**The Right to Vote**

**Objectives** You may wish to call students’ attention to the objectives in the Section Preview. The objectives are reflected in the main headings of the section.

**Bellringer** Tell students that you have a thousand dollars to spend on the class and that they will vote on how to spend the money. However, only students who own a car will get to vote. Ask students what they think of this restriction. Explain that in this section, they will learn about restrictions on voting throughout American history.

**Vocabulary Builder** Ask students to pick out the two synonyms in the political dictionary. Then have them define or describe the terms.

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**The Right to Vote**

Soon, you will be eligible to vote—but will you exercise that right? The record suggests that while you may do so, many of your friends will not, at least not for some time. The record also suggests that some of your friends will never vote. Yet, clearly, the success of democratic government depends on popular participation, and, in particular, on the regular and informed exercise of the right to vote.

**The History of Voting Rights**

The Framers of the Constitution purposely left the power to set suffrage qualifications to each State. Suffrage means the right to vote. Franchise is another term with the same meaning.¹

**Expansion of the Electorate**

When the Constitution went into effect in 1789, the right to vote in the United States was restricted to white male property owners. In fact, probably not one in fifteen adult white males could vote in elections in the different States. Benjamin Franklin often lampooned this situation. He told of a man whose only property was a jackass and noted that the man would lose the right to vote if his jackass died. “Now,” asked Franklin, “in whom is the right of suffrage? In the man or the jackass?”

Today, the size of the American electorate—the potential voting population—is truly impressive. Some 220 million people, nearly all citizens who are at least 18 years of age, can now qualify to vote. That huge number is a direct result of the legal definition of suffrage. In other words, it is the result of those laws that determine who can and cannot vote. It is also the result of some 200 years of continuing, often bitter, and sometimes violent struggle.

The history of American suffrage since 1789 has been marked by two long-term trends. First, the nation has experienced the gradual elimination of several restrictions on the right to vote. These restrictions were based on such factors as

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¹Originally, the Constitution only had two suffrage provisions. Article I, Section 2, Clause 1 requires each State to allow anyone qualified to vote for members of “the most numerous Branch” of its own legislature to vote as well for members of the national House of Representatives. Article II, Section 1, Clause 2 provides that presidential electors be chosen in each State “in such Manner as the Legislature thereof may direct.”

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**Block Scheduling Strategies**

Consider these suggestions to manage extended class time:

- Have pairs or small groups of students create time lines that show the five stages in the growth of the American electorate. For each stage of the time line, students should estimate how much more of the population has become eligible to vote. (Have them look up population statistics in an almanac). Have students show the increases in a bar graph below the time line.
- Have students discuss each of the restrictions the Constitution places on States’ power to set voting requirements. Which do they feel is the most important, and which the least? Are there any restrictions not included in the Constitution that should be added? Have students write paragraphs of their opinions.
Extending Suffrage: The Five Stages

The growth of the American electorate to its present size and shape has come in five fairly distinct stages. The two trends described above—elimination of voting restrictions and growing federal control over voting—are woven through those stages. You will see several illustrations of both of these trends over the course of this chapter.

1. The first stage of the struggle to extend voting rights came in the early 1800s. Religious qualifications, instituted in colonial days, quickly disappeared. No State has had a religious test for voting since 1810. Then, one by one, States began to eliminate property ownership and tax payment qualifications. By mid-century, almost all white adult males could vote in every State.

2. The second major effort to broaden the electorate followed the Civil War. The 15th Amendment, ratified in 1870, was intended to protect any citizen from being denied the right to vote because of race or color. Still, for nearly another century, African Americans were systematically prevented from voting, and they remained the largest group of disenfranchised citizens in the nation’s population.

3. The 19th Amendment prohibited the denial of the right to vote because of sex. Its ratification in 1920 completed the third expansion of suffrage. Wyoming, while still a territory, had given women the vote in 1869. By 1920 more than half of the States had followed that lead.

4. A fourth major extension took place during the 1960s. During that time, federal legislation and court decisions focused on securing African Americans a full role in the electoral process in all States. With the passage and vigorous enforcement of a number of civil rights acts, especially the Voting Rights Act of 1965 and its later extensions, racial equality finally became fact in polling booths throughout the country.

The 23rd Amendment, passed in 1961, added the voters of the District of Columbia to the presidential electorate. The 24th Amendment, ratified in 1964, eliminated the poll tax.
The gradual elimination of voting restrictions and the expansion of the Federal Government's control over voting have greatly expanded suffrage. Stages include: The early 1800s during which religious, property ownership, and tax payment qualifications were eliminated; the post-Civil War era which saw the passage of the 15th Amendment; the passage of the 19th Amendment which expanded suffrage for women; the 1960s, which saw the passage of several civil rights acts; and the passage of the 23rd and 24th Amendments, eliminating poll taxes and adding the District of Columbia to the electorate. Nearly all citizens who are at least 18 years of age. In other words, those 18 and over were given the right to vote by this amendment.

Key Terms and Main Ideas

1. Describe two long-term trends that have characterized the history of suffrage in the United States.
2. Describe five distinct stages in the growth of the American electorate.
3. Who exercises the franchise?
4. What restrictions does the Constitution place on the States in setting suffrage qualifications?
5. Demonstrating Reasoned Judgment: It is the year 1970. Suppose that you are a young adult testifying before Congress in favor of granting the vote to 18-year-olds. What arguments would you present in order to make your case?

Critical Thinking

5. Demonstrating Reasoned Judgment: It is the year 1970. Suppose that you are a young adult testifying before Congress in favor of granting the vote to 18-year-olds. What arguments would you present in order to make your case?

6. Drawing Inferences: Why do you think the Federal Government took more and more control over the setting of voter qualifications? Why could the States not have accomplished the same ends?

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