

AMERICAN CONSTITUTIONALISM
VOLUME II: RIGHTS AND LIBERTIES
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Supplementary Material

Chapter 7: The Republican Era – Democratic Rights/Voting

Americans Debate Universal (Male) Suffrage

Americans during the Republican Era engaged in new debates over universal suffrage. Many controversies were spurred by the growth of cities and increased Catholic and Jewish immigration from non-English-speaking countries. Protestant elites reacted differently to this increased diversity. Francis Parkman (1823–93) was a professor of history at Harvard. Like many Boston Brahmins, Parkman was a “scientific” racist who doubted the political capacities of Catholics and immigrants from places other than northern Europe. His works championed restrictions on the ballot in order to ensure intelligent republican government. John Martin Luther Babcock (1822–94) was a Baptist minister in New Hampshire and Maine. An abolitionist before the Civil War, Babcock turned to social reform and the rights of the poor during the late nineteenth century. He championed universal male suffrage as a means for greater political, social, and economic equality.

Below are two short excerpts from Parkman and Babcock’s main writings on universal male suffrage. What are Parkman’s main objections to universal suffrage? How does Babcock respond to these claims? Does Babcock make universal arguments for universal male suffrage or are his arguments distinctive to the Republican Era? Parkman did not speak of property or taxpaying qualifications. What explains the differences between his arguments for restrictions on the ballot and popular arguments for restrictions on the ballot before the Civil War?

Francis Parkman, “The Failure of Universal Suffrage,”¹

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The success of an experiment of indiscriminate suffrage hangs on the question whether the better part of the community is able to outweigh the worse. There are certain social conditions, rarely to be found except in small communities and a civilization not the most advanced, in which this question may be answered confidently in the affirmative; but, as numbers, wealth, and luxury increase, the difficulty grows with them. It is aggravated by the fact, generally acknowledged by those most competent to judge of it that intellectual development and high civilization are not favorable to fecundity, so that the unintelligent classes, except when in actual destitution, multiply faster than those above them. Thus the power of ignorance tends to increase, or rather the power of the knaves who are always at hand to use it.

A New England village of the olden time that is to say, of some forty years ago would have been safely and well governed by the votes of every man in it; but, now that the village has grown into a populous city, with its factories and workshops, its acres of tenement houses, and thousands and ten thousands of restless workmen, foreigners for the most part, to whom liberty means license and politics means plunder, to whom the public good is nothing and their own most trivial interests everything, who love the country for what they can get out of it, and whose ears are open to the promptings of every rascally agitator, the case is completely changed, and universal suffrage becomes a questionable blessing. Still we are told it is an inalienable right. Suppose for an instant that it were so, wild as the supposition is. The community has rights as well as the individual, and it has also duties. It is both its right and its duty to provide good government for itself, and, the moment the vote of any person or class of persons

¹ Excerpt taken from Francis Parkman, “The Failure of Universal Suffrage,” *North American Review* 127 (July–August 1878):1.

becomes an obstacle to its doing so, this person or class forfeits the right to vote; for, where the rights of a part clash with the rights of the whole, the former must give way. When a man has not sense to comprehend the questions at issue, know a bad candidate from a good one, or see his own true interests—when he cares not a farthing for the general good, and will sell his vote for a dollar—when, by a native instinct, he throws up his cap at the claptrap declamation of some lying knave, and turns with indifference or dislike from the voice of honesty and reason—then his vote becomes a public pest. Somebody uses him, and profits by him. Probably it is a demagogue, possibly a priest, or possibly both. In any case, it is folly to call him a free agent. His inalienable right may perhaps be valuable to him for the bribe he gets out of it; but it makes him a nuisance and a danger to the state. It causes pulpit, platform, and press, to condone his vices, and debauch the moral sense of the people by discovering objects of sympathy in vagabonds, thieves, and ruffians. It gives power to the communistic attack on property, and makes it difficult to deal with outbreaks of brutal violence against which even humanity itself demands measures of the most stern and exemplary repression.

Universal suffrage, imposed upon the country by the rivalries of contending parties bidding against each other for votes, has since been promoted into a principle, regarded by many persons as almost sacred. This so-called principle, however, is by no means of universal application, and, when applied in the wrong place, at once reduces itself to absurdity. . . . Universal suffrage is applicable only to those peoples . . . who by character and training are prepared for it; and the only rational question is as to the degree of preparation that will serve the purpose. . . . There must be hereditary traditions of self-government. Universal suffrage exists in some European nations, and exists along with a high degree of civilization and prosperity; but in these the traditions and material forces of a centralized government are extremely strong, and the evils of an ignorant or vicious vote are held in check by powers of resistance which are unknown here.

Those who bray loudest for inalienable rights extol the ballot as an education in itself, capable of making good citizens out of the poorest material. Under certain conditions, there is a measure of truth in this. An untaught and reckless voter, enveloped by honest and rational ones, is apt to change greatly for the better; but, to this end, it is essential that those whom the ballot is to educate should be segregated and surrounded by healthy influences. When extensive districts and, notably, large portions of populous cities are filled by masses of imported ignorance and heredity ineptitude, the whole ferments together till the evil grows insufferable.

There is an illusion, or a superstition, among us respecting the ballot. The means are confounded with the end. Good government is the end, and the ballot is worthless except so far as it helps to reach this end. Any reasonable man would willingly renounce his privilege of dropping a piece of paper into a box, provided that good government were assured to him and his descendants.

. . . When a majority of the people become convinced that no aggregate of folly can produce sense, and no aggregate of worthlessness can produce honesty, and when they return to the ancient faith that sense and honesty are essential to good government, then it will become possible—not, perhaps, peaceably to abolish a debased suffrage—but to counteract and so far neutralize it that it may serve as a safety-value and cease to be a danger.

John Martin Luther Babcock, The Right Of The Ballot²

. . . Establish in the national consciousness the full conception and conviction of human rights, and neither a king nor a majority can safely oppress or easily despoil the individual. The great value to us

² Excerpt taken from, John Martin Luther Babcock, *The Right of the Ballot* (Boston, MA: John Wilson and Son, 1879).

of our Revolution was, that it planted in the heart of the nation the conception of certain human rights, — the germ of all liberty. One may be willing, for the sake of discrediting the ballot, to repudiate the idea of natural rights; but he must also be willing to repudiate the most inspiring lessons of our history. With the present infirmity of human nature we may not at once secure the wisest laws or the most perfect government by the aid of the ideas that "All men are created equal," and that "Governments derive their just powers from the consent of the governed"; but history shows that governments and laws must be infinitely more unjust and oppressive that are created or enacted in disregard or defiance of these great natural principles.

It is not a little significant that, in attacking the ballot, one finds it essential to his argument to attack the truth of the natural equality of man. It is gravely assumed or argued that, because human beings are not equal in physical structure or mental calibre, they are equal in nothing. . . .

Does it follow, then, that a man of great intellect or great learning may oppress or rob a weak or ignorant man? Or that a man of exceeding virtue may rightfully make a vicious man his chattel slave? Where is the charter of personal liberty, of a man's right to own himself, to be found, if not in the truth of human equality? . . . If liberty thrives where an "even distributive justice is refused to human nature," why was not our beloved South, previous to 1860, a paradise of freedom? . . . Who does not see that equality is the basis of liberty? It is because "all men are created equal" that they have an inalienable right to liberty. The human heart thrills with unwonted emotion at the record of every struggle for freedom that glorifies the annals of the race; but, if the proposition now put forth in the name of the higher education be true, every such struggle was a magnificent mistake!

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Of course, as a question of individual morals, some men may be better than others; but, in the broad realm of natural rights, one man *is* essentially as good as another. And this is the basis of the right of suffrage. When society organizes into a State, the rights of all men in it are absolutely equal. Each one is entitled to an equal voice in building the framework of government, and in choosing the persons to whom shall be intrusted the administration of it. On what ground can any man claim, as an individual, more power or authority in civil affairs than another? There is none. Can a man or a class of men be arbitrarily excluded from the highway? No one will claim it. Yet it may be done as justly as a man may be robbed of his right of the ballot. No man has yet been able to show any natural warrant for the exercise of superior political power; and until such a warrant can be shown, it is futile to deny the equal civil and social rights of all men. So our fathers thought, no doubt, when they stated, as a self-evident truth, that "Governments derive their just powers from the consent of the governed."

Suffrage stands, then, on the impregnable basis of human rights. But the moral argument in its behalf rests on ideas not less invincible. It is most frequently urged against the ballot that the vote of the ignorant and vicious man counts as much as that of the wise and virtuous; but in this objection appears the reason why it should be in every man's hand. In compact society, all classes affect or interact upon each other by certain yet invisible moral influences. When a pestilence breaks out, who does not fear the contagion? But few feel the same solicitude in the state of the moral atmosphere. If we could colonize all the goodness and worth at the South End, and banish all the vice and misery to the North End, keeping the two classes entirely separate, we might realize the dream of those who sigh for the "intrinsic inequality of character, ability, and culture." If that could be done, why should the South End then care for the moral and social condition of the other quarter? But it is not so to be! If ignorance and vice brood and fester in North Street and in Water Street, Beacon Street and Fifth Avenue will find it impossible to escape the contagion. And herein is seen the mission of the ballot: it comes, not to create but to reveal and emphasize this interdependence and interaction of different classes of society. Wealth and learning may look with indifference upon an outlying mass of poverty and vice, destitute of political power. The poor multitudes may be oppressed with safety, if unarmed. But put the ballot in their hands, and the situation assumes an entirely new face. It is not so safe to wrong and despoil a class whose votes are as numerous as those of your own; nor is your indifference to its moral or social condition conducive to the public good. It is then seen to be as much for the interest of one class as for the other that the streams of justice should flow in equal currents, and the fountains of moral influence be made pure for all. The ballot is the visible bond to unite the different elements of society in harmonious fellowship, and to aid in securing

the best popular education and enlightenment. That a condition of society in which a wealthy or titled aristocracy monopolizes political power and the common people are condemned to poverty and distress, contains the seeds of violent dissolution, is a fact with which the careful student of history is familiar; but, without the ballot, who knows how soon it might be forgotten?

Moreover, the ballot is invaluable to the individual as an inspiration of manhood and independence. He to whom wealth or genius secures abundant social consideration may not feel the need of it; but the poor or less fortunate cannot be entirely unconscious of its effect. It is not reasonable to expect high moral character of one who is made to feel that he is destitute of social standing or fellowship,—a pariah in society. . . . With the ballot in his hands, the humblest man may feel that in one thing, at least, he is the equal of the proudest; that he has an interest in the public good; that he may contribute in some measure to the securing of just laws and wise government,—and the manliness and self-respect thus developed tend to a nobler character. . . .

. . . [N]othing could be more at variance with the facts than to charge the poor of our cities with the responsibility for political corruption. Thieves have filched from the treasuries alike of cities, States, and the nation; but where the workmen are who have profited by these robberies it is certainly impossible to say. What has piled up the vast debts of cities? Has it been the plundering of an “ignorant mob,” bent on spending the public money on their own “most trivial interests”? Not a fact supports such an assumption. Aside from the war-debts, the indebtedness of the great cities has been caused by vast expenditures for parks, street openings and widenings, and luxurious public buildings,—for measures advocated and engineered, not by the poor for their profit or pleasure, but for the gratification and in the interest of the wealthy and business classes. . . .

In this recent arraignment of suffrage, all that seems to be made out is that it has not always been exercised wisely and well. What institution exists, however sacred it may be, of which as much may not be affirmed? But it is no discredit to the ballot to say, that the worst abuses of it have been perpetrated by those who have inherited the effects of many generations of Old-World oppression or New-World slavery. They may not make a good use of their newly-won rights: but what they are they have been made by the despotism and injustice which had too much share in educating them. The only cure for their errors is liberty. Give them time; and under the benign education of the ballot, they may become fully intelligent in the use of it. But the abuses of suffrage are not to be corrected by setting up any new aristocratical distinctions, or intensifying any class prejudice. If learning is wise, it will not seek to generate the passions which sever and divide human hearts, but will cultivate and foster the feelings that draw men together in fellowship and brotherhood. Not by the futile attempt to overthrow natural rights, but by establishing justice and equity among men, is the republic to be perfected.