

In a democracy, do the votes of the unlettered tend to protect a country against the bad ideas of the lettered or do the votes of the lettered tend to protect a country against the bad ideas of the unlettered?

Introduction

Edmund Burke celebrated the wisdom of “unlettered men,” suggesting that ordinary citizens, without a formal education, possess a kind of grounded judgment that educated elites lack (Burke 1790). In modern democracies, this raises a fundamental question of who truly protects a country from dangerous ideas? The lettered elite or the unlettered masses? The need to answer this question has never been more pressing as clear lines between political divisions are drawn and populist movements strain the tension between the lettered and unlettered.

This essay explores that tension through the lens of pluralist theory, which values the sharing of political power among diverse groups (Dahl, 1989), and Dani Rodrik’s globalization paradox, to reveal the source of the conflict between the desires of the elites and the working class. It will explore two pivotal moments in recent democratic history, them being the Brexit referendum and the 2016 U.S. election. These events analysed through the aforementioned theories exposed deep divides between educated elites and working-class voters, and raised questions about whose voice should guide national decisions.

Consequently, this essay argues that both lettered and unlettered voters are capable of protecting a country from each other’s bad ideas, rather than claim one group is objectively wiser than the other. It is only through a pluralist system, where opinions check and balance each-other, that democracies can be resilient and protect the countries that employ it in their political systems.

Pluralist Theory and Rodrik’s Globalization Paradox

To understand the role of the lettered and unlettered in safeguarding democracy, pluralist theory and Rodrik’s globalization paradox are necessary to view how the two sides’ opinions balance each other.

Pluralist theory argues that distributed political power among many competing groups rather than concentrated in the hands of a single elite enables democracy to function at its best. According to political theorist Robert Dahl, pluralism ensures that diverse interests, including those of less-educated or marginalized citizens, are represented in the policy-making process (Dahl, 1989). It emphasizes a perfect democracy where no single class holds a monopoly in decision-making, as each class holds their own selfish ideas that aim to benefit themselves, often at the expense of the other. Under this model, both the lettered and unlettered are essential to a functioning democracy. Pluralism also challenges the assumption that education automatically gives one superior political wisdom; it values experience and local knowledge alongside education.

Dani Rodrik's globalization paradox complicates this picture as he argues a trilemma where democracy, national sovereignty, and economic globalization cannot all coexist fully, and nations can only pick two (Rodrik, 2011). Democracy is a necessary choice for countries that enable voting rights for both the lettered and unlettered, which is the case for the purpose of this essay. Consequently, when countries embrace globalization through free trade, capital mobility, and transnational agreements, they sideline national control. This paradox creates friction as the globalist policies pushed by educated elites often clash with the desires of working-class populations who experience job losses and wage stagnation as a result of these globalist policies (Rodrik, 2011).

It is inevitable for a country to consist of a population divided by education. Thus, there will always be those who are lettered and those who are unlettered. This is where Dani Rodrik's globalization paradox connects back to pluralist theory, as the ambitions of the lettered elites for globalization frequently come into conflict with the desires of the unlettered who prioritize local jobs. These clashes do not represent political dysfunction but rather the importance of pluralism. Pluralist theory maintains that democracy is not about eliminating disagreement but about using it to ensure political progress. It ensures that the voices of both the unlettered and the lettered are heard to maintain balance in policy decisions. Thus, the role of each group is not to dominate but to act as a check on the excessive ideas of each other, and ensure that no single party reaps all the benefits while the other completely suffers. The votes of the unlettered prevent elites from making overly ambitious political decisions, while the votes of the lettered can safeguard countries from unchecked populism. Ultimately, it is this tension between the unlettered and lettered that protects a country. A functioning democracy does not demand that both sides agree, but that both sides are empowered to participate and constrain one another to ensure that decisions reflect the needs of the majority, rather than the minority.

Case Study of Real-World Events

The balancing tension between the lettered and the unlettered is not simply an academic theory; it has played a part in some of the most turbulent moments in democracy of the last decade. From the Brexit referendum, there are recurring battles stemming from Rodrik's globalization paradox when elite visions of globalism contradicted the demands of the common people for national control and stability. In this event, ordinary people felt ignored by elites, and elites didn't adjust or listen as the pluralism that makes democracy stable collapsed. On the contrary, the 2020 U.S. presidential election demonstrated an inverse dynamic, where the lettered mobilized to protect America from what they viewed as the politically unstable effects of unchecked populism under Donald Trump (Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018). Together, they come together to show how both the lettered and unlettered have the potential to protect a country from each other's selfish ideas.

The 2016 Brexit referendum revealed the divide between Britain's educated elites and its working-class citizens. Political, academic, and business leaders overwhelmingly supported remaining in the European Union, and stated that a departure from it would cause economic catastrophe. Experts such as economists, policy analysts, and business leaders also agreed by emphasizing the benefits of trade and investment from remaining (Goodwin & Heath, 2016). However, the unlettered who were often working-class individuals in deindustrialized towns

voted to leave the European Union as they argued staying would cause a loss of national sovereignty, immigration, and national identity. They felt this way as according to Rodrik's Globalization Paradox, the European Union's model of deep economic integration between its member states increasingly required Britain to sacrifice national control (Rodrik, 2011). For many voters, remaining in the EU was technocratic in nature as it was dominated by expert-driven decision-making with minimal democratic input. This resulted in policies that often failed to address the material concerns of working-class communities, such as job insecurity, regional inequality, and declining public services.

For example, a 10 percentage point increase in the share of migrant workers in semi- and unskilled service occupations was associated with a 1.88% decline in wages for UK-born low-skilled workers (Nickell & Saleheen, 2015). This decline was a direct consequence of the European Union's freedom of movement policy, which allowed citizens of all member states in it to work in the UK without restriction. Although it was intended to support labor mobility and economic growth, it actually increased the supply of low-skilled labor in sectors where many working-class Britons were employed, which put pressure on lowering their wages and employment opportunities. Thus, rather than improving economic conditions, the UK's involvement in the EU policy intensified job competition and undermined earnings in communities that were already struggling from deindustrialization. This outcome illustrates how elite-driven and technocratic policies developed with little input from those most affected produced real harm to the working-class populations, which ultimately incited their overwhelming vote to leave the EU (Goodwin & Heath, 2016).

From a pluralist perspective, the vote to leave was not simply an expression of dissatisfaction, but an act of protecting the country from overly aspirational elitist views. This is a perfect example of Pluralist Theory's assertion that a healthy democracy relies on a constant balancing of interests between different groups in society, to prevent any single elite or institution from holding unchecked power (Dahl, 1989). In this context, the unlettered who have traditionally been excluded from elite policymaking exercised their voice in politics to challenge a system they believed no longer helped them. Their vote to leave the EU disrupted technocratic decisions that sidelined working-class concerns in favor of globalization and market efficiency at the expense of the lower class. This also echoes Edmund Burke's belief in the wisdom of unlettered men, as their lived experience and local knowledge served as a counterweight to expert-driven elitist policies.

Based on the events of the Brexit referendum, one might now argue that the votes of the unlettered protect a country from the votes of the lettered, however that is not always the case for other votes in history such as the 2020 US Presidential Election. This event is opposite in nature to the Brexit referendum, and similar only in the way that it was also a balancing act. It marked a shift in the nation's political trajectory, where Biden's victory represented a reassertion of the lettered class following the four years of Donald Trump's populist presidency that were rooted in the unlettered's frustration of globalization and elitist ideas (Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018). His campaign was centered on restoring democratic norms, upholding public health in context to the Covid-19 Pandemic, and reaffirming trust in expert-led governance while being backed by academics, scientists, policy experts, and institutional leaders. Biden's presidency was an example of the Globalization Paradox at play, as it moved away from populist ideas of national

sovereignty, and leaned towards stability, rationality, and globalization. Thus, this shows how while Trump had used the frustrations of the unlettered who felt excluded from elite decision-making to win his presidency, Biden won his by symbolizing the protective force of lettered people to preserve the country's necessary foundational structures.

This outcome reinforces the central argument of how both the lettered and the unlettered can act as forces of protection within a democracy. In this case, rather than the unlettered protecting against ideas of the lettered, Biden's election demonstrated how the elites can mobilize to restore democratic norms and expert-led governance in moments of political breakdown when the ideas of the unlettered become excessive. This protection of democracy aligns with pluralist theory's core idea, which is that democracy thrives when power is contested by multiple groups rather than concentrated in a single elite. Thus, in this context Biden's victory does not represent unchecked elitism, but rather how pluralist theory applies itself into the real world by ensuring diverse interests are represented in the policy-making process.

Taken together, the Brexit Referendum and the 2020 US Presidential Election demonstrate that a healthy democracy does not exist by placing a higher emphasis on the opinions of one group over the other. The vote to leave the EU in the Brexit referendum was a powerful demonstration of the unlettered pushing back against the overly ambitious ideas of globalization from the lettered, which had ignored their economic concerns. Conversely, the 2020 U.S. election revealed the limits of populist ideas and the extent to which the ideas of the unlettered can lead a country. Thus, this shows how democracy relies on ensuring that both parties have a say in the political trajectory of a country, and can respond when each other's ideas become overdone.

Conclusion

Both the Brexit referendum and the 2020 U.S. presidential election exemplify the dynamic interplay between the lettered and unlettered in safeguarding democracy. Together, these events reveal that a functioning democracy requires the voice of the unlettered to check the overly ambitions of the lettered, who serve to prevent populism from descending a country into chaos. This dynamic is an integral part of democracy, and going back to how Edmund Burke celebrated the wisdom of "unlettered men," the insights of the lettered should not be ignored either. Each group plays a vital role in protecting the nation from the excesses of the other.

Therefore, a functioning democratic country where both the lettered and unlettered can vote is only able to protect itself if the voices of each are weighed equally, as the ideas of one protect a country against the bad ideas of the other.

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