

THE TWENTIES IN CONTEMPORARY COMMENTARY



National Archives

Clifford Berryman, "Ain't Politics Grand?" political cartoon, October 18, 1924 (detail)

— MODERN DEMOCRACY —

In the traumatic aftermath of World War One, many questioned whether man's civilization had revealed a dooming weakness, and if one of its greatest achievements—democracy—was only a fragile ideal. Did the war "to make the world safe for democracy" expose a world unfit for democracy? And what about America? For 130 years the republic had survived chronic growing pains—and a murderous civil war—but was it, too, displaying signs of dissolution and rot? Selections from the commentary follow: "Is modern democracy a failure?"

My Fellow Countrymen: The armistice was signed this morning. Everything for which America fought has been accomplished. It will now be our fortunate duty to assist by example, by sober, friendly counsel, and by material aid in the establishment of just democracy throughout the world.

President Woodrow Wilson
Announcement of the Armistice Ending
World War One, Nov. 11, 1918

I do not believe there was ever a time in history when victorious nations were so unhappy in the period immediately following their triumph. No one is satisfied with the Treaty of Versailles, and it is doubtful if a treaty could possibly have been made which would have been satisfactory. At first there were those who believed that after the war there would be a new and better age. That new age has not come. Instead, many men of all classes and shades of opinion are predicting the downfall of civilization, and many in despair believe that future wars more deadly and grim than the last are inevitable.

Rev. Everett Dean Martin
"Are We Facing a Revival of Religion?"
Harper's, April 1924

Democracy in the hour of its victory turns to social strife and industrial class struggle. Democratic institutions are everywhere under criticism as never before. Thoughtful people are growing tired of politics, are losing confidence in their governments, and are generally distrustful of the powerful propagandist agencies which the war has left in control of the sources of their information.

Editors of the *Forum*
"What Is Democracy?" definition contest
The Forum, April 1928

At the present moment, Democracy is assailed by doubts in many quarters. We are no longer as sure as we one were that the basic assumptions of Democratic theory are true. As a practical test, some of them are listed below. Try them on your own credulity. If you can swallow them hook, line, and sinker, you are an orthodox Democrat¹—and probably the only surviving member of the Simon-pure species. The theory of Democracy assumes:

- That a king and slave were born free;
- That philosopher and fool were born equal;
- That a natural reservoir of wisdom and virtue resides in the common man;
- That this wisdom and virtue will express itself through the ballot;
- That every man in his right mind wants to vote;
- That there exists an intangible but very real something called "the will of the people";
- That "the will of the people" can be ascertained by counting noses;
- That if fifty-one percent of the people say black is white, then black *ought* to be white.

To be sure, one may deny every one of these assumptions and still remain what may be termed "a negative Democrat"—that is, one who looks upon all government as a necessary evil and prefers the certain ills of Democratic government to the uncertain ills of a monarchy, a dictatorship, or a soviet republic.

Charles W. Eliot
"An Assay of American Democracy"
Current History, March 1923

Historian Eliot offered an examination (assay) of postwar democracy.

... it is obvious that large democratic progress was made for centuries before universal suffrage was even dreamed of. How much risk society is going to run because of the advance from limited suffrage to universal, including woman suffrage, does not yet appear. Is the instability of public opinion to be increased or diminished by universal suffrage? Is our democracy to become more radical or more conservative, more liable or less liable to engage in rash adventures? This question is much involved with another. Will universal suffrage select better leaders and representatives than limited suffrage has done, or worse ones? Prophecy on this subject would be rash; but anyone is free to hope that universal suffrage in the United States will prove to be wiser than any limited suffrage of which this country has had experience, and hoping is always wiser and happier than worrying.

¹ Here meaning a proponent of democracy as a governmental ideal, not a member of the Democratic political party.

² Shakespeare, *Twelfth Night*, ca. 1601: "... but be not afraid of greatness: some are born great, some achieve greatness and some have greatness thrust upon them."

³ Lincoln, Gettysburg Address, 1863: "... that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth."

WHAT IS DEMOCRACY?

Definition Contest, *The Forum*, 1928

Recruiting readers' definitions for terms looming large in current discussion was a regular feature of the periodical *The Forum*. In April 1928, five submitted definitions of *democracy* were published.

Democracy is the government of a state or nation by the people (representative or otherwise) which maintains a political equilibrium or balance between anarchy and absolutism. It requires at least two major political parties, of which one favors more individual freedom—a drifting toward anarchy, without desiring anarchy—while the other favors more centralization—a drifting toward absolutism, without desiring absolutism. Too much drift either way disturbs the balance, arouses a great protest, and the voters place the other party in power—which restores the political balance called Democracy.

-L. A. Hollenbeck, Duchesne, Utah

Democracy is a form of government in which the legislature and the executive hold their power by consent of the people, expressed not merely in silent acquiescence, but in some regularly occurring formal and legal way, such as votes of election and recall.

-Alfred C. Lane, Cambridge, Massachusetts

Democracy—government wherein "the elect" stand aside for the elected, where mass has superseded class as the rightful source of power.

-John M. Crook, Chicago, Illinois

Democracy—that form of the state which allows man to choose his own oppressions, in which some men are born equal, some achieve equality, and some have equality thrust upon them.²

-Katherine Foster, New York, New York

Unlike the governments which hold sway by divine right of blood, **Democracy** is based on paper. It is from paper, by paper, and for paper.³ Men write on paper what they want people to do; if enough agree, the paper becomes law. Those who object may write what they think and make newspapers. This is Democracy.

-Iva Purdum Bruton, Memphis, Tennessee

Henry R. Carey
 "Leadership or Mob Rule?"
The North American Review
 December 1928

Democracy is defined as a government by all the people. The people have

had over one hundred years of general suffrage, in increasing amounts, and they are not yet governing. The people do not vote. They are not interested in public affairs. The wise leaders, who undoubtedly exist, do not get to the top, nor are they encouraged to do so. America is ruled in secret by rich men, in semi-public by the bosses, and in public by the demagogues. Is it too much to say that if Democracy means rule by the people as a whole, it is a failure? . . .

The remedy for the national disorder of ultra-Democracy is, therefore, the principle of selection by wise men, plus election by the voters. It is a plan for selecting and training the noblest and most intelligent Americans for political leadership, after election by the people. It is a combination of Democracy with aristocracy, in its fine old Greek sense. . . . In a word, the suggested remedy is an Aristo-Democracy designed to overcome the evil of mob rule and employing a "Society of Leaders" as a fourth branch of the National Government.

Samuel Spring
 "The Voter Who Will Not Vote"
Harper's, November 1922

On the Fourth of July we celebrate [the

right to vote] proudly as our heritage and our portion in life. Indeed, most of us would die to maintain the right to representation in government.

And yet on the rainy election morning, when "the fate of the nation hangs in the balance," from a fourth to a half of us invariably do not vote. We either oversleep, and thus are too rushed to catch our train, or procrastinate until the afternoon, and then completely forget about voting. Some of us even fail to remember that there was any election at all! And many are so indifferent that they fail to place their names on the election lists by registering. . . .

Our present system of absentee voting—of letting the other fellows' votes decide the election because we are so lazy we feel that one vote more or less does not matter—not only creates but demands a boss system. . . . Men who have the ideals of Jesse James and use lung power and spurious promises instead of bullets, insults, and vituperation instead of dynamite, hold too much power. . . .

Once create a means by which the vast majority of our voters will always go to the polls, rain or shine, at every election, whether a President or local board of water or gas commissioners are to be chosen, and we shall not only hurl into oblivion political bandits, who live by the vote of small minorities who always vote, but we shall also readily upset and even destroy the rule of our bosses. And if this is not thought desirable, consider the municipal government today of three of our largest American cities—New York, Chicago, and Boston. . . .

Compulsory voting! That suggestion is no sooner made than there comes to one's mind the difficulty of putting over one half of our votes in jail because they will not vote. . . . is there a practical way of enforcing the obligation to vote?



Popular Science Monthly, November 1920, depicting a voter studying a gear-and-lever voting machine adopted in many cities and states to eliminate paper ballots, promote accuracy, and minimize fraud.

The great advantage of the American political system is that the average voter gets the opportunity of hearing each candidate call the other candidate what the average voter would like to call both candidates.

Which leads on to the thought that the average voter is the voter who doesn't vote.

"Life Lines," humor column, *Life*, Oct. 15, 1925

Alfonso Washington Pezet
 "The New Despotism"
The Forum, May 1924

Our democracy is a delusion. Though for a while we made real political progress, in the past hundred years we have steadily lost ground previously gained. What we have today are the old shibboleths, the old delusions, differently expressed. The divine right of the king has become the divine right of the people. The sovereign all-powerful king has become the sovereign all-powerful people. The old saying that the king can do no wrong has been restated in slightly different terms; now it is the people who can do no wrong. Today we are earnestly assured that the opinions of a majority, no matter how irrationally arrived at, must of necessity be just and wise; that if only enough people believe a thing to be true it must be true. . . .

It is all myth-making and delusion! There is no "The People." It is an invention of the politicians and of the new demagogues who speak through their newspapers. There is but a mass of people—that is, a mass of utterly present-minded and inevitably selfish individuals. . . .

A new despot has appeared among us. He is hydra-headed; he wears a thousand crowns and wields a thousand scepters. Though he is known by a thousand different names, the politician always addresses him reverently as "The People." He is the organized militant minority—for as the mass of men is incapable of political action as a mass, men group themselves in accordance with their dominant self-interest into organized minorities. Thus the mystic "The People" dissolves into a congeries of intolerant, self-seeking, present-minded, organized militant minorities, each one sacrificing the state and the individual citizen to its own peculiar and special interest, and using the courtier-politician for its indecent traffic.

C. H. Bretherton
 "Too Much Democracy"
The North American Review
 December 1927

Democracy does not envisage each man as being a law to himself, directly or by delegating his authority to another, but as being a law to everybody else. In a word it embraces fundamentally that sublime institution, the Tyranny of the Fifty-One Per Cent. . . .

There is no country in the world where the fifty-one percent interferes with the liberty of the forty-nine percent so often or so fundamentally as in the United States. More inhibitory laws⁴ are annually placed on its statute books, state and federal, than on all the statute books of Europe together. Theoretically, these inhibitory laws represent the desires of the majority of the people—who are presumed to inherit from their Puritan forebears a mania for making each other be good by numbers. Actually they are the work of a few cranks and fanatics, enthusiastic, well organized and well supplied with money—since Big Business is always on the side of the inhibitionists—and as active as the mass of the electorate is apathetic. As new and unwanted laws have multiplied, respect for the law as such has weakened, and a high premium has been placed upon the arts of the lawyers skilled in defeating the law. While leading the world in the number and variety of its legal inhibitions, the United States also leads it in the number and variety of its criminals and the ease with which they elude detection and arrest.

⁴ Laws inhibiting—regulating or banning—certain behaviors. The Volstead Act, which enforced Prohibition, was an inhibitory law.



John T. McCutcheon, "As She Looks for Her Standard Bearer,"
Chicago Tribune, June 2, 1924

"Miss Democracy" is the Democratic Party on the eve of its 1924 nominating convention, faced with a bewildering array of political interest groups vying to represent the spirit of the party—the "standard bearer."

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Walter Lippmann
"Bryan and the Dogma of Majority Rule"
Men of Destiny, 1927

Political commentator Lippmann wrote this piece after the 1925 Scopes "Monkey Trial" in Tennessee, in which teacher John Scopes was convicted of teaching evolution in a public school classroom. William Jennings Bryan, a staunch opponent of Darwinism, served as the prosecuting attorney.

Those who believed in democracy have always assumed that the majority should rule. They have assumed that, even if the majority is not wise, it is on the road to wisdom, and that with sufficient education the people would learn how to rule. But in Tennessee the people used their power to prevent their own children from learning, not merely the doctrine of evolution, but the spirit and method by which learning is possible. They had used their right to rule in order to weaken the agency which they had set up in order that they might learn how to rule. They had founded popular government on the faith in popular education, and they had used the prerogatives of democracy to destroy the hopes of democracy. . . .

. . . we hardly take the trouble to pretend that the rule of the majority is not at bottom a rule of force. What other virtue can there be in fifty-one percent except the brute fact that fifty-one is more than forty-nine? The rule of fifty-one percent is a convenience; it is for others the lesser of two evils, and for still others it is acceptable because we do not know any less troublesome method of obtaining a political decision. But it may easily become an absurd tyranny if we regard it worshipfully, as though it were more than a political device. . . .

At Dayton [Tennessee], Mr. Bryan contended that in schools supported by the state the majority of the voters had a right to determine that should be taught. If my analysis is correct, there is no fact from which that right can be derived except that fact that the majority is stronger than the minority. It cannot be argued that the majority in Tennessee represented the whole people of Tennessee; nor that fifty-one Tennesseans are better than forty-nine Tennesseans; nor that they were better biologists, or better Christians, or better parents, or better Americans. It cannot be said they are necessarily more in tune with the ultimate judgments of God. All that can be said for them is that there are more of them, and that in a world ruled by force it may be necessary to deter to the force they exercise.

Glenn Frank
"A Gadfly to Democracy"
The Washington Post
November 25, 1925

Democracy has been a sort of political religion with Americans. It has seemed to us to be almost a closed question; we have often doubted our loyalty to democracy, but we have rarely doubted democracy itself. But since complacency is the cover under which many sinister enemies creep into camp, it may do us good to listen to Dean Inge's indictment

of democracy.⁵ Here are the six counts in his indictment, as I remember.

First, that in the normal run of things, democracies do not find and put into power their greatest men, and that when a crisis, like war, arises, democracies invariably abdicate and hand themselves over soul and body to a strong government, either of one man or of a small group of men.

Second, that democracy is an easy victim of catchwords; that democracy will follow a demagogue's slogan more quickly than it will follow established fact or sound argument.

Third, that democracy is equally susceptible to reckless revolution and to reckless reaction; that democracy when aroused may be dominated by insanity, but when not aroused may be paralyzed by inertia.

Fourth, that democracy may easily become as inquisitorial and as tyrannical as a dictator or monarch; that democracy often exercises its inquisitorial habits by unenlightened interference with the legislature and the executive, and often exercises its tyrannical habits by hounding the minority man who is not content to be a mere phonograph record of the mob either in his ideas or in his actions.

Fifth, that democracy finally makes for anarchy rather than for order; that democracy dissolves a community into individuals and then reassembles them into mobs; that democracy invariably is powerless in the face of the organized demands of its militant groups or sections; that democracy has never been able to control its militant groups except by temporary stepping aside in the interest of some other and stronger form of social control.

Sixth, that the ethical standards of democracy are distinctly lower than the ethical standards of its enlightened citizens; that democracy puts generosity above justice, sympathy above truth, love above chastity, and a pliant disposition above rigid honesty.

I undertake no comment on this indictment. I spread no balm over the gadfly's sting.

⁵ Rev. William Inge, an Anglican priest and dean of St. Paul's Cathedral in London, had completed a lecture tour in United States in May 1925.

Has Democracy Broken Down?

THE FORUM ■ JANUARY 1929 ■ EXCERPTS

The *Forum*, a magazine of social and political commentary, regularly invited point-counterpoint essays on contemporary issues. For this inquiry it invited the noted philosophy scholar Will Durant, author of the best-selling *The Story of Philosophy* (1926), and the mayors of all American cities above 100,000 population. *The Forum* published readers' comments on this debate in the February issue (see p. 8).

The war that was to make the world safe for Democracy has been followed in Europe by unmistakable signs of the breakdown of democratic government. The strong dictatorships which have arisen in Italy, Spain, Poland, Russia, and Turkey are outward expressions of a general disillusionment. In America, although an unprecedented prosperity has tempered the force of criticism, an increasing tendency has shown itself to view democratic government as "a complex, distant, irresponsible, and disappointing business." Years ago, Lord [James] Bryce pointed out that the weak spots in the American system were the administrations or our cities. In the accompanying article Professor Will Durant expresses more than a merely personal opinion when he says that these weak spots have now become centers of virulent infection, indicating that Democracy's goodly apple is rotten at the core. To this indictment the Mayors of all cities having a population of 100,000 or more were invited to reply, and the best of their answers are published herewith. [The reply from the mayor of Des Moines, Iowa, is not included in these excerpts, for reasons of space.]

"The Reign of Mediocrity"

WILL DURANT

TO THE MAYORS OF AMERICA:

. . . Let us, then, agree, on this too: that whatever the evils and errors of democracy may be, it is far better for us than a reversion to older forms of misrule. We need not yet regret the democratic experiment, nor the revolutionary convulsions in which it had its birth. It is not a question of abandoning democracy, but of healing and preserving it. To do that we must diagnose its sickness candidly, and be ready for even the most heroic cures.

That it is considerably indisposed is evident in an increasing proportion of our American cities and states. A recent governor of Indiana has spent a term at Atlanta [penitentiary]. The governor of Illinois thrives on accusations. The governor of Oklahoma is charged with "moral turpitude"—as if that were a novelty in politicians. The former governor of Pennsylvania is out of office because he was not only a man of great ability, but, as even a detective agreed, he "was known to be on the level." It is being demonstrated that Philadelphia suffers from domination by a political machine so corrupt that even other politicians cannot bear its odor; that Boston is no longer ruled by Ph.D.s; that Kansas City and St. Louis are in the hands of "The Organization"; that Pittsburgh is part of the United States' Treasury; and that the most popular mayor west of the Hudson River has not learned of the termination of the Revolutionary War. . . .

. . . the impression has gone about the country that our cities, with certain honorable exceptions,

"Experiments in Trial and Error"

THE MAYORS OF AMERICA

SALT LAKE CITY, UTAH: John F. Bowman

Democracy, Mr. Durant concedes, has been offered to the people. He claims they have refused it. My observation and study would indicate that this is not true. Not every voter is a deep student of government, but he knows whether he approves of current policies with regard to the water supply, public safety, or the streets. Then the press informs him of every sin of commission or omission. A dishonest executive or employee is discovered and punished. I think the public is discriminating, even exacting.

. . . Machines? I may say without fear of contradiction that I was elected without making a single promise to anyone except that I would uphold the law.

TOLEDO, OHIO: William T. Jackson

. . . I think the greatest defect of democracy cannot be laid at the door of the machine, nor even to the lack of interest of the part of the masses who are not in a position to learn the facts. Rather, the fault can be laid to the intelligent people themselves. Being independent by nature, it is impossible for the individuals in any group of independents to pool their resources for any great length of time. Personalities are strutted forth, differences arise, and before long the independent movement falls by the wayside and the machine, led by the boss, ruling those who by nature can only follow, returns to power.

JACKSONVILLE, FLORIDA: John T. Alsop, Jr.

Municipal ownership is not an experiment, for Jacksonville has been in business for itself for twenty-eight years. For example, it operates its own power plant and sells electricity to its citizens at a low rate, so that all are benefited—the capitalist in his large business enterprise, the laborer in his humble home.

are ruled by inferior and sometimes half-illiterate men, whose shining virtues are neither knowledge, nor integrity, nor statesmanship, but fidelity and gratitude—fidelity to present instructions, and gratitude for nominations to come. . . .

Since the [political] machine is, in these premises, omnipotent, it selects its candidates solely with regard to their qualifications to serve the machine and the secret masters of the machine; . . . Each party and each machine represents an organized minority; whoever wins, the majority is sure to lose. All politics is the rivalry of organized minorities; the majority is too unorganized, occupied, scattered, contradictory, and forgetful to accomplish anything. The voters are bleacher athletes who cheer the victors and throw bottles at the defeated, but have no other part in determining the result. . . .

Yes, gentlemen, I know what you will tell me. That these faults of democracy are due to the imperfect education of our people, and that we must patiently wait and labor for their mental development. But I have waited considerably, and educated as many as would let me, and I find that people get born and grow up and die faster than I can educate them. . . .

I know of no way of saving democracy except to put upon [political] candidates a restriction, not merely of age and residence, but of training. . . . Let us require of those who rule our cities or our states or our country that they shall have devoted themselves as assiduously to learning the art and science of *administration* (which differs from politics) as men must now devote themselves to learning medicine and law. . . .

You say that this substitutes theoretical training for experience. Very well. Let higher offices be open only to those who have served two terms in an office of the next lower rank. You say that we need character as well as training. I answer that shysters and charlatans would not undertake so arduous a preparation, or would fall by the wayside. You say that the plan is undemocratic because it restricts office. It is; it is an attempt to combine aristocracy in government with democracy in choice.

. . . Let those who love democracy establish equality of educational opportunity. Let democracy mean the equal chance of all to make themselves *fit* to hold office.

SYRACUSE, NEW YORK: Charles G. Hanna

. . . I make the unqualified statement that the government has as much right to good participation by the citizens as the public has right to good government.

In Syracuse we have achieved this active participation. In the year 1926, I, as Mayor, appointed a Mayor's Citizens' Committee of fourteen members, comprising leaders in practically all of the large business enterprises in this city. . . . That these citizens, alive to their responsibility and the real importance of their advisory capacity, have sacrificed their time and given generously of their judgment in considering the varied business problems that confront the city, is not an achievement to be credited to an unusual public spirit in Syracuse. I believe this plan, properly and sincerely presented, would work with the same success in every city.

PORTLAND, OREGON: George L. Baker

All in all, I cannot agree that the cities are in the deplorable condition pictured by Mr. Durant, nor that the system is a failure. Some of the officials may not measure up to the very high moral and cultural standards of Mr. Durant, but his ideals along this line are not human. The type of official he has pictured would not last long in office because his ideals would not be the ideals of the public. . . . To be successful, a mayor must be a clearinghouse between the public and the technical staff of the municipality. He must be human and deal in a human way with the problems of the public which come before him.

MILWAUKEE, WISCONSIN: Daniel W. Hoan

To meet this onslaught against democracy by establishing colleges to educate more experienced public officials is nonsensical, to say the least. Nothing short of a political revolution can prevent corruption, promote decent and efficient government, and make it truly representative of the common citizens. . . .

Recognizing this, in Milwaukee, the workingmen and the middle classes—which, after all, are the producing elements—organized a political party called the Socialist party. They have agreed upon and promoted a program which, in brief, demands decency in government, the elimination of corruption, the taking of the dollar sign from government, and the placing of Service in its stead; a plan for municipal ownership, and such relief measures for the producers as are compatible with common sense. . . .

. . . What has been done in Milwaukee can be accomplished anywhere.

SOMERVILLE, MASS.: Leon M. Conwell

Most of the mayors I have met are men of high purpose and ability. Their success in office depends on how successfully they can withstand popular pressure when that pressure is misdirected.

Is Democracy A Failure?

THE FORUM ■ FEBRUARY 1929 ■ EXCERPTS

The American public comments on Dr. Durant's confirmation and the mayors' denial of democracy's failure as discussed in the January *Forum*. [Editors' note]

If it is any consolation to an enlightened government, present politicians and statesmen may be glad to know that there seems to be an intense and general conviction that democracy, as such, is not a failure in these United States. . . . Since the [readers'] letters themselves are the great proofs, they should be presented. They seemed most logically to divide themselves into three groups:

- those who felt that democracy either is breaking or has never existed;
- those who felt that democracy is the only governmental policy for the U.S., and that it is growing stronger; and
- those intermediate ones who could see both sides and had various remedies to suggest.

CALE YOUNG RICE, poet and dramatist, Louisville, Kentucky

"The ideal of self-government is so ingrained in the American mind that I see no probability of a resort to an autocracy or dictatorship, but political corruption is so pervasive that one must be capable of a great deal of self-delusion to fancy that we are really controlling ourselves democratically."

TOM D. McKEOWN, Congressman from Oklahoma

"The transfer of our population from the soil [farm] to the city has put a terrific strain on America's institution of democracy. By increasing the complexity of living, this trek to the city is making inadequate many of the old governmental methods. By submerging the individual in the crowd, it lessens his sense of civic responsibility and thus opens the way for political machines which thrive better in urban than in rural conditions. The political machine is not the root of the trouble, as Dr. Durant says, but rather the fruit of the trouble."

CHARLES L. KNIGHT, publisher of the *Akron Beacon Journal*, Akron, Ohio

"Under the primaries, it was inevitable that groups and blocks, easily used by the commercial politician, should become the dominant factor in selecting candidates. That, of itself, has driven out of public life practically all first-rate intelligence, for few able and courageous people are willing to make the compromises and to suffer the indignities necessary to get into office. Consequently, in a few years, we have passed from the wise representative democracy given us by our fathers to the rule of mobocracy which always has eventually destroyed. People destroy liberty in the name of more liberty."

ISAAC O. WINSLOW, Supt. of Education, Providence, Rhode Island

"Democracy is so firmly established in the United States that there is no real danger that it will be abandoned or overthrown. We have too much forward momentum. There is no possibility of pure democracy on this side of the millennium [i.e., 20th century]. We must be satisfied with oligarchical democracy. The paramount influence of a comparatively small number of leading spirits cannot be overcome or rejected. In a practical sense this is not to be regretted. Society should have the benefit of the leadership of the wisest and most capable citizens. The difficulty is to secure the selection of such citizens."

WILLIAM E. MULLEN [unidentified]

"A cult of inefficiency, insincerity, and greed has gained an influence in our politics that has caused some indifference to civic duty. But that will be remedied as time goes on, by the democratization of industry and trade, profit sharing through stock and bond participation, lessons of the World War, and the great educational movement now in progress."

SINCLAIR LEWIS, author of *Main Street*, *Babbitt*, and other novels

"I do not believe that there has ever been a breakdown of democracy in the United States because I do not believe that there has ever been democracy in the United States. I do not find the country club sets who felt superior to Al Smith [1928 Democratic presidential candidate] very different from the Tories of the Revolutionary War, the polite circles who felt superior to Andrew Jackson, the polite circles who felt superior to Abraham Lincoln, or the literary gentry of Boston who were shocked when Mr. Samuel Clemens of Boston [Mark Twain] dared to exhibit his Missouri humor at the dinner table."

B. E. P. PRUGH, chairman, Prohibition State Committee of Pennsylvania

"In spite of the noisy hue and cry about political chicanery and corruption, and the undoubted prevalence of it in great political centers, I believe it exists less today than it did in the past, taking into account the growth of cities in population and wealth, and the same I believe to be true of federal and state government in general. If democracy has failed or is failing, it is because fundamental moral principles are violated and the people are faithless to their duties and responsibilities to themselves as well as to others. At the bottom of this shirking is selfishness, standing aloof, preferring escape from a small share in civic duty, with its consequent acceptance of whatever evil results, thus inviting usurpation of power and dishonest administration of government."

FRANCIS H. SISSON, Vice President, Guaranty Trust Company of New York

"Human nature is weak and fallible, and so are its institutions. Through the pages of history we find autocracy, oligarchy, aristocracy, plutocracy, the tyranny of the few and the tyranny of the many, the rule of might, the rule of superstition, and the rule of wealth, all breaking down sooner or later in their efforts to perfect a scheme of government. Out of it all has emerged modern democracy, weak, unintelligent, inefficient, and frequently unable to cope with the problems it faces, and yet, in spite of it all, it seems to me to be the best scheme of government which society has yet devised for the preservation and protection of its interests."

FRANK WEBSTER SMITH [unidentified]

"Nothing requires such patience as democracy. Its slowness is often exasperating, but I doubt whether democracy, considering present conditions, is any more discouraging than it was 150 years ago, and 150 years is a brief span. In fact, I suspect it is far less discouraging. Democracy is rich in prophecy. It has not yet reached the promised land, but it is not in the wilderness. Our new [restrictive] immigration policy insures better conditions. Democracy is a penetrating and steady force. . . . The November election was one of the most encouraging illustrations of democracy in action we have ever had."

Walter Lionel George
*Hail Columbia!: Random Impressions
of a Conservative English Radical, 1921*

W. L. George was an English writer, a lover of America, and a social liberal, despite the tongue-in-cheek subtitle of *Hail Columbia!*, a memoir of his 1920 travels throughout the U.S.

America is conscious of her good fortune, and that is why she can afford the manifestation of pride which is called democracy. Democracy is the most arrogant of all forms; it is the converse of snobbery, for the snob conceives only superiors and inferiors. The snob is a man who thinks he has no equals, while the democrat is the man who thinks he has only equals. He is often mistaken in this view. . . .

. . . The American seems to have no illusions about the state; indeed, when one has read the American newspapers for a few months, and seen them filled with extraordinary tales of graft taken by high employees of corporations, by district attorneys, sanitary trustees [health officials], etc., one begins to believe that American rule is founded on graft. One has to reason with oneself to realize that the greatest and richest nation in the world cannot be erected on such a foundation.

For my part, I suspect that the situation is actually this: most of the public officials are elected; therefore they have to truckle to local opinion, for they hope to be re-elected. This must mean corrupt favoritism. In many cases, however, the situation is worse because the public official not only has to be re-elected by a body of constituents, but he also is the nominee of either the Democratic or the Republican party. He will naturally cleave to his party; its managers will have influence upon him. If he does not satisfy them, he will not be renominated. It is too much to ask of a human being that he should resist an influence such as that. Lastly, the public official is, in America, very ill paid. Many state governors before the war received less than six thousand dollars, and their pay has not been raised commensurately with the rise in the cost of living. If you compare rank with rank you will find that the American judge is paid about a quarter of what the English judge receives, and this in a country where the cost of living is twice as high as in England. What is the result? It is not necessarily corruption. Indeed the American judge deserves a tribute which he does not always receive for resisting corruption offered to poverty. I think it was Oscar Wilde⁶ who said that "anybody could be virtuous on ten thousand pounds a year." The most supreme of the American judges has never received such a salary, but he has been virtuous all the same.

David F. Houston
"An Answer to Pessimists"
Harper's, June 1924

Harper's Note: "During his eight years of service as Secy. of Agriculture and Secy. of the Treasury under Pres. Wilson. Mr. Houston won a deserved reputation for wisdom and calm statesmanship. What he says is always worth listening to, and never more so than at a season when confidence in public officials is at a low ebb, politics are debased, and cynicism and apathy are widespread. We commend his refreshing article to the thoughtful attention of *Harper* readers."

For four years, from 1914 to 1918, the political, economic, and social world sustained a shock of tremendous intensity and proportions. The wreckage is all about us. Emperors and empresses, kings and queens, and other hereditary potentates in more than twenty communities have been killed or deposed or have abdicated. . . . In fact, government in most parts of the world is under fire. Ships of state are waterlogged or rudderless.

In our own country there is no little doubt or uncertainty. In every direction one is confronted by the pessimist. Criticism of public officers and bodies is the favorite indoor sport. As Congress assembles or as the presidential election approaches, the seasonal shiver runs through the body politic. The argument runs this way: the Senate and the House of Representatives have deteriorated; they are full of cheap demagogues courting the popular favor, intent mainly on holding office; and the country is bureaucracy ridden, each bureau seeking to expand its functions and causing a rapid centralization of government and mounting expenditures. The people themselves do not escape. The Solicitor General of the United States⁷ tells us that they have lost their sense of values, that they have moving-picture brains, that true civilization cannot be made of such stuff, that the people are not interested any more in the serious business of government, . . .

If our public servants and institutions are so unsatisfactory and have been more so in each generation preceding this, how did it come about that the United States today, on the basis of any test you wish to

⁶ Oscar Wilde: 19th-c. Irish writer and poet.

⁷ In 1924, James Beck was serving as the U.S. Solicitor General, the official who represents the federal government in cases before the U.S. Supreme Court.

apply—certainly on the basis of every material test—is in a position of world leadership? Note the salient facts. Her wealth is as great as that of the states of Central and Western Europe with double the population; her national income is equal to theirs, and 60 percent of it accrues to individuals with incomes of less than \$2000 or less and 52 percent of it to wage earners. . . .

And yet this nation has only 110,000,000 people. Europe has 476,000,000. What is the explanation?

As the first two reasons, Houston cites the vast size of the nation, and its institutions and practices, especially majority rule and the rule of law.

Lincoln gave the third and larger answer when he said that the thing which has held this country together and made it strong has been the promise given that the weights should be lifted more and more from the shoulders of the average man, that he could be given an equal chance, and that he would have an opportunity to make the best of himself and to enjoy the fruits of his labor—in other words, democracy, with its decent regard for the average man.

And democracy with its concern for the average man is still a new and a very rare thing in this world. It is mainly a matter of concrete expression. It exists in reasonable measure only in these United States, in Switzerland, and some of the colonies of the British Empire. There are many proofs of the existence here of democracy. There are many proofs of its absence in a large part of continental Europe. It does not yet exist in the greater part of Europe. The essential thing in civilization, as we understand it, does not exist there. “The meaning of civilization,” Walter Page⁸ wrote, “is the extent to which it will improve the average man. The mere right to vote and to hold office is not democracy. They are only details—equality of opportunity is democracy.” . . .

Walter F. White
The Fire in the Flint
Novel, 1924

In his first of two novels on race in America, Walter White, an NAACP official who investigated race riots and lynchings, gave voice to his speculations on “the problem of race in America” through his protagonist, Dr. Kenneth Harper, a black physician in a small Georgia town. In this scene, Harper discusses black disenfranchisement in the South with two sympathetic white leaders of the town.

“It’ll be a long time,” answered Dr. Scott frankly. “There are a lot of white people in the South who know disfranchisement is wrong. We know that we can’t keep the ballot from the Negro always. But,” he ended with a shrug of the shoulders and a thrusting-out of his hands, palms upward, in a gesture of perplexity and despair Kenneth was learning to know so well that he was associating it instinctively with the Southern white man, “we’d stir up more trouble than we could cope with.”

“And while you’re waiting for the opportune time, conditions are getting steadily worse, the problem is getting more complicated, and it’ll be harder to solve the longer you put off trying to solve it,” urged Kenneth. It was with an effort that he kept out of his voice the impatience he felt. “Why don’t men like you three band together with those who think as you do, so you can speak out?” he asked?

“That’s just what we are trying to do, but we have to go very cautiously,” answered Dr. Scott. “We must use discretion. How much are Negroes thinking about voting?”

“They think about it all the time,” replied Kenneth. “We know the mere casting of a ballot isn’t going to solve all our problems, but we also know we’ll never be able to do much until we do vote.”

“You must be patient—wait until the time is ripe——” cautioned Dr. Scott.

“Patience can be a vice as well as a virtue.” It was David Gordon who spoke.

Kenneth looked at him gratefully.

“Your race’s greatest asset,” continued Dr. Scott, addressing his remark to Kenneth, yet seeking to impart a gentle rebuke to Gordon, “has been its wonderful gentleness under oppression. You must continue to be sweet-tempered and patient——”

“That’s all very well to advise, but how would you or any other white man act if you had to suffer the things the Negro has had to suffer?” demanded Kenneth. “Suppose you saw your women made the breeding ground of every white man who desires them, saw your men lynched and burned at the stake, saw your race robbed and cheated, lied to and lied about, despised, persecuted, oppressed—how would you feel, Dr. Scott, if somebody came to you and said: ‘Be patient?’”

⁸ Walter Hines Page was an American journalist and publisher who served as ambassador to the United Kingdom during World War One.

W. E. B. Du Bois
 "The Election and Democracy"
The Crisis, February 1921

As founder and editor of the African American magazine *The Crisis*, Du Bois emphasized coverage of the arduous struggle for blacks' civil and voting rights, especially through enforcement of the equal opportunity clause of the Fourteenth Amendment (1868).

In 1920, for the first time in twenty years, a presidential election has coincided with the decennial [ten-year] census. This gives us a chance to examine with some care the actual working of democracy in the United States. . . .⁹

A study of this table [Table A, estimating the percentage of each state's voting population that actually voted in the 1920 election] leads us to conclude that democracy in the United States, even in the basic matter of popular voting, is failing to function properly. We may, in fact, by rearranging the states, note certain astonishing differences.

TABLE B

Number of votes cast per representative in the 67 th Congress		Percent of voters voting		Percent of total population voting	
S. C.	8,269	S. C.	7.	S.C.	3.9
Miss.	10,311	Miss.	8.2	Miss.	4.6
Ga.	11,439	Ga.	9.2	Ga.	5.1
La.	14,636	La.	11.9	La.	6.3
Texas	21,001	Texas	17.7	Texas	9.2
Va.	21,003	Va.	18.	Ala.	10.
Ala.	21,915	Ala.	18.4	Ark.	10.
Ark.	22,955	Ark.	18.8	Va.	10.
Nev.	27,093	Fla.	28.6	Fla.	15.
Ariz.	33,281	Tenn.	32.7	Tenn.	18.
Fla.	37,349	N. C.	38.3	Ariz.	19.
Tenn.	33,768	Ariz.	41.	N. C.	21.
Vt.	44,953	Okla.	43.5	Pa.	21.2
N. C.	45,728	Pa.	44.5	Okla.	23.
Pa.	46,281	Mass.	46.	Me.	25.
Me.	49,461	Vt.	52.2	Mass.	25.
Wyo.	53,120	Me.	52.7	Vt.	25.
Okla.	54,046	N. Mex.	54.9	Conn.	26.
Mass.	55,205	Wis.	55.3	Wis.	26.
R. I.	55,996	Md.	56.4	Cal.	27.
Wis.	58,442	Wyo.	56.5	N. Y.	27.
Cal.	58,966	Cal.	58.	R. I.	27.
Ore.	59,643	Mich.	58.9	Wyo.	27.
Mont.	59,668	S. Dak.	59.3	Md.	28.
S. Dak.	60,582	Conn.	60.1	Mich.	28.
Conn.	60,921	Idaho	61.3	N. J.	28.
Md.	61,206	Kan.	61.7	N. Mex.	28.
N. Y.	61,332	Wash.	62.3	S. Dak.	28.
Mich.	61,636	Ore.	62.4	Ill.	30.
N. J.	64,567	N. J.	62.8	Minn.	30.
Wash.	65,700	W. Va.	64.4	Mont.	30.
N. Dak.	66,926	N. Y.	64.9	Ore.	30.
Minn.	66,894	R. I.	67.4	Idaho	31.
Idaho	67,796	Ky.	68.4	N. Dak.	31.
Kan.	71,269	Mont.	68.8	Ohio	31.
Ill.	72,231	Ohio	69.	Kan.	32.
W. Va.	72,849	Minn.	69.	W. Va.	34.
Ohio	77,660	Ill.	69.1	Nev.	35.
Neb.	79,192	Mo.	70.4	N. H.	35.
N. H.	79,546	N. Dak.	70.9	Wash.	35.
Iowa	81,371	Iowa	74.	Neb.	36.
Ky.	82,998	Neb.	74.4	Colo.	37.
Mo.	83,300	Colo.	76.4	Iowa	37.
Colo.	88,059	N. H.	79.5	Ky.	37.
Del.	94,756	Nev.	79.6	Mo.	39.
Utah	96,748	Ind.	80.9	Del.	42.5
Ind.	97,151	Del.	82.4	Ind.	43
N. Mex.	104,305	Utah	88.3	Utah	43.

. . . .
 In the United States we have three approximations to democracy. The great Middle West and the South West are states where 70 percent of the total voters vote, and voters form one third of the whole

⁹ For explanation of the statistical analysis and basis of estimates, see the full article—W. E. B. Du Bois, "The Election and Democracy," *The Crisis*, Feb. 1921—in the Modernist Journals Project (Brown University Library) at dl.lib.brown.edu/mjpl.

population. About 30 percent of the apparent voting population was disfranchised at the last election mostly, we can probably say, by voluntary abstention. The apportionment of a representative in Congress in this part of the United States calls for nearly 75,000 voters.¹⁰

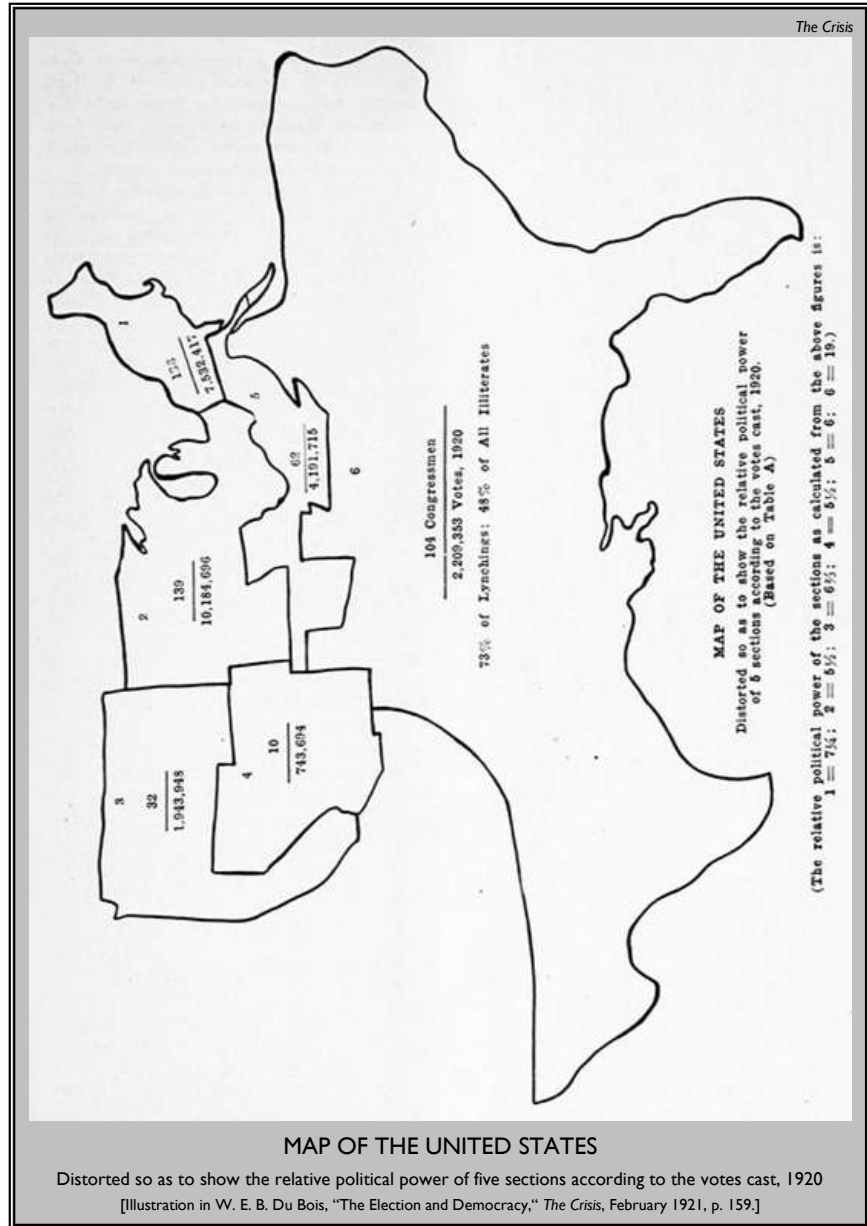
In contrast to this notice the South, here with a total population of nearly 23,000,000, and a probable voting population of nearly thirteen million, there were in 1920 less than two and a half million votes cast. Less than 10 percent of the total population vote and of the men and women 21 years of age about 18 percent vote. We have the astonishing total of ten and one-third millions of possible voters disfranchised, or 82.4 percent!

Notwithstanding this, the Southern portion of the Union will receive 104 representatives in the 67th Congress, thus requiring only 21,248 voters per representative. . . .

In the South we have an oligarchy ruling rotten

boroughs [towns], and a few calculations make this manifest: if the South with its 104 representatives is properly represented, then the Middle West ought to have 479 representatives instead of 139; the Pacific and Northwestern States ought to have 91 instead of 32; the South West ought to have 35 instead of 10; the Border States should have 197 instead of 62; the Middle States should have 265 instead of 101; and New England should have 89 instead of 35. Or, to put it another way, if the Middle West is properly represented, then the South instead of having 104 representatives ought to have 31.

These figures are, of course, tentative and may be criticized because of the assumptions made in estimating the voting population and the disfranchised foreigners. Nevertheless on the whole they approximate a correct picture of the dangerous situation in this country. If democracy is to survive, action and vigorous action looking toward the enforcement of the 14th Amendment is absolutely necessary.



¹⁰ In Table C (not reproduced here) the data in Table B was organized by regions of the U.S., adding an estimate of the number of disfranchised voters (including those who did not choose to vote).