

The Power of a Vote

America's democracy, or government by the people, is characterized by the right to vote, which ensures that the government remains responsive to the people. However, this ideal was only realized for all Americans after campaigning by the disenfranchised spurred amendments that extended the right to Americans of every race and gender. These amendments illustrate that voting must be protected because it provides citizens with a voice in government and protects popular sovereignty, the foundation of American democracy. Voting is also a responsibility that ensures the government remains responsive to the public's demands and Americans retain the freedoms granted by democracy. Furthermore, it is a responsibility to those who dedicated their lives to fighting for the right to vote, without whom, I and many others would not have been able to vote due to our gender or the color of our skin.

The American electoral process supports democracy through the right to vote in transparent and fair elections, accountability to the electorate, and a peaceful transfer of power. As Thomas Jefferson described in the Declaration of Independence, "Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just Powers from the Consent of the Governed." Voting in fair and transparent elections ensures that a government's power originates from the people. Additionally, representatives are accountable to the electorate because they will only be re-elected if they act on their constituents' behalf, further preserving self-governance and democracy. Finally, the peaceful transfer of power ensures that the decision of the people prevails. By guaranteeing the right to vote in fair elections, accountability, and a peaceful transfer of power, the American electoral process upholds the will of the people.

The expansion of the vote to the previously disenfranchised through amendments illustrates that voting is an imperative right because it allows all citizens to have a voice in their

government, which ensures that the will of the nation is accurately reflected. Although America was founded on consent of the governed, the right to vote was originally restricted to white, land-owning male until campaigning by the disenfranchised led to amendments that extended the right to all Americans. Voting rights advocate Frederick Douglass declared in his speech, “What the Black Man Wants”, “Without [enfranchisement], [the black man’s] liberty is a mockery; without this, you might as well almost retain the old name of slavery for his condition; for in fact, if he is not the slave of the individual master, he is the slave of society [...]” (BlackPast). His and other activists’ efforts came to fruition when the Fifteenth Amendment was ratified in 1870, the first step towards enfranchising men of color. Although the Fifteenth Amendment did not succeed because states employed practices like poll taxes, literacy tests, and the notorious ‘grandfather clause’ to prevent minorities from voting, it laid the ground for the Twenty-fourth Amendment that later solidified these rights.

Around the same time, women were also disenfranchised. After being arrested for voting, suffragist Susan B. Anthony argued that denying women the right to vote violated the ideal of equal rights that the American democracy is founded on: “One-half of the people of this nation to-day are utterly powerless to blot from the statute books an unjust law, or to write there a new and a just one [...] in direct violation of the spirit and letter of the declarations of the framers of this government, every one of which was based on the immutable principle of equal rights to all” (“Susan B. Anthony Speech: Is It a Crime for a Citizen of the United States to Vote?”). The disenfranchisement of women promoted a false myth of inferiority and hindered women from influencing the government. The women’s suffrage movement prompted the ratification of the Nineteenth Amendment in 1920, which gave women a voice in their government.

Women and men of color were only truly enfranchised in 1964, when the Twenty-fourth Amendment was ratified, eliminating poll taxes, and when a year later, the Voting Rights Act abolished all remaining voting obstacles. As a result, Black voter registration increased so much that the disparity between Black and White voters dropped from 30 percent before ratification to 8 percent a decade afterward, making the electorate a more accurate reflection of America. The expansion of the right to vote to women and people of color via amendments has strengthened the ideal of self-governance central to democracy (Crayton).

Voting is a right and a responsibility because it allows citizens to exercise their voice in government by participating in referendums themselves or electing representatives who promote policy on their behalf. The legalization of same-sex marriage illustrates the power of voting because it was spurred by public support and involvement on the matter. In 1996, the courts and around 70 percent of the American public opposed same-sex marriage (Igielnik). However, as public support rose, numerous states began legalizing same-sex marriage. In Washington and Maryland, legislators proposed and voters affirmed marriage equality legislation, and in Maine, voters initiated a referendum promoting marriage equality that became law (Kowal). This increasing public engagement ultimately culminated in the 2015 Supreme Court ruling *Obergefell v. Hodges* which legalized same-sex marriage across America. In this country, strides in marriage equality relied upon the right to vote because they were driven by referendums and elected officials. The change citizens initiated through voting illustrates how this right allows citizens to influence their government and make it responsive to the people's interests.

Voting is a right and responsibility as citizens of a democracy, but a joyous one, because this simple act allows each citizen's voice to be heard, thereby preserving democracy. Additionally, voting pays tribute to the rights and liberties democracy guarantees and to those who

fought for current generations to have this right. So when I go to vote, I will carry in my mind the suffragists without whom I wouldn't have this right, and when I place my ballot in the box, I will know that I am helping to preserve this country's democracy and the voice of future generations.

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