

## The Story of Voting Continues Today

The stories of women and people of African descent voting in New Jersey from 1776-1807 and the **suffrage** movement nearly a century later still have connections to us today. They can remind us that our rights are fragile and they can be taken away. In doing so, these stories remind us that what some people consider to be rights for all, other people consider to be privileges for some. Women fought for the right to vote until 1920 when the 19th Amendment was **ratified**. While this **amendment** granted women the right to vote, it did not result in universal suffrage for all women or all citizens, or in full equality for women. Though several laws in the 20th century expanded access to the polls, even now, some United States citizens are still not able to vote, and women and others continue to lead movements that seek greater equality.

How can the story of early women voters and voters of African descent in New Jersey help us better understand debates around voting rights today?

### A BRIEF HISTORY OF VOTING

Though New Jersey allowed for women and people of African descent to vote for 31 years, the process of gaining and, in some cases, regaining the right to vote for many Americans took over 100 years. These steps were accomplished through the work of many suffrage advocates who continuously fought for the expansion of the vote.

Removal of property requirement by states (years vary)	Legally recognized the right to vote for men who did not own property <i>Due to other restrictions, this typically only enfranchised white male citizens.</i>
15th Amendment (1870)	Legally recognized the right to vote for men of African descent
19th Amendment (1920)	Legally recognized the right to vote for women to vote nationwide
Indian Citizenship Act (1924)	Recognized Native Americans as citizens of the United States, which kicked off a state by state movement that recognized their right to vote
McCarran-Walter Act (1952)	Overtaken further race restrictions on citizenship, legally allowing Asian immigrants to become citizens for the first time in over 60 years
Voting Rights Act (1965)	Outlawed <b>discriminatory</b> voting practices
26th Amendment (1971)	Lowered the voting age to 18
Section 203 of the Voting Rights Act (1975)	Provided language assistance and provided ballots and information in other languages
Voting Accessibility for the Elderly and the Handicapped Act (1984)	Required accessible polling places for federal elections

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## BARRIERS TO VOTING

Despite the accomplishments of suffragists at the federal levels, there were still barriers in place to prevent many Americans from accessing the polls. After the passage of the 15th Amendment, African American men were now allowed to vote in all states, and some states even elected men of African descent to Congress. However, new state laws, like **grandfather clauses** and **Black Codes**, were put in place to prevent African Americans from voting. The U.S. government also used the term “citizen” to prevent other groups, like Native Americans and Asian Americans, from voting. People of color, other cultural and ethnic groups, and some poor white Americans were impacted by state laws requiring **literacy tests** and the payment of **poll taxes** to vote. Violence and threats of violence also kept many Americans from the polls throughout the end of the 19th century and first half of the 20th century.

These discriminatory practices were largely disposed of with the passage of the Voting Rights Act of 1965, which forbade literacy tests, grandfather clauses, Black Codes, and other practices to prevent Americans from voting. A year earlier, the 24th Amendment removed all forms of poll taxes. In the decades that followed, suffrage advocates continued to push for more voting rights, leading to the passage of laws ensuring physical access to polling places and providing election materials in all necessary languages. And advocates continued to push for existing laws to be fully enforced.

## PUSHING FOR THE VOTE

During the 19th and 20th century, suffrage advocates worked tirelessly for the expansion of the vote. In 1848, the Seneca Falls Convention was the first national gathering to discuss ways to advance women’s rights. In part inspired by the leadership of women of the Haudenosaunee (Iroquois Confederacy), they pushed for increased rights of women, including the right to vote. In the next two decades, the National Women’s Rights Convention joined with the **Abolitionist** Movement and eventually created the American Equal Rights Association (AERA) in 1866. This organization made its purpose to secure the vote for all Americans regardless of race, color, or sex. Though the organization dissolved a few years later over disagreements regarding the 15th Amendment, other organizations formed to continue the fight for suffrage.

*“We are all bound up together in one great bundle of humanity, and society cannot trample on the weakest and the feeblest of its members without receiving the curse in its soul.”*

-Frances Ellen Watkins Harper on universal rights, 11th National Women’s Rights Convention, 1866

**Suffragists** Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton formed the National Woman Suffrage Association while others like Lucy Stone, Frances Ellen Watkins Harper, and Julia Ward Howe joined together to form the American Woman Suffrage Association. These and other suffrage organizations emerged at the local, state, and national levels in the latter half of the 19th century. Their efforts were successful in several western states; Wyoming, Utah, Colorado, and Idaho all granted women the right to vote before the end of the 19th century.

Still other groups and individuals, like the National Association of Colored Women led by Mary Church Terrell, pushed for the inclusion of Black and other women’s voices in conversations about suffrage. These groups also pushed for universal suffrage, the removal of barriers to the polls, and the outlawing of voter intimidation practices. Despite the passage of the 19th Amendment in 1920, they continued to push for access to voting for all Americans throughout the 20th century.

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## VOTING RIGHTS TODAY

At the Constitutional Convention in 1787, the framers established the United States as a **republic** where the government derives its power from the people. In a republic, people elect officials who they feel will best represent their concerns in government. The right to vote is not written into the Constitution, and before the addition of several amendments, each state was allowed to choose who could vote for representatives in their state. Today, the Constitution works alongside state laws so that voters can cast **ballots** for representatives in all levels of government — local, state, and national.

Most U.S. citizens over the age of 18 are eligible to vote in federal elections provided they meet their state's residency requirements and have registered with their state. North Dakota is the sole state that does not require voter registration; instead voters must bring an approved form of identification to the polls. Some states and localities within them also allow for non-citizens and 16 and 17 year-olds to vote in local elections. There are also resources for people who are unhoused to vote in various elections. Eligible voters who live abroad, are living out of state for schooling, or are not able to vote in person for other reasons are also able to submit an absentee ballot. Some states also allow early voting, which lets voters cast their ballots in the days or weeks leading up to Election Day.

However, not all United States citizens can vote. Some states do not allow people who are convicted of crimes to vote, while others do not allow people with certain mental disabilities to do so. Citizens who live in territories of the United States, such as Guam or Puerto Rico, cannot vote in presidential elections.

In recent years, laws that require voters to show picture identification before they cast a ballot have caused controversy in numerous states. These state laws have prevented thousands of people from voting. Supporters of such laws argue that requiring citizens to show a government-issued identification card before voting is the best way to prevent election fraud. Opponents point out that election fraud is not a major problem in the United States. They argue that the laws were designed to **disenfranchise** groups like people of color, the poor, the young, and the elderly who are less likely to have the necessary means to acquire picture identification.

## IMPORTANCE OF VOTING

Voting is one of the civic responsibilities of citizens within a democracy. Unlike civic duties, which are things citizens are required to do, civic responsibilities are things citizens should do to help support the community. These can include things like volunteering, being well-informed in public issues, and engaging in their local government. Through civic responsibilities, people are able to actively engage in the practice of democracy.

Voting allows citizens to have a voice in their government by choosing representatives who reflect their beliefs and who promise to advocate for the issues that are important to them. For example, if a citizen feels that the cost of a college education is too high, they can vote for someone who promises to lower the cost of tuition. In addition, voting holds government officials accountable to the people. If citizens do not feel their representatives are doing a good job, they can vote them out of office by electing someone else.

People who vote are also more likely to participate in their communities in other ways. By becoming knowledgeable on issues that affect them and are important to them, some voters tend to be more engaged in community affairs. People who vote are more likely to be involved in other civic activities such as writing to a government official, joining an interest group, or participating in a protest since they are informed and value the importance of making their voice heard.

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## HOW MANY PEOPLE VOTE?

Despite the importance of voting, the United States has low voter turnout compared to most nations around the world. The Pew Research Center concluded that in the 2020 presidential election, 62.8% of people of voting age cast their vote. You might think this number is low, but this election was unusually high for voter turnout. In the past, presidential elections have seen turnout much lower, about 55%. Midterm elections for Congress are usually much lower than presidential elections with about 45% of people of voting age turning up to the polls. Even though they also have great impact, local and state elections have even lower turnout especially when there is not a national election the same year.

There are many reasons why people choose not to vote. In their last survey on the topic, the Pew Research Center found that a large number (25%) of the people who did not vote disliked the candidate choices or their stances on issues. Other reasons included a lack of interest in the election or feeling their vote did not matter (15%), while others were kept from the polls due to conflicting schedules (14%) and illness or disability (12%). Other reasons mentioned in the survey included people being away from home, people having registration or transportation problems, and inconvenient hours and locations for polling places. Unlike other nations that hold their elections on a weekend, Election Day in the United States is on a Tuesday when many people are at work or in school.

### DID YOU KNOW?

Other countries around the world have much higher voter turnout compared to the United States. In Turkey, Sweden, and Australia voter turnout is closer to 80%. In Australia, this could be because people are fined if they don't vote.

However, in the past ten years, there has been a rise in voter turnout. Though the 2024 general election only saw a 63.51% voter turnout, this number is still higher than the 58% voter turnout in 2012 and the 60% voter turnout in 2016. Midterm elections are also seeing an increase in voter turnout. In 2014, 36% of eligible voters turned out to vote in the Midterm elections. This rose to 50% in 2018, and though there was a small drop to 46% in 2022 it still shows an increase in the number of voters from 2014. Why do you think more people are coming out to vote?



Unit 5 Big Idea