Nobody ever did. That’s why you didn’t learn it in school. You were just told to believe. The arguments for democracy—which aren’t often articulated—are so flawed and flimsy, some of them even so silly, that pious democrats might be startled.

Now, it maybe that some of these criticisms of democratic government are really criticisms of government itself. That does not detract from, but rather enhances, their validity. That just means that democracy is not so special after all, and that it has been found out.

VOTE NOBODY
NOBODY TELLS THE TRUTH.

Bob Black PO Box 3112 Albany NY 12203

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74 For example, voluntary residence in a country is said to be "tacit" consent to its democratic government. Love it or leave it! Incredibly, most democrats fail to notice that if voluntary residence counts as consent to be ruled, then it counts as consent to be ruled by any government, despotic or democratic. Harry Brighouse, "Democracy and Inequality," in Democratic Theory Today: Challenges for the 21st Century, ed. April Carter & Geoffrey Stokes (Cambridge, England: Polity Press, 2002), 56; J.P. Plamanatz, Consent, Freedom, and Political Obligation (2nd ed.; London: Oxford University Press, 1968), 7-8; A. John Simmons, Moral Principles and Political Obligations (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1979), 7374 & ch. 4. In the anthology Democratic Theory Today, the eleven contributors—all of them college professors—solemnly discuss civic republicanism, developmental democracy, deliberative democracy, associative democracy, etc. Not one of them pauses to justify democracy itself.

than "pure democracy, or the immediate autocracy of the people," as Joel Barlow described it.\textsuperscript{71} A celebrant of Swiss direct democracy at its height admits: "Corruption, factionalization, arbitrariness, violence, disregard for law, and an obdurate conservatism that opposed all social and economic progress were pathologies to some extent endemic to the pure democratic life form."\textsuperscript{72} Democracy in any form is irrational, unjust, inefficient, capricious, divisive, and demeaning. Its direct and representative versions, as we have seen, share many vices. Neither version exhibits any clear advantage over the other. Each also has vices peculiar to itself. Indeed the systems differ only in degree. Either way, the worst tyranny is the tyranny of the majority,\textsuperscript{73} as most anarchists, and some conservatives, and some liberals, and even the more honest democrats, have often said.

Is democracy nonetheless the best form of government? Even that is not so obvious, after taking a hard look at just how bad it is. Its theory is reducible to ruins in a few pages. The believers claim that democracy promotes dialogue, but where is the dialogue about democracy itself? Democrats ignore their critics, as if democracy is such a done deal, why bother to defend it? They just take it for granted that somebody (Locke? Rousseau? Lincoln? Churchill?) has long since made out a strong case for democracy.


\textsuperscript{73} e.g., Goldman, "The Individual, Society and the State," Red Emma Speaks, 98; see also Robert L Hoffman, Revolutionary Justice: The Social and Political Theory of P.-J. Proudhon (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1972), 187. The expression is generally credited to Alexis de Tocqueville (Democracy in America, 250) and it was further popularized by John Stuart Mill; but it was used by at least one Anti-Federalist in the Ratification debate. Wood, Creation of the American Republic, 484 & n. 19. Certainly the idea was widespread then, and since.
which Caucus stalwart Sam Adams played a key role."\textsuperscript{66} This is democracy in action.

What Hobbes is talking about, as he proceeds to say, is faction, which he defines as "a sort of effort and hard work, which they use to fashion people."\textsuperscript{67} James Madison famously argued that direct democracy promotes factionalism.\textsuperscript{68} But an organization of organizers of votes serves a purpose (its own) in any assembly or legislature. Parties (the euphemism for "fractions") could play central roles in a direct democracy, maybe greater roles than in representative democracy.\textsuperscript{69}

Only regular high turnouts would minimize (not eliminate) these capricious or manipulated reversals, since, if most citizens attend every meeting, most of them who attend one meeting will attend another. The polar possibilities are that all the same people, or all different people, attend the next meeting. If it is all the same people, it is de facto oligarchy. If it is all different people, it is chaos, the only kind of "anarchy" consistent with direct democracy. It will usually turn out to be closer to oligarchy.

\textbf{Conclusion}

Majority rule is as arbitrary as random decision, but not nearly as fair.\textsuperscript{69} For a voter, the only difference between the lottery\textsuperscript{70} and an election is that he might win the lottery. Better pure chance


\textsuperscript{67} Hobbes, On the Citizen, 124.

\textsuperscript{68} James Madison, The Federalist No. 10, at 56-57.

\textsuperscript{69} Wolff, In Defense of Anarchism, 44-45.

that was made when their opponents were there in strength may be reversed when they fail to show."\textsuperscript{63}

Hobbes exactly describes how Samuel Adams manipulated another assembly, the Boston town meeting, at prior private meetings of his faction at the Caucus Club: "Caucusing involved the widest prevision of problems that might arise and the narrowest choice of response to each possibility; who would speak to any issue, and what he would say; with the clubmen's general consent guaranteed, ahead of time, to both choice of speaker and what the speaker's message would be." His cousin John Adams was astonished, after many years of attending town meetings, to learn of this: "There they drink flip [a rum drink], I suppose, and there they choose a moderator who puts questions to the vote regularly, and selectmen, assessors, wardens, fire wards, and representatives are regularly chosen before they are chosen by the town."\textsuperscript{64} Exactly the same methods of manipulation were practiced in the Athenian assembly.\textsuperscript{65}

Direct democracy is well suited to machine politics: "The powerful town meeting [in Boston] named the many municipal officials, determined taxes and assessments, and adopted public service projects that were a rich source of jobs and economic largesse. For years the original Caucus and its allies in the Merchants Club had acted as the unofficial directing body of the town meeting in

\textsuperscript{63} Hobbes, On the Citizen, 124.
\textsuperscript{64} Gary Wills, Inventing America: Jefferson's Declaration of Independence (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Company, 1978), 20 (quoted), 23 (quoting John Adams). The Bostonians recreated the smoke-filled room at the Continental Congress, where Jefferson noticed that "[Samuel Adams] was constantly holding caucuses of distinguished men, among whom was Richard Henry Lee, at which the generality of the measures pursued were previously determined on, and at which the parts were assigned to the different actors who afterwards appeared in them." Quoted in ibid., 25.

For the first time in history, "nearly everyone today professes to be a democrat."\textsuperscript{1} Professors profess democracy profusely, although they keep it off campus. Democracy—truly, "that word can mean anything."\textsuperscript{2} Even North Korea calls itself a Democratic People's Republic. Democracy goes with everything. For champions of capitalism, democracy is inseparable from capitalism. For champions of socialism, democracy is inseparable from socialism. Democracy is even said to be inseparable from anarchism.\textsuperscript{3} It is identified with the good, the true, and the beautiful.\textsuperscript{4} There's a flavor of democracy for every taste: constitutional democracy, liberal democracy, social democracy, Christian democracy, even industrial democracy. Poets (admittedly not many) have hymned its glory. And yet the suspicion lurks that, as it seemed to another poet, Oscar Wilde, "democracy means simply the bludgeoning of the people, by the people, and for the people. It has been found out."\textsuperscript{5} Found out, and found to be unfounded.

Until the 20th century, there were few democracies. Until the 19th century, the wisdom of the ages was unanimous in

\textsuperscript{3} David Graeber (in the AK Press catalog 2008), quoted in Bob Black, letter to the editors, Anarchy: A Journal of Desire Armed, No. 67 (Vol. 26, No. 2) (Spring-Summer 2009), 75.
\textsuperscript{4} "Democracy is made identical with intellectual freedom, with economic justice, with social welfare, with tolerance, with piety, moral integrity, the dignity of man, and general civilized decency." Robert A. Nisbet, Community and Power (London: Oxford University Press, 1962), 248.
condemnation of democracy. All the sages of ancient Greece denounced it, especially the sages of democratic Athens.\textsuperscript{6} As Hegel wrote: "Those ancients who as members of democracies since their youth, had accumulated long experience and reflected profoundly about it, held different views on popular opinion from those more a priori views prevalent today." \textsuperscript{7} The Framers of the U.S. Constitution rejected democracy.\textsuperscript{8} So did their opponents, the Anti-Federalists.\textsuperscript{9} The democracy which was then universally despised is what is now called direct democracy, government by the people over the people. "People" in "by the people" meant the citizens: a minority consisting of some of the adult males. "People" in "over the people" meant everybody. The citizenry assembled at intervals to wield state power by majority vote. This system no longer exists anywhere, and that makes it easier to believe in it, as Hegel observed.

Democracy only became respectable, in the 19th century, when its meaning changed. Now it meant representative democracy, in which the citizenry—now an electorate, but still a minority—from...
pedition: “The result of this excessive enthusiasm of the majority was that the few who were actually opposed to the expedition were afraid of being thought unpatriotic if they voted against it, and therefore kept quiet.”

17. A specific, experimentally validated emotional influence vitiating democracy is group pressure to conform. This was strikingly demonstrated in a famous experiment by social psychologist Solomon Asch. Each of seven to nine experimental subjects was asked to compare a series of lines, and in each case identify the two lines that were equal in length. For each comparison it was obvious, indeed extremely obvious, which lines matched— but time after time, every member of the group gave the same wrong answer—except the only subject who was unaware of the real purpose of the experiment. In these circumstances, fifty-eight percent of the test subjects changed their answer to agree with the unanimous majority. Even when subjects were each given one ally, thirteen percent of the subjects agreed with the group instead of the evidence of their senses. Some of the conformists actually changed their perceptions, but most of them simply decided that the group must be right, no matter how strong was the evidence to the contrary.

18. Another inherent flaw in direct democracy partly (not entirely) a consequence of the previous one, is the inconstancy of policy. This really covers two related arguments against democracy. What the assembly does at one meeting it may undo at the next, whether because citizens have had sober second thoughts (a good reason) or because a different mix of people shows up (a bad reason). This often happened in classical Athens, the only polity which has ever seriously tried to make direct democracy work.


The announced popularity of democracy is surely exaggerated. It’s a mile wide and an inch deep. Aversion to authoritarian regimes is not necessarily enthusiasm for democracy. In some of the post-Communist democracies, democracy has already lost its charm. In others, such as Russia, democracy itself is already lost. Older democracies persist more from apathy and force of habit than from genuine conviction. John Zerzan reasonably asks: “Has there ever been so much incessant yammer about democracy, and less real interest in it?” Well, has there?

The idea of democracy has never been justified, merely glorified. None of the older criticisms of democracy has been refuted, and neither has any of the newer ones. They come from left, right, and center. Some of these criticisms follow. They establish that democracy is irrational, inefficient, unjust, and antithetical to the very values claimed for it: liberty, equality, and fraternity. It does not even, for instance, imply liberty. Rather, the instinctive tendency to time to time choose some of its rulers by majority vote (or rather, by the majority of those actually voting—which is not the same thing). The elected rulers appoint the rest of the rulers. As always, some rule, and all are ruled. In the 19th century, when this system prevailed in only a few nations, it acquired a few intellectually able proponents, such as John Stuart Mill, but it also evoked some intellectually able opponents, such as Herbert Spencer, Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, and Friedrich Nietzsche. Democracy, as one of the ascendant political ideologies of the age, accommodated itself to the others: to liberalism, nationalism, socialism, and even Christianity. They in turn accommodated it, usually. Improbably, the doctrines legitimated one another, usually.

of democracy is "to despise individual rights and take little account of them." Democracy not only subverts community, it insults dignity, and it affronts common sense. Not all of these violated values are important to everyone, but some of them are important to anyone, except to someone to whom nothing is important. That is why post-modernists are democrats.

In recent years, some intellectuals (academics and former radicals) have tried to revive direct democracy as an ideal, and set it up as a viable alternative to representative democracy. Their strenuous exertions interest only themselves. Their efforts fail, for at least two reasons.

The first reason is that, as a matter of fact, "there is no reason to believe that there has ever been an urban, purely direct democracy or even a reasonable approximation of one. Every known instance has involved a considerable admixture of representative democracy which has sooner or later usually subordinated [direct] democracy where it didn’t eliminate it altogether."14 There is no space to prove it here, but the evidence is ample.15 Direct democracy is merely an abstract ideal, a fantasy really, with no basis in historical experience. According to Jean-Jacques Rousseau, who is falsely claimed to be an advocate of direct democracy, "however small any State

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claims that an overarching confederal system produces majority decisions,53 affirms the impossible as an act of faith.

16. Direct democracy, to an even greater degree than representative democracy, encourages emotional, irrational decision making.54 The face-to-face context of assembly politics engenders strong interpersonal psychological influences which are, at best, extraneous to decision making on the merits. The crowd is susceptible to orators and stars, and intolerant of contradiction.55 The speakers, in the limited time allotted to them, tend to sacrifice reasoning to persuasion whenever they have to choose, if they want to win. As Hobbes wrote, the speakers begin not from true principles but from "commonly accepted opinions, which are for the most part usually false, and they do not try to make their discourse correspond to the nature of things but to the passions of men’s hearts. The result is that votes are cast not on the basis of correct reasoning but on emotional impulse."56 "Pure democracy, like pure rum, easily produces intoxication, and with it a thousand mad pranks and foolishness."57 Dissenters feel intimidated, as they were, for instance, when the Athenian assembly voted for the disastrous Sicilian ex-

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54 “The general characteristics of crowds are to be met with in parliamentary assemblies: Intellectual simplicity, irritability, suggestibility, the exaggeration of the sentiments and the preponderating influence of a few leaders.” Le Bon, The Crowd, 187. Automatic word wrap
to be nearly equal in population, gerrymandering—the drawing of their boundaries so as to favor some candidate or party is a standing temptation. Especially since the incumbents do the drawing. Using the latest liberatory technology—the computer—it’s easy to devise gerrymandered but mathematically equal districts.

15. Direct democracy trying to avert this evil, embraces federalism, which increases inequality.

If the neighborhood or face-to-face basic units were autarchic—self-governing and self-sufficient—it would be nobody’s business but theirs which people they included and how many. They could go to hell in their own way. But schemes for direct democracy typically call for a federal system with layers of “mandated and revocable delegates, responsible to the base” by which the decisions of assemblies are reconciled. Some delegates to the higher levels will potentially speak for a different number of citizens than other delegates but cast equal votes. In a federal system of units of unequal population, voting equality for the units means voting inequality for individuals. The federalist—but single-member—simple-plurality system evidently contemplated by most direct democrats, including the syndicalists, is the least proportionate of all voting systems.51

The inequality will be compounded at every higher level. The majority; the majority of the majority; the majority of the majority of the majority—the higher up you go, the greater the inequality. The more often you multiply by a fraction, the smaller the number you arrive at. “It is not possible,” it is said, “to find a general answer to the question of to what extent federalism may legitimately be allowed to outweigh democracy.”52 Actually, there is a general answer to the question. The answer is no. A direct democrat who may be, civil societies are always too populous to be under the immediate government of all their members.”16

The second reason is that the major objections to representative democracy also apply to direct democracy, even if the latter is regarded as an ideal form of pure majoritarian democracy. Some objections apply to one version, some to the other, but most apply to both. There are more than enough reasons to reject every version of democracy. Let us, then, consider some of these objections.

**Objections to Democracy**

1. The majority isn’t always right.

As (among many others) Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, Henry David Thoreau, Mikhail Bakunin, Benjamin Tucker, Errico Malatesta, and Emma Goldman said—and does anybody disagree?—democracy does not assure correct decisions. “The only thing special about majorities is that they are not minorities.”17 There is no strength in numbers, or rather, there is nothing but strength in numbers. Parties, families, corporations, unions, nearly all voluntary associations are, by choice, oligarchic.18 Indeed, in assemblies whether direct or representative, in electorates as in legislatures, the whole is less—even less—than the sum of its parts. It is even mathematically demonstrable (but not by me) that majority decision-making

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51 Sally Burch, Encyclopedia of Democratic Thought, q/v “Electoral Systems.”
52 Linder, Swiss Democracy, 84. In the Swiss system, the vote of one citizen in Uri, a small rural canton, outweighs the votes of 34 citizens in Zurich. Ibid., 81.
89 (quoted); see also Dahl, Dilemmas of Pluralist Democracy: Autonomy, 83-84.
generates inefficient, socially wasteful, more or less self-defeating decisions.  

Besides, after all, why should you, why should anyone, accept a decision that you know is wrong? Surely the quality of its decisions has something to do with the quality of the decision-making process.

2. Democracy does not as is promised, give everyone the right to influence the decisions affecting her, because a person who voted on the losing side had no influence on that decision.

As Henry David Thoreau wrote, "a minority is powerless while it conforms to the majority; it is not even a minority then." It is, in fact, powerless, it is nothing. Thomas Hobbes anticipated Thoreau: "And if the Representative consist of many men, the voice of the greater number, must be considered as the voice of them all. For if the lesser number pronounce (for example) in the Affirmative, and the greater in the Negative, there will be Negatives more than enough to destroy the Affirmatives; and thereby the excess of Negatives, standing uncontradicted, are the only voice the Representative hath." The numerical majority," wrote John C. Calhoun, "is as truly a single power—and excludes the negative as completely as the absolute government of one or a few."

3. Democracy especially in small constituencies, lends itself to the disempowerment of permanent minorities, who occupy the same position in the democracy as they would in a despotism.

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22 John C. Calhoun, Disquisitions on Government and Selections from the...
to face an opponent publicly may provoke aggression, anger, and competitive feelings. In a winner-take-all system there is no incentive to compensate or conciliate defeated minorities, who have been told, in effect, that not only are they not to get their way, they are also stigmatized as wrong. The unaccountable majority is arrogant; the defeated minority is resentful. Coercive voting promotes polarization and hardens positions. Deliberation "can bring differences to the surface, widening rather than narrowing them." These consequences, muted in systems of large-scale, secret voting in not-too-frequent elections, are accentuated in the imagined communal combination of very small electorates, extremely frequent elections, and public voting. Citizens will take their animosities and ulcers home with them and act them out in everyday life. Elections are undesirable.


consideration in enacting legislation.”

But, however embarrassing to democrats, “the intensity question is absolutely vital to the stability of democratic systems”—and it’s a question to which pure majoritarian democracy has no answer. Rousseau at least recognized the problem, although his solution is impractical. He thought that “the more grave and important the questions discussed, the nearer should the opinion that is to prevail approach unanimity.”

But there is no way in which to decide a priori the importance of a question. First you have to decide how important the question is, and the majority may well rule a question to be unimportant to make sure that the question will be answered as that majority wishes.

5. There are no self-evident democratic voting rules.

Majority or plurality? Proxy voting? Quorums? Are supermajorities (three-fifths? two-thirds?) required for all, some, or none of the decisions? Who sets the agenda? Are motions from the floor entertained? Who decides who gets to speak, and for how long, and who gets the first or last word? Who schedules the meeting? Who adjourns it? And who decides, and by what rules, the answers to all these questions? “If the participants disagree on the voting rules, they may first have to vote on these rules. But they may disagree on how to vote on the voting rules, which may make voting impossible as the decision on how to vote is pushed further and further back.”

Everyone wants a road, but no one wants it in his back yard. If three groups want a road—but not in their back yards, thank you—they will gang up to scotch the project. The road that everyone wants somewhere will not be built anywhere. That is an even worse outcome than with logrolling, where at least the road gets built somewhere, and might be of some use to somebody. It isn’t easy to say which is worse, a democracy that doesn’t govern, or a democracy that does.

12. Democracy, especially direct democracy, promotes disharmonious, antisocial feelings.

The psychology of the ekklesia (assembly) is the psychology of the agora (marketplace): “Voters and customers are essentially the same people. Mr. Smith buys and votes; he is the same man in the supermarket and the voting booth.” Capitalism and democracy rose to dominance together as the goals of the same class, the bourgeoisie. Together they made a common world of selfish individualism—an arena of competition, not a field of cooperation. Democracy, like litigation, is an adversarial decision method: “Majority rule belongs to a combat theory of politics. It is a contest between opposing forces, and the outcome is victory for one side and defeat for the other.” Indeed, as Georg Simmel noticed, majority rule is really the substituted equivalent of force. “We agree to try strength by counting heads instead of breaking heads. The minority gives way not because it is convinced that it is wrong, but because it is convinced that it is a minority.”

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32 Tullock, Vote Motive, 5. Moral considerations aside (where they belong), majority rule with logrolling may lead to inefficient outcomes—peak efficiency requires, surprisingly, supermajorities: “Majority rule is thus generally not optimal.” Ibid., 51-55, 55 (quoted).
34 Stephen, Liberty Equalioc Fraternity, 70.
this is not a compromise because the measures are unrelated. In a sense, logrolling facilitates some accommodation of the urgency of preferences, since a faction only trades its votes for votes it values more highly—but it does so by bribery and to the detriment of deliberative democracy. No majority really approves of either measure enacted by logrolling, since if it did, there would be no need for logrolling. And those whose votes are unnecessary can be excluded from the logrolling process. The practice is common to representative and direct democracies. The practice is common to representative and direct democracies.

In the unlikely event a legislative body eschews logrolling, it may succumb to gridlock. Consider a typical political issue, the building of a highway. (A power plant or a garbage dump might be an even better example.)

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6. Collective, all-or-nothing balloting is irrational. A decision made on a momentous matter by a single vote is as valid as a unanimous vote on a trifle. That extreme rarity, the one time one vote, one person’s will, makes a difference, is the very same situation—monarchy, dictatorship, one-man rule—that democracy is supposed to be an improvement on!

At all other times, of all the votes for the winning side, only one is decisive, so the votes of all but one of the winners, like the votes of all of the losers, might as well not have been cast.

7. Majority rule is not even what it purports to be: it rarely means literally the majority of the people. Many people (such as children, foreigners, lunatics, transients, and felons) are everywhere denied the right to vote. The disenfranchised are never much short of being the majority, and sometimes they are the majority. And since it rarely happens that every one of the eligible voters votes every time, usually the resulting majority of a majority means plurality rule, in other words, the rule of the momentarily largest minority, which might be rather small. The majority of a majority is often, and the majority of a minority is always, a minority. In order to cobble together majorities out of incoherent assemblies, leaders usually wield literally decisive power. Under any possible government, a minority governs.

8. Whether voting by electoral districts or in popular assemblies, decisions are arbitrary because the boundaries of the districts de-

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termine the composition of their electorates, which determines the decisions.

In a democracy, “the definition of the constituency within which the count is taken is a matter of primary importance,” but democratic theory is unable to say who should be included in an electorate. Redraw the boundaries and the majority becomes a minority or vice versa, although no one has changed his mind. The politicians who draw and redraw the boundaries understand this very well.

9. Then there is the Voter’s Paradox, a technical but very real contradiction in democracy discovered by Condorcet before the French Revolution.

In every situation where two or more voters choose from three or more alternatives, if the voters choose consistently, the majority preference may be determined solely by the order in which the alternatives are voted on. It can happen that A is preferred to B, B is preferred to C, yet C is by the majority preferred to A! This is no mere theoretical possibility: it has happened in real votes. There are, in fact, a number of these voting paradoxes. Under ideal conditions, majority rule almost always produces these cyclical preference orders. For this and other reasons, “the various equilibrium conditions for majority rule are incompatible with even a very modest degree of heterogeneity of tastes, and for most purposes are not significantly less restrictive than the extreme condition of complete unanimity of individual preferences.”

What that means is that whoever controls the agenda controls the vote, or, at least, “that making agendas seems just about as significant as actually passing legislation.” It is fitting that a 19th century mathematician who wrote on this phenomenon (which he called “cyclical majorities”) is better known under his pen name, Lewis Carroll. He came by his sense of the absurd honesty.

10. Another well-known method for thwarting majority rule with voting is logrolling.

Logrolling is an exchange of votes between factions. Each group votes for the other group’s measure, a measure which would otherwise be defeated because each group is in the minority. (Note that

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