Season 3, Episode 5: The Demons of Democracy

Full Transcript

Barry: Before we get started, I want to thank my Patreon supporters, whose monthly donations help me cover the production budget for the show. Thanks to Daniel Miller, Alyson O'Halloran, Christine Howlett, Scotty Voight, and **James crop Joe**

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Barry: Jay is a teacher in the preschool wing of his school, though that's not what he would call himself.

Jay: I'm Jay Saper and I'm an advisor at Brooklyn free school.

Barry: Brooklyn free school is a democratic school where teachers are advisors, and classes are advisories. At democratic schools kids have autonomy and get to vote about the kind of things adults usually determine for them. So it's the beginning of the year, and the first decision the kids have to make is what do they call themselves?

Jay: 'The Stinky Socks,' 'The Butterflies,' 'The Whales,' 'The T-Rex.'

Barry: There's a primary process, kind of like a caucus. Kids start making their case for a candidate, and they lobby each other. And then finally the voting.

Jay: We started to take some duplos out.

Barry: In case you aren't a parent, duplos are these big Lego blocks for preschoolers.

Jay: They got to put that duplo by the one that they wanted to vote for. And so, while they were connecting the duplos, they were like creating the bar graph, they could then see the representation of how many people were interested in the different names.

Barry: After a long and brutal primary season it came down to two candidates: the T-Rexes and the Dolphins.

Jay: So I cut out with paper representation of a dinosaur and a dolphin. We talked about what these different names meant to us, and then again, over a few days, we went through another process of handing over the duplos, voting, constructing those bar graphs. So now we are here, now are the Dolphins.

Barry: But the post-election was not without controversy. A small faction of diehard T-Rex supporters, who don't think that dolphins represent them, broke off into their own little sub-group, organizing, dissenting, making their voices heard.

Jay: We have some children who like to enter every morning, and before speaking to each other in English, those talk t-rex to one another. So lots of roaring.

Barry: Democratic schools are an interesting experiment because you're giving the people with the least political power something that no one in the outside world thinks they should have: the right to vote. Do they mess up, or do they rise to the occasion? On today's episode, we're going to look at two proposals for saving our political system from its current state, which all sides agree is dysfunctional. The first says that we need more democracy, more voting. Democratic participation in the United States is one of the lowest in all liberal democracies. we're 26th in the world, just behind Estonia. Turnout is hovering around half of eligible voters voting in presidential elections. The argument goes that, as a result of this, the most impassioned partisans disproportionally get to make the political decisions, and that is the source of our problems. The second proposal says the first proposal has it backwards. Too many people are voting, including ignorant and irrational people, and that is leading to ignorant and irrational political decisions to fix our political problems. We need less democracy. Make it so those people can't vote, and you fix the problem. Well, today on the show, we look at these arguments and we take a little snapshot of the one area in the world where things aren't usually democratic-- schools. And we see what happens when you make them democratic: is it better or worse for children when they get to vote on everything from curriculum to discipline?

Meredith: From slate, this is Hi-Phi Nation, philosophy in story form. Recording from the Center for Public philosophy at UC Santa Cruz, here's Barry Lam.

Barry: Jill Shepherd is a lecturer in politics, particularly Australian politics, at the Australian National University, and she's a big fan of compulsory voting.

Shepherd: It's incredibly popular in Australia. We don't question, it it's just a fact of life.

Barry: President Obama once touted compulsory voting as a solution to some of the problems with American politics.

Shepherd: The best thing about compulsory voting is, and this is going to sound incredibly kind of self-evident, is that it increases voter turnout. And what happens when you increase voter turnout is that you remove some of the biases among people who vote.

Barry: When you have voluntary voting, the most hyped up partisans wield a lot of power, because they're the ones mobilized to vote, and canvas, and donate money and they tend to be people who fit a certain demographic profile.

Shepherd: Well-educated, high incomes, they tend to be white, they tend to have some pre-existing kind of disposition towards politics. They may have been socialized into a political family, to have some reason for caring. In compulsory systems where everyone is compelled, you remove those biases. And we talk about this as being one of the key challenges of democracy, at the moment. That we want legislative representation to look like the people. We're not getting that.

Barry: And there are other effects. If you force everyone to vote, you have a government mandate against voter suppression. You get a consistent turnout. And you get the votes of the hyper partisans swamped by the non-partisans, which turns out to be a lot of people.

Shepperd: Now the sort of flip side to this argument about expanding the voter base is that it makes the parties really lazy, because political parties don't have to compel us to go and vote. They don't have to mobilize us, they don't have to inspire us. And the parties tend to converge in the center because they can grab the whole voter base. Ao I might be so far extreme on the right, or so far extreme on the left, and if I'm compelled to vote by law, I will still turn up and vote for the party that's closest to me. If I was in a voluntary system, and I was out in the extremes, I wouldn't turn up to vote, because the parties would be so far from me ideologically that it wouldn't be worth my time. In a compulsory system, you still turn up to vote, so the parties don't have to move. All they have to do is sit in the center.

Brennan: Ultimately that comes down to a judgment call about, is it good that democracy always does what's in the middle?

Barry: Jason Brennan is a political philosopher at Georgetown University. He doesn't particularly like compulsory voting, or democracy really.

Brennan: Do we want to do what the median voter supports? It really depends on whether you think the median voter knows what he or she is talking about. I frankly think the median voter is highly ignorant and supports a lot of bad ideas.

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Barry: It's a complaint about democracy that goes back to Plato, really. Governing a state should require a lot of knowledge and good thinking. But the people who do the voting just keep showing that they have neither.

Brennan: Basically voters know almost nothing. Who's the president, who's the vice president? Which direction is the unemployment rate going on? We're not asking them for very precise stuff. In the year 2000, they ask American voters who tends to be more liberal, Al Gore or George W Bush. and 57% percent get the right answer. That's already pretty depressing. But then they ask them follow-up questions, okay. So slightly more than half of you know that Gore is more liberal than Bush. Who's more in favor of abortion rights for women? Who's more in favor of extending the civil rights of blacks? Who's more in favor of protecting the environment? And, for most of those questions, fewer than a third of people knew the answer, and the same number of people got the answer wrong. So it's like they know that there's this word 'liberal' that applies to Al Gore, and they don't even know what the word means.

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Brennan: And it's always been like that. In 1964, they asked American voters, is Russia part of NATO? And this is a year and a half after we almost had a devastating nuclear war with them, and most Americans didn't know. So surprising is that ignorance has been stable over time. We have devices in our pockets now that are capable of accessing all the world's information instantaneously, and nevertheless we don't know anything.

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Barry: Brennan is describing the median voter. Then you get the voters who do know a lot more than the median voter. But it turns out that these voters are the partisans.

Brennan: Your rabid sports fans of politics. If you think about a typical sports fan, they often know lots of facts about the game, and they know statistics about their favorite players. But they're also incredibly biased. I don't mean biased in the sense of having an opinion. Having an opinion is not the same thing as being biased. I mean biased in that they process information in a deeply irrational and unscientific way. We suffer from confirmation bias, dis-confirmation bias, and a number of other instances of what are called motivated reasoning. If you're a conservative, you turn on Fox News. If you're a liberal you put on MSNBC. If you're a Marxist, you don't watch either thing and you probably read, like, Jacobin magazine. And then if you're, like, libertarian, you'll read like, Reason Magazine. So it's basically like, the informed people are unscientific and the uninformed people-- the only reason they're not biased is because they just don't care enough to be biased.

Barry: For Brennan, having a political system where the ignorant and the irrational make decisions on behalf of everyone else isn't just in the same way that letting such people make decisions about guilt or innocence would be unjust. In fact, that's the exact analogy Brennan would have us make.

Brennan: You've been accused of a capital murder. But then during the trial, the jury just doesn't pay any attention to the facts. They completely ignore the case. Suppose instead of being ignorant, they're irrational. They say, 'Well sure, the evidence points to him being free. But I believe in a conspiracy theory which says that he's one of those lizard people that's taking over the world, so we should find him guilty in order to have him killed. Suppose they find you guilty because they don't like your race, or your religion. If you're gonna have a jury trial, you're entitled that they be competent and that they act in good faith. They're wielding tremendous power over you. They have a monopoly on decisions with regard to justice. They can deprive you of life, liberty, and property and greatly affect your life prospects, and they can impose their will upon you through violence and threats of violence. But those features that make it so that the jury owes us competence in good faith apply to many other government decisions. I think they even apply during electoral decisions. We're deciding for everybody, including children, people in other countries, people who live in our country who aren't allowed to vote, our minority dissenters who really don't want what we're doing but have no way to get out of it. You're seeing this rise of this kind of populist hysteria all around the modern democracies. And then, you know, Trump being elected, and Brexit in particular, Brexit was like a real shock to the system. And it's a nice example of the phenomena that I'm talking about. We know from polling data from the firm Ipsos MORI and others that the more ignorant you are about the facts related to Brexit, the more likely you were to vote to leave. The closer you were to having accurate perception of what the relevant facts were, the much more likely was your vote to remain. All of these pathologies, which have been there for fifty years, and we've known about them for fifty years, it's just obvious to people today.

Barry: Now I agree with you that we've seen pretty bad results from the votes of under-informed masses of people. But, but, the justice of democracy isn't all about results, right? Like, probably, arranged marriages have better results than free-choice ones. Or having your parents determine your diet is better than doing it yourself. Isn't it just intrinsically valuable for people to have a say in who runs things or what kind of policies are going to be enacted?

Brennan: I think you cannot plausibly advocate democracy simply on intrinsic grounds. So imagine that we decide to have a referendum in the United States. We have a referendum on whether we're going to nuke the tiny island nation-state of Tuvalu. And we go through Habermas' ideal deliberative procedure. We offer reasons to one another, we deliberate, we debate. We make sure that there's perfect equality and that there's no outside pernicious influence of money or other forms of privilege. And at the end we unanimously decide to nuke Tuvalu. I would think, well, nevertheless, that's really evil. We should all shouldn't do it. So, in the philosophy of democracy and democratic theory there's a debate between what you might call instrumentalists and procedurists. Instrumentalists, they view democracy or any kind of political system as a tool. What makes a hammer valuable is that it pounds and nails, and it's effective for people like me given the task we have. You'll be happy to use a different hammer if it's more effective than the hammer that you have. And you wouldn't insist on using a hammer when a wrench or a screwdriver is what's called for. There's some truth of the matter about what justice requires, about what counts as good outcomes, and we should pick the political system that does the best job delivering us whatever good politics is supposed to aim at. On the other side of that is what you might call pure proceduralism. This is the view that we should have democracy simply because it's fair and equal regardless of what outcomes it has. Basically, as a procedurist, you end up being a kind of moral relativist. 'Well, whatever we decide to do is right because we decided to do it.'

Barry: As an instrumentalist, Brennan thinks that democracy has run its course. It's shown to generate bad enough results that it's not worth the value we put on giving every individual the power to vote. Brennan's alternative is called epistocracy. Where only the knowledgeable and the rational get to make political decisions. You'll hear about the details of it later. If you hate Brennan's arguments, because, well, you're most people who've heard them, you probably agree with him 100% when you apply the argument to kids. We build undemocratic institutions for people in the first 18 years of their lives, and deny them the right to vote, for the exact reason Brennan gives. Kids are ignorant and irrational-- that's part of what makes them so much fun, and a pain in the ass. Give them the vote and it's ice cream for lunch and recess all day. Imagine what it would be like if they got to make the school budget. Well, in some schools, they *do* do that. In fact, compulsory voting, volunteer voting, completely undemocratic schools, all of them exist somewhere. If you wanted to learn about some of the joys and perils of democracy, you can look at how kids do it -

Tape: Hi-Phi Nation will return after these messages.

Music, messages

Barry: There's a lot that's different between schools and society at large, so comparing democratic schools with undemocratic schools isn't the best way to test the justice of democracy. But at the same time, democratic schools are an experiment in the value of democracy. That's been an explicit goal from their beginnings. producer Sophia Steinert-Evoy has the story.

Sophia: One of the earliest experiments to come out of the democratic school movement in the U.S. is the Sudbury Valley School, in Framingham, Massachusetts. The school was founded in 1968, and is still around today. And it's inspired people all over the world to open their own schools using the Sudbury model which as you'll hear is very different from what we're used to when it comes to education.

Sam McGuire: I think during those years, I was very social.

Sophia: McGuire is an alumnus of Sudbury Valley, class of 2014. He actually started at Sudbury in middle school, went back to public schools and then finished at Sudbury for high school.

McGuire: I didn't really care about doing more traditional schoolwork. Things like basketball, I played music a lot. And we'd kind of just, hang out.

Sophia: The biggest difference between traditional and democratic schools, besides the governance over things like the dress code or cellphone policy, is that students have a choice over what they learn and what they take. Traditional schools have become increasingly top-down since No Child Left Behind, Race to the Top, and common core, with state standardized tests and state mandated curriculum determining almost all of what students do in school from kindergarten all the way to high school graduation. If you wanted to find a place in American society where technocrats made rules to be followed by millions of other people, with little flexibility and funding attached to compliance, there'd be no better example than the public school system.

Noleca Radway: I don't understand how many schools aren't run from a democratic perspective.

Sophia: Noleca Radway is the executive director of the Brooklyn Free School.

Radway: Because they're, authoritarian, you know what I mean, and if that is the societies that we want our children to grow up in and live, and, like, reproduce, then that makes sense to have kids go to school that are about oppression. Which is what most of them look like. And it's not to say democracy in itself is like the Savior or the end-all-be-all. I just think that it's important that if we are thinking that this is the path we want to take as a people, that we're practicing it.

Amalia: One of them was cheese-tasting.

Sophia: Amalia Schwarzschild is a graduate of Brooklyn Free School. She's now a junior at Hampshire College, another democratic school. She's talking about one of her favorite classes at Brooklyn Free School.

Amalia: We had our old director of our school come in every Friday and do cheese tasting, where he would bring his favorite cheeses from anything, like the Park Slope food co-op, and we would take time and we discussed cheese.

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And then also get into conversations about classism, and how French cheese is also like really expensive and how it's unaffordable and, like, there's kind of this idea of like absolute freedom and it's like, 'Oh my god, I don't have to take math classes if I don't want to!' But then there's the kind of onset realization of like, 'Oh wait, I kind of have interest in that, especially when I don't have, like, Common Core on my butt.' You think, 'I don't have to feel anxious about this. I don't have to feel like I'm doing it for someone or for a letter. I could just do it for me, and because I can do it for me, I can understand myself and how I want to do it.'

Jonathan Ho: Academic subjects aren't mandatory or required.

Sphia: Jonathan Ho is the education coordinator at Brooklyn Free School. He's also an adviser to the high school students. I asked him if there's a risk to this level of autonomy. Students could end up opting out of the very classes they need to succeed.

Sophia: Is it possible for students to graduate without having taken, like, basic math or basic humanities?

Ho: For that to happen, a student's plan would be to not to go to college. We had a student who was a musician, and performing and achieving, I would say to some success. Following that was his plan.

McGuire: It allowed me to figure out what I really loved.

Sophia: Sam McGuire, alumnus of Sudbury Valley School.

McGuire: What was important to me, it's not like Sudbury Valley taught me that, but I needed to come up with ways of learning, like I took classes at community colleges, and whatever, like once I decided that I wanted to do it. And I taught myself a lot of it, like I think being engaged in the political parts helped me build the confidence that allowed me to self-determine a little more.

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Barry: So Sophia, one of the aspects of democratic education is that you have autonomy over your own learning, right? But a lot of democracy, like in society, is about having power over a group. Like the majority through voting get a say as to what everybody else has to do. So how does this kind of thing manifest in these democratic schools?

Sophia: Yeah, so one of the biggest ways that majority rule, so to speak, manifests at the Brooklyn Free School is in class selection. So, you know, there are very few staff members. And so there are only a few classes that are offered, and the way that these classes are chosen is, at the beginning of each semester, the students get together and decide what kind of classes they want to take, in this process called the Circus.

Barry: So, they get to vote on what classes are offered, and that's a way of having power over somebody else. Because if somebody else wants something, but the majority votes against that, then they don't get to take that course, right?

Sophia: Right. Class choice is a great example of power. But an even better example is the graduation process.

Barry: Right, which is what?

Sophia: Well, students actually have a vote in whether or not other students can graduate.

Barry: Whoa.

Sophia: Yeah. Everyone has to write a senior essay basically justifying why they deserve to graduate. Like, why they're ready to take the next step in their life. And then there's a public presentation of the defense. So not only other students, but other staff and parents come to it. And the students have to sort of answer questions defending themselves

Barry: Like a dissertation defense!

Sophia: Right, but for an 18 year old, and the people deciding whether or not you pass aren't college professors. They're the people who sit next to you in homeroom, so naturally it's not purely about good grades.

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Sophia: Here's Amalia again, from Brooklyn Free.

Amalia: You could really talk a lot of shit. With one student who was a year before me, I think, people really questioned him, like, gave him a really hard time. Like, usually, I think the meeting is going about four to six. They just kept asking questions. Granted, this kid was a little bit like egotistical you know. His ideas weren't very structured, really, like sustainable, and so people were definitely questioning his methods. People kind of went at him.

Barry: So did they let him graduate?

Sophia: Yeah, they did. Jonathan Ho told me that by the time you get to the defense, they're pretty sure the person is prepared to graduate. Like, if there's any question, they probably talked to the person beforehand, and suggest that they take some time off, or work with that student to make sure they really are prepared. You know, they're not really setting these kids up so that they bomb in front of the school.

Barry: Right, right. So what else the students have power to do over others?

Sophia: Well one obvious place I was really interested in is discipline. So at Sudbury Valley school, they do all the discipline democratically. They take the ancient Greek thing very seriously. The rules are democratically voted on, and then if there's a violation, the whole school can get together and determine what to do with the person.

McGuire: If you witness someone violating some rule, then you'll right what's called a complaint. And then, every day at eleven, there's a meeting of the Judicial Committee. So there's one, like, super young kid, there's one, you know, eight-year-old, there's one, like, eleven year old, there's one, like, fifteen year old, and then there's one seventeen or eighteen year old. They vote on some type of, punishment, I guess you could say. Or what they'll do is they'll refer the case to the school meeting. During the weekly school meeting and the whole school meeting would would discuss the way they're going to to deal with it. So I have a twin brother, and one time, when we were like twelve, we got in a fight, like kind of like a fistfight. And I remember being pretty freaked out, like, as a twelve year old and being like, you know, I mean just like really, really thinking I did something wrong. And we both got, like, suspended for a day. It was kind of a bummer for me because, like, there was, like, this [indiscernible] show that the school was playing the day after school meeting, and I wasn't able to play in it anymore because, you know, I've gotten suspended.

Radway: If something has to do with the health and safety of the members of our community, we can't vote on that.

Sophia: Unlike at Sudbury, discipline and rules at the Brooklyn Free School are not necessarily democratic. In fact, when it comes to health and safety, the system is closer to parentalism. Noleca, executive director.

Radway: female students had experienced social harassment in the bodega. They were going there, someone had said they'd seen the shopkeeper expose themselves. Like, all kinds of things. And so, we had a meeting, and it was decided that, for health and safety reasons, students could not go to that bodega. There other convenience stores, and we thought about, we could do a campaign, make stickers so people could know which ones were safe, and felt comf- like all that kind of stuff. And students were pissed. Because apparently, the candy at that bodega is cheaper than the candy at other bodegas. And it was really, really upsetting, and we'd say, 'Well, it's a health and safety issue,' and like, well, the male students were like, 'Well, it's not a health and safety issue for me, I'm, I'm fine.'

Sophia: Because they have this rule about health and safety, sometimes the advisors at Brooklyn Free School have to make tough decisions. Because at the end of the day, as democratic as the school is, they are still liable for the health, safety, and growth of these children.

Noleca: Screens is a big thing happening here. Like phone use, computer use. And that is always a contentious conversation, and the research around how it impacts learning, and brain development, and young people, and is it should be, and how, and it's all happening right now. Is it fair to expect a ten-year-old to make a decision about screen usage when they don't have all of the information or understanding what the long-term impact will be on their brain development?

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Barry: So it sounds like things aren't fully democratic at Brooklyn Free School, the way they are at Sudbury. Like, in a real democracy, you can't have some wise people veto the people, right? If the people really want something, even if it actually does hurt them, or it's a bad decision, they just have to live with that bad decision.

Sophia: It's interesting though, because in some ways there's less democracy, and in some ways there's more at Brooklyn Free School. So at Sudbury, voting and participating isn't mandatory.

McGuire: Maybe a little more than 50% of the people vote.

Barry: Okay, that is just like the US, actually.

Sophia: But at Brooklyn free school, everyone in the school has to attend the democratic meetings. It's one of two compulsory things about the school.

Barry: What's the other one?

Sophia: There's this social justice requirement. The students have to learn about the power relations that come with race, class, and gender, specifically in the United States, so that in democratic meetings they can understand why some people have more power than others.

Barry: So what's their reasoning behind that requirement?

Sophia: So at Brooklyn Free School they have this deep understanding of the fact that democracy is not something that can be taken for granted, right. It's something that you have to use and exercise every day. But also it's not the thing that was invented thousands of years ago, just to be used by people thousands of years ago. It's something that we're living and re-understanding today and if we're doing it today then we have to work within the society of today.

Barry: So what can you tell me about the results of running a school democratically? I feel like we're told all the time about the good and bad results of all these public schools and charter schools, right? Like outcomes assessment and stuff like that are the outcomes just better when you run things democratically?

Sophia: I mean this is hard, right? Because we know that the results of all these other schools track so many other things that have nothing to do with how democratic a school is. Mostly about how wealthy the students are, class sizes. And also, no matter how radical schools like Brooklyn free school and Sudbury Valley School are, still private schools, you know, and they have a lot of money and they have a lot of resources. And so the outcomes are going to be better than your standard public school. Out of the fewer than a hundred kids who've graduated since the beginning of the school, almost all of them have gone on to college, right. And that's pretty huge. And so it's interesting to look at a school like Brooklyn Free School, which is majority students of color, it's in a historically black neighborhood in Brooklyn. It doesn't have AP classes. It doesn't have fancy textbooks. But these kids are going to college, which is how we measure success in the United States. Like, yes, it's hard for me to articulate exactly the outcomes of these schools, but it's even hard for the people who run the schools to articulate it.

Ho: It is the job of schools and public schools, just for job training and job placement. Because if that's the case, education will always be reactive and at a disadvantage. Something like a blogger or a social-media influencer those were not jobs that anybody was aware of when I was in high school. So no teacher could have prepared me or trained me for those jobs, right?

Radway: I'm not as concerned of what about what comes next. I'm concerned about you here now in this moment. Like who could have prepared for 2018? Nope, like you wouldn't think to do that! Or, 2019, you know, what kind of, or like you know, snow in June! Like I don't know how you prepare for something like that.

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Amalia: Yeah I was prepared for, you know, like the work in college. But I was so much more prepared for the social college. I mean, for me personally, no offense to Hampshire, like, I was like, okay, like 'I know how to continue this' and that's, like, I don't feel like I have to start again in this big, you know, sea with a lot of fish.

Barry: By all the standard metrics for educational success, test scores, graduation rates, college attendance, the democratic schools that are still around today are far in front of public schools. 75% of Sudbury Valley students end up going to college. Students report higher rates of happiness and satisfaction with things like their social life, their confidence, whether they're susceptible to bullying. But there's a flipside. Most democratic schools have failed. Many that were open in the 60s and 70s have closed down. And when private schools close, usually it's because people stopped going to them. There can be so many explanations for why that happened. Maybe the tuition just priced out the kind of families that would want to send their kids to these schools. Maybe on the whole, the results just weren't good enough when compared to good public schools. Maybe bad democratic decisions really did the schools in. One simple explanation was that, on the whole, not enough parents like them. The risk that your child would fall behind others because of their own bad decisions was enough for most parents that just stopped out. Choose the less risky school run by adults, who are supposed to know better. On the whole, then, democratic schools don't seem to lead to disastrous results from ignorant and irrational decisions. Quite the opposite. But at the same time, we don't know whether democracy itself is responsible for the positive outcomes of these schools. Maybe democracy works only for some kids. Or the kinds of kids we choose to go to democratic schools. What we do know is that the risk of failure is enough for most people to opt for non democratic alternatives. And that fact might be telling for the rest of us and our democracy.

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Tape: We'll return to the rest of Hi-Phi Nation after these messages.

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Barry: To learn more about the ideas explored in Hi-Phi Nation, I recommend you try the Partially Examined Life philosophy podcasts, where you can witness hands-on engagement with texts and ideas in all their complexity, with a dose of humor and an eye towards figuring out why seemingly academic questions might matter for your life. Hear why Partially Examined life has been downloaded more than twenty-six million times over ten years at partiallyexaminedlife.com, or wherever you listen to podcasts. Stay tuned after the credits for a sneak preview of the Slate Plus content for this show. You can get an ad-free feed of this in every other Slate podcast by signing up for Slate Plus. Your Slate Plus membership also gives you bonus content and early access to Slate events. You can sign up now by going to slate.com/hiphiplus, or click the link in the show notes.

Barry: One of the big takeaways I had from looking into democratic education was that it was very hard to find an example where kids were doing an injustice to themselves by making bad decisions about their own education. Quite the opposite. Giving kids the power of the vote seemed to imbue them with a kind of responsibility that made them step up. It's supposed to be one of the hopeful arguments in favor of compulsory voting. Jill Shepherd of the Australian National University.

Shepherd: This is stuck with a lot of us, right, this idea that, when you make people vote, even if they despise the act of voting, they have to think about it. They at least have to think: 'I guess I'm a labor person,' 'I guess I'm a liberal person,' 'I have a party of choice,' 'I vaguely know who the leaders are because I have to be switched on at least for a day.' And so we've always assumed that lent itself to a better-informed public, you know, would make us all a little bit smarter about politics.

Barry: It's a lot like the argument for compulsory jury duty. The juries are imperfect. There's a lot of evidence that there are juries that reach bad verdicts. But on the whole, there's a lot of evidence that justly selected jurors, when properly informed with the stakes of a case, try really hard to do exactly what they're asked to do, which is to take the letter of the law and apply it to the facts of the case, setting aside their biases. The claim is that compelling people to vote will lead to the same outcome. Whether this is true in the case of compulsory voting is complicated.

Shepherd: so I did some research on this a few years ago, and I found that it doesn't increase aggregate levels of information. But what it does is it makes political knowledge more evenly distributed.

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Barry: So tell me, tell me what that means.

Shepherd: Basically what it means is, if we gave everyone a score on how knowledgeable they were politically, how informed they're about politics and we scored everyone from one to five the mean was 2.5 everywhere. It's not like the mean is two in America and three in Australia. What you get is a better spread. People who don't fit the mold of your politically interested kind of engaged citizen in any other way still know some stuff about politics.

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Shepherd: This is good. We should all be a little bit more engaged, just that we know vaguely what's going on. No, it's, it's a really good thing. Now one of the theoretical arguments against this idea is, say, someone like Jason Brennan in the States will say 'You can know a few things about politics but doesn't make you really informed.'

Brennan: it does increase their trust in government a little bit.

Barry: Jason Brennan.

Brennan: At the same time it lowers, as it should, their sense of their own political efficacy. Which makes sense because if more people are voting, my vote counts for less. And it really has very few other measurable effects. And people have speculated, they say things like, 'Well, if we can make everybody vote, they'll take voting more seriously. They'll become better informed.' But most of the studies have tried to test that don't find any positive impact on people's level of knowledge, which we wouldn't expect. Because when we think about why people are ignorant, compulsory voting is not going to change the incentive structure that causes that.

Barry: Democracies, the argument goes, are supposed to make people lazy and ignorant about politics. Not more knowledgeable and motivated about it.

Brennan: The reason this happens is because of an endemic flaw in democracy. It's not an accident. We know why people are like this. Economists call the phenomena national irrationality. Imagine you're in, say, biology at the University of California. And there's a thousand students in that class. The professor says to you, 'At the end of the semester you're going to take a test that'll be worth a hundred percent of your grade. But I'm an egalitarian. So what I'm going to do is average all of your grades together so you all get exactly the same grade.' Would you study? I say this to classes this all the time. They say, 'I wouldn't study.' So the average grade would be an F. Here the problem is that there is no incentive to get the information to retain it. If you become really well-informed, you incur all of the costs, but you nevertheless expect other people not to be informed. If you slack off, you don't bear any cost, you get an F either way. So this is what's happening in democracy, except, in American democracy, I'm taking a final exam with 210 million other citizens, other students. The only people who are going to really know a lot about politics, besides people who work directly in it, are citizens who find it interesting, which means they're gonna be like sports fans who are biased. And the average citizen, it's not useful to them, and it's not interesting, so they don't have it.

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Barry: So it's not just that we are, by nature, bad. Democracy makes us have these flaws that you talk about, right?

Brennan: The kind of way that we distribute power is something that you should expect to make people ignorant. It takes away their incentive to be informed, and it takes away their incentive to use information to track the truth. It liberates us, in fact, to use politics not to aim at policy outcomes to help ourselves, but rather to use politics for largely symbolic reasons.

Shepherd: I don't follow that argument at all. I give voters a lot of credit for making, you know, maybe not always good decisions in the collective interest, but usually good decisions in their self-interest. And as a rule, you know, democracy sort of stands on the principle that, if we aggregate self-interests, that we will get some kind of at least proxy for collective interest, right?

Barry: it's another weird paradox of democracy. The argument for rational irrationality means you should never expect your citizens to step up. The fact that kids in democratic schools do step up might have to do with the fact that schools are small. The pathologies of democracy arise from size. The less your vote counts, the less you have any incentive to know how to vote correctly. But then, on the whole, it is true that democracies have better results than authoritarian countries. So on average, citizens do step up when it comes to policies in the collective interest. Philosophers like Brennan don't deny this. They just think there are better systems, a better instrument for getting policies that are just and collectively good. Systems that give you all the good of today's current democracies, and less of the bad.

Brennan: the phrase epistocracy, or the term epistocracy, was coined by the philosopher David Estland, and it refers to any kind of political system in which, in one way or another, power is proportioned according to knowledge, or competence or ability.

Barry: One misunderstanding of epistocracy is that there's only one way to do it. The way the US has done it in the past to disenfranchise black voters, give ridiculous tests to people so if they can't pass them, they don't get to vote, that was a form of epistocracy.

Brennan: Restricted voting, which means you're only allowed to vote if you, say, get a license by proving that you have a certain level of competence.

Barry: But there are other forms.

Brennan: Plural voting would be a system in which everyone gets one vote, but some people get more than one, like, so if you have some level of education. There's something called democratic veto which is something that economist Bryan Caplan has advocated where everyone gets to vote, but then there's panels of experts who have the power to simply undo bad laws.

Barry: And then there are forms of epistocracy that look exactly like what we do for jury duty.

Brennan: The philosopher Claudia Lopes Guerra advocates something called the voting lottery, where say 20,000 people are selected at random, and they're allowed to vote. Only they may vote, but before they're allowed to vote, they have to undergo certain kinds of confidence-building exercises.

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Barry: Rhe key concern in the American context with epistocracy is that it's built to disenfranchise large numbers of voters through tests of political knowledge. And it's just historically true that that's going to mean black people, poor people, new immigrants, precisely the people who can't afford to have more of their political power diluted.

Brennan: What would happen is you get a disproportionately white male, higher income, middle aged electorate, as compared to the electorate as a whole, and maybe that would cause the voting system to be biased towards their interests. There are certain forms of epistocracy that overcome this problem. In fact, better than democracy does. Even in a democracy, even in compulsory voting like in Australia, you still get an electorate that is disproportionately advantaged. It's still the case, say, in the American democracy, that not everyone chooses to vote, and the people who turnout tend to be advantaged in various ways. A type of alternative political system that I discuss in my book is called 'government by simulated Oracle.' In this system, everyone is allowed to vote. But what happens is when you vote, you don't just simply write down your preference. You have to do three things. The first thing is you give us information about who you are. Like how much money do you make, what religious identity do you have, what gender identity do you have, where do you live, etc, etc. Because these sorts of factors influence people's voting behavior and what they want. Secondly we give you a quiz a very basic political knowledge: who's the president, who's the vice president ,which party controls Congress, and other easily verifiable facts, not advanced microeconomics, just that simple stuff. The third thing you do is you tell us what you want. So whatever we're being-- we're voting on -- candidates policy whatever it might be, we find out what you want. And you can let everyone vote on this. Toddlers, even. Doesn't matter. So when you have these three sets of data, you then take that data, you make it public, you give it to all the newspapers, you put in a government database. it's anonymously coded. And then you can, using second semester graduate statistics, estimate: What would a demographically identical public want if it were fully informed?

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Barry: Here's a hypothetical to give you an example. A poor, industrial town, white voter expresses many anti-immigrant sentiments and votes for the most racist or xenophobic candidate, but at the same time expresses that his true preference is economic growth and lower crime. Well it turns out that, factually, immigration increases economic growth and lowers crime rates. This voter is uninformed about that. So what you do is you look at the references of someone with similar demographics who turns out to be rightly informed. Someone who's a poor, industrial town, white voter, but also knows the facts about immigration, and wants economic growth and lower crime rates. You align the votes of the uninformed person with the informed person of the same demographic profile. So as it turns out the demographic group is not disenfranchised. You've only disenfranchised the misinformed person's choices.

Brennan: And when you do this you're controlling for the influence of income, for race, for advantage. So if anything, this system is estimating what the public would want without having any kind of pernicious influence, of these sort of other factors. So I tend to think of it as, if you're worried about disenfranchising minorities, this system is the best. Democracy is in the middle, and then systems in which you exclude some people from voting, those are at the bottom.

Shepherd: It's fascinating. It's really, really fascinating. I would be fascinated to see how it plays out. Instinctively I have a really strong gut feeling, you know, against it. Because I think voting, you know, it's not just, it's not just a means to an end. It's not just instrumental, it's also part of-- it's a democratic act, right, and it's a citizen act. It's an act of citizenry, that when we vote we do become part of something bigger. And so we would lose that collective action if we went to a kind of epistemic voting franchise. But I think the outcomes would be good.

Barry: You think they would be? Oh wow.

Shepherd: It probably would be, right? But on that that's the biggest tradeoff to do compulsory voting, you know. I'm pro-compulsory voting, absolutely. But it's still, really, it's a really cool idea. I don't think the benefits would outweigh the massive problems of disenfranchising a lot of people. I think if we want people to feel like there is some something bigger than ourselves, right, that we have some national identity, or we have some collective community, that taking away their right to vote for the people that lead us is a pretty big, you know, loss to that idea.

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Barry: Do you think that an epistocratic system would have had significant differences both in terms of who we elected and the policy outcomes within the last, I don't know, thirty-forty years?

Brennan: I think we wouldn't have had Brexit. I think there's overwhelming evidence Brexit would not have taken place. I think if you'd had an epistocratic system, say in the South, that Jim Crowe had been overturned much sooner. You sometimes see those tests they gave black voters that are impossible to pass. Well, it turns out the people who could pass them were pro-civil rights. So if they used them on whites, it would have been a good thing. the problem was they didn't-- they only used them on blacks. I think we would have had women's equality much sooner, and more of it. We'd have stronger protection to, say, abortion rights. We'd have increased protection of immigrants. We have really good data that higher information people, regardless of their background demographics, tend to be more pro-civil rights, more in favor of abortion rights, more concerned to protect the environment, more in favor of free trade, more in favor of immigration rights (which is really a form of free trade,) more concerned to say balanced budgets, but also nuanced about their economic analysis. The way that they lean, it doesn't really lean left-wing, it doesn't really lean right-wing, it's not really libertarian. High information voting doesn't track any of the platforms of the major parties.

Barry: Theoretically speaking I could see a lot of really pissed-off people who can't vote, you know, like just stirring shit up, and maybe democracy is just there to be a check on violence. What do you think about that?

Brennan: I'm skeptical about this idea that only democracies can be perceived as legitimate. If you go and interview people, say, Chinese students when they're in the US anonymously, so they're not worried about getting caught by the Chinese government, and you ask, 'Is your government legitimate?' There's a very high degree of trust and perception of legitimacy in their government. They'll say, 'Yeah, yeah, we don't have a democratic system. But we have this alternative system which works with our culture. And they're very functional and they even do have be very successful. They're creating a lot of growth and we're happy with them.' If you interview people around the world, you tend to find that they think whatever system they grew up with is pretty legitimate. If anything, you find Americans have a lower sense of the legitimacy of their government than many people who are living in non-democratic governments have. I think it's true that, for a government to function well, you want the citizens that live there to perceive it as legitimate. I don't think it's true that only a democratic system can enjoy that kind of legitimacy.

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Barry: Do you think people should vote?

Brennan: My view is something like this. If you're a well-informed voter, and you're relatively non- biased, if you can do a good job explaining why people who disagree with you disagree enough, in a way that's, like, fair and kind to them, then you're probably doing us a favor by voting. If you are not well informed and you don't really know what's going on, you're probably not doing us a favor by voting, and you shouldn't be ashamed of that. The average auto mechanic does much more for the country by fixing motorcycles than I do by voting. The average nurse does much more by helping people who are sick than I do by voting. I'm an elitist when it comes to voting, but I'm a populist when it comes to civic virtue. I think that we elevate politics way too much in democracies. We treat the height of contribution to society as being an amateur political scientist, when in reality, the average person, by working a job by, being a good neighbor, is doing a lot more to make a society work than anyone is through politics.

Barry: Jason Brennan's book is "Against Democracy"

Tape: Hi-Phi Nation is written, produced, and edited by Barry Lam, associate professor of philosophy at Vassar College. For Slate podcasts, editorial director is Gabrielle Roth, senior managing producer is June Thomas, senior producer is TJ Raphael, production assistance this season provided by Jake Johnson and Noah Mendoza Goot. Visit hiphination.org for complete show notes, soundtrack, and reading list for every episode. That's hiphination.org

Barry: In the Slate Plus segment, I'm going to include outtakes in my interview with Jill Shepherd about the details of how the compulsory voting system works in Australia, and I present Jason Brennan's argument against compulsory voting.

Shepherd: If you don't turn up to vote you face a twenty dollar fine, which is sort of $15 US. You can get it waived pretty easily. But we, sort of, when we think about the costs and benefits of voting, we tend to assume with this and we categorize Australia as a strongly enforced compulsory system, like that we take this compulsion seriously you will get the letter and you will be asked to pay the fine. But you can waive it quite easily. We just assume that the hassle of getting the fine, having to write back, you know, stipulate some reason why the fine should be waived, all adds to that cost. So it's probably pretty equivalent in terms of, you know, expenditure of time or resources.

Barry: Is there evidence of partisan or ideological favoring under compulsory voting?

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