

# The Promise and Limits of Democracy

by Sophia



## WHAT'S COVERED

Perhaps one of the greatest legacies of the American Revolution was the development of a democratic political system in which citizens could use their right to vote (also known as the franchise) to display their support for, or opposition against, a particular person or program. Traditionally, Federalists defended property qualifications for voting rights and political participation, because they wanted to ensure that citizens had sufficient economic independence in order to exercise sound political judgments. Increasingly after 1815, however, a number of states started to abolish property requirements when it came to voting rights. By 1840, more than 90 percent of adult White men in the United States were eligible to vote.

How did this happen, and why did certain groups—such as African Americans and women—still find themselves outside of the political process? This tutorial seeks to answer these questions. To do so, our discussion breaks down as follows:

## 1. Deference and the Federalist Party

Federalists—led by George Washington, Alexander Hamilton, and John Adams—dominated American politics during the 1790s. After the Revolution of 1800, which signaled the election of Thomas Jefferson and the peaceful transition to an opposing political party, the Democratic-Republicans gained ascendance while the Federalist Party gradually declined.

The Federalist Party never successfully elected a candidate to the presidency after 1800. After the election of 1816, in which Democratic-Republican **James Monroe** defeated his Federalist rival Rufus King, the Federalists never ran another presidential candidate.



### DID YOU KNOW

When Monroe ran for re-election in 1820, he carried the entire country. Only one elector, William Plumer of New Hampshire, voted against him. Plumer voted for **John Quincy Adams**, whom he believed was better qualified for the presidency. However, legend has it that Plumer voted for Adams because he wanted George Washington to remain the only president elected unanimously.



### PEOPLE TO KNOW

## James Monroe

Virginia planter and 5th president of the United States.

## John Quincy Adams

6th president of the United States and son of John Adams.

James Monroe's two terms in office are commonly referred to as an "Era of Good Feelings" because they represented a period of one-party government under the Democratic-Republicans. This period stood in stark contrast to the contentious, partisan nature of American politics during the 1790s and early 1800s.

Before the War of 1812 and the subsequent "Era of Good Feelings," a code of **deference** still underwrote much of the American political order.

### TERM TO KNOW

#### Deference

The practice of showing respect for individuals who had distinguished themselves through military accomplishments, educational attainment, business success, or family pedigree.

Deference was the social code upon which the foundations of Federalist political power rested. Federalists argued—and a significant number of Americans agreed—that a natural aristocracy of statesmen, landowners, and other elites—men like George Washington and John Adams—should lead the United States. Such men possessed virtue, or placed the common good above narrow self-interests, and, according to such logic, the rest of the nation should defer to their leadership. Federalist statesmen in the 1780s and 1790s expected and routinely received deferential treatment from others, and supporters deferred to such leaders because they were their "social betters."

➞ **EXAMPLE** George Washington epitomized virtue for many Americans because of his conduct during the American Revolution. Thus, many deferred to him and considered his judgment beyond reproach. Such deference toward Washington continued even after he left office. In 1800, an Anglican minister named Mason Locke Weems wrote *The Life of Washington*, which introduced the fictional story of a young Washington who chopped down one of his father's cherry trees and, when confronted by his father, confessed, "I cannot tell a lie."

Although it was a fictional incident, the story celebrated the honesty and integrity of Washington that many Americans looked up to. The story also taught generations of American children the importance of virtue.

To reinforce this code of deference, Federalists implemented a number of restrictions to maintain their authority, and to keep the destabilizing forces of democracy, or "mobocracy," in check. At the state level, the most common restriction was a property qualification for voting or holding political office. Federalists and Democratic-Republicans alike also agreed to define citizenship in racial terms.

➞ **EXAMPLE** The Naturalization Act of 1790 stated that an immigrant had to be a "free white person"



"Father, I Can Not Tell a Lie: I Cut the Tree" (1867)  
by John McRae, after a painting by George Gorgas White, illustrates Mason Locke Weems's tale of George Washington and the cherry tree.

of “good character” to become a citizen of the United States.

Such stipulations automatically excluded enslaved people and American Indians—as well as free African or Asian immigrants who wanted to settle in the United States—from citizenship. Property qualifications, meanwhile, also excluded the majority of free African Americans, women, and poor White men from participating in the political process.

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## 2. The Decline of Deference and the Promise of Democracy

The “Era of Good Feelings” and subsequent periods witnessed a remarkable expansion in voting rights for part of the American population, specifically White men. There are three major explanations behind this expansion in voting rights, which went hand in hand with the overall decline of deference within American society.

- **Revolutionary ideology**

Widespread expansion in voting rights partly reflected continued acceptance of the American Revolution’s emphasis on natural equality, or the idea that all men were created equal, and the rights that accompanied it. A number of lawmakers argued to abolish property qualifications for voting by referencing the Revolution’s democratic ideals.

➞ **EXAMPLE** In 1821, New York removed the property qualifications for voting for White men. Such arguments represented a shift in how Americans understood voting. In a society defined by deference, voting was a privilege for the virtuous elite. However, ideas associated with the American Revolution steadily undermined that idea, by suggesting that voting should be a right for all White male citizens.

- **Western settlement**

As a means to promote settlement, a number of western states adopted constitutions that did not contain property qualifications for voting.

➞ **EXAMPLE** In an attempt to entice settlers from neighboring states, Vermont and Kentucky—admitted to the Union in 1791 and 1792 respectively—granted the right to vote to all White men, regardless of whether they owned property or paid taxes.

A number of other western states followed Vermont and Kentucky’s example. Doing so placed political pressure on eastern states, who did not want to lose citizens to the West and thus decline in political influence.

- **The “communications revolution”**

The “communications revolution” of the early 19th century, which featured the development of new technologies such as the telegraph alongside ever-expanding printing, publishing, and newspaper industries, made it easier for individuals to learn about political issues, express their opinions, and take part in the political process.

As a result of these trends, American politics during the early 19th century became a public, oftentimes rowdy, and predominantly male affair. Polling places typically displayed drinking, debates, and occasional violence.



## DID YOU KNOW

Usually, specific weekdays were set aside as holidays for each election, in order to allow men to assemble and vote. Since separate elections were held for local, state, and federal offices during this time, communities typically experienced at least two elections a year. Each election was preceded by public demonstrations and even the act of voting was a public affair. Where written ballots were used, rival political parties printed their respective ballot on paper of a certain color, which made it easy for them to see which party the people were voting for. Such an absence of secrecy contributed to strict party-line voting, in which most men in each community voted the same way.



George Caleb Bingham, "The County Election," 1854.

The above image depicts a county election in Missouri during the mid-19th century, in which the artist provided a sense of all that might occur during an election day. Elections could include festivities such as horse racing (in the background), drinking, and common commotion. The variety of groups gathered might be discussing potential candidates and ballots, but note the general absence of women and people of color. In the middle of the frame, it appears that someone is dragging a drunken, passed-out individual toward the poll.

Given the variety of scenes that the artist presented, historians have debated whether the artist was celebrating or mocking American democracy.



## BRAINSTORM

What do you think—was the artist celebrating or mocking American democracy? How might your answer



### 3. The Limits of Democracy

As voting rights came to depend less on economic criteria such as property ownership, they came to rely more on the social categories of gender and race.

New Jersey epitomized this trend in regard to gender. In 1776, the fervor of the American Revolution led New Jersey revolutionaries to write a constitution that extended the right to vote to unmarried women who owned property worth £50. For the next three decades, politicians competed for the votes of New Jersey women who met this property requirement. However, by simply adding the word "male" to its voting requirements in 1807, the state of New Jersey effectively deprived women of the right to vote.

There was also a concerted effort to deny free Black men the right to vote. This was particularly the case in northern states that had only recently abolished slavery within their boundaries. For example, by 1838, Black men lost the right to vote in Connecticut, Rhode Island, North Carolina, and Pennsylvania. Other states such as New York, which had given free Black men the right to vote in its 1777 constitution, subsequently raised the property qualification for these voters while removing it for White voters.

➞ **EXAMPLE** After removing the property qualification for White voters, approximately 80 percent of the White male population in New York could vote in state elections by the 1820s. At the same time, however, New York effectively disenfranchised free Black men by requiring that “men of color” possess property over the value of \$250 to vote.

The reasoning behind voting restriction rested largely on sexist and racist grounds. The act of depriving women the right to vote was intricately tied to the idea that females were inferior to males, as well as to the notion of **Republican motherhood**.



#### TERM TO KNOW

##### **Republican Motherhood**

Reinforced traditional expectations of women as wives and mothers by insisting that women’s role in a republic was to raise good children, instilling in them all the virtue necessary to ensure the republic’s survival.

The concept of Republican motherhood helped to elevate women's symbolic status in the 18th and 19th centuries and provided a basis for women's claims to expanded educational opportunities. On the other hand, it simultaneously relegated women to the household, or domestic sphere, while men handled public affairs such as voting.

In 1852, the *New York Herald* asserted that women were, "By her nature, her sex, just as the negro is and always will be, to the end of time, inferior to the white race, and, therefore, doomed to subjection" (Stanton, Anthony & Gage, p. 854).

Likewise, the deprivation of Black voting rights on racist grounds was accompanied by other restrictions. By the 1830s and 1840s, the federal government barred free Black men from service in state militias or the U.S. military. Nor did any state in the Union provide equal protection under the law.

➞ **EXAMPLE** In a northern state such as Illinois, African Americans could not vote, testify or sue in court, or attend public schools.

In these ways, sexism and racism exposed the limits of American democracy during the early 19th century.



## BRAINSTORM

How does this tutorial contribute to your understanding of contemporary debates over voting rights? Do you notice any parallels between the promise and limits of democracy during the early 19th century and today? Any important divergences?



## SUMMARY

During the first half of the 19th century, American political culture witnessed a decline in deference and an upsurge in democracy. Such an increase in political participation was largely a consequence of the American Revolution, particularly the notion that voting should be a right for all citizens rather than for only a virtuous elite, as well as of increased western settlement and improved communication. However, the expansion of political power was limited to White men. Expanded voting rights did not extend to women, Indians, or free African Americans in the North. Instead, gender and race replaced property qualifications as the criterion for voting rights in the United States.

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Stanton, E. C., Anthony, S. B., Gage, M. J., & Harper, I. H. (1881). *History of woman suffrage*. New York: Fowler & Wells.



## ATTRIBUTIONS

- ["The County Election" \(1954\)](#) | License: Public Domain



## TERMS TO KNOW

### Deference

The practice of showing respect for individuals who had distinguished themselves through military accomplishments, educational attainment, business success, or family pedigree.

### Republican Motherhood

Reinforced traditional expectations of women as wives and mothers by insisting that women's role in a republic was to raise good children, instilling in them all the virtue necessary to ensure the republic's survival.



## PEOPLE TO KNOW

### **James Monroe**

Virginia planter and 5th president of the United States.

### **John Quincy Adams**

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## DATES TO KNOW

### **1791–1792**

Vermont and Kentucky are admitted to the Union with a right to vote that extends to all white men.

### **1800**

Power is peacefully transitioned from Federalists to Democratic-Republicans.

### **1816**

The election that occurred during this year was the last time the Federalist Party supported a candidate.

### **1816–1824**

The "Era of Good Feelings" marks a period of one-party politics.

### **1820**

James Monroe is reelected by the largest majority since George Washington.

### **1820–1830**

Voting rights expand among white male citizens and contract for other groups of Americans.

### **1840**

More than 90% of adult white men in the US are eligible to vote.