

# VOTING RIGHTS AND CIVIC ENGAGEMENT IN THE UNITED STATES



Girls Inc. is committed to advancing the rights and opportunities of girls and young women, with a particular focus on the needs of girls from low-income communities and girls who face multiple, intersectional challenges. Informed by the voices of girls themselves, we advocate to break through the barriers girls face and to reform systems that impede their success by giving them the tools they need to organize for and elect those who will champion beneficial change.

## GLOSSARY

The following glossary is provided to ensure that readers understand what is meant by the issue-specific terminology and phrases used throughout this fact sheet.

**Civic Engagement:** Action that promotes the quality of life of all people in a community, through both political and non-political processes.<sup>1</sup>

**Felony Disenfranchisement:** The denial of the right to vote for those convicted of past or current felony-level crimes. Felony disenfranchisement laws vary widely across the United States, often creating confusion or misinformation for people who are or were incarcerated as to whether they have lost their right to vote.<sup>2</sup>

**Gerrymandering:** In U.S. politics, the practice of drawing the boundaries of electoral districts in a way that gives one political party an unfair advantage over its rivals (political or partisan gerrymandering) or that dilutes the voting power of members of ethnic or linguistic minority groups (racial gerrymandering).<sup>3</sup>

**Voting Age:** Citizens of the United States aged 18 years or older have the right to vote in federal elections.<sup>4</sup>

**Voter Purges:** An often-flawed process of removing ineligible voters from registration lists.<sup>5</sup>

**Voting Suppression:** Any effort to prevent eligible voters from registering to vote or voting.<sup>6</sup>

**Youth Voter:** A voter between the ages of 18-29.<sup>7</sup>

**The right to vote is the most sacred tenet of American democracy, yet voting has a long history of discrimination that has prevented a large portion of Americans from obtaining and exercising this right.**

Women, people identifying as BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and people of color), and youth have historically been the target of such discrimination. While laws have been amended and passed to give such minority groups the right to vote on paper, modern adversities—such as inequity in voting registration resources and election interference—can make it difficult to exercise one's right.

## A HISTORY OF STRUGGLE AND PERSISTENCE FOR THE RIGHT TO VOTE IN THE U.S.

In 1870, the 15th Amendment to the United States Constitution declared that the right 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.”<sup>8</sup> However, this amendment only granted the right to vote to African American men, continuing to exclude women. This is one of many ways intersectionality has played a pivotal role throughout the history of voting in the United States.

## WOMEN'S SUFFRAGE--THE 19TH AMENDMENT

The Women's Suffrage Movement in the United States was founded at the first Women's Rights Convention in July 1848 in Seneca Falls, New York. (Although Black women played a significant role in the Suffrage movement, it is worth noting that not a single woman of color was invited to the Convention.)<sup>9</sup> **These activists and organizers worked continuously for women's right to vote, and nearly 70 years later, on June 4, 1919, Congress passed the 19th Amendment giving women the right to vote.**<sup>10</sup>

While the 19th Amendment gave all women the right to vote, it did not guarantee that right. In practice, many women of color were still excluded through blatant racism (e.g. poll taxes, literacy tests, grandfather clauses, violence, and lynching) and voter suppression, which continue today among marginalized communities. **Despite their role in the Women's Suffrage Movement, Black women's ability to vote differed significantly from white women's,<sup>11</sup> leaving them alone to start a new movement in 1920 (as the broader women's suffrage organizations had disbanded).**<sup>12</sup> Famous abolitionist Sojourner Truth recognized the disconnect between the abolitionist and women's rights movements well-before the Women's Suffrage Movement in her “Ain't I A Woman?” speech.<sup>13</sup> Along with African Americans, other groups continued to be excluded from the vote, including Asian American immigrants, who were ineligible for naturalized citizenship on account of race and only won the vote starting in 1943.<sup>14</sup>

**Finally, the 1964 Civil Rights and 1965 Voting Rights Acts, guaranteed the voting rights of Black, Indigenous, Latinx, and other women and men of color by prohibiting discrimination on the basis of race, color, religion, sex or national origin.**<sup>15</sup> **However, efforts to limit voting rights for these groups still exist today.**



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## YOUTH VOTING RIGHTS--THE 26TH AMENDMENT

In 1942, during World War II, Congress lowered the minimum age to be drafted into the US Military from 21 to 18. This sparked a decades-long debate over lowering the voting age in the US. If a young person was old enough to fight in war, shouldn't they be old enough to vote?<sup>16</sup> Despite extensive debate on both a state and federal levels, it was not until July 1, 1971 that the 26th Amendment extended the right to vote to all Americans aged 18 and older.<sup>17</sup>

While young voters are enthusiastic about voting, historically they have smaller voter turnout in presidential elections, a discrepancy which is even larger in midterms, state, and local elections.<sup>18</sup> This gap in youth voter turnout is the result of both a lack of preparation by youth voters and restrictive state and local policies that hinder youth voters from exercising their right.<sup>19</sup> However, youth voted in record numbers in the 2018 midterm elections and further increased their participation in the 2020 presidential elections.<sup>20</sup>

The youth vote currently includes the youngest members of the Millennial Generation (anyone born between 1981 and 1996<sup>21</sup>) and the oldest members of Gen Z (anyone born after 1997<sup>22</sup>). **In 2024, Millennials and Gen Z will combine to make up 44% of eligible voters – giving them incredible power to influence election outcomes.**<sup>23</sup> Considering that 48% of Gen Z and 39% of Millennials identify as minorities, we can expect these generations to have different priorities and values than previous generations.<sup>24</sup>

## HOW VOTING RIGHTS ARE STILL THREATENED TODAY

**Despite laws to ensure that all Americans can vote, marginalized communities (especially young voters, women, and/or people identifying as BIPOC still face adversities in exercising this right.**

Laws which require ID to vote vary state to state and are a major source of voter suppression in the United States. Women may not have government-issued photo ID in their current legal names (which can change because of marriage, etc.).<sup>25</sup> Few college students have a photo ID with their current address, and some states restrict use of student IDs for voting.<sup>6</sup> For students living away from home for school, limitations to early voting and voting by mail restricts their ability to participate in the electoral process. People without vehicles, including low-income individuals, often do not have driver's licenses - the most common form of government-issued photo ID.

Marginalized communities, BIPOC and women in particular, also face discrimination that prevents them from exercising their right to vote. **In addition to voter ID laws, obstacles include voter registration limitations, voter purges,<sup>27</sup> felony disenfranchisement (incarceration rates are extremely disproportionate by race<sup>28</sup>), gerrymandering, limited early voting dates, and limited voting locations in BIPOC communities.** In 2021 alone, [more than 389 bills in 48 states](#) were introduced to restrict Americans' right to vote by establishing barriers to voting and disproportionately impact people of color.<sup>29</sup>

## GIRLS INC.'S SUPPORT FOR VOTING, VOTING RIGHTS AND CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

Giving girls the power to lead starts with engaging them in activities to become savvy voters, engaged citizens, and potential future candidates. Girls Inc.'s [She Votes](#) program allows girls to see how leadership can be expressed through civic engagement, from learning how legislators make decisions at all levels of government to how those decisions impact girls' lives.

Girls Inc. affiliates across the country launched the *She Votes* program leading up to the U.S. Presidential election in 2008. Girls Inc. believes that democracy is stronger when more voices are heard and everyone is engaged. We prepare girls to be civically engaged members of society and encourage all eligible voters to participate in our democracy.<sup>30</sup> Girls Inc. advocates to:

- Promote high quality, sustained civic education in schools, for grades K-12.
- Support free and fair elections.
- Promote policies that make it easier for people to register to vote.
- Protect the rights of communities that have historically been excluded from freely voting.

Young people have shown time and time again their ability and desire to participate civically and politically. Youth are raising awareness about issues, leading movements, and persuading friends, peers and policymakers. **When young people are civically and politically engaged earlier in life, they are more likely to remain engaged in the future.**

In a [2018 study](#) of low-income youth, 39% said they did not know where to vote. While some young people can rely on family, teachers or peers who are experienced voters, many others lack that support system and are unaware of other resources (like county or state elections office websites) where they could find out the information they need.<sup>31</sup> **Election administrators, educators and elected officials can do more to understand issues of youth access, especially for young people who aren't on college campuses.**

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## RESOURCES ON VOTING RIGHTS AND CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

- [Growing Voters](#) – CIRCLE’s comprehensive report provides actionable steps for youth, government, schools, organizations, media, and campaigns, to improve youth participation in voting.
- [WhenWeAllVote.org](#) – a resource to find your polling place, register to vote, and research what’s on the ballot in your local elections.
- [Rock the Vote](#) – a landing page of free tools to help inform people of their voter status, timeline and important deadlines for their state, options for absentee voting, and more.
- [Voting Rules by State](#) – know your state’s voting rules, from identification requirements to provisions for voters with special needs and language assistance, and emergency procedures.
- [VoteRunLead](#) – a nonprofit organization that trains women to run for office in the United States.
- [She Should Run](#) – a nonpartisan nonprofit working to increase the number of women considering a run for public office.

## WHAT POLICYMAKERS CAN DO

### Improve access to and quality of voting rights for youth, BIPOC, and women voters in underserved and underrepresented communities, including by:

- Passing federal legislation that implements comprehensive reforms, including establishing national standards for registering and voting; reducing the power of big money and special interests in our democracy, and restoring the Voting Rights Act of 1965.
- Increasing funding to create easily accessible voter registration resources.
- Ensure equitable access to education on state and local voter ID laws and practices.
- Increase funding for poll workers and polling places, so that everyone has equal access to exercise their right to vote. This includes (but is not limited to) increasing the number of state polling places as well as expanding the hours polling places are open.



## ENDNOTES

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