

Antonio Carmona Báez ~ After Hurricane Maria We Need To Reconstitute

This summer, the Netherlands and the world came to know Puerto Rico through the all-time most popular music video *Despacito*, which received over 3 billion hits on Youtube. But Puerto Rico has never been mentioned in Dutch news as much as it had throughout the last three weeks. First with Hurricane Irma which -besides depopulating smaller islands, nearly destroyed the Dutch and French territory of neighbouring St. Maarten, bringing 600 refugees to Puerto Rican hospitals and shelters. Another thousand refugees arrived from the Virgin Islands. However, this was only a precursor to a deadlier category 4/5 storm system ravaging the smallest island of the Greater Antilles.

Hurricane María pounded the US territory of Puerto Rico, leaving over 3 million people without electricity and clean running water. The hurricanes came and left, but the height of misery is yet to be experienced. Electricity workers claim that 80 percent of the island's electric cables are insalvable, and hospitals are now totally dependent on diesel generators. While thirteen people have been declared dead to date, the death toll is surely to rise, as 70% of the island is incommunicado.

In a sense, the tropical weather systems have brought us, Puerto Ricans in the Caribbean and in the diaspora, closer to realise what we have in common with other islands: our delicate modernity and dependent vulnerability. Through Irma, we have become more aware of our neighbouring St. Maarten. The similarities of our territorial status in relation to the metropolises have also become more apparent. St. Maarten's territorial status within the Kingdom is very similar to Puerto Rico's relationship with the United States; both territories, just like Curaçao, have a Fiscal Control Board (*College Financiële Toezicht*) running local public expenditures from The Hague and from New York. In Puerto Rico and St. Maarten, it is now the military at the airports, running rescue and reconstruction. But the most striking similarities are those found in how our people back home are presented in the media: helpless, thirsty and prone to "looting", ever moreso dependent on the greatness of those governments under which he have been subordinate for a long time.

Go to: <http://curacaochronicle.com/after-hurricane-maria-we-need-to-reconstitute/>

Greece and Economic Recovery: Fake News in Action



Ten years ago, the implosion of Lehman Brothers ignited a financial crisis whose impact and effects were felt virtually across the globe as banks and financial institutions everywhere that were exposed to subprime lending, formed part of a long chain of complicated and interconnected derivatives, and partook freely in Wall

Street shenanigans.

In Europe, the global financial crisis that started in the United States did not reach shore until late 2009, and the first victim was the land that gave birth to democracy and laid the foundations for the emergence of Western civilization.

Enter Greece and an ongoing debt drama, with catastrophically spectacular economic, social, and political ramifications, that has no end in sight.

Indeed, now into its eighth year, Greece remains entirely dependent on international bailouts (three bailouts involving the European Union and the International Monetary Fund have been arranged since 2010), has lost a quarter of its GDP with no realistic expectations of recovering it for decades to come, experiences unemployment levels which have oscillated between a high 27.8 percent (in July 2013) and a low 21.2 percent (in June 2017), and has seen the standard of living decline to 1960s levels.

Worse, Greece's debt-to-GDP ratio has exploded since the start of the bailout programs, rising from 128 percent in 2010 to over 185 percent in 2017, and, with no debt relief in sight, the small Mediterranean nation has become truly a

permanent debt colony inside the world's richest region. In the meantime, a mass exodus of young and educated people has been in motion for several years now (youth unemployment rate in Greece stands currently at 43.3 percent), a process that is bound to have long-term effects on demographic trends and a significant impact on future economic developments.

Nonetheless, the story line advanced these days from Athens, courtesy of a pseudo-leftist government that has not only reneged on every one of its promises to the Greek citizens since coming to power, but has ended up reinforcing the neoliberal agenda of the European Union/International Monetary Fund duo with more perseverance than all previous governments put together, is that the country has "turned page" and that the crisis is now practically over.

Yes, these days, "post-truth" politics, the production and "fake news" and the dissemination of "alternative facts" are not the exclusive domain of the narcissistic megalomaniac with the pseudo-populist agenda occupying the White House. The Syriza/ANEL coalition government in Athens, a mephitic political marriage of sorts between the radical Left and a nationalistic and xenophobic party, has been following closely in the footsteps of Trumpian manipulation of political discourse and extreme populist propaganda surrounded by lies and more empty promises.

First, the actual facts about the broken promises and the continuous lies of and the dissemination of fake news by the Syriza government. For starters, not only did Alexis Tsipras deceive the Greek people by winning the popular vote with passionate pleas that, if elected, he would do away with international bailouts, secure a debt write-off, and put an end to the vicious cycle of debt-austerity-recession-unemployment, but ended up signing a third bailout agreement with the country's international creditors and has even consented to the enforcement of Procrustean economics, which entail additional cuts in excess of five billion euros (about \$6bn), even deeper pension reductions, and the attainment of outrageously high primary surplus targets - well into 2020.

The impact of all these measures will be the equivalent of a surgery that was successful, but the patient died.

Indeed, the country's fiscal affairs have improved and some aspects of economic activity are even showing a slight improvement in 2017 (for example the GDP

expanded by a pitiful 0.5 percent in the second quarter of 2017, although household consumption continued its steady decline, dropping by an additional 0.1 percent, while fixed investment shrunk 4.5 percent) but the majority of people sink ever deeper into poverty and despair.

Nonetheless, the Greek “economic success” story advanced by Tsipras and some of his lackey ministers would have been hilariously funny if it wasn’t such a serious matter. But one couldn’t possibly expect anything else from such an unethical and opportunistic government.

After all, the message of a Greek “economic success” story implies, and in contrast to everything known so far about economic reality, or what Syriza government officials were professing themselves until fairly recently, that austerity and the brutal experiment undertaken on the part of European authorities to convert Greece into a neoliberal laboratory are finally paying off; thanks in large part to the government of Alexis Tsipras in enforcing to the fullest possible extent policies such as blanket privatisation of state-owned assets, sharp cuts in wages and pensions, draconian reductions in public spending, and unrestrained labor market flexibility.

However, the reality of the situation in Greece is that the depression that broke out as early as 2009 has stabilised since late 2014, although the economy took an additional huge dive immediately after Syriza took power in January 2015 and it did not stabilise again until the spring of 2017.

To be sure, back in 2014, the conservative government of Antonis Samaras was also celebrating the “recovery” of the Greek economy on account of having produced a primary surplus thanks to huge taxes and draconian budget cuts and having successfully launched a temporary return to the private credit markets.

Of course, as an opposition party, Syriza made a mockery of the propaganda campaign launched by the Samaras’s government to convince citizens that it had succeeded in putting an end to the crisis.

Yet, for the last year or so, Tsipras’ government had been doing exactly what the Samaras government was doing by virtue of having “accomplished” all of the above tasks.

The problem is that the Greek people, who are stretched to the outer limits with

the imposition of massive tax hikes on everything from income, property, and consumption, while experiencing at the same time mass unemployment, a sharply reduced minimum monthly wage, and never-ending austerity, are not buying the “fake news” of their tieless prime minister.

Unsurprisingly, all latest polls in Greece show that, if elections were held now, Syriza would lose by a big margin. And this piece of news is not surprising because whatever its flaws and limitations, under democracy fraudulent populism, lies, and fake news have an expiration date.

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Truth Or Dare? A Plea For Moderation



*Dick Pels ~ Foto:
Uitgeverij Cossee*

Philosophers who play the game ‘truth or dare’ are bound to recall the celebrated motto *sapere aude* (dare to know, dare to seek the truth) which Immanuel Kant used to capture the essence of the Enlightenment. In his famous essay from 1784, he called upon mankind to release itself from its self-inflicted immaturity in thoughtlessly accepting the authority of tradition and the tutelage of others, by wielding the force of critical reason. Self-emancipation through free public

reasoning, however, required an act of personal courage, of daring to speak 'truth to tradition' and 'truth to power': of using knowledge, evidence, science and facts in challenging the powers that be.

But in our so-called post-truth society, Kant's motto has been dramatically turned inside out, stood on its head, become perverse and cynical. The courage to speak out, to speak the truth, to break taboos, has become a major hallmark of a dominant anti-intellectual and populist Zeitgeist. Rightwing leaders such as Jörg Haider, Filip de Winter, Pim Fortuyn and Marine le Pen have all brandished the slogan: 'We say what you think (but do not dare say)'. *Mut zur Wahrheit* is a poster tekst widely used by the Alternative für Deutschland. Donald Trump's followers particularly like him because he dares to 'speak his mind'.

According to this upside down version of the 'courage of reason', true speaking is transformed into a simple act of daring: of speaking without moderation, without thinking twice, as a raw expression of resentment, anger and frustration, and indulging in extremism, provocation, brutality and abuse. The courage of reason turns into the courage of the bully.

Alt-right writer Milo Yiannopoulos explains: 'Extreme ideas are permitted and even desirable. Anything goes. Rebellion, raising hell and incivility once again become acceptable in public life'. It is the by-now- familiar style of Breitbart, Fox News and Donald Trump, as pioneered in the Netherlands by GeenStijl, PowNews en De Dagelijkse Standaard. All of them seem to have adopted rule #1 of populist propaganda as formulated in Adolf Hitler's *Mein Kampf*: 'Be radical, proclaim your vision as the absolute truth'. A watered-down version of this was presented by Geert Wilders a few years ago in Milan: 'Truth is not located somewhere in the middle. It is on our side, so you better get used to it'. Thierry Baudet, who describes himself as 'one of the most brilliant thinkers in the Netherlands' adopts an equally peremptory tone: 'My opinions are simply facts: I am right and the others are wrong'.

In this context of total politicization, values such as neutrality, objectivity and autonomy are devalued: facts do no longer exist, all that matters is emotion, partiality and political interest.

Whoever wins, is right. Truth is a product of succesful marketing. Winners create their own facts. Lies and 'faking the news' become legitimate political instruments in the hands of those who routinely accuse their opponents of the same. 'Bullshitters' like Trump view truth as a power game: they simply don't

care whether what they say is true or not. Their depreciation of fact-finding, independent research, and hence of experts and professionals, comes with an elevation of the 'People' as the ultimate arbiter of wisdom, truth and justice. *Vox populi vox dei*. 'Ordinary people know better'. Donald Trump says: 'I love the uneducated'. In the populist idiom, People and Truth indeed become freely interchangeable terms: whoever speaks *our* truth we call 'People', and whoever disagrees with us is our enemy (the '*Lügenpresse*', the elite etc.).

Now perhaps I will startle you by saying that I find the knee-jerk response to this populist perversion: which is to revert to the traditional Enlightenment conceptions of truth, objectivity and factuality, to be counterproductive and ineffective. In my view, these have been conclusively overhauled and discredited by the insights of postmodernist philosophy, constructivist sociology and anthropology, and the social studies of science and technology.

In some way or other, these disciplines have all followed up on Friedrich Nietzsche's radical statement that 'There are no facts, but only interpretations'. In this account, facts are not things that objectively exist 'out there' to provide a rockbottom of knowledge; they do not speak for themselves, but instead emerge as the product of collective constructions and hence require framings, contexts, theories, interpretations and values in order to 'speak' their meaning. Otherwise put: there are no facts without spokespersons. Claiming to stand on hard, ineluctable facts often comes down to playing a subtle power game, which is expected to create categorical imperatives. Expressions such as 'it is a fact that', 'the facts of the matter say' often function as simple enforcements of one's own views.

But if facts are 'mere' constructions, and tend to follow the Pied Piper, it would appear that everyone is licensed to create his/her own 'alternative facts' and to adopt private realities.

Does the postmodern disenchantment of reason hence not come with a terrible risk: that of issuing in a tragic sell-out to the 'fact-free' politics of emotion, irrationality and cynicism? In what way might populist politics and its cynical embrace of constructivist philosophy be seen as the bastard child of the postmodern critique of the Enlightenment?

Fortunately, there is an alternative way to escape from this tragic dilemma. If there is no going back to the objective certainties provided by Enlightenment rationalism; if facts (in spite of all fact-checking exercises) will remain essentially

contested and contestable; and if traditional separations between truth and power, science and belief or facts and values do no longer hold, a different divide emerges, which invites different tasks which are more ethical and educational than epistemological in nature. Indeed, the most important distinction which now arises is that between *absolutists* and *moderates* (Max Weber would call them *Gesinnungsethiker* and *Verantwortungsethiker*): between those who claim to be always right and those who concede that truth is inevitably partial, incomplete and dependent on one's perspective, and who therefore remain committed to critical inquiry, opposition and debate. In this latter view, the significance of facts is not so much that they provide a solid foundation of cognitive certainty, but that they offer building bricks for a common world of mutual trust: a reality we may come to agree about, that we can share. Those who simply elevate their opinions into facts are no longer interested in creating such a commonality.

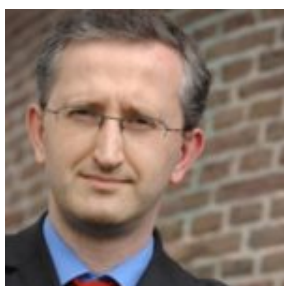
If truth and reality are indeed products of social construction, a moral contrast arises between those who proclaim their construction to be the only thinkable and acceptable one, thereby creating division and enmity and tending towards aggression and violence, and those who remain committed to the construction of shared realities and social peace. While absolutists tend to ignore their opponents (who are seen as enemies, to be humiliated and destroyed) and avoid open and critical debate, moderates adopt a more relativizing (though not relativistic) attitude which admits and welcomes doubt, and which remains willing to subject all perspectives to critical scrutiny. If a God's eye view of the world is out of reach, the solution is not to play God again and absolutize one's own viewpoint, but to 'accumulate different eyes' (to cite another of Nietzsche's sayings): i.e. to organize perspectival pluralism, to create and defend institutional checks and balances, to promote independent media and journalism, autonomous teaching and research, freedom of political opposition and democratic debate: everything that authoritarian populists are currently fighting against.

People may be classified according to many different criteria, subdividing into socio-economic classes, educational strata, age groups, gender divisions etc. etc. But arguably, one of the most enduring divisions is offered by something like the 'social distribution of doubt', which separates those who think they own the sovereign truth from those who are prepared to embrace a modicum of critical

scepticism, who remain interested in taking the other's point of view, and hence remain committed to create a common world of trust. Kant's *sapere aude* had therefore better be retranslated as *dubitare aude*: dare to doubt, pluck up the courage to live with a little more uncertainty.

Dick Pels, sociologist, a freelance political writer and a singer-songwriter

Speech Truth or Dare, September 17th 2017



Joshua Livestro

In preparation for this session I looked at the idea of critical citizenship. Specifically at the question of what are the preconditions for critical citizenship?

I would say there are at least three:

1. procedural: everyone playing by the same rules, and accepting the legitimacy of those rules. I'm thinking here of our constitution, and of the international charters in which our fundamental rights or liberties have been enshrined;
2. moral: everyone accepting the legitimacy of the other as an actor in that debate. Acceptance that life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness is the right of *every* individual. That we believe that *all* men and women are created equal, that we accept and respect the fundamental dignity of each individual;
3. epistemological: everyone accepts that debates may be guided by emotions and/or ideologies, but that they should be grounded in facts. Or at least checked against them.

Is there a crisis in critical citizenship? It's certainly being challenged on all three grounds.

To give one example: American conservative radio talkshow host Charlie Sykes recently did an interview with NPR. He told about how facts seemed to have lost their meaning for some of his listeners. When lushing back against some crackpot conspiracy theory with facts, he was told these facts counted for nothing because sources (NY Times, CNN etc) "had lost legitimacy".

This is a problem: facts matter. If facts lose their meaning, there's no basic standard to which we can appeal to assess political claims. Then any kind of theory can be used to explain reality, even conspiracy theories — which as far as I'm concerned is the lowest form of sociology.

So facts matter. As does morality. It really *is* a problem if a politician treats whole groups of citizens as a suspect class, and tries to strip them of their fundamental rights (wanting to outlaw an entire religion). Or if a politician suggests all society's ills are caused by "the elite", suggesting those who govern the country are engaged in a deliberate secret campaign to ruin the country.

It is equally problematic if a politician calls a democratically elected parliament 'fake', thereby delegitimizing our democratic procedures.

So we have to push back. We have to defend critical citizenship from those who would turn it into something dangerous.

Do I think we can do that? Yes I do. First and foremost by speaking out. As we are doing here. There may be other means, but I'll leave that for the discussion that follows.

Now if this was a political speech, I would end by leading you to sunny uplands where problems melt like snow flakes, and enemies of truth and decency are

defeated through the mere use of words freely spoken.

But this is a philosophical setting, so I'll end not with an exclamation mark but with a question mark. My question then is this. Assuming we all agree on the need for critical citizens, how can we make sure it isn't turned into a destructive force? Do we set limits to the freedom to speculate and criticize — a tempered version of critical citizenship? Or do we look for ways to strengthen our democratic system so that it can withstand even the most outrageous attacks — a setting in concrete of our liberties and our values in a kind of super constitution which no plebiscite could ever overturn? Is that even possible?

Those are my questions, I look forward to hearing your answers.

Columnist NRC Handelsblad, owner/editor of opinion site Jalta.nl

To Make Our Democracy Functional, We Must Confront Economic Inequality



Larry Bartels

The United States is a plutocratic disaster. Extreme levels of inequality and a political system in which elected officials cater primarily, if not exclusively, to the needs and interests of the rich have produced a social order beset with mounting problems and critical challenges that elections alone cannot realistically be expected to address. In this exclusive interview for Truthout, renowned political scientist Larry Bartels, author of the already classic work *Unequal Democracy*, provides a sweeping look at the state of our dysfunctional society.

C.J Polychroniou: In your book Unequal Democracy, you presented mountains of data revealing the seriousness of the problem of inequality in the United States. In your view, what have been the underlying factors for the emergence of a New Gilded Era, and why has the American political system failed to rise to the challenge of addressing the deep problem of inequality?

Larry Bartels: Most affluent democracies have experienced substantial increases in economic inequality over the past 30 or 40 years. In significant part, those increases are attributable to technological change, globalization and increased mobility of capital. ... But different countries have responded to those changes in different ways. Most have mitigated their effects through increased redistribution, making post-tax-and-transfer incomes much less unequal. In the United States, there has been comparatively little redistribution. There have also been political shifts that have exacerbated pre-tax-and-transfer inequality, including deregulation of the financial industry, rules restricting the clout of labor unions and the erosion of the minimum wage.

Broadly, the difference is attributable to the economic ideology of America's political leaders. More specifically, it is attributable to the economic ideology of Republican leaders. My historical analysis of partisan differences in income growth demonstrates that virtually all of the net increase in income inequality since the end of World War II has occurred under Republican presidents; income growth under Democratic presidents has tended to be faster and much more egalitarian.

What is the actual impact or effect of economic inequality on democracy?

We like to think that we can wall off our democratic political system from our capitalist economic system, leaving everyone free to get rich (or poor) but remain politically equal. In practice, however, that turns out to be impossible. Hence, "unequal democracy."

My analysis of the voting behavior of US senators found that they are moderately responsive to the views of affluent constituents but completely ignore the views of low-income constituents. A study by Martin Gilens of policy outcomes likewise found that the probability that any given policy change will actually be adopted is pretty strongly related to the preferences of affluent people but virtually unaffected by the preferences of middle-class people, much less poor people.

Proposed explanations for these remarkable disparities in responsiveness often focus on distinctive features of the US — our permissive system of campaign finance, low rate of unionization, ethos of individualism and so on. But recent work along similar lines in other affluent democracies suggests that they, too, are marked by severe disparities in political influence rooted in economic inequality.

Regardless of their specific political institutions, contexts and cultures, democratic systems seem to be chronically vulnerable to the conversion of economic power into political power.

*In your latest book *Democracy for Realists: Why Elections Do Not Produce Responsive Government* (co-authored with Christopher Achen), the key argument being made is that voting behavior is not rational. Is this something you think applies to all democratic polities, or is it confined to the peculiarities of the American political culture and the flawed nature of American democracy?*

Some of the pitfalls Achen and I described involve the “rationality” of voters, loosely speaking. They have lots of other, more immediate demands on their time and attention, so most don’t invest much in mastering the complexities of politics and government. Is that “irrational”? I don’t think so.

In any case, all of us are subject to the fundamental mental limitations richly documented by psychologists under the rubric of “cognitive biases.” For example, we attach more weight to recent experience than to previous experience, we insist on assessing reward or blame for events that are essentially random, and we tend to find arguments and evidence consistent with our prejudices more persuasive than arguments and evidence that contradict our prejudices.

All of us are similarly limited when it comes to what might be called moral imagination. We know that we should be concerned about the well-being of people who are physically or socially distant, unnamed and “statistical” rather than personally identifiable, but that is very difficult, so we tend to be parochial, short-sighted and more attuned to our own comfort and power than to any impersonal vision of the collective good.

I don’t see any reason to suppose that people in other countries or cultures are less susceptible to these basic human limitations than Americans are. Nor am I aware of any compelling evidence that voters in other democratic systems perform notably better or worse than Americans do, on the whole. Certainly there are significant differences in political institutions and behavior across countries stemming from distinctive histories and economic and social contexts. For example, people in other countries are invariably puzzled by the decentralized system of election administration in the US, which leaves state and local officials remarkably free to manage registration and voting as they see fit. That system

contributes to our unusually low (and class-biased) turnout; but I wouldn't say that it fundamentally alters the nature of American democracy.

The main point of our book is not to castigate voters but to criticize an unrealistic "folk theory" of democracy that expects impossible things from them. The idea that millions of people could somehow, literally, rule themselves is simply incoherent. A great political scientist, E. E. Schattschneider, wrote long ago that, "The immobility and inertia of large masses are to politics what the law of gravity is to physics. ... An electorate of sixty million Aristotles would be equally restricted." Another, Henry Jones Ford, wrote even longer ago that, "Politics has been, is, and always will be carried on by politicians, just as art is carried on by artists, engineering by engineers, business by businessmen. All that ... political reform can do is to affect the character of the politicians by altering the conditions that govern political activity, thus determining its extent and quality."

The selection of presidential candidates is a good example. ... We have too many candidates, too little information about their backgrounds, character and commitments, and too little coordination and cueing of the sort that parties themselves provide in general elections. The result is a system ripe for fringe candidates, neophytes and demagogues.

From the analyses one encounters in the two aforementioned books the conclusion easily drawn is that the US is not a democracy. Is it an oligarchy, a plutocracy or something else?

People are used to thinking about the distinction between democracies and non-democracies as categorical. I think that's an over-simplification. Our political system has important democratic features — most notably, fairly robust civil liberties and elections that allow ordinary citizens to replace their rulers from time to time. Those features do not make it an ideal democracy in the sense suggested by the "folk theory" criticized in *Democracy for Realists*, but they are far from insignificant.

The eminent political theorist Robert Dahl coined the term "polyarchy" to refer to political systems roughly like ours. For better or worse, the term did not catch on. Thus, we are stuck with the term "democracy" to describe a wide variety of actual political systems as well as a variety of political ideals. (As Achen and I noted in the first chapter of *Democracy for Realists*, people almost everywhere nowadays

manage to think of their own political systems as democratic. Asked “how democratically is this country being governed today,” people in Rwanda, Malaysia and Kazakhstan provided higher average ratings than Americans, while people in China perceived as much democracy as Americans did.)

Thus, perhaps the best we can do is to try to specify more carefully what we are talking about when we talk about democracy. For example, some scholars have used the term “participatory democracy” to refer to systems in which citizens are supposed to be routinely involved in governing, in contrast to “representative democracy” in which the primary role of citizens is to elect their representatives. On the other hand, they have referred to various diminished forms of democracy, including “illiberal democracy,” in which rulers are elected but civil liberties are not protected; “limited democracy,” in which rulers are elected but suffrage is significantly curtailed; and “tutelary democracy,” in which democratic rule is subject to military veto.

My phrase “unequal democracy” is intended to highlight another important departure from the usual understanding of democracy — the fact that political influence in America, and, I suspect, in all large-scale democratic systems, is strongly correlated with wealth. But that is a matter of degree. At what point does an “unequal democracy” tip over into a plutocracy masquerading as a democracy? I don’t know any good way to answer that question.

In your view, what would make citizens cast votes more rationally, or, alternatively, what changes need to be undertaken to make the American political system responsive to those issues, problems and threats undermining a democratic political culture?

I don’t have a sweeping agenda of political reforms to offer. I think most reformers vastly overstate their ability to predict the impact of their proposals and vastly understate the difficulty of enacting them in the face of the very political problems they are intended to mitigate.

One problem with the “folk theory” of democracy is that it leads people to think that they ought to be able to get what they want from the political system simply by voting. When that doesn’t happen they blame corrupt politicians and demand “more democracy.” Often — as in the case of [some] presidential primaries, referenda and term limits — the cure is worse than the disease. But even when

that's not the case, the obsessive focus on electoral procedures tends to distract attention from more consequential issues.

The enormous effort devoted to "reforming" campaign finance over the past half-century is a case in point. Concerns about the total amount of money being spent on political campaigns is way overblown; Democrats and Republicans in a typical election cycle spend about as much on advertising as McDonald's and Burger King. In any case, efforts to limit the role of big contributors have mostly been ineffectual. A reform that might really accomplish that goal — providing public funding of campaigns at a level so lavish that additional private spending would be of little value — is a political non-starter, highly unpopular among incumbent politicians and citizens alike. And if the problem is the role of money in politics, the fixation on campaign finance mostly misses the point, anyway — political scientists estimate that corporations spend several times as much money on lobbying as they do on campaign contributions.

As a matter of principle, I think efforts to suppress turnout under the guise of safeguarding the electoral system against phantom "voter fraud" are pernicious. However, I don't think that increasing turnout by liberalizing registration rules or enfranchising ex-felons or allowing everyone to vote by mail would drastically alter the policy outcomes produced by our democratic system. As Achen and I put it in the subtitle of our book, "Elections Do Not Produce Responsive Government."

In the end, politics is about power. Changing election laws can shift the distribution of power, but mostly in modest and somewhat unpredictable ways. (The 1965 Voting Rights Act enfranchised millions of African Americans — and millions more southern whites.) Given the bluntness of the vote as a political tool, a much more straightforward path to equalizing political power would be to equalize economic power. But that is very hard to do, because the economically powerful are also politically powerful. More often, I suspect, the distribution of economic power itself shifts significantly for reasons outside the political system — as with the destruction of physical capital in major wars or the increased mobility of financial capital in the contemporary global economy.

But it is worth bearing in mind that ideas can be powerful, too. The successes of the civil rights movement hinged in large part on the ability of African Americans to harness the power of American ideals, persuading the politically powerful of the justice of their cause. In much the same spirit, I suggested in the concluding

chapter of *Unequal Democracy* that “many affluent people support egalitarian policies that seem inconsistent with their own narrow material interests” and that (Democratic) “policy-makers may be much more generous toward the poor than the political clout of the poor themselves would seem to warrant,” since “the specific policy views of citizens, whether rich or poor, have less impact in the policy-making process than the ideological convictions of elected officials” themselves.

Health Communication In Southern Africa: Engaging With Social And Cultural Diversity



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