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If Democracy is a Habit, How Might Citizens Practice It?

John B. Min, College of Southern Nevada, John.min@csn.edu

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The rise of authoritarianism, fascism, and illiberalism are all contributing factors to the malaise of the dark times of democracy. Many books written on this topic share a common theme. Whether one argues that democracy is resilient or democracy rests on a shaky foundation, their arguments are essentially premised on the idea that democracy is as strong as its institutions and laws. Melvin Rogers (2018) argues that democracy is primarily about habits and dispositions of citizens (or what he calls “culture”) rather than a set of institutions or the rule of law. After all, what is democracy other than the people that it constitutes?

To make this argument, Rogers appeals to John Dewey’s philosophy of democracy, which places the cultural dimension of democracy squarely where it belongs, in the hearts and minds of the ordinary people. Dewey had the fundamental belief in the intelligent conduct of ordinary people, reflexivity of human institutions, and vibrant functioning of civil society—or what he calls the “democratic faith.” Thus, Rogers wants to take Dewey’s radical advice more seriously than the current flurry of the “crisis of democracy” literature. Rogers argues, the opposite is true: democracy is as strong as its people.

On the Habits of Citizenship

I agree with Rogers that democracy is as strong as its people whose habits of citizenship are practiced. The question is, how? Dewey offered education and economics as the concrete steps to realize the aspirational ideals. Dewey was keenly aware that external mechanisms reinforce and complete the cycle of education or economy or democracy. This is partly due to his scientific outlook on organism-nature interactions and corresponding instrumentalist philosophy; partly due to his keen observation of human nature and her conduct. Thus, Dewey offered education as the ideal space of *praxis*. He founded the Laboratory School during his tenure at the University of Chicago, where students practiced how to become better democratic citizens. Education that focuses on the student’s development and growth as an agent does not merely entail learning mathematics, reading, and science. The learning should take place in the context of cooperation, problem-solving, and mutual respect. In short, the habits of democratic citizenship. Moreover, Dewey was committed to the transformation of economic institutions, which is evidenced by his direct involvement with the Hull settlement house. These two concrete proposals suggest that *democracy is a habit and disposition citizens ought to practice through concrete institutions*.

When Dewey suggests that democracy is a habit that must be practiced through concrete institutions, he draws on philosophers as diverse as Aristotle and G. W. F. Hegel. Hegel argued that all norms and ideals must be mediated through concrete institutions of family, civil society, and ethical life. In some sense, Hegel’s philosophy of right is an extension of Aristotle’s insight that the development of virtues (*arete*) requires external resources. For instance, Aristotle argues that developing virtues requires one’s soul to be in a dispositional state. If this dispositional state is to be exercised, then it requires external goods, such as money. A good illustration of this comes from Alasdair MacIntyre’s virtue ethics. He talks about chess playing. A child will not want to play chess in the beginning unless he is motivated by an external reward like candy. Once the child’s character forms as a result of

playing chess, she will come to appreciate the activity of playing chess and learns that the joy of chess is an end.

On the Practice of Democratic Citizenship

This philosophical idea can be found in thinking about accounting fraud. In their classical discussion of fraud, Albrecht et al. (2012) articulate financial pressure, rationalization, and opportunity as the three necessary components of fraud. First, pressure implies that one has financial reasons to commit fraud. Second, rationalization occurs when one falsely justifies one's actions. Third, opportunity implies real opportunity to commit fraud. It is commonly agreed that the opportunity to commit fraud is the most important factor (Albrecht et al. 2012). Thus, accounting theorists argue in favor of mechanisms of internal and external control activities within a company, such as regular audits, to minimize opportunities for fraud.

So, what kind of mechanisms are necessary for democratic citizenship? Besides educational institutions, a hallmark of any democratic citizenship, I propose deliberative institutions. Deliberative institutions are halfway spaces between formal decision-making bodies and the informal public sphere. These institutions make possible many democratic innovations in the United States and around the world. One example of this is the mini-publics, which harkens back to mini-populace a concept coined by Robert Dahl. For example, deliberative polling is a mechanism by which randomly selected participants are polled pre-and-post deliberation. Another example is participatory budgeting where citizens are empowered to decide on the city's budget. These institutions promise democratic renewal and innovations.

There are reasons to be less than sanguine about the prospects of deliberative institutions. Much is said about citizen competence (or the abysmal lack of it). The history of political philosophy is not short of such critics of democracy from Plato and Aristotle to Walter Lippmann and Joseph Schumpeter. Citizens have been maligned for having "low political knowledge about even the most basic things." They are right. However, that is only a partial story. Their conclusions about low political knowledge are based on survey results, before deliberation. Moreover, a more complex picture emerges when we study mini-publics. Given the right conditions, citizens can process complex information, make preferential changes, make reasoned decisions, and change one's minds (Dryzek et al. 2019). This is not an illusion; this is also the reality as we know it.

Much is also made of group polarization, not only polarization among party and ideological lines but also group polarization. The law of group polarization captures a statistical fact that likeminded individuals talking to one another leads to having more extreme positions. Talisse calls the more "extreme version of ourselves" (Talisse 2019). This is true. However, this is again only a partial story. The more complex picture is that group polarization can be reduced by increasing the diversity in group composition, the inclusion of different opinions and interests that elicits empathy (Chappell 2011; Morrell 2014).

On the Renewal of Democratic Citizenship

It would be wrong to infer that institutions are enough to cure all ills of democracy. That would be akin to “magical thinking.” Moreover, it would be wrong to infer that people can cure all ills of democracy. That would also be “magical thinking.” If we take Rogers’ point seriously—that citizens should develop habits of democracy and practice it—and my suggestion—developing habits requires external mechanisms—then we ought to take Dewey’s points seriously. The challenge then is to go about developing the habits and dispositions and concrete institutions to practice it. That is the task of democracy for all of us.

Of course, many will malign the task of democracy. But what is the alternative? The fundamental belief that ordinary people are unintelligent and “stoops down to infantile level”; self-interested and motivated by greed and distrust; pathological functioning of civil society occupied by atomistic individuals fending for their life; diseased public sphere no longer capable of reflexive reawakening?

We must make choices. The choice is not merely political, economic, nor technological. The fundamental choice is whether we will further the task of democracy or not.

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