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Economics

WHAT IS THE IMPORTANCE OF CIVIL DISCOURSE AND FREE SPEECH?

"Democracy dies in darkness" certainly was not the most original slogan for a newspaper when the Washington Post adopted it in 2017, yet it still cuts straight to the fundamental truth that a democratic society cannot exist without a free and fair exchange of information for citizens to judge their leaders. That fundamental right – to dare to question – has been at the center of American representative democracy since its inception. Indeed, the first amendment lays out that "congress shall make no law ... prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or the press." Many areas of the Constitution can fairly be interpreted in many different ways; this is not one of them. There exists a fundamental right to freedom of speech, and that right is the key to the preservation of all others. Put plainly, it is the most important right, even ahead of the right to vote.

The reason for this is simple: the right to vote is only effective to achieve a voter's interest when that voter can be informed as to the effect of their vote. Freedom of speech is crucial for the informed electorate because with it voters have access to the exchange of ideas needed to actually vote their interest. Without that civil discourse, a voter can easily be manipulated into voting for candidates or policies that control the process rather than most accurately represent the voter's wishes.

Freedom of speech is also paramount when the right to vote is being suppressed. If a person is being denied suffrage yet has the ability to make their grievances known, then over time they can gather influence to protect their right. This is especially important in the context of America today, where suffrage is legally protected but in some places denied. The right to highlight those instances and make those grievances known, expressly protected under the First Amendment, is the safeguard against those practices remaining the exception and not becoming the norm.

The simple truth is that policy protections, if they exist, are not necessarily the same as actual protections. In a discussion about rights, this would suggest that the enumerated right that enables the voter to be aware of violations of rights or acts against their interest is the most important because it is the key to preserving all of a person's other rights. In that respect, nothing is more important than the ability to speak freely in a public forum and to engage in a civic discourse. Without the enlightenment that the free and fair exchange of information gives people, they are left in darkness. That darkness is the one under which democracy withers and ultimately dies.