

Do Americans Believe In The Wisdom of the Public?

The Promise of Popular Democracy

Glenn W. Smith

The Rockridge Institute

Do Americans believe our hopes are best met by listening to the wisdom of the people or by sacrificing popular rule and freedom so that a self-selected elite can lead the way?

What remains of the promise of a transformative, popular democracy? To answer these questions, we won't turn to pundits and politicians. We'll turn instead to a little creature called a sea squirt.

But first, a little background and explanation of where we're headed.

I was for many years a political journalist. Then a legislative staffer. Then a campaign manager and consultant. Then I stepped back from political consulting because I could see, like many of you, that something was terribly wrong with our democracy.

I was like a fisherman who discovered his nets were empty, I blamed another fisherman, say, Karl Rove. Then I blamed all the other fishermen, say, the lobbyists, greedy consultants and other courtiers. Then I shook my fist at the media, the weathermen and fishing forecasters. Perhaps the harbor masters were to blame. Nixon in my youth. Reagan in my thirties, Bush in my fifties.

I had plenty of disagreements with those I blamed, and wish with all my heart that my side had won the arguments. But what did I get for all my blaming: thirty years of empty nets.

I finally decided to look past the blame. And when I did, I discovered that below the surface our democracy was diminished by fundamental misunderstandings of what it means to be a human being.

There are those who selfishly exploit these misunderstandings. There are also those American prophets who have from the beginning sensed the trouble and urged us on.

When Thomas Jefferson sighed that the nation he'd helped liberate politically was in need of "moral emancipation," he was pointing to these dangers.

When Ralph Waldo Emerson wondered why no one had ever tried to found a nation on love, he was warning us that self-interest was short-sighted.

Sojourner Truth, Henry David Thoreau, Fredrick Douglass, Jane Addams, John Dewey, Martin Luther King – all inhabit a deep and vibrant current of transformational democratic life that survives. When I took the time to look, their work showed up in my meager nets.

And when I looked back up at contemporary America, I discovered that some things that might lead to our moral emancipation and a transformational democracy had begun to happen.

Cognitive scientists like George Lakoff have isolated faulty Enlightenment thinking that had seeped like a poison into the waters of democracy. Here was hope for transformation.

Elite control of public communication is beginning, just beginning, to diminish somewhat, thanks to internet political pioneers.

A newly energized public came together in their opposition to the dark dreams of an imperial president who distanced the people from their government and isolated America from the world. The Hobbesian gloom of the Bush Administration is giving way to hope and renewed faith in humankind.

But the enemies of transformational, popular democracy are, if nothing else, alert.

Even as new possibilities are arising, new barriers are erected. Corporate consolidation of news media is in a race for dominance with new, freewheeling, independent, inter-active media. A conservative federal judiciary makes money equivalent to speech, meaning those with more money have more speech. Voting rights are threatened. Bush uses signing statements and executive orders to disregard the deliberations of Congress.

This is an old struggle. Let's put it in focus, first on the misunderstandings and the revolutionary discoveries of science that may erase them. Then we'll take up the contemporary arguments among elites and transformation democrats.

We'll see that a transition to popular democracy won't take a new constitution. Such things as public finance of campaigns, free air time for candidates, true universal suffrage, election-day holidays, election-day voter registration, re-regulated media industries, enforcement of anti-trust laws, and a re-commitment to civic-minded public education would be a good start.

Then we can all go fishing.

Since it's founding, America has been a central site of a political contest between two radically opposed camps. The first camp supports popular or transformational democracy. Its advocates have faith in human potential and believe our best hope lies in the people, in basing our actions upon broad and diverse perspectives. Among the founders, Jefferson is identified with this camp.

Opposing them are advocates of elite democracy. They believe the masses are incapable of self-rule and need expert elites to show them the way. In the founding era, this was the camp of Alexander Hamilton.

Both camps rely upon Enlightenment ideas of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Widespread acceptance of principles like that of universal reason led directly to the founding of America. Universal reason seemed to demand an egalitarian, popular democracy. Enlightenment ideas freed the West of much dogma and oppressive authority. But the older, aristocratic belief that some people are naturally more equal than others never really gave way. Some Enlightenment misconceptions were twisted into justifications for old authoritarian ways.

We know now that some Enlightenment views of mind and the human person are as profoundly wrong as an earlier belief that the sun and stars move 'round the earth.

We have organized ourselves around a mistaken understanding of what a human being is.

Politically, this has led to social and economic structures and policy prescriptions that are the equivalents of bleeding a body with leeches, eating figs before six in the morning, or bathing in urine to cure the Black Death.

The misunderstandings are many, but we'll focus here on two: 1) the idea that bodies and minds are different things, that thought is disembodied; and, 2) the belief that reason is unemotional, that emotions interfere with rational thought. Both these mistakes are exploited by advocates of

elite democracy to justify top-down rule. In his upcoming book, *The Political Mind*, Lakoff devotes considerable attention to the deep implications of these and other concerns.

Obviously, the contest among authoritarian and egalitarian political structures is an ancient one. The more we learn about human cognition, the more we see that many factors shape our political views by molding the structures of our brains. Lakoff has identified two dominant modes of political thought. The authoritarian, or strict parent mode, stresses discipline, authority, and obedience; the egalitarian mode stresses empathy, responsibility, and equality. Most of us are a little of both; maybe we're bossy at work and nurturant with our children, or strict at home and empathetic in our social and political views. Generally, progressives fall into the egalitarian group; conservatives into the authoritarian.

There are legitimate questions about whether the authoritarian political mind is democracy-blind. Hierarchy, command, and obedience may be so much a part of the authoritarian make-up that reflective thought about egalitarianism or empathy is all but out of the question. John Dean is one of many to raise questions such as this [he'll be there with me at the event]. Here, I want to focus not on what may divide us, but what unites us, our common humanity.

Lakoff, in an earlier work co-authored with Mark Johnson, wrote: "The traditional Western view of the person is...at odds on every point with fundamental results from neuroscience and cognitive science..."

But what is the correct view of the person, and what might it mean for theories of democracy and everyday political practice?

Here's where the sea squirt comes in.

Think of an undersea floret of cauliflower wearing a tunic. That's a sea squirt. But it's not because it's dressed like a Roman senator that the sea squirt provides a handy entry point. Nor is it the fact that the sea squirt eats its own brain once it obtains a strong enough position to survive the aquatic bureaucracy.

Still, it is this simple creature's brain that interests us here. When neurophysiologist Rodolfo Llinas looked at the sea squirt, he found a creature with a little spinal chord and about 300 neurons, all associated with finding a secure piece of coral to put down roots. Once rooted, it never moves. With the sea squirt, it's easy to see the connection between movement and thought. When it no longer moves, it doesn't need its brain. So it eats it.

Llinas looked at the sea squirt's cognitive habits and said:

"That which we call thinking is the evolutionary internalization of movement."

Thought is embodied. As Lakoff and Johnson have noted, meaning and thought derive from our physical orientation and movement in space. Our bodies think. Mind is movement.

In addition, the Enlightenment view of mind divorced emotion and reason. Universal reason is emotionless. But return to Llinas' statement. Thinking is movement internalized. The Latin root of the word emotion is *emovere*, to move. Emotion and thought are both about movement. Emotion does not interfere with reason. They move together, as one. The work of Antonio Damasio and many other scientists has confirmed the intimate relationship of emotion and reason. They are one process, not two.

How do mistaken views of the disembodied mind and the divorce of reason and emotion bear upon the contest between transformative and elite democracies?

It's not likely that we can turn insights into how we know and who we are into electrifying 30-second spots that will galvanize public support for popular democracy. However, a new understanding of what a human is will help all of us reflect on what our lives together should be like.

There are two core arguments against popular democracy. The first holds that the intelligent few rise above the messy, fleshy, prejudiced body of the masses. They must rule the unintelligent many. This bears a remarkable resemblance to the picture of the reasoning brain ruling the body from above.

The second is that the masses are too emotional and easily manipulated, while the elite few, with their greater access to unemotional rationality, can be coldly objective about the interests of society.

The new picture of human thinking gives the lie to both these arguments. A human person is not an isolated, emotional and unwieldy body ruled by an unemotional, rational controller from above. Our conceptual systems, our thinking, our metaphors, derive from our physical interaction with our environment, including other human beings.

Because our thinking is embodied and embedded in our social and natural environment, there is no unemotional, disembodied, or objective height for the elite to perch upon. We need the ongoing engagement of the many because we are engaged with the many, moment to moment.

As infants, we mature and learn by mimicking and interacting with our parents. Even out of the cradle, we are endlessly rocking, said Whitman. The embodied, inter-subjective nature of human being is with us from birth to death.

Babies denied human interaction in infancy develop abnormally. It is likely that societies that limit or exclude political interactions of the many – of anyone – put themselves in similar developmental jeopardy. History would appear to be on the side of such a judgment.

There is no privileged access to social and political wisdom. The unique experiences of the longshoreman, the barber, or the homeless man under the bridge have as much insight to give us as the political scientist's or the captains' of industry.

The idea that expertise should be politically privileged misses by a mile what is needed for us to collectively deliberate upon how to provide one another fulfilling and happy lives. I don't need to know how to transplant a heart to know in my heart that my neighbor's health is my moral concern.

You don't need to know how to manufacture a cruise missile to help us decide whether to go to war.

The philosopher Cheryl Misak said: "In moral and political inquiry...we must be careful with the notion of an expert. Everyone who is engaged with others is engaged in moral and political deliberation. And anyone, whatever their formal training, might be very good at it."

American pragmatist thinker John Dewey wrote, "A class of experts is inevitably so removed from common interests as to become a class with private interests and private knowledge, which in social matters is not knowledge at all."

Don't misunderstand. Facts about our shared reality are important. As Misak argues, we want our beliefs to be true. Therefore, we expose our beliefs to the widest possible community of inquiry. A physicist, for example, who arbitrarily excluded the research results of some group – say U.S. physicists – would fall behind in the pursuit of truth.

"Similarly," Misak writes, "those engaged in moral or political deliberation who denigrate or ignore the experiences of those with a certain skin color, gender, or religion are also adopting a method unlikely to reach the truth."

Seen in the light of new understanding of the human person, the justifications for exclusion used by theorists of elite democracy look just as nutty – and just as destructive – as that of our fictitious physicist who rejects experimental results because they come from a country between the Pacific and Atlantic oceans.

In 1630 Puritan John Winthrop sailed to that place between the oceans. This was three years before the Church condemned Galileo and seven years before Descartes launched the Enlightenment with publication of *Discourse on Method*. In his famous shipboard sermon, Winthrop compared the community of pilgrims to a human body and its interdependent parts. Faced with a daunting and dangerous adventure, he saw that survival depended upon a nurturant and egalitarian sharing of responsibilities.

“...that every man might have need of others, and from hence they might be all knit more nearly together in the bonds of brotherly affection," Winthrop said. Winthrop's law of nature commands that "every man afford his help to another in every want or distress." And Winthrop's use of the interdependent body as a metaphor for the community seems to reflect our contemporary insight. "There is no body but consists of parts and that which knits these parts together, gives the body its perfection, because it makes each part so contiguous to others as thereby they do mutually participate with each other.”

Politically, Winthrop was no radical democratic. But the moral worldview that calls forth such a democracy was present in his thought. It was brought to America by the earliest European colonists. In fact, as many have pointed out, a strong anti-authoritarian and egalitarian spirit ran through many nations of native peoples that had already been here for centuries.

The American Revolution was fought by people with high democratic aspirations. The Framers, of course, were as concerned about protecting the interests of enlightened elites as they were about guarding the nation from tyranny and injustice. Alexander Hamilton fretted about "an excess of democracy" that was alive in the states. This concern was raised in part by the states' more populist approach in protecting the rights of debtors – family farmers and shopkeepers. Madison was aghast when the states' habits of debt relief for the little people made it difficult for him to borrow money from skeptical international lenders.

Still, the Framers succeeded brilliantly in designing a republican government which could evolve. Jefferson thought every generation should undertake a revolution. The First Amendment helped guarantee that the struggle among transformational and elite democrats could go on.

Gone on it has.

However, throughout that struggle the accepted historical narrative of democracy has often reversed the roles of the protagonists and antagonists.

If we grant the human aspiration to freedom, the belief that all are created equal, that our capacity for empathy lies at the root of all we are and all we can become, then the defenders of elite control must be seen as the subversive antagonists of a democratic movement we know has lived at least since before the sixth century B.C. That's when Solon, advancing an already existing democratic ethos, established the rule of law at Athens.

Democracy has no singular founding document in antiquity, no framers, no discoverers. Democracy sprang from the hearts of people, so many people over so much time that we can't assign a date to it, we can't put up a monument to the moment.

Instead, we feel the founding moment alive in our own hearts in this moment.

In early 19th Century America, popular democracy threatened to overwhelm the careful plans of northeastern elites and southern planters. Political parties arose. Penny papers. Mass demonstrations. Democratic clubs. The surviving founders feared factionalism and civil chaos.

I think they lacked confidence in people. Our earliest lights in literature and philosophy never shared that fear. Emerson and Thoreau knew that real truths were to be found in individuals and that those truths would surface only if society was organized to hear them.

Harold Kaplan described their view this way:

“All of these particulars, the evidences of personal being, must be used to warrant the truth, and no principle, no idea...could be allowed to leave behind the sacred immediacy of personal experience and the sacred right to personal assent.”

This is a clear a statement as there is of the democratic spirit. It is heroic in its aspiration. And it scares the bejeepers out of elites.

By the 1920s, the justifications for elite control were out in the open: True transformational democracy was not the promise of America, it was its antagonist. Here's what Walter Shepard, president of the American Political Science Association, declared in 1924. He was articulating a widely shared view among aristocratic leaders in business, government, and the academy:

“...the dogma of universal suffrage must give way to a system of educational and other tests which will exclude the ignorant, the uninformed, and the anti-social elements which hitherto have so frequently controlled elections.”

It should not surprise us that the judge who recently approved onerous voter i.d. requirements – in an opinion about to be affirmed by the U.S. Supreme Court – echoed Shepard's language. In 2003, U.S. District Judge Richard Posner wrote

“Few citizens have the formidable intellectual and moral capacities (let alone the time) required for the role that [popular democracy] assigns to the citizenry...” The theory of popular democracy, Posner said, "hopelessly exaggerates the moral and intellectual capacities, both actual and potential, not only of the average person but also of the average official (including judge) and even of the political theorists who seek to tutor the people and the officials.”

Posner is a well-respected conservative intellectual. His views are dominant in American political life today.

When barriers to voting are widely accepted, it's because the wisdom of the people is seen as a contradiction in terms.

When the U.S. Supreme Court can in 2000 effectively appoint a president with its contorted logic and partisan bias on public display, the view that elite control trumps the popular wisdom becomes the law of the land.

When a paper trail of a person's vote is seen as unnecessary, the value of the vote is undermined.

When political operatives cavalierly conduct intense voter suppression campaigns – giving wrong polling locations and dates, intimidating voters at the polls, purging voter lists – voting becomes a shallow ritual intended only to give a false impression that Americans really do live in a popular democracy.

When a president can throw out the deliberations of Congress with executive orders and signing statements, elite power approaches the absolute.

When judicial precedent formalizes the equivalence of money and speech, only those with money have speech.

When our national political conversation is dominated by costly, expertly produced ads that seek to manipulate the many into doing what the few may want, what has become of "the sacred immediacy of personal experience and the sacred right to personal assent?"

Tonight, we can celebrate that those sacred truths still hold, and that many in this room are their committed champions.

California can be proud of its secretary of state, Debra Bowen, who has made the integrity of voting procedures a priority once again. The Courage Campaign, launched some months ago by a band of dedicated Californians, defeated the cynical, partisan attack on the state's electoral college procedures.

Efforts like these are taking place around the country. Bringing them to attention helps us see that we don't need a massive reorganization of society, a new constitution, a wholesale scrapping of institutions and procedures.

Still, the odds are against us, as they have always been.

The elite will not meekly relinquish control. Many progressive incumbents, satisfied that the current, elite-controlled system made them incumbents, are reluctant to change that system.

The people, accustomed to decades of disempowering propaganda, are unsure of themselves. Our educational system has sacrificed the teaching of citizenship, self-reliance and public responsibility to the filling of the vocational needs of a corporate elite who see no human faces on their balance sheets.

It was 400 years after the Copernican Revolution that we used our knowledge of the heavens to help humankind reach the moon. Should we expect the new insights into human thinking and being to take that long before delivering us to a transformational democratic politics that does justice to who we really are?

I don't think so. I believe a that time could be nearer than many assume. A few major reforms – election-day holidays and same day registration, public campaign finance, free air time for candidates – would go a long way toward eliminating some current barriers. Granted, that is only a start. And perhaps one of the most important features of such reforms would be to reverse the long, disempowering trend of dismissing public participation in politics.

When the elite balk at these reforms and say citizens don't have the time or inclination to participate anyway, we can answer, okay, if that's the case, even from the elite point of view, no harm will be done by removing the barriers.

We're going to have to make government transparent again.

We're going to have to democratize knowledge. It's heartening that the goal of one of the country's most successful companies – Google - is just that: the democratization of knowledge.

More than voting reforms are needed. As advocates for deliberative democracy point out, voting should be only the last step in an open and fruitful national civic conversation that seeks to include the largest possible community of inquirers in addressing our shared problems and possibilities.

That means critical information can no longer be filtered through the corporate media lens. Alternative sources of information and new local and national venues for dialogue are key.

These reforms are only a beginning. I am not so naïve to suppose that they would be enough to overcome the enormous power of today's elite. But they would help level the field where our forces could be marshaled for the struggle ahead.

We can do this.

I once jokingly told Professor Lakoff that a science fiction writer might muse that a planetary civilization's chances for survival depended upon the timing of its understanding of cognition. If it learned how its inhabitants thought before it learned how to destroy itself, its chances of success were good.

I'm not sure that's such a joke. We missed the deadline, but not by much.

There may not come a moment when the fight has finally been won, when transformational democracy reaches its full fruition, anymore than there is a moment when the dream of democracy began.

We know what direction to go, and we know many of the barriers in our way, and that's a good deal more than John Winthrop knew when he and other hopeful pilgrims set sail for their new world. It's more than the ancient peoples knew before they crossed the Bering Land Bridge for their new world, a world we can make new again.