

Voting Reform: White Manhood Suffrage

THE DEMOCRATIC IDEAL that every individual should have an equal voice in government was not completely reflected in the practice of the early United States. When the U.S. Constitution was drafted in 1787, all of the original 13 states had economic qualifications that excluded poorer citizens from voting: 10 states required a certain amount of property; three required payment of a tax. The Constitution left the question of who should have suffrage, or the right to vote, to the states. But within those states, clamor grew in the late 18th and early 19th centuries for expansion of the suffrage to all adult white males, regardless of economic status. The demand was loudest in frontier areas, where egalitarian spirit was especially strong. No states admitted to the Union after the original 13 required property for voting, and only a few required

a tax. This example put pressure on the older states, which abolished all property qualifications by 1860, with five retaining tax requirements. The power of the widening electorate was felt in national politics, where newly enfranchised voters helped elect Democratic candidate Andrew Jackson, hero of the common man, to the presidency in 1828. At the same time that states were enacting white manhood suffrage, they tightened other requirements, setting residency and age qualifications and excluding criminals, the mentally ill, African Americans, and women. The last two provisions prompted movements to extend the suffrage—movements that would not achieve success until the 15th Amendment (1870) enfranchised African Americans and the 19th Amendment (1920) enfranchised women.

White Manhood Suffrage: Pros and Cons

Dating back to medieval England, the view that voting should be reserved to property owners had a long history and died hard. Among the American champions of property qualifications was founding father Benjamin Franklin, who declared, “as to those who have not landed property, the allowing them to vote is an impropriety.” Future president John Adams wrote in 1787 that if the majority took control of the government, “Debts would be abolished first; taxes laid heavy on the rich, and not at all on others; and at last a downright equal division of everything be demanded and voted.” On the other side, the advocates of white manhood suffrage marshalled arguments of their own. The two sides clashed repeatedly in state legislatures throughout the late 18th and early 19th centuries.

Arguments for Property Qualifications

- Property owners had a bigger stake in the community than their unpropertied neighbors, and therefore had a better claim to suffrage.
- Property owners were usually better educated and therefore better suited to making decisions.
- Property owners were more likely to be moderate in their judgments, avoiding the rash, potentially catastrophic decisions the desperate poor might make.
- Property owners, with their independent means, were less prone to corruption and manipulation by candidates promising rewards.

Arguments Against Property Qualifications

- In accord with the principles of the American Revolution, even unpropertied people should not be taxed without the right to vote for representatives.
- As the Declaration of Independence (1776) stated, “all men are created equal”; therefore all men have an equal right to vote.
- The legitimate wish to confine the franchise to community stakeholders and mentally and morally fit people could be addressed through other restrictions, such as residency requirements and exclusion of criminals and the mentally ill.
- With states competing for scarce laborers, people would flock to states where they could vote rather than states where they could not.
- In frontier states, land titles were often insecure, so it was hard to establish property qualifications. Also, social mobility was high, so today’s pauper could be a person of means tomorrow.
- With sentiment increasing for white manhood suffrage, politicians could not win election without supporting that sentiment.

Economic Qualifications for Suffrage in the Original Thirteen States

State	In 1787	In 1860
New Hampshire	Tax	None
Massachusetts	Property	Tax
Rhode Island	Property	Tax
Connecticut	Property	None
New York	Property	None
New Jersey	Property	None
Pennsylvania	Tax	Tax
Delaware	Property	Tax
Maryland	Property	None
Virginia	Property	None
North Carolina	Property	Tax
South Carolina	Tax	None
Georgia	Property	None

Economic Qualifications for Suffrage in New States, 1791–1821

State	Year of Admission	Economic Qualifications In Year of Admission
Vermont	1791	None
Kentucky	1792	None
Tennessee	1796	None
Ohio	1803	Tax (ended 1851)
Louisiana	1812	Tax (ended 1845)
Indiana	1816	None
Mississippi	1817	None (ended 1832)
Illinois	1818	None
Alabama	1819	None
Maine	1820	None
Missouri	1820	None



In this engraving promoting the presidential candidacy (1840) of war hero William Henry Harrison, Harrison greets a wounded veteran of the Battle of Tippecanoe (1811) outside his log cabin. Such appeals to mass sentiment became common with the extension of the suffrage to all white men.