

RESEARCH REPORTS

Reviews of new research at public agencies and private institutions

"Direct Democracy: The Politics of Initiative, Referendum, and Recall."

Harvard Univ. Press, Cambridge, Mass. 02138. 289 pp. \$25.

Author: *Thomas E. Cronin*

Direct democracy in America is as old as the New England town meeting. Yet the Founding Fathers, wary of popular passions, shunned it in favor of representative democracy. Only around the turn of the century did Populists and Progressives begin to persuade many states—mostly in the West—to adopt ballot initiatives (proposed by citizens), referendums (referred by legislatures), and recalls of elected officials.

Today, about half the states permit initiatives or referendums, or both. A 1987 Gallup survey showed that, by a margin of 48 to 41 percent, Americans favor a Constitutional amendment to allow national referendums. During the 1980s, more than 200 initiatives and 1,000 referendums have appeared on state ballots, on matters ranging from abortion to bond issues.

How has direct democracy worked for the states? Fairly well, says Cronin, a political

scientist at Colorado College. Voters are "not as competent as we would like them to be, yet not as ill informed or irrational as critics insist."

The most disconcerting fact uncovered by researchers is that many voters make up their minds on initiatives and referenda at the last minute, "perhaps as much on the basis of a television campaign blitz as on any detailed knowledge of the issues." Sometimes, confusion reigns. In 1980, California voters were so mixed up by a "vote yes if you mean no" proposition that a majority of the people who opposed rent control laws wound up voting in favor of them.

Yet, somehow, voters generally cast ballots that reflect their preferences; they are level-headed. A 1980 New York State Senate panel concluded: "In none of the 52 initiatives on the ballot [nationwide] in 1978 did voters approve what might be termed a 'disaster' for state and society." Overall, lib-

eral and conservative measures succeed with about equal frequency. Occasionally, the voters have erred—Oklahomans disenfranchised blacks in a 1910 initiative—but their representatives in the state legislatures have only slightly fewer blots on their records, Cronin notes.

Ballot initiatives have not been the great tool of grassroots democracy that advocates hoped. Through superior polling and advertising, "big money" (often corporations and trade associations) beats the underdog about 80 percent of the time. Reforms are needed.

On balance, Cronin concludes, direct democracy has been a slight plus for the states because it has encouraged citizen participation in politics. Would it work on the national level? He thinks not. The stakes are higher and the issues bigger. And, as the Founding Fathers recognized, public opinion and the public interest are not always synonymous.

"Why Nations Arm."

Basil Blackwell, 432 Park Ave. So., Ste. 1503, New York, N.Y. 10016. 247 pp. \$27.50.

Author: *James L. Payne*

Some nations arm themselves to the teeth. Others, such as Gambia and Mauritius, have neither arms nor teeth. But such vast disparities are seldom based on rational assessments of threats to national security. Then what are they based on?

To find out, Payne, a visiting scholar at Bowling Green State University's Social Philosophy and Policy Center, surveyed

137 nations. He created, among other measures, an indicator called the "force ratio": the number of full-time military personnel per 1,000 population in 1982. Although only a rough gauge of defense burdens, it is more accurate, he believes, than the traditional one, defense spending as a percentage of gross national product, which is marred by unreliable statistics.

By Payne's measure, Israel, with a ratio of 46.2 armed forces personnel per 1,000 population, was the most "militaristic" nation in the world in 1982. Not too surprising. But why was North Korea (41.8, per 1,000) second on the list, while South Korea (14.8, per 1,000) was 19th? And the two superpowers? The Soviet Union (force ratio: 16.3) ranked 17th. The United States

(force ratio: 9.5), ranked 40th. The world average: 8 military personnel per 1,000 people.

Israel aside, Payne found only a moderate correlation between force ratios and real threats to national security. Of the 49 nations engaged in hostilities between 1970 and 1984, the average force ratio was 10.8; the average for the 88 nations at peace was 6.4.

The 22 nations facing armed domestic insurgencies during that 14-year period—including Angola, Morocco, the Philippines—were actually less militarized than other nations. Their force ratio was 6.7.

What matters most, Payne says, are “non-rational” factors: “orientations toward military force rooted in culture, ideology, and religion.” And of these factors, Marxism and Islam are by far the most compelling.

Thus, the 29 Marxist nations of the world had far higher force ratios in 1982 than the

non-Marxist nations: 13 men under arms per 1,000 population versus 6.7. (Even the 36 non-Marxist societies ruled by military dictators were less militaristic, with an average force ratio of 7.5.) Likewise, the world’s 25 overwhelmingly Muslim nations—from Turkey to Afghanistan to Niger—boasted an average force ratio of 11.8, compared to 7.1 for the rest of the world.

Historically, Payne argues, both Marxism and Islam are “cultures of war.” Marxism was founded on the doctrine of class struggle, Islam on the sword of Mohammed during the 7th century and the Koran’s command, “Make war on them [non-believers] until idolatry is no more and Allah’s religion reigns supreme.” (Four countries that embraced Islam long after its initial century of military expansion—Bangladesh, Gambia, Senegal, and Niger—had markedly lower force ratios than other Muslim

countries.)

By contrast, the 57 predominantly Christian nations of the world had an average force ratio of 5.8, versus 9.5 for non-Christian nations.

England and the 32 nations that it once ruled—from the United States to Botswana and India—likewise had low levels of militarization: an average force ratio of 3.4. Payne attributes this to what he calls the English tradition of “romantic pacificism”—an idealistic reluctance to *prepare* for war which does not, however, translate into less *participation* in war.

Of course, Payne says, there is an element of rationality in nations’ decisions about how heavily to arm themselves. But it is a small element. In designing U.S. defense and arms control policies, he warns, it would be dangerous for Washington to assume that potential adversaries will respond like dispassionate accountants.

“Is There A White Underclass?”

The Urban Institute, 2100 M St. N.W., Washington, D.C. 20037. 24 pp. \$6.

Author: *Ronald Mincy*

Underclass. The word conjures up images of single mothers on welfare or unemployed youths loitering on street corners—all black or Hispanic. In fact, says Mincy, an Urban Institute researcher, a substantial minority of the underclass is white.

Estimates of the size of the entire underclass range from 1 to 3.5 percent of the U.S. population. About one thing, most researchers agree: What makes the underclass special is its concentration in certain urban neighborhoods. Thus, Erol Ricketts and Isabel Sawhill

count the number of poor people living in big city U.S. Census tracts where “underclass social problems”—female-headed families, unemployment, and high drop-out rates—are common. They put the total in 1980 at 2.5 million (1.1 percent of the population). Another way is to count the poor people in Census tracts with poverty rates higher than 40 percent.

Reformulating the Ricketts/Sawhill data and including small cities, Mincy arrived at a new profile of the underclass:

81 percent black and Hispanic, 16 percent (about 390,000 people) non-Hispanic white, 3 percent others. Using the “concentrated poverty” measure, whites make up 12 percent of the total. Whites were a majority in about 25 percent of the 880 underclass Census tracts Mincy examined.

The existence of a sizeable white underclass suggests to Mincy that race-specific policies, such as fair-housing laws and affirmative action, are not the best solution to the worrisome underclass problem.