TEACHING TOLERANCE

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EXPANDING VOTING RIGHTS

Why Women Couldn't Vote

Originally the U.S. Constitution didn't say much about who had the right to vote. The country's framers left it up to the states to decide. Most states initially limited voting rights to white male property owners. Over time they extended voting rights to nearly all white men. After the Civil War, three amendments were added to the Constitution. These additions at the federal level freed the slaves, made them citizens and granted them voting rights. The 14th Amendment, ratified in 1868, specifically identified "voters" as male. It was the first time a federal document had done so.

Why were women excluded, both from many individual states' laws and from the 14th Amendment? The framers of the Constitution—and many who followed them for more than the next 100 years—believed that women were childlike and incapable of independent thought. They believed that women could not be counted on to vote responsibly, so they left women out of states' voting laws and the Constitutional amendments that granted voting rights to African American men.

As early as the 1840s, some women began speaking out, arguing that women should have the right to vote. It took until 1920 for that right to be added to the United States Constitution.