

A Brief Comparative History of Suffrage
in Peru and the United States

Peru was a colony of Spain from the year 1533, when the conquistador Francisco Pizarro claimed it for Spain to “westernize it” and gain political power for himself. Spanish –born Peruvians and native Incas declared their Independence from Spain on July 28, 1821. On August 27, 1821, indigenous peoples were granted citizenship. The first form of democracy in Peru was called the Nominal Democracy and existed between 1822 – 1895. In this democracy, illiterate people were not excluded from voting in theory, but were not allowed to actually exercise that right. In fact, the Constitution of 1860 officially excluded illiterate people from voting and laws passed in the 1890 elections abolished their right to vote officially. In 1896, electoral reform law went into effect with the following voting criteria:

“the right to vote is exercised by all Peruvians older than twenty-one years of age, or married younger than that age, who can read and write, and are registered in the Civic Register of their domicile.”

With this criteria, a huge section of the Peruvian population was officially excluded from all political participation.

The next era of journey of Peruvian suffrage is called the “Census Democracy”. It was between 1896 and 1931. This is coined the “Census Democracy” because tax-paying citizens listed on the official census of each district were the only citizens eligible to be chosen for the 25 representatives for that district’s electoral.

In 1931-1955 the National Government Board appointed a committee to draft an elections bill that stated,

“the establishment of an autonomous electoral power, the representation of minorities, compulsory and secret vote, and the scientific organization of the electoral register. The elections reform made gave the voting process some guarantees unknown till then, based on the organization of a real electoral register and the elimination of main taxpayers’ privileges.”

This excluded all women and illiterate people from political participation.

Then on September 7th, 1955 Congress of the Republic passed a law that let all literate women of a legal age could also vote. This still excluded any illiterate person from voting.

But, in 1979 Constitution of Peru fully recognized the right of illiterates to participate in the election processes saying,

“Peruvian citizens are those older than eighteen years of age. For the exercise of citizenship one must be registered in the electoral register.
All citizens have a voting right as long as they enjoy their civil capacity.
The vote is personal, equal, free, secret, and compulsory up to seventy years of age. It is optional after that age.”

This allowed all citizens of 18 years age to vote as long as they were registered.

The United States was a colony of Great Britain until the Founding Fathers wrote and delivered the Declaration of Independence and the War for American freedom began. The war was over and when General Cornwallis surrendered on October 17th, 1781 in Yorktown, Virginia. From the beginning of our democracy, voting rights were controlled by State legislatures, and only white, males over the age of 21 who owned land (thus only the wealthy portion of the population) were allowed to vote. In 1868, the 14th Amendment granted full citizenship rights, including voting to **all men** (eliminating the requirement to own land) born or naturalized in the United States. In 1870, after the Civil War secured the emancipation of slaves nationwide, the 15th Amendment to the Constitution technically eliminated racial barriers to the right to vote, but in real practice many states still practice voter discrimination through poll taxes, literacy tests, fraud and intimidation. Despite this Amendment, Native Americans were still denied the right to vote. In 1920, the 19th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution was ratified, giving women the right to vote nationwide. Native Americans were finally recognized as U.S. Citizens and allowed to vote in 1924 with the Indian Citizenship Act. In 1964, as a result of the Civil Rights Movement the 24th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution eliminated poll taxes nationwide and the federal Civil Rights Act was passed to ensure that all men and women age 21 or older regardless of race, religion, or education have the right to vote. In 1965, the federal Voting Rights Act suspends literacy tests for registration of voting and is federally enforced. In 1971, fueled by the draft of 18 year olds for Vietnam, the 26th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution lowers the voting age to 18. In 1975 the federal Voting Rights Act is renewed, permanently banning literacy tests nationwide and even ensures in Section 203 that voting materials be translated into other languages in areas with large numbers of citizens with limited English skills. In 1984 the federal Voting Accessibility for the Elderly and Handicapped Act requires polling places to be accessible to these populations.

The history of Peruvian and American suffrage is quite similar. In the beginning, even though these colonies broke free from the oppression of a colonizing country that had limited

the voice and representation of the individuals who led the rebellions to establish "free nations", the right to vote was only offered to non-native (white), wealthy (land-owning), literate (educated and thus privileged) men over the age of 21. Both countries had many small changes over their histories to slowly arrive where they are today. Both countries now allow all citizens 18 years old or older, regardless of gender, race, education, or religion to exercise the right to vote. One notable difference between Peru and the United States is that in Peru, registered voters are **required to vote**, until the age of 70, when it is no longer compulsory. This is quite a difference in the United States, where consistently of people who are of voting age population (VAP) **barely over 50% turn out to vote**. The maximum was been in 1876 when 81.8% of the VAP turned out to vote and the fewest was in 1924 when 48.9% of the VAP showed at the polls. The average is around 55%.