

INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF APPLIED ETHICS  
Volume 8 (2022), pp. 71–77

RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Equality Versus Excellence: Does Universal Adult Franchise Complement Democratic Values?

Tanmita Kundu

Former Student, Department of Political Science University of Delhi

*Received: February 15, 2020; returned: NA; revised: NA; accepted: September, 25 2020.*

---

**Abstract:** Since political equality, free and fair elections, and universal adult franchise have become synonymous with the primary characteristics of democracy, it is ironic to see how such democratic means have the potential to yield undemocratic outcomes. This article questions whether political equality practiced through a universal adult franchise is able to fulfill its goal of empowering people to express their ‘will’ equally or whether this political equality actually is the reason behind the increase in substantial inequality as people have the unequal capability of cognitive decision making, and hence are susceptible to influence which might corrupt their ‘real will’ and end up expressing ‘false will.’ If people possessing unequal cognitive ability are enfranchised with an equal value of the vote, then it might lead to greater inequality in expressing the ‘real will’ of the people. Furthermore, although every citizen is considered to be morally equal and deserves equal respect, there are bound to be inequalities in terms of wealth, education, luck, etc. The real aim of democracy is to reduce such inequality and propound egalitarianism rather than simple equalitarianism through democratic decision-making. This article further proposes an alternative plural voting system where people could be awarded extra votes as per their excellence and disadvantage.

**Keywords:** Egalitarianism, equality, decision making, excellence, democracy.

---

## 1 Introduction

The word democracy originated from the Greek word ‘dēmokratía’, meaning ‘rule by people’. Presently democracy is considered to be the most desirable form of government as it upholds values such as freedom, equality, collective decision-making, constitutionalism,

the rule of law, etc. The concept of democracy originated in ancient Athens, which practiced direct democracy. Since then, democracy has come a long way, molding itself with the changing requirements of different times, and is practiced differently in different countries. In this neo-liberal era, there seems to be growing desirability for a liberal form of democracy where citizens enjoy political equality in the form of rights and freedom of expression and are also empowered with voting rights, which ensures their participation in decision-making. However, such leverages are also accompanied by messy politics, delayed decision-making, etc. Despite such shortcomings, democracy is still considered better than other forms of government such as monarchy, military dictatorship, etc. It recognizes the equal moral worth of its citizens, which is mainly practiced through elections. Unlike other regimes, in democracy, real sovereignty is vested among citizens; that is, it is the people from whom the ultimate political authority is derived. Through the process of elections, citizens can express their will while choosing a government.

Nevertheless, the successful working of democracy requires an informed citizenry that has the rational capacity to choose what is best for them. Such decisions about politics and the economy require certain knowledge and experience that the masses do not possess equally (Rosenberg, 2018). J.S. Mill recognized this problem as a “problem of exposure.” He believed that people lacked the information needed to address political and economic problems. He suggested two solutions: mass public education and free speech. He also suggested a plural voting system which would result in better decision-making. Other contemporary theorists such as Hannah Arendt, Guttman, and Thompson have suggested that the above problem of citizen capability goes deeper than insufficient information and extends to their unequal cognitive ability to understand and productively engage with other perspectives. Furthermore, David Pears, in his book ‘motivated irrationality,’ argues how people can be motivated to make irrational decisions through incorrect processing of information, which may lead to the formation of a belief which in turn corrupts and influences the real will leading to post-judgment rationality (Pears, 1984).

Furthermore, some people require government assistance and safeguards more than others because of structural inequalities such as poverty, minority, physical disability, historically disadvantaged communities based on race and caste etc. Hence, formal political equalitarianism through universal adult suffrage would do little help in achieving egalitarianism. This concept of egalitarianism is born out of dissatisfaction with the unintended consequences of equalitarianism or formal equality. If the citizens are structurally unequal, possess resources (such as cognitive ability and information) in excess, and others do not possess the same at all, giving everyone an equal share will reproduce inequality. In this case, if everyone is entitled to one vote to express their real will, and only some have the cognitive ability and knowledge to understand to make an informed decision.

In contrast, some are dependent on others’ understanding and knowledge, which might lead to expressing false will. This kind of situation will end up reproducing inequality in expressions of real will as some people might incorrectly process information to influence their real will upon others, thus corrupting the real will of others and creating a false will that will, in turn, complement the former’s real will. This is the reason we are witnessing irrational democratic decisions that go against the informative

and rational decisions made by political scientists as well as economists. These decisions affect the disadvantaged sections of society, and equal stakeholders in the electoral process.

Hence, if political equality, which guarantees procedural equality, results in substantial inequality, it might be desirable to look for an alternative electoral system that will ensure greater substantial equality. This paper proposes an alternative plural voting system inspired by the concept of excellence to ensure rational and informative decision-making.

Modern democracy derives its legitimacy from its people. They exercise their sovereignty by expressing their will as citizens or real will through voting (Riley, 1982). This real will is distinguished from another human will, such as the actual, particular, and false will.

Actual will is motivated by one's immediate and selfish interests, which J.S. Mill terms 'sinister interests' (Mill, 1859). Such interests are confined within the boundaries of individual and family, which reflect the will of the self. Since emotions and desires prompt the actual will rather than reason, they are usually unstable and inconsistent and change from time to time. Like an actual will, the particular will is also motivated by sinister interests, but unlike the former, the latter can also be prompted by reason, emotions, and desire. It mainly expresses selfish interests, which only focus on individual good rather than the common good.

False will is prompted by self-deception, belief, and akrasia (action against one's own better judgment). False will is created when the real will is corrupted or motivated by incorrect information, and the person is made to believe that the 'new false will' will serve for her/his good. This kind of will has a background of rationality in the form of post-judgmental rationality. Here, the so-called rationality is used to justify decisions or preferences which were initially being motivated by desires, pleasures, or emotions instead of reason, thus violating standards of epistemic rationality. For example, if a person at a party knows that drinking alcohol would not be a rationally righteous decision, she/he has to drive back home but drinks the same after a friend says that a few drinks will not harm her/his senses. Although this decision seems to be motivated by reason, in reality, it was motivated by his desire to drink alcohol, which was rationally justified by incorrect information processing by his/her friend. Furthermore, psychological studies have shown how humans are susceptible to making irrational decisions under the influence of perception, desire, belief, incorrect information, etc., which might contradict their real wants and choices (Rosenberg, 2018).

Unlike the wills mentioned above, a real will is motivated rationally by a person's ultimate and collective interest. It requires a person to have the cognitive ability to rationally choose what is right for them based on knowledge and information and productively engage with different perspectives. Since the real will is prompted by reason, it is stable and consistent. This will is different from Rousseau's concept of 'general will.' Unlike a general will, a real will does not pre-suppose righteousness. Instead, the real will reflects what a person wants and what choices will complement those wants.

The purpose of voting in a modern democracy is to empower its sovereign citizens

to express their real will by choosing the government. The stability of such a system depends on an informative civil society that requires a mixture of the parochial and participant political culture known as civic culture (Almond and Verba, 1963). This society consists of individuals who, on the one hand, enjoy political equality as they are recognized with equal moral worth and are governed by the rule of law. On the other hand, they are subjected to structural inequalities based on caste, race, wealth, sex, etc. It is voting which enables the diverse citizens an equal chance to express their real will. But is it justifiable to give equal voting rights to people who possess the unequal cognitive ability required to differentiate real will from a false will? Should the poor and disadvantaged be provided with extra votes so that they will hold a greater value? Should the professionals who excel in politics and economics have been given an extra vote so that their suggestions hold a greater value?

The concept of democracy originated in ancient Athens, where only male citizens possessing some amount of material property were allowed to engage in public affairs and politics. Hence women and enslaved people did not enjoy political equality. It was assumed that only a particular class of men had the time and capability required to govern a state.

At the same time, women and slaves were only meant to help the men in private affairs so that propertied men get the time to engage in public affairs. Only in the late nineteenth and twentieth century, after the abolition of slavery and the women's suffrage movement, was every human being recognized as having equal moral worth, which gradually led to the universal adult franchise. Growth in population and size of the state gave way to a representative democracy where people enjoyed political equality for choosing their representatives. Hence, democracy changed from direct democracy to representative democracy. This representative form of democracy was inspired by liberalism, which entails the value of merit and equality. Although these developments ensured formal equality or equalitarianism, the unintended consequences of this formal equality favored the already advantaged class. They led to an increase in the gap between rich and poor. This formal equality was unable to achieve social and economic equality, which gave rise to the concept of egalitarianism and affirmative action to compensate and help the disadvantaged section. The main aim of such actions was to provide equal opportunities to people and reduce the gap between the advantageous and disadvantageous sections. However, in reality, these led to the decline of democracy as people who did not have the cognitive ability to recognize their real will got influenced by populist leaders who preyed on the insecurities and beliefs of the masses by creating a false will.

Scholars such as J.S. Mill, Hannah Arendt, Guttman, and Thompson recognize that majority of the masses do not possess the cognitive capacity and emotional wherewithal to act as rational, reflective, and critical subjects or self-directing subjects and get influenced to support the false will which legitimizes majoritarian regimes (Rosenberg, 2018). This, in turn, leads to substantial inequality as such regimes prey on the inequalities and insecurities of the disadvantaged section to ensure their status quo and legitimacy. Such regimes do not support egalitarianism and do not productively work for the common good as the source of their power and legitimacy is rooted in ignorant citizens. They are deliberately made to believe in a false will manufactured by self-interested politicians.

Hence, the universal adult franchise may not be the appropriate voting method for upholding and achieving democratic values and democratic ethos, respectively. The next section proposes an alternative voting system that favors the values of excellence in terms of knowledge needed for good governance and is based upon the difference principle of Rawls theory of justice.

To curb the above-discussed problem, philosophers such as J.S. Mill came up with a detailed proposal of a plural voting system in 'Thoughts on Parliamentary reform' so as to maintain the values intrinsic to representative democracy. Some of those values are fair representation, competence, participation, freedom of speech and expression, strong opposition, accountability, legitimacy, etc. His main objective was to promote equality by providing the educated propertied minority with extra votes to prevent the majority's tyranny. He thought that the educated and propertied citizens would have the leisure and knowledge to understand what is good for the society, unlike the uneducated and poor who strive to fulfill their private interests. He overlooked that giving extra votes to the well-off minority may give them the power to exploit the poor, uneducated majority. Furthermore, he did not attempt to compensate the disadvantaged poor citizens by providing extra votes, which will, in turn, give more value to their needs. Hence, he was criticized for his unclear substantive eligibility criteria for extra votes and for overlooking the value of 'participation' (Brilhante and Rocha, 2013).

Although Mill's plural voting system seems to have many flaws, the main problem seems to be the eligibility criteria for extra votes. Since every citizen has multiple identities, giving extra votes based on property and education will not do justice to the complex identities of the contemporary world. Here, we will try to come up with new eligibility criteria per the features of the contemporary world, which will give extra votes to disadvantaged people and those who have the knowledge and capability to express their real will. Although it is difficult to differentiate between real and false will, educated people are most likely to have the cognitive ability, knowledge, and information required to recognize their will. Since the disadvantaged sections of the society need more assistance from the state, their wills must also have extra value. The disadvantage might be financial or social. Hence the criteria for extra votes might be the following:

- Race/Caste/Gender: The blacks, Dalits, women, and people of another gender(s) share a history of unequal treatment by whites, people of upper castes, and patriarchy and hence need additional assistance for developing capabilities.
- Age: Since life experiences cater to better decision-making capacity, a person above fifty years of age might be considered to have a better cognitive ability to make decisions than a younger person. This bar of fifty years of age is flexible and might change with time and place.
- Class: A person with property or regular income might be considered financially stable, while a person who neither has regular income nor property can be considered financially disadvantaged. It is the latter who require more state assistance.
- Education: Education is considered to be one of the empowering factors for enhancing and improving one's cognitive capabilities, which leads to better decision-making. The disadvantaged might include the people who do not possess a graduation degree, whereas those with a graduation degree might be included in the advan-

taged group. Hence, the extra vote is given to the people holding at least a graduation degree.

In a plural voting system, every adult citizen will enjoy one vote. However, one extra vote will be given to disadvantaged sections of the population based on caste/race and class and those who possess better decision-making capacity based on age and educational qualification. Hence, each citizen will be entitled to a minimum of one vote and a maximum of five votes. An old Dalit person who does own a property with graduation will have the maximum number of votes, while a young upper caste person who has regular income or owns the property but does not possess a graduation degree will have only one vote. Although this system seems to be more complicated than a universal adult franchise, it promotes egalitarianism and closely represents the diversity of modern democratic society.

## 2 Conclusion

Although democracy is considered the most desirable kind of government, the recent political developments such as the Colombian people's initial rejection of peace with FARC, the increase in populist regimes, and Brexit, even after economists' disapproval, raise doubts about the wisdom of democratic decision-making. Furthermore, philosophers such as Shawn W. Rosenberg, in his paper 'Democracy as devouring itself', recognized how the system of democracy requires its citizens to possess the cognitive ability, knowledge, and necessary information to make good political decisions, which the majority of its citizens lack. Thus democracy in itself carries the elements which devour it. Also, recent trends such as low economic growth rate, high corruption, etc., resembles the conditions of the early nineteenth century in the backdrop of which J.S. Mill proposed his plural voting system. However, contemporary times face the additional problem of irrational decision-making and the rise of populism. These decisions propel us to question the ability of citizens to make decisions. It questions the compatibility of democracy with the universal adult franchise and reminds us of Plato's allegory of ship and Aristotle's warning against democracy. These ancient Greek philosophers argued that, like any other science such as medicine, politics also requires a certain kind of excellence, knowledge, and cognitive ability for the successful working of the government.

Nevertheless, it is also true that their version of the ideal state never existed. Hence, in the contemporary globalized world, a democratic form of government is preferable to other forms of government that the world has witnessed, such as monarchy, dictatorship, military dictatorship, totalitarianism, etc. However, since modern democracy carries some characteristics that might cause its decline, we must try to find alternatives or remedies for those negative characteristics. This essay attempts to find an alternative to the existing voting system, which might potentially destroy democracy. Although the criteria for giving extra votes in a plural voting system may vary from society to society, the essence and values of egalitarianism and excellence behind this system will remain the same.

## References

- [1] Almond, G. A., & Verba, S. (1963). *The Civic Culture: Political Attitudes and Democracy in Five Nations*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press.
- [2] Amaral Brilhante, Á., & José Sales Rocha, F. (2013). *Democracy and Plural Voting in John Stuart Mill's Political Thought*.
- [3] Mill, J. S. (1859). *Thoughts on parliamentary reform*. London: John W. Parker and Son.
- [4] Pears, D. (1984). *Motivated Irrationality*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- [5] Riley, P. T. (1982). *Will and Political Legitimacy: A Critical Exposition of Social Contract Theory in Hobbes, Lock, Rousseau, Kant and Hegel*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- [6] Rosenberg, S. W. (2018). *Democracy Devouring Itself: The Rise of the Incompetent Citizen and the Appeal of Right Wing Populism*. UC Irvine Previously Published Works.