

UNIT 4: LESSONS ON VOTING RIGHTS, REPRESENTATION, AND NATURAL INEQUALITIES

John Adams thought extensively and continuously about how to structure a government that accounted for the natural tendencies and qualities of man. He believed that there are natural distinctions amongst men, and that a functioning republic must manage these distinctions. He opposed “leveling” more than others, for instance. The notion that everybody should have the same say in all government matters was absurd, he held, as not everybody has the capacity or the desire to make informed decisions that will benefit the general welfare. Those who do, he contended, should rule with the consent of the ruled. They form an aristocracy of talent that must be tapped, if not fully trusted.

Today, while voting rights are far more leveled than they were at the founding of the republic, relatively few people exercise this right, and most commentators believe that the public is not nearly as well-informed about candidates and political issues as they should be.

Where did John Adams stand on voting rights? What did he believe about the relationship between the legislative branch and its constituents? What might he have to say about some of these issues set in our contemporary context?

Document 1

Knowing that a Declaration of Independence would soon be written, John Adams’s wife, Abigail, felt compelled to express her views on the position of women in the new republic. She raised the issue more than once in her letters to John, who was in Philadelphia at the Continental Congress.

What is the tone of her letter? To what extent might John Adams agree that “all men would be tyrants if they could”? Abigail is making quite a radical proposition and employing the rhetoric of the revolution to appeal to her husband’s reason. Why might or might not this reasoning work?

Letter from Abigail Adams to John Adams, 31 March 1776 [excerpt]

Braintree March 31, 1776

. . . I long to hear that you have declared an independency -- and by the way in the new Code of Laws which I suppose it will be necessary for you to make I desire you would Remember the Ladies, and be more generous and favourable to them than your ancestors. Do not put such unlimited power into the hands of the Husbands. Remember all Men would be tyrants if they could. If perticular care and attention is not paid to the Laidies we are determined to foment a Rebellion, and will not hold ourselves bound by any Laws in which we have no voice, or Representation.

That your Sex are Naturally Tyrannical is a Truth so thoroughly established as to admit of no dispute, but such of you as wish to be happy willingly give up the harsh title of Master for the more tender and endearing one of Friend. Why then, not put it out of the

power of the vicious and the Lawless to use us with cruelty and indignity with impunity. Men of Sense in all Ages abhor those customs which treat us only as the vassals of your Sex. Regard us then as Beings placed by providence under your protection and in imitation of the Supream Being make use of that power only for our happiness [. . .]

Letter from Abigail Adams to John Adams, 31 March - 5 April 1776 [electronic edition]. *Adams Family Papers: An Electronic Archive*. Massachusetts Historical Society. <http://www.masshist.org/digitaladams/>

Document 2

In his response to Abigail, John Adams dismisses her plea as laughable. What is the tone of his letter? What about this note suggests that, though he mocks her suggestion, he actually is concerned about man's tendency to abuse power? Do you think men are more apt to "abuse" power than women?

Letter from John Adams to Abigail Adams, 14 April 1776 [excerpt]

Ap. 14, 1776 [Philadelphia]

[. . .] As to Declarations of Independency, be patient. Read our Privateering Laws, and our Commercial Laws. What signifies a Word.

As to your extraordinary Code of Laws, I cannot but laugh. We have been told that our Struggle has loosened the bands of Government every where. That Children and Apprentices were disobedient -- that schools and Colledges were grown turbulent -- that Indians slighted their Guardians and Negroes grew insolent to their Masters.

But your Letter was the first Intimation that another Tribe more numerous and powerful than all the rest were grown discontented. -- This is rather too coarse a Compliment but you are so saucy, I wont blot it out.

Depend upon it, We know better than to repeal our Masculine systems. Altho they are in full Force, you know they are little more than Theory. We dare not exert our Power in its full Latitude. We are obliged to go fair, and softly, and in Practice you know We are the subjects. We have only the Name of Masters, and rather than give up this, which would compleatly subject Us to the Despotism of the Peticoat, I hope General Washington, and all our brave Heroes would fight.

Letter from John Adams to Abigail Adams, 14 April 1776 [electronic edition]. *Adams Family Papers: An Electronic Archive*. Massachusetts Historical Society. <http://www.masshist.org/digitaladams/>

Document 3

The following response to a letter from James Sullivan reveals much more of John Adams's thinking about extending voting rights. Sullivan was a Massachusetts judge who stood poised to help craft a new state government once independence was declared.

Although Adams flippantly dismissed his wife's suggestion of extending suffrage, true to his character, he actually considered it in great detail. As this letter was written after his exchange with Abigail, perhaps his consideration actually grew out of Abigail's prompting.

What reasons does Adams provide for not extending suffrage to those without property, women, and children? In what ways does he hold that these three categories are analogous? Adams suggests that the only way to maintain a "balance of power" is to make as many people land owners as possible. Explain his logic. What does Adams mean by maintaining a "balance of power" and why is this so important? Does it imply, necessarily, maintaining the status quo? Adams seems to be concerned about extending the right for two practical reasons: the disruptions it might cause and the natural distinctions amongst men. Explain these. To what extent, given the historical context, is his reasoning compelling?

Letter from John Adams to James Sullivan – May 26, 1776, Philadelphia

Dear Sir

Your Favours of May 9th. and 17th. are now before me; and I consider them as the Commencement of a Correspondence, which will not only give me Pleasure, but may be of Service to the public, as, in my present Station I Stand in need of the best Intelligence, and the Advice of every Gentleman of Abilities and public Principles, in the Colony which has seen fit to place me here.

Our worthy Friend, Mr. Gerry has put into my Hand, a Letter from you, of the Sixth of May, in which you consider the Principles of Representation and Legislation, and give us Hints of Some Alterations, which you Seem to think necessary, in the Qualification of Voters [. . .]

It is certain in Theory, that the only moral Foundation of Government is the Consent of the People. But to what an Extent Shall We carry this Principle? Shall We Say, that every Individual of the Community, old and young, male and female, as well as rich and poor, must consent, expressly to every Act of Legislation? No, you will Say. This is impossible. How then does the Right arise in the Majority to govern the Minority, against their Will? Whence arises the Right of the Men to govern Women, without their Consent? Whence the Right of the old to bind the Young, without theirs.

But let us first Suppose, that the whole Community of every Age, Rank, Sex, and Condition, has a Right to vote. This Community, is assembled - a Motion is made and carried by a Majority of one Voice. The Minority will not agree to this. Whence arises the Right of the Majority to govern, and the Obligation of the Minority to obey? from Necessity, you will Say, because there can be no other Rule. But why exclude Women? You will Say, because their Delicacy renders them unfit for Practice and Experience, in the great Business of Life, and the hardy Enterprises of War, as well as the arduous Cares of State. Besides, their attention is So much engaged with the necessary Nurture of their Children, that Nature has made them fittest for domestic Cares. And Children have not Judgment or Will of their own. True. But will not these Reasons apply to others? Is it not

equally true, that Men in general in every Society, who are wholly destitute of Property, are also too little acquainted with public Affairs to form a Right Judgment, and too dependent upon other Men to have a Will of their own? If this is a Fact, if you give to every Man, who has no Property, a Vote, will you not make a fine encouraging Provision for Corruption by your fundamental Law? Such is the Frailty of the human Heart, that very few Men, who have no Property, have any Judgment of their own. They talk and vote as they are directed by Some Man of Property, who has attached their Minds to his Interest.

Upon my Word, sir, I have long thought an Army, a Piece of Clock Work and to be governed only by Principles and Maxims, as fixed as any in Mechanicks, and by all that I have read in the History of Mankind, and in Authors, who have Speculated upon Society and Government, I am much inclined to think, a Government must manage a Society in the Same manner; and that this is Machinery too [. . .]

[. . .] Power always follows Property. This I believe to be as infallible a Maxim, in Politicks, as, that Action and Re-action are equal, is in Mechanicks. Nay I believe We may advance one Step farther and affirm that the Ballance of Power in a Society, accompanies the Ballance of Property in Land. The only possible Way then of preserving the Ballance of Power on the side of equal Liberty and public Virtue, is to make the Acquisition of Land easy to every Member of Society: to make a Division of the Land into Small Quantities, So that the Multitude may be possessed of landed Estates. If the Multitude is possessed of the Ballance of real Estate, the Multitude will have the Ballance of Power, and in that Case the Multitude will take Care of the Liberty, Virtue, and Interest of the Multitude in all Acts of Government.

I believe these Principles have been felt, if not understood in the Massachusetts Bay, from the Beginning: And therefore I Should think that Wisdom and Policy would dictate in these Times, to be very cautious of making Alterations. Our people have never been very rigid in Scrutinizing into the Qualifications of Voters, and I presume they will not now begin to be so. But I would not advise them to make any alteration in the Laws, at present, respecting the Qualifications of Voters.

Your Idea, that those Laws, which affect the Lives and personal Liberty of all, or which inflict corporal Punishment, affect those, who are not qualified to vote, as well as those who are, is just. But, So they do Women, as well as Men, Children as well as Adults. What Reason Should there be, for excluding a Man of Twenty years, Eleven Months and twenty-seven days old, from a Vote when you admit one, who is twenty one? The Reason is, you must fix upon Some Period in Life, when the Understanding and Will of Men in general is fit to be trusted by the Public. Will not the Same Reason justify the State in fixing upon Some certain Quantity of Property, as a Qualification.

The Same Reasoning, which will induce you to admit all Men, who have no Property, to vote, with those who have, for those Laws, which affect the Person will prove that you ought to admit Women and Children: for generally Speaking, Women and Children, have as good Judgment, and as independent Minds as those Men who are wholly destitute of

Property: these last being to all Intents and Purposes as much dependent upon others, who will please to feed, cloath, and employ them, as Women are upon their Husbands, or Children on their Parents [. . .]

Depend upon it, sir, it is dangerous to open So fruitfull a Source of Controversy and Altercation, as would be opened by attempting to alter the Qualifications of Voters. There will be no End of it. New Claims will arise. Women will demand a Vote. Lads from 12 to 21 will think their Rights not enough attended to, and every Man, who has not a Farthing, will demand an equal Voice with any other in all Acts of State, It tends to confound and destroy all Distinctions, and prostrate all Ranks, to one common Levell.

John Adams to James Sullivan, 26 May 1776, *Papers of John Adams*, Vol. 4, ed. Robert J. Taylor (Boston, Massachusetts Historical Society, 1979), 209-213

Document 4

In his essay, "Thoughts on Government," written in 1776, Adams aimed to influence how the newly independent states organized their governments. He defined the function and formulation of a legislative branch.

Consistent with his letter to Sullivan, Adams suggests that there be limits on voting rights. Why might he not wish to define these limits? Why does he, again, suggest not changing current voting standards? Adams says that a representative body should be the exact portrait of the entire society, but in miniature. Is such a composition possible? What responsibilities follow for those in government and for citizens? Is Adams contradicting his views as stated in his letter to James Sullivan?

Thoughts on Government, 1776 [excerpt]

As good government, is an empire of laws, how shall your laws be made? In a large society, inhabiting an extensive country, it is impossible that the whole should assemble, to make laws: The first necessary step then, is, to depute power from the many, to a few of the most wise and good. But by what rules shall you chuse your Representatives? Agree upon the number and qualifications of persons, who shall have the benefit of choosing, or annex this priviledge to the inhabitants of a certain extent of ground.

The principle difficulty lies, and the greatest care should be employed in constituting this Representative Assembly. It should be in miniature, an exact portrait of the people at large. It should think, feel, reason, and act like them. That it may be the interest of this Assembly to do strict justice at all times, it should be an equal representation, or in other words equal interest among the people should have equal interest in it. Great care should be taken to effect this, and to prevent unfair, partial, and corrupt elections. Such regulations, however, may be better made in times of greater tranquility than the present, and they will spring up themselves naturally, when all the powers of government come to be in the hands of the people's friends. At present, it will be safest to proceed in all established modes, to which the people have been familiarised by habit.

John Adams, "Thoughts on Government," in *Papers of John Adams*, Vol. 4, ed. Robert J. Taylor (Boston: Massachusetts Historical Society, 1979), 86-93.

Document 5

In 1787, Adams again wished to influence the way government was structured. This time, he wrote a three-volume book that, in effect, supported the proposed United States Constitution through an extensive examination of the history of governments. Here, Adams wrote about the purpose of and need for a "lower house" of representatives.

What assumptions does Adams make of the common man? To what extent are these assumptions consistent with his thought in the prior documents? Why does Adams hold that frequent elections are needed? To what extent do you agree with Adams's characterization of the nature of the common man?

Defence of the Constitutions of Government of the United States of America, 1787-1788 [excerpt]

It is often said, too, that farmers, merchants, and mechanics, are too inattentive to public affairs, and too patient under oppression. This is undoubtedly true, and will forever be so; and, what is worse, the most sober, industrious, and peaceable of them, will forever be the least attentive, and the least disposed to exert themselves in hazardous and disagreeable efforts of resistance. The only practicable method, therefore, of giving to farmers, &c. the equal right of citizens, and their proper weight and influence in society, is by elections, frequently repeated, of a house of commons, an assembly which shall be an essential part of the sovereignty [. . .] The moral equality that nature has unalterably established among men, gives these an undoubted right to have every road opened to them for advancement in life and in power that is open to any others. These are the characters which will be discovered in popular elections.

John Adams, "Defense of the Constitutions of Government of the United States of America," in *The works of John Adams : second President of the United States*, Vol. 5, ed. Charles Francis Adams (Freeport, New York: Books for Libraries Press, 1969), 457.

Document 6

In the same work, Adams took up human nature and the need for an "upper house" or Senate. While he felt that the legislature would benefit from the leadership of elite and educated men, the more prestigious Senate also would naturally attract those most likely to abuse power.

What seems to be the primary purpose of a Senate, according to Adams? Again, what does this tell us about how the will of the people is best represented? To what extent do you agree with Adams's characterization of the "rich, well-born." Do you agree with Adams that a Senate can both benefit from the elite and restrain their ambition?

Defence of the Constitutions of Government of the United States of America, 1787-1788 [excerpt]

The rich, the well-born, and the able, acquire an influence among the people that will soon be too much for simple honesty and plain sense, in a house of representatives. The most illustrious of them must, therefore, be separated from the mass, and placed by themselves in a senate; this is, to all honest and useful intents, an ostracism. A member of a senate, of immense wealth, the most respected birth, and transcendent abilities, has no influence in the nation, in comparison of what he would have in a single representative assembly. When a senate exists, the most powerful man in the state may be safely admitted into the house of representatives, because the people have it in their power to remove him into the senate as soon as his influence becomes dangerous. The senate becomes the great object of ambition; and the richest and the most sagacious wish to merit an advancement to it by services to the public in the house. When he has obtained the object of his wishes, you may still hope for the benefits of his exertions, without dreading his passions; for the executive power being in other hands, he has lost much of his influence with the people, and can govern very few votes more than his own among the senators.

John Adams, "Defense of the Constitutions of Government of the United States of America," in *The works of John Adams: second President of the United States*, Vol. 4, ed. Charles Francis Adams (Freeport, New York: Books for Libraries Press, 1969), 290-291..

Document 7

At the dawn of Washington's presidency, revolution had taken over France. In "Discourses on Davila", Adams argued that the French had taken the idea of democracy too far. It was too populist, he claimed, subject to the whims, ambitions, and human frailty of the masses. A government that intended to "level" everyone was doomed. The best form of government would recognize and account for the "natural distinctions" among people.

What does Adams mean by his assertion that no men are equal, but all are subject to equal laws of morality and a right to equal laws? How might he square this with his assertions that some people shouldn't vote? Do you believe in the natural distinctions amongst people? In what sense? What is your evidence? To the extent that there are, how should that impact who makes decisions in our society or who votes? That is, should those who are not "qualified" not vote or be decision makers?

John Adams, Discourses on Davila, 1790

Nature, which has established in the universe a chain of being and universal order, descending from Arch Angels to microscopic animalcules, has ordained that no two objects shall be perfectly alike, and no two creatures perfectly equal. Although among men, all are subject by nature to *equal laws* of morality, and in society have a right to *equal laws* for their government, yet no two men are perfectly equal in person, property, understanding, activity, and virtue, or ever can be made so by any power less than that

which created them; and whenever it becomes disputable between two individuals, or families, which is the superior, a fermentation commences, which disturbs the order of all things, until it is settled, and each one knows his place in the opinion of the public.

John Adams, *Discourses on Davila: a series of papers on political history. Written in the year 1790, and then published in the Gazette of the United States*, (New York: Da Capo Press, 1973, c1805), 20-21.

Putting it all together

1. In the whirlwind of uncertainty that preceded the Declaration of Independence and the ratification of the Constitution, people became very interested in what sort of republic would replace the old system. We must note that Adams lived at a time when most men, and almost all women, were not formally educated. Students at Harvard College were all male and there was not a compulsory, publicly funded system of education. Adams appealed to the notion that there are natural distinctions among people, and that government shouldn't try to meddle with this nature. What is at work in Adams's thinking is not bigotry, but the need for an informed citizenry, and a government that will carry out the will of the people, for the good of the people.

So, what about the role of education, which Adams holds as essential to the health of a republic? How might education allay any of Adams's worries about "leveling"?

2. Adams seems on all accounts, to be distrustful of human nature. Where do you see this in the documents and how did it affect his thinking about representation and voting rights? How does it affect yours?

3. What might Adams say to a proposal that property be redistributed to give men an equal footing and interest in the common welfare?

4. Make a case to Adams for lowering the voting age.

5. Argue that by the 1920's (or earlier) Adams would have welcomed women's suffrage.

THE ISSUE: WHO VOTES AND WHO SHOULD VOTE?

Enfranchisement has expanded significantly since Adams wrote about the need for stability and the dangers of expanding suffrage. Some Americans are making efforts to extend voting rights as well as ensure that more eligible citizens are registered to vote.

Examine the following documents:

“Why don’t Americans vote?” *Digital History* (accessed 11 August, 2004),
http://www.digitalhistory.uh.edu/historyonline/con_voting.cfm.

“Voter Registration and Turnout by Age, Gender and Race 1998,” *Federal Election Commission* (accessed 11 August 2004) <http://www.fec.gov/pages/98demog/98demog.htm>.

Use the documents listed above to consider these questions:

1. *Why don’t Americans vote?*
2. *What might we do about this trend?*
3. *How significant are the race and gender differences in voter turnout?*
4. *To what extent would this trend worry John Adams or validate his beliefs?*

Examine the following documents:

Jonathan Finan, “Voter Registration Drive Targets the Homeless in 16 States, D.C.,” *Washington Post*, 23 July 2004 (accessed 12 December 2007)
<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/articles/A7534-2004Jul22.html>

Ed Fletcher, “14-Year Olds Would Rock Under This Plan.” *The Sacramento Bee*, 9 March 2004 (accessed on 12 December 2007)
<http://www.sacbee.com/content/politics/ca/story/8460626p-9389735c.html>

“Measure to Deny Voting Rights for Prisoners Is a Step Back for Massachusetts, ACLU Warns,” American Civil Liberties Union., 2 October 2000 (accessed 12 December 2007)
<http://www.aclu.org/VotingRights/VotingRights.cfm?ID=8139&c=167>

Use the documents above to consider these questions:

1. *What are the arguments for and against enfranchising these three groups? (the homeless, 14-17 year olds, and incarcerated felons)*
2. *Consider what Adams held should be the criterion that one weighs when considering who should vote (ex. their ability to vote in an informed way, their investment in the public good) What would he think of enfranchising each of these groups? And why?*
3. *Where do you stand?*

Examine the following document:

Josh London, "The Non-Voting Way of Life," *The American Partisan*. 1 February 2000
(accessed 12 December 2007) <http://www.american-partisan.com/cols/london/020100.htm>.

Use the document above to answer these questions:

1. *For what reasons does the author suggest that the numbers of voters that take part in elections now is sufficient?*
2. *To what extent do you agree with his point of view?*
3. *With what elements of this author's reasoning might John Adams agree? What might he find disagreeable?*

SERVICE-LEARNING CONNECTIONS: VOTING

The following list contains ideas that teachers and students might like to pursue as service learning extensions for this lesson. Teachers should make certain students have ample time and prompting to reflect on the significance of their service and how John Adams might have considered their work. Students and teachers could:

- Set up a voter registration drive at the school. Several organizations have websites that contain instructions on how to set up a drive. See the *League of Women Voters*, *Vote Smart*, and *Rock The Vote*.
- Research important issues in an upcoming election and create public displays that outline the details of the issues.
- Develop profiles of Senators and Representatives, documenting their stances on issues and their voting records. Distribute pamphlets to the community.
- Conduct a public issues forum with other students or local candidates for public office.
- Assist immigrants with the process of obtaining citizenship and educate them about election issues and the voting process.