

Women's Suffrage (1830)

During the Jackson era, the right to vote was expanded to include nearly all white men. While this was an unprecedented expansion of suffrage by the standards of the time, it came at a significant cost to African-Americans and to women, who had in some places and at some times enjoyed the right to vote. Reformers argued against the traditional conception that ownership of real property was the best standard for determining who was independent enough to exercise a free vote; they instead argued that all men have property in and of themselves through their labor. Thus, the reformers included the growing class of propertiless artisans within the fold of American democracy. How then could the vote be kept from free African-Americans and women who also clearly fit this description of self-ownership? In this excerpt from a speech given at the Virginia State Convention of 1829-1830, Mr. Cooke expressed the answer: Women (and, by implication, members of purportedly inferior races) did not deserve the right to vote because, like children, they were by their very nature inferior and dependent on men. Thus, even African-Americans and women with substantial real property could be excluded, while white men with or without property could enjoy the franchise.

[I]t is said that if it be true that "all men are by nature equally free," then all men, all women, and all children, are . . . entitled to the right of suffrage. . . .

Sir, no such absurdity can be inferred from the language of the Declaration of Rights. The framers of that instrument . . . did not express the self-evident truth that the Creator of the Universe, to render woman more fit for the sphere in which He intended her to act, had made her weak and timid, in comparison with man, and had thus placed her under his *control*, as well as under his protection. That children, also, from the immaturity of their bodies and their minds, were under a like control. They did not say . . . that the exercise of political power, that is to say, of the right of suffrage, necessarily implies *free-agency* and *intelligence*; free-agency because it consists in *election* or *choice* between different men and different measures; and *intelligence*, because on a *judicious* choice depends the very safety and existence of the community. That nature herself had therefore pronounced, on women and children, a sentence of incapacity to exercise political power. They did not say all this; and why? Because to the universal sense of all mankind, these were self-evident truths. They meant, therefore, this, and no more: that all members of a community, of mature reason, and free agents by situation, are originally and by nature, *equally* entitled to the exercise of political power, or a voice in the Government.

PROCEEDINGS AND DEBATES OF THE VIRGINIA STATE CONVENTION OF 1829-30, TO WHICH ARE SUBJOINED, THE NEW CONSTITUTION OF VIRGINIA AND THE VOTES OF THE PEOPLE 25 (Richmond 1830), 55-56.