American Women Get the Vote in 1920
by Judith Schiffer

The United States Constitution is the document that sets out the rules about how the Federal Government in Washington, D.C., and the 50 state governments in the nation may govern. It sets out what powers the Federal Government has and what powers the states have. One of the powers it gives every state is the right to decide how elections are conducted in the state and who gets to vote in that state.

"Suffrage" means the right to vote, and it is one of those rights that people have fought for and have been given by amendments to the Constitution. With the addition of the 15th Amendment to the Constitution in 1870, African American men got the right to vote, but women of all races had to wait another 50 years to get it with the 19th Amendment.

Before the 19th Amendment was added to the Constitution, some states did give women the right to vote, but the Constitution did not make it a right that every state had to give women until it was added to the Constitution in 1920.

The Constitution says that changes can be made to the original document. The way it is changed is that Congress and the states vote to add an amendment to the original document. It has been changed 27 times. As the country's conditions and beliefs changed, new groups wanted rights that they did not have at the time the Constitution became "the law of the land."

In the 1800s, most of the states gave unmarried women many rights that were equal to men's rights. For example, as long as they did not get married, they could buy and sell real estate (such as land and homes), write a will, and work outside of the home in many types of jobs. But in many states as soon as women got married a law called "coverture" made them totally dependent on their husbands. Coverture stated that the husband owned everything, even the money and property the wife brought into the marriage and the money she herself earned by doing work. The husband had to support and take care of his wife and family.

A married woman could not own property on her own, sit on a jury, get a divorce without her
husband's agreement, or have custody of her children if she was divorced. In many states, the only job married women could get outside their homes was school teacher. In the middle of the 1800s, some women got together and began to work to change laws that restricted the rights of both unmarried and married women.

During the Civil War (1861 to 1865), women served in the army as nurses and did other jobs. After the war, many women said that if they could do these difficult and important things, they deserved the right to vote. It took a long time for the rest of the country to agree.

Although both married and unmarried women were already given the right to vote in some states, there was no *national right* to vote. Some men did not want women to vote. They believed that politics and governing should be left to men, and so only men should be allowed to vote. But there were also many men who were in favor of giving women the right to vote, and some of them joined women in their fight to get the 19th Amendment passed.

Many more men and women joined the woman suffrage movement after World War I (1914 to 1918). They knew that women had worked outside the home during the war, doing jobs that men who left to serve in the military used to do. They also knew that women worked as nurses and did other things to help the war effort.

Finally, in 1919, Congress proposed the amendment. Although it was proposed, it could not be added to the Constitution yet. It needed three-fourths of the states to ratify, or approve, the amendment. In 1920, enough state legislatures voted "yes," and the amendment was ratified. The 19th Amendment says that the right of citizens of the United States to vote cannot be taken away because of a person's sex. All women in every state who were at least 21 years old would now have the right to vote!

On November 2, 1920 - Election Day - 8 million women across the United States voted for president of the United States and other elected officials.
1. What did the 19th amendment of the United States Constitution do?
   A. give white men the right to vote
   B. give African Americans the right to vote
   C. give people ages 18-21 the right to vote
   D. give women the right to vote

2. The text describes a sequence of events leading to the passage of the 19th Amendment. What happened in 1919?
   A. Congress proposed the 19th Amendment.
   B. The Civil War ended.
   C. World War I started.
   D. Women organized for the first time to change laws.

3. Read the following sentences from the text.

   "But in many states as soon as women got married a law called "coverture" made them totally dependent on their husbands. Coverture stated that the husband owned everything, even the money and property the wife brought into the marriage and the money she herself earned by doing work."

   Which conclusion about marriage in the 1800s does this information support?
   A. Marriage further restricted the rights of women.
   B. Marriage increased the rights of women.
   C. Marriage restricted the rights of men.
   D. Marriage started to become less popular among men.
4. Why did women's work during the Civil War and World War I strengthen the argument that they should have the right to vote?

   A. They showed they weren't able to successfully help during war so they should at least be given the chance to contribute in politics.
   
   B. They showed they could do important and difficult jobs just like men, so they should be able to vote like men, too.
   
   C. They showed they could lead battles just like men, so they should be able to vote like men, too.
   
   D. They showed they could do jobs men couldn't do, so they should be able to at least vote like men, too.

5. What is the main idea of this text?

   A. The United States Constitution is the document that sets out the rules about how the federal government and 50 state governments in the nation may govern.
   
   B. As the United States' conditions and beliefs changed, new groups wanted rights that they did not have at the time the Constitution became "the law of the land."
   
   C. In the 1800s, most of the states gave unmarried women many rights that were equal to men's rights. For example, as long as they did not get married, they could buy and sell real estate.
   
   D. Prior to getting the national right to vote, women faced discrimination yet helped war efforts. Their fight for suffrage led to the passage of the 19th Amendment.

6. What is the purpose of the first paragraph in the text?

   A. to distract the reader from the issue of suffrage
   
   B. to establish the significance of the Constitution
   
   C. to argue why women should have received the right to vote
   
   D. to provide information the text later contradicts
7. Choose the answer that best completes the sentence below.

_____ the 19th Amendment was added to the Constitution, some states did give women the right to vote.

A. After  
B. Although  
C. Before  
D. Meanwhile

8. According to the text, how did men feel about giving women the right to vote?

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9. Explain how women's rights were impacted by getting married in many states in the 1800s. Use information from the text to support your answer.

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10. Imagine you are fighting for women's suffrage in the early 1900s. What argument would you make to someone to convince him or her women should have the right to vote? Use information from the text to support your answer.