Amendment 24: The right of citizens of the United States to vote in any primary or other election for President or Vice President, for electors for President or Vice President, or for Senator or Representative in Congress, shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or any State by reason of failure to pay poll tax or other tax.

The night was dark, but a light shown in the distance, and like very colorful and glittery flies, the denizens of the night were drawn to that light. As one approached, and the light got brighter and filled the street, the buzz began to build, the thumping of rhythmic disco music permeated the air and the ground vibrated with excitement and anticipation. The building pulsed, the adrenalin was palpable and expectation was at a record high. The yin and yang of hope and despair could be felt simultaneously on 54th Street. Being at, and actually getting into the club was a chance to feel included. It was a way to know you “belonged.” Not everyone made it past those velvet ropes. What mysteries waited behind that doorway? The only way to know was to be accepted and have a chance to hob nob with the “cool crowd.” Would this be the night of acceptance? Would hopeful young people dressed in layers of fabulous finally make it onto that famous dance floor? Only the bouncer knew, and he wasn’t telling until he was good and ready. Not everyone made it. Selecting the crowd. Perhaps that’s a more “polite” and contemporary way to say “discrimination.”

In a very similar way, the poll tax imposed on voters in the southern United States acted as a not-so-glamorous velvet rope as well.

The twenty fourth amendment to the US Constitution establishes that every American has the right to vote, and there will be no consequence should failure to pay a poll tax or other tax becomes an issue with a prospective voter. Poll taxes were abolished thanks to the ratification of this amendment. There is evidence that poll taxes were used –and hated, in ancient Rome, in fact, it was also known in certain historic eras as a “head” tax or “capitation” tax, indicating that the tax was levied “per head.” In England in the late 1380’s King Richard II instituted a poll tax to help defray the costs of war. Poll taxes were instituted in the United States after Reconstruction and the ratification of the 15th Amendment in the late 1870’s and were particularly meant to bar poor black people from voting-in spite of the 15th Amendment. The poll tax movement picked up steam in the south in the 1890’s and by 1902 all 11 southern states that had been the Confederacy had a poll tax in place. The Deep South had placed their “velvet rope” of exclusion and made sure that their black constituents were not going to have the right to vote, no mater what reformation had taken place.

It’s remarkable to think that almost 100 years after the Civil War and reformation occurred, black Americans, having been guaranteed their rights as citizens, still could not exercise those rights. The 24th Amendment was introduced in August of 1962 and was not ratified until January 1964. Incredible as it may seem, Virginia didn’t go along with ratification until 1977 and Texas waited until 2009!!! In this day and age, these states still upheld openly discriminatory statutes until only a few years ago!

Studio 54’s golden era shone a light on exclusivity and exclusion in much the same way that the poll tax made it almost impossible for former slaves and poor southerners to have a say in their government and their well being. As with ancient Rome and other societies that condone arrogance and discrimination, these societies learned that prejudice and narrow-mindedness are intolerable and archaic. Thanks to the 24th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, the opportunity for more rampant and ugly practices like this was curtailed.

Thank you.