



Ignorance, Politics & Democracy v. Expertise & Entrepreneurship

June 8, 2020

In *The Death of Expertise: The Campaign against Established Knowledge and Why It Matters*, Tom Nichols worries that peace and affluence are paradoxically producing resistance to expertise. (p. xv) He bemoans a lack of understanding of how to remedy such “aggressive dysfunction”. (p. xvii)

In *Against Democracy*, Jason Brennan catalogs the weaknesses of our nominally *democratic* form of government and proffers a solution to the problem Nichols laments. Brennan’s solution is *epistocracy*, rule by the politically knowledgeable class. Acknowledging that some experts, like Ilya Somin, believe the best way to alleviate the harm wrecked by ignorant voters is to reduce the scope of government, Brennan avows agnosticism on the wisdom of that cause. (p. 19) For him, the charge is merely to *disenfranchise* ill-advised majoritarians from the right to impose their will upon others.

Just as Brennan inventories the shortcomings of majoritarianism, Somin catalogs not only the ignorance of voters but also the futility of trying to educate them on the myriad details of increasingly expansive and centralized governance. Moreover, even if that were possible, taking the time and trouble would be irrational because the cost of acquiring the knowledge would outweigh the benefit. The impact of individual votes on the outcome of elections is infinitesimal. (pp. 89 – 92) That assumes, of course, the “education” imposed upon the masses is not efficacious enough to convince virtually everyone to vote as desired by the political elite ... as commonly occurs in China, Russia, and North Korea.

Brennan argues, “Universal suffrage incentivizes most voters to make political decisions in an ignorant and irrational way, and then imposes those ignorant and irrational decisions on innocent people.” He suggests the only justification for such treatment of the unfortunate, politically oppressed minorities would be that no better-performing system can be devised. (p. 8) Moreover, he says politics as currently practiced “gives us genuine grounds to hate” and thus makes us enemies of each other. (p. 22)

Again, however, that assumes the reeducation of the masses is not up to the challenge of prompting us to hate someone else ... someone expressly identified as the enemy by the political elite rather than merely by the natural dynamics of the system in which they operate. That is the presently preferred approach of the ayatollahs in Iran, for example. Unfortunately, it is also the inevitable result of all forms of politics, regardless of how it is practiced. Since politics is about imposing our will upon others, it is useful for politicians to justify coercion on the basis of hatred – at least for the ignorant views of opponents, if not also for them personally as “deplorable” human beings.

The bigger and more centralized the power structure, the greater the need to identify threats to justify its ever-increasing scope. On the conservative side of the political spectrum, there is no end to the external risks requiring greater military strength and increasing nationalism. Meanwhile, at the other extreme, so-called “progressives” would have us externalize and [derogate as out-groups](#) both large enterprises that employ thousands of workers as well as individual entrepreneurs who have derived great wealth from innovation. To voters of such ilk, the fact novel practices have delivered vast benefits freely chosen by hundreds of millions of people may be considered immaterial to the cause of social justice.

Striking a more hopeful tone, in *The Great Reversal*, Thomas Philippon suggests the excessive dominance of a single network, like Facebook, could be alleviated if authorities required two features – interoperability and data portability. (p. 275) It is unclear why it should be necessary for authorities to dictate such requirements when Facebook users could insist upon them as the price for their patronage, if they cared enough to do so. However, in the context of commercial competition, Philippon’s proposal is equivalent to Somin’s emphasis on the utility of “foot voting,” i.e., moving to political jurisdictions that are better attuned to our personal values. Indeed, Somin suggests the ease of switching from one provider to another is part of the justification for devolving powers from government (politicians and bureaucrats) to commercial services.

In *Your Next Government: From Nation State to Stateless Nations*, Tom Bell suggests that is exactly what is occurring. However, in *Public Policymaking by Private Organizations: Challenges to Democratic Governance*, Catherine Rudder, Lee Fritschler, and Yon Jung Choi express concern about its incidence. Yet they acknowledge that *democratic legitimacy* is just one possible standard that might be applied to private governance groups. (p. 153) Others include: expertise, effectiveness, enhancement of markets, and fairness.

Those criteria are equally applicable to public bodies. Indeed, any regulatory agency lacking those attributes could hardly be considered legitimate. Moreover, with reference to the relatively indisputable claims made by Nichols, Brennan, and Somin, how can policy established by representatives of ignorant voters be deemed optimal? As Brennan suggests, do we not owe it to ourselves to consider the possibility of applying evidence, learning, and knowledge to derive a better alternative?

On the other hand, surely, we ought to be able to do better than replacing majority rule with minority rule, as proposed by Brennan. Somin’s solution seems to be the most logical but also unlikely to be permitted by the entrenched political powers-that-be. Yet hope springs eternal and difficulty should not dissuade us from mounting a meritorious cause.

Toward that end, in *Evasive Entrepreneurs & the Future of Governance*, Adam Thierer suggests incumbent authorities and institutions are often incapable of thwarting technologically driven progress, even in the misappropriated name of *humanism*. (pp. 190-193) Moreover, he argues technological change “may become the most important check on government power.” (p. 15) At least, he asserts policymakers will be forced to adjust traditional policies rapidly or risk irrelevancy. (p. 77)

So how might we work together to foster permissionless innovation while at the same time rendering permissionless governance obsolete?

A good, first step would be to document our objectives in an open, internationally standardized format like Strategy Markup Language (StratML, ISO 17469-1). No one’s permission is required and doing so will enable myriad value-added intermediaries to compete to enable us to collaborate more efficiently. The result will be a market for good in which we are empowered to achieve shared goals far more

effectively than ever before possible, devoid of politics and without attempting to impose our will upon each other.

If the incumbent powers-that-be have the public interest at heart, they will embrace such change. If not, evasive entrepreneurs may turn the tables on them, rendering epistocrats irrelevant. Ironically, were that to occur, expertise is likely to regain its natural luster – not via edicts issued by self-righteous, politically deified overlords but, rather, as means to realize the objectives of mere mortals comprising the mass of the market.