

The Myth of American Democracy

Trenton Fervor

A sweeping catalog of the ills, contrasted with the supposed strengths, of democracy

Everybody interested in the process of government should have this book as a reference. Its analysis is removed from politics, not favoring any political party or particular implementation of democracy. People on both the right and left increasingly find fault with America and prescribe partisan solutions. This book provides essential background information for analyzing such solutions, but following its relentless logic, few suggestions now in play would improve much of anything. Democracy is the source of its own ills... but there is no identified alternative, except less of it.

Trenton Fervor has written a book that is extraordinary in several ways. It is a book of lists. He has systematically brought together a number of ideas under general headings, and made very useful bullet pointed lists to support his argument. His first chapter is devoted to the benefits of democracy. He takes them point by point, heading by heading, and fills in the logic behind the headings with bullet points. It is incredible to me that a person can devise 50 or 60 points to support the same heading, and not have the bullet points become redundant. But his reading is extensive, and the points are articulately written. At the end of the first chapter you are in sync with the thinking of the Federalist papers, the Founding Fathers of our democracy. You see the world the way they did, and you are inclined to believe that democracy is the best of all possible systems.

The subsequent chapters demolish that notion. He systematically identifies the problems with democracy. Again, he employs the same approach. Extremely well worked out lists. His lists reference great thinkers throughout the ages. Although the book does not include a bibliography or footnotes, it does include a large number of quotes over the last couple of centuries. This man has done his homework! A Google search will fetch up most of the quotes if you are truly interested.

So what are the problems with democracy? It is a sham. It does not live up to its billing. There never has been, never could be an ideal system of government. Hence the title – democracy is just another figment of Greek mythology. Has never existed in pure form, and the impurity in the forms that exist can be quite revolting. Most important, every democracy contains the seeds of its own destruction. Expanding the voting franchise ever downwards is always in somebody's interest, and once the vote is given, it can never be taken back. It invariably turns out to be a government of takers looting the productive members of society.

Complexity seems to be one of the biggest problems. As societies grow in numbers, and as technology grows, the amount of knowledge that one must have in order to be an informed voter grows beyond the measure of what people can do. First of all, most people, the common run of mankind, are neither smart or educated or devoted enough to learn about the issues. The majority of voters are left behind. Politicians of course take advantage of this, and appeal to the least intelligent voters through their emotions, avoiding logical discourse. To listen to the back and forth on issues such as the debt ceiling,

abortion or guns is to listen to nothing but blather and noise on both sides. It is in nobody's interest to seek the truth. There are impartial bodies which attempt to do this, writing books for literate audiences, but their voices are seldom heard in the dialogue over political issues.

Compounding the problem of complexity is the propensity of political systems to perpetuate themselves, and politicians to perpetuate themselves in office. It is not in the politicians' interest to solve problems. Their general objective is to gain power and to remain in office. They are increasingly successful at doing this. Success does not equate with solving problems – it is the antithesis. As long as the public believes that politicians are necessary to solve problems, and politicians can identify problems that supposedly need to be solved, the politician appears essential. The most dangerous person in a politicians world is the person who says that there are problems which are beyond the reach of politics and thus are best left in the private sphere.

A quick mental inventory of issues of the last 50 years will indicate that more and more issues have gone into the public sphere. Medicine used to be a private matter. Now it is very much a government matter. Pensions used to be a private matter. Now it is the government. Education used to be state and local. Now it is federal, with "common core" politicizing the curriculum for grade schoolers. There is less and less that is reserved to the individual. The individual is regarded as a threat to the State, as we note through the increased spying on civilians who are really doing nothing except living ordinary civilian lives.

Fervor makes a number of claims which the serious observer of government can immediately confirm via his own experience. He says "Some of the most profound changes to the US Constitution have occurred, not when the government formally amended the Constitution, but when the political establishment exploited a crisis to act in a de facto revolutionary manner, and outside of its constitutional authority, to just ram it through." Certainly this is the case in *Brown vs. Board of Education* and *Roe vs. Wade*. Fervor is perhaps assuming too much knowledge on the part of his readership not to cite such examples.

In the next paragraph, we find: "The government is "broken" because it is trying to do what it was specifically designed not to do. It has been "evolved" beyond its own coherency." Again, healthcare and education spring immediately to mind. It would be useful to cite the examples.

One of Fervor's major issues is that democracy pretends to be by the consent of the governed. He asks that very reasonable question, what if you withdraw your consent? What does it mean? He contends that consent really means nothing. That it is only by casting your vote that you sort of consent to the outcome. But the people that you vote for are not your agents. They are strictly your representatives, and they are not interested in your but in their own best interest. They do not even represent most of the people within their constituency. First of all only a minority vote, it takes only a minority of the voters to get somebody elected, and the people who count are the organized forces people with money such as labor unions who are able to drive which way the vote goes. The representatives are under no particular pressure to the representative of you. And they usually do not. Our government, assumes

the power to confiscate our wealth, deprive us of our freedom, and in extreme, kill us, without our having consented in any way except having come under its jurisdiction, usually by accident of birth.

Now I come to the things that the book does not address. In his final chapter, Fervor concludes by saying that democracy doesn't work for all the reasons above. Anybody looking at modern United States or Europe would have to conclude that he is right. It begs for an alternative. There is no alternative offered. Our founders did as good a job as one could conceive of building a foolproof system, a democracy that could not be compromised, and they failed. Yet, people have to live under a government of some sort. Philosophers going back to Plato addressed this question, and there does not seem to be a good answer. Jefferson wrote that "Eternal vigilance is the price of liberty." He knew mankind quite well. He might have added "And as mankind is dumb and lazy, our posterity will dissipate the liberty we created for them." This risk was on the minds of all the Founding Fathers. They knew human frailty all too well. And the average citizen of their time was more enterprising and more intelligent than those of the United States today. Moreover, it was a homogeneous population that pretty much believed in themselves and their project.

A more answerable question is, what happens when democracy collapses? One can have a clean break, as in postwar Germany. The political system was swept clean in what had been a democracy up until 1933. The Central European satellites of the USSR, mostly democratic prior to 1946, reverted to it in 1991. It was a major change, but not a clean sweep. Eastern Europe – Ukraine, Moldova and Belarus – had no democratic tradition to build on. They got the trappings without the substance.

Argentina lurches from collapse to collapse, both financial and political, without seeming to change. Chile went through the full cycle, from democracy to Communism to authoritarian and back to democracy. Venezuela and the Andean nations are witnessing what happens when populist forces wholly subvert individual freedoms within a supposed democracy. There must be lessons which we in the United States can apply after its impending financial collapse.

Individual survival is a related topic. Intelligent and educated people always need to survive among envious, less gifted people. How should we, Fervor's typical readers, prepare to live in the chaos which ensues after the United States can no longer sustain the fictions of democracy and solvency? I would read such a treatise with gusto.

Fervor deploys a very broad vocabulary very well. He comes across as a highly intelligent and widely-read man. Who is he? A private person behind the mask of a pseudonym. He wants to be known for his thinking and nothing else. As I mention above, footnotes, would double the size of the book. But I would love them! The bulk of a book is not a problem in the Kindle format – footnotes work rather like hyperlinks. Fervor should consider them in his next book projects.

Let me close with the note that while Fervor quotes many other authors, he himself, though unknown, is very quotable. Below are some passages that struck me as especially valuable:

"There exists as well, a class of self-righteously compassionate, vicarious altruists, intent upon seducing the masses with the promise of freedom from the burden of uncertainty and responsibility. Their policy efforts sap the masses of initiative, potency, discernment, and moral judgment, and increase the proportion of society which has lost the desire to be self-providing, encouraging them instead to support a government which pillages booty for them from those who are."

"Illiberal democracy: American progressives view the government as an authority for empowering and enforcing their moral visions, not as a pluralistic framework within which people may pursue independent visions. They see government not as providing a safe environment for individual liberty and voluntarism, but as a vehicle for imposing their enlightened views upon others. Their view of society is one of synchronized and compulsory association, and full-spectrum paternalism. Theirs is a paradoxical form of democracy, brimming with illiberal principles and content."

"Dependency: Americans have lost their "self reliance," and the country has become an environment where non-achievers can simply count on the government to redistribute the wealth of those who have achieved. The incentives to achievement have been eroded. Achievement today depends not on individual initiative, but on petitioning government authority. "

"Rational ignorance: With regard to political questions, it is most often difficult to distinguish reliable from unreliable information. A person's cost of ensuring he has pertinent, accurate, and sufficient information can exceed its benefit. It is almost always economically irrational for him to mitigate his ignorance. In most instances, whether or not he invests the time to have a reliably informed political opinion, will in no way effect the outcome. The benefit of having good information is not worth the cost of acquiring it. (Fervor quotes this from Bryan Caplan)"

" Ridiculous farce: "It will be of little avail to the people that the laws are made by men of their own choice if the laws be so voluminous that they cannot be read, or so incoherent that they cannot be understood; if they be repealed or revised before they are promulgated, or undergo such incessant changes that no man who knows what the law is today, can guess what it will be tomorrow." – James Madison"

"Democratic tyranny does not contemptuously announce itself and invite reprisal. It deludes and seduces, divides and co-opts, debilitates and undermines, infuses and corrupts, accumulates and suffocates. The forces of oppression which accumulate into tyranny are not things that can be individually resisted; they must be precluded with a principled and rigorous restraint of government scope and power."