

Disfranchisement is a denial of the right to vote. Before 1776, a higher proportion of Americans could vote than in any other country. Still, the vast majority of women and free persons of color were voteless, and white men who owned less than a certain amount of property, such as 40 acres of land, or land or housing that would rent for 40 British shillings per year, were also disfranchised. Property qualifications, which primarily affected younger men, were considerably loosened even before 1800 and were generally abolished in the 1820s and 1830s. By the Civil War, America enjoyed nearly universal white male adult citizen suffrage, and at one point or another during the 19th century, 22 states enfranchised male immigrants who had indicated their intention to become citizens. But African-American males could vote only in New England and, for those who owned substantial property, in New York State, and no females could vote.

Although voters rejected universal black male suffrage in twelve of fifteen referenda in northern states from 1846 to 1869, Republicans extended the vote to southern black males by congressional act in 1867 and to all black males through the Fifteenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution in 1870. Efforts to include women in the Fifteenth Amendment failed, and the movement for female suffrage took another fifty years, slowly but gradually winning support at the local and state levels until it developed sufficient strength to win passage of the Nineteenth Amendment.

By the time most white women won the vote, nearly all southern black men and many southern white men had lost it. Their disfranchisement came about gradually, through a sequence of actions motivated by inseparably intertwined racial and partisan interests. The process began when the Ku Klux Klan wing of the Democratic party attacked its white and African-American opponents. Violence and intimidation allowed Democrats to conquer the polls, stuff ballot boxes, and count in more Democrats. Democratic state legislators passed laws that, for instance, gerrymandered districts to make it harder for blacks and Republicans to win, and they restricted the rights of individuals to vote by requiring them to register long before elections or pay high poll taxes. They also mandated secret ballots or required voters to deposit ballots for different offices into separate ballot boxes, both of which served as de facto literacy tests. But these laws could be repealed by state legislatures if an economic depression or political movement ousted Democrats from power.

To secure white Democratic supremacy permanently, upper-class southern leaders beginning in 1890 engineered the passage of state constitutional provisions that required voters to pay poll taxes and pass literacy or property tests administered by racist, partisan registrars. Disfranchisement transformed a southern political system with fairly vigorous party competition, solid voter turnout, and somewhat egalitarian governmental policy to one with no parties, shrunken participation, few policy benefits for poorer whites, and almost no role for African-Americans.

Only with the passage of the Voting Rights Act of 1965 were such laws overturned and a free, competitive political system restored to the South. Even in 1998, state laws that disfranchised felons and former felons, particularly in the South, denied the vote to 4.7 million U.S. citizens, 36 percent of whom were black. In ten states, such laws disfranchised a quarter or more of black adult males.

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