



Civics is all around us. There is a lot to know about the government and how “We the People” interact with the government and each other. Let’s help each other expand our civic literacy.

One way to look at the story of America is through the lens of the expansion of citizen rights. One of the most important of these rights is suffrage, or the right to vote. Since the ratification of the U.S. Constitution in 1787, the right to vote has been **expanded** from a small group of land-owning Protestant Christian white males 21 or older to everyone who is a citizen and at least 18 years old.

The expansion of suffrage began at the state level, because it was historically the states that set requirements for voting. It took nearly 70 years after ratification of the U.S. Constitution for universal white male suffrage and it took much longer for the right to apply to all Americans.

Expansion of Suffrage in the United States

- ★ **1787** - White land owning Protestant Christian males at least 21 years old.
- ★ **1856** - North Carolina removes the landowning requirement for white men to vote. Universal suffrage exists across the country for all white men who are at least 21 years old.
- ★ **1868** - The 14th Amendment grants citizenship to former slaves, but only men get the right to vote.
- ★ **1870** - The 15th Amendment states that the right to vote cannot be denied based on race. States find ways to limit voting, creating literacy tests and poll taxes which prevented some eligible males from voting.
- ★ **1890** - Wyoming is the first state to grant suffrage to women.
- ★ **1920** - The 19th Amendment grants women nationwide the right to vote.
- ★ **1924** - Native Americans gain access to the vote after the passage of the Indian Citizenship Act.
- ★ **1961** - Citizens of Washington, DC gain the right to vote for president.
- ★ **1962** - Native Americans fully gain the right to vote when New Mexico agrees to enforce the 1924 Indian Citizenship Act after judicial action.
- ★ **1964** - The 24th Amendment bans poll taxes (having to pay to vote).
- ★ **1965** - The Voting Rights Act banned race discrimination in voting practices by federal, state & local govts.
- ★ **1971** - The 26th Amendment lowered the voting age to 18 years old.

The expansion of suffrage to all American citizens at least 18 years old required continuous struggle and efforts to demand that the government live up to the promise of the Declaration of Independence that we are all created equal and entitled to our natural rights of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. To help protect our **natural rights**, we must have our civil rights, and for citizens, the right to vote is foremost among them.

Conversations about expanding suffrage continue even today, such as whether **16 year-olds** should have the right to vote. While some might say that they are not mature enough, others argue that some democratic countries allow 16 year-olds to vote because they pay taxes, are subject to payroll tax if they work, and must abide by laws and ordinances enacted by elected officials. Ultimately, there is little doubt that exercising one’s right to vote is vital to a healthy democracy.

✓ **To Do and To Think:** [Read this article](#) about whether 16 year-olds should have the right to vote. What are some reasons the article cites for and against granting 16 year-olds the right to vote? Do you think 16 year-olds should have this right? Cite evidence from the article to support your opinion.

Learn MORE about the expansion of voting rights. Free registration may be required.

- [Voting Rights](#), from Civics360
- [Voting Rights in America](#), from Bill of Rights Institute
- [Expanding Voting Rights](#), from Teaching Tolerance

