Democracy Despite Itself: Why a System That Shouldn’t Work at All Works So Well


Reviewed by Catherine A. Lemmer

It's an election year, and once again many people long for a swift end to the negative campaign ads, voter-fraud and gerrymandering allegations, and sound-bite yapping of political pundits. In the midst of that longing, we often wonder if this governmental system truly represents the people's wishes. In Democracy Despite Itself, Mike Edwards and Danny Oppenheimer attempt to make sense of our system by investigating this basic paradox: “If voters are irrational and uninformed, and the election process flawed, why is democracy successful?”

Part I details many facets of voter irrationality. The authors note that voters are inherently biased, uninformed about major issues, unaware of how little they know, and not particularly good at getting needed information or sorting through biased media and campaign reports.

Ignorance is just the beginning. Voters are constantly influenced by environmental factors. Physical appearance, language, and word choice often play a greater role in influencing voters than does the content of a politician's platform.

Additionally, “the will of the people – already irrational and uninformed – can be further distorted by the electoral process.” The authors review the effect of gerrymandering, incumbency advantage, ballot form and structure, primaries, voting days and locations, and state election officials’ roles. For example, voters whose polling place is in a school are more likely to vote for a school referendum. And the authors state their belief that it was absurd for Katherine Harris, then Florida secretary of state, to be placed in the role of deciding vote recounting issues during the 2000 election.

The authors conclude part I by comparing democracy and The Price is Right to illustrate communication problems inherent in a democracy. Candidates and elected officials rely on polling to try to understand what people really want. Unfortunately, polling is difficult to administer, and the results are difficult to interpret. Voters' irrationality is compounded by both biased electoral processes and a lack of communication between the elected and the electorate.

Part II attempts to prove that democracy nevertheless still works, albeit not perfectly. It works, the authors argue, because democracies are more likely to use the country's resources to benefit citizens, grant liberties, foster peace, effectively transfer power, and respond to crises.
Perhaps more important, the ability to vote in regular elections that are perceived to be fair creates a motivated and invested populace.

Of particular interest in part II is the authors’ discussion of how heuristics and other adaptive mental shortcuts help voters make better decisions. The authors also argue that the opinions of large groups of people tend to be more stable as they aggregate knowledge and mitigate the extremes. This creates an environment in which it is difficult to predict which issue will generate a voter response. As a result, politicians tend to consider the likely possible voter reaction to almost every action. Add in that democracies, unlike other governmental forms, have powerful and legitimate veto players and the power to punish wayward politicians, and the result is that democracy works.

Oppenheimer and Edwards conclude by suggesting that even though democracy works, some things could be done to make it work better. Individual voters can acknowledge their ignorance and bias and can research the issues that matter. Voters also should consider diverse opinions, demand plain language in governmental documents, and support fair, unbiased reporting. In other words, voters must actively participate. The nation can further strengthen its democratic system by 1) ending the fad of conducting large-scale investigations of the previous administration, 2) designing processes that better promote the practice and perception of fairness in elections, and 3) eliminating the Electoral College.

Each chapter is well documented, and the book’s overall tone renders the content accessible and enjoyable. For anyone looking to make sense of a democratic system, Democracy Despite Itself is an interesting and clever read.