Should we have to qualify to vote?

Here are some thoughts to throw in the mix.

The question is perhaps a little imprecise because, in one sense, in the UK we all have to meet certain qualifications to be allowed to vote. For example, in a parliamentary election you must

- be over 18 years old,

- be registered to vote,

- be a UK or Irish citizen, or a Commonwealth citizen living in the UK who meets certain criteria.

- not be subject to any 'legal incapacity' to vote. Prisoners serving a sentence for a conviction cannot vote in UK parliamentary elections and neither can peers in the House of Lords.

So maybe the question should be more like: Should we place *further* qualifications on those who are allowed to vote, and what would those extra qualifications be?

Rationale for current restrictions. What are the reasons for the current qualifications? Could it give us some pointers as to whether we need to make them stricter? But why might we be considering the question in the first place?

Critics of democracy. Past philosophers, particularly Plato, have criticised democracy as a way to choose leaders and holders of public office. He argued that, under democracy, anyone can become a leader; even if they are self-serving, unqualified for the job, make bad decisions and ignore the common good. He believed in rule by the knowledgable and wise, and that rulers should be properly raised, trained and educated for the job.

It can be argued, perhaps, that many of our recent UK leaders justify Plato's concerns.

Epistocracy. Plato's solution of an epistocracy (an aristocracy based on educational merit) may be a little too radical, but would it be possible to improve on democracy by improving the quality of the voters?

Going back to one of the current qualifications needed to vote: why have the age restriction? Because a voter requires a certain amount of life experience to have a hope of choosing a good leader? Or because you can only think rationally and reasonably after a certain age? Or maybe people below the age of 18 are less independently-minded and more susceptible to manipulation? But can't these characteristics also sometimes apply to those well over the age of 18?

Would it make any sense to have some sort of mini-exam to pass in order to qualify to vote? Just to check if voters have some knowledge of the policies that candidates (or their parties) are putting forward.

Or would it be better to revise what is taught in our schools and ensure that adults have a good knowledge of our political system, and how our economy and society works? The average level of knowledge amongst ordinary people in this respect is pretty low. And it is generally found to be higher amongst the more educated. So could this be an argument for giving more votes to those with higher educational achievement? Positions at the top of a large multimillion corporation would never be decided by people who just happen to meet basic voter qualifications. Instead it is persons who meet a certain level of qualification that make that decision. Yet it is accepted that they, the electorate, can select national leaders who are going to make decisions about the future direction, not of just a large corporation, but of a whole nation state. Isn't there some inconsistency here?

Historical note. Right up to 1969 some universities had there own seats in the UK Parliament. Only current and ex graduates had votes in these constituencies. This was in addition to their normal vote in their geographical constituency like everyone else. Hence some graduates in the UK had 2 votes. The majority of these "university constituency" seats were abolished in 1950.