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Voting, History of

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Voting is the act of declaring a choice among a number of alternative options in the process of reaching a group decision on a particular matter. In politics, this mostly concerns the selection of a person for a specific position, such as a mayor or a member of parliament. The right to vote in elections is widely considered the most fundamental political right of citizens. This entry discusses the historical development of two important elements of voting, namely who is entitled to cast a vote (voting rights) and the procedure that is employed for declaring a choice (voting methods).

Voting Rights

The concept of voting is closely associated with the notion of democracy. In ancient city-states like Athens in Greece, where the word *democracy* originated, citizens were directly involved in many more political decisions than in the present century, but the number of people who had those rights was much more limited. A large majority of the population was excluded because they were slaves, women, underage, or born outside Athens. Universal suffrage as known today is the result of long and often hard-fought struggles over the course of history.

In the 18th and 19th centuries, when rulers became accountable to the population through assemblies with their elected representatives, the right to vote was typically limited to men of a certain age who owned property, which constituted a small segment of the population. The timeline differs across countries, but the common pattern is that first property requirements were abandoned and later gender inequality was abolished. For example, in New Zealand universal male suffrage was arranged in 1879, while women's suffrage was established in 1893, making it the first country with universal suffrage. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, property requirements were also lifted in a few dozen other countries, thus establishing male universal suffrage. The first country in Europe to also grant women the right to vote was Finland (1906). During the next decade, several other countries in Western Europe followed, including Germany and the United Kingdom. The United States and Canada granted women the right to vote in 1920, while Japan, France, and Italy followed in the 1940s. In countries that became independent after decolonization, voting rights were often immediately granted to both men and women, as in India and Indonesia in the 1950s. The last Western country to grant women the right to vote was Switzerland, which did so in 1971.

In several countries race or ethnicity also was an issue, either because specific groups had no voting rights or because certain legal provisions disadvantaged particular groups. In the United States, voting rights of Black people for a long time varied substantially across states. Even though they formally had the right to vote since 1870, in practice, several provisions prohibited them from using these rights (e.g., tax and literacy requirements). The Voting Rights Act of 1965 abolished those racial inequalities. In the same decade, aboriginal Canadians and Australians were granted equal voting rights in their countries. A special case is South Africa, where the system of apartheid (racial segregation) was kept in place until the late 20th century, and the first election in which Black people could participate was held in 1994.

Today the largest group that has no voting rights is minors. In virtually all countries the voting age has been lowered, and at present in most countries it is 18 years, but in some countries it is as high as 21 (Malaysia, Singapore) or as low as 16 (Austria). Discussions about the voting age, like those about other changes in voting rights, have often been closely linked to judgments about voter competence and to the duties that citizens have, such as paying taxes or serving in the military.

Voting Methods

When in ordinary life a group of people vote about a specific matter, they often do so by a show of hands or by speaking aloud to declare a choice. For large audiences, this is rather impractical. In ancient Athens, citizens therefore had to express their preference by putting a pebble (small stone) in an urn that represented their choice; these could easily be counted at the end.

The desire to facilitate the counting process and reduce the chance of errors has also been the driving force behind the implementation of new technologies in the polling station, replacing the widespread and longstanding use of paper ballots. In the latter half of the 20th century, the United States, for example, used punch cards, in which voters used a device to make small holes to mark their choices; the punched cards were then counted by machine. Counting votes was even easier with lever machines, where voters had to move a lever to indicate their choice.

The rise of computer technology had an impact on elections, as it led to the development of voting computers that in many countries replaced the paper ballot and registered the choices made by voters electronically, which were announced at the end of the polling day. Due to criticisms about the potential threat of privacy (reading choices from a distance with special equipment) and fraud (manipulated software), some countries (e.g., the Netherlands) abolished voting computers and went back to the traditional paper ballot or implemented voting computers that print pieces of paper that can be optically scanned (e.g., United States).

To some extent, similar threats occur for e-voting, which means casting a vote electronically from one's personal computer or another electronic device. Whereas the presumed advantage is that it lowers the time and effort needed to cast a vote, the downsides are that voting may not be secret, and there is no guarantee that the vote was cast by the person entitled to do so. The risk of "family voting," in which one person votes for each of the family members, is a clear example of this. Such risks are also a downside of postal voting and proxy voting, which means mandating another person to vote on your behalf. In order to assess the value of new technologies for voting, it is important to be aware of the risks and trade-offs involved.

See also [Citizenship](#); [Democracy](#); [Voter Disenfranchisement](#); [Voter Identification](#); [Voting Behavior](#), [Theories of](#)

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Further Readings

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