

A Possible Drawback to Letting Everybody Vote

In America, the ability of every citizen 18 and older to vote is considered one of the country's hallmarks of "freedom and equality". And that's not only the case in America. Indeed, [most countries in the world](#) now have a system of what's known as "universal suffrage".

But as with every system, there are some drawbacks to it. One of them was raised by [Konstantin Pobedonostsev](#)—a powerful figure in 19th-century Russia—in his 1896 classic *Reflections of a Russian Statesman*. In fact, Pobedonostsev questioned the very idea that universal suffrage actually resulted in "freedom and equality":

"Forever extending its base, the new Democracy now aspires to universal suffrage—a fatal error, and one of the most remarkable in the history of mankind... In the result it has undoubtedly been shown that in the attainment of this aim Democracy violates its sacred formula of 'Freedom indissolubly joined with Equality.' It is shown that this apparently equal distribution of 'freedom' among all involves the total destruction of equality. Each vote, representing an inconsiderable fragment of power, by itself signifies nothing; an aggregation of votes alone has a relative value. The result may be likened to the general meetings of shareholders in public companies. By themselves individuals are ineffective, but he who controls a number of these fragmentary forces is master of all power, and directs all decisions and dispositions. We may well ask in what consists the superiority of Democracy... In a Democracy, the real rulers are the dexterous manipulators of votes, with their placemen, the mechanics who so skillfully operate the hidden springs which move the puppets in the arena of democratic elections. Men of this kind are ever ready with loud speeches lauding

equality; in reality, they rule the people as any despot or military dictator might rule it. The extension of the right to participate in elections is regarded as progress and as the conquest of freedom by democratic theorists, who hold that the more numerous the participants in political rights, the greater is the probability that all will employ this right in the interests of the public welfare, and for the increase of the freedom of the people. Experience proves a very different thing."

To sum up Pobedonostsev's argument, giving everybody the right to vote inevitably leads to despotism. Those will rise to power who are the most effective at appealing to the masses and working the mechanics of the elections in their favor. According to Pobedonostsev—who by the way was a monarchist—universal suffrage thus undermines the very freedom and equality it supposedly embodies.

It's an interesting argument, but I don't think universal suffrage is going away anytime soon. In America and other countries, [the extension of voting rights](#) involved removing barriers tied to the controversial categories of race, class, and gender, and I don't think we'll see a 180 on those anytime soon—nor, of course, should we. There has been talk about bringing back literacy tests to vote, or [adding a civics test](#), but [some would very likely try argue](#) that they conflict with the [1965 Voting Rights Act](#), which prohibits racial discrimination in voting. (If interested, check out Alabama's 1965 Voter Literacy Test [here](#).)

Would you support more restrictions being placed on current voting rights in America? Moreover, would those restrictions provide a greater check on the manipulators of elections?