

Birthright Citizenship: Should We Keep It?

One vexing current problem centers on who becomes the citizen of a given country, since citizenship confers voting rights.

The Anglo-American model, in which every baby born in the country's land area automatically becomes a citizen, clearly invites welfare immigration by expectant parents. In the U.S., for example, a current problem is illegal immigrants whose babies, if born on American soil, automatically become citizens and therefore entitle themselves and their parents to permanent welfare payments and free medical care. Clearly the French system, in which one has to be born to a citizen to become an automatic citizen, is far closer to the idea of a nation-by-consent.

It is also important to rethink the entire concept and function of voting. Should anyone have a "right" to vote? Rose Wilder Lane, the mid-twentieth century U.S. libertarian theorist, was once asked if she believed in womens' suffrage. "No," she replied, "and I'm against male suffrage as well." The Latvians and Estonians have cogently tackled the problem of Russian immigrants by allowing them to continue permanently as residents, but not granting them citizenship or therefore the right to vote. The Swiss welcome temporary guest-workers, but severely discourage permanent immigration, and, a fortiori, citizenship and voting.

Let us turn for enlightenment, once again, to the anarcho-capitalist model. What would voting be like in a totally privatized society? Not only would voting be diverse, but more importantly, who would really care? Probably the most deeply satisfying form of voting to an economist is the corporation, or joint-stock company, in which voting is proportionate to one's share of ownership of the firm's assets. But also there

are, and would be, a myriad of private clubs of all sorts. It is usually assumed that club decisions are made on the basis of one vote per member, but that is generally untrue. Undoubtedly, the best-run and most pleasant clubs are those run by a small, self-perpetuating oligarchy of the ablest and most interested, a system most pleasant for the rank-and-file nonvoting member as well as for the elite. If I am a rank-and-file member of, say a chess club, why should I worry about voting if I am satisfied with the way the club is run? And if I am interested in running things, I would probably be asked to join the ruling elite by the grateful oligarchy, always on the lookout for energetic members. And finally, if I am unhappy about the way the club is run, I can readily quit and join another club, or even form one of my own. That, of course, is one of the great virtues of a free and privatized society, whether we are considering a chess club or a contractual neighborhood community.

Clearly, as we begin to work toward the pure model, as more and more areas and parts of life become either privatized or micro-decentralized, the less important voting will become. Of course, we are a long way from this goal. But it is important to begin, and particularly to change our political culture, which treats "democracy," or the "right" to vote, as the supreme political good. In fact, the voting process should be considered trivial and unimportant at best, and never a "right," apart from a possible mechanism stemming from a consensual contract. In the modern world, democracy or voting is only important either to join in or ratify the use of the government to control others, or to use it as a way of preventing one's self or one's group from being controlled. Voting, however, is at best, an inefficient instrument for self-defense, and it is far better to replace it by breaking up central government power altogether.

In sum, if we proceed with the decomposition and decentralization of the modern centralizing and coercive

nation-state, deconstructing that state into constituent nationalities and neighborhoods, we shall at one and the same time reduce the scope of government power, the scope and importance of voting and the extent of social conflict. The scope of private contract, and of voluntary consent, will be enhanced, and the brutal and repressive state will be gradually dissolved into a harmonious and increasingly prosperous social order.

Excerpted from [Nations by Consent](#)

Murray N. Rothbard made major contributions to economics, history, political philosophy, and legal theory. He combined Austrian economics with a fervent commitment to individual liberty.

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