

THE DEMOCRACY, STRAIGHT-UP! PROJECT

The Democratic Ownership of Law

Legislative Alienation, Political Agency, and Equal Sovereignty

— CHAPTER SIX —

Enlightenment Reason and the Improvement of the Citizen

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CHAPTER SIX

Enlightenment Reason and the Improvement of the Citizen

6.1 The emancipatory promise and the tutelary problem

The Enlightenment supplied modern democracy with some of its most powerful moral language. Human beings were increasingly described as capable of reason, entitled to freedom, and able to judge the institutions that governed them. Authority could no longer justify itself simply by pointing upward to God or backward to inheritance. Political power had to answer to human purposes, public reasons, natural rights, consent, or some other account available to the persons who lived under it. The subject of rule was recast, at least in principle, as an agent capable of becoming an author of the social order.

That transformation was revolutionary. It weakened the claim that rank, dynasty, priesthood, or inherited station supplied a natural title to govern. It widened the conceptual space in which ordinary persons could appear as moral equals. It made education, criticism, publicity, and institutional reform central to political progress. It also generated the ideas of autonomy, equal citizenship, public reason, and self-government upon which the present theory depends.

Yet the same intellectual movement produced a durable ambiguity. If legitimate government requires the exercise of reason, what follows when the people are judged unreasonable? If autonomy requires maturity, who decides whether citizens have matured? If a republic depends upon virtue, who forms the virtuous citizen? If political judgment requires education, may the educated hold power until everyone else is ready? The rejection of divine tutelage did not necessarily end tutelage. It could transfer the role of guardian from priest or prince to legislator, educator, expert, property holder, civilizing state, enlightened administrator, or representative elite.

The resulting tension runs through modern democratic thought. Human beings are declared universally capable of reason, but actual populations are divided into those presently fit to exercise authority and those who must first be improved. Equality is affirmed at the level of moral status while competence is invoked to delay or qualify political standing. The people are sovereign in theory, but their sovereignty is mediated through institutions designed to refine their judgment, cultivate their character, or protect government from their deficiencies.

This chapter traces that tension from Enlightenment accounts of reason, autonomy, progress, and education to contemporary projects intended to produce better democratic citizens. The argument is not that civic education, deliberation, empathy, media literacy, or intellectual discipline are undesirable. A democratic order needs all of them. Nor is the argument that citizens already possess every skill required for responsible government. Human beings learn unevenly, reason imperfectly, and enter politics under conditions of unequal knowledge and power.

The problem begins when improvement becomes a condition that must be satisfied before people may possess the authority through which improvement itself will be organized. At that point education ceases to be a public good available to equal citizens and becomes an entrance examination for sovereignty. Someone must write the examination, administer it, interpret the results, and decide whether the public has passed. The evaluator retains power while the evaluated remain in preparation.

The pattern will be called the *change-the-voters-first* logic. It need not appear as an explicit proposal to disenfranchise anyone. It may take a harder form, in which legal rights are withheld from allegedly unfit populations, or a softer form, in which reform energy is directed toward producing more informed, civil,

deliberative, empathetic, or rational voters while the ownership of legislative authority remains untouched. The softer form is morally preferable to exclusion, but it can preserve the same order of operations: first improve the public; then, perhaps, democracy will work.

The central claim of this chapter is narrower than a condemnation of the Enlightenment. The Enlightenment is not one doctrine, and its internal critics often supplied the strongest arguments against exclusion. Condorcet used reason to attack the political subordination of women. Wollstonecraft exposed the circularity of denying education and then citing the resulting deprivation as evidence of incapacity. Kant's account of enlightenment attacked guardianship itself. Republican traditions recognized that civic capacity develops through practice, not merely prior instruction.

The inheritance is therefore double. Enlightenment thought gave democratic theory both the ideal of self-authorship and a developmental vocabulary through which self-authorship could be postponed. The task is not to discard reason, education, or moral development. It is to separate them from political guardianship.

Citizens should be educated because they possess political authority, not required to prove themselves educated before authority becomes theirs.

6.2 From divine authorization to human reason

Premodern European political authority was never justified by theology alone. Custom, conquest, law, corporate privilege, reciprocal obligation, and inherited constitutional forms all mattered. Nor did Enlightenment thinkers simply replace universal belief with secular reason in a single movement. The history is more plural and contested. Nevertheless, the erosion of divine-right monarchy and confessional uniformity altered the burden of justification. If rulers could not rely upon sacred status or hereditary order as sufficient grounds of authority, political institutions had to be defended in terms increasingly accessible to human judgment.

Natural-law and social-contract theories were among the most influential responses. Locke's political argument began from persons naturally free and equal, possessing rights that government was instituted to protect. Legitimate authority depended upon consent, and government that violated its trust could be resisted or dissolved (Locke 1689). Rousseau radicalized the problem by asking how persons might obey law without becoming subject to another person's will. Kant made autonomy - the capacity of rational beings to regard themselves as authors of the law they follow - central to morality and political right (Kant 1785; 1797).

These positions differed sharply, but they shared a decisive shift. Human beings were not merely recipients of an order whose source lay beyond them. They became judges of authority and, in various senses, its authors. The modern legitimacy problem emerged from that transformation: coercive law must be connected to the freedom or reason of those subject to it.

The shift toward human reason also raised the stakes of human formation. A regime grounded in obedience can function while most subjects remain politically passive. A regime grounded in judgment appears to require citizens capable of judging. Once legitimacy depends upon reason, education becomes politically constitutive. It is no longer only a private preparation for occupation, piety, or social rank. It becomes a means of producing the persons upon whom the legitimacy of the regime supposedly rests.

This is visible in Locke's educational writings. *Some Thoughts Concerning Education* was addressed principally to the formation of a gentleman rather than the design of mass democratic schooling. Its emphasis on self-command, reason, habit, and virtue nevertheless illustrates a broader Enlightenment confidence that character could be deliberately formed rather than accepted as fixed by birth (Locke 1693). Education promised to make

persons capable of governing themselves. But the original social location of that education mattered. The rational, self-commanding agent was often imagined through the experience of a class already positioned to govern.

The political ambiguity can be stated simply. The human capacity for reason undermines inherited hierarchy. Differences in the development or exercise of reason can then be used to reconstruct hierarchy on apparently nonhereditary grounds. The ruler no longer claims superiority by blood. The ruler claims superior judgment, education, independence, civilization, virtue, or knowledge.

This is an improvement over the closed metaphysics of rank. Acquired competence can be challenged, expanded, and distributed in ways that nobility of birth cannot. Yet competence hierarchy remains a hierarchy, and its criteria are rarely innocent. Property may be treated as evidence of independence; formal education as evidence of intelligence; conformity to dominant norms as evidence of virtue; fluency in an official language as evidence of civic capacity; or familiarity with elite political discourse as evidence of reasonableness. The standards of fitness are generated within existing relations of power and then used to justify those relations.

The rejection of divine authority therefore opened two political pathways. One led toward equal political agency: because no person possesses a sacred title to rule, those subject to law must stand as equals in its authorship. The other led toward enlightened guardianship: because rule must be rational, those judged most rational should direct or filter the political judgment of the rest.

Modern representative government developed through both pathways at once. Consent and popular sovereignty supplied legitimacy. Education, property, virtue, and institutional filtration limited the direct exercise of popular authority. The people became the source of power without necessarily becoming its continuing owners.

6.3 Kant: emancipation from tutelage without immediate popular rule

Kant's 1784 essay "An Answer to the Question: What Is Enlightenment?" provides the clearest vocabulary for the tension. Enlightenment is emergence from self-incurred immaturity or tutelage: the condition in which one relies upon another to use one's understanding. The famous injunction *sapere aude* - dare to know - calls persons to exercise their own reason rather than permit books, clergy, physicians, or other guardians to think for them (Kant 1784).

The essay is a manifesto against intellectual dependence. Guardianship persists not because most people lack understanding but because fear, habit, and institutional convenience make dependence comfortable. Those who claim to guide the public also have an interest in portraying independent judgment as dangerous. Kant therefore identifies a self-reinforcing relation: dependence discourages practice, and lack of practice is then offered as proof that dependence is necessary.

That analysis is directly relevant to democratic authority. Political systems can deny citizens consequential judgment, observe that citizens do not develop the habits associated with consequential judgment, and then cite the absence of those habits as a reason to continue the denial. A public treated as a permanent audience may behave like an audience. The resulting passivity does not demonstrate a natural incapacity for authorship.

Kant also insists that enlightenment requires freedom, especially freedom in the public use of reason. A scholar must be able to address the reading public, criticize doctrine, and contribute to the gradual reform of thought. Yet the essay sharply separates public reason from obedience within an assigned civil role. The officer, taxpaying citizen, and clergyman may be required to comply while, as scholars, they publicly criticize the rule or doctrine under which they act. Kant's enlightened monarch can say, in effect, reason publicly but obey institutionally.

This arrangement is more emancipatory than censorship, but it is not democratic ownership. The subject acquires a public voice without necessarily acquiring the decision-right. Criticism is liberated while authority

remains concentrated. Reform is expected to proceed through the gradual effect of public reasoning upon a ruler willing to permit it.

Kant's political philosophy later grounds rightful government in the freedom and equality of persons under universal law, and he rejects paternal government as a form of despotism (Kant 1793; 1797). Yet his republicanism remains representative rather than directly legislative in the modern democratic sense. The united will of the people functions as a regulative standard of legitimacy; actual citizens do not thereby receive continuing control of each legislative decision. Moreover, Kant's distinction between active and passive citizenship limited political participation according to civil independence, excluding those whose economic or social position was understood to make them dependent (Kant 1797).

The apparent contradiction should not be simplified. Kant's attack on tutelage supplies a powerful argument against political guardianship. His account of autonomy offers one of the deepest foundations for equal agency. At the same time, the historical and institutional route from autonomous person to active citizen remains restricted. Moral personhood is universal; political authorship is filtered through independence and representation.

This pattern recurs throughout modern democratic thought. Equality enters at the level of principle. Institutional participation is conditioned by a second test: independence, competence, property, education, maturity, civilization, or reasonableness. The universal subject is affirmed, but the active citizen remains a developed achievement.

Kant's essay also reveals why the developmental threshold is difficult to complete. Enlightenment is a process, not a certificate. A public becomes enlightened through the use of freedom. One cannot first produce a fully enlightened population under tutelage and then safely release it into freedom, because the capacities in question require exercise. Kant says this about reasoned public discussion more clearly than about legislative authority. The logic, however, presses further than his institutions do.

A people cannot be trained for self-government entirely from outside self-government.

6.4 Universal humanity and the restricted citizen

The tension between universal moral language and restricted political standing was not incidental to Enlightenment politics. It was built into the transition from subjecthood to citizenship. Declarations of natural equality coexisted with slavery, colonial domination, property restrictions, sex exclusion, religious tests, and distinctions between active and passive citizens. Those arrangements cannot be explained merely as failures to apply principles already complete. The principles themselves were often articulated through concepts - independence, civilization, rationality, virtue, household status - that made exclusion appear consistent with equality.

Property qualifications offer a clear example. Property could be defended not simply as privilege but as evidence of independence. A person dependent upon wages, employers, patrons, husbands, masters, or poor relief was said to lack the independent judgment required for political participation. The property holder's vote appeared to protect the common good because the property holder supposedly possessed a stable stake in society and freedom from another's command. Material inequality was converted into a theory of political competence.

The argument contained a real insight and a circular conclusion. Dependence can impair agency. A person subject to economic domination may face coercion, lack time, and be vulnerable to pressure. But excluding the dependent does not cure dependence. It turns a condition produced by social institutions into a reason for political subordination. The remedy for unequal agency becomes unequal standing.

Sex exclusion followed a similar pattern. Women were described as governed by sentiment, domestic attachment, dependence, or insufficient education. Wollstonecraft's reply exposed the circle. Women were denied serious education and public responsibility, formed for pleasing and obedience, and then judged unfit because they displayed the traits that this formation produced (Wollstonecraft 1792). Her argument was not that education is irrelevant. It was that deprivation cannot serve as evidence of natural inferiority, and that rational capacity develops through opportunity and exercise.

Condorcet made a parallel case for women's political rights. Differences in the observed achievements of men and women could not justify exclusion where women had been denied the institutions through which achievement was cultivated. Political equality followed from common rational and moral capacities, not from identical accomplishments among members of historically unequal groups (Condorcet 1790).

Colonial and racial hierarchies extended the same developmental grammar across peoples. European powers portrayed colonized populations as occupying earlier stages of civilization and therefore requiring tutelage. The language of progress could delegitimize inherited European authority while legitimizing imperial authority over those classified as not yet prepared for freedom. A universal history of human development became a ranking system in which some societies represented the future and others the past.

The concept of "fitness for self-government" joined moral development to geopolitical power. Fitness was rarely defined as the capacity to obey rulers; populations had demonstrated that capacity under empires. It referred to the capacity to operate institutions recognized by the judging power as civilized, orderly, rational, and secure. The colonizer claimed authority both to define the standard and to supervise the path toward it.

The same logic appeared inside states. Workers, poor people, immigrants, racial minorities, Indigenous peoples, and formerly enslaved persons were repeatedly subjected to claims that suffrage must wait upon education, literacy, property, assimilation, or civic discipline. In the United States, literacy tests and ostensibly neutral administrative requirements were later used systematically to disenfranchise Black citizens and other disfavored populations. The history demonstrates a general danger: competence standards are administered by institutions already embedded in conflict, and their formal neutrality does not prevent selective application (Keyssar 2000).

This history does not establish that every concern about competence is fraudulent. It establishes that competence is inseparable from power. The evaluator decides which knowledge counts, which language is acceptable, which errors are disqualifying, and whether the standard applies equally to rulers and ruled. A political class may tolerate astonishing ignorance among officeholders while treating limited knowledge among ordinary citizens as a crisis of democracy.

The democratic alternative is not to deny developmental differences. It is to refuse the conversion of developmental difference into a standing title to rule. Unequal preparation creates obligations of support, access, translation, time, and institutional design. It does not establish that those who control the support system may own the decisions made in the name of those receiving it.

6.5 Republican virtue and the formative republic

The demand to improve citizens did not originate with liberal elitism. Republican traditions had long treated civic virtue as a condition of free government. A republic could not rely solely upon a monarch's command or a despot's fear. It required citizens able to place public purposes above private advantage, resist corruption, defend liberty, and participate in common affairs.

Montesquieu described virtue as the animating principle of republican government: a love of the laws and the country expressed in preference for public over private interest (Montesquieu 1748). Because the republic entrusted government to citizens, it required dispositions that monarchy or despotism could obtain through honor or force.

Education therefore became inseparable from constitutional survival. The laws had to form the character that would sustain the laws.

This claim can support democratic equality. Civic virtue is not necessarily a possession of elites. It can be generated through participation, public institutions, shared responsibility, and habits of mutual accountability. Republican theory often recognizes that citizens become capable by acting as citizens. The polity is formative: institutions produce the dispositions upon which they rely.

Yet republican virtue can also become a standard of conformity. If the republic requires a particular moral character, dissenting ways of life may be treated as civic defects. If private interest is contrasted too simply with public good, officials may claim special authority to identify the public good. If virtue is measured by service, sacrifice, military discipline, cultural sameness, or attachment to inherited institutions, the citizen ideal can exclude those whose experiences do not match it.

The formative republic therefore contains its own version of the evaluator problem. Who decides what virtues the citizen must acquire? Is civic education designed to equip persons for equal judgment, or to produce agreement with an authorized conception of the good citizen? Does the citizen learn how to contest power, or how to trust the institutions that currently possess it?

A useful distinction is between *constitutive capacities* and *substantive conformity*. Constitutive capacities make equal agency practicable: literacy, access to information, the ability to communicate, knowledge of procedures, resistance to coercion, and opportunities to organize. Substantive conformity concerns the conclusions citizens are expected to reach: the proper balance of public and private interests, the correct national identity, the approved degree of civility, or the accepted range of policy views.

Democratic institutions may legitimately support constitutive capacities. They cannot condition equal standing upon substantive conformity without allowing whoever defines conformity to become a guardian over the public. The line is not always simple. Every curriculum embodies judgments, and even procedural education carries values. The relevant test is whether education expands the citizen's capacity to challenge authority or primarily trains the citizen to fit the authority already in place.

Republicanism also reveals a deeper flaw in the change-the-voters-first sequence. If institutions form character, then one cannot treat citizen quality as an external input that must be repaired before institutional reform begins. The representative system, electoral competition, party organization, media incentives, economic insecurity, and the absence of consequential public authority already educate citizens. They teach what politics is, what participation can accomplish, and whether sustained attention is rational.

The question is therefore not whether citizens are educated by institutions. They always are. The question is what relationship of authority the education reproduces.

6.6 Rousseau: sovereignty, civic formation, and the legislator's paradox

Rousseau stands at the center of the tension because he combines an uncompromising theory of popular sovereignty with an equally powerful theory of civic formation. Sovereignty belongs to the people and cannot be represented. The citizen who obeys a law prescribed through the general will can remain free because the law is not another person's private command (Rousseau 1762a). Few canonical thinkers come closer to the principle of democratic ownership.

Yet Rousseau does not assume that an assembled population will spontaneously perceive the general will. The people may will the good without seeing it. Private interests, faction, dependence, inequality, and poor judgment can distort collective decision. This makes the figure of the legislator necessary: an extraordinary founder able to shape institutions, customs, and civic identity so that a people becomes capable of willing well.

The legislator's role generates a paradox. The people are sovereign, but the people must be formed before they can exercise sovereignty properly. The founder must guide without formally ruling, persuade without possessing coercive authority, and somehow design the conditions under which the people will later become authors of their own laws. The institution that creates autonomy initially depends upon a person standing outside the ordinary structure of autonomy.

Rousseau recognizes the difficulty rather than concealing it. A people suitable for legislation must possess a degree of unity, simplicity, and independence that legislation itself is supposed to cultivate. Good laws require good citizens, while good citizens require good laws. The founding moment cannot be generated by the mature civic order because the mature civic order does not yet exist.

The paradox is not confined to founding. Rousseau's educational and constitutional writings emphasize the continuing formation of citizens through mores, festivals, public opinion, patriotism, and institutions. *Emile* imagines the careful formation of an autonomous individual under the hidden direction of a tutor (Rousseau 1762b). The pupil experiences development as freedom while the tutor structures the environment in which choices occur. In political form, the danger is obvious: a state may claim to liberate citizens by managing the conditions of their judgment.

Rousseau's theory is therefore both a resource and a warning for democratic ownership. It supports the claim that sovereignty cannot be transferred to representatives without loss. It also shows why merely placing final votes in public hands does not solve the problems of information, dependence, faction, and civic formation. A people can formally decide while informal power shapes what it sees and wants.

The present theory departs from Rousseau at the point where formation threatens to require an unaccountable founder. Institutions need designers, educators, organizers, and experts. But the functions they perform must not become an independent authority over the political standing of the people they assist. Founding power must be made temporary, transparent, contestable, and replaceable. The people may inherit an initial architecture without remaining the wards of its architect.

Rousseau also helps distinguish education from sovereignty. Citizens can need information and formation without surrendering authorship. A person may be taught how a mechanism works while retaining the right to decide whether to use it. A public may receive expert advice while retaining the right to reject it. The need for guidance does not logically entail the alienation of authority.

The practical problem is to organize guidance so that it develops judgment rather than substitutes for judgment. Rousseau's legislator solved the problem through exceptional wisdom and civic artistry. Democratic ownership seeks a less heroic answer: plural sources of knowledge, recoverable delegation, transparent procedures, direct intervention, and institutional self-amendment.

6.7 Progress, public instruction, and the democratic education of reason

Enlightenment theories of progress gave education an expansive political role. Human ignorance and prejudice were no longer fixed features of a fallen world. Knowledge could accumulate. Institutions could be revised. Superstition, arbitrary authority, and inherited inequality could be exposed. The future might contain forms of freedom unavailable to the past.

Condorcet offered one of the most systematic versions of this hope. The progress of the human mind joined scientific advancement to moral and political improvement. Public instruction could reduce dependence, widen actual equality, and give citizens the knowledge needed to exercise rights (Condorcet 1791; 1795). Education was not merely a test of existing competence. It was social infrastructure intended to make formal equality effective.

This distinction matters. Condorcet's program did not simply say that only educated persons should govern. It sought to distribute education so that citizens would not be intellectually dependent upon officials, priests, or experts. Public instruction could protect political agency by enabling persons to understand laws, examine claims, and resist manipulation. In this form, education opposes guardianship.

Condorcet was also alert to the danger that public education could become state indoctrination. Instruction had to remain sufficiently independent of political authority to prevent rulers from manufacturing compliant opinion. The democratic educator therefore occupies a delicate position. Public institutions must provide access to knowledge without establishing a monopoly over truth or civic virtue.

Wollstonecraft's argument likewise treats education as emancipation from constructed dependence. Women appeared frivolous or irrational because social arrangements trained them for those roles. Equal education would not grant rights as a reward for becoming like educated men. It would dismantle one of the mechanisms through which subordination reproduced itself (Wollstonecraft 1792).

These arguments reveal an egalitarian version of the improvement project. The problem is not deficient people who must earn sovereignty. It is unequal institutions that withhold the resources through which agency becomes practical. Education should reduce dependence and make equal standing usable.

Nevertheless, progress narratives can acquire a tutelary structure even when their goals are universal. If history has a knowable direction, those who claim to understand that direction may regard resistance as backwardness. If science reveals the rational organization of society, political disagreement may appear as ignorance rather than conflict among values and interests. If education is expected to produce convergence, persistent dissent can be treated as evidence that education remains incomplete.

The idea of progress also creates a temporal hierarchy. Some persons and societies stand nearer the imagined future; others occupy an earlier stage. The advanced acquire a duty, and then a claimed right, to guide the backward. Educational assistance becomes political supervision.

The lesson is not that progress is an illusion or that every opinion deserves equal epistemic respect. Some beliefs are false. Some institutions are cruel. Knowledge can improve judgment, and education can enlarge freedom. The lesson is that epistemic asymmetry does not settle the allocation of political sovereignty. A person may know more about medicine without owning another person's body; an economist may know more about monetary policy without acquiring an extra share of citizenship; an educator may know more about civic history without becoming the owner of a student's legislative vote.

Equal authority does not flatten knowledge. It changes what knowledge entitles one to do.

6.8 American republicanism: education, filtration, and the divided people

The American founding joined declarations of popular authority to institutions designed to filter popular judgment. Its leading thinkers did not simply distrust the people or simply celebrate them. They confronted the problem of founding a republic across a large territory, under conditions of social inequality, slavery, local attachment, faction, limited communication, and fear of both elite and popular domination.

Madison's defense of representation in *Federalist No. 10* famously argued that elected representatives might "refine and enlarge" public views by passing them through a chosen body of citizens whose wisdom could discern the public good (Madison 1787a). The extended republic would multiply interests, obstruct majority faction, and make it harder for unjust passions to coordinate. Representation was not merely a logistical substitute for assembly. It was an epistemic and moral filter.

The filter contained a democratic possibility. Representatives could deliberate, reconcile dispersed information, and resist temporary passions. But it also changed the relation of authority. The public's views became raw political

material to be refined by persons who possessed the legislative vote. The representative was expected to improve the people's judgment while being institutionally empowered to depart from it.

Other Federalist arguments defended a Senate insulated by longer terms and indirect selection, partly to provide stability, knowledge, and resistance to sudden popular impulses (Madison 1788). The constitutional order mixed popular authorization with temporal and institutional distance. The people ruled through a structure designed not to permit their immediate judgment to rule directly.

Jefferson represented a different but related strand. He repeatedly connected republican government to public education. Citizens needed knowledge to protect liberty, detect ambition, and participate in local self-government. His proposals for public schooling were unusually expansive for their time, though still embedded in racial, sex, and class exclusions (Jefferson 1779; 1816). Education was to identify talent and equip citizens, but it also served as a sorting mechanism through which a "natural aristocracy" of virtue and talent might emerge.

The distinction between natural and artificial aristocracy captures the Enlightenment reconstruction of hierarchy. Hereditary privilege was illegitimate; superior talent and virtue could be legitimate. The difficult question was whether the talented would serve as advisers and administrators under equal public authority or become a more rationally selected ruling class.

American suffrage history displayed the same ambiguity. Property restrictions weakened over the nineteenth century for white men, and mass electoral participation expanded. Yet political equality remained racially and sexually bounded, and later literacy tests, registration systems, poll taxes, and discretionary administration converted claims of competence and order into instruments of exclusion (Keyssar 2000). Expansion did not eliminate guardianship; it changed its forms.

The founding tradition therefore bequeathed two rival educational models.

In the first, education equips citizens to supervise government. Knowledge is a defense against domination, and local participation develops political capacity.

In the second, education identifies or produces the persons most qualified to exercise government. Knowledge is a title to filter, refine, or temporarily supersede ordinary judgment.

The models can coexist within the same institution. A representative may educate constituents while also owning the decision. A school may teach popular sovereignty while presenting elections as the completion of self-government. A constitution may declare the people sovereign while structuring nearly all consequential participation as influence upon officeholders.

The change-the-voters-first trap does not require hostility to the public. It often arises from sincere concern for the public good. The representative says: the people are the source of authority, but I must exercise the authority until their judgment is sufficiently refined. The problem is that the office itself supplies no final point at which refinement is complete and ownership returns.

6.9 Mill: participation as education and education as hierarchy

John Stuart Mill offers perhaps the most revealing nineteenth-century synthesis of democratic development and competence hierarchy. He defended a broad franchise, women's political equality, freedom of discussion, local participation, and representative institutions as instruments of human improvement. Government should be judged not only by the quality of decisions it produces but by the type of character it develops in citizens (Mill 1859; 1861; 1869).

Mill therefore provides strong support for the formative thesis developed here. Participation enlarges the citizen's concerns, develops judgment, and counteracts narrow private absorption. Local institutions and public

responsibilities teach persons to consider interests beyond their immediate lives. A passive population governed well from above may remain politically stunted.

At the same time, Mill ranked forms of government according to the developmental condition of peoples. Representative government required capacities that some societies were said not yet to possess. In such cases, despotism or highly directive rule could be defended as a temporary instrument of improvement, especially in colonial contexts (Mill 1861). The advanced governed the less advanced in the name of future capacity.

Within representative government, Mill also proposed plural voting. Everyone meeting a basic threshold might receive a vote, but persons with greater education or demonstrated intellectual attainment would receive additional votes. The proposal attempted to combine inclusion with competence weighting. The working classes would not be excluded, but the educated would receive protection against numerical domination and greater influence in shaping public decisions.

Plural voting makes explicit what many systems accomplish informally. Political equality is accepted at a baseline, then stratified according to judgments of competence. The educated citizen counts as more because education supposedly improves the capacity to judge the common interest.

Mill's position was not a simple defense of class privilege. He opposed giving wealth itself extra votes and wanted educational opportunities expanded. He feared class legislation by both rich and poor and sought a balance in which no group could dominate. Yet the institutional result remains unequal authority. The person who has passed the recognized test of education acquires more legislative weight.

The difficulty is not only distributive. It concerns who defines education and how its political value is measured. Formal credentials can reflect opportunity, class, culture, and institutional conformity as much as judgment. Experts may know more within a domain while being no less biased in matters of interest or value. Educated groups can coordinate around their own advantages. A competence premium can become a class premium even where the theory distinguishes them.

Mill's deeper tension is between two developmental mechanisms.

One mechanism is participation: people become capable by exercising responsibility.

The other is qualification: greater capability should produce greater authority.

The first mechanism tends toward equal political standing with unequal and changing contributions. The second converts unequal development into unequal shares of sovereignty. Mill tried to preserve both, but they pull in different directions.

The theory of democratic ownership accepts Mill's first insight and rejects the second conclusion. Institutions should create opportunities for participation, specialization, education, and leadership. Persons who contribute more knowledge may acquire influence, trust, responsibility, and delegated labor. They should not thereby acquire an unrecoverable extra share of the legislative decision-right.

This distinction allows democratic theory to value excellence without converting excellence into rulership. The expert may persuade. The teacher may teach. The delegate may act. The organizer may coordinate. The public may sensibly rely upon all of them. But authority must remain traceable to equal members and recoverable by them.

6.10 From explicit exclusion to the soft prerequisite

The expansion of suffrage transformed the language of political competence. Once property, sex, race, and literacy exclusions became increasingly indefensible, democratic systems could no longer openly declare large classes of adults unfit to vote. Universal adult suffrage became a core marker of democratic legitimacy.

The competence problem did not disappear. It migrated.

In one direction, political science lowered the demands placed upon voters. Democratic government could be understood as competition among elites for electoral support rather than continuous popular authorship. Citizens did not need to formulate coherent policy programs; they needed only to choose among leaders and remove failures. Schumpeter's competitive model is the canonical expression of this move (Schumpeter 1942). The empirical limitations of citizens became an argument for a thinner conception of democracy.

In another direction, reformers sought to improve citizens so that democratic ideals could be approximated more closely. Civic education, public-interest journalism, discussion forums, nonpartisan voter guides, deliberative processes, media literacy, and anti-polarization programs all attempt to strengthen capacities associated with democratic citizenship. These projects often perform valuable work.

The shift from hard exclusion to soft prerequisite changes the legal relation without necessarily changing the conceptual hierarchy. Citizens retain the vote, but their judgment is regarded as the defective input responsible for institutional failure. Democracy will improve when voters become more knowledgeable, less prejudiced, more deliberative, more civil, less partisan, more empathetic, more resistant to misinformation, and more willing to compromise.

Each diagnosis may contain truth. The problem lies in aggregation and sequence. The political system is treated as a fixed container into which improved citizens must be poured. Institutional ownership of the final decision remains with representatives. Citizen improvement is expected to produce better policy indirectly by changing electoral preferences, campaign incentives, public discourse, or pressure upon officeholders.

This is the soft prerequisite. No one explicitly says that voters must pass a test before receiving sovereignty. Instead, democracy's failures are attributed to citizen deficiencies, and reform is directed toward those deficiencies while the structure of legislative alienation remains outside the frame.

The resulting agenda can become infinite. Citizens must learn constitutional facts, policy details, statistical reasoning, media verification, civil disagreement, empathy, historical context, ideological self-awareness, and resistance to manipulation. They must overcome racial, religious, regional, and partisan prejudice. They must balance passion with reason, identity with common purpose, conviction with compromise, and participation with trust.

These are worthy aspirations. They are also standards that no population has ever fully met. If sovereignty waits upon their completion, sovereignty never arrives.

The soft prerequisite is especially durable because it does not look like exclusion. It offers programs, workshops, curricula, and dialogue rather than legal barriers. Its practitioners often oppose voter suppression and defend universal suffrage. The critique developed here is therefore not a charge of bad faith. It is an argument about functional position. A project can empower citizens in one respect while leaving them structurally confined to influencing someone else's legislative decision.

6.11 The modern science of the deficient voter

Twentieth-century social science gave the competence problem an empirical foundation. Survey research found that many citizens possess limited factual knowledge, weakly structured ideological beliefs, unstable issue positions, and low levels of sustained political attention. Lippmann argued that the world of public affairs was too remote and complex for citizens to know directly; people acted upon simplified pictures formed through media and social cues (Lippmann 1922; 1925). Converse's analysis of mass belief systems found that ideological constraint and stability were concentrated among a relatively small portion of the electorate (Converse 1964). Delli Carpini and Keeter documented substantial inequalities and gaps in political knowledge (Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996).

Later research challenged idealized accounts of electoral judgment. Citizens use partisan cues, identities, retrospective impressions, and heuristics rather than independently calculating policy preferences. Achen and Bartels argued that group loyalties and social identities explain much voting behavior better than the folk theory of a sovereign electorate issuing policy mandates (Achen and Bartels 2016). Somin and Brennan drew more explicitly skeptical conclusions, contending that widespread political ignorance weakens the case for expansive democratic authority and may justify limiting the political domain or weighting competence more heavily (Somin 2013; Brennan 2016).

These findings cannot be dismissed merely because they are uncomfortable. A theory of democratic ownership that requires a constantly attentive, comprehensively informed, ideologically coherent electorate would be empirically implausible. Citizens have limited time. Public policy is complex. Rational individuals may invest little in knowledge when a single electoral vote has negligible probability of changing an outcome. Inequalities in education, income, security, and social position affect access to political information.

But the interpretation of deficiency depends upon the institutional role assigned to the citizen.

Survey measures often compare citizens to an implicit ideal of the independent policy analyst. A person is judged by recall of officeholders, institutional facts, issue positions, or ideological consistency. Some of these measures capture important capacities. None by itself establishes whether citizens can participate effectively within institutions that distribute research, permit trusted delegation, make consequences visible, and connect attention to actual decisions.

The voter in a mass election is asked to select among bundles of candidates and policies at long intervals. The practical value of learning the details of one bill is limited because the voter cannot decide that bill. The voter cannot easily know which campaign promise will reach the agenda, what amendments will be added, which committee will block it, or how the representative will trade among issues. Low information investment is partly produced by the low control attached to information.

This does not mean that authority automatically cures ignorance. Consequential participation can also intensify motivated reasoning, group conflict, and manipulation. It means that observed competence under one institutional arrangement cannot be treated as a fixed human input into every possible arrangement.

The distinction between *capacity* and *incentive* is central. A person may possess the capacity to understand an issue when it becomes salient, supported, and consequential while rationally declining to monitor the entire political system continuously. Episodic attention is not equivalent to incapacity. Reliance on others is not equivalent to incompetence. The relevant democratic question is whether reliance remains transparent and recoverable.

Modern voter research also raises the evaluator problem in empirical form. Experts choose which facts count as basic knowledge, which issue alignments count as consistency, and which errors reveal incompetence. Officeholders and professional elites are rarely subjected to an equivalent general-knowledge test as a condition of authority. Nor do credentials eliminate bias, identity, or motivated reasoning.

The proper response to citizen limitations is institutional design, not romantic denial. Democratic ownership must lower the cost of obtaining usable information, permit specialization, expose source provenance, support minority reports, distribute labor, and allow persons to delegate decisions they do not wish to study. Equal authority requires unequal and voluntary patterns of attention.

6.12 Public reason and the deliberative turn

Deliberative democratic theory responded to the thinness of electoral competition by restoring reason-giving to the center of legitimacy. Citizens and officials should not merely aggregate fixed preferences. They should exchange

reasons, consider evidence, revise views, and seek terms of cooperation that others can accept. Habermas located democratic legitimacy in communicative processes linking public spheres to lawmaking institutions (Habermas 1996). Rawls's idea of public reason asked citizens and officials to justify fundamental political decisions through reasons appropriate among free and equal persons who disagree about comprehensive doctrines (Rawls 1993; 1997).

The deliberative turn supplied a powerful correction. Preferences are not simply given. Public judgment can improve through discussion. Legitimacy depends upon more than counting; it also depends upon inclusion, justification, and the quality of the process through which decisions are formed.

Yet deliberative democracy creates a demanding citizen ideal. Participants should be informed, reflective, willing to listen, capable of giving reasons, open to revision, and able to distinguish public justification from private conviction. Real political communication is often emotional, unequal, strategic, identity-laden, and shaped by power. The gap between deliberative ideal and mass politics can again generate a developmental hierarchy.

One response is to construct specialized deliberative spaces. Deliberative Polling, citizens' assemblies, juries, and other mini-publics select participants, provide balanced materials, organize moderated discussion, and create conditions under which ordinary citizens can reach more considered judgments (Fishkin 1991; 2009). Such processes provide strong evidence that citizens can learn and deliberate when institutions supply time, information, and facilitation. They undermine the claim that ordinary people are inherently incapable of complex judgment.

At the same time, mini-publics are often advisory. A carefully selected and educated sample deliberates; elected institutions retain the legal decision. The process improves consultation without necessarily changing ownership. The better citizen judgment is produced in a temporary enclave and transmitted upward to decision owners.

There are legitimate reasons for caution. A small sample cannot automatically bind millions of nonparticipants. Selection, agenda design, briefing materials, expert witnesses, facilitation, and question framing all exercise power. The mini-public's internal equality does not resolve its external authority.

The relevant distinction is not between deliberation and decision. Democratic ownership needs both. It asks whether deliberative institutions are connected to an architecture in which the public can retain, delegate, recover, and exercise final authority. Deliberation should support sovereignty rather than serve as a substitute for it.

Public reason also risks becoming an admission standard. A citizen who speaks through anger, narrative, religious conviction, embodied experience, or distrust may be judged insufficiently reasonable. Deliberative norms can improve mutual understanding, but they can also privilege persons trained in calm, abstract, institutionally recognized discourse. The style of the seminar room becomes a measure of civic worth.

A democratic information system should therefore widen the forms through which relevant knowledge enters collective judgment while preserving standards of evidence and contestability. Stories can reveal harms that aggregate data conceals. Expertise can test causal claims. Moral convictions can identify values that technical analysis cannot settle. None should receive an automatic monopoly.

The aim is not the perfected deliberative citizen. It is an institution in which imperfect citizens can use multiple forms of knowledge, correct one another, and remain equals while disagreeing.

6.13 Knowledge, civility, empathy, and resistance to misinformation

Contemporary democracy-reform culture contains a wide range of projects aimed at citizen development. Civic-education organizations seek to increase knowledge, engagement, and a sense that young people's voices matter. Deliberative programs provide balanced briefing materials and moderated discussion. Depolarization organizations teach listening, intellectual humility, and communication across partisan difference. Media-literacy

initiatives train people to verify sources, recognize manipulation, and resist misinformation. These interventions address genuine democratic needs.

The Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement, for example, studies how schools and communities can support more equitable youth civic development. Stanford's Deliberative Democracy Lab designs processes through which representative samples receive information and deliberate before expressing considered views. Braver Angels organizes structured encounters intended to reduce affective polarization and strengthen citizenship across political divisions. Media-literacy programs teach lateral reading, source evaluation, and recognition of misleading content (CIRCLE 2026; Deliberative Democracy Lab 2026; Braver Angels 2026).

The present critique should not caricature such work. Better access to information matters. Political hatred can destroy cooperation. Misinformation can cause direct harm. Citizens benefit from opportunities to practice discussion and learn institutional procedures. The democratic ownership thesis is compatible with extensive investment in all of these capacities.

The concern is the place assigned to them in the causal story of democracy.

When political failure is attributed primarily to ignorant voters, education becomes the remedy while agenda control, campaign finance, party gatekeeping, legislative bottlenecks, and alienated decision ownership remain background conditions. When polarization is treated primarily as a failure of interpersonal empathy, structural conflicts and unequal power may be recoded as communication problems. When misinformation is treated as a defect in individual media consumption, the political economy of information, strategic elite deception, platform incentives, and the absence of trusted public institutions can receive less attention.

Citizen improvement is attractive partly because it avoids confrontation with institutional ownership. Teaching workshops does not require officeholders to surrender authority. Encouraging civility does not alter who controls the agenda. Media literacy can be promoted without changing the structure through which organized interests purchase access. These interventions fit comfortably inside the legacy system because they ask citizens to become better inputs.

The danger is especially clear in the language of civility. Civil communication can protect participation and reduce humiliation. But civility can also be demanded asymmetrically from people protesting domination. Those with secure institutional power may define disruptive speech as evidence of unfitness while their own exercise of power remains outside the civility test. An etiquette of democracy can become a discipline imposed upon the governed.

Empathy has a similar ambiguity. Understanding another person's experience can improve judgment and reduce dehumanization. Yet political equality cannot depend upon the dominant group becoming sufficiently empathetic toward the subordinate. Rights and decision-standing are not rewards for successfully eliciting sympathy.

Misinformation presents the hardest case because false beliefs can directly undermine democratic decisions. Education and verification are indispensable. But the standard cannot be that citizens must become manipulation-proof before receiving authority. No population, expert body, legislature, or court is manipulation-proof. The relevant design question is comparative and institutional: where can claims be challenged, sources traced, uncertainty disclosed, conflicts of interest exposed, and decisions reversed after error?

The change-the-voters-first logic treats citizen defects as a preliminary obstacle. Democratic ownership treats them as permanent conditions for which the governing institution must be designed.

6.14 The recurring structure of change the voters first

Across its historical forms, the change-the-voters-first argument follows a recognizable sequence.

First, a demanding account of legitimate or successful government is established. Government should be rational, virtuous, informed, public-spirited, deliberative, tolerant, stable, or resistant to manipulation.

Second, actual citizens are compared with the ideal and found deficient. They are ignorant, dependent, prejudiced, passionate, factional, uncivil, inattentive, or vulnerable to misinformation.

Third, a developmental program is proposed. Citizens must be educated, civilized, deliberatively trained, economically independent, morally reformed, assimilated, depolarized, or protected from falsehood.

Fourth, existing decision owners retain authority during the developmental interval. The monarch permits public reason. The legislator forms the people. The property holder votes for the dependent. The colonial administrator prepares the colony. The educated citizen receives additional weight. The representative refines public views. The expert designs the information environment. The reformer improves civic culture.

Fifth, no clear transfer condition is specified. Because reason, virtue, knowledge, and civic maturity are matters of degree, the evaluator can always identify further deficiencies. The public remains almost ready.

This structure does not prove that every developmental proposal is illegitimate. Children do require education before adult legal responsibility. Some institutional roles require demonstrated competence. Emergency conditions can justify temporary delegation. The issue is the political standing of recognized adult members of the polity and the absence of a determinate endpoint to guardianship.

Three forms should be distinguished.

Exclusionary tutelage withholds political rights from a class until a standard is met.

Weighted tutelage grants formal rights but gives greater authority to those judged more competent.

Structural tutelage preserves equal suffrage while confining citizens to influence and periodically selecting the independent owners of legislative authority. Improvement is encouraged, but even improved citizens do not receive the decision-right.

Modern representative democracy largely operates through the third form. The voter may become extraordinarily knowledgeable and public-spirited. Nothing in the ordinary structure follows from that achievement except greater capacity to persuade, organize, campaign, or seek office. The citizen does not graduate into continuing legislative ownership.

This is why the soft prerequisite can persist indefinitely. The stated project is citizen development, but the institutional pathway never culminates in sovereignty. Better voters are expected to choose better rulers.

The theory developed here reverses the sequence. Equal legislative standing is not the prize at the end of civic development. It is part of the environment through which civic development occurs. Citizens can delegate extensively, rely on expertise, and participate episodically. What they cannot be required to do is satisfy an evaluator before the underlying authority becomes recoverable.

6.15 Who judges the judges?

Every competence threshold creates an evaluator. The evaluator may be a legislature, court, examination board, university system, civil service, platform, expert commission, deliberative facilitator, or informal professional class. Its authority is often presented as technical rather than political. Yet choosing the standard, measuring performance, and attaching consequences are exercises of power.

The evaluator problem has several dimensions.

First is *substantive contestability*. Political judgment concerns facts, causal predictions, values, interests, and acceptable risks. Expertise can clarify some questions but cannot eliminate disagreement over ends. A test that treats one policy conclusion as evidence of competence may encode ideology as knowledge.

Second is *social bias*. Standards of education, language, demeanor, and reasoning are shaped by institutions with unequal access. Groups already advantaged by schooling and professional culture are more likely to appear competent under measures derived from those settings.

Third is *self-exemption*. Guardians often evaluate citizens more rigorously than themselves. Legislators may lack policy knowledge, repeat misinformation, or act from partisan identity without losing the legal authority to vote. Experts may make grave errors without surrendering general standing. The public's fallibility is treated as a constitutional problem; elite fallibility as a personnel problem.

Fourth is *jurisdictional expansion*. An evaluator appointed to certify factual knowledge may gradually define acceptable sources, discourse, or values. A narrow competence function can become a general guardianship over political reason.

Fifth is *termination*. Even a well-designed temporary guardianship requires a rule for ending itself. If the guardian decides whether the ward is ready, the guardian possesses an interest in the continuation of guardianship and can interpret uncertainty in its own favor.

Democratic theory has long asked who guards the guardians. The improvement problem adds another question: who decides that the governed have been sufficiently improved to cease needing guardians?

No answer can eliminate evaluation entirely. Voting systems verify eligibility. Professional roles require certification. Public institutions assess evidence. Courts judge legal claims. The alternative is not a world without standards. It is a constitutional separation between functional certification and equal political standing.

A person may need a license to perform surgery because the license controls a specialized activity that can directly injure patients. The physician's expertise does not entitle the physician to more votes on health legislation. A citizen may need identity verification to cast a ballot because the institution must ensure one eligible member, one vote. Verification does not authorize the verifier to judge whether the citizen's reasons are good enough.

The evaluator may certify access conditions and role-specific competence. It may not convert those functions into ownership of the citizen's legislative authority.

6.16 Education as infrastructure, not an entrance examination

The critique now permits a positive distinction. Democratic education is legitimate and necessary when it functions as infrastructure for equal agency. It becomes tutelary when it functions as an entrance examination for sovereignty.

Education as infrastructure has several characteristics.

It is *universal in availability*. Access does not depend upon prior political conformity, wealth, social status, or membership in a favored group.

It is *non-disqualifying*. Failure to master a curriculum does not erase the equal standing of a recognized adult citizen.

It is *plural and contestable*. No institution possesses an uncontested monopoly over political truth. Citizens can compare sources, challenge curricula, and organize alternative forms of education.

It is *connected to consequential practice*. People learn procedures, issues, and forms of cooperation while exercising real authority rather than rehearsing participation in permanently advisory settings.

It is *supportive rather than substitutive*. Educators, experts, and facilitators make judgment more practicable; they do not acquire the decision because they supplied the knowledge.

It is *reciprocal*. Officials, delegates, experts, and institutional designers are also subject to scrutiny, correction, and continuing education. The public is not imagined as the only defective actor.

It is *accessible under unequal conditions*. Translation, disability access, compensation, childcare, time, technological support, and multiple modes of participation are part of civic capacity, not peripheral accommodations.

It is *compatible with reliance*. Citizens need not personally master every subject. Education includes learning how to evaluate sources, choose delegates, understand uncertainty, and recognize when to reclaim a decision.

This model changes the meaning of civic competence. Competence is not a single quantity possessed by individuals in isolation. It is a distributed property of persons, relationships, and institutions. A community can govern competently because different people know different things, trusted intermediaries perform work, minority reports preserve dissent, audit systems expose error, and authority can be recovered when reliance fails.

The distributed conception is more realistic than the ideal of the encyclopedic citizen. Modern government requires knowledge no individual can hold. The relevant question is whether specialization is organized under democratic control or becomes a title to rule.

Education as infrastructure also clarifies why equal standing does not entail indifference to truth. A democratic system can require evidence standards in administrative proceedings, professional qualifications for technical tasks, transparent sourcing in legislative materials, and correction of false official records. What it cannot require is that citizens adopt certified beliefs as a condition of retaining their political personhood.

6.17 Institutional formation and the direction of causation

The change-the-voters-first argument usually treats citizen character as causally prior to institutional performance. Better citizens produce better democracy. The claim is partly true. Institutions cannot generate outcomes wholly independent of the people who inhabit them.

But causation also runs in the opposite direction. Institutions shape attention, motivation, efficacy, identity, trust, and skill. They tell people whether participation matters, what kinds of knowledge are useful, which relationships are rewarded, and how errors can be corrected. Civic education in the broad sense includes everything a political order teaches through its operation (Crittenden and Levine 2018).

A system in which citizens vote for bundled representatives every few years teaches one set of lessons. It teaches that most policy detail is the responsibility of professionals; that political influence is aggregated through parties and campaigns; that losing an election means waiting; and that attention to a specific bill has little direct connection to one's formal power.

A system in which citizens can cast or reclaim a legislative vote, join small working associations, delegate to trusted persons, inspect sources, and challenge procedures would teach different lessons. It would not guarantee wisdom. It would make different forms of attention and cooperation rational.

Participation theorists have long emphasized this feedback. Mill treated political activity as educative. Dewey understood democracy as a mode of associated life and communication, not merely a governmental mechanism (Dewey 1916; 1927). Pateman argued that participation develops the capacities and efficacy required for further participation (Pateman 1970). Contemporary evidence from deliberative processes likewise shows that ordinary participants can learn under supportive institutional conditions.

The present argument adds authority to the feedback model. Participation is most formative when it is consequential. Advisory exercises can teach discussion, but they also teach the limit of advice. A citizen who deliberates carefully and then watches an independent authority decide may gain information while also learning that final judgment belongs elsewhere.

The phrase "freedom is the education" captures the reversal, but it must not be romanticized. Authority does not automatically improve character. People can use power irresponsibly. Consequential decisions can generate fear,

propaganda, faction, and domination. The claim is not that freedom is sufficient education. It is that some capacities of self-government cannot develop fully while self-government is withheld.

This makes citizen development a design problem rather than a permission gate. The institution should expect uneven attention, error, prejudice, and conflict. It should build routes for learning, delegation, correction, appeal, and reversal. It should not wait for a transformed population before becoming democratic.

6.18 From tutelary democracy to democratic development

The Enlightenment inheritance cannot be divided neatly into democratic reason and antidemocratic hierarchy. The same commitment to human development supported both emancipation and guardianship. Reason undermined hereditary rule, but differences in reason justified new elites. Education widened agency, but education also became a qualification for authority. Progress opened the future, but progress ranked populations along a developmental scale. Public reason challenged censorship, but public reasoning could remain institutionally separate from decision.

The strongest response is not to abandon the Enlightenment project. A politics that rejects truth, education, reason-giving, and development would leave citizens more vulnerable to domination, not less. Democratic ownership requires people able to communicate, investigate, specialize, criticize, and learn. It requires a public culture in which claims can be tested and authority can be challenged.

The response is to remove political equality from the developmental ladder.

Equal legislative standing should attach to recognized membership in the polity, not to success in becoming an ideal citizen. Knowledge may affect influence. Trust may affect delegation. Skill may affect assignment to specialized work. Experience may affect leadership. None of these differences should become an independent title to own another citizen's legislative decision.

This conclusion also changes the role of reformers. The reformer is not the tutor of a public awaiting admission to democracy. The reformer is an institutional collaborator helping equal citizens build the means through which they can govern. The difference is relational. A tutor decides when the pupil is ready. A collaborator supplies tools whose use remains subject to those who will live under the result.

Contemporary civic education, deliberation, depolarization, and media-literacy work can all be incorporated into this model. Their value increases when connected to real public authority. Citizens have stronger reasons to learn when learning can alter a decision. Deliberation has greater dignity when it is part of governing rather than a demonstration for officeholders. Media literacy matters more when citizens can use verified information to cast, delegate, or reclaim consequential votes. Empathy becomes one resource among equals rather than a favor upon which another's standing depends.

The theory does not promise that voters will become enlightened enough to eliminate error. It rejects enlightenment as a threshold that someone else must certify. Democracy begins under conditions of incomplete development because all political orders begin under those conditions. Rulers are not complete either.

The evaluator's final defense is often prudential: surely power should remain with those more prepared to use it. But this assumes that concentrated decision ownership is itself a neutral safeguard. It is not. Guardians possess interests, biases, blind spots, and limited knowledge. Their mistakes are amplified by the authority they monopolize. The choice is not between fallible citizens and infallible guardians. It is between different organizations of fallibility.

Democratic ownership distributes final standing while allowing labor and knowledge to remain differentiated. It makes education continuous, plural, and available without turning it into a license for citizenship. It treats civic development as something people undertake through the exercise of authority, not as a probation imposed before authority is returned.

The Enlightenment asked human beings to emerge from tutelage. Democratic theory should take that demand institutionally seriously.

A people does not become ready for self-government under the permanent government of others.

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