

Citizenship and Franchise

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As liberals or progressives, we are naturally concerned that the right to vote and seek public office be scrupulously protected for all eligible persons. We are also inclined to advocate that this eligibility be extended as far as reasonable. We generally understand this to be equivalent to “citizenship”.

The “Founding Fathers” who wrote the original U. S. Constitution left the determination of the right to vote to the states, and were not at all inclined to allowing many to vote. The Constitution writers may have designed the Electoral College, as opposed to more popular election of the President, in fear that a demagogue might seduce the voters. (Look how that turned out!) Most states had property qualifications to vote, and as a matter of course restricted the vote to free white males. But subsequent Constitutional amendments have banned the states from excluding based on race, sex, and the notorious “literacy tests.”

Many have also advocated that citizenship implies duties as well as rights. (In Louisiana, as in many states, this, in practice, includes the duty to serve on a jury when called.) Some countries even require citizens to vote and impose fines for failure to do so. Note also that the oath taken by naturalized citizens includes willingness to serve the armed forces if called, though native born citizens take no such oath.

It might be interesting to consider what conditions, if any, we might wish to place on citizenship. I would like to suggest a piece of unconventional reading on the subject: the novel *Starship Troopers*, by Robert A. Heinlein. (It should be understood that this is a work of fiction, not necessarily a proposal.) In it Heinlein imagines a future society in which citizenship can only be obtained by a satisfactory term of public service, which would often include personal risk. Applicants are accepted without bias as to sex, age, or ethnicity. The volunteer is allowed to express preferences as to the form of service, but is required to serve as assigned. Fans of that era of science fiction will know that Heinlein is famous for “future history.” In this novel he goes into great detail as to how this practice developed, how it works, and its philosophical justifications. I am not arguing that we should adopt such law, only that it is provocative to consider. (Note: Read the novel; avoid the movie based on it!)