

Why There Must Be Qualification Tests for Voting

In western democratic societies, people have gotten used to almost absolute freedom: of speech, consciousness, self-expression, gender roles, and so on. Freedom of political will is among the benefits American and European societies enjoy as well; no one can be forced to vote this or that way, and even though during elections politicians fall over themselves to convince the electorate to vote in their favor, there are no guns pressed to voters' heads: a person is free to vote any way he or she likes, or to not vote at all. At the same time, voting is not just a right: it is also a great responsibility of every member of a society, because each vote contributes to the results of elections, which in their turn will define the way society will have to live until the next election.

And this is probably the greatest catch: since in modern democratic societies a right to vote is granted to any citizen having reached a certain biological age, the political future of each particular society depends on a large mass of random people. In other words, not only knowledgeable, intelligent, conscious, and competent people with reasonable political positions can vote—and this is a problem. Why? Let us figure out why.

L.Z. Granderson, a senior writer for ESPN magazine and a CNN columnist, puts it radically, but fairly: "If I were to ask you to ingest an unknown medicine from someone who knew nothing about the medical field, you probably wouldn't do it. And I doubt many of us would feel comfortable as a shareholder in a company that asked people who knew nothing about business to hire its next CEO? Yet we all know people who gleefully admit they know nothing about politics, don't have time to find out what the current issues are or even know how the government works, but go out and vote" (CNN). He suggests that people who know little to none about politics, how governments and economies work, and how political solutions affect societies—in other words, people ignorant about politics—should not be allowed to vote.

It might sound shocking at first, but people have got so used to their rights and freedoms that even the slightest limitation looks like totalitarianism to them. But, for example, how many Americans unsatisfied with Donald Trump's rule are there? How quickly has his rating dropped since the moment he was elected a president of the United States? This data can be gathered on the Internet easily, so there is no point in discussing it here; what is important, however, is how Trump became president, and what was his target audience. Attentive observers must have noticed how primitive and naive his speeches were, how easily he blamed everyone, promised to build those infamous walls against migrants, and "Make America great again." Probably knowing that complicated problems do not have simple solutions, Trump and his electoral team still chose such a form of informing society about their political agenda that would appeal to the majority of their electoral base: uneducated or ignorant people who got used to blaming others for their own misfortunes. If his electoral base was not so ignorant and craving for quick solutions, it would question their candidate more, and would probably find out that there was no solid basis behind his loud words; as a result, America might have had a different president now, and the whole political course of the country could have been different.

Ignorant and poorly-educated people always make the majority of the population. Ancient Greeks knew that; nowadays praised for inventing the democratic form of rule, Greeks had numerous limitations for those who wanted to participate in the political life of their society. Many of them would be unreasonable to implement today: to tell a long story short, a right to vote belonged only to free male citizens of Ancient Greece's cities (Inside Loyola), and some Greek city-states also required voters to match additional criteria, such as education or a certain level of income. This way, Greeks filtered those social categories who were biased towards certain subjects; for example, poor people would obviously vote for candidates who promised to make them rich, ignorant and uneducated people would vote for those who promised them unearthly goods and happiness, and so on. By granting the right to vote to few, Greeks ensured that those few were educated, knew about the current problems of the city-state they lived in, understood how the system worked, and were interested in the best possible outcomes for everyone could vote.

So why not, for example, implement similar limitations nowadays? For example, a test—not the one that would completely remove certain groups of society from voting, but the one that would ensure voters know what and why they will be doing during the elections. The right to vote would still belong to everyone—but a person would first need to prove that he or she knows (at least in bare outlines) how the American political system works, how the economy works, why and how things in the country work or do not work. Failure would not mean being banned from voting for life, but would require a person to learn more about the country he or she lived in, and then try to take the test again. And again, and again, until this person is competent enough to decide the future of the society and country, he or she lives in. Besides, it would be fair: immigrants, for example, need to pass a similar test when moving to the U.S.—so how are the rest of the Americans privileged to not know how their system works? Currently, there are many advocates of the idea to implement testing before voting in the United States, for example Jonah Goldberg, a syndicated columnist and editor-at-large of the National Review Online, the conservative columnist Ann Coulter, and the former U.S. Representative Tom Tancredo (ThoughtCo). If what they suggest works out one day, the United States' society could be sure that its life depends on educated, well-informed people, not on marginals demanding quick solutions to complicated problems.

The idea of making citizens pass a special test to ensure their ability to make informed decisions during elections might seem limiting and somewhat authoritarian. Many people have got so used to their rights and freedoms that the idea of even the slightest limitation makes them scared. However, there are reasons to believe that qualification tests could not damage, but heal and improve the political system of the United States, because such tests would ensure that, metaphorically speaking, little children will not put forks into electrical sockets—meaning that ignorant people who have no idea about how the United States' society works will not be able to affect its life through voting during its elections.