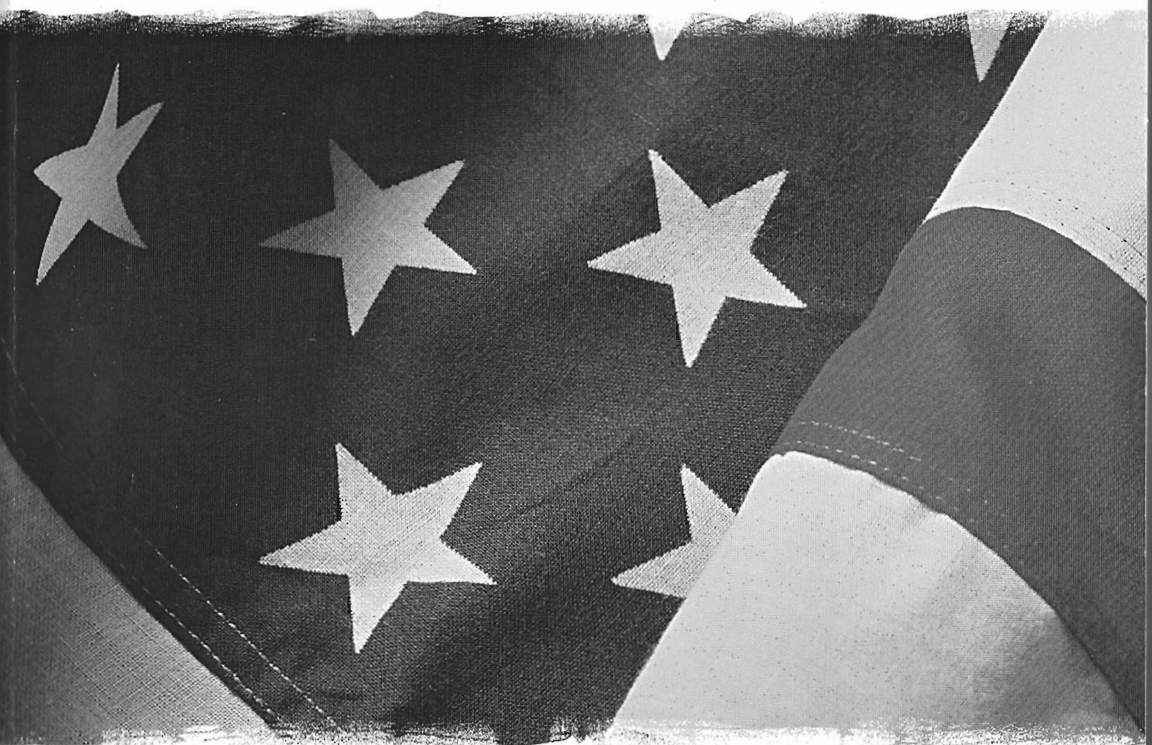


# DANGEROUS DEMOCRACY?



## THE BATTLE OVER BALLOT INITIATIVES IN AMERICA

EDITED BY

LARRY J. SABATO • HOWARD R. ERNST • BRUCE A. LARSON

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## Dumber than Chimps? An Assessment of Direct Democracy Voters

*Arthur Lupia*

In "The Populist Legacy: Initiatives and the Undermining of Representative Government," Bruce E. Cain and Kenneth P. Miller compare the current practice of direct democracy to the ideal of its Progressive Era advocates. Their comparison is thorough and multifaceted. They claim that "the actual operation of the initiative process violates a number of norms that have evolved in advanced democracies." My essay focuses on the claim that initiatives violate one specific norm—the norm of accountability.

Cain and Miller claim that direct democracy violates the norm of accountability. They say that accountability occurs when "voters know what their representatives have done in office and through their ballots appropriately reward or punish them." In other words, Cain and Miller claim that direct democracy voters do not know enough to appropriately reward or punish those who put measures on the ballot.

In an ideal world, direct democracy voters research the issues before them. But, as Cain and Miller point out, ours is not an ideal world. Instead, citizens learn much of what they know about ballot measures from bumper stickers, sound bites, interest-group endorsements, and slick thirty-second advertisements. At the same time, public opinion polls show that citizens are bad at answering questions about politics. Like many observers, Cain and Miller take facts such as these as evidence of voter incompetence.

Are Cain and Miller correct to doubt the competence of direct democracy voters? To answer this question, it is important to define competence precisely. Following definitions of intelligent performance from the cognitive sciences, I define voter competence as follows: A voter's choice is competent if it is the same choice that she would make given the most accurate available information about its consequence. Would she cast the same vote if fully informed about its consequences? If yes, then her choice is competent. An electorate containing a large number of competent voters satisfies Cain and Miller's accountability norm.

This definition of competence stipulates only that the voter chooses as if she were well informed. It leaves open the possibility that encyclopedic information about issues is not required. This definition stands at odds with prevailing definitions of competence in political science—definitions that demand encyclopedic levels of knowledge and focus on attentiveness to political detail. For something like knowledge of details to be a necessary condition for competence, however, people should be able to make reliable predictions about the consequences of their actions only if they know a particular, detailed set of facts about these actions. But this assumption is false. Citizens can and do use limited amounts of information to make the same choices they would have made if they had more information.

Suppose, for example, that knowledge of a particular set of facts is sufficient for a competent choice (e.g., suppose that knowing Bill Clinton's position on one hundred political issues is sufficient for a competent vote in the 1996 U.S. presidential election). Then, if a person does not know these facts, and cannot access any other facts that allow her to make the same choice, she cannot choose competently. If, however, there exists another, perhaps simpler, set of facts that leads her to make the same choice (i.e., the Sierra Club and the AFL-CIO endorse Clinton), then knowing the initial set of facts is not a prerequisite for competence. When a few, simple pieces of information can lead citizens to make the same choices that many, complex pieces of information do, citizens can be competent without having detailed information. In sum, competence and information are different. Competence is the ability to make accurate predictions; information is data.

Of course, direct democracy confronts voters with choices that are very complex. So, it is reasonable to ask, "How does complexity affect voter competence?" The answer to this question is that voter competence is helped by a common attribute of initiatives and referendums—nearly all ask voters to make a binary choice. The typical ballot measure asks voters to choose one of two alternatives—the piece of legislation described on the ballot or the status quo policy. A direct democracy voter is competent when she chooses the same alternative that she would choose given the best available information about the consequences of doing so. Even if both alternatives are very technical, a competent voter need only figure out which of the two alternatives is better than the other—having more detailed information will not change her vote.

Cain and Miller's accountability concern, which is really a concern about voter competence, can be restated as: Can voters (or elec-

torates) choose the better of two alternatives? To begin to answer this question, I propose a simple thought experiment. Suppose, for a moment, we allow the outcome of a direct democracy election to be determined by chimpanzees. Suppose further that instead of reading newspapers, watching television, and talking to others, the chimps base their voting decisions on the flip of a coin. What can we say about the competence of this electorate? To clarify the example, suppose further that one of the two alternatives is indeed better for the voters in question—a luxury not universally afforded to political choices. Let “heads” represent the policy outcome that is best for all voters. So, if the coin-flipping voters choose tails, then we can all agree that they are incompetent.

In this scenario, one chimp with a fair coin can make a competent choice (heads) 50 percent of the time, on average. In many decision-making venues, a 50 percent success rate is regarded as a good thing. In politics, however, many people desire a higher rate of competence, something approximating 100 percent. If this is true, then one chimp with a fair coin is insufficient.

Now let’s change the example a bit by giving each chimp a coin that is slightly unfair. In particular, imagine that each chimp has a coin that gives the correct choice (heads) 51 percent of the time. This is not much greater than 50 percent and is far short of the 100 percent correctness that we desire. But there is no reason to make any single chimp a policy dictator. So let’s determine society’s choice by a referendum of coin-flipping chimps, using majority rule to determine whether heads or tails wins the election.

When we do this, things change dramatically. To see why this is true, we rely on a bit of eighteenth-century mathematics, the Generalized Condorcet Jury Theorem (Grofman and Feld 1988). The theorem shows that collective decision-making processes can overcome the errors of individual decision making. The theorem states that if each voter is more likely than not to make a correct choice, then as the number of voters goes to infinity, the probability that a majority will make the correct choice goes to one.

What does the theorem tell us about the competence of our chimp electorate? Grofman and Feld (1988, 571) give a preliminary indication, where  $p$  is the probability that a single coin generates the right answer and “a competence of .98” implies that an electoral majority makes a competent choice ninety-eight times out of one hundred.

Even for average group competence  $p$  near .5, the expected judgmental accuracy of large assemblies is considerable. For example, even if  $p$  is only .51, a 399-member assembly has a competence of .66, while if  $p = .55$ , a 399-member assembly has a competence of

.98. For a reasonable level of  $p$  (e.g.,  $p = .6$ ), even relatively small assemblies (of size greater than 41) have a group competence level PN above .9. For  $p = .7$ , an assembly of only size 11 will have a group competence level of above .9.

The electorates that students of direct democracy are used to dealing with number somewhat more than 399, but somewhat less than infinity. So I close this thought experiment by citing the result for two different-sized electorates—one of one million chimps (the approximate size of electorates in many U.S. states) and one of ten million chimps (the approximate size of electorates in the largest U.S. states). In both cases, the Jury Theorem tells us that a majority chooses the correct answer approximately 100 percent of the time. So, for electorates of the size of most U.S. states, even an electorate filled with 51 percent coin-flipping chimps chooses correctly about 100 percent of the time.

If an electorate of chimps with slightly unfair coins can choose the best alternative approximately 100 percent of the time, what does this imply about competence of human voters in direct democracy elections? Are we dumber than chimps?

While this question may seem fanciful at first, the human voters’ superiority cannot be taken for granted. The chimps have at least one advantage that human voters do not. The coins do not try to mislead the chimps. Indeed, the Jury Theorem works only if every voter on average is more likely than not to make an accurate prediction. If large segments of the electorate are easily or systematically led to vote against their interests, then the competence of the electorate is in peril.

As recent research (Sniderman, Brody, and Tetlock 1991; Lupia 1994; Bowler and Donovan 1998; Lupia and McCubbins 1998) shows, our ability to choose competently depends on how we use the limited information to which we attend. This is true not only of voting, but of nearly every conscious decision we make. We collapse complex phenomena into simple categories that we can later use and process quickly. We do not take these actions randomly, but when we observe aspects of the environment that have systematic and similar properties, we convert them into informational shortcuts, some of which are better known as brand names, interest-group endorsements, personal reputations, or political ideologies.

Cain and Miller assert that if voters rely on shortcuts, “then they delegate power to a new class of mediators who are also unaccountable if something goes wrong.” Their concern is valid, though it presumes that using shortcuts is a recourse used only by lazy voters rather than a general attribute of human cognition (Marcus, Neu-

man, and MacKuen 2000). The key to competence in direct democracy is the voters who use shortcuts (which is to say nearly all direct democracy voters) for making correct decisions about whom to trust. The research cited above reveals that transparency and feedback regarding the interests of those who attempt to persuade voters are essential elements of voter competence. The research further implies that ensuring publicly visible competition among initiative proponents and supporters induces transparency and feedback—for if someone has the opportunity to expose the opposing side's weaknesses, the competitive nature of politics gives them a strong incentive to go public.

The theory and evidence produced by scientists over the last two decades reveal that common stereotypes about voter incompetence rely on shaky theoretical and empirical foundations. They show that if there are people who are willing to provide simple cues to voters and there is sufficient competition for voters to learn the motives of people they listen to, then voters can approximate the binary choices they would have made if better informed. And if the electorate is large enough, then the Jury Theorem shows that not everyone in the electorate must choose competently for an electoral majority to do so.

Direct democracy voters are far more competent than commonly perceived.

### 3

## Campaign Financing of Ballot Initiatives in the American States

*Daniel Smith*

A century ago, Populist and then Progressive reformers advanced the devices of direct democracy in the United States. While the two groups of reformers were not always in agreement on policy outcomes, one of their shared goals was to limit, if not eliminate altogether, the corrosive effect of corporate money on the legislative process. The champions of direct democracy argued that by empowering ordinary citizens to participate in the making of public policy via the initiative, "the people" would be able to circumvent state legislatures that were controlled by political bosses and entrenched special interests. Acting as election-day legislators, citizens would approve ballot measures and reclaim the right of "government by the people." By devolving policymaking decisions directly to the people, the leading proponents of the process thought they could break the political stranglehold on state legislatures by party bosses and vested special interests.

Far from eliminating special-interest money from politics, as the advocates of the initiative process had hoped, the process has permitted campaign financing to play a central role in ballot measures. Today, as a century ago, ballot measures are susceptible to the same kind of financial pressures present in the legislative process. As political scientist John Shockley (1985, 427–428) laments, "As long as wealth is as unequally distributed as it is in American society, and political interest groups are organized around private rather than public rewards, ballot proposition campaigns, like American politics generally, will reflect the power of the best-organized and wealthiest groups in society." Reflecting on the past century, it becomes fairly clear that the process of direct democracy, and most notably the initiative, has not been any more immune from the in-