

Book Review

Review of Noveck, B. S. (2015). *Smart Citizens, Smarter State: The Technologies of Expertise and the Future of Governing*. Harvard University Press.

Contrary to the title and, perhaps, to the expectations of some readers, technology plays a secondary role in Beth Simone Noveck's *Smart Citizens, Smarter State: The Technologies of Expertise and the Future of Governing* (2015). Rather, this is a work about the future of democracy. Technology surely plays a critical role in her analysis and she offers several technology-centered proposals for changes in public management, but Noveck is primarily concerned with the ways in which government can and must change to maintain both relevance and legitimacy.

One of those needed changes, according to Noveck, is the opening of government to its own citizens. Near the beginning of chapter one, she defines open government as the idea that "... governing institutions are not as effective or legitimate as they might be because they operate behind closed doors" (p. 2). This clear, formal definition works but it is not nearly as appealing as her homier formulation, "conversational models of governing" (p. 30). Expressed either way, though, this is an unrealized ideal and Noveck has no illusions about the possibility for change in the current institutional context. Her frustration about this is clear and her language is pointed.

Nothing fundamental stands in the way of a concerted effort to build a genuinely smarter state – nothing that is, except the immense dead weight of entrenched institutional arrangements and beliefs that have long served us well but that now slow us down. . . (p. 31)

In her first few chapters, Noveck offers a theoretical analysis – indeed, indictment might be more accurate – of this institutional status quo. Chapter two traces the fall of agrarian, plebian society and the rise of the Weberian state bureaucracy in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. This is an intellectually intriguing narrative that weaves together the sociology of knowledge, James Scott's (1999) study of measurement and standardization, and the rise of public universities as bastions of elite professionalism [3]. The scope of the argument obscures what is essentially a simple idea: professional bureaucracy is founded on a hegemony of expert knowledge which excludes the average citizen and all that she can contribute to the polis and to policy. Says Noveck, "... after a century of professionalism, our institutions are willfully blind to what our people are capable of and willfully ignorant of their eagerness to contribute" (p. 74).

This theory of professionalized, bureaucratic government does not stand by itself, however. An inescapable complement is a theory of the citizen which justifies and rationalizes it. Noveck makes this point in her third chapter with the revealing title, "The Limits of Democratic Theory." Here, again, we are treated to another thoughtful and interesting tour of intellectual history and the scholarly foundations of modern political institutions. Noveck notes that political science has generally found empirical evidence to support a rather dim view of the citizen.

Though it is awkward to admit this, the core assumptions even in our democratic polity and society are profoundly undemocratic: people are ignorant; attempts at participation will be plagued by group pathologies; large organizations require hierarchical, professional management to function effectively. (p. 92)

She suggests, instead, that political scientists are victims of defining their terms too narrowly and then sustaining those narrow definitions in their findings. Democracy suffers, in short, from a failure – a critical failure – of theoretical imagination and vision. Noveck points to several scholars whose work she finds intriguing, but she seems to have little hope that traditional political science has much of a role to play in constructing the political future.

Institutional designs that take citizen competence seriously thus cannot grow out of mainstream political theory. . . . Rather, it is our changing conceptions of expertise, engendered by new technology and developments in computer science, that are likely to have the most profound impact on the next stage of evolution of our political institutions. (p. 99)

It seems clear, then, that this next stage of evolution depends on a marriage of technology and democracy. This union is explored in chapter four titled, “The Technologies of Expertise.” This is an especially important part of the larger book and readers seeking to understand Noveck’s vision of the relationship between technology and democracy must wrestle with and understand what she says here. Again, it is a task made easier by Noveck’s rich, interdisciplinary writing that weaves together ideas from the nature of expertise itself to her assessment of the traditional (and future) role of the university as a means to communicate and certify expert knowledge. The university does not fare well in this argument. Along with bureaucracies, universities and the knowledge elites they create have traditionally served to further the hegemony of knowledge that undermines full democracy. Noveck does not deny that policy-making requires expertise. Quite the contrary, she argues forcefully for the preeminent role of expertise in policy. But she just as forcefully argues that professional bureaucracy artificially and incorrectly attributes expert knowledge to the professional bureaucrat alone. In the current age, knowledge has been networked and expertise disaggregated. Therefore, policy and policy-making can be removed from the exclusive domain of professional bureaucrats. Networked knowledge makes it possible to eliminate the 19th century bureaucratic middleman who stands between the citizen and true democracy.

Against the backdrop of a broader dissatisfaction with top-down models of learning, ivory tower instruction, and insular governance, we would be exceedingly foolish not to make the most of our new technology-enabled ability to democratize how we define, express, and measure mastery. (p. 136)

After laying the theoretical groundwork in these first several chapters, the book takes a turn towards the practical and the prescriptive. Chapter five is a lengthy, detailed look at several cases which manifest some of the ideas, concepts, and possibilities of distributed expertise. Chapter six, “Why Smarter Government May Be Illegal,” looks at U.S. federal administrative law and its tendency to squelch democracy, citizen engagement, and innovation. Here Noveck seems to be writing from direct experience (in the Obama administration) and readers will undoubtedly come away sharing her sense of frustration with bureaucratic absurdity.

The final third of *Smart Citizens, Smarter State* is a visionary attempt to describe what the political future might look like if the obstacles Noveck identifies are overcome and the ideas she proposes are put into practice. Perhaps the best example of this vision is her suggestion for an updated version of Franklin Roosevelt’s brain trust (described extensively in Chapter seven) informed by technology and a more direct form of democratic engagement without – or, at least, with less – bureaucratic mediation.

The reference to the brain trust, in addition to being a specific program proposal, is a template for a different kind of governance. It may work as planned and Noveck’s call for updated governance is well-supported throughout this work, but some parts of Noveck’s broader argument do not hold together quite as well. Consider, for example, her critique of democratic theory and the citizen. To be sure, Noveck’s

criticisms of traditional political theory are pointed and interesting. In the concluding paragraph of her chapter on democratic theory she says, for example, “The notion that citizens are illiterate, pathological, inefficient, and, at best, capable only of talk divorced from action or of exercising an up-or-down vote on a topic runs through mainstream political theory” (p. 99). The implicit alternative she offers (and it is only implicit) is one of engaged citizens enabled by technology to participate in the policy process by offering untapped expertise. She may well be correct that the theory of the democratic citizen should be updated to account for, say, the highly educated software engineer willing to devote spare time to writing code to be used for disaster recovery. In other words, a 19th century theory may not fit the 21st century citizen. Yet that same theory must still explain the citizen who holds virulently racist, anti-immigrant sentiment and sees the internet as a vast left-wing conspiracy. Noveck suggests that computer science will be more useful than political theory in defining the political future, but how will computer science reconcile the darker aspects of the *demos* with its rosy vision of full democratic engagement? Until this question can be answered clearly and unambiguously, traditional political theory with its skepticism of the citizen is, regrettably, more convincing.

Noveck’s theory of bureaucracy is also problematic. She criticizes political science for defining the citizen in a way that is self-referential and self-fulfilling, but the same charge may be made against her overly narrow definition of bureaucracy and the bureaucrat. She focuses exclusively on the bureaucrat’s claim to expertise and the way this excludes citizens from policy-making and governance. Or, as Noveck puts it, “Those who fail to speak the language of this high priesthood, who are not trained in their academies, and who do not conform to the cultural practices of their profession are deemed too ignorant to govern” (p. 74). To support this conception of bureaucracy, Noveck employs examples that involve the collection of expert-level data and the subsequent making of a stereotypically “expert-level” policy (see, for example, the discussion of drug and medical device review panels in Chapter five). If the study of bureaucracy since Weber teaches us anything, though, it is that bureaucracy is not monolithic. As James Q. Wilson put it, “. . . bureaucracy is not the simple, uniform phenomenon it is sometimes made out to be. Reality often does not conform to scholarly theories or popular prejudices” [3, p. xvii].

One possibility – a possibility that Noveck seems to overlook – is that an insulated, elitist bureaucracy subject to the vast and, certainly, sometimes absurd strictures of administrative law serves to mediate (and, yes, sometimes to attenuate) conflicting democratic interests. As Mashaw notes in his defense of administrative discretion, “Interpreted in this way, delegation to experts becomes a form of consensus building that, far from taking decisions out of politics, seeks to give political choice a form in which potential collective agreement can be discovered and its benefits realized” [1, p. 99]. This, of course, is just one of many contested views of bureaucracy, but it is one that needs to be considered before we continue the march to the less bureaucratic future which Noveck advocates.

These, however, are differences of opinion and perspective. Such differences are to be expected in a book like *Smart Citizens, Smarter State* that makes thoughtful and important arguments about the political and technological future. Noveck’s early theoretical chapters are an erudite, fascinating tour of political, administrative, and intellectual history. They are worth reading on their own. The later chapters speak with the voice of someone who has herself struggled with innovation in the U.S. federal bureaucracy and “lived to tell the story.” Her policy and program prescriptions are important both because of their theoretical bases and because of the practical experience that informs them. There are some parts of this book that are not entirely persuasive, but the rich, well-argued, well-supported ideas will certainly provoke a deep, important dialogue about the evolving, intertwined nature of politics, bureaucracy, and technology. The reader interested in these topics should certainly read this book.

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References

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