



November 1, 2016

Our Right to Vote

The right to vote in the United States, and more specifically the enfranchisement and disenfranchisement of different groups, has been contested throughout the history of the United States.

Eligibility to vote in the United States is established both through our federal Constitution and by state law. Several Constitutional Amendments (the 15th, 19th, and 26th) require that voting rights cannot be taken away on account of race, color, previous condition of servitude, sex, or age for those above 18; the U.S. Constitution as originally written did not establish any such rights during 1787–1870.

The Fifteenth Amendment was passed February 3, 1870. This amendment established suffrage for black men. This amendment was added to give black men a say in electing their elected officials. The amendment is similar to the 19th Amendment and the 26th Amendment because they all involve giving voting rights to groups of United States citizens. After the Fifteenth Amendment was passed, United States citizens who were black got one step closer for the right to vote for their elected officials.

Despite this Amendment, by the late 1870s, various discriminatory practices were used to prevent African Americans from exercising their right to vote, especially in the South. After decades of discrimination, the Voting Rights Act of 1965 aimed to overcome legal barriers at the state and local levels where blacks were denied their right to vote under the 15th Amendment.

The Nineteenth Amendment was passed on August 18, 1920. This Amendment established suffrage for women. This amendment was added to give women a say in electing their elected officials.

The Twenty-sixth Amendment was passed June 30, 1971. This Amendment extended suffrage to 18-year olds. This Amendment was added to give citizens who are over age 18 the right to vote for their elected officials.

In the absence of a specific federal law or constitutional provision, each state is given considerable discretion to establish qualifications for suffrage and candidacy within its own

respective jurisdiction; in addition, states and lower level jurisdictions establish election systems, such as at-large or single member district elections for county councils or school boards.

The Illinois General Assembly, by law, may establish registration requirements. In Illinois, the law allows that every citizen who is over 18 years old to vote.

Across the country, state laws vary greatly regarding the right to vote for ex-offenders. According to the American Civil Liberties Union, about 5.85 million Americans with felony convictions (and misdemeanors in several states) cannot vote. The Sentencing Project estimates that 1 in 13 African Americans are prohibited from voting.

People convicted of a felony can vote in Illinois, but while under sentence in an Illinois correctional institution, the inmate loses the right to vote. Voting rights are automatically restored upon release from prison, and people on parole or probation can vote.

The struggle for the right to vote and to keep the right to vote for American citizens didn't, and still doesn't, come without a fight. I urge citizens to remember all of their ancestors and the many freedom fighters during this election cycle and vote in their honor for a more just democracy.

November 8, 2016, is Election Day. If you are a victim of government discrimination, an unjust criminal justice system, a wrongful criminal conviction, an unfair prison sentence, unemployment, poverty, low wages, police misconduct, a failing school system, or a lack of equal opportunities - to have an equal opportunity for life, liberty and the right to pursuit happiness, then this Election Day is for you.

On Election Day, we remember Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s words reminding us that "the arc of the moral universe is long but it bends towards justice". This election will give us the opportunity to be the judge and deliver the sentence with our vote for justice.

Our vote is our proxy for our best interests - to elect those who we feel will best protect our right to life, liberty and the ability to pursue happiness in America.

In America, whether you are black or white, man or woman, our vote makes us all equal.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'La Shawn K. Ford', with a stylized, sweeping flourish at the end.

La Shawn K. Ford
State Representative-Eighth District