

What If the Government Said You Couldn't Vote?

In modern America, almost everyone can vote who wants to. But it wasn't always that way! Here are some of the groups that have been blocked from voting over the past 200 years.

1. WOMEN. For many years only men were allowed to vote. People believed women were too emotional and cannot make intelligent choices. Women had to protest for 75 years to win the right to vote. In 1920, the 19th Amendment to the Constitution allowed women to vote.

2. POOR PEOPLE. When this country was new, only White men with property could vote. In the early 1800s, this changed and people did not need to have property to vote. Then people had to pay a poll tax to vote. In 1964, the 24th Amendment to the Constitution made poll taxes illegal.

3. YOUNG PEOPLE. For many years, only adults 21 years and older were allowed to vote in some states. During the time of the Vietnam War, many people had a different opinion. Because younger people went to fight and die for the country, they should be able to vote. In 1971 the 26th Amendment allowed everyone 18 or older to vote.

4. PEOPLE WHO COULD NOT READ AND WRITE. Early in America's history, only people who could read and write were allowed to vote in some states. The Civil Rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s ensured passage of the 1965 Voting Rights Act, which made literacy tests illegal.

5. AFRICAN-AMERICANS. The Constitution did not say only White people could vote. But it said that only free people (people who were not slaves) could vote. This made it illegal for most African-Americans to vote until after the Civil War. In 1870, the 15th Amendment allowed Black men to vote. After that, many states passed new laws to limit Black voting. Some ways people tried to limit

Black voting were literacy tests, poll taxes, and making Black people scared to vote. Southern states

had a "grandfather" law. This law said that if your grandfathers voted, you didn't have to take a literacy test. This was good for White men who could not read because their grandfathers could have voted. This did not help Black men because their grandfathers were slaves. They were not able to vote. The Voting Rights Act of 1965 took away all these limits on voting. It also created a system to make sure that people would follow the new law.

6. NATIVE AMERICANS. In 1887, some Native Americans could vote if they gave up their tribal affiliations. In 1924, after wiping out nearly all of the Native American people, the U.S. declared that Native Americans were citizens. However, the right to vote was decided by states, and some states did not give Native Americans the right to vote until 1957.

Can Everyone Vote Now?

No. Convicted felons in most states can't vote. Some states let people vote when they get out of jail. Some states do not. When felons in Mississippi get out of jail, they need to get a pardon by the governor before they can vote. Also, people living in the U.S. who are not citizens of this country cannot vote. Maybe they work and pay taxes here, but they still cannot vote.

"History of Voting" and "What if the Government Said You Couldn't Vote" reprinted and adapted with permission from the Civic Participation and Community Action Sourcebook, Andy Nash, ed. Originally adapted from Beyond Basic Skills, 1998 by Tom Valentine and Jenny Sandlin.

