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ATIZATION STUDIES

Democracy, Participation and Contestation

Civil society, governance and the
future of liberal democracy

Edited by
Emmanuelle Avril and
Johann N. Neem

ROUTLEDGE 

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5 Democracy

America's other "peculiar institution"

Andrew W. Robertson

In the words of Alexis de Tocqueville, American democracy was "*très particulier*." In English that can be translated as "unique," "special", "particular," or "peculiar." Ever since Alexis de Tocqueville published *De la Démocratie en Amérique* in 1835 and 1840, Americans have seemed preoccupied with the question of whether American democracy was truly "unique." Rather than revisiting this tired theme, perhaps we should consider an alternative translation of Tocqueville's *particulier* that draws more attention to the twists and turns of American democracy. The term "peculiar" better captures the unusual and puzzling features of popular government in America both then and now. In fact, the "peculiarity" of American democracy may be precisely what warmed Tocqueville to his subject. Thinking of American democracy in the early nineteenth century as America's other "peculiar institution" has another advantage as well: this backhand connotative link to slavery points to the increasing salience of race to American democracy from the Revolution to the Civil War. The boundaries of democratic participation became increasingly racialized in the Jacksonian and antebellum periods in the North as well as the South. Moreover, racial exclusion was not the inevitable outcome of the political invisibility of free African Americans; it was often their visibility and activity that made them rational targets for exclusion by their political opponents.

Universal suffrage and its boundaries

Tocqueville exaggerated when he said that in the America of the 1830s universal suffrage had triumphed everywhere (Tocqueville, 2004: 224). There were exceptions: Virginia, South Carolina and Rhode Island still had restrictive property qualifications on adult male suffrage, which prevented the majority of white male inhabitants in each of those states from voting. Moreover, if property qualifications for voting were declining in the 1830s, racial barriers to suffrage were expanding.

The defining boundary of inclusion/exclusion at the end of the American Revolution was free status and a modicum of property. In states in which black slaves formed a majority (South Carolina) or a significant minority (Georgia, Virginia) race per se was a qualifier. In New England, states such as

Massachusetts and New Hampshire, where slavery had already been abolished, freedom and economic “independence” constituted the basis of inclusion. Quite surprisingly, after the Revolution, some southern states adopted the same rationale for inclusion: Maryland and North Carolina permitted free African American men (a small minority of the total black population) to vote on the same basis as their white neighbors (Ratcliffe, 2013: 219–254).

Americans in their suffrage disparities displayed what Tocqueville—in another context—calls “*double effet*” (Tocqueville, 1981: Vol. 1, Part 2, Ch. 7: 348). Tocqueville (speaking of prisons) said that Americans, in their enthusiasm for reform, overlooked existing prisons and allowed old, unreformed prisons to coexist with new, reformed penitentiaries. In a similar way, we can see a “double effect” in suffrage. In their zeal to expand the suffrage in the first decades of the nineteenth century many American states embraced supposedly “universal” boundaries of inclusion not defined by property. Yet in the midst of this effort, other American states adhered to an older colonial definition of suffrage defined by property. For a time from 1800 to 1835 these two constructions of American democracy coexisted, then gradually the older definition of inclusion by property gave way to inclusion bounded not merely by free status, as it had been, but by increasingly explicit definitions of race.

With that new definition, the boundaries of American democracy became more idiosyncratic. In Canada, suffrage reformers in the nineteenth century reduced the property requirements for suffrage, but those requirements were not eliminated entirely until the first decades of the twentieth century. In Mexico, universal male suffrage was guaranteed by the constitution of 1917. In other Latin American states, universal suffrage gradually became the accepted practice, as property requirements—sometimes suddenly, sometimes gradually—gave way to universal inclusion of adult males. Constructions and definitions of race were a factor in defining the boundaries of political inclusion in Latin America or in Canada, but not to anything like the degree they were in the United States. In part this was because the construction of race was far more fluid in all of these countries. In Québec, particularly in the rural areas, most of the population was descended from the intermarriage of the French habitants and the peoples of the First Nations. Aside from the First Nations inhabitants, Anglophone Upper Canada was mostly settled by northern European immigrants and a small number of African American and Caribbean refugees from slavery. In Mexico and the Central American republics, the vast majority of the population descended from the mixture of European and Native American ancestors. In New Granada, Venezuela and Brazil the populations came from Native American, African and European ancestry.

Only in the US was there an obsessive concern with the “taint” of African racial origin which would somehow stigmatize the participation of people of color in the suffrage. In much of the US, racial definitions conformed to the “one-drop” rule, which meant that any evidence of African ancestry automatically conferred a person to the category of “colored” and in most cases to suffrage restriction. This odd American Dream of restricting anyone suspected of

the minutest African lineage persisted until the Civil War, re-emerged after the brief experiment of bi-racial government in the South during Reconstruction and reached its full maturity after the terror of lynching in the fervid manipulations of Jim Crow segregation. The plaintiff in the infamous Supreme Court case that affirmed the constitutionality of race segregation was Homer Plessy in *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896). Plessy was categorized by the State of Louisiana as being an “octoroon, that is 7/8 ‘white’” (Fireside, 2004).

As a result of its obsession with race, American democracy became increasingly “peculiar”—at first unique, then odd, and finally almost incomprehensible, to both its detractors and admirers in the years between the visits of Alexis de Tocqueville in 1831–1832 and the Civil War thirty years later.

American suffrage after the Revolution

In the years immediately after the American Revolution, explicit race barriers to voting did not emerge in most of the original thirteen states. Not surprisingly, the northeastern states that were among the first to abolish slavery also abolished property requirements for voting. Vermont and New Hampshire led the way and Pennsylvania soon followed most of the way (Pennsylvania retained a tax requirement). Massachusetts, Connecticut and Rhode Island abolished slavery but retained property requirements. These states did not hinder free men of color from voting on account of race, however. In all these states, black inhabitants were entitled to vote on the same basis as whites (Keyssar, 2000: 341–344).

Moreover, slave states such as Delaware, Maryland and North Carolina, which did not abolish slavery before the Civil War, initially permitted free men of color to vote on the same basis as free whites (Keyssar, 2000: 342–343). In Maryland and North Carolina, free men of color constituted a small but still relatively significant portion of the whole black population. Many of these men were skilled craftsmen who were long settled in their communities and some had acquired enough property to qualify for the vote. The frontier slave states of Kentucky and Tennessee, newly admitted to the Union in the 1790s, also allowed free African Americans to vote (Keyssar, 2000: 342–344). In these southern frontier states, the African Americans who initially settled there were often free people of color who had the skills and the means of earning their own livelihood. In these early days of settlement, blackness did not constitute a barrier to economic or political participation in these frontier communities. Free men were probably accorded equal rights because their status as free men counted for more than their race in states with no slavery or small plantations and limited slaveholding patterns.

Thus in 1790, free black men were accorded the same voting rights as white men in ten of the thirteen states. Only those states in which more than 40 percent of the population was enslaved restricted the vote explicitly to whites: the Deep South states of Georgia and South Carolina and Virginia retained this colonial vestige of race exclusion. By 1800, two more states with small free black

populations had instituted race restrictions, Delaware and Kentucky. Maryland followed suit in 1801, when the legislature eliminated property requirements for state elections.

Racial restrictions in the West

The peculiar trajectory of American suffrage took a different turn, however, in the first decade of the nineteenth century. In 1803, for the first time a state that did not have an enslaved population nonetheless restricted the vote to whites only. In that year, the free state of Ohio, newly admitted to the Union, prohibited all of its black inhabitants from voting. Other free western territories followed suit. In the neighboring territories of Indiana and Illinois, free blacks were restricted from voting and when Illinois was admitted as a state in 1818 its legislature passed a law prohibiting African Americans' residence there. In the West, race restriction on suffrage operated under a very different set of motivations and justifications than it did in the South. Western states did not have very large populations of African Americans. In the West, slavery was prohibited by the Northwest Ordinance of 1787. Moreover, the free black population was very small.

Black men were explicitly disenfranchised in the new states of the West for two reasons: white inhabitants, particularly those who emigrated from the South, did not want to encourage free black settlement in the West. Of course white Southerners may have felt antipathy to blacks, but that did not provoke a movement to restrict free blacks from voting in the neighboring slave states of Kentucky and Tennessee. Second, Westerners in the free states shared the widespread concern that free black labor would depress the wages of whites (Malone, 2008: 23–56; Polgar, 2011: 1–23).

Although the new states of the West led the way to increased race-based suffrage restrictions, there was no immediate movement to ensure the wholesale restriction of free men of color from voting elsewhere. New Hampshire and Vermont continued to allow all inhabitants to vote regardless of race or property holding. Yet the other states which temporarily shielded men of color from blatant racial exclusion were mostly those that retained property requirements for voting. Left temporarily untouched were free men of color in states which retained some residual property requirement: Massachusetts, Connecticut, New York, Pennsylvania, North Carolina, Rhode Island and, for a time, New Jersey.

This was another turn in the trajectory of American suffrage. Property restrictions had been the basis of all suffrage in the colonial era. In those states that did not remove property restrictions quickly, free men of color who held property were seen as having the same "stake" in society as white inhabitants. At least for a time, the idea of a mass influx of poor African American laborers depressing the wages of whites did not loom as a serious threat in the settled states of the East to anything like the same degree as it did to Westerners. Race per se was not the identifier; property was. Poor whites and poor free blacks found themselves summarily excluded.

Race restrictions in the Northeast

The next turn of this peculiar trajectory began in 1808. Those states in the Northeast which had previously allowed free black property-holders to vote on the same basis as whites gradually changed their laws. In 1808 New Jersey eliminated African American voting entirely. By the time of the Civil War, other states in the Northeast that had once shielded black freemen from racial barriers now applied property restrictions only to free men of color. What had been a property protection for free men of color increasingly became a further means of restricting black voters. That is to say, at the very same time that Connecticut, New York and Pennsylvania eliminated all property restrictions for adult white men they introduced an increased property requirement for male African Americans. By 1860 only five New England states—Massachusetts, Maine, Vermont, New Hampshire and Rhode Island—allowed their black citizens to vote on the same basis as whites.

The reasons for this gradual realignment of suffrage laws in the northeastern States varied. One ostensible reason had to do with "independence": those behind the New Jersey campaign to disenfranchise black voters argued that they were stopping "corruption" by preventing slaves from fraudulently voting according to the wishes of their masters. In New Jersey and New York, where in the first decades of the nineteenth century there was still a sizeable minority of enslaved African Americans, this justification at least seemed plausible to those willing to entertain it.

In Connecticut and Pennsylvania, opponents of black suffrage often cited the possibility of black voters "corrupting" the vote. In these northern states which had long since eliminated slavery and had no enslaved inhabitants, the justification for an increased property requirement on black voters coincided with the idea that newly settled black men or even fugitive slaves might vote if an increased property requirement did not insure that the men of color who did vote were well established in the community and would not "sell" their vote or worse still, perhaps advocate for wholesale abolition throughout the Union.

Race restrictions in the South

Although Delaware, Kentucky and Maryland restricted their suffrage to whites around the turn of the nineteenth century, two other slave states waited another generation to do so. Tennessee and North Carolina prohibited free men of color from voting, but they lagged well behind the other states, only abolishing the vote for free black men in 1834 and 1835 respectively. Like Connecticut, New York and Pennsylvania, Tennessee and North Carolina acted to restrict black voting at the very moment they finally abolished all property requirements for adult white males. Perhaps these two slave states disenfranchised their free men of color so late because in a slave society, race per se was less salient than free status and free men of color who held property were classified by their status rather than their race (Keyssar, 2000: 343, 345).

In Tennessee and North Carolina, where the numbers of those enslaved dwarfed the free black population, the justification given for disfranchising the free men of color was similar. In North Carolina, for example, there were a number of contested elections in which African Americans alleged to be slaves were accused of having fraudulently obtained false documents showing their free status and title to property. Their accusers complained that they were guilty of voting for their masters and abetting "corruption."

Maryland offered a similar rationale for restricting the vote of its free men of color in 1801. Between 1783 and 1801, no free man of color could vote unless he could prove he had achieved free status before 1783. The Maryland legislature, fearing that more slaves would be freed in the years after the American Revolution, wanted to be sure only those free men of color who had long enjoyed that status could vote.

Instrumental reasons for racially restricted democracy

To understand why men of color were increasingly disenfranchised, it is first important to understand the astonishing surge in voter turnout that swept the electorate between 1800 and 1816, a surge that included free men of color. Thomas Jefferson called his victory in the presidential election of 1800 "as real a revolution [...] as that of 1776 was in its form; not effected indeed by the sword [...] but by the suffrages of the people." While this presidential election was hardly the hallmark of democracy that Jefferson suggested, a real revolution in suffrage did take place after 1800, particularly in the elections for Congress, state governors and state legislatures. In these elections a majority of adult male inhabitants took to the polls. In the 1790s, perhaps 30–40 percent of adult male inhabitants voted in the New England states and in Pennsylvania. By 1800, however, more than 50 percent of adult male inhabitants were voting. By 1808, over 60 percent of free adult male inhabitants in New Hampshire, Massachusetts, Pennsylvania and North Carolina were voting.

Earlier scholars assumed that two factors caused the dramatic rise in voter participation in the years after 1800. The first was the elimination of suffrage restrictions. For the most part, however, the elimination of property restrictions on suffrage was not enough to cause an immediate surge in turnout. Of the twenty-four states that composed the United States in 1824, only three saw a surge in voter turnout immediately following the end of suffrage restrictions. In most of the other states, a rise in voter turnout lagged anywhere from four to twenty years after the end of restrictive property requirements. In New Jersey, a surge in turnout immediately preceded the elimination of property restrictions because unqualified voters surged to the polls to elect a legislature pledged to end property restrictions. Overall, there is no discernible relationship between the end of property restrictions and the rise of voting that holds for all the states or even all the states in one region. Simply reducing or eliminating the property restrictions on voting did not automatically jump-start mass participation (Pole, 1962: 626–646).

A second factor that many scholars assume contributed to the expansion of the American electorate was the rise in party organization and party competition. This theory, however, presents a puzzle to American historians and political scientists: Jeffersonian political parties were not as well organized or elaborated as the Jacksonian parties that followed, so how could they get voters to the polls?

More recently, a newer generation of scholars has argued that political parties could be "embodied" in print culture and in the imaginations of their readers without the elaborate party organizations that emerged in the United States a quarter century later. Party competition in and of itself did not prove to be the spur to participation. What actually mattered were the critical issues before the public. American democracy in the Age of Jefferson invented the idea of framing critical issues and fostering public deliberation. In an age of an emerging American public sphere, when cultural and symbolic issues had yet to crystallize into powerful factors of party identification, deliberation over real issues mattered to electors. For both Jefferson's party and his Federalist opponents, issues drove elections (Formisano, 1983).

In this period, mass mobilization occurred over issues involving international trade and foreign affairs, federal taxation and banking policies and the relationship of church and state. The period after 1800 saw the rise of ad hoc political organizations, some closely connected to the parties and some arising from popular ferment. These included democratic societies, literary societies, coffee house tontines, militias and formal party organizations, all of which were enlisted and exploited by the Republican and Federalist Parties (Cotlar, 2011; Koschnik, 2007; Neem, 2008; Newman, 1997; Pasley, 2000; Waldstreicher, 1997). In many ways these highly political social organizations served as direct conduits for focusing public opinion. Such issues were publicized by a burgeoning network of partisan newspapers.

From 1800 to 1816, Federalists and Republicans in the northern states were joined in a fiercely partisan battle over foreign policy, trade policy, and the politics of war. That debate was sufficient to jump-start a full-fledged participatory democracy in the American republic. In the years after 1808, both parties contested every popular election, competing for what they believed were the highest stakes imaginable. Turnout levels in the presidential election of 1812 (when Americans debated war policy) were by far the highest for any presidential contest between 1800 and 1824. The turnout in states north of the Mason-Dixon line set records, some of which would not be broken until the Log Cabin Campaign of 1840, in which the victorious candidate generated enthusiastic popular support by avoiding issues and proclaiming himself the candidate of the "Log Cabin and Hard Cider." Turnout in some of these states was not surpassed until after the Civil War.

In the case of northeastern states like New Jersey and New York, where free African Americans were entitled to vote on the same basis as their white neighbors, issue-centered voting may have been their undoing. Free men of color were hardly inert. As we know from recent scholarship, free African Americans initiated public commemorations in the first decade of the nineteenth century in

order to promote the end of the international slave trade (White, 1994: 13–50). In New Jersey and New York, free black men were acknowledged by both parties to be one of the most reliable voting blocs for the Federalist Party. There was little wonder about this: the leadership of the national Republican Party was composed of slaveholders like Thomas Jefferson and James Madison. Although many northern Republicans expressed their antipathy to slavery, those African Americans in the North who could vote made little secret of their loyalty to the party that opposed the Jeffersonian Republicans. As noted above, it was not the inertia of black voters in New Jersey and New York that caused them to be disfranchised; it was their very engagement in politics that made them vulnerable to exclusion. We see this in examining the interesting case of New Jersey politics from 1802 to 1808.

The New Jersey example

New Jersey was the first northeastern state to restrict the definition of political eligibility to adult white males only. After the critical election of 1800, the debate in the United States between Federalists and Republicans turned from defining the role the people should play in representative government to defining the makeup of the people who would participate in government. The New Jersey constitution of 1776 enfranchised all heads of household regardless of race or gender as long as he/she possessed a minimal freehold of £50 in depreciated Revolutionary paper money. This definition of property-holding allowed for a very wide exercise of voting in New Jersey, not only among free men of color, but among women heads of household as well.

In the pre-Revolutionary era, colonial legislatures rarely troubled to specifically exclude women from voting but there is depressingly scant evidence of women acting to take advantage of the law's failure to exclude them. In the years after the American Revolution, New Jersey was the only state that did not limit its suffrage only to men. According to the state constitution of 1776, women heads of household (widows and spinsters), who paid tax on £50 (almost valueless proclamation currency) worth of property could vote (Klinghoffer and Elkins, 1992: 159–193). These were the same qualifications required of their male counterparts. Moreover, in New Jersey no racial restrictions applied. Free men and women of color who met this relatively low property requirement could also vote. The right of women to vote was confirmed by state statutes in 1790 and 1797, laws that explicitly referred to voters as “he and she.” Women (as well as free blacks) continued to vote without gender or race restrictions until after the elections of 1807.

In 1808, however, Republicans argued that women, and free blacks, whatever their property holdings, by virtue of their identity lacked “independence.” Until this point the Republican Party had never taken a position advocating the disenfranchisement of women householders or free people of color who met the property requirement.

New Jersey Republicans, like many northern Jeffersonians, were mostly anti-slavery although not for the most part as outspoken in opposing slavery as the

Federalists. Unlike the Jacksonian Democrats a generation later, New Jersey Republicans had not proclaimed themselves to be virulently anti-black. Moreover, the Republican Party had not supported the exclusion of women heads of household when the suffrage laws could have been amended to exclude women. So why did the Republican Party of New Jersey suddenly act to exclude women and free people of color? Strategic rather than racial, gender or ideological considerations initially dictated this change among Republican New Jerseyans. In the years from 1802 through 1806, the state government had been stalemated because of “gridlock” in the legislature. The Republicans hit upon a strategy in which they could decisively win the next election by eliminating two small but significant Federalist voting blocs—single women and free people of color. More importantly by playing on class resentments of white men who owned no property at all, they could insure that this much larger bloc of voters would ally themselves solidly with the Republican Party. The two definitions of inclusion collided, one defined by property and the other by race and gender identity. In 1807 New Jersey Republicans achieved their goal, simultaneously eliminating property-holding as the defining characteristic for voter suffrage and restricting the vote exclusively to whites and males.

The propertied women's vote was hardly dominant (these were women, after all, who paid taxes on property held in their own right). The number of free African Americans possessing property sufficient to qualify for the vote was also rather small, and they could never have exercised great leverage in New Jersey politics. Nevertheless, in the fierce party competition that characterized the state's politics in the early years of the nineteenth century, women and free black voters became the targets of extended attacks. By targeting them the Republicans won the enduring loyalty of the group mostly likely to resent independent women and free blacks—the large cohort of unpropertied white men.

The state elections of 1802 and 1806 were too close for the Republicans' comfort, and subsequently party leaders blamed women and black voters for “corruption” (i.e., fraudulent voting). Republican leaders targeted both groups for exclusion from the suffrage. In doing so, they were not simply scapegoating.

It turns out that, even in the early nineteenth century, women heads of household as well as free African Americans were identified as voting blocs loyal to the Federalist Party. Contemporary reports drawn from newspapers on both sides tell us that women property holders preferred the Federalists to the Republicans, perhaps for both religious and economic reasons. Free blacks tended even more strongly to vote Federalist because of the overall connection in black voters' minds of the Republican Party with slaveholders' interests. Thus, it became the Republicans' mission in New Jersey to deny women and blacks the vote (Zagarri, 2007).

In the years between 1802 and 1808, New Jersey's legislature was deadlocked with a Federalist majority in the state senate and a Republican majority in the state assembly. New Jersey's governor and United States senators were elected by the state legislature. In order to elect either a governor or a US senator, the legislature met in joint session. The result of the 1802 election was a state senate and a state

house of representatives tied at twenty-six votes each when they met jointly. For six years the legislature was consequently deadlocked and New Jersey was unable to elect either a governor or a United States senator in those six years.

In 1802 New Jersey Republicans had benefitted from a national landslide in congressional elections; but, for the lack of a single vote in Hunterdon County, they were unable to deliver on their mandate and elect either a Republican governor or US senator. That may very well have been the moment when Republican Party leaders decided to augment their support at the polls—by playing the gender and race cards.

Immediately after the October 1802 election, Republican partisans in Hunterdon County formed “An Association for the Preservation of our Electoral Rights.” The following month a state legislative committee held hearings to determine the extent of voter fraud in Hunterdon County and the Republicans gave evidence that “women voted, citizens of Philadelphia, [N]egroes and slaves, and those possessing less than £50 freeholds” (presumably in this last category were unqualified Federalists). The legislative committee eventually dismissed all the allegations of partisan unfairness, concluding that the Republicans received as many fraudulent votes as the Federalists did. Republicans then charged the Federalist-dominated committee with conducting the investigation unfairly (Prince, 1964: 84, n.25).

Jeffersonian politics initiated low appeals to race and gender prejudice for instrumental reasons. Republican Party organizers also fostered and nurtured blatant race prejudice among poorer whites, who were unenfranchised themselves and resented any blacks being given the right to vote. In the 1803 election, the vote in Hunterdon County jumped by nearly 50 percent. The total vote for the Republicans swamped the Federalists and was probably fraudulent. Only two-thirds of the men in the county would likely have met the £50 requirement and the county’s total vote was 25 percent higher than the total adult male population.

In 1806 the Republicans were still charging vote “corruption.” The editor of the Republican *Trenton True American* indignantly addressed the Federalists playing up race resentments against African Americans (“vast numbers of blacks who were known to be worth nothing?”), gender resentments against “misses” (“yet in their teens”), and class resentments directed both downwards against paupers (“Why shove in votes of those who declared they were not worth a cent?”) and upwards against college students (“Why admit Princeton students?”).

What we see in the following election is the triumph of racial and gendered democracy over property-holding democracy. We might call this the “boots on the ground” effect: unpropertied/unqualified voters turned out at the polls and forced a retroactive extension of the suffrage. Men were prompted to the polls in part by antipathy—nurtured and sustained by Republican Party organizers—to the political power allegedly enjoyed by propertied women and prosperous free African Americans.

The election of 1807 in New Jersey marks the beginning of a turning point from the colonial criteria of citizenship defined by property to a concept of

American democracy defined by race. In one sense, Republicans were the agents of democratization. They eliminated the property requirements in New Jersey for all adult white males nearly two decades before neighboring New York followed suit. Furthermore, by promoting meetings providing “correct information on public officers among [their] fellow citizens,” Republicans encouraged a politics of widespread deliberation. At the same time, however, Republicans in New Jersey were the agents of democratic restriction. Initially because of strategic reasons, Jeffersonian Republicans and their political descendants, the Jacksonian Democrats, became increasingly wedded to the idea that the United States was a democracy for white men only (Tillery, 2009: 639–652; Vickery, 1974: 309–328).

Conclusion: The long decline of the “double effect”

A generation after the American Revolution a new definition of democratic inclusion based in part on racial exclusion gradually expanded to most of the United States. It worked its way from South to West, then to the Northeast and back again to the two remaining holdout states in the South. Ultimately only five of the New England states resisted this exclusionary definition of democracy. This represented a collision between two conceptions of democracy, one defined by property that originated in the Colonial era and another based on racial identity that emerged in the years between the American Revolution and the Jacksonian era. The first definition of democracy was based on the assumption that only those with a “stake” in the society and polity—usually a freehold of property—could effectively participate in government. The second definition of democracy—which actually was much older, having originated among the ancient Greeks—reflected the belief that any free male inhabitant should be able to participate in government as long as he could claim his identity within defined boundaries of the polity. Gradually the boundaries of the American polity became focused on race (Dunn, 2005: 71–118).

New Jersey was thus in the vanguard of race-based politics. New Jersey’s action was only the first in a depressing series of decisions by leaders of all parties to take the “low road” in American politics. Repeated appeals to race prejudice, however, “dumbed down the discourse” over the course of years, and party leaders who appealed to these prejudices saw less and less need to engage in serious policy debates. In the later Jacksonian era deliberative discourse began its long decline in favor of blatant appeals to race, ethnic and religious prejudice. Even as the definition of democracy expanded along one axis in the first decades of the nineteenth century, it narrowed significantly along others. Long after the Civil War and extending into the present day, political strategists in the North and South have found an effective battle cry in the charge of “vote corruption.” This term resonated with the prejudices of many Americans who believed and continue to believe that suffrage restrictions of one kind or another were and are needed to preserve the “purity” of American democracy and avoid the contaminating “corruption” of blacks, immigrants and poor whites.

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