The right to vote spread slowly to more and more people.

**Qualifying to Vote**

*What are the requirements to vote?*

For most of history, the vast majority of people never had a chance to choose their rulers. Instead, they lived under powerful rulers such as kings and queens who inherited their thrones.

Today, in the United States, it is different. Citizens have the right to vote for leaders. It is one of our most treasured rights. Casting a vote is at the core of American citizenship. For most adults, voting for the first time is a rite of passage that is as exciting as and even more important than getting a driver’s license.

**Expanding Suffrage**

The Declaration of Independence states that “all men are created equal.” Unfortunately this principle, or basic belief, of giving equal rights to all people has not always been achieved. In the early years of our country, suffrage, or the right to vote, was limited to small groups of people. A few states allowed both white and African American males to vote. Typically, however, only white, male landowners were allowed to vote. Over the years, suffrage has expanded to include more and more Americans.

People who were once barred from voting included white adult males who could not afford to buy property, all women, African American males, Native American males, and people under 21 years of age. Gradually, the barriers that kept these groups from voting were removed.

Over time individual states increased suffrage. However, the expansion of voting rights was largely accomplished by adding amendments to the Constitution. The first step came in 1870, after the Civil War, when the nation ratified the Fifteenth Amendment. The Fifteenth Amendment states that no person can be denied the right to vote because of race or color. Its purpose was to extend suffrage to African Americans who were recently freed from slavery. The amendment was unable to achieve that goal, however. Many Southern states passed laws to keep African Americans from exercising this right. It took nearly a century for true suffrage to be granted to African Americans.

The Nineteenth Amendment extended suffrage to all American women. For decades, women had fought for the right to vote. Some states had given them that right, but they did not enjoy the ability to vote across the entire nation. Women finally achieved that victory in 1920, when the Nineteenth Amendment was ratified. One suffragist, or person who fought for women’s right to vote, later recalled:

> "I never doubted that equal rights was the right direction. Most reforms, most problems are complicated. But to me there is nothing complicated about ordinary equality."

— Alice Paul, from a 1972 interview, quoted in a biography published by the Alice Paul Institute

The Twenty-sixth Amendment, ratified in 1971, lowered the voting age to 18. Before that, the voting age in most states was 21. Now, many people can vote before they graduate from high school.

**Voting Requirements Today**

Today, many barriers to voting have been eliminated. More people than ever before can take part in government by voting. When an American citizen turns 18, he or she has the right to vote in all local, state, and national elections.

However, some groups of people are not eligible, or qualified, to vote. In most states, people who have committed serious crimes are not eligible to vote while imprisoned. Also, people who suffer certain mental illnesses may lose their eligibility. People born in other countries who have immigrated to the United States are not allowed to vote until they become citizens. Other than these exceptions, the great majority of adult American citizens are eligible to vote. This means that hundreds of millions of Americans have a part in running their own government. As Abraham Lincoln said, we have “a government of the people, by the people, for the people.”

**Specifying** Which amendment to the Constitution gave suffrage to women?

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**Florida CONNECTION**

**Convicted Felons and Voting Rights**

For many years, Florida was one of the few states that denied voting rights to felons for life. In recent years, Florida has eased the restriction. Some ex-convicts can now reapply for voting rights. Civil rights activists remain concerned, however. The new rules are confusing, and even election officials remain unclear on who may be allowed to regain the right to vote.
Steps in the Voting Process

What steps must you follow to vote?

Voting is not just a matter of checking a box or clicking a mouse. Voting is a process that involves three steps. These steps are registering, preparing, and casting your ballot.

Registering to Vote

Except for North Dakota, all states require citizens to register before they can vote. To register means to officially sign up to vote. Registering puts your name on the list of eligible voters.

How do you register to vote? First, you have to make sure to do it on time. The process is different in different states. Most states require voters to register at least 25 days before an election. Some states let voters register on Election Day.

To register, you need to fill out a form. Registration forms ask for your name, address, age, and often your political party preference. You may register as a member of a political party or as an independent voter. You will need to provide a driver’s license, a birth certificate, or some other valid form of identification to prove your citizenship and age.

In many states, you can register to vote through the mail. Forms can be downloaded from the Web. You can also find forms and register at public places such as government offices, libraries, and agencies that serve people with disabilities. The National Voter Registration Act requires states to let people register when they renew their driver’s licenses. Some people call this the “Motor Voter” law.

Preparing to Vote

Once you have registered, you will be able to participate in the next election. But that does not mean you are ready to vote. The second important step in the voting process is preparing to vote.

Your vote will help determine the outcome of an election. This means it will affect the lives of many people. You owe it to yourself and to your fellow citizens to prepare to vote.

A prepared voter is a voter who is informed about public issues and current events. Today, keeping up with the news is easier than ever. Web sites, television, radio, newspapers, books, and magazines are all good sources of information.

Other sources of information may include candidates’ speeches, debates, and campaign literature. Campaign literature may be a combination of letters, pamphlets, and ads. They are distributed by political parties and by private groups. You will need to be alert to bias in these materials. Be careful to separate facts from opinions.

Once you inform yourself about the issues, you will need to decide where you stand. Which candidate will you support? Use the information you have gathered to help you decide. Ask yourself questions like these:

- Does the candidate stand for the things I think are important?
- Is the candidate reliable and honest?
- Does the candidate have relevant past experience?
- Will the candidate be effective in office?
- Does the candidate have a real chance of winning?

Sometimes Americans vote for candidates even though they do not have a real chance of winning the election, because they want to show their support for a certain point of view.

Casting Your Vote

Many states allow early voting. This means that citizens can vote during a set period of time before Election Day. Each state has its own rules. Some states allow early voting by mail. Others allow early voting in person at certain locations. Early voting makes it easy for people to vote.

The place you go to vote on Election Day is called a polling place. Polling places are usually set up in schools, community centers, fire stations, or other public buildings. Each precinct, or voting district, has one polling place.

When you arrive at your polling place, you will have to present some form of identification and sign in. Officials will check your name against the list of registered voters to make sure that you are eligible to vote. Once you have been approved, you wait your turn to go to the voting booth. The booth may have a curtain, or it may have simple dividers. The purpose of these barriers is to make sure that each person is able to cast his or her vote in secret.

A ballot is a list of the candidates’ names that shows their political party and the office they are seeking. States decide what kind of ballot to use. Your ballot might be a piece of paper with check boxes that you mark with a special pen. It might be a punch card that you put into a machine. The machine punches a hole next to the candidate of your choice. Or your ballot might be a computer touch screen.

Citizens who cannot get to the polls on Election Day can vote by absentee ballot. Typically, absentee ballots are used by people who know they will be traveling on Election Day or by military personnel serving far away from home. Voters must request an absentee ballot before the election. They return their marked ballot to the election board. On or shortly after Election Day, election officials open and count the absentee ballots.

Many polling places hand out stickers that read “I voted!” Wearing the sticker is an outward display that you have fulfilled a civic responsibility. It is also a reminder to others to go vote. As President Franklin Delano Roosevelt said,
"The ultimate [final] rulers of our democracy are not a president and senators and congressmen and government officials, but the voters of this country."

—speech at Marietta, Ohio, July 8, 1938

**Summarizing** What are the three steps in the voting process?

**21st Century SKILLS**

Write a Persuasive Paragraph

Write a persuasive paragraph aiming to convince the reader to vote for a specific candidate based on that candidate’s background, positions on the issues, experience, and chances of winning.

If there is an election going on, you can base your paragraph on an actual candidate that interests you. Otherwise, you can write about an “ideal” candidate.

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**Florida CONNECTION**

**Voter Registration in Florida**

To register to vote in Florida, you must be a resident of the state, be a U.S. citizen, and be at least 18 years old. You must provide your current and valid Florida driver’s license number, state identification card number, or the last four digits of your Social Security number. You must be registered at least 29 days before an election in order to vote in that election. Applications are available from your county elections office, online, at driver’s licensing offices, and at the offices of state agencies that offer public assistance.

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**Why Your Vote Counts**

**Why is it important to vote?**

Have you ever heard the phrase "every vote counts"? It’s true. The United States is pledged to the ideal of equality. When you vote, your vote will be counted exactly the same way, and be given the same value, as everyone else’s vote.

**Reasons to Vote**

Voting is a right and a responsibility of citizenship. When you are eligible to do so, there are important reasons why you should vote in every election. Voting gives you a chance to choose your government leaders. It also allows you to express satisfaction or dissatisfaction with the performance of the people who already hold office and want to be reelected. It gives you a voice in how your community, state, and country are run. In a speech in 1965, President Lyndon Johnson called the vote “the most powerful instrument ever devised . . . for breaking down injustice.”

Citizens who vote share some characteristics. They generally have positive attitudes toward government and citizenship. Many of them believe that they have a right—and a duty—to make their voice heard.

**Understanding Voter Participation**

Despite the fact that voting gives people a voice and gives them power, some Americans choose not to vote. The **voter turnout rate** is the percentage of eligible voters who actually do vote. For example, if 100 people are eligible to vote in a community election and only 60 people vote, the voter turnout rate is 60 percent. Although it varies by election, the voter turnout rate in American elections is often well below 50 percent.

Why is turnout low? One reason for low voter turnout is **apathy**, or lack of interest. Studies show that many people feel they are “too busy” to vote. Another reason is that people fail to register to vote. When people move to a new address—which millions of Americans do every year—they need to register to vote. Many simply do not. People who are registered are likely to take the time to vote.

**Summarizing** What does the saying “every vote counts” mean?

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**Florida CONNECTION**

**Florida Voter Turnout Rate**
In the 2008 presidential election, just over 62 percent of Floridians old enough to vote were registered to vote. About 56 percent actually voted in the election. Overall, about 58 percent of the U.S. voting-age population voted.

LESSON 1 REVIEW

Review Vocabulary

1. What is suffrage?

2. How is apathy related to voter turnout rate?

Answer the Guiding Questions

3. Identifying What are the two basic qualifications to vote in the United States?

4. Explaining If you were a voter, what would you do to become informed before an election?

5. Synthesizing How does voting affect society?

6. NARRATIVE Write a journal entry as if you have just cast your first vote. Describe how you felt about voting.