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DEMOCRATIC POLITICAL COMPETENCE: Clearing the Underbrush and a Controversial Proposal

Robert Weissberg

Though the link between democracy and an appropriately trained citizen is obvious, the theoretical and empirical nature of this association is murky despite mountains of scholarship addressing this topic. Part of this problem is that the term “democratic competence” has been stretched almost to the point of uselessness. This constant adding of desired traits—many of which are ideologically driven—misdirects effort away from such complex problems as the relationship between individual attributes and collective capacities. Moreover, recent research has often been guilty of using data of uncertain relevance to demonstrate a competence that seems largely an analytical artifact. We conclude by offering an approach that stresses “old-fashioned” traits such as patriotism that seem necessary to the existing, and quite democratic, status quo.

Key words: democracy; political competence; citizenship; civic education.

That democracy cannot exist amid a citizenry incapable of executing its conditions is now axiomatic. Today's growing impetus for worldwide democratic governance has made this connection especially urgent. If the dismal lessons of exporting democratic infrastructure teach us anything, it is that institutional reform fails miserably without a receptive populace. This is hardly recent news. Well over a century ago American educators, faced with surging immigration, correctly grasped that democratic habits were hardly spontaneous. These vital inclinations had to be tediously inculcated, not left to chance, and this demanded a colossal undertaking. This instructional legacy continues to thrive: perfunctory pledges of allegiances, legally mandated US history classes, obligatory classroom elections, and untold other rituals are all justified as building “proficient democratic citizenship.”

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Given this enduring, centuries old effort—often precisely codified into state law—one might suppose that delineating “civic competence” and its relationship to democratic governance would be patently obvious. When superficially judged by proliferating present-day scholarship on this subject, an upbeat assessment appears justified. Unfortunately, this prodigious, often superb, effort aside, there is less than meets the eye. Scholarly abundance, alas, has sowed more confusion than insight, and matters seemingly grow worse. The problem arises when these investigations are viewed collectively; conceptual incoherence of an ever-expanding domain is the failing. Those few simple strictures once encompassing our wisdom have evolved into an Ivory Tower of Babel, often speaking at nonsensical cross-purposes and certainly providing scant assistance to champions of enhanced democratic competency.

This analysis takes a few steps back from nitty-gritty research and seeks to restore a modicum of conceptual order to this realm, sort things out, so to speak, before inquiry degenerates yet further. While this overview is often critical of present-day accomplishments, we also acknowledge the subject matter’s exceptional complexity. In all fairness, the competency enterprise is but a few decades old, and theoretical growing pains are inevitable. Nevertheless, a critical stance is indispensable if scientific fact is to replace rhetoric. Our overall strategy is threefold. First, explore some recent theorizing on “democratic competence” to show how this venerable idea has unfolded into a cacophony lacking distinct boundaries or even a demonstrable political content. This cumulation only superficially resembles progress. When democratic civic competence can be reconfigured into whatever suits the investigator’s whims, little emerges beyond vacuous advice giving.

Second, we argue that advancing democratic competence often constitutes political proselytizing. “Competence” is not a standard scientific term like velocity. What is passed off as mere technical improvement can, in fact, be quite subversive. Nothing, of course, forbids entreating for upheaval or even supplying the necessary blueprints. Yet, it is disingenuous to label such advice “building citizen competence.” Finally, turning away from the democratic component of democratic competence, we advance a conception of citizen proficiency that differs fundamentally from present-day admonitions. This is group-, not individual-based vision, and takes as a given insurmountable limitations in improving cognitive talent. Its central theme is that if the less able are to be improved as civic activists, skilled organization, not refurbishing millions of people disinclined to be reworked, is the superior competency pathway.

THE HYPER-INCLUSIVE WORLD OF COMPETENCE

It is sometimes said that fools rush in where angels fear to tread. If one spent a few weeks immersed in the competency literature, one might further add that even fools might be cautious here. Although analysts frequently in-

voke competency as if its meaning were self-evident, even a perfunctory overview suggests immense disorder. Let us begin simply. In its narrowest sense, competency seems plain enough. The *Oxford English Dictionary*, second edition, captures a prevailing element among almost all users, namely, “Sufficiency of qualification; capacity to deal adequately with a subject.” A competent person is thus capable of doing something correctly, whether this is baking cakes or fermenting a revolution.¹

Problems arise when applying this notion to challenging social and political settings. A competent baker is one thing, but what exactly is, among other things, social competence, civic competence, or political competence? Even more frustrating is “democratic competence.” Of course, glib answers are always possible, for example, one could define “civic competence” as being qualified at the obligations imposed by civil society. Ditto for “democratic competence”—one is a deft democrat. Still, sooner or later, guidance seekers must confront an activity’s precise content—what a capable person must excel at. Success or failure of adequacy cannot be proclaimed abstractly. Even protean terms like “intelligence” must be reduced to specifics such as memorizing a string of random numbers. Nor can science rely on “I know it when I see it” definitions.

It is here that exasperating evasiveness enters the picture. Aptness at what? Consider, for example, the social competence definition offered by Gladwin (1967; cited in Smith, 1968, p. 274): [Social competence] is the ability to learn or use a variety of alternative pathways or behavioral responses in order to reach a given goal. . . . The competent individual comprehends and is able to use a variety of social systems with society, moving within these systems and utilizing the resources they offer. . . .” This indistinctness, as we shall show below, is not unique. Conceivably, this capacity might apply to almost anything, from “successfully” buying groceries to organizing a multibillion dollar foundation.² And, one might add, everybody is socially competent in one setting or another, save those in custodial care, just as everyone somewhere exhibits social deficiencies. Can this content-free definition (and untold similar ones) assist in separating the competent from the incompetent, or calibrating degrees of competency? Surely not.³

Moreover, how might we disentangle concepts so related—civic competency, political competency, and so forth—that they are often employed virtually interchangeably? Is “civic competence” conceptually distinct from, say, “political competence” since not every societal act is quintessentially political? If distinct, is this unquestionably intrinsic to the phenomena or just dependent on user operational choice? Although the latter tactic is surely attractive in terms of conducting research, it opens the door to endless confusion. Taking an entirely different track, it might be more profitable to abandon these global terms altogether and focus exclusively on discrete, one-time behaviors. We might, for instance, assess proficiency in the 2000 presidential election or skill

at filing a particular lawsuit instead of grappling with illusive “political competence.” These specified behaviors may number into the hundreds and require periodic adjustment (e.g., adding Internet-related skills while dropping trial by combat), but this restricted strategy does engender scientific precision.

Having inserted uncertainty into what once seemed clear, let us continue this brushclearing task by first focusing on democratic competency—being proficient at democracy. As we understand democratic competence research, the ultimate aim is—or should be—to uncover those traits facilitating democratic governance (somehow defined). Formulating democratic competencies must, therefore be relational, an “if A, then B,” enterprise where B is democracy. Put more colloquially, what types of people are needed to assure a democratic government? As certain attributes are essential to a championship sports team, other qualities are vital to democratic governance. Taking the isolated individual in vacuo as the initial measurement unit is only an analytical convenience, a useful though incomplete place to begin a long journey. A wholly individually centered analysis would be appropriate if each person constituted his or her own society. This is patently nonsensical. Democracy is inescapably a collective process entailing interactions. Individuals taken singularly cannot be intrinsically democratic or undemocratic as one might be, say, blue-eyed. Imagine, for example, being self-governed by majority rule or due process? To be sure, these required capacities may be measured one person at a time, each in isolation from the other, but the proof of the pudding is on how it all adds up. The worst Nazi can spend an entire lifetime being democratic if he or she were the only Nazi around. Exclusively attending to individual traits would be the pointless equivalent of measuring athletic team accomplishment by only assessing skills of individual players.

What regularly sows confusion in this theorizing is the easy conflation of democratic competency with political skill within a democratic setting. The two ideas should be kept separate, though in practice this seems a Herculean task. Consider voting. Hypothesize that an inclination to settle civil disputes via ballot boxes is integral to democratic competency. In principle, this proclivity, if indeed requisite, overshadows any particular electoral choice save the possibility of voting for, say, Pol Pot. Taking to the ballot box in lieu of assassination is what is to be ascertained. Utilizing the franchise skillfully, however, might be political competence in a democracy, but this need not be democratic competence. Conceivably, the most inept voter may still be “a good democrat,” and, conversely, a skilled voter may subvert democratic governance. The former, for example, erroneously votes for Pat Buchanan when intending to choose Al Gore; the latter cleverly figures out a way to support a Nazi takeover. The mistaken citizen is, ironically, the honored democrat, while the sophisticated one is the threat.

Since this distinction is routinely obscured in the competency literature, let

me burden the patient reader with a more lucid nonpolitical example. Parents worried that their children might become car thieves might enroll them in Little League baseball. Having family baseball stars may be pleasing but, fundamentally, this is incidental to inculcating lawabiding behavior in a supervised setting. Without question, given this aim, a family klutz is preferable to a superstar using his or her prodigious skill to gain gambling riches by manipulating scores. Again, let us not forget that dictators often try to exploit democratic elections to bring tyranny. Such dexterity hardly constitutes democratic competence. In a nutshell, if democratic participation is the evaluative criterion, embracing the game's conventions outshines deftness outside the rules.

To return to the democratic element in competency, how might one proceed in assembling those citizen qualities that might contribute to democratic governance? In principle, the possibilities are literally infinite. Everything from Boy Scout-type uprightness to religious devotion and economic energy might be suggested for inclusion. Some, for example, collegial family decision-making, may have zero face political pertinence. Nevertheless, the resultant list would, by necessity, be fairly restrained. The emphasis is on essential traits, not everything conceivably augmenting democracy. The formidable task of connecting hypothesized proficiency criteria with political outcomes certainly cautions against facile expansiveness, at least initially. Limits would also attend expectations since, as a practical matter, not every citizen can be required to "pass" several dozen arduous hurdles. Most important, a hypothetical Committee on Democratic Competency would correctly insist on empirically demonstrated relevance before any desideratum is appended to the official list. Intrinsic "goodness" of a proffered characteristic is wholly extraneous; it is only the relationship of the trait to specified political end that certifies relevance.

Unfortunately, contemporary theorizing on "democratic civic competence" (or close cousin concepts) contravenes empirically anchored restraint. The *modus operandi* informing this literature is to welcome almost any trait momentarily attracting the researcher's admiration. Education scholars are particularly taken with lofty hortatory-like admonitions about what democracy requires. Robert E. Cleary (1971) posits a link between democracy and citizen ability to think logically and analyze problems in a rational manner. This further entails appreciating diverse values and a gift for relating these values to specific goals. Indoctrinating citizen regardless of what is inculcated is, moreover, antithetical to democracy. Another educationally oriented listing (Remy and Turner, 1979) inveighs for ecological attentiveness, global awareness, social problem consciousness, consumer adroitness, a capacity for moral action, involvement in social change, an aptitude for critical thinking, and patriotism (among other virtues). Morse's (1989) "how-to-make-democratic-citizens" compendium stipulates articulateness, sound judgment, the courage to act, and a talent for reflection. Yet another treatise is unsure of the precise attri-

butes to be inculcated, but nevertheless feels that progress is possible when “the discussion of skills must focus on awareness building, liberating education, promotion of a critical consciousness, overcoming internal oppressions, and developing indigenous or popular knowledge” (Gaventa, 1995, p. 31).

Nancy L. Rosenblum (1999) offers a roster of democratically required qualities notable for its creativity and reach. Some attributes are a *mélange* of the familiar—tolerance, a sense of justice, a disposition to accept painful policies, a modicum of self-restraint, and a willingness to furnish collective benefits. Less traditional is an “easy spontaneity,” plus speaking out on day-to-day injustices. This entails everyday life, not just politics as narrowly understood. Democratic competence might thus be exhibited by castigating store clerks rude to teenagers or non-English speakers. An outwardly more focused account stipulates, “citizens must be able to distinguish from among perspective law-makers those who are disposed toward deliberate ways of lawmaking” (Elkin, 1999, p. 388). To be proficient, according to this exacting conception, a citizen must reject hacks beholden to interest groups, constituency panderers, and those seeking the material rewards of office. Public-spiritedness and prideful independence round out this list. An especially novel, though hardly unique, perspective holds that the very notion of minimal competency skills is inherently undemocratic for this exclusionary tactic engenders elite domination. Competency, thusly, is to be awarded to everyone, regardless of demonstrable talent; existence as a moral agent certifies proficiency. Going one step further, those insisting on *any* proficiency disqualify themselves from authentic, truly inclusive democracy (Smiley, 1995).

Not surprisingly, educators are frequently happy to combine democratic competence with today’s infatuation with egalitarian multiculturalism. One such exposition stipulated democratic citizenship skills as appreciating group interconnectedness, suspicion of those denying diversity as a normative value, a belief in the superiority of group versus individual socioeconomic progress, a disdain for competition, and a penchant to challenge critically the validity of knowledge. And, if these obligations were insufficient, competent citizens are morally committed to promoting group equity while seeking to achieve social justice for diverse groups and individuals (Pang, Gay, and Stanley, 1995, pp. 322–323). Equally enterprising are the competency standards advanced by the National Council for the Social Studies (cited in Pang et al., 1995, p. 321). Worthy attributes include an ability to analyze the role of dissent and other actions to influence public policy, experience with forms of civic discourse, a faculty for evaluating how policies might violate “ideas of a democratic republican [*sic*] government,” and participation in activities to strengthen the common good.

Political scientists may lack this grandiloquence, but they, too, often succumb to high-sounding verbiage sans strict boundaries. One can only surmise

that key references must exist in mythical scientific dictionaries. A common theme might be depicted as informed activism as democracy's foundation. Dennis Thompson (1970), for example, stresses the ability to influence politics in such endeavors as voting and discussion. Nie, Junn, and Stehlik-Berry (1998) speak of a capacity for "political engagement," by which they mean an aptitude for understanding politics, identifying preferences, skillfully pursue interests, and analogous traits essential for self-rule. Robert Dahl (1992) similarly stresses activism to influence government coupled with a desire to foster the general welfare as part and parcel of democracy.

Although this "informed activism as the pathway to democracy" model has comfortably evolved into a political science cliché, fashionableness hardly demonstrates precision. Exactitude is only superficial, and one could imagine the discomfort if these advocates were summoned to defend legally their criteria as businesses accused of racial discrimination carefully justify their employment screening tests. For example, what exactly is "understanding politics"? Resolution is seldom obvious, given recurrent expert disagreements on nearly every public issue. When does idle gossip transform itself into "political discussion"? One can only imagine certifying who, exactly, possesses "a knack for influencing politics" or how much of this precious commodity currently exists. Must this dexterity be a general flair or might it be issue- or time-specific?

A second broad, expansive body of competence related research attracting political scientist attention stresses policy decisionmaking dexterity. In the words of Popkin and Dimock (1999), "A fundamental concern of democratic theory is the competence of citizens to make informed choices between political candidates" (p. 117). Activity and interest are, by themselves, insufficient to certify competence: as in a school quiz, citizens must choose wisely among competing ballot box alternatives and similar options if, it is as alleged, democracy is to flourish. This theoretical conflation between playing the game and how well one performs, as we have emphasized, is crucial, yet it passes entirely unnoticed into our scholarly *Weltanschauung*. Being democratic now, alas, effortlessly becomes "being proficient at democratic conflict."

The most notable illustrations of this democratic assessment approach are, of course, the multitudinous individual-level voting studies. Indeed, this "can-voting-sustain-democracy?" is typically the *raison d'être* of this literature. The classics such as *Voting*, *The American Voter*, and *The Responsible Electorate*, plus the endless rejoinders and counterrejoinders, all wrestled with this democratic deftness enigma. Interestingly, while disputes over the average voter's sagacity or foolishness are oft intense, even ingenious, the possibility that democracy might still thrive amid complete ineptitude receives scant attention (the possibility that too much adroitness may doom representative government receives even less mindfulness). The obstacle of calibrating "absolute foolhardiness," as one achieves zero degrees Kelvin, undoubtedly impedes this quest.

One might speculate that certifying the electorate's democratic credentials was "hindered" by the absence of clear antidemocratic ballot options.⁴

Like the Energizer Bunny, this find-the-competent-voter enterprise marches on. Recent variants have extended analysis to initiative and referenda and generally render an optimistic competency verdict. Cronin (1989, ch. 4) expressly frames the decisionmaking aptness in terms of citizen democratic suitability. He summarizes several empirical studies that generally evidence democratically required voter skill, as indicated by prudent taxation choices or avoiding calamitous outcomes. Though prospective voters were occasional confused, this deficiency often reflected convoluted ballot language or the topic's inherent esoteric nature. An especially creative exemplar of uncovering mastery is Lupia's (1994) analysis of California voters navigating a complex insurance rate initiative. This is tough civic work given both the topic's novelty and the absence of traditional guideposts such as party. Happily for fans of democratic governance, voters generally fulfill this perplexing assignment despite the hurdles. The secret is in the clueless mindfully following others better informed than themselves, even if leaders and followers were physically separated. Thus understood, competency can transpire almost by osmosis, even unconsciously. One should also include here the robust "short-cut" literature demonstrating how those with minimal information can make surprisingly smart choices by, for example, picking out a few salient clues in complex settings.

To appreciate the tenuous linkage between adroit decisionmaking and democratic survival, imagine the worst-case election scenario. That is, hapless voters tossed coins, sold their votes, or otherwise decided in ways contravening any known reasonableness criteria. The upshot might then be such "calamities" as popular referenda being accidentally defeated, out-of-touch candidates put in office, and, assuredly, postelection bewilderment among TV network commentators. These inept choices resulted in inferior, disliked policies. But, and this is absolutely critical, would these elections be *inherently* undemocratic? Assuredly not. In fact, if postelection survey probes into voter skill were never executed, this ineptitude would pass entirely unnoticed. Surely we cannot stipulate that poll's postmortem necessarily certifies "democracy."⁵ Would these elections be more democratic if everyone voted brilliantly but, as is commonplace elsewhere, violence marred the balloting and disgruntled losers pursued armed insurrection instead?

A macro-level strategy focuses on how aggregate public opinion shifts in response to events. Page and Shapiro's *The Rational Public: Fifty Years of Trends in Americans' Policy Preferences* (1992) is undoubtedly the classic example here. Their aim is to demonstrate public rationality—holding sensible opinions by processing available information. Such rationality will then certify democratic competency. Proof is marshaled by scanning decades of poll data.

Fortunately for democratic citizen capacity devotees, when these survey data are properly aligned with notable events, public sagacity triumphantly emerges. Overwhelmingly, preferences evince considerable stability, and when shifts do occur, these are explainable by civil disorders, government actions or other prominent events. The public is an astute, nimble spectator, and so democracy is safe. Even on the difficult-to-follow MX missile deployment debate, allege the authors, public astuteness prevails.

Competence certification has also, predictably, zeroed in on the public's political knowledge and awareness. This linking of civic aptitude to current events/personalities seems axiomatic: those dreary reports of popular ignorance inevitably draw discomfiture regarding our future democratic fitness. The most notable foray here is Delli Carpini and Keeter's (1996) massive overview of polls stretching back decades regarding popular awareness of U.S. history, legal principles, public figures, government policies, and the like. Knowledge and democracy are explicit linked: on page 1 they declare, "democracy functions best when its citizens are politically informed." If this veneration of knowledge were insufficient, the authors further intone, "Political knowledge is also a critical and distinct facilitator of other aspects of good citizenship. . . . No other single characteristic of an individual affords so reliable a predictor of good citizenship, broadly conceived, as their level of knowledge" (pp. 6–7). Judged by the absence of explicit theoretical connective tissue, Delli Carpini and Keeter indubitably take themselves to be announcing the self-evident.

Lastly among political scientists is what might be called the attitudinal configuration model of democratic citizen aptness. This cosmology has outshined all rivals in dominating disciplinary thinking regarding public capability. Philip Converse's seminal 1964 essay on ideological constraint demonstrating the lack of political sophistication via statistical associations among varied policy items is the founding ancestor. Attitudinal structure, Converse asserted, exhibited political capacity. The separate questionnaire item's distribution was relatively unimportant. The underlying logic seemed impeccable: democracy requires savvy citizens, astuteness is reflected in belief system integration (higher interitem correlations), so *Quod Erat Demonstrandum*—democracy necessitates coherent belief structure. Nor did the underlying substantive connection among items attract careful dissection. What fundamentally mattered was predicting one issue stance from another. The respondent's own connective association was entirely subordinated to uncovering sample-based correlations.

While early devotees of this methodology found pervasive inconsistency, subsequent investigations became progressively upbeat. In part, one might speculate, more powerful statistical techniques provided innovative ways to unearth previously cryptic proficiencies. William G. Jacoby's 1994 inquiry into

public spending attitudes usefully illustrates this genre. Employing the 1984 CPS National Election Study, the interconnection among 10 items (e.g., Medicare, food stamps, assisting blacks, etc.) was examined. After ample sophisticated statistical computation, underlying cognitive structure bubbles to the surface, and where lacking, this was, likewise, explainable in a way compatible with public shrewdness. Jacoby concludes with a sanguine message for democratic citizenry fans, “public opinion on government spending represents a relatively high degree of rationality and apparently reasonable judgments on the part of individual citizens” (p. 354).

As was true for voting, these cognitive dexterity probes are never concretely connected to democratic politics. The link is only asserted, never demonstrated. Again, what if those surveyed responded randomly on the MX or any other issue? Other than polling, how could we tell, and can favoring or opposing *any* policy on the democratic agenda constitute an antidemocratic act? None of these policy choice items inquire about ethnic cleansing, incarcerating dissenters, or another other palpable democratic violations. And even if they had, and everyone answered in the most antidemocratic way possible, this verbal response is hardly troublesome behavior (and such antidemocratic opinions have long existed without subverting democracy).

These varied imprecise exemplars hardly exhaust the bountiful subject.⁶ This heterogeneity is reminiscent of early science when idiosyncratic definitions, let alone personalized field demarcations, were commonplace. To reiterate, our unease attends the bewildering cacophony, not particular studies, which emerge from the theoretical inattention given to “competency.” Modern social science etiquette may well encourage this incoherence. Certainly, few incentives exist to challenge any particular competence compilation. Those disagreeing merely declare their alternative, and one ideological sect is unbothered by rivals. Alleged obligations typically owe their longevity to scholarly habit. Even in the contentious voting literature, the democratic centrality of astute balloting survives by custom—one merely cites others, and the problem ostensibly disappears. Among educators, desiderata seem driven by ideological fashion unencumbered by any data. More generally, what seems admirable (at least for the moment) is easily pronounced a democratic citizen requirement. Why should any upright investigator dispute, say, a flair for discerning moral distinctions or a passion for social change? Without guardians to ban the unworthy from admission or sort the mandatory from the optional, it is predictable that catalogues multiply unchecked into a theoretical hodgepodge.

DEEPER NEGLECT

This brief excursion only highlights certain obvious problems. Still, as troubling as these deficiencies are, worse problems are embedded in the enterprise’s very foundations. Most striking is the omnipresent disconnect between

any stipulated *individual* obligation and some notable *political* characteristic pertaining to democracy. Without a micro-to-macro linkage, the catalogue of “required traits” is infinite, and no hypothesized candidate can be excluded. There is scarcely a trait imaginable that cannot, in some form or fashion, be speculatively deemed part of democratic competence. It is not that the professed qualities we have depicted are unconnected to democracy; rather, this pertinence must be empirically verified, not merely announced. Without this proof, expressions like, “Democracy requires citizens to have ample levels of X” are but personal or ideological preferences. It is preposterous to assume that every worthy trait that might be pertinent is, indeed, a required ingredient.

To connect traits measured at the individual level to collective properties is a formidable undertaking. To begin, consider the statistical nightmares here. If one assumes that the United States is, in fact, a democracy, one must correlate variations in citizen attributes with a constant, hardly a straightforward statistical endeavor. Making our collective democracy into a variable could solve this covariation quandary, but this, too, is an uncertain undertaking. A crossnational design is also a viable solution, but here, again, the practical obstacles are daunting, especially given the problem of establishing equivalences. One can only imagine the not-yet-invented statistical tools and data sets required for these intimidating tasks.

Consider the exceedingly plain-Jane attribute of being politically informed as a hypothetical “democratic citizen requirement.” The more extensive popular knowledge, the greater the democratic vitality, is the familiar linkage. This surely appears to be a no-brainer theoretically, and no reputable scholar seems to disagree. Recall the Delli Carpini and Keeter’s facile connective proclamation. Yet, how *exactly* does this venerated knowledge upgrade or subvert democracy? What if polls had never existed and this ignorance was unknown? Typically, theoretical worthiness seems eminently “logical” in the sense that an informed citizenry could better monitor leaders, vote shrewdly, prefer wise public policy, and otherwise contribute to enhancing civic life. If this reasoning seems insufficient, the fact that democracy and education seem related, and education is surely related to political knowledge, seemingly closes the case.

Unfortunately, this comfortably accepted logic is only one plausible concatenation among many. At the outset, one might reasonably ask why those information quiz items obscurely selected by pollsters (not researchers!) unbothered by the citizen capacity-democracy linkage puzzle should be authoritatively imposed? A measureless test menu exists here, and, perchance, some vital information items have been neglected at the expense of the trite. Does the Gallup Organization secretly know that if respondents fail to identify their senator or estimate correctly that year’s defense spending, democracy is at risk? If so, how has this exceedingly exacting inference been verified? Even if

we concede the information-democracy nexus and include only relevant test items, *what* particular information level is most essential to democratic vitality? The silence here is deafening. Is every fact equal to every other fact? Or, as in a school examination, might some correct answers be worth 50 points while other items are a mere 1 point each? And, might this evolve over time as new information becomes essential for democratic competence? Outsourcing this test design task to commercial pollsters is, to be blunt, theoretical sloth. The data tails are wagging the theoretical dog.

There is also the troublesome issue of aggregate or community affects. For example, it is plausible that taking 10 million hardcore antidemocrats (somehow defined) and randomly scattering them in a population of 260 million may have zero democratic impact. These would-be bombers and assassins disappear into a sea of democratic civility or are covered into peaceful acquiescence. But, assemble these identical 10 million dictatorship devotees in a single metropolitan area and the outcome might be radically different. Now the antidemocratic threat can be far more dangerous. This scenario is not hypothetical: every year immigrants from nations lacking vibrant democratic traditions settle in the United States, yet they soon succumb to democracy. In other words, geographical context, not strict proportions, may be critical. Random national samples are rarely attuned to this situation.

Moreover, what makes the researcher so confident that their particular shopping list constitutes the correct *entire* recipe, in the correct proportions, or even a significant part of the total package, and that each designated ingredient can be monotonically cumulated so that the more democratically respondents one discovers, the greater the democracy? The appropriate model is the chemical formula, not the shopping list. Are we to believe Mae West's quip that too much of a good thing is great? Or, on the other hand, might there be such a thing as excessive virtue? The lack of attribute overlap in this body of literature is also conspicuous. Taken together, this enterprise resembles a haphazard potluck dinner—educators bring some alleged necessary traits, while political scientists have their own delicacies. Nobody seems inclined to move beyond a handful of disciplinary favorites, let alone the precise proportions. Perhaps several dozen possibilities spanning multiple disciplines might have to be accurately tested prior to uncovering all the essential ingredients.

It is equally reasonable to suppose that, at least in some circumstances, virtues taken to be "obvious" (for example, civic attentiveness) and democratic health, exhibit a far more complex, perchance inverse, relationship. There is less universal logic here than oft-repeated ethnocentric penchants. Why must we assume linearity across time and space for the democratic recipe? Context may change everything: what is true in the United States may be false in Albania and irrelevant in Israel. Maybe heightened political watchfulness exacerbates deeply rooted acrimony in some settings or facilitates elite domination

by exposing citizens to ceaseless propaganda in other environments. Recollect that not all highly educated nations have embraced democracy and that hyper-astuteness may engender a politics of life and death, not tranquility. Or, public political obsessions detract from other endeavors vital to democracy while coffeehouses are abuzz with astute conspiratorial gossip. No doubt, similar counter-conventional logical steps can be formulated for every trait stipulated as an “obvious” democratic necessity.

A further neglected problem concerns how any stipulated competency virtue is to be calibrated. The existing literature implicitly typically takes a relativist posture: competency analyses apply categories like “high” or “too little” rather than precise ratio scale quantities. Someone who, for instance, knows the answers to 9 out of 10 Gallup-style information questions becomes “well informed.” That this “star” performance may still fall well short of what, platonically, constitutes requisite civic astuteness goes unmentioned. In testing language, everything is curved so that a “superior performance” is merely better among all test takers. Sufficiency itself is not ascertained; conceivably, a superior performance may still be inadequate. Maybe Mr. Gallup’s test is too easy (or too arduous) for properly measuring democratic aptitude. This relativistic strategy rests exclusively on measurement conventions—dividing survey respondents with respect to each other versus some hard and fast exterior yardstick is exceedingly handy. Statistical usefulness also requires variance even when the distribution is highly clustered.

Yet, competency would seem to imply an absolute standard, or at least a defined minimum threshold. That is, “a competent citizen” (on some trait) performs at a level exceeding some preestablished, empirically certified bare minimum. The operative term is adequacy. This attentiveness to absolute proficiency is commonplace in vocational licensing. We expect medical doctors or airline pilots to exhibit certain hard-and-fast minimal proficiencies, not just be “better” at these skills than randomly selected others. Why visit the “best doctor in town” if he or she is lethal? Similarly, nearly everybody may pass the required minimum threshold. To wit, while some drivers are superior to others, prevailing licensing standards classify nearly everyone as “qualified driver.” Unfortunately, this critical attentiveness to absolute versus relative is seemingly unknown when scholars promulgate civic competency standards. Recall our discussion of voting. What may be absolutely vital is that most people gravitate to the ballot box to choose leaders rather than embrace savagery. How they vote, even if frivolously, is inconsequential—every voter passes the democracy test.

Our final qualm concerns the distinction between beliefs about competence versus competence itself. In their seminal inquiry, Almond and Verba (1963, ch. 7) stipulate “citizen competence” as a person’s *belief* about their efficacy—their key indicator assessed self-judgment regarding reversing an unjust na-

tional or local law. This self-designated competency is assumed, never demonstrated empirically, to be a democratic bulwark insofar as this subjective orientation promotes actual participation while restraining elites (pp. 181–183). This “subjective-competence-fortifies-democratic-civic-culture” nexus has evidently achieved an exalted “everybody knows” status. Bennett (1997), for example, blithely intones, “Democratic theorists agree that citizens’ sense of political competence is essential to democracy” (p. 231).⁷ Ample evidence elsewhere, notably the political efficacy research literature, similarly echoes this putative democratic centrality of belief.

The matter is hardly resolved regardless of this alluring psychological. It is equally conceivable (if not more so) that people are delusional regarding their ability, and, worse, these deceptions conveniently yet dangerously displace reality. Beliefs are not reality. Almond and Verba never challenge respondents for detailed instructions to accomplish this baffling goal. Quite likely, those most capable of rescinding unjust laws, for example, public officials or judges, would be pessimistic regarding their success. Conversely, those naïve souls conveniently separated from reality would be the most upbeat. In fact, one extensive review of this subjective versus objective link finds overwhelming evidence that the incompetent grossly exaggerate their true ability across numerous domains (Kruger and Dunning, 1999). In a nutshell, the incompetents are too ignorant to grasp their own insufficiency, while the truly expert accurately appreciates the awaiting obstacles. Subjectivity painlessly solves untold measurement problems, but it may construct a democratic proficiency foundation built on sand.

If, on the other hand, one pursued the objective route regarding aptitude (democratic or otherwise), an exterior grading standard is necessary. This is highly consequential for inherently murky alleged attributes, for example, an appreciation for diversity, a willingness to condemn injustice, tolerance, and similar high-sounding but contentious attributes. To appreciate this quandary, consider the huge (and incessant) battles erupting over national history standards—even professional historians scarcely agree on what are “important” facts or what, indeed, is “a fact.” A few even deny the existence of “facts.” Yet, this might be a snap compared to, say, devising national standards for “moral decisionmaking” or other value-laden requisites. And, who should be awarded this awesome responsibility? Can the government be trusted to devise a “good democratic citizen” standard and to impose it nationally when democracy itself might entail a healthy suspicion of state power? Opportunities abound for grievous political mischief. *Quis custodiet ipsos custodes?* Who will guard the guardians?

Quite clearly, some excellent singular studies aside, the field as a whole remains uncertain. To recap, the proper formulation of democratic competency requirements would include: (1) postulating precise qualities that could

be essential to democratic governance; (2) calibrating these attributes absolutely, not relatively; (3) hypothesizing how these prospective desiderata might interact at various levels; and (4) testing these formulations empirically against some political process to determine what, exactly, comprises democratic competence. This is a far cry from the current custom of either pulling requisites out of thin air, defending attributes as intrinsically “good” civic qualities, justifying choices on the grounds that other scholars concur, or that these stipulations intuitively appear democratically pertinent. Obviously, we insist on an immense, perhaps impossible, undertaking. We agree, and, to be frank, we hardly expect old habits to be immediately abandoned.

HIDDEN AGENDAS OF DEMOCRATIC COMPETENCE

Analysis has thus remained silent regarding those political visions underlying democratic governance. Although these foundations are rarely explicated, it is evident that civic competence devotees are hardly of a single mind here. These future betterments range from the radical to more humdrum conceptions stressing elections. We would hardly expect otherwise: reasonable definitions of “democracy” are almost inexhaustible. This divergence is critical for our understanding of civic capacity, though researchers conveniently avoid this implication. Definitional variance means that each proffered democracy brings its own unique competency.⁸ Invoking any particular fitness agenda, in effect, commands one form of democratic politics versus another. Thus understood, varied civic competency approaches are much closer to ideological battles over the “good society” than technical disputes over accomplishing shared objectives.

This coupling of competence ideals and specific political arrangements becomes self-evident if one formulated a “citizen” job description. A single, universal citizenship standard is unattainable so long as nations differ—a genius one place may be a knave elsewhere. In the former Soviet Union, for instance, civic expertise might entail paranoia lest one fell victim to informers, a flair for circumventing impossible-to-follow rules, a theatrical talent for feigning adherence to a disbelieved ideology, and a robust sense of fatalism. These are hardly estimable democratic traits. Whether these were, indeed, the exact requirements, is not critical. They merely illustrate the specificity of proficiency, a perfectly adequate democratic citizen might face a terrible time in a dictatorship, and vice versa.

To appreciate this mischievous element in promoting currently less-than-well-satisfied democracy competencies, consider as heightened passion for social justice coupled with invigorated activism. These requested qualities appear in multiple democratic sufficiency admonitions and seem plausible enough. Can we say with a reasonable certainty that these supposed profi-

ciencies enhance existing democracy? Hardly. Something quite different is being advanced though it, too, may be—legitimately—classified as “democratic.” Conceivably, mobilizing citizens in this direction will push conflict to levels barely contained by present institutional bulwarks dependent on moderate disinterest and acceptable imperfection. How can this newsprung passion tolerate legal technicalities—due process or majority rule—if they regularly impede coveted social justice? If social justice cannot be achieved via the ballot box, perhaps other, more disruptive tactics are warranted. It is the open-ended, uncertain impact of this new element that sounds the alarm. In a sense, introducing new citizen attributes resembles inserting nonnative creatures into an environment; ecological impact is never certain and betterment is seldom guaranteed. It is *different* democracy, not *better* democracy, being fashioned here.

Equally notable about these new and improved civic sufficiency exhortations is that they betray a neglect of the traditional alleged pillars of democratic governance. Here, the connection to democracy appears far stronger, though hardly a scientific law. Opportunity costs apply to citizenship building just as they govern economics; something is inevitably sacrificed in the quest for new and improved. There are real dangers from neglecting vital, in-place citizen democratic capabilities at the expense of chasing alluring unproven novelties. The old adage of dancing with the girl you brought surely applies here.

Several “oldies but goodies” qualities immediately come to mind as worthy of protection as opposed to chasing after fresh allures. Perhaps foremost is a sense of national loyalty and attachment to the constitutional order. These attributes are not, of course, distinctly democratic, yet it is equally clear that democracy is impossible without them: necessary but not definitionally democratic, if you will. Distressing internecine brutality over national definition in the former Soviet Union, what was once Yugoslavia, large portion of sub-Saharan Africa, and elsewhere demonstrate the incompatibility of democracy with endemic civic discord. Try conducting elections or reasoned debates amid tribalistic civil wars or without agreement on fundamental institutional arrangements.

That such citizen affection is commonly mechanically instilled in ways at odds with the challenge-existing-verities theme permeating democratic competency speculation deserves mention. Is democracy truly served if grade school pupils are instructed, for example, that the United States deserves close critical inspection so that its oversight of some nebulous “fairness” is exposed? Must every fifth grader freely decide whether the United States warrants his or her loyalty? Is history to be taught as an assault on tradition to free citizens from shibboleths? This is exceedingly risky negligence. Do we want to have the coup d'état become a viable element in the activist repertoire?

Similarly, rushing to promote fresh appreciations of alleged neglected subjects, for example, “critical thinking,” easily depreciates the rule of law versus idiosyncratic personal morality. Law in a democracy, it would seem, is legitimate insofar as it flows from stipulated democratic procedures; for example, it was legislatively enacted or promulgated by authorized agencies. Its disagreeableness might instigate demands for revision, but deficiency does not warrant disobedience. Alternatively, if a grievous legal error has transpired, appeal to the courts. Respect for established process is fundamental. This approach stands in stark contrast to an arrangement in which everyone, as per some enlightened democratic vision, is encouraged to judge autonomously the personal applicability of legal strictures as the badge of one’s superior competence. Such dubious legal empowerment would surely wreak havoc with democratic governance, not build a civic Utopia.

These venerable attributes hardly exhaust potential candidates for inclusion into the democratic competence menu. What is notable about these (and similar qualities) is their existing pervasiveness (and disregard by betterment seekers). All seem to exist in sufficient supply though, to be sure, slight improvements are always welcome. The rush to rescue democracy from impending collapse via crusades for new and improved citizen upgrades may thus be unwarranted or, at best, a trivial improvement. If an agenda for action exists, a better case can be made for reinvigorating the tried and true. These are the esteemed qualities—affection for the political order, respect for the rule of law, a cool-headedness regarding political disputes, a toleration differences of political viewpoint, among others—that have undoubtedly long sustained our democracy, warts and all. Although perhaps not as “sexy” as, say, daily denouncing injustice, they demand scholarly attentiveness.

A DIFFERENT APPROACH TO POLITICAL COMPETENCE

Our review initially distinguished between two types of political competence often undifferentiated in the research literature. Democratic competence referred to traits obligatory for democratic governance, for example, a penchant for voting versus bomb throwing. The second quality is political skill, for example, being an accomplished voter, not exclusively democratic. These two distinct qualities, it will be recalled, have a complex (and very much underexamined) relationship. To wit, a “good democrat” may be baffled when navigating referenda choices, while the politically adroit might direct his or her energies to terrorism.⁹

Having explored the murkiness of democratic competence, let us now turn to the skill-based competence part of this story. Put sharply, how can ordinary citizens become better political players, hopefully within a democratic framework, without Soviet-style compulsory mobilization or educational miracles?

This normative concern doubtlessly informs much of the competency literature, though rarely made explicit. It is especially prominent among those uneasy about SES-related proficiency differences.

The place to begin is to acknowledge the prevailing analytical framework informing research into enhanced competence. With scant exception, it is the *individual* who is proficient or, more commonly, requires upgrading. That is, individuals should be more involved, better informed, more sensitive to divergent values, more sophisticated ideologically, attentive to daily injustices, or whatever. Even among acknowledged egalitarians, the individual (albeit one belonging to a specific group) still remains central—the downtrodden, for example, must be politically mobilized or taught the subtleties of political struggle. That some disadvantaged interest or demographic entity might gain astuteness *collectively*, apart from uplifting each member separately, escapes analytical notice. Deeply ingrained cultural individualism conceivably unconsciously steers investigation away from group-centered betterment.

This individual centered framework intensifies the remediation task; the strenuous engineering must necessarily apply to millions, addressed one at a time. This is a tall order, and, not unexpectedly given the failure of so many past schemes, contemporary solutions often have a pie-in-the-sky quality. Delli Carpini and Keeter, for instance, wistfully hope that the politically infused music of Ice-T, Sister Soulja, or other rap stars will invigorate political awareness among African Americans (p. 277). When advances are claimed regarding popular proficiency, this unearthing, more often than not, rests on statistically extracting “competence” from data of uncertain relevance. Although technically satisfying, this demonstration is more smoke and mirrors than real. Naïve optimism in education’s power to uplift is similarly pervasive. Only if teachers were enthusiastic, had inspirational textbooks, could expose pupils to exciting political struggles, or possess other just-beyond-reach elixirs, a democratic citizenry would blaze forth. Or so it is hoped. More up-to-date correctives herald technological gimmicks—Net-based mobilization, electronic town meetings, interactive cable shows, and similar tricks to stir the slumbering. Although often ingenious and lavishly funded, these panaceas, too, fall short.

Fortunately for fans of heightened competency, the dismal track record here scarcely dooms progress. It is possible, we contend, to enhance civic capacity substantially, all the while heeding democratic strictures. Remediation, moreover, is especially pertinent to those currently less competent—for example, the poor or recently arrived immigrants. And, competence devotees will be glad to hear, the recipe is readily available, feasible, and, more important, has proven successful. What, pray tell, is the secret? The rejection of individually centered democratic politics is central. Instead of refurbishing millions, one person at a time, few of whom crave this supposed betterment, expertise is achieved by top down direction of the less capable by the more dexterous.

If getting people to pursue, vigorously and astutely, their interest absolutely democratically without everybody embodying these advantageous attributes, the pertinent model is the adept organization. The befuddled outsource competence just as they hire experts to manage their finances or cure their medical maladies. Democracy is assured via organizational democratic behavior: the blood-soaked peasant revolt (or urban riot) gives way to farmers dutifully paying dues to support expert lobbyists deftly navigating legislatures and bureaucracies. Farmers are not tutored in the intricacies of agricultural price supports or the mysteries of government access. Nor are they expected to assess the worthiness of competing campaign appeals. These arduous tasks are accomplished by hiring well-trained economists for this job. If these hired hands prove inept or corrupt, a new crop is employed until the outcome is satisfactory. Labor unions have long embraced this model in gaining political influence for members assuredly challenged by the most elementary political dilemmas (and even corrupt unions have often gained considerable economic benefits for their members).

Democracy at the system level flourishes when organizations abide by the rules, not when constituents embrace abstract principles. Farmers may thus be dazzling adroit at democratic politics though each peasant might favor a modern day Shays' Rebellion if acting autonomously. Well-directed campaign contributions replace violently disrupting court proceedings. This logic, moreover, is applicable to any group currently on the "to-be-democratically-improved" list. For those seeking a more equitable distribution of government-supplied benefits, the key is extending a model of politics that has proven itself among the wealthier. A worthy national model might be Sweden where democratic politics is ably, though centrally, directed. Note well, nothing in this vision precludes independent action. Every person may elect to be their own lawyer or doctor though these experts are available; only the accessibility of this option for those wishing heightened proficiency is vital.

This "let-others-do-it-better" approach will surely offend those intoxicated with mysteriously upgrading citizens into junior Philosopher Kings. The dutiful follower hardly conforms to the noble image of "democratic citizen." Unfortunately, this romantic vision has proven futile and will probably prove even less feasible as politics daily becomes even more complicated. Alluring crusades are admirable, but at some point concrete accomplishment must be expected. What permits competence via outsourcing to outshine its individualistic rivals is its grim acceptance of limits in reshaping human capacity. Hecctoring ordinary people to upgrade their political expertise, let alone compulsory reschooling, asks far too much and, conceivably, invites totalitarian human reengineering.

Individual-centered remediation efforts are likely to fail for two reasons, one well known and pedestrian, the other less prominent and controversial. The first impediment is the familiar popular disinterest in heeding the admo-

nitions of those demanding a newsprung expertise. Ushering in a Golden Age of Invigorated Citizenship entails excessive commitment in a world overflowing with competing demands. Even if sufficient leisure were plentiful, new nonpolitical activities would undoubtedly be far more appealing, despite scoldings from scholars guarding our political health. The Home Shopping Network inevitably trumps C-SPAN. The political landscape is littered with failed efforts to energize public attentiveness, let alone augment adequacy.

The more somber impediment that goes unmentioned in developing popular acumen concerns innate cognitive capacity. Harshly stated, many individuals, but particularly those to whom the democratic competence remediation is most essential, cannot be upgraded. No amount of tinkering, regardless of resource commitment, will square this circle. This reality may be unwelcome, exceptionally distasteful, and certainly controversial for some idealists, but it is scientifically true. If this civic enhancement campaign substituted, say, training a nation of nuclear physicists, its futility would be self-evident. Only when our “beyond reach” argument is applied to modern-day politics does this pessimism become castigated as elitist, mean-spirited, or even antidemocratic. Our rejoinder is that to insist that mass competency, taken one person at a time, is reachable ignores indisputable scientific evidence and past failures; it comfortably conflates being “prodemocratic” with a lofty fantasy. It is this gloomy view that rests on science, whereas optimists offer little more than unfounded good intentions.

Our disputatious argument begins by acknowledging the difficulty of *intelligent* individual political action. This is seriously underestimated by those calling for substantial personal improvement. Admittedly, politics is not rocket science, but tasks well short of rocket science are beyond many people—even with extensive coaching. Self-selected students at elite universities can be mystified when confronting elementary rules guiding U.S. politics. To intimate that ordinary citizens can somehow navigate issues vexing full-time public officials with ample technical assistance betrays a disconnection from reality. The advantages of specialization are not invalidated once politics is encountered.

The long record of failed consumer education campaigns only reinforces this pessimism. If “good education” could transform ordinary citizens into discerning shoppers, the untold statutes and government agencies designed to protect consumers from deceptive practices would be unnecessary. Ditto for all the warning labels or relentless public health campaigns. These protective laws are monuments to education’s futility. Why assume that those hapless buyers easily hoodwinked by overblown advertising, deceitful packaging, exploitive loan contracts, and all else bedeviling millions can successfully be made resistant to demagogical magic bullet nostrums? In consumer affairs, laws enforced by trained experts, not intensive person-to-person remediation, is the practical solution; the answer proposed for politics is quite similar.

To appreciate this arduousness, consider what executing even a simple act proficiently requires. Any semiliterate person can draft a letter to a public official, but crafting a readable, informed missive, and mailing it to the appropriate person (whose exact address has to be located) in a timely fashion may be unrealizable for most people. At best, the less able merely sign a petition and let experts handle the bothersome details. These cognitive burdens increase as the task become more intricate; this is of momentous importance. Filing a persuasive lawsuit (and funding it) may rival rocket science in its ingenuity, and expecting impoverished citizens to instigate successfully this action autonomously is folly. Prodigious apt assistance is vital, and it makes scant difference how it is secured. To expect the deficient to be savvy political players automatically consigns them to only the simplest acts. The civil rights movement's notable legal triumphs attest to this strategy. A few brilliant lawyers won immense courtroom victories for people uninterested in legal esoterica. Political skill, as in performing well economically, requires ample cognitive talent, and this relationship grows closer as we move to more exacting assignments.

A second key point here is that these cognitive shortcomings cannot be overcome, at least without totalitarian measures. This does *not* mean that education is wasted on the less capable or that other capacities cannot substitute for cognitive talent. That discouraging view is clearly preposterous in light of what is accomplished daily. Our argument is merely that this upgrading has a ceiling, and beyond a certain point, all the schooling (and hectoring) will not engender betterment. Modest progress does not foretell an eventual leveling. Trillions of dollars for failed help-the-disadvantaged schemes speak forcefully (though surprisingly quietly) to this point. Academic differences among children appear intractable despite lavish funding and endless initially guaranteed-to-succeed nostrums such as Head Start, multicultural curriculums, role model teachers, classroom technology, and the like.¹⁰ The U.S. military and private businesses have all made monumental, sincere efforts to train the less cognitively capable for more intellectually demanding positions with scant success (Gottfredson, 1997, recounts these failures). The nature versus nurture debate regarding cognitive talent is irrelevant here. Even if these gaps were 100% environmentally caused (hardly likely), it does not automatically follow that they can be bridged by social engineering. Raising the spectra of biology or *Brave New World* to discredit a cognitive difference-based argument is a chimera.

Intellectual aptitude divergence has a powerful (though usually ignored) implication for schemes to flood society with new information, ingeniously packaged, to achieve the competency upgrade. This stratagem will only exacerbate differences. The cognitively advantaged, by definition, master information quicker and more efficiently than the less talented. This is exactly what

cognitive talent means. When all students receive the identical lesson, the smart ones generally get A's, the less intelligent C's.¹¹ The more information to be absorbed, the greater the advantage accruing to the brighter, and—critically—learning advantages increase as the materials grow more complicated. If everyone were exposed to thrice-a-week mandatory tutorials on exacting political conundrums, the less cognitively talented would extract the least, and their failings would progressively increase. If strict equality were sought, a superior tactic is to ban all new information. This is what plainly occurs in schooling—tiny gaps among kindergarteners expand with age as the cognitively superior successively add to their dominance.

The final argument ingredient concerns cognitive talent-economic position relationship. The two are closely related—those at the socioeconomic bottom are the least able measured by cognitive talent (Herrnstein and Murray, 1994, ch. 2; Murray, 1997). Obviously, it takes more brains to be a doctor than a truck driver, and this relationship even applies to economic differences within job classification (e.g., smart truck drivers out earn doltish ones). The political corollary is unavoidable: the poor will generally be outgunned by the wealthier in a battle of wits among individuals when wits are the principal political resource. What makes our argument controversial is that this advantage flows from *immutable* mental ability, not some vague reversible “unearned privilege,” “unfair advantage,” or similar domination that can be overturned by instructing the less affluent. As truck drivers cannot be instructed into doctors, the politically inept cannot be made ingenious by enrolling them in Harvard's Kennedy School of Government. If this is disputed, skeptics should try upgrading high school dropouts into “A”-level political science students by awarding them extra attention. The inexorable conclusion is that if the political disadvantage of the poor is to be overcome individually, their cognitive skills must be enhanced, while preventing similar rises among the better off. Once again, outside of totalitarian eugenics, this is beyond our democratic reach.

Enhancing competence (and of the democratic variety, to boot) in spite of this cognitive capacity-economic position relationship is not especially daunting, at least compared to proffered alternatives. Strong, democratically disposed interest groups have already been mentioned as a collective competency vehicle. They merely have to be extended to those now dependent on self-initiated action. With this accomplished, the playing field is both more level and assuredly democratic since conflict exists on a group-to-group basis minimizing between group cognitive differences. If necessary, those especially deficient in cognitive skill can “rent” advocates, for example, the homeless pool their meager resources and hire a capable law firm or seek pro bono representation. Talented outsiders can surely effectively champion one's cause, and just as Max Weber vowed, the gains from bureaucratization will be formidable. The homeless might be oblivious to quirks in zoning ordinances

or stumped when debating bureaucrats, but these tasks can still be executed proficiently and, critically, democratically.

The singular mechanism most suited to overcoming a politics weighted toward cognitive advantage is the sturdy, centralized political party. This fearsome, number-driven creature, famously depicted in Michels's *Political Parties* (1949), has historically delivered the economic goods to those below in ways perfectly consistent with society-wide democracy (remember that Michel only criticized internal party democracy). The disciplined, knowledgeable army replaces the rag-tag mob of disorganized individuals, each trying to crack vexatious political choices. And, this mechanism scarcely infringes on competing nonpolitical appetites—one need only vote correctly or pays modest dues. In lieu of romantic fantasies about millions individually calculating intricate political equations, the party's bureaucracy navigates these quandaries. If not, more effective defenders are found. This process resembles the financially inept hiring a financial planner and deciding his or her continued employment via plain-to-see quarterly monetary returns.

An intriguing irony is embedded here. Today's democratic competency prophets commonly celebrate enlightened individual autonomy. This is the gold standard. In their imaginary polis, citizens skillfully reflect on their desires, assess the pros and cons, balance individual gain against the common good, and then eruditely advance their preferences democratically. This archetype is undeniably intoxicating, even blinding. Alas, within this allure there lurks the vision's very undoing. Fans of the multitude acting brilliantly alone have it backward. Awakening the crowd to govern cannot create an assembly of equals other than in legal standing. Elevation cannot abolish preexisting cognitive differences, and denying this awkward disparity hardly levels the playing field. Ritualistically invoking "more education" is but self-defeating denial. Flattering dismissal of these inequalities only guarantees the highly endowed (who are generally the wealthier) the competitive advantage. Eventually, heightened autonomy can politically devastate the less capable as they autonomously pursue dubious, if not harmful, schemes. Let the downtrodden hire a brilliant champion, if competitive fairness is the aim. Spellbinders should battle each other, not amateurs. This assignment hardly abdicates power; it is a reversible transfer of discretion. In exchange for the illusionary joy of imperfect "participation" one secures the benefits of political astuteness.

CONCLUSIONS

Analysis commenced by asserting that democracy was undoubtedly embedded in a competent citizenry. How it exists, however, is a momentous puzzle. After all is said and done, have we drawn any closer to an answer? We have both good news and bad news to report. Let us start with the tale's bleak side.

Most plainly, the democratic political competence literature is in disarray, top to bottom. This is less a flaw with specific studies than with the enterprise taken as a whole. New attributes are all too easily added to the alleged desiderata inventory, and, not surprisingly, coherence across analyses vanishes. Confusion also bedevils basic terminology, for example, separating general civic expertise from narrower democratic proficiency. Proffered qualities are often more notable for their amorphous idealism or conformity to passing trends. Among the empirically minded, the invocation, “democratic theory requires citizens to” often constitutes an empty decorative line supplying “relevance” for a data analysis exercise of uncertain consequentiality. This idiosyncratic make-it-up-as-you-go-along inclination is irrepressible. Absolutely nothing forbids any quality, no matter how uncertain, from being advanced as “essential to a democratic citizenry.”

The lurking empirical problems are serious. Connecting specific attributes to democracy as a system of governance is the most formidable nut to crack. How can we prove that a certain quality, at a measured level, in conjunction with other itemized attributes, is indispensable for democratic vitality? This quest is not animal husbandry, in which we can confidently determine that if zinc is removed from the diet, health deteriorates. Additional quandaries concern how attributes should be calibrated or whether a subjective sense of adequacy can serve as the genuine competency article. The universality of any democratic formula is likewise a troubling issue. That this theorizing is almost wholly restricted to U.S. politics is an analytical shortcoming almost too obvious to dwell on. Sad to say, these inescapably empirical and measurement conundrums remain seriously neglected.

Fans of dispassionate scientific inquiry should be especially alarmed at the commonplace conflation of ideological advocacy with objective scientific analysis. Ideological espousal per se is not the qualm; it is the mislabeling that draws rebuke. Traits promoted as democratic enhancements are often but Trojan Horse devices, contrary pleas aside. It is disingenuous to insist that augmented passions for social justice or a newsprung ardor for diversity will merely consummate—not alter—the status quo. Even humdrum qualities, for example, greater civic awareness, can have unforeseen political ramifications inimical to status quo democracy. Political engineering, especially when knowledge regarding future impacts is skimpy, is not to be pursued lightly. Rabbits might be cute, but their introduction to Australia hardly entranced Australians disposed to cuddly little creatures.

The upbeat news comes in two forms, difficult to accomplish and easy. The challenging news is that democratic competency is feasible *if* the group is accepted as the unit of competency analysis. This choice is largely practical, not a deduction from some lofty citizenship conception. Rejected in this remediation effort is individually upgrading the deficient. The interest group or,

better yet, strong political parties are what we have suggested for this cure. The great quandary of instilling an attraction for democratic procedures among those of limited education becomes less pressing. Naturally, no guarantees can be promised, and many competence devotees will find this solution unappetizing, even smacking of "elitism," yet this model deserves serious attention. It certainly outshines the parade of failed nostrums and Utopian dreams.

Now for really great news. The United States, by all accounts, is democratic, and to the extent that this status rests on a supportive citizenry, sounding the alarm regarding dangerous deficiency is unwarranted. Ours is scarcely democratic heaven on earth, to be sure, but the status quo is commendable, even enviable. If one were to catalogue these plain-to-see qualities, everything from peaceful elections to toleration for political differences, many nations seeking democracy would be exceedingly covetous. Does anyone seriously fear that the army will assume power if the generals reject the president-elect? Where is our Bureau of State Security shipping dissenters off to the Gulags? Imagine if the United States, like Columbia during a recent election, had to deploy 15,000 troops to protect candidates from murder and kidnapping threats? (Adjusted for population, this would have meant have nearly 120,000 U.S. soldiers to guarantee candidate safety.) Those who disagree with this upbeat portrait can typically only make their case by resurrecting convoluted historical facts with zero contemporary relevance or fixating on murky ephemera.

Given this palpable fact, imploring that more be done to ensure democracy appears as a cure sans disorder. To repeat, the United States is hardly some Third World nation overwhelmed by the prospect of conducting a free election, let alone inculcating the very idea of a loyal opposition. Citizens never resort to vigilantism to overturn unpopular court decisions. And on and on. That being the case, why then does democracy require its citizens to possess a burning passion for social justice or a knack for unraveling knotty moral quandaries? Or any of the other necessities that are allegedly in short supply? Will our democracy collapse if millions of voters are perpetually confused or dumbfounded in explaining how a bill becomes a law? Apparently not. When all is said and done, everything seems to work satisfactorily, and most essentially, it is accomplished democratically. If there is a lesson to be extracted here, it is that today's competency inquiries might be somewhat askew. Spinning out novel desiderata or imputing democratic citizen competency where none seems evident may be empty exercises. Make no mistake, scrutinizing civic competency in its myriad forms remains a research topic of the first order. Ditto for helping to sustain these capacities. What we are suggesting here is that the competence enterprise remains very much a theoretical work in progress.

NOTES

1. We should admit that this definition has become less rock solid in recent decades. The force of cultural relativism is now making itself felt in how “competency” is defined. One example of this shift rejects this OED II standard as “Eurocentric” and instead stresses traits such as ethnic awareness, a positive view of one’s ethnicity and a capacity to promote ethnic survival (Freeman, 1994). The possibility that the competency notions currently infusing empirical social science betray a single cultural viewpoint cannot be dismissed out of hand.
2. It is perhaps impossible to exaggerate just how complicated “competence” can be made when studiously probed. A useful overview can be found in Smith (1968).
3. Even the legal definition of “competence” is equivocally defined despite centuries of theorizing, untold court cases, and prodigious efforts of contemporary legal scholars. Court proceedings to determine if, for example, a person is capable of handling their finances or raising children are often quite contentious with experts differing on both the facts and definitions. Yet, this might be snap compared to bringing citizens to court to certify their “political competence.” For a superb exegesis of the legal and medical issues swirling around “competence,” see Pepper-Smith, Harvey, and Silberfeld (1996).
4. Technically, of course, this is false—several totalitarian parties, such as the Communists, were on the ballot for decades, and voters could have legally selected any of them. Nevertheless, it is hard to build an analysis on this transparent, nonbarking dog, fact. This empirical quandary would not be true if analysis were directed at the 1932 German election.
5. The *reductio ad absurdum* philosophical quandaries here are riveting. That is, if one accepts this capacity-certifies-democracy argument, and only the postelection survey can authenticate adroitness, it then follows that polling is essential for democratic vitality. Without the poll, we can only speculate that, indeed, the election outcome was truly democratic. In effect, the polling industry now becomes an election commission adding yet one more item to the usual list of mandatory fairness requirements.
6. It is worth noting that competency inventories associated with survey research show scant overlap with nonpoll-based listings. For example, Wilson (2000), in his explanation of democratic survival, mentions private property, low ethnic conflict, and democratic tradition (among other characteristics). These attributes might be profitably converted into poll-assessed traits. At a minimum they demand scrutiny in a well-rounded analysis. One also reasonably might add an inclination toward compromise, social trust, religious heterogeneity, a degree of honesty, and untold other qualities appearing in comparative analysis that have escaped the attention of those inclined toward U.S. surveys. We are not accusing survey practitioners of myopia, but to reiterate the bewildering array of proffered “democratic requirements.”
7. Bennett cites a half dozen or so other studies making this argument on behalf of subjective reality. Notably absent is even the possibility that these views are nothing more than paying homage to civic oughts or that, more likely, a disengagement from harsh reality. Apparently, measuring perception versus the real thing is just too tempting.
8. The troublesome nature of the relationship between competency visions and politics cannot be exaggerated. The guiding assumption appears to be “better citizens make better democracy.” This is a paralogism without any empirical proof. Much of what passes for scholarship here might better be depicted as would-be sightless social engineering. This theme is developed at greater length in Weissberg (1981).
9. This relationship can be viewed as a 2×2 table of competencies. The “competent democratic” is obviously to be preferred to the “competent antidemocrat,” with the other two possibilities falling in between.

10. No doubt, the argument against cognitive improvement makes many academics uneasy while alarming others. To repeat, the scientific evidence here is overwhelming, though who can predict what miracle may change everything. The usual medley of improvement factors—better infant nutrition, early intellectual stimulation, nurturing parents, intensive preschool instruction, among other remedies—have not proven effective. Only in extreme instances, for example, for children raised in extreme isolation or children with severe nutritional illnesses, can intervention substantially boost intelligence (and then only to levels that would be predicted from other factors). The Head Start program in particular has received intense scientific scrutiny, and the consensus is that, whatever else good it may bring, it does not remediate intelligence gaps. This literature is carefully summarized in Jensen (1998, ch. 11).
11. Obviously, factors such as work ethic and resources affect outcomes, and, indeed, the less cognitively talented sometimes outshine their more intelligent compatriots. This is *not* an argument, however, for the irrelevance of intellectual talent. In fact, if one equalized all resources outside of intellectual ability, this talent would be the *only* factor making a difference. Pushed to its logical limits, equality might be achievable only if the more mentally gifted were consciously hindered.

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