

Interview – Jason Brennan

Written by E-International Relations

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Jason Brennan (Ph.D., 2007, University of Arizona) is Robert J. and Elizabeth Flanagan Family Professor of Strategy, Economics, Ethics, and Public Policy at the McDonough School of Business at Georgetown University. He specializes in politics, philosophy, and economics. He is the Editor of *Public Affairs Quarterly* and an Associate Editor of *Social Philosophy and Policy*. He is the author of 15 books, including *Debating Democracy*, with Hélène Landemore (Oxford University Press, 2021), *Business Ethics for Better Behavior*, with William English, John Hasnas, and Peter Jaworski (Oxford University Press, 2021), *Why It's OK to Want to Be Rich* (Routledge Press 2020), *Good Work if You Can Get It* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2020); *Injustice for All: America's Dysfunctional Criminal Justice System and How to Fix It*, with Christopher Surprenant (Routledge, 2019); and *Cracks in the Ivory Tower: The Moral Mess of Higher Education*, with Phil Magness (Oxford University Press, 2019). He is co-editor, along with David Schmidtz and Bas Van der Vossen, of the *Routledge Handbook of Libertarianism* (Routledge, 2017). His books have been translated 25 times. The German translation of *Against Democracy*, *Gegen Demokratie* (Ullstein, 2017), was a *Der Spiegel* bestseller.

Where do you see the most exciting research/debates happening in your field?

Let's talk specifically about democratic theory. Over on the normative side, that is, the side that is trying to ask what is just or what justifies democracy, frankly most of the work is not very good. Philosophical democratic theory is a bit like theology; just as many theologians take it for granted God exists, so philosophical democratic theorists take it for granted democracy is good and largely ignore or evade evidence to the contrary. Many of the theories are based upon false and falsified models of voter, politician, and bureaucrat behavior. That said, some democratic theorists, if not most, take real democracy seriously, and their work shows it. For instance, Alexander Guerrero is doing interesting work about how random selection [e.g. the use of a lottery system to select representatives] might overcome some of the flaws in real-life democracy.

In contrast, on the empirical side, things are exciting. We have renewed and increasing evidence that most voters are not ideological, and their reasons for joining this party or that are not based upon shared interests or policy goals. For most voters, politics is not about policy. Rather, politics is a way of signaling fidelity to their peer or demographic group. What this means is that the traditional story for democracy—that democracy instantiates the will of the majority, if not everyone—falls apart. Most people do not have political wills per se, other than that their team win. And their reasons for wanting their team to win have little to do with what the team will do in power. For good work on this, see *Democracy for Realists*, *Neither Liberal Nor Conservative*, *Uncivil Agreement*, and *The Elephant in the Brain*.

How has the way you understand the world changed over time, and what (or who) prompted the most significant shifts in your thinking?

In, say, 2005, I assumed most voters voted their self-interest in a fairly rational way, and that they voted on the basis of ideology and policy goals. Michael X. Delli-Carpini and Scott Keeter, Bryan Caplan, Christopher Achen and Larry Bartels, Philip Converse, and others disabused me of this. The evidence shows voters are not merely uninformed and subject to massive cognitive biases, but that they aren't even trying to vote for political goals. So, in short, I used to think politics was about policy for most people. Now I don't. Another big change has to do with immigration. I had

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never really thought much about immigration rights until I read work by Bryan Caplan and Michael Huemer. I then realized that the foundational question of political theory is not about justice inside the state, but why the state should have any right to exclude people at all.

You published your book *Against Democracy* in 2016. How has the subsequent COVID-19 pandemic affected your views on the viability of democracy?

The COVID pandemic has been a nice illustration of the things I discuss. People on both sides in the US are largely irrational and unscientific. Instead of carefully assessing the evidence, thinking carefully about cost-benefit analysis, worrying about overreach, thinking about long-term effects on children, and so on, we see both Democrats and Republicans loudly parroting stupid and unscientific ideas and trying as best they can to “own” the other side. We see people switching their views overnight on basic issues and acting like they haven’t.

I suspect that had Trump taken a harsh and authoritarian approach, as China did, we would have seen the opposite positions in the US. Imagine back in March 2020, Trump announces immediate lockdowns. If he had, I think Democrats would have said that this is a mass violation of civil rights that involves a mass redistribution from the young to the old and from the poor to the rich. It enriches Walmart and Amazon at the expense of small businesses. It has a differential impact, where upper class white and Asian people, and their kids, do OK, but the burdens fall primarily on minorities and their children. It’s easy to imagine that the Democrats, given their putative goals, would have been anti-lockdown if only Trump had been pro. And had Trump been pro right away, then Republicans today would be pro. It’s hard to make any sense of the actual positions Republicans and Democrats take given their putative ideologies. But once you see that politics is not about policy but instead about waving flags for your team, it makes sense.

Do you believe China’s continued rise will have an impact on how people around the world view western-style liberal democracy?

China carefully curates and creates the perception of success, but in reality, it’s a fragile political system. We know it’s fragile because the government engages in mass censorship and continuous propaganda. Stable and strong political systems do not need to lie, manipulate, or control their citizenry to stay in power. That doesn’t mean it will collapse. It seems to be pretty good at propaganda and censorship, but the fact that it has to do it is proof of its own failures. In contrast, American football player Tom Brady doesn’t have to censor the media to keep up his reputation; he just wins.

You have argued for epistocracy, the rule by the knowledgeable, as opposed to technocracy as a preferable system of government. What are the shortfalls of technocracy relative to epistocracy?

Most of my friends who extol democracy are also technocrats. They want bands of experts to control and manipulate the population to produce desirable social goals. For instance, almost none of the democratic theorists who say they hate epistocracy came out against the mass invasion of civil rights during COVID; they instead defended the view that health experts should make emergency policy free of democratic oversight. They lambast senators and others who dare to question health officials. On paper, these democratic theorists are pro-democracy; in practice, they are technocratic authoritarians. In contrast, I suspect an epistocracy would be less technocratic, because people who are actually informed about politics take seriously perverse incentives, government failure, and civil rights.

Do you believe epistocracy is desirable in all countries or do you think it would be preferable for there to be a variety of political structure around the world?

Epistocracy is like democracy, I think, in that how well it functions would vary from place to place. Democracy fails in certain countries which have a poor constitutional culture and in which people see the government as means to exploit rival groups. It fails where there is low interpersonal trust. Similarly, epistocracy will function worse in those places. I think epistocracy of a certain sort—what we might call enlightened preference voting—will outperform democracy, but it will work best where democracy works best and also work worse where democracy works worse.

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That said, I'm not saying other countries should be authoritarian or have single-party states. These systems are also usually terrible.

Will growing global challenges, such as climate change, future pandemics, or nuclear proliferation, have an impact on the types of governments countries will choose for themselves? What does this mean for democracy?

There seems to be a recent trend of democratic backsliding, where formerly somewhat democratic countries have become authoritarian, and more democratic countries have become less. So the trend is toward authoritarian states run by strongmen or technocratic bureaucracies. In modern democracies, we keep seeing that when something bad happens, people want to stifle rival speech, give emergency power to their leaders, and force compliance with poorly-thought-out but “nice”-sounding policies. So, I think leaders will take advantage of crises to secure more and more power for themselves, and people will mostly go along with it. Most people are conformist cowards who would have gone along with the Nazis or with Stalin if only they had the chance. Very few people have a deep commitment to democracy or liberalism. These are fragile ideas and I am not bullish on them sticking around.

What is the most important advice you could give to young scholars of political philosophy?

You should be able to teach intro to sociology, intro to economics, and intro to political science off the cuff without much preparation. If you can't, you probably don't understand the institutions you theorize about. It's a bit bizarre that political philosophy and theory are filled with scholars who think they can say what is just or unjust but who fundamentally do not understand how the institutions they discuss work or why they function as they do. People who do political philosophy only without expertise in the social sciences overwhelmingly do bad work that's not worth reading. As an example, I was giving a talk once when a grad student said he was writing a dissertation on what makes employment good or bad. He admitted, as part of his question, that he had never read Ronald Coase's 1937 paper “The Nature of the Firm,” which is the most important and foundational paper in economics explaining why we work for firms rather than all acting as private service contractors. Frankly, if you haven't read that paper, you shouldn't have much of an opinion on employment, because you have little idea what you are talking about.