

I Democracy Is Crazy

The will of the people is the only legitimate foundation of any government, and to protect its free expression should be our first object.

—Thomas Jefferson

Merlin's Beard

Democracy is rife with stories of inept, corrupt, unqualified, or just plain bizarre politicians. One of our favorites is the story of State Senator Duncan Scott of Albuquerque, New Mexico. In 1995, Scott introduced the following bill for consideration by the New Mexico State Senate:

When a psychologist or psychiatrist testifies during a defendant's competency hearing, the psychologist or psychiatrist shall wear a cone-shaped hat that is not less than two feet tall. The surface of the hat shall be imprinted with stars and lightning bolts.

Additionally, a psychologist or psychiatrist shall be required to don a white beard that is not less than 18 inches in length, and shall punctuate crucial elements of his testimony by stabbing the air with a wand. Whenever a psychologist or psychiatrist provides expert testimony regarding a defendant's competency, the bailiff shall contemporaneously dim the courtroom lights and administer two strikes to a Chinese gong.

This bill actually passed the New Mexico State Senate, although fortunately for New Mexico's psychiatric community it never became law. But our favorite part about this example, other than the question of how vigorously the psychiatrist must stab the air when making a crucial point, is this: Only two New Mexico state senators were voted out of office in the following election. It would seem that the people of New Mexico thought so much of the representatives who passed this bill that they reelected them.

Democracy relies on ordinary people—people like you and us—regularly voting in meaningful elections for politicians who are supposed to follow our will. That’s a scary thought. As you will see in the pages that follow, ordinary people don’t know the first thing about most of the laws that govern their daily lives. Ordinary people stick to their first impressions well after they have plenty of evidence that those first impressions are wrong. Ordinary people are driven to make important decisions based on completely meaningless factors. Moreover, the ignorance and irrationality of ordinary people is only part of the problem. The elections that we use to determine our leaders are riddled with biases and opportunities for error. And, of course, once those leaders do get into office, it is extremely difficult for them to accurately interpret what the people truly want, even if they are trying to pay attention.

As a result, we elect officials who want to put psychiatrists in wizard’s hats.

It’s not as though the problem here is a simple lack of voter education. After all, in the United States there exist thousands of small, reasonably well-educated communities that hold frequent elections for their leadership positions. These communities have at most a couple thousand people and everyone knows basically everyone else. Most of them have 100 percent literacy rates. People are active and engaged; they participate in sports, the arts, and various social clubs. These are communities where virtually everyone has read Shakespeare, taken algebra, and studied the causes of the American Civil War. But do these communities yield particularly good elected officials—leaders who engage in lively issues-driven debates that result in policies that make those societies substantially better places?

Well, *our* high school elections were certainly nothing like that.

Winning elections in high school isn’t about having the best policies; it’s about being liked by the most people. Find the kid in the popular clique who gets along well with the geeks, goths, and jocks, and chances are you’ve just identified the class president, irrespective of his or her ideas—that is, unless someone else can come along and give a particularly funny speech on Election Day.

“Real” elections aren’t that much different. Sure, presidential elections are much larger, more diverse, and more complicated than choosing a student council—but the more things change, the more they stay the same.

Just like in high school, presidents win elections by building broad coalitions of voters—only this time, those coalitions might be made up of churchgoers, small business owners, and suburban housewives, instead of geeks, goths, and jocks. Just like in high school, being broadly liked by those groups is much more important than having the best ideas.

A Tale of Two Citizens

Danny Oppenheimer is a psychologist at Princeton University. He has devoted his career to studying how people make decisions, and the results typically aren't pretty. In one study, Oppenheimer and his colleagues biased people's estimates of the length of the Mississippi River by nearly 500 miles just by having them draw three short lines before making their guess. In another study, the font on the survey influenced people's decisions about whether or not to disclose personal and embarrassing information to a stranger. "We the People"—the folks who get to decide who our leaders are and what direction our country goes in—regularly make bad decisions for bad reasons. When Oppenheimer talks about his findings, listeners often come away worried that democracy must be hopeless.

But Mike Edwards has a different take on things. Edwards has studied political science extensively and knows that democracy isn't doomed—quite the opposite, in fact. Relative to people in other countries, the citizens of democracies live longer, are better educated, have more freedom, and have better access to basic public services. By almost any measure, democracy is a tremendously successful form of government. When Edwards thinks about democracy, he thinks about a form of government that is uniquely suited to guaranteeing the lives, liberty, and prosperity of its citizens.

These two contrasting perspectives lead to a riddle: Given that voters make irrational and biased choices, how can democracies produce such well-functioning societies? We call this the paradox of democracy: Democracy shouldn't work—but it does.

This book is structured around that basic dilemma. In Part I, we will address exactly why democracy is so flawed. Voters are ignorant of even the most basic knowledge about political candidates and issues. All voters, no matter how educated or politically astute, are prone to make snap

judgments about candidates based on superficial factors and to then irrationally hold on to those beliefs. Elections will always favor certain candidates over others, for reasons that have nothing to do with which candidate has the best ideas or is the best leader. And even well-meaning political leaders usually cannot understand what the true will of the people is, even if they are trying to follow it.

In Part II, we will explore why democracy works so well anyway. Democracy works because mass participation in contested elections creates psychological pressures for individuals to be better citizens and for politicians to be better leaders. It works because regularly alternating power between different factions helps to avoid political instability. It works because of the many ways that individuals and crowds can overcome their ignorance and make informed decisions. And it works because people will occasionally punish politicians, thereby helping to curb the worst abuses of the public trust.

Part I is about the craziness inherent in any democracy; Part II is about the sanity that makes democracy the greatest form of government humankind has ever devised.

Foundations of Government

If democracy works so well, what is the point of including Part I at all? Why talk about all the problems, if we're just going to turn right around and conclude that democracy is actually quite successful?

Well, in order to really understand something, you have to know about its strengths *and* its weaknesses. For instance, before you buy a house, the property will usually have to undergo a thorough inspection. The inspection will detail all of a house's flaws, from leaky pipes to cracked foundations. Of course, many fundamentally sound houses have water leaks. But just because you are buying a good, well-built house doesn't mean that you can ignore the leak. Nor can you fix a leak without first understanding where the water is coming from.

This book is like an inspection report for democracy. Like a well-built house, democracy is a strong and structurally sound system of government. But it also has its flaws. The purpose of Part I is to pinpoint the weaknesses of democracy so that we can fix them; the purpose of Part II is to identify the strengths of democracy so that we can bolster them.

Of course, before we can analyze the strengths and weaknesses of democracy, we first have to know what democracy means. Unfortunately, *democracy* is a surprisingly difficult concept to define, but for the purposes of this book, we will consider a country to be democratic if it regularly holds free, fair, and meaningful elections. There's not a word in the previous sentence that isn't controversial or hard to define, but let's give it a go, anyway.

Elections are *free* if there are few restrictions on who can run for election and who can vote in those elections. In France, all citizens are automatically registered to vote when they turn 18, and any citizen over the age of 23 is eligible to run for office so long as they have fulfilled their required military obligations. By contrast, in South Africa under apartheid the vast majority of adults were forbidden from participating in national elections because they were black.

Elections are *fair* if they are untainted by bribery, intimidation, or corruption, and if the outcome is not predetermined by the leadership. In Great Britain, Parliamentary elections are regularly held with little or no controversy, and small political parties frequently claim unexpected victories in various districts. In Cuba, the Castro regime has regularly been reelected every couple of years, but those elections have always been rigged so that it was impossible for there to be any other outcome than a landslide victory for Castro.

Elections are *meaningful* if the winners of those elections are put into positions of real power and authority. In Japan, the winners of the parliamentary elections become legislators, capable of creating the laws of the land. By contrast, in Iran the president is elected democratically, but once in power all of his decisions can be vetoed by an unelected council of religious leaders.

This definition of democracy is not without its faults. In particular, it is purposefully vague. For instance, we never say exactly what percentage of the population needs to be eligible to vote in order for a country to be a democracy. In the early days of American government, only white men who owned property were allowed to vote. While the property restrictions were lifted over the next sixty years or so, African Americans were, for the most part, not legally allowed to vote until after the Civil War, and restrictions existed for most black voters until the 1960s. Women were not guaranteed the right to vote until 1919, 18-year-olds were not allowed to

vote until 1971, and many convicted felons are barred from voting even today. So when did the United States become a democracy?

Similar debates can be had about many countries, but they are not especially relevant for this book. We can quibble over the details of how free, fair, or meaningful a given election is, but some countries are clearly more democratic than others. When we talk about democracy, we are mainly referring to the set of least controversial democracies in the world, places like the United States, Brazil, Germany, South Korea, and Botswana. By nondemocracies, we mean countries with transparent violations of the above criteria, such as Syria, Zimbabwe, Cuba, Belarus, and Vietnam.

The paradox of democracy applies to all democracies. All people are irrational and uninformed, and all electoral systems are flawed. Yet democracy is an extraordinarily successful form of government, and has proven successful in almost every region of the globe, despite whatever local forms of craziness plague any given country. That being said, we have chosen to focus our attention on the particular brand of American craziness for the sake of simplicity and familiarity.

One last caveat before we begin: Throughout this book we will talk about how “crazy” or “irrational” people are. If you were to call your friend “crazy,” it would mean he’s “not all there” or he’s “acting emotionally.” But in the social sciences, *irrational* refers to people making inconsistent or imperfect decisions. We all do this; so, according to social scientists, we are all irrational. So when we say that the voters are “crazy,” we don’t mean that voters are insane—certainly not in a talking to trees or eating your neighbors sort of way. We simply mean that voters are human.

So we implore you not to take any of this personally. At times during this book, it’s going to seem like voters are ignorant and foolish pawns of a political system they don’t understand. To be honest, that’s actually a fairly accurate description: Voters often are ignorant and foolish pawns of a system they don’t understand. But we would include ourselves in that category too. Our purpose is to inform, not to insult.

In short, people may be irrational but democracies are quite sane. The sum is greater than its chaotic parts. The late columnist Molly Ivins once said that democracy “requires a certain relish for confusion.” In other words: Democracy is crazy—but maybe that’s not so bad.

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