

Democracy is a Challenging Possibility

In order for a representative democracy to work, it has long seemed to me, we must learn to live with a basic incongruity.

On the one hand, it matters greatly who we elect to public office. Not everyone is competent. Not everyone cares about the public good. Not everyone has the necessary integrity, vision, and leadership skills to make a positive contribution to the well-being of society and its members. In short, it can make a huge difference who we elect to govern us – and this is true at every level from school board member or township trustee to Congress and the Presidency.

On the other hand, the cost in time and effort to be an informed citizen, compounded by the time it takes to become acquainted with the candidates for public office in order to vote, will probably never be worth it. In short, over the course of your lifetime it will rarely if ever make a difference in the outcome of an election whether you, as an individual, vote or not. The most important elections are hardly ever decided by a single vote.

I'm stating this basic incongruity rather starkly for a least two reasons: 1) I suspect an awful lot of people seldom if ever vote precisely because they do not think their vote will make a difference; 2) this sort of thinking, while logically compelling, is utterly disastrous for the survival of a true and vibrant democracy.

By "this sort of thinking," I'm referring to a kind of individual cost-benefit view of things. When an individual acts on the basis of whether a particular desired outcome (benefit) is worth the personal time and effort (cost), it cuts at the heart of any notion of the public, or common, good.

Unfortunately, a cost-benefit view of human decision-making is pervasive in our society, and not just at the level of individuals and their choices. It also prevails in business life, in public policy and action, even in much legal argument and adjudication. It is present whenever we ask ourselves whether some desired outcome is worth the perceived cost – in money, in time and effort, in some other foregone option or opportunity. The problem is not that this sort of thinking is present, but that it dominates so much of our lives that we under-value, overlook, and forget other ways of approaching human decision-making and action

Other ways of thinking invite us to ask different questions: What is the right thing to do? What is my obligation? What is my duty? How can I be true? The answers to such questions may well lead us to take actions that confound any notion of costs and benefits. Besides, we almost always act with only partial and faulty knowledge of costs and benefits. We must be guided by other lights.

It is frequently argued that "the ends justify the means." Well, they may, or they may not. One thing is for certain: the means determine the ends. If the means are not sound or right or just, the ends will not be either.

When it comes to a sustainable democracy, what is required are citizens who see beyond

individual self-interest and think beyond cost-benefit calculations, citizens who have vital conceptions of the common good, who understand that being well-informed has myriad benefits beyond knowing how and for whom to vote, who possess a sense of duty or obligation born of gratitude for being privileged to live a society whose leadership is answerable to its members.

God knows, the United States is far from perfect as a democracy. Some might even judge that it has yet to become truly democratic, or that its democracy is slipping away. In any case, we now face what may prove to be one of the most consequential elections in our history. One thing is certain: How we decide and how we act, individually and together, will make all the difference in what is yet to come.

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