Politicized Pseudo Science

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On June 7th, 2004 the American Political Science Association (APSA) issued a Media Advisory announcing, "Leading Political Scientists Warn of Threat to American Democracy in Rare Nonpartisan Statement" (APSA Press Release 2004). The subtitle reiterated this alarmist tone: "New Study will Report Economic Disparities Deny Many Americans A Political Voice; Money Buys Access; Gains in Civil Rights Threatened as Well." Note, we are speaking of "threats" (to democracy) that are "profound." Furthermore, "research shows a *devastating* erosion of political equality in America" (italics added). Have these distinguished professors possibly discovered a conspiracy to cancel elections, repeal the First Amendment, or otherwise impose a racist plutocracy? Are retired generals and multinational CEOs about to launch a *coup d'état*?

Everything about the APSA Task Force on Inequality and American Democracy's press release superficially suggests respectability. The Task Force authors are indisputably A-list, respected scholars. The report took two years to produce and outwardly bears the well-regarded APSA imprimatur (it was on the Association's letterhead). Fortunately, the press release soon (and inadvertently) calmed jangled nerves. Those suspecting that many of today's professors live on Mars might find smoking gun proof here. To wit, the Advisory does admit that government has commendably bestowed immeasurable economic and political opportunity, everything from Social Security, home mortgage programs, and the G.I. Bill to public education. Also conceded are laudable government efforts to secure political equality. Nevertheless, "Today, however, few government programs ensure opportunity and security and encourage political engagement for Americans who are not elderly. This situation reinforces the preoccupation of political leaders with improving the programs of the aged rather than assisting young and old alike."

On its face the message appears to claim that we now live in a gerontocracy in which, supposedly, nearly all else—including federal aid to education and countless expensive health care initiatives for the non-elderly—is cannibalized to placate the greedy old folks. An AARP *coup d état*, and we slept through it all! And, are we really to believe that the government itself (not just evil Republicans) is really trying to banish women, gays, and sundry minorities from politics? These assertions are, to be frank, a professional embarrassment. Far more plausible is that Washington relentlessly intrudes into elections to expand, not contract, access while going into debt to bestow fresh cornucopias of benefits to young and old alike.

Having announced this stealthy AARP putsch and how government is now shrinking civic access, the Media Advisory then presents a litany of well-researched facts that will (hopefully) galvanize those worried over our democratic fitness. What might these threats be? Massive undiscovered voter fraud? Rampant bribery? Unelected judges capriciously riding roughshod over legislatures? Not even close. The real culprits are greater political activism among wealthier citizens than among the disadvantaged, the targeting of the affluent by political parties, unexpected disproportionate Internet use by "the privileged," blue collar unionism's decline, the failure of "public interest" organizations to counter business groups, and, most central, soaring U.S. economic disparities.

Zero here even hints at evil-doing. Republicans are innocent of intimidating potential African-American voters or of imposing draconian taxes on the destitute. Nor is it alleged that today's wealthy acquired their loot illegally or by exploiting the poor. Like terrible weather, unfairness just seems to happen—evil lies with the system, not people. Rival explanations are non-existent. That the less fortunate may freely choose to shun haranguing city hall or spend their money on groceries, not campaign contributions, is never considered. It is likewise assumed that wealthy participants are waging selfish class warfare so the less fortunate must replace the millionaire Ted Kennedy with Archie Bunker or Ralph Kramden. Given the absence of identifiable evildoers plus the deeply ingrained nature of these deplorable conditions, something more is obviously required than, say, raising upper bracket taxes or subsidizing universal Internet access. Stay tuned for the solution.

And, what does this deteriorating situation foretell? Are slum dwellers secretly stockpiling RPGs while pretending to buy flat-screen plasma TVs? Almost. The Task Force's lead author (Lawrence Jacobs) depicts a bleak future: "there is also a growing sense of powerlessness that is tearing at the heart of democracy itself. When people feel powerless, when the rich get richer and the poor get poorer, we make ourselves vulnerable to the sort of system-wide chaos that we like to believe will never touch us." Again and again, the message is unmistakable—deep economic disparities are killing democracy, and we better watch out or it might be the fire next time!

Momentarily concede that Media Advisories require hyping to garner notice, or that overeager interns absconded with APSA letterhead stationary. Are these arguments any more persuasive if we examine supporting documentation? Surely these 15 academic luminaries

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know that Congress is not prisoner of the AARP, and that endemic economic inequality has hardly inhibited democracy's expansion. Alas, ideology mongering only gets worse.

The Report

The 22-page Report's (2004a) quantitative data and erudite citations aside, the over-heated radical egalitarian tone remains as fervent (and annoyingly repetitive) as before. That the privileged are privileged comprises the Mother of All Facts and the source of every evil. This copiously footnoted tome might better be characterized as non sequitur polemical decorations, not scientific confirmation. Let me just highlight some key Report claims and offer some contrarian comments.

The Report begins by asserting that "equal political voice" and "democratically responsive government" are widely cherished American ideals (1). In nearly four decades of scrutinizing American political values, I have never, *never* seen any evidence that Americans "cherish" *equal* political voice; at most, Americans want to be heard, and while everyone agrees that "responsive government" is a splendid idea, the term invites so many murky meanings as to be analytically useless unless precisely defined. Detailed discussion of this alleged public craving for economic equality in the footnote-laden "Inequalities of Political Voice" (2004b) is gobbledygook and reflects a cartoonish grasp of policy. Here, for example, Social Security and federal aid to education (and just about every other social welfare goodie) are portrayed as efforts to level wealth so, *ipso facto*, poll data showing desires for "more spending" is twisted into "proof" that the public "really" favors economic egalitarianism. Zero, for example, is said about Social Security being a flat, if not slightly regressive, tax since all income over $90,000 are untaxed (15% of total income in 2002). Analysis is equally silent about the poor receiving less due to shorter life expectancies though they receive slightly higher benefit levels. That federal education subsidies probably disproportionately reward the middle class at the expense of the poor also goes unnoticed (the authors naively conflate spending to assist the needy with actual assistance). Oddly, the authors admit that Americans generally endorse economic *in*equality and a bit later confess that the public opposes government efforts to diminish income gaps (2004a, 8).

Similar deception applies when "discovering" public support for political equality. Almost any handy survey tidbit—opposing the Electoral College, endorsing term limits, supporting campaign contribution limits, a distaste for Senate filibusters, rejecting a single six-year presidential term—becomes "proof" of the public's burgeoning egalitarian embrace. As pickpockets see only pockets, these levelers only see an egalitarian infatuated public (and polling, it is further alleged, under-reports egalitarian appetites by disproportionately excluding the destitute who surely must crave more taxing and spending).

And how do we know that racial/gender/ethnic income disparities are fundamentally inimical to democracy? Surely no standard definition of "democracy" inserts this almost impossible-to-satisfy (let alone measure) requirement. Fear not, the Declaration of Independence authoritatively assures us that "all men are created equal," which, according to these students of history, "in our time means that every citizen—regardless of income, gender, race, and ethnicity should have an equal voice in representative government." Think about this ground-breaking interpretation *seriously*: Does the Declaration forbid Whites from donating more money to campaigns, or having more bumper stickers than African Americans? If so, is this "equality" enforceable given the First Amendment (which, unlike the Declaration, does have legal standing) protects unrestrained political access? Again, stay tuned.

Uneven voting rates receive tedious scrutiny, as if they inherently de-legitimized democratic elections. That turnout gaps are often slight hardly lessons their alleged despicable, subversive character. Curiously, both parties are slammed for catering to habitual voters versus energizing the chronically apathetic. Shame! Perhaps these Ivory Tower residents, unlike party professionals, possess the ancient secret of mobilizing the lethargic and grasp that this reallocation better utilizes political capital vis-à-vis trying to sway regular voters. Barring felons from voting is predictably assailed as victimizing minority men though this disenfranchisement is legal, not a hidden plot, and thus reversible by democratically elected state legislatures (that excluding felons might *improve* democracy is, of course, unthinkable). And how do the wealthy more skillfully advance their political aims (which are, assumedly, totally divergent from those preferred by those below)? Is civic engagement structured to give plutocrats unfair advantages? Just about: "Exercising the rights of citizenship requires resources and skills, which privileged occupations disproportionately bestow on the economically well-off" (2004a, 7–8) In other words, if one becomes a lawyer versus a garbage collector, one "gets" the skills necessary to be a savvy participant. Talk about on-the-job training! Never considered is that the very ineptitude that confines people to menial jobs also diminishes their political dexterity.

Even apparent upbeat news is twisted into a democratic threat. Consider, for example, the explosive growth in liberal "do-gooder" organizations protecting gays, at-risk children, women, and others at a disadvantage. What's wrong with this picture showing newfound voice? Plenty—these ostensible guardians attract well-heeled donors, associations are professionally run, and they must battle burgeoning business-oriented rivals! (2004a, 9) Might we want to exclude rich folk from donating to Public Citizen, demand amateur administration, and limit would-be business lobbies à la scarce airwave licenses? Seems reasonable enough, the professors might say.

These authors never acknowledge that the growing economic inequality in the U.S. vis-à-vis European democracies may signify beneficial wealth creation, not democratic imperfection and that stagnant French and German economies might gain from a Bill Gates, Larry Ellison, or countless other risk-taking billionaire entrepreneurs. What about growing inequality arising from new wealth at the top, not the impoverishment of those below? Going one step further, if the U.S. economy collapsed and billionaires became mere millionaires, would this invigorate democracy? What if the U.S. slid into Third World privation? Nor do these scholars concede that this mushrooming wealth subsidizes all the entitlements that will, supposedly, restore a frayed social welfare safety net so essential to "democracy." In this peculiar zero-sum cosmology, rising inequality that flows from expanding prosperity is unconsciously equated with economic stagnation. A heavy-handed populist disdain for affluent business people lurks here.

Now for the really terrible news: unequal voice shapes daily life. These 15 experts tell us (but sans any data), among other things, that the politically hushed must toil extra hours just to survive, often postpone vital medical treatment, go hungry and deprive their children of education (2004a, 16). It is a wonder that Charles Dickens is absent in the bibliography. These assertions assume that coercing government is the superior—perchance exclusive—pathway to gaining extra leisure, adequate medical care, and even more food (or, happily, government-funded weight loss programs to combat soaring obesity among the voiceless poor). After all, this is how the wealthy became rich: they cleverly extracted it from Washington.

For these professors, apparently, it is unimaginable that plugging away extra hours for Ebenezer Scrooge will doubtless pay for food, health care, and education while political recourse is a

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dicey luxury risking further short-term deprivation. The rival proposition that the well-off play politics because they enjoy the discretionary income needed for this hobby, or seek psychological fulfillment, not because they crave food and cheaper drugs, goes unnoticed (and how can we explain plutocrats like George Soros bankrolling the rich candidates?). Similarly, how might these experts account for politically apathetic immigrant Blacks out-earning native-born African Americans who have rallied to civic activism as *the* solution? Perhaps Jamaican shopkeepers should sell their stores and mail the proceeds to the DNC if they truly seek millionaire status.

And how can we reverse these inequalities that derive from the poor being tongue-tied? Restore the Great Society! Democracy, these experts inform us, requires massive fresh Washington expenditures for health care, education, subsidies for working parents, and the like. That this costly "relief" has historically proven ineffective while not always benefiting intended recipients, and may bankrupt government or even drive industries employing the poor abroad, goes absolutely unmentioned. The report also assumed that the voiceless truly desire this welfare state expansion (and the higher taxes), a debatable conclusion defensible only by presenting polls asking about free-lunch benefits. Perhaps Congress should stop diddling around and act decisively: just repeal the laws of economics and embrace Third-World style economic populism.

Lastly, how *precisely* can we fabricate this egalitarian utopia? If, indeed, inequality of voice rooted in the mal-distribution of wealth is the chief culprit, one must then (a) level wealth and (b) forcefully prevent too much yakking. Regarding the latter option, how about just mailing a $1,000 campaign donation chip to everyone, and forbid spending one cent more? Likewise, we might allocate a fixed number of political e-mails or missives to Congress lest the privileged again out-shout everyone. A Ministry of Equal Civic Activism (MECA) could specify legal activism levels and gag the verbose. Of course we must repeal the First Amendment and assign state troopers to spy on pushy types while coercing stay-at-homes to join the civic fray. Only then, thank goodness, will real democracy, albeit of a Democratic Peoples' Republic variety, flourish.

The authors, unfortunately, seem oblivious to the embedded totalitarianism, an oversight that speaks loudly about today's intellectual environment. Perhaps we should be thankful that a Worker's Paradise is not yet on this menu. Offered instead is a litany of futile, vacuous proposals. We must (somehow) restore faith in government since a positive attitude breeds civic involvement. Conveniently overlooked is that Washington hardly warrants such confidence, or that Pollyannaish blank-check trust may subvert liberty. Also recommended is reversing blue collar union membership declines since unions once encouraged civic participation (including, we can assume, "voluntary" political contributions). Totally disregarded is that unions have lavishly spent to reverse membership declines, all to no avail (these alleged experts obviously refused to share their secrets with Lane Kirkland before he got the axe for failing to reverse membership declines). Especially novel is the plea for religious renewal, not because of our spiritual deficiencies, but because church experiences build civic virtue—today's soup kitchen volunteer is tomorrow's vote canvasser. Three cheers for Christian Fundamentalists (I presume)! How this new-found religious engagement is to be officially encouraged is, sadly, left to the reader's imagination. Updating George W. Bush's Faith-Based Initiative scheme with tax breaks for choir practice? A "no parishioner left behind" outreach? It goes without saying that the media must deepen the passion for community life among those with muted voices, perhaps, one might guess, by broadcasting dull city council meetings simultaneously on every available channel and permanently depriving resistors of ESPN or the Home Shopping Network.

An interesting irony infuses this nonsense. Totalitarian-flavored ideology mongering is self-evident even with a cursory read, and non-believers will detect it immediately. Such foolishness would probably have disappeared if a few "conservatives" joined the Task Force, but inclusiveness might, regrettably, have doomed the report at conception. A little diversity, so to speak, would have saved considerable embarrassment. The "conservative" Task Force members surely would have contributed their own unique life experience, suggesting, perchance, that the First Amendment prohibits restraints on the free expression of ideas even though unequal voice dooms democracy. Just a thought.

Empirical Deficiencies . . . and a Personal Note

Conceptual sloppiness—a bizarre vision of democracy, a politics-as-the-source-of-all wealth cosmology, equating genuine accomplishment with unearned "privilege," and so on—are sufficiently fatal to relegate the project to history's dustbin. But, as they say on cheap TV infomercials, "wait, there's more." Serious methodological flaws lie embedded here, and while others might more carefully explicate these deficiencies, they at least warrant brief mention and a little personal note, to boot.

Asserting that political voice is uneven requires *fully* measuring "voice" levels. Unfortunately, Task Force scholars apparently grew deaf after reading Lester Milbrath's 1965 *Political Participation*. Activism exemplars—voting, writing letters, donating money or time, joining a political group, engaging in a protest—are, to be sure, bona fide activities, but they are but a tiny outcropping in today's civic landscape, at best a sampling, and there is no reason to suppose a representative sampling. In fact, political necessity guarantees adaptive innovation if only because yesterday's attention-getting tactics grow stale and, believe it or not, reality changes. Moreover, what separates the political from the non-political is exceedingly contentious, so calibrating voice loudness inescapably reflects differing theoretical conceptions of "political." Are rioters "political activists" or just hooligans? How do we classify teachers propagating ideologies under the guise of objectively explicating American history? If all civic instruction is inherently political, as some respectable scholars claim, participation levels explode. This is a serious problem in calibrating "voice," and cannot be dismissed by insisting that measuring it is just too arduous. How do we measure "voice" expressed via bribery, sabotage (a favored tacit of certain environmental groups), or even terrorism?

Real world aficionados, versus Talmudic scholars pouring over the NES data, will encounter a cacophony of fresh voices. To secure greater funding to combat AIDS, gays used "die-ins," threats to "out" closeted homosexuals, "kiss-ins," and countless other effective tactics unknown in Milbrath's day. Opponents of the Iraq War staged a thousand productions of Lysistrata, conceivably to remind women that withholding sex can undermine militarism. Who would ever envision a bake sale conscripted for political ends, as when conservative college students used race-based pricing to challenge affirmative action? Clothing emblems and music (from country western to rap) have now become *major* vehicles for expressing political ideas. After all, wearing a Confederate Flag bandana does say something. How can one justify an activism inventory that excludes litigation? What about varied activists pushing corporations in political directions via their shareholder votes? Have any of these scholars encountered the expression, "culture wars"? Examples of new but Task Force neglected "voice" are almost endless. This is myopia verging on blindness.

The Task Force analysis also tunes out "voice" quality, as if everything were just a matter of volume. All donations—$1,000

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to a contender in a close contest versus $10 given to the Vegetarians—receive identical treatment. Some "voice" might be better understood as therapy, not instrumental activism, e.g., proudly wearing a "Dump W" button during his second term. To close one's ears to quality is the equivalent of insisting that everyone is a Pavarotti. More important, claiming that those now silent would gain only if they would "speak up" is scientifically unproven. In a political arena prizing articulateness, relentless screeching is dismissible noise.

The Task Force also embraces a Pollyanna view of politics—as in carnival game pitches, everyone is a winner, but you have to play. Again, wacky nonsense—political engagement is not positive sum, civic activism has opportunity costs, and, of the utmost import, political engagement can make things worse! Some pro-choice TV ads may only alienate potential allies, even generate a backlash, not rally support to block a judicial appointment. And this is so patently obvious, save, perhaps, cloistered monks mired in statistical data. My own work, *The Limits of Civic Activism* (2004) showed how misguided, though highly successful, gay activism to sustain a promiscuous lifestyle against public health officials brought brutal, and largely unnecessary, carnage. Tens of thousands of young men would be alive today had this "voice" never been expressed. Does the scientific evidence prove that fervent African-American electoral politicking has produced the desired socio-economic gains? Would additional rallies to protest school segregation boost student performance? Perhaps the time could be better spent studying. Civic engagement may be a dreadful investment.

Let me add a disheartening personal note. Like everyone who believes that scholarship requires a communal effort, especially when venturing into unsure territory, in late 2003 and early 2004 I sent draft chapters of my heretical *Limits* book to 10 leading scholars in this field (including three Task Force members). One just asked to see more, but, beyond that, total silence. My litany of charges regarding the antique nature of today's activism measures, the need to add a quality dimension, and multiple other fundamental qualms went unchallenged. I sadly concluded that zero interest exists in improving our hearing of "voice." A wind-up Victrola is perfectly fine if you already hear what you want to hear.

Why?

The economic inequality/democracy nexus hardly constitutes a pressing public concern requiring disciplinary attentiveness. A dozen rival and far more urgent democratically related topics easily come to mind (e.g., erratic election administration, noncitizen voting, the Electoral College). It is also improbable that influencing Congress or provoking public debate was the project's aim. And, as we noted, the policy recommendations (e.g., boost blue collar union membership, encourage the media to extol civic involvement) are quixotic.

A political interpretation is more plausible: by certifying which ideological gods need worshipping, and what constitutes heresy, this enterprise provides "on the make" academics with helpful advancement clues. This is "signaling" in today's social science jargon, and is fundamentally no different than what has already transpired in the discipline's acknowledgment of feminism and race/ethnic identity politics as bona fide "approaches" to scholarship. The ultimate aim is anointing the quest for draconian egalitarianism as respectable scholarship so future generations passing through universities will soak up this radical vision. This is the capture-the-culture game via colonizing an academic discipline. Today the professors, then the students, and tomorrow the world, so to speak.

Transforming a discipline's intellectual center of gravity is not rocket science once the administrative apparatus is secure and disciplinary incentives controlled. Every reader who has ever sought professional publications understands the system. Savvy careerists quickly learn to sniff the air to avoid suicide notes or shun entire lines of inquiry altogether. Better yet, study the speeches of association luminaries, track disciplinary awards, observe the trendy topics that garner extra convention panels, and so on. You don't have to be a weatherperson to know which way the wind is blowing.

In this vocational context, a grand project depicting economic inequality's nefarious impact on our democratic health, implicitly endorsed by the APSA itself, authored by 15 A-list scholars using 300 footnotes, supplies a cornucopia of useful catch phrases and research ideas. Even our professional vocabulary has altered; for example, the industrious are now labeled "privileged" as if they slyly inherited their accomplishments. Add ideologically kosher citations galore to be conveniently borrowed and used to route one's journal submission to fellow travelers. That this tortured "research" may even subvert knowledge is irrelevant: it's the career, stupid. Those hungry for dissertation topics now have a feeding fest while tenure bubble assistant professors would be well-advised, for example, to re-direct their energy to publish, "Voice in TV Campaign Commercials: Why Is Everything So Lily White?" or "FCC Policy and the Silencing of Gay Media." Meanwhile outlandish claims regarding impending chaos without drastic wealth distribution will now *increase*, not decrease, publication likelihood.

A burgeoning "democratic inequality studies" field may all too quickly emerge in which go-getters incestuously cite each other's shaky conclusions to build formidable resumes and thus help each other up the ladder. That the core ideas infusing this enterprise are outlandish will hardly kill it off—disdaining reality can even be advantageous insofar as it publicly demonstrates a get-with-the-program commitment. If everything goes according to plan, this multiplying "knowledge" will eventually infuse textbooks and generations of students will "know" that democratic tribulations are rooted in even the smallest economic inequality.

The enterprise also announces that mixing research and political activism is absolutely permissible, even commendable while showing how to disguise an ideological slant. Recall that the enterprise is conspicuously labeled "non-partisan," as if it transcends ideological divides. By this standard, demanding a U.S. Islamic Republic would be "non-partisan" since everyone would reject it regardless of party affiliation or ideology. This is light years from offering explicit "Policy Recommendations." While advocacy research is hardly professionally new (recall anti-war academic-sponsored surveys from the 1960s), today's version differs—it comes from the best and the brightest with the national Association's full cooperation. The distinction between objective research and ideology mongering has evidently evaporated or been rejected.

Serious Quackery

Transforming the profession into scholarly agitprop is lamentable, but hardly catastrophic in the grand scheme of things. At worst, intellectual corruption will render the Association publicly irrelevant. The potential for serious personal damage is far greater, however, if impressionable undergraduates absorb this "politics is the best pathway to economic gain" message. Consider what happened in 2003 when Blacks disproportionately failed Florida's required high school exit exam. Rather than exhort students to shape up, Black leaders threatened to boycott major state industries unless Governor Jeb Bush reversed this outcome. A similar exercise in "voice" recently occurred in New York State—failing test scores drew a political response for dumbed-down standards, not a public outcry for academic

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diligence. These "just get involved" lessons have even motivated the obese to demand that government remove temptations to cure their gluttony, though one could argue that marching and demonstrating is healthy exercise. Such examples, unfortunately, have grown commonplace—whatever the problem, harangue officials for a government fix. That many of these quandaries are not amenable to government-provided solutions or are doomed from the get-go, or that private responses are more efficacious, seems almost unthinkable. That shouting louder ("voice") is likely to be futile, and a recipe for chronic political dependency, is hardly trivial for those mired in poverty. Democracy, let alone economic progress, hardly prospers when semiliterate Florida teenagers foolishly believe that an awaiting lifetime of menial work can be escaped by threatening to boycott the lottery.

Let me be impolitely blunt: this Task Force message is dangerous quackery, quackery devastating to those at the bottom. I am *not* insisting that all, or even most, political activism is pointless. It does perform as advertised, but only *sometimes*, and even then usually for those who already enjoy many advantages. To prescribe as a tonic for a better life the imploring of the less fortunate to just talk louder, no matter what is said, and perhaps the muzzling of the verbose "privileged," is on a par with 14th-century medicine. That this totalitarian infected counsel issues from handsomely paid, distinguished tenured academics who should know better makes this Report all the more deplorable. This garbled voice should be silenced.

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