THE RIGHT TO VOTE

The Contested History of Democracy in the United States

ALEXANDER KEYSSAR

C. 2000

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Democracy Ascendant

The course of things in this country is for the extension, and not the restriction of popular rights.

—NATHAN SANFORD, NEW YORK STATE CONSTITUTIONAL CONVENTION, 1831

Things changed rapidly in the new nation. The population of the United States was less than four million in 1790; by 1820 it was nearly ten million, and by 1850, more than twenty million. Cities grew, seaboard counties became more densely inhabited, and millions of settlers spilled into the western reaches of Massachusetts, New York, Pennsylvania, Virginia, and the Carolinas. Vast new territories were added by purchase or conquest, and wars were fought against Britain and Mexico. Commerce expanded, thousands of workers carved canals through the earth, steam-powered ships made their way up and down the Mississippi, and the South grew dependent on the cash crop of cotton. In the Northeast, particularly after the War of 1812, manufacturing industries, led by textiles, became increasingly prominent features of the economic and physical landscape.

This fast-moving assembly of changes created pressures for the states to significantly revise the blueprints for governance that they had drawn during the era of the revolution. To many citizens of early-nineteenth-century America, the first state constitutions, written during the tumult of the revolution, appeared either flawed or obsolete—or both. Between 1790 and the 1850s, every state (there were thirty-one by 1855) held at least one constitutional conven-

tion, and more than a few held several. The issues addressed by these conventions were many, but almost invariably a key concern was the distribution of political power among the increasingly diverse residents of each state. Indeed, disputes over political power, rights, and influence—including the breadth of the franchise and the apportionment of state legislative seats—were often what prompted states to call constitutional conventions in the first place.

That these conventions could gather at all, that the people of the states could select delegates to reshape their governing institutions, was itself a highly valued legacy of the political leadership of the revolutionary generation. In 1820, members of the Massachusetts constitutional convention paid tribute to that legacy by standing in silence and removing their hats as eighty-five-year-old John Adams, a delegate from Quincy, slowly entered the State House to take his seat. They even elected Adams—the principal author of the document they were about to revise—president of the convention, but he declined the honor. Nine years later in Virginia, in an eerily similar scene, seventy-eight-year-old James Madison, weakened by a recent illness, nominated his even more frail but slightly younger colleague, James Monroe, to be president of that state's convention. Monroe accepted the position, but had to be helped to the speaker's chair by Madison and the somewhat more spry seventy-four-year-old Chief Justice of the United States, John Marshall.¹

Once these conventions settled down to work, however, the founding fathers played minor roles. While Adams sat in the State House, his fellow delegates opened the Pandora's box of suffrage reform that he had been so eloquently describing since 1776. Madison could do little to prevent Virginia's warring factions from producing a constitution so unsatisfactory that it would have to be replaced within twenty years. For better or worse, the torch had been passed to a new generation of political leaders equipped with different ideas and compelled to confront significantly altered historical conditions.

The Course of Things

To attempt to govern men without seeking their consent is usurpa-
tion and tyranny, whether in Ohio or in Austria. . . . I was looking the other day. . . . into Noah Webster's Dictionary for the meaning of democracy, and I found as I expected that he defines a democrat to be "one who favors universal suffrage."

—NORTON TOWNSEND, OHIO CONSTITUTIONAL CONVENTION, 1850
The Right to Vote

Near the end of the American Revolution, the electorate in the eighteenth century became blurred, even indistinct. Legal changes involving the right to vote in the United States were greatly elaborated and significantly transformed between 1790 and 1812. In addition to the fundamental changes wrought by constitutional conventions, state legislatures frequently supplemented and sometimes altered constitutional provisions with statute law and courts intervened to interpret both the constitutions and the physical act of voting. For instance, in 1790, the state of Connecticut, with its rural and urban areas, had one of the most comprehensive systems for determining who could vote. Connecticut's constitution required that voters be landowners, while the state's statute law allowed for the registration of voters as they were called to vote, and then announced to those who had not been called. The state also had a system of voting by ballot, which was officially adopted in 1790, after 1790, voting by ballot became the state's official procedure. The constitution provided that votes be cast from a box or directed to an official, and extensive lists of voters were required. Abuses of this system were sometimes checked by a canvassing of the conduct of ballots, which was often done for personal gain. Other legal developments were essentially administrative, reflecting a need to translate broad precepts into detailed rules governing the conduct of elections. The political parties themselves, which by the 1790s were beginning to have an established influence, also had to specify the ways in which a personal property qualification could be met. Dedications ceremonies were common, and the process of registering voters was often formal. By 1825, there was a patchwork of qualifications, ranging from property to a commitment to the Constitution.
This broadening of state voting requirements was paralleled by changes both in federal policy and in municipal voting laws. In 1808, Congress modified the property qualifications in the Northwest Ordinance; three years later it acted more decisively, enfranchising all free white males who had paid taxes and resided in the territory. Subsequent acts of territorial organization for other regions generally permitted either taxpayer or white male suffrage. Similarly, congressional enabling acts (authorizing territories to become states and to hold constitutional conventions) became increasingly liberal in their suffrage provisions. Representatives to the constitutional conventions of Ohio (1802) and Indiana (1816) were chosen by adult male citizen taxpayers who met a one-year residence requirement; Illinois in 1818 did not even insist on a taxing qualification; and several decades later, all free white male inhabitants of Michigan (1835) and Wisconsin (1846) were able to participate in the founding elections. The franchise in the District of Columbia followed a similar path: a taxing requirement, adopted in 1802 when the city was first incorporated, was dropped in 1855.

The patterns of change in municipal voting laws were more varied. Differences between state and city (or town) voting requirements persisted into the nineteenth century, sometimes as a legacy of colonial practices, but more often because individual locales wanted to control the entry portals into their political communities. In some cities and towns, municipal suffrage laws were more liberal than those in force for state elections, as had been true in the late eighteenth century. In Massachusetts, for example, male citizens who were "liable to be taxed" remained able to vote for town officers despite the property qualification that applied to state elections until 1820. New Jersey's laws were similar, while numerous towns and counties in Mississippi, including Greenville, Holmesville, and Sheldsborough, simply ignored the state taxing requirement and granted the suffrage to all "citizens of the town."

More often, the eligibility gap was reversed: in contrast to the eighteenth-century pattern, cities and towns that had their own franchise requirements during the first half of the nineteenth century tended to have relatively strict eligibility rules. This was true not only in cities such as New York, where property qualifications were a holdover from colonial charters, but also in new municipalities such as Chicago, which, in its first charter (1837), enfranchised taxpayers only—even though Illinois did not have a taxing requirement. Comparably strict suffrage requirements could be found in all the towns of Maine and Tennessee, in Milwaukee, Louisville, St. Louis, Memphis, Richmond, and Petersburg, Virginia; some municipalities (in Alabama and Indiana, among other places) even adopted freehold requirements. The relative stringency of these municipal laws was generally justified by the increasingly widespread notion that the distinctive responsibility of local government was financial administration—from which it seemed to follow that only those who contributed to the municipality's finances ought to elect its officials. As novelist James Fenimore Cooper put it in 1838, "towns and villages regulating property chiefly, there is a peculiar propriety in excluding those from the suffrage who have no immediate local interests in them."

Still, the most significant trend affecting municipal elections was the convergence of state and local eligibility requirements. Almost everywhere, between 1790 and the 1850s, state suffrage laws and municipal suffrage laws became identical. Behind this convergence were two important, and related, shifts in law. The first was the early nineteenth-century deterioration and then collapse of the notion that municipal charters were inviolable. The second was the ascent of a broad concept of state supremacy, the idea that municipalities legally ought to be regarded as administrative creatures of the state, rather than as separate sovereignties of any type. This second notion became known in the late nineteenth century as Dillon's rule (thanks to the exhaustive and pioneering scholarship of jurist John Dillon), but it was already well established in American law before the Civil War. One of its implications was that state legislatures could set the franchise in municipal elections and compel cities and towns to adopt the same suffrage provisions as the state.

Which is exactly what state legislatures did, sometimes for partisan reasons, sometimes for the sake of principle—and usually because they were asked to intervene by the disfranchised residents of cities. Pennsylvania's legislature altered the franchise in Philadelphia in 1796; New York State overrode New York City's charter in 1804; the state legislature in Missouri broadened the St. Louis franchise in the 1840s; and Virginia finally brought Richmond into line in the 1850s. Although the idea persisted that municipalities had to perform special tasks that might warrant special suffrage requirements (Michigan adopted separate rules for school elections as early as 1837), there was a presumption, by the 1850s, that state suffrage regulations would and did apply to all elections.

In some states, the right to vote also was broadened along axes that were not economic or financial. Almost everywhere states tinkered with their resi-
idency rules, which had become increasingly salient once property qualifications had been eliminated. In several states, including Delaware, Pennsylvania, South Carolina, Indiana, and Michigan, residency requirements were shortened, opening the polls to large numbers of migrants who previously had been barred. In Ohio, widespread migration led to a shift in the entire conceptual underpinning of residency rules, increasing the weight given to an individual's right to vote while limiting the power of communities to decide who their official residents were.

Far more dramatic, and perhaps surprising, was the extension of the franchise to aliens—although the history of alien (i.e., noncitizen) voting was anything but unidirectional. At the end of the eighteenth century, the line separating citizens from aliens was not clearly or consistently drawn, either in law or in practice. Some state constitutions specified that voters had to be citizens, while others conferred the franchise on “inhabitants”; the federal government, hoping to encourage settlement, expressly permitted aliens to vote in the Northwest Territories. Thus in many locales, foreign-born men who had not been naturalized by the federal government but who did meet property, taxing, and residence requirements were able to participate in elections.

The status of aliens was in flux, however. The federal government changed the procedures and qualifications for naturalization every few years, settling on a durable formula only in 1802, when Congress declared that any foreign-born white male who met a five-year residency requirement could become a citizen three years after formally announcing his intention to do so. In addition, the distinction between citizens and inhabitants became the subject of litigation in Ohio, Illinois, and other jurisdictions.

Between 1800 and 1830, numerous states opted to clarify ambiguous wording in their constitutions to protect themselves against a perceived or potential influx of (undesirable) foreign-born voters. While revising their constitutions, New York, Massachusetts, Connecticut, Vermont, Maryland, and Virginia all replaced “inhabitant” with “citizen”; New Jersey performed the same alchemy by statute. New Jersey seemed uniquely cavalier about altering suffrage qualifications by statute rather than constitutional amendment.) Not surprisingly, the western states followed suit almost all of the new states joining the union between 1800 and 1840 conferred the right to vote exclusively on citizens. (The one exception was Illinois, which permitted aliens to vote for several decades after the state was organized in 1818.) By

the Jacksonian era, aliens were barred from the polls nearly everywhere. (See table A.4.)

Then the pendulum swung back, particularly in the Midwest. Although Illinois by a narrow vote decided to limit the franchise to citizens in 1848, other states in the upper Midwest moved in the opposite direction. Wisconsin was the pioneer, adopting in 1848 what became known as “alien intent” or “declarant non-citizen” suffrage: building on the two-step structure of the naturalization laws, the franchise was extended to aliens who had lived in the United States for two years and who had filed “first papers” declaring their intention to become citizens. Not coincidentally, the population of Wisconsin in 1850 was 35 percent foreign born, the highest of any state. Michigan and Indiana soon passed similar laws, as did the federal government for the territories of Oregon and Minnesota. In the late 1850s, Kansas, Minnesota, and Oregon all adopted alien suffrage, and after the Civil War a dozen more states in the South and the West did likewise (again joined by various territories administered by the federal government). Outside of the Northeast, declarant, noncitizen suffrage therefore became commonplace, permitting hundreds of thousands of previously excluded voters to go to the polls. Although the constitutionality of alien suffrage was heatedly debated in the mid-nineteenth century (opponents often claimed that states were usurping federal power by conferring the franchise on those who were not naturalized), state courts consistently upheld such provisions. In 1840, for example, the Illinois Supreme Court affirmed that the state’s constitution granted “the right of suffrage to those who, having by habitation and residence, identified their interests and feelings with the citizenry . . . although they may be neither native nor adopted citizens.”

Sources of Expansion

It ought to be remembered, Sir, that manufacturers are rapidly increasing; and their employers may bring them in regiments to the polls.

Sir, if they come in regiments to the polls to vote; they go in regiments to fight the enemies of our beloved country.

—Legislative Debate, Connecticut, 1818

Why was the franchise broadened—and broadened so dramatically? Why were property requirements jettisoned almost everywhere and taxing
requirements abandoned in most states? Why were men who were not even citizens permitted to vote? Why, in sum, was the suffrage enlarged nearly everywhere in the United States, North and South, along the coast and inland?  

Not surprisingly, no single factor can explain this upsurge of democracy—not even a factor as capacious as Frederick Jackson Turner’s frontier. Although insightful, Turner’s famous vision of the frontier as a democratizing force cannot account for the relatively early democratization of much of the eastern seaboard. The much-celebrated broadening of the suffrage during the first half of the nineteenth century indeed was spawned not by one change but several, by the convergence of different factors, present in varying combinations in individual states. Among them were three important socioeconomic and institutional developments: widespread and significant changes in the social structure and social composition of the nation’s population; the appearance or expansion of conditions under which the material interests of the enfranchised could be served by broadening the franchise; and the formation of broadly based political parties that competed systematically for votes.

Most fundamentally, perhaps, all of the states that had property requirements in 1790 witnessed an increase in the number and proportion of adult males who were unable to meet those requirements. Up and down the eastern seaboard, from Boston to New York to Baltimore to Richmond to Wilmington, North Carolina, the urban population grew rapidly, swelling the ranks of those who owned no real property and sometimes no property at all. Artisans, “mechanics,” laborers, even small merchants and shopkeepers—an increasingly large and prominent slice of the population of nearly all cities and large towns was disqualified for economic reasons. In some states, there was also an increase in the proportion of farmers who could not meet property requirements—because they were tenants, their holdings were too small, or because of shifts in householding patterns. In both northern Louisiana and western North Carolina, for example, the rapid growth of newly settled counties and parishes, dominated by small farms on just-cleared land, spelled a sharp increase in the population of eligibles. A similar pattern resulted from the shift, in Virginia, from leases for life (which were counted as freeholds) to shorter-term leases (which did not). In the North, farm tenancy was on the rise, and in some locales, including upstate New York, farmers who purchased land through installment mortgages did not become eligible to vote until they had made their last payment and secured legal title to their lands. Meanwhile, in the West, the slow, cumbersome, and erratic process of gaining title to lands was preventing many settlers from voting. Swelling the ranks of the voteless in the North were hundreds of thousands of immigrants excluded by increasingly widespread citizenship requirements.

These changes in the social structure created significant and growing clusters of men who were full participants in economic and social life but who lacked political rights. Not surprisingly, at times these ineligible citizens themselves exerted significant pressure to enlarge the franchise, particularly when they were concentrated in cities, neighborhoods, or distinct rural districts. Between 1790 and 1835, from the Southeast to Michigan, voteless men petitioned legislatures and constitutional conventions to broaden suffrage requirements. Maryland’s early decision to drop property qualifications was hastened by years of agitation by the propertyless residents (including many “mechanics”) of politically dominant Baltimore; in the 1840s, men who could not meet North Carolina’s senatorial freehold requirement held mass meetings to demand the right to vote in all elections, while German and Irish aliens petitioned for their own enfranchisement in Milwaukee. In Virginia, the War of 1812—which, according to historian J. R. Pole, “gave the greatest single stimulus to the movement for suffrage extension”—created conditions that accelerated such protests and gave them a patriotic cast. When gathered together to be mustered into the militia, men signed petitions affirming and protesting their disfranchisement. In a Shenandoah muster of 1,000 men, 700 claimed they could not vote; in Loudoun, the figure was 1,000 out of 1,200.

Perhaps the most eloquent expression of protest emanating from the voteless themselves was the “Memorial of the Non-Freeholders of the City of Richmond,” presented on October 13, 1829, to the Virginia Constitutional Convention. Chief Justice John Marshall, who was far from sympathetic with the nonfreeholders, delivered the memorial to the convention, without comment. More angry than pleasing in tone, the memorial charged that Virginia’s freehold requirement was an unjust usurpation of power that violated the commonwealth’s celebrated Declaration of Rights.

[It] creates an odious distinction between members of the same community; robs of all share, in the enactment of the laws, a large portion of the citizens, bound by them, and whose blood and treasure are pledged to maintain them, and vests in a favoured class, not in consideration of their public services, but of their private possessions, the highest of all privileges.
The nonfreeholders, "comprising a very large part, probably a majority of male citizens of mature age," ridiculed the notion that the possession of land established that a man was "wiser or better." "Virtue" and "intelligence" were "not among the products of the soil." The memorial also pointed out that landless men were not considered too "ignorant" or "depraved" to serve in the militia.

In the hour of danger, they have drawn no invidious distinctions between the sons of Virginia. The muster rolls have undergone no scrutiny, no comparison with the land books, with a view to expunge those who have been struck from the ranks of freemen. If the landless citizens have been ignominiously driven from the polls, in time of peace, they have at least been generously summoned, in war, to the battle-field.

The nonfreeholders conceded that the right of suffrage was a "social right" rather than a "natural right," and that "it must of necessity be regulated by society. For obvious reasons, by almost universal consent, women and children, aliens and slaves, are excluded." Yet those exclusions were "no argument for excluding others" along indefensible economic lines. "We have been taught by our fathers, that all power is vested in, and derived from, the people, not the freeholders," the memorial claimed, echoing the Declaration of Rights. "They alone deserve to be called free, or have a guarantee for their rights, who participate in the formation of their political institutions."43

Powerful as their words may have been, the nonfreeholders of Richmond had little success: the Virginia convention of 1829–30, despite the presence of an extraordinary group of political notables, produced a muddled and confusing suffrage law that effectively retained a freehold requirement. "No one can understand it," concluded one contemporary.44 (For the incomprehensible text, see table A.2.) This disappointing yet illustrative outcome reflected a stalemate in the deeply contentious political life of the Commonwealth. For nearly three decades, residents of the rapidly growing western counties had been clamoring for a new constitution: foremost among the changes they (and their scattered eastern allies) sought were the abolition of the freehold requirement for voting and a redistribution of seats in the lower house of the legislature, based on each county's white population alone. Virginia's most revered founding father, Thomas Jefferson, had joined this cry for reform. In 1816, he wrote a letter to one of the leaders of the reform movement endorsing suffrage for all free white males. In 1824, shortly before his death, he criticized the state's government as violating "the principle of equal political rights."45

Yet the eastern slaveowners who dominated the Commonwealth's government had fiercely resisted such changes; the "odious landed aristocracy" (as they were called by reformers) was deeply reluctant to even hold a constitutional convention, fearing both the immediate loss of political power and setting in motion a democratizing dynamic that might eventually undermine slavery itself. When a convention finally was forced on them by a popular referendum, Virginia's conservatives fought tooth and nail against every major proposal for change. Thanks to a delegate selection system that favored the eastern counties, they prevailed.46

Virginia's convention of 1829–30 was a vivid demonstration of the ways in which the issue of suffrage was interlaced with other questions of political power and representation. The convention also demonstrated the difficulties faced by men who lacked the franchise as they sought political power. The nonfreeholders of Richmond, as well as their numerous nonvoting allies in the west, could not generate constitutional reform simply by signing petitions and holding meetings. As was true throughout the nation, the disfranchised were unable to precipitate change by themselves. When the right to vote was enlarged, it happened because some men who were already disfranchised actively supported the cause of suffrage expansion.

Why did voting members of the community sometimes elect to share their political power with others? In numerous cases, it was because they saw themselves as having a direct interest in enlarging the electorate. One such interest was military preparedness and the defense of the republic. In the wake of the Revolutionary War and again after the War of 1812, many middle-class citizens concluded that extending the franchise to the "lower orders" would enhance their own security and help to preserve their way of life, by assuring that such men would continue to serve in the army and the militias. The nation's experience during the War of 1812 underscored this concern: the federal government had great difficulty recruiting and retaining soldiers and eventually had to call on militia forces to bolster the army.47

In nearly every subsequent debate over the suffrage, from New York to Illinois to Massachusetts to Alabama, the issue of soldiers was invoked—not simply as a question of fairness (how unjust to withhold the ballot from "the poor and hardy soldier who spills his blood in defence of his country") but also as a matter of security.48 In Connecticut, worried leaders expressed the view that the state's militias had not performed well during the war be-
cause the men who served were unenthusiastic about protecting a government they played no role in choosing; in 1820, Massachusetts convention delegate Reverend Joseph Richardson feared that the "ardor" of the disfranchised "would be chilled . . . when called upon to defend their country." Between 1817 and 1820, three states—Connecticut, New York, and Mississippi—exempted militia members from property or taxing requirements. Thirty years later, North Carolina gubernatorial candidate David S. Reid declared that he "would like to see the brave men who periled their lives in the War against Mexico, received at the ballot-box upon terms of equality." 61

In the South, the issue had an added twist: enfranchising all white Southerners was a means of making sure that poor whites would serve in militia patrols guarding against slave rebellions. However much diehard reactionaries such as John Randolph of Virginia might have feared that broader suffrage would unravel the fabric of slave society, there were other political leaders who believed that it would contribute to white solidarity. A delegate to Virginia's convention pointedly noted that "all slave-holding states are fast approaching a crisis truly alarming, a time when freemen will be needed—when every man must be at his post." Was it not then "wise . . . to call together at least every free white human being and unite them in the same common interest and Government?" 62

Economic self-interest also played a role in the expansion of the franchise, particularly in the Midwest. As territories began to organize themselves into states, inhabitants of sparsely populated regions embraced white manhood suffrage, in part because they believed that a broad franchise would encourage settlement and in so doing raise land values, stimulate economic development, and generate tax revenues. After 1840, similar concerns helped to propel the alien suffrage laws, as new states of the old Northwest competed with one another for settlers. Granting full political rights to immigrants appeared to be economically advantageous as well as democratic; that this was so was testimony to the desirability—or at least perceived desirability—of the franchise.

Nowhere was this case made more strenuously (though unsuccessfully) than in Illinois, where the 1847 constitutional convention unfolded against the backdrop of a mountain of public debt. "Is it our policy, as a state burdened with debt and sparsely settled, to restrict the right of suffrage, and thus prevent immigration to our soil?" queried one convention delegate. "Should we not . . . hold out to the world the greatest inducement for men to come amongst us, to till our prairies, to work in our mines, and to develop the vast and inexhaustible resources of our state?" demanded a delegate from Joe Davies County. "We cannot obtain this class of population without holding out to them inducements equal to those of other states; and as we are burthened with a debt, we should have those inducements greater than elsewhere." 61

Perhaps the most common way in which the fortunes of the already enfranchised were concretely linked to the cause of suffrage reform was through political parties and electoral competition. Early in the nineteenth century, the Federalist and Republican parties competed actively for votes in many states; in others (such as New York in the 1820s), contests between organized political factions were commonplace. By the 1830s, competition between Whigs and Democrats dominated political life, reflecting the creation of a strong and vibrant national party system: not only were elections systematically contested, but both party loyalty and party identification became prominent elements of public life. In this competitive political culture, the issue of suffrage reform inescapably attached itself to partisan rivalries.

To some degree, particularly during the first quarter of the nineteenth century, the involvement of political parties in debates over suffrage was a straightforward reflection of ideological differences, an outgrowth of beliefs and values. The Federalists, rooted among the northeastern elites and confident in their own leadership, tended to oppose any broadening of the franchise; the more egalitarian Jeffersonian Republicans viewed expansion more favorably. Decades later, the ideological gap between the Whig and Democratic parties was even more pronounced. The Democrats, heirs to the Jeffersonians, embraced an individualist, competitive vision of society, in which the pursuit of self-interest was altogether legitimate and in which all (white) citizens were entitled to political rights—in part to defend themselves against the encroachments of government. The Whigs, on the other hand, clung to a more organic and hierarchical social vision, believing both in a more active state and that it was best for public affairs to be conducted by society's "natural" leaders. They consequently were inclined to resist efforts to enlarge the polity. 62

Yet the significance of political parties in the evolution of suffrage went beyond matters of ideology: the elementary dynamics of electoral competition created a stimulus for reform. Put simply, in a competitive electoral environment, parties were always alert to the potential advantage (or disadvantage) of enfranchising new voters and potential supporters. The
outcomes of electoral campaigns could easily depend on the size and shape of the electorate; it was natural therefore for parties, at least in some circumstances, to try to broaden the franchise because they wanted to win elections, whatever their views about democratization.

These dynamics probably did not play a significant role in the evolution of suffrage between 1790 and the mid-1820s. Although parties and factions did exist, the political arena was not acutely competitive, particularly once the Federalists started disintegrating in the face of the War of 1812. More important, popular participation in electoral politics was limited: turnout levels were low, and many offices were filled either by appointment or by legislative, rather than popular, vote. In some states, there was not even any popular balloting for the presidency. The institutions of politics changed dramatically by the late 1820s and the 1830s, however, with the spread of popular elections, the formation of the Democratic Party as the nation’s (and the western world’s) first mass-based political organization, and the subsequent emergence of the second party system. Electoral politics became a form of public theater, parties themselves began to print written ballots (deemed acceptable by the courts), the mobilization of voters became a critical activity for both the Democrats and the Whigs, and electoral turnout rose dramatically, from 27 percent in 1824 to 56 percent in 1828 to 78 percent in 1840. It was in this modern political universe that the partisan pursuit of new voters became clearly visible. The Democratic embrace of alien suffrage, for example, was unmistakably motivated in part by the party’s desire to enroll and win the support of immigrant voters.53

The nature of partisan competition, moreover, was such that if any party or faction—out of conviction or political self-interest—actively promoted a broader franchise, its adversaries experienced pressure to capitulate.54 This dynamic was manifested most distinctly in circumstances where different suffrage restrictions applied to different offices. In both New York and North Carolina, for example, voters had to meet a stiff property requirement to participate in senatorial elections, while many more people were eligible to vote for state representatives. As a result, once any political organization began to support abolition of the senatorial property qualification, it became politically risky for others to endorse the status quo—because their parties (or factions, in the case of New York) could be punished at the polls by men who were already voting in some elections.55 A similar scenario could unfold if there were a sizable gap between municipal and state voting regulations, as occurred in St. Louis in the 1850s.56

Such was the scenario played out dramatically in North Carolina in the late 1840s and early 1850s. State politics had been dominated by the Whigs until David S. Reid, a long-shot Democratic candidate for governor, embraced the cause of suffrage reform, somewhat to the surprise of his fellow Democrats. In the election of 1848, Reid did much better than expected (there was no property requirement in gubernatorial elections) and aided by a wave of support from the landless was elected governor in 1850, promising a constitutional amendment to eliminate the property qualification for senatorial voting. Once elected (and reelected), Reid pursued that goal, declaring that the “elective franchise is the dearest right of an American citizen” and complaining that 50,000 free white men were disfranchised by the state’s constitution. Sobered by political reality, the Whigs abandoned their opposition to suffrage reform by the early 1850s, they saw the wisdom of tacitly approving a measure that they had denounced in 1848 as “a system of communism unjust and Jacobinical.”57

A more common scenario unfolded when two parties were fairly evenly matched, and a broadening of the franchise appeared likely to be of particular benefit to one. In Connecticut, for example, the Republicans stood to gain far more than the Federalists from the abolition of property requirements; in Pennsylvania in 1837, the Democrats expected to benefit from a halving of the residency requirement; and throughout the Midwest, the Democratic Party seemed likely to attract far more alien voters than the Whigs.58 In each of these instances, and many others, support for democratization stemmed in part from partisan self-interest.59 Once suffrage reform appeared possible, however, what might be called an endgame dynamic often came into play: the parties that formerly resisted reform would drop their opposition, regardless of their convictions, because they did not want to risk antagonizing a new bloc of voters. In the 1840s and 1850s, for example, in both Ohio and New Jersey, the Whigs ended up capitulating to Democratic demands because they feared the political damage that might result from appearing hostile to men who might well gain the franchise anyway.60

These partisan dynamics also point to the ways in which suffrage sometimes was expanded as a political compromise or tactical concession. The Massachusetts convention of 1820–21, for example, was dominated by a well-organized faction of conservatives who generally opposed democratization of the state government: as was true in New York (and later in Virginia), the constitutional convention had been forced on them. The Bay
State's conservatives, however, were willing to tolerate expansion of the franchise as long as seats in the powerful state senate continued to be allocated on the basis of property rather than population. Similarly, in North Carolina, the final acquiescence of the most conservative Whigs to "free suffrage" for senatorial elections was prompted by their desire to maintain a favorable legislative apportionment system and to fend off a constitutional convention that might adopt further reforms. Partisan compromises and tactical maneuvering also marked the New York convention of 1821 and Virginia's final "reform" convention of 1850. Conceding suffrage reform could be a means of taking the steam out of democratic movements while retaining or reconstructing institutional structures that would keep dominant factions and elites in power.

Ideas and Arguments

Alongside the shifts in the social structure and in political institutions—and surely linked to them—was another factor that played a critical role in the expansion of suffrage: a change in prevailing political ideas and values. Stated simply, more and more Americans came to believe that the people (or at least the male people—"every full-grown featherless biped who wears a hat instead of a bonnet") were and ought to be sovereign and that the sovereign "people" included many individuals who did not own property. Restrictions on the franchise that appeared normal or conventional in 1780 came to look archaic in subsequent decades. Franklin's oft-cited view that the right to vote should belong to the man and not the ass began to look commonsensical rather than radical. The shift in political temper was evident in the decisions of states admitted to the union after 1800 not to impose any pecuniary qualifications on suffrage. It also surfaced throughout the nation in newspapers, in the occasional treatise, in public debate: at William and Mary College, in both 1808 and 1812, the graduating students who gave commencement addresses seized the occasion to proclaim their support for universal suffrage. "The mass of the people," declared one newspaper in 1840, "are honest and capable of self-government." Not everyone embraced such ideas, but the tide of political thought was flowing in the direction of democracy.

This ideological tilt, grounded in social changes that had swept the nation, was readily apparent at numerous constitutional conventions that debated and acted on proposals to enlarge the franchise. These debates generally were heated, and many of the views expressed echoed those heard at the end of the eighteenth century. But the ideological spectrum had shifted, its centerpoint sliding to the left—which was reflected not only in the substance but in the emphases, tones, and language of the debates.

Delegates who advocated the elimination of property requirements (the central obstacle to a broader suffrage) from the outset were more aggressive and more confident in their arguments than their predecessors during the revolutionary period. These delegates paid their rhetorical respects to the founding fathers, but pointed out that the "framers" had unfortunately "retained a small relic of ancient prejudices" that it had come time to be "rid of." As retired Senator Nathan Sanford of New York noted in 1821, the ideas that had shaped the first constitutions came from "British precedents," from the British notion of "three estates" that ought to be represented in Parliament. "But here there is but one estate—the people." David Buel, a young lawyer from Rensselaer County, pointed out that social conditions had changed: "without the least derogation from the wisdom . . . of the framers," it had to be understood that their embrace of property qualifications came in response to "circumstances which then influenced them, but which no longer ought to have weight."

Reform delegates frontal attacked the notion that those who owned property were somehow better qualified to vote than those who did not. "Regard for country," argued J. T. Austin of Boston in 1820, "did not depend upon property, but upon institutions, laws, habits, and associations." William Griffith of New Jersey, writing under the name of Eumenes, declared that it was simply an irrational prejudice, unsupported by any evidence, to claim that the ownership of "fifty pounds clear estate" made someone "more a man or citizen," or "wiser than his neighbor who has but ten pounds," or "more honest." The eloquent nonfreeholders of Richmond went a step further in 1829: "to ascribe to a landed possession, moral or intellectual endowments, would truly be regarded as ludicrous, were it not for the gravity with which the proposition is maintained, and still more for the grave consequences that flow from it." Linked to such views was a complete and sometimes contemptuous dismissal of the Blackstonian notion that only real property ownership gave a man sufficient independence to be a trustworthy voter. One Virginia delegate, after a detailed, logical dissection of the claim that broadening the franchise would permit the rich to manipulate the poor, concluded that the "freehold test" had no merit "unless there be something in the ownership of land, that by enchantment or magic converts frail erring man, into an infallible and impecable being."
Some advocates of reform insisted, as their predecessors had in the late eighteenth century, that voting was a natural or universal right. New Yorker James Cheetham, writing in 1800, invoked the Declaration of Independence ("all men are created equal") to support the notion that "the right of suffrage cannot belong to one man without belonging to another; it cannot belong to a part without belonging to the whole." In the late 1840s and 1850s, the most radical advocates of democracy even mustered natural rights arguments to support the enfranchisement of African Americans, women, aliens, and paupers. On the whole, however, natural rights or universal rights arguments were notably scarce in convention debates, at least in part because reformers were well aware that such arguments would immediately provoke the conservative Pandora's box counterattack. Josiah Quincy, a staunch defender of property requirements, leapt on a Massachusetts reformer's claim that "every man whose life and liberty is made liable to the laws, ought therefore to have a voice, in the choice of his legislators." Is not this argument, argued Quincy, "equally applicable to women and to minors? ... The denial of this right to them shows that the principle is not just."  

To avoid such counterattacks, many who favored a broader suffrage retreated to the argument that voting was a qualified "right" that only some possessed. "Niles' Register," the voice of manufacturing interests in Connecticut, maintained that voting was the "natural right of every citizen, who is bound by the law to render personal services to the state, or aid its revenue by money." Similarly, a delegate to the Ohio convention in the early 1850s insisted that voting was a "matter of right" for "a man who is the subject of government, and shares in its burthens." In 1846, in New York, a delegate urged that blacks be granted "the common rights of freemen."  

As such language suggests, most proponents of an expanded suffrage, while rejecting the conservative view that the franchise was a privilege that the state could limit however it wished, took the position that voting was a right, but a right that had to be earned: by paying taxes, serving in the militia, or even laboring on the public roads. As Nathan Sanford put it, "those who bear the burthens of the state should choose those that rule it." That simple proposition meshed well with the rhetoric of the revolution, and the principle lent force to demands that all taxpayers vote and that it was an injustice to withhold the franchise from those who sought for the nation and served in its militias. (The military service argument also was mobilized to support the enfranchisement of aliens and African Americans.)  

There was, to be sure, one glaring inconsistency in the proposed application of this principle: the exclusion of women who paid taxes and shared the burdens of the state; but this was an inconsistency that most found easy to overlook.  

The centrality of the notion of an earned right made clear that the goal of most suffrage reformers was not a universal right to vote but rather the enfranchisement of what New Yorker Samuel Young described as "the intermediate class." Future president Martin Van Buren was more precise, as he maneuvered the New York convention toward rejection of both the status quo and demands, from a radical faction, for universal suffrage. Van Buren's stated goal was "clothing with the right of suffrage" a "class of men, composed of mechanics, professional men, and small landholders" that constituted the "bone, pith, and muscle of the population of the state." Such men, of course, comprised a core constituency of the Democratic Party that Van Buren was so instrumental in building.  

Underlying these arguments for expanding suffrage to include "mechanics, professional men ... small landholders" and others like them was a curiously static vision of the future. Although conservatives (as will be discussed) repeatedly raised the specter of the growth of manufacturing and the appearance of a large, urban proletariat, reformers—in the Northeast between 1800 and 1830 and substantially later in the Midwest—dismissed that specter as a scare tactic. David Buel, for example, acknowledged that if he believed that manufacturing would become predominant and that enormous disparities in wealth loomed in the nation's future, then he would "hesitate in extending the right of suffrage"; but, to the contrary, he was convinced that "the farmers in this country will always out number all other portions of our population." Moreover, the "supposition that, at some future day, when the poor shall become numerous ... they may rise, in the majesty of their strength, and usurp the property of the landholders, is so unlikely to be realized that we may dismiss all fear arising from that source." His views were seconded by convention delegates throughout the nation, including the redoubtable Daniel Webster.  

The movement for franchise expansion thus was grounded in the conviction that the relatively agrarian and egalitarian United States of the early nineteenth century would permanently endure. Only rarely did a reformer, such as J. T. Austin of Boston, argue that suffrage should be broadened even if we did become "a great manufacturing people." "God forbid," declared Austin, but if it should happen, he shrewdly observed that it would be "better to let ... the laborers in manufactories" vote. "By refusing this right to them, you array them against the laws; but give them the rights of citizens ... and you disarm them."
In this lease agreement, we are aware of the significant economic factors that influence the rental market, and we have taken these factors into consideration when determining the rental price. The economic factors include market demand, availability of similar properties, and the overall state of the local economy.

The rental agreement is structured to provide a fair and reasonable return on investment for the landlord while ensuring the tenant has a affordable living space. The lease terms are designed to be flexible enough to accommodate changing circumstances while maintaining a stable rental income for the property owner.

The contract includes provisions for regular maintenance and repairs, as well as guidelines for both tenant and landlord responsibilities. Both parties agree to communicate effectively to address any issues that may arise during the tenancy.

Should you have any questions or require further details on the lease agreement, please do not hesitate to contact us. We are committed to ensuring a smooth and satisfactory rental experience for both parties.
Despite the angered and hurriedly composed letter to the Mayor of New York, the poor and working-class residents of the city were still struggling to make ends meet. The economy was in turmoil, and the city was facing a severe financial crisis. The Mayor, who had been appointed by the Governor, was under pressure to act quickly and make some tough decisions.

The letter to the Mayor expressed the need for immediate action to address the housing crisis. The letter emphasized the urgent need for the government to take steps to prevent further evictions and forced removals. The poor and working-class residents were struggling to make ends meet and were facing the specter of homelessness.

The letter also called for the government to provide more support for the working-class and poor communities. The letter emphasized the need for the government to provide job training and support for the unemployed and the underemployed.

The letter to the Mayor was one of many that were sent to the government, calling for action to address the housing crisis. The government was under pressure to act quickly and make some tough decisions. The poor and working-class residents of the city were struggling to make ends meet and were facing the specter of homelessness.
were launched by Democrats, but the White House itself was well aware of the concerns. The
provisions were seen as a way to strengthen the presidency, but they were not well received. The
Republican-controlled Congress was initially opposed to many of the provisions, but President
Bush strongly supported them. The president argued that the provisions would strengthen
the executive branch and enhance its ability to carry out its duties.

With the accession of President Clinton in 1993, the situation changed. Clinton was
pledged to work with Congress to strengthen the presidency. He signed several
provisions into law, including the Antidiscrimination Act of 1993. The act
expanded the rights of federal employees and made it easier for them to sue their
employers for discrimination. The act also included provisions that made it easier for
employees to file complaints and won the support of many House Republicans.

By 1995, the Republican-controlled Congress had passed several
measures that strengthened the presidency, including the 1994 Independent Budget
Authority Act. The act gave the president more control over the budget process and
made it easier for him to veto legislation that he did not support. The act also
expanded the president's authority to make appointments to key positions in the executive
branch.

The goal of these measures was to strengthen the presidency and enhance its ability to carry out
duties. The provisions were seen as a way to give the president more power, but they were also
welcomed by some as a way to make the presidency more effective. The provisions
were seen as part of a larger effort to modernize the presidency and enhance its ability to
carry out its duties.

In conclusion, the provisions were seen as a way to strengthen the presidency and enhance
duties, but they were also welcomed by some as a way to make the presidency more effective. The
provisions were seen as part of a larger effort to modernize the presidency and enhance its ability
to carry out its duties.

The Right to Vote

FIGURE 1: Property and International Economic Relations: 1979-1985
wagon quickly, both to shore up their democratic credentials and because they believed that Democrats were corruptly evading the law anyway. In Southern states such as Louisiana and Virginia, eliminating taxpaying requirements was viewed, once again, as mortar solidifying the edifice of white supremacy.88

By the middle of the nineteenth century, thus, the nation had taken significant steps in the direction of universal white male suffrage. Spurred by the development of the economy, shifts in the social structure, the dynamics of party politics, the diffusion of democratic ideals, the experiences of war, and the need to maintain militias, the states, the federal government, and municipalities all had dismantled the most fundamental obstacles to the participation of men in elections. The impact of these reforms on the size of the electorate varied from state to state and is difficult to gauge with precision, but it surely was substantial. A careful study of New York before 1820 indicates that two-thirds of adult males were unable to meet the freehold requirement to vote for the senate, and one third were unable to meet the much lower property requirement for voting for the legislature; the reforms therefore tripled the electorate for senatorial elections and increased it by 50 percent for the assembly. Similarly, in North Carolina, abolition of the freehold requirement doubled the electorate for senatorial elections, while the Virginia reforms of 1851, applying to all elections, increased the size of the polity by as much as 60 percent.89

The consequences were not everywhere so dramatic (in New Jersey and Massachusetts, for example, the growth of the electorate was more modest), but in every state where property and taxpaying qualifications were abolished, thousands and sometimes tens of thousands of men were enfranchised. The expansion of the suffrage in fact played a key role in the enormous upsurge of political participation in the 1830s and 1840s, when turnout in some locales reached 80 percent of all adult male citizens. De Tocqueville’s declaration that “the people reign over the American political world as God rules over the universe” was more than a little hyperbolic; but his celebratory enthusiasm was far more closely matched by the reality of the United States in 1850 than it would have been in 1800.90

—THREE—

Backsliding and Sideslipping

According to our general understanding of the right of universal suffrage, I have no objection . . . but if it be the intention of the mover of the resolution to extend the right of suffrage to females and negroes, I am against it. “All free white male citizens over the age of twenty-one years,”—I understand this language to be the measure of universal suffrage.

—Mr. Kelso, Indiana
Constitutional Debates, 1850

History rarely moves in simple, straight lines, and the history of suffrage is no exception. Significant as the broadening of the franchise was in the first half of the nineteenth century, it does not tell the whole antebellum story. While the major thrust of legal change was toward increasing the number of voters, laws also were passed that tightened voting requirements. Some of these were administrative in origin, giving specificity to vaguely worded constitutional mandates. Others were designed to fill specific quadrants of the large space opened up by the abolition of property and taxpaying requirements. Still others were a response to the profound economic, social, and political changes transforming the nation: as the United States began to wrestle with the impact of industrialism, sectional conflict, immigration, and westward expansion, the first clouds of an antidemocratic reaction were forming on the horizon.