

Expansion of suffrage in the jacksonian age essay



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The Age of Jackson, or the 1820's and 1830's, harbored changes in the government, one of which was the expansion of suffrage. Throughout this time period in American history, the right to vote created controversy and arguments, supporting and opposing the right of suffrage being given to the common man in addition to the wealthy, who already had voting rights.

The expansion of suffrage in the Jacksonian Age generated numerous arguments, mainly regarding the effect on the government and politics, the eligibility of the poor in society, and the morality of expanding voting rights and the voters. Arguments on the issue of politics were a foundation for a majority of the arguments on the expansion of suffrage in the 1820's and 1830's. Accounts of the negative effects of the expansion of suffrage on America's government and political system were seen in the late 1820's and 1830's. These were mainly from people visiting America from other countries.

In the early 1830's Alexis de Tocqueville, a French nobleman and social observer saw that " the most able men in the United States are very rarely placed at the head of affairs; and it must be acknowledged that such has been the result in proportion as democracy has out stepped all its former limits. The race of American statesmen has evidently dwindled most remarkably in the course of the last fifty years" (Document 3). Tocqueville saw that American presidents have become less talented and deserving of the position as a result of the expansion of suffrage to the " common man".

By comparing the American government during Jackson's presidency to that of the 1780's, where less people were eligible to vote, Tocqueville argued

that the expansion of suffrage was deleterious to the United States. A similar argument opposing the expansion of suffrage was from Frances Trollope, an Englishwoman who lived in the United States during the 1820's. Trollope saw that " Mr. Adams was out-voted for no other reason, that [she] could learn, but because it was " best to change. "

" Jackson for ever!" was, therefore, screamed from the majority of mouths, both drunk and sober, till he was elected" (Document 4). During her visit to America, Mrs. Trollope saw that the result of large masses voting for the president resulted in the President of the United States being elected because of popularity rather than his ability to be the leader of a country. Although her reasoning for opposing the expansion of suffrage was supported by her observations while living in the US, her argument is invalid because she did not witness the Corrupt Bargain.

This gave Americans a reason to oppose John Quincy Adams in the Election of 1828, other than popularity as Frances Trollope observed. In addition to the effects on government and politics created by the expansion of suffrage in the Age of Jackson, the common people's role in society was utilized by both sides of the debate of suffrage rights in the 1820's and 1830's. One of the people who opposed the expansion of suffrage was James Kent, Chief Justice of New York State's highest court.

He argued that, " there is a constant... tendency in the poor to coven and to share the plunder of the rich; in the debtor, to relax or avoid the obligation of contracts... to cast the whole burdens of society upon the industrious and virtuous" (Document 2). Kent believed that the common people were not

suitable to have power or vote because they were inherently lazy and constantly wanted to take away from the wealthy in society. He also argued that the poor would cast all of their burdens onto the wealthy, and thus were dangerous to society if given any power in the government such as voting rights.

While Kent believed that the expansion of suffrage to include the poor would create corruption in the government, others such as George Bancroft, a prominent historian, teacher, and political leader, saw the expansion of suffrage as a method to enhance the government. He claimed, “ the best government rests on the people and not on the few,... on the free development of public opinion and not on authority... individuals are corrupt [and] false, the masses are ingenuous [open] and sincere” (Document 5).

Bancroft believed that the expansion of suffrage benefited the nation because large masses involved in the government decreased corruption, which seemed more prevalent with reduced voting rights. In addition to the role of both wealthy and common men in society, the morality of masses and common men voting generated arguments both for and against the expansion of suffrage in the Jacksonian Age. During the revision of the New York State Constitution in 1821, Nathan Sanford supported the requirement that voters be property owners, thus supporting the expansion of suffrage.

He believed that “ the only qualifications [to vote] seem to be the virtue and morality of the people... those who contribute to the public support we consider as entitled to a share of the election of rulers... this scheme will embrace almost the whole male population of the state... founded on just

and moral principals" (Document 1). Sanford justified his support of the expansion of suffrage early in the Age of Jackson with his belief that the qualification to vote should not be based on wealth or property, but of the virtue of the people.

This was similar to George Bancroft's argument that the best government rested on the development of public opinion and not on the wealth or authority of individuals. James Kent, a New York Chief Justice, opposed the proposal to drop property ownership requirements which was supported by Nathan Sanford. Kent believed that universal suffrage, due to the poor's morals, would jeopardize the principles of liberty. This was because he believed that the poor tended to steal and covet the wealth of the rich.

While Kent had strong points and opinions opposing the expansion of suffrage, his arguments are largely invalid because there was no historical evidence to show his perception of the common man's involvement in the government. The expansion of suffrage in the Jacksonian Age generated many arguments both supporting and opposing the privileges of the poor to vote. The main arguments were based on the effect of larger masses voting on politics and the government, the morality of restricting or expanding suffrage to the common man, and the eligibility of both poor and wealthy to vote in society.

While both those for and against the expansion of suffrage in the 1820's and 1830's supported their argument with opinion, observations, and historical fact, the arguments supporting the expansion of suffrage consisted of more valid points. The arguments opposing the expansion of suffrage were mainly

from observers from another country as with Alexis de Tocqueville and Frances Trollope, or from the point of view of the wealthy as with James Kent's argument.