

Voting Rights TIMELINE

Voting Limited to White Male Property Owners

→ Colonial America

Voting rights vary among the colonies, but leaders agree that only individuals who have a “stake in society” should be allowed to vote, meaning white male property owners and taxpayers. Some colonies have religious requirements, banning Catholics or Jews. The U.S. Constitution leaves voting rights for the states to decide. The Panic of 1819, the nation’s first major financial crisis, leads to demands that property restrictions end. In 1856, North Carolina is the last state to drop the property rule.

First Women’s Suffrage Conference

→ 1848

About 300 activists gather for a convention in Seneca Falls, N.Y., to strategize on women’s suffrage. Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Lucretia Mott, along with 60 other women and 32 men, sign the Declaration of Sentiments and Resolutions, modeled on the Declaration of Independence, which calls for equal treatment of women and men under the law and voting rights for women.



Postage stamp featuring Elizabeth Stanton, Carrie Chapman Catt, and Lucretia Mott

Photo: Wikimedia Commons

Former Slaves Get Voting Right

→ 1870

The 15th Amendment is ratified, prohibiting federal and state governments from denying citizens the right to vote based on “race, color, or previous condition of servitude,” but it does not specifically mention women. About 150 women attempt to vote after ratification but are turned away.



Print commemorating celebration of enactment of the Fifteenth Amendment.

Photo: Wikimedia Commons

Poll Taxes and Literacy Tests

→ 1889-90

Mostly Southern states begin to charge a fee, known as a poll tax, and institute literacy tests to keep African Americans, who are mostly poor, from voting. (Connecticut in 1855 adopted the first literacy test to discourage Irish-Catholic immigrants from voting.) Because the tests also exclude many white voters, states add grandfather clauses to allow those who could vote before 1870 and their descendants to vote regardless of literacy tests.

Women Win Right to Vote

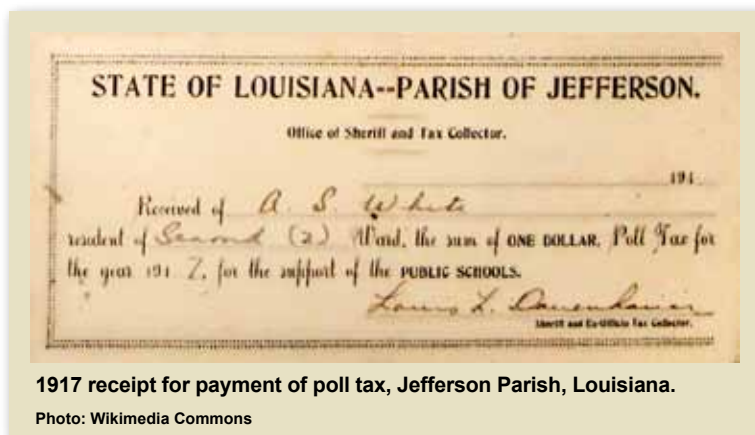
→ 1920

Seventy-two years after the Seneca Falls Convention first called for women’s voting rights, the 19th Amendment is ratified. Only one person who had signed the convention’s Declaration of Sentiments and Resolutions, Charlotte Woodward, is still alive and able to exercise her right to vote.

Civil Rights Act Is Passed

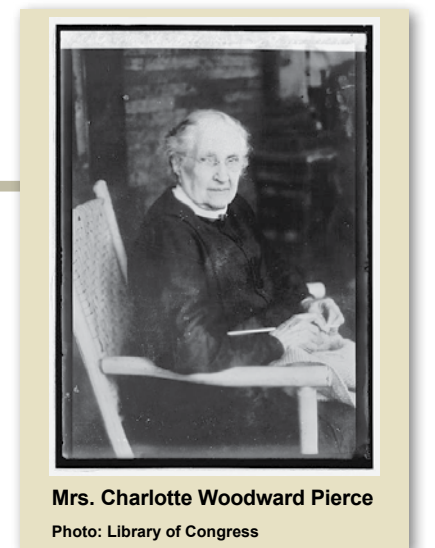
→ 1957

The Civil Rights Act is the first civil rights law enacted since Reconstruction. It creates the Commission on Civil Rights to investigate voting rights complaints and authorizes the Justice Department to take legal action, but it has a slow start. Sen. Strom Thurmond sustains a one-man filibuster for 24 hours and 18 minutes to try to stop the bill.



1917 receipt for payment of poll tax, Jefferson Parish, Louisiana.

Photo: Wikimedia Commons



Mrs. Charlotte Woodward Pierce

Photo: Library of Congress

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One Person, One Vote

1962

The issue of whether legislative districts reflect the population distribution arises in the Supreme Court case *Baker v. Carr*. Tennessee's failure to redraw districts was challenged as a violation of the 14th Amendment's equal protection clause. Rural citizens, who were mostly white, had greater proportional representation than their counterparts in the cities, where ethnic minorities and blacks primarily lived. Reversing a previous ruling, the Supreme Court says the courts, rather than state legislatures, can resolve the issue. After the ruling, many redistricting challenges are brought to the courts.

Poll Tax Outlawed in Federal Elections

1964

The 24th Amendment, which prohibits poll taxes in elections for federal officials, is ratified. The fees were imposed on voters in elections to prevent poor Americans, particularly people of color, from voting.



The 24th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution

Photo: Wikimedia Commons

Civil Rights Act

1964

Shortly after President John F. Kennedy's death, President Lyndon Johnson proposes and Congress passes the Civil Rights Act of 1964, one of the most important pieces of legislation in U.S. history. The law bars discrimination on the basis of race, national origin, religion and sex in voting, public accommodations, the workplace and schools.



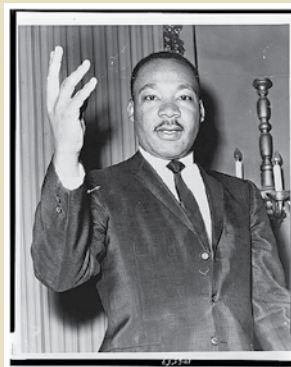
President Lyndon B. Johnson signs the 1964 Civil Rights Act as Martin Luther King, Jr. and others look on.

Photo: Wikimedia Commons

King Leads Voting Rights Marches

1965

Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. launches a voter registration drive in Selma, Ala., where the voting rolls are 99 percent white and 1 percent African American, even though African Americans outnumber whites. Over nearly two months, 2,000 are arrested as they try to register. No African Americans are added to the rolls. After an African American youth is murdered, King tries to lead marchers from Selma to Montgomery but is met with brutal violence. Two weeks later, the march to the state capitol is completed under federal protection. King calls for an end to segregation, poverty and voter discrimination: "I know you are asking today, 'How long will it take?'"... How long? Not long, because no lie can live forever."



Martin Luther King, Jr.

Photo: Library of Congress

Voting Rights Act

1965

Racial violence in the South prompts President Lyndon Johnson to call for a strong national voting rights law that directly addresses voting discrimination because states are resistant to enforcing the 15th Amendment, passing new discriminatory practices when others are struck down. The law bans literacy tests and sends federal examiners to Southern states to register African American voters. Poll taxes are not addressed, but the law directs the federal government to challenge their use. In 1966, the Supreme Court strikes down poll taxes as a violation of the 14th Amendment in *Harper v. Virginia State Board of Elections*.

Voting Age Lowered to 18

1971

The 26th Amendment permanently lowers the voting age for all elections to age 18. The change was largely in response to the Vietnam War and the feeling that young people who are old enough to die for their country are old enough to vote.

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Proof of Discriminatory Intent

→ 1980

Voting rights advocates receive a setback in *Mobile v. Bolden* when the Supreme Court rules that any constitutional claim that a legislative district illegally dilutes the power of minority voters must include proof of a racially discriminatory purpose (i.e., the legislature intended to discriminate on the basis of race). This requirement is widely seen as making such claims far more difficult to prove. In 1982, Congress amends the Voting Rights Act of 1965 to permit a finding of discrimination without proof that the state specifically intended to discriminate.

Congressional Districts Are at States' Discretion

→ 2006

In 2003, the Texas Legislature redrew lines for its 32 congressional districts to replace a court-drawn map based on the 2000 census. Plaintiffs challenge the new map on the grounds that it violates the one person, one vote requirement, dilutes the votes of people of color and violates the First and Fourteenth Amendments. The Supreme Court decides that states can redraw their congressional districts at their discretion.

