

SUMMARY THE FIGHT TO VOTE

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Summary of “The Fight to Vote” by Michael Waldman

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The arduous history of American voting rights.

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Introduction

“We hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men are created equal; that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights; that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.” These words, penned by Thomas Jefferson, define the American Constitution and our rights as American citizens. But despite the verbiage which posits that “all men are created equal,” these truths weren’t quite so self-evident in practical application. Today, we often take our voting rights for granted. But in fact, it was a long time before that right became equally accessible to all people. And over the course of this summary, we’ll explore the history of American voting rights and their impact on the democracy we have today.

Voting Rights Have Never Been Equal

When it was first written in 1787, the phrase “all men are created equal” couldn’t have been more ironic. Because it would be a long, long time until equality was the law of the land in the budding United States. Black men would not have the right to vote until 1870. White women would not gain the right to vote until 1920. And although their male counterparts may have been allowed to vote in 1870, Black women would not have the right to vote until almost five decades later. As a result of this inequality, we cling to a bitter remembrance of the battle to close the gap. In fact, historian Martha S. Jones has dedicated her life to documenting Black women’s fight for voting rights and has written a number of best-selling books which chart the history of their battle. In a recent interview with Time magazine, Jones unpacked the historical context and significance of voting inequality in the United States.

She remarked that, firstly, “it’s a landmark moment when the U.S. Constitution includes an amendment that prohibits government from using sex as a criteria for voting rights. But as is the case with any constitutional amendment, there’s a great deal more required in order to give it teeth. In the case of the 19th Amendment, even as it’s ratified in August of 1920, all Americans are aware that many African-American women will remain disenfranchised. The 19th Amendment did not eliminate the state laws that operated to keep Black Americans from the polls via poll taxes and literacy tests—nor did the 19th Amendment address violence or lynching. Some African-American women will vote with the 19th Amendment. Some are already voting in California, New York and Illinois where state governments have authorized women’s votes. But many Black women faced the beginning of a new movement for voting rights in the summer of 1920, and it’s a struggle they will wage alone because now the organizations that had led the movement for women’s suffrage are disbanding.”

The fight for voting rights illustrated a saddening and inescapable facet of discrimination: the fact that sexism and racism are always intertwined.

Once white women won their own battle and gained the right to vote, suffragette organizations decided that their work was done. Disregarding the fact that their Black sisters were still battling inequality and discrimination, they were content to rest on their laurels and celebrate their hard-earned victory. Jones observes that “Black women are set at a distance quite intentionally because, in order to hold onto the support of many white southern women, it’s necessary to keep the organization distant from African-American women. And it’s also the case, that, implicitly, the promise is that the amendment will not interfere with the disenfranchisement of African-American women—so it’s not a campaign premised in women’s universal voting rights, but it’s a campaign premised in the process of selective voting rights for white American women.” Put simply, white women were able to achieve voting rights for themselves by playing into the blatant racism and sexism that keeps all women ensnared.

Now, this aspect of American voting history is both alarming and underrepresented. But it might surprise you to know that this isn’t the only voting controversy that has occurred in our nation’s history! In fact, before the Constitution was written, voting rights were limited to male citizens who owned a certain amount of property. But some of our founding fathers understood that the birth of a new nation would require some updates when it came to that nation’s voting policy. But while some-- like Benjamin Franklin-- were in favor of progress, others-- like John Adams-- preferred the classism and elitism that had been passed down by their British ancestors. Franklin had already been a champion of progress and invention in many other areas of life and he wanted to expand voting rights to all men. Franklin wanted to achieve equality by discontinuing the land-owning requirement and giving every white and Black man the right to vote, provided that the Black men were not enslaved.

John Adams, by contrast, fiercely opposed Franklin’s updates. And although we often celebrate him as one of our nation’s foremost founding fathers, he held some pretty reprehensible views on the matter of equality. In fact, he even explicitly stated his fears in a letter to his friend James Sullivan, who was a state court judge in Massachusetts. Adams explained

his concerns at length, writing that: “it is certain in theory, that the only moral foundation of government is the consent of the people, but to what an extent shall we carry this principle? Shall we say, that every individual of the community, old and young, male and female, as well as rich and poor, must consent, expressly to every act of legislation?...

...Why exclude women? ...Because their delicacy renders them unfit for practice and experience, in the great business of life, and the hardy enterprises of war, as well as the arduous cares of state. Besides, their attention is so much engaged with the necessary nurture of their children, that nature has made them fittest for domestic cares. And children have not judgment or will of their own. Depend upon it, sir, it is dangerous to open [such a] source of controversy and altercation, as would be opened by attempting to [change] the qualifications of voters. There will be no end of it. New claims will arise. Women will demand a vote. Lads from 12 to 21 will think their rights not enough attended to, and every man, who has not a [dime], will demand an equal voice with any other in all acts of state. It tends to confound and destroy all distinctions, and [surrender] all ranks, to one common level.”

Given that these were the views of his opponent, Franklin certainly had his work cut out for him. So, in the end, America’s first voting controversy was solved with a compromise. Franklin and Adams finally concluded that they wouldn’t address the voting rights of women or Black people and would instead concentrate solely on the voting rights of white men. They would draft a Constitution that stated the baseline voting rights of all white men and let individual states decide how to address the voting liberties of their residents. Unfortunately, however, that ultimately meant that voting rights were still mostly restricted to wealthy white land-owners and not their poor male counterparts.

Voting Equality Was Contested For a Long Time

As we've seen in the previous chapter, the concept of equal voting rights was unpopular in 1776. But although we might hope to have progressed beyond such small-minded attitudes, prejudice was still alive and kicking in the early 1900s. Slavery might have been abolished in 1865, but if you've ever heard of the Jim Crow laws, you know that it's impossible to legislate people's attitudes. Lincoln might have freed the slaves, but he couldn't force the white public to see Black people as their equals and he couldn't prevent them from introducing new laws that would champion segregation. And this was especially true when it came to voting rights. Many towns--especially those in Southern states-- had laws which mandated the segregation of waiting rooms, bus stops, and phone booths. Today, we find it outrageous to imagine this type of discrimination, but in practice, these were only minor examples of flagrant, socially acceptable racism.

On a much more horrific scale, it was also common practice to segregate such public services as hospitals, public transportation, mental health care, and residential homes for the elderly, disabled, or mentally ill. Restaurants, movie theatres, and public restrooms were also heavily segregated, and in some states, it was common to give Black people a different Bible to read or swear on. So, given that many states were proud proponents of injustice and inequality, it is therefore unsurprising that they also did not support equal voting rights. And once the Civil War broke out, that was especially true. But the work of abolitionists and Black activists slowly changed attitudes and legislation. In May of 1865, Frederick Douglass famously said that "Slavery is not abolished until the Black man has the ballot," and he was exactly right.

Following Lincoln's assassination in April 1865, his successor, Andrew Johnson, was responsible for determining the course of American voting rights. And unfortunately, Johnson preferred to cling to the compromise achieved by Benjamin Franklin and John Adams in 1776. By leaving individual voting rights up to each state, Johnson got to pass the buck and

claim that he technically supported American independence and equality, even as he granted a great deal of freedom to the Southerners who upheld the Jim Crow laws. He also declined to ban laws that explicitly denied Black people the right to vote. Historian Sarah Pruitt has conducted her own critical analysis of Johnson's role in the history of American voting rights and observed that his leniency towards racist Southerners sparked some of the first examples of radical voting legislation in American history. For example, she remarks that "early in 1866, Congress passed the Civil Rights Bill, which aimed to build on the 13th Amendment and give Black Americans the rights of citizens. When Johnson vetoed the bill, on the basis of opposing federal action on behalf of formerly enslaved people, Congress overrode his veto, marking the first time in the nation's history that major legislation became law over a presidential veto."

But Black voting rights wouldn't see a significant shift in equality until 1867, when the Reconstruction Act was passed. The Reconstruction Act aimed to expand the 13th Amendment and explicitly spell out the voting rights of Black citizens. Once the Reconstruction Act was finally passed, Pruitt notes that you can document a marked shift in the nation's voting patterns and that "Black Americans voted in huge numbers across the South, electing a total of 22 Black men to serve in the U.S. Congress (two in the Senate) and helping to elect Johnson's Republican successor, Ulysses S. Grant, in 1868. The 14th Amendment, approved by Congress in 1866 and ratified in 1868, granted citizenship to all persons "born or naturalized in the United States," including former slaves, and guaranteed "equal protection of the laws" to all citizens. In 1870, Congress passed the last of the three so-called Reconstruction Amendments, the 15th Amendment, which stated that voting rights could not be "denied or abridged by the United States or by any state on account of race, color, or previous condition of servitude."

The Reconstruction Amendments finally confirmed the equal voting rights of Black men. But as we saw in the previous chapter, women would not win the battle for their own voting rights for many years to come.

American Democracy is Still Under Attack

As we read this history in 2020, it might be tempting to pat ourselves on the back. It's tempting to compare our past with our present and say, "Wow, we've really come a long way!" But have we really? The author disagrees. In fact, his research indicates that American democracy is still under attack and that voting rights are not yet equal. The only difference is that our government isn't quite so blatant in advertising its push for inequality. Obviously, in the twenty-first century, legislators know that they could never get away with saying something like, "We don't want Black people (or Latino people or poor people) to vote!" But they also know that if you quietly, subtly pass legislation that amounts to the same thing, many people won't notice.

For example, everyone's heard of voter fraud. We know that it's illegal. We know that it's scary. We know that voter fraud is often mentioned in connection with rigged elections and Russian hackers. But would it surprise you to know that voter fraud isn't nearly as common as Republican pundits would like you to think? This was proven in a 2005 study conducted by the Walter Cronkite School of Journalism and Mass Communication at Arizona State University. Lead by two faculty members and a host of Communications students, this study set out to verify the truth of the voter fraud threat we hear so much about. The study began in May and continued through the course of an intense ten-week investigation period. And the results were quite surprising! After ten weeks of research, the study revealed that only 491 cases of absentee ballot fraud had occurred since 2000. That's 491 cases out of the billions of votes which have been cast in U.S. elections since 2000!

So, while this is certainly conclusive proof that voter fraud isn't as much of a threat as we thought, it also raises another question: why would the Republican party want people to fear voter fraud? What could someone possibly gain from spreading this misinformation? Sadly, the answer is simple: this fear mongering enabled the Republican regime to institute

strict voting regulations that restrict the rights of voters who typically lean to the left. For example, many Black and Hispanic voters historically vote Democrat. Many Black and Hispanic voters are also less likely to own a photo ID or have access to a copy of their birth certificate. This is also true of white voters who come from disadvantaged socioeconomic backgrounds. So, how do you stop these voters from exercising their right to vote?

As we mentioned earlier in this chapter, Republicans understand that they can't come out and say, "We don't Black, Hispanic, or poor people to vote!" But they also understand that they can take a sneakier approach by restricting voting regulations. So, if you require all voters to have a copy of their birth certificate or a photo ID in order to vote, you've effectively handicapped a substantial portion of the voting population. And if they can't vote against you, then you can continue to stay in power and push your own agenda! Upon hearing this information, it might be tempting to say, "Surely people wouldn't really do that! Maybe it's all just a liberal conspiracy theory!" But the funny thing is that voting restrictions are always highest in states and cities that have a sizable population of Black voters. Coincidence? It seems pretty unlikely.

Final Summary

As Americans, we cherish our right to vote. And because this has been an inalienable right for so long, some people even take it for granted or decline to exercise their right to vote. But the truth is that our right to vote isn't as simple or as casual as we sometimes think. In fact, our voting rights have been a matter of contention for a very long time and the battle for voting equality was not easily won.

And although we'd like to think that we are more progressive as a nation, the sad truth is that Black people and poor people still face discrimination when it comes to suffrage. That means that many people still have to fight for their right to vote. That's why it's important that we continue to fight for our right to vote and that we use our voices to advocate for voting equality. We also have a patriotic duty to vote for candidates who will make our country a better place and who will champion equality for all voters.



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