

The Dictatorship of Interest

Peter Spiliakos

Against Democracy

By Jason Brennan

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Jason Brennan hates it that people he considers less informed than himself help to choose many of our political leaders. In *Against Democracy*, Brennan (plausibly) considers political disputation a corrupting exercise and then seeks to limit the franchise to those who most enjoy arguing about politics. He prefers that our political leaders be chosen by what he considers the enlightened. He writes:

I justifiably believe that I—a named professor of strategy, economics, ethics and public policy at an elite research university, with a PhD from the top-ranked political philosophy program in the English-speaking world, and a strong record of peer-reviewed publications in top journals and academic presses—have superior political judgment on a great many political matters compared to many of my fellow citizens.

Usually, such a monologue is followed by the revelation of a giant laser orbiting Earth and a demand for exactly one million dollars, but Brennan has the wrong analogy right from

the start. Brennan explicitly compares his political judgement to the expertise of airline pilots and surgeons, but the difference is that he, an academic philosopher, is not a doctor of democracy. Surgery is practiced by surgeons. The real doctors of democracy are the statesmen who win elections, hold office, and implement policies. Brennan is, at best, a professor of medical ethics arguing that only patients who passed the United States Medical Licensing Examination should be allowed to refuse or accept treatment.

I should start by noting that every criticism of Brennan's work is, in some respect, against my interest. I would pass most or all of his proposed voting screens. I care enough about politics to do my homework to pass the rest. Brennan's voting screens would substantially increase the value of my vote—and that is the problem.

Brennan contends that political argument is inherently conflictual and corrupting. He marshals data that most voters are politically ignorant and that political disputation tends to make them more extreme and dishonest, but not better informed. His description of the political ignorance of the voters is a little

off. He cites a 2000 study that purports to show that significantly less than half of voters knew that Al Gore was more supportive of abortion rights than was George W. Bush. The 2000 exit poll did not break down how people voted based on abortion policy, but the 2004 exit poll tells a different story. Both those who wanted all abortions to be legal and those who wanted all abortion banned voted by 3-to-1 margins for the candidate who was closer to their policy preferences. Moderate pro-lifers and pro-choicers also voted decisively for the candidate who was closer to their policy preferences. Keeping in mind that abortion is not necessarily the top priority of every voter, it seems that the 2004 electorate was much better informed than Brennan would lead one to believe.

But put that aside. Who does Brennan want to vote? He argues that many people who take an active interest in politics are “hooligans” who have “strong and largely fixed worldviews” and who “consume political information in a biased way.” These people “cherry-pick data” and are “overconfident in themselves and what they know.” Brennan writes that hooligans would “happily manipulate one another, use language in a deceitful way to confuse people, and lie, if doing so helps their side.”

Yes, about that. Most of Brennan’s proposed voting screens (some version of the citizenship test, an AP Government test, enhanced voting based on educational attainment) would seem to advantage the hooligans who take a sporting interest in politics versus well-meaning people who can’t remember the name of their state’s senator who *isn’t* up for reelection this year.

There is some reason to suspect that Brennan’s screens might select for political hooliganism rather than the serene, logical, “Vulcan” politics that he claims to prefer.

Take Brennan on immigration. Brennan refers to studies that argue that the elimination of most immigration controls would

double global GDP and that this consideration “swamps most things on the political agenda.”

He does not note that, according to immigration scholar George Borjas, these alleged gains are primarily captured by the new immigrants. The economic gain that accrues to the legacy population is fairly small. He also fails to note that, while the immigration surplus for the legacy population is fairly small, the distributional impact is about eleven times as large. For every one dollar that the native population gains (as a whole) about eleven dollars are redistributed (in the form of lower wages for some and cheaper services for others) from low-wage workers to the rest.

And that is describing the impact of immigration under our current, relatively selective (though not as selective as Canada or Australia) immigration regime. Anyone who has confidence that the migrations likely to occur under a regime of relatively open borders would actually produce the mathematically expected economic benefits has a dangerous addiction to abstraction, combined with the absolute certainty that someone else will be paying the economic costs and enduring the resulting social frictions. Germany surrendered to immigration enforcement after just the mildest taste of what an open borders regime would bring, and trembles at the thought of Turkey opening a flood of migrants into Europe. Perhaps Chancellor Angela Merkel is unaware of the economic benefits of her recent adventures.

Brennan could have described a policy of modestly increasing immigration as primarily benefiting immigrants with a substantial upwardly distributive impact on the country’s current low-skill population. He could have proposed some sort of detailed redistributive program rather than just the vague promise of compensating the “losers.” There are reasons to support such a policy, but also good reasons to believe that many (or most)

voters would oppose such an immigration program when the costs and benefits are clearly explained.

Brennan chose to explain the immigration issue in the manipulative and overconfident (how else to explain one who pretends to know how societies would adjust to an open borders regime?) manner of the political hooligan. Is it possible to create a set of voter screens that do not unduly empower extremist, political obsessives like Jason Brennan?

One notes that most of Brennan's voter screens mimic the challenges of getting into, and graduating from, a college program. There is, perhaps, some self-interest in that—or maybe just familiarity. It might make more sense to construct screens for real achievement rather than for how well one remembers the details of 1970s campaign-finance regulations.

One could construct a screen where voting would be limited to those who have established businesses with a certain number of employees on the payroll and have reached a threshold of net taxable income for a period of five consecutive years. An alternative way of gaining the franchise would be for those who have attained at least the rank of E-5 in the U.S. armed forces. Citizens of such attainment will have shown discipline, intelligence, and practical achievement. What is better, such screens (unlike Brennan's) would give no special advantages to political obsessives who have spent an unhealthy amount of their time on what Brennan assures us are the corrupting activities of democratic deliberation. No hooligans here.

This is, of course, nonsense. Proprietors and sergeants are, perhaps, just as likely to act the part of the hooligan as professors of political philosophy. But, as in immigration, Brennan tailors things to his biography and his interests. Whether it is immigration, or abortion, or the construction of voting screens, one keeps hearing Lincoln's question to the political philosopher: "Will Dr. Ross

[or Dr. Brennan] be actuated by that perfect impartiality, which has ever been considered most favorable to correct decisions?"

Can anyone be trusted to have that impartiality? In his defense of "epistocracy," Brennan argues that voters (even ignorant voters) vote for what they consider the community interest rather than for their own narrow, selfish interests. Therefore, the epistocrats will also vote for the community interest—just with better knowledge.

Which brings us to Mitt Romney's famous "47 percent" gaffe. According to the *Mother Jones* magazine transcript, Romney referred to 47 percent of Americans as deadbeats who "are dependent upon government, who believe that they are victims, who believe that government has a responsibility to care for them, who believe that they are entitled to health care, to food, to housing, to you name it" and who can never be convinced "that they should take personal responsibility and care for their lives."

Mitt Romney is a well-informed fellow. He has a JD and an MBA from Harvard to go along with a successful career in both business and politics. The attendees to the fundraiser are not known, but *Mother Jones* has narrowed down the list of likely attendees to a group of large donors from the Florida area. The donors are mostly successful business owners. One presumes they probably take a great interest in politics.

Most of these donors—and certainly Mitt Romney—would pass virtually all of Brennan's tests for entering the epistocracy. They are probably as sincere as anyone else in their concern for their fellow citizen and the common good. Their judgments are also distorted by their social circles and their economic circumstances. Does anyone trust Mitt Romney and his wealthy donors to act as trustees for their fellow citizens, after those citizens have been deprived of the vote? I don't.

In *Coming Apart*, Charles Murray writes

that the most educated and the least educated Americans are increasingly living in different worlds. Less educated Americans are increasingly less likely to work, less likely to marry, and less likely to be part of civic groups. Murray warned of the increasing influence of those who “have little direct experience with the lives of ordinary Americans, and make their judgements about what’s good for other people based on their own highly atypical lives.”

Brennan is almost certainly right that less educated, less politically interested Americans don’t have the answers for what is wrong with American policy. The question is whether those Americans for whom our

institutions are working the best should have more power and less accountability, thereby converting the electorate into a gated community. Would our less fortunate, less politically obsessed citizens be better off if the vote were limited to the credentialed, the wealthy, and the politics nerds? Let us leave the final word to Lincoln: “Nonsense! Wolves devouring lambs, not because it is good for their own greedy maws, but because it is good for the lambs!!!”

Peter Spiliakos has an MA in history from Salem State College and is a Web columnist for First Things. He lives in Massachusetts with his wife and two daughters.

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