



Political Elections and “the Will of the People”

By now, no supporter of Ron Paul’s will find himself surprised by the glaring inconsistencies, outright distortions, and, frankly, boldfaced lies to which Republican-friendly media figures will descend in their efforts to marginalize his presidential candidacy. Still, so unabashed is their illogic, so overt the dishonesty, it is nevertheless difficult not to be amazed, even mesmerized, by the audaciousness with which Paul’s critics subject him to one injustice after the other.



For as ugly as it is, though, this phenomenon is not without its value. That is, it supplies us with a classic textbook illustration of what many of us have always known: it *is* indeed politicians and their cohorts in the media, and not voters, who select candidates.

Joseph A. Schumpeter was a conservative theorist who was also among the most distinguished and erudite of social scientists of the first half of the twentieth century. In his *Capitalism, Socialism, and Democracy*, he debunks what he characterizes as “the classical doctrine of democracy.” According to this doctrine, it is “the people itself” that settle “issues through the election of individuals who are to assemble in order to carry out its will.” In reality, though, “the will of the people is *the product* and not the motive power of the political process.” [Emphasis added.]

The problem with this idealized notion of “democracy” — a notion, mind you, that continues to prevail today, *over two centuries* after it emerged — is that it ascribes to “the will of the *individual* an independence and a rational quality that are altogether unrealistic.” [Emphasis in original.] Thomas Sowell, I believe it was, once said that ideology is fairy tales for adults. Schumpeter would agree. More specifically, inasmuch as the average democratic voter makes his decisions on the basis of largely “extra-rational and irrational” factors, he would say that the eighteenth century rationalist ideology of “Democracy” is among the grandest “fairy tales” that had ever been invented.

If the “classical doctrine of democracy” were sound, then “everyone would have to know definitely what he wants to stand for,” and this “definite will would have to be implemented by the ability to observe and interpret correctly the facts that are directly accessible to everyone and to sift critically the information about the facts that are not.” Then, “according to the rules of logical inference,” the citizen should be able to draw “a clear *and prompt* conclusion as to particular issues.” [Emphasis in the original.]

This, though, is most certainly not how the average voter thinks. When it comes to *politics*, his will, far from being “determinate” and “rational,” is actually “an indeterminate bundle of vague impulses loosely playing about given slogans and mistaken impressions” thrust upon him by “pressure groups and propaganda[.]” For the average voter, “mere assertion, often repeated” is much weightier than “rational argument” could ever hope to be.

It isn’t that the average voter is dumb. He attends carefully to those matters with which he is intimately bound, those concerning his family, friends, work, current financial condition, church, neighborhood,



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and town. When it comes to national politics, in fact, there are *some* issues that engage him personally. But even then, voters not infrequently “prove themselves bad judges of their own long-run interests, for it is only the short-run promise that tells politically and only short-run rationality that asserts itself effectively.”

Schumpeter explains that the average voter easily falls prey to the manipulative machinations of politicians, journalists, and pundits because, at bottom, national affairs generally have an air of unreality for him. “Normally, the great political questions take their place in the psychic economy of the typical citizen with those leisure hour interests that have not attained the rank of hobbies, and with the subjects of irresponsible conversation.” Issues concerning the nation as a whole “seem so far off; they are not at all like a business proposition; dangers may not materialize at all and if they should they may not prove so very serious[.]” In short, when it comes to national politics, the average voter “feels” like he is “moving in a fictitious world.”

“The will” of “the people” of which politicians tirelessly proclaim themselves unqualified champions is, then, an “artifact.” Along with the issues themselves, it is “manufactured” similarly to the ways in which the desires and wants of consumers are manufactured by “commercial advertising.” As Schumpeter explains, in politics ...

we find the same attempts to contact the subconscious. We find the same technique of creating favorable and unfavorable associations which are the more effective the less rational they are. We find the same evasions and reticences and the same trick of producing opinion by reiterated assertion that is successful precisely to the extent to which it avoids rational argument and the danger of awakening the critical faculties of the people.

Schumpeter’s argument resonates more readily with our imagistic generation than it did in 1942 when he first composed it. While thinking about our national politics generally, and the media coverage of Ron Paul’s candidacy in particular, we would be well served to call it to mind.



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