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“Restoring an Imagined Democracy”

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In his Gettysburg Address, President Abraham Lincoln described our democracy as a "government of the people, by the people, for the people." To meet this condition, all tax-paying citizens must be allowed to vote. If our founding fathers opposed taxation without representation, we can agree that it would be pious to allow such a violation today.

With this definition in mind, Greider's statement rings false. In his words, "Americans cannot teach democracy to the world until they restore their own." However, the term "restore" suggests that America's democratic system was at one point more inclusive—that we need to go back to the way things once were. However, our democratic history lacks any traits in need of restoration.

Initially, only White, landowning men who made up 6% of the population could vote. Decades later, this privilege extended to all White men over twenty. However, with women and racial minorities left out of the voting pool, we lacked an accurate representation of our population in civic issues. While the Fourteenth Amendment recognized all people born or naturalized in the United States as citizens, they were not granted the right to vote until the ratification of the Fifteenth Amendment— almost eighty years later. Despite this accomplishment, the South would continue to make voting difficult for Black Americans for decades to come. Jim Crow Laws prevented Black and poor White men from participating in our democracy. These regulations included expensive poll taxes, confusing literacy tests, the grandfather clause, and the White Primary.

By this time, the Women's Suffrage Movement had begun to pick up speed, but Southern states fought just as hard to prevent this new influx of voters from having their way. Finally, in 1920, the Nineteenth Amendment was approved, and White women were

guaranteed the right to vote. However, voting restrictions on Black men would also be applied to Black women. It was not until 1965, with President Johnson's signing of the Voting Rights Act, that literary tests, threats of violence, and other limitations on Black voters were halted. After that, almost anyone over twenty could vote, so long as they were mentally competent and a non-felon. Recently, the Twenty-sixth Amendment was approved, lowering the voting age to eighteen in 1971.

In short, the democracy of the past was incomplete, and we are more inclusive now than ever. So, what democratic value is Greider trying to "restore"? Even today, people try to restrict the voting rights of others. Some feel that additional groups should have this democratic privilege. These groups include working teens under eighteen and legal permanent residents. Their checks are taxed, but their voices are not heard. Is this not the same taxation without representation that we opposed so long ago? Despite our efforts and achievements, there is still work to do. Truthfully, America was never an expert in democracy, and we definitely should not be teaching something we have yet to figure out ourselves.