

Letting Foundation

CONNECTIONS

Winter 2006



CONNECTIONS

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A Deeper Look at Citizen Engagement and Democracy

First Democracy: The Challenge of an Ancient Idea

by Paul Woodruff
New York: Oxford University Press, 2005

Do Americans truly practice democracy? We often speak with pride of our democracy and rarely question as to whether our system is, in fact, a democracy. But do we truly practice it? Paul Woodruff, in his recent book, unmasks certain practices that look like democracy on the surface but are instead ideas that actually represent failures of democratic practice. He calls them “doubles.”

He makes his claims by going back into history and examining Athenian democracy and the seven core ideas of democracy that he found there. According to Woodruff, these ideas include harmony, freedom from tyranny, rule of law, natural equality, citizen wisdom, reasoning without knowledge, and education. These ideas are what make Athens the “first democracy.”

Athenian democracy at times went astray, during times of war in particular, but Athenians endeavored to cultivate a clear vision of democracy—what it meant, how it should work, and what it should ultimately accomplish. According to Woodruff, the vision and constant debate over the ideas of democracy are absent in democratic societies today.

Woodruff identifies three of democracy’s doubles. These include the practices of voting, electing representatives, and majority rule. For example, he argues that voting is not democratic in a system in which an elite chooses the candidates. Indeed, dictators have often used voting to solidify their own power.

The democratic double of electing representatives is closely related to the fallacy of voting as democracy. Elected representatives often find themselves required to curry favor with their wealthy benefactors and special-interest groups rather

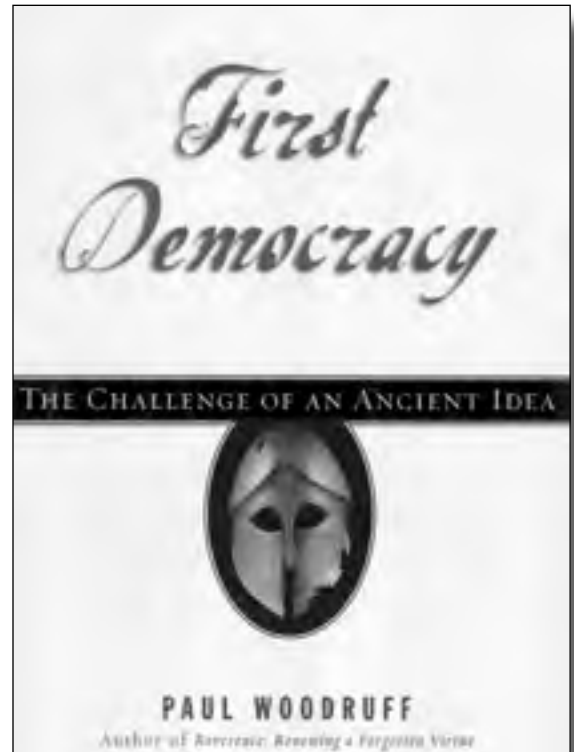
than the public as a whole. Not only will such elected representatives not represent the will of the people, but, as we have seen in the United States, people lose confidence in the government when special interests seem to have endless lobbying power with both the legislative and executive branches.

Finally, Woodruff states that out of all the doubles, majority rule is most often confused with democracy and is thus the most “seductive” of all three. Majority rule is “merely government by and for the majority.” As Woodruff says, “it’s not freedom if you have to join the majority in order to feel that you are free.” Majority rule leads us away from the democratic idea of freedom from tyranny. Freedom from tyranny not only frees the people from a dictator, but demands active citizen participation to allow people to achieve their own destiny.

Thus each of these democratic doubles is the result of ignoring one of the seven democratic ideas, as expressed in Athenian democracy. All seven of the democratic ideas are interconnected, particularly harmony and rule of law. Harmony requires three things to function in a democracy: “adhering to the rule of law, working together to seek common goals, and accepting differences.” No citizen can be above the rule of law. When the rule of law is ignored, such as when a rich man escapes punishment for his crime while a poor man is sentenced to jail, harmony will be upset. Athenians came to the realization that they could disagree about anything as long as they adhered to the rule of law and respected these differences.

Woodruff argues that citizen wisdom is essential in order for ordinary people to possess the wisdom to govern themselves. How do people acquire this wisdom? It is part of human nature, personal experience, tradition, and education.

Closely connected to citizen wisdom is the idea of reasoning without knowledge. To be done well, it requires open debate. It



is working out that which is most reasonable to believe. He argues that “adversary debate, followed by a vote, is a rational way of handling murky issues.”

Woodruff offers substantial challenges for our current educational system, which focuses on preparing people for jobs, but fails in teaching good citizenship. Students are not asked to consider the tough questions of democracy. Woodruff speaks gravely about fear—the public media has done a wonderful job creating “shared ignorance, shared fear, shared outrage” but not “shared compassion, shared commitment to justice, or shared reverence.” These are qualities, he argues, that could be cultivated through education.

Athenians did not succeed in all of these areas of democracy. They did, however, debate and attempt to base their democracy upon these ideas. Woodruff contends that, in the United States today, we fail to even consider these ideas, much less debate and dream about them. His book is a call for us to reexamine the struggles of democracy today through the experiences of ancient Athens.

—Anne Thomason

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The Kettering Foundation, chartered in 1927, is a research foundation—not a grant-giving foundation—rooted in the American tradition of inventive research. Its founder, Charles F. Kettering, holder of more than 200 patents, is best known for his invention of the automobile self-starter. He was interested, above all, in seeking practical answers to “the problems behind the problems.”

The foundation today continues in that tradition. The objective of the research now is to study what helps democracy work as it should. Six major Kettering programs are designed to shed light on what is required to strengthen public life.

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