The Right to Vote: The Contested History of Democracy in the United States. By Alexander Keyssar. (New York: Basic Books, 2000. xxiv, 467 pp. Cloth, $30.00, ISBN 0-465-02968-X.)

Why America Stopped Voting: The Decline of Participatory Democracy and the Emergence of Modern American Politics. By Mark Lawrence Kornbluh. (New York and London: New York Univ. Press, 2000. xv, 243 pp. Cloth, price?, ISBN 0-8147-4708-6.)

Keyssar's largely intellectual history of suffrage throughout the nation's history and Kornbluh's largely quantitative analysis of the transition from nearly universal male political participation in the late 1800s to the much less active polity of the twentieth century underscore a simple, but often neglected lesson: Because words and behavior are sometimes at variance, scholars should study both. The division of labor between these two books leads to contradictory conclusions. Despite mentions of low contemporary voter turnout and unequal political power at the beginning and end of his book, Keyssar's is mainly a hopeful story of the sometimes reversed, but eventually successful dismantling of class, race, and gender barriers to voting, in that unusual order of emphasis. Kornbluh's is explicitly a story of decline, from a late nineteenth century polity in which nearly every man, at least in the North, not only voted, but argued, marched, and often organized for his party, to a deferential, interest-group- and expert-dominated political system in the twentieth. In one, democracy flowers; in the other, it withers.

Limitations on their research strategies call some conclusions of both books into question. Thus, Keyssar's deliberate inattention to voting behavior undermines his four-period chronology. No doubt his first period, from the 1780s to 1850, saw loosened legal restrictions on the suffrage. But since most colonial historians estimate that 60-80% of adult white males could vote, how much did the suffrage actually broaden during the first generations of the republic? In

light of the extremely high turnout rates from 1840 through 1896 and the lengthy, but ultimately successful struggle for women's suffrage, is Keyssar justified in calling 1850 the beginning of a period of contraction, a "slow Thermidor" (80)? Since women's voting participation gradually rose after the Nineteenth Amendment and since the basis for the full enfranchisement of African-Americans was firmly laid in the 1940s and 50s, is it correct for him to characterize the period from 1920 to 1960 as "the quiet years," a period of "relatively little change" (xxii)? And since, according to most accounts, turnout decreased substantially from 1960 to the present, is this really, as Keyssar terms it, an era of "breaking barriers"?

Not only Keyssar's periodization, but also his emphases and conclusions derive from the fact that his book is a description of conversations about suffrage, not of changes in voters' actions or the causes or consequences of those changes. More concerned with high-flown rhetoric about principles than with analyses of why particular laws passed or failed, Keyssar cannot systematically weigh the reasons for alterations in the suffrage; instead he repeatedly just lists many incommensurable factors (e.g., 52). This does not stop him from off-handedly (and unjustifiably) dismissing explanations based on partisanship or self-interest as "superficial" and embracing sound-bite-sized theories as "deeper" reasons for conflict over voting regulations (298-99). Keyssar seems insufficiently aware that policy debates are full of rationalizations -- none more than those that distribute political power.

By contrast, Kornbluh's 165 pages of text, suitable for undergraduate assignment, contain few quoted paeans to broad principles, but many descriptions of party practices, in addition to 31 tables and 17 maps and figures. From 1880 to 1896, an average of 79 percent of the eligible electorate voted in presidential elections; from 1900 to 1916, only 65 percent. In off-year

congressional elections from 1882 through 1894, 71 percent of northern eligibles voted, a figure that dropped to 59 percent from 1898 to 1918. (12, 89, 99) Before 1900, young men, farmers, and recent male immigrants, many of whom could not read or speak much English, nearly all participated in politics. Elite reformers may have feared polyglot, multi-class democracy, as Keyssar shows, but those fears manifestly did not prevent what Kornbluh calls "the full politicization of late-nineteenth century America," based on community-level partisan organizations. (34-62) Partisanship is peripheral for Keyssar, central for Kornbluh.

After 1896, the percentage of voters who were perpetual political activists fell sharply, substantial differentials in turnout by class, ethnicity, and age appeared for the first time since the 1840s, and politics became a less important part of life in nearly every locality. When women were enfranchised, their participation was stunted, because most were socialized in the use of the ballot in an era of lower turnout and party competition. (Kornbluh, 107-12) Why the transformation? Keyssar and Kornbluh agree that in the South, laws that not only disfranchised blacks and poor whites directly, but also indirectly discouraged voters by diminishing party competition, account for the shift. (Keyssar, 111-15; Kornbluh, 98, 132-35) For the North, Kornbluh adopts a version of the *fait accompli* thesis, which V.O. Key, Jr. developed in *Southern Politics*, contending that laws that discouraged voters and undermined parties only permitted, rather than determined the decline in turnout, the rises in split-ticket voting and candidate-centered, rather than party-centered elections, and the shift to more active, administrative government. Instead, Kornbluh asserts, it was the decrease in party competition after 1896 that produced these changes. But scholars have rejected Key's thesis for the South and have never comprehensively tested it for the North, and Kornbluh's application of it here begs the questions

of why party competition declined and why the parties acquiesced in legal changes – the Australian ballot, registration laws, civil service reform, primaries, non-partisan elections – that decimated their power. Analyses of election returns alone cannot answer these questions.

Keyssar's and Kornbluh's books also illustrate two important points about the field of political history: First, the secondary literature about voting is richer and much more interesting than current denigrations of the history of formal public institutions imply. Though Keyssar's theme is that historians have either ignored the history of the suffrage in America or that they have treated it as a smooth and inevitable progressive expansion, his fifty small-print pages of endnotes undercut both contentions. If these contentions were correct, his book, the most comprehensive and valuable overview of the suffrage in America ever published, could not have been written, since it is necessarily based principally on secondary sources. Second, many unanswered, even unasked questions about suffrage and political participation remain. Indeed, Keyssar's twenty appendices detailing state suffrage qualifications from 1790 through 1920, many of which have never been closely examined by scholars, constitute a veritable catalog of research projects. And while Kornbluh points to social and legal transformations underlying the decline in party competition after 1896, he does not fully document or account for them. It is to be hoped that these widely-researched, astute, well-written books will focus more of the profession's attention on institutional political history. Much has been done, and more needs to be.

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