

WHO CAN VOTE?

A Brief History of Voting Rights in the United States

Exhibition Guide

Developed by

THE GILDER LEHRMAN
INSTITUTE *of* AMERICAN HISTORY

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Content

GENERAL INFORMATION	1
Format	
Rental Security	
Shipping	
Reporting	
Questions	
PROGRAMMING IDEAS	2
Public Program Ideas	
Program Ideas for Classrooms	
Program Ideas for Younger Students	
LESSON PLANS	3
FURTHER READING	5
Related Works	
For Younger Readers	
EXHIBITION CONTENT	6
Panel 1: The Founding Era, 1787–1838	
Panel 2: The Jacksonian Era to the Civil War, 1828–1865	
Panel 3: The Civil War and Reconstruction, 1865–1877	
Panel 4: Voting in the Jim Crow Era	
Panel 5: Women’s Suffrage	
Panel 6: The Civil Rights Era	
Panel 7: Enfranchising New Voters	

GENERAL INFORMATION

This exhibition was developed by the Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History (GLI) and made possible by the 2022 Leonore Annenberg Institute for Civics Award, presented by the Annenberg Public Policy Center of the University of Pennsylvania. The Leonore Annenberg Institute for Civics Award aims to further an exemplary and ambitious project that would improve civics education in the nation's elementary, secondary, or high school classrooms.

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Format

The exhibition is composed of seven retractable vinyl panels. Each panel measures 81 inches in height and 33 inches in width. It requires a total of 16 running feet and can be displayed separately or together. Detailed setup instructions are included.

Rental Security

Exhibitions may be displayed in any open areas, but preferably not in a hallway. No exhibition is to be displayed outdoors or in a tent or other temporary structure. It is preferable that a staff member is in the room with the exhibition when it is open to students or guests. If a borrower causes damage or loss of any part of the exhibition, then that institution will be responsible for paying the replacement or restoration costs. The value of the *Who Can Vote?* exhibition is \$2,250. Some institutions choose to add a rider to their insurance policy.

Shipping

The exhibition is shipped in a wheeled, plastic case measuring 38 inches x 18 inches x 14 inches and weighing approximately 75 pounds. The Gilder Lehrman Institute will be responsible for arranging shipping via FedEx. A week before your loan period ends, we will provide a return label and instructions.

Reporting

Each site is required to complete a condition report upon receipt of the exhibition. The condition report form will be emailed to you along with tracking and shipping information.

Questions

If you have questions, please contact:

Traveling Exhibitions Program
exhibitions@gilderlehrman.org
Phone: (646) 366-9666 ext. 164

PROGRAMMING IDEAS

The Institute encourages host sites to plan programs related to the exhibition. Past programs have included discussions, debates, lectures, and film series. We encourage sites to get creative with programming and incorporate community history and resources as well! If you choose to host a voting drive or other registration event in conjunction with this exhibition, please check your state and local laws regarding elections and voter registration.

Public Program Ideas

- Host a voting registration drive or a poll worker drive. Partner with a local civic organization (such as your local chapter of the League of Women Voters) that can help get people registered to vote or signed up to be a poll worker. You can set up the exhibition in a separate room for people to browse or along the registration line so people can view it while waiting.
- Host a voting literacy event and invite your community members to come learn about their right to vote and the current guidelines surrounding voting. Topics can include registration deadlines, ID requirements in your area, primary voting, and barriers to voting such as transportation or time off work. Make sure you check your state and local voting laws so you are providing the most accurate information!

Program Ideas for Classrooms

- For schools with students aged 16 and over, plan a voting drive to get your high school students pre-registered to vote for when they turn 18 (where possible).
- Have students create a timeline showing how voting rights shifted from before the American Revolution to the present day. Place emphasis on the groups who lost and then regained their rights to vote (White women, Black men).
- Break students into groups for research projects. Ask them to do a deeper dive into each of the voting groups explored in the exhibition. Alternatively, allow students to do independent research projects on a disenfranchised group of their choice.
- Provide students with access to current local voting and voter registration guidelines. Have them either write about or discuss current barriers to voting. How might they propose these barriers be eliminated?
- How would you convince someone that voting is important? Ask students to create materials (such as a flier or pamphlet) that they think would help explain why voting is important and encourage people to exercise their right to vote.

Program Ideas for Younger Students

- Show your students the power of voting by holding a classroom election. To emphasize the importance of voting in local elections, come up with a roster of classroom rules or activities for students to vote “yay” or “nay” on. Have a discussion after the vote to talk about what it might be like to not be allowed to vote on issues that affect them.

LESSON PLANS

The following lesson plans have been developed by the Gilder Lehrman Institute and curated for this guide to help educators facilitate a deeper understanding of the topics covered in the exhibition for their students. An additional page featuring materials crafted specifically for this exhibition is available here: [The Right to Vote: The Role of States and the US Constitution](#).

On Federalism and early Voting Rights Struggles

[Analyzing Federalism](#) - This collection of 5 lesson plans provides resources and guidance for teaching about federalism from our nation's founding to today. When taught in conjunction with this exhibition, it can be used to provide further context for the state-by-state differences in voting rights. This lesson plan also touches on tribal rights and sovereignty. *Intended grade levels: 9–12*

On Native American Voting Rights

[Native American Policy](#) - This 2-day lesson plan provides context for the relationship between the US government and Native Americans from the Northwest Ordinance of 1787 to Jacksonian Era policies, including forced removal and other violations of rights. *Intended Grade Levels: 6–10*

[Nineteenth-Century Native American Viewpoints](#) - This lesson plan will help students understand the views of Native leaders during the 1800s as Native Americans were forced off of their lands and contrast those views with those of the White men implementing these policies. *Intended Grade Levels: 7–12+*

On African American Voting Rights: From Reconstruction to the Civil Rights Movement

[Securing the Right to Vote: The Selma-to-Montgomery Story](#) - This lesson plan explores the struggle for African American voting rights from post-Civil War America up through the 1965 march from Selma to Montgomery. Students will be asked to analyze the strategies used by African American voting rights activists and evaluate the effectiveness of those strategies. *Intended Grade levels: 7–12+*

[Supreme Court and the Fourteenth Amendment](#) - The Fourteenth Amendment explicitly forbids states from denying Black citizens their rights as laid out in the amendment. Why then did Black citizens have to fight so hard to access these new rights? This lesson plan will help students understand the complex relationship between the states and the courts, as well as the reconstruction era fight to access newly established rights. *Intended grade levels: 9–12*

On Women's Suffrage

[Women's Suffrage: 140 Years of Suffrage](#) - Students will learn about the women's suffrage movement in America from 1776 to 1920 by using primary source documents to analyze the cultural forces around gender and gender discrimination leading up to the 1920 ratification of the Nineteenth Amendment. *Intended Grade Levels: 5–8*

[Women Win the Vote](#) - Over the course of two lessons, students will analyze primary source documents in order to examine the factors that contributed to the exclusion of American women from the right to vote and the battle for full enfranchisement. Handouts, background information, and GLC collection items included for analysis. *Intended Grade Levels: 11–12*

FURTHER READING

The Gilder Lehrman Institute has created a [Bookshop.org page](#) featuring relevant books for further reading. Selections from that list are featured here.

By purchasing any of the books mentioned through the links to bookshop.org provided, you are helping to support the programming of the Gilder Lehrman Institute. We receive an affiliate commission from every sale.

Related Works

Blain, Keisha N. [*Until I Am Free: Fannie Lou Hamer's Enduring Message to America*](#). Beacon Press, 2021.

Free, Laura E. [*Suffrage Reconstructed: Gender, Race, and Voting Rights in the Civil War Era*](#). Cornell University Press, 2020.

Frost, Jennifer. [*Let Us Vote!: Youth Voting Rights and the 26th Amendment*](#). New York University Press, 2022.

Garrow, David J. [*Protest at Selma: Martin Luther King Jr. and the Voting Rights Act of 1965: Revised*](#). Yale University Press, 2015.

Gates, Henry Louis. [*Stony the Road: Reconstruction, White Supremacy, and the Rise of Jim Crow*](#). Penguin Books, 2020.

May, Gary. [*Bending toward Justice: The Voting Rights Act and the Transformation of American Democracy*](#). Duke University Press, 2014.

McCool, Daniel, Susan M. Olson, and Jennifer L. Robinson. [*Native Vote: American Indians, the Voting Rights Act, and the Right to Vote*](#). Cambridge University Press, 2007.

McDonald, Laughlin. [*American Indians and the Fight for Equal Voting Rights*](#). University of Oklahoma Press, 2010.

Milteer, Warren Eugene. [*Beyond Slavery's Shadow: Free People of Color in the South*](#). University of North Carolina Press, 2021.

Tetrault, Lisa. [*The Myth of Seneca Falls: Memory and the Women's Suffrage Movement, 1848–1898*](#). University of North Carolina Press, 2017.

Wert, Justin J., Ronald Gaddie, and Charles Bullock. [*The Rise and Fall of the Voting Rights Act, vol. 2*](#). University of Oklahoma Press, 2018.

For Younger Readers

Diesen, Deborah, and Magdalena Mora. [*Equality's Call: The Story of Voting Rights in America*](#). Beach Lane Books, 2020.

Jenkins, Tommy, and Kati Lacker. [*Drawing the Vote: An Illustrated Guide to Voting in America*](#). Harry N Abrams, 2020.

Lowery, Lynda Blackmon, and P. J. Loughran. *Turning 15 on the Road to Freedom: My Story of the 1965 Selma Voting Rights March*. Puffin Books, 2016.

White, Linda Arms, and Nancy Carpenter. *I Could Do That!: Esther Morris Gets Women the Vote*. Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2005.

Winter, Jonah, and Shane W. Evans. *Lillian's Right to Vote: A Celebration of the Voting Rights Act of 1965*. Anne Schwartz Books, 2015.

EXHIBITION CONTENT

Panel 1: The Founding Era, 1787–1838

Header text

This exhibition examines voting rights with an emphasis on the role of the US Constitution and the interplay between the states and federal government in determining who is allowed to vote.

Introductory Text

Before the American Revolution all English colonies in North America held popular elections. However, wealth, race, religion, and gender limited voting rights. Scholars estimate that perhaps 40 percent of adult, White, male Virginians and more than 60 percent of adult, male New Englanders (including free Black men) voted in the decades before and immediately after the American Revolution. The Constitution had few guidelines for voting, and provided the states a free hand in determining their own elections.

- 1.1 Benjamin Franklin’s copy of the official edition of the US Constitution distributed to Constitutional Convention delegates on September 17, 1787. (The Gilder Lehrman Institute, GLC03585)
 - 1.2 Howard Pyle, “Women at the Polls in New Jersey in the Good Old Times,” *Harper’s Weekly*, November 13, 1880. (The Gilder Lehrman Institute, GLC10078)
 - 1.3 A Bill to Establish an Uniform Rule of Naturalization, Thomas Greenleaf, 1790. (Library of Congress)
 - 1.4 Map depicting the results of the 1800 election. “The Presidential elections of the United States,” Britton & Rey, 1877. (Library of Congress)
 - 1.5 This 1813 act to “secure the citizens of this State their rights of Suffrage” gave male, taxpaying citizens in New Hampshire the right to vote in their hometowns. It excluded women and the poor. State of New Hampshire, “An Act, more effectually to secure the citizens of this State their rights of suffrage,” June 23, 1813. (The Gilder Lehrman Institute, GLC10099)
- In 1838, Robert Purvis wrote a pamphlet urging voters to reject a new Pennsylvania constitution that would disenfranchise Black men. It was ratified in October. Robert Purvis, ca. 1840. (Boston Public Libraries)

Panel 2: The Jacksonian Era to the Civil War, 1828–1865

Introductory Text

As states loosened their voting restrictions in the early nineteenth century, more White men across the country received the right to vote. Their votes ushered in an era of political change. This was the era of Jacksonian Democracy, named after President Andrew Jackson, seen as the champion of the common man. Although women could not vote in the Jacksonian era, they played prominent public roles in movement ranging from temperance to abolitionism.

- 2.1** Map depicting the results of the 1828 election. “The Presidential elections of the United States,” Britton & Rey, 1877. (Library of Congress)
- 2.2** *Stump Speaking*, George Caleb Bingham, 1856. (The Gilder Lehrman Institute, GLC04075)
- The County Election*, George Caleb Bingham, 1854. (The Gilder Lehrman Institute, GLC04074)
- 2.3** “Declaration of Sentiments,” *Report of the Woman’s Rights Convention, Held at Seneca Falls, New York, July 19 and 20, 1848*, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, 1848. (Library of Congress)
- 2.4** View of the Procession in Celebration of the Admission of California, Oct. 19th, 1850. (Library of Congress)
- 2.5** Engraving showing Union soldiers from Pennsylvania casting absentee ballots during the 1864 presidential election. *Harper’s Weekly*, October 29, 1864. (The Gilder Lehrman Institute, GLC01733.06)

Panel 3: The Civil War and Reconstruction, 1865–1877

Introductory Text

Soon after the Civil War, the United States adopted three constitutional amendments designed to recognize and protect the rights of the formerly enslaved. It was the first time that the federal government had become involved in legislating voting rights, part of an expansion of federal power and responsibility. These three changes to the Constitution are collectively known as the “Reconstruction Amendments.” The Thirteenth Amendment and section one of the Fourteenth Amendment guaranteed liberty, citizenship, and due process under the law to Black Americans. The Fifteenth Amendment stated that the right to vote could not be denied to citizens “on account of race, color, or previous condition of servitude,” leading to the enfranchisement of Black men. In addition, many former Confederates were briefly disqualified from voting or holding office. For a time, these changes transformed the political landscape of the South.

- 3.1** The United States readmitted South Carolina to the Union after its 1868 constitutional convention. Proceedings of the Constitutional Convention of South Carolina, 1868. (National Archives)
- 3.2** *Memorial of American Equal Rights Association to the Congress of the United States*, 1867. (National Archives)
- 3.3** This image, entitled “The First Vote,” from the front page of *Harper’s Weekly* on November 16, 1867, shows a newly freed Black man casting his vote. (The Gilder Lehrman Institute, GLC01733.09)
- The Fifteenth Amendment resolution was passed by Congress and sent to the states for ratification in February 1869. The amendment was ratified a year later. (The Gilder Lehrman Institute, GLC00788)
- 3.4** Engraved portrait of African American members of Reconstruction Congresses, Wellstood and Co., New York, ca. 1880s. (The Gilder Lehrman Institute, GLC09400.447)

- 3.5 Cartoon published during the 1868 presidential election condemning three Democratic bases—Irish immigrants, former Confederates, and wealthy urbanites—for suppressing the rights of African Americans. Thomas Nast, “This Is a White Man’s Government,” *Harper’s Weekly*, September 5, 1868. (The Gilder Lehrman Institute, GLC01733.10)

Panel 4: Voting in the Jim Crow Era

Introductory Text

When Reconstruction ended in 1877, federal troops no longer protected African Americans in the former Confederate states. Legislatures in the South began enacting laws to suppress the Black vote. Vigilantes terrorized and even killed those who tried to vote. These legal and extralegal means of settling segregation policies in all aspects of life were the foundation for the Jim Crow South. In the North and West, laws restricting African Americans’ rights also affected Black voters’ access to the polls. More restrictions came into play during the Great Migration, as more Black southerners moved north and west for better opportunities. Similar laws were used to prevent other minority groups from voting through the mid-1900s.

- 4.1 Two documents from Louisiana and Mississippi offering a sample of the kinds of forms voters would have had to answer in order to vote. “Literacy test questions & voting rights materials, March 1955” and “Louisiana Voter Application and Literacy Test, circa 1963.” (Civil Rights Movement Archive)
- 4.2 Cartoon from a 1944 voting rights pamphlet portraying the lack of secrecy in South Carolina’s voting laws. Committee of Editors and Writers of the South, *Voting Restrictions in the 13 Southern States, A Report*, 1944. (The Gilder Lehrman Institute, GLC09640.048)
- 4.3 Thurgood Marshall represented the NCAA in *Smith v. Allwright* in 1943. In 1967, he was the first African American to be appointed to the Supreme Court. (Library of Congress)
- 4.4 Thomas Nast, “Move on!” *Harper’s Weekly*, April 22, 1871. (The Gilder Lehrman Institute, GLC01733.13)

Panel 5: Women’s Suffrage

Introductory Text

Throughout the 1800s, women became more involved in battles for social and political reforms. Starting in the 1840s, women used those same organizational and advocacy skills and tactics in calling for equality and the right to vote.

In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, women succeeded in achieving the vote in twenty states and territories, yet a national suffrage guarantee remained elusive. Former President Theodore Roosevelt, running for a third term in 1912, supported the effort as head of the Progressive Party. But it took years for suffragists, who picketed the White House and served prison time for their protests, to persuade President Woodrow Wilson. Finally, the Nineteenth Amendment, ratified in 1920, guaranteed women access to the ballot box.

“Suffrage is the one right which no person or class has the right to give or withhold.” - Susan B. Anthony to Charles James Folger, New York, July 7, 1867. (The Gilder Lehrman Institute, GLC04360.034)

As a prominent African American suffragist, Mary Church Terrell often noted the “double burden” of gender and race: “A white woman has only one handicap to overcome—that of sex. I have two—both sex and race. I belong to the only group in the country which has two such huge obstacles to surmount. Colored men have only one—that of race.” - Mary Church Terrell, *A Colored Woman in a White World*, 1940

Marcy Church Terrell, one of the first Black women to obtain a college degree and a prominent activist for education expansion for Black students, founded and served as the first national president of the National Association of Colored Women in 1896. (Library of Congress)

5.1 An illustrated map depicting the spread of women’s suffrage across the nation from the western states to the eastern ones. *Puck*, February 20, 1915. (Library of Congress)

5.2 Engraving of Virginia Louisa Minor, suffragist and main plaintiff in *Minor v. Happersett*. (Library of Congress)

5.3 Ohio postcard from 1914 listing state amendments dealing with taxes, “Intoxicating Liquors,” and women’s suffrage. (The Gilder Lehrman Institute, GLC10091)

5.4 Pin opposed to women suffrage, ca. 1900 (The Gilder Lehrman Institute, GLC10090)

Argument against a proposed Sixteenth Amendment in 1879 that would have given women the right to vote. (The Gilder Lehrman Institute, GLC06081)

National Equipment Co. pin, ca. 1900 (The Gilder Lehrman Institute, GLC09764)

Front page of the *St. Louis Globe-Democrat* on October 7, 1875. (The Gilder Lehrman Institute, GLC09753)

5.5 Depending on state legislation, women could vote in different types of elections (federal, state, school board, etc). This map depicts the status of women’s suffrage in each state, published circa 1914 with hand-drawn additions, circa 1919. (The Gilder Lehrman Institute, GLC09773)

5.6 “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.” - Joint Resolution of Congress proposing a constitutional amendment extending the right of suffrage to women, approved June 4, 1919. (National Archives)

Panel 6: The Civil Rights Era

Introductory Text

The twentieth century witnessed unprecedented federal government expansion of voting rights, with American Indians and African Americans at the forefront. When Black soldiers returned from World War II, they expected their service to affect their treatment back home. However, Jim Crow laws and violence continued to keep them from voting. The modern Civil Rights Movement was born along these lines, and the movement fought for a federal guarantee of Black suffrage. Shocked by violence against peaceful proponents of voting rights in Selma, Alabama, and spurred by President Lyndon Johnson, Congress passed the 1965 Voting Rights Act (VRA). Congress has amended and reauthorized the 1965 VRA periodically and by bipartisan consensus. A quarter-million Black voters registered after the act's initial passage.

6.1 The Snyder Act made more than 100,000 Indigenous Americans citizens. In 1928, *The Literary Digest* published an article detailing the population of Indigenous peoples in different states to highlight the law's impact. (The Gilder Lehrman Institute, GLC10083)

6.2 *Zitkála-Šá*, by Joseph Turner Keiley, 1898. (National Portrait Gallery)

6.3 A year after their deaths, the NAACP used the memory of Goodman, Chaney, and Schwerner to appeal to people in Michigan to register to vote. (The Gilder Lehrman Institute, GLC09623)

6.4 Protests in Selma, Alabama, March 1965: Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) chairman John Lewis can be seen behind one of the state troopers in the top photograph. He was beaten by state troopers at the protest and sustained a skull fracture. Lewis was one of the most influential leaders of the Civil Rights Movement, and later served in Congress for over three decades. (The Gilder Lehrman Institute, GLC09734.05, GLC09734.03)

6.5 President Lyndon Johnson signing the Voting Rights Act, August 6, 1965. (The Gilder Lehrman Institute, GLC09752)

Panel 7: Enfranchising New Voters

Introductory Text

The push to expand voting rights led to changes at the federal level throughout the 1960s and 1970s across race, age, and place. Since the US Constitution was ratified in 1788, some groups have fought long and hard to gain access to the ballot, while others have pushed against the expansion of the franchise. Ultimately, the tension between federal and state control over elections and who can vote is integral to the nation's democracy and remains the central conversation in the ongoing evolution of voting rights in the United States.

7.1 Cartoons from *Voting Restrictions in the 13 Southern States, A Report*, Committee of Editors and Writers of the South, 1944. (The Gilder Lehrman Collection, GLC09640.048)

Nevada poll tax receipt, 1924 and 1941. (The Gilder Lehrman Institute GLC09924.12)

This graph demonstrates the difference in voter turnout between states with and without poll taxes. The vertical black bars represent states with poll taxes, where only 19% of potential voters voted. *Voting Restrictions in the 13 Southern States, A Report*, Committee of Editors and Writers of the South, 1944. (The Gilder Lehrman Institute, GLC09640.048)

7.2 Twenty-Fourth Amendment resolution, January 10, 1962. (National Archives)

7.3 Bumper Sticker, D.C. Voting Rights. (National Museum of American History)

7.4 John F Kennedy to Robert D Moran, letter. 1957. The Gilder Lehrman Institute, GLC09784)

“In my opinion, this is a matter which should continue to be within the jurisdiction of the individual States, inasmuch as each State can best judge the qualifications of its own voters.”

7.5 During the Vietnam War, eighteen-year-old men were considered mature enough to serve in the military, but not to vote. They did not have a say in electing the officials who were sending them to war. These three buttons from before, during, and after the war show the progression of their fight. (The Gilder Lehrman Institute, GLC09750, GLC09915, GLC09749)

7.7 The Rehnquist Court, pictured here in 2003, decided 7-2 to stop the Florida recount in *Bush v. Gore*. Bush subsequently won Florida’s electoral votes and the election. (Library of Congress)