

The Privilege and Right to Vote

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Today, in most democracies, the right to vote is granted as a birth right, without discrimination with regard to race, ethnicity, class or gender and without any qualifying test to see how much you can read or write. Resident aliens can vote in local elections in some countries and in others, exceptions are made for citizens of countries with which they have close links like the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico or Guam.

When the polls open on Election Day, every citizen over the age of 18 will be able to cast a vote. It is a right we take for granted one that defines our nation as a democracy and a right that allows us to have a say in the country's running. But this right that the majority take for granted, did not appear overnight with the ratification of our Constitution. Two hundred years ago, you had to be white, male and wealthy in order to vote.

Historically, many groups have been excluded from the right to vote. Sometimes this exclusion was an explicit policy, clearly stated in the electoral laws; at other times it was implemented in practice by provisions that may seem to have little to do with the exclusion actually being implanted as for example poll taxes and literacy requirements used to keep emancipated slaves in the pre-Civil Rights Era American South from voting.

Many people had fought for our right to vote, many had died fighting for this cause. It is because of these brave men and women our Constitution was amended five times.

- 15th Amendment (1870): no law may restrict any race from voting
- 19th Amendment (1920): no law may restrict any sex from voting
- 23rd. Amendment (1961): residents of the District of Columbia can vote for the President
- 24th Amendment (1964): neither Congress nor the states may condition the right to vote in federal elections payment of a poll tax or other type of tax
- 26th Amendment (1971): no law may restrict those above 18 years of age from voting.

Nevertheless, today, we still, perhaps unintentionally exclude some social class their right to vote; one are the homeless because most democratic countries require an address for the electors to be qualified to vote, and this practice, may exclude many who have not the means to own or rent living quarters, such as the homeless. The second excluded group in some of the U.S. states is the prisoners and convicted of a felony after they are released from prison.

In the United States, the right to vote is determined by the individual states, not federally. There is no national "right to vote". The states and the people have changed the U.S. Constitution to disallow states from limiting the right to vote. If it wasn't for the courage of people that dedicated their lives to changing the fact, the right of vote might still be the privilege of a chosen few. Today, regardless of our ethnicity, sex, social class, gender, if we are poor or rich, from the

rural communities or urban communities we have a right that allows us to have a say in the future of this country. Let us use this right for the common good and well being of our country.

The Human Rights Commission encourages everyone to exercise their privilege and right and vote on November 7.