# **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.

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| **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 eliminated by 1850. Almost all adult white males could vote. |
| **1855** | Connecticut adopts the nation's first [literacy test](http://www.infoplease.com/id/A0518709) for voting. Massachusetts follows suit in 1857. The tests were implemented to discriminate against Irish-Catholic immigrants. |
| **1870** | The [15th Amendment](http://www.infoplease.com/id/A0438916) 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](http://www.infoplease.com/id/A0839551). 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](http://www.infoplease.com/id/A0461771) that allow those who could vote before 1870, or their descendants, to vote regardless of literacy or tax qualifications. |
| **1913** | The [17th Amendment](http://www.infoplease.com/id/A0647938) calls for members of the [U.S. Senate](http://www.infoplease.com/id/A0857527) 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](http://www.infoplease.com/id/A0847276) rules that the clause is in conflict with the 15th Amendment, thereby outlawing literacy tests for federal elections. |
| **1920** | The 19th Amendment guarantees [women's suffrage](http://www.infoplease.com/id/A0861989). |
| **1924** | Indian Citizenship Act grants all [Native Americans](http://www.infoplease.com/spot/aihm1.html) 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](http://www.infoplease.com/id/A0840125) were conducted by private associations, which, by definion, could exclude whomever they chose. The Court declares the nomination process to be a public process bound by the terms of 15th Amendment. |
| **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** | In *Gomillion* v. *Lightfoot* (Alabama) the Court outlaws "[gerrymandering](http://www.infoplease.com/id/A0820654)." |
| **1961** | The 23rd Amendment allows voters of the [District of Columbia](http://www.infoplease.com/id/A0815651) 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.](http://www.infoplease.com/spot/mlkbiospot.html), mounts a [voter registration drive](http://www.infoplease.com/spot/civilrightstimeline1.html#1964) 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](http://www.infoplease.com/id/A0807740), 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](http://www.infoplease.com/id/A0781452) for voting in state and local elections is unconstitutional and suggests that 30 days is an ample period. |
| **1995** | The Federal "[Motor Voter Law](http://www.infoplease.com/id/A0544673)" takes effect, making it easier to register to vote. |
| **2003** | Federal Voting Standards and Procedures Act requires states to streamline registration, voting, and other election procedures. |
| **2013** | In *Shelby County v. Holder*, the Supreme Court strikes down Section 4 of the Voting Rights Act, which established a formula for Congress to use when determining if a state or voting jurisdiction requires prior approval before changing its voting laws. Under Section 5 of the act nine—mostly Southern—states with a history of discrimination must get clearance from Congress before changing voting rules to make sure racial minorities are not negatively affected. While the 5–4 decision did not invalidate Section 5, it made it toothless. Fallout from the ruling was swift, with several states quickly moving to change their voting laws. |
| **2014** | In response to the [*Shelby County v. Holder*](http://www.infoplease.com/us/government/voting-rights.html) ruling, several states, including Texas, North Carolina, Wisconsin, Ohio, Alabama, Mississippi, Virginia, and South Carolina, passed laws that limited voting times or required photo ID at the polls. In October, the U.S. Supreme Court blocked law a photo ID law in Wisconsin. The Court, however, in September overturned a federal appeals court ruling that restored a week of early voting and allowed same-day registration in Ohio. |
| **2015** | A federal appeals panel ruled in August that Texas's voter ID law, which was passed in 2011, discriminates against blacks and Hispanics and violates Section 2 of the Voting Rights Act of 1965. The panel ordered a lower court to re-evaluate if the law was in fact written with discriminatory intent and to fix it if it was passed under such circumstances. |

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