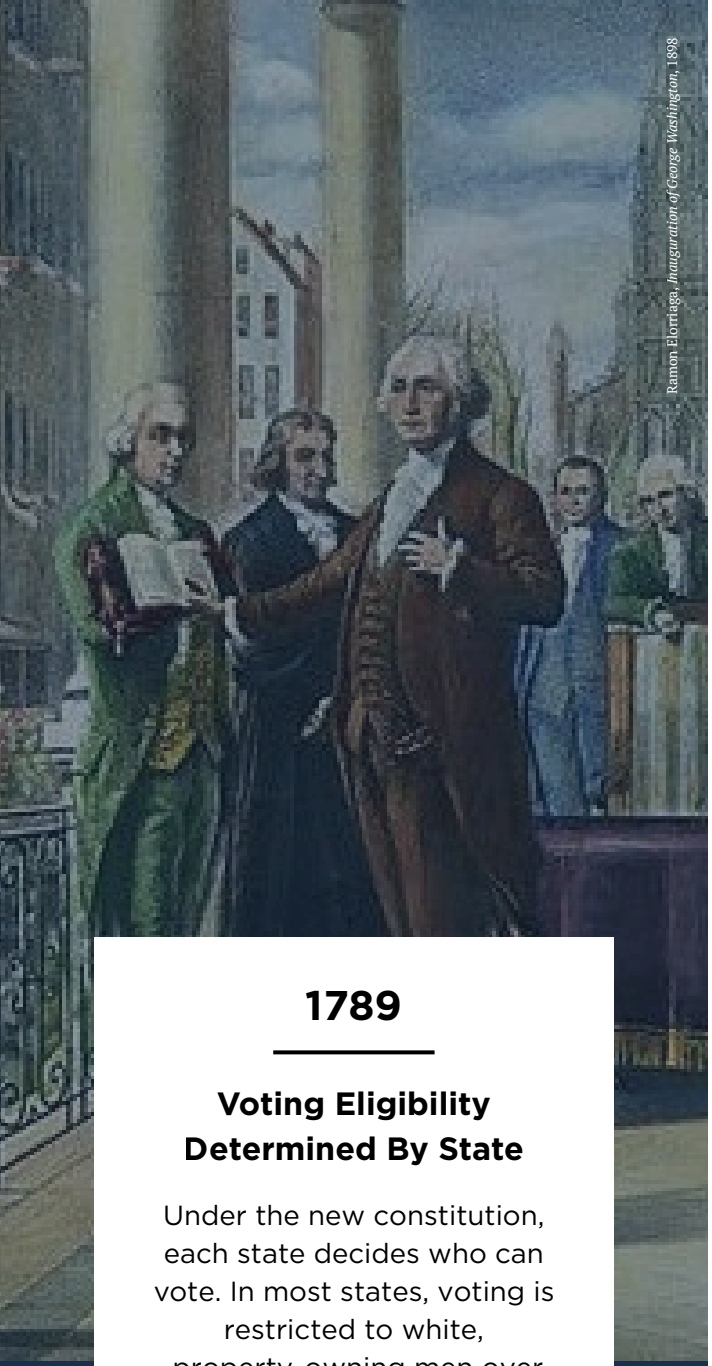
America at the Polls

The Evolution of Our Quintessential Right to Vote

CELEBRATING AMERICA'S 250TH

A TRIBUTE TO OUR SYSTEMS



Ramon Elorriaga, *Inauguration of George Washington*, 1898

1789

Voting Eligibility Determined By State

Under the new constitution, each state decides who can vote. In most states, voting is restricted to white, property-owning men over the age of 21.

New Jersey allows women the right to vote until 1807. Other states initially allow emancipated Black men.

1820–1856

‘Universal’ White Male Suffrage

State by state, suffrage is expanded to all white men, regardless of socio-economic status. It is repealed for all others. North Carolina is the last state to declare white male suffrage in 1856, cementing the right nationwide.

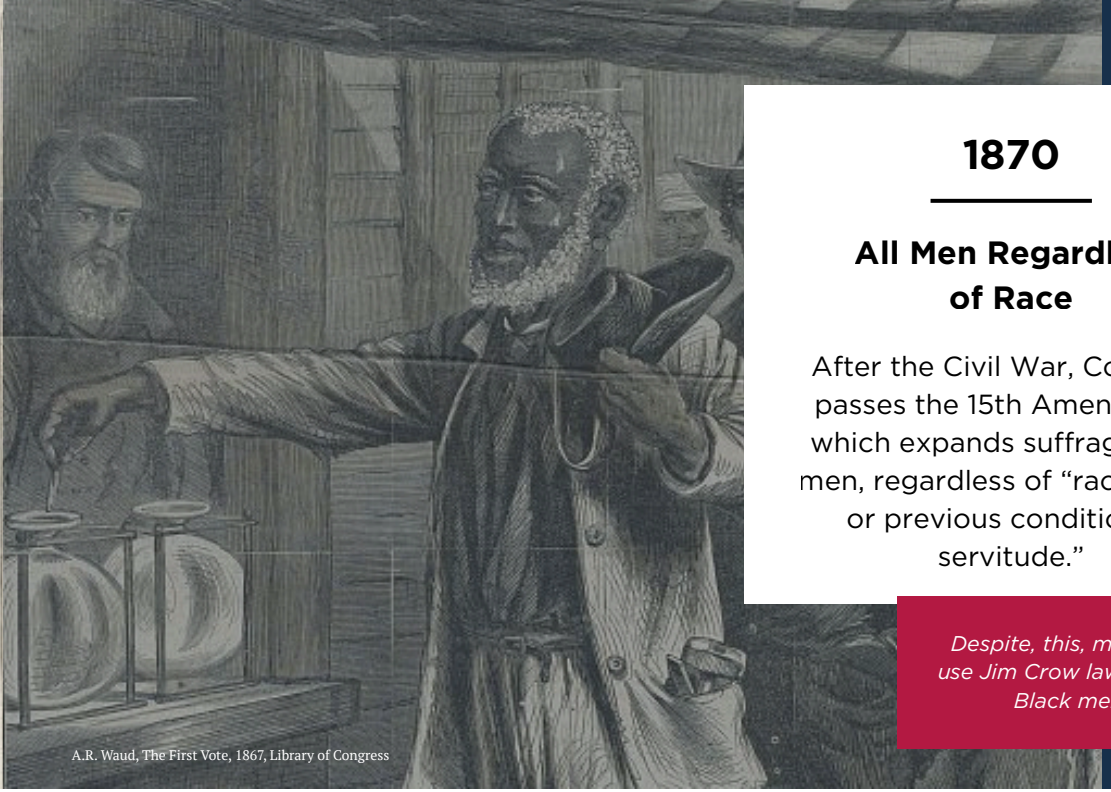
George Caleb Bingham, *The County Election,* 1852, St. Louis Art Museum

Frank Leslie, Judiciary Committee Receiving Female Suffragists, 1871, U.S. House of Representatives

1848

Ladies Convene at Seneca Falls

In upstate New York, sixty-eight women sign the Declaration of Sentiments urging the government to end the “disenfrancisement of one-half the people of this country.” The convention sparks the American Women’s Suffrage Movement.



A.R. Waud, The First Vote, 1867, Library of Congress

1870

All Men Regardless of Race

After the Civil War, Congress passes the 15th Amendment, which expands suffrage to all men, regardless of "race, color, or previous condition of servitude."

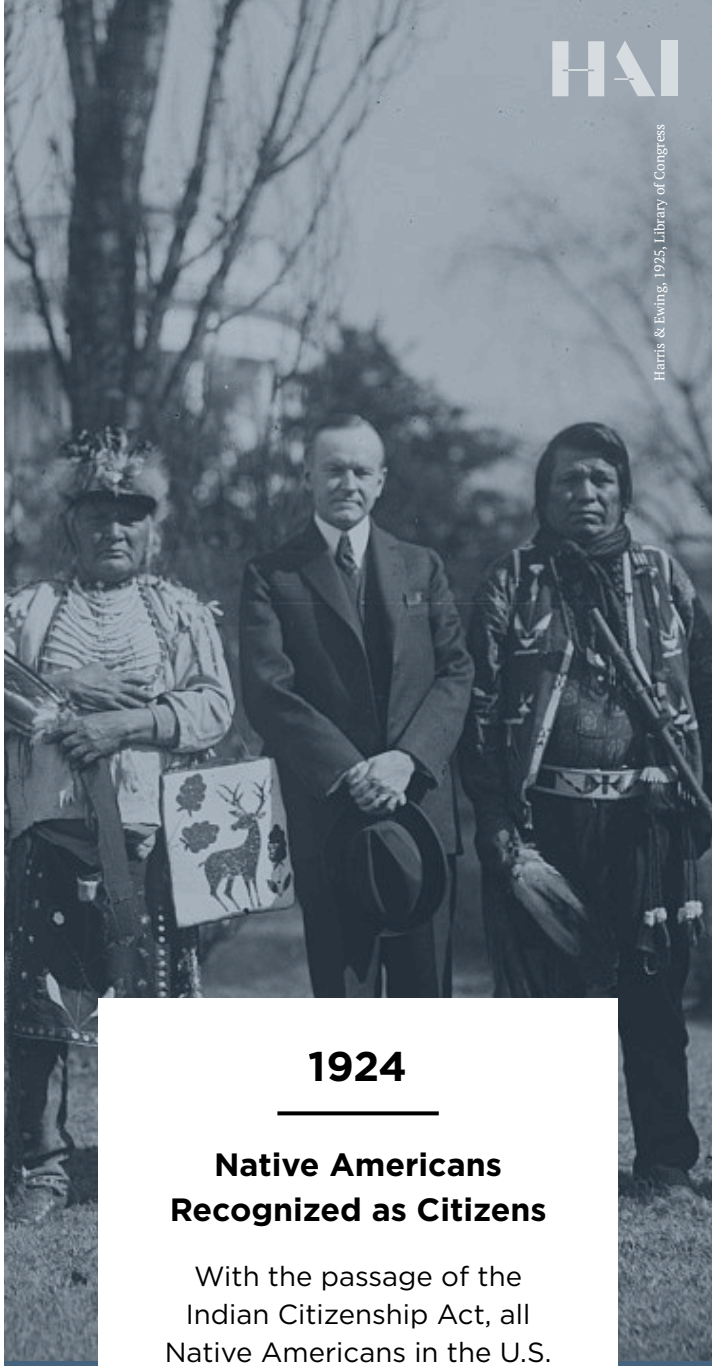
Despite, this, many Southern states use Jim Crow laws to severely restrict Black men from voting.

National Photo Company, c. 1917, Library of Congress

1920

Suffrage for White Women

The 19th Amendment codifies the right to vote for white women across the nation. As the law only prevents discrimination based on sex, minority women are still largely excluded from voting.



Harris & Ewing, 1925, Library of Congress

1924

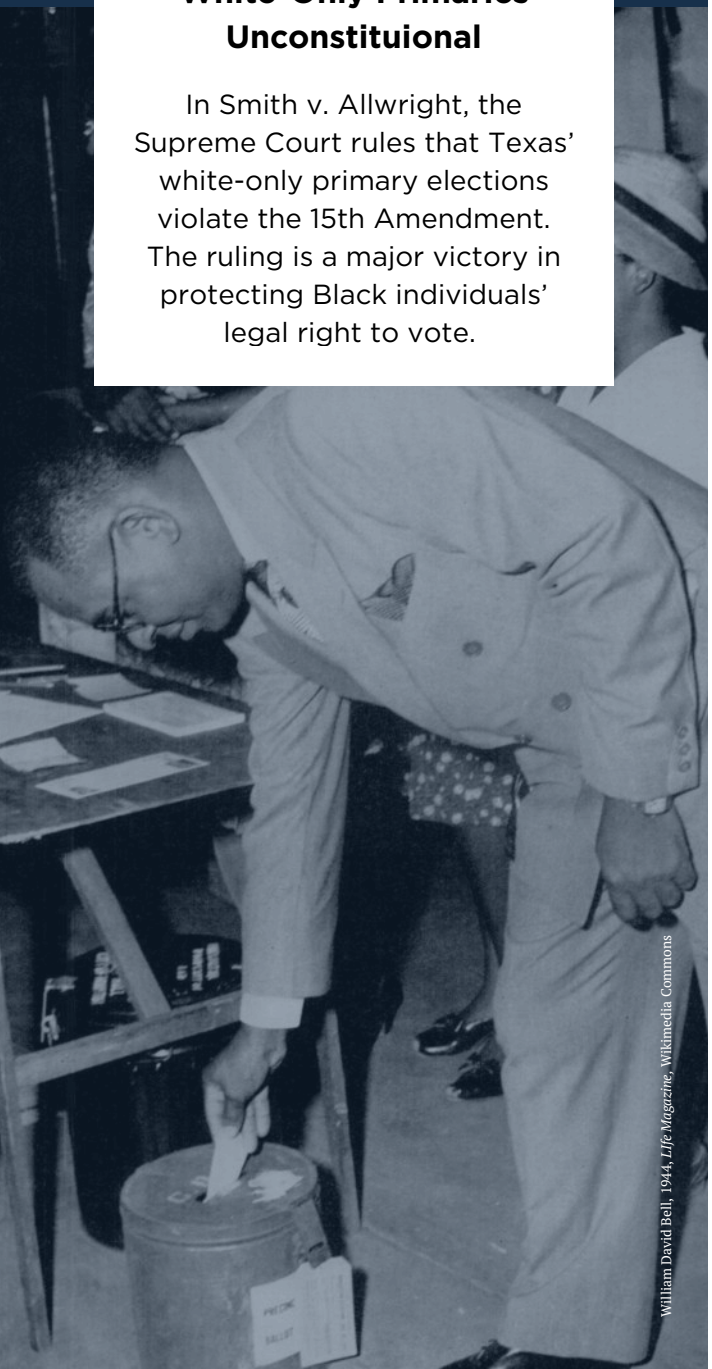
Native Americans Recognized as Citizens

With the passage of the Indian Citizenship Act, all Native Americans in the U.S. and Alaskan territory gain the right to vote under the 15th Amendment. However, some states still barred them from the polls.

1944

White-Only Primaries Unconstituional

In Smith v. Allwright, the Supreme Court rules that Texas' white-only primary elections violate the 15th Amendment. The ruling is a major victory in protecting Black individuals' legal right to vote.



William David Bell, 1944, *Life Magazine*, Wikimedia Commons

1917, Wikimedia Commons

1952

Asian Americans Gain Citizenship

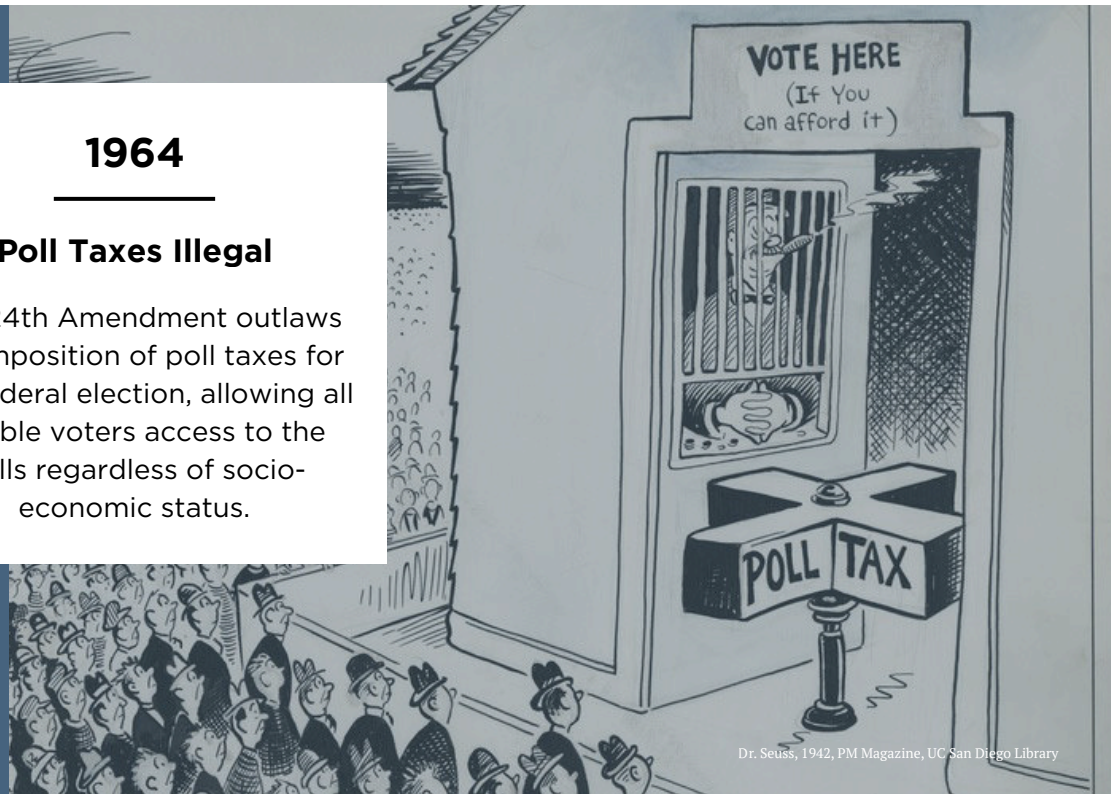
Congress passes the McCarran Walter Act, expanding citizenship rights to Asian Americans after decades of discrimination. With it, they gain the right to vote.

Many states continue to use discriminatory policies to block Asian Americans from the polls.

1964

Poll Taxes Illegal

The 24th Amendment outlaws the imposition of poll taxes for any federal election, allowing all eligible voters access to the polls regardless of socio-economic status.

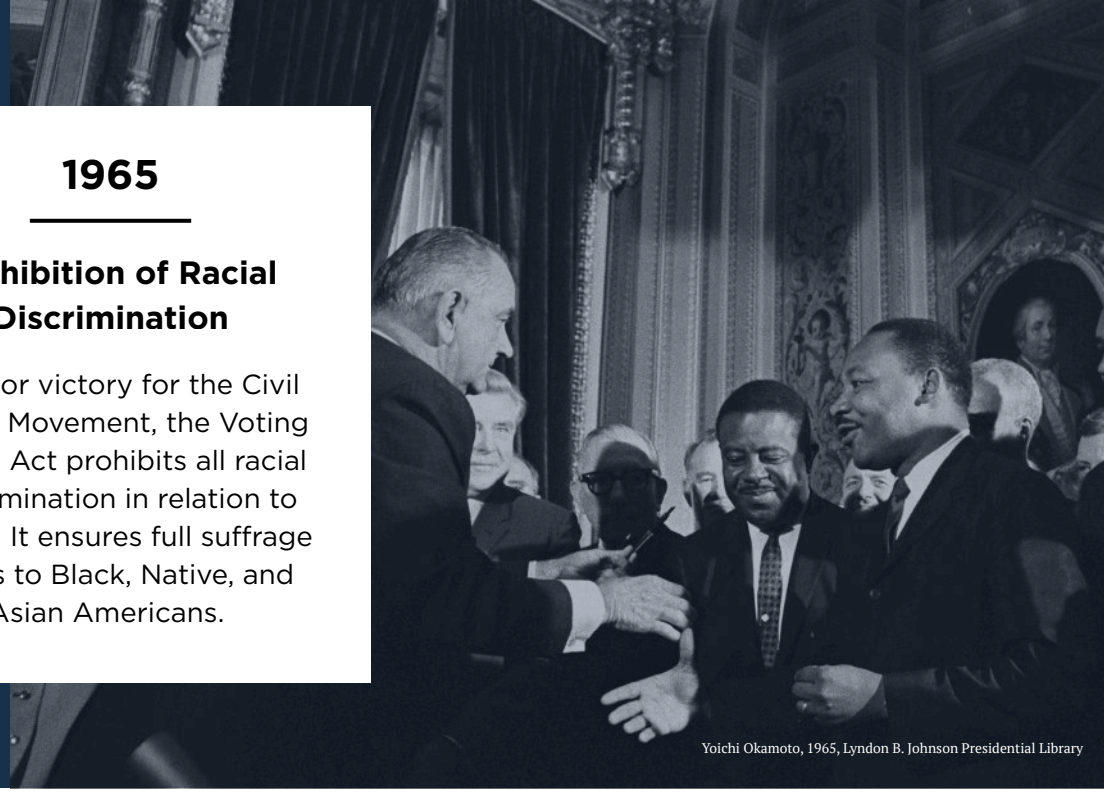


Dr. Seuss, 1942, PM Magazine, UC San Diego Library

1965

Prohibition of Racial Discrimination

A major victory for the Civil Rights Movement, the Voting Rights Act prohibits all racial discrimination in relation to voting. It ensures full suffrage rights to Black, Native, and Asian Americans.



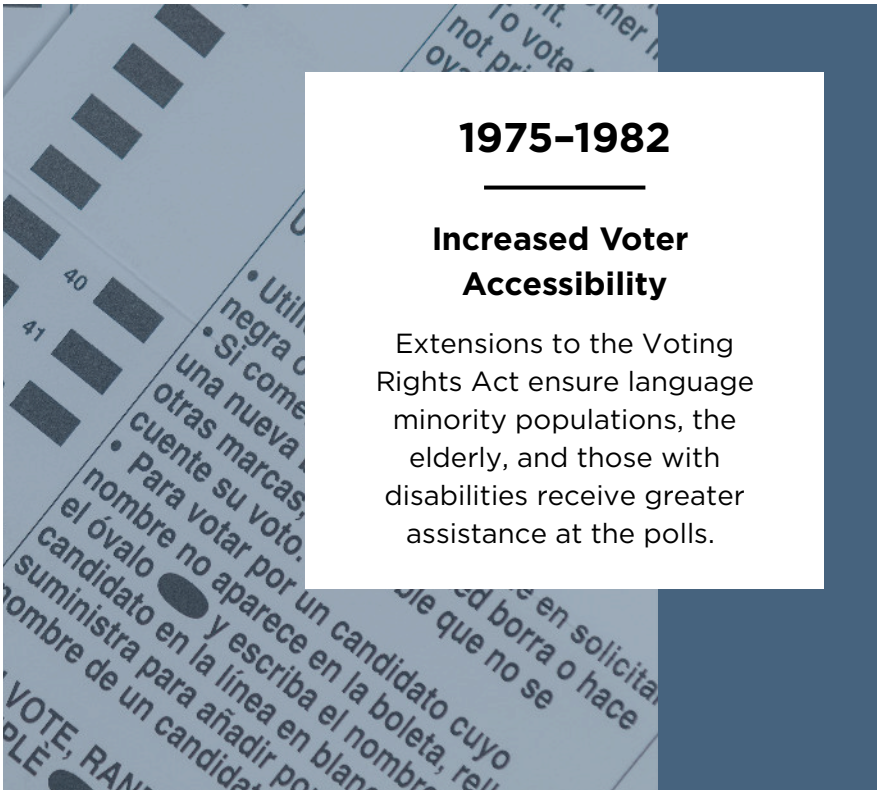
Yoichi Okamoto, 1965, Lyndon B. Johnson Presidential Library

1971

Voting Age Lowered to 18

In a reaction to the Vietnam War draft, young Americans protest to support lowering the voting age from 21 to 18. Their efforts prompt Congress to pass the 26th Amendment.

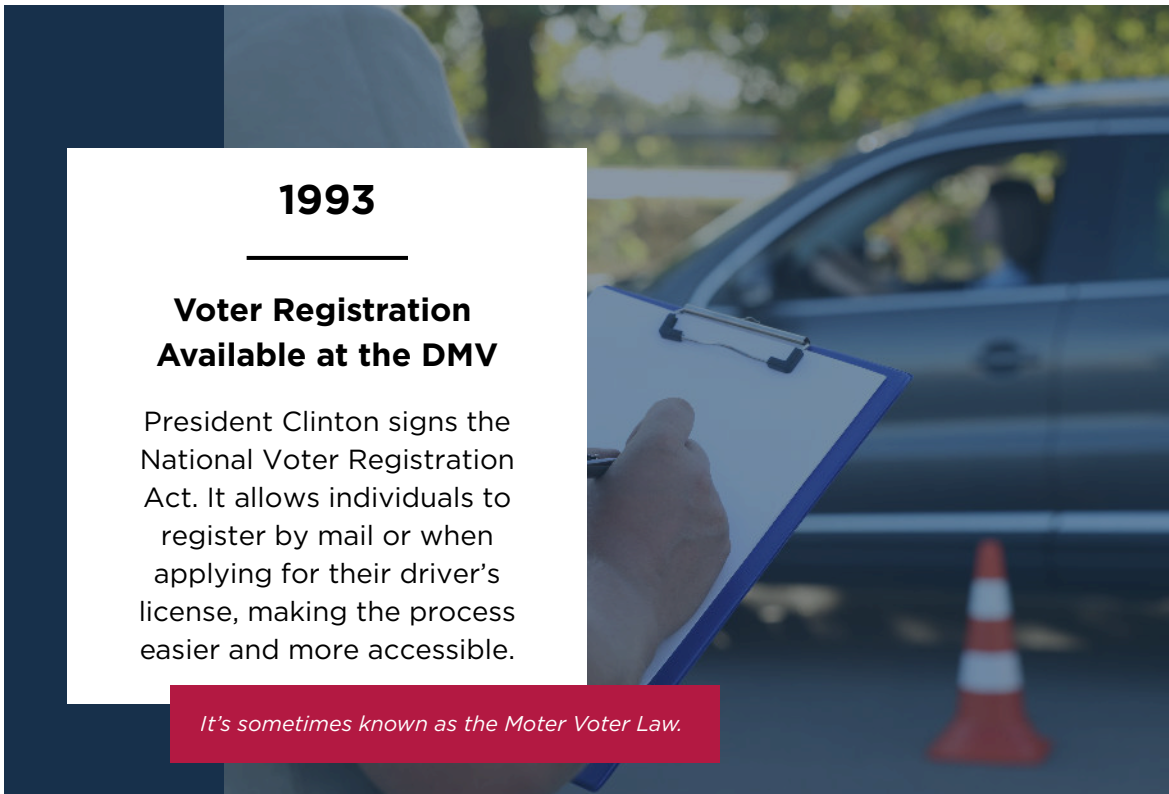
Museum of History & Industry



1975–1982

Increased Voter Accessibility

Extensions to the Voting Rights Act ensure language minority populations, the elderly, and those with disabilities receive greater assistance at the polls.



1993

Voter Registration Available at the DMV

President Clinton signs the National Voter Registration Act. It allows individuals to register by mail or when applying for their driver's license, making the process easier and more accessible.

It's sometimes known as the Moter Voter Law.

Obama White House Archives

2002

Modernizing the Polls

After the 2000 presidential election, Congress passes the Help America Vote Act to update and modernize voting procedures. It encourages states to replace punchcard or lever voting machines with electronic systems.

2010s

Voter Suppression on the Rise

States increasingly restrict voter access through photo ID requirements and limits to early and mail-in voting. The Supreme Court strikes down key voter protections in Shelby v. Holder.

These policies overwhelmingly target minority suffrage.

Shepard Fairey, We the Future - Power to the Polls, 2020, Amplifier, LIbrary of Congress

2014–2022

Continuting the Fight

Members of Congress try to reinstate federal voter protections. Most recent attempts have passed in the House, but stalled in the Senate. The fight for equal and inalienable suffrage continues...

Sources

- American Civil Liberties Union
- American Revolution Museum
- American University Pence Law Library
- Andrew Carnegie Foundation
- Asian Americans Advancing Justice
- Bill of Rights Institute
- Civil Rights Digital Library
- Civil Rights Teaching
- Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History
- Jewish Museum of Maryland
- Jim Crow Museum
- Legal Defense Fund
- Library of Congress
- National Archives and Records Administration
- National Congress of American Indians
- National Constitution Center
- PBS
- Richard Nixon Presidential Library and Museum
- Stanford University Libraries
- U.S. Commission on Civil Rights
- U.S. Congress
- U.S. House of Representatives
- U.S. Department of the Interior
- U.S. Department of Justice

Preserve and activate your heritage

America's 250th is a reminder of how moments shape our future. Each civic milestone of our nation and your organization is just one stop along a longer path that extends into a bright future.

Our team at The Milestone Collective can help you tell your story and mark the milestones that truly matter through strategic planning, content development, brand identity, and event production. Let's build something timeless together.

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