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Elizabeth Theiss-Morse
University of Nebraska-Lincoln

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The Perils of Voice and The Desire for Stealth Democracy

by Elizabeth Theiss-Morse



In this article and the next, we present two addresses given by prominent scholars at the May 2002 Maine Town Meeting sponsored by the Margaret Chase Smith Library in Skowhegan. In the first, Theiss-Morse, a political scientist at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, takes issue with each of the alleged beneficial effects of increased participation and deliberation in politics. She presents evidence from her own research with colleague John Hibbing that suggests a more participatory democracy does not necessarily result in better decisions, a better political system or better people. Rather, most Americans would prefer not to have to participate in politics at all. Theiss-Morse explains where this view comes from and, in the end, argues for a civic education process that better prepares young people for the gritty divisiveness of our democratic system.. 

A trumpet call rings out across America: we must increase citizen participation in politics; we must give the people a stronger voice. For far too long, the argument goes, Americans have been pushed out of the political system. We must use every means possible to bring them back—more ballot initiatives and referenda, more use of technology to enhance direct participation, more involvement in voluntary associations, more use of citizen issue juries or deliberative opinion polls. If we could just get more people involved in politics, numerous benefits would accrue to the political system. We would get better decisions, a better political system, and better people. In essence, we would finally have a strong democracy.

John Hibbing and I have taken issue with these claims in our book *Stealth Democracy* (2002a). In this talk, I will tackle each of the alleged beneficial effects of increased participation and deliberation—better decisions, a better system, and better people—by laying out the proponents’ arguments and then raising questions based on empirical research from social psychology and political science. I will then discuss two reasons why calls to increase public participation in politics won’t work. I will show that people’s understanding of how democracy ought to work and of their role in that democracy is not at all in line with participatory democracy. I will conclude with a brief discussion of whether Americans should get the democracy they want.

BETTER DECISIONS?

One benefit claimed by proponents of a more participatory democracy is that we will get better decisions if people are more actively involved in political decisionmaking. This contention is certainly not surprising. In 1785, Condorcet’s Jury Theorem demonstrated that if each person on a jury has private information and reveals that private information to others during deliberation, the decision following deliberation will be a step above that which would have occurred had no deliberation taken place. As people become aware of new ideas, arguments and facts, they can obviously make more informed and, therefore, better decisions. Proponents further argue that deliberation

and participation push people to think beyond their self-interest—to think of “we” instead of “me”—because they are forced to confront alternative views. Awareness of others’ diverse needs and concerns broadens people’s understandings of the problems and forces them away from their myopic views.

As good as these arguments sound, they are unlikely to play out in the real world of politics. Robert Axelrod (1997) has shown that people tend to choose to interact with those who are quite similar to themselves. For example, contrary to Robert Putnam’s vision of group involvement, voluntary associations tend to be highly homogeneous and therefore provide little exposure to dissimilar political views. If there is a chance for real disagreement to arise, groups often actively discourage debate of the issues. To quote Nina Eliasoph (1998, 63), “In an effort to appeal to regular, unpretentious fellow citizens without discouraging them, [volunteer groups] silence public-spirited deliberation.”

Perhaps I am interpreting the proponents’ arguments too narrowly. Perhaps better decisions arise even from discussion within homogeneous groups, in which case it wouldn’t matter that people tend to associate with those who are similar. Unfortunately, research from social psychology simply does not back this up. When people deliberate in homogeneous groups, their attitudes tend to become polarized toward the extremes. For example, Myers and Bishop found that unprejudiced students became more unprejudiced after a group discussion (becoming less prejudiced by about a half a point on a seven-point scale), while prejudiced students became even more strongly prejudiced (becoming more prejudiced by about a point and a half). Homogeneous group discussions, which are the most likely kind of discussion, do not

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necessarily lead to better decisions, and could lead to worse decisions.

BETTER SYSTEM?

What about the argument that increased participation and deliberation lead to a better system?

The proponents are concerned here with people's beliefs in the legitimacy of the political system. They argue that if people have the opportunity to participate in political decisionmaking, or at least believe the decision was based on inclusive and responsible debate, they will feel better about the process and the decision. Tom Tyler, a social psychologist, and his colleagues (1985) offer empirical evidence for this assertion. People who believed they had a chance to voice their arguments in an Illinois traffic and misdemeanor court viewed the judge's decision on their case as more legitimate and were more accepting even of adverse decisions than were people who believed they had no voice in the proceedings. These results suggest deliberation and participation can make people feel better about the political system even if they do not always get what they want from that system.

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Does having a chance to discuss their position on an issue really lead people to view the system as more legitimate? To answer this question, let's look again at Tom Tyler's work. Tyler, like most researchers who proclaim the positive effects of voice, relies on evidence from the legal system where the decisionmaker—the judge—has no vested interest in the particular outcome of the case. People widely believe that judges are neutral arbiters, applying the law as prescribed by precedent and the Constitution. But this is not the

case when it comes to most political decisionmakers. People believe members of Congress, for example, act self-interestedly most, if not all, of the time. When the decisionmaker is seen to be self-interested, people view the opportunity for voice as a sham. Why might this be so? Imagine yourself in a situation where a decisionmaker—we'll call her Jane—is in a position to make a decision that benefits herself at your expense. In one situation, Jane makes the decision without any input from you. In the other, Jane makes the decision after you have made an impassioned plea for an outcome more beneficial to yourself. Wouldn't you be less accepting of the outcome in the second situation? After all, your opportunity to provide input into the decision makes it certain that Jane was aware of your position. Jane looked you right in the eye and decided against you and for herself. Is there any reason to expect that such a situation would produce anything other than frustration?

My colleague John Hibbing and I (2002b) conducted an experiment to see if people actually did become more frustrated after having had a say in a decisionmaking situation. We found that people who had the opportunity to express their desires to a self-interested decisionmaker were much more upset with the outcome and with the process than were people who did not have the opportunity to express their desires to the decisionmaker. Since most political situations involve decisionmakers whom people at least *perceive* to be self-interested, it is very likely that having voice increases people's frustration and their feeling that the system is not legitimate.

BETTER PEOPLE?

The final argument proponents make is that participation and deliberation in the political system will be beneficial for the people themselves. In essence, they will become better people. Back in the 1700s, Jean Jacques Rousseau argued that in the process of interacting with others on societal and political issues, a person's "ideas take on a wider scope, his sentiments become ennobled, and his whole soul elevated" (1946, 263). In the 1800s, John Stuart Mill argued for the educative benefits of participation in public affairs.

Many modern writers also have been enthusiastic champions of this point of view. For example, Robert Paul Wolff (1970, 36-7) claims that, were citizens to be directly involved in deliberation, “America would see an immediate and invigorating rise in interest in politics... Politics would be on the lips of every man, woman, and child, day after day.”

I would certainly agree that face-to-face interaction can have beneficial effects. For example, in Stanley Milgram’s famous experiments on obedience, he found that people were less likely to administer what they thought was a potentially lethal electric shock to another person if they could actually see the person. Latane and Darley (1970) found that even a brief meeting with a person who later had a (simulated) epileptic seizure greatly increased the likelihood that the new acquaintance would respond to cries of distress. So face-to-face interaction is likely to heighten positive emotions such as empathy. But when there is disagreement, it can also lead to heightened negative emotions: anger, aggression, feelings of competition, and denigration of the other. People often respond to these negative emotions by becoming more entrenched in their original views or by clamming up. As a result, as Jane Mansbridge argues, “assemblies designed to produce feelings of community can... backfire” (1983, 273). We want people to agree with us, which is why we tend to gravitate toward those who hold similar views. When we are confronted with conflicting views, deliberation makes it more difficult to think everyone does agree with us.

A major problem with deliberation, as people see it, is the inequalities that quickly surface in public discussions. The best examples of this come from studies of direct deliberative democracy in action: New England town meetings. Mansbridge’s (1983) fascinating account of the events and sentiments surrounding town meetings in the real but fictitiously named New England town of Selby is the most revealing. After observing town meetings, Mansbridge interviewed many of the participants and concluded that face-to-face deliberation actually “accentuates rather than redress(es) the disadvantage of those with the least power in a society” (ibid., 277). The major reason for this exacerbation is simply variation in

people’s communication skills. As a retired businessman from Selby put it, “some people are eloquent and can make others feel inferior. They can shut them down. I wouldn’t say a word at town meetings unless they got me madder’n hell” (ibid., 62). Another said, “we have natural born orators, don’t we? I think we do. It’s just the same as anything else. They carry more than their share of the weight” (ibid., 83). A farmer had similar sentiments: “There’s a few people who really are brave enough to get up and say what they think in town meetings... now, myself, I feel inferior, in ways, to other people... forty percent of the people on this road that don’t show up for town meeting—a lot of them feel that way” (ibid., 60). All in all, it is difficult to dispute Mansbridge’s conclusion that “participation in face-to-face democracies can make participants feel humiliated, frightened, and even more powerless than before” (ibid., 7). Not surprisingly, research shows that the people who are most likely to “feel humiliated, frightened, and even more powerless than before” are women, minorities, and the less educated.

STEALTH DEMOCRACY

I’m sure that at this point some of you are thinking that I am opposed to people participating in politics. That couldn’t be further from the truth. I would love to see more people participate in politics, and I spend much of my time in the classroom trying to draw young adults out of their apathy. But I think it is fallacious to believe that pushing people into participating in politics will lead to all sorts of positive outcomes. First, I don’t think people can be pushed to participate; second, I believe that, given their current understanding of democracy, pushing people to participate would be harmful to them and to the political system. I will discuss these two arguments and then finish by discussing what people want in a democratic system and raising the question of whether they should get what they want.

Why do I think people cannot be pushed to participate more actively in politics? The basic answer is that people don’t like politics and would much rather spend their time doing other things; in fact, they would rather do almost anything other than participate in

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politics. Remember, I'm a political scientist—I love keeping up on what's happening in the political world. But the average American just doesn't like politics. My colleague John Hibbing and I (2002a) conducted focus groups around the country in 1997 (including two in Maine). Here are some of the comments made by the focus group participants which demonstrate clearly that people just don't want to take the time to be politically involved:

Eric: We have avenues to contact our representatives... we just choose not to.

Jackie: We're too apathetic...

Mike: There were times I didn't vote. Honestly, it wasn't because I didn't think my opinion counted, it was because that was out of my way. You know, I had something else that I wanted to do that day.

Chuck: I think the biggest problem with our government is not the government, it's the people... We really don't care to take an active role and it don't bother us, you know, as long as it doesn't directly affect me. Just leave me alone.

Glen: And if this isn't going to impact me, I'm not going to [get involved in politics].

Gary: See, we're all concerned about survival, what we have to do eight hours a day in order to [pay the] bills, and therefore, regardless of what's taking place across town that really irritates you, you say, "well, that's across the town." Let me do my eight hours and do my thing rather than really getting involved.

Michelene: When I leave here, when I walk out this door, I'm not going to volunteer for anything. I'm not going to get involved in anything. I mean I know this.

I'm not going to pretend I'm some political activist. I'm lazy. I'm not going to do it. I'm too busy obsessing on other things going on in my life.

Robin: That's how most people are.

Michelene: I am.

Michelene is right on target when it comes to Americans' views of political participation. Most people believe they are "too busy obsessing on other things" in their lives. Back when I was working on my dissertation, I asked people why they believed they did not live up to their standard of good citizenship. The respondents overwhelmingly said they were too busy with other things going on in their lives: their jobs, their families, and so on. The focus group respondents also emphasized their busy schedules. But they also added the nuance that people are not motivated to make time for politics. Let me illustrate with one focus group exchange:

Carol: You know, we say that we don't have time, but nobody goes to city council meetings. I had to go for a class. I had to go, so I went. I don't have to go now, so I don't go. *Wheel of Fortune* is on. I'm comfortable. It's cold out. So I'm as guilty as anybody.

John: And the other thing is, you know, no offense to you, but . . . people in general are, like, "I don't have time. I don't have time." But how many of us make time to watch *ER*?

Many people do not find politics intrinsically interesting. They do not want to engage with the political process. They do not want to follow political issues because they do not care about most issues.

Why do people dislike politics? I will discuss two reasons: 1) people's overestimation of consensus and their subsequent lack of appreciation of political disagreement, and 2) people's dislike of standard elements of democracy. First, people overwhelmingly believe there is a consensus among Americans on the important issues of the day. Psychologists have consistently found that people often perceive a "false

consensus.” That is, people tend to see their own attitudes as typical so they overestimate the degree to which others share their opinions. This pattern almost certainly applies to perceptions of issue interest as well. Those not interested in political issues tend to believe that most other ordinary people are also not interested in any political issues. Those interested in, say, education policy overestimate public concern about education and underestimate public interest in other policy areas. Evidence for this false consensus comes from a survey John Hibbing and I (2002a) conducted in 1998. Fully 80% of the respondents believed there was widespread agreement on what is the most important problem facing the nation. In fact, the most identified problem (crime) was mentioned by only 6.5%. People do agree on certain big issues—wanting a lower crime rate, better education, better national security—but fail to recognize that they would likely disagree heatedly over the means to achieve those ends. Because people believe a consensus exists, they do not comprehend any legitimate justification for intense disagreement on the issues. When the political arena is filled with intense policy disagreement, people conclude that the reason must be illegitimate—namely, the influence of special interests. After all, the reasoning goes, people like me could not be the cause of bitter policy disagreements on all those issues because we do not care that much, because we do not see their relevance, and because even when a particular policy goal is important to us, we cannot understand why bickering over the details of proposed solutions is necessary.

The second reason for people’s dislike of politics flows from the first. People’s overestimation of consensus leads them to view much of democratic politics as unnecessary. If 80% of the people are in agreement, then there is no need for democratic procedures designed to allow politicians to come to a decision amidst wildly diverse views—such as debating the issues and compromising on solutions. Our survey results provide evidence for people’s dislike of these democratic procedures. Eighty-six percent of respondents said that “elected officials would help the country more if they would stop talking and just take action on important problems.” Sixty percent agreed that “what people call compromise is really just selling out

on one’s principles.” A focus group respondent underscores this view: “I’ll tell you right off the bat the thing that I don’t like, or maybe I just don’t understand it, is... where it seems like you have someone over here and someone over here and they’re always fighting, although they’re both supposed to be working for this common good. You know they’re always, ‘well, he said this and you said that,’ you know, bickering, and it doesn’t seem like there’s so much concern about where we’re going rather than where each other’s been.” The people’s impatience with deliberation and compromise is an important element of the American political system, one that proponents of participatory democracy ignore. Even though Americans say they want democratic decisionmaking, they do not believe in standard elements of it, such as debate and compromise, and are quite drawn to what John Hibbing and I (2002a) call stealth democracy, which I will now describe.

If Americans could have their druthers, they would not have to participate in politics at all. Representatives would simply understand the concerns of ordinary people because they are ordinary people themselves and because they spend time among other ordinary people. No public input would be necessary. How is such a system democratic? The people want to be certain that if they ever *did* want to get involved, if an issue at some point in the future happened to impinge so directly on their lives that they were moved to ask the system for something, their request would be taken with the utmost seriousness. This, to many people, is as democratic as they want their political system to be; they do not want a system that is characterized by regular sensitivity to every whim of the people (and which thus expects and requires an attentive and involved public), but rather a system that is instinctively in touch with the problems of real Americans and that would respond with every ounce of courtesy and attentiveness imaginable if those real Americans ever did make an actual request upon the system. This form of latent representation is not just what people would settle for, it is what they prefer since it frees them from the need to follow politics. For this to happen, though, people need to be assured that decisionmakers are interested in them as people, are potentially open to popular input, and are not benefitting materially from

their service and decisions. This desire for empathetic, unbiased, other-regarding, yet uninstructed public officials is about as distinct as possible from the claim that people really want to be more involved in politics than they already are if only the system would let them.

If this interpretation of people's procedural preferences is correct, if indeed they are not suspicious of the concept of elite decisionmaking generally but rather only suspicious of those elites whom they perceive as able and willing to serve selfish interests, then people's desire to stay out of the political process should lead them to be surprisingly open to empowering any elite they believe will not be particularly selfish. People believe elected officials are irreparably self-serving. Is it possible for them to envision elite decisionmakers who are not? To be sure, this is a difficult image to conjure, but two items in the survey make an attempt. They read:

1. Our government would run better if decisions were left up to successful business people.
2. Our government would run better if decisions were left up to non-elected, independent experts rather than politicians or the people.

While neither of these statements advocates replacing democracy with a dictatorial style of government, it is fair to say that support for business-type approaches to governing or for turning authority over to something as amorphous and as unaccountable as "non-elected, independent experts" instead of "politicians or the people" suggests moving in a different direction from the one espoused by the proponents of participatory democracy. Giving more political influence to successful business people and to unelected experts would entail a significant diminution in the influence of the run-of-the-mill American. If the proponents of more citizen participation are right, surely the American people would reject such notions out of hand. However, if the argument I have been making is right, these less-than-democratic options would appeal to a substantial number of people.

And they do. Surprising percentages of people respond favorably to the notion of decisionmaking structures that are not democratic and not even republican. Nearly one-third of the respondents agreed that

the political system would be better if "decisions were left to successful business people" and a similar percentage agreed the political system would be better if "decisions were left to non-elected experts" rather than to politicians or the people. Some people, of course, liked both the expert and the business people options, but cross-tabulation indicates nearly half of all respondents agreed with at least one of these two less than democratic options.

Just short of half the adult population in the United States sees some real benefit to transferring decisionmaking authority to entities that are, for all intents and purposes, unaccountable to ordinary people. John Hibbing and I (2002a) believe the key to explaining this sentiment is recognition that many Americans accept these two notions: 1) ordinary people are more or less in agreement on the fundamental goals for the nation, and 2) governing is, therefore, basically a management problem of determining how best to achieve those goals. Since the people agree on societal goals, no conflict need exist, and governing is reduced to the mechanical process of implementing a good plan for attaining these goals. In a stealth democracy, governmental procedures are not visible to people unless they go looking; the people do not routinely play an active role in making decisions, in providing input to decisionmakers, or in monitoring decisionmakers. The goal in stealth democracy is for decisions to be made efficiently, objectively, and without commotion and disagreement. As such, procedures that do not register on people's radar screens are preferred to the noisy and divisive procedures typically associated with democratic government.

Should Americans be given the government they want? Should they be given stealth democracy? One possible answer is a straightforward "no." People don't like the current system, but perhaps we should simply admit that government will often be unpopular and live with it. Certainly, the U.S. government can survive being unpopular. It has done so for most of its 200-plus year history. Still, there are costs associated with the public's intense negativism toward government. Politicians, sensitive to public disapprobation, may choose to avoid difficult policy matters. In the spring of 1998, the leadership in Congress worried that if it

adopted an agenda that addressed difficult issues, the popularity of the institutions and, with it, the majority party would plummet. It therefore followed a conscious strategy of laying low. Evidence also exists that quality candidates sometimes choose not to run for election or reelection to positions in unpopular institutions such as Congress. Disapproval of government leads the public to be less likely to comply with laws. Simply accepting the status quo is not necessarily benign.

Another option is to reduce the ability of politicians to be self-serving in an attempt to make them more empathetic and less self-interested. How could this be accomplished? There are several possibilities. One is to reduce the pay of public officials. Americans believe public officials are grossly overpaid, even as they underestimate, for example, the congressional salary. Americans would be quite happy if public officials were paid minimum wage.

A second possibility is to reduce the ability of special interests to provide lucrative benefits to public officials in exchange for legislation. Americans not only believe that special interest groups buy their way through Washington, but that their innumerable gifts to members of Congress—the cushy vacations in the Bahamas and the opulent parties in Washington—also lead these elected officials to lose touch with the American people. Americans would be wildly happy if laws forbade special interests from contacting members of Congress, from providing money or any other lavish benefits to elected officials, and from giving ex-public officials a job. But removing the perceived remuneration offered by special interests is virtually impossible without violating provisions of the Constitution, primarily the First Amendment.

A final option is the one I endorse. I believe that people's willingness to settle for stealth democracy is based on, or at least is encouraged by, their misunderstandings of democratic politics. We need to teach people, through the education system, that Americans legitimately disagree on many important issues. It is possible for ordinary Americans to care about the Mideast, about tourism in Hawaii, about the spotted owl, or about racial patterns in college admissions, even if others do not. People need to be convinced that, while elements of the common good, such as low

crime rates and good education, may not be up for debate, the best method of achieving the common good is. Experts are not all in agreement; one solution is not as good as another; details matter. If people are ever going to tolerate politicians who are debating and compromising with each other on a range of issues, people must be convinced that the issues matter to other real people and that not all strategies for tackling each issue are equally effective.

The proponents of a more participatory democracy mistakenly think that pushing people to be involved in political processes that the people perceive to be irrelevant and biased toward special interest groups would somehow have a beneficial effect—that people would eventually be drawn in or that their participation would lead them to conclude the process was fair and relevant. The empirical evidence indicates this is not the case. Exposing people to a system they believe is flawed will only add to their frustration. People first need to be convinced that the political system deals with issues that are relevant to some ordinary people and does so in a way that is not designed to benefit only politicians and special interests.

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The current approach to civic education, with its emphasis on civic facts, volunteer service, and community, is wholly unable to show students the realities of political conflict. Constitutional facts and impassioned pleadings to vote and to be good citizens are not the answer. We need to expose students to the range of issue-interests of people across the United States and to simulations illustrating the challenges of coming to agreement in the face of divided opinion. Students will not become good citizens by memorizing lists of what a good citizen does but, rather, by recognizing that ordinary people have refreshingly different interests, that these interests must be addressed even when they

appear tangential, that each issue has an array of possible solutions, and that finding the most appropriate solution requires time, effort, and conflict.

When schools avoid controversial political issues, which they tend to do, students are left with only a saccharin civil side of politics and are therefore more likely to react negatively when, in the real world, they are exposed to the gritty, barbaric side of politics. I'll end with a quotation from Jean Bethke Elshtain (1995, 62): "Western democracies are not doing a good job of nurturing those democratic dispositions that encourage people to accept that they can't always get what they want." She continues, "if we spurn those institutional forms and matrices that enable us to negotiate our differences and to mediate them in civil and political ways, the result will be not more variety and pluralism but less" (ibid., xiii). 🐉



Elizabeth Theiss-Morse is Professor of Political Science at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. Theiss-Morse has co-authored two award-winning books: *Congress as Public Enemy* (1995, with John R. Hibbing), which was awarded the APSA's Fenno Prize for the best book on legislatures, and *With Malice Toward Some* (1995, with George Marcus, John Sullivan, and Sandra Wood), which was awarded the APSA's Best Book in Political Psychology Prize.

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