

Matsuaka, G. John. 2020. *Let the People Rule: How Direct Democracy Can Meet the Populist Challenge*. Princeton University Press: Princeton and Oxford. pp. 312. Paperback: \$21.95; Hardcover: \$22.79

So, you want to fix American democracy? Then, let the people rule. The constituents can directly rule themselves! Matsuaka's message is too good to be true: cut the middlemen. The latter are vampires who have corrupted what would otherwise remain a benevolent and thriving democracy. Unfortunately, I find Matsuaka's proposal is not only imprecise but illusory. Nonetheless, and given the looming threats from the Occupy Movement to the Covid pandemic, the proposal serves in quelling genuine alternatives to the current political order.

The thrust of Matsuaka's book underlines that direct democracy should not be automatically dubbed as a call for populism. In carrying out a series of "myth-bustings" regarding referendums, the author is certain that the US establishment will change its mind and give direct-democracy the chance he sincerely believes it deserves for renovating American democracy.

The book is in four parts unevenly distributed between nineteen chapters in addition to a preface and an introduction. Each section contains from three to seven chapters. Part I: "Democracy Adrift" has four chapters, and it details how bureaucracy, or what Matsuaka calls "the rise of the administrative state" (comprising mostly of unelected technocrats and judges), has made the federal government a plaything in the hand of corporations and interest groups. Such a state of affairs leaves little space for ordinary citizens to participate meaningfully in national policies. Matsuaka wonders why states' constitutions tolerate and practice referendums while the federal constitution remains basically distrustful of direct rule.

Part II: “Referendums Past and Present” has seven chapters. Referendums, not elections, are the way out of the democratic drift ushered in by an overblown administrative state. The chapters in this part report on how direct democracy is working at the state level in several European democracies and elsewhere in the world. Later, Matsuoka traces the reasons for what he deems as lingering misunderstandings that made the Founding Fathers distrust referendums. He even proposes six practical types of referendums which the US needs to adopt.

Part III: “The benefits and Risks of Direct Democracy” consists of six chapters. The author here minutely traces the pros and cons of direct democracy. Towards this end, he analyses both California Proposition 13 and the United Kingdom’s Brexit referendum. Obviously, California’s proposition passes as a success and Brexit as the failure of referendums. What determines success or failure of direct democracy is not so much the capacity to determine the voters’ best interests, but more whether these voters are equipped with a fair amount of information to vote responsibly. No less important for the success of referendums is the capacity of governments to hinder interest groups from hijacking the process. This part concludes with a chapter that ponders the fate of minority groups.

Part IV: “Making Direct Democracy Work” contains three chapters. Referendums provide guarantees for the establishment that citizens will not be meddling in the day-to-day management of government. Instead, citizens only contribute needed feedback in respect to major policies. Matsuoka specifies those policy issues that demand referendums and those that are to be left for elected representatives and bureaucrats. The

part concludes with practical suggestions on how to design and execute referendums effectively.

It becomes obvious that the book is addressed primarily to the American establishment. It underscores a knowledge-gap regarding the virtues of direct democracy which can propel a change of attitudes within the establishment. The myth-busting is aimed at saving the US from a revolutionary change. By taking “the populist argument on its terms...” (p. 4), Matsuoka urges the establishment to address the disconnections and the dysfunctionalities within the political system before social pressure becomes untenable and the revolutionary path irreversible. When tolerating direct democracy, populist candidates, like Trump, will neither exploit the precariat’s frustrations nor abuse their legitimate demands for a better tomorrow. Matsuoka’s egalitarianism (p.11) is a bonus.

The book brims with figures, statistics, and numbers that are meant to illustrate the thesis. Readers find that “Executive-branch employees, once tasked to administer the laws, are now empowered to make the laws” (p. 18) The hypotheses by which the argument progresses are very intriguing: “Will more competition and less campaign money increase connection (between legislature and constituents)?” (p. 47) Similarly, readers learn of the US Founder’s deep distrust of the common men” (p. 99). In making consistent appeals to a presumed past of direct democracy in the early days of the republic, the author willingly overlooks how the American revolution was a bourgeois revolution. But to his credit, Matsuoka highlights that “populism is not necessarily a destructive force; it can also be a catalyst for change.” (p. 109)

The book is full of charts, tables, and figures that are meant to enable thoughtful contrasts. But by subscribing to the logic of empiricism, all these measurements succeed in doing is the suppressing of the reader's historical consciousness. The units feed the illusion that some real methodological break has been achieved but as the French aphorism outlines: *comparaison n'est pas raison*, meaning that comparisons do not prove a case. For comparisons have their own limits.

Meanwhile, Matsuoka's project in *Let the People Rule* can be qualified radical reformism. For social movements seeking empowerment and egalitarianism, the project is a mystification. It mistakes the primary perceptions of democracies as neutral spaces. But democracies (direct or representative) are never neutral territories. They render the economies of alienation profitable within a political economy principally organized around exchange value, not use value.

Now whether the American establishment is going to consider Matsuoka's advice depends less on the dexterity of his notes and more on whether the attitudes of populist pressure can mount credible dangers against this establishment. And even then, direct democracy will exclusively serve in quelling ingenious ways of organizing space outside the matrix of exchange values. Early in the life of the republic, Matsuoka underlies Shay's Rebellion of Western Massachusetts of 1786-87 (p. 101) Right now, the populist pressure remains contained and the proposal will be shelved. For social movements seeking meaningful change, the proposal will only sidetrack the precariat's energy towards reformism. For the American precariat, *Let the People Rule* is precisely the abattoir of their plans for change. Referendums cannot be the way forward and the

subaltern cannot afford to reinvent the wheel with each generation as such experiments have been tried and failed several times before.

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