American Democracy and its Critics[1]

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Actually-existing democracy tends to have support in the middle of the political spectrum but is criticized on the two wings.

Consider anti-Wall Street attitudes in the United States. From the left, regulatory capture and a weak government (as evidenced, for example, by the inability of the political class to increase tax rates on the rich) suggests that regular elections and a two-party system are ineffective institutions when it comes to implementing the popular will, and that democracy does not, perhaps cannot, perform as advertised. From the right, the very same pattern of collusion between government and big business (as evidenced, for example, by provisions in the recent health care bill, or by the large scale of corporate campaign contributions to both parties) suggests that representative government is, and perhaps almost always will be, a distorting force that favors the politically connected.

In drawing this analogy, I do not intend to say that there are no differences between left and right. Certainly, the recommended remedies coming from the two directions are completely different, with (U.S.-style) liberals supporting stronger government regulation and fewer brakes on the democratic process (for example, by removing the filibuster rule in the U.S. Senate) and conservatives seeking to reduce the impact of democratic decisions on the economy (for example, by reducing workplace and environmental regulations). But it is my general impression that people at the extremes of the political system tend to see democracy as fundamentally flawed.

In both cases this can be seen in relation to what might be considered the ultimate potential, or threat (depending on your perspective) of democracy: that the poorer majority could vote to expropriate the richer minority, to "spend and spend, and tax and tax, and elect and elect," in the purported words of Harry Hopkins, an influential adviser to Franklin Roosevelt. Indeed, one of the enduring mysteries of political science is how, in the United States and elsewhere, the upper classes have managed to keep their wealth despite centuries of steadily-widening suffrage. From the perspective of the far left, it is a serious problem that democracies nearly always seem to fall short of major redistribution of wealth, and from the perspective of the far right, the danger of such redistribution motivates a continuing project of bounding the role of government. So, for quite different reasons, both sides have a motivation to discredit the democratic project.

Andrew Perrin in his new book *American Democracy* is coming from the center-left. Perrin, a sociologist, is interested in various aspects of political participation, and his papers include "Political Microcultures: Linking Civic Life and Democratic Discourse"

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[1] Review of the book *American Democracy* by Andrew Perrin for the *American Journal of Sociology*.

and "Political and Cultural Dimensions of Tea Party Support, 2009-2012." Perrin is interested in democracy as a means of placing individuals and groups within the larger American community and concludes his book as follows:

> In the final analysis, the question of democracy is a question of culture and society. I believe our practices, technologies, and institutions have the potential to build and maintain vibrant publics and lend those publics voice. . . . but efforts . . . need to continue to insure that practices, institutions, and technologies can serve that public faithfully.

As a political scientist, I find Perrin's perspective to be refreshing and valuable. Political scientists and economists have formed valuable insights into public opinion and political participation (see, for example, *The Rational Public* by Benjamin Page and Robert Shapiro [University of Chicago Press, 1992] and *Voice and Equality* by Sidney Verba, Kay Lehman Schlozman, and Henry Brady [Harvard University Press, 1995]) but generally with a focus on political outcomes rather than on democracy as a unifying aspect of our culture. Looked at it this way, democracy is more than a way to deliver the goods and ensure the consent of the governed; it is also a central part of the American identity. Perrin writes, "the ritual of voting simultaneously allows us to imagine ourselves as members of an abstract national community and as effective, thinking, competent individuals."

Perrin focuses on the experience of political participation, while political scientists tend to focus more on voting decisions. "Legitimacy" is a much-desired political property but, in a Zen-like paradox, can exist more easily than it can be created. In Bush v. Gore (2000), the Supreme Court ruled against counting all the votes in Florida on the grounds that it would "cast a cloud" on the legitimacy of the election. For another example, consider those European countries that have constitutional monarchies. The queen of England and her cousins in Holland etc. enjoy a certain legitimacy from historical tradition and can potentially play useful roles as national figures during constitutional disputes (as in Spain after the death of Franco), but it would be difficult to manufacture this sort of legitimacy.

An aspect of American politics that Perrin does not focus on is the active role of parties and political activists. For example, the civil rights movement of the 1950s-60s and the tax revolts of the 1970s were crucial turning points in recent American history, with major changes in public opinion, legislation, and political culture. But these changes did not happen on their own; they were the result of political struggles, with progress and setbacks against what at times seemed like overwhelming odds. I do not criticize Perrin for not discussing this aspect of American democracy; any scholarly book needs to have some focus.

I will conclude this review by sharing one of Perrin's insights, based on a recent study he did of letters to the editor: newspaper editors complain that "the fact that letters come from organized groups makes them somewhat less authentic; their imagination of the true, authentic citizen is one who develops ideas on her own, without the 'outside'

influence of an organization or social environment. But political ideas are likely to be better thought out . . . when they are are shared with other citizens, as in a group or organization!" On one hand, Perrin doesn't seem to realize that centrally-prepared letters to the editor could well be "astroturf" material prepared by public relations consultants with no involvement of the letter writer at all. Newspapers print enough press releases in their news section so there hardly seems need to continue the practice on the editorial page. On the other hand, I take Perrin's larger point that the political expressions of a group of citizens has a value beyond the mere summing of individual votes.

On the whole, I think Perrin's book is an excellent complement to political science texts on American politics.