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** The surnames are listed in alphabetical order.*

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BOOK REVIEW

John G. Matsusaka

Let the People Rule: How Direct Democracy Can Meet the Populist Challenge

Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2020, ISBN: 9780691199726, 312 pp., \$29.95 / £25.00)

Matsusaka sets out on a very ambitious task – he seeks to find a political corrective to the crisis of democratic representation that is currently plaguing the United States (and many other countries), culminating in the rise to power of populist figures. Broadly speaking, his antidote to the current lack of confidence in national political institutions is to transfer power and voice back to the citizenry. In short, the solution to poor democracy is more democracy of and by the people. Depending on who the audience of this book may be, I think the reader may take different aspects for their own purposes.

Strength of this book is the culling of arguments and evidence that Matsusaka employs that spans the whole gamut of social science fields. The reader will be exposed to political history, economic, sociological, and political science arguments for why citizens should have their voices amplified. Amidst the inefficiencies and inadequacies of the bloated “administrative state” (p. 5) to solve complex 21st century problems, Matsusaka stakes out the position that power should be reassigned from faceless technocrats on alphabetized DC streets to the denizens on Main Street. The book is organized into four sections: the first lays out the “democratic drift” that has transpired over the last few decades and how representative institutions in the US have failed the citizenry; the second provides a comprehensive descriptive account of direct democracy practices in US history and around the world and also refutes the notion that direct democracy is somehow un-American or politically destabilizing; the

third posits potential reforms and ideas on how to implement popular referendums drawing on historical cases while reviewing their potential shortcomings; and, the fourth wraps up the author’s argument with scope conditions and best practices of direct democracy.

The book offers various things for various types of readers and will be easily accessible to the general public, political practitioners, and academics. Its general appeal, however, may contribute to some of its weaknesses, discussed below. Viewed through an academic lens, the book suffers from four weaknesses. First, scrutinizing the methodological and empirical merit of the book leaves the reader wanting more. The author’s argument would be bolstered with more convincing evidence for the book’s most important claim—that national referendums in the United States would yield a democratic panacea for low levels of trust in government. Apart from a few mentions of Pew or Gallup public opinion polls (and a discussion on p. 165-6), there was not much empirical support that citizen participation in referendums increases trust in government. At one stage, Matsusaka discusses this practice’s regularity at the local and state level and puts forth a higher level of trust in local and state governments. However, there is no discussion of a rich political science literature that has investigated this phenomenon through statistical modelling of survey data, panel data, and even survey experiments. The author champions the countries of Italy and Ireland as success stories of direct democracy

practices. However, both of these countries routinely score well below the European average on trust indices of political institutions. Further, the countries scoring much higher on these annual surveys (e.g. Finland and Sweden) tend to have significantly fewer referendums than the cases highlighted by Matsusaka as model cases.

Second, and connected to the above, the author's selection and presentation of evidence seem to suffer from a selection bias. As a comparative politics scholar, I appreciated the chapter discussing global direct democracy practices. However, the chapter seemed rushed and offered few details about interesting cases (e.g. Taiwan, Uruguay, the Philippines) that could yield informative lessons for the United States. In the quick overview of Latin America, the author could have discussed some of the more problematic cases of Venezuela and Ecuador, two poster children that would have allowed the author to caution against some of the worst excesses that may result from executives using referendums as governing mechanisms, especially in extremely polarized contexts similar to the US. Much scholarly work has illustrated the politicized nature of referendums in both countries and how power-hungry presidents manipulated these institutions to circumvent checks and balances, all in the name of the popular will. What were billed as citizen participatory mechanisms in constitutional reforms actually ended in constitutional coups, resulting in disastrous democratic recessions. South America also offers alternative institutions that the author could have also considered—namely citizen participation in direct governance in Brazil, ranging from health councils to participatory budgeting committees.

Third, although populism is in the title and used to set out the intellectual roadmap of this book, there is actually very little about the phenomenon. The term is briefly mentioned and loosely applied to cases across Europe. I struggled to see the broader

connection of the proposed cure of citizen referendums to solve populism's causes, especially given that the author acknowledged that "populism springs from different sources in each country" (p. 80). Fourth, the book also tends to offer a monolithic treatment of those who lack trust in government. A generation of political science research has illustrated the many different micro-level factors (e.g. age, education, income, gender, partisanship, race) that strongly condition citizens' levels of trust in government. Treating an entire population as behaving and responding to stimuli in a rather uniform fashion seems a bit simplistic. Lastly, as highlighted above, other mechanisms of citizen participation we see around the world have been shown to enhance citizens' trust and even improve the outcomes of government performance, making a case that the real solution to a lack of representation is to democratize certain institutions. This alternative, perhaps superior to national citizen referendums, would satisfy a major shortcoming pointed out by the author of his own recommendation, a "reliance on government officials to implement is unavoidable" (p. 64).

Although there may be shortcomings from an academic perspective, the book offers quite a lot for other audiences, namely political activists and practitioners. Those dedicated to improving public institutions' legitimacy and concerned by the current demise of the public's trust in representative and governing institutions will take a lot from this book. Matsusaka offers clearly articulated policy solutions and political mechanisms by which to regain the citizenry's trust. It should be taken seriously by those currently in public office and wanting to better serve their constituents.

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