

The History and Process of Voting

by Ben's Guide to the U.S. Government



voting booths in U.S., 1945

Any U.S. citizen who is at least 18 years old, and who meets certain requirements, can vote in federal elections. This has not always been the case. When the United States first won its independence, there were restrictions on who could vote. In some states, only white male landowners that were at least 21 years old could vote. Beginning in 1870, a series of Constitutional Amendments and other laws have extended voting privileges to more and more citizens.

- The Fifteenth Amendment (Amendment XV) was ratified (or officially adopted) on February 3, 1870. It gave African-American men the right to vote by declaring that the "right of citizens of the United States to vote shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any state on account of race, color, or previous condition of servitude."

- The Nineteenth Amendment (Amendment XIX) was ratified on August 18, 1920. It guarantees the right to vote to all American women by declaring that "the right of citizens of the United States to vote shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any State on account of sex."

- The Voting Rights Act of 1965 (Public Law 89-110) became effective on August 6, 1965. It enforced the Fifteenth Amendment and outlawed discriminatory voting practices.

- The Twenty-sixth Amendment (Amendment XXVI) was ratified on July 1, 1971. It lowered the voting age from 21 to 18 and declared that "the right of citizens of the United States, who are eighteen years of age or older, to vote shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any State on account of age."

It took a long time and a lot of hard work to extend the right to vote to every adult citizen in the United States. That's why it is every eligible American citizen's civic responsibility to vote. In order to vote, you must first be registered. Requirements for registration and registration deadlines change depending on where you live in the U.S.

Registration forms can be obtained from local election officials in your county, from your state's election office, or through voting advocacy groups. You can also register to vote at motor vehicle or driver's licensing offices, Armed Forces recruitment offices, or state agencies that provide public assistance services. Many states offer registration opportunities at public libraries, public high schools and universities, and post offices.

The form from the United States Election Assistance Commission (EAC) allows you to register to vote from anywhere in the United States. The forms on the EAC site have specific information in several languages about voter registration for each state. Can you find the instructions for your state?