



What Struggles over the Right to Vote Reveal about American Democracy

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Although the United States has long prided itself on being a paragon of democracy, the ideal of one person, one vote – universal suffrage – was not achieved until nearly two hundred years after the nation’s founding. The right to vote was originally limited to adult white male property owners. Other sectors of the U.S. population achieved the franchise only slowly and fitfully. Universal suffrage did not become a clearly embraced American national value until the 1960s – and even since then there have been efforts to curtail rights and make voting more difficult. Some in the United States still regard voting as a “privilege” rather than a right.

The prolonged and diverse conflicts over voting throughout American history shed new light on our political institutions and values – and may also help us better understand the ongoing struggles about democratization so visible in other parts of the world.

Lengthy and Contested Struggles

Efforts to secure universal suffrage in the United States have been long and arduous:

- Several important social movements in U.S. history were decades-long struggles to gain voting rights for particular groups of citizens. Women’s suffrage activism was born from the pre-Civil War movement against slavery, and it took seventy years, until the Nineteenth Amendment, to complete the job. Movements for African-American suffrage took longer and suffered huge reversals. Many Native Americans were denied the vote until the 1950s.
- Class dynamics have also been central to fights over voting rights. From the outset, segments of our nation’s elites feared political participation by workers and the poor. Alarmed elites hindered major extensions of the franchise and have periodically sought to reduce voting by the less advantaged.
- The long-term trend has been towards greater inclusion, but progress has not been smooth or steady, and there have been recurrent setbacks. Rollbacks of voting rights happened, for example, to women in New Jersey; to African-Americans in many states at various times; and to dependent poor people. For non-elites, voting rights are neither certain nor fixed. Indeed, periodic restrictions on the franchise, coupled with active resistance to each major push forward in voting rights, tells us that there have always been significant numbers of Americans who do not accept voting in democratic elections as a universal right.

The States and the Federal Government

From the outset, the evolution of voting rights in the United States has been shaped by a decision of the drafters of the Constitution to separate suffrage from citizenship and leave voting rights to the states. For much of U.S. history, suffrage requirements were not uniform across the United States, as the states were free to define their own electorates. In practice, this often meant that different states were able to discriminate against minorities of their own choosing – including, in various places, African-Americans, Native-Americans, Chinese immigrants, and non-English speaking people. The first federal interventions in voting rights occurred through the constitutional amendments that followed the Civil War, but not until after World War II did the federal government actively promote democratic rights. To this day, there is no affirmative national right to vote under the U.S. Constitution, and voting requirements as well as procedures vary among the states.

Wars Have Furthered Voting Rights

Every major expansion of voting rights in U.S. history occurred during or just after a war. The need to attract broad popular support and recruit young men to the military repeatedly created strong pressures to extend political rights to some of those previously excluded. This dynamic encouraged extensions of rights to non-propertied white men as early as the American Revolution and the War of 1812. Subsequently, the Civil War led to the first wave of enfranchisement of African American men. World War I helped put female suffrage over the top. And World War II and the Cold War furthered the southern Civil Rights movement, which finally universalized voting rights for blacks. Even the war in Vietnam mattered, by encouraging the extension of voting rights to eighteen-year-olds who, it was argued, should be able to vote if they were subject to the military draft.

The Past as Prologue

Struggles over voting rights and their exercise continue in the United States today – and contemporary efforts to extend or restrict voting resemble similar attempts from the past:

- Waves of immigrants are arriving in America today, and some localities want to extend certain voting rights to the newcomers even before they become citizens. This is not without precedent. From the early 19th century until the 1920s, non-citizens could vote in many states, where voting rights were extended to immigrants who had resided in the United States for three years and declared their intent to become citizens.
- “Voter suppression” refers to practices or laws that discourage or block participation by categories of people who cannot be formally denied the right to vote. Historically, such efforts occurred after expansions of voting rights, when many new voters were added to election rolls. Similarly, in our era, the extension of voting rights to African Americans in the 1960s has been followed by efforts in many states to discourage black voting – by making it hard to register or requiring picture IDs at the voting booth, and by suspending voting rights for former prisoners. Many scholars think that such steps are no coincidence.

History certainly underscores that the right to vote in the United States has always been contested, especially for less privileged citizens. Voting rights are far from automatic, and can never be taken for granted. The price of full participation in American democracy has been high, and vigilance is always in order, lest the gains that one generation thinks it has achieved end up being reversed for the next.

Read more in Alexander Keyssar, *The Right to Vote: The Contested History of Democracy in the United States* (Basic Books, 2009).