

THE PROJECT OF DEMOCRACY

By
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This is a story with a partially happy ending. At the opening of the twenty-first century (and the new millennium), nearly all adult citizens of the United States are legally entitled to vote. What once was a long list of restrictions on the franchise has been whittled down to a small set of constraints. Economic, gender-based, and racial qualifications have been abolished; literacy tests are gone, if not forgotten; residency requirements have been reduced to a matter of weeks; the age of political maturity has been lowered; and the burden of registration has been rendered less onerous. The proportion of the adult population enfranchised is far greater than it was at the nation's-founding or at the end of the nineteenth century. That there exists a right to vote rather than the privilege of voting is clearly established in law as well as in popular convictions.

Yet getting here has taken a very long time. The elementary act of voting-of participating in the shaping of our laws and the selection of our lawmakers was, for many decades, reserved to white English-speaking literate males, a majority of whom belonged to the respectable classes. As late as 1950, basic political rights were denied to most African Americans in the South, as well as significant pockets of voters elsewhere, including the illiterate in New York, Native Americans in Utah, many Hispanics in Texas and California, and the recently mobile everywhere.

That it took so long for universal suffrage to be achieved reflects elements of our history that fit uneasily into the official portrait of the United States as the standard bearer of democracy and representative government. One such element — known to scholarly specialists but widely ignored in popular culture — is that the right to vote has never been formally enshrined in our nation's constitutional order. At the country's birth, there were few believers in universal suffrage, even for males: the Bill of Rights guaranteed Americans freedom of speech and the right to bear arms, but it did not guarantee the right to participate in elections. Not until 1868, with the passage of the Fourteenth Amendment, did the phrase "the right to vote" appear in the federal Constitution, and to this day the nation's fundamental law contains no affirmative embrace of universal suffrage. State constitutions did make voting an affirmative right, but not for all residents; and the guarantees afforded by state constitutions were highly variable and subject to revision.

In addition, large and influential sectors of the population have frequently opposed democratization and the extension of political rights to all Americans. They did so both to defend their own interests and because their beliefs and prejudices led them to view others as something less than responsible or worthy citizens. Most men did not want to enfranchise women until the twentieth century; most whites did not want to enfranchise blacks or other racial minorities in their own states; the native-born often were resistant to granting suffrage to immigrants; the wealthy at times sought to deny political citizenship to the poor; established community residents preferred to fence out new arrivals. There is nothing peculiarly American or particularly surprising about these patterns; those who possess

political power commonly are reluctant to share it, and they have easily developed or embraced ideas that justify and legitimize that reluctance.

It took powerful forces, as well as decades of conflict and change, to overcome resistance to a broad franchise. Two of the largest social movements in American history were devoted to achieving suffrage for women and for blacks; smaller, less celebrated campaigns of agitation were mounted by militiamen in the early nineteenth century, by workers in Rhode Island, by Asians, Native Americans, and young people in the twentieth century. The eventual success of these movements was made possible by the dynamics of party competition, by economic changes that spawned new patterns of labor force participation (e.g., among women), and by surges of urbanization that lessened the isolation and heightened the visibility of some excluded groups (e.g., blacks and Native Americans). The expansion of suffrage also depended heavily on ideological shifts, on the spread of democratic values in the first half of the nineteenth century, and on a renewed commitment to them in the mid-twentieth. The expansion depended too on war: the most prominent peaks in the history of the franchise in the United States were the Revolutionary War, the Civil War, World Wars I and II, and the first decades of the cold war. Each of these conflicts contributed significantly to the broadening of the right to vote.

Powerful as the forces promoting democratization may have been, their progress was not inexorable and the outcome was far from certain. From the perspective of the late twentieth century, it is all too easy to invest the triumph of universal suffrage with an aura of inevitability; but the contested history suggests otherwise. Contingencies of timing and politics dot the chronological landscape: had New York and Massachusetts waited until 1830 or 1840 before removing property qualifications, much of the Northeast might have ended up embroiled in a large version of the Dorr War; had Radical Republicans not successfully pressed for the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments (the latter passed during the final days of a session of Congress), the twentieth-century struggle for civil rights might have been far more arduous; were it not for the war in Vietnam, the voting age still might be twenty-one. The interaction of underlying processes with critical events that had independent causes shaped the contours of suffrage history — and there was little that was predestined about the timing or consequences of those interactions.

The lack of inevitability — despite de Tocqueville's "invariable rule of social behavior" — also is suggested by the reversals of direction that characterize the history. Not only was there a prolonged period when the franchise on the whole was tightened rather than expanded, but there were numerous occasions on which particular groups lost political rights that they once had possessed: women in New Jersey in the early nineteenth century; blacks in the mid-Atlantic states before 1860 and in the South after 1890; naturalized Irish immigrants during the Know-Nothing period; aliens in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries; men and women who were on public relief in Maine in the 1930s; and countless citizens who suddenly found themselves confronted with extended residency requirements or newly complex registration rules. To be sure, all of these restraints on the franchise were eventually removed, but a path so long and winding suggests contingency and conflict rather than a clear and sure destination.

The evolution of suffrage in the United States is a story with many parallels in the histories of other nations; indeed, nearly all of the key ingredients in this contested history

appeared elsewhere as well. Property and tax qualifications were commonplace in nineteenth-century Europe; in some nations, such as Hungary, class-based restrictions were so finely tuned that members of specific occupations were prohibited from voting. Poor relief recipients were disfranchised in England and Japan; literacy tests were deployed to disfranchise peasants in Italy; racial barriers were erected in several Canadian provinces; and both Australia and New Zealand for many decades refused to fully enfranchise their aboriginal populations. Lengthy residency requirements aimed primarily at mobile workers were common and detailed registration rules (in England, after 1885, e.g.) kept countless individuals from the polls. Similarly, almost all European nations have been resistant to enfranchising the foreign-born, although such resistance was (and is) most often expressed in the erection of high barriers to citizenship. Not surprisingly, conflicts over districting and apportionment (e.g. Britain's rotten boroughs") also have been widespread.

The dynamics of change too have been transnational. Across the world grassroots movements (often tied to labor unions) pressed for inclusion in the polity; Party competition cracked numerous exclusionary walls; and broad-gauged ideological shifts made suffrage restriction less and less defensible. Both Bismarck and Disraeli in the late 1860s — much like the Republicans who acted at almost exactly the same time — expanded the franchise to strengthen the state and their own political factions. Moreover, war served as a stimulus to democratization in many nations. The enfranchisement of soldiers, for example, was an issue in Britain in World War I; and the dynamics of wartime mobilization contributed to expansion of the suffrage in Belgium, parts of Canada, and Italy (where the Libyan campaign, in 1912, led to the enfranchisement of soldiers and veterans who did not meet the normal age requirement). The cause of women's suffrage, of course, was promoted by both world wars. In a rather different pattern, military defeat — and thus the imposition of new political regimes — resulted in the broadening of the franchise in Germany and Austria. Class tensions slowed the progress of woman suffrage in England (among other places), and they also produced reversals in the progress of democratization in France, Germany, and Italy. Although France was the first nation to adopt a broad franchise, the right to vote contracted several times after brief spells of expansion. In Germany, Austria, and Italy, universal suffrage was adopted during the second decade of the twentieth century but became meaningless with the suspension of political rights under fascism.

Even these brief international comparisons make clear that the basic forces shaping the history of suffrage in the United States were not unique: they were — and are — grounded in the realities of class and ethnic conflict in the industrial capitalist world of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The American experience, to be sure, had several distinctive features: the early abolition of property requirements; the presence of slaves and afterward a large, repressed, and regionally concentrated racial minority; the scale of immigration and the facility with which immigrants could become citizens. Each of these features had a significant impact on the details and rhythms of the history of suffrage in the United States, particularly on the backsliding that marked the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Yet these distinctive features also interacted with broader currents — economic, social, and political — that were common to the western world. Conflicts over the breadth of the right to vote have been nearly universal in the political life of modern nations for the past two centuries.

All of which brings us back to the fact that the ending to the story is only partially happy. Although the formal right to vote is now nearly universal, few observers would characterize the United States as a vibrant democracy, as a nation where the equality of political rights offers release to a host of engaged and diverse political voices. The most telling symptom of the malady is the low level of popular participation in American elections: in recent years, only half of all eligible adults have voted in presidential elections, and fewer than 40 percent generally cast their ballots in other contests. Electoral turnout has declined significantly over the last century, and it is markedly lower in the United States than in most other nations.

In theory, of course, nonvoting could be a sign of contentment, of a satisfied electorate. But portraits of the nonvoting population make this rosy interpretation difficult to sustain: turnout is lowest among the poor, minorities, and the less well educated. In a pattern distinctively American, turnout correlates positively with social class: those with more education and higher incomes are far more likely to vote than are their less advantaged fellow citizens. The people who are least likely to be content and complacent (and most likely to need government help) are those who are least likely to vote.

As debates among political scientists have made clear, there are numerous factors that contribute to this low and class-skewed turnout. Yet it is not a coincidence that nonvoters come disproportionately from the same social groups that in earlier decades were the targets of restrictions on the franchise itself. Despite the Motor Voter bill, there remain procedural obstacles to registration that have a heavy impact on the poor and uneducated. Perhaps more important, the political institutions and culture that evolved during the era of restricted suffrage spawned a political system that offers few attractive choices to the nations least well-off citizens. The two major political parties operate within a narrow, ideological spectrum; the programmatic differences between candidates often are difficult to discern; the core social and economic policies of both parties are shaped largely by the desire to foster economic growth and therefore to satisfy the business and financial communities. Ideas and proposals that might appeal to the poor and are commonplace in other nations such as national health insurance or laws enhancing job security-have been beyond the pale of modern American political discourse.

The range of choices offered to the public has been kept narrow, in part through the increasing institutionalization of the two-party system: rules governing ballot access limit the ability of dissident parties to mount national campaigns; public funding goes only to parties that already are established; and the persistence of winner-take-all elections makes it exceedingly difficult for new parties to gradually acquire influence, visibility, and strength. (Notably, the only third party to have made any headway in recent years — the Reform Party — has no distinctive ideology or program and was underwritten by an iconoclastic billionaire.) Meanwhile, the two major parties have displayed little interest in altering the political equation (and rocking the boat) by reaching out to nonvoters: most tellingly, perhaps, the Democratic Party-the more likely beneficiary of an increase in turnout-has focused less on mobilizing the disaffected than on winning the suburban swing vote and remaining in the good graces of Wall Street. This political strategy led even a member of President Clintons cabinet, Robert B. Reich,

the former secretary of labor, to conclude that "the great mass of non-voters ... didn't vote in 1996 because they saw nothing in it for them."

Low levels of electoral turnout are not the only problem. As political scientist Sidney Verba and his colleagues have pointed out in an important study of civic voluntarism, voting is one of several forms of political participation open to Americans and vital to the health of democracy. Other avenues of participation, however, such as volunteering time or contributing money, are even more class correlated: people with more money, more education, and middle-class skills are far more likely than working-class citizens to engage in all forms of political activism. As a result, the voices of the more privileged are heard more loudly in the halls of governance, and the ideal of democracy — that all voices be heard equally — is consistently undermined.?

Indeed, the raw and growing power of money in politics serves as a counterweight to the democratic thrust of the twentieth-century broadening of suffrage. Critical governmental decisions are made by regulatory commissions and agencies that are beyond the direct reach of electoral politics but accessible to well-funded lobbyists and organized interest groups. Congressional committees and state legislatures hear not only the distant and diffuse voices of the electorate but the nearby and insistent voices of those who roam the corridors of power. Even institutions ostensibly insulated from public influence, such as the all-important Federal Reserve Board, have constituencies to which they listen, and these constituencies are comprised largely of the wealthy and the well positioned. Former secretary Reich is not the only commentator to regard Federal Reserve Board Chairman Alan Greenspan as "the most powerful man in the world," and those who get to express their views to Greenspan are not a random cross-section of the population.

In addition, the direct role of money in elections is enormous. Campaigns, waged largely on television, have become extraordinarily expensive, and candidates who cannot raise large war chests are doomed to failure. The need to raise such sums has made candidates and parties altogether dependent on the wealthy and on organized influence groups, who in turn exert a grossly disproportionate influence on the political parties and the positions they espouse. Blue-collar workers and welfare recipients do not sleep in the Lincoln bedroom or air their views with high-ranking officials at \$1,000 a plate dinners; they rarely get to testify before congressional committees either. Indeed, if current trends continue, the actual casting of ballots may be in danger of becoming a pro forma ritual designed to ratify the selection of candidates who have already won the fund-raising contests.

The current state of American politics makes clear that universal suffrage is a necessary but not sufficient condition for a fully democratic political order. No political system can claim to be democratic without universal suffrage, but a broad franchise alone cannot guarantee to each citizen an equal voice in politics and governance. The arrangements and institutions that surround the conduct of elections — such as districting, apportionment, the structure of representation, the financing of campaigns, and the organization of activist groups — all can promote or vitiate the equality of political rights. These institutions and rules often are contested, just as the right to vote was contested for a century and three quarters. The current debate over campaign financing and the use of soft money can be viewed as the latest battle in the two-centuries-old war over the democratization of politics in

the United States; at the moment, antidemocratic forces are winning that battle, and in so doing, are undercutting the achievement of universal suffrage.

Yet the sweep of history suggests that democracy should not be imagined or understood as a static condition or a fixed set of rules and institutions; it may be more valuable-and accurate-to think instead of democracy as a project. One critical lesson of the history of suffrage in the United States and elsewhere is that modern societies always have contained individuals and social groups who oppose equal and universal political rights. In capitalist societies (and at present, we have none other) there always have been private interests and centers of power that are or believe themselves to be threatened by democratic control of the state. In socially diverse nations, ethnic, racial, and religious antagonisms often have sparked the impulse to suppress or restrict the rights of minorities. Even individual issues have sometimes loomed so important that factions have sought to deny political voice to their adversaries. On the other hand, there always have been individuals and groups pressing in the opposite direction, for greater democratization and equality. As a result, the very structures and rules of electoral politics periodically become touchstones and lightning rods of conflict.

This lesson drawn from the history of suffrage should lead us to expect recurrent skirmishing once universal suffrage has been achieved. The effects of a restricted suffrage can be replicated, or at least approximated, by cleverly unequal districting or by complex registration requirements. Even if one person, one vote principles are applied to districting, regulations governing the access of parties to the ballot can influence the outcome of elections; so too can the design of electoral systems (majority versus plurality victors or "winner take all" versus proportional representation, e.g.) or the structure of campaign financing. As American political parties discovered long ago, changing the rules is one way to win.

It would, alas, be utopian to expect that such conflicts will ever subside: that any tamperproof set of rules or institutions can be devised; that competing interests will not seek to alter electoral regulations; or that changing conditions will not recurrently create the need for new arrangements. History offers no examples of political institutions that can permanently guarantee genuine political equality. Democracy therefore must remain a project, a goal, something to be endlessly nurtured and reinforced, an ideal that cannot be fully realized but always can be pursued.

This notion of democracy as a project, as well as the contested history of democracy, ought to inform American-and other-efforts to promote democratic regimes in nations with different political traditions and troubled recent pasts. The business of exporting democracy has been booming since the end of the cold war, and American experts and consultants have been dispatched throughout the globe to offer advice regarding the erection of new political institutions. Thus far, the track record of such efforts has been mixed: blueprints drawn up in Washington do not necessarily fit foreign landscapes, and the creation of formally democratic electoral procedures does not guarantee a redistribution of power and influence. Military leaders, party bosses, and business moguls have been endlessly inventive in devising methods of circumventing or overriding procedural democracy. Our own history suggests that this ought not be a surprise. Growing a democracy takes time, and it is often easier to pay lip service to popular government than to live with its decisions. This is not to say that

the United States ought to be tolerant of abuses or cast a blind eye to oligarchies masquerading in constitutional garb. But if Americans are to be involved at all in such international efforts, and if our goal truly is to promote democracy-and not simply capitalism-we must recognize the real scope of the endeavor and be prepared to provide long-term support to those individuals and forces who will be struggling for popular government for some time to come.

At home too, there is, and always will be, much to be done. The ideal of democracy – that all individuals are not only born equal but remain equally worthy — surely is an admirable one. The principle that no persons interests and needs are more important than those of anyone else — and thus that all individuals should have an equal chance of influencing government policy — seems well worth fighting for. The project of democracy has never been unanimously embraced in the United States, but it has animated and shaped a great deal of our history. For more than two centuries, men and women who were committed to that project have pressed it forward, despite ceaseless and sometimes forceful opposition. The history of the right to vote is a record of the slow and fitful progress of the project, progress that was hard won and often subject to reverses. The gains so far achieved need to be protected, while the vision of a more democratic society can continue to inspire our hopes and our actions.
