The Crisis of American Democracy

Essays on a Failing Institution

Edited by
Leland Harper
Siena Heights University

Series in Politics

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Foreword:
The Future of American Democracy

> "Democracy, in a word, is a social, that is to say, an ethical conception, and upon its ethical significance is based its significance as governmental. Democracy is a form of government only because it is a form of moral and spiritual association."
>
> John Dewey, "The Ethics of Democracy" (1888)

American democracy has never been perfect. *Far from it*. And yet, despite the long, blood-soaked history of the United States—despite all the anti-democratic exclusion and disenfranchisement—someone could be forgiven for thinking that the future prospects of American democracy are currently bleaker than ever before.

Consider some of the challenges that the American democratic experiment now finds itself having to contend with. One cluster of these challenges has to do with the political-electoral machinery itself. We have seen an explosion of new legislative and bureaucratic techniques designed to depress voter turnout, especially among African Americans. (Indeed, in 2016, when the fourth circuit federal appeals court blocked a dramatic new voter-ID law in North Carolina on the grounds that the law was passed with "discriminatory intent" and targeted African-American voters "with almost surgical precision", the court merely stated in writing what millions of Americans have known for a long time). In state after state, we see ever more restrictive voter ID laws. Fewer polling places. Citizens waiting in lines for many hours simply to cast their ballot. More red-tape. One more step to complete. Another form to fill in. Yet another new rule to be aware of. A new bureaucratic hurdle to clear. And on and on.

Another cluster of these challenges has to do with the acrimonious, high-temperature politics against whose background American elections take place. American elections have always been hotly contested, to be sure. Passions have always run high. But we see now that vote counts are disputed with more regularity than in the past. Allegations of widespread voter fraud abound. Evidence of foreign interference in American elections apparently mounts. For an increasingly large number of American voters, the integrity of the political process *itself*, not just the results it announces, is highly questionable. The upshot is that, as recent polling data amply shows, a

growing number of Americans have less trust in the democratic process than they once did.[1]

It is also becoming increasingly clear, if it wasn't crystal clear already, that the Electoral College is a profoundly anti-democratic system, expressly designed to maintain something that is in fact the diametric opposite of democracy: a system of minority rule. Dave Wasserman, the editor of the non-partisan *Cook Political Report,* calculated that, in the 2020 presidential election, Donald Trump lost the popular vote by a whopping 7.1 million votes, and yet, because of the irregularities of the Electoral College, actually came within 65,009 votes of winning reelection. Given the current make-up of the American electorate, there are good reasons for predicting that we could see more of this in the years ahead: that is, decisive popular vote victories for the Democrats that nevertheless result in Electoral College "squeakers" for the Republicans. As a practical matter, I think this is an unsustainable situation. But no one can deny that the Electoral College makes a mockery of the ideal of the rule of the *demos*, the ideal embodied in the slogan, *One person, one vote*.

The preceding is only a sample, by no means an exhaustive accounting, of the challenges currently threatening the ideal of American democracy. One might have also mentioned the relentless gerrymandering of congressional districts, the use of "dark money" to fund political campaigns, the steady stream of attempts to "purge" voter rolls in numerous states, or the rise of *Fake News* and other techniques of mass disinformation. There is also felony disenfranchisement, which (given that no country on earth imprisons a higher percentage of its citizens than the United States) strips voting rights away from millions. In the 2016 election, for example, an estimated 6.1 million people were disenfranchised because of a conviction.

These challenges need to be taken seriously and confronted head-on. Anyone who is cheering for American democracy should care about their just resolution. And yet, daunting though they certainly are, from a certain angle of vision, these are not the most formidable challenges currently facing the American democratic experiment. On the contrary, these are relatively easy and straightforward problems, which is to say that there are simple legislative and constitutional measures which, if enacted, would more or less bring about their resolution. We already know—again, more or less, in broad strokes—the shape that solutions to most of these problems would have to take. The problems are simple from an analytical point of view, even if they

[1] See https://www.pewtrusts.org/en/trust/archive/winter-2020/how-americans-view-trust-facts-and-democracy-today

are virtually impossible from a political point of view. In short, what we urgently need here is political skill and gumption, not the special expertise of philosophers and political theorists.

I think that the really formidable challenges currently facing American democracy—and here, the work of philosophers and political theorists is very much in point—are *cultural* at their root. This is a central line of argument in the work of America's greatest theorist of democracy, John Dewey. For Dewey, democracy is first and foremost "a way of life" and only secondarily a mode of government.

> Democracy is much broader than a special political form…It is that, of course. But it is something broader and deeper than that…It is…a way of life, social and individual. The keynote of democracy as a way of life may be expressed…as the necessity for the participation of every mature human being in formation of the values that regulate the living of men together.[2]

A thriving democracy obviously requires just laws and institutions. But what principally matters for Dewey's conception of democracy are the traits and aptitudes characteristic of a democratic culture. Some of these include, to paraphrase Dewey, a more pronounced ability to convince and be convinced by reason and argument. To be less susceptible to propaganda and manipulation. To have the capacity to engage in fruitful deliberation—back-and-forth, give-and-take discussion. To be able to recognize values and interests shared in common, rather than being moved solely by private desires. To develop a sense of open-mindedness and fallibilism. To be willing to revise one's beliefs in the light of new information and evidence. To be able to inquire, systematically and in a protracted way, into difficult, multi-faceted issues. A willingness to work cooperatively with others. And so much more besides.

While Dewey is not specifically invoked in this excellent and timely volume, many of its contributors seem to be operating broadly within an understanding of democracy that he took as central. The chapters in this volume are focused less on questions involving the political machinery of the state (though some of that is addressed too) and focused more on questions about the conditions under which a democratic culture can flourish. This comes out forcefully in chapters addressing the democracy-destroying

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[2] John Dewey, "Democracy and Educational Administration." In *The Later Works of John Dewey,* Volume 11. Edited by Jo Ann Boydston. (Carbondale: University of Southern Illinois Press, 1987), p. 217.

consequences of anti-Black racism and white fragility, the epistemology of political disagreement and polarization, the vital importance in a democracy of listening and critical thinking.

There are good reasons to be skeptical right now about the future of the American experiment in democracy. Sadly, a rich democratic culture is no one's birthright, and no one should take for granted that such a culture can or will flourish in the United States. The arc of the moral universe is long, and no one should just assume that it bends toward justice and democracy. Yet the achievement of justice and democracy is not impossible either. American democracy is not necessarily doomed, but neither is its flourishing guaranteed.

The future is open and undetermined. The contributors to this volume have considered these different possibilities for the future of American democracy thoughtfully and admirably. Like Dewey before them, they see American democracy as an unrealized aspiration, as, in Dewey's words, "an ideal of the future, not a starting point". Anyone with an interest in the future of democracy in the United States will benefit from reading these chapters and thinking hard about their arguments.

David Rondel
Reno, Nevada. 2021

Introduction

Leland Harper

Siena Heights University

American democracy has long been the self-proclaimed ideal for governance. And, for years, many have accepted that as self-evident but, of late, some have begun questioning whether or not that designation is, or ever was, warranted. Those questioning, or flat-out denying, the greatness of American democracy have grown not only in number but also in volume and power. Regardless of which side of the political aisle you sit on, many around the country and abroad see American democracy as being in crisis, at worst, and problematic, at best. In the time that this collection of essays was compiled, America faced many challenges to the premise that its democracy functions correctly. In this short period of history, America has confronted and, in some cases, continues to confront some genuine threats. The impeachment proceedings of a sitting president; the global health pandemic of COVID-19; the disruption of global economic markets as a result of COVID-19; nationwide protests against systemic racism and police brutality; voter suppression; and the genuine possibility that, even when voted out, the sitting president would not cede power. The list goes on.

How did we arrive at such a place where, seemingly everybody, regardless of the political ideology that they subscribe to, can agree that something is wrong – that something is broken – with American democracy? Ironically, this seems to be the one position on which we have found a near consensus. So, again, how did we arrive in such a place, what are the consequences that we see presently, and what are the best courses of action to improve the situation in which America currently finds itself? This collection of essays seeks to provide insight on just those questions.

Providing answers to the questions above is no small task, and it is not one to be taken lightly and not one that is to be discussed solely as a topic in seminar rooms. Real change stems from and comes through the expression of ideas. The changes that many hope for, and the changes that many of the contributions to this volume call for are crucial not only to individuals, not only to America but potentially to democracy itself. Investigating and remedying the flaws, from both practical and theoretical standpoints, of such

a far-reaching concept is something in which we all have a vested interest. This collection of essays aims, primarily, to address the underlying ideas of democracy and to connect them to their practical application, exploring democracy from philosophical perspectives rather than purely from the perspective of policy-making and governmental structure and strategy. The crisis in which America currently finds itself appears to be much more profound than simple policy and procedure. There is a deep crack in the foundation. It is the very principles on which American democracy is based that need to be looked upon with fresh eyes. The hope is that this collection of essays begins some much-needed conversations about what that crack in the foundation of American democracy is and how it got there. Further discussions are needed about the problems that the crack is causing and whether or not we should save what rests upon that foundation. If we do decide that we should embark on the mission of protecting American democracy, we must engage in deep thought about how we ought to go about it and how we can make it more durable than it was before. We must then take what that reflection yields, and use it as the foundation for action – for rebuilding, strengthening, solidifying, and improving the structure that serves such a crucial function for so many of us. Only then can we have the confidence that we need to begin to build a new future.

“Remember, democracy never lasts long. It soon wastes, exhausts, and murders itself. There never was a democracy yet that did not commit suicide.”

- John Adams

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About the Authors

Leland Harper is Assistant Professor of Philosophy at Siena Heights University. His research focuses on philosophy of religion, particularly issues in the epistemic status of religious experience, and on philosophy of race, particularly issues in racism, racial solidarity and injustice. He is the author of *Multiverse Deism: Shifting Perspectives of God and the World* (Lexington, 2020), as well as articles in *Res Philosophica*, *Forum Philosophicum*, *Global Discourse* and *The International Journal of Philosophy and Theology*. He is the organizer of the Great Lakes Philosophy Conference, an annual international ethics conference held in Adrian, Michigan, and he is co-author of the forthcoming book, with Dr. Jennifer Kling that addresses the intersections of race, language and justice in the United States (Lexington Books).

Jay Carlson is a Ph.D. candidate in philosophy at Loyola University-Chicago. His main research interest is on issues of political disagreement, though he also works on issues in bioethics and medical ethics.

Derrick Darby is Henry Rutgers Professor of Philosophy at Rutgers University, New Brunswick. He works in social and political philosophy. Some of his recent publications include *The Color of Mind: Why the Origins of the Achievement Gap Matter for Justice* with John L. Rury (Chicago University Press, 2018), *Rights, Race, and Recognition* (Cambridge University Press, 2009) and *Hip Hop and Philosophy: Rhyme to Reason* with Tommie Shelby (Open Court, 2005). He is currently writing about democracy, social identity, and black radicalism.

Jennifer Kling is Assistant Professor of Philosophy and Director of the Center for Legal Studies at the University of Colorado, Colorado Springs. Her research focuses on moral and political philosophy, particularly issues in war and peace, self- and other-defense, international relations, protest, and feminism. She is the author of *War Refugees: Risk, Justice, and Moral Responsibility* (Lexington, 2019), as well as articles in *Res Philosophica*, *Radical Philosophy Review*, *Journal of Global Ethics*, and *The Routledge Handbook of Pacifism and Nonviolence*, and is the editor of *Pacifism, Politics, and Feminism: Intersections and Innovations* (Brill, 2019). She is also the Executive Director of Concerned Philosophers for Peace (CPP), the largest, most active organization of

professional philosophers in North America involved in the analysis of the causes of war and prospects for peace.

Colin J. Lewis is Instructor of Philosophy and Director of the Asian Studies Minor at the University of Colorado, Colorado Springs. His areas of specialization include Chinese and comparative philosophy, ethics with a focus on moral psychology, and philosophy of education. He is the author of *Confucian Ritual and Moral Education* (Lexington, forthcoming), and articles in *Educational Philosophy and Theory*, *Asian Philosophy*, and *Dao*.

Ellen M. Maccarone is Associate Professor of Philosophy and Faculty Advisor to the President at Gonzaga University. Her main areas of focus include social justice theory, international development ethics, and food ethics. As an applied ethicist, she takes seriously the intersection of real-world events and ethical theory, whether it be about immigration policy or what to have for dinner. She believes bringing these ideas outside of academia through community services and social justice activism is a way for philosophy to serve the greater good.

John J. Park is Assistant Professor of Philosophy at California State University, Sacramento. He received his PhD from Duke University in philosophy. His research interests are in ethics, political philosophy, and philosophy of mind & cognitive science.

Tanya Randle is Associate Professor and chair of the Philosophy department at St. Ambrose University. Her research interests are in epistemic, especially religious, disagreement, and in the study of consciousness. In particular her interests lie in bringing hermeneutic and phenomenological methods to bear on these topics.

Isidoro Talavera is Professor of Philosophy and Lead Faculty at Franklin University. The focus of his philosophical research is the confluence of applied epistemology, logic, critical thinking and the philosophy of natural and/or social sciences. Dr. Talavera holds advanced degrees in Mathematics and in Philosophy.

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