

# History 600: The Right to Vote

University of Wisconsin-Madison, Spring 2006  
Prof. Steve Kantrowitz  
Thursdays, 9 – 11 a.m.  
Humanities 5257

## The Seminar

We are a community of scholars. You are not in competition with each other, and it is possible for everyone in the seminar to earn an A. Please help each other succeed.

Over the next 15 weeks you will:

- Learn how historians analyze, interpret, and write about primary sources
- Prepare for and participate in discussions of the common readings
- Turn in several short writing assignments, including revisions
- Research and write a substantial, original work of historical interpretation

The main text, Alexander Keyssar's *The Right to Vote: The Contested History of Democracy in the United States*, is available at Rainbow, 426 W. Gilman.

## Research and Writing

For much of the semester, each of you will be working on a research paper. You will identify a topic, locate sources and the existing scholarship, and write several drafts.

## **Topics**

In general, you should expect to write a state- or community-level study of an aspect of American history in which questions of suffrage were central. This could mean arguments over who should vote, as well as where, when, and how; social movements in specific times and places that sought to expand or restrict suffrage rights in particular directions; or other incidents, debates, or controversies that shed light on the history of the suffrage in the United States. Comparative or transnational approaches are possible, but only if you have already mastered the historiography and are familiar with the sources for the other country or countries in question.

One place to start is to pay attention to Keyssar's footnotes: he has read and synthesized much of the secondary literature (historiography) on voting rights, so as you become interested in particular topics you should always look to his footnotes. Where he cites secondary literature, you should examine those works. Where he cites mainly (or only) primary sources, you may have found a topic without a substantial historiography.

The choice of a research topic—especially determining a) whether primary sources are available at UW, and b) whether another historian has already answered your question—is perhaps the most important phase of the project. Choosing a topic will be a process of working back and forth between topics that interest you, the resources available for studying that topic, and the existing literature on the subject. A workable topic will help

you at every step; a difficult one will frustrate you. We'll do our best to make sure everyone has a workable one.

An important note about the subject in general: a lot of writing about voting rights takes place in the language of political science. While some of this work may be useful for political topics, the methodology of history is somewhat different. We'll discuss this as it comes up. A rough guideline is that topics less than twenty years old are generally not suitable for historical inquiry. For example, the last two presidential elections, while fascinating, are out of bounds.

### **Resources**

For secondary literature on specific topics, check basic sources such as bibliographies (e.g. the *Harvard Guide to American History*); MADCAT and the card catalog; the stacks (shelf-reading is how historians find a lot of their sources); and the periodical literature, using electronic search tools such as Proquest Research Library, ISI Web of Knowledge, and America: History and Life (all available through the E-Resource Gateway at UW Libraries).

Some primary sources you'll want to consider using.

- **Newspapers on Microfilm:** The State Historical Society has a vast collection of newspapers, but do not assume they have the specific issue(s) you need.

- **Congressional Serial Set:** testimony, reports, and documents collected by committees of the U.S. House and Senate, and the records of debate in those chambers, published regularly since the early days of the republic. These include the hearing about contested elections, extra-legal interference with voting (e.g. by the Ku Klux Klan during Reconstruction) and much else. The State Historical Society, like all great research libraries, has a complete set (thousands upon thousands of volumes).

- **Memoirs, Autobiographies, and Personal Papers:** some topics may involve individuals who left their own published or unpublished record of events. The State Historical Society has (at a guess) ten thousand memoirs and autobiographies from all corners of North American history. If you are pursuing a Wisconsin topic, there may well be relevant personal papers in the Historical Society's Archives (on the 4<sup>th</sup> floor of the building).

### **The paper itself**

To write an original research paper, you must:

- Identify a question that you'd like to answer,
- Confirm that it has not been asked and answered by a previous historian
- Identify sources that may help answer it
- Read the appropriate secondary literature
- Write several drafts of a research paper.

The final product should be about 25 pages plus notes, approximately the length of a short article in a historical journal such as the *Journal of American History*.

Polished drafts of these research projects will be due **before** the end of the semester. You will comment on each other's drafts (and receive comments from me) before producing a final draft.

### **Grades**

Your grade for the semester will be calculated as follows:

- Preparation for and participation in seminar meetings – 50%  
(Includes discussion and assignments other than the research paper)
- Seminar paper – 50%  
(Includes work refining your topic and writing drafts, as well as the paper itself)

**All assignments are due at the beginning of the seminar meeting and may not be turned in late.** You Are Warned.

### **Schedule of Readings and Assignments**

Week 1: Jan. 19 - Introductions

Week 2: Jan. 26      **summarizing a text**

READ: Keyssar, *The Right to Vote*, xv-116

ASSIGNMENT: write and bring to class a one-page essay that answers the following question: *What forces led to the expansion of suffrage between the signing of the Constitution and about 1850?*

Week 3: Feb. 2      **identifying sources**

READ: Keyssar, 117-221

ASSIGNMENT:

1) In chapter 5 of Keyssar, footnotes 24 through 26 cite many primary and secondary works. Find as many of these sources as you can in UW libraries—you don't need to physically locate the works, just establish whether or not they are available here. Create a bibliography of the works cited in these footnotes, dividing them into broad categories (primary and secondary) and also into sub-categories of your own devising. Indicate whether or not the works are available in UW-Madison libraries.

2) Physically locate **one** of the works from those footnotes. Determine how and why Keyssar cites it in that note; come to class with the document (or a copy of it, or notes taken on it, as appropriate) prepared to offer a one-minute explanation of how and why Keyssar uses it.

Week 4: Feb. 9

READ: Keyssar, 223-end

ASSIGNMENT: to be determined.

Week 5: Feb. 16      **assessing a primary source**

ASSIGNMENT: Using MADCAT and your wits, find the proceedings of a state constitutional convention from the period between 1789 and 1945. (This is not the same thing as finding a state constitution; actual convention proceedings include summaries or

[sometimes] near-verbatim records of what each delegate said during debates.) The SHSW has (among many, many others) Wisconsin's two conventions from the 1840s; South Carolina's from 1790, 1868, and 1895; and Massachusetts, 1853 and 1917-1919.

Read one of these proceedings quickly, taking note of all debates and provisions regarding the suffrage. Come to class prepared to make a 3-minute presentation on the major arguments you found in these proceedings. (Three minutes is approximately the time it takes to read aloud about one and a half pages of double-spaced 12-point.)

**Week 6: Feb. 23 – NO CLASS MEETING THIS WEEK**

READ: Sven Beckert, "Democracy and its Discontents: Contesting Suffrage Rights in Gilded Age New York," *Past & Present* 174 (Feb. 2002): 116-157.

ASSIGNMENT: write a two-page essay that answers the following question:

*To what degree does Beckert's analysis of these events fit into the framework Keyssar provides for understanding this period?*

**Turn this in to [skantrow@wisc.edu](mailto:skantrow@wisc.edu) as an email attachment in Microsoft Word (or a rich-text/vanilla format) no later than Friday, Feb. 24**

**Week 7: March 2 bibliography**

ASSIGNMENT 1: Using a variety of keyword searches, shelf-reading, and all the other clever research strategies at your disposal, assemble a bibliography of secondary works pertaining to the constitutional convention you reported on several weeks ago.

ASSIGNMENT 2: identify 3 possible areas of research. Spend up to an hour on each topic in the historical society, and produce a summary of the literature you were able to find. Come to class prepared to present your three ideas and answer questions about them.

**Week 8: March 9**

Reading and Assignment to be determined.

**Spring break – March 11-19**

**Week 9: March 23 closing in on a topic**

ASSIGNMENT: Choose a rough area of study: a period and/or place and/or conflict over voting rights. Identify the most important primary sources available at UW for research in that area. Spend **four hours** before the class meeting reading in those primary sources.

WRITE: Send the class email list a written description of 3 potential paper topics in that area.

Week 10: March 30    **final topic selection and research**

**ASSIGNMENT:**

- 1) Pick one of your three potential topics and spend AT LEAST four more hours reading through the sources. Make a note of everything you find interesting or surprising. Revise your list of primary sources; bring it to class.
- 2) Write a one-paragraph summary of your research topic; bring it to class.
- 3) Thinking about the period, the subject, and your experience so far in the library, identify three or four books that are directly relevant to this topic. Bring a list of these books with you, attached to your list of primary sources and one-paragraph summary.

Week 11: April 6    **research**

**WRITE:** a revised topic statement that reflects what you have learned so far

**BRING:** three copies of your latest topic statement, including a tentative outline of the research paper

Week 12: April 13    **research and writing**

**WRITE:** a partial draft of the research paper; at a minimum, this should include a new revision of your first paragraphs and an outline or summary of the major points you plan to make, with references to the primary sources you will be analyzing and the secondary literature you are using.

**BRING:** 3 copies of that draft with you to seminar

Note: Thursday of this week is Pesach (Passover); Friday is Good Friday. If you are going to be out of town, submit your partial draft as an attachment in Word **NO LATER than Noon, Wednesday, April 12.**

Week 13: April 20 – **NO CLASS MEETING THIS WEEK**

I will schedule extended office hours on Tuesday and Wednesday and meet with each student to discuss your progress.

This week you will be turning in polished drafts to me. You will also exchange drafts with your writing partners (to be determined), comment on those drafts, and bring the marked-up drafts with you to class on April 27. Details and commenting worksheets to follow.

Week 14: April 27    **revision**

**BRING:**

- 1) Your comments on the polished drafts submitted by classmates last week.
- 2) Your own most vexing writing problem.

Week 15: May 4 – **LAST CLASS**

**PAPERS AND DOCUMENT COLLECTIONS DUE IN CLASS, 9 AM SHARP.**