On Harwood’s Plural Voting System

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In “More Votes for Ph.D.’s,”1 Robin Harwood defends a version of John Stuart Mill’s plural voting system, according to which the number of votes any individual receives should be based on his attained level of education. Harwood modifies Mill’s system in two ways: (1) he adds a compulsory vote, and (2) he rejects Mill’s provision that denies voting privileges to the illiterate and innumerate. Although Harwood’s project is well-intended, we argue that it not only would fail to accomplish its stated goals, but would bring about a number of unintended, negative consequences. We then propose a system which bases the number of votes granted on the ability to demonstrate basic knowledge of an election’s primary issues and candidates.

The main features of Harwood’s system include the following:

1. Everyone receives a minimum of one vote.
2. Voting is compulsory.
3. Everyone has the opportunity to gain more voting power through universal, free education.
4. There is a limit to the number of votes any one person can have.

The education that would count toward acquiring more votes includes general education (mathematics, chemistry, history, philosophy), technical education (plumbing, auto repair), and “fast-track” courses for those who do not have time to go to school. The courses/training need not be politically relevant. The justification for this system is that the motivation to gain more political power would lead to an overall better-educated populace, which in turn would lead to the election of more capable politicians and better governing, since voters would possess a greater capacity and desire to understand political issues.

Harwood predicts his system would produce a greater interest in participating in the political process. Voter statistics from the 1996 U.S. presidential election support this claim, as shown in Table 1.2 Not only were the more educated more likely than the less educated to be registered and to vote, but among the more educated there was a smaller gap between those registered and those voting. Furthermore, the less educated were far more likely to cite lack of interest as their primary reason for not voting (20.4 percent of those without a high school education vs. 9.6 percent of those with an advanced degree).3 Under Harwood’s system, everyone of voting age must vote, so a better-educated public would not yield a greater number of voters. But, Harwood argues, since a better-educated populace would be more interested in participating in the political process, it would also
exhibit an increased interest in learning about the relevant issues. This, in turn, would lead to better political debates and better dissemination of information, since politicians would most want to attract those with the greatest number of votes.

We argue that Harwood fails to answer adequately four important objections. The first objection denies a connection between higher education in general and political acumen. H. B. Mayo advances this argument, citing a paper by William Robson, who demonstrated that “when the universities of Oxford and Cambridge had parliamentary seats of their own, in which members of the universities voted, the members showed no greater wisdom than other constituencies, and frequently chose the mediocre candidate over the brilliant candidate.”\(^4\) So, says Robson, there is not a link between higher education and political sophistication. In response, Harwood states that “[t]he trouble with this objection is that Robson does not say how he arrived at this conclusion.”\(^5\) This response is unsatisfactory, because it commits an argument from ignorance; in effect, his argument says that, since Robson did not demonstrate how he arrived at his conclusion, we do not know whether Robson is right, so we should accept the initial thesis that there is a connection between higher education in general and political acumen. But common sense suggests that Robson is right; whereas social scientists are better equipped than the rest of us to make political decisions, what about, say, highly trained chemists? Although the chemist knows much about chemistry (and other related disciplines), this does not mean she knows much about politics in general, let alone about the issues of a particular election. The point holds even more strongly for the non-college-educated. Further, within Harwood’s system, there is no motivation to become more politically educated. A person with an M.A. in chemistry who wants more voting power can gain more votes by earning her Ph.D. in chemistry (or she can take a weekend course in auto repair), but such programs do not lead to greater political acumen. As Allan Bloom so aptly put it, “A highly trained computer specialist need not have had any more learning about morals, politics, or religion than the most ignorant of persons.”\(^6\)

The second objection states that inequality in political decision making is unjust. In response, Harwood argues that inequality in competence should translate into inequality of voting power. Further, he claims that

\begin{table}
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\caption{Reported Voting and Registration, by Educational Attainment}
\begin{tabular}{|l|c|c|}
\hline
Educational attainment & Percentage registered & Percentage voted \\
\hline
Less than high school & 54.2 & 38.8 \\
High school graduate or GED equivalent & 65.5 & 51.7 \\
Some college or associate’s degree & 76.1 & 63.1 \\
Bachelor’s degree & 83.2 & 74.1 \\
Advanced degree & 89.8 & 83.3 \\
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“since the inequality is one that results at least in part from the efforts of the individuals in acquiring greater education, it seems unjust to deny them greater voting power.” But as we explained above, highly trained experts would be among the politically elite, those who would be granted the most votes. In his system, someone with a Ph.D. in chemistry, but with no interest in politics, would nevertheless have a significantly higher number of votes than a politically active union organizer without a high school diploma, but since the union organizer has exerted greater effort to acquire the relevant kind of education, granting more votes to the chemist would, on Harwood’s own terms, be unjust. Moreover, Harwood places great faith in his proposed universal, free education system and in people’s desire to acquire more votes through free education. In practice, free education would translate into neither universal nor equal education. Quality of education never enters into Harwood’s system. He assumes that higher education means better education and that better education means better political education. But as we argued above, this is false. A person who takes the time to study an election’s issues is more deserving of more votes than the politically apathetic, regardless of her level of education. Yet education and training, not familiarity with political issues, are all that count in Harwood’s system.

Harwood considers the third objection the most important. It states that the educated vote differently from the uneducated and choose policies and politicians who favor the educated. Granting more votes to the more educated will result in fewer benefits accruing to those who need them most. In short, his system favors conservatism. In response, Harwood argues that, since his system includes free education, liberals and conservatives will have an equal opportunity to gain political power. He assumes that education is politically neutral; that education does not affect one’s political leanings. But even if he is correct, the point still stands that the more educated tend to be more wealthy, and the more wealthy tend to vote more conservatively. Further, since on his system votes can never be taken away from a person but are cumulative (once one earns 80 votes for receiving a Ph.D. in English, for example, one can never lose them), older generations will by necessity have more votes, and the elderly tend to vote conservatively. So again, his system inherently favors conservatism.

Harwood responds that the more educated tend to hold more altruistic political views, but he then undermines himself by saying that “this opinion was formed many years ago, and society seems to have changed since then.” This suggests that there is no clear relation between education and political views. Whether or not he is correct about this, the point still holds that granting more voting power to the more educated (and, hence, wealthier) segment of the population can have serious consequences for those most in need of government assistance, particularly during periods when the more educated are less altruistically inclined.

The final objection Harwood considers claims that people with fewer votes will lose a certain amount of self-esteem and self-respect. He denies this, saying that in his system everyone gets at least one vote, and everyone has the opportunity to gain more votes. Everyone’s voice is valued, and all
are given the same chance to strengthen their voice. Further, Harwood claims that in practice there would be a continuum, with most voters having a medium number of votes.

We see two ways in which his system could lower the self-esteem and self-respect of its members. The first we call the “if votes were dollars” objection. In a capitalist economy, everyone can “make a buck.” That is, the opportunity is available (at least in theory) for all to get rich. But failure to make more than a living wage often results in a loss of self-esteem. A parallel can be drawn to Harwood’s system. Even though education is freely available to all, that does not guarantee that one will pass one’s courses; further, one might not have the time to take even a “fast-track” course to increase one’s voting power. The poor, who are often less capable, who often hold more than one job, who often head single-parent households, and who already may have a lowered self-esteem because of their economic condition, will be given one more reason to feel bad about themselves. Second, under Harwood’s system, the educated are given so much power that those with fewer votes will have lower self-esteem as a result of their belief that they cannot possibly counteract the power of the educated. Contrary to Harwood’s intentions, his system is elitist and would not produce its intended results.

We suggest an alternative system in which the more politically educated, and not the more educated in general, double their voting power. This double-vote system is election specific. The voter must pass an examination demonstrating basic competency in the major issues of the upcoming election. (Special considerations, like oral examinations, would be made for the illiterate and others unable to take written exams.) Should the voter pass the exam, she would earn a second vote. After that election, the voter returns to having only one vote until the next election, at which time she can demonstrate her competency with respect to that election. In our system, education does matter, but it is education about the issues, so the education we propose is politically relevant. Our system includes the following features:

1. Everyone gets at least one vote.
2. Voting is not compulsory.
3. One can gain more voting power in each election by passing election-specific exams.
4. The maximum number of votes a person can have is two.

Our system is better than Harwood’s, because it achieves his desired results while avoiding the above objections. Concerning the first objection, we recognize that there is not a necessary connection between higher education in general and political acumen. As stated above, the conditions that lead to greater voting power in our system are politically relevant.

Regarding the second objection, Harwood’s system is unjust, because the education or training that earns someone more votes is, in the majority of cases, politically irrelevant. Further, the discrepancy in voting power can be great. By contrast, in our system, the requisite demonstrable knowledge is
relevant, and the greatest discrepancy is one vote. So since our system bases increased voting power on whether a person has earned it, and since our system makes it comparatively easy for any given person to attain the maximum allowable number of votes, the system is just according to Harwood’s own standards. Further, by limiting the number of additional votes to one, our system does not threaten to drown out the voices of the least advantaged.

With respect to the third objection, our system does not inherently favor conservatism, since it does not make votes cumulative, and since the number of votes granted to each person is not connected with higher education and thus with greater wealth.

Finally, in our system, earning a second vote seems achievable by almost everyone; further, the Ph.D. has to earn a second vote by studying the issues, just as does the least educated. Given this equal opportunity, our system does not threaten anyone’s self-esteem or self-respect. Indeed, since the less educated can gain more political power by doubling their voting power, and since many highly educated voters may not bother to earn a second vote, our system may actually be a source of self-esteem for the less advantaged.

Notes

3 Casper and Bass, *Voting and Registration*, 3.
5 Ibid.
8 Ibid., 137.