

Words Poorly Used #72: Oligarchy

I got in trouble last month for using the term “oligarchy” in, admittedly, a pejorative sense. Here’s what I wrote on Facebook: “No matter how one votes tomorrow, the winner will be oligarchy A or oligarchy B (where $A = B$).”

Very good friends called me to task for this logic fallacy, justifiably so since I had committed several logic fallacies, the worst of which was the fallacy of begging the question. My premises assumed their own truth without establishment. Is the USA really run by an oligarchy?

I have put a great deal of thought into this problem, since then. Among the things I am most grateful for is the constructive criticism of good friends. The real problem was that I used an emotional version of the word oligarchy, thus aiding and abetting in its common misuse.

The Oxford Dictionary holds:

oligarchy – NOUN

1 A small group of people having control of a country, organization, or institution.

‘the ruling oligarchy of military men around the president’

2 A country governed by an oligarchy.

‘the English aristocratic oligarchy of the 19th century’

3 Government by oligarchy.

None of these definitions are inherently pejorative unless the listener dislikes military, aristocracy, or government (the last is my bias, but the others, in my opinion, are flaws in civilization as well).

All organizations have both static and dynamic oligarchies — senators serve for 6 years, representatives serve for 2. The offices are static, provided for in the Constitution; the officeholders can change, dynamically, also dictated by the Constitution.

All organizations have both formal and informal oligarchies. We have THE editor for EVC, while various people volunteer to contribute beyond the observations of THE editor.

I am now reading the book, *White Trash*, which is an examination of the 400 year history of a class system in the European territory of North America known now as the USA. Does

anyone doubt that Thomas Jefferson was part of the American state's Oligarchy, including both his government and civilian careers? Alexander Hamilton? Aaron Burr? Admit it, one's recognition of these oligarchs as positive or negative is influenced by ideology, but objectively assigning a value to oligarchs is outside their proximity to the centers of power. It is a function of how they implement that opportunity.

At the present, we await with bated breath the transition's tale on how a new oligarchy in Washington, DC will supplant an old oligarchy.

In my Facebook post, on election eve, I had written:

*No matter how one votes tomorrow, the winner will be oligarchy A or
oligarchy B
(where $A = B$).*

This merely addressed my view that what appears to be a dynamic change in the oligarchy is probably, under the facade, a reiteration of the *status quo*. Do you doubt that the denizens of K Street have contributed to every politician on every side of the debate?

In my day as a minion of Kentucky state government, I gradually became aware that all of the big law firms in the Commonwealth found among their partners at least one colleague who would contribute to the political campaign of each candidate, so that informally the firm had access to the office no matter who the officeholder might eventually be. The same happens with neo-con think tanks, liberal think tanks, libertarian think tanks, and too many PACs to mention. How about foreign countries? Bingo! How about special interest groups? Natch! Colleges and universities? They have to spend those increased tuition revenues somewhere.

My best advice on oligarchy is to recognize its presence in the affairs of humans. Understand that it can be good or bad. Be diligent in supporting the good.