1960 In *Gomillion v. Lightfoot* (Alabama) the Court outlaws "[gerrymandering](#)."

1961 The 23rd Amendment allows voters of the [District of Columbia](#) to participate in presidential elections.

1964 The 24th 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

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, cited

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 26th 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.

1980

1990

1995 The Federal "[Motor Voter Law](#)" takes effect, making it easier to register to vote.

2000

2003 Federal Voting Standards and Procedures Act requires states to streamline registration, voting, and other election procedures.