

Script for Who Can Vote? 1787 to 1920 (Part 1)



Slide 1: Notes for Teachers

Slide 2: Who Can Vote? A Short History of Voting Rights, Part 1

Who can participate in government? Who has a voice? Does “We the People” really mean ALL citizens? And who is considered a citizen?

This PowerPoint describes the expansion of voting rights in the United States from 1787 to 1920; however, during this same time, some people’s voting rights continued to be denied.

Slide 3: What do you think?

Take a minute to read these sentences and decide if each one is true or false.

Did you know that all these sentences are false? Listen to the information in this PowerPoint to find out more.

Slide 4: When the U.S. Constitution was adopted

Even though the U.S. Constitution starts with “We the People . . .”, it did not include ALL people that were in the United States at that time. The creators of the Constitution could not agree on how elections for federal offices would be conducted, so they decided to let the states make their own decisions about voting rights. However, as a safeguard, they added a clause to the Constitution that allowed Congress to make laws about voting or change states’ laws or regulations about voting.

As a result, at first, white men with property were the only Americans routinely permitted to vote. This meant that even some soldiers in the American Revolution, such as Black soldiers and those who were not property owners could not vote! Why do you think that was the case at that time?

Slide 5: Voting Differences Among the States

As you can imagine, leaving control of elections to the individual states led to many different voting requirements, as well as unfair voting practices. Individual states had different rules about the amount of property needed in order to vote. A few states allowed freed slaves to vote, and New Jersey allowed women to vote if they had the correct amount of property; however, these rights were later removed.

Property was not the only qualification for voting. Some states had voting restrictions based on religion. Maryland was the last state to remove religious

restrictions for voting, and states no longer denied eligible voters the right to vote based upon their religion.

Black people, women, Native Americans, non-English speakers, and citizens between the ages of 18 and 21 could not vote at this time. Their fight for the right to vote would last almost 200 years.

Slide 6: Change starts to come

President Andrew Jackson was elected in 1824. He was the first president who was not a wealthy landowner from the 13 original colonies. Many western frontiersmen came to the White House to celebrate his inauguration and created an unruly spectacle. Jackson helped advance the political rights of those who did not own property. This opened the political process to include more people, but once again, this only applied to white male citizens. As a result, the 1828 presidential election was the first election in which non-property holding white males could vote in most states.

As the nation expanded and the population increased, the movement for the voice and rights of women to be heard began. A group of women led by **Lucretia Mott** and **Elizabeth Cady Stanton** held a conference with about 200 in attendance in 1848 in Seneca Falls, NY. It was advertised as "a convention to discuss the social, civil, and religious condition and rights of woman." The conference issued the Declaration of Sentiments and Resolutions which called for equal treatment of men and women under the law and voting rights for women. This was the beginning of the women's suffrage movement.

Slide 7: The 14th Amendment

In 1866 after the Civil War, the 14th Amendment was passed which granted equal protection of laws to all people born in the U.S. or who become naturalized citizens, effectively finally making Black people citizens of the U.S.

This amendment set the stage for the expansion of voting rights. However, Native Americans born on tribal land or reservations were excluded because they were not considered US citizens at this time.

Slide 8: The 15th Amendment

In 1870, 15th Amendment extended the right to vote to all male citizens regardless of race, color, or previous enslavement. With the right to vote, many Black men were elected to government positions at all levels of government, national, state, and local. Historians have identified more than 1,500 African American officeholders during the Reconstruction Era. However, with the end of the

Reconstruction Era in 1876, voting rights for Black people were increasingly suppressed with the passage of various Jim Crow Laws, especially in the South. Note that women were not included in this Amendment and were not allowed to vote as a result.

Slide 9: How were voting rights denied? (poll taxes, literacy tests)

After Reconstruction ended in 1876, some states enacted laws to restrict the right to vote. These included poll taxes that required people to pay a tax in order to vote. While the amounts of money on these poll taxes do not seem like a lot of money today, in those days, these amounts were significant.

Faced with a choice between putting food on the table or paying to vote, what would you do? Many poor people could not afford to pay the poll tax and therefore could not vote.

There were many versions of literacy tests. All were very difficult and unfair. Especially in smaller towns, the voting registrar decided what would be included on a literacy test and whether a person passed it. Even if all the answers were correct, a person could be judged by the local registrar to have failed the test and not be able to register to vote.

Slide 10: How were voting rights denied? (grandfather clause, intimidation, and violence)

Some states used the “grandfather clause” to restrict Blacks for voting. This meant that in order to vote, the person’s grandfather had to have been a registered voter. This eliminated anyone freed as a result of the Civil War whose grandfather would have been enslaved. In addition, acts of violence and threats from people and organizations, such as the Ku Klux Klan also intimidated and stopped Black men from registering and voting.

Slide 11: Women Could Not Vote

Women organized, marched, demonstrated, debated, lobbied, wrote newspaper articles, and worked hard for the right to vote for years after the Seneca Falls Conference. In 1869, Wyoming became the first state to give women this right. Eight western states followed Wyoming’s example. Why do you think women were given the right to vote in western states first?

But the right to vote was not easily granted by other states. Women continued to advocate for the right to vote nation-wide. The most famous demonstrations took place in front of the White House. Women were arrested for these demonstrations, put in jail, many of them in 1917 at the Occoquan Prison in Lorton, VA (now the

Lucy Burns Museum at the Workhouse Art Center) where they were shackled to the wall, and endured abuse. When they went on hunger strikes, they were painfully force-fed with tubes rammed up their noses.

Slide 12: The 19th Amendment

While Congress finally approved legislation allowing women to vote in May 1919, it would take more than a year before the Amendment was approved by the states to become law. Women finally won the right to vote when Tennessee approved the 19th Amendment by **ONE** vote!

Although women won the right to vote in 1920 with the 19th Amendment, Black women faced the same obstacles as Black men. Jim Crow laws suppressed their voting rights. It would be many more decades before most Black women would be able to cast a ballot. Since Native Americans and Asian Americans were not considered citizens in 1920, the 19th Amendment did not apply to these women either until decades later.

Slide 13: Who could not vote in 1920?

While more citizens were able to vote in 1920, more change was needed. Although Black men and women had the right to vote, this right was suppressed in many states. Native Americans, Asian Americans, and people under age 21 still could not vote.

For the rest of the story, see Part 2 of the presentation, *Who Can Vote? A Short History of Voting Rights, Part. 2.*