

## ◀ BOOK REVIEWS ▶

**George Robert Bateman, Jr.**, *The Transformative Potential of Participatory Budgeting: Creating an Ideal Democracy*.

Contemporary politics is rife with inequity, polarization, and apathy toward democratic institutions. For George Robert Bateman, Jr., the key to addressing such issues is participatory budgeting (PB), a practice in which everyday people choose how to distribute public money. In *The Transformative Potential of Participatory Budgeting*, Bateman asks: What are the benefits of PB practices? How can we realize more of these practices around the globe? And what are the implications of such practices on democracy?

By Bateman's account, PB—when designed effectively—can help to promote public happiness; a sense of belonging; enhanced understanding of others; and a collective morality. Engaging with the likes of John Dewey, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, and Walt Whitman, Bateman shows us that PB transcends liberal democratic ends by bringing the “ideal of democracy” to life (1). Through the deliberative process of PB, people learn more about their own preferences and those of others, and they develop both the capacity and the desire to do more for their communities. In this way, PB can help to encourage people to be more self-reflective and better able to translate their private struggles into public issues. In short, PB allows individuals to develop personal and collective morality in a way that representative democracy does not. As Thoreau puts it: “What a monster of a government is that where the noblest faculties of the mind, and *whole heart*, are not *represented*” (41). Additionally, Bateman makes the important point that “our social institutions help shape our social customs” (16). He argues that PB therefore provokes individuals into thinking about their communities and matters of social justice long after their participation in PB itself.

Bateman's work is not limited to theorizing about PB as a utopian possibility, but rather gives considerable thought as to how to expand PB until it is the primary local decision-making process. Drawing on extant practices of PB, Bateman proposes that funding be increased for PB and that city bureaucracies be reorganized to elevate PB's status. He suggests empowering participants through enhanced communication and facilitation, as well as embedding PB in society through collaboration with local civic groups. Bateman's work balances pragmatic questions (such as



acknowledging the time it will take to convince city officials of the need for more PB) with social justice issues (such as how to ensure that rules, procedures, and practices of PB are empowering and inclusive). This ability to consider normative questions while keeping sight of practical limitations pertaining to when – and how, and to what extent – this can be achieved renders his work refreshing and of significant empirical value.

Perhaps the strongest aspects of Bateman's work are his careful explorations of the historical example of the League of the Iroquois and the contemporary example of PB in New York City (PBNYC). Discussion of the League of the Iroquois – which was initially formed to keep peace between five tribes (which later became six) – highlights how participatory democracy was established in North America long before the English arrived. The League emphasized the importance of promoting a sense of belonging and connection as well as happiness through focus on checks and balances, smaller groups and deliberations, the overlapping of tribal boundaries, and the consent of the governed. This example highlights the historical roots of participatory democracy and links to Thomas Jefferson's understanding of, and vision for, American democracy. More importantly, though, it helps to challenge Western-centric accounts of political and democratic theory by spotlighting and drawing from the practices of Indigenous groups. The example of PBNYC is also important for its evaluation of the implementation of PB in practice against democratic ideals in theory. Bateman shows which steps have been made to encourage more equitable participation, such as holding assemblies near public transport; providing childcare and food; dropping citizenship requirements; and adopting language support. He also discusses the impact of limited status and resources on engagement, empowerment, and inclusion. Bateman's strength is his capacity to combine a discussion of normative ideals with an analysis of extant practices in order to expose weaknesses and propose improvements.

In spite of all of this, it remains unclear whether more practices of PB will be sufficient to truly transform our democratic institutions and societies. The argument that PB can help to promote more participation, community, and understanding is clear and convincing. However, Bateman skims over the uneven nature of the power relations that permeate each deliberation. While there are cursory attempts to respond to this matter (such as the measures discussed above, as well as thought about designing procedures), it is my contention that Bateman does not fully acknowledge the way in which political participation is affected by age, gender, race, class, education, and time. Indeed, certain of Bateman's proposals, such as to use activist leaders to improve deliberations and to provide public speaker training for participants, are blind to the potential

for elitism, inequity, and exclusion, and might even serve to reproduce the uneven and unrepresentative participation that currently plagues politics. In order for PB to be transformative, it must not simply offer instances of more frequent participation, but must also address inequity; marginalization; and relations of inclusion and exclusion much more deeply.

Furthermore, as Bateman himself asserts, our current political arena is muddied by the mass media, corporations, money, and weak parties and politicians. How can practices of PB transform society into a communal, moral, educated, and understanding sphere when these structures exist in their current form? If Bateman wants to “spark the imagination and rekindle the democratic revolutionary spirit” (135) as he claims, then thought must be given, not just as to how institutions help to shape our society, but also as to how institutions can also be shaped by society. The overarching structures that both create and sustain power imbalances must be exposed and challenged. In this way, advocating for more practices of PB is an admirable first step, but the next step necessarily involves reimagining society as a whole. It requires a society that supports and sustains practices of PB, rather than one that undermines their democratic goals.

Bateman’s contribution here is significant. His blend of pragmatic and normative questions offers useful insights to both political theory and institutional design. *The Transformative Potential of Participatory Budgeting* makes an important, timely, and convincing argument about the need for more democratic participation. If it combines this with further thought about how to redress power inequities both in deliberation and in wider society, it can offer a new way of thinking about politics to faculty and students from a range of disciplines.

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**Garett Jones**, *10% Less Democracy: Why You Should Trust Elites a Little More and the Masses a Little Less*.

The question of “good governance” occupies a central position in the history of political thought. Political systems are often assessed by their capacity to induce high-quality decisions. By virtue of the alleged link between good policies and competent politicians, finding the right decision-makers is often considered to be the key to good governance. In *10% Less Democracy: Why You Should Trust Elites a Little More and the Masses a Little Less*, Garett Jones offers an accessible, ambitious, and thought-provoking argument suggesting that Western democracies are likely to improve

the quality of their political decision-making by becoming a little less democratic. His definition of democracy is minimalistic: “widespread, substantive voter involvement in governance” (15). Drawing on extensive empirical evidence and discussing two case studies, the European Union and Singapore, Jones argues that slightly more technocratic and nondemocratic governance structures lead to better policymaking in the face of economic challenges, the migration crisis, and the goal of rapid development.

One of the main problems Jones tackles in this book is the short-termism of electoral politics. As career politicians usually seek re-election, they are heavily incentivised to “work on projects where it’s easier and more credible to publicly claim credit” (26). However, the public visibility of a project does not guarantee that it is the best use of scarce resources for the common good. For instance, Jones holds that professional politicians tend to brush aside policy proposals that boost the long-run performance of the economy when such policies do not contribute to their re-election campaigns. Jones’s first remedy for the short-termist pressures would be to make elections less frequent (Chapter 2). By granting elected representatives longer terms, Jones contends that the incentive structures in democratic politics can be transformed in a direction more favorable to the long-run interests of the polity. In such an institutional setting, as politicians have more time before the next election, they will find it less costly to adopt unpopular policies with long-run benefits. Longer terms encourage politicians to spend more time and effort on implementing good policies rather than maximizing their chance of re-election. Jones seems to believe that a little less frequent democratic control is a small price to pay for this improvement.

In Chapters 3 and 4, Jones discusses independent regulatory institutions that ostensibly improve policy outcomes in comparison to their democratic counterparts. His first example is independent central banks that are not “under the direct control of a nation’s elected officials” (35). He suggests that independent central banks are more effective in combating inflation than democratically controlled central banks (39). Furthermore, he shows that countries with undemocratic central banks “had just about the same rates of unemployment and just about the same growth rate of income per person as countries with heavily political central banks” (40). Hence, he concludes that the alleged trade-off between growth and inflation is not a tenable view. Jones’s second example of independent institutions is the judiciary. He hypothesizes that elected judges will indeed exhibit behavioral patterns similar to politicians who seek re-election. As electoral pressures shape judges’ incentives, it is suggested that elected judges are more likely to favor home-state citizens over outsiders (54).

As opposed to immediate democratic control, insulation of judges from the influence of voters and politicians is deemed to be a better route to high-quality judicial processes. Comparing the performance of judges who are appointed by merit commissions with elected judges, Jones presents empirical evidence that judges from the former group make higher-quality decisions (57)—controlling for crucial factors, appointed judges’ decisions get cited a lot more than those of elected judges. He concludes that appointed judges satisfy the professional standards of the judiciary institutions and are more conducive to better governance.

In Chapters 5 and 6, Jones makes two proposals to empower “more educated citizens” and “government bondholders” in the political process to curb the impact of voter ignorance and short-termism in democratic politics. First, Jones proposes “a slightly larger voice in a democracy” (85) for those more educated through education-based gerrymandering to reduce the harm the “least-informed voters” have on government quality (84). Second, Jones suggests certain legal rights and powers authorizing government bondholders, with their deep interest in governments’ long-run fiscal health, to participate in the economic policymaking of a country (Chapter 6). These rights and powers include giving their representatives “limited forms of veto power over economic policy actions” and “a small number of seats in the upper house of the national legislature” (100). Their influence, he believes, could partly compensate for democratic governments’ failure to focus on the distant future. Bondholders have an interest in governments’ long-run fiscal health, as their future profits depend on governments’ ability to repay them with interest. Hence, Jones takes bondholders as a source of wise policy advice, as their interests overlap with the long-run performance of the economy.

There are a number of shortcomings in Jones’s arguments about reducing the level of democratic voice in the political process. First, Jones assumes that any solution to short-termism will have to be undemocratic without considering how alternative conceptions of democracy might address the very same problem. Switching the focus from democracy as an aggregative phenomenon to democracy as the ideal of public deliberation, one might envisage alternative institutional reforms to curb the pervasiveness of short-termism through a deepening of democratic participation rather than through a reduction in it. Simon Caney’s (2019) recent proposals are an example of this approach. Caney suggests that reshaping deliberative structures of political decision-making might constitute an effective push in the direction of future-oriented politics. He recommends forming an institutional setting in which an independent committee of experts “would be responsible for producing long-term projections of the challenges and opportunities ahead.” Furthermore,

“governments and opposition parties should be required to produce a ‘Manifesto for the Future’” and “certain days in the parliamentary calendar ... should be earmarked specifically for deliberation about the future” (2019: 11–12). By changing the institutional rules regulating which issues policymakers are supposed to pay attention to as well as emphasizing the space for citizen deliberation in building social support, Caney offers a vision of democracy as an effective vehicle reorienting politics away from short-termism and toward the problems of our shared future. By not considering the possibility of democracy as a domain of public deliberation, Jones pushes an unfounded assumption that long-termism gives automatic support to reduced democratic responsiveness.

Second, Jones’s proposal to empower certain groups such as bondholders and more educated citizens is likely to maintain and escalate the oligarchic tendencies in contemporary Western democracies (Arlen and Rossi 2018). In the case of education-based gerrymandering, Jones holds that “people who just barely graduate from high school have a lot in common with those who don’t graduate” (90). Following this, he suggests that those who are above the threshold are likely to represent the interests of nongraduates by virtue of their shared experiences and preferences. However, there are also important differences between these groups. According to the US Bureau of Labor Statistics, a high school diploma has a substantial positive impact on earnings (BLS 2019). The considerable income gap between the two groups makes at least some of their significant interests diverge from each other, for instance in the domain of redistribution and fiscal policy. Further, there is mounting empirical evidence that Western democracies are already biased toward the preferences of wealthier groups (Gilens 2012; Schakel 2019; Schakel et. al. 2020). Shifting political power from marginalized groups to bondholders and the highly educated is likely to deepen these systemic ills of liberal democratic capitalism. Jones seems to bite the bullet and accept that his recommendations mean a little more oligarchic governance, which is allegedly a small price to pay for better policy outcomes. However, it is far from clear how the fruits of better governance will be distributed fairly in a political system that is even more heavily biased toward the technocratic and economic power centers in society. While Jones appeals to Aristotelian insights about striking a balance between oligarchy and democracy to promote good governance (139), he seems to ignore the fact that the default setting in today’s democracies is already disproportionately influenced by the powerful and wealthy.

Indeed, there is ambiguity about the author’s particular normative stance on the main question. In the final section of the book, he avoids making conclusive normative judgments about what specific degree of

democracy is better, and encourages the reader to make up their own mind. However, in the introduction, Jones explicitly indicates that “we’ve taken democracy, mass voter involvement in government, at least a little too far” (5), which is a clearly evaluative if not normative conviction. Nonetheless, throughout the book Jones does not offer a justification of why his preferred combination is the right mixture of good governance and democracy.

Despite these concerns, there is much to like about this book. It is a timely intervention capturing the zeitgeist of our decade revolving around the controversies about the future of democracy. Furthermore, it is versatile and comprehensive in its use of empirical literature. In this respect, this book complements more theoretical arguments defending technocratic modes of governance in contemporary societies. It is definitely worth reading, especially for those working on democratic theory and good governance.

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