CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

Voter Suppression

How the Poor, Felons, and Minorities are Disenfranchised in the United States

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"Everyone has the right to take part in the government of his country, directly or through freely chosen representatives." When listed here in the United Nation's Declaration of Human Rights, there is little argument for the inhibition of suffrage in our world. Yet time and time again we read or experience some form of limit on the fundamental right to vote that deviates from the "universal and equal suffrage" that Eleanor Roosevelt and the other 18 drafters of the Declaration sponsored.

In 2016, thirty-two states in the United States had a voter-ID law on the books. Some of the strictest require a photo-ID for any individual to vote. In some cases, the federal courts have found these voter-ID laws to have a discriminatory effect on Black and Latinx voters, as seen in Texas and North Carolina. However, any limit on the right to vote may transform into the silencing of an entire group of people; a silence that can grow into an oppression.

Although the days of the appalling treatment of minority voters seem long gone to some, a perpetual awareness of the history of voter suppression is imperative. During the era of Jim Crow, states institutionalized understanding clauses, grandfather clauses, and literacy tests to hinder the participation of black voters. Only through the diligence of the NAACP, SNCC, and other civil rights activists and groups, did states begin to bend to the rules of the Fifteenth and Nineteenth Amendments. The Fifteenth Amendment of the U.S. Constitution was ratified in 1870, and granted all men, "regardless of race, color, or previous condition of servitude" the right to vote. Congress is in charge of enacting this amendment through proper legislation, yet it took almost a century to see the Voting Rights Act of 1965 rectify literacy tests and other arbitrary limits to suffrage.

For women, the call to arms started well before the ratification of the Nineteenth Amendment in 1920. At the Woman's Rights Convention in Seneca Falls, NY in 1848, the suffragette garnered 100 signatures on the Declaration of Sentiments pronouncing "all men and women are created equal." Under that law, there are still inequalities; but the Nineteenth Amendment guarantees the right to vote regardless of sex, fulfilling a promise that should have been expressed 131 years earlier.

Many of the current limits on suffrage continue to abnegate poor and working class voters, felons, and non-whites; his-
y demonstrates this pattern has never been out of favor. In the earliest American elections, property owners were guaranteed the right to vote as they had an interest who governed and levied property taxes policy. Poor citizens without property were considered non-players and were denied participation in elections with property requirements embedded into constitutions. In accordance with the 14th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, the administration of elections and voting requirements was left to individual states; this allowance brandished states immense power over who could and could not vote.

Felony convictions also prohibited voting rights for those in prison and by the reclamation of rights for those who had served their prison sentences. Today, “Florida, Kentucky and Iowa are the only states where people convicted of a felony permanently lose their voting rights ending clemency hearings; an estimated 7 million Florida residents have been ripped of voting rights.” Felony convictions, however, continue to place a burden on citizens who have served their sentences and seek to restore their voting rights. The Office of Executive Clemency grants the return of voting rights, but recently Federal Courts have found the Office’s methods to be “arbitrary and exceedingly slow.”

Finally, movements toward limiting non-whites were increasingly preva lent. Poll taxes, especially during the Jim Crow era and the changing tides of civil rights in the mid-Twentieth Century, were utilized as just another “facially neutral” attempt to prohibit non-whites from the ballot box. With its ratification in 1964, the Twenty-Fourth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution banned poll taxes, helping to further ensure “universal and equal suffrage” to all American citizens.

Change requires activism and diligence. The right to vote should not be a guarantee to some, but to all; regardless of age, sex, race, color, creed, religion, capacity, and/or residency. To protect suffrage rights for yourself and others, become involved in your local and state elections along with the national forum. Subscribe to the League of Women Voters who offer citizens detailed candidate questionnaires and state amendment information. In Florida, one must register to vote 29 days in advance of any election; the registration process can be in person, by mail, or online. For upcoming primaries, one must join their party of choice 29 days prior to their party’s primary election; party changes are made through updates on a voter registration form (along with name, address, or signature changes). To vote in an election, Florida voters can access the polls in person, during the available early voting period, or through the mail. To find out more about elections in Florida and pertinent rules and regulations, be sure to visit the Florida Division of Elections website [http://dos.myflorida.com/elections/] and your local county Office of Elections website.

Bibliography


PBS Newshour. (22 April 2016). Felons who’ve paid their debt deserve to vote, says Virginia Gov. McAuliffe. PBS News Hour.


