

## Book Review | *Eyes of the People: Democracy in an Age of Spectatorship*

**Alex Sager**

Published online: 1 August 2012

© Alex Sager 2012

***Eyes of the People: Democracy in an Age of Spectatorship*. Jeffery Edward Green; Oxford/New York: Oxford University Press, 2010; 208 pages; \$24.95 paperback; 978-0-1998-3847-9.**

In an unusually candid episode of *Meet the Press*, U.S. Vice-President Joe Biden came out against the official Democratic Party line on same-sex marriage. In contrast to President Obama's insistence that his views on the controversial issue were still "evolving," Biden stated that he was "absolutely comfortable with the fact that men marrying men, women marrying women, and heterosexual men marrying women are entitled to the same exact rights." Biden's gaffe – as it was widely described in the press – rapidly led President Obama to clarify his position and to affirm his support for same-sex marriage.

Jeffrey Edward Green's ambitious *The Eyes of the People* attempts to found democratic politics on the value of candor and to reshape politics so gaffes of the sort committed by Biden become more common. He seeks to move away from a model of democracy based on the voice of the people to a plebiscitary model in which politicians are subject to the people's gaze and forced to relinquish control over their public appearances. By reviving plebiscitary democracy, Green addresses one of the great challenges for democratic theory: to explain what rule by the many might mean in a large society. In the ancient Athenian *polis*, most citizens could expect to hold office in their lifetimes and all citizens had the opportunity to raise their voice in the assembly. Today, most citizens never directly participate in the government even at the local level and enjoy only limited and indirect opportunities to express their views. Not surprisingly, many people are politically uninformed and apathetic, exhibiting limited knowledge of policy and often failing to vote. Even more worryingly, much of the voting population does not have defined political

---

Corresponding Author: Alex Sager  
Portland State University  
email – asager@pdx.edu

preferences or attitudes on many issues. For this reason, policy makers cannot represent the will of the people because there is no will to represent.

How should democratic theorists respond? Green argues that the dominant – indeed hegemonic – model of democracy is based upon autonomy and voice. Citizens express their preferences through voting and/or deliberation and this influences the content of laws. Under this paradigm, citizens can be seen as both authors and subjects of the law. Of course, in large states people do not usually directly authorize the law, so democratic theorists must explain how it is possible to see the people as authors as well as subjects. Theorists who think that mass democratic institutions are generally laudable generally argue that the political system tracks people's views or interests with reasonable reliability. Even though citizens don't directly authorize laws and policies, there is a form of accountability through voting or through the political activities of interest groups. Theorists who are more skeptical about the *status quo* propose ways to give people more effective voices, sometimes by advocating the creation of new deliberative institutions.

Green rejects both of these strategies and seeks to develop a democratic theory in which the ordinary citizen is involved in politics primarily as a spectator. His goal is to revive a theory of plebiscitary democracy that engages democratic theory from the perspective of the political spectator instead of the political actor. Green seeks to replace models of democracy that focus on empowering the people by incorporating their voice with an ocular model that privileges sight. This involves a reinterpretation and revival of Max Weber's writings on plebiscitary democracy.

Chapter 1 introduces, outlines, and motivates Green's account of ocular democracy. Chapter 2 argues for the need for a theory of democracy that takes the citizen-spectator seriously as a major political figure. Chapter 3 analyzes the philosophical tradition, particularly Rousseau, Publius, Bentham and James Mill, and J.S. Mill, to argue for the traditional dominance of the vocal model. It also aims to show how twentieth-century political scientists such as V.O. Key and Bernard Manin explicitly or implicitly retain the vocal paradigm. Chapter 4 describes and attempts to revive plebiscitary democracy, largely through an analysis of Shakespeare's Roman plays *Julius Caesar* and *Coriolanus*. Chapter 5 contains an extended exposition of Max Weber's plebiscitarian democracy and a discussion of what Green considers as its misapplication in the work of Carl Schmitt and Joseph Schumpeter. Chapter 6 provides some cursory proposals for reforming democracy under the plebiscitarian model and Chapter 7 ends with a brief reply to potential critics along with some final remarks in favor of the model.

Green's account of democracy requires some elaboration. Green follows Weber and Schumpeter by beginning with an empirical account of our actual democracies and only

then providing a normative model. On his analysis, citizens are spectators, not participants, and the most that can be said about “citizen-spectators” is that they are interested in political events portrayed in the mass media. He is critical of democratic theorists who begin with a normative ideal of citizens who participate in politics, arguing that this ignores how most citizens experience politics. Rather, he seeks to rehabilitate a model of “democracy” that many theorists would consider undemocratic. His goal is to provide a theory for the “citizen-being-ruled,” i.e., for people that he describes as “political spectators linked together in their shared experience of nondecision, nonpreference, and relative subordination to political elites” (63).

What is particularly unusual about his account is that he sees himself as committed to a progressive democratic theory based on the critical standard of “candor,” defined as “the principle that leaders not control the conditions of their publicity” (19). Weber and Schumpeter’s theories in which elites compete for votes are not generally thought to be progressive, but rather an accommodation to the rise of bureaucracy and mass society. Insofar as their accounts of plebiscitary democracy provide a normative ideal to evaluate and criticize political institutions, they are largely limited to checking the most egregious abuses of elites.

Green argues that Weber’s plebiscitary democracy has normative resources that are frequently overlooked. Green follows Weber in rejecting the ideal of autonomy for ordinary citizens and replacing it with the ideal of candor for leaders. Rather than asking whether politicians respond to the interests of the people, we ask if they possess the personal traits of good leaders. We should understand democracy as a relationship between the leader who struggles to achieve the support of the people through public appearances, the mass media, and public inquiries. What is crucial in Weber’s model is that politicians must not be able to control how the public sees them through public relations; rather, they must be subjected to the public gaze under conditions that they can’t control. For this reason, the fundamental value in Green’s plebiscitarian model is candor. To achieve candor, Green draws on Michel Foucault’s account of disciplinary power and his concept of the gaze which “does not compel so much as it molds a particular kind of personality” (154). Green briefly supplements Weber’s account with practical suggestions that include reshaping leadership debates to include more competition so that candidates cannot unilaterally shape their images, maximizing public inquiries to keep leaders in the public gaze under circumstances they do not control, and designing presidential press conferences to remove control from leaders.

Green’s *Eyes of the People* surveys a broad terrain of political theory, ranging from historical explorations of major figures from Aristotle to the present, forays into the empirical literature on political participation, and discursions on literature. It is an original

work and an impressive synthesis of the tradition. Nonetheless, I have a number of reservations about the attempt to reframe democratic theory on the ocular model.

First, Green's point of departure of the citizen as spectator requires more argument than he provides. He claims that democratic theorists, if they are to take seriously the experience of everyday citizens, must give value to their role as spectators. This is a conservative position and by no means an obvious one. Deliberative democrats, for example, also claim that they start from the experience of everyday citizens, but instead focus on their apathy and frustration with political processes that refuse to grant ordinary people any more role than that of consumers of mass media. If we are to follow Green, we should be convinced that attempts to expand voice through the reformation of political institutions are largely futile. Unfortunately, Green largely neglects the growing literature on empirically grounded deliberative and participatory institutions that arguably give people a more effective voice. The tradition of seeing democracy as based in voice is based on a compelling insight about the value of citizen input in decision making and we should be reluctant to abandon it unless we are convinced that it is futile.

Second, Green sees one of his contributions as restoring meaning to the notion of "the People." Instead of the People being unified by a common good or by common interests, the People as Green understands them share their status as spectators observing politicians through the mass media. The People share a "form of political experience" and Green sees himself as reviving the notion of popular sovereignty based in shared spectatorship. But what is notable about this conception of the People is that it is empty – as in Bentham's panopticon, what is needed is not actual observers with defined characteristics and interests, but only the *supposition* that there is an observer. This raises a deep question about Green's project: how far can a theory depart from the conviction that citizens are in some respect authors of the law and deserve to be described as "democratic?" If "the People" only signifies an empty place holder for an abstract, observing entity, democratic theory is better off not positing a unified people and instead attending to the diverse and fragmented interests of the populace. Green's vision of the People serves only as a check on power and is as equally suited to a mixed constitution or oligarchy as to a democratic society.

Third, and perhaps most fundamentally, Green's normative ideal of "candor" is underdeveloped and not obviously appealing. Green appeals to a relational concept of charisma in which the leader receives legitimacy from public acknowledgement, but says little about the relationship between spectators and actors or why candor should lead to desirable political results. One danger with Green's under-theorized notion of candor is that it might lead to the elevation of undesirable leaders. We should ask how far Green is able to distance himself from the danger of the plebiscite raising authoritarian leaders to power. His examples of candor include Shakespeare's *Coriolanus* and *Julius Caesar* and Weber's

writings on the Hebrew prophets. These exemplars are not Carl Schmitt's *Führer*, but they should hardly reassure democratic theorists worried about the fetishization of the charismatic leader.

There is also the opposite concern. Green is insufficiently critical of the potentially undesirable side-effects of candor. It is not clear that we want leaders to be exposed to the public gaze, at least at all times. One reason may be that leaders' character as revealed to the public eye may not be related to their effectiveness *as leaders*. Indeed, it is a common tactic in politics to discredit rivals by revealing unsavory aspects of their personal lives. Unsavory personal revelations about politicians are arguably disturbing, but not necessarily relevant to their role as political leaders. Moreover, it is not clear that there is a correlation between being able to effectively compete before the public for power and the ability to govern well. At the very least, the relationship between candor and good governance requires further investigation and elaboration.

Furthermore, it is not clear why candor would lead to good policy. Consider the example of Vice President Biden straying from the official party line on same-sex marriage. Though the political *zeitgeist* has probably changed so that Biden's gaffe is unlikely to have a major effect on the issue, under other circumstances it might have undermined LGBT rights by giving conservative opponents fodder for their legislation. Candor could harden positions and prevent the necessary compromise needed for politics. Plebiscitary democracy's focus on politicians attributes too much power and influence to the spectacle of politics and not enough attention to how policy is actually made. The point is not to dismiss candor as an important political value, but to contend that it needs to be more fully theorized.

Though this review is critical of Green's book, *Eyes of the People* is a challenging work with an impressive command of the democratic tradition. Green's criticisms of theorists' reliance on the vocal mode of power are formidable and his reinterpretation of Max Weber deserves engagement. He has also done us a service by drawing attention to the value of candor and reopened a topic that deserves serious consideration, even if Weberian democracy should ultimately be resisted.