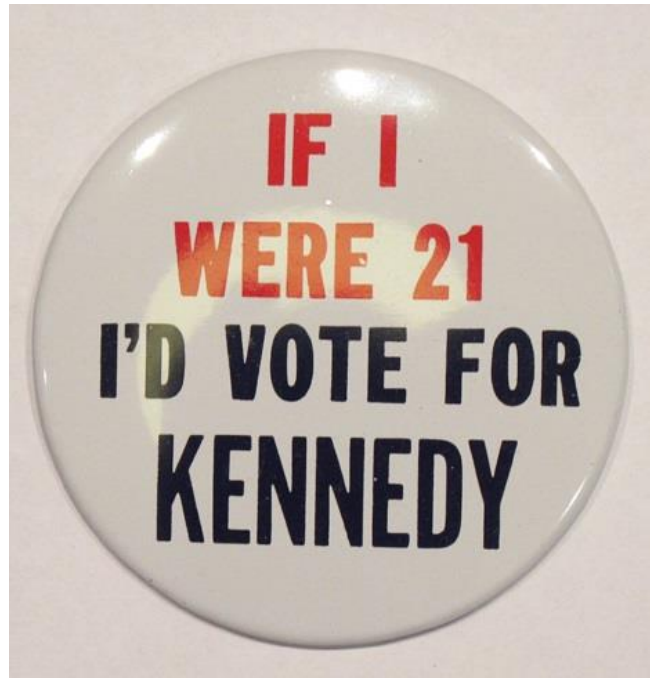


**“The Most Powerful and Precious Right”:
A Voting Rights Photo Book**



“The right to vote in a free American election is the most powerful and precious right in the world — and it must not be denied on the grounds of race or color.”

John F. Kennedy, Special Message to Congress on Civil Rights, February 28, 1963

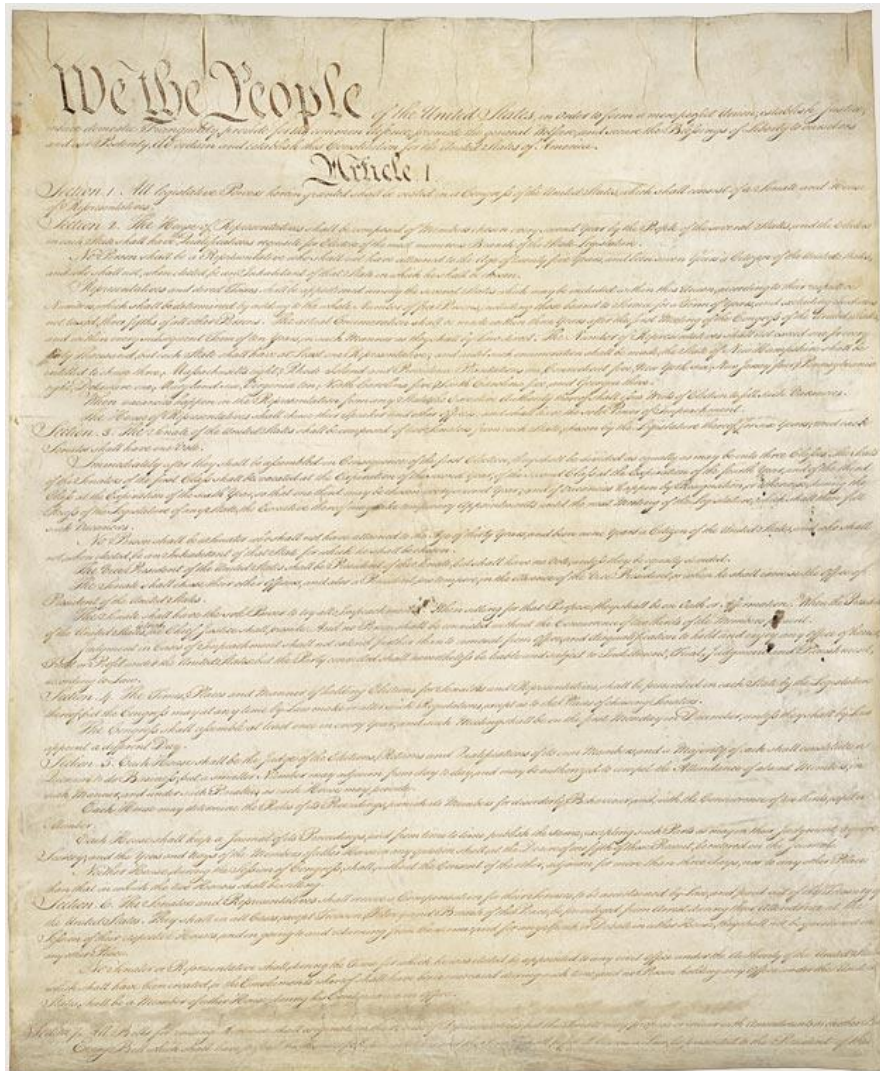
Democracy = Government by the People



Senators and representatives approve laws, or legislation, in the US Capitol building. (Photo credit: US Bureau of Land Management)

The United States government is a democracy, which means government by the people. Eligible voters choose leaders to make laws and lead the government. Elected officials such as mayors, governors, senators, representatives, and the president are responsible to the people who elect them. Why is voting so important? Does everyone have the right to vote? What happens when people do not have the right to vote?

Does the Constitution Protect the Right to Vote?



Section 1 of the 15th amendment:

“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 race, color, or previous condition of servitude.”

The Constitution describes the way the government is structured and how it operates. The original document from 1789 did not spell out who had the right to vote.

However, the 15th amendment was added in 1870 to make sure citizens were not prevented from voting because of their race. (Women did not gain the right to vote until much later.)

Demanding the Right to Vote



(Photo credit: Library of Congress)

This photograph is from the 1963 March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom. What do you notice about the marchers and their signs? What does it tell you about voting rights at that time?

Barriers to Voting: Poll Taxes

Unfortunately, despite the 15th amendment, Blacks and other citizens of color faced many barriers. For example, when John F. Kennedy became president in 1961, five southern states still had poll taxes, or a fee required to register to vote. In many cases, Black people (and some White people) could not afford to pay the tax.

ORIGINAL

1954 **POLL TAX RECEIPT** **STATE OF TEXAS** **NO. 1176**

COUNTY OF HARDIN WARD _____ DATE 1-30-54 1954

PRECINCT NUMBER 14

RECEIVED OF Lee Carr
 ADDRESS Grayburg Tex
 STREET AND HOUSE NO. _____ R. F. D. _____ BOX _____

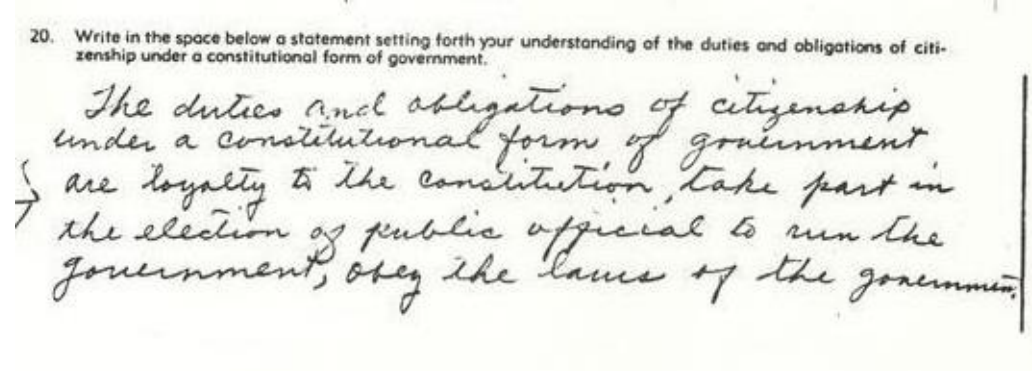
AGE	Length of Residence				CITIZEN	SEX	RACE	Born in (State or Foreign Country)	Occupation	Paid by
	years	years	years	years						
<u>34</u>	<u>34</u>	<u>34</u>	<u>34</u>	<u>34</u>		<u>Male</u>	<u>White</u>	<u>Tex</u>	<u>Rail Roader</u>	<u>Self</u>

The sum of ONE and 50/100 Dollars, in payment of POLL TAX for the year shown above. The said Taxpayer being duly sworn by me says that the above is correct; all of which I certify.

By Stout Collier Deputy. **STOUT COLLIER**
 Tax Assessor and Collector

This is a receipt from a poll tax which has been preserved in the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture. In what year was the poll tax paid? What details can you learn about the person who paid the tax? How much was the tax? (Note: \$2.00 in 1962 would equal about \$17 dollars in 2020.) What would have happened if Lee Carr had not been able to pay the poll tax? Why did some states have a poll tax?

Barriers to Voting: Literacy Tests



(Burke Marshal Papers, bmpp-022-003-p0027)

This is an excerpt from a literacy test given to voters in southern states. Literacy tests were supposed to test a person's ability to read and write but were used to prevent Black people from registering to vote. The registrar, or official in charge of voting registration, had the power to decide which registrations would be accepted. The response shown here, written by a Black person, was used as evidence in a court case during the Kennedy administration to show racial discrimination: even though the answer is complete, the person failed the test.

Barriers to Voting: Intimidation and Violence

“Black men and women were not allowed to register to vote. My own mother, my own father, my grandfather and my uncles and aunts could not register to vote because each time they attempted to register to vote, they were told they could not pass the literacy test. And many people were so intimidated, so afraid that they would lose their jobs - they would be evicted from the farms - they almost gave up.”

John Lewis, civil rights leader and US Congressman



US Congressman John Lewis speaking at the John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum in 2013. Photo by Tom Fitzsimmons.

In some states, Black people who tried to vote were fired from jobs or made to leave their houses and farms. There was violence, too. Some people were beaten or even killed for trying to vote or trying to help other people vote.

Protecting the Right to Vote: Voter Education Project (VEP)



President Kennedy met with leaders from the National Association of Colored People (NAACP) in July 1961 to hear their concerns about racial discrimination in voting and other areas. White House Photographs, JFKWHP-KN-18354

President Kennedy believed everyone deserved the right to vote. He knew that African Americans were facing severe discrimination in voting and wanted that to change. In 1962, his brother Robert, who was Attorney General, created the Voter Education Project (VEP), a program which provided money to civil rights groups working on voting rights for African Americans. Here are some of the organizations that participated:

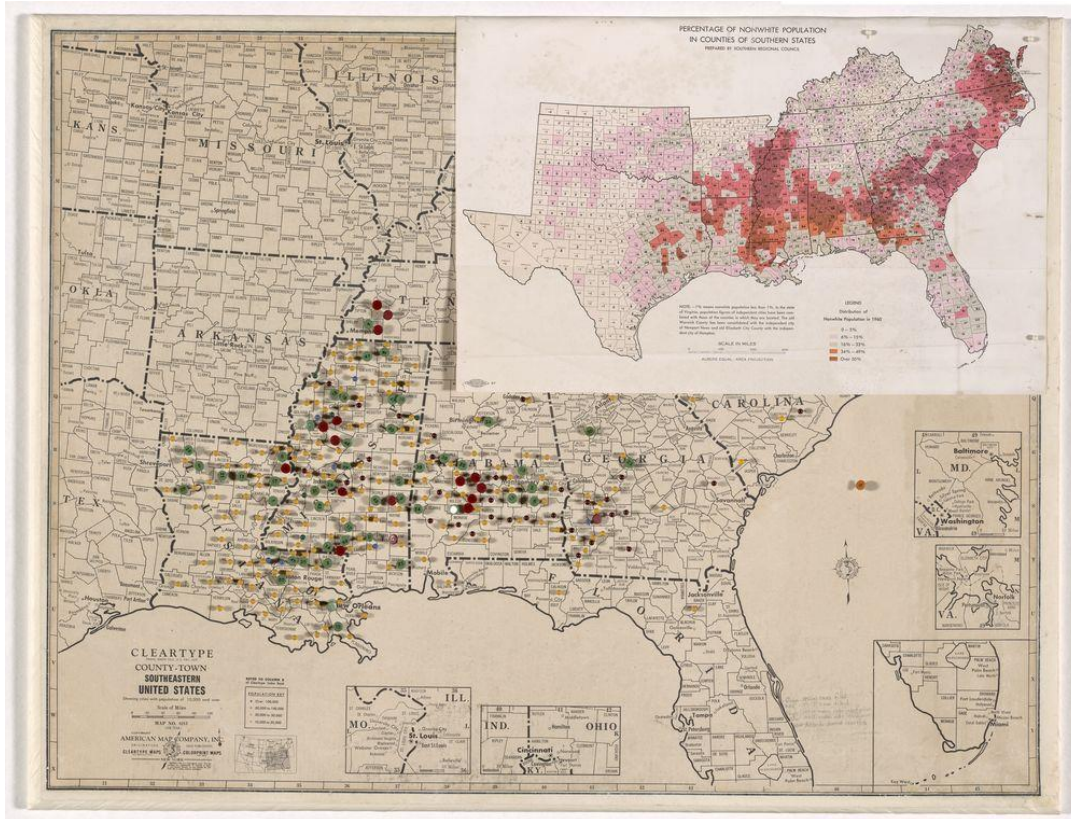
Congress of Racial Equality (CORE)

National Association of Colored People (NAACP)

Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC)

Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC)

Protecting the Right to Vote: Court Cases



This map hung in the office of Burke Marshall, Assistant Attorney General. Working under Attorney General Robert Kennedy, he hired a team of lawyers to travel to southern states to recruit witnesses, examine voter registration records, and bring cases to trial. There was great risk to the work because both lawyers and witnesses could face threats such as violence or losing their jobs or property.

Burke Marshall Papers, BMPP-061-015-p0002

During the Kennedy administration, the Department of Justice (DOJ) filed hundreds of court cases against towns, cities, and states that prevented Black people from voting. Each colored pin on this map represents a DOJ voter discrimination court case. Which states had court cases?

A Voting Rights Question for the President

11-11-63

Moab, Utah
13 Orchard Way
April 16, 1963

President Kennedy
Washington D.C.
White House

Dear President Kennedy:
Our reading class is studying the Constitution.
While my friends and I were read the 16th amendment we were wondering about what it said about every man's right to vote. Then why are the southern states able to make the Negroes pay poll taxes when they know they can't pay. We know they are doing it because they don't want each man to have equal rights.
If there is something we can do write to:

Laurel Baker
13 Orchard Way
Moab, Utah

Yours, truly,
Olivia, Marcy, and
Laurel

In his 1962 State of the Union speech, President Kennedy expressed that poll taxes and literacy tests should not be used to prevent people from voting. He supported the 24th amendment to the Constitution which would make poll taxes illegal in federal elections. Read this letter from students in Moab, Utah, to learn about their request.

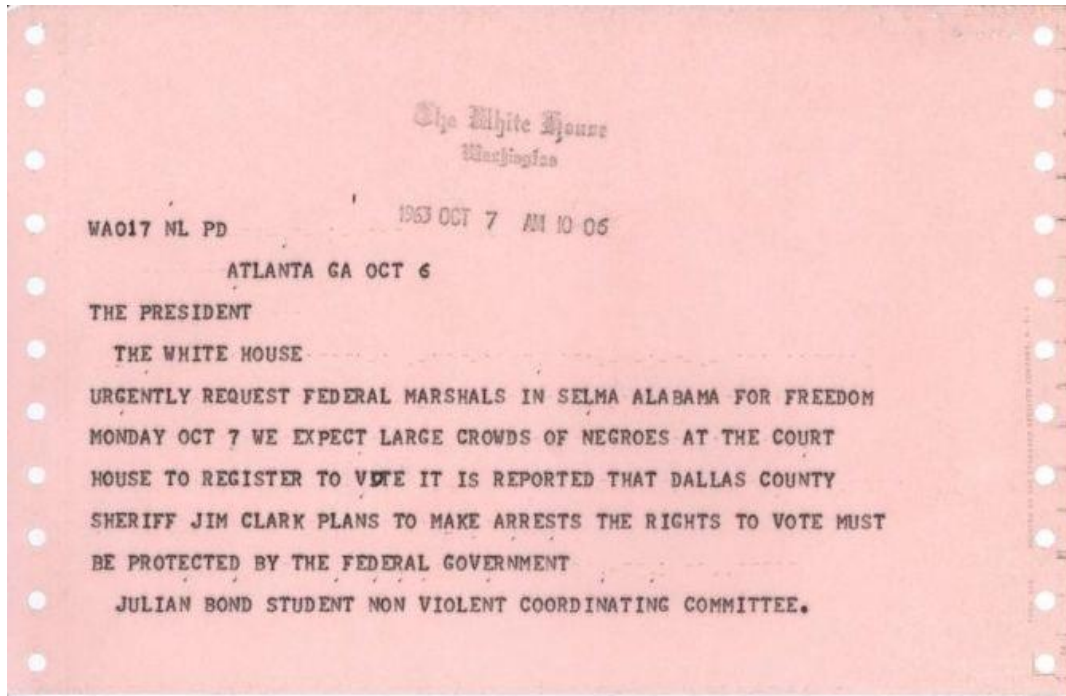
- What is the date of the letter?
- To whom is it written?
- Who are the authors of the letter?
- What age would you guess the authors to be?
- What barrier to voting does the letter address?
- Why do you think the authors wrote, "We know they are doing it because they don't want each man to have equal rights."
- What does the letter reveal about poll taxes in 1963?

(John F. Kennedy Library and Museum, jfkmpfpom-171-004-0001)

Congress passed the 24th Amendment to the Constitution on August 27, 1962. President Kennedy sent telegrams urging governors to support the amendment. It was ratified on January 23, 1964.

Freedom Monday: An Urgent Request

In addition to poll taxes, arrests, intimidation, and violence continued to threaten Black citizens' voting rights. Read this telegram to learn how this was communicated to President Kennedy.



- What is the date of the telegram?
- When was it received by the White House?
- Who wrote it?
- To whom was it written?
- What is the purpose of the document?
- Why was it sent?

(John F. Kennedy Presidential Papers, White House Central Office Files, jfkwhcsf-0368-006-p0045)

What actually happened on October 7, 1963, in Selma, Alabama? According to a November 9, 1963 report from the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), 450 Black citizens lined up in front of the courthouse in Selma, Alabama. Sheriff Clark called in hundreds of state troopers and local White citizens to threaten the crowd. Only fourteen Black citizens were able to register that day. Two SNCC organizers who tried to distribute sandwiches were beaten and arrested. Some participants were fired and beaten after the action.

President Kennedy Proposes a Civil Rights Act



(White House Photographs, JFKWHP-AR7969-D)

In 1963, President Kennedy proposed that a law be passed to end segregation in public places, and to help end racial discrimination in voting. The proposed bill was far-reaching, but many changes had to be made so that southern states would agree to it. After months of discussions and compromises, and in honor of President Kennedy, following his assassination, Congress passed the Civil Rights Act. President Lyndon B. Johnson signed the historic law on July 2, 1964. But changes to the law had weakened the voting rights protections. More needed to be done.

"... it ought to be possible for American citizens of any color to register to vote in a free election without interference or fear of reprisal."

John F. Kennedy, Address to the American People on Civil Rights, June 11, 1963

Freedom Summer



(Photo credit: National Archives)

Other events in the summer of 1964 made it clear that more had to be done to make voting safe and accessible to all. In a program organized by civil rights organizations, hundreds of mostly White college students traveled to Mississippi to teach in Freedom Schools and help with voter registration. About 17,000 Black voters attempted to register that summer but only 1,600 applications were accepted by local registrars. It was a dangerous project: 80 volunteers were beaten, and more than 1,000 people were arrested. Tragically, three civil rights workers were killed.

March From Selma to Montgomery



Photo credit: Library of Congress

On March 7, 1965, John Lewis of SNCC and Hosea Williams of SCLC led 600 people in a peaceful march for voting rights and to protest the death of a young army veteran, Jimmy Lee Jackson, who had been beaten and shot by Alabama state troopers. The demonstrators were severely attacked by Alabama state troopers. The day, which came to be known as “Bloody Sunday”, was a turning point in voting rights history. Two more marches were attempted. The third march was successful and by the time protesters arrived in Montgomery, they numbered 25,000.

President Lyndon B. Johnson Signs the Voting Rights Act



(Photo credit: LBJ Library photo by Yoichi Okamoto)

The violence in March 1965 spurred President Johnson to move quickly to pass a Voting Rights Act that would make all racial discrimination in voting illegal. When he signed the law on August 6, 1965, he said, “This act flows from a clear and simple wrong. Its only purpose is to right that wrong. Millions of Americans are denied the right to vote because of their color. This law will ensure them the right to vote. The wrong is one which no American, in his heart, can justify. The right is one which no American, true to our principles, can deny.”

A US Supreme Court Decision: *Shelby County v. Holder*

The Voting Rights Act was extended four times from 1970 to 2006. In 2013, the US Supreme Court voted 5–4 to strike down a part of the law: a section that determined which states had to receive “preclearance” or approval from the US government before they could make any changes to voting rights laws. States that had patterns of voter discrimination in the 1960s were required to have this preclearance before changing their voting laws.



Chief Justice Roberts wrote the majority opinion which asserted that this part of the law was outdated. It had been almost 40 years since the Voting Rights Act was passed and the states that had been identified as having racial discrimination in voting and the majority opinion ruled that they should no longer have to seek approval before changing their voting laws.

The late Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg wrote the dissenting opinion which claimed that those states that had widespread racial discrimination in voting should still have to get approval before changing their voting laws. She wrote that “throwing out preclearance when it has worked and is continuing to work to stop discriminatory changes is like throwing away your umbrella in a rainstorm because you are not getting wet.” What does this metaphor mean? What did Justice Ginsburg think would happen if the law was struck down?



Protecting the Right to Vote Today

“The challenge of voter suppression is that it not only blocks you from voting, it convinces you it’s not worth trying. And, typically, it doesn’t just affect one person, it affects communities. So, if someone had a hard time voting, sometimes the family decides it’s not worth it. The community will decide it’s not worth it. ...If your one polling place is shut down and there is no bus to take anyone there to the new location, an entire community can decide, ‘fight a system that clearly doesn’t want me?’”

Former Georgia House Democratic Leader and candidate for governor Stacey Abrams, December 3, 2019



Since 2010, thirty-six states have passed laws that require voters to have identification or ID. Other practices that limit voting include removing names from voting lists and closing polls, or locations where people vote. However, some states are expanding voting by allowing people to register on Election Day and online. To ensure that people can vote safely during the Covid-19 pandemic, many states passed laws to allow people to vote by mail or to vote early. As a democracy, it is essential to continue to protect voting rights for all.

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