

The Fight for Suffrage, Continued

Suffrage, in American education, seems to end after 1965, when everyone was supposedly placed on level ground and equally enfranchised to represent their voices in democracy. Benjamin Franklin, sometimes regarded as one of America's first suffrage leaders, advocated to remove the property requirement for voting and stressed the importance of a fully-functioning democracy, driven by the people. It is important to pose the question: how can a democracy truly be people-driven if the people are wholly underrepresented, effectually undersized, and socially undernourished? Franklin seems to predict this pattern in modern society by declaring that “[a] great Empire, like a great Cake, is most easily diminished at the Edges”. By anticipating the struggles modern America faces in adequate political representation, Franklin and his words define the fight for voice in a community long silenced.

While it is true that we have come a long way from the blatantly exclusionary poll taxes, literacy tests, and grandfather clauses that legally oppressed black communities for decades, it is equally true that new, more cunning measures are being used to minimize the power of black voices in politics. Voting, like most parts of society, is a privilege-powered game, where governments can commodify votes with the simple manipulation of existing policies. These take the form of seemingly unassuming voter policies: identification laws, registration restrictions, and purges. As the American Bar Association outlines, voter purges work by “canceling registrations of people who have died, are imprisoned, have moved to another state, or become legally incompetent” (Smith). Additionally, some states use voter purging to remove people who have not voted in a certain number of consecutive elections from the voter rolls. It can seem straightforward enough at face value, and the 16 million purged votes from 2014-2016 can seem justified; however, the malice presents itself in the numbers: ACLU compiled data representing

voter purges in Virginia based on information that was found to have a 17% error rate which led to 39,000 votes not being considered; similarly, Arkansas wrongly purged thousands of votes for false felony claims (“Block the Vote”). So, it is apparent that voter tallies seem to be out of touch, but the consequences surely cannot account for oppression?

We often forget that some institutions in our country were built on prejudiced principles that were never truly addressed or mended. One such example presents itself in the recent *Shelby County vs. Holder* Supreme Court decision. As a result, states that historically exhibited voter discrimination no longer needed preclearance to enact voting-specific policies. The Southern Poverty Law Center examines the effect of this decision and relates it to the Jim Crow-esque legislation we had left behind as a nation: “Florida, for example, has been sued several times... [for] a modern-day poll tax... [that denied] people who lack the financial means to pay off certain debts [the right to vote]” (Abudu). The legacy of flawed voter enfranchisement still haunts the voting system and contributes to massive shortcomings in the protection of privileges.

The mobilization of misrepresented groups and hidden populations to make themselves heard *should* not be a controversial idea. Yet, our current partisan culture strangles discourse and muddles empathy until even the upholding of civil liberties becomes “political agenda.” Thus, partisan moves impede the “edges” and their centuries of struggle from claiming their rightful place in the “cake.” Franklin once made a remark that exemplifies the daunting yet necessary efforts to enact real change today, explaining that politicians have crafted “[a] republic, if you can keep it.” Democracy is a living, breathing offshoot of our society that is fed and nurtured by those who dare to challenge problematic institutions, and we can only be trusted to maintain our republic if we keep our fragile test-tube organism protected and alive. Luckily, the energy and

advocacy towards voting is only skyrocketing with each forthcoming generation. The voter turnout effort was enormously successful this past election in Georgia, where over 4 million votes were cast after an aggressive campaign for mobilization led to a massive uptick in participation for black Georgians.

Benjamin Franklin's theory of a "great Empire, like a great Cake, [being] most easily diminished at the Edges" proves extremely relevant to the modern struggle for complete suffrage. Voter discrimination has not remotely disappeared, but instead has been shoved under the rug to discreetly silence underrepresented, especially black, voices. At a time where mobilization is making notable gains in politics, it is imperative that America upholds the principles of democracy that governed its revolutionary inception in 1776.

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