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“Democracy as a Project: The Strange Career of Political Participation in the United States”

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Democracy cannot be reduced to a particular set of institutions, nor should it be seen as something binary -- that a country either has or does not have. Any nation, regardless of its political history, should think of democracy as an ongoing effort to build, improve, and defend institutions. The project of democracy is to empower individuals so that all citizens have equal voice and equal access to institutions of public power. .

Implicit in this description of democracy is the notion that, in any society, there are anti-democratic forces of varying strengths that are always at work to undermine democratic values. There will be both deliberate efforts and broad structural changes that will undercut citizen access to democracy's institutions.

To examine the proposition that the development of democracy is not unidirectional, I will discuss the history of voting rights in the United States, which is a history of gains and reversals. These reversals are not accidental. The history of participation in the U.S. is one in which many citizens have been prevented from adding their voices to public debate. Moreover, in the case of twentieth-century participation, voting rates have continued to decline, particularly among the less well off and less well educated. The question for innovators and historians alike is: why is this the case?

Alexander Keyssar is Matthew W. Stirling Jr. Professor of History and Social Policy at the John F. Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University. His 1986 book, Out of Work: The First Century of Unemployment in Massachusetts, was awarded three scholarly prizes. His most recent book, The Right to Vote: The Contested History of Democracy in the United States (2000), was named the best book in U.S. history by both the American Historical Association and the Historical Society; it was also a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize and the Los Angeles Times Book Award. He is coauthor of Inventing America, a text integrating the history of technology and science into the mainstream of

American history, as well as coeditor of a series on Comparative and International Working-Class History. In 2004 and 2005, Professor Keyssar chaired the Social Science Research Council's National Research Commission on Voting and Elections. His current research interests include election reform, the history of democracies, and the history of poverty. Professor Keyssar holds a doctorate in History of American Civilization from Harvard University.