

Thomas Dorr on Universal Suffrage (1842)

In this speech, Thomas Dorr argued for the need to change the Rhode Island Constitution to enfranchise those who were not property holders. Across every state during this period, movements for what was called "universal suffrage" sprang up, many of them associated with the presidential campaign of Andrew Jackson.

THE principle of universal suffrage, as adopted in the United States, was the unrestrained exercise of that right on the part of all white male citizens over twenty-one years of age, unless the right was forfeited by some violation of law on the part of the individual. Thus, the white males of age constituted the political nation; and these, according to the several enumerations, state and federal, number pretty uniformly about one-fourth part of the whole people, and these again are divided pretty equally into two parties, which alternately triumph; hence, about one-eighth part of the whole number of souls would govern the nation, or, at least, would appoint the officers who should carry on the government, if the principle was fully carried out. Through the operation of various state laws, however, restraints are imposed which still further reduce the number of legal voters and render the governing minority of the whole people still more marked. Thus, of the New England states, Rhode Island had, in 1840, at the date of the census, a property qualification for voters; while in New Hampshire, as an instance, no restraint but those growing out of crimes were imposed upon the right of suffrage. If we compare these two states by taking the number of white males over the age of twenty-one, according to the United States census, and the number of votes cast at the presidential election of that year, when probably the strongest vote was brought out, we observe a great disparity... Thus, in New Hampshire, among 100 inhabitants, there were twenty actual voters, and only five per cent. of aged, sick, incapacitated, or neglecting to vote. In Rhode Island, out of 100 inhabitants, twenty-five were free white males, but only eight voted, while seventeen were mostly restricted by the operation of the property qualification.

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In many of the states the rights of the "unrepresented classes" have, in the State Constitutional Conventions, received more attention of late, particularly in the mode of protecting them; but it would seem to be better to go directly to the point, and alter their condition from the "unrepresented classes." In the case of property, the relations between man and wife in New-York and some other states have been changed so far, that the married female holds absolutely in her own right the property which comes to her through any other channel than her husband. Thus, her property is, before the law, no longer his property. In this position it becomes necessary for her to exercise the control of that property; and a law was passed at the last session of the New York legislature, giving married women the right to vote at elections of officers and directors in corporations of which they are stockholders. That is to say, if a married woman holds 100 shares of bank stock, she can vote at the election of officers and directors. Now, if the same woman holds land and houses forming a portion of the city corporation, has not she as much natural right to vote for the mayor and aldermen who manage the business of that corporation, as for the president and directors who manage the affairs of the moneyed corporation in which she is concerned? This, however, is applying a property qualification to women, and degrading the intellectuality of the voter in the manner pointed out by Dr. Franklin when the property qualification was proposed. Said he: "Suppose a man owns a jackass worth \$100, and that property confers upon him the right to vote: very well! he votes, but in the next year the death of the animal deprives the man of the vote: was it then the man or the jackass which voted?" It is not this ground of the mere possession of property, which, for the most part, she has not earned, that the female influence at the polls would be most desirable; but it is on the ground of the moral influence which the female voice would exert upon the course of government, that the greatest good might be expected. The moral influence of woman in the social state softening and purifying the ruder temper of the sterner sex has long been admitted, even if ever doubted. Her perception of right and wrong is more acute, and her superior love of offspring would form a most powerful check upon that profligacy of legislation, which has not only become so disgraceful, but is so rapidly increasing in magnitude, and which, if no check-upon it is applied, must become subversive of government.