

THE PERSISTENT PUZZLE OF THE MINORITY DEMOCRAT

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I
ROUSSEAU writes,

Aside from [the] primitive contract, the vote of the majority always obligates all the others But it is asked how a man can be both free and forced to conform to wills that are not his own. How can the opponents be both free and be placed in subjection to laws to which they have not consented?¹

His answer is that by consenting to or willing the procedure that leads to an outcome, one consents to or wills the outcome and so remains free. A democrat, let us say, is one who wills or desires whatever gets a majority of votes (it is beside the point that few are fully democrats, or whether it is a morally defensible stance).² Democrats are then subject to their own wills even when they are in the minority.

The usual view of voting is that it involves favoring one of the alternatives over the others. If the social choice is between *A* and *B*, to vote for *A* is to favor, or will, *A* over *B* (or, more strictly, *A* and not-*B* over *B* and not-*A*). In the case where one votes for *A* but *B* wins, it appears that the winning alternative is something the minority voter wills not to be enacted. However, if this voter is a democrat, Rousseau's argument suggests that he or she wills *B* by willing whatever gets a majority. This seems to put the voter in the incomprehensible position of willing *A* and not-*A*; *A* is willed in the agent's vote, and not-*A* is willed in the agent's being a democrat.

- (1) I will that what a majority wills is enacted (even if this is *B*).³
- (2) I will that *A* be enacted.

This would appear to attribute two inconsistent attitudes to minority democrats: willing *A*, and also not-*A*.⁴

Commentators have generally concluded that the puzzle can be solved without upsetting the received understanding of democracy to any significant extent. I wish to argue that the puzzle cannot be solved as long as voting for a policy is conceived as favoring it, though I do not suppose that this undoes the possibility of democratic theory altogether. Still, since it is a central part of contemporary thought about democracy that voting is a kind of favoring, what follows is, in an important way, a defense of the puzzle's reality and importance.

Perhaps the minority voter's attitudes are not, after all, inconsistent. Consider a similar situation, but in another context—that of a losing sprinter. Supposing I am the sprinter, it is reasonable to assume that I begin the race with two desires:

- (A1) I want the first runner past the line to get the prize, even if that is not me.
- (A2) I want it to be the case that I am first past the line.

If I have these two desires, we can fairly say that I want the prize to go to me. Still, if I am beaten in the race I want the prize to go to another. There is no reason to consider these as incompatible desires, since the desire that the prize go to me is, in a way, conditional on my being fastest, which I also desire.

Once the race is over and I have lost, I needn't be thought to give up my original desire (to get the prize as a result of being first). It involves a state of affairs which I still prefer to the one that has actually come about. It has not disappeared but has been rendered moot. The two desires peacefully coexist; I haven't changed my mind on anything.⁵

Consider the minority voter's attitudes as they parallel those of the losing sprinter:

- (B1) I desire that the policy with majority support be enacted.
- (B2) I desire that *A* is the policy with majority support.

