

Voting and Elections in the Early 1800s



Even though you will not be able to vote until you are 18 years old, you have probably heard the adults in your life talk about the upcoming presidential election. Election Day this year is November 3! While Americans have been voting for president since the election of George Washington in 1789, voting looks much different today than it did in early America.

Today, many adults can vote. **Here are the requirements to vote in an election today:**

- You must be a U.S. citizen.
- You must be at least 18 years old on Election Day.
- You have to register to vote.

In 2020, women and men can vote. People of all races and religions can cast a **ballot**.

If you had to guess, who do you think could vote in the early 1800s?

Here are the requirements to vote in a Massachusetts election at the time:

- Only men could vote.
- You had to be at least 21 years old to vote.
- You had to pay some taxes. Taxes are money that we pay to the government to help pay for schools, roads, and other things like that. This means that the very poor could not vote.

What do you think of these requirements?

By the beginning of the 1800s, African American men could vote in Massachusetts, New Hampshire, Vermont, and Maine. However, they were sometimes kept from voting. This is called **disenfranchisement**. In Connecticut and Rhode Island, African American men could not vote at all until later in the century.

In the 1840s, women started to petition for woman **suffrage**, or the right to vote. Women had helped with a lot of social causes at the time, like the antislavery movement. Still, they were not able to have their voice heard at the polls. Women did not receive the right to vote until 1920 after a long and complicated struggle.

Today, we vote with something called a **secret ballot**. This means that you can cast your vote without someone seeing your vote. In a private booth, we fill out a printed form with the candidates. Then we place it in a machine to be counted.

In the early 1800s, how you voted depended on what you were voting for. In New England, people voted at something called a town meeting. At these meetings, townspeople decided what was best for their community. All elections used handwritten, unfolded ballots (so technically your vote wasn't a secret!). If your town voted on a local issue, you might do a voice vote. This means that if you voted yes, you said "aye," and if you voted no, you said "nay." Some towns used a show of hands, or had voters move to opposite sides of the room for a count. Many towns in New England still have town meetings today to discuss important issues.

We are about to have another presidential election in 2020, which is very exciting for some people. The election of 1840 was also a thrilling event. The two **candidates** were named Martin Van Buren (who was the **incumbent**, or the president at the time) and William Henry Harrison.



Martin Van Buren



William Henry Harrison

William Henry Harrison was a retired general and a war hero. His supporters constructed giant balls with words and phrases written on them. These were kind of like the campaign ads and posters you might see today. They rolled the balls to political rallies and Independence Day celebrations. The balls were very large—some about 10 to 12 feet in diameter. They needed several people to roll them around! We have a reproduction of one of these rolling balls here at Old Sturbridge Village. Just like today, Harrison's supporters were very passionate and outspoken about their preferred candidate.

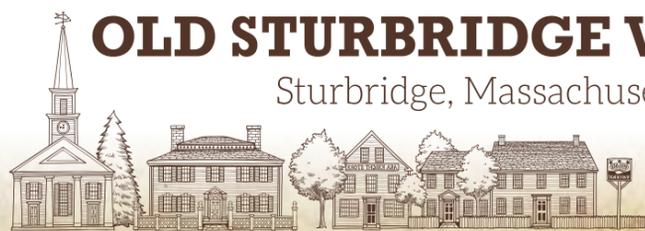
With his many supporters, William Henry Harrison won the election of 1840. However, he died only 31 days after his **inauguration**, making him the shortest-serving president in U.S. history.

Voting looks a lot different today than it did in the early 1800s. In 2020, more Americans are involved in the democratic process. Still, many people are as enthusiastic as ever about their favorite political candidates.



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