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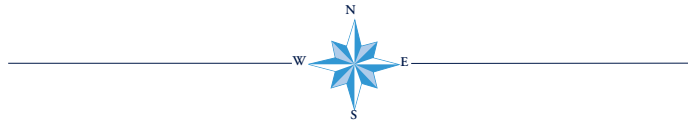
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The American Dream, Equal Opportunity, and Obtaining the Vote

Ben Wyman, BA.¹

The further the limit of voting rights is extended, the stronger is the need felt to spread them still wider; for after each new concession the forces of democracy are strengthened (A. D. Tocqueville 1835).

Introduction

The United States was founded on the principles of inalienable and natural rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. Out of those ideals arose the ideas of an American Creed and American Dream, which have provided aspirations for millions of Americans to pursue their dreams, and, with hard work, the chance to improve their situation in life. The fundamental values of the new American Creed became “liberty, equality, individualism, populism, laissez-faire, and the rule of law under a constitution” (Jillson 2004, 4) while the idea of an American Dream which was first instilled upon the citizens of the new nation at the close of the 18th century was the balance of “our creedal values to create and preserve an open, competitive, entrepreneurial society in which the opportunity to succeed is widely available” (Jillson 2004, 5). Both the creed and the dream have a strong emphasis on liberty, equality, and equal opportunity, which were supposed to be guaranteed to all the citizens as proposed by the Declaration of Independence and cemented under the Constitution. But was equality and equal opportunity available for Americans if the vast majority were excluded from the political process? How did equality, equal opportunity, and access to the American Dream depend upon political participation and inclusion? They are closely linked together with fine threads and if a certain group loses their ability to be politically included, their hope and voice for equality and access to the American Dream is lost. Without a voice in the political realm the subjugation or discrimination of a group of people will inevitably become a certainty as was clearly present for blacks and women in American history. Since the founding of the republic in 1776, the hypocrisy of American “equality and liberty” has

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been plain to see. From the beginning the United States was a country whose political power rested in the hands of the elite who owned a certain amount of land. To help insure it stayed that way, at the end of the Revolutionary War, all thirteen original states required property qualifications and/or tax requirements to vote. Blacks in America were completely excluded from political participation until after the end of the Civil War when slavery was abolished and blacks became citizens. Blacks were enfranchised for a time before the end of reconstruction and the rise of Jim Crow returned them to the status of a subjugated people. Women had a long road to suffrage and enfranchisement, the roots of which extended back to the revolutionary period with such women as Abigail Adams, and suffrage was not realized on a national scale until the passage of the 20th amendment. One additional group of Americans who had been excluded from political participation, 18 to 20 year-olds, was finally enfranchised with the passage of the 26th amendment in 1971. This paper will make the argument that an individual or group's access to equal opportunity and the American Dream is connected with its enfranchisement in the American political process.

Jacksonian Democracy

During the Revolutionary War and under the Articles of Confederation, when the thirteen original states first began to adopt and ratify their new constitutions, the qualifications to vote were at a bare minimum. The states had at the most three qualifications which were necessary to vote; a white male twenty-one or older, who owned a certain amount of property, or paid taxes to the state. The property and tax requirements, for the vast majority, canceled each other out because at the time of the Revolution and for the first few years after the ratification of the federal Constitution, to own property meant the individual was paying taxes and taxes were normally only collected from those individuals who owned property. The states made no effort to exclude any group from the political process based on their race or sex at the time of the founding because there was:

Practically no race problem to deal with, for the northern states did not concern themselves greatly about the few free negroes who might dwell in the state, and in the South it was not necessary specifically to exclude negroes...Where sex was mentioned, and it seldom was except incidentally, the presumption of course was that only men could vote. The word "freeman" is frequently used and gives weight to this presumption...Such undesirable persons as paupers, idiots, the insane, etc., were practically excluded by the property test, and the need for specifically disqualifying them did not appear until the property test was gone (Porter 1918, 20-21).

Most states also required a certain amount of time of residency in a state or county to vote and two states at that time imposed clauses in their constitutions that limited suffrage to white males and South Carolina required belief in God to vote. There is much debate today about just how restricting the property qualifications were for white men at the founding of

the nation because land was being practically given away, but at the time most leaders felt only those individuals who had a stake in society should be allowed to vote because those who did not own land or pay taxes, in theory, would not be affected by laws regulating land, commerce, and taxes. As time passed and the 18th century became the 19th century many people began to feel property qualifications were in direct opposition to those ideals for which the Revolution had been fought. The idea of all men being created equal and that all deserved to have a say in the government was brought to the forefront of political discussion by the admission into the Union of the western states at the close of the 18th century and with more urgency in the first few decades of the 19th century.

The first state to begin the breakdown on property qualifications was New Hampshire which in the 1780's revised their constitution to do away with property qualifications all together and just retained the tax qualification which eventually gave way to just a residency requirement and the white male being twenty-one years of age. As Kirk Porter described it: "Seldom did the property test give way altogether; almost invariably it passed more or less rapidly through these stages" (Porter 1918, 22).

Vermont was added to the Union in 1791 with the most liberal constitution in the nation at the time which allowed for universal white male suffrage; the only qualification being a year residence in the state. Western states were soon added which also had very liberal constitutions in regard to voting rights for white males. The political ideals touted by the newly formed Democratic-Republican Party, led by Thomas Jefferson helped to push those liberal democratic ideas further than had been done up to that point. The Jeffersonian ideas strove for greater popular control of government and relied heavily on the founding ideals of the Revolution and the Declaration of Independence, which held that white men deserved to vote by natural rights. As the 19th century began, so to begin the old cries of the revolution echoing the slogan "no taxation without representation," which held a firm belief in the power for the government to govern came from the governed. The number of governed was drastically larger than just property owners especially in the growing urban centers of the northeast and even in the older states such as Massachusetts where land was becoming scarce.

The disappearance of land in the northeast at the turn of the 19th century led to the western expansion and the furtherance of the idea of an American Dream. The idea one could work hard and rise above the situation he had been born into, the sense of equality men felt when being compared to other men, helped created the move to eliminate property qualifications for voting. The pioneers held stubborn and steadfast to the right of equality all men shared, and as Professor Frederick Jackson Turner put it: "the triumph of this Western democracy revealed also the fact that it could rally to its aid the laboring classes of the coast, then just beginning to acquire self-consciousness and organization" (Brown 1964, 22).

The democratic ideas which infiltrated even the most conservative of the original thirteen states from the move west and the ideas coming from the White House in the body of Jefferson and his Democratic-Republican Party caused the states to slowly begin disbanding the qualifications of property. The first blow to the states holding stubbornly to

property qualifications was an act passed in Maryland in 1809, which abolished all property and taxpaying qualifications while specifically restricting suffrage to white males. The following year South Carolina added to its constitution as an alternative to property qualifications a residency requirement of six months in the election district and two years in the state. Alexis de Tocqueville commented on the act passed in Maryland in his timeless masterpiece, *Democracy in America*, even though the state had been founded by “great lords”, it was one of the first to allow universal white male suffrage and that “Once a people begins to interfere with the voting qualification, one can be sure that sooner or later it will abolish it altogether...The further the limit of voting rights is extended, the stronger is the need felt to spread them still wider; for after each new concession the forces of democracy are strengthened, and its demands increase with its augmented power” (Tocqueville 1835, 60). It was ironic, perhaps, that states where the spirit for independence and liberty had been the strongest, were the last to allow universal male suffrage. Massachusetts, New York, Pennsylvania, and Virginia held on to those qualifications the longest and some of the fiercest advocates for independence from Britain tried to get their states to hold on to those qualifications for as long as possible. Fear of absolute democracy and the “rule of mob” made most of the founders the most conservative towards voting rights at the beginning of the 19th century.

The impact of male suffrage was not truly felt until the election of 1824 and to a greater extent in 1828 when the people elected the first people’s man to be President of the United States. Andrew Jackson embodied the idea of the American Dream because he was the “self-made man,” because the masses saw that he had come from humble beginnings and lived a life much like theirs, but through hard work and a little bit of luck achieved the American Dream. He became the symbol of the age between the War of 1812 and the Civil War, the Age of Jackson. The common man’s voice in presidential elections had been relatively small prior to 1824, but that all changed in 1828 when the masses rushed to the ballot boxes to vote for Jackson. John Quincy Adams had won the White House in 1824 after a tightly contested race, which ended with the House of Representatives getting to decide who the next president would be. As a result of the contentious race in 1824 the election of 1828 sent historically unheard of numbers of men to the polls to ensure their voice was clearly heard (Watson, 1990). Resoundingly the people wanted Andrew Jackson to be their President. Jackson was indeed the “people’s candidate”—no one could deny him that—elected on a slogan of ‘Jackson and Reform’. With him had triumphed democracy, which men had feared for a thousand years” (Brown 1964, 4). When Jackson arrived in Washington for his inauguration in early 1829 Amos Kendall of Kentucky commented: “It was a proud day for the people...General Jackson is their own president” (Brown 1964, 8).

With the coming of the 1830s came the height of Jacksonian Democracy in America and the people held strong to the conviction “of the intrinsic excellence of the common man, in his right to make his own place in the world, and in his capacity to share in government” (Brown 1964, 22). When the people got the right to vote they got true democracy, their full

voice in government, and the greatest access possible to the equality they needed to pursue their American Dream.

Black Suffrage: Reconstruction and the Rise of Jim Crow

No other group in the American context had been kept subjugated or held as an inferior race for so long a period of time as the African Americans. They were, for centuries, beaten down by the federal government and then, following the end of Reconstruction in 1877, by the state governments of the South (Bond 1997). During the years of the Revolution when the belief in the principles of the inalienable rights of all men was at its highest until the close of the Civil War, northern state governments began abolishing the practice of slavery in their newly drafted state constitutions. Some of the states had immediate abolition of slaves in their constitutions such as Massachusetts, while others consisted of gradual emancipation of the slaves, such as New York. In several northern states black males even held suffrage rights equal to that of their white counterparts. By 1860, on the eve of the Civil War, blacks had suffrage in five northern states: Maine, Vermont, New Hampshire, Rhode Island, and Massachusetts. The state of New York also allowed black males to vote but only if they met certain property qualifications even though those qualifications had been long abolished for their white counterparts (Porter 1918).

In 1838 Pennsylvania “reformed” its state constitution to end the suffrage of free black males, which led to an extremely large convention being held in Philadelphia in 1846 to no avail. The divide between North and South, Free and Slave, rose to new heights in 1857 when the Supreme Court handed down its decision in the case *Sanford v. Scott*. In the ruling Chief Justice Taney declared blacks were not citizens of the United States and were never intended to be by the Founders because they considered blacks to be “beings of an inferior order, and altogether unfit to associate with the white race, either in social or political relations, and so far inferior that they had no rights which the white man was bound to respect” and continued “no State can, by any act or law of its own, passed since the adoption of the Constitution, introduce a new member into the political community created by the Constitution of the United States” (PBS.org 1857). In one fell swoop the court invalidated the five states which let free blacks vote in federal election, declared blacks could never be citizens regardless of condition of servitude. The decision in *Scott* created a public outcry and helped give the Republican Party and Abraham Lincoln the Presidency in 1860.

After the election of 1860 that put Republican Abraham Lincoln in the White House, eleven southern states seceded from the Union and the nation plunged into a deadly Civil War. At the end of the conflict in 1865 Lincoln was dead, there were 600,000 casualties and the slaves had been freed, first by Lincoln’s Emancipation Proclamation in 1863, and then officially by the passage of the 13th Amendment in 1865 (Bond 1997). Soon after Reconstruction began Congress moved to pass the 14th Amendment, which provided equal protection to the blacks. In 1866 Congress passed an act, which created the Freeman’s Bureau, which virtually controlled the South during Reconstruction. The War Department

and the Secretary of War directed the Bureau had the authority to use confiscated Confederate property and forfeited lands for schools for the newly freed blacks (Lynd 1967).

Also passed in 1866 was the Civil Rights Act, which extended citizenship to blacks and provided a list of what rights were extended to the newly freed slaves. The act also gave authority to federal officials to “arrest and institute criminal proceedings against anyone violating the rights specified under the act” (Goldman 2001, 8). The black codes which the Civil Rights Act of 1866 was created to combat helped to prompt the drafting of the 15th Amendment which extended the right to vote to all black men and gave Congress the power to enforce those rights. The principle drafter of the amendment, Massachusetts Republican George Boutwell said: “With the right of voting, everything a man ought to have or enjoy of civil rights comes to him. Without that right he is nothing” (Goldman 2001, 9). The abolitionist Wendall Phillips echoed Boutwell when he said: “A man with a ballot in his hands is the master of the situation. He defines all his other rights. What is not now given him, he takes” (Goldman 2001, 9).

In 1867 Congress passed the Reconstruction Acts that forced the states to acknowledge suffrage could not be discriminated against based on race. Much like how it reacted to the South’s refusal to ratify the 14th Amendment, the Congress said for any former Confederate state to be readmitted to its place in the Union it had to ratify the 14th Amendment and accept the laws which stemmed from the Reconstruction Acts. It is estimated roughly 750,000 blacks registered to vote as a result of the Reconstruction Acts, which even allowed for several blacks to be elected to state and federal offices. In the opening term of the Fortieth Congress in January 1869, the 15th Amendment was officially passed by Congress and sent to the states for ratification.

The election of 1876 resulted in the end of Reconstruction in the South and in 1877 the last troops were withdrawn ending the Reconstruction period. It did not take long for the Democrats to regain political control over the state governments and attempt to return the blacks to subjugation. The process of stripping the blacks of all their political and social rights was not immediate, but a gradual process of twenty years in which literacy tests, poll taxes, and grandfather clauses were put into state constitutions to take away the voting rights of the blacks. As soon as their rights to vote were stripped, social equality faded away with the rise of Jim Crow.

Black Suffrage: Separate But Equal and the Voting Rights Act of 1965

For a brief period of roughly a decade at the end of the Civil War all black males were enfranchised before they, regretfully, lost their equality at the end of the 19th century due to the rise of Jim Crow laws throughout the South and the legal sanctioning of segregation by the Supreme Court. Slowly blacks would regain some of their social and political rights with President Harry Truman desegregating the Armed Forces of the United States after the end of World War II and the Civil Rights Act of 1957 and 1960. But blacks would not begin to truly regain equality until the Supreme Court Case *Brown v Board of Education* in 1954 set in

motion a federal government push towards social and political equality with the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965 (Perman 2001).

Over the two decades following Reconstruction, the South increasingly kept imposing laws and reforming their state constitutions with new Jim Crow laws to see just how far the courts would let them go. Other than overturning the Grandfather Clause, which prohibited voting to those people whose grandfather had been able to vote, (thus excluding almost the entirety of the black electorate) the court increasingly endorsed laws that disenfranchised blacks (Riser, 2010). But to many blacks and civil rights advocates there was still hope Congress would pass laws to enforce the 14th and 15th Amendments. That all changed with the Courts ruling in *Plessy v. Ferguson* in 1896. In the 1890s Louisiana passed a set of laws, which forced blacks and whites to be seated in different train cars when traveling. Plessy was a man who was one-eighth black and purposely broke the law with the intention of challenging its constitutionality. When his case was brought before the Supreme Court in 1896 his argument was the segregation laws in Louisiana violated the Equal Protection Clause of the 14th Amendment and in a 7-1 ruling the Supreme Court wrote Jim Crow into the constitution. Justice Brown wrote the majority opinion and declared “A statute which implies merely a legal distinction between the white and colored races—a distinction which is founded in the color of the two races, and which must always exist so long as white men are distinguished from the other race by color—has no tendency to destroy the legal equality of the two races, or reestablish a state of involuntary servitude...” he went on to say “the plaintiff’s argument to consist in the assumption that the enforced separation of the two races stamps the colored race with a badge of inferiority. If this be so, it is not by reason of anything found in the act, but solely because the colored race chooses to put that construction upon it” (Foster and Leeson 1998, 518-520). Justice Harlan wrote in dissent that “all knew the true reasons for the Louisiana Acts and those were to segregate the blacks from the white, to keep them inferior regardless of what the majority opinion was, and went on to say the American constitution was “color-blind” before the law and what can more certainly arouse race hate...than state enactments which, in fact, proceed on the ground that colored citizens are so inferior and degraded that they cannot be allowed to sit in public coaches occupied by white citizens? That, as all will admit, is the real meaning of such legislation as was enacted in Louisiana” (Foster and Leeson, 1998 521).

The ruling in *Brown v. Board of Education* in 1954 did not have immediate effects on segregation in the country but it set in motion the events, which culminated in the 1965 Voting Rights Act. In Brown the parents whose children were forced to bus to schools far away from their homes because of segregation from white schools in their neighborhood brought suit. Chief Justice Warren wrote for a unanimous court saying segregation was extremely damaging to “Negro” children and gave them a sense of inferiority that might never be undone. The psychological effects of segregation were not known when the ruling in Plessy was given in 1896, but they were known by 1954 thanks to several studies. Warren wrote “Any language in *Plessy v. Ferguson* contrary to this finding is rejected...in the field of public education the doctrine of ‘separate but equal’ has no place” (Foster and Leeson 1998,

531). Warren overturned the precedent set by *Plessy* and declared segregation unconstitutional under the Equal Protection Clause of the 14th Amendment but gave the federal and state governments time to devise a way to safely desegregate the schools.

Martin Luther King, Jr's *I Have a Dream* Speech during the Civil Rights March on Washington in 1963 was a defining moment in the Civil Rights Movement. In the speech King called for an end to racism and for the American people to live up to the fundamental ideals found in the Declaration of Independence calling all men equal. The March on Washington and increasing racial violence in the South helped to prompt President Kennedy to push for new meaningful civil rights legislation in Congress. President Lyndon Johnson called for a civil rights act to be passed quickly in memory of the recently assassinated Kennedy. The act was finally passed in the summer of 1964 and Johnson signed it into law on July 2, 1964. The act outlawed major forms of discrimination in the United States including all public areas and businesses towards anyone regardless of race, religion or sex.

In March 1965, Civil Rights protesters began a march from Selma, Alabama to Montgomery, Alabama and were brutally beaten by state police with billy clubs and tear gas. When images of the Selma march appeared on the news most Americans were horrified and national sentiment drastically shifted towards civil rights. In August of the same year, President Johnson signed into law the Voting Rights Act, which gave the Federal government the power to preside over elections in states with a history of discrimination at the polls, or states where less than 50% of their population was registered to vote. The Voting Rights Act used the words of the 15th Amendment in which no one will be denied their right to vote by any state regardless of race. The act was monumental and, for the first time since the end of Reconstruction, blacks were truly enfranchised in the American electorate (Sowell 1984).

The passage of the Civil Rights Bill in 1964 and the Voting Rights Act in 1965 provided the opportunity for blacks to finally be able to pursue their American Dream. Since the 1960s blacks have had the same opportunities as whites, both politically and socially. Their enfranchisement is assured, their path for equal opportunity and access to the American Dream is secured by their ability to politically participate in government and fight back against any infringements on their rights.

Women Suffrage: “Remember the Ladies”

Throughout the colonial times and for the majority of the history of the United States women have held an unequal position both socially and politically in the United States. They were not the last group to attain the right to vote nor were they the most highly discriminated against, but nonetheless they had a long struggle to gain the right to vote. The 19th Amendment passed in 1919 and secured for women their right to vote after ratification by the states in 1920. The amendment's passage finally allowed for women to pursue their equality and equal opportunity.

The birth of the woman's suffrage movement was really born out of the abolitionist movement, which began to form in the 1830s and 1840s, and many prominent abolitionist leaders supported woman suffrage including Frederick Douglass. But the roots of woman suffrage lay in the Revolutionary Era and the ideas of inalienable rights and the equality of all as Jefferson wrote in the Declaration of Independence. Two early suffragists were Mercy Otis Warren and wife of future president John Adams, Abigail Adams. Warren believed in the idea of natural and "inherent" rights which were founded in the Declaration. The "inherent" rights Warren believed, "belonged to all mankind, and had been conferred on all by the God of Nations" (Gage 1881, 57) and could not be abridged by any government or man. Abigail Adams argued for the "independency and the limitation of man's power over women, declaring all arbitrary power dangerous and tending to revolution" (Gage 1881, 58). In correspondence with John Adams in 1776 about independence from Britain and the set up of a new government, Abigail wrote: "and by the way in the new Code of Laws which I suppose it will be necessary for you to make I desire you would Remember the Ladies, and be more generous and favorable to them than your ancestors" and to remember "all Men would be tyrants if they could. If particular care and attention is not paid to the Ladies, we are determined to formant a rebellion, and will not hold ourselves bound by any Laws in which we have no voice, or representation" (Adams 1776, 77). John Adams replied to his wife by saying: "in Practice you know we are the subjects. We have only the Name of Masters" and if equal rights were given men would become subject to the "Despotism of the Petticoat" (Adams 1776, 77).

After the end of the Revolution and the start of the republic under the constitution women were expected to take on the role of the Republican Motherhood. The role of women under the Motherhood was to raise and educate their children and be good republican citizens; to teach their sons to read and write and be prepared to lead a virtuous life in the public sphere, while they were to teach their daughters all the morals of a virtuous and respectful wife to a man. During the late 18th and into the early 19th century women were expected to keep away from the public sphere of life which was reserved for their male counterparts, and invest themselves in the works of the private sphere of life, the home. During that time period women could not own property, could not vote, divorce was something which could be initiated only by the husband, and they could not keep any wages they earned at a job; it all went to their husbands. Out of this complete disregard for their equality arose the woman suffrage movement in the late 1840s which believed the only way to guarantee woman's equality was to become enfranchised (Buhle and Buhle, 1979).

By the 1840s the abolitionist movement had been catching steam in the North and out of the movement came the idea of woman suffrage; a belief which was held by many abolitionist leaders, most prominently Fredrick Douglass who felt: "that the power to choose rulers and make laws, was the right by which all others could be secured" (Jo and Buhle 1978, 97). Many women were actively involved in the abolitionist movement including two women who would become the leaders of the suffrage movement for the next fifty years, Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony.

Stanton along with friend Lucia Mott devised the idea of conventions to rally support for the cause of woman suffrage and equality and in July 1848, staged the Seneca Falls Convention in New York. At the convention, which was attended by numerous women and men, Stanton read her Declaration of Sentiments and Resolutions. Stanton relied heavily on the Declaration of Independence to give her argument strength and to generate support behind the movement. In the declaration, Stanton declared: “We hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men and women are created equal; that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights” and that “The history of mankind is a history of repeated injuries and usurpations on the part of man toward woman, having in direct object the establishment of an absolute tyranny over her... He has never permitted her to exercise her inalienable right to the elective franchise. He has compelled her to submit to laws in the formation of which she had no voice. He has withheld from her rights which are given to the most ignorant and degraded men—both natives and foreigners” (APT, Stanton 1848, 231-232). She closed the declaration by determining that “we insist that they [women] have immediate admission to all the rights and privileges which belong to them as citizens of the United States” (APT, Stanton 1848, 233). From the 1840s forward until the ratification of the 19th amendment in 1920, there was a constant push and struggle for woman suffrage. From the period of Reconstruction forward, the suffrage movement would take great pains to keep the movement about white women in order to gain support from Southern women; Frederick Douglas was actually asked to stay away from a national convention in the late 1880s (Graham 1996).

By the beginning of the 20th century the National American Woman Suffrage Association (NAWSA) became a well-organized movement, which took on the appearance of a political machine in the way it used the press and lobbied members of Congress for a federal amendment. In 1916 President Woodrow Wilson spoke at the national convention of the NAWSA and said: “the [suffrage] tide is rising to meet the moon...We feel the tide, we rejoice in the strength of it, and we shall not quarrel in the long run as to the method of it” (Graham 1996, 87). In 1917 the United States entered World War I and ended any hope of the passage of a suffrage amendment for the immediate time for the NAWSA, and, as a result, they turned to ways in which the women of the movement could support the war cause and help bolster public opinion and sentiment to their cause. The women indulged themselves in any patriotic cause they could find and certainly did change the public image of their movement, which, until that time, had been seen as women who were against families and marriages. As a result of the First World War the NAWSA was able to finally see the 19th Amendment pass both Houses of Congress and get sent to the states for ratification which was done in record time with the required three quarters of states ratifying it by 1920 (Graham, 1996). The leader of the NAWSA, Carrie Catt proclaimed: “We are no longer petitioners, we are not wards of the nation but free and equal citizens... Let us do our part to keep [America] a true and triumphant democracy” (Graham 1996, 145).

It is important to note that the passage of the 19th Amendment did not mean universal woman suffrage, but only white woman suffrage. Regardless of the partiality of the 19th

Amendment, it was still a huge victory for woman rights activists and those who argued for complete equality between the sexes. Since 1920 women no longer have to live under laws dictated to them by men, suffrage was the first step in the long process of attaining equal opportunity in the country, and chasing their American Dream.

18-20 Year-Old Suffrage

The final group in the United States to be enfranchised was the block of people between the ages of 18 and 20. Starting in the 1940s and going through the end of the 1960s, lowering the voting age was debated many times and numerous bills for a constitutional amendment or a statutory law were debated and either voted down or killed in committee. Finally in 1971 the 26th Amendment was passed enfranchising all 18 to 20-year-olds (Diamond 2008).

The issue of lowering the voting age in the United States was not seriously discussed in any meaningful way on the national stage until the beginning of US involvement in World War II. It was then the question began to be asked; was it right to draft men and send them to war at 18 but not let them vote? The arguments made against lowering the age had always revolved around the idea that 18 to 20-year-olds were neither educated enough nor responsible enough to make educated decisions in elections (Felchner 2008). Senator Jennings Randolph (D-WV) repeatedly submitted proposals to the Senate from 1942 onwards for passing a constitutional amendment to lower the voting age but was always met with defeat. The conservatives in Congress felt the decision to alter the age for voting needed to come from state constitutional amendments and not from the federal government (Diamond 2008).

In 1943 Georgia lowered their voting age to 18 but no other states followed suit. Some territories of the U.S. voted to lower their voting ages in the 1950s when Hawaii, Alaska, and Guam lowered their voting ages to 18. Afterwards the issue of enfranchising 18 to 20-year-olds took a back seat to the other issues, which took place in the tumultuous 1960s. The Civil Rights movement, feminist movement, and the Vietnam War all took center stage over lowering the voting age, but it was all of those issues that helped bring about the 26th Amendment in 1971. Finally, in 1970, the issue was once again brought to the forefront of debate in Congress when the Voting Rights Act, which had passed in 1965, was up for renewal. Senator Edward Kennedy (D-MA), proposed amendments to the Voting Rights Act, which would lower the voting age in federal and state elections to 18. He was opposed by many members of the Senate who favored lowering the voting age but felt to lower it in a federal statute would be unconstitutional; the only way was in the form of a constitutional amendment. Nonetheless the Act passed the Senate and went to the House where Head of the Judiciary Committee Emanuel Celler (D-NY), who had always been opposed to lowering the voting age, threw his weight behind it because he felt the need for renewing the Voting Rights Act outweighed any consequence of lowering the age to vote. The act passed the House and was signed into law by President Richard Nixon but was quickly challenged in the Supreme Court (Diamond 2008).

In September 1970, the Supreme Court heard arguments over the constitutionality of the federal government lowering the voting age in federal and state elections by a statutory law. The Court issued its opinion on December 21, 1970, in which Justice Black wrote the opinion for the majority. The opinion held that Congress could lower the voting age in federal elections but not in state elections and if they wished to do so at the state level, a constitutional amendment would need to be passed (Diamond 2008).

The result was a hasty push by the Senate to push an amendment bill forward before the 1972 elections. The amendment proposal was introduced by Senator Randolph and passed by a joint resolution in the Senate on March 10, 1971. It was then sent to the House where it passed and was sent to the states for ratification. Three-quarters of the states ratified it; the ratification took only two months and seven days, the shortest ratification time in the history of the U.S. President Nixon signed the amendment on July 5 (Felchner 2008).

The enfranchisement of 18 to 20-year-old in the United States brought to fruition the long struggle for different groups to gain the right to vote. Throughout history different groups were fueled by the idea of inalienable rights due to all men and women as was written in their country's founding document, and those groups held true to the idea of equality in America. Each group realized the only way to better their position and interests in the country and to ensure their equality was to achieve the right to vote; the most sacred and valued tool of a democracy. The American Dream of hard work paying off with living a comfortable life and bettering an individual's position in the world kept alive the fire required to keep the different suffrage movements going. The history of African American suffrage was the longest and most violent movement to gain equality politically and socially in a nation built on the idea of liberty. Women also had a long struggle to achieve their enfranchisement while universal male suffrage and lowering the voting age were not all that controversial. As each group gained the right to vote they guaranteed to themselves the right to have their voices heard; to have their equality assured, and their opportunity to better themselves and their families as they saw fit. Political equality and participation for all the groups discussed in this paper was necessary for any of the individuals to achieve equal opportunity and access to the revered American Dream.

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