

Prompt: U.S. History (USH.1) – How did the post-Civil War era transform America through civil rights struggles, immigrant experiences and Western settlement? How did these experiences both expand and restrict voices in the nation's democracy during this period?

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Establishing Voices of Democracy: Post-Civil War American Reform

“Our fathers believed that if this noble view of the rights of man was to flourish, it must be rooted in democracy. The most basic right of all was the right to choose your own leaders”, says President Lyndon B. Johnson in a special message to Congress regarding the American promise in 1965.

Democracy is the cornerstone of America and is what allows the ideas of possibility and hope to run through the country. Present-day democracy in America allows all Americans to have the opportunity to express their voice and participate as important decisions are made for the betterment of the people. However, during the post-Civil War era, establishing what opportunities there were and who had access to them was still a looming question. Americans were faced with many new challenges and developments beyond simply reuniting the North and the South after the ultimate display of sectionalism, the Civil War. Before the Civil War, American democracy often excluded women and people of color, denying them their voice. Now,

Americans had to address the status of former slaves, increased immigration, and the growing idea of moving and settling in the West. These new issues and ideas called for the country to reevaluate and rebuild ideals, forcing the evaluation of long-standing societal values like racial and class hierarchies. The post-Civil War era changed American society by establishing equal rights, equal protection, and greater opportunities for voices to be heard, key aspects of democracy. The Reconstruction amendments and new laws increased Black voices throughout America, immigration influx changed American culture and social structure, and Western settlement established new industries and communities that changed class structure, growing the working classes and expanding their voices politically. However, not all Americans were ready for the expansion of democratic ideals. Voter suppression and Supreme Court rulings restricted Black opportunities and Constitutional rights. Anti-immigration policies and nativism sought to stop immigrants' influence on cultural exchange and economy, limiting their voices and restricting their opportunities in America. Finally, Western settlement restricted Native American rights and suppressed their voices.

Black Freedmen and Formerly Enslaved People

Accessible opportunities to learn, work, and hold leadership positions in government drive the American dream and strongly contribute to democracy as it ensures that people have the means to participate in society and make their voices heard. Post-Civil War America did just that for Black freedmen, opening many doors of opportunity for formerly enslaved people. Freedmen began the fight for equal rights in America and increased opportunity after the Civil War. The 13th-15th Amendments created during Reconstruction abolished slavery, established citizenship and equal protection under the law for African Americans, and voting rights for

Black men. Institutions like the Freedmen's Bureau also sought to assist in their assimilation into American society, increasing education and work opportunities for former slaves by introducing freedmen schools and jobs. Black reconstruction also gave African American men the opportunity to run for legal positions, and around 2,000 men were estimated to have held local, state, and federal legislature positions. Through these new establishments, former slaves were given a voice in democracy and society, allowing them additional opportunities and the chance to be leaders.

While the Reconstruction era created many new opportunities for Black voices to be heard, efforts to restrict Black democratic rights continued and restricted freedmen's voice in democracy. The Supreme Court frequently undercut Black rights and the 14th Amendment, as shown through cases like *United States vs. Cruikshank*. The Supreme Court ruled that people were not protected from violations by private citizens, setting a precedent that Black freedmen were only protected on the federal level, making their rights susceptible to state restrictions. As they gained more opportunities and worked towards equal rights, Americans in the South felt uneasy. Before the Civil War, the South saw African Americans as property. With the new post-Civil War developments, their success and growing influence made Southerners uneasy due to their long-standing hierarchy where the Black population was at the bottom of the class system, even below poor, impoverished Whites. Americans in the South also feared job and resource competition with the freedmen. All of these factors increased the restriction of Black rights through Black codes. Literacy tests were implemented in order to vote, yet they were unachievable questionnaires rigged to fail African Americans. The Ku Klux Klan, a White terrorist group, also suppressed Black voters by instilling fear of voting through violence. The

lack of protection for Black freedmen and their rights ultimately hindered their participation in society and restricted their voices in democracy.

Post-Civil War Immigration

President George Washington's vision of America was that it would be a home for all, no matter their background. "I had always hoped that this land might become a safe and agreeable asylum to the virtuous and persecuted part of mankind, to whatever nation they might belong", he said, which effectively paints the picture of America during this time. After the Civil War, European and Asian immigration to America occurred, with many seeking the American dream and opportunities it provided. America's endless opportunities served as hope for many destitute immigrants from different backgrounds who faced hardships and difficulties in their home country. The influx of immigration led to an expansion of American reform and culture. For example, the California Gold Rush established the mining industry for gold and silver, which many immigrants had moved for and participated in. Free land in the West also attracted more people to immigrate to the United States. Through the Homestead Act, Chinese immigrants heavily contributed to railroad expansion in the West, working to build the transcontinental railroad upon their arrival. European immigrants contributed as cheap labor, fueling American manufacturing and agricultural sectors. Their participation in industry and labor also resulted in their participation in the labor movement as Americans fought for worker's rights. Immigrants helped to grow the movement, which eventually led to better working conditions, wages, and hours. Immigrant voices expanded democracy as they encouraged advocacy for reforms and made themselves heard alongside others. Aside from their impacts on American reform movements, they also contributed to shaping America's cultural landscape. Immigrants often

preserved their customs, establishing ethnic enclaves where their traditions, foods, art, and music prospered, diversifying and enriching American society and culture.

However, anti-immigration ideals and violence contributed to the suppression of immigration and immigrants' rights and voices. Fears of job competition and profitable immigrant establishments, particularly that of the Chinese, led to the passing of the Chinese Exclusion Act in 1882, which stopped Chinese workers from immigrating to America. Some Americans also began to resent immigrants' influence on American society, like the Nativists who were anti-immigration and prioritized keeping American values pure from outside influence. Violence toward immigrants often restricted their influence on American reform and culture as well. For example, the Rock Springs Massacre in 1885 burned Chinatown, a cultural community, and killed 28 Chinese miners. The Ku Klux Klan was also against immigration and often committed acts of terrorism to scare them, discouraging their societal and political participation and restricting their voices. The exclusion of immigrants and discouragement of participation in democracy continued through generations, as immigrants' children who were born in America were also denied citizenship and equal protection under the law until 1898. Despite the mistreatment, many still stood up for their rights and worked to make their voices heard. The landmark court case, *The United States v. Wong Kim Ark*, established *jus soli*, birthright citizenship, after Wong Kim Ark, an Asian American born in the United States, was denied re-entry after traveling to China. Despite hardships, immigrants still made an effort to fight for their rights and liberties. However, anti-immigration policies and nativism ideals all restricted immigrant influence on American reform and society, restricting their voices from democracy.

Western Settlement and Native Americans

As Turner's Thesis states, American identity and the culture of American democracy was dependent on the settlement and colonization of the Western frontier. American migration to the West led to economic growth and established working class communities that contributed to further American development and interconnectedness. Westward migration began as the Homestead Act of 1862 gave 160 acres of federal land to anyone who could improve the land. Movement grew industries like agriculture, as Western settlers farmed on their land to improve it. Railroad development in the West also created greater interconnectivity and facilitated trade and commerce. Ranchers fenced land and created stockyards where cattle could be taken by train for profit, establishing the ranching industry. All new settlers established cities in the West, such as San Francisco, which served as trade hubs and promoted economic activity. These new cities and communities furthered cultural exchange and contributed to shaping American society, but most importantly expanded the working class. These cities and communities grew in size as more settlers moved west, and with a greater working class, there was greater representation for them in democracy alongside the wealthier class. The Populist party was established as "the people's party", a party free of corporate money and influence. With an organized party of working people, they ensured that they wouldn't be excluded from democracy and politics by the wealthier population, overall expanding the voices and say of the working class.

While Western settlement expanded American development and allowed for the workers to expand their voice in democracy, it suppressed Native Americans and took away their land. The *Ex parte Crow Dog* decision by the Supreme Court established that no Native American would be considered a citizen and given the rights that came with it unless Congress deemed so. Additionally, with an increased desire for land in the West for American settlement, more

Natives were forced to relocate to settlements or face violence from American forces. In *Lone Wolf v. Hitchcock*, the Supreme Court ruled to disregard all previous Native treaties in 1903, suppressing all Native voices and power in America. Natives were also expected to assimilate into American culture, ridding them of their identities and traditions. Native boarding schools stripped Native American children of their cultural identity and only taught them aspects of White culture. Post-Civil War Western settlement ultimately led to the restriction of Native American culture and suppressed their voice in American democracy.

Conclusion

Overall, the post-Civil War era changed American society and culture, increasing opportunities for participation in democracy for many groups. Reconstruction opened legislature positions for formerly enslaved people and gave them the chance to vote. Immigrants contributed to the workforce as cheap labor and supported reform movements, which allowed them the chance to use their voices and increase their participation in democracy. Western settlement sparked new economic growth through trade, commerce, and interconnectedness, which grew the working class of farmers and gave them more power in democracy and political decisions. However, efforts to restrict rights for Black freedmen, stop immigrants' influence on culture and society, and suppress Native Americans continued. Amid the great reform and development of American society and democracy through opportunity, many groups continued to be restricted, suppressed, and silenced. Despite progress for Black freedmen and new perspectives and ideas from immigrants, struggles continued as they faced restriction and suppression. Pre-Civil War mindsets and ideals like White supremacy, Nativism and civilization of other groups, and Manifest Destiny continued to be prevalent in American society. Ultimately, there was a great

development, diversification, and expansion of American democracy and opportunities to be heard post-Civil War, but it is also important to identify the restrictions and suppression that various marginalized groups faced during this time as they fought for their rights and chance to use their voice.