Tanya Andino

A More Perfect Union, For All

Even as the land famous for its “American Dream,” the United States has failed to achieve its own dreams of liberty, justice, and freedom—making it far from a perfect union. The impotence of the American government to realize its own ambitions is in most part a result of its contradicting rhetoric and consistent failure to achieve equality. The Lockean principles that predate and greatly influence the liberal republic of the United States emphasized a divine and natural state where all men are born equal. Due to the archaic and demode society of the 1700s, the equality encompassed in the founding documents was inherently contradicting and discriminatory against all populations not white and male and landowning. Thankfully, the government has enacted legislation that extends natural rights to marginalized groups; however, the contradictions of these bedrock principles still have an impactful legacy on the American government. Despite the liberal-republican ideologies that established this nation upon a tradition to “actualize the ideals for all,” U.S. government officials have inhibited their own ability to achieve a more perfect union. To abandon the mistakes of the past and move forward towards our perfect union, the United States must find ways to enfranchise the ideals of all and give all voters equal power.

In search of creating a more perfect union, it is important to understand the flaws and mistakes of our institutions, specifically from a democratic perspective. While great and powerful compared to other nation-states, the U.S. government has a number of misguided and harmful public policies in its history, which reinforced and perpetuated inequality between and among its citizens. Such realities have proven to be a substantial impediment toward the pursuit of the American dream. From the institution of slavery itself to the blatantly xenophobic legislation that deported American-born individuals with Mexican heritage and the internment of Japanese individuals during World War II, the United States has a long history of discrimination against many of its citizens. These inequalities are accentuated even more so when juxtaposed with the legislative rhetoric that established the American republic. Representation in the U.S. House of Representatives was predicated on the policy of counting African Americans as three-fifths of a human being, a compromise that would completely contradict the notion of an egalitarian society where all citizens were equal under the law. This glaring hypocrisy did not comport with Thomas Jefferson’s notion in the Declaration of Independence that “all men are created equal.” The irony, of course, is that Jefferson himself owned hundreds of slaves and fathered a number of children with Sally Hemings, who was one of them. These archaic values even manifest themselves in modern policies that inhibit the stride towards a more perfect union. The ability to exclude certain populations was a power enumerated in the second section of the very first article of the Constitution in which representatives would be appointed “adding to the whole Number of free Persons, including those bound to Service for a Term of Years, and excluding Indians not taxed, three-fifths of all other Persons” (Article I, Section 2). Despite the fundamental rhetoric that founded this nation, in which all men are created equal, the Constitution deliberately outlined which people did not have the same human right to representation. The issue of this inequality is detrimentally destructive to our government because it directly threatens the viability of our democracy. And yet, excluding minorities was so fundamental to the values of this nation that it was included in the first article of our Constitution. The preamble begins with “We the People,” and while the society of the founders allowed them to neglect the reality of ALL the people, it is imperative the United States correct this defect in order to achieve a more perfect union.

How is it then, that even more than two centuries later, the exclusion of certain populations in the Constitution still influences modern society? Despite the several amendments to expand voting rights to more than land-owning white men, voting discrimination is still horrifically prevalent in the United States today. It is an even more detrimental failure of modern politicians to allow these demode values to manifest themselves into current politics, impeding our journey to become a perfect union even more. The Fifteenth, Nineteenth, Twenty-third, Twenty-fourth, and Twenty-sixth Amendments all extend voting rights to those who did not previously have it and the Voting Rights Act of 1965 also protected the right to vote for millions. Granting voting rights to those disenfranchised despite race, sex, wealth, and to those eighteen years old and above, the United States has made many attempts to extend this power and right to representation to strive to become a more perfect union. Yet still, 5.2 million people cannot vote due to criminal convictions (Uggen et. al., 2020), and 4.1 million people cannot vote in presidential elections nor have senatorial representation in United States territories (Steckelberg and Esteban, 2017). Furthermore, beyond the people who do not even have the right to vote, those who do are still disproportionately discriminated against voting. After the repeal of section 5 of the Voting Rights Act, states that historically attempted to impede the voting rights and power of Black and Brown Americans could begin to do so, taking thousands off the voting rolls because their names did not exactly match. Laws in such states also required stricter voting identification and made accessibility much more difficult by closing polling locations and limiting the times voting could take place (University of Texas at Austin, Center for the Study of Race and Democracy, 2021). The Senate historical committee even declared that the first three words of the Constitution, “‘We the People,” affirm that the government of the United States exists to serve its citizens” (U.S. Senate, 2021). The disenfranchisement of citizens based on location and personal judicial history contradicts this bedrock value of the United States. The United States is a nation and a union intended to serve its people, to provide liberty and freedom, and justice to all. But these tenets cannot exist without representation and the enfranchisement of all Americans.

Many of these ideas delineated are radical, at least to some Americans, but none are more important than the abolition of the Electoral College which is the greatest threat to the viability of our democracy. Reasonably, the founders created a system in which large states could not completely overpower smaller states. But, similar to the three-fifths clause, this institution is outdated. The most potent manner to analyze its archaic nature is to recognize the issues with unequal representation. Currently, Census Bureau information indicates that Los Angeles County has a population of around 11 million people, making its population larger than all but 9 states. Despite having a much larger population, “An elector in “Wyoming represents around 150,000 voters, whereas a California elector represents the votes of some 500,000 residents” (Paine, 2020) making the voting power of those in Wyoming 3 times more powerful than those in California. Just as it is unfair to count minority people as a fraction of a human, it is unfair to hold the power of one voter 3 times greater than another voter simply because of her or his location.

The United States is currently far from a perfect union: it is divided and wounded by the consequences of our differences. What does unite this nation, however, is the consensus-building dream of prosperity and greatness. This greatness can only be achieved once all voices are heard equally in the political system. Voting is not only a fundamental right, but it is also a privilege that every individual who lives and contributes to the well-being of the nation should have. The national government exists to serve its people; but how can government leaders that do not listen to all of the people really expect to thrive and flourish over time? To achieve a more perfect union and prosper as a champion for democracy across the world, the United States government should extend the right to vote to all residents without equivocation. This right should be extended to even those who do not live in a state, or to those who are paying their debt to society because, in the end, this government serves those people as well. While that idea might be an anathema to some, it is imperative for the livelihood of this nation that all voices be heard through the election process and that those voices are protected from discrimination. This right should even be extended to all who live and contribute to the prosperity of the nation. Currently, over 11 million undocumented people live in and contribute to the economy and prosperity of the United States (Kamarck and Stenglein, 2019). Many believe that these people are dangerous, or criminals, and do not even deserve the right to live in the United States. And while they are not here with legal permission and that does pose a threat to security, millions of these people are simply trying to make a better life for themselves and their families. They work picking fruit, cleaning our toilets, making our food, and taking care of our children. They pay taxes and are simply trying to live a prosperous and peaceful existence. My parents came to the United States over twenty years ago. They have worked hard in all the aforementioned fields, changing hats to make ends meet and sometimes working multiple jobs. They pay their taxes and have raised three successful American children. They are the embodiment of the American Dream. They have given decades to the prosperity of this nation, worked through the financial crisis in 2008-09, and the ongoing global pandemic; they deserve to have their voice heard.

In pursuit of a more perfect union, the United States should extend the right to vote to all of its citizens—while extending citizenship to all—and should furthermore count these votes equally. Voting is the cornerstone of our democracy and should be protected accordingly. While our founding fathers found it acceptable to discriminate against those who did not fit the hegemonic ideal, we must no longer do the same. We must correct the mistakes of our predecessors and find a manner to create a more perfect union for all Americans. The United States is still a land where the American Dream is possible, but only if all the dreams are recognized. The founding of the United States was revolutionary and radical; the perpetuation of these ideals is essential in order to achieve the most perfect union, for all citizens.

Works Cited

Kamarck, Elaine and Christine Stenglein. November 12, 2019. “How Many Undocumented Immigrants Are in the United States and Who Are They,”

https://www.brookings.edu/policy2020/votervital/how-many-undocumented-immigrants-are-in-the-united-states-and-who-are-they/.

Paine, Timothy. September 20, 2020. “Why Should Wyoming Voters Have More Power than Californians?” *Los Angeles Times*

https://www.latimes.com/opinion/story/2020-09-20/electoral-college-why-should-wyoming-voters-have-more-power-than-californians.

Steckelberg, Aaron and Chiqui Esteban. September 28, 2017. “More Than 4 Million Americans Don’t Have Anyone to Vote for Them in Congress.” *The Washington Post*,

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/2017/national/fair-representation/>.

Uggen, Chris; Ryan Larson; Sarah Shannon; and Arleth Pulido-Nava. October 30, 2020.

“Locked Out 2020: Estimates of People Denied Voting Rights Due to a Felony Conviction,”

https://www.sentencingproject.org/publications/locked-out-2020-estimates-of-people-den

ied-voting-rights-due-to-a-felony-conviction/.

University of Texas at Austin, Center for the Study of Race and Democracy. 2021. “Modern Day Voter Suppression,” http://sites.utexas.edu/notleyvrp/article-on-modern-day-voter-suppression/.

U.S Senate. 2021. “Constitution Day,” https://www.senate.gov/artandhistory/history/common/generic/ConstitutionDay.htm#.