

A bean-counting analysis of democracy

Michael Sean Winters | May. 16, 2012

DEMOCRACY DESPITE ITSELF: WHY A SYSTEM THAT SHOULDN'T WORK AT ALL WORKS SO WELL

By Danny Oppenheimer and Mike Edwards

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If this book were a cocktail party, it would be an especially bad one. You might encounter a witticism here, a decent, though not hilarious, joke there. In the course of the evening, the partiers become more and more intoxicated and, consequently, the conversation grows less incisive, less memorable and less interesting.

Danny Oppenheimer, a professor of psychology and public policy at Princeton University, and Mike Edwards, founder of the blog Leftfielder.org [1], are this party's hosts and they come to their event already drunk. If only they had indulged vodka or Scotch or Cabernet, but, no, they are drunk on social science. They set out to prove, in the manner of social scientists, that democracy is a mess, the *demos* badly informed and easily manipulated, the press scarcely better, and yet it all works out. "Democracy is the worst form of government, except for all those other forms that have been tried from time to time," as Churchill put it, but he required a single sentence to make the point these authors so laboriously seek to defend.

The text is littered with foolishness. "Democracy is supposed to work because voters will choose the candidate with the best ideas." But we do not choose ideas at election time, we choose candidates, and something about their manner, or their lack of experience, or some other consideration may lead us to conclude that while their ideas may be fine, something else disqualifies them. They cite studies that show people do not know the abortion rate, do not know how long the Mississippi River is, nor the amount of money spent on foreign aid. OK. But voters could tell that Al Gore had the demonstrable need to be the smartest person in the room and concluded they did not want him in their living rooms for four years. Is that irrational? Maybe. Maybe, too, voters know someone like that at work and recognize that he or she is the last person capable of accomplishing much because his or her "I'm smarter than you are" demeanor turns everyone off.

The authors seem very disturbed by the fact that various studies show access to increased information can lead to increased polarization, with such people only listening to the information that confirms their extant opinions and dismissing contrary information. (This explains the popularity of FOX News and MSNBC, no?) I suppose that in the artificial environment all social science surveys erect, that may be the case. But, politically, it is undoubtedly the case that in 2005, the American people had become skeptical about the Bush administration's claims about the Iraq War, but lacked the information to evaluate the circumstances on the ground. But when Hurricane Katrina hit, and the Bush administration demonstrated its inability to grasp what was going on in New Orleans, its claims about Baghdad became even less believable. Hurricane Katrina, of course, had no impact on Iraq, only on the attitudes of the American people. Was that wrong-headed?

Oppenheimer and Edwards' "rational" analysis is stifling. They turn their eye to the American Revolution and wonder, "Why would the American colonists risk so much, to gain so little? It turns out that people are less

interested in 'getting a good deal' than they are in ensuring a fair process ... it turns out that having the opportunity to make those decisions is tremendously motivational, and leads to all sorts of positive benefits for society. Of course, explaining the American Revolution as faulty cost-benefit analysis and the value of democracy as 'motivational' is at least novel. But, really, does anyone think this way? Is the cost of a human value the most important thing to know about it? Is democracy valuable because it motivates or because it prevents tyranny and human beings like freedom?

The authors argue that democracy works essentially because democracy aggregates our various individual stupidities, and they offset each other. 'In fact,' they write, 'not only is there safety in large numbers, there is also intelligence.' I read that sentence and had to wonder if the authors are even aware of Reinhold Niebuhr and his great, and serious, book *Moral Man and Immoral Society*. Alas, the question answers itself. These authors appear thoroughly ignorant of any knowledge that cannot be measured in their lab.

There is much about the Enlightenment to celebrate. But this kind of Cartesianism on steroids is what has given liberalism a bad name. Franklin Roosevelt did not talk about 'motivation,' he practiced it. Abraham Lincoln did not need a poll nor a social science study to convince him the Union must be preserved. Thomas Jefferson, as great a rationalist as ever inhabited the White House, would be revolted to find the democracy he loved reduced to an object of stuff for bean-counters and focus-group leaders and culturally illiterate questionnaire-writers. This is not just a stupid book, it is a pernicious one, valuable only insofar as it is so bad it might convince liberals that it is time to reclaim a concern for justice and democracy in moral terms, not because it tested well in the lab.

[Michael Sean Winters writes the blog *Distinctly Catholic* for *NCR*. His book *God's Right Hand: How Jerry Falwell Made God a Republican and Baptized the American Right* has just been published by HarperOne.]

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