

## **DBQ 7: JACKSONIAN DEMOCRACY**

### Historical Context

A broad-based voting public is essential to any healthy democratic system. U.S. suffrage (the right to vote) has been expanded at different times in U.S. history. In colonial times, suffrage was limited to males, and then typically only to those men who were major landowners and taxpayers. But as years and centuries passed, suffrage was expanded. The most recent episode in this history of democracy's expansion occurred in the early 1970s, when the right to vote was extended to 18-, 19-, and 20-year-olds.

A large increase in the numbers eligible to vote occurred during the 1820s and 1830s. At this time, most states extended suffrage to poor men—factory workers, artisans, laborers, and others who, typically, were not landowners or major taxpayers. This movement to empower the “common man” with the right to vote is sometimes referred to as “Jacksonian democracy.” This refers to Andrew Jackson, who championed this cause in his political career, and whose personal life symbolized the rise of the “common man.”

The effort to expand suffrage during the “Age of Jackson” was a fierce struggle between those who favored it and those who opposed what they saw as a dangerous expansion of democracy. In many ways, the arguments used by supporters and opponents of Jacksonian democracy were similar to those who debated later expansions of voting rights: to African American men in 1870, to women in 1920, and to 18-, 19-, and 20-year-olds in 1971.

■ **Directions:** The following questions are based on the accompanying documents (1–6). As you analyze the documents, take into account both the source of each document and the author's point of view. Be sure to

1. Carefully read the document-based questions. Consider what you already know about this topic. How would you answer the questions if you had no documents to examine?
2. Now, examine each document carefully, underlining key phrases and words that address the document-based question. You may also wish to use the margin to make brief notes. Answer the questions that follow each document.
3. Based on your own knowledge and on the information found in the documents, formulate a thesis that directly answers the question.
4. Organize supportive and relevant information into a brief outline.
5. Write a well-organized essay proving your thesis. The essay should be logically presented and should include information both from the documents and from your own knowledge outside of the documents.

**Question: What were the major arguments used, pro and con, in the debate over expanding suffrage during the Age of Jackson? Which arguments were most valid?**

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A**

The following documents deal with the debate over Jacksonian democracy. Examine each document carefully, and answer the question or questions that follow.

**Document 1**

In 1821, New York State held a convention to revise the state constitution. A committee recommended dropping the requirement that voters be property owners. This would allow all white male adults the right to vote. The following excerpt shows how Nathan Sanford, the chairman of the committee, supported the recommendation. (From *Reports of the Proceedings and Debates of the Convention of 1821, Assembled for the Purpose of Amending the Constitution of the State of New York*, Albany, New York, 1821.)

The question before us is the right of suffrage – who shall or who shall not have the right to vote. . . . To me the only qualifications [to vote] seem to be the virtue and morality of the people . . . those who contribute to the public support we consider as entitled to a share of the election of rulers. . . . Now, sir, this scheme will embrace almost the whole male population of the state. . . . This scheme has been proposed by a majority of the committee; they think it safe and beneficial, founded on just and moral principles.

How did Sanford defend the plan to expand the right of suffrage to the poor?

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**Document 2**

James Kent, Chief Justice of New York State's highest court, opposed the 1821 proposal to drop property ownership requirements. Here are some of the points he made at the state convention in opposition to Sanford's proposal.

The tendency of universal suffrage is to jeopardize the rights of property and the principles of liberty. There is a constant . . . tendency in the poor to covet [desire] and to share the plunder of the rich; in the debtor, to relax or avoid the obligation of contracts; in the majority, to tyrannize over the minority and trample down their rights; in the indolent [lazy] and the profligate [depraved] to cast the whole burdens of society upon the industrious and the virtuous; **and there is a tendency in ambitious and wicked men to inflame these combustible materials.**

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Why did Kent oppose empowering the poor with the right to vote? \_\_\_\_\_

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What do you suppose Kent meant by "tyrannize over the minority"? \_\_\_\_\_

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What do you suppose he meant by the last line of the quotation? \_\_\_\_\_

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**Document 3**

Alexis de Tocqueville, a French nobleman and social observer, visited the United States during the early 1830s. His perceptive observations were collected in a significant book titled *Democracy in America*.

On my arrival in the United States I was surprised to find so much distinguished talent among the subjects, and so little among the heads of the Government. It is a well-authenticated fact, that at the present day the most able men in the United States are very rarely placed at the head of affairs; and it must be acknowledged that such has been the result in proportion as democracy has outstepped all its former limits. The race of American statesmen has evidently dwindled most remarkably in the course of the last fifty years.  
 . . . democracy is not only deficient in that soundness of judgment which is necessary to select men really deserving of its confidence, but it has neither the desire nor the inclination to find them . . .

What criticism was Tocqueville making about the expansion of U.S. democracy?

Is his criticism valid? \_\_\_\_\_

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**Document 4**

Frances Trollope was an Englishwoman who lived in the United States for several years during the 1820s. She returned to England and, in 1832, published *Domestic Manners of the Americans*, a very unflattering account of the United States, its people, and its culture. The following excerpt from this book describes the election of 1828.

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... this electioneering madness ... engrosses every conversation, it irritates every temper, it substitutes party spirit for personal esteem. When a candidate for any office starts, his party endow him with every virtue, and with all the talents. They are all ready to peck out the eyes of those who oppose him. When I first arrived in America Mr. John Quincy Adams was President, and it was impossible to doubt, even from the statement of his enemies, that he was every way calculated to do honour to the office. All I ever heard against him was, that "he was too much of a gentleman;" but a new candidate must be set up, and Mr. Adams was out-voted for no other reason, that I could learn, but because it was "best to change." "Jackson for ever!" was, therefore, screamed from the majority of mouths, both drunk and sober, till he was elected.

What, according to Mrs. Trollope, was wrong with U.S. democracy?

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**Document 5**

George Bancroft was a prominent historian, teacher, and political leader; he served at different times as ambassador to Great Britain, ambassador to Germany, and Secretary of the Navy. The following excerpt comes from a speech he gave at Williams College in 1835.

... the best government rests on the people and not on the few, on persons and not on property, on the free development of public opinion and not on authority ...  
Such is the political system which rests on reason, reflection, and the free expression of deliberate choice. There may be those who scoff at the suggestion that the decision of the whole is to be preferred to the judgment of the enlightened few. They say in their hearts that the masses are ignorant; that farmers know nothing of legislation ... but true political science does indeed venerate [respect] the masses. ... Individuals are corrupt [and] false, the masses are ingenuous [open] and sincere. ...  
Thus the opinion which we respect is, indeed, not the opinion of one or of a few, but the sagacity [wisdom] of the many.

What argument did Bancroft make in support of expanding the right to vote to common people?

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## **DBQ 7: JACKSONIAN DEMOCRACY, *CONTINUED***

### **Document 6**

“The County Election” is a painting by George Caleb Bingham in 1851. The original painting hangs in the St. Louis Art Museum.

Judging by this painting, do you suppose that Bingham was a supporter or an opponent of Jacksonian Democracy? Support your viewpoint.

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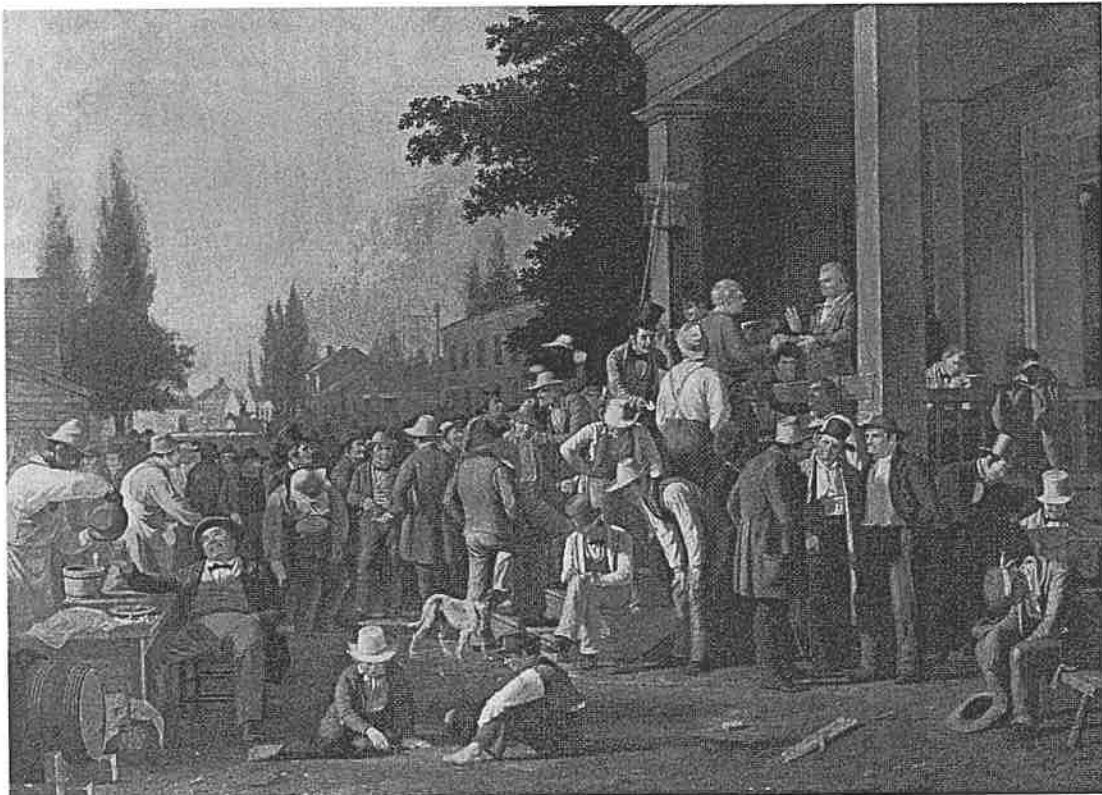
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*St. Louis Art Museum*

**PART  
B**

What were the major arguments used, pro and con, in the debate over expanding suffrage during the Age of Jackson? Which arguments were most valid?