

Looking Ahead:
What Kind of Nation
Do We Want to Be?



Imagine you are living in the U.S. in 1899.



This print features a festive parade held in Baltimore in May 1870 to celebrate the ratification of the Fifteenth Amendment to the Constitution (1870), which granted the right to vote to male citizens, regardless of “race, color, or previous condition of servitude.”

Unidentified Artist, Copy after James Carter Beard, Fifteenth Amendment, 1870. National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution.

COVER PAGE:

Frances Willard helped found the Woman’s Christian Temperance Union (WCTU) in 1874. In 1881, Willard formally endorsed the suffrage cause, bolstering energy for suffragists.

Kurz & Allison Lithography Company, portrait of Frances Elizabeth Caroline Willard, c. 1897, National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution

Journalist Ida B. Wells spent most of her life advocating for the civil rights of African Americans—including suffrage. In 1913, at the suffrage parade in Washington, D.C., she famously refused to march in the back with the other African American women. Instead, she marched at the front of the Illinois suffrage delegation.

Sallie E. Garrity, portrait of Ida B. Wells-Barnett, c. 1893. National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution

William McKinley is in the White House and change is in the air. It’s a time of rapid expansion in population, geography, industry, and diversity, all of which present opportunities but have also aggravate tensions.

Our victory in the Spanish American War, last year, brought an end to Spanish colonization in the Western hemisphere and ceded Guam, Puerto Rico, and the Philippines to the United States. At the same time, the US annexed the Republic of Hawaii, which has now also become a US territory. As we have seen, each year, increasing numbers of immigrants arrive seeking refuge and opportunity. And, spurred by mechanization, the mass production of goods continues to change the lives of American workers—not always for the better.

The 15th Amendment, which granted voting rights to former slaves and freed men, was ratified in 1870, But Southern states are systematically stripping this right from them both legally and illegally by means of poll taxes and literacy tests, as well as violence and intimidation. In the West, American Indians and Chinese immigrants and their descendants are being forced from their homes and lands. In cities around the nation, violence erupts in conflicts between police and federal troops and workers striking for improved conditions. And, from coast to coast, women in the National American Woman Suffrage Association march on, demanding their place in shaping the nation.



Lucy Parsons was an organizer and anarchist who held complex views regarding capitalism and was a key figure in the 19th century labor movement in Chicago.

Louis Gogler, portrait of Lucy Parsons, 1886, National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution

The nature and form of democracy, citizenship, and the state of the union are all at stake. In this time of rapid expansion and increasing tensions, many Americans are asking, "What kind of nation do we want to be?"

Not so long ago, in 1886, the dedication of the Statue of Liberty reflected the promise of a diverse democracy dedicated to liberty for all. Across the United States, people are talking about what that means for themselves and for their country. Now, imagine that you and the others gathered in this issue forum are among them. This guide is meant to provide a framework for your deliberation by offering three approaches to this complex question. Each is accompanied by possible actions to be taken and notes possible drawbacks.

This issue guide was developed by a team of Smithsonian educators in collaboration with the Charles F. Kettering Foundation whose mission is to support the experimentation needed for the development of innovative ways to advance democracy.

What are your options?

At the turn of the 20th Century, the future of the nation is contested. As the nation expands, the best path forward is unclear.

Option One reflects belief in the strength of an expansive and diverse democracy. In this view, the new century presents an opportunity to fully live up to the aspirations of liberty, justice, and equality for all.

Proponents of **Option Two** are concerned about the changing demographics and support the maintenance of traditional institutions and values to ensure that the nation remains strong and consistent at home and abroad.

Option Three proponents contend that the federal government does not and cannot serve the interests of everyone. They advocate for self-rule for a variety of groups. Each of these paths has benefits, and each has tradeoffs. Which one provides best for the future of the nation and its citizens?

Option 1

Advance inclusivity: everyone living on US territory should be recognized as a full citizen.

The Declaration of Independence and the U.S. Constitution clearly state that the country should be governed by the people who live in it. Increasing numbers of new immigrants demonstrate our economic and political standing in the world. The Statue of Liberty symbolizes the strength and influence of our diverse democracy. In our expanding nation, our government requires the inclusion of everyone to ensure representation and the creativity and opportunity that derives from diverse ideas and perspectives. We have a large country with booming industries, vast unsettled land in the West, and a number of new territories. As with the Louisiana Purchase, we must move newly acquired territories to statehood, so that their people can share in the equality and economic opportunity of the nation. Federal, state, and local governments must ensure that democracy includes everyone and that everyone has equal protection and rights under the law.

BUT...we are still in the shadow of a disastrous Civil War and in this time of rapid expansion we must move cautiously to ensure a stable and strong nation.

EXAMPLES OF WHAT MIGHT BE DONE

The federal government should ensure equal suffrage for all and use the Army, if necessary, to eliminate all barriers to the ballot.

All residents of the United States, including people of color, American Indians, residents of new territories, and immigrants should be fully recognized as US citizens, with all the rights and responsibilities that status entails.

Newly acquired Pacific and Caribbean territories should become states.

The federal government should enact labor laws to guarantee wages and worker safety.

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SOME CONSEQUENCES AND TRADEOFFS TO CONSIDER

This will be seen as a violation of states' rights and likely result in another civil war.

Many American Indians and residents of newly acquired territories do not want citizenship. Immigrants may not wish to embrace our culture.

Many in the new territories do not wish to be part of the United States. They demand self-rule.

Such laws will hinder economic growth and lead to increased unemployment.

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Option 2

Strengthen existing institutions and traditions: create and protect current American culture and values.

The rapid expansion in population threatens national and local stability. People from other cultures must earn democratic citizenship. Current American citizens are best situated to make decisions regarding the future.. The Civil War taught us that a strong unified national identity is essential for our future. The safety of the whole is more important than individual rights or groups seeking political power. The government must limit immigration, especially of those who do not share or understand democratic values. The Constitution rightfully provides for states and local communities to determine suffrage and create laws that reflect the their own needs. The nation was settled and established under difficult circumstances; those who did that work should rightfully be in control of politics and economics. To ensure the strength of the expanding nation and the safety of our communities, those who reflect our values must govern our nation.

BUT... limiting civic participation to a privileged few does not reflect the nation's population or its founding documents. People of color, women, new immigrants, American Indians, and others make significant economic, intellectual, cultural, and creative contributions to the nation and to their communities. Many of them are taxed and subject to our laws without representation. Protecting the economic and political power of a few allows them to profit from the labor and contributions of others.

EXAMPLES OF WHAT MIGHT BE DONE

Local and state authorities should enact residency requirements and poll taxes and literacy tests to ensure electoral integrity.

The US must place limits on immigration until current immigrants have been integrated into the American culture and economy.

US businesses should fire striking workers, and armed forces should protect industries.

To promote Western expansion, the federal government should open American Indian land to settlement.

SOME CONSEQUENCES AND TRADEOFFS TO CONSIDER

These voting restrictions unconstitutionally discriminate against people of color, immigrants, and working-class citizens. Efforts to limit the ballot to white men may result in protest and unrest.

Immigration is necessary for economic growth. Excluding immigrants from certain countries will hurt our international trade and security.

Encouraging low pay and dangerous working conditions could lead to a violent workers' revolt.

This violates treaties and the stated values of the nation's founding documents. It could also require a constant military presence.

Option 3

Affirm distinctive identities: recognize that some groups want to be self-governing.

The tensions caused by rapid expansion demonstrate the failures of the nation and the need for revolutionary change. The United States has abandoned individual liberty and democratic principles; working within the system will change nothing. Laws dividing up American Indian land and abolishing tribal sovereignty violate treaties the US government signed.. Recent imperialist expansion, including the conquest of the Kingdom of Hawaii and occupation of the Philippines, Puerto Rico, and Guam, defy the principles of self-governance central to the Declaration of Independence. Further, US "imperialism" extends to the control of businesses and ignores abuse of the working class. Suffrage itself has become a false issue. Those in power control the ballot. Wealthy industrialists own labor by controlling party politics, the ballot box, local police, and military forces. We must actively work to secure our future through resistance and replacement of the current system.

BUT...resistance and revolution come at great cost for the individuals involved and serious risk for the future. Democracy provides an inclusive and stable form of government. The ballot is a rational and fair method for enacting change. A strong nation and individual success result from economic prosperity and spreading US presence and power throughout the country and the world.

EXAMPLES OF WHAT MIGHT BE DONE

Workers should go on strike to gain better wages and working conditions and, ultimately, to secure cooperative ownership.

The US should not hold colonies. The newly acquired territories should be free to rule themselves.

Native Americans should fight government efforts to break up their land and resist government attempts at assimilation, such as placing their children in American boarding schools.

People of color should establish their own towns in Oklahoma Territory to ensure self-rule and to establish a stake in creating the new state.

SOME CONSEQUENCES AND TRADEOFFS TO CONSIDER

Those who strike could lose their jobs, and violence is a real risk, as the police and, if necessary, the military will intervene to support industrial interests.

The new colonies strengthen the nation with needed resources to enhance US trade, and military outposts to protect our safety.

Resistance is dangerous and futile; the government will take lands and children by force.

Doing so may eventually mire them in conflict with white settlers and with American Indians, who originally lived on the land.