

DEMOCRATIC REASON



Politics,
Collective Intelligence,
and the
Rule of the Many

Hélène Landemore

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Democratic Reason

To my parents

“The many, who are not as individuals excellent men, nevertheless can, when they have come together, be better than the few best people, not individually but collectively, just as feasts to which many contribute are better than feasts provided at one person’s expense.”

—Aristotle

“Democracy is the recurrent suspicion that more than half of the people are right more than half of the time.”

—E. B. White

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Prologue

ON MAY 29, 2005, France held a referendum on ratifying the European Union Constitution. Contrary to the hopes and expectations of the political and intellectual elites, the French people decided to reject this constitutional treaty. Commentators were all but unanimous in their condemnation of the result. Doubtless, they said, the people had gotten it all wrong; they had taken an ill-chosen opportunity to sanction the government (and Jacques Chirac, then the president of France, in particular), thereby irresponsibly sinking the European project.

As a French citizen, I initially reacted to the referendum result in similar fashion. How could my fellow citizens have voted in this ignorant way? If only they had looked past their navels, they would have realized that Europe represented the only possible future for a country having difficulties coming to terms with the economic and cultural challenges of globalization on its own. The proposed constitution was a perhaps imperfect but ultimately reasonable compromise between different political conceptions of the European project. In any case, embracing it was the only way to move the construction of Europe forward—a construction all the more necessary, as it represented the promise of modernization and necessary institutional reforms. There was a right answer to the referendum, and I believed the French people had given the wrong one.

Upon reconsideration, however, I came to think that as a single individual, with a particular and limited experience of what it is to be French in Europe today, I might not be in the best position to pass a judgment on the needs of France. Was it plausible that more than 15 million people should be wrong and I right? Arguably, I could find comfort in the fact that nearly 13 million of my fellow citizens voted with me. At the end of the day, however, was it more likely that 55 percent of the population was wrong and the other 45 percent right or vice versa? On some assumptions, this is not what the law of large numbers (as formalized in the Condorcet Jury Theorem, for example) would predict. At the very least, it seemed to me that some probabilistic consideration of this sort should have been factored into my assessment of the referendum results. I thus came to wonder whether there wasn't, after all, a good reason to trust the majority more than my own judgment and more than the minority of which I was a part. More broadly, I wondered, what if the reason we use majority rule in the first place is because it is in general a reliable decision procedure?

Immediate objections spring to mind, offering examples of deeply mistaken majorities. A majority put Socrates to death. A majority allegedly

brought Hitler to power.¹ All over the world, in fact, formal and informal majorities endorse irrational, xenophobic, racist, anti-Semitic, and sexist ideologies. What if the French majority that rejected the constitution project was just as mistaken, if not as evil? The fact that a majority agrees on a position does not say much, the suspicion goes, about the intrinsic value of that position.²

Another objection runs even deeper, challenging the very notion that there could be a right or wrong answer to political questions. For some, the “right” answer to the referendum on the constitutional treaty is simply the one that is procedurally determined by its outcome. In that view, the endorsement of majoritarian decisions is just one of the rules of the democratic game that citizens implicitly underwrite when casting their vote. The point, however, is not to figure out any independently given “right” answer.

The first objection comes naturally to any observer of history, particularly the history of discrimination against minorities. Yet pointing at historical cases of democratic failure does not amount to a fully fledged refutation of the general validity of democracy as a collective decision-making rule; moreover, many supposedly classical examples of democratic failures, such as Athens’s infamous Sicily expedition, can always be challenged.³ Further, for every democratic failure, one may point out a

¹This was Daniel Cohn-Bendit’s postreferendum remark to a journalist who pointed out that the negative result of the referendum was, after all, the choice of the majority. The historical truth, as it turns out, is that a plurality, not a majority, brought Hitler to power (see Ermakoff 2008 for an account of what that vote looked like).

²Jacques Rupnik offers an alternative reading of the referendum results, which neither condemns the people as stupid nor accepts that they were right on that particular issue. According to him, the referendum in France had little chance to elicit the “collective wisdom” of the multitude, because referenda in France are plebiscites. If referenda were much more of a tradition, however, the way they are for example in Switzerland, the results would probably have been more meaningful. The Swiss are used to deciding by referendum, both at the federal and the cantonal level, issues such as “Should there be mandatory army service?” or “Should the highway cut across this ancient cemetery?” The system of the “initiative” also allows the Swiss people to have some control over the questions and the way they are phrased. The problem in France, Rupnik argues, is not that the people are stupid, but that they are not trusted enough. As a result, when they finally have an opportunity to voice their concerns, they do so in a contrarian way (personal communication, May 2006).

³See Finley’s analysis of the Sicily expedition, which provides a more global critique of elitist objections to popular rule: “The familiar game of condemning Athens for not having lived up to some ideal of perfection is a stultifying approach. They made no fatal mistake, and that is good enough. The failure of the Sicilian expedition in 415–413 BC was a technical command failure in the field, not the consequences of either ignorance or inadequate planning at home. Any autocrat or any ‘expert’ politician could have made the same errors” (Finley 1985: 33). For Finley, occasional democratic mistakes do not count against the idea that democracy can be smart, nor can they serve as an argument for elitist theorists of democracy.

democratic success, or at least a comparatively worse failure of nondemocratic regimes. In the game of “Who went the most wrong in history?” it is unclear that democracies are on the losing end.⁴ As Machiavelli made the point in the *Discourses on Livy*, the elitist tradition that holds the masses in contempt relies on a biased and methodologically flawed comparison between unruly mobs and the rare instances of wise and good-willed princes. Machiavelli suggests that when you stop comparing apples and oranges and compare people and princes that are both “shackled by laws” (Machiavelli 1996: 117), the evidence is much more favorable to the people and not as favorable to princes. Machiavelli, for his part, concluded from his own historical observations that people were “of better judgments” than princes (Machiavelli 1996: 115–19).⁵ Contemporary political scientists have statistical methods and tools that can be applied to challenging and verifying that claim. Political theorists, meanwhile, can also attempt the comparison from an *a priori* perspective, comparing abstract models of different rules and their expected properties.

If anything, therefore, examples of democratic failures should invite further inquiry into the comparison, both theoretical and empirical, of democratic decision procedures with nondemocratic ones. When it comes to majority rule in particular, such examples should raise the probabilistic question (which can be asked from both a theoretical and empirical perspective) of when and where a majority is likely to be right, and how this should affect the authority of democratic decisions.

The second objection stems from a purely proceduralist understanding of democracy, according to which the value of democracy and its decisions is assessed only in terms of their procedural fairness. This objection denies, or at least avoids asserting, the existence of any objective or substantive criteria by which to assess a democratic decision. In that view, democratic decisions are good because they are procedurally fair, not because they yield outcomes that are in some sense “good.” Such a purely proceduralist commitment to the value of democracy, however, runs against the idea that when we argue and deliberate about politics and when we ultimately vote at the end of such a deliberative process, what we hope for is the triumph of “the unforced force of the better argument,” according to Habermas’s beautiful and suggestive

⁴Notice that arguments stressing examples of evil majorities, while powerful and valid to some extent, also feature in the strategy of every brand of antidemocrat. As such, they often reek of what the philosopher Jacques Rancière (2005) calls “the hatred of democracy”: a tendency to selectively look for examples of democratic failures while ignoring democratic successes or the comparative results of competing decision procedures.

⁵See chapter 3 of this book for a brief survey of Machiavelli’s analysis of the wisdom of the multitude. See also the work of John McCormick (2011), with whose interpretation I am in complete agreement and which I rehearse in part here.

formula.⁶ If no alternative was truly better, in some sense, than the others, one might wonder: Why would politicians bother campaigning, that is, resort to reasons and arguments and try to inform the people? Do they not do this in the explicit hope of helping them make more enlightened judgments about politics? Why mail citizens the 300-page volume of the constitution if not for them to make up their mind as to the “rightness” of this document for the European project? Even critics who routinely deplore the low level of information and knowledge of average voters confirm the idea that there is an epistemic component to the value of political decisions.

This reflection prompted me to question two things. The first is the justification of democracy as an intrinsically worthy regime, in virtue of the values embodied by its procedures (equality, justice, and so forth). A purely proceduralist justification seems to leave democratic governments and their decisions on shaky grounds. For democracy and democratic decisions to be fully justified, if not legitimate, it seems there has to be something more to it than the values it embodies. There has to be some kind of substantial merit and, I would argue, some kind of “intelligence” as well. In this respect, David Estlund’s work on the epistemic dimension of democratic authority (1997, 2008) raised and answered some important questions. It left me, however, with more questions as to the actual epistemic performance that could be expected from democratic rule.

Second, assuming this idea of democratic intelligence is valid and relevant, I came to question the idea that such intelligence should be no more than the aggregation of the intelligence of individuals. The collective intelligence of the citizens—what I call more broadly “democratic reason”—might in fact be distinct from individual reason writ large. Psychology and cognitive sciences, including the science of animal behaviors, show that intelligence can be a property of groups as well as of individuals. The phenomenon of “emergent intelligence” characterizes societies of social animals such as ants and bees. Another relevant concept is that of “distributed intelligence”—which posits intelligence as spread across both the individual agents themselves (mind and body) and their environment (institutions, language, symbolic systems, and other “cognitive artifacts”).

These new concepts of collective intelligence—as emergent or distributed—have had little influence in democratic theory. One reason probably has to do with the fact that political theorists, like philosophers, are by training suspicious of the idea that large groups can be smart. Another reason may have to do with the focus on individuals that comes

⁶The German original reads “der zwanglose Zwang des besseren Arguments” (Habermas 1981: 47).

with the notion of reason as autonomy, and undergirds political science's principled commitment to methodological individualism. From the point of view of political scientists (at least those influenced by rational choice theory), the relevant agency units are assumed to be individuals and should not be located at the supra level of groups (or, for that matter, at the infra level of genes). Notions of collective or distributed intelligence may seem by contrast to raise the specter of social holism. Yet, far from it, it can be argued that these notions lend themselves to explanations in terms of individual choices and actions, in the same way that collective-action problems can be accounted for by the analytical tools and individualist methodology of social choice theory.

At the same time that my ideas were thus turning to an epistemic approach to democracy, the literature on "the wisdom of crowds" was becoming mainstream (the landmark being Surowiecki 2004), focusing on the then-not-so-well-understood phenomena of the predictive accuracy of information markets or the birth and almost overnight success of Wikipedia, the free online encyclopedia written cooperatively by non-experts. In parallel, debates about the importance of the Internet, the possibility of cyber- or e-democracy, and the role of blogs and amateur citizen-journalists in the new informational sphere also revolved around the notion of collective intelligence and were sometimes explicitly linked, however loosely, to the idea and ideal of democracy (see most recently Coleman and Blumler 2009 and, for a revolutionary notion of "Wiki government," Noveck 2009). How this literature can be reconciled with the more classical paradigm of deliberative democracy, which emphasizes exchange of arguments over mere aggregation of dispersed information and knowledge, is one of the obvious and most interesting challenges that this book aims to address.

Finally, the political landscape itself became shaped, on both sides of the Atlantic, by ideas related to the concept of collective intelligence, in both its deliberative and its aggregative dimension. For the 2007 presidential elections in France, the Socialist candidate Ségolène Royal campaigned on the Deweyan theme of "citizens' expertise." Her argument was that in a complex and informed world, every citizen holds a parcel of the truth and that the best source of enlightened political decision is to be found not in experts, or even in professional politicians, but in the people themselves.⁷ She thus advocated more direct forms of participatory

⁷Translated and adapted from an introductory text available on Royal's website, <http://www.desirsdavenir.org/index.php?c=bienvenue>, accessed March 10, 2007. Similar ideas are present in her current defense of "popular and participatory universities," which are gatherings meant to combine the expertise of scientists, political militants, and regular citizens (see "Descriptif: Les Universités Populaires et Participatives," accessed April 8, 2012, <http://www.desirsdavenir.org/les-universites-populaires-et-participatives/descriptif.html>).

democracy and presented herself less as a leader of the people and more as a recipient and a catalyst for their own judgment. Simmering in Royal's discourse was the notion of collective intelligence—the idea that political solutions are often best figured out by the people as a whole, when individuals talk to each other and contribute their bits of knowledge to a general public discussion.⁸

In the United States, and in a more aggregative than deliberative vein, the Obama administration started experimenting with new tools and techniques of “crowdsourcing.” In 2008, for example, it encouraged the creation of a “peer-to-patent” experiment, in which the process of patent reviewing was opened up from a few experts to a larger public. More significant perhaps was the launch in late May 2009 of the Open Government Initiative.⁹ The principles of this initiative—transparency, participation, and collaboration—were explicitly about using the latent collective intelligence distributed across the nation to bring to the fore new policy ideas. While the Obama campaign was praised for its innovative way of reaching the hearts and wallets of average citizens, as opposed to the usual interest groups and big donors, later developments showed that the new administration aimed to go beyond culling votes and money and was seeking out knowledge, information, and ideas from usually voiceless citizens.¹⁰

⁸This approach to politics was, on the face of it, revolutionary. According to a commentator, the logic of “*ségolisme*” contributed to displacing the traditional distinction between those who know (the professional politicians) and those who don't (average citizens), as well as to integrating the life and problems of ordinary citizens into the noble sphere of “the political.” Zaïki Laïdi, “Le véritable apport de Mme Royal,” *Le Monde*, July 4, 2006. It is also ironic that someone literally named “kingly” (the meaning of “royal” in French) and who is a pure product of one of the most elitist French institutions (*Ecole Nationale d'Administration*) should claim the superiority of the people's judgments over that of individuals like herself. In any case, this new trend in politics is echoed everywhere, from the writing of encyclopedias on the Internet (e.g., Wikipedia) to the rise of a new form of journalism more popular and participatory than the traditional ones. *Rue89* in France, for example, is an online newspaper started by former journalists from *Libération* that builds in part on the (controlled) input of nonjournalists. No longer passive readers, and not professional journalists either, the participants in these new forms of information processing contribute to revolutionizing the information industry along what are arguably participatory and democratic lines.

⁹Perhaps following the French example, at least if one is to believe Ségolène Royal, who claims that Obama was inspired by her campaign and copied it, borrowing in particular the idea of the citizen expert and adapting her tactic of participative democracy to the American political landscape (*Le Monde*, January 29, 2008). Given that Royal herself borrowed her ideas about participatory democracy from the American philosopher John Dewey, this seems only fair (if true). Another distinct and probably more direct influence is probably that of Cass Sunstein (himself influenced by the aggregative rather than deliberative preferences of James Surowiecki).

¹⁰See <http://www.whitehouse.gov/open/>, accessed June 10, 2009.

The ideas of wisdom of the crowds and the collective intelligence of regular citizens have thus been slowly gaining ground. Among the boldest implementations, Iceland's recent experiment of crowdsourcing the very writing of its new constitution is worth mentioning. Following the institutional crisis that resulted from the massive financial and economic meltdown of 2008, Iceland has, indeed, embarked on a major overhaul of its foundational text. As of July 2011, regular Icelanders have thus been invited to contribute ideas via the Internet and social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and Flickr, to supplement the work of a constitutional council, which regularly posts drafts on the Internet.¹¹ Whether these experiments are successful or not and whatever their flaws, they reflect the fact that the idea of collective intelligence has become mainstream and speak to its appeal, particularly in times of crisis.

In light of these evolutions, I now see my book as a product of its time, gathering a "knowledge" already present in popular and academic culture, albeit distributed over many sources and many individuals, and expressed in so many different forms as to lose clarity. It gathers, organizes, and synthesizes this common and distributed tacit knowledge and turns it into a coherent argument for democracy. My hope is that it also adds to this knowledge by putting forward a new argument in favor of democracy based on the correlation between inclusive decision making and cognitive diversity.

¹¹See, e.g., <http://www.theatlanticwire.com/global/2011/06/iceland-crowdsourcing-its-new-constitution/38713/> (accessed August 20, 2011).

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