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The Idiocy of Policy: The Anti-Democratic Curriculum of High-Stakes Testing

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Abstract

Making use of the body of literature outlining the various controlling aspects of high-stakes testing on classroom practice, the analysis presented here finds that vertical hierarchies are both established and maintained through the top-down structure of education policies in the United States, as exemplified by the No Child Left Behind Act. By looking at the effects of such policies through Parker's (2005) discussion of key aspects of democratic education, this article finds that educational policies based upon systems of high-stakes, standardized testing represent a curriculum that teaches anti-democracy.



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Introduction

Public education in the United States is currently dominated by policies centered upon systems of high-stakes standardized testing. As part of a broader political agenda, and despite the persistent production of inequality (e.g., Au, 2009b; Ladson-Billings, 2006), such policies have been advanced upon a consistent rhetoric of democracy, couched in terms of individual choice, individual equality, equal opportunity for achievement, and the promise of leaving no child behind (Apple, 2006; Gay, 2007). In this article, I seek to interrogate the relationship between education policy predicated on high-stakes testing and democratic ideals, particularly as they are communicated through policy structure. I begin here by defining high-stakes testing and providing a short history of the modern-day high-stakes testing movement in the United States. I then move on to discuss the research on how these tests operate as a form of control over classroom practices and learning. Such control, I argue, is a product of education policy structure itself, which makes use of high-stakes testing to assert “bureaucratic control” (Apple, 1995) within systems of education. When viewed through the lens of democratic education, particularly Parker’s (2005) discussion of the need to teach against idiocy through the encouragement of diversity and deliberation in schools, I conclude that policies based on systems of high-stakes testing teach teachers and students a curriculum of anti-democracy vis-à-vis policy structure.

High-Stakes Testing in the United States

High-stakes tests are a part of a *policy design* (Schneider & Ingram, 1997) that “links the score on one set of standardized tests to grade promotion, high school graduation and, in some cases, teacher and principal salaries and tenure decisions” (Orfield & Wald, 2000, p. 38). As part of the accountability movement stakes are also deemed high because the results of tests, including the ranking and categorization of schools, teachers, and children by test results, are reported to the public (McNeil, 2000). “High-stakes testing” thus simultaneously implies two things: 1) Standardized testing as the technology and tool/instrument used for measurement, and 2) Educational policy erected around the standardized test results that attaches consequences to test results.

While the history of standardized testing in the United States reaches back to the I.Q., eugenics, and scientific management movements in education of the early 1900s (Au, 2009b), the modern-day, high-stakes, standardized testing movement can effectively be traced back to the publication of *A Nation At Risk* (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983). This Reagan era report sounded an alarm within public education in the United States, and despite that much of the report’s education crisis was found to be manufactured (Berliner & Biddle, 1995), the report had a tremendous impact on educational policy. Fifty-four state level commissions on education were created within one year of the report’s publication, and within three years of publication twenty-six states raised graduation requirements and thirty-five states instituted comprehensive education reforms that revolved around testing and increased course loads for students (Kornhaber & Orfield, 2001). By 1994 forty-three states implemented statewide assessments for K-5, and by the year 2000 every US state but Iowa administered a state

mandated test (Jones, G. M., Jones, & Hargrove, 2003). The high-stakes, standardized testing juggernaut continued during then Vice President George H. Bush's campaign for the presidency, and as President, he carried this agenda forward into his Summit on Education, which laid the groundwork for Bush's America 2000 plan – focusing on testing and establishing “world class standards” in schools. Then President Bill Clinton and Vice President Al Gore subsequently committed themselves to following through on the goals established by Bush's America 2000 plan, including the pursuit of a national examination system in the United States, and within the first week of taking office in 2001, President G.W. Bush advocated for federal Title I funding to be tied to test scores (Kornhaber & Orfield, 2001).

In 2002, the US government passed the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) into law (U.S. Department of Education, 2002). As a policy, NCLB originally mandated that all students be tested in grades 3-8 and once in high school, in reading and math, with future provisions that students be tested at least once at the elementary, middle, and high school levels in science. If student test scores do not meet “Adequate Yearly Progress” (AYP) in subgroups related to race, economic class, special education, and English language proficiency, among others, schools face sanctions such as a loss of federal funding or the diversion of federal monies to pay for private tutoring, transportation costs, and other “supplemental services” (Burch, 2006, 2009). Under NCLB, all students in all subgroups are also expected to be testing at 100% proficiency by the year 2014 or face the above-mentioned sanctions (U.S. Department of Education, 2002). Thus, high-stakes, standardized testing has become *the* policy tool for enforcing educational reform in the United States.

High-Stakes Testing and Classroom Control

The bulk of educational research on the effects of systems of high-stakes testing on the classroom practices of teachers, as well as the classroom experiences of students, finds that these tests are essentially controlling what knowledge is taught, the form in which it is taught, and how it is taught (Au, 2007, 2009). Within the policy context of systems built around high-stakes testing such as NCLB, this means at least three immediate things. One, the content of instruction is being determined by relevancy to the test themselves: If subjects are not included on the tests, then the subjects are not being taught in the classroom. Thus subjects such as social studies, science, art, among others, are being greatly reduced and sometimes even cut completely within high-stakes testing environments (see, e.g., CEP, 2007; Renter et al., 2006). Second, in teaching to the tests, teachers are also catering their instruction to the form and presentation of knowledge included on the high-stakes tests. What this implies is that, in addition to the content being shaped to meet the norms of the tests, the very form in which such knowledge is being communicated – often times in small, isolated, decontextualized pieces of information – is also being controlled by the tests as teachers seek to improve their students' scores through the simple reproduction of test-styled knowledge in their instruction (see, e.g., Luna & Turner, 2001). Third, in response to high-stakes testing, teachers are shifting their pedagogy relative to changes in both curricular content and form of knowledge being taught. What this means is that teachers are increasingly moving towards lecture and more rote-based, teacher-centered pedagogies in order to

meet test-based content and knowledge form demands (see, e.g., Clarke, M. et al., 2003; Vogler, 2005). Thus we see systems of high-stakes testing exerting forms of control over knowledge content, knowledge form, and pedagogy in classroom practice. This control, however, is only made possible through policy structure itself, and as such illustrates another type of control made possible via the use of high stakes testing in U.S. education policy: bureaucratic control.

High-Stakes Testing, Bureaucratic Control, and Performativity

The fact that high-stakes testing exerts so much control over classroom practice is evidence of the existence of hierarchies of institutional power. Indeed, high-stakes tests hold so much power because their results are tied, by policy, to rewards or sanctions that can deeply affect the lives of students, teachers, principals, and communities. High-stakes testing thus manifests bureaucratic control, or control “embodied within the *hierarchal* social relations of the workplace” (Apple, 1995, p. 128, original emphasis). I employ “bureaucracy” here, in the sense of Weber (1964), as an organization that relies upon,

...a complex rational division of labor, with fixed duties and jurisdictions; stable, rule-governed authority channels and universally applied performance guidelines; a horizontal division of graded authority, or hierarchy, entailing supervision from above; a complex system of written record-keeping, based on scientific procedures that standardize communications and increase control;...predictable, standardized management procedures following general rules; and a tendency to require total loyalty from its members toward the way of life an organization requires. (Ferguson, 1984, p. 7)

Bureaucratic control is evident in education polices structured around high-stakes testing. Research consistently finds that systems of high-stakes, standardized testing centralize authority at the top of Federal, State, and District bureaucracies, and generally take control away from local decision-makers and local contexts by shifting power up the bureaucratic chain of command, holding those “on the bottom” accountable to those “on top” within administrative hierarchies (Apple, 2000; McNeil, 2000; Natriello & Pallas, 2001; Sunderman & Kim, 2005). In discussing the system of high-stakes testing in Texas (the blueprint for NCLB), McNeil (2005) explains that:

The accountability system is an extreme form of centralization. The controls hinge on a standardized test. Through a simple set of linkages, the centralized educational bureaucracy of the state has established a test that must be taken by all children, in key subjects in key grades. The state then rates each school according to the test scores of the children in the school. School districts are rated by the scores of all their schools. Set up as a hierarchical system, each layer of the bureaucracy is held accountable to the one above it. The rules are set at the top and there can be no variations in their implementation, nor can schools or districts opt out if they prefer a different method of evaluating children’s learning or assessing the quality of their schools. (p. 59)

Within the bureaucratic control of high-stakes testing, upper level authorities in the State or Federal governments determine standards and tests. Student test scores are publicly reported, and State authorities use those scores to hold districts, schools, administrators, teachers, and students “accountable” for increases in those scores – handing out sanctions or rewards depending on student performance. Within these systems, McNeil (2005) continues:

The decisions are made centrally, and at the top of the bureaucracy. The lower levels of the bureaucracy, where teachers and children reside, are not invited to create variations or improvements on this system or to offer alternatives to it. They are, rather, intended to merely comply. They are to be accountable to those above them. (p. 60)

The structure of systems of accountability based on high-stakes standardized tests pull decision-making power away from the classrooms and schools and puts it into the hands of technical “experts” and bureaucrats who operate with their own political agendas far away from local contexts (Apple, 1995; Jones, G. M. et al., 2003; McNeil, 2000).

The power in this model, then, is located in the upper echelons of institutional bureaucracies that maintain the authority to determine the assessment, determine the criteria for what counts as passing or failing, and determine the sanctions and punishments for those that do not meet their criteria for passing. In these ways, high-stakes testing programs are an extremely effective tool for government agencies to use their regulatory power to influence what happens at the classroom level (Goodson & Foote, 2001; Natriello & Pallas, 2001). Through such regulation, these agencies can be seen as successfully tightening the loose coupling between policy makers’ intentions and the institutional environments created by their policies (Burch, 2007). Educational policy constructed around high-stakes, standardized testing thus represents a form of “steerage from a distance” (Menter, Muschamp, Nicholl, Ozga, & Pollard, 1997; see also, Apple, 2006), where the state uses its regulatory power to guide the actions of local actors from afar.

While the empirical research surrounding bureaucratic structures associated with high-stakes testing and the control of teachers’ labor is undeniable (Au, 2007), it is important to recognize that bureaucratic control is, in a sense, taking on different forms under neoliberalism that also draw on forms of neoliberal individualism that do not always require institutional, bureaucratic structures to operate. Under these forms, as an extension of the neoliberal managerial state (Clarke, J. & Newman, 1997), and as an expression of the habitus (Bourdieu, 1984) of the professional, managerial new middle class (Apple, 2006; Au, 2008), centralized authority is often exercised vis-à-vis individualized, self-interested performativity (Ball, 2003) that does not necessarily require the existence of the institutionalized bureaucratic form. However, given the realities presented by the empirical research, where formal bureaucratic hierarchies of power are directly wielded in efforts to discipline teachers within contemporary systems of accountability (Vinson & Ross, 2003) that at times directly results in policy-based punishments such as loss of employment (Crocco & Costigan III, 2007; Jaeger, 2006), it could be argued that in the U.S. the structural, bureaucratic form of control either functions in concert with, or perhaps provides the operational basis for, the neoliberal

form of control associated with performativity.

The Curriculum of High-Stakes Testing Policies

Let us shift focus here by thinking about education policy as a form of curriculum, one that communicates particular ideas, concepts, and lessons about educational practices, power, and decision-making to students and teachers alike. Such a shift allows us to ask a simple question: What does our education policy teach us? Based on the research evidence discussed above, we could then say NCLB and systems of high-stakes testing teach us a few key lessons:

Lesson 1: Teachers Are Not Competent

The first lesson of high-stakes test-based education policy is that teachers cannot be trusted, as professionals, to effectively determine the best ways to educate and assess students. Rather, echoing the application of “scientific management” of Taylorism to education (Kliebard, 2004) – where managers (administrators and policy/makers) determine the “best” and most efficient methods of production (ways to teach students) – teachers are compelled within systems of high-stakes testing to adopt teaching methods strictly for the tests (Au, 2007), and oftentimes against their own judgment of what constitutes best practice (Abrams, Pedulla, & Madaus, 2003). In the process, teachers are thus feeling what Ball (2003) refers to as the “terrors of performativity” as their identities become increasingly defined by the test scores themselves, being labeled as “good” or “bad” teachers (and, by extension, even “good” or “bad” people) depending on whether or not their students perform well on high-stakes tests (Lipman, 2004; Smith, 2004). Consequently we see teachers’ sense of powerlessness has increased in the face of such testing, with subsequent dips in morale (Nichols & Berliner, 2005).

Lesson 2: Diversity is Bad

The second lesson of the high-stakes test-based education policy is that diversity, in various forms, is detrimental to education. For instance, as discussed above, research has found that subject matter diversity, as well as the diversity of instructional delivery, has decreased as a result of high-stakes testing. In this sense, knowledge and pedagogy is becoming standardized and homogenized under the influences of high-stakes testing (Au, 2007; McNeil, 2000). One extension of this process is that non-tested, multicultural knowledge is likewise being squeezed out of the curriculum (Agee, 2004; Au, 2009a; Bigelow, 1999; Darder & Torres, 2004). Thus we see high-stakes tests functioning to force schools to adopt a standardized, non-multicultural curriculum, that ultimately silences the “voices, the cultures, and the experiences of children” (McNeil, 2000, p. 232), particularly if those voices, cultures, and experiences fall outside the norms of the tests. In this way, students’ lives, in all their variation, are effectively thrown out, as schools press to structure learning to fit the standardized curricular norms established by the tests, literally making their schooling subtractive (Valenzuela, 1999). Additionally, under NCLB, policy has been structured so that the more subgroups a school has, the more opportunities a school has to fail to meet AYP. Thus, as schools feel pressures to meet policy mandate, homogeneity is favored over heterogeneity, and more racially integrated and

diverse schools are more likely to be penalized within the law (Darling-Hammond, 2007; Schwartz, Stiefel, & Chellman, 2005).

Lesson 3: Local Conditions Are Unimportant

The third lesson of the high-stakes test-based education policy is that locality doesn't matter. Or, put differently, local contexts and local voices are not valued within high-stakes tests. This lesson is most apparent in the bureaucratic control of high-stakes testing, discussed above. Here, local actors – in this case teachers and students – have significant amounts of their power evacuated by policy regimes of high-stakes testing, as school, district, state, and federal policymakers and administrators above them in the institutional hierarchies use their authority to both surveil (Hanson, 2000; Vinson & Ross, 2003) and control what is happening in classrooms (Apple, 1995; Au, 2007; McNeil, 2005).

In addition to policy structure, systems of high-stakes testing also eschew localities vis-à-vis the standardized tests themselves. This is apparent in the way that such tests not only rely on the need to standardize knowledge but also rely on the need to simultaneously standardize the measurement of students so that comparisons can be made functional within education policy (De Lissovoy & McLaren, 2003). The logic is as follows: Standardized test results are validated based on the assumption that they can be universally applied to different populations, thus enabling the supposedly fair and objective comparison of individuals across different contexts. In order for such comparisons to be meaningful, however, standardized tests have to deny certain amounts of local context, local variability, or local difference, thus establishing a common measurement that can reach across localities. Otherwise it would be impossible to compare student A to student B, school C to school D, district E to district F, state G to state H, and country I to country J (Au, 2009b).

Hence, standardization has to assume that local, individual conditions and local, individual factors make no difference in student performance, teacher performance, or test-based measurement. Indeed, the assumed validity of objective measurement provided by standardized tests rests upon this denial of individual differences: The tests are considered objective because they supposedly measure all individuals equally and outside of any potential extenuating circumstances (McNeil, 2000). Thus when students, teachers, schools, districts, states and countries are measured by standardized testing and compared to other students, teachers, schools, districts, states, and countries, they are necessarily decontextualized in order to make such comparisons possible. It is a process where:

Students, as well as teachers, with all their varied talents and challenges, were reduced to a test score. And schools, as well as their communities, in all their complexity—their failings, inadequacies, strong points, superb and weak teachers, ethical commitments to collective uplift, their energy, demoralization, courage, potential, and setbacks—were blended, homogenized, and reduced to a stanine score... (Lipman, 2004, p. 172)

This process of abstracting a number with which to define students in relation to other

students, requires that their individuality be omitted, that their variability be disregarded and reduced “to one or two characteristics common to the larger universe of objects” (McNeil, 2005, p. 103). Standardized tests thus, by definition, literally decontextualize students for comparison. Subsequently we can see how both policy structure, as well as the high-stakes, standardized tests such policies are built upon, serve to deny locality in two ways: Policy structure serves to disempower local actors and empower centralized authorities, while the standardized tests simultaneously serve to deny the power of local contexts to inform meaning, due to their deference to a universalized and singular standard.

The Idiocy of Policy

Having explored what I have framed as the curriculum of education policy that is based on systems of high-stakes testing, we can now ask the follow-up question: Given the United States’ rhetorical commitment to democratic government, what kind of democratic education do high-stakes test-centered policies provide? Parker’s (2005) formulation of what he sees as the requirements for democratic education and the role of such education in “teaching against idiocy” proves useful for this analysis. As Parker explains, “idiocy” has its root in the Greek *idios*, meaning private, self-centered, selfish, and separate. Thus for Parker the overarching goal of democratic education is teaching *against* idiocy and teaching *for* a more public, unselfish, common, and deliberative identity.¹ In doing so, Parker optimistically asserts that schools are positioned to teach against idiocy (or, rather, teach for democracy), and that to do so requires educators to take up three key actions. Parker’s first suggested key action is to “increase the variety and frequency of interaction among students who are culturally, linguistically, and racially different from one another” (p. 348). The underlying point being that diversity is good and necessary for fostering democratic education and consciousness, and that such diversity would be reflected in a school experience where students could learn about each other in all of their differences. Parker’s second and third key actions for democratic education revolve around the deliberation of common social and academic problems. Deliberation, he explains is,

...discussion aimed at making a decision across these differences about a problem that the participants face in common. The main action during a deliberation is weighing alternatives with others in order to decide on the best course of action. In schools, deliberation is not only a means of instruction (teaching *with* deliberation) but also a curricular goal (teaching *for* deliberation), because it generates a particular kind of social good: a democratic community, a public culture. (p. 348, original emphasis)

¹ I want to recognize that much of the discourse surrounding democratic education is framed around the concept of democratic “citizenship” (see, e.g., Gutmann, 1990; Parker, 2005). While I clearly am supportive of democratic values, particularly those associated with “thick democracy” (Cunningham, 1987), I also have to recognize that discourses of “citizenship” are often problematically linked to official membership or allegiance to a particular nation-state (Abowitz & Harnish, 2006). It is for this reason that I am choosing here to focus on democratic education more generally, while avoiding a full engagement with concepts of citizenship within democratic education.

Parker distinguishes the second and third key actions related to deliberation thusly: create the conditions where diverse groups can deliberate common issues; and distinguish between what he refers to as “blather” and deliberation as well as between inclusive/open and exclusive/closed deliberation.

Based upon the evidence I’ve provided regarding the effects of high-stakes test-based policy on classroom practice, the “curriculum” of our policy effectively works against all three of Parker’s (2005) key actions for developing democratic education. Given the decline of multicultural education, the standardization of classroom knowledge, the standardization of teaching and learning, and the policy pressures for less diverse student bodies (both numerically and culturally), it is reasonably clear that high-stakes test-based education policies work against the promotion of diversity. Indeed, as I’ve discussed here, policies constructed upon systems of high-stakes, standardized testing do the exact opposite: They work towards homogeneity and stasis. Further, looking at policy structure and classroom control associated with high-stakes testing, especially that of bureaucratic control (Apple, 1995; Au, 2009b), we can see an absolute absence of open or public deliberation of any form. Teachers, vis-à-vis testing, are essentially being told by outside “experts” how to best teach, with little to no public deliberation (or at least deliberation actively including teachers, students, or parents) about what should constitute best practice and whether or not such testing should be involved. As such, education policies associated with high-stakes testing, such as NCLB, might be seen as a closed deliberation amongst politicians, policy makers, and those corporations reaping profits from education policy (Au, 2009b; Burch, 2006, 2009). Thus, in the sense of Parker’s (2005) framing, education policy that maintains a myopic focus on high-stakes, standardized testing and by extension sustains a self-centered disregard for diversity, local context, and teacher and student input in policy operation, is literally idiotic and structurally anti-democratic.

Conclusion

In this article, I have made a simple argument: Based on the findings of research on the effects of education policies built upon systems of high-stakes testing in the U.S., educators and students alike are essentially being “taught” a curriculum that is anti-democratic. This can be seen in the various ways teaching and learning have been re-structured by such systems of high-stakes testing to control teachers, to restrict diversity, and to ignore local contexts and voices. Further, using Parker’s (2005) key tasks for democratic education, I have argued here that we can see that systems of high-stakes testing are literally idiotic in that they are self-centered, closed, and do not welcome open democratic deliberation: Teachers, students, and the public simply do not learn about democracy from education policies erected around high-stakes testing. Rather, they learn anti-democracy, as the curriculum of such policies work against diversity and deliberation and instead teach bureaucratic control and autocratic, centralized authority over education.

Indeed, Dewey (1916) recognized the undemocratic nature of educational systems where, as is the case with policies associated with high-stakes testing, the aims of education are being imposed by external authorities. He remarked that:

The vice of externally imposed ends has deep roots. Teachers receive them from superior authorities; ...The teachers impose them upon children. As a first consequence, the intelligence of the teacher is not free; it is confined to receiving the aims laid down from above. Too rarely is the individual teacher so free from the dictation of authoritative supervisor, textbook on methods, prescribed course of study, etc., that he can let his mind come to close quarters with the pupil's mind and the subject matter. This distrust of the teacher's experience is then reflected in lack of confidence in the responses of pupils. The latter receive their aims through a double or treble external imposition, and are constantly confused by the conflict between the aims which are natural to their own experience at the time and those in which they are taught to acquiesce. Until the democratic criterion of the intrinsic significance of every growing experience is recognized, we shall be intellectually confused by the demand for adaptations to external aims. (Dewey, 1916, pp. 108-109)

Dewey's analysis would be prophetic if it were not for the fact that he was addressing the rise of scientific management in U.S. education in the early 1900s. Instead, his words stand as a sad testament to some of the ways that our current education policy harkens back to key issues of power and control (and inequality) associated with corporate models of schooling that originated in the 20th century (Au, 2009b): The aims of education are increasingly being imposed by external authorities with growing forcefulness and consistency, and students are feeling this double or treble external imposition as they are being told what and how to learn by teachers, who themselves are being told what and how to teach by policymakers. Thus, even though it would be naively romantic to think that schools were particularly democratic pre-NCLB and before the hegemony of high-stakes testing—indeed, they were not (see, e.g., Anyon, 1997; Apple, 1986), in a Deweyan sense we still might say that one of the overarching objectives of the “curriculum” of modern day regimes of high-stakes test-centered policy is increased pressures for the acquiescence of teachers, teacher educators, and students alike. This central critique of regimes of high-stakes testing also points to a problem that extends beyond schools: *The current hegemony of high-stakes testing not only subverts democratic deliberations of teaching, learning, and multicultural education, it also undermines democratic thinking more generally by narrowing the conversations that students, teachers, and communities can engage in as potentially active participants in the content and direction of schooling relative to broader social relations.*

Given the policy pressures to acquiesce to the expectations of high-stakes tests, it is important to recognize that the increased control over classroom practice and increased bureaucratic control are not the “unintended” consequences of high-stakes testing, as some scholars assert (see, e.g., Jones, B. D., 2007; Jones, G. M. et al., 2003; Nelson, 2002; Stecher & Barron, 2001), because policies of “accountability” built upon high-stakes, standardized tests are *intended* to control and regulate what happens in education (Madaus, 1994).

As noted policy conservative Moe (2003) explains quite clearly:

The movement for school accountability is essentially a movement for more

effective top-down control of the schools. The idea is that, if public authorities want to promote student achievement, they need to adopt organizational control mechanisms—tests, school report cards, rewards and sanctions, and the like—designed to get district officials, principals, teachers, and students to change their behavior in productive ways....Virtually all organizations need to engage in top-down control, because the people at the top have goals they want the people at the bottom to pursue, and something has to be done to bring about the desired behaviors....The public school system is just like other organizations in this respect...(p. 81)

Thus, it is important to remember that policies are designed (Schneider & Ingram, 1997), that they require active intent with regards to particular structures and particular outcomes. The intentions of promoters of policy regimes reliant upon high-stakes testing are clear in the structures and outcomes of current education policy in the United States, which are designed to negate “asymmetries” between classroom practice and the test score related goals of those with political and bureaucratic power (Wößmann, 2003). From this perspective, the curriculum of education policy based on systems of high-stakes testing is simply anti-democratic by design.

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