

Voters and Voter Behavior

SECTION 1

THE RIGHT TO VOTE

TEXT SUMMARY

Suffrage, also called **franchise**, is the right to vote. In 1789 only white male property owners had this right. Today, the American **electorate**, or the people eligible to vote, includes nearly all citizens who are at least 18 years of age. Two trends caused this change: the elimination of many of the restrictions on suffrage and the assumption of much of the States' power over suffrage by the Federal Government.

The Constitution's Framers left the power to set suffrage qualifications to the States; they did, however, forbid States from setting different qualifications for who can vote in State and federal elections. Also, State qualifications could not violate any part of the Constitution.

The struggle to extend voting rights began in the early 1800s. Laws were passed to prevent States from restricting suffrage to the extent that they had been. By the mid-1800s, restrictions based on religion and property were eliminated, and nearly all white adult males could vote. In 1870 the 15th Amendment eliminated restrictions based on race; in practice, however, African Americans were not totally free to vote until the passage of several civil rights acts in the 1960s. In 1920 the 19th Amendment added women to the electorate. In 1964 the 24th Amendment said that States could not make the payment of a tax a condition for voting. Most recently, in 1971 the 26th Amendment said that States could not deny anyone 18 or older the right to vote.

THE BIG IDEA

The United States has expanded its electorate through the elimination of restrictions on voting qualifications.

GRAPHIC SUMMARY: *The Expansion of Voting Rights*

Constitution	States cannot violate any part of the Constitution when they set suffrage requirements. States cannot have different qualifications for voting in State and federal elections.
15th Amendment (1870)	States cannot use race to determine who can vote.
19th Amendment (1920)	States cannot require people to be male to vote.
24th Amendment (1964)	States cannot use the payment of taxes to determine who can vote.
26th Amendment (1971)	States cannot require people to be older than 18 to vote.

Over time, the Constitution has been amended to allow for much less restriction on suffrage.

REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Who is eligible to vote in the United States today?

2. **Chart Skills** When did women win the right to vote?