

America's Knowledge Deficit

Benjamin R. Barber | November 10, 2010

Going into midterm Congressional elections that he knew wouldn't turn out to his liking, President Obama complained that politics was tough because "facts and science and argument" do not "seem to be winning the day all the time." He was echoing President Clinton and others who have complained that voters know more about football than political issues and, with their minds made up, can't be "bothered with the facts." In 2004 John Kerry voiced the same worry: "Facts, science, truth seem to be significantly absent from what we call our political dialogue."

In a *New York Times* "Week in Review" essay reminding us of these complaints the Sunday before the election, Peter Baker notes that many observers saw them as "elitist"—the seeming disdain of politicians for the intelligence of ordinary voters. But the real story is less about elitism or the new know-nothingism than about democracy and what I want to suggest is a novel and treacherous epistemological deficit.

We already know too many Americans know rather too little. A recent Pew survey confirmed that the religious are often "profoundly ignorant about religion"—above all, their own. At least in the survey, one's level of education was a predictor of knowledge. Not so in other domains. College students remain woefully ignorant about history and geography; year in and year out, many of my students cannot place the Civil War in the right century or Iraq on the right continent. And our beleaguered president knows all too well that 20 percent of his fellow citizens—up from 11 percent two years ago—insist he is a Muslim, and more than 25 percent doubt he was born in the United States. Not to mention all those Americans who believe 9/11 conspiracy theories (Bush did it! The CIA did it!) or that extraterrestrials hijack people (as of last year, a New England support group for abductees claimed a growing membership of 1,500).

But it is not what Americans don't know that is so pernicious to our democracy (they can always be educated); it is that they don't know what knowing actually is. Standing in the background of Obama's and Kerry's complaints, as well as of our radical political polarization and the multiplication of candidates (some of whom won on November 2) making preposterous claims about witchcraft, stem cell research, headless bodies in the desert, climate change, creationism and Islam-as-inherently-evil, is this debilitating civic deficit.

We hear about the democratic deficit all the time, but it is the epistemological deficit that is putting democracy at risk. Epistemology signifies the "science of knowing" and expresses a civilizational conviction that truth, objectivity, science, fact and reason are fundamentally different from opinion, subjectivity, prejudice, feeling and irrationality. The science of knowing insists on the fundamental distinction made by the Greeks between *episteme* (true knowledge) and *doxa* (opinion or prejudice, a root of our word "orthodoxy"). The Greeks understood that there is a potent difference between knowledge claims rooted in reason, or in facts that reflect some version of a real or objective world, and the subjective opinions by which we advertise our personal prejudices. We may not always be able to agree on what counts as real knowledge rather than mere prejudice, but we can and must agree on the criteria by which the distinction is made. Indeed, our science, our society and our democratic culture depend on the distinction.

Knowledge as *episteme* denotes claims that can be backed up by facts, good reasons and sound arguments. This doesn't mean there is perfect truth, but it does mean there are good and bad arguments—claims that can be verified by empirical facts or rooted in logically demonstrable arguments and those that cannot be. Because democracy relies on words rather than force, reason rather than compulsion and an agreement about the value if not the substance of objectivity, it works only when we agree on the distinction between knowledge and opinion, between claims that can be verified by facts and validated by sound reasoning and subjective personal beliefs that, however deeply felt, are incapable of being corroborated or falsified.

There are those who will say that democracy is simply government by the people, smart or dumb, knowledgeable or ignorant. But democracy is government by citizens, and citizenship is defined by education, deliberation, judgment and the capacity to find common ground. This is the difference between democracy as mob rule and democracy as deliberative civic engagement. Mob rule asks only for the expression of prejudice and subjective opinion. Democracy demands deliberative judgment.

Yet far too many Americans, including not just many of the new Tea Party politicians but established leaders like former President George W. Bush, honestly think the difference between, say, evolution and creationism is merely a matter of opinion: you think man is descended from the apes; I think he is a creature made by God. Two competing belief systems, two forms of personal conviction equally salient. Tolerance, to Bush, means we respect both views and acknowledge their common creditability, because, after all, we both feel deeply about the matter—which means, in turn, we teach both views in our schools.

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The trouble is that when we merely feel and opine, persuaded that there is no possible way our opinion can be controverted or challenged, having an opinion is the same as being "right." Being right quickly comes to trump being creditable and provable, and we lose the core democratic faculty of admitting that we might be wrong, and that our views must be judged by some criterion other than how deeply we hold them. Our polarized

antidemocratic politics of personal prejudice is all about the certainty that we are right paired with the conviction that nothing can change our mind. Yet democracy is wholly contrary to such subjective certainty. To secure our liberty in a world of collectivity, we must remain endlessly sensitive to the possibility that we might be wrong. And hence to our reciprocal willingness to subject our opinions to corroboration—and to falsification. We teach evolution not because it is "true" in some absolute sense but because it is susceptible to falsification. Creationism is not, which is why evolution is science while creationism is subjective opinion—a fit candidate for belief but inappropriate to schooling.

There are, of course, many issues that cannot be judged by empirical evidence or objective truth. The existence of God is one of them; the nature of justice is another. These are normative rather than empirical claims. But even in the realm of politics, where we lack empirical evidence and must argue normative opinions, there are good and bad arguments, claims that are more persuasive because they are more reasonable. The Greeks used to say "right opinion" (*orthodoxia*). Aristotle was especially alert to the need for a kind of practical wisdom in the political sphere, when *episteme* was not available. He called it *phronesis* and was at pains to distinguish it from mere opinion. *Phronesis* is not yet *episteme* or true knowledge but is more than mere prejudice and gives politics its relative objectivity and capacity for consensus.

None of this means science is "absolutely true" or that belief is false. But what is true is that science is falsifiable and belief is not. When as an evolutionist I claim man is descended from apes and their historical/biological predecessors, I am claiming something that can be corroborated or falsified by reference to fossil records, genetic affinities, geology and other kinds of empirical data and testable hypotheses. When I claim God created man and then woman from a rib of man, there is no way to confirm or falsify the claim, no "evidence" that can counter what is a subjective belief. One claim invokes science and the possibility of rational agreement; the other, limited to incommensurable subjective beliefs, does not and may provoke violence and war.

Since democracy requires that we agree (or disagree) about facts, policies and outcomes, we must have criteria by which we can rationally agree or disagree about such things. We need science not just to make sense of the world and subordinate it to our purposes but to sustain our freedom. If I claim there is no such thing as global warming (or man-made warming), I must be able to point to data and arguments that you can inspect and judge. I must be able to detach my arguments from my interests. The fact that I profit from oil sales, for example, is not a reason to argue that fossil-fuel use does not cause warming. Conversely, the fact that I benefit from alternative energy technology is not a reason to say warming is real. There must be evidence that is convincing to investors both in fossil fuel and in alternative energy.

Yet what has happened to American democracy is that we have substituted opinion and prejudice for science and reason—or, worse still, no longer recognize the difference between them. Larry King can thus interview both bigger-than-life cosmologist Stephen Hawking and a psychic-for-hire who talks to the dead in a way that suggests there is no

difference in their methods. Ghost stories can appear on the History Channel next to World War II documentaries. And candidates can say just about anything impulse dictates, confident that their constituents will have neither an authoritative basis on which to judge nor any reason to think they need one. As Obama learned, many Americans are likely to associate a call for "proof"—for epistemological authority—with "elitism" and suggest that pushing "knowledge" is less a common way to put ourselves in the service of reason than someone's private way of announcing his own supposed superiority.

The great African-American author James Baldwin once said, "People who shut their eyes to reality simply invite their own destruction." Many Americans seem to have turned reality itself into a set of television shows utterly detached from reality. Daniel Boorstin, a former Librarian of Congress, wrote, "We risk being the first people in history to have been able to make their illusions so vivid, so persuasive, so 'realistic' that they can live in them. We are the most illusioned people on earth."

The tyranny most corrosive to democracy is not the tyranny of money but the tyranny of illusion. As Chris Hedges says in his book *Empire of Illusion*, "A populace deprived of the ability to separate lies from truth, that has become hostage to the fictional semblance of reality put forth by pseudo-events, is no longer capable of sustaining a free society."

The November 2 elections were many things: a manifestation of anger and resentment, a tribute to citizen organization, a demonstration of protest politics, an invitation to polarization and a proof of the enduring role of money in politics. But they also offered distressing evidence of our emerging epistemological deficit—a long, destructive erosion of our Enlightenment faith in reason and reasoning and of our willingness to recognize that facts and good arguments must prevail if freedom is to survive. The elections sent a lot of politicians home, but the real loser was democracy.

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