

How to Save Democracy

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The Price of Democracy: How Money Shapes Politics and What to Do about It. By Julia Cagé. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2020.

Presidents, Populism, and the Crisis of Democracy. By William G. Howell and Terry Moe. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2020.

Let the People Rule: How Direct Democracy Can Meet the Populist Challenge. By John G. Matsusaka. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2020.

q1 Democracy seems to be in a state of crisis. While the stability of fledgling regimes is always a concern, the past decade has seen established democracies—most notably, the United States—struggle with the erosion of critical political institutions and norms (Levitsky and Ziblatt 2019; Mettler and Lieberman 2020). Globalization and modernization have also threatened vulnerable populations, and governments across the world have struggled to develop policy solutions to cope (while being increasingly captured by wealthy private interests). This provides the ideal fuel for the rise of antisystem populist parties and politicians, whose authoritarian tendencies threaten democracy further. Not only is the comparative study of populism becoming more and more important, but this tension between government “responsiveness and responsibility” is particularly relevant to understanding populism’s rise (Mudde and Kaltwasser 2018).

The three books in this essay explore all these threats to democracy, in order to propose institutional reforms designed to save it. In *The Price of Democracy*, Julia Cagé documents the dominant influence of money in politics and argues that new systems of political financing and representation are needed. In *Presidents, Populism, and the Crisis of Democracy*, Wil-

liam G. Howell and Terry Moe show that populism and its discontents are a result of ineffective government and that the future of democracy in the United States lies in the reform of the presidency. Finally, in *Let the People Rule: How Direct Democracy Can Meet the Populist Challenge*, John G. Matsusaka engages populism at its core and makes the case for incorporating direct democracy.

Each study benefits from an expansive approach, in taking a historical perspective to document the threats to democracy yet grounding their modern reforms with original empirical data and prior academic research. All three books share a common perspective, which is to inform the reader of what is at stake. As Cagé writes, “the reader has to ask herself what kind of democracy she wants to live in. The researcher’s task is to produce facts that make things clear” (xvi). If democracy is to be saved, the crises it faces must first be understood.

THE PRICE OF DEMOCRACY

For Cagé, the crisis of democracy is money—more specifically, private interests dominate politics, while citizens are ignored. We take the political power of money for granted, and as a result politics is increasingly oligarchic, governed by a set of private interests—in addition to conservative elites, we now have new strategic actors in the form of wealthy libertarians, Silicon Valley billionaires, and philanthropic foundations (created for tax breaks and public relations but now with the power to shape politics). Democracy has moved from “one person one vote” to “those who win are those who pay,” and Cagé’s goal is to bring us back.

Cagé brings a broad and historical perspective, informed by decades of campaign finance and funding democracy data in both Europe and the United States. She shows how different countries have tried to adopt campaign finance laws and public systems to fund democracy but that these have mainly been ineffective. Part 1 of the book provides evidence for the private funding of democracy by special interests but also how taxpayers subsidize conservative and wealthy preferences. Part 2

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continues this discussion in focusing on the decline in the public funding of democracy and campaign spending, while part 3 lays out her proposals. She argues that while we can learn from policy experiments in Europe and the United States, more ambitious reform is needed.

The data collection here is impressive; the book presents a wide range of cross-national data on the historical evolution of twentieth-century political funding. Her coverage includes annual spending by political parties, donations by corporations, and the average amount of money spent per candidate, among other metrics, for both the United States and a number of European countries. At one point Cagé begs forgiveness from the reader for the plethora of tables and figures, but this is clearly one of the strengths of the book. Readers can instantly engage with the wide variety of data, and this does an excellent job of presenting a comparative review of money in politics.

The Price of Democracy proposes by far the most ambitious reforms, in the form of a “dual democratic revolution.” The first proposal is a new model of funding for political parties, movements, and election campaigns, using a tool called Democratic Equality Vouchers (DEV). This would enable citizens, when filing their tax returns, to allocate a small amount of public money to the party or movement of their choice. The second proposal, to be taken in tandem with the first, is to enact tighter regulations on spending and contributions to electoral campaigns. Together, these policies will help break the influence of private interests in politics. Yet this is not enough to solve the crisis of democracy, so her third proposal is to reserve national assembly seats for “social representatives,” consisting of candidates who hold working-class occupations (broadly defined). This “mixed assembly” ensures socioeconomic parity and the representation of these typically excluded segments of the population. It is also worth noting that she takes time to discuss and dismiss a number of related popular policy reforms, such as direct democracy or random selection.

Her ideas are ambitious and innovative. Here, it is very important to read the preface of this book—a section often skipped by readers, in their haste to get to the main event. She updates and defends a number of her propositions from various critiques, informed by “a year of discussions” in between the French and English publishing dates. The preface should almost be an addendum—a defense of ideas readers have yet to experience is an odd way to start; still, the preface is essential reading for a book written amid rapidly changing global politics. It is also necessary to recognize the timing of the book. It was first published in 2018, before the critical events of the pandemic, the 2020 US election, and the global wave of misinformation. This is no fault of her own, but it is

worth considering how some of her public or technology-based reforms will be received in a context in which some voters are prey to populist assertions of fake news, conspiracies, and fraud.

PRESIDENTS, POPULISM, AND THE CRISIS OF DEMOCRACY

Howell and Moe focus on the populist threat, which is driven by public grievances relating to disruptive socioeconomic forces like inequality, poverty, and corruption. But for them, the true crisis of democracy lies specifically in citizens’ frustration with government failure—failure to control immigration, reduce inequality, or ensure basic stability with health care, employment, and welfare policies. Widespread discontent, that then undermines trust in political institutions and leaves voters vulnerable to “rabble rousing, power-seeking demagogues” (7), is driven by ineffective government. This has nothing to do with gridlock—policies abound, but they often fail to target the sections of society most affected by negative international change. Thus, the goal of the book is to defuse the populist threat in the United States through targeted reforms, with a specific focus on the institution of the presidency.

The first half of the book provides a historical overview of populist currents in the United States, where populism never gained enough traction to be a permanent force. It then charts Trump’s strategic use of demagoguery and his ability to tap into hidden antisystem currents in the United States, and then it reviews the subsequent reshaping of the Republican Party. While the book’s focus is on US institutional reform, it uses a comparative lens to survey populism in other regions, including Latin America and Eastern Europe, whose socioeconomic conditions allow populism to thrive, and Western Europe, which has had a diverse range of experiences with populist parties and politicians. These chapters are broad but effective overviews, perfectly designed for syllabi or to provide important background for an interested reader.

Another thing the book explores is how the historical structure of US institutions makes it impossible to get anything done. The US Congress was designed to be responsive to special interests and to be concerned with raising money for local electoral campaigns. Legislators do not focus on national problems in the national interest because they are consumed with constituency concerns. Chapter 3 supplements this argument with a number of case studies of Congress’s failure to act, including Obamacare, tax cuts, and Russia’s interference in the 2016 election.

The authors’ solution to these issues is to reform the presidency. They acknowledge the existence of other reforms to make democracy more democratic or more responsive, but

their ultimate point is that these problems pale in comparison to the problem of ineffective government—for which the presidency is key. Their proposed reforms are threefold and interestingly enough both expand and restrict the powers of the president. They argue for an expansion of agenda-setting powers, including universal fast-tracking authority. The president alone can effectively focus on solutions to national issues and, therefore, can use executive action to pass effective policy to address long-term national problems. Then they propose limitations on the executive, in the form of insulating government domains such as the intelligence agencies and Department of Justice from presidential control, as well as restricting presidential appointments throughout the federal bureaucracy. Both can make the institutions of government more effective and restore ultimate trust in government. As the authors write, “if democracy is to be saved, the presidency must be redrafted for modern times” (18).

Overall, the book is highly accessible and written for a popular audience. Some readers might be less satisfied with such a broad overview, although all readers will benefit immensely from referencing the multitude of academic studies presented in the endnotes. The proposed presidential reforms are well reasoned and would most likely be effective; however, an overly optimistic reader should recognize the difficulty of enacting such sweeping Constitutional changes in the US context.

LET THE PEOPLE RULE

Matsusaka also engages with the threat of populism, but on its own terms. He points out that populism is associated with a crisis of discontent and distrust in government, and current explanations for this tend to fall in two camps: first, government failure to protect everyday citizens from global changes or, second, the rise of social and cultural changes that threaten traditional societal values and the status quo way of living. While these are surely stressors on society, he writes that the real problem can be found in the rallying cry of populism itself—that government is drifting out of control of the people and into the hands of elites.

The first part of the book documents the existence of this “democratic drift,” or the increasing disconnect between ordinary people and policy decisions that can undermine trust in democratic institutions. This is due to the rise of the “administrative state,” an “immense bureaucracy with lawmaking power,” which has moved the locus of policy making to unelected bureaucrats, technocrats, or judges. The administrative state also enhances the power of organized interest groups, in particular, large and well-funded special interests. He finally argues that legislators are increasingly disconnected from their constituents. While the motivation behind the first

part of the book is intuitive, and believable, the chapters are a bit fleeting; the representation of citizens by their elected officials, and to what extent this representation is successful, is a deep well, but the first half of the book here only seeks to highlight a few examples.

Matsusaka’s ultimate solution to democracy in crisis is to cut out the middle men—technocrats, judges, and legislators—and let the people decide. Parts 2–4 get into the nitty-gritty of direct democracy, and this is where the book shines. Readers will benefit from the glossary of terms, as well as its strong comparative coverage of direct democracy across the world. The book also does an excellent job of documenting the use of direct democracy, at the local and state levels, in the United States. It may surprise many readers to find out that the United States has had a long history with referendums and initiatives at the local level; almost every state has experience with them. This is aided by a number of charts and figures that document state-level initiatives and topics over time, as well as initiatives in the largest cities in the United States. Readers interested in this topic would be well served to consult this comparative survey.

Matsusaka reviews a series of different direct democracy tools, as well as their costs and benefits. In his eyes, the main risks to direct democracy are uninformed voters, the cooptation of referendums by special interests, and the tyranny of the majority; he deals with each in turn. Still, there are other threats with referendums that could be addressed, such as their strategic use by political parties to bypass normal policy making (Qvortrup 2019), that get little attention. Readers would also benefit from thinking about the use of direct democracy paired with citizens’ assemblies (Dryzek et al 2019).

Yet part 4 provides a detailed discussion of implementation and a specific framework for how and when this tool should be used. Much of the existing policy debate on direct democracy is unflinchingly enthusiastic and universal, but importantly, this book takes the time to detail precisely how to make direct democracy work. Among others, policy makers or those concerned about implementation would be well served to read this book.

CONCLUSION

The common thread that links all three books is that they are designed to be prescriptive, to offer real world policy solutions to problems of populism and special interests in politics. These problems and their solutions are diverse; the crisis of democracy is a battle on all fronts. Yet these reforms may be difficult to execute. Scholars of politics know that elites in power are reluctant to change institutions in which they benefit, and one might find fault with each book on these lines. All these reforms are perfectly plausible, but can they be achieved?

This is acknowledged by all three authors, with varying levels of engagement. Howell and Moe are bracingly honest about the obstacles to institutional reform of the presidency in the United States, which involve amending the Constitution (a notoriously difficult thing to do), amid polarization and a Republican Party that benefits from the status quo and is increasingly antidemocratic. For them, the only hope of reform lies in the Democratic Party—with its demographic electoral advantages and willingness to pursue programmatic policies, in the long term it can possibly obtain the needed majorities to reform the system. Similarly for Cagé, while her proposal for parliamentary quotas for disadvantaged socioeconomic groups fits into a larger global movement to enact various types of political quotas, it is also difficult to change legislative institutions, and the definition of disadvantaged socioeconomic groups could be subject to debate. Yet reforms on campaign finance are feasible, and while it may be easier to implement DEV in certain countries than others, the increased public funding of parties seems to be an achievable target. For Matsusaka, the path to reform is more straightforward (assuming the costs of direct democracy outweigh the benefits). While incorporating direct democracy could require a constitutional amendment, a number of alternative solutions exist. Further, to gain confidence for more structural reforms, he recommends incorporating advisory referendums first, then moving to binding initiatives later. The last part of the book is also explicitly focused on implementation—the specific design requirements needed for direct democracy.

Finally, there are many explanations for the rise of populism and democratic discontent and just as many potential solutions. It is outside the scope of any one book to tackle all of them, so it is left to the reader to consider the potential for cross-pollination. Some of the crossover is clear; for example, Cagé considers the danger of direct democracy when it is driven by well-funded special interests. But other questions emerge. Is executive power as essential if citizens can bypass institutions and vote on policy directly? Would the public funding of political parties and restrictions on campaign finance reduce the legislator disconnect and combat democratic drift? Implementation issues aside, the potential for these ideas to be generative is high; new scholars can take on how to execute and evaluate these reforms. And for a popular audience, these books serve as an important introduction to the facts, what is at stake, and a way forward.

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