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# The Right to Vote and the Rise of Democracy, 1787–1828

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A long tradition in American political history associates the presidency of Andrew Jackson with the achievement of universal suffrage and the coming of democracy, at least for adult white males. There is some justification for this view, but only in limited senses; for the most part this interpretation has had a deleterious effect on our understanding of political development in the early republic. In particular it has created the belief that relatively few people possessed the right to vote in the early republic, and that therefore mass participation was postponed to the years after 1815. As recently as September 2008 the distinguished historian Jill Lepore could write in the *New Yorker* that during Washington's presidency only 6 percent of Americans could vote—which admittedly translates into about 15 percent of the free adult population. Sean Wilentz's prize-winning *Rise of American Democracy* (2005) recognizes that the suffrage was much more widely spread before 1815, but he still builds his interpretation around the assumption that politics did not involve the public at large until the Age of Jackson. Even Alexander Keyssar's illuminating *The Right to Vote* (2000) and Daniel Walker Howe's excellent *What Hath God Wrought* (2007) assume that the

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practice of politics became more democratic in the 1820s because of recent fundamental changes in electoral rules. Such views are explicitly contradicted by the voting data that Philip Lampi has gathered that are now available on the A New Nation Votes website, which confirm the huge expansion of popular participation within two decades or so of the adoption of the United States Constitution.<sup>1</sup>

This expansion was possible because the right to vote had always been extraordinarily widespread—at least among adult white males—even before the country gained its independence. During the colonial period, the right to vote for the lower house of colonial legislatures had been defined in traditional British terms: Only people who had freehold landed property sufficient to ensure that they were personally independent and had a vested interest in the welfare of their communities could vote. That qualification normally applied to men who were heads of households, since women were almost by definition dependent, but the right could extend to widows who had become responsible for the family property. Some colonies excluded propertied people whose civic commitment they suspected—recent arrivals, members of minority religious sects, and racial groups deemed unacceptable. But those most generally excluded were laborers, tenant farmers, unskilled workers, and indentured servants, all of whom were considered to lack a “stake in society,” a permanent interest in the community, and the wherewithal to withstand corruption.<sup>2</sup>

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1. Jill Lepore, “Rock, Paper, Scissors: How We Used to Vote,” *The New Yorker*, Oct. 13, 2008, 2, consulted at [http://www.newyorker.com/reporting/2008/10/13/081013fa\\_fact\\_lepore?currentPage=2](http://www.newyorker.com/reporting/2008/10/13/081013fa_fact_lepore?currentPage=2); Sean Wilentz, *The Rise of American Democracy: Jefferson to Lincoln* (New York, 2005); Alexander Keyssar, *The Right to Vote: The Contested History of Democracy in the United States* (New York, 2000); Daniel Walker Howe, *What Hath God Wrought: The Transformation of America, 1815–1848* (New York, 2007). See also Charles Sellers, *The Market Revolution: Jacksonian America, 1815–1846* (New York, 1991). The A New Nation Votes: American Election Returns 1787–1825 website may be found at [http://elections.lib.tufts.edu/aas\\_portal/index.xq](http://elections.lib.tufts.edu/aas_portal/index.xq).

2. The best overall study of the evolution of the suffrage before the Civil War remains Chilton Williamson, *American Suffrage from Property to Democracy, 1760–1860* (Princeton, NJ, 1960). For colonial attitudes, see *ibid.*, 1–61; Jack P. Greene, *All Men Are Created Equal: Some Reflections on the Character of the American Revolution* (Oxford, UK, 1976), reprinted in his *Imperatives, Behaviors, and Identities: Essays in Early American Cultural History* (Charlottesville, VA, 1992),

In Britain property qualifications increasingly restricted the number qualified to vote. Whereas over 20 percent of adult males had enjoyed the franchise around 1700, population growth and the increasing concentration of wealth reduced the proportion to 17.2 percent by 1754, continuing down to 12.7 percent in England and Wales by the 1820s.<sup>3</sup>

By contrast, the abundance and availability of land in North America meant that large numbers of colonists satisfied similarly defined requirements. This was especially true where the requirement was expressed in terms of acreage rather than value, as was customarily the case in the southern colonies: It was much easier to acquire (and to measure) 50 acres than land worth £50 either at sale or in annual rents. Six colonies also allowed alternative qualifications to freehold ownership in the form of personal property or payment of taxes, opening the suffrage to owners of urban property, and even to those prosperous farmers who rented their land or held it on some form of leasehold.<sup>4</sup>

Consequently, as early as the 1720s the suffrage was uniquely wide in the colonies. Virginia reputedly had the most restrictive franchise, with fewer than half the free white males qualified to vote, but a recent calculation raises the figure to two-thirds at midcentury, declining slightly thereafter. In some New England colonies and in the great northeastern seaports about three-quarters of adult males met the requirement. Already before the Revolution an unprecedentedly large proportion of the adult free male population could vote, though historians have been uncertain in their calculation of just how many. Chilton Williamson and Robert Dinkin estimated that in the late colonial era the proportion of freehold owners ranged between 50 and 75 (or even 80) percent in the various communities and states, while Alexander Keyssar suggests that overall nearly 60 percent of adult white males were eligible to vote.<sup>5</sup>

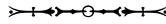
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esp. 246–59; Robert J. Steinfeld, “Property and Suffrage in the Early American Republic,” *Stanford Law Review* 41 (Jan. 1989), 335–76, esp. 339–48.

3. The Great Reform Act of 1832 would increase the potential electorate to only 18.4 percent in England and Wales. Frank O’Gorman, *The Long Eighteenth Century: British Political and Social History, 1688–1832* (London, 1997), 49, 140, 369.

4. Robert J. Dinkin, *Voting in Provincial America: A Study of Elections in the Thirteen Colonies, 1689–1776* (Westport, CT, 1977), 39.

5. Williamson, *American Suffrage*, 20–39, esp. 38; Dinkin, *Voting in Provincial America*, 49; Keyssar, *The Right to Vote*, 7. See also Richard R. Beeman, *The Varieties of Political Experience in Eighteenth-Century America* (Philadelphia,



The Revolution established the pattern of voting rights that determined American politics in the generation after 1787. The years from 1774 to 1787 did not see a drastic qualitative change, but they did see the proportion of eligible voters expand, probably by significantly more than 10 percent.<sup>6</sup>

On the one hand, the controversy with Britain after 1763 over political rights stimulated democratic sentiment in both the colonies and the metropolis, and radicals began to argue that the right to vote was inherent within individual manhood. In the revolutionary crisis of 1775 and 1776, the need to ensure popular support encouraged several states to allow men—especially militia men—who did not meet the formal requirements to vote at critical moments, while the Declaration of Independence resoundingly based the legitimacy of the new nation on the consent of the governed. Radicals began to insist that every adult male deserved the right to vote, and that individual citizens needed the vote to protect them against the possible tyranny of lawmakers.<sup>7</sup>

On the other hand, many leading patriots remained committed to the idea that voting was a privilege open to those who were tied to the community's long-term welfare and had a sufficient tangible measure of that commitment. As a result, the new state constitutions generally established a more conservative electoral system than the democrats wanted.

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2004), 75, 105–106, 250, 293–94, 310. The calculation that 85 percent of free white males could vote, made by Robert E. Brown and B. Katherine Brown, *Virginia, 1707–1786: Democracy or Aristocracy* (East Lansing, MI, 1964), has generally been regarded as too high. Historians have tended to follow Charles S. Sydnor, *Gentlemen Freeholders: Political Practices in Washington's Virginia* (Chapel Hill, NC, 1952), 34–43, in preferring a figure below 50 percent. The more recent midway calculation was made by John Kolp, *Gentlemen and Freeholders: Electoral Politics in Colonial Virginia* (Baltimore, 1998), 38–49.

6. Robert J. Dinkin, *Voting in Revolutionary America: A Study of Elections in the Original Thirteen States, 1776–1789* (Westport, CT, 1982), 39.

7. Marc W. Kruman, *Between Authority and Liberty: State Constitution Making in Revolutionary America* (Chapel Hill, NC, 1997), 87–108; Elisha P. Douglass, *Rebels and Democrats: The Struggle for Equal Political Rights and Majority Rule during the American Revolution* (Chapel Hill, NC, 1955); Edmund S. Morgan, *Inventing the People: The Rise of Popular Sovereignty in England and America* (New York, 1988); Wilentz, *Rise of American Democracy*, 13–39.

In 1776 the most radical state, Pennsylvania, enfranchised all taxpaying adult males and so broadened the electorate markedly, especially in older eastern areas where no more than 50 to 60 percent of adult males had previously qualified. In 1787 it was estimated that, in the state as a whole, upwards of 87.5 percent of adult white males could now vote.<sup>8</sup>

But, significantly, even the Pennsylvania radicals of 1776 still associated representation with taxation: Only “free men having a sufficient evident common interest with and attachment to the community” deserved the privilege of voting in a republican polity. There was no desire to enfranchise the poor, who were commonly identified as profligate or idle. As J. R. Pole suggested, what was significant was not that lots of men could vote but that it was still thought necessary to exclude some, however few, from the polls.<sup>9</sup>

The determination to maintain meaningful tests arose from the aware-

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8. Dinkin, *Voting in Revolutionary America*, 36. See also Willi Paul Adams, *The First American Constitutions: Republican Ideology and the Making of the State Constitutions in the Revolutionary Era* (Chapel Hill, NC, 1980).

9. Quotation from the 1776 constitution, in Greene, *Imperatives*, 260; J. R. Pole, “Historians and the Problem of Early American Democracy,” *American Historical Review* 67 (Apr. 1962), 626–46, and reprinted in his *Paths to the American Past* (New York, 1979), 223–49. Pole’s important pioneering contributions to the subject came in a series of still valuable articles, listed here by state: “Suffrage and Representation in Massachusetts: A Statistical Note,” *William and Mary Quarterly* 14 (Oct. 1957), 560–92, as corrected by Richard P. McCormick, “Letters to the Editors,” *William and Mary Quarterly* 15 (July 1958), 412–416; Pole, “The Suffrage in New Jersey, 1790–1807,” *Proceedings of the New Jersey Historical Society* 71 (1953), 39–61; Pole, “Suffrage Reform and the American Revolution in New Jersey,” *Proceedings of the New Jersey Historical Society* 74 (1956), 173–94; Pole, “Jeffersonian Democracy and the Federalist Dilemma in New Jersey,” *Proceedings of the New Jersey Historical Society* 74 (1956), 260–92; Pole, “Election Statistics in Pennsylvania, 1790–1840,” *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 82 (Apr. 1958), 217–219; Pole, “Suffrage and Representation in Maryland from 1776 to 1810: A Statistical Note and Some Reflections,” *Journal of Southern History* 24 (May 1958), 218–25; Pole, “Constitutional Reform and Election Statistics in Maryland, 1790–1812,” *Maryland Historical Magazine* 55 (Dec. 1960), 278–92; Pole, “Representation and Authority in Virginia from the Revolution to Reform,” *Journal of Southern History* 24 (Feb. 1958), 16–50, reprinted in his *Paths to the American Past*, 3–40; Pole, “Election Statistics in North Carolina, To 1861,” *Journal of Southern History* 24 (May 1958), 225–28; all resulting in his magisterial *Political Representation in England and the Origins of the American Republic* (New York, 1966).

ness that broader social and economic trends were actually reducing the proportion of men who owned property. In newly settled areas where land was cheap, 70 or 80 percent of adult white males held enough property to be enfranchised. But in some older areas, notably New England, the limited availability of land and the practice of subdividing family plots among children reduced the number who possessed the minimum estate. Kenneth Lockridge found a 30 percent decline in eastern Massachusetts between midcentury and 1790, and the situation may have been worse in the middle states. In cities the crowds of poor men swelled, as economic tendencies made rich and poor ever more distinct. Such developments raised fears that in the near future a large propertyless proletariat might appear in the United States, and statesmen were apprehensive of the effects a class that lacked true moral independence might have on the politics of the growing republic.<sup>10</sup>

Virginia and New York are the prime instances of states that marginally eased their property requirements but essentially maintained a restrictive regime intact. Virginia in 1776 held to its basic freehold qualification of 25 acres of improved land, but then in 1785 lowered the alternative requirement for freehold owners of unimproved land from 100 to 50 acres. Calculations as to how many men possessed this level of property have ranged widely, but since long-term leaseholders and some residents of the few towns could also vote, most authorities have accepted that between half and two-thirds of adult white males could vote in the 1780s. Certainly most adult sons, tenants, laborers, artisans, merchants, professional men, and their employees did not legally qualify, but, as Pole observed of the years before the revolution, suffrage in Virginia “was often exercised in fact by persons to whom it did not belong as a right under the law.” As a result, he calculated, the “effective voting force” in revolutionary Virginia “could rise to over sixty per cent of the white male population of adults”—and sometimes even higher.<sup>11</sup>

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10. Kenneth Lockridge, “Land, Population, and the Evolution of New England Society, 1630–1790,” *Past and Present* 39 (Apr. 1968), 62–80; Allen Kulikoff, “The Progress of Inequality in Revolutionary Boston,” *William and Mary Quarterly* 28 (July 1971), 375–412.

11. Pole, *Political Representation*, 146–47. For the debate over the size of Virginia’s electorate in the mid eighteenth century, see note 5 above. For the post-Revolutionary period, Jackson Turner Main, *The Antifederalists: Critics of the Constitution, 1781–1788* (Chapel Hill, NC, 1961), 31, found that in most coun-

New York's revolutionary reforms were, if anything, more restrictive. The 1777 constitution opened the qualification to vote for the house to both those who owned a £20 freehold (previously £50) and tenants who paid 40 shillings annual rent and state taxes, as well as to those merchants, artisans, and professionals who had previously become freemen of the cities of New York and Albany. These terms continued to exclude many of New York's tenant farmers and laborers (and their adult sons), but less completely than might be imagined since long-term tenancies were treated as freeholds, which enfranchised many tenants on the great feudal estates of the Hudson valley. In the New York of 1790, about 58 percent of adult white males—that is, 70.7 percent of heads of households—could vote for the assembly.<sup>12</sup>

Four other states that retained their colonial restrictions intact already allowed fairly broad access to the suffrage. Delaware retained both its old 50-acre freehold requirement and its traditional alternative of £40 personal property, which in colonial days had enabled about 80 percent of adult white males to vote. South Carolina is normally regarded as preserving a conservative establishment in 1778: It did keep its existing 50-acre freehold rule, but it also lowered its previous alternative of paying 20 shillings in taxes to paying taxes equal to the tax on 50 acres. Yet this tax concession seems to have been of little significance since the

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ties about half the adult white males could meet the requirements, a view accepted by Richard P. McCormick, *The Second American Party System: Party Formation in the Jacksonian Era* (Chapel Hill, NC, 1966), 179. The suggestion of Dinkin, *Voting in Revolutionary America*, 38, that 70 to 75 percent of adult white males in Virginia were qualified in the 1780s seems to go beyond the evidence he cites. Later writers see 60 to 65 percent as close to the mark. Kolp, *Gentlemen and Freeholders*, 38–49; William G. Shade, *Democratizing the Old Dominion: Virginia and the Second Party System, 1824–1861* (Charlottesville, VA, 1996), 4.

12. New York's figures are not beyond dispute. Linda De Pauw estimated that 92 percent of adult white males could vote in 1790, but Alfred Young's careful analysis argues convincingly that she and other historians (including himself) had misunderstood contemporary tabulations and that the figure was closer to 58 percent. Linda Grant De Pauw, *The Eleventh Pillar: New York State and the Federal Constitution* (Ithaca, NY, 1966), 141–46; Alfred F. Young, *The Democratic Republicans of New York: The Origins, 1763–1797* (Chapel Hill, NC, 1967), 83–84, 585–87. See also John Brooke, "King George Has Issued Too many Patents for Us": Property and Democracy in Jeffersonian New York," in this issue of *JER*.

acquisition of a £50 freehold continued to be relatively easy in South Carolina, where tax records reveal that over 80 percent of adult white males owned qualifying freeholds in the 1780s.<sup>13</sup>

Rhode Island and Connecticut retained intact their colonial charters and ancient suffrage rules: Both states required those who could meet the property qualifications to take the freeman's oath before they could vote. The Rhode Island charter restricted the oath to those who owned real estate valued at £40 or rented for 40 shillings per annum (and their eldest sons), a qualification that about 74 percent of adult males could meet in 1778. However, only about four-fifths of them took the freeman's oath so that in 1788 only about 60 to 70 percent of adult males were *bona fide* freemen. The same was true in Connecticut, where the qualifications for the oath were described as "maturity in years, quiet and peaceable behavior, a civil conversation, and forty shillings freehold." In practice probably no more than 60 percent of adult males took the freeman's oath in the 1780s. Yet in both cases the oath should surely be seen as a sort of registration process: As Joel Cohen has suggested, failure to take the oath can be considered as voluntarily choosing not to vote rather than being ineligible. Dinkin calculated that those eligible to take the oath in 1789 amounted to about 75 percent in each state, though other evidence suggests that the qualification was becoming harder to meet and 65 percent would be nearer the mark.<sup>14</sup>

Of the other six states, five deliberately eased the qualifications required for voting for their legislative assemblies, even while rejecting the principle of universal manhood suffrage. Eager to attach more social groups to the republic, they decisively broadened their view of what could constitute a "stake in society" and accepted various forms of wealth and evidences of social contribution as alternatives to property. New Jersey in 1776 gave the vote to all possessing £50 of personal estate. Pennsylvania included the adult sons of freeholders even when not tax-

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13. Dinkin, *Voting in Revolutionary America*, 35–36, 37.

14. The description of the Connecticut qualifications comes from the *Pennsylvania Magazine* (1776), quoted in Marchette Chute, *The First Liberty: A History of the Right to Vote in America, 1619–1850* (London, 1969), 286. See also Joel A. Cohen, "Democracy in Revolutionary Rhode Island: A Statistical Analysis," *Rhode Island History* 29 (Winter/Spring 1970), 5; Dinkin, *Voting in Revolutionary America*, 39; Williamson, *American Suffrage*, 165–66, 243–47; Charles S. Grant, *Democracy in the Connecticut Frontier Town of Kent* (New York, 1961).

payers. Georgia in 1777 retained its old qualification of £10 in any sort of property but now also accepted non-property owners who paid taxes or pursued a “mechanic trade.” In a few states, relaxing the rules meant introducing residence requirements—usually one year in the state—in order to ensure voter commitment to the community or locality.<sup>15</sup>

Three states—North Carolina, New Hampshire, and Pennsylvania—gave up landed property qualifications entirely for elections to the assembly and adopted tax-paying as the essential sign of contribution to the maintenance of the republic. Like Georgia, these three also introduced light, compulsory poll taxes which transformed the taxpaying requirement into a broad adult white male suffrage. In North Carolina, for example, the poll tax enfranchised all adult males, except “sons living under the paternal roof, apprentices, slaves, and indentured servants.” In all four states, taxables represented about 90 percent of the adult white male population.<sup>16</sup>

Changes in the value of money markedly affected the restrictive power of qualifications, as seven states issued their own paper money and inflation became rampant during and after the war. Maryland may have retained its 50-acre freehold qualification in 1776, but it changed its alternative qualification from £40 in other forms of property to £30 in current money, which cut the amount needed in half. This opened the suffrage to most freemen, with inflation expanding the proportion of Maryland’s adult white males who could meet that standard from 64 percent in 1783 to over 70 percent by 1789.<sup>17</sup>

In New Jersey after 1776 the necessary £50 was to be measured not in sterling but in currency or proclamation money, which reduced the level by one-third. As Richard P. McCormick remarked, “The percent-

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15. Dinkin, *Voting in Revolutionary America*, 32–33, 42–43; James H. Kettner, *The Development of American Citizenship, 1608–1870* (Chapel Hill, NC, 1978), 102–103; Kruman, *Between Authority and Liberty*, 98.

16. Dinkin, *Voting in Revolutionary America*, 32–33, 36–37; Williamson, *American Suffrage*, 135–36.

17. Williamson, *American Suffrage*, 108–10, 121. Conversely, Pole could detect no indication that the improvement in the currency after 1789 disfranchised any voters in New Jersey or Maryland. Pole, “Suffrage and Representation in Maryland,” 220–21; Thornton Anderson, “Eighteenth-Century Suffrage: The Case of Maryland,” *Maryland Historical Magazine* 76 (Summer 1981), 141–58, esp. 149; Dinkin, *Voting in Revolutionary America*, 38.

age of men who could not swear to being worth fifty pounds, lawful money, must have been extremely small, especially when the currency depreciation of the times is taken into consideration.” In New Jersey this meant that “the potential electorate included all but a small fraction of the white males over twenty-one.”<sup>18</sup>

Notoriously, Massachusetts in 1780 was the one state to raise the level of its qualification for state elections—from £40 to £60 of personal property, while the freehold alternative increased from £2 to £3 annual value. However, it is doubtful whether this move actually disfranchised many people, since the old requirement was in sterling while new one was in paper currency. According to one estimate, between 60 and 70 percent of adult males in Massachusetts seaboard towns could vote, and as many as 80 to 90 percent in most rural sections. But in any case within a few years the property qualifications were being ignored: By 1786, according to some witnesses, everyone with settled residence or who paid a poll tax was admitted to the polls, and the alternative requirement of an estate worth £3 per annum was commonly construed to mean any man who earned £3 per annum could vote, which enfranchised common laborers! According to one Bay State politician, “So small are the qualifications of voters that scarce a single man is excluded,” which allowed the upsurge of rural voters in 1787 to overthrow the conservatives whose fiscal policies had provoked Shays’s rebellion.<sup>19</sup>

This growing electorate was not restricted to voting for the lower houses of the legislature. In colonial times governors had normally been appointed by higher authority, by the king or a proprietor, but in Rhode Island and Connecticut the local electorate could elect the governor even before the Revolution. After 1776 the four New England states and New York allowed their voters to choose the governor, but elsewhere—and especially in the South—governors continued to be appointed, but now by the legislature. Similarly the upper chamber had usually been appointed by the governor in colonial days, except in Rhode Island, Connecticut, and Massachusetts. Now the upper house too became elec-

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18. Richard P. McCormick, *The History of Voting in New Jersey: A Study of the Development of Election Machinery, 1664–1911* (New Brunswick, NJ, 1953), 77, 85.

19. George Minot, in 1788, quoted in Dinkin, *Voting in Revolutionary America*, 37; Pole, “Suffrage and Representation in Massachusetts,” 567, 569, 570, 577–78, 580.

tive, though on slightly different terms from the lower house: The districts were larger, the terms longer, and usually the officeholder had to meet more stringent requirements on age, residence, and wealth. In North Carolina and New York the franchise was also more restricted. Both states lowered the requirements to vote in a house election but retained the earlier property qualification for the upper house: 50 acres in the former, £100 freehold in the latter. In New York, under this provision only 28.9 percent of adult white males could vote for the state senate in 1790, half the number that could vote for the house. In most states, though, the senates of the 1790s were fairly reflective of popular opinion and, in any case, power was concentrated more in the lower houses.<sup>20</sup>

The broadening of the suffrage and the attraction of the equal-rights ideology raised awkward questions about the rights of those whose exclusion from the suffrage had previously been taken for granted. After the Revolution most states specifically disfranchised women, even when property holders, though Rhode Island, Connecticut, and Delaware did not; only New Jersey explicitly enfranchised “all inhabitants” who could meet the residence and property qualifications.<sup>21</sup>

For male minorities, the new state constitutions were more favorable. The five provinces that had traditionally disfranchised Roman Catholics now admitted them, though New York’s constitution called for new immigrants to take an oath renouncing all foreign ecclesiastical allegiances. Jews were now allowed to vote (though not hold office) in almost every state, though Maryland continued to require the voter to be a “Christian.” The three states that had previously prohibited free African Americans from voting (Virginia, South Carolina, and Georgia) maintained their bans, and Maryland in 1783 limited the right to vote to those manumitted before that year. Otherwise, at the Revolution free black adult males were enfranchised in every other state, mainly through silence and ignoring of the issue, subject of course to property or tax requirements. Only New York, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, and North

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20. Pole, *Political Representation*, “Suffrage and Representation in Massachusetts,” 571, and “Constitutional Reform in Maryland,” 275–76; Young, *Democratic Republicans of New York*, 83–84, 585–87; Jackson Turner Main, *The Upper House in Revolutionary America, 1763–1788* (Madison, WI, 1967).

21. Rosemarie Zagari, *Revolutionary Backlash: Women and Politics in the Early American Republic* (Philadelphia, 2007).

Carolina explicitly enfranchised black males on the same terms as white men.<sup>22</sup>

So how many adult males could vote for the most popular branch of their state government by 1790? Fewer than half of adult white men, as the latest version of the *Guide to U.S. Elections* issued by the *Congressional Quarterly* asserted in 2010? Alexander Keyssar has claimed that, “according to most estimates, roughly 60 to 70 percent of adult white males (and very few others) could vote.” This calculation is, however, not justified by the sources he cites: Influenced no doubt by the evidence that the proportion of property owners was declining, Keyssar neglects the alternative routes to qualification that appeared even in the more conservative states, as well as the impact of currency changes and inflation. Yet even Keyssar’s 60 to 70 percent figure suggests an eligible adult male electorate incomparably larger than many historians continue to assume.<sup>23</sup>

A more careful examination of the same sources made earlier by Robert Dinkin calculated that by the end of the 1780s the qualified electorate in the thirteen states probably fell in the range from about 60 to 90 percent of adult white males, with most states toward the upper end. When some of his figures for individual states have been slightly adjusted to conform to revised figures given above, his tabulation places six states at around 90 percent (New Hampshire, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, North Carolina, and Georgia), and three states above 80 percent (Massachusetts, Delaware, and South Carolina); Rhode Island, Connecticut, and Maryland stand between 65 and 70 percent, followed by Virginia and New York at about 60 percent, or just below. Revised or not, Dinkin’s survey suggests that, across the nation as a whole, about 80 percent of adult white males were eligible to vote in the late 1780s.<sup>24</sup>

Certainly many leading figures of the time believed that the country had become too democratic. The view that an overly powerful popular will was corrupting politics in the states was commonly expressed among those who by the late 1780s were working to strengthen the Union. In

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22. Dinkin, *Voting in Revolutionary America*, 41–42; Williamson, *American Suffrage*, 115.

23. Jon P. Preimesberger, ed., *Congressional Quarterly’s Guide to U.S. Elections*, 6<sup>th</sup> ed. (2 vols., Washington, DC, 2010), 1: 23; Keyssar, *The Right to Vote*, 24.

24. Dinkin, *Voting in Revolutionary America*, 39.

the Northwest Ordinance of 1787 the Congress, worried about the loyalty of western settlers, laid down a 50-acre freehold requirement for voting in the new territory that was more stringent than in any of the states. In the Philadelphia constitutional convention of 1787 several delegates blamed the nation's weaknesses on the excessive democracy within too many states. Conservatives such as Gouverneur Morris and John Dickinson wanted the new instrument of government to introduce a freehold qualification across the country, but their arguments were effectively countered by the need to secure ratification in the several states. As Oliver Ellsworth of Connecticut pointed out, the people would "not readily subscribe to the national constitution if it should subject them to be disfranchised."<sup>25</sup>

In the end the United States Constitution neither limited nor broadened the suffrage anywhere, since it left the issue to the individual states. Its sole requirement was that, in elections to the federal House of Representatives, the states must use the same franchise as they used for "the most numerous Branch of the State Legislature" (article 1, section 2). Thus the Constitution underwrote the expansion of the suffrage since 1776. Moreover, the belief that the new instrument of government must be grounded in popular consent ensured that ratification would be the responsibility of popularly elected ratifying conventions. The suffrage for those elections was left to the states, which universally adopted the broadest franchise used in state elections, except that New York and Connecticut enfranchised all free adult males especially for the occasion. The new Constitution might offset the power of the popularly elected federal House of Representatives with the balancing power of a president and senate that were both indirectly elected; but, as James Madison pointed out, election to these two bodies depended upon the very state legislatures that some Founders considered too dependent on the broad popular electorate that had emerged from the Revolution.

The United States Constitution may have reflected a desire for a more republican, less democratic way of organizing governments, but those states that rewrote their constitutions between 1789 and 1791 never reduced the right to vote for adult white males. In 1789 Georgia confirmed that all free white males who paid tax during the previous year

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25. Williamson, *American Suffrage*, 117–18, 124–31; Ellsworth, quoted in Dinkin, *Voting in Revolutionary America*, 40.

could vote. In 1790 South Carolina broadened the suffrage slightly by admitting all free white males who owned a 50-acre freehold, *or* who owned a town lot, *or* who had been resident for six months and paid a tax of at least 3 shillings sterling. In 1790 Pennsylvania rejected the radicalism of 1776 and introduced a more balanced constitution based on bicameralism and a stronger executive, but no change was made to the suffrage in state elections and the governor was now to be popularly elected. Most drastically, in 1791–1792 Delaware at last dropped its freehold qualification and enfranchised adult white male residents who had paid a state or county tax. Together with New Hampshire (which in 1791 also chose to retain its taxpaying qualification) and North Carolina, these states all maintained tax systems that made qualification easy. Prevailing attitudes may have wished to restrict the right to vote to freeholders, householders, taxpayers, and settled residents, but there could now be no question of withdrawing the vote from any group of white men that already possessed it.<sup>26</sup>

Thus by the time of George Washington's reelection in 1792, after the admission of Vermont and Kentucky, seven of the fifteen states had given up property qualifications in voting for their lower house of assembly. In at least three others, inflation had made existing property requirements relatively unrestrictive. Taxpaying requirements too provided little obstacle: As in Pennsylvania, a small property tax or county road tax was enough to establish what historian Philip Klein described as "almost universal manhood suffrage." Across the nation as a whole, at least 80 percent of adult white males could vote. And in the states where the legislature did not reserve the privilege to itself, that was the electorate that chose the state's presidential electors.<sup>27</sup>



The mere fact that so many adult white males could vote for the lower houses of both state and federal government did not make the United States of 1790 a democracy. Not only were women largely excluded from the political process, but contemporaries still did not think that all adult

26. Williamson, *American Suffrage*, 131–37.

27. Philip S. Klein, *Pennsylvania Politics, 1817–1832: A Game without Rules* (Philadelphia, 1940), 34. See also Pole, "Election Statistics in Pennsylvania," 217–19.

white males deserved the vote even when citizens. The assumption that the poor, the idle, and the profligate had to be prevented from corrupting the electoral process remained strong, and the principle of universal manhood suffrage made only slow headway. Yet in practice in most states the opportunity to vote was gradually extended so that by 1812 very few adult white males outside Rhode Island, Virginia, and the new, unusual state of Louisiana were denied access to the polls in elections for state and federal legislatures. The process by which that happened—and the timing of the process—are too frequently slipped over by recent historians who remain fixated with the notion of Jacksonian Democracy.<sup>28</sup>

Immediately after the acceptance of the Constitution there was little demand for greater democracy. Most voters proved reluctant to use their vote, and not all electoral units actually claimed their right of representation. Those who did vote commonly preferred their traditional leaders, gentry in the country and merchants in the cities, though the social sources of legislators were broadening considerably. The formal criteria for membership of legislatures were much stiffer than for voters, requiring of the representative not just maturity in years, citizenship, and residence, but also in many states significant levels of property ownership, especially for state senators. Moreover, the principle that elected bodies should represent persons rather than interests was still not generally accepted: In Virginia, South Carolina (till 1819), and some parts of Kentucky the principle of plural voting persisted, allowing wealthy men to vote in every county in which they owned sufficient property. In many states the house reflected the distribution of persons, while the senate represented property and established interests. Representation was

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28. Keyssar's *Right to Vote* is particularly disappointing in its overly generalized treatment of the changes from 1790 to the 1850s, though his tabulations of constitutional changes relating to voting, 340–61, are invaluable and relied upon here. Likewise, Wilentz's *Rise of Democracy*, 40–178, misses the significance of the developments of 1790–1815. If democratization had substantially taken place by 1815, it becomes inappropriate to explain it in terms of changes that occurred after 1815, as in Sean Wilentz, "Property and Power: Suffrage Reform in the United States, 1787–1860," in *Voting and the Spirit of American Democracy: Essays on the History of Voting and Voting Rights in America*, ed. Donald W. Rogers and Christine B. Scriabine (Urbana, IL, 1990), 31–42. One consequence of recent disregard of the earlier period is that much of the best secondary literature on the subject is now half a century old.

commonly skewed to give dominance to the seaboard areas, especially through state senates; in the South Atlantic states, in particular, this device provided extra protection for the interests of slavery. The protection of property also encouraged the retention of higher qualifications (including stricter residency and citizenship rules) for voting in local elections where men of property feared discriminatory local taxation. In most southern states local government remained essentially appointive, notably in Virginia through the county court system, and continued so in the 1820s.<sup>29</sup>

Yet elite control did not generally extend to the electoral process. Historians have commonly assumed that in the early republic the voters exercised their electoral privilege under the close supervision of their social superiors. Certainly in Virginia, Kentucky, Maryland, and for a time in some parts of other states, voting continued to be done publicly *viva voce*, with “living voice”: The voters, one by one, had to swear that they were qualified and then publicly declare the names of those they were voting for. This was a slow process and open to abuse, especially where less wealthy men had to announce their vote in the presence of those to whom they were beholden—landlords, employers (possibly of family members), local officials with real authority.<sup>30</sup>

But even in colonial days paper ballots, discreetly folded and deposited in a sealed box, were used to protect the voter’s integrity throughout New England and the Carolinas, and in parts of Pennsylvania. With the Revolution the practice became obligatory in those places. New York, New Jersey, and other parts of Pennsylvania experimented further with paper ballots during the Revolutionary War, so that by 1787–1788 nine states had substantially adopted the practice.<sup>31</sup>

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29. Pole, *Political Representation*; Jackson Turner Main, “Government by the People: The American Revolution and the Democratization of the Legislatures,” *William and Mary Quarterly* 23 (July 1966), 391–407; Pole, “Suffrage and Representation in Massachusetts,” 561–62; Charles S. Sydnor, *The Development of Southern Sectionalism, 1819–1848* (Baton Rouge, LA, 1948), 33–53.

30. Sydnor, *Gentlemen Freeholders*, 27–31; Donald J. Ratchliffe, *Party Spirit in a Frontier Republic: Democratic Politics in Ohio, 1793–1821* (Columbus, OH, 1998), 34–35.

31. Keyssar, *Right to Vote*, 5–6, 17; Williamson, *American Suffrage*, 104, 108, 121–22; Dinkin, *Voting in Revolutionary America*, 101–104. See also Morgan, *Inventing the People*, 174–233, esp. 183; and Eldon Cobb Evans, “A History of the Australian Ballot System in the United States” (Chicago, 1917), ch. 1, avail-

As a result—and contrary to common historical opinion—the secret ballot was the norm in the early republic. Other jurisdictions soon adopted it: Georgia in 1789, Delaware in 1791, the Northwest Territory in 1800, New York City in 1804, and Maryland in 1802 for state elections and 1810 for all elections. When the Federalists of Connecticut introduced the Stand Up law in 1801, which replaced the existing secret ballot with a public declaration in congressional elections (though not in elections for governor or town representative), it served only to enhance the Republican claim that Federalists scorned the ordinary voter, and the Republicans repealed it in 1817.<sup>32</sup>

Only in Virginia and Kentucky did the old-fashioned English mode of elections continue, lasting throughout the antebellum period. Oral voting, added to the persisting power of local sheriffs and county courts in parts of the Upper South, gave local elites some control over elections. Interestingly, one southern-influenced western state, Illinois, adopted the ballot in 1819, moved to oral voting in 1821, back to the ballot in 1823, and readopted oral voting again in 1829, all in an effort to combat secret intrigues during elections.<sup>33</sup>

Otherwise the polling place was a less closely supervised place than historians have sometimes assumed. Even in the North, it has been argued, voters were traditionally subject to close scrutiny in the act of voting, essentially to ensure that they were duly qualified members of the local community. Some of the evidence for such scrutiny is stronger,

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able at [http://en.wikisource.org/wiki/A\\_History\\_of\\_the\\_Australian\\_Ballot\\_System\\_in\\_the\\_United\\_States](http://en.wikisource.org/wiki/A_History_of_the_Australian_Ballot_System_in_the_United_States).

32. Williamson, *American Suffrage*, 135, 149, 169–70, 183–84, 212. See also Thomas P. Abernethy, *The South in the New Nation, 1789–1819* (Baton Rouge, LA, 1961), 31; John T. Willis, *Presidential Elections in Maryland* (Mount Airy, MD, 1984), 3; Richard J. Purcell, *Connecticut in Transition, 1775–1818* (Washington, DC, 1918), 139–40, 156, 252.

33. Sydnor, *Development*, 48–49, 49–52; Robert M. Ireland, “Aristocrats All: The Politics of County Government in Ante-bellum Kentucky,” *Review of Politics* 32 (July 1970), 365–83. For Illinois, see Theodore C. Pease, *The Frontier State, 1818–1848* (Springfield, IL, 1918), 39; Thomas Ford, *A History of Illinois, From Its Commencement as a State in 1818 to 1847* (1854; repr., Urbana, IL, 1995), 56. Similarly, Kentucky had adopted the secret ballot in 1792 and then reverted to publicly recorded voice voting in 1799, mainly because of fraud surrounding the ballot system. Joan Wells Coward, *Kentucky in the New Republic: The Process of Constitution Making* (Lexington, KY, 1979), 143.

however, at the height of the Second Party System in the 1840s than in the early republic. About the turn of the century enforcement of voting qualifications was generally very lax. In disputed election cases the complaint was normally that too many people had been allowed to vote, not that arguably qualified voters had been turned away. When disappointed candidates did appeal to the legislature, they generally stopped short of courting unpopularity by appearing to favor a restricted franchise.<sup>34</sup>

Voter-qualification laws concerning the ownership of property were difficult to enforce in newly opened areas where titles had not yet been confirmed, which is why most frontier states avoided property qualifications. Election judges could not rule authoritatively on land ownership in any areas—like New England and Pennsylvania—where small amounts of land were frequently bought and sold or taken into joint ownership. In these circumstances the old practice of handing over title deeds for a day, and so creating “fagot votes” as a temporary qualification, could not be effectively policed. Where other forms of property were acceptable, the practice grew of accepting any evidence the voter brought forward: in Massachusetts, some voters brought the tools of their trade, a couple of cattle, and even credit notes as proof that they possessed enough substance to satisfy the law. Even bankrupts could qualify since the law allowed them to keep, free of distraint, household effects that happened to be worth enough to meet the property requirement. In theory, tax qualifications ought to have been easier to enforce. Yet official records were not readily available and voters were asked to self-certify that they had paid sufficient taxes, which simply encouraged perjury. In any case, the onus of proof was on the objector to prove non-qualification, not the voter to prove his eligibility. This helps to explain the comparative lack of public demand for the extension of franchise—because the legal limitations did not have much effect, at least not for anyone who wished to vote.<sup>35</sup>

Many voters simply assumed that they could vote, because they could not conceive why they should not be able to. War veterans, in particular,

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34. Compare Kenneth J. Winkle, *The Politics of Community: Migration and Politics in Antebellum Ohio* (New York, 1988), with Ratcliffe, *Party Spirit*, 11, 105–106, 163. See also Pole, “Suffrage in Maryland,” 221–22, and “Representation and Authority in Virginia,” in Pole’s *Paths to the American Past*, 20.

35. Pole, “Suffrage in Massachusetts,” 572–74, 576; Williamson, *American Suffrage*, 210–13, 134.

turned up to vote, as in South Carolina in the 1790s, regardless of the suffrage rules. In New York, Vermonters settling on the Holland Purchase in western New York presumed that they could not be deprived of a right they had enjoyed in Vermont, and used their fists at the polls in 1807 to enforce that right. Cultural attitudes were shifting in the wake of the Revolution so that the suffrage franchise was seen as the natural right of men who supported government, did their civic duty, risked their lives for the republic, or worked hard to become property owners, regardless of their current wealth. By 1801, as the Federalist George Cabot recognized, “The spirit of our country is doubtless more democratic than the *form* of our government.”<sup>36</sup>

The shift in attitude was most obvious in those states that had occasion to write or rewrite their rules. Six of the ten new states that established their political institutions from scratch before 1821 instituted universal manhood suffrage, at least for whites. In 1777 Vermont had accepted this revolutionary principle at its first organization, though it did not become a state of the Union till 1791. Kentucky followed suit in 1792, as did almost all the states admitted between 1816 and 1821. Tennessee, in 1796, was the only frontier state to introduce a property qualification, but it applied only to those who had not lived in the county concerned for more than six months.<sup>37</sup>

In the territories Congress initially tried to maintain a freehold franchise, but finally conceded a taxpaying qualification for the Indiana, Illinois, and Mississippi territories between 1811 and 1814. Three of the new states adopted taxpaying qualifications, but these were not always a great restriction. Certainly Louisiana, dominated by a Gallic population determined to retain its control, imposed in 1812 a tax requirement that effectively excluded over half the state’s adult white males from voting, despite exempting from the qualification for five years those who had bought land from the United States government. By contrast, Mississippi in 1817 excepted from its own taxpaying requirements all those who

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36. Cabot quoted in Williamson, *American Suffrage*, 174. See also *ibid.*, 152–53; Harvey Strum, “Property Qualifications and Voting Behavior in New York, 1807–16,” *Journal of the Early Republic* 1 (Winter 1981), 347–71, esp. 364–65.

37. The states admitted between 1816 and 1821 were Indiana (1816), Mississippi (1817, the only one to adopt a taxpaying qualification), Alabama (1819), Illinois (1819), Maine (1820) and Missouri (1821).

were enrolled in the local militia—or who were exempt from militia service! Earlier, in 1802, Ohio had given the franchise to taxpayers and those who worked on the roads, but since all adult males were obliged to work on the roads, this amounted to a thoroughly democratic franchise (for white males) that, without amendment, would make possible the huge turnouts there in the Jacksonian period.<sup>38</sup>

In the older states where existing property qualifications had long existed, elites were understandably concerned that their interests might be jeopardized if power was transferred to a popular majority. Accordingly, they resisted the demand for liberalization, but with limited success. In New York City the charter of 1730, which restricted voting to property owners, was reformed in 1804 by a Republican state legislature that extended the suffrage also to taxpayers who paid rent of twenty-five dollars or more a year. In Maryland, a broad bipartisan movement for universal white male suffrage appeared after 1797, with huge backing from the landless residents of rapidly growing Baltimore. In the face of diehards in the state senate, a reform bill finally passed the legislature in 1801 and was confirmed in 1802 (thus making it a constitutional amendment), admitting all free white adult males, twelve-months resident in a county, to vote in elections for sheriffs, delegates, and other state officials. In 1810 a constitutional amendment confirmed that this privilege extended also to voting for congressmen and presidential electors, but the state senate and governor continued to be indirectly elected. Similarly South Carolina, after a three-year struggle over the suffrage, confirmed in 1810 that all free white males with two years' residence could vote, though only for the lower house and congressmen. By 1810 three of the southeastern states—the exceptions were Virginia and North Carolina—had achieved a thoroughly democratic suffrage for white adult males, at least in elections for the lower house of assembly and for congressmen.<sup>39</sup>

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38. Williamson, *American Suffrage*, 97–99, 208–209, 213–14; Donald J. Ratcliffe, “Voter Turnout in Early Ohio,” *Journal of the Early Republic* 7 (Autumn 1987), 233–34, 246–50. For Louisiana, see Joseph G. Tregle, *Louisiana in the Age of Jackson: A Clash of Cultures and Personalities* (Baton Rouge, LA, 1999), 65, 68; Samuel C. Hyde, Jr., *Pistols and Politics: The Dilemma of Democracy in Louisiana's Florida Parishes, 1810–1899* (Baton Rouge, LA, 1996), 47; and John M. Sacher, *A Perfect War of Politics: Parties, Politicians, and Democracy in Louisiana, 1824–1861* (Baton Rouge, LA, 2003), 12, 205–207.

39. Pole, “Constitutional Reform in Maryland,” 278–81; Williamson, *American Suffrage*, 138–57, 162–64.

In most states, new constitutional provisions did not result from widespread popular demands for a wider suffrage. Usually constitutional conventions were called to settle other problems, especially the basis of regional representation within the states, and the opportunity was taken to introduce reforms of the suffrage. As representation was made fairer, so, too, the restrictions on voting for upper houses were democratized, though in a piecemeal way. Property qualifications for appointive and elective office holders were also made less restrictive, as in Maryland in 1809. Local government opened up in many states, as, for example, in Massachusetts in 1811, and the franchise made more generous. The most restrictive systems of local government survived in New York and in seven southern states where county courts, either appointed by the legislature (as in South Carolina) or co-optive and self-perpetuating (as in Virginia and Kentucky), remained the fulcrum of local government.<sup>40</sup>

Pressure for a change in the franchise rules came simply from the increase in the number of people voting. Before 1790 voters had not used the right to vote in large numbers even when they possessed it; in a routine election like that for governor of Connecticut in 1793 only 5 percent of eligibles turned out. But much greater numbers were possible if exciting or important matters seemed at stake, and, as in England between 1694 and 1716, shorter terms and more frequent elections served to stimulate interest. In this respect the introduction of popular elections for Congress provided an important stimulus, especially in states like South Carolina that otherwise did not have many popular elections. In practical terms, the most effective way of encouraging voter turnout was to make voting places more accessible, and the introduction of smaller election districts, notably in New Jersey, Maryland, and Ohio, greatly stimulated voting.<sup>41</sup>

The greatest incentive to rouse popular participation came in the 1790s with the development of two-party conflict. As the governing elite divided, so each side recognized that the existence of a huge pool of uncommitted potential voters could decide the outcome of the struggle,

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40. Pole, "Constitutional Reform in Maryland," 281–82, and "Suffrage in Massachusetts," 564; Williamson, *American Suffrage*, 133–34; Sydnor, *Development*, 33–43, 287; Ireland, "Aristocrats All." For reform of local government elections, see Keyssar, *The Right to Vote*, 30–31, 50.

41. McCormick, *Voting in New Jersey*, 80–81, 84, 95–97, 119–20; Ratcliffe, *Party Spirit*, 34, 48–49; Pole, "Constitutional Reform in Maryland," 278; Williamson, *American Suffrage*, 166, 180.

and each appealed downwards for support among the mass electorate. As a consequence, two-party conflict created in many areas a close competition that stimulated interest and brought large numbers to the polls in 1798–1800, including even in Virginia.<sup>42</sup>

After 1800 the Jeffersonians for some years enjoyed an easy predominance that made voting seem less necessary, but after 1807 party competition revived north of the Potomac, creating electoral excitement in two-thirds of the states for the next eight years. As David Fischer argued in 1965, this was a major democratizing experience for the New England, Middle Atlantic, and coastal border states.<sup>43</sup>

One important consequence was a decline in the habit of deference as politicians used issues to rouse popular support in their opponents' traditional areas of strength. Significantly, between 1800 and 1810 delegate nominating conventions were introduced at the local level in the middle states, and even in Ohio, to reassure voters that the candidates they voted for were indeed the people's choice.<sup>44</sup>

A further stimulus to voter participation came with the extension of statewide elections. Though party conflict aroused interest, there was little motivation to vote in the many counties and districts where opinion was overwhelmingly one-sided. But a statewide contest made every vote

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42. Pole, *Political Representation*; Andrew W. Robertson, "Voting Rites and Voting Acts: Electioneering Ritual, 1790–1820," in *Beyond the Founders: New Approaches to the Political History of the Early American Republic*, ed. Jeffrey L. Pasley, Andrew W. Robertson, and David Waldstreicher (Chapel Hill, NC, 2004), 73–74.

43. David Hackett Fischer, *The Revolution of American Conservatism: The Federalist Party in the Era of Jeffersonian Democracy* (New York, 1965). It is a sly mark of Wilentz's rejection of Fischer's thesis that he entitles his section on the Whig party in the mid-1830s "The Revolution of American Conservatism." Wilentz, *Rise of American Democracy*, 483.

44. For the decline of deference, see also Strum, "Property Qualifications," 366–69, and Donald J. Ratcliffe, "The Changing Political World of Thomas Worthington," in *The Center of a Great Empire: The Ohio Country in the Early American Republic*, ed. Andrew R. L. Cayton and Stuart D. Hobbs (Athens, OH, 2005), 36–61. For the significance of delegate nominating conventions, see Noble E. Cunningham, *The Jeffersonian Republicans in Power: Party Operations, 1801–1809* (Chapel Hill, NC, 1963), 196–200; Pole, "Jeffersonian Democracy and the Federalist Dilemma in New Jersey," 263–70; Carl Prince, *New Jersey's Jeffersonian Republicans: The Genesis of an Early Party Machine, 1789–1817* (Chapel Hill, NC, 1967), 71ff.; Ratcliffe, *Party Spirit*, 45–57, 101–13, 125–35, 161–65, 185, 210–17, 235–38.

potentially critical: Politicians had every reason to mobilize isolated supporters in hostile areas, and to persuade voters in areas of strength of the need to offset hostile votes elsewhere in the state. Overall, the popular election of governors operated to stimulate higher turnouts after 1790 in most states north of the Potomac; where repeated annually, as in New England, it had an even more powerful democratizing effect.<sup>45</sup>

Similarly, before 1842 some states, usually smaller ones, chose their congressmen by a general-ticket election, as of course did those allowed only one congressman. Such statewide elections were in general less common in the South, but the biennial statewide contest for congressmen brought democratic agitation to Delaware, Georgia, and Louisiana before 1815, and Alabama and Mississippi thereafter.<sup>46</sup>

Half a century ago J. R. Pole and Richard P. McCormick demonstrated that during the presidencies of Jefferson and Madison voters began turning up to the polls in huge numbers. Between 1808 and 1816 statewide turnouts in Massachusetts, New Hampshire, and New Jersey commonly passed 60 percent. As Pole pointed out, a higher proportion of adult males in Massachusetts voted in these years than at any subsequent time down to the Civil War. In some Maryland counties turnout reached heights of over 80 percent between 1808 and 1812. Moreover, in many states these high levels of turnout did not entirely disappear after 1816. Partisan conflicts continued to raise their heads from time to time, and the Panic of 1819 brought a degree of popular distress that roused high turnouts in the early 1820s in some states. The gist of these figures is now being confirmed by scholars using Lampi's much more extensive, precise, and authoritative data for 1787–1825.<sup>47</sup>

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45. By 1792 seven states allowed popular statewide election of their governor, including Pennsylvania (from 1790) and Delaware (from 1792), both of which, like New York, held their election every three years. The exception among the free states, New Jersey, did not give the election to the people until 1844. All the states admitted after 1789 had direct popular elections for governor, except Louisiana. *Gubernatorial Elections, 1787–1997* (Washington, DC, 1998).

46. Rosemarie Zagari, *The Politics of Size: Representation in the United States, 1776–1850* (Ithaca, NY, 1987), 125–31, 154–59. For a debate over the party advantages of statewide as opposed to district elections, see Pole, “Jeffersonian Democracy and the Federalist Dilemma in New Jersey.” Congress mandated compulsory district voting for the House in 1842.

47. J. R. Pole, “Letters to the Editor,” 414. See also his “Suffrage in Maryland,” 222, and “Constitutional Reform in Maryland,” 280–81. The voting data that appeared in Pole's articles (cited fully in note 9) were reprinted in Pole, *Political Representation*, 543–64. See also McCormick, *Voting in New Jersey*, 119–

These returns confirm that close party conflict at the state level drew to the polls many men who were not qualified to vote. Candidates and parties that were determined to win had little scruple in encouraging the unqualified to vote, as they did, for example, by creating “fagot votes” and encouraging aliens to vote. In New York, where severe restrictions supposedly applied, even conservative Federalist landlords encouraged tenants to vote, paying their traveling expenses and offering financial inducements to vote appropriately. In turn, New York Republicans used some ingenious devices, from at least 1807 onwards, to bring every man over the age of twenty-one to the polls. Several counties between 1807 and 1814 cast more votes than they had eligible voters: Martin Van Buren claimed there were six hundred illegal voters in his county in 1810. Though the suffrage rules considerably reduced the numbers voting in New York, electoral frauds, according to historian Harvey Strum, “created a de facto lowering of property qualifications for voting in gubernatorial and senatorial races . . . and significantly enlarged the potential electorate.”<sup>48</sup>

The high turnouts of 1808–1812 confirmed, as J. R. Pole remarked, that “constitutional limitations [on voting] were not only slight in themselves but were seldom enforced by local authorities and did little to prevent the exercise of the suffrage franchise by almost any member of the adult male population.” In his view, New England (outside Rhode

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20, and “New Perspectives,” 292; Fischer, *Revolution of American Conservatism*, 188–90. Even in ostensibly one-party Ohio, the few counties that experienced close two-party conflict saw turnouts exceeding 60 percent of adult white males between 1808 and 1815. Statewide, turnout remained constant, 1808–1818. Ratcliffe, “Voter Turnout in Early Ohio,” 237, 239, 245, 247. See also Ratcliffe, *Party Spirit*, passim, and “Changing Political World”; Jeffrey L. Pasley, “The Cheese and the Words: Popular Political Culture and Participatory Democracy in the Early American Republic,” in *Beyond the Founders*, ed. Pasley, Robertson, and Waldstreicher, 46–48; and Robertson, “Voting Rites,” *ibid.*, 73–74. The significance of close party competition and high turnouts before 1815 is missed by Keyssar, *The Right to Vote*, 40.

48. Williamson, *American Suffrage*, 159–63; Strum, “Property Qualifications,” 360–66 (quotation at 366); Keyssar, *The Right to Vote*, 34–35. McCormick calculated that 41.8 percent of adult white males could legally vote for governor and state senator in New York in 1807 and 36.6 percent in 1814. Turnout for governor reached 93 percent of eligibles in 1807 and 95 percent in 1814, surely reflecting considerable intervention by illegal voters. McCormick, “Suffrage Classes and Party Alignments: A Study in Voter Behavior,” *Mississippi Valley Historical Review* 46 (Dec. 1959), 397–410; Strum, “Property Qualifications,” 362.

Island) had not known an effective freehold rule, or much enforcement of the suffrage laws, since the Revolution. Even the Massachusetts constitution of 1780 could not prevent the existence by 1809 of what Chilton Williamson described as “a condition bordering on universal suffrage.”<sup>49</sup>

In New Jersey, all serious thought about enforcing property qualifications disappeared long before the constitutional reform of 1807; as in Maryland in 1801, that apparently fundamental change simply confirmed what had been previously been common and regular though unconstitutional, and turnout scarcely increased as a result of the reforms. Lax interpretation of the rules not only served the parties; it also solved the problem of established voters whose deteriorating socioeconomic condition meant that they could no longer meet the formal requirements, even though they remained worthy citizens.<sup>50</sup>

The open disregard of suffrage rules, encouraged by political parties that flagrantly breached the law at election time, made it clear that the only way to secure honesty in elections was to remove property restrictions. As one Connecticut legislator in effect said in 1801, the state’s property tests should be abolished because they were treated as meaningless in many towns. In addition, many appreciated that electoral fraud, especially as practiced in New York, allowed party politicians to control who voted and when they voted, a control that could be broken by introducing a universal suffrage (for white males) either legally or *de facto*. Though in some states Federalists sometimes argued for tightening up the rules and feared that Republicans would be the main beneficiaries of extension, many other Federalists came to feel they could not oppose a popular demand and in any case recognized the need to reform rules that could not be enforced. Thus movements to broaden the suffrage rules arose in the 1810s as much as a consequence of high voter participation as in hope of creating it.<sup>51</sup>

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49. Pole, “Suffrage and Representation in Massachusetts,” 561; Williamson, *American Suffrage*, 169, 176, 177 (quotation), 178. See also Paul Goodman, *The Democratic-Republicans of Massachusetts: Politics in a Young Republic* (Cambridge, MA, 1964), 136–45; Ronald P. Formisano, *The Transformation of Political Culture: Massachusetts Parties, 1790s–1840s* (New York, 1983), 408–409.

50. Williamson, *American Suffrage*, 176–77, 209; Pole, “Suffrage in Maryland,” 220–23. See also Pole, “Election Statistics in Pennsylvania,” 217–19.

51. Williamson, *American Suffrage*, 171, 188–90, 192–94; Strum, “Property Qualifications,” 360, 366.

Even so, much resistance persisted to the abandonment of the principle of a “stake in society” from those who feared the growth of an unreliable and ill-equipped population. Republicans were on the whole more sympathetic to reform, especially in the northern states, but they were far from united on the issue: In New York, in particular, a significant minority of Republicans helped to obstruct reform in the legislature. In general, upper houses were more conservative, regardless of party control, and lower houses more aware of the disadvantage of seeming to oppose a widespread right to vote. Before 1812, such internal divisions ensured that contests for reform failed in Massachusetts, Rhode Island, Connecticut, and New York. The one exception was New Jersey, where anxiety about corrupt practices in elections—and about the number of aliens, blacks, and women voting—led to a major reform in 1807. This placed suffrage on a clear taxpaying basis, creating a very broad franchise for white men but disfranchising women and African Americans. As a mark of white male hegemony, apparently neither group protested.<sup>52</sup>

The demand for reform affected New England in the years immediately following the party passions of 1807–1815 and the War of 1812. As in Mississippi, veterans in particular were widely thought to have earned the right to vote, regardless of all other considerations. In Connecticut the postwar union of Republicans and dissenters brought about a new constitution in 1818 that gave the vote to adult white males of “good character” and six months’ residence who were \$7 freeholders or state taxpayers or militiamen. Here, as in many other states, a taxpaying qualification amounted, in Williamson’s judgment, to “almost manhood suffrage, so long as males of voting age were almost all polled.”<sup>53</sup>

In 1819 the new state of Maine adopted the principle of universal manhood suffrage that had in fact existed in previous years when it conducted its politics as part of Massachusetts. So too in 1821 Massachusetts at last adopted taxpaying in place of its property qualification, but

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52. Pole, “Constitutional Reform in Maryland,” 282–84; Strum, “Property Qualifications,” 358–59; Williamson, *American Suffrage*, 158–64, 177; McCormick, *Voting in New Jersey*, 97–101; Zagari, *Revolutionary Backlash*, 36. See also Judith Apter Klinghoffer and Lois Elkis, “‘The Petticoat Electors’: Women’s Suffrage in New Jersey, 1776–1807,” *Journal of the Early Republic* 12 (Summer 1992), 159–94.

53. That is, so long as they had to pay a poll tax. Williamson, *American Suffrage*, 190. See also *ibid.*, 182–90; Purcell, *Connecticut in Transition*, 399.

this probably did not make the Massachusetts electoral system significantly more democratic in its operation than before the Revolution. Constitutional reform in New England basically sanctioned voting practices that had previously been common but irregular, unconstitutional, and possibly producing results that were subject to challenge in the legislature.<sup>54</sup>

A real change did take place in New York, where constitutional reform was an extension of recent reform movements in New England. The flood of Yankee settlers into New York in the years since 1800 prompted demands for liberalization that the regular Democratic Republicans could not resist. The new constitution of 1821 abolished the severely restrictive franchise for the state senate, and extended the right to vote for the assembly to all male taxpayers and militia men. This formally increased the proportion of adult white males able to vote for the assembly, it is estimated, from 78 to 90 percent. However, as elsewhere, interpretation of the taxpaying qualification proved complex and difficult. The search for simplification produced a non-contentious shift in 1826 from taxpaying to a qualification based simply on citizenship, age, and residence—which increased the electorate by 1 percent! Far more significant than the franchise changes was the abolition, in 1821, of the Council of Appointment, which had controlled fifteen thousand officeholders at all levels of government, and the consequent increase in the number of offices open to popular election.<sup>55</sup>

New York was the only state where a constitutional convention held in the 1820s effectively extended the democratization of politics. Although the process of constitutional change here was deeply affected by party hostilities, the issue of the suffrage did not reflect unbridgeable differences. The main argument was not over the principle of extending the right to vote, but whether a higher qualification should be retained for the senate. Most of the Democratic Republican Party favored manhood suffrage, but their leaders, notably Martin Van Buren, preferred a

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54. Williamson, *American Suffrage*, 190–95. Maine followed the precedent of Vermont in 1777, which, Williamson argued, had simply legalized the loose practices of Connecticut electoral politics before the Revolution. *Ibid.*, 97–99, 190.

55. Williamson, *American Suffrage*, 204, 207. For the significance of the 1821 convention, see Jabez D. Hammond, *The History of Political Parties in the State of New York, From the Ratification of the Constitution to December, 1840* (2 vols., Albany, NY, 1842), esp. 2: 1–85.

more limited franchise because they recognized that the new constitution had to be approved by a referendum among the old restricted electorate. Though arguing in favor of retaining some restrictions, many Federalists saw little danger in broadening the franchise, as long as the judiciary remained independent. As the old Federalist standard-bearer Rufus King pointedly remarked, “I have not observed that the States in which a property qualification is established, either choose wiser men or are less democratical than those where the property qualification for electors does not exist. We are so nearly alike, and have so much intercourse, that it has appeared to me pretty certain that the popular claim would prevail over that of property.” His main concern was to stop potentially corrupt party managers from perverting the popular will: “We must choose the [presidential] electors by the people or the public liberties will be lost. . . . They cannot be bribed, they are safe against corruption.”<sup>56</sup>

The widespread acceptance of manhood as the essential qualification for enfranchisement had carried with it a definition of those who could be trusted to preserve property and liberty, and that in turn required a definition of those not to be trusted. Paupers were seen as unworthy, criminals as dangerous, and women as inherently dependent, while attitudes to aliens fluctuated, often being viewed as acceptable voters but not office holders. The shift to recognizing civic contributions (such as military service and road work) that were then essentially male activities inevitably undermined the claim of women to the vote, as did the gradual replacement of Enlightenment environmentalism by biological determinism.<sup>57</sup>

It has become almost a commonplace that “As the Anglo-American political system became more ‘democratic,’ it also became even more

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56. Rufus King to Charles Gore, Dec. 18, 1820, in *The Life and Correspondence of Rufus King, Comprising his Letters, Private and Official, His Public Documents, and his Speeches*, ed. Charles R. King (6 vols., New York, 1894–1900), 6: 365, 519–20, 532–33. For a different but perceptive perspective on voting reform after 1815, see Wilentz, *Rise of American Democracy*, 181–202.

57. Keyssar, *The Right to Vote*, 32–33, 54–59, 61–63; Kettner, *Development of American Citizenship*, 102–103, 122–24, 214–18, 231; Zagari, *Revolutionary Backlash*, 164–73. For the limitation of democratic rights by racial, ethnic and gender hierarchies, see Rogers M. Smith, *Civic Ideals: Conflicting Visions of Citizenship in U.S. History* (New Haven, CT, 1997). Paupers were disfranchised before 1828 in only New Hampshire (1792), South Carolina (1810), Maine (1819), and Massachusetts (1821), though in most seaboard states after 1828. Steinfeld, “Property and Suffrage,” 335–36, 353.

racist and sexist as women and blacks were stripped of rights.” The growing cultural belief in inherent racial differences ensured that African-Americans, even when free, would increasingly be considered unworthy of citizenship, and so suffered disfranchisement as socioeconomic barriers to voting disappeared between 1790 and 1821. This process of marking out blacks as an unacceptable *racial* group began in the South, where the three seaboard states that already had prohibitions in place were joined by three border states—Delaware in 1792, Kentucky in 1799, and Maryland in 1801—that had large and growing free black communities.<sup>58</sup>

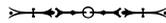
Ohio in 1802 was the first free state to ban African-Americans from the polls; every new state to join the Union thereafter, whether slave or free, followed Ohio’s precedent, with the exception of Maine in 1819–1820. New Jersey in 1807, Connecticut (by statute in 1811 and by constitution in 1818), and Rhode Island in 1822 instituted their own bans, while New York in 1821 allowed free black voting only if a heightened property qualification could be met. Though racial intolerance would deepen further in the 1820s, disfranchisement temporarily halted. In 1828 eight states still officially allowed voting by free blacks: four in New England where their numbers were low, plus New York (in its limited way), Pennsylvania, North Carolina, and Tennessee.<sup>59</sup>

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58. Richard Young and Jeffrey Meiser, “Race and the Dual State in the Early American Republic,” in *Race and American Political Development*, ed. Joseph Lowndes, Julie Novkov, and Dorian T. Warren (New York, 2008), 43; Smith, *Civic Ideals*, 165–232. Virginia, South Carolina, and Georgia already prohibited black voting.

59. Keyssar, *The Right to Vote*, 349–53; for Connecticut, see Pole, “Suffrage in Massachusetts,” 581. The new states banning free black voting were Louisiana (1812), Indiana (1816), Mississippi (1817), Illinois (1818), Alabama (1819), and Missouri (1820–1821). Bans were later introduced in Tennessee in 1834, North Carolina in 1835, and Pennsylvania in 1838; Rhode Island reversed its ban in 1842. For an interesting discussion of these different outcomes, see Christopher Malone, *Between Freedom and Bondage: Race, Party, and Voting Rights in the Antebellum North* (New York, 2008). For the “racialization” of politics, see David Waldstreicher, “The Nationalization and Racialization of American Politics: Before, Beneath, and Between Parties, 1790–1840,” in *Contesting Democracy: Substance and Structure in American Political History, 1775–2000*, ed. Byron E. Shafer and Anthony J. Badger (Lawrence, KS, 2001), 37–63, and the literature cited therein; and for the process in the 1820s, see Donald J. Ratcliffe, “The Decline of Antislavery Politics, 1815–1840,” in *Contesting Slavery: The Politics of*

The suffrage was therefore not entirely restricted to men who could pass as white, but it was undoubtedly the preserve of adult males. The principle of universal manhood suffrage (at least for whites) had been formally established in only eight states by 1828, while in Virginia and Rhode Island social and economic change was making traditional legal restrictions actually reduce the size of the legal electorate. But that did not alter the fact that overall the United States was already a functioning mass democracy for white males, and in many states substantially had been for some considerable time before the rise to political prominence of Andrew Jackson.



The assumption that there was a connection between enlarging the franchise and the election of Andrew Jackson to the presidency rests upon rather fuzzy assumptions. It is not always clear whether Jackson supposedly owed his rise to power to a prior expansion of the voting public or whether he himself somehow contributed toward the process of democratizing the franchise. Either way, there is a presumption that in the early nineteenth century the franchise was—as Keyssar claimed—“generally granted . . . only to property holders,” even though the evidence widely available in authoritative monographs suggests, as we have seen, that many non-property holders already enjoyed the privilege, both in theory and practice. As a result, it is simply not true that political parties of the 1820s and 1830s “often campaigned on the promise of eliminating property requirements.” It is also frequently said that the destruction of property tests in “the constitutional conventions of the 1820s” prepared the way for Jackson’s presidential victories, even though there was only one decisive reforming state constitutional convention (New York) between 1815 and 1832. If there were a connection between Jackson’s victory and an expanded voter universe, it was surely that Jackson was the first presidential candidate to win a clear popular majority in a competitive presidential election in which the popular voice directly determined the final outcome in the Electoral College.<sup>60</sup>

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*Bondage and Freedom in the New American Nation*, ed. John Craig Hammond and Matthew Mason (Charlottesville, VA, 2011), 267–90, esp. 282–84, 302–303.

60. Keyssar, *The Right to Vote*, xvi; Rogers, ed., *Voting and the Spirit of American Democracy*, 11–12. These common assumptions have been expressed in, for example, Waldstreicher, “The Nationalization and Racialization of American

In the 1820s voters began to act in presidential elections as they had previously, in many states, at the state and local levels. Presidential elections had been bitterly fought in 1796 and 1800, but thereafter the electoral predominance and caucus nominations of the Jeffersonian Republican Party made the outcome of these contests predictable. Only in 1812, when the Federalists exploited the Republican factional split in New York, might the nominee of the congressional caucus have failed. After the Republican walkovers of 1816 and 1820, it became clear by 1823 that the party could no longer agree upon a single candidate, and the resort to a congressional caucus in 1824 was essentially a maneuver by the Republican faction most confident of winning the plurality needed to lay claim to the traditional party label. The uncertainties of the early 1820s, when economic breakdown stimulated voter turnout to new levels in a number of (mainly western) states, created a situation in which ambitious leading national politicians could be challenged by an outsider, especially one who, like Jackson, was an acclaimed national hero. By 1827–1828 two new political formations had appeared, each campaigning to attract popular support, and the contest to win the White House became the central driving force behind political mobilization.<sup>61</sup>

It is misleading to assume that, before then, traditional aristocratic attitudes had previously placed the selection of the Electoral College in the hands of the state legislatures, or that its members exercised their judgment independent of the ticket upon which they were elected. In 1792 the New York legislature apologetically explained that it gave itself

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Politics,” 51; Howe, *What Hath God Wrought*, 231, 269, 281, 489–91; and the *Congressional Quarterly’s Guide to U.S. Elections*, 1: 5. The idea of the 1820s as an age of constitutional reform owes much to the title of Merrill D. Peterson’s valuable anthology, *Democracy, Liberty, and Property: The State Constitutional Conventions of the 1820’s* (Indianapolis, IN, 1966), which reprints part of the debates of the Massachusetts (1820–1821), New York (1821), and Virginia (1829–1830) conventions.

61. For the rise in voter turnout at the state level since 1818, see Richard P. McCormick, “New Perspectives on Jacksonian Politics,” *American Historical Review* 65 (Jan. 1960), 288–301, esp. table 1; Ratcliffe, “Voter Turnout,” 245–46; and especially Daniel Peart, “Popular Engagement with Politics in the United States during the Early 1820s” (PhD diss., University of London, 2011). For the priority of presidential politics over state issues by 1828, see Donald J. Ratcliffe, “Antimasonry and Partisanship in Greater New England, 1826–1836,” *Journal of the Early Republic* 15 (Summer 1995), 199–239.

the privilege of choosing the state's presidential electors only because there was not sufficient time to organize a popular election for that year. By the time of the first contested election in 1796, respect for popular sentiment had persuaded eight states—half of them—to allow all those people who could vote for the assembly and congressmen to choose the state's Electors. By 1800 four states had moved the decision away from the people back to the assembly, but the demand for popular participation ensured that in 1804 and 1808 only seven legislatures out of seventeen kept the electoral vote in their own hands. Those Jeffersonian elections—not that of 1824, as often asserted—were probably the first in which a majority of adult white males had the opportunity to participate in a presidential election.<sup>62</sup>

The retraction, in some states, of the choice of electors from the people arose from the majority party's determination to ensure that it won every one of the state's electoral votes, a necessity that its own intensely partisan supporters could readily accept. Such partisanship underlay the resort to legislative control in some states in 1800; again in 1812 the New Jersey and North Carolina legislatures reclaimed the privilege in order to ensure that all the state's electoral votes went to Madison. Still in 1816 the states were evenly divided between legislative and popular elections for president, but the growing irrelevance of the old party fight at the federal level undermined the argument against giving the choice of electors to the people. Out of twenty-four states, by 1820 only nine state legislatures still kept the decision in their own hands, and by 1824 only six. In New York the regular Republican leadership under Van Buren persisted in preserving the legislature's privilege gained in 1792, and

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62. C. H. Rammelkamp, "The Campaign of 1824 in New York," in *Annual Report of the American Historical Association for 1904* (Washington, DC, 1905), 181–82. Methods of choosing presidential electors are tabulated in *Historical Statistics of the United States: Colonial Times to 1970* (2 vols., Washington, DC, 1975), 2: 1071. The assertion about 1824 has most recently been made in Lynn Hudson Parsons, *The Birth of Modern Politics: Andrew Jackson, John Quincy Adams, and the Election of 1828* (New York, 2009), 69. The belief that members of the Electoral College often disregarded the ticket they were elected on is expressed, for example, in Howe, *What Hath God Wrought*, 207–208, 231. In fact, between 1789 and 1820 only five (at most) out of nearly 1,500 electors ignored their implied pledges—one (but arguably four) in 1796, and one (famously) in 1820. *Congressional Quarterly's Guide to U.S. Elections*, 1: 819.

uniquely clung to it in 1824 because they wished to elect as president a man who was unpopular with the state's voters. The voter uprising in New York that temporarily overthrew Van Buren's control in 1824 finally discredited the legitimacy of legislative prerogative, so that in 1828 only Delaware and South Carolina retained it—and from 1832 until the Civil War only South Carolina.

In rousing popular participation, it was not enough to give the voters the power to choose members of the state's branch of the Electoral College: The election had also to be organized on an at-large, winner-take-all basis. The district system may have seemed more democratic because it gave greater representation to minority interests, but in districts possessing overwhelming partisan agreement it could instill apathy in comparison with a statewide election. Only if an easy statewide majority existed, as it did in Virginia, did the at-large election undermine participation in the relatively few evenly divided districts. In the first four presidential elections only three or four states used the general-ticket system at any one time—most commonly, New Hampshire and Pennsylvania. After 1800 Rhode Island, New Jersey, Virginia, and Ohio joined them on a regular basis. Not until 1824 did half the states choose their Electors in a statewide election, with nine of those twelve in the North. The originality of 1828 lay in the fact that eighteen states (out of twenty-four) used the general-ticket system, eight of them slave states. In that sense, certainly, agitation of the electorate across the nation became possible in a presidential election as never before.<sup>63</sup>

In securing his great popular victory in 1828, Jackson did not owe his success to new states admitted since 1815 or to the suffrage extensions of 1818–1821 in the East. New Western states carried little weight in presidential elections, while older, larger states like Ohio and Kentucky were closely divided between the parties. Of the states in which recent constitutional reform had been concentrated, those in New England overwhelmingly preferred John Quincy Adams in both 1824 and 1828, while New York virtually ignored Jackson in 1824 and in 1828 split its Electoral College votes between him and Adams, 20 to 16. Nationwide,

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63. The shift to at-large, winner-take-all voting came from the desire to maximize the electoral weight of the state. It surely stretches things a little to claim that larger states as a class initially preferred the district system, in view of the adoption of the general ticket in presidential elections by Pennsylvania and Virginia from an early date. Cf. Zagarri, *Politics of Size*, 131–33.

the total numbers voting for Jackson in 1824, 1828 and 1832 were not unprecedented in state elections, though renewed competition for the presidency now encouraged men to vote in large numbers in presidential as well as in congressional and state elections. The great increase in turnout came after Jackson had left the White House, with the sharpening of two-party conflict in 1840.<sup>64</sup>

Indeed, the heart of Jackson's support lay in the least democratic section of the Union. Whereas there had been nothing to choose between North and South in 1790 in terms of allowing an extensive franchise, by the 1820s the older South was remarkable for the barriers it retained to the full operation of democratic choice. Throughout the southern seaboard states, voters could not vote for governor, except in Delaware and in Georgia from 1824 onwards, and contrived representation systems ensured that eastern voters counted for more than western. Voters continued to be excluded from control of county government in seven of the ten southern states. South Carolina, in particular, stood out as a state that allowed a broad electorate to choose the legislature, and then gave that legislature absolute centralized power to elect other officers and run both the state and local government. Far from demanding greater democracy, the Southeast's Jacksonian Democrats were often distinguished by their support of the *status quo*: in Virginia, for example, they supported the 1829 state constitutional convention's decision to relax only marginally the state's complex property qualifications.<sup>65</sup>

Significant reform began in the South with Mississippi in 1832 and Tennessee in 1834. Both states adopted universal white male suffrage, opened up a wide range of offices to local election, and democratized county governments. Traditional obstacles persisted elsewhere in the

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64. McCormick, "New Perspectives."

65. Sydnor, *Development*, 275–89; Fletcher M. Green, *Constitutional Development in the South Atlantic States, 1776–1860: A Study in the Evolution of Democracy* (1930; repr., Clark, NJ, 2008). After 1831 about one-third of Virginia's adult white males were disfranchised: McCormick, *Second American Party System*, 180–81; Shade, *Democratizing the Old Dominion*, 4. Jackson's dependence on the South has been emphasized in recent times by William W. Freehling, *The Road to Disunion: Secessionists at Bay, 1776–1854* (New York, 1990); Donald J. Ratcliffe, "The Nullification Crisis, Southern Discontents, and the American Political Process," *American Nineteenth Century History* 1, no. 2 (2000), 1–30; and Howe, *What Hath God Wrought*, 279–84, 328–445.

South but did not prevent the development of two-party conflict in most of the older southern states after 1834. As a result, the South Atlantic region at last experienced the democratizing effects of an upsurge of popular participation such as the states north of the Potomac had experienced before 1815.<sup>66</sup>

Although Jackson's presidency had almost no direct influence on the few state constitutional reforms that did take place between 1829 and 1837, it did have one important lasting effect. Largely as a result of his controversial financial policies, national party competition rose to new levels after 1836 and the Democratic Party developed a more pronounced and radical ideology. Among other things, it committed itself to the doctrine that the suffrage must be based on the civic equality inherent in all adult white males. Thereafter, whenever a state constitution came to be revised, Democrats pressed for universal white manhood suffrage, even though in practice the existing situation did not seriously disfranchise any adult white males. In a series of state constitutional conventions between 1832 and 1851, Jacksonian Democrats would abolish property and taxpaying rules and extend the principle of universal white manhood suffrage in six states, half of them in the South. Even so, in 1855 some form of property requirement would still survive in three states and the principle of taxpaying in six others.<sup>67</sup>

Jacksonian reforms were usually accomplished without great popular

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66. Shade, *Democratizing the Old Dominion*; Fletcher M. Green, "Democracy in the Old South," *Journal of Southern History* 12 (Feb. 1946), 3–23. Even South Carolina experienced an invigorating internal conflict in 1830–1832: James B. Stewart, "'A Great Talking and Eating Machine': Patriarchy, Mobilization and the Dynamics of Nullification in South Carolina," *Civil War History* 27 (Sept. 1981), 197–220. North Carolina and Maryland threw open their gubernatorial elections to popular voting in 1835 and 1837, respectively.

67. John Ashworth, *"Agrarians" and "Aristocrats": Party Political Ideology in the United States, 1837–1846* (London, 1983); Keyssar, *The Right to Vote*, 29. An important aspect of this later spell of constitutional reform was the opening of more offices to popular election: for example, whereas in 1833 judges were elected in only 5 out of 25 states, the practice had extended by 1844 to 12 out of 29 states and by 1853 to 25 out of 31. Tax qualifications for voting were abandoned in Mississippi in 1832, Tennessee in 1834, New Jersey in 1844, Connecticut in 1844–1845, Louisiana in 1845, and Ohio in 1850–1851. They were retained in Pennsylvania (1838), New Hampshire and Massachusetts (1851). Massachusetts did not recognize universal manhood suffrage constitutionally until 1891.

demand or pressure, and without great resistance; in many cases, the new constitutions (as Pole said of New Jersey in 1844) simply enshrined the practice of the last forty years. In only one state, Rhode Island, would this demand lead to a serious political conflagration. Here an antiquated suffrage, dating back to 1662, proved increasingly restrictive as the growth of industry proletarianized the state's lower classes, sparking fears of the effects of admitting such people to the electoral process. The Dorr War of 1842 underlines the fact that, in the rest of the United States, the suffrage had been democratized before industrialization occurred.<sup>68</sup>

As Tocqueville famously remarked in the 1830s, the Americans had “arrived at a state of democracy without having to endure a democratic revolution.” The early creation of a mass democracy had its origins in the inheritance of British representative systems, the wide availability of land, and the liberalizing impact of the Revolution's equal-rights ideology. In a situation in which a large proportion of adult white males could already vote, it proved difficult to refuse the vote to other white men, especially when they were adult sons of property owners, or tenant farmers, or pioneers buying on credit, or self-employed artisans—men difficult to see as unworthy, potentially subversive, or lacking moral integrity. The exclusion of other people on gender and racial grounds is highly invidious in retrospect, but the fact remains that a system that admitted women and racial minorities could have been just as constraining for the future of democracy if at the same time it had limited the suffrage to an exclusive socioeconomic elite. The expansion of the active electorate between 1787 and 1828 incorporated an unattractive belief in essential biological differences that denied political equality, but in practice it also created a structure and situation out of which a more open and broadly democratic system might emerge.<sup>69</sup>

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68. Pole, “Suffrage in New Jersey,” 39; Howe, *What Hath God Wrought*, 599–603. For debates after 1820 over the political status of propertyless wage earners, and the distinction between the self-supporting and the dependent, see Steinfeld, “Property and Suffrage,” 353–74.

69. Alexis De Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 2 vols. (1835, 1840), many editions, vol. 2, Book 2, ch. 3.