

# Citizen Reasoning within Counterfactual Democratic Institutions

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In reflecting on *The Democratic Dilemma* (Lupia and McCubbins 1998) 20 years after its publication and thinking about the context in which it was written, it is clear that the book did a tremendous job of establishing a coherent justification for democracy as currently practiced. The authors developed this justification using what I call an “everyday scientific realist” framework, and such a justification was desperately needed at the time. That said, I argue that we can take the book’s fundamental premise—that institutions can enhance the capacity of ordinary people to be good democratic citizens—as a charge for political science to engage in more “translational” research. This entails moving beyond scientific realism to recommend novel institutions that might make democracy even better.

It would be disingenuous to begin without first acknowledging the inherent awkwardness of commenting on the specific contents of a book written 20 years ago. This is particularly true given the breadth and depth of the ongoing intellectual projects that the authors embody as creative and prolific scholars. Fairly or unfairly, my intent is to be provocative by confining the meaning of the book to what had been typeset into the pages two decades ago.

## SCIENTIFIC REALISM OF THE DEMOCRATIC DILEMMA

For purposes of this article, I define “everyday scientific realism” as an orientation of science that takes the existing world as given and seeks to understand and explain current practices and existing phenomena. (I use “everyday” as a generalization so as not to distract with the specifics of any given realist epistemology.) I define “translational research” as science that aspires to improve existing practices (Neblo et al. 2017). In institutional research, the primary difference between the scientific realist and the translational approaches is that the latter compares distinct institutions with an intent to evaluate which one best meets normative criteria, whereas the former intends to understand the properties of extant institutions. We can loosely think of translational epistemology as combining two orientations that initially might be seen as in tension: an epistemology oriented toward democratic normative aspirations (Dewey 1905) practiced within expanded metaphysical and methodological considerations made possible within counterfactual reasoning (Lewis 1973).<sup>1</sup>

In my reading, in its epistemological orientation, *The Democratic Dilemma* is firmly rooted in everyday scientific realism. To see this, note that the authors define “democracy” as “government based on the choices of people” (Lupia and McCubbin 1998, 3), by which they mean choices among well-defined alternatives. This definition includes the choices of both officeholders and citizens, all of whom are tasked with making decisions based on information. For present purposes, I focus on the specific problem of voters during election season, who need to make decisions such as: Should I send a check to PAC A or PAC B? Should I vote for candidate A or candidate B? From the perspective of everyday scientific realism, restricting our conception of the tasks for democratic citizens in this way is compelling because contemporary mass democracy mostly asks only for citizens’ money and votes and provides few opportunities for them to interact substantively or meaningfully with their government. So the book’s argument and analysis are well rooted in existing real-world referents of democratic institutions and practices.

Because citizens in contemporary democracy are asked to participate only in these thin ways, they will invest little effort in gaining knowledge of complex policies or politics—because, of course, why bother? Those who overcome feelings of ambivalence or apathy need to seek out only the minimum knowledge necessary to tip the scales between two choices (Lupia and McCubbins 1998, 6). So Lupia and McCubbins could appropriately take it as given that citizens typically know very little about politics—a premise that often is restated in existing survey research (e.g., Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996). From that premise, the authors show that with well-designed democratic institutions, even people who have limited information can make *reasoned* decisions when choosing between alternatives—a party label or an interest-group email blast will do (Lupia and McCubbins 1998, 207)—provided that the institutional context creates incentives for the information source to be perceived as knowledgeable and trustworthy.

The essential contribution of the book then is that within the confines of existing democratic institutions and practice, Lupia and McCubbins show we live in a coherent equilibrium: our institutions have evolved to compensate for citizens’ minimal attention. This is good and we can say, scientifically, that the contemporary version of mass self-government has

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an internal normative justification: democratic citizens who lack information can still make reasoned choices; hence, self-government is—or at least has the prospect of being—rational and coherent. The normative implications were and remain substantial given that—certainly in the 1980s through the 1990s—the canonical treatments of institutions regulating voting decisions (e.g., Riker 1988) and legislative choices (e.g., Shepsle and Weingast 1981) viewed the role of institutions as creating an arbitrary ordering out of incoherent aggregate preferences.

Drawing on inspiration from Dewey's (1905) democratic pragmatism, we could imagine political scientists reorienting our view of science to move beyond realism and explaining current practices, including new methods for *translational research* that recommends new practices under novel sets of institutional constraints. In particular, if citizens counterfactually are given more opportunities to substantively engage one another and elected officials, could institutions be designed that can help them rise to the challenge? And should they?

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#### TRANSLATIONAL SCIENCE AND (DELIBERATIVE) DEMOCRATIC ASPIRATIONS

To say that the current state of affairs is coherent, however, is not to say that it is desirable or cannot be improved. And so it is worth pointing out that in rooting the book in everyday scientific realism, Lupia and McCubbins missed the opportunity to consider how and to what extent alternative democratic institutions might *enhance* citizens' capacities even more under a broader and counterfactual definition of democracy. Indeed, in chapter 1, footnote 2, the authors specifically state that they defer judgment on whether democracy *should* be more than choices between alternatives (Lupia and McCubbins 1998, 2). This too, of course, is a reflection of the time in which the book was written because counterfactual approaches to science were not as prevalent then as they are today (e.g., Pearl 2000).

Whereas democracy in current practice amounts to choices between alternatives (e.g., candidates and PACs), for most citizens, democracy—as a concept—need not be so narrowly defined. Citizens' lack of knowledge and thin participation are products of current institutional arrangements that channel these activities—institutions that have evolved over time in response to the increased scale of our republic and the complexity of modern policy making. In this context, a system that asks so little of citizens reasonably leads them to feel disconnected from their representative government. It also leads them to appropriately question whether more robust participation can be meaningful in an era of elite-driven partisan warfare and corporate dark money—and whether investing their attention, effort, and hard-earned income in democratic politics is ever worthwhile. That is, even though Lupia and McCubbins demonstrate it is relatively easy for citizens to make reasonable choices around election time, it does not mean that they find making those choices fulfilling or worthwhile.

The current state of affairs is like this but need not be: it is possible to conceive of better institutions if we are willing to entertain a broader counterfactual vision for democracy.

*The Democratic Dilemma* does not say. However, the book seems to slip back and forth between language stating that the current system does not give citizens *incentives* to exert the effort to gain more thorough information and language suggesting that citizens do not have the capacity to gain detailed firsthand knowledge in the first place. When the authors state “[w]e concede people lack political information,” it is not clear which is their view. That is, the book is ambiguous about whether citizens' capacity to gain more extensive knowledge simply remains dormant under current arrangements or simply is absent. Of course, for purposes of the book's argument, which of these two views is true does not matter. This is the case because under everyday realism, the proposition that citizens choose not to exercise the capacity to gain knowledge and that they lack that capacity in the first place are observationally equivalent within the status quo.

If we take the status quo mass democracy and its current institutions as arrangements that are coextensive with the very definition of democracy, then the difference between these two views does not matter. As a result, the idea that citizens would behave differently and engage more substantively and with more attention and effort if given a different set of opportunities comes across as inconsistent with the realistic scientific view—that is, as unscientific—and political scientists steeped in this perspective dismiss the idea entirely (e.g., Hibbing and Theiss-Morse 2002).

However, because the status quo does not provide more robust opportunities, the actual capacities of citizens remain a counterfactual; hence, the current arrangements provide no evidence to confirm or deny whether citizens have the capacity to participate with more effort and thought. And so it is worthwhile to press the question: Can translational science create a path forward to change the current equilibrium and to lead democracy to better approximate normative ideals, such as to enhance deliberative democracy (Cohen 1989; Gutmann and Thompson 2004) or to create substantive connections between citizens and representative government

(Neblo, Esterling, and Lazer 2018), which in turn can enhance citizen learning, engagement, trust, and perceptions of legitimacy?

Given its realist roots, the book does not offer much guidance or describe pathways to translational research. Indeed, in the section entitled “Unenlightening Democratic Institutions,” the authors appear to dismiss the possibility that democracy can be reformed to enable more substantive engagement among citizens in the form of *deliberative* institutions—that is, a set of arrangements that seek to engage citizens in reason-based, constructive communication with one another and with elected officials. The authors state (1998, 227): “The mere construction of a deliberative setting does not guarantee that the cream of the collective’s knowledge will rise to the top and spread evenly across the group.” Foreclosing the prospect for deliberation is indeed consistent with a description of the current institutional arrangements of mass democracy (Sanders 1997) and therefore with an expectation that citizens will not have an interest in a more robust engagement with politics.

Subsequent to the book’s publication, however, an expanding literature on empirical deliberation has emerged (Neblo 2015) that investigates alternative institutional arrangements purposefully designed to promote reasoned interactions among citizens, where—under conditions of equality—discussants openly exchange reasons for their views that are warranted by high-quality information. Many of these studies focus on deliberative mini-publics (Fishkin 2018) that reveal that the counterfactual can approximate normative ideals; however, mini-public settings typically have a tenuous fit with existing arrangements. Other studies focus on field experiments connected to ordinary politics, such as Broockman and Kalla’s (2016) finding that conversations between voters and canvassers can be designed to evoke cognitively effortful or “System 2” (Kahneman 2012) reasoning even on difficult topics.

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My collaborators and I aspire to translational research through deliberative field experiments—for example, examining the counterfactual of what citizen capacity looks like under alternative, deliberative arrangements when citizens have the opportunity to interact with elected officials (Neblo et al. 2010; Neblo, Esterling, and Lazer 2018). Much of our research focuses on carefully designed online town halls in which members of the US Congress discuss complex policy topics with representative samples of their constituents. We demonstrate that it is possible to build new, counterfactual communication channels to enhance substantive

communication between elected officials and their constituents, which enables broader and more robust citizen participation in direct, informed, and constructive conversations on policy. Among other things, we show that when given meaningful opportunities to participate under these different institutional arrangements, citizens from all backgrounds exercise their normally dormant capacity to learn about policy and to engage constructively and extensively with one another and their representatives on the complex nuances of policy.

Furthermore, we show that our institutional design enables survey research to identify and measure that capacity by administering a political-knowledge survey when citizens have a specific reason to be knowledgeable on a topic within a designed field experiment. In this view, much of the received survey research findings showing how little citizens know are due simply to a methodological flaw, that random sampled surveys simply catch citizens off guard, asking them political-knowledge questions at a moment in time when they have no reason to know the answers to those questions (Esterling, Neblo, and Lazer 2011). Such survey evidence is simply not dispositive in evaluating citizens’ capacity for gaining knowledge, and hence cannot serve as a guide for deciding whether institutions should be designed to merely compensate for our frailties or to challenge us to become more engaged and thoughtful participants in self-government.

By the argument of *The Democratic Dilemma*—and within the conception of democracy that motivates the argument—the marginal gains in information that we observe among citizen-participants in our research make little material difference in the typical case in which the information might reinforce a choice they would have made anyway (e.g., under the limited information to which they are exposed via current institutions). There is much more to democracy than making informed choices among alternatives, however.

Under counterfactual deliberative institutions, we can increase not only knowledge but also citizen engagement, trust, efficacy, and participation—all of which are important aspects of democracy that the book sets aside and all of which are essential to a fuller conception of democracy and its justification.

#### THE PATH FORWARD

Conceptually, the equilibrium under alternative, well-designed *deliberative* democratic arrangements is strikingly different from the current set of arrangements. And so rather

than confining our conception of democratic government to current arrangements—irrespective of how coherent and defensible those might be—we can envision an alternate version of democratic institutions in which a cross section of citizens is motivated to gain substantial knowledge about specific details of policy alternatives and constructively engage with elected officials—and, in turn, invest representative government with greater trust and legitimacy. Then, going forward, if political science can convince elected officials to invest in this new communicative architecture of representative government, it is possible that they will have good reason to value citizen input more highly and to create different incentives for a new—and, for now, only counterfactual—equilibrium of even more robust citizen knowledge and engagement.

#### ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This article largely reflects what I have learned from ongoing conversations with my long-time collaborators: Michael Neblo, David Lazer, William Minozzi, Ryan Kennedy, Claire Abernathy, and Amy Lee. Many thanks to Jamie Druckman for his helpful comments. ■

#### NOTE

1. The argument comes from a larger project described in Neblo et al. (2017) and Neblo, Esterling, and Lazer (2018), which combines normative aspirations with the methodological constraints of causal inference.

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