



Libertarian Critiques of Democracy Can't be Refuted by Showing that it's Better than Dictatorship

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Imagine we are holding a debate about whether Queen Cersei Lannister of *Game of Thrones* fame should rule the Seven Kingdoms of Westeros. Cersei's critics correctly point out that she is often cruel, impulsive, and short-sighted. Her defenders admit the truth of these charges. But they say it doesn't matter: What's really important is that Cersei is far preferable to Sauron, the Dark Lord from the *Lord of the Rings*. Relative to elevating Sauron, giving power to Cersei will result in much less oppression, enslavement, and death. Thus, all must bend the knee to Queen Cersei, the first of her name!

This defense of Cersei makes excellent sense if she and Sauron are the only two available options. But not if there are other realistically feasible alternatives. And even if we do have to go with Cersei, perhaps her authority can be constrained in various ways, so as to reduce the harm she can cause.

In this example, the choice between giving unconstrained power to Cersei and giving it to Sauron is a false dichotomy. A similar false dichotomy crops up in real-world political debates about the strengths and weaknesses of democracy. Too many people are inclined to dismiss critiques of the latter on the grounds that it is still far preferable to dictatorship. A recent otherwise laudable article on libertarian criticisms of democracy by Jason Kuznicki of the Cato Institute is an example of this fallacy. I'm a fan of Kuznicki's work. But I think he misfires here.

Kuznicki recognizes that libertarian scholars such as Jason Brennan, Bryan Caplan, and myself, are right to highlight the problem of widespread voter ignorance as a significant shortcoming of democracy. This flaw is deeply embedded within the political system, and leads to a variety of harmful and unjust policies. Indeed, you don't have to be a libertarian to recognize the significance of this problem. Prominent liberal scholars such as Christopher Achen and Larry Bartels have documented it as well.

But Kuznicki believes the libertarian critique of voter ignorance is ultimately insignificant because democracy has an important advantage over dictatorship. Specifically, it ensures peaceful succession and replacement of political leaders:

Understood in the context of the systems that went before it, representative democracy was a new attempt to solve an ancient problem, and to improve on the solution given by hereditary

monarchy. Under democracy, not only was the act of removing a ruler *not* an act of treason, but one might say that it was the very cornerstone of the system itself.... We owe our truest allegiance never to a person, and never to a family, but only to an impersonal method of choosing, one that we resolve to undertake at regular intervals, and not only when an officeholder happens to die....

One may object that ignorant voters can't reliably recognize a bad ruler, and there is certainly some truth to this. Majorities sometimes empower bad people and remove good ones. Yet if we take it as a given that rulers will change.... it seems clearly better to have a mechanism agreed upon by which changes can happen, and by which these changes can command assent without violence. If sooner or later one ruler must give way to another in any case, how shall it be done? By a bloody and opportunistic palace coup? By the rising of an angry mob? Or by counting a stack of papers on a duly appointed day? This shouldn't be a hard call to make....

Democracy does its good work—the work of keeping civil peace in a presumptive time of stress and danger—without depending *at all* on voters' knowledge....

It is indeed true that democracy is better than hereditary monarchy (and other forms of despotism) at ensuring peaceful succession of leaders. Kuznicki is right to emphasize that this is an important advantage of democracy. Sadly, he is also right to suggest that some libertarians are prone to forget that.

But, as a response to libertarian criticisms of democracy, this argument only works if the libertarians were themselves advocating despotism or some other system prone to violent conflict over positions of powers. In reality, however, none of the writers Kuznicki is responding to advocate any such thing. Bryan Caplan argues for tighter limitations on the power of government, so that voter ignorance would have less scope to cause harm. I argue for both that and greater decentralization of government power, so that people can make more decisions by "voting with their feet," in which framework they have better incentives to become informed and minimize bias in their decision-making.

Notice that these approaches are entirely compatible with retaining regular elections as a mechanism for replacing political leaders. It's just that these officials in question will have less power than they might otherwise, and more of that power will be dispersed to regional and local leaders as opposed to national ones. Indeed, violence may be less likely to arise under a system where elected officials have less power than one where they have more. In the latter case, the losers of an election have more incentive to take up arms, because they have more to fear from a government dominated by the winners. Such dynamics have in fact generated uprisings and civil wars in all too many emerging democracies.

Jason Brennan advocates "epistocracy," a system of voting that would be more heavily weighted towards citizens with greater knowledge of public policy. I have significant reservations about his theory. But it too is entirely compatible with regular, peaceful replacement of leaders through an electoral process. Indeed, we already put some epistocratic constraints on the franchise, for example by barring children, incarcerated felons, some of the mentally ill, and immigrants who can't pass a civics test that most native-born Americans are likely to fail.

Brennan, Caplan, and I could be wrong for any number of reasons. But our concerns about democracy and voter ignorance are not refuted by citing the superiority of democracy over dictatorship. Just as Sauron is not the only possible alternative to Cersei, so democracy, as it currently exists, is not the only possible alternative to dictatorship. Democracy combined with greater decentralization and tighter constraints on government power is one such alternative. Epistocracy might be another.

What is true of Kuznicki's article is also true of other efforts to dismiss libertarian concerns about democracy by emphasizing its superiority over despotism. In a 2013 post, I addressed another variation of this type of argument, advanced by conservative political commentator Pascal-Emmanuel Gobry.

Arguments like those of Gobry and Kuznicki are related to, but distinct from, a different concern about libertarian critiques of democracy: even if valid, they are reprehensible because they give ammunition to dangerous illiberal authoritarians. Whatever flaws democracy might have, we shouldn't air its dirty laundry at a time when liberal democracy is under serious threat from populist nationalists and other enemies. I responded to that type of concern here, building on an earlier post on the same subject by Jason Brennan. Far from helping illiberal forces, inquiry into the dangers of public ignorance can potentially help counter them.

Democracy does indeed have important advantages over despotism. Libertarians (and others) who tend to forget or ignore that would do well to remember it. But we should also remember the importance of avoiding false dichotomies.

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