

## Lesson 25

# How has the right to vote expanded since the Constitution was adopted?

### Purpose of Lesson

The Constitution originally left it up to the state governments to decide who should have the right to vote. In the early years of our nation, the states limited the right to vote to white men who owned property. In 1789, white males who did not own property, members of certain religious groups, free blacks, Native Americans, slaves, and women were not allowed to vote.

In this lesson, we will look at how the right to vote has been expanded in the last two hundred years to achieve a basic ideal

of our representative democracy—the constitutional right of all adult citizens to vote.

When you have completed this lesson, you should be able to explain how voting rights were extended by changes in state voting laws, by amendments to the Constitution, by acts of Congress, and by decisions of the Supreme Court.

### Terms to know

suffrage  
poll tax  
literacy test  
grandfather clause  
register



Which of the people in this picture would have been eligible to vote in the federal election of 1788?

## Extending the right to vote to all white males

The colonial limits on who could vote were also used during the early years of the new nation. Many colonies only gave the right to vote to white men who owned property and who belonged to a particular religious group.

After the Revolution, an increasing number of people objected to these limits on voting rights. States began to eliminate property and religious restrictions. In addition, new states joining the Union placed fewer limitations on **suffrage** (the right to vote). In the early 1800s, for example, six new western states gave the vote to all white males. By the time of the election of Andrew Jackson as President in 1828, the process of giving voting rights to more people was well on its way.

Although the states took many steps before the Civil War to extend suffrage, change was not easy. For example, as late as 1842 in Rhode Island, only men with property—less than half of the adult males—were allowed to vote. This situation caused an armed rebellion led by Thomas Dorr, a Providence lawyer, whose story is told below. The rebellion failed but the following year a new state constitution was adopted that gave voting rights to all male citizens who paid a tax of at least one dollar a year. Yet a large part of the population—including blacks and women—still could not vote.

## Problem solving

### Rebellion over voting rights — right or wrong?

Pretend you are the publisher of a newspaper in 1842. One of your reporters has written the following news story about Dorr's Rebellion. Now you are to write an editorial supporting or attacking Dorr. Which position will you take? Think about what you have learned about the social compact and representative democracy in making your decision.

Providence, R.I., May, 1842 — Thomas W. Dorr, leader of the rebel "People's Government," has fled Rhode Island after the state militia disbanded his group. Dorr and his followers had established a separate government in protest against the voting laws of Rhode Island. The state's constitution says that only property owners and their oldest sons may vote. The rebels argue that all white males should have the right to vote.

Dorr and his followers held a convention in Providence at which Dorr was elected governor under a "People's Constitution." Members of the Dorr group were declared rebels by the state, which began to imprison some of Dorr's followers. Outraged, Dorr led a band of his men in an attack on the arsenal at Providence. Martial law was imposed, and the state militia was called to put down the rebellion.

The President of the United States, John Tyler, said he would not support the Dorr group but instead would call out federal troops to aid the "legitimate" government of Rhode Island.

## Extending the right to vote to black males

Although many blacks fought in the Revolutionary War, the Americans' newly-won rights were not given to them. For example, in 1860, only 6 of the 34 states allowed free blacks to vote. The 14th and 15th Amendments to the Constitution, passed after the Civil War, gave full citizenship to blacks and guaranteed the right to vote regardless "of race, color, or previous condition of servitude." But much remained to be done to make the rights guaranteed by these amendments a reality.

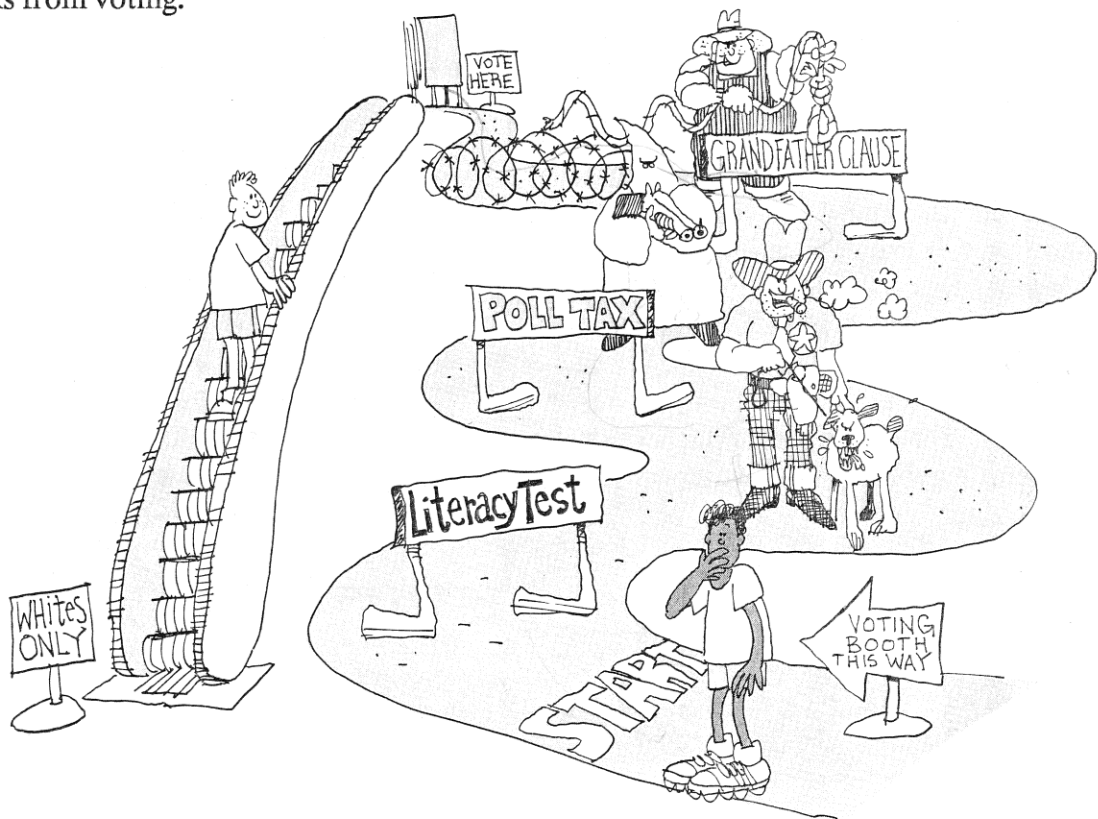
Many people in the southern states did not want blacks to vote or hold office. Some state governments passed laws that made it impossible for blacks to vote. **Poll taxes, literacy tests, and grandfather clauses** were three ways the states kept blacks from voting.

## Problem solving

### How were blacks kept from voting?

Copy the chart below onto a piece of paper. Look up in the Glossary the three terms in the first column. Write a definition in the second column. Then think about what you have learned about slavery and voting rights in the 1800s. In the third column, explain how each law kept black people from voting.

Law	Definition	Result
Poll tax		
Literacy test		
Grandfather clause		



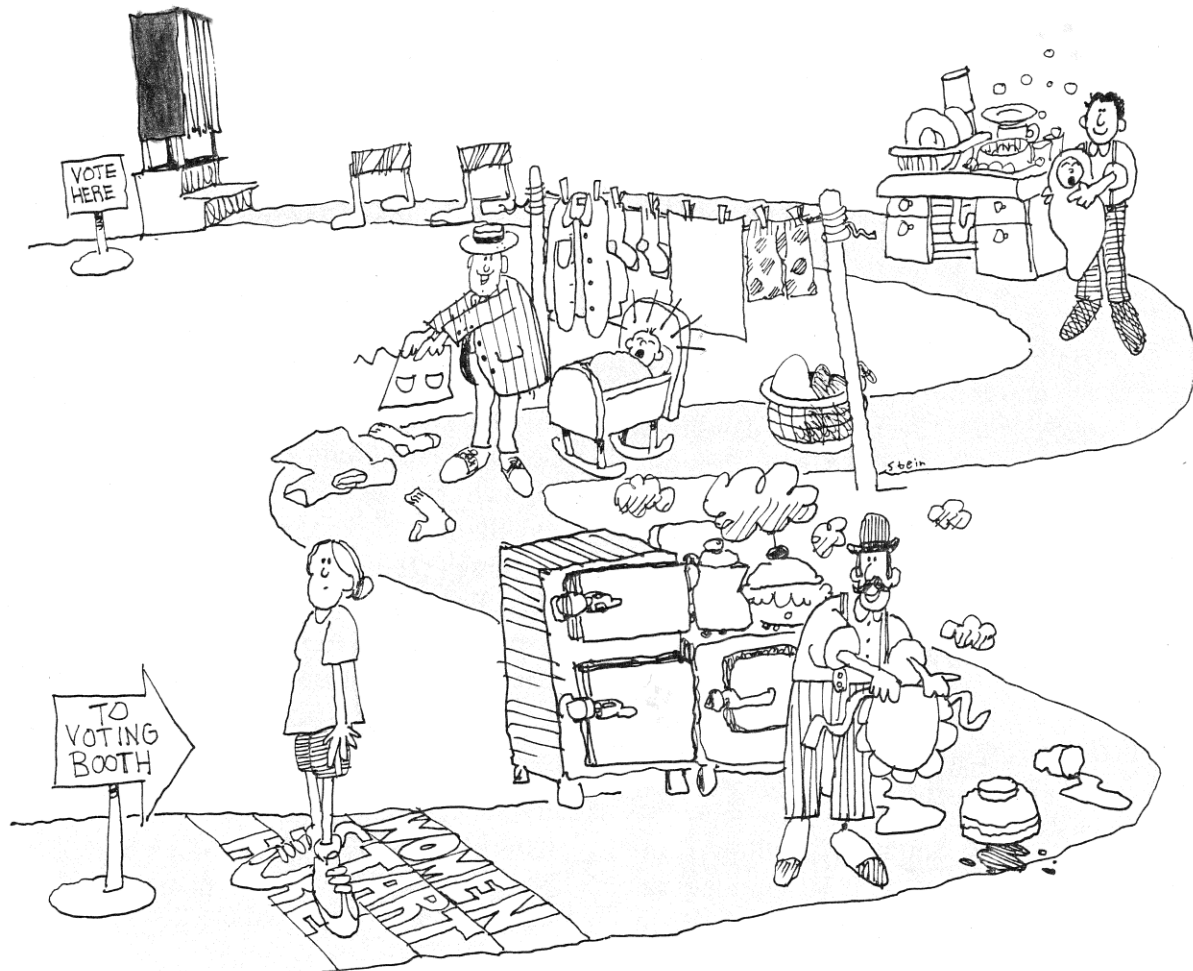
How would you caption this picture?

## Removing state barriers to voting

It was not until recently in our history that actions were finally taken to extend voting rights to most blacks. The Twenty-Fourth Amendment to the Constitution (1964) denied states the right to require poll taxes in federal elections. In 1966, states were denied the right to require poll taxes in state elections in the case of *Harper v. Virginia Board of Education*. Congress passed the Voting Rights Act in 1965. It denied states the right to require literacy tests before allowing people to vote. It also gave the federal government the authority to register voters in areas where blacks were prevented from voting.

## Extending the right to vote to women

In 1848, a convention was held at Seneca Falls, New York, which launched a national movement by women to win the right to vote. Although suffrage for women had many supporters among men, the battle was difficult. When the Fifteenth Amendment (1870) gave black males the right to vote, women worked hard to gain the same right. However, at that time many people thought a woman's place was in the home and not in politics. This idea made it harder for women to achieve their goal.



Why was it so difficult for women to win the right to vote?

In 1875, the Supreme Court made a decision that denied women a constitutional protection of the right to vote. This was in the case of *Minor v. Happersett*. The Fourteenth Amendment says, "No state shall make or enforce any law which shall abridge the privileges or immunities of citizens of the United States." Women had argued that since they were citizens, this amendment meant that the states could not make laws denying them the right to vote. The Court disagreed. It said that being a citizen does not guarantee a person the right to vote.

In 1876, Susan B. Anthony led a delegation of women to the Philadelphia Centennial Celebration of the Declaration of Independence. These women protested their lack of suffrage by reading the Women's Declaration of Rights.

Change was slow. The territory of Wyoming had allowed women to vote before 1890. But by 1900, only Colorado, Utah, and Idaho had followed Wyoming's lead.

It was not until 1912 that the movement to give women the right to vote gained national recognition. Presidential candidate Theodore Roosevelt's Bull Moose Progressive Party supported women's suffrage. In 1920, the Nineteenth Amendment to the Constitution was ratified. One hundred thirty years after the Constitution was signed, women had gained the right to vote.

### **Extending the right to vote to eighteen-year-olds**

In the 1950s, Senator Jennings Randolph of West Virginia introduced an amendment to lower the age requirement

on voting from twenty-one to eighteen. Progress was slow until the Vietnam War. Thousands of young men were drafted to fight in Vietnam. However, they were not able to vote in the elections that chose the members of government responsible for deciding America's role in that war.

Congress passed a law in 1970 lowering the voting age to eighteen. But the Supreme Court ruled that Congress could only regulate the age of voters in federal elections, not in state elections. At that time, only four states allowed eighteen-year-olds to vote. Within six months of the Supreme Court's decision, steps were taken to amend the Constitution so that suffrage would be extended to eighteen-year-olds in both state and federal elections.

In 1971, the Twenty-Sixth Amendment was added to the Constitution. This amendment says that anyone eighteen years old or older cannot be denied the right to vote because of age.

### **Voting requirements today**

The states, although limited by the Constitution and the federal Voting Rights Act, still make some decisions regarding voting rights. For example, all states have laws saying only citizens have the right to vote, although the Constitution does not require this. Every state requires that persons must live in the state for a period of time before they can vote, and all states except North Dakota require citizens to **register** in order to vote.

The right to vote in our democracy is a closely guarded right. Yet it is a right that has taken many citizens a long time and much hard work to achieve.





How was the right to vote extended to each of the groups in this picture?

### Reviewing and using the lesson

1. List the restrictions on voting rights that have kept various groups from voting.
2. List the ways in which various groups have won the right to vote.
3. Why do you think it took so long for women to win suffrage?
4. Why do you think that action by the federal government was necessary to gain voting rights for some groups of people?
5. What restrictions, if any, do you think states should be able to place on voting rights? Explain your position.

