

**Main Idea**

The Constitution is designed to guarantee basic civil rights to everyone. The meaning of civil rights has changed over time, and many groups have been denied their civil rights at different times in U.S. history.

**Reading Focus**

1. What are civil rights, and how have civil rights in the United States changed over time?
2. How has a pattern of discrimination affected the civil rights of some groups in U.S. history?

**Key Terms**

prejudice

racism

reservation

Japanese American internment

**Civil Rights in the United States**

(p. 321)

Civil rights are some of the most basic and important rights we have in the United States today. However, the meaning and application of civil rights have changed over the course of U.S. history.

**What Are Civil Rights?** Civil rights are rights that involve equal status and treatment and the right to participate in government. One of the most basic is the right to be treated equally regardless of race, ethnicity, sex, or other personal characteristics. This means freedom from discrimination—the act or practice of treating people unfairly based on personal characteristics or other factors. Another basic civil right is the right to equal opportunities in voting and running for political office. Civil rights are protected by law.

**How Have Civil Rights Changed?**

People’s ideas in the past about who deserves fair and equal treatment were very different from what they are today. Women and racial minorities, such as African American and Native American men, were viewed as unequal at the time the

Declaration of Independence was written. Women and ethnic minorities fought for their rights and succeeded in pushing for the passage of constitutional amendments, federal and state laws, and legal decisions that redefined the meaning of civil rights, fairness, and equal treatment.

**Reading Check Contrasting** How is the meaning of civil rights today different from in the past?

**A Pattern of Discrimination** (pp. 322–324)

In the past, the U.S. government legalized and supported discrimination. Those in power viewed members of certain groups with **prejudice**, a negative opinion formed without just grounds. Widespread prejudice in society was often caused by **racism**—discrimination and unfair treatment based on race. Because of racism and prejudice, women and racial minorities suffered unequal treatment in many areas. Religious minorities and immigrants have also suffered from discrimination.

**African Americans** African Americans were first brought to this country against

their will as slaves. The government denied enslaved African Americans their civil rights because they were viewed as property. In *Dred Scott v. Sandford* (1857) Chief Justice Roger Taney wrote that African Americans could never be citizens of the United States.

After the Civil War, the United States abolished slavery with the Thirteenth Amendment. The Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments were passed to protect the civil rights of former slaves by granting them citizenship and the right to vote. However, in many places new laws, judicial decisions, discrimination, and violence kept former slaves from participating in civic life.

**Native Americans** Like African Americans, Native Americans were viewed in the past as separate peoples that were not a part of American society and therefore not deserving of rights. During colonial times, many groups lost their lands. The U.S. government also signed treaties with Native Americans but then violated them, taking even more land.

In the mid-1800s the government forced Native Americans to move to reservations to make room for settlers. A **reservation** is an area of public land set aside by the government for Native Americans. In addition to losing their lands, many were forced to abandon their culture and language to become “Americanized.”

**Asian Americans** Asian Americans have come to this country from places like China, Japan, Korea, South Asia, and Southeast Asia. Many Asian Americans in the United States suffered from discrimination. In the 1800s Chinese workers were discriminated against because of competition for jobs. The government even passed a law to end Chinese immigration—the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882.

In the early 1900s anti-Japanese feelings led the government to make an agreement

with Japan ending Japanese immigration to the United States. The United States promised not to allow racial segregation of Japanese already living in America. In the 1940s, during World War II, many Americans feared Japanese Americans would aid the Japanese in attack on the United States. President Franklin Roosevelt signed an executive order requiring people of Japanese descent on the West Coast to report to War Relocation Centers. This event is known as the **Japanese American internment**. Around 120,000 people were forced to leave their homes and businesses, and most were forced to live in internment camps until the end of the war. The Supreme Court upheld internment as a military necessity.

**Hispanics** Hispanics, or Latinos, are people with a Spanish-speaking background. They come from places such as Mexico, Puerto Rico, Cuba, and Central and South America.

In the 1840s the United States took control of the American Southwest, and Mexican Americans in these areas suffered from discrimination and violence. Several waves of immigration since the 1800s have brought Hispanics from many nations. They work in many sectors of the U.S. economy. Many have faced discrimination as a result of being culturally different.

**Women** Before 1920 most women could not vote and had fewer rights compared to men. They were expected to marry and raise children and had unequal access to education and jobs. This status was given legal justification by a Supreme Court case in 1873, *Bradwell v. Illinois*, in which the Court ruled that the “domestic sphere” was the proper place for women. They and other groups had to fight for equal justice under the law.

**Reading Check Summarizing** What groups have experienced civil rights violations in the past?

### SECTION 1 ASSESSMENT

1. **Define** What are civil rights? Give two examples.
2. **Describe** What groups have suffered from discrimination in U.S. history?