

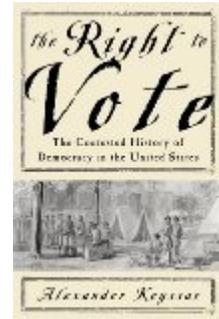
H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Alexander Keyssar. *The Right to Vote: The Contested History of Democracy in the United States*. New York: Basic Books, 2000. xxiv + 467 pp. \$20.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-465-02969-3; \$30.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-465-02968-6.

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The tragic death of Paul Wellstone, Minnesota's outspoken progressive Democratic senator, reminded us all, if it was necessary, how dangerous it is to be an energetic public figure. Although Wellstone died in a plane accident en route to a funeral, he was also campaigning vigorously in a tight schedule that demands a punishing lifestyle, especially during the electoral season when politicians customarily court prospective voters through regular primaries and in frequent fundraising events. Being an activist on a local and national level, is a risky proposition when the most spirited battles in Congress and in the media are fought primarily over allocation of domestic resources and foreign affairs rather than over matters of racism and political exclusion. But the contested history of access to power is far from resolved.

The complex question of whether the United States is or should be a procedural polity or a full substantive democracy, as well as what are the decisive moments for that narrative, has constituted one of the most fundamental debates in the annals of U.S. politics. What is needed to understand this controversy is a close analysis of who has the right to vote in free and periodic elections, presumably inherent in a self-described representative republic; who gets to exercise this liberty and under what circumstances; and how and by whom the votes are counted. Exploring these issues of mandate, power, influence, philosophy, and public policy as well as technical depth in an engaging manner is quite a challenge. Alexander Keyssar, Professor of History and Public Policy at Duke University, performs these tasks brilliantly. His treatise has already become the authoritative work in the field thanks to his thorough analysis and elegant prose. His appendix, moreover, can delight scholars in

its depth and breadth of reference materials.

Keyssar is not an objective spectator, of course; nor does he pretend to be. By lauding the advancements and regretting the obstacles, Keyssar makes what could have been a rather dull and minutiae-oriented project come alive, albeit from a decidedly progressive perspective that seeks social justice. Keyssar, for example, laments the public apathy concerning voting. Successful struggles to enable access to the ballots have caused subsequent generations to take this option for granted, resulting in an appalling lack of participation, which in turn results in a much higher say for the propertied and commercial classes through financial and lobbying efforts. These groups advance only certain interest groups rather than the national welfare. Although this reviewer largely shares Keyssar's views and appreciates his professional method, a more nuanced approach as to why there was such a concerted campaign to limit the right to vote, and whether there are benefits from elite white men wielding and protecting their residual powers, could have made the work more compelling.

Keyssar evidently thinks that Marx was right. Much of the political process is about class struggle—a fight for resources and sheer power. This book affirms the conclusion that the New World, perhaps especially the United States, could not escape that trap which makes the powerful even more influential and dispossesses the weak. Utopian visions of representative democracy collapse amidst the fierce competition between interest groups, which deem the public arena a zero-sum game. The comparative weakness of federal institutions, moreover, left “weak” groups (especially African-Americans) disen-

franchised.

The prolonged antics of the 2000 presidential elections proved most dramatically that who votes and how often, the voting process and who administers it, and who voters support while exercising this right are at the core of American democracy. Jesse Jackson once commented that if a police officer stops someone while speeding, the entire history of traffic violations committed by that person is revealed. Conversely, even after aggressive campaigns to recruit citizens so that they can perform their civic rights, such as the 1993 National Voter Registration Act (commonly known as Motor Voter Act), voting can remain a difficult, sometimes unattainable goal.

The book is divided into three parts. The first, entitled "The Road to Partial Democracy," deftly analyzes the early part of the American republic to the 1840s, with a focus on the exclusion of the working class and immigrants. The second part, "Narrowing the Portals," focuses on the crisis that led to the Civil War and the constitutional legacy of this conflict. Keyssar, wisely, includes women's suffrage in this section, taking his discussion of the issue well into the twentieth century. That timeframe, spelling freedom and power to former slaves and unrecognized females, was, to my mind, the peak of the book. The compelling narrative of the rever-

sals of African-American rights in the brutal "Redemption" launched by Southern whites under the cloak of "states' rights" leaves the reader with a greater and more poignant awareness of this period of unfulfilled promise. The final section, "Toward Universal Suffrage—And Beyond," which commences in the 1920s and goes well into the 1990s, is probably the easiest to understand given its proximity to current circumstances. The depth of erudition and presentation further attests to the sophistication of the author and the breadth of his research.

As I submitted this review, President George W. Bush signed into law, on October 29, 2002, the Help America Vote Act. It aims to reform and improve the nation's election procedures and proclaims minimum federal standards, which are intended to prevent the ballot disputes that largely discredited his victory two years ago. Nevertheless, Keyssar's peculiar American journey will never end. More laws will be enacted, but citizenship—defined by electoral participation—will likely be incomplete for the foreseeable future.

Although undergraduates will benefit from this book, probably only experts in the field will grasp its full value. Thus using Keyssar's book in survey classes will not grant this volume its true audience.

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