

IS DEMOCRACY THE PROBLEM, OR MONEY-CORRUPTED GOVERNANCE?

I've been pondering this NYT story—which is presented as news yet which in fact is analysis attempting to provide a general explanation for protests in democracies—since it came out. Its general explanation for why so many people are protesting is that people—primarily youth—have grown disillusioned with voting.

Hundreds of thousands of disillusioned Indians cheer a rural activist on a hunger strike. Israel reels before the largest street demonstrations in its history. Enraged young people in Spain and Greece take over public squares across their countries.

Their complaints range from corruption to lack of affordable housing and joblessness, common grievances the world over. But from South Asia to the heartland of Europe and now even to Wall Street, these protesters share something else: wariness, even contempt, toward traditional politicians and the democratic political process they preside over.

They are taking to the streets, in part, because they have little faith in the ballot box.

Note, the title of the article (which presumably the authors didn't write) refers to a "scorn for vote," but even this last sentence focuses on the ballot box, rather than the system the ballot box supports. The article doesn't offer any polling to show this generation (or even just protest participants) are objecting to voting, per se, nor does it question why the record number of youth who came out to vote in the US in 2008 are now among those occupying

Wall Street. Rather, it offers these quotes from a protest participants.

“Our parents are grateful because they’re voting,” said Marta Solanas, 27, referring to older Spaniards’ decades spent under the Franco dictatorship. “We’re the first generation to say that voting is worthless.”

[snip]

“We elect the people’s representatives so they can solve our problems,” said Sarita Singh, 25, among the thousands who gathered each day at Ramlila Maidan, where monsoon rains turned the grounds to mud but protesters waved Indian flags and sang patriotic songs.

“But that is not actually happening. Corruption is ruling our country.”

[snip]

Mr. Levi, born on Degania, Israel’s first kibbutz, said the protests were not acts of anger but of reclamation, of a society hijacked by a class known in Hebrew as “hon veshilton,” meaning a nexus of money and politics. The rise of market forces produced a sense of public disengagement, he said, a feeling that the job of a citizen was limited to occasional trips to the polling places to vote.

“The political system has abandoned its citizens,” Mr. Levi said. “We have lost a sense of responsibility for one another.”

All three of these speakers are talking about something more than democracy. They’re talking about democracy that has been delegitimized by its insulation from voters; two specify that corruption is the culprit.

In other words, the article claims to report something about protestors’ attitude towards democracy, while mostly downplaying the role that money has had in the failed governance that results from that democracy, though the protests

focus on the latter.

The authors fail to distinguish between democracy and capitalism in other ways, too. In one case, for example, they use a quote talking about capitalism to support a claim they make about voting.

Frustrated voters are not agitating for a dictator to take over. But they say they do not know where to turn at a time when political choices of the cold war era seem hollow. "Even when **capitalism** fell into its worst crisis since the 1920s there was no viable alternative vision," said the British left-wing author Owen Jones. [my emphasis]

And while they say, "the protest movements in democracies are not altogether unlike those that have rocked authoritarian governments this year," they only examine the technological similarities, the reliance on social media in both. They don't bother to consider the commonality between Tunisians demanding jobs, Israelis demanding affordable housing, Europeans fighting austerity or (in the case of London's riots) for some kind of future. And while they link to news on Occupy Wall Street, they don't even mention Wisconsin, perhaps because the involvement of unions and middle class teachers would spoil their desired narrative, which claims protestors are also bypassing unions.

A globalized economy has presented similar problems leading to similar protests in democracies and authoritarian regimes alike, but the NYT's reporters want to claim this is about democracy and not economics.

All of which builds to their judgment, one terribly sourced paragraph spinning these protests as a profoundly undemocratic movement.

While the Spanish and Israeli demonstrations were peaceful, **critics have raised concerns over the urge to bypass representative institutions**. In India, Mr. Hazare's crusade to "fast unto death" unless Parliament enacted his anticorruption law struck some

supporters as self-sacrifice. **Many opponents viewed his tactics as undemocratic blackmail.** [my emphasis]

"Critics have raised," "many opponents viewed." None of them named or quoted in the article, but all critically deployed to interpret the evidence the reporters set forth as being primarily about democracy and not about so-called capitalism (otherwise known as elite looting).

For the record, I do believe there's commonality among these protests. Not just the ones the authors puzzle through in Israel, India, and Europe, but also those in Madison, Wall Street, Egypt, and Tunisia. I do believe it's worth reflecting on this commonality. But I find it telling that an article published in the most elite news institution and complaining that, "protesters have created their own political space online that is chilly, sometimes openly hostile, toward traditional institutions of the elite," interprets the commonality here as a rejection of democracy, not a rejection of elite looting.