

U.S. CONSTITUTION, FIFTEENTH AMENDMENT

Government Document

Author(s): U.S. Congress

Date: 1869

Source: U.S. Congress. U.S. Constitution, Fifteenth Amendment. 1869. Reproduced in History Resource Center. Detroit: Gale.

In 1869, African-American men were not permitted to vote in many states, including most northern states outside New England. Blacks were enfranchised in ten states of the South under the Reconstruction Act of 1867, which was imposed on those states after the Civil War (1861-1865). Still, that law and even the Fourteenth Amendment were considered insufficient to safeguard the voting rights of blacks. The Republican Party, having triumphed in the presidential and congressional elections of 1868, therefore passed the Fifteenth Amendment (which was ratified by early 1870), explicitly giving the right to vote to all qualified citizens regardless of "race, color, or previous condition of servitude." (Of course, "qualified citizens" did not include women or anyone under twenty-one years old; it took further amendments to the Constitution, much later, to enfranchise them.)

The Fifteenth Amendment left the specifics of control over voting to the states. Technically, federal power could be used whenever the states denied citizens the opportunity to vote on racial grounds. In fact, many state procedures that had the effect of disenfranchising blacks, such as the poll tax, primaries placed under the effective control of white groups, and discriminatory voter-eligibility tests, persisted until the civil-rights movement after World War II (1941-1945). These were eliminated only gradually, through court orders, legislation, or even additional constitutional amendments.

After the ratification of the Fifteenth Amendment, President Ulysses S. Grant (1822-1885) wrote, in a message to Congress, that it "completes the greatest civil change and constitutes the most important event that has occurred since the nation came to life." The fact is that another century would pass before the political climate of the nation permitted this amendment to take full effect.

PRIMARY SOURCE DOCUMENT

United States Constitution, Fifteenth Amendment

Passed by Congress February 26, 1869

Ratified February 3, 1870

Section 1. The right of citizens of the United States to vote shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any State on account of race, color, or previous condition of servitude.

Section 2. The Congress shall have the power to enforce this article by appropriate legislation.