



THE CASE AGAINST DEMOCRACY

Steven Michels

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*There never was a democracy yet
that did not commit suicide.*
—John Adams

Preface

The idea for this book came to me several years ago, in the summer of 2007. The country was suffering a malaise of sorts, with an unpopular president presiding over a stalling economy and two wars. “Politics as usual” started to feel pretty unusual, and many began to wonder if something more systemic was the cause. I thought a book comparing the theory and practices of democracy might do something to redirect the conversation from petty squabbles toward a more substantive treatment of the issues.

By the summer of 2008, the landscape had begun to change. Barack Obama was running for president and leading what many called a social movement. Commentators, on the Left and even a few on the Right, were singing his praises. He was compared to Abraham Lincoln, Robert Kennedy, and Martin Luther King. The language of hope and change wasn’t mere campaign rhetoric; for many, it captured the mood of the day. Even the economic collapse that occurred in September of that year did little to damper the nation’s belief that things would soon improve.

“This is not a good time to write that book,” Seamus McNamee-Perez, one of my research assistants, said in my office one afternoon, and of course, he was right. I had been thinking the same thing for weeks. It didn’t seem necessary to write a book like this when things were looking up. I put it on the back burner and moved on to teaching my classes and other research.

But Obama’s honeymoon was short-lived. The battle over the stimulus bill proved to be exceptionally contentious and partisan, given

Obama's electoral mandate and the felt need for him to do something to right the ship. By the summer, the debates over his health care legislation had ushered in a new era of partisan rancor and had mobilized a very vocal—not to say angry—group against the new president and his “socialist policies.” American democracy, it seemed to me, was not in a good place, so I returned to my notes on Aristotle and Tocqueville and got to work.

I'm sorry to say that the book seemed to get easier and easier to write with every day that passed. But I'm happy to report that I left out quite a bit. For every example I include, there are countless more.

And now that it's done, I have a strong temptation to thank everyone whom I've ever met. But I'll stop a little short of that.

I first need to acknowledge the many research assistants who've had a hand (and a voice) in this endeavor—Seamus McNamee-Perez, especially for Chapter 9; Nick “The Governor” Kapoor and Sean Latella, who did a great deal of the early heavy lifting; Katie Nichols; James “The Mayor” Piazza; Stephen Hanshaw; and Corey Emilia.

I also need to thank my cadre of trusted readers, commenters, and discussants:

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I'd also like to thank Sacred Heart University for my Spring 2011 sabbatical. It goes without saying that the opinions (and any errors) contained herein are solely my own.

Finally, my deepest gratitude is reserved for my family—Jill, Dave, Matt, and Pat. This book is dedicated to them.

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Introduction

Power and the People

Democracy is like a tambourine: not everyone can be trusted with it.

—John Oliver

On January 25, 2011, a few thousand citizens gathered in Cairo and Alexandria and other cities throughout Egypt to protest police abuses and the Mubarak regime. Within a week, the crowds were estimated between 100,000 and 250,000. Two weeks later, their longtime authoritarian president had been ousted.¹

Demonstrations would follow in over a dozen other countries, including Libya and Yemen—some of which would lead to new regimes. Although Tunisia had been the first, Scott Peterson, in *The Christian Science Monitor*, claimed that what happened in Egypt “redefines what’s possible in the Arab world.”² These events were as surprising as they are inspiring. And although Egyptian democracy is moving in fits and starts, we can say, without exaggeration, that we are watching a new and remarkable wave of democracy.³

Meanwhile, democracy at home is experiencing a few fits of its own. The president and Congress cannot agree on any serious measures to boost a stagnant economy and control our nightmarish national debt; we have yet to reconcile economic growth with the environment; health care has not been fixed; our infrastructure is in dire need of repair and updating; and we are falling behind the rest of the industrialized world in science and math preparedness. In sum, our democracy seems ill-equipped to respond to the pressing public policy challenges of our day, even as others look to it as a model and for inspiration.

According to journalist and commentator H.L. Mencken, “Only a country that is rich and safe can afford to be a democracy, for democracy is the most expensive and nefarious kind of government ever

heard of on earth.”⁴ But if not every country is prepared for democracy, perhaps not every country should have it. Or want it. Even if countries like Egypt, Libya, and Syria were to become stable and liberal democracies, it would not be the end of their troubles; it would be the beginning of a whole new set.

WHAT DEMOCRACY IS—AND IS NOT

The word “democracy” comes from the Greek for people (*demos*) and power (*kratia*), but it’s applied in very different ways. Oftentimes, *democracy* is merely the term we use for things we like, while *undemocratic* signifies disapproval of some kind. “It is almost universally felt that when we call a country democratic we are praising it,” George Orwell observed.⁵ But if democracy can mean everything, then it means nothing, which is why even officials in Cuba and Iran can refer to their democracy. It’s not a good way to have an enlightened conversation about politics, much less run a country.

Before we delve into democracy’s shortcomings, let’s establish a framework for what we mean by it. At its most basic level, there are only two conditions for a state to be deemed a democracy: universal suffrage and competitive elections. Everyone of a certain age must be able to cast a ballot and have a choice for how that ballot is cast.

Yet things are not that simple. Some believe that democracy requires more than just procedures; it requires democratic outcomes. In Abraham Lincoln’s formulation, “Democracy is the government of the people, by the people, and for the people.” To that extent, there are procedural and substantive definitions of democracy. The more procedural views are usually aligned with conservative politics. But in *Up from Liberalism*, conservative commentator William F. Buckley writes of how democracy can be good or bad, but it “must be justified by its works, not by doctrinaire affirmations of an intrinsic goodness that no mere method can legitimately lay claim to.”⁶

There is also considerable disagreement about what those outcomes should be. For example, is a state sufficiently democratic if its representative bodies do not proportionately represent women or minorities? Are two major parties enough? Is an election legitimate if a majority of the electorate doesn’t participate? Should individuals, or even private entities, have the ability to donate unlimited funds to a candidate? Or, what about what happened in February 2011, when a group of

Wisconsin legislators hid out in Illinois, in an effort to thwart legislation that they felt was hostile to the rights of workers.⁷ Is that democratic or not? These are serious and complicated questions that demand more attention—and not just because agreement is unlikely.

In addition to squabbling over what democracy entails, we routinely confuse democracy with other ideas and practices. First is the well-known difference between direct versus representative democracy. Ours is an indirect or representative democracy, or what James Madison calls a republic.⁸ The scheme of representation he helped to design for our Constitution was supposed to correct for the excesses of democracy. Our Framers were very familiar with the troubled history of democracy and aimed to correct it. The quote from John Adams that begins this book—“There never was a democracy yet that did not commit suicide”—is a reference to pure democracy, not to what the new nation would eventually adopt.⁹ There are good reasons to choose a representative republic rather than a democracy of the direct sort, even if technology is changing the logistics of government and making one possible.

For most of our history, we have worked to improve the efficacy and integrity of our legislatures, but representation is an inexact concept. Many believe that popular sovereignty is delegated to officials through elections and that a representative is merely a stand-in for his or her constituents. Others follow Edmund Burke in maintaining that a representative ought to exercise his or her best judgment, even when that means voting against the expressed wishes of constituents. What often happens, political scientists have learned, is a combination of these two models, whereby elected officials mostly do what they think is best, except in instances where public opinion is well-known and unambiguous. In any event, representation, the subject of Chapter 1, remains a source of controversy, even as it's expected to solve one of the most basic problems of self-government.

Second, there is a rather significant difference between democracy's reliance on simple majority rule and liberalism, which involves the protection of individual rights and liberties at the hands of electoral majorities. More democracy does not always mean more liberty, and it has often led to the opposite. An illiberal democracy can be very ugly, indeed. The decision to keep slavery in the South before the Civil War, for example, was based on the democratic principle of states' rights, insofar as the institution of slavery was highly supported by the enfranchised electorate. Whether it's the rights of slaves, women,

or gays, democracy is almost always behind the liberal curve. As we'll see in Chapter 2, tyranny of the majority remains a test for democracies, especially in the age of the opinion poll and social media, when the will of the majority is almost always known.

Third is the difference between democracy and capitalism. As the largest economy in the world, no one can doubt the economic prowess of the United States. The vastness of our natural resources and the relative ease of our economic development have done much to overcome the shortcomings of our politics. American voters might be apathetic, but the average American laborer is not. Politicians can give all the speeches or shake as many hands as they like, but the most difficult day on the campaign trail is no match for the blood, sweat, and toil of the best day at the factory or in the fields. In other words, democracy cannot take credit for the successes of capitalism, which is more likely due to what Max Weber called "the Protestant work ethic." Material wealth seems to be a condition for democracy to take root, but it could also be its undoing. That's the subject of Chapter 3.

There's also the difference between democracy in theory and how it actually works, a fourth point. Democracy requires the participation of citizens, for instance, but as Chapter 4 shows, apathy is curiously widespread. Consider that about a third of eligible voters decide not to vote in a typical presidential election. It's even worse for midterm and local elections. Still fewer participate in a more meaningful way, such as letter writing or activism of any kind. A healthy democracy also assumes the informed participation of its citizens. One poll showed that 26 percent of Americans don't know which country we gained our independence from.¹⁰ (It was Great Britain.) The Supreme Court's health care ruling was big news in June 2012, but less than half of the country knew about it in the days afterward.¹¹ Chapter 5 turns to what the American people know and don't know about government and the effect it has on our politics and the culture at large.

Fifth, democracy is more than just a way to order government. Indeed, it is a way of ordering society, or even a way of life. There is democracy in the government and its institutions, which are determined in large part by the Constitution. But there are also cultural aspects related to equality, liberty, and justice. We might think that societal norms and culture make democracy possible, but it could also be that democracy has implications beyond government and politics. Democratic values can sometimes extend to society—exaggerating its effects, good and bad, as we'll see in Chapter 6, when the democratic principle of equality comes to trump ability and merit.

Finally, there is also the relationship between governing and politics. Public policy is designed by legislators and administered by presidents and governors, but they first have to get elected and then remain in office. That means that whenever government is doing or deciding something, politics can never be too far away. The American people have shown little understanding of government—and little tolerance for politics. Eugene Robinson, a syndicated columnist, calls us the “spoiled brat electorate.”¹² We’ve come to expect immediate and easy solutions for big problems, which politicians feed into when they promise the impossible during campaigns. Chapter 7 looks at the extent to which individual self-interest and factions harm the body politic.

Democracy is the most political form of government not only because it allows for the election of officers and other forms of participation, but because it requires a constant or near-constant discussion over fundamental concepts. Attempts to settle these matters on religious or moral grounds are themselves contentious—as we’ve seen when Christianity, natural rights liberalism, or some secular notion of universal human rights is brought to bear on an issue. In short, defining democracy is itself a political activity—and a very personal one, at that.

WE DIDN'T START THE FIRE

A Rasmussen poll from the summer of 2012 provides some shocking numbers on the health of our democracy. Only 30 percent of those polled said we are “on the right track,” up from 21 percent the previous year.¹³ “Americans feel the governmental process simply does not work to represent them or respond to their needs,” another study concludes.¹⁴ A Gallup poll shows optimism about the future among young people has reached an all-time low.¹⁵ “There is a real crisis of authority,” laments Francis Fukuyama.¹⁶ Indeed, there is a growing sense that something is fundamentally wrong. *The system might be broken.*

There have been scores of articles and books written in the last several years about the crisis of American democracy. *New York Times* columnist Thomas Friedman warns, “What I increasingly fear today is that America is only able to produce ‘suboptimal’ responses to its biggest problems—education, debt, financial regulation, health care, energy and environment.”¹⁷ Bill Moyers is also sounding the alarm. “Democracy in America is a series of narrow escapes, and we may be running out of luck,” he writes. “For all of its shortcomings, we keep

telling ourselves, 'the system works.' Now all bets are off. We have fallen under the spell of money, faction, and fear."¹⁸ Or, if you're not one to rely on the testimony of intellectuals, perhaps Joseph Kulbacki, a former football player, might convince you. He wrote *America: A Nation That's Lost Its Way . . . What's Wrong With America!*¹⁹ Something is clearly wrong when sports figures turn against you.

So, what or who is to blame? Political scientist Alan Wolfe sees a fundamental shift in our politics. Under the "old politics of democracy," he writes, battles between the Left and the Right were over economics, whereas now they're more likely to be over moral or religious issues, making compromise more difficult, if not impossible. The other new aspect of our politics, he claims, is that the winning side is the one best able to frame its issue in the language of ordinary people—Wolfe calls it "populism"—rather than "the language of elites, tradition, leadership, habit, deference, restraint, rules, judges, or wisdom."²⁰

But Wolfe misses the mark. For one thing, demagoguery is nothing new. Democracy has suffered at the hands of the ignorant, the self-interested, and the ambitious since its inception. His claim about religion and morality is also dubious. The United States was founded by religious refugees and, for better and worse, has remained one of the more faith-based countries in the developed world. Even if things have changed, it's too soon to call it a major turning point in the history of our democracy, when it could soon pass. The United States has seen times of trouble—slavery, the Civil War, the Depression, etc. The status quo might be the new normal, or it might just be an aberration, or how things are right now.

Democracy may be a sub-optimal government, but it's always been that way. It's a purposefully limited and separated government, designed to maximize liberty and minimize the potential for tyranny and corruption. In his 1959 article, "The Science of Muddling Through," political scientist Charles E. Lindblom even heralds the virtues of policy "incrementalism."²¹ Although its outcomes are largely unpredictable, our government is regularly and systematically inefficient or inadequate in its primary tasks. Chapter 8 begins to chronicle the many ways in which democracy is an inefficient and even unstable form of government.

Others are concerned about the international impact of American decline. Morris Berman's *Dark Ages America* warns about the impact of unserious politicians on our standing in the world.²² Chris Hedges writes of the United States as an "empire of illusion."²³ As Larry

Diamond contends in a recent issue of *Foreign Affairs*, a weak or flawed democracy is less likely to take root elsewhere.²⁴ It's also likely that a debt-ridden developed world will have less ability to support and fund democratic movements worldwide.²⁵ While this book is not about the Middle East and other troubled areas of the world, we will see in Chapter 9 that democratic reforms elsewhere are more likely to take hold and endure if American foreign policy is more humble than it has been. Anti-democrats frequently charge the United States with being hypocritical in its talk about democracy; it's a perception that we can ill afford.

The problems of democracy are hardly new. But they are exacerbated by globalization and globalized competition, technological advances, and the speed of communications, just as they were masked before the United States' favored geography and abundant natural resources and the fact that much of the world remained underdeveloped. If the speed of democracy has not kept up with the speed of commerce and culture, that's a difference of quantity, not quality.

We didn't start the fire. But we haven't stopped it, either.

LOST IN TRANSLATION

Democracy is the bedrock of our political culture and practices. In fact, the notion that popular rule is the only legitimate form of government is so widespread and so firmly believed that it has come to be the sole standard by which all governments are judged. But even as we're judging others, we've stopped judging ourselves. Democracy has been ennobled or even prone to worship, as recent books on the issue have argued.²⁶ "The cure for the evils of democracy is more democracy!" cries H. L. Mencken.²⁷ More democracy is often seen as the solution—not appreciating that democracy itself might be part or the whole of the problem.

It was not until John Locke, in 1690, that the notion of popular sovereignty and individual rights were taken seriously. That democracy has a downside has been common knowledge throughout most of the history in the West; that didn't stop with Locke or those who came after him. The idea that democracy is an unqualified good is relatively recent, which seems to have been accelerated, if it did not altogether originate, in the wake of the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. We have lost sight of some hard truths about our regime, and we are worse off for it.

That said, we don't have to look too far to gain some perspective. There is, of course, Churchill's dictum—"Democracy is the worst form of government, except for all those other forms that have been tried from time to time"—which he offered from a House of Commons speech in 1947. Then there's Oscar Wilde, who never offends unintentionally: "Democracy means simply the bludgeoning of the people by the people for the people." Most recently, there's journalist Art Spander: "The great thing about democracy is that it gives every voter a chance to do something stupid."²⁸ But talk like this is not part of standard rhetoric in the United States. Regrettably, we're not usually that self-aware.

One of the most astute observers of American democracy is a Frenchman, Alexis de Tocqueville. He came to the United States in 1831 to study our prison system and left after a few short months, believing that we were at the fore of a great social and political upheaval: the equality of conditions. The United States was an example of great democratic potential that would invariably, as Tocqueville saw it, make its way to France and across Europe. The "effort to halt democracy appears as a fight against God Himself," he concludes.²⁹

Although he considers democracy a more just regime than aristocracy, Tocqueville is concerned about what the spread of equality will mean for society. "Democracy has been left to its wild instincts," he charges. "It has grown up like those children deprived of paternal care who school themselves in our town streets and know nothing of society but its vices and wretchedness."³⁰ For that reason, he calls for elites and officials "to educate democracy; to put, if possible, new life into its beliefs; to purify its mores; to control its actions; gradually to substitute understanding of statecraft for present inexperience and knowledge of its true interests for blind instincts; to adapt government to the needs of time and place; and to modify it as men and circumstances require."³¹ Tocqueville sees the first wave of democracy and urges the world to react accordingly. "A new political science is needed for a world itself quite new," he writes.³²

Readers might be surprised to know that there is a strain of American political thought that is suspicious of unfettered democracy. In *The American Political Tradition*, historian Richard Hofstadter summarizes the mood at the Founding. It's not antidemocratic, exactly. But it's a very measured and honest assessment of some of the problems with popular rule: