

What's Happening

I N T H E U S A ?

BY LAWRENCE GABLE

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A democratic government gives power to its citizens by allowing them to vote. In theory it means that it would be good if everyone voted. In practice, however, the United States has a long history of suppressing votes. Now it is happening again through new laws that require photo ID's.

Discrimination against certain voters has existed since the early days of the U.S. When the U.S. Constitution went into effect in 1789, only White men who owned property and paid taxes could vote. Even so, some of those men could not vote because of their religion. By 1850, though, nearly all White men could vote.

More changes came after the Civil War when Congress passed the 15th Amendment in 1870. The new law gave all Black men the right to vote, even those who were former slaves. Unfortunately some states in the South began forcing people to pay poll taxes before they could vote. That prevented Black Americans and many poor Whites from voting. By the 1890s Southern states and a few Western states also instituted literacy tests that prevented Black men from voting.

American women fought for decades for the right to vote. After the Civil war some states began granting women that right. Finally in 1920 the 19th Amendment guaranteed them the right to vote in federal elections.

In the 1960s leaders of the Civil Rights Movement registered Black Americans to vote. Their efforts led to the Voting Rights Act of 1965. That law does several important things. First, it outlaws literacy tests. Second, it gives the federal government control of voting laws in states that used to suppress votes. Third, it requires states with large Spanish-speaking populations to print voter information in Spanish.

Many other things also have made it easier to vote. People can use "absentee" ballots if they cannot vote in person on Election Day. In 1971 the 26th Amendment lowered the voting age to 18 years old. In 2000 Oregon became the first state to run its voting for president entirely by mail. "Early voting" in 34



SOME STATES SUPPRESS VOTES

states allows people to cast their ballots by mail or in person before Election Day. Some states even allow voters to register to vote on Election Day itself.

For this presidential election some states are suppressing votes.

In Ohio, for example, almost 30 percent of the voters used early voting in 2008. About 100,000 people voted in the last three days before that election, and most of them voted

for one party's candidate. This year the state's leaders, who belong to the other party, tried to eliminate those last three days. However, in October a court stopped them.

Nine states have added a new requirement for voting: a photo ID. Civil rights and voting rights groups have challenged these laws

in court because they target several million poor, elderly and disabled people. Getting the specific ID in some states can be hard. Pennsylvania's law, for example, required people to go to the Department of Motor Vehicles. There they had to show a Social Security card, an original birth certificate, two years of tax returns and local utility bills. According to a study by the Brennan Center for Justice at New York University, 11 percent of American voters lack a photo ID. The percentages are higher among Blacks, Hispanics and people over age 65. A judge has blocked Pennsylvania's law for now.

The states argue that photo ID's will reduce voter fraud. However, in October 2012 the government's General Accounting Office reported that voter fraud has not been a problem anywhere in the U.S. In addition, journalism students at Arizona State University organized a nationwide study of voter fraud. They found ten cases since 2000 in which a photo ID would have stopped voter fraud. Clearly this is not a serious problem.

Americans hold deep, strong beliefs about democracy and government by the people. The country has come a long way in granting everyone the right to vote. Politicians should not prevent Americans from voting. Instead they should embrace every voter who wants to participate in the democratic process.

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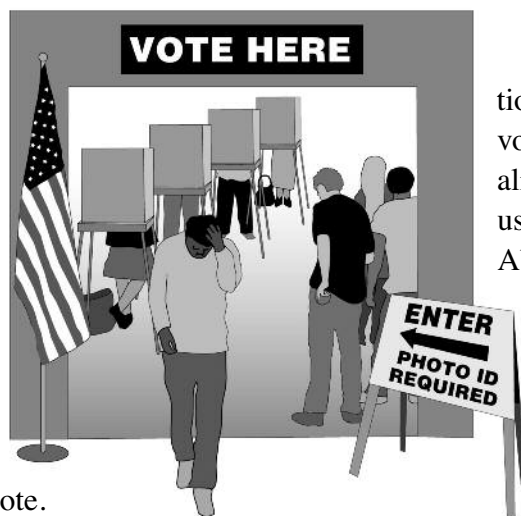
Only certain people could vote in the early days of the U.S. In 1789 only White men who owned property could vote. Even so, some of those men could not vote because of their religion. By 1850 nearly all White men could vote.

More changes came after the Civil War. In 1870 the 15th Amendment gave all Black men the right to vote. Unfortunately some Southern states began forcing people to pay poll taxes before they could vote. That prevented Black Americans and poor Whites from voting. By the 1890s Southern states and a few Western states also used literacy tests to stop Black men from voting.

American women fought a long time for the right to vote. After the Civil war some states began granting women that right. Finally in 1920 the 19th Amendment allowed them to vote in U.S. elections.

The Civil Rights Movement led to the Voting Rights Act of 1965. That law bans literacy tests. It also gives the U.S. government control of voting laws in states that used to suppress votes. In states with many Spanish speakers, it requires voter information in Spanish.

Many other things also have made it easier to vote. The voting age is now only 18 years old. People can use "absentee" ballots if they cannot vote in person on Election Day. Oregon runs its voting for president entirely by mail. "Early voting" in 34 states allows people to vote by mail or in person before Election Day.



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For this presidential election some states are suppressing votes. In Ohio, for example, almost 30 percent of the voters used early voting in 2008.

About 100,000 people voted in the last three days before that election, and most of them voted for one party's candidate. This year the state's leaders, who belong to the other party, tried to get rid of those last three days. However, in October a court stopped them.

Nine states have made photo ID's a new requirement for voting. Getting the official ID in some states can be especially hard for millions of poor, elderly and disabled people. Pennsylvania's law, for example, required people to go to the Department of Motor Vehicles. They had to show a Social Security card, an original birth certificate and two years of tax returns. The Brennan Center for Justice at New York University reports that 11 percent of American voters lack a photo ID. The percentages are higher among Blacks, Hispanics and people over age 65. A judge has blocked Pennsylvania's law for now.

The states argue that photo ID's will reduce voter fraud. However, in October 2012 the government reported that voter fraud has not been a problem anywhere in the U.S. Also, students at Arizona State University made a study of voter fraud in the U.S. They found ten cases since 2000 that a photo ID would have stopped. Clearly this is not a serious problem.

Americans feel strongly about democracy. The country has struggled to grant everyone the right to vote. Politicians should not prevent Americans from voting. Instead they should welcome every voter who wants to be part of the democratic process.

Background Information

There are 146 million registered voters in the U.S.

In 1869 Wyoming became the first state to grant women the right to vote.

In 1890 Mississippi became the first state to use literacy tests. When Civil Rights organizers began to register Black voters in Mississippi in 1962, only 6.7 percent of African Americans there were registered to vote. That was the lowest percentage in the U.S.

In 1915 a ruling by the U.S. Supreme Court prohibited literacy tests for voters in federal elections.

According to the National Conference of State Legislatures, 19 states and the District of Columbia have no voter ID laws at all. Another 19 states require some sort of identification, but not necessarily photo ID. They accept things like student ID's and Social Security cards.

No state had a requirement for a government-issued photo ID before Georgia and Indiana passed their laws in 2005. Now eleven states have adopted laws for 2012 that require it in order to cast a ballot. They are Florida, Georgia, Hawaii, Idaho, Indiana, Kansas, Louisiana, Michigan, New Hampshire, South Dakota and Tennessee.

Six states have adopted photo ID laws that they hope will go into effect sometime after the 2012 election. They are Alabama, Mississippi, Pennsylvania, South Carolina, Texas and Wisconsin. It is possible that the federal government will deny permission to AL, MS, SC and TX under the Voting Rights Act of 1965. Courts declared WI's law unconstitutional in March 2012 and blocked PA's law until a trial after the election.

The Brennan Center reports that 25 percent of Blacks do not have a government-issued photo ID. The number is 16 percent among Hispanics, and 18 percent among people over age 65.

The students at Arizona State University were in the Walter Cronkite School of Journalism and Mass Communication. Their project, News21, included investigations by journalism students around the U.S. It analyzed 2,068 cases of alleged election fraud and found 10 cases of alleged in-person voter impersonation. That represents one case for almost every 15 million prospective voters.

Topics for Discussion and Writing

Pre-reading:

- Tell what you know about U.S. presidential elections.

Comprehension:

- Trace the expansion of the right to vote to various members of American society.

Beyond the Text:

- A few countries actually require their citizens to vote. Tell why you think that voting should, or should not, be viewed as an obligation and not just a right.
- Describe how getting a government-issued ID might be difficult for an elderly person, poor person, disabled person or someone who works long hours.
- Go to this Internet address (www.millercenter.org/president/speeches/detail/4034) and watch President Johnson speak about the Voting Rights Act.

Vocabulary (*advanced article only)

Article-specific: to suppress; discrimination*; amendment; poll tax; literacy test; candidate; utility bill*; according to*; voter fraud; journalism*

High-use: democracy/democratic; theory*; to require; former*; to institute*; decade*; to grant; to guarantee*; federal*; to register*; to eliminate*; to embrace

Sources

Montgomery (Alabama) Advertiser October 4, 2012

Gannett News Service September 21, 2012

Dayton Daily News September 10, 2012

Minneapolis Star Tribune August 18, 2012

Portland (Maine) Press Herald August 13, 2012

New York Times July 28, 2012

Library of Congress www.loc.gov

National Conference of State Legislatures www.ncsl.org

Common Core Curricular Standards

Reading—Grades 5–12

Quote accurately from text / Cite textual evidence /
Draw inferences / Determine central ideas /
Analyze structure of text / Interpret words and phrases

CA Curricular Standards (4–12)

ELD—Intermediate and Advanced

Reading Vocabulary Development/Comprehension
Writing Strategies and Applications
Listening and Speaking

History-Social Science

5.4; 5.7; 8.3; 8.6; 8.9; 8.11; 11.5; 11.10; 12.2