

THE EVOLUTION OF SUFFRAGE INSTITUTIONS IN THE NEW WORLD:

A PRELIMINARY LOOK

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June 2000

Prepared for the NBER Summer Institute of the Program on the Development of the American Economy. Not to be quoted without permission.

It has long been recognized that the conduct of elections, including who holds the right to vote, is one of the most crucial of institutions. Varying the rules or organization of how votes are cast and of who casts them can have a fundamental impact on the policy choices that the elected representatives – who in some sense constitute the collective government of the electors – make. Given that governments generally have a monopoly of power over certain important activities, there are often major implications for how a society's resources or wealth is distributed across the population, as well as for the pace of economic growth. Given what is at stake, it should not be surprising that throughout history many have fought and died over both the design of the rules and the outcomes of elections.

In recent years there has been an increased appreciation of how democratic rules for electing government representatives might contribute to different paths of development. A number of specific mechanisms have been identified.<sup>i</sup> Many scholars have emphasized the relation between degree of democracy, or the distribution of political influence, and the distribution of income, with reference to how the nature of the franchise would lead to different types of tax systems, provisions of public services, legal and regulatory frameworks, levels of corruption, and trade policies.<sup>ii</sup> Implicit in these treatments have been suggestions that policies with effects on distribution will have indirect consequences on the prospects for long-term economic growth as well. Some have focused on potential negative consequences, such as the disincentives for investment that are created by progressive or higher rates of taxation, and infringements giving rise to insecure property rights to the streams of income from investments. Where an economic elite wields highly disproportionate political power, or a political elite exploits its position for economic advantage, a broadening of political influence through an extension of the franchise might diminish the returns to members of the elite and dampen their rates of

investment.<sup>iii</sup> On the other hand, there could well be advantages for growth to having a more equal distribution of political influence. Many would expect, for example, more substantial support of infrastructure and other public goods and services (that would augment the returns to investment by non-elite segments of the population outside the elite), a reduction in levels of corruption, a wider participation of the population in commercial activity and economic matters generally, and perhaps more competition throughout the economy (with associated improvements in the allocation of resources and in transactions costs).<sup>iv</sup>

Most of the systematic analysis on how the distribution of political power affects the patterns of growth has been confined to experience over the late-twentieth century.<sup>v</sup> This work has made important contributions to our knowledge, but there has been relatively little investigation of earlier periods (largely because of the lack of comparable data). One of the problems associated with the focus on the modern record is that processes that take place over the long run cannot be examined. One example of this deficiency is the difficulty of studying where institutions such as those that establish the distribution of political power come from. We may all agree that institutions have an impact on growth, but our interpretation of this relationship will vary with our understanding of where institutions come from; in particular, to what extent are institutions exogenous, and to what extent are they endogenous (and with respect to which conditions and processes).

This paper is intended to make a modest contribution toward the goal of improving our knowledge of where institutions have come from by surveying how the rules governing the extension of suffrage, a key measure of the distribution of political power, have differed across the countries of North and South America, as well as evolved over time within them. Because of the enormous shocks to these societies associated with European colonization of the New

World, and to the substantial variation among them in their initial characteristics and outcomes, such an examination has the potential for improving our understanding of the conditions that over the long run give rise to more democratic political institutions. Moreover, it should also allow us a better chance at getting at the underlying processes that relate the degree of political democracy or equality to the evolution of strategic economic institutions, and thus to economic development more generally.

That there was extreme variation across the New World in the evolution of social and economic institutions cannot be doubted. Over the sixteenth through the eighteenth centuries, the Europeans had established colonies throughout the Americas as part of a worldwide effort to economically exploit underpopulated or underdefended territories. Nations and private agents, often with national support, set about extracting economic and other advantages from unfamiliar types of environments, and there was great diversity in the characteristics of the societies and institutions that evolved. Common to all of the New World colonies was a high marginal product of labor and, for that era, per capita income. One of the crucial dimensions in which colonies differed was in the homogeneity of the population and in the extent of inequality in the distributions of income and human capital.<sup>vi</sup>

We have previously argued that the substantial variation in the initial degrees of inequality can be largely attributed to factor endowments broadly conceived.<sup>vii</sup> Extreme inequality arose in the colonies of the Caribbean and in Brazil, because their soils and climates gave them a comparative advantage in growing sugar and other lucrative crops that were produced at lowest cost on large slave plantations. With the consequent importation of enormous numbers of slaves, their populations came to be composed of a small elite of European descent with the dominant share of the population consisting of black slaves, or (later) non-white freedmen and

their descendants. Extreme inequality in wealth and human capital came to characterize much of Spanish America as well. The inequality arose here from the large populations of Native Americans and the Spanish practices (which were influenced by pre-existing Native-American organizations in Mexico and Peru) of awarding claims on land, native labor, and rich mineral resources to members of the elite (whose number were limited by restrictive immigration policies), but some societies, such as Argentina, Uruguay, and Costa Rica, were less affected. In contrast, the societies of the northern part of North America developed with relative equality and population homogeneity, as there were relatively few Native Americans and the climates and soils favored a regime of mixed farming centered on grains and livestock which exhibited quite limited economies of scale in production.

Contemporary estimates indicating that Latin America has, as a region, the greatest degree of income inequality in the world today make it clear that the extreme disparities of the colonial era have persisted.<sup>viii</sup> We have hypothesized that inequality in political influence may have been a powerful contributor to the maintenance of this condition, and that such inequality in political power was rooted in the exceptional economic inequality and population heterogeneity that prevailed during the early histories of these societies. Our contention is that to the extent that elites in any society were able to obtain disproportionate political leverage, their efforts could shape legal frameworks and state policies in such a way as to advantage themselves relative to others because of enhanced access to economic and other opportunities. What some have called 'political cronyism' would have privileged the individuals in question, as well as their families and children, and encouraged the persistence of inequality – relative to what would transpire in a society that began with relative equality. What was in the private interests of members of the elite may not, however, have been conducive to the growth of the overall economy.

In what follows, it is shown that the early patterns of the extension of the franchise, the proportions of the respective populations voting, and other aspects of the conduct of elections are generally consistent with the notion that the extent of initial inequality and population heterogeneity was associated across societies – even within the United States and amongst the nations of Latin America -- with the nature of the political institutions that evolved. Specifically, where there was extreme greater inequality and/or heterogeneity, the proportion of the population that had the right to vote was generally lower, and the timing of the extensions of this right from elite groups to a broad population generally later, than in areas where there was relative homogeneity in the population. These relationships are all the more striking because most of the New World societies were at least nominally democracies by the middle of the nineteenth century, and had embraced the rhetoric of revolution and modernization during their respective movements for independence. Only a few, however, would extend to most of the population the right to vote and to political influence until the twentieth century.

## II

Despite the sentiments popularly attributed to the Founding Fathers of the United States, the formal or conceptual differences across New World societies in who had the right to participate in community decisions were not all that large as late as the end of the eighteenth century. The British colonies on the mainland, like those elsewhere in the hemisphere, reserved the privilege of voting to white adult men with significant holdings of real estate, although differences in the extent of inequality in landholding across colonies as well as in the specified thresholds meant that the same sort of limitation on the franchise implied very different proportions of the population eligible to vote.<sup>ix</sup> This practice was rooted in a philosophy that can be traced back at east as far as medieval Britain in which the right to vote was reserved to

'freeholders', who because of their stake in land had more of a long-term interest in the welfare of the community (as compared to mere 'freemen') and thus the right to be a decision-maker and voter.<sup>x</sup> It treated communities as akin to business corporations, both in England and in its colonies, where perhaps this consideration was more appropriate. Landowners were regarded as analogous to shareholders, and entitled to vote; indeed, even non-residents were frequently permitted to vote where they owned property. Over time, as the colonies became more diverse socially and economically, the restrictions on the suffrage evolved to take account of the more complex society.

It is difficult to identify one single guiding philosophy that guided the changes in the qualifications for suffrage across the British mainland colonies. Instead, two general considerations might be said to have framed the political debates, with their relative influences varying over context. One focused on the individual and was concerned with what characteristics gave a person the "right to vote"; was it the ownership of property, the payment of taxes, residency, or simply being an adult white male. The other general consideration in setting the qualifications was what would be good for the community or the society. Would it be in the best interests of the society for non-residents, non-property holders, women, illiterates, criminals, or non-church members to be allowed to vote? Overall, the dominant trend over the colonial period was the movement away from the idea that the right to vote should be based solely on the ownership of land. There was a growing appreciation of how suffrage qualifications specified along this single dimension might exclude otherwise appropriate individuals, especially in urban settings, and as well as allow members of undesirable groups to vote. Over time, colonies began to introduce means of substituting other assets to meet property requirements, and this development ultimately led to the acceptance of qualifications based on the amount of

tax payments. In no colony, however, did there appear to have been a serious challenge to the notion that suffrage should be restricted to property owners.<sup>xi</sup>

All thirteen colonies maintained some sort of property qualification for the franchise on the eve of the American Revolution. Georgia, North Carolina, Virginia, New Jersey, New Hampshire, New York, and Rhode Island had minimum real estate requirements, specified in terms of either acreage or value. The remaining six colonies allowed for more flexibility, with the property requirement allowing either landholding, ownership of some other property exceeding a specified minimum, or (in the case of South Carolina) payment of a certain amount of taxes. Given the issues at stake in the conflict between the thirteen colonies and Britain, as well as within the colonies, it should not be surprising that the question of suffrage reform was central to many of the intense debates about the organization of state governments. Although some states, such as Rhode Island, merely carried over the voting qualifications in place during the colonial era, eight of the thirteen made substantial changes through the constitutions they adopted during the Revolutionary era. Most moved in the direction of expanding the franchise somewhat, such as by providing for alternative ways of meeting standards for property holders or adopting differential requirements for elections to different posts (such as New York's having higher property requirements for the election of state senators and the governor than for the election of members of its assembly), but only Pennsylvania eliminated wealth qualifications (replacing them with a taxpaying requirement).<sup>xii</sup> The paucity of data makes it difficult to construct estimates of what the effects of these changes on the size of the legal electorate were, but even those scholars who argue that the legal changes were important seem to believe their de facto effects were modest.<sup>xiii</sup> It is not clear why enforcement was limited, but many of those who opposed wealth-based suffrage qualifications argued that they were difficult to administer

because the amount of wealth held by an individual could change quickly, and decisions about valuation often involved some degree of arbitrariness. In cases where the desire to vote was intense, something less than rigorous application of the requirements might have seemed prudent to the authorities.

In general, the major break of doing away with all suffrage qualifications related to property or economic standing more generally, was led by new states entering the Union (see Table 1). Not a single state that entered the Union after the original thirteen had a property requirement for the franchise, and although a few adopted a tax-based qualification, it was only in Louisiana that the restriction was quite binding and endured very long. Most of the original thirteen (all but Rhode Island, Virginia, and North Carolina) had done away with property qualifications by the middle of the 1820s, but tax-based requirements for suffrage (and for the holding of public office) lingered on in many of them into the middle of the nineteenth century and beyond. Also striking is that of the states formed of the originally settled areas, it was those that were sparsely settled and on the fringe (Vermont, New Hampshire, and Georgia) that seem to have taken the lead in doing away with all economic-based qualifications for the franchise. The spirit of the Revolution undoubtedly contributed to the movement for the extension of the franchise, but the rather systematic pattern of where the changes were made seems significant and has attracted much comment.<sup>xiv</sup> Why were frontier states more liberal than the original states that had long histories? There have been a number of explanations offered. First, the U.S. Constitution and Congress had laid out a process for new states to join the Union and that process may have favored the adoption of state constitutions with universal white male suffrage.<sup>xv</sup> Another distinctive feature of the frontier areas that might have contributed to their having fewer restrictions on the right to vote was that they generally had a scarcity of labor. If

the right to participate in the political process was desirable to potential migrants, the new states thus had an economic incentive to adopt liberal suffrage provisions (which in turn might have put pressure on other states to alter their laws to remain competitive). The frontier areas were also where there was probably the greatest degree of equality or homogeneity in the population, and where the amount of property owned at a particular point in time was least informative of an individual's life course or commitment to his community.<sup>xvi</sup> These conditions could have made it more difficult to sustain a case for discriminating between otherwise rather similar individuals on the basis of holding a specified amount of wealth at a single point in time.

The actual attainment of universal white adult male suffrage, that is doing away with all economic-based qualifications for the vote, began when Vermont and Kentucky joined the U.S. in 1791 and 1792. Perhaps inspired by her neighbor, in 1792 New Hampshire -- which resembled a frontier area in many respects -- swept away the taxpaying qualification that it had previously (in 1784) adopted to replace a rather high property requirement. Although serving to keep suffrage reform a live issue of political debate, these states did not immediately attract a flood of imitators, especially since both Pennsylvania and South Carolina had in 1790 adopted new state constitutions which maintained, in slightly weakened forms, qualifications that were primarily tax-based. During the last decade of the eighteenth century, Tennessee joined the Union with a freehold requirement (but one that was waived for those who had been resident in a county for six months) for the suffrage, and Delaware and Georgia revised their laws to set the payment of a state or county tax, or of any assessed taxes, as the test.<sup>xvii</sup>

The suffrage issue was of course only one of a number of important issues that divided the population, and the political battles, if not alignments, were somewhat different in each state -- often not along party lines. In general, however, the older colonies were where elites were

slower to embrace the changes and political conflict was greatest (the salient examples include Massachusetts and New York); they were much slower to do away with economic-based restrictions on the franchise. Among new entrants to the Union, no state outside of the original thirteen ever had a meaningful property requirement for the suffrage. After Tennessee, the next state to join the Union was Ohio, in 1803, which required of its voters that they had paid a county tax or else worked out a tax on the public highway. Louisiana became a state in 1812, with a landholding alternative to a relatively stringent tax qualification; anyone who had purchased land from the United States government had the right to vote, as long as he was a white male who had resided in the county in question for a year. It was the only significant deviation from the pattern among new states, and it failed to follow the examples of its southern neighbors like Georgia, Maryland and South Carolina, which had formally or effectively done away with economic-based requirements and allowed white adult males to qualify for suffrage by length of residency in 1798, 1802, and 1810 respectively.<sup>xviii</sup>

Louisiana notwithstanding, the innovations in suffrage laws over the first two decades of the United States signify a critical juncture. The use of wealth as a basis for distinguishing who should vote was clearly becoming less viable, and the ultimate fate of such qualifications was becoming clear.<sup>xix</sup> This did not mean, however, that there was opposition to all restrictions on who could vote. The relatively homogeneous white male population might believe that differentiation on the basis of wealth was unfair, unreasonable, or inconsistent with basic rights, especially where wealth was relatively equally distributed and there was substantial social mobility, but they could support the exclusion of groups of the population that were obviously distinctive and arguably unsuitable for participating in community decisions: blacks, women, the mentally ill, those with criminal records, and those (immigrants as well as native born) who had

not long been resident in the county or state. When there were wealth-based restrictions, there had been no real need for provisions that dealt specifically with these classes, but as states eliminated or weakened the economic-based qualifications, there was increasing emphasis on introducing or tightening qualifications that would keep them out of the electorate. Indeed, it was typical for a package of reforms affecting the composition of the electorate to be adopted altogether, with the requirements for length of residence and mental health strengthened to offset the effects of lower economic-based qualifications. The tightening of residency requirements is perhaps not very interesting, but it is notable that despite virtually all of the new states beyond the original thirteen entering the Union with weak or no economic-based requirements for the franchise, Kentucky (and it only for a brief period) and Vermont were the only ones that allowed blacks to vote. The list of those that never allowed blacks to vote before the Fourteenth Amendment include California, Colorado, Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Kansas, Michigan, Minnesota, Missouri, Nebraska, Nevada, Ohio, Oregon, Utah, Wisconsin, as well as all of the southern states. Moreover, at the same time that Delaware, Maryland, Connecticut, New Jersey, and Pennsylvania eased their economic qualifications, each altered their constitution to exclude blacks. On the eve of the Civil War, the only states that extended the franchise to blacks were four in New England, where those of African descent were exceptionally rare, and New York (where a property requirement of \$250 was applied to blacks, as compared to no requirement for whites).<sup>xx</sup>

Indiana, Illinois, and Missouri were brought into the nation between 1815 and 1820, and none had any suffrage qualification related to wealth or to tax payments. There was little support within the relatively homogenous populations of the western states for drawing a line to distinguish the franchised from the disenfranchised among white adult males; indeed, a modest

proposal to require a tax payment was voted down resoundingly in the Missouri constitutional convention of 1820. Indeed, after Ohio in 1803, no northern state admitted to the Union came in with a property or taxpaying qualification (and no southern state, after Mississippi in 1817). Residency requirements, strictures on race, gender, and age, as well as disqualifications for infamous crimes were the only constraints on suffrage imposed in the more newly settled areas. Elsewhere, the significance of property was definitely on the wane, but remained an issue. Maine, once part of Massachusetts, joined the U.S. in 1819, and its constitutional convention issued a public statement describing its stand on the question: "Pecuniary qualifications have been productive of little benefit; sometimes of injustice. They are too often relaxed or strained to suit the purposes of the day. The convention has therefore extended the right of suffrage, so that no person is disqualified for want of property unless he be a pauper."<sup>xxi</sup> Of the two new southern states established during these years, Alabama made no reference to property in its suffrage laws, but Mississippi did adopt a requirement of either a tax payment or service in the state militia (one that was abandoned in 1832). Both devoted considerable attention to specifying which classes of the population could vote, and which -- mostly various classes of criminals -- could not. Lines were continuing to be drawn, but the population was increasingly skeptical of basing them on purely pecuniary factors.

Property- or tax-based qualifications were most strongly entrenched in the original thirteen states, and the most dramatic political battles took place at a series of prominent state constitutional conventions held in them during the late 1810s and 1820s. For example, although the Committee on Elective Franchise to the New York State convention had recommended in 1821 to abolish all property distinctions and require only virtue and morality of voters, opponents of universal suffrage put up a spirited defense. After lengthy discussion, and a strong vote

against an explicit property qualification, a compromise plan that offered a wide set of alternatives was enacted: a voter must have paid a state or county tax, or have performed military service, or have worked on a public highway, or have lived three years in the state (instead of the ordinary one-year requirement); in 1826, these qualifications were dispensed with in favor of universal white adult male suffrage for residents.<sup>xxii</sup> Another heated debate took place at the Massachusetts convention of 1820, where notables like John Adams and Joseph Storey warned of the consequences of extending the franchise. Although their eloquence was not sufficient to save a property qualification, the new constitution did include a requirement that either a county or state tax had been paid.

These vigorous political struggles were repeated in virtually all of the states that retained property or tax-based qualification, with a gradual winnowing down of the restrictions – often to the point of a token tax payment of a dollar or two. Because of the progressive erosion of the requirements even within those states that maintained them, our limited knowledge about patterns of wealth holding and tax payments, and because of shifts in the regional distribution of the population, it is difficult with the information available at present to construct precise estimates of how the eligible pool of voters changed over time. As shown in Table 2, however, comparisons of the number of votes cast with the adult white male population indicate that a very high rate of voter participation was realized rather early in the nineteenth century. These figures, which reproduce estimates prepared by McCormick, suggest that by 1820 more than half of adult white males were casting votes in nearly all states (with the prominent exceptions of those that still retained property requirements – Virginia, Rhode Island, and New York as well as Louisiana (that had an unusually stringent tax requirement) and Ohio (tax requirement)). McCormick’s estimates are somewhat puzzling in that they reveal much high voting rates in early

non-presidential elections than in the presidential elections in which Andrew Jackson was a candidate, but he argues that local issues were much more important during this era and that presidential races were not generally contested seriously at the state level. The traditional notion that it was Jackson and his Democratic Party that brought forth mass voting participation does not seem consistent with this evidence. The estimates do, however, support the notion that broad participation coincided with the adoption of laws that extended suffrage. As is reflected in the consistently lower voting rates of Rhode Island and Virginia (the two states that maintained property restrictions through 1840), part of the higher rates of the era were due to the changes in the laws governing suffrage. But the figures also bolster the view that a broad mass of the population was interested in exercising political influence, and that this sentiment contributed to the way in which the suffrage institutions evolved. Given the interest in voting that McCormick's figures suggest, it may have been difficult for legislators or participants in constitutional conventions to resist the pressure to extend the suffrage.

By 1840, there were only three states that retained a property qualification (North Carolina (for some state-wide offices only), Rhode Island, and Virginia), and North Carolina in 1856 was the last state to end the practice. Tax-paying qualifications were also gone in all but a few states by the Civil War, but they did survive into the twentieth century in Pennsylvania and Rhode Island.<sup>xxiii</sup> Poll taxes were revived during the 1890s and the first decade of the twentieth century, along with the introduction of literacy tests, as a number of southern states revised their constitutions or enacted new laws to sharply restrict voting by blacks.<sup>xxiv</sup> This effort was successful, and the experience of blacks in the South – when they were flagrantly denied equal access to public services -- during their period of disfranchisement even as a free people that dramatizes how important the right to vote can be.<sup>xxv</sup> As obvious and consequential as this

episode of systematic action to deny a salient social group a significant political voice was, what stands out from the U.S. record is how relatively rare such measures were – at least as judged by the proportion of the population affected (compared to virtually all of the other societies in the hemisphere). Women, blacks, and youth were the principal sufferers of restrictions on the franchise. The relative absence of binding requirements on white male adult voters does not appear to have been due to philosophical positions that everyone or even every man had an innate right to vote. Qualifications based on race, residency, as well as on criminal record and mental health, were too commonplace for the notion of voting being a basic right to hold. On the contrary, the pattern by which such qualifications were introduced and stiffened as property and tax-based standards were relaxed or abandoned suggests that the requirements for the franchise were being set through a process that accepted the drawing of lines but would change or vary them depending on circumstances.<sup>xxvi</sup> As regards the question of what circumstances favored the universal white manhood suffrage, perhaps the most telling observation is that the western or frontier states, together with highly rural northern ones, were the first-movers.

The weakening and ultimate removal of wealth-based restrictions on the franchise seems likely to have been an important contributor, together with the spread of more secrecy in balloting and other reforms in the conduct of elections, to a substantial increase in the fraction of the population voting in U.S. elections. But it was only one. Although McCormick's figures suggest a reinterpretation may be in order, the age of Andrew Jackson is frequently depicted as one of broad advance in political participation, and the proportion of adult white males voting in presidential elections did rise sharply between 1824 and 1840. Whatever the distribution of responsibility, the U.S. had amongst the highest, if not the highest, proportion of the population voting in the world by the middle of the nineteenth century. None of the Latin American

countries would equal this rate of suffrage for another seventy-five years. Indeed, throughout the hemisphere, only Canada, where similar movements for the extension of the franchise with similar outcomes lagged those in the U.S. by nearly a half-century, was much of a rival in political participation.

As is evident from Table 3, in the middle of the nineteenth century the United States had perhaps one and a half times the rate of population voting as did Canada, and eight or more times the rate as elsewhere in the hemisphere (including the other British colonies, such as Barbados and Jamaica). Given that most of these societies were at least nominal democracies, it is reasonable to ask where this extraordinary gap in the rate of the fundamental political participation that is voting came from? The chief issue, of course, is whether the gap in the proportions of the population voting were due to differences in the numbers eligible to vote under law, or to some other disparity in conditions, and if it was attributable to differences in qualifications for the suffrage, what accounted for the contrast in the laws? Even a cursory examination of the requirements for voting elsewhere in the Americas is sufficient to demonstrate that they were much more restrictive than in the U.S. or Canada, and thus they would be expected to have had much lower rates of voting. Not only were qualifications based on wealth or income very common, but the requirement of literacy came to be virtually universal in Latin America as well. These latter strictures, which were generally set forth as qualifications for being a citizen, effectively barred the great majority of wage-earners, whether urban or rural, and of Native Americans from voting. In such a legal environment, and with extremely low literacy rates (perpetuated by lack of support for public schools until late in the nineteenth or the twentieth centuries) and with unequal distributions of land and wealth, it is not surprising that the proportions of the populations voting were no higher than 1 or 2 percent until late in the

nineteenth century. Even the most progressive of the Latin American societies were seventy-five years behind the U.S. in voter participation.

The exclusion of non-property owners from the standing to vote, and from other rights of citizens, by the independent Latin American nations continued in the tradition inherited from the political institutions and policies put in place during the colonial period by Spanish authorities. Although the major figures in the Spanish colonial administrations were appointed by the Crown, or by its colonial representatives, municipal councils (*cabildos*) with elected members were allowed some significant political jurisdiction (including authority to levy taxes) to provide local public services. Each typically -- though not always -- originated with a set of appointed council members drawn from prominent citizens (*vecinos*) of the municipality or *pueblo*, but was later extended through elections of members. Participation in such elections (and frequently membership on the council as well as the holding of other offices) was generally restricted to substantial landowners (and sometimes even confined to the council members themselves).<sup>xxvii</sup> In restricting the right to vote to an elite propertied class, the regulation of suffrage in the Spanish colonies resembled that in the English colonies but was much more restrictive with respect to the proportion of the population that had voting rights. Given this history, it should perhaps not be surprising that after they gained independence, these societies -- again like their counterparts to the North -- continued to restrict the franchise on the basis of characteristics directly related to wealth.

As with the states in the U.S., however, the nature and centrality of the suffrage qualifications based on wealth-related variables changed. Although systematic information allowing for quantitative assessment of patterns has not yet been retrieved, restrictions that had often been specified in terms of ownership of land during the colonial period were made more

flexible after independence. In both early constitutions, and increasingly over time, qualifications for voting were revised to encompass those who owned different types of property (other than land), satisfied an income threshold, or had a certain social standing or professional occupation. Scholars of Latin America have often attributed these sorts of changes in post-independence political institutions to the interests of the *criollo* elite – who had been at the forefront of the independence movement and whose power was very much enhanced by gaining independence from Spain. It is suggested that they were much broader in composition, if not distinct from, the major landowning families, and that they accordingly favored reducing the importance of land relative to other gauges of economic and social standing.<sup>xxviii</sup> An alternative measure of status that came to be extensively employed in the laws was the ability to read and write – a capacity that was quite rare in these societies, especially among Native Americans. In time the literacy test evolved to become the dominant standard; for example, in its 1859 constitution, Chile considered literate males to have sufficient income to meet the qualification for the franchise. Indeed, the introduction and growing emphasis on a literacy requirement was the major change that occurred after independence in the laws governing the franchise. This development is remarkable not only for spreading rapidly throughout Latin America, but also for it being rather novel for the New World. Whereas a literacy qualification was not used in the U.S. until the 1890s, when the black population was targeted for disfranchisement in the South (as well as blacks and immigrants in the North), virtually all Latin American countries included a literacy requirement for citizenship (encompassing the right to vote) in their first constitution or soon afterward. For example: Bolivia advanced a literacy restriction in its 1826 constitution which was maintained beyond the 1945 constitution; Costa Rica had one in its first constitution as an independent state (1844) but eliminated it in 1913; Chile had a literacy requirement between

1833 and 1874, and then later from 1885 through 1970; Ecuador abandoned its property requirements for voters in its 1861 constitution, but replaced them with a literacy requirement (which endured until 1978); El Salvador had a literacy restriction in its first constitution as an independent state (1864), but seems to have eliminated it in 1945; Guatemala had a literacy restriction in its first full constitution (1879), and maintained it through its 1945 constitution (when illiterates were given the right to a public vote – illiterates with a profession were given the right to vote in 1935); Mexico had a literacy qualification in its 1835 constitution, but did away with it in the 1857 constitution (which also nationalized church property and set off a civil war); Peru had a literacy qualification in its 1826 constitution that was largely maintained through 1979 (there have been more than twenty constitutions, and a few of them prior to 1979 relaxed the qualification albeit briefly); and Uruguay had a literacy requirement from the 1830 constitution until the 1918 constitution. Brazil, despite a different national heritage, also had property-based restrictions after independence, but replaced them with a literacy qualification in 1891; this restriction endured until 1988. Overall, the only major Latin American countries that did not have had literacy requirements at the national level were Argentina and Colombia. In both of these cases, states or provinces were allowed considerable latitude in regulating elections and voting, and it seems that some did impose literacy qualifications.<sup>xxix</sup>

To an even greater extent than was the case in the United States, the requirements for suffrage seem to have made a difference in the rates of political participation across Latin America. This is apparent in cross-section from Tables 2 and 3 in that the countries with the most progressive suffrage laws (Argentina, Costa Rica, and Uruguay – which lead in extending the franchise early in the 20<sup>th</sup> century) having markedly higher rates of the population voting. That the literacy restrictions could have had such a great impact on participation in elections is

evident from the exceptionally low literacy rates in Latin America (see Table 4), and indeed nearly everywhere in the hemisphere except for the U.S. and Canada, until the twentieth century. Within countries, even the short-term responses to laws extending suffrage were significant in terms of increasing the proportions of the population voting. For example, after the literacy requirement in Chile was removed by the 1874 constitution (an action reversed in 1885), the proportion of voters in the population more than tripled within a few years. In Argentina, the 1912 reform that introduced the so-called 'Australian ballot', with secrecy and standardized public ballots, as well as universal and compulsory suffrage for men over eighteen, led to a rapid and dramatic increase in political participation, as "voting increased threefold or fourfold in the parliamentary elections of 1912, 1913, and 1914, and rose still further in the presidential elections of 1916".<sup>xxx</sup> Indeed, the change in the law is generally credited with being responsible for an historic defeat of the long dominant National Autonomist party (PAN) and the election of the presidential candidate of the principal opposition Radical Civic Union. Such evidence that the extent of the franchise mattered both quantitatively and qualitatively is consistent with the observation that intense political debates normally surrounded changes in the suffrage laws in all of these countries.

### III

The record of suffrage in the Americas highlights a series of fundamental questions about the evolution of political institutions. What factors account for the systematic variation across the societies of the New World in the tightness of the restrictions on who was eligible to vote, and in the fraction of the population that voted? What factors accounted for the variation in form

of the restrictions over place and time, and did they matter? What were the effects of these restrictions within the respective societies?

These important issues, and the relevance of the evidence reviewed here, deserve further study. Nevertheless, a few observations seem warranted at this point. First, as regards the existence and sources of systematic variation in the extent of suffrage, there seems no doubt that although there were some striking parallels across the New World societies in their suffrage institutions, especially during the colonial period, some clear patterns in the differences between them are evident. In particular, states or countries with greater homogeneity or equality (broadly defined) among the population tended to extend the franchise earlier and more broadly -- contributing to the evolution, or persistence, of a more equal distribution of political influence. This general regularity is suggested not only by the contrast between the English colonies on the North American mainland and the Spanish colonies throughout the New World, but also by the variation in experience across the states/societies with the same national heritage. It was, for example, the western or frontier states within the U.S., where labor was relatively scarce and both human and non-human capital relatively equally distributed, that took the lead in doing away with wealth or income-based qualifications for the franchise and establishing universal white manhood suffrage. Moreover (if perhaps trivially), the binding qualifications that were retained for males --based on race -- applied to a smaller fraction of the population in those states where the population was more homogenous.

Why the states in the U.S. at first moved from economic-based to race-based qualifications for suffrage, instead of the Latin American pattern of going from economic-based to literacy-based qualifications, is a fascinating and important question. Although eliminating economic-based qualifications, such as land, other forms of wealth, income, or taxes paid,

extended the franchise to some groups, the adoption of the new sets of qualifications were clearly intended by those who played a role in designing the new laws to disfranchise other groups. It does not seem obvious that the elites in the North American states/societies were more ideologically committed to broad suffrage than their counterparts to the South. Both acted to exclude a segment of the male population that was perceived to be very distinct. In the U.S., this distinct class composed a smaller proportion of the population than the distinct classes of most of the Latin American societies did. The situation in the U.S. was perhaps also different from Latin America in that until the Fourteenth Amendment race could be explicitly specified as a qualification for suffrage. In Latin America, for whatever reason -- perhaps cultural, perhaps due to the greater continuity in the racial distribution of the population -- explicit use of race or ethnic background as a requirement for suffrage does not seem to have been feasible. The Latin American pattern (excepting Argentina) of employing literacy as a requirement for suffrage (and citizenship) not only served the purpose of excluding large fractions of the respective populations from voting, but may also have had the effect of discouraging elites from investing in the establishment of an extensive system of public schools.

At least at the national level, the hypothesis that societies with greater homogeneity or equality tended to adopt suffrage institutions that provided broader suffrage or a more equal distribution of political influence seems to be consistent with a preliminary examination of the historical record in Latin America. Those countries that are thought to have long had more homogenous populations, as well as greater equality, such as Argentina, Uruguay, and Costa Rica, were the first to implement suffrage institutions associated with greater access to and use of the franchise. Although this pattern is consistent with the hypothesis, the limited information available means that this is but a weak test. More evidence needs to be retrieved. It would be

especially interesting to identify the variation in suffrage institutions across the provinces/states of Argentina, Colombia, and other countries that -- like the U.S. -- allowed such jurisdictions to set the qualifications for voting.

Finally, there is the question of whether the patterns in how the suffrage institutions evolved made a difference for long-run patterns of economic development. In theory they should, if governments in nominal democracies are influenced by voters, and if the voters have systematic preferences about the economic policies that are on the agenda. There is a vast literature suggesting that governments are responsive to the preferences of their respective electorates, and the salient case of the losses suffered by blacks in the U.S. South when they were effectively disfranchised by the diffusion of literacy tests and poll taxes between 1890 and 1910 (to cite a familiar and well accepted example) seems highly relevant to the contexts considered here.<sup>xxxix</sup> Moreover, Stanley Engerman, Elisa Mariscal, and I have argued elsewhere that the variation in the extent of the franchise across the societies of the New World was associated with investment in public schooling and literacy attainment – even after controlling for per capita income.<sup>xxxix</sup> This association, if it reflects a more general relation between the distribution of political influence and public policies, would suggest that the evolution of suffrage institutions might encompass a mechanism by which relative differences across societies in the extent of inequality generally might persist over time, and might – in the case of New World economies – help to understand differences in rates of economic growth over the long run.

<sup>i</sup> Davis and North 1971.

- ii. Tocqueville 1835 provides a classic discussion. Musgrave 1969 discusses patterns of change in government expenditures after the extension of suffrage in many nations over the 20<sup>th</sup> century. For other more recent examples of a vast literature, see Acemoglu and Robinson 2000; Barro 1997; and Perotti 1996.
- iii. Alesina and Rodrik 1994; and Perrson and Tabellini 1994.
- iv. Acemoglu and Robinson 1999; Benabou 2000; and Saint-Paul and Verdier 1993.
- v. The construction and maintenance of a rich cross-country data set for this period has been an enormous boon to scholars in this area. See Summers and Heston 1991.
- vi. For excellent surveys of the early development of the colonies in the New World, see Galenson 1995 and Lockhart and Schwartz 1983.
- vii. Engerman and Sokoloff 1997.
- viii. Deininger and Squire 1996.
- ix. Porter 1918; and Williamson 1960.
- x. See Williamson 1960 for a discussion of precedents, as well as of the range of ‘freehold’ requirements in the colonies. Long-term leases, extending beyond a lifetime, were sometimes accepted as satisfying such qualifications.
- xi. There were often different qualifications for local elections than for colony-wide elections, and Williamson 1960 has suggested that one reason for this was to increase the pool of individuals who could be co-opted to serve as local officials.
- xii. Economic-based qualifications for suffrage were not the only way in which the wealthier classes were granted privileged status as regards political standing. In 1787 all of the thirteen states except Pennsylvania had economic qualifications for holding office. In six of the twelve (Maryland, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, North Carolina, New Jersey, and South Carolina) the property requirements were considerably higher for serving as governor, senator, or as a representative than they were for voting. See McGovney 1949, chpt. 1.
- xiii. Porter 1918, chpts 1-2. Williamson 1960 appears to be more impressed with the conceptual import of the legal changes during the Revolutionary era than was Porter, but is at the same time skeptical about their direct impact. McGovney 1949 suggests that roughly half of the adult white male population was eligible to vote in 1787. Sydnor 1952 has a similar estimate for Virginia.
- xiv. Although many observers of that time noted how the new states, and especially those in the West, were more democratic in their suffrage laws and in other respects, Frederick Jackson Turner 1906 and 1920 was perhaps the first major scholar to devote much attention to the question of why. Williamson (1960) is skeptical of the notion the West was unique, however, and has suggested that the prevalence of universal suffrage in the frontier states may have been due to the difficulty of establishing freehold rights in a newly settled area where land titling was imperfect and recent. See McCormick 1960 for estimates of the proportion of adult white males who voted, and for discussion of the variation over time and state in voting participation. He too is uncertain that the western states were all that different from those in the East.
- xv. Congress was generally responsible for the processes by which the populations of territories applying to become states selected participants in their constitutional conventions. The qualifications for choosing those representatives, or for participating in a territory-wide referendum on a draft of a constitution, might well influence the qualifications set down for elections after statehood.
- xvi. For evidence of the relative equality of populations in frontier states, see Soltow 1975; Newell 1986; and Kearl and Pope 1996.
- xvii. Porter 1918; Williamson 1960; and McCormick 1960.
- xviii. These changes in the state constitutions to extend the suffrage (if not lower the very high wealth requirements for holding office) were highly controversial in both states, with the alignments in favor and in opposition not corresponding all that strongly with political party. In Maryland, the change is not thought to have had a major impact on the size of the electorate, largely because of the previously limited enforcement of the economic qualification, and because inflation had eroded the import of the threshold estate value. Some other reforms dealing with the conduct of elections, such as the introduction of balloting (as opposed to voice votes) and the expansion of the number of polling places were also introduced at about the same time. In South Carolina, the movement for suffrage reform coincided with concern about the possibility of war with Britain and seems to have benefited somewhat from the view that those who bore arms in the militia should be able to vote. See Williamson, chpt. 8.

<sup>xix.</sup> Mississippi, in 1817, was the last state to enter the Union without universal adult white male suffrage, and from then on the maintenance of economic-based restrictions was largely a holding action. Many of the original thirteen states replaced wealth qualifications with tax-based requirements (which endured in some states for a very long period), but it is not clear how binding they were. Of course, the use of poll taxes expanded greatly in the late-nineteenth and early twentieth centuries as a way of obstructing blacks and immigrants from voting.

<sup>xx.</sup> See the discussion in Porter 1918, chpts 2-4, and Stamp 1990, p 134.

<sup>xxi.</sup> Porter 1918, pp. 50-51.

<sup>xxii.</sup> See the discussions in Porter 1918; Williamson 1960; and Chute 1969.

<sup>xxiii.</sup> Porter, chpt. 4.

<sup>xxiv.</sup> The institution of literacy tests was not confined to the South. Eighteen states, seven southern and eleven non-southern, introduced literacy requirements between 1890 and 1926. They were directed primarily at blacks and immigrants.

<sup>xxv.</sup> See Kousser 1974.

<sup>xxvi.</sup> It is relevant to note that after emancipation, the British colonies in the West Indies generally increased the levels of wealth required to be eligible to vote. The result, as seen in Table 3, was very low proportions of the population voting in elections.

<sup>xxvii.</sup> Stein and Stein 1970; Lockhart and Schwartz 1983; and Bayle

<sup>xxviii.</sup> Stein and Stein 1970, chpt. 6.

<sup>xxix.</sup> See the discussion of the evolution of constitutions within the various countries in Fitzgibbon 1948.

<sup>xxx.</sup> Bethell 1993: 109.

<sup>xxxi.</sup> Powerful examples of how changes in the composition of the electorate can lead to changes in government policy are detailed in Kousser 1974 and Lott 1999.

<sup>xxxii.</sup> Engerman, Mariscal, and Sokoloff 1999.

TABLE 1

## SUMMARY OF ECONOMIC-BASED QUALIFICATIONS FOR SUFFRAGE

	<u>Qualification in 1787 or Year of Entry</u>	<u>Year Economic Qualifications Ended, or Qualif. in 1860</u>
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Original Thirteen

New Hampshire	Tax	1792
Massachusetts	Property	1821 (prop), tax req. in 1860
Rhode Island	Property	1842 (prop), tax req. in 1860
Connecticut	Property	1818 (prop), 1845 (tax)
New York	Property	1821 (prop), 1826 (tax)
New Jersey	Property	1807 (prop), 1844 (tax)
Pennsylvania	Tax	tax req. in 1860
Delaware	Property	1792 (prop), tax req. in 1860
Maryland	Property	1802
Virginia	Property	1850
North Carolina	Property	1856 (prop), tax req. in 1860
South Carolina	Tax	1810 (tax)
Georgia	Property	1789 (prop), 1798 (tax)

#### New States

Vermont	none (1791)	
Kentucky	none (1792)	
Tennessee	none (1796)	
Ohio	Tax (1803)	1851 (tax)
Louisiana	Tax (1812)	1845 (tax)
Indiana	none (1816)	
Mississippi	Tax (1817)	1832 (tax)
Illinois	none (1818)	
Maine	none (1819)	
Alabama	none (1819)	
Missouri	none (1820)	

Sources and Notes: Porter 1918 and Williamson 1960. Tax req. in 1860 means that a tax-based qualification for suffrage was still in effect in that year.

TABLE 2

PERCENTAGES OF ADULT WHITE MALES VOTING IN ELECTIONS

	Highest % % AWM Before 1824		Presidential Elections						
	Year	%AWM	1824	1828	1832	1836	1840	1844	
Maine	1812	62.0		18.9	42.7	66.2	37.4	82.2	67.5

New Hampshire	1814	80.8		16.8	76.5	74.2	38.2	86.4	65.6	
Vermont	1812	79.9		-	55.8	50.0	52.5	74.0	65.7	
Massachusetts		1812	<i>67.4</i>		29.1	25.7	39.3	45.1	66.4	59.3
<i>Rhode Island</i>		<i>1812</i>	<i>49.4</i>		<i>12.4</i>	<i>18.0</i>	<i>22.4</i>	<i>24.1</i>	<i>33.2</i>	<i>39.8</i>
Connecticut	1819	54.5		14.9	27.1	45.9	52.3	75.7	76.1	
New York	1810	<i>41.5</i>		-	70.4	72.1	60.2	77.7	73.6	
New Jersey	1808	71.8		31.1	70.9	60.9	69.3	80.4	81.6	
Pennsylvania	1808	71.5		19.6	56.6	52.7	53.1	77.4	75.5	
Delaware	1804	81.9		-	-	67.0	69.4	82.8	85.0	
Maryland	1820	69.0		53.7	76.2	55.6	67.5	84.6	80.3	
<i>Virginia</i>	<i>1800</i>	<i>25.9</i>		<i>11.5</i>	<i>27.6</i>	<i>30.8</i>	<i>35.1</i>	<i>54.6</i>	<i>54.5</i>	
North Carolina	-	-	42.2	56.8	31.7	52.9	83.1	79.1		
Georgia	1812	62.3		-	35.9	33.0	64.9	88.9	94.0	
Kentucky	1820	74.4		25.3	70.7	73.9	61.1	74.3	80.3	
Tennessee	1817	80.0		26.8	49.8	28.8	55.2	89.6	89.6	
<i>Louisiana</i>	<i>1812</i>	<i>34.2</i>		-	<i>36.3</i>	<i>24.4</i>	<i>19.2</i>	<i>39.4</i>	<i>44.7</i>	
Alabama	1819	96.7		52.1	53.6	33.3	65.0	89.8	82.7	
Mississippi	1823	79.8		41.6	56.6	32.8	62.8	88.2	89.7	
Ohio	1822	46.5		34.8	75.8	73.8	75.5	84.5	83.6	
Indiana		1822	52.4		37.5	68.3	61.8	70.1	86.0	84.9
Illinois	1822	55.8		24.2	51.9	45.6	43.7	85.9	76.3	
Missouri	1820	71.9		20.1	54.3	40.8	35.6	74.0	74.7	
NAT AVG				26.5	56.3	54.9	55.2	78.0	74.9	

Sources and Notes: McCormick 1960. The elections that were conducted under a property-based requirement for the franchise appear in *italics*. Although North Carolina had a property qualification in voting for certain state posts, there appears to have been none in the presidential elections. The Louisiana figures also appear in italics, because McCormick characterized its tax-based qualification as unusually stringent. The estimates of the highest proportions of adult males voting before 1824 were prepared by McCormick because of his desire to highlight how participation in the elections during the Jacksonian period was not exceptionally high. As McCormick recognized, it is potentially misleading to use the highest figure before 1824 as he basis for comparison, and the examination of the record over time is complicated by the changes that were made in the methods of electing governors and presidential electors, but he reports that the average voter participation before 1824 was obviously higher (than in the three Jackson elections) in Alabama, Connecticut, Massachusetts, Mississippi, New Hampshire, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, Tennessee, and Vermont.

TABLE 3  
**LAWS GOVERNING THE FRANCHISE AND THE EXTENT OF VOTING IN  
 SELECTED AMERICAN COUNTRIES, 1840-1940**

		Lack of Secrecy In Balloting	Wealth Requirement	Literacy Requirement	Proportion of the Population Voting
	<u>1840-80</u>				
Barbados	1857		Y		1.0%
Chile	1869	N	Y	Y	1.6

	1878	N	NN	--	
Costa Rica	1890	Y	Y	Y	--
Ecuador	1848	Y	Y	Y	0.0
	1856	Y	Y	Y	0.1
Grenada	1854		Y		0.6
Jamaica	1863		Y		0.3
Mexico	1840	Y	Y	Y	--
Peru	1875	Y	Y	Y	--
Uruguay	1840	Y	Y	Y	--
	1880	Y	Y	Y	--
Venezuela	1840	Y	Y	Y	--
	1880	Y	Y	Y	--
Canada	1867	Y	Y	N	7.7
	1878	N	Y	N	12.9
United States	1850	N	N	N	12.9
	1880	N	N	N	18.3

<u>1881-1920</u>					
Argentina	1896	Y	Y	Y1.8%	
	1916	N	N	N	9.0
Brazil	1894	Y	Y	Y	2.2
	1914	Y	Y	Y	2.4
Chile	1881	N	N	N	3.1
	1920	N	N	Y	4.4
Colombia	1918	N	N	N	6.9
Costa Rica	1912	Y	Y	Y	--
	1919	Y	N	N	10.6
Ecuador	1888	N	Y	Y	2.8
	1894	N	N	Y	3.3
Mexico	1920	N	N	N	8.6
Peru	1920	Y	Y	Y	--
Uruguay	1900	Y	Y	Y	--
	1920	N	N	N	13.8
Venezuela	1920	Y	Y	Y	--
Canada	1911	N	N	N	18.1
	1917	N	N	N	20.5
United States	1900	N	NY	18.4	
	1920	N	N	Y	25.1

	<u>1921-40</u>				
Argentina	1928	N	N	N	12.8%
	1937	N	N	N	15.0
Bolivia	1951	-	Y	Y	4.1
Brazil	1930	Y	Y	Y	5.7
Colombia	1930	N	N	N	11.1
	1936	N	N	N	5.9
Chile	1920	N	N	Y	4.4
	1931	N	N	Y	6.5
	1938	N	N	Y	9.4
Costa Rica	1940	N	N	N	17.6
Ecuador	1940	N	N	Y	3.3
Mexico	1940	N	N	N	11.8
Peru	1940	N	N	Y	--
Uruguay	1940	N	N	N	19.7
Venezuela	1940	N	Y	Y	--
Canada	1940	N	N	N	41.1
United States	1940	N	N	Y	37.8

Notes and Sources: Engerman, Haber, and Sokoloff 2000.

TABLE 4  
LITERACY RATES IN THE AMERICAS, 1850-1950

	Year	Ages	Rate
Argentina	1869	+6	23.8%
	1895	+6	45.6
	1900	+10	52.0
	1925	+10	73.0
Barbados	1946	+10	92.7
Bolivia	1900	+10	17.0
Brazil	1872	+7	15.8
	1890	+7	14.8
	1900	+7	25.6
	1920	+10	30.0
	1939	+10	57.0
British Honduras (Belize)	1911	+10	59.6
	1931	+10	71.8
Chile	1865	+7	18.0
	1875	+7	25.7
	1885	+7	30.3
	1900	+10	43.0
	1925	+10	66.0
	1945	+10	76.0
Colombia	1918	+15	32.0
	1938	+15	56.0
	1951	+15	62.0
Costa Rica	1892	+7	23.6
	1900	+10	33.0
	1925	+10	64.0
Cuba	1861	+7	23.8
			(38.5,5.3)*
	1899	+10	40.5
	1925	+10	67.0
	1946	+10	77.9

Guatemala	1893	+7	11.3
	1925	+10	15.0
	1945	+10	20.0
Honduras	1887	+7	15.2
	1925	+10	29.0
Jamaica	1871	+5	16.3
	1891	+5	32.0
	1911	+5	47.2
	1943	+5	67.9
	1943	+10	76.1
Mexico	1900	+10	22.2
	1925	+10	36.0
	1946	+10	48.4
Paraguay	1886	+7	19.3
	1900	+10	30.0
Peru	1925	+10	38.0
Puerto Rico	1860	+7	11.8 (19.8,3.1)*
Uruguay	1900	+10	54.0
	1925	+10	70.0
Venezuela	1925	+10	34.0
Canada	1861	All	82.5
Eng-majority counties	1861	All	93.0
Fr- majority counties	1861	All	81.2
United States			
North Whites	1860	+10	96.9
South Whites	1860	+10	56.4
All	1870	+10	80.0 (88.5,21.1)*
	1890	+10	86.7 (92.3,43.2)*
	1910	+10	92.3 (95.0,69.5)*

\*The figures for Whites and Non-Whites are reported respectively within parentheses.  
Source : Engerman, Haber, and Sokoloff 2000.

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