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# Development of the American Electorate

## Session 4

Professor Devin Caughey

MIT Department of Political Science  
17.263: American Elections

# Roadmap

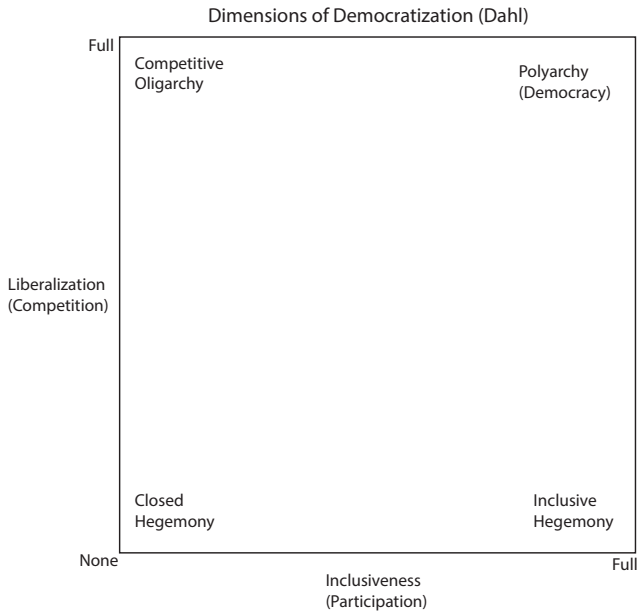
[Democracy and Participation](#)

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# Democracy and Participation

# Democracy, Competition, and Participation

- ▶ Minimalist definition of democracy (Schumpeter 1942):  
*The democratic method is that institutional arrangement for arriving at political decisions in which individuals acquire the power to decide by means of a competitive struggle for the people's vote.*
- ▶ According to Schumpeter, the definition of “the people” is irrelevant to a regime’s classification as “democratic.” Even regimes with highly restricted electorates are democratic if there is political competition.
- ▶ Most democratic theorists disagree with Schumpeter.
- ▶ Robert Dahl, for example, argues that there are two main dimensions of democratization: competition and participation.



## Principles: Civic Republicanism

Most competitive regimes have restricted suffrage to some degree. Why?

- ▶ One answer is the principled conviction that voting should not be a right, or at least not an absolute one.
- ▶ For example, an influential strain in American political culture, **civic republicanism**, holds that democracy is possible only where citizens are virtuous, independent, and invested in the community.
- ▶ Groups that were considered to lack these characteristics were therefore **not qualified** to participate in self-governance:
  - ▶ children
  - ▶ insane
  - ▶ felons
  - ▶ propertyless/non-taxpaying
  - ▶ women (who could rarely hold property in early America)
  - ▶ “childlike” non-whites

## Power: Strategic Manipulation

- ▶ But suffrage restriction stemmed also from the desire of those with political power (traditionally, propertied white males) to protect their interests.
  - ▶ Protect property from taxation or expropriation
  - ▶ Preserve patriarchal dominance of men
  - ▶ Maintain “psychological wage” of white supremacy
- ▶ The urge to restrict suffrage could be undermined, however, by strategic incentives to enfranchise likely supporters (or, in anticipation of future enfranchisement, avoid antagonizing new voters) → **competitive enfranchisement.**

# Evolution of Suffrage in America



## On the Eve of Independence (1776)

- ▶ Nearly all women and non-whites disenfranchised
- ▶ Substantial property and tax-paying requirements
- ▶ Eligible electorate: approximately 1/4 of free white males (far more than England or anywhere else); rises to 1/3 within half-century

## Jacksonian Democracy (1820s–1850s)

- ▶ Founding of first mass political party, the Democrats, around the presidential candidacy of Andrew Jackson
- ▶ Dismantlement of property and other qualifications for white males, but formal disenfranchisement of women and non-whites.
- ▶ Presidential turnout among adult white males rose from 27% in 1824 to 75%(!) in 1844.

## The First Reconstruction (1860s–70s)

- ▶ Sparked by turn in Civil War's aims from restoring the Union to abolishing slavery.
- ▶ Legally, begins with prohibition of slavery (13th Amendment), then continues with federal guarantees of due process and equal protection under the law (14th Amendment), and culminates in prohibition of race-based suffrage qualifications (15th Amendment), along with associated civil rights legislation.
- ▶ Extension of voting rights to blacks was very controversial, even among Northern Republicans, but without black suffrage Republicans had no chance of being competitive in the South (where almost all blacks lived) once it returned to the Union.
- ▶ Given violent resistance in South, had to be enforced with federal troops and law enforcement.
- ▶ Even after withdrawal of federal troops in 1877, at least 60% of black men in the South voted in the 1880 presidential election.

## The One-Party, Jim-Crow South

- ▶ In the decades after Reconstruction, Southern white conservatives gradually “redeemed” their region and used their regained control over state governments to restrict black civil and political rights.
- ▶ Black male turnout in the South fell to around 40% by 1892, 20% in 1900, and 2% in 1912, by which time all Southern states had adopted legal disenfranchising devices such as the poll tax and literacy test.
- ▶ Turnout fell among white males as well, due partly to disenfranchising devices and partly to the **elimination of partisan competition** to the dominant Democrats.
- ▶ Black voting rights remained largely secure in the non-South, but very few blacks lived there.

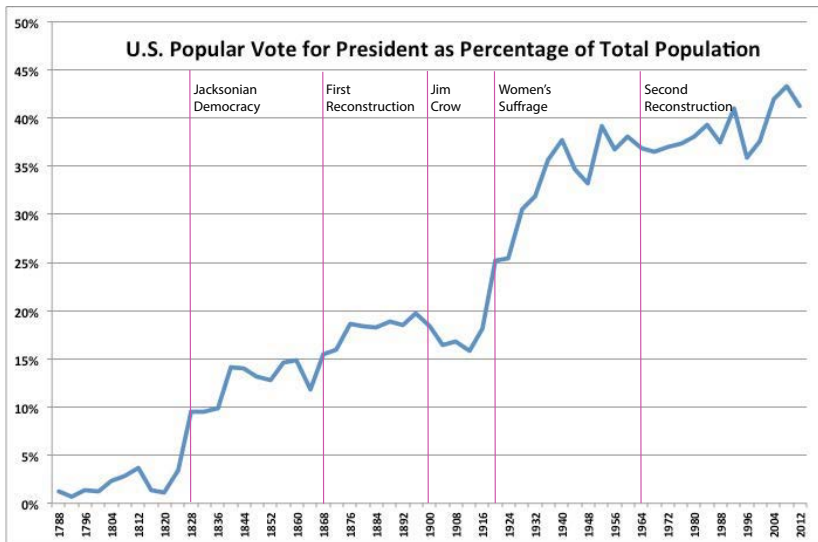
## Women's Suffrage

- ▶ Beginning with Wyoming in 1890, women could vote in some states, but gender restrictions on suffrage were not eliminated across the nation until the implementation of the 19th Amendment in 1920.
- ▶ Unlike black suffrage, women's suffrage was not a clear partisan issue.
- ▶ Black women sought to take advantage of the 19th Amendment but were rebuffed from the polls just like their male counterparts.
- ▶ Women initially voted at much lower rates than men, but the gender gap in turnout eventually closed and is now reversed.

# The Second Reconstruction

- ▶ Dismantling of racial and economic suffrage barriers in the South and break-up of the one-party system.
- ▶ Continued disenfranchisement of
  - ▶ felons (× rise of mass incarceration)
  - ▶ non-citizens (× large increase in immigration post-1965)

# Presidential Turnout, 1788–2012



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