

Is our democracy doomed to become more and more exclusionary?

Benjamin Page and Martin Gilens offer a discouraging diagnosis—and some specific remedies.

by [Nathan J. Kelly](#) in the [November 21, 2018](#) issue

In Review



Democracy in America?

What Has Gone Wrong and What We Can Do about It

By Benjamin I. Page and Martin Gilens

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Is democracy in peril? A veritable subgenre of books has developed on that question. In *How Democracies Die*, Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt show how a series of small shifts in norms and legal frameworks can combine to undermine a democratic system. Yascha Mounk argues in *The People vs. Democracy* that mass commitment to the institutions of democracy is breaking down not only in the United States but around the world. Amy Chua's *Political Tribes* points to hyper-partisanship and cultural tribalism as the gateway to the demise of democratic systems.

Benjamin Page and Martin Gilens argue that although the United States may formally be an institutional democracy, in practice it is an exclusionary democracy: equal rights are enshrined on paper, but a variety of groups are routinely excluded and politically marginalized. They catalog a litany of failures in American democracy which are rooted in political and economic inequality, arguing that extreme economic inequality “undermines the very democratic political processes that ordinary citizens rely on to ameliorate economic inequality. In short, economic inequality and democracy are in serious conflict.”

Over the past 40 years, the concentration of economic wealth in the United States has indeed become extreme. A small sliver of those at the top of the economic heap has pulled away from everyone else. According to Page and Gilens, this economic separation has fractured democracy. Using a mountain of data, they show that the rich are much more likely than the poor to get what they want from government. “The best evidence indicates that the wishes of ordinary Americans actually have had little or no influence at all on the making of federal government policy. . . . The general public has been virtually powerless.”

For example, most Americans think that climate change is a problem and action should be taken to limit CO₂ emissions. Most Americans also think that more infrastructure investment is needed, that gun control should be enacted, that education spending should be increased, that more should be done to make sure working Americans have decent wages, that access to child care for working parents should be expanded, and that taxes on the rich should be higher. Rich Americans aren't nearly as supportive of such policies as everyone else. Given that the views of

the majority on these and other issues are thwarted in Washington, the authors conclude that democracy is not working for most people, and that this malfunction hurts the most vulnerable.

One caveat to their argument is that the policy preferences of the rich and the poor are surprisingly congruent; rich people and poor people often want more or less the same thing. This means that there are several policy arenas in which the rich getting what they want allows the poor to get what they want as well.

A second caveat is that nobody, the rich included, get what they want from government all that often. One of the most striking bits of data indicates that even when a policy change is supported by over 90 percent of the public, that change is enacted less than 60 percent of the time. The system is biased toward the status quo. But neither of these caveats undermine the core argument: American democracy is not working the way it should.

Page and Gilens argue that unequal representation is driven by unequal political power and that unequal power is a function of access to financial power. The wealthy simply move in different circles than most Americans, and those circles are the ones where policymakers most likely spend their time as well. After all, politicians tend to be fairly rich themselves. Even if they are not wealthy, they have to find funding for their campaigns, and the easiest path toward that goal is a circle of wealthy donors who can write big checks.

Another contributor to unequal power is the fact that interest groups disproportionately give voice to the interests of corporations. Lobbying is big business—a \$2.5 billion business in 2007—and Page and Gilens show that the lobbyists in Washington are highly skewed toward the interests of corporations and the wealthy. There is an extremely strong correlation between the policy proposals supported by interest groups and the ones that actually make their way into law.

Lobbyists and organizations that speak on behalf of corporations are able to exert influence over policymaking early in the process. Lobbyists are key to informing legislators about issues and framing options—and of course these options are the ones most amenable to the corporations. Working behind the scenes, lobbyists can take the most objectionable policy changes off the table before they are even seriously considered.

Page and Gilens's diagnosis is discouraging, but they end by describing a path toward reinvigorating democracy. They call for a broad movement of activism and a specific set of reforms.

Their first set of reforms is aimed at amplifying the voices of ordinary citizens. These include campaign finance reform that increases public funding, a constitutional amendment allowing limits on corporate campaign spending, programs that multiply the small donations of individuals through matching contributions, "democracy vouchers" by which every citizen receives from the government a sum of money to spend on a candidate of their choice, enhanced disclosure requirements for lobbying and campaign spending, further restrictions on gifts from lobbyists to politicians, and reduced barriers to voting and voter registration.

A second set of reforms targets gridlock and polarization. The authors call for limiting the filibuster in the Senate to make majority rule more common, restricting practices that give individual senators the ability to block the policymaking process, creating a more open legislative process in the House to prevent a small subset of a majority party (like Tea Party Republicans) from controlling legislative outcomes, increasing competitiveness in congressional elections, reducing partisan gerrymandering, and shifting toward proportional representation to ensure that even the losers of elections have representation.

Some of these reforms would require congressional legislation or even a constitutional amendment. But many could be tried at the state and local levels first—a common first step for successful reformers in the past.

One of the most significant hurdles facing efforts to revive America's democracy is the politicization of democratic institutions. Republicans and Democrats have had their failings over the years in this area, but both parties have generally been committed to the rule of law and the institutional practice of democracy. That consensus is breaking down.

Not since the Jim Crow era have elected officials and policymakers so openly sought to disenfranchise, disempower, and exclude certain citizens from participating in democracy. Republicans have blatantly (and at times by their own admission) sought to make it harder for nonwhites to vote, undermined the right of workers to bargain on a level playing field with their employers, and meddled with the levers of justice to benefit their friends and penalize their foes. These practices have become

increasingly standard with the Trump presidency, further amplifying an exclusionary democracy.

If you are looking for ways to join the reform effort, reading this important book is a useful start. The authors offer a hopeful note: “If many of our readers and others join together in the fight for democratic reforms, they may find themselves members of a powerful social movement for Democracy. Such a movement could well transform American politics.”