



## WHAT IT MEANS

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Although the Fifteenth Amendment prohibited voting discrimination on account of race, many southern states enacted laws to make it difficult for African Americans to vote. The Twenty-fourth Amendment was designed to address one particular injustice, the poll tax. The requirement to pay a fee in order to vote kept low-income citizens, both white and black, from taking part in elections. The Twenty-fourth Amendment made it illegal to charge any voter for the right to cast a ballot in any federal election.



*“I’m as much a Southerner as anyone, but this is a moderate proposal. It seems to me the South can help its own cause by taking an affirmative position on this.”*

—Florida Senator Spessard L. Holland, defending the constitutional amendment to outlaw the poll tax, speaking in the Senate in 1962



# Twenty-fourth Amendment

## **New Hampshire eliminates property requirement**

→ 1792

New Hampshire is the first state to eliminate the rule that only property owners and taxpayers can vote. Following New Hampshire's lead, other states begin to shift away from such restrictions in an effort to open the electorate to all white males over age twenty-one. In 1856, North Carolina becomes the last state to eliminate property holding as a requirement for voting.

## **The Supreme Court upholds literacy tests for voting**

→ 1898

In *Williams v. Mississippi*, the U.S. Supreme Court held that literacy tests for voting did not violate the Fourteenth Amendment's equal protection clause so long as there was no proof that they were being given in a discriminatory fashion to exclude voters because of their race.

## **"Grandfather clause" is struck down**

→ 1915

In *Guinn v. United States*, the U.S. Supreme Court declares unconstitutional the "grandfather clause" in the Oklahoma Constitution, which allows illiterate men to vote if they can prove that their grandfathers had held the right. This provision allows illiterate white men to vote, but not illiterate blacks, as most of their grandfathers had been slaves.

## **Congress passes the Civil Rights Act of 1964**

→ 1964

In a sweeping move, Congress passes the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which bars discrimination on the basis of race, national origin, religion, and gender in voting, public accommodations (such as restaurants and hotels), the workplace, and schools.

## **The Voting Rights Act of 1965 is adopted**

→ 1965

Believing the social gains that African Americans achieved by the Civil Rights Act of 1964 can best be protected by exercising the right to vote, Congress writes a comprehensive voting rights law. It temporarily suspends literacy tests and provides for the appointment of federal examiners with the power to register qualified citizens to vote. Under this law, any racially discriminatory act that prevents Americans from voting is prohibited.

## **The Supreme Court strikes down Virginia's residency requirement**

→ 1965

Following ratification of the Twenty-fourth Amendment, Virginia amends its poll tax law. Voters can either pay the poll tax or file a "certificate of residency" proving they lived in the state six months prior to the election. In *Harman v. Forssenius*, the Supreme Court rules that the burden of proving residency so far in advance of an election violates the Twenty-fourth Amendment.

# TIMELINE

## Poll taxes are upheld as constitutional

1937

Many southern states adopt the policy of charging voters a poll tax. This tactic denies the right to vote to both black and white voters who cannot afford the tax. In *Breedlove v. Suttles*, Breedlove, a twenty-eight-year-old white male, seeks to have Georgia's poll tax declared unconstitutional. The Supreme Court holds that the statute does not violate the Constitution, as it does not discriminate arbitrarily.

## Alabama literacy tests are found unconstitutional

1949

In *Davis v. Schnell*, the U.S. Supreme court finds that an Alabama constitutional amendment that requires citizens to pass a test demonstrating their understanding of an article of the federal Constitution in order to vote violates that very document. The legislative history of the Amendment discloses that the tests are intended to disenfranchise African Americans.

## North Carolina's literacy tests are upheld

1959

In *Lassiter v. Northampton County Board of Elections*, the U.S. Supreme Court rules that the state of North Carolina's requirement that all voters pass a literacy test in order to vote is constitutional. The Court finds that the policy is not inconsistent with the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments' standards of fairness.

## Poll taxes are ruled unconstitutional

1966

In *Harper v. Virginia Board of Elections*, the U.S. Supreme Court overrules its earlier decision in *Breedlove v. Suttles* (1937) and declares that the use of a poll tax at state elections is unconstitutional. The Court holds that discrimination based on economic status is in violation of the equal protection clause of the Fourteenth Amendment. As a result of this ruling and the passage of the Twenty-fourth Amendment, poll taxes can no longer be used in federal or state elections.

## "Durational residency" rule is found unconstitutional

1972

Tennessee passes a "durational residency" rule for citizens to qualify to vote. Under this rule, voters must live in the state for one year and in the county for ninety days before being allowed to vote. In *Dunn v. Blumstein*, the U.S. Supreme Court strikes down the residency rule as an unconstitutional restriction on the right to vote. The Court notes that there are other ways to achieve the state's goals of deterring voter fraud and ensuring that voters are knowledgeable without blocking otherwise eligible voters from participating in elections.

## Congress strengthens the Voting Rights Act

1982

Renewing its commitment to voting rights for another twenty-five years, Congress extends the authority of the Justice Department to review legislative redistricting in some southern states. In *Mobile v. Bolden* (1980), the Supreme Court rejects a class action suit by African Americans who argue that electing the Mobile, Alabama, city council on an at-large basis—meaning that council members were elected by the city population as a whole rather than in neighborhood-based districts—dilutes the black vote. The Court finds that at-large elections are racially neutral. In response to this ruling, Congress amends the Voting Rights Act to permit a finding of racial discrimination without proof that the state specifically intends to discriminate.