

The Weaponization of Responsibility

“I hate parallel parking!” After I turned eighteen, I still didn’t have my driver’s licence. Spending my high school years at boarding school meant that I could only practice driving during summers, and even then, I was rarely ever home. I will never forget the faces of the amused pre-school campers when they saw my mother drive me to the drop-off line. It was even more frustrating to have to rely on my parents every time I wanted to leave the house. Still, the concept of a driver’s test made sense to me. Someone should have the power to verify that new drivers can safely operate their vehicles. So I struggled to see freedom as purely a right or a responsibility

Freedom, I’ve come to think, really does carry a responsibility, but there are two very different kinds. There’s the responsibility we owe to each other once we’re free: to vote thoughtfully, to speak honestly, to drive carefully. That kind is ours to carry, and no one can take it from us. Then there’s the responsibility someone else demands we prove before they’ll let us be free at all: a test we have to pass first. Throughout history, oppressive systems have used that second kind to strip freedom away from people. The moment freedom becomes something we must earn rather than something we already hold, we hand someone else the power to decide who deserves it.

In 1964, Unita Blackwell, an aspiring civil rights leader, walked into the Issaquena County Courthouse in Mississippi to register to vote (Branch). State law required her to read and transcribe a passage of the state constitution (Branch). At first glance, this mandate seems reasonable. Voters should be able to demonstrate the critical thinking and knowledge to make such an important decision. But take a hypothetical group of farmers who never finished school and care deeply about an issue like crop subsidies. A literacy test could screen them out on the basis of education alone, even though they understand the policies shaping their own livelihood better than a well-respected, Harvard-educated doctor ever could. Literacy tests gives outsized representation to whoever already has the schooling to clear the bar. For this reason, literacy tests were an insufficient means of measuring voter responsibility, and any test would be. Driving, on the other hand, is not a human right; untrained drivers on public roads can endanger other people and infringe on their freedom, which is why a skills test for driving makes sense. Voting carries no equivalent risk. A single vote does not jeopardize anyone’s safety or freedom the way an unlicensed driver might.

Furthermore, the subjectivity of literacy tests made them an ineffective measure of responsibility. Blackwell’s clerk handed her a passage on corporate tax exemptions dense enough that most law students would struggle with it (Branch). She failed, as expected. Later, a federal investigation found that over the three years before her attempt, every one of the 133 white applicants in Issaquena County had passed the literacy test, and 107 of them had been handed one of three short, straightforward constitutional passages, including the one-sentence Section 240: “All elections by the people shall be by ballot” (Branch). In the same period, out of the 90 Black residents who attempted to register, only nine succeeded, becoming the only nine registered Black voters in a county where Black residents made up 68 percent of the population (Branch). Once responsibility becomes a precondition for freedom, whoever holds the power to define “responsible” also holds the power to move that definition around to decide who gets

freedom. In the case of Issaquena County, the clerks used the tests to take freedom away from Black residents and protect their own interests.

Literacy tests weren't simply a product of local prejudice. They were strategically chosen to disenfranchise black voters. During the Jim Crow era, Black school districts received far less funding than their white counterparts, and segregation laws barred Black workers from skilled positions, leaving many with unsustainable options like sharecropping that kept them locked in generational poverty and cut off from education. Black literacy rates suffered as a direct result. So when Congress passed the Fifteenth Amendment, Southern states answered with a test that disguised a systematic disadvantage as a measure of responsibility.

If literacy tests show how responsibility gets weaponized, the Civil War draft shows what happens when the responsibility we owe each other is distributed unequally. Both the Union and the Confederacy required every able-bodied man of military age to register for the draft (Plummer and Halfond). But the Union let wealthier men buy their way out for a three-hundred-dollar commutation fee (Plummer and Halfond). In the Government's eyes, it was every capable citizen's civic responsibility to support the war efforts. The elites believed they fulfilled that obligation by providing money to fund the military. However, poor laborers and Irish immigrants saw it differently. They would be risking their lives at the benefit of wealthy politicians. If anything, more freed slaves would mean more competition in the unskilled labor market. In July 1863, Irish rioters attacked the draft office in Manhattan, and the violence quickly turned on New York's Black community (Harris). Mobs looted and destroyed Black homes and businesses and burned the Colored Orphan Asylum to the ground (Harris). Responsibility, distributed by whoever holds power rather than accepted freely by everyone it applies to, becomes just another tool for the powerful to protect themselves.

The Confederacy built the same asymmetry into its own draft. The "Twenty Negro Law" exempted any white man who owned twenty or more slaves from conscription, leaving poor, non-landowning white farmers to fight what felt less like their war than a war for wealthy planters (Plummer and Halfond). Desertion rates in the Confederate army climbed as the war dragged on.

This doesn't mean that responsibility has no place in freedom. The draft riots and the Twenty Negro Law aren't evidence against responsibility itself, only against responsibility imposed by someone with the power to exempt themselves from it. That distinction is the one my own thesis almost missed. A driving test measures something narrow and mechanical: can you read the signs, can you parallel park, do you know the rules of the road. It's the same test, applied the same way, for everyone who takes it. That's what made it feel fair to me even though I resented it. A literacy test disguised as a measure of "readiness" is a different animal entirely, because there is no universal standard for civic responsibility the way there is for parallel parking. That means whoever administers the test writes the standard in their own image. I did eventually get my licence, months later than I wanted to, after failing the actual parallel-parking portion twice. I didn't resent that failure, because the bar was the same one everyone else had to clear. Responsibility is real, and it's ours to uphold, but it has to be something we choose to carry, not a threshold someone else gets to enforce.

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