UNIT 3 BIG IDEA

Revolutionary Backlash

During the 31 years (1776-1807) when women and free people of African descent could vote in New Jersey, the reactions of Americans were mixed. News of the New Jersey vote spread throughout the country, as did opinions on it. In 1797, a newspaper in Boston published an article on New Jersey's voting laws, which shows it was exceptional enough to gain attention in other states as conversations about women voting increased.

Some saw it as an expansion of revolutionary ideals, fulfilling a promise of a more equal society. Abigail Adams, in favor of the New Jersey voting law, wrote to her sister about the election of Reverend Whitman as a minister in Massachusetts. "Tell him if our state constitution had been equally liberal with that of New jersey and had admitted females to a Vote, I should have certainly exercised it on his behalf." Support for women's vote also appeared at the national level in 1791 when a national newspaper published a letter to Congress calling for the "right of election" for women in what is probably one of the earliest known calls for women's **suffrage**.

However, the New Jersey vote was not universally loved or accepted. Both men and women dissenters disapproved and even feared the vote, viewing it as a danger to political and social **norms**. Others viewed the extension of voting to women and free people of African descent as the ideals of the Revolution going too far. Ultimately, New Jersey took the vote away from women and free people of African descent in 1807. The reasons for why are complicated and speak to stereotypes about women, people of African descent, and immigrants and reflect the impact of partisan politics, the impact of global events, and a changing nation.

LOSING THE VOTE IN NEW JERSEY

A contested election in 1807 was the breaking point that resulted in the loss of the vote for women and free people of African descent in New Jersey. In 1807, a new state law was created that defined eligible voters as white male property owners. There are several reasons why this happened:

Stereotypes

As news of the extension of voting rights in the New Jersey Constitution spread, many in New Jersey and around the country began to question and consider who should have the right to vote.

Some dissenters of the New Jersey vote expressed their disapproval through the use of **stereotypes**. Many people — both male and female — believed that allowing women to vote would take them away from their traditional **gender roles** of housewife and mother. In addition, the idea of women voting posed a threat to the authority of the men who did not want to share political power. Some men believed that giving women the vote would enable them to push for other political rights, such as holding political offices, and creating what some mockingly called a "government of **petticoats**."

Why did some people believe that a government with women in it would be a bad thing? Some believed that women were not intelligent enough to understand politics and voted with no understanding of the issues. Many believed that women were not capable of making their own decisions. They believed that when a woman voted, she simply cast a vote for whomever the men in her life told her to vote for. Women voters were also accused of being immature. One newspaper editorial, for example, suggested that women's votes gave handsome candidates an unfair advantage over their opponents.

International events also shaped many Americans' feelings about women voting. In France, women were actively participating in the violence of the French Revolution (1789-1799). French women were depicted as armed and dangerous. Might American women go down this path if encouraged to vote and formally participate in politics? This fear encouraged some Americans to view women who were involved in politics in the United States as exhibiting aggressive and dangerous behavior that threatened the social order.

Rise of partisanship and political press

Differing opinions regarding who had the right to vote occurred during a bitter rivalry between the two major political parties in the United States, the **Federalists** and **Democratic-Republicans**. Though many politicians, especially Washington himself, did not support dividing the country through parties, divisive political factions developed as early as the Constitutional Convention and eventually became full parties by the 1790s. The Federalist Party called for a strong national government. The Democratic-Republicans argued instead for individual freedoms and the rights of states.

Political parties turned to newspapers to persuade the masses, particularly voters, to their views. New **partisan** newspapers began to emerge supporting, and being supported by, one political party or the other. Some newspapers even received financial start up from Alexander Hamilton or Thomas Jefferson, leaders of the Federalists and Democratic-Republicans respectively.

Both political parties actively courted women voters and applauded them for their support in campaign rallies and publications. However, as partisan divisions grew, both parties became increasingly concerned over women and free people of African descent voting, especially when these votes were seen to benefit the other party. These groups were seen as a threat to many politicians who worried about losing votes and upsetting the balance of power. Partisan newspapers began to promote stereotypes about women, people of color, and immigrants from Europe as unfit to vote.

By 1807, coverage of women voters in partisan newspapers was wide and varied as both political parties continued to investigate who was benefiting the most from the female vote. Some papers portrayed women voters as "petticoat electors," a derogatory reference to the skirt-like garment that some women wore from their waist to their shoes. Though still a popular garment, the petticoat was seen as old-fashioned compared to other, more popular styles emerging in the 1790s. The phrase was meant to diminish older women as supposedly inexperienced in politics and the pawns of male candidates.

Other newspapers described women voters as "Wollstonecraftians," after British feminist thinker Mary Wollstonecraft (1759-1797) who wrote on the equality of men and women and how it can better society. Her writings and beliefs in equal rights influenced many Americans in the push for women's equality. The newspapers suggested that Wolstonecraftians had radical thoughts resulting in the potential to bring chaos to the new **republic**. These two depictions — petticoat elector and Wolstonecraftian — branded women voters as inexperienced and dangerous, both of which heightened fears that women in New Jersey could tip the scales of partisan power.

> *"Although reinforced by the petticoat band/ True Republican valor they could not withstand/ And of their disasters in triumph we'll sing/ For the petticoat faction's a dangerous thing."*
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> - *Centinel of Freedom*, October 23, 1798

Changes in Electorate

During the 1790s, over 100,000 immigrants moved to the United States from Great Britain, Ireland, France, and the French colony Saint-Domingue (today Haiti). These immigrants were largely poor and seeking a better life after fleeing from violence in Europe and the Caribbean. They largely voted for Democratic-Republican candidates after meeting

the two-year residency requirement. However, both parties feared different groups of immigrants for similar reasons. One overwhelming fear was that the immigrants were working with foreign countries or specific groups to overthrow the United States government. On the brink of a war with France, a Federalist-controlled Congress passed a series of laws to control immigration and naturalization in part as a response to their fears. However, these and another law had a secondary purpose of crushing the Democratic-Republicans. President John Adams signed the **Alien and Sedition Acts** into law in 1798. These acts had a direct impact on the voting population in New Jersey. While the 1797 election reform law explicitly gave women the right to vote, the Federalist Party majority, both nationally and in New Jersey, increased its effort to regulate and limit the vote and rights for others.

Accusations of voter fraud

During the period between 1776 and 1807, several close local elections in New Jersey caused many to reconsider or double down on their beliefs about who should vote in the state. In these 31 years, the New Jersey **Legislature** received 73 petitions to investigate accusations of voter fraud and accounts of people being turned away at polling locations. Many of these complaints focused on illegal situations that they claimed were possible because, to quote one complaint, "persons of a certain description" (women and free people of African descent) were able to vote.

Some petitions accused married women and **enslaved** people of voting illegally. These groups did not meet the property requirement as all property owned by a woman became her husband's upon their marriage and an enslaved person could not own property legally. Other petitions included charges that men had voted multiple times by wearing wigs and dresses to impersonate women. Still more included accusations that men — including poll inspectors, who were supposed to ensure that legal voting practices were being followed — dragged women from carriages to vote for candidates against their will. Some petitions included all of these accusations and more.

LEARN MORE

Explore an actual petition written by a group of men from Hunterdon County, NJ in 1802:
https://www.amrevmuseum.org/virtualexhibits/when-women-lost-the-vote-a-revolutionary-story/pages/petition-of-voter-fraud

Most blamed disputed elections on judges and poll inspectors, who they claimed worked on behalf of a particular candidate or party. They claimed the poll workers allowed married women, enslaved people, or recent immigrants to vote illegally. Some charged that poorly written laws provided poll inspectors with little help in verifying a person's right to vote and that it was too difficult for inspectors to determine if a woman had enough property to vote or if a person of African descent was enslaved or free.

> *"Women vied with men, and in some instances eclipsed them, in 'stuffing' the ballot box."*
> - *Centinel of Freedom*, March 22, 1803

Courthouse Election of 1807

The anger over election fraud in New Jersey peaked in 1807 during a disputed local election in Essex County in which voters were deciding on the location of a courthouse. Citizens of Newark and Elizabeth came out to vote for their towns in the hopes the courthouse would bring an increase in business and development. After the city of Newark won the close election, the citizens of Elizabeth demanded a recount claiming voter fraud and corruption. After the investigation, it was discovered that more votes had been cast than there were eligible voters in the county. Many who were present at the polls claimed they witnessed men dressing as women in order to cast multiple votes or seeing poll officials allowing women to vote without proof of property ownership.

The two political parties used this contested election as an opportunity to take the vote away from women and free people of African descent, claiming it would finally rid the state of voter fraud and corruption. Both the Federalist and Democratic-Republican political parties were able to agree on this plan. Both political parties feared the power of these two groups to benefit their opponent. By turning the blame for voter fraud on free people of African descent and women, the New Jersey state legislature took the opportunity to **disenfranchise** them.

On November 16, 1807, property-owning women and free people of African descent in New Jersey lost the right to vote. The state legislature passed a new statute that defined voters as "free, white male citizens...worth fifty pounds," overturning the 1790 and 1797 acts. According to the **preamble** of the statute, limiting who could vote was "highly necessary for the safety, quiet, good order and dignity of the state."

LOSING VOTING RIGHTS

Historians have not found evidence that New Jersey's women and free people of African descent openly expressed opposition to losing the vote in 1807. It is possible that people of African descent were focused instead on other issues, such as the opportunities and repercussions of the state's new Gradual **Abolition** Act, passed in 1804. This act declared children born to enslaved women after July 4, 1804, to be free after reaching the age of twenty-one for women and twenty-five for men. Although those enslaved before the passage of the Act would remain enslaved for the remainder of their life, thousands of enslaved people were able to be freed under the new law during the next twenty years. It is possible that free people of African descent did not want to push for the vote during this fragile time when enslaved people were obtaining their freedom.

For women, the reasons for their apparent silence seems less clear. Though there is evidence of women (among others) voting against disenfranchisement in an earlier attempt in 1799, there is no evidence of a similar defense against the 1807 law. A possible reason for this could be that for a decade women's suffrage was associated with voter fraud and unseemly behavior in partisan newspapers. Public support for women's suffrage seems to have declined due to this, and defenders of women's suffrage may have been less inclined to come to its defense. This decrease in support for women's suffrage may have also led to problems at the polling place. Polls were already unfriendly to women, as they were located in largely male spaces like taverns. Many women voted in groups with other women or with family members. Did they do this to feel safer at the polls?

In the years after New Jersey barred women from voting in 1807, women activists opened schools to educate a new generation of women and keep them active in public life. These academies laid the groundwork for women to launch or grow reform movements in the nineteenth century, including abolitionism, prison reform, **temperance**, and suffrage for women. Women also remained active in politics informally by reading and writing about politics, influencing their male relatives and friends, and becoming involved in community and charitable organizations.