

Democracy is a religion that has failed the poor

Voting expresses our desire to belong. But is it worth belonging to a country that has become little more than an aggregation of self-interest?



Right now I feel ashamed to be English. Ashamed to belong to a country that has clearly identified itself as insular, self-absorbed and apparently caring so little for the most vulnerable people among us. Why did a million people visiting food banks make such a minimal difference? Did we just vote for our own narrow concerns and sod the rest? Maybe that's why the pollsters got it so badly wrong: we are not so much a nation of shy voters as of ashamed voters, people who want to present to the nice polling man as socially inclusive, but who, in the privacy of the booth, tick the box of our own self-interest.

Rewind 24 hours and it felt so different. Thursday morning was lovely in London, full of the promise of spring. Even the spat I had with the man outside my polling station shouting at "fucking immigrants" didn't disrupt an overall feeling of optimism. Were people walking just a little bit more purposefully? Was I mistaken in detecting some calm excitement, almost an unspoken communal bonhomie? Perhaps also a feeling of empowerment, a sense that it was "the people" that could now make a difference. But by bedtime the spell had been broken. Things were going to stay the same. No real difference had been made.

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The utterly miserable thought strikes me that Russell Brand just might have been right. What difference did my vote make? Why indeed do people vote, and care so passionately about voting, particularly in constituencies in which voting one way or the other won't make a blind bit of difference? And why do the poor vote when, by voting, they merely give legitimacy to a system that connives with their oppression and alienation? The anthropologist Mukulika Banerjee suggests a fascinating answer: elections are like religious rituals, often devoid of rational purpose or efficacy for the individual participant, but full of symbolic meaning. They are the nearest thing the secular has to the sacred, presenting a moment of empowerment.

But is this empowerment illusory? Is, as Banerjee asks, "the ability to vote ... a necessary safety valve which allows for the airing of popular disaffection, but which nevertheless ultimately restores the status quo. In such a reading, elections require the complicity of all participants in a deliberate mis-recognition of the emptiness of its procedures and the lack of any significant changes which this ritual brings about, but are a necessary charade to mollify a restless electorate." The morning after all the hope of election day feels a lot like this.

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But rejecting cynicism, Banerjee insists that voting is more an expression of one's citizenship than a rational procedure for changing the world. Why else would someone go out of their way to find a polling station only to spoil their ballot paper? Surely because being handed a blank ballot paper in the polling station is a way in which one's rights – even identity – are acknowledged. "If I don't even vote, no one will know I exist," is what one man told Banerjee while she was conducting her research in rural "semi-forgotten" parts of India. Another said: "If we don't vote, how can we prove we are citizens of this country?"

I spent some of election morning with a woman who wasn't sure if she was eligible to vote. We spent a couple of hours trudging round polling stations, phoning up the town hall, working out if she was. It was obviously terribly important to her – but the funny thing was, despite all this, she didn't really know who to vote for. That wasn't really the point.

Church-speak for this is: belonging precedes believing. The idea is that people tend to join churches

not because of any specific belief but as a marker of belonging. And the rituals of the church are more an expression of this belonging than they are an ideological statement of faith. So too the rituals of democracy. We try and control the gods of Rothermere and Murdoch with our electoral intercessions. But maybe they are just too powerful, too remote. “As flies to wanton boys, are we to the gods.” Shakespeare had it right.

Giles Fraser-The Guardian