

# Questioning History

16 Essential Questions That Will Deepen  
Your Understanding of the Past

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**Vernon Series in Education**



**VERNON PRESS**

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[www.vernonpress.com](http://www.vernonpress.com)

*In the Americas:*

Vernon Press  
1000 N West Street,  
Suite 1200, Wilmington,  
Delaware 19801  
United States

*In the rest of the world*

Vernon Press  
C/Sancti Espiritu 17,  
Malaga, 29006  
Spain

Vernon Series in Education

Library of Congress Control Number: 2016941799

ISBN: 978-1-62273-105-3

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*To Dana, my truest companion...*



# Preface

This book represents the culmination of a 37-year teaching career. I have been a high school history teacher since 1979, beginning in an inner-city school in New Orleans, Louisiana, followed by 30 years in the Parkway School District located in the western suburbs of St. Louis, Missouri. This experience, combined with an ample amount of reading, research and reflection, has led me to the belief that the true nature of history requires a style of teaching different from that of any other subject.

In simple terms, history is defined as “*the study of past events, particularly in human affairs.*” However, history is anything but simple. Rather than consisting of a litany of events from long ago, it is more about our interpretation of the past as seen through a lens focused by modern-day values. In other words, perception may count for more than reality. It has taken the better part of my life to come to this realization. If history is constantly being rewritten according to an evolving set of standards that distinguishes a new generation of historians, then why even bother including it in the school curriculum?

The answer lies in its inherent power to teach critical thinking. Properly taught, history is a bottomless well from which to draw all of the water that our intellect will require in order to become better-educated citizens. An effective democracy requires not just an informed populace but individuals who can objectively analyze issues and think on their own two feet. What better way to prepare future citizens than by presenting them with a series of broad questions, taken from the past but with relevance to the future? If each question came with a certain amount of background information, it might then serve as a diving platform by which to leap into the intellectual process of becoming an effective citizen in a democratic society.

So, why read this book? First, for any adult who learned and then quickly forgot their textbook history, this book might serve as a means to develop a deeper understanding of the past and how it relates to the present. It will connect the dots and provide much fodder for meaningful reflection. Second, for anyone in the teaching profession, or at least considering such a worthy career choice, it might steer you in a more fruitful direction. I was lucky enough to have a mentor do this for me many years ago, so I am hoping this book might help me to pay it forward, at least a little bit. Finally, this

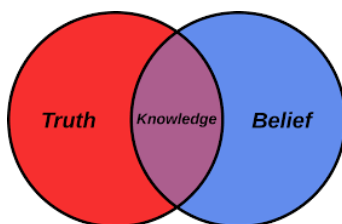
book is intended to generate fervent discussion - heated, zealous, passionate discussion. The greatest learning experiences do not originate from passively listening to lectures, they only come from authentic engagement. Is there anything more memorable or meaningful than participating in a provocative discussion? I feel eternally grateful to two professors, one in philosophy and the other in education that bestowed this experience upon me in my formative years. It is my deepest hope that this book will be the kindling to ignite those same kinds of conversations amongst students and adults.

At the very least, I know this book will help me be a better teacher. I am not fully retired yet, and that day may never happen. Meanwhile, I am already using this book to stir up spirited discussions in my classroom. Seventh and eighth graders have been so engaged they barely notice I am still in the room and they take their conversations with them after the ringing of the bell. Teaching has never been so much fun.

Joe Regenbogen  
January 2016



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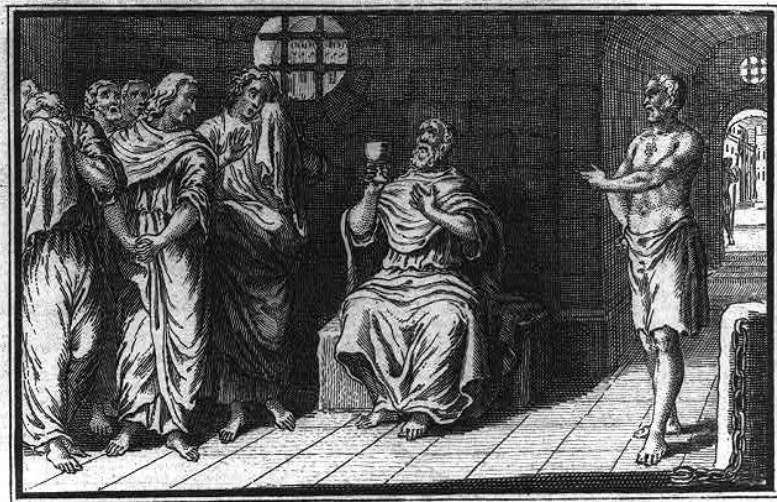
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## Chapter 7

# A balancing act



*L. P. Boitard Juv. et Sculp.*

Socrates Holding Cup of Hemlock

Courtesy of Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division LC-USZ61-1503

### **How much power should be given to the people?**

The place is Athens, Greece and the date is 399 BCE. Socrates, the famous (or infamous) educator and philosopher best known for the precept that *“the unexamined life is not worth living,”* has just been convicted on two charges: corrupting the youth and impiety. More specifically, Socrates’ accusers cited two impious acts: *“failing to acknowledge the gods that the city acknowledges”* and *“introducing new deities.”* In reality, the conviction is the result of the philosophical questions Socrates had been raising with his pupils and his encouragement that they should question everything and think for themselves. A majority of the dikasts voted to convict Socrates,

and consistent with practice, the dikasts voted that his punishment should be death by drinking a hemlock-based liquid.

While these events took place more than 2400 years ago, the information regarding the trial comes by way of two of Socrates' students, Plato and Xenophon. The trial and the resulting execution stand out as one of the most famous injustices in the history of the world, and many lessons have since been drawn from these proceedings. The lesson, here, however, involves the dikasts. To this day, Athens remains one of the best examples of pure democracy that history has ever provided. All big decisions were the result of a vote taken by the Athenian Assembly, and every citizen of this Greek city-state was a member. Granted, women, slaves and the foreign-born were excluded from citizenship, so the Assembly did not represent a majority of the population. However, with between 6,000 and 43,000 members (estimates vary widely), there is probably no better historical example of a society that entrusted its populace with so much power. In addition, in order to minimize the accumulation of too much political power in the hands of a small number of career politicians, the individuals charged with executing and interpreting the laws were periodically chosen by lot. That included the dikasts, the jurors who voted to convict Socrates.

In retrospect, the decision to try, convict and execute a philosopher for raising questions that challenged the status quo might be seen as a momentous error in judgment and a terrible injustice. But should a decision of this magnitude have been left up to ordinary people? By definition, a democracy entrusts all or most of its political power to the people, but are the masses up to the challenge? This question has been debated for many centuries, and it has been thoroughly vetted in all of my history classes. The initial reaction by my students may be a bit surprising – they tend to fear the masses. Over the years, they have been quick to point out numerous examples of where the people “blew it” in a particular election. After all, it was the American people (through the electoral college) that voted to send James Buchanan, Warren G. Harding and Richard Nixon to the White House. (U.S. News has listed these three among the ten worst presidents in history.) In my early days of teaching in New Orleans, students were too quick to remember the “*democratic*” mobs that participated in violent lynching’s; and in 1989, the people of Louisiana elected David Duke, a well-known Ku Klux Klan leader, to the state House of Representatives. In the world history classes, the more knowledgeable students usually point out that Adolph Hitler was appointed as the German chancellor only after his Nazi Party led all other political parties by receiving over 37% of the votes.

It is usually at this point that I remind them of Winston Churchill's famous quote that "*it has been said that democracy is the worst form of Government except for all those other forms that have been tried from time to time.*" Before going any further, we then agree to identify and define those other forms of government. We start by agreeing that in a democracy, the people govern, but we also distinguish between those rare examples of pure democracy like Ancient Athens and the more common representative democracies also known as republics. After all, most democracies are much too large to fit all of the citizens into one assembly, so while the final say may rest with the people, representatives are elected by the citizens to make and carry out the laws. In the United States, only 535 representatives are elected to Congress to make the laws for over 300,000,000 people.

When asked to identify the form of government that sits on the opposite end of the spectrum from democracy, the answer is a monarchy or a dictatorship. Here, the power resides with just one person, and the only difference between a monarchy and a dictatorship is over how that one person comes to power: monarchs inherit their position while a dictator is either chosen or simply uses force to take the power. In between are forms of government like aristocracies, where once again, the power is usually inherited; and oligarchies, which can be simply defined as governments where the power sits with only a minority of the population. There are obviously other specific forms of government – theocracies, meritocracies, etc., but the point to the use of this linear spectrum approach is to keep the focus on how many people have a share in a society's political power:



Usually at this point I introduce a hypothetical situation to my students. Since we now live in the age of computers and the Internet, the question is raised as to whether we really need Congress. After all, 435 U.S. Representatives and 100 Senators are only .00000178% of the U.S. population, and in a *Rasmussen Reports* survey taken in February, 2016, only 11% of the U.S. population believed Congress was doing a good or excellent job, while 60% rated Congress poorly. What if the people instead decided the major issues currently voted on by Congress? Once a week, a major issue could be debated by "*experts*", or better yet, average people sitting in front of their computer terminals could be randomly picked to offer their opinions for others to consider. In addition, the news media, which already acts as the "*fourth*



*branch of government*”, could provide relevant information and fact-checking services. Commercials and advertisements could be run and a certain amount of time might be allowed for informal discussion to take place across the nation. Then, at an appointed time, people could vote from the comforts of their own living rooms. In this manner, the citizens themselves could decide whether to raise their own taxes, restrict abortions or approve the military budget. Thanks to modern technology, we could transform our nation, with the world’s third largest population, into a pure democracy. When a student invariably mentions the cheating that might take place, I remind him that if my son or daughter could take their law school final exams online without cheating, we can certainly create a secure method to conduct the voting. Beside, security is not the issue; the question is whether we should trust the masses with the same power we currently give Congress.

At this point, some of the students usually become intrigued by the idea, and we generally agree that the next step should be to examine the pros and cons of the proposal. Those who lean toward becoming a pure democracy point out that if the people are trusted with the power to directly make the big decisions, they will care more about what is taking place around them and will be less apathetic. Giving people more of a stake in their government is certainly preferable to the less than 37% of the electorate that turned out in the 2014 congressional election, is it not? The next point usually made in defense of greater democracy is the attack that is usually fomented against the other forms of government. When power resides with just one person or is in the hands of a small minority, what will guarantee that the interests of everyone will be considered? History is filled with examples of corruption and/or the abuse of power whenever kings or oligarchies are in charge. As the famous line by Lord Acton says, *“Power tends to corrupt and absolute power corrupts absolutely.”* Finally, there are always some students that just have an implicit faith in the people. For whatever reason, they are populists by nature and feel that if given a proper civic education, the people can be trusted to rule. With a little research, they will bring in quotes like the following:

*“It is an axiom in my mind that our liberty can never be safe but in the hands of the people themselves, and that, too, of the people with a certain degree of instruction.”*

Thomas Jefferson

*"I am a firm believer in the people. If given the truth, they can be depended upon to meet any national crisis."*

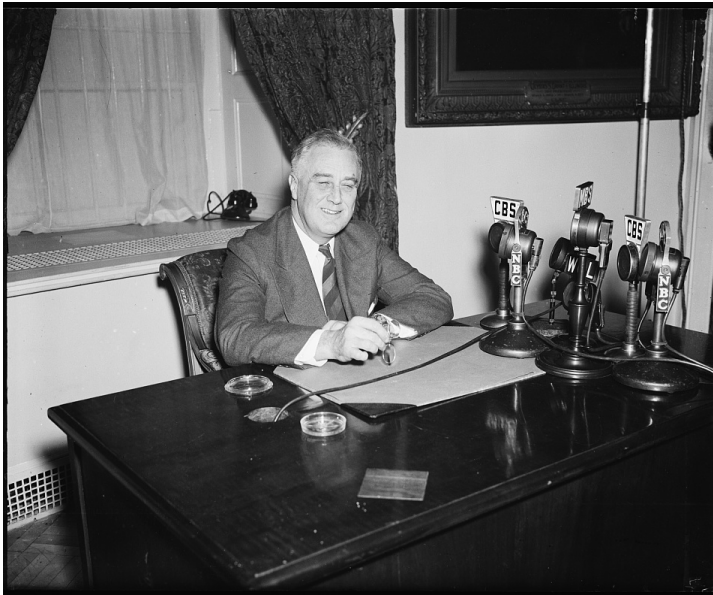
Abraham Lincoln

*"Democracy is worth dying for, because it's the most deeply honorable form of government ever devised by man."*

Ronald Reagan

To give this side of the debate a little more support, and also because it is an appealing activity, I usually propose at this point that we engage in a simulation called "*Lost on the Moon*." In this activity, which is readily available online from Kagan Cooperative Learning, students are told to pretend they are members of a space crew originally scheduled to rendezvous with a mother ship on the lighted surface of the moon. However, due to mechanical problems, their ship was forced to land at a spot 200 miles from the rendezvous point. There are 15 items available to help with the journey to the mother ship, but since taking them all may prove to be problematic, the items should be ranked according to how useful they will be to guarantee survival. The items include a box of matches, five gallons of water, a magnetic compass and two 100-pound tanks of oxygen. The students are then told to rank the items from one to fifteen on their own without any discussion. After this is accomplished, the students are divided into groups of five or six and then given a reasonable amount of time to discuss the situation. Each group is then told to create a collective ranking of the same 15 items. When this is accomplished, the correct NASA ranking of the fifteen items is distributed, and students are told to calculate the error for each item. For example, if they rated the compass a three for being the third most important item, the error would be 11, since NASA actually ranked the compass 14<sup>th</sup>. (The magnetic field on the moon is not polarized, so it is worthless for navigation.) The error for all 15 items is then totaled for each individual and for each group. Obviously, the lower the total, the better the score for the decisions made. While there are a few individual exceptions, the average score for the groups has generally been better than the average individual scores. What does this mean? The students are usually forced to acknowledge that at least in some situations, a larger number of people will make better decisions through discussion and the sharing of ideas than they will as individuals.

After completing the case for doing away with Congress and becoming a more democratic society, the other side is allowed to develop their arguments. The first point usually made is that democracy tends to be too slow and inefficient to get things done. Both the United States and Germany faced similar economic disasters in 1933 as each nation confronted the worst year of the Great Depression. However, when Adolph Hitler and his Nazi henchmen took over the reigns of power in Germany, money was immediately spent on massive public works projects that put people back to work in armaments plants or constructing the Autobahn. Within months, Germany had effectively clawed its way out of the Great Depression. Meanwhile, President Franklin Roosevelt had to deal with Congress, the Supreme Court, and plenty of critics from all sides. While New Deal legislation did help to mitigate some of the worst symptoms of the Depression, unemployment remained relatively high throughout the remainder of the decade. Unlike Hitler, the fascist dictator, there were limits on the powers of Roosevelt, the elected president.



Franklin Delano Roosevelt  
Courtesy of Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division  
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The great journalist, H.L. Mencken, once said that *“under democracy one party always devotes its chief energies to trying to prove that the other party is unfit to rule - and both commonly succeed, and are right.”* Roosevelt, a Democrat, had to tackle the Republicans in his bids to seek reelection in 1936, 1940 and 1944; additionally, he was also facing a growing number of Republicans in Congress after 1936. Furthermore, the Supreme Court had declared some of his New Deal legislation to be unconstitutional. Is it no wonder that the popularity of fascism was on the rise around much of the world at the same time that democracies were struggling to handle the worst economic crisis the modern world had ever known?

The other arguments against giving too much power to the people are usually aimed directly at the people. The masses are generally accused of being too ignorant, too selfish or both. While Winston Churchill has been quoted as saying that democracy may be the best government when one considers the other options, he also said *“the best argument against democracy is a five-minute conversation with the average voter.”* And James Bovard once said in *Lost Rights: The Destruction of American Liberty*, that *“democracy must be something more than two wolves and a sheep voting on what to have for dinner.”* Ask any member of a school district what often happens when the voters are requested to improve their schools by passing a tax referendum. While there may be a significant number of people who do take their roles as citizens seriously by staying informed about their options, the majority often tends to be apathetic, unaware and self-centered. The result more often than not tends to be bad decision-making and a high tolerance for corruption. This fear of the people abusing their power helps to explain why men like James Madison and Alexander Hamilton worked so hard to place many limits within the Constitution on the powers of the people. As stated in Federalist No. 51, Madison argued, *“If men were angels, no government would be necessary. If angels were to govern men, neither external nor internal controls on government would be necessary. In framing a government which is to be administered by men over men, the great difficulty lies in this: you must first enable the government to control the governed; and in the next place, oblige it to control itself.”* He went on to say in Federalist No. 10 that *“Democracies have ever been spectacles of turbulence and contention; have ever been found incompatible with personal security, or the rights of property; and have, in general, been as short in their lives as they have been violent in their deaths.”*

Finally, the students themselves generally raise a valid, pragmatic concern: time. In our modern world, filled with all of its complexities, would the average person have the time to work a jam-packed job by day and then

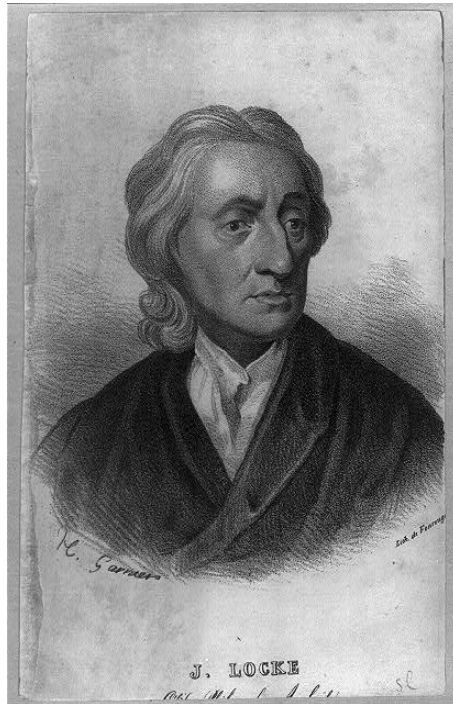
come home at night and have additional time to become a legislator? The members of Congress, despite their perceived shortcomings, do not simultaneously pursue other careers that will compete with their time or energy to be full time legislators. When a bill is proposed, they serve on committees, call in experts to testify and have assistants to conduct research. There are many chores to be completed, and as anyone who is familiar with the procedures of Congress knows, the real work gets done in committees. When Congress passed the Affordable Care Act (Obama Care) in 2010, there were over 20,000 pages of details. Most in Congress had not read all of these pages, so how many average voters would be able to do this if Congress were abolished?

The pro-democracy students usually rebut this point by stating that the field of journalism could provide enough experts to sift through the mountains of data before a law is passed. In addition, they say that if given enough civic education, the people can be trusted to vote for the greater good of society and not just to enrich themselves. To this point, their opposition usually mentions the Dictator Game. In this game, the first player, "*the dictator*", determines how to split an endowment (such as a cash prize) between himself and a second player. The second player, "*the recipient*", simply receives the remainder of the endowment left by the dictator. The recipient's role is entirely passive, as he has no input into the outcome of the game. Studies show that 40% of the "*dictators*" end up keeping all of the money, and the average amount given to the recipients is only 20%. Can a proper civic education ever hope to root out this high level of greed among the general populace? Only the most eternally optimistic could ever say yes. As much as we may like to tout our democratic system as the greatest the world has ever seen, many Americans, including a majority of my students, get very nervous at the prospect of our system ever becoming a pure democracy.

When reviewing the historical record for insight on how to best answer this essential question, there was very little to go on prior to the year 1215. With the exception of some of the Greek city-states and possibly the Roman Republic before the rise of demagogues like Julius Caesar, power was usually in the hands of a single person. The titles varied: king, queen, emperor, Caesar, Kaiser, Czar, chief; but the reality was that one person possessed most of the power within any given society. Things began to change in England in 1215 when a group of lords managed to force King John to seek and receive their approval before taxes could be raised. The king agreed to these terms by signing the Magna Carta and many have come to see this document as the birth certificate of our modern democracy. Over time, this

council of lords evolved to become Parliament, but even four hundred years later, there were still English kings competing with Parliament over who should have the most power.

The issue was finally resolved in 1688 when Parliament decided to peacefully remove James II as the king and replace him with William of Orange, a distant relative that could not even speak English. If Parliament could remove one monarch and replace him with another, the power pendulum had shifted to Parliament, and it has never shifted back. John Locke, the first great thinker and philosopher of the Age of Enlightenment, defended this move by developing his Theory of Natural Rights. According to Locke, all humans are born into a state of nature with three natural rights: life, liberty and property; and that in order to protect these rights, the people should create a government through a social contract. The purpose of government is simply to protect these rights, and if the government abuses this responsibility, the people can then void the contract by overthrowing the government and replacing it with another. This principle, along with others ideas contributed by French philosophers like Voltaire, Montesquieu and Rousseau, formed the foundation for the American and French Revolutions of the late 18<sup>th</sup> Century. Liberal revolutions in some form or fashion have been spreading around the planet ever since.



John Locke  
Courtesy of Library of Congress  
Prints and Photographs Division  
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However, it must be noted that by 1800, there was still a long way to go before authority really rested with the people. In Great Britain, power may have shifted from the monarchy to an elected Parliament, but most adults in England still could not vote in Parliamentary elections, and they certainly had no direct say in passing English law. It was not until passage of the Reform Acts of the mid 19<sup>th</sup> Century that most men in England gained the right to vote, and women's suffrage did not come about until the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Meanwhile, across the pond, England's 13 colonies began to wage a war for independence after the first shots were fired outside of Boston in 1775. While battles waged from New England to South Carolina, the Continental Congress in Philadelphia wrote the Articles of Confederation to create a

government for the emerging nation. Mostly out of fear that a powerful federal government could be just as dangerous as the British government that was currently being replaced, the Articles gave very little authority to Congress and instead, left most power with the individual states. Within each state, however, only white, male landowners could vote. Also, with a Congress that could not collect taxes and lacking a president or a Supreme Court to enforce or interpret the law, the new nation was soon faced with the prospect of coming apart. When Daniel Shays led a rebellion of farmers from western Massachusetts in 1786 against the state government in Boston over taxes and other economic issues, the rest of the nation took notice and quickly realized the Articles needed some major reform.

The result was the Constitutional Convention of 1787. This meeting in Philadelphia lasted months and was filled with contentious debates. As might be expected, one of the central issues involved how much power should be given to the people. Should all adults be able to vote? The answer: let's leave it up to the states, and for the immediate future, the vote was only given to white, male landowners. Should these voters be able to vote for the members of Congress? The answer: yes, in the case of the House of Representatives, which was intended to have a closer connection to the people, but no in the case of the Senate. The people could elect their friends and neighbors to the state legislatures (although even here, property requirements meant that legislatures would usually be composed of wealthy, well-educated white men), and the state legislatures would elect the state's two senators. This would not change until 1913 when the 17<sup>th</sup> Amendment finally provided for the direct election of senators. Should the people be empowered to elect their president? The answer: no. Once again, the state legislature would pick a group of electors (the number would be based on the state's population), and the electors would come together as an Electoral College to pick the president. In an age where there was no radio, television or Internet, and since a large number of people had no access to newspapers or were unable to read them, it is amazing that the members of the Constitutional Convention trusted the people as much as they did. The United States had a long way to go in the dissemination of political power amongst the people.

After 1787, two developments in America helped to move the pendulum a little closer towards greater democracy. One was the addition of a Bill of Rights to the Constitution. Since many Americans threatened to hold up the ratification of the Constitution over the fear that it was creating a government that might easily abuse its new powers, another compromise was proposed that if the Constitution were approved, a set of amendments would



soon be added to the Constitution to limit these powers. However, it should be noted these amendments were primarily intended to be limits on the powers of the government. After all, the First Amendment does not begin, *“The people should have freedom of religion.”* It states, *“Congress shall make no law respecting the establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof...”* In other words, despite the fact that the Bill of Rights has been interpreted to make us a more democratic society, the reality is that the first 10 amendments were really just intended to check the powers of the government.

The second development occurred with the election of Andrew Jackson as president in 1828. It came about more because of his image as a man of the people rather than through specific actions taken by Jackson. Even his inauguration party, which almost brought down the White House, was seen as ushering in the new *“Age of Jackson”*; a more democratic period in American History. Probably the single most important development during this time was the decision by the states to drop the property requirements to vote. Making the franchise more available to all white men rather than just wealthy white men was a step towards spreading political power out to a larger number of stake-holders. The Age of Jackson laid a foundation for the expansion of the right to vote from the 1830s up to the 1960s.



Andrew Jackson  
Courtesy of Library of Congress  
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After the Civil War was concluded, Reconstruction ushered in three more amendments to the Constitution, including the 15<sup>th</sup> Amendment, which gave the right to vote to former slaves. However, this progress was largely dismantled when southern states found major loopholes in the 15<sup>th</sup> Amendment. These loopholes allowed for the creation of poll taxes, literacy tests and grandfather clauses to keep African Americans out of the voting booth.

During the Progressive Age between 1900 and 1920, two more amendments were added to the Constitution. As previously stated, the 17<sup>th</sup> gave American voters the power to directly elect their senators. Then, in 1920, as a culmination to the Women's Suffrage Movement that had first begun in Seneca Falls, New York way back in 1848, women were finally granted the right to vote. Forty-four years later, the 24<sup>th</sup> Amendment abolished poll

taxes, and a short time afterwards, the 26<sup>th</sup> Amendment lowered the voting age from 21 to 18. This development made perfect sense in light of the fact that young men aged 18 to 20 were being sent off to fight, kill and die for their country in Vietnam without the ability to elect the leaders who were sending them off to fight.

This brings us back to the present and to the essential question at hand. How much power should be given to the people? As can be seen, this is purposely not a yes or no question and might best be answered on a spectrum. If the number one represents giving the masses no say at all and the number 10 is the opposite position where we become a pure democracy, most of my students over the years have veered toward the lower numbers. Even though the Digital Revolution has given us new technology that has effectively allowed us to create an assembly with hundreds of millions of members, the majority of my students have opposed this idea. Instead, they prefer we continue the current system of checks and balances as first envisioned by men like John Locke, the Baron Montesquieu, John Adams and James Madison. The fear of entrusting too much power to one person, a small group or everyone, has led to the principle that power should be shared between different branches of government, as well as between different levels of government; and that each should be able to check the abuse of power by the others. After all, it is hard to argue with what appears to be over two centuries of political success.

There is one final consideration. Which political system provides the best government when it comes to effectively meeting the needs of the most people? Citizens in the western democracies would argue that the answer to that question should be a representative democracy. This form of government not only allows each citizen to vote based on individual concerns, but also insures that no one person or group will gather enough power to threaten the existence of the current government. A representative democracy, in which the people elect legislators to vote on their behalf, also offers a more responsive and efficient governing body than a direct democracy. A pure democracy would require cumbersome popular votes to decide every issue and the service of amateurs as opposed to professionals to execute the decisions made.

Further support for representative democracy comes from the World Bank, which ranks nations according to a government effectiveness score, based on how well each government meets the needs of the people. The countries that rank highest on this scale include the United States, the United Kingdom, Germany, Australia and several Scandinavian nations; all

maintain some form of bicameral, multi-party, representative government. By contrast, nations that were part of the former Soviet Union such as those located in Sub-Saharan Africa, in addition to nations in Southern Asia, rate poorly. Countries scoring lowest are likely to have a one-party system, a military or a monarchy, or a state of government so disordered it is best described as anarchy.

Based on this thinking, it can be argued we have come a long way since the death of Socrates 2400 years ago. It seems unimaginable that a group of ordinary Americans would force him to drink the hemlock today. On the other hand, it was the elected members of Congress that passed such horrible acts of intolerance as the Indian Removal Act in 1830 and the Chinese Exclusion Act in 1882. It was elected members of Congress during the Red Scare of the early 1950s that jailed Dalton Trumbo for his association with the Communist Party. And for that matter, it was juries composed of ordinary citizens serving a vital role in our democratic society that sent many of the two million people to our nation's jails and prisons. Yes, most of these people are guilty of serious crimes, but according to the Innocence Project, studies indicate that somewhere between 2.3 to 5 per cent of these inmates were wrongly convicted. This means that despite the best of intentions, somewhere between 46,000 to 100,000 people are serving time for crimes they did not commit. With this in mind, one has to wonder what would happen to a modern-day Socrates.

In the final analysis, most students have usually come to the conclusion that as much as they might complain about our current system of government, they would not make any significant changes to our present system. Our current representative democracy might be tweaked in certain ways, like abolishing the Electoral College and replacing it with a national election where all citizens over 18 can directly choose their president. The students fully understand the imperfections of the human race; so after a careful examination of this essential question, they usually come to the conclusion that any form of government will also be imperfect. Otherwise, the question over how much power to give the people is purely academic. In a democratic society like our own, it is guaranteed to lead to heated debate but also a healthy exchange of ideas.

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# Acknowledgements

It took 37 years to lay a foundation for the writing of this book. There are many people that have had a profound influence over the course of my teaching career and have helped to shape the experiences reflected in its pages. The first was Russell Costanza, my building principal at F.T. Nicholls High School in New Orleans, who understood that the first rule to follow in grooming future educators is to give them the freedom and support to develop their full potential. Next came Craig Larson, the principal of Parkway South High School. Craig always assumed there is room for improvement no matter how satisfied a community might be with its school, so he constantly attempted to expose his faculty to many reform principles, including those espoused by Theodore Sizer and the Coalition of Essential Schools. There have also been a number of fellow teachers over the years that exerted their own influence over what was occurring in my classroom. These include Edward Mihevc, Michael Howe, Daryl Hemenway, Scott Nilssen, Elizabeth Morrison and my good friend for many years, James Hubbard. Finally, there is Devon Metzger, the man who taught me the lesson that the rationale behind what you teach is even more important than the methods. So much of this book sprang from the discussions held in his graduate classes and in our many conversations.

There are also many people who have contributed to this book as it was being written. For starters, there is Rosario Batana, editor at Vernon Press, who provided the necessary guidance to turn a rough manuscript into a publishable book. Next, there is Trevor Kraus, a former student and now a friend who proofread the entire book and reminded me of the writing maxim that less is usually more. I also received much support from a number of family members, including my sister, Debby Jacobson, my daughter Julie Regenbogen and my son, Jack Regenbogen. I am also most grateful to my brother-in-law, Dean Robbins and my sister-in-law, Ann Shaffer, for their feedback, and especially for their support in encouraging me to submit this book for publication. Rounding out the family involvement is my mother-in-law, Radine Robbins, who also read the book and supplied invaluable feedback and advice. Finally, this book would never have made it into print without the assistance and support of my wife for 37 years, Dana. Most of the visuals and the suggested readings are the result of her tireless

efforts, and she had the “pleasure” of reading this book more times than I can count. Most of all, I cherish her words of loving encouragement provided when I was most in need.



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