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Great Debates

RECITATION:

Consent of the Governed

A democratic government by definition bases itself around a body of citizens either directly or through representative elected officials governing a nation. The representative based democracy's sole workings are dependent on the voting rights of its citizens, for voting is the primary instrument through which a populace can express or withhold content regarding its governing body (Page 8). In its beginnings, the United States possessed a narrow franchise, only including wealthy white male landowners, but social, economic, and political changes in the early 18th century brought about drastic changes which ultimately led to voting rights being extended to one group of citizens after another.

After being excluded from participating in electing governmental representatives for years because of land-holding requirements, many citizens (still white and male) began a movement in the early 1800s arguing for suffrage based around the belief that, "a man can think without property, therefore he can vote without property" (Page 50). Though rhetorically effective and mirroring objections utilized in past years in opposition to British rule, these arguments were easily dismissed by opponents fond of the property qualifications. For reasons varying from economic interests to racism, the voting elites held on to the land holding stipulation to ensure that their interests were favored. As the country began to develop and diversify, the same class of elites who had a firm grip on the rights to suffrage slowly initiated the expansion of those rights to the American politic. What caused the enfranchised elites who directly benefited from their

exclusive right to vote to actively pursue the expansion of voting rights? The cause was no single factor, but a combination of issues that enveloped the blossoming nation.

The social aspect was exemplified in the growing population of men who were full participants in the economic and social spheres of the country but lacked political rights (Page 35). They were unable to meet the land-holding requirements but argued that, “the right to suffrage was a social right rather than a natural right” (Page 36). Their line of reasoning was influential, but a separate social issue concerning the men serving in the army directly affected the country’s elites. American citizens fighting the wars but being deprived of the right to vote for the ones who sent them there, was a great hypocrisy that engulfed the federal government. By extending the voting rights to the ones who enhanced their own security (army), the elites in turn protected their own way of life (Page 39).

The economic aspects were even more closely related to the self-interests of the class of elites. States that were sparsely populated or burdened with debt broadened the franchise in order to, “encourage settlement and in so doing raise land values, stimulate economic development, and generate tax revenues” (Page 38). The material wellbeing of the elites that was utterly dependent on the monopoly of suffrage rights years earlier was now benefiting from the expansion of those same rights.

The political aspects of voting rights became significant with the emergence of political parties in the early 19th century. The competitive nature of American politics attached itself to the issue of suffrage and was fueled by partisan rivalries. Politicians immersed in this environment and determined to win elections, “were always alert to the

potential advantage (or disadvantage) of enfranchising new voters and potential supporters” (Page 39).

The end result was an expansion of voting rights that led to a six million voter increase between the 1790 and 1820 presidential election (Page 26). There were prominent contemporaries who supported universal suffrage for genuine beliefs in democracy, but many elites were motivated by the social, economic, and political issues of the time. Blacks, women, and Indians were still excluded from voting, but as new issues shaped the nation, they would ultimately gain that right within the next century.