

The Reformation of Democracy: Issue I

One of the most historic achievements in the foundations of political philosophy is the ideology behind democracy, most commonly attributed to the Ancient Greek philosophers (from *dēmokratia*; *dēmos* meaning 'the people' and *kratia* meaning 'power'). However, in Book Six of Plato's *Republic*, Plato describes Socrates as an ardent dissident of democracy. Plato describes a conversation between Socrates and Adeimantus where he proposes 'If you were heading out on a journey by sea', asks Socrates, 'who would you ideally want deciding who was in charge of the vessel? Just anyone or people educated in the rules and demands of seafaring?'. 'The latter of course', says Adeimantus, 'so why then', responds Socrates, 'do we keep thinking that any old person should be fit to judge who should be a ruler of a country?'. In the end, Socrates was right to be troubled by democracy. He was put to trial in 39 BC for the supposed corruption of the youth in Athens by his "radical ideas", and a jury of 500 Athenians convicted him and promptly sentenced him to death. Although Socrates was not in favour of a few experts deciding matters of national interest, he was right in expressing concern of an apathetic electorate influenced by populism, identity politics and demagoguery.

Before the Brexit vote in 2016, Mark Carney, then Governor of the Bank of England, issued a statement predicting a slowing rate of growth in national output if Britons chose to leave the European Union. Economic uncertainty to any degree is one of the primary factors in negatively affecting GDP growth; a principle taught in any introductory macroeconomics course. It was an apolitical statement and entirely constitutionally permissible as it was not based on a partisan electoral manifesto but rather a macroeconomic analysis of the potential impacts of a referendum result. Mark Carney, who was also responsible for tremendous work while at the helm of the Bank of Canada in mitigating the damages of the 2008 Financial Crisis, was called for a hearing, brutally embarrassed, chastised and ultimately dismissed by Conservative

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MP Jacob Rees-Mogg, and later a pro-Brexit cabinet member of the Conservative party, Michael Gove, even went far enough to say that “We have had enough of experts in this country”. The day after the referendum, an interview showed a voter struck when she learned that she had voted *for Brexit* when in fact she wanted the United Kingdom to *remain* in the European Union. Google’s search trends showed a massive spike in questions such as “what is eu” and “what is Brexit” *late on the day* of the referendum vote. A leading message (“We spend 350 million pounds on the EU per week, why not put it towards the national healthcare service?”) sponsored by pro-Brexit campaigner Boris Johnson throughout his campaign was immediately renounced. Nigel Farage, the leader of the United Kingdom Independence Party, who was a staunch opposer of the European Union, resigned immediately after the vote saying that he had accomplished his mission of getting Britain out of the EU. David Cameron who had arrogantly promised a referendum to help his re-election in 2015 resigned after the vote, and Theresa May, who had campaigned to **remain** was elected instead. Failed negotiations, repetitive cabinet restructurings and resignations, votes of no confidence, a snap election which led to the conservatives losing their parliamentary majority led to Theresa May’s resignation and the recent election of Boris Johnson. Even after all this, the United Kingdom is still no closer to striking a deal with the European Union, which will ultimately lead to their complete “hard” exit in October 2019. To say that this was an astonishing failure of democracy in one of the world’s significant superpowers and bastions of liberalism would be an understatement in every sense of the word. The foremost reason for this goes back to Socrates’ assessment that the electorate is incapable of reading beyond the demagogue.

Some, in today’s time, recognise these threats to democracy but blame other factors for its perpetuation. They would say that voting systems and institutions such as the first-past-the-post, electoral colleges, gerrymandering practices, lobbying, the corrupted mass media are inconducive to a prosperous and genuine democracy.

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While it is *true* that these are all contributing factors to a flawed democracy (will be addressed in further issues), the critical point is that an electorate must be well-informed and more importantly have the necessary intellectual freedom and vitality to gain the *right* to vote. The millennium-old argument is that people will suffer the consequences if they do not abide by those principles, but it would be most disastrous to allow people to keep cyclically damaging their and future generations' lives as punishment for their irresponsibility and apathy. The quintessential point of democracy does not follow the aggregation principle; every individual vote counts and each vote should be taken with serious and legitimate consideration. Only then does the tree of democracy bear fruit and its branches can begin to heal.

However, it is impossible to be entirely impartial to demagogue. A genuinely democratic state has the responsibility to ensure its mitigation and encourage voters who desire to participate in the political process. A survey conducted by the Woodrow Wilson National Fellowship Foundation with the research firm Lincoln Park Strategies sampled 1,000 American adults and showed that only 36 per cent could pass the basic naturalisation test consisting of essential dates, civics questions and current events. Only 13 per cent knew when the US Constitution was written, and 24 per cent of respondents knew what Benjamin Franklin was known for doing. More than half (60 per cent) of those surveyed did not know which countries the US fought against in World War II. Fifty-seven per cent did not know how many justices are on the Supreme Court, despite the survey being conducted during Brett Kavanaugh's hearings.

Furthermore, a survey conducted by the Spanish Centro de Investigaciones Sociológicas in 2014 casts serious doubt on the competence of the European voter. The majority of respondents voted for the European Parliament without informed political knowledge of European issues: 58.6 per cent of respondents recognised that their vote was mainly influenced by "the current political situation in Spain," and "issues relating to the European Union and the European Parliament" influenced the

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vote of only 13.7 per cent of the respondents. Furthermore, 56.4 per cent of the respondents declared that they had never or seldom read the political and electoral information available in newspapers, and 92.6 per cent said they never searched for information about the election on the internet. Despite the evident political disengagement, 72.6 per cent admitted that the EU's decisions affect the life of the Spanish. Hardly illustrative of an apt electorate.

The two solutions to address this problem are a) improving civics education in the school curriculum and b) requiring citizens to pass a competency test during voter registration.

The Brookings Institute defines a high-quality civics education as providing students with an understanding of how democratic processes work, as well as how to engage in these processes. Thus, it includes opportunities for students to engage in activities within the classroom that model what democratic processes look like, as well as opportunities to participate in the civic life of their communities and learn from this participation as a regular part of their coursework. A 2016 survey by the Annenberg Public Policy Center found that only 23 per cent of eighth-graders performed at or above the proficient level on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) civics exam, and achievement levels have virtually stagnated since 1998 in America. Fewer than half of the nation's eighth-graders knew the purpose of the Bill of Rights and only one-quarter of high school seniors could name a power granted to Congress by the Constitution. In Europe, GHK looked into national framework curricula of the 27 Member States from primary to upper secondary education. The study found that little references are made on what is the impact of the EU on their life and how they can engage in the democratic process despite students showing interest. Many teachers do not receive any particular initial education itself, and there are a few examples of in-service training and continuing education along with their career. The European Commission said that the lack of knowledge on the Union was quite impressive. Not only does early and comprehensive civics education stimulates a

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young mind to think about society and one's duty towards it, but it also provides invaluable knowledge on citizens' rights and limitations of government, empowering and creating proactive voters. Studies by the Brookings Institute and the European Commission show that the best way to teach early age students about civics is to simulate participation in civic events through community service and engagement and discourse or re-enactments of local civic affairs. This solution also addresses the problem with *non-voters*. Studies show that these people are intimidated by the political systems and feel as though their vote will not make a difference, coupled with their limited knowledge about current events. A civics course would demonstrate the ease of voting and privacy afforded to citizens during voting as well as assert the principle that in most election cycles the difference is not by a vote or two, but rather everybody voting for their and the nations' interests are what propels the big democratic machine to function.

The latter solution would be a simple method of ensuring the continuation of a basic level of interest, diligence and understanding of the political process and status quo following the scholastic introduction. In most western countries, naturalisation tests are conducted to test immigrants' fidelity to and knowledge of the state and often grants them additional rights such as being able to buy a property and prolonged stay. Most people native to the country are unable to pass this facile examination, and yet have all these rights, including the right to vote. It is critical to introduce this examination for initial voter registration and renew it every few election cycles. The principal arguments that critics have against this proposal are the prospect of socioeconomic disenfranchisement and a moral betrayal of the fundamental right to vote. Firstly, while it is true that in some countries not all people have access to the internet, the World Internet Usage statistics show that 88.1% of the populations of North America and Europe are *active internet users*, projecting a 94% rate by 2023. Moreover, western countries have exceptional access to television, radio and public libraries offering computer usage. If this was not enough, immigration offices and

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public libraries offer free brochures and books to would-be permanent citizens to study and pass the naturalisation test, the same can be offered at government buildings and institutions. Despite this availability, if people still choose not to learn, then they are forfeiting their right to vote and are forced to live with the consequences of other people's interests. If they feel as though they are misrepresented, they will study and once again gain the right to vote. The belief that this test would disenfranchise more impoverished people would be a massive discredit to their will to be actively engaged in society and elect folks who work towards alleviating their poverty. Secondly, about the fundamental right to vote: Felons are rejected the right to vote because their decisions would be baseless and with potential malice. It can be argued that a voter, without the necessary level of proficiency, is being equally malicious towards the democratic process. The state does not allow people to make decisions about their health and well-being without proper consultation through the medical system, or decisions about their finances without consulting governmental or financial institutions, so why then, can a decision which affects every aspect of one's life be benevolently made without the proper expertise on the subject?

Conclusively, every electoral cycle, a voter makes decisions which have domestic and international geopolitical consequences with generational outcomes. Knowledge, licenses/certificates and competency tests dictate everything from one's ability to drive to start a business, and surely the same principle should apply towards electing a member of parliament, congressmen/congresswomen or head of state. Ultimately, there is nothing wrong about being ignorant about politics; but it is perverse to inflict the repercussions of that ignorance on the rest of society.