

Mickey Dollens. 2024. *A Citizen's Guide to Political Change: How to Win with Ballot Initiatives and Defend Direct Democracy*. Whizbang Publishing. 231 pages.

Oklahoma House Representative Mickey Dollens authored a literal ‘how-to’ guide for engaging the tools of direct democracy enshrined in the state Constitution and provides even inactive citizens with a step-by-step manual of how to participate and have their voice heard. Dollens comes from a recognizably traditional Oklahoma background, having played Division 1 football, worked in the oilfield, and working as a high school teacher; a background that is not overtly political stripping away the idea that to engage in politics, one must be well-connected initially.

Dollens does a wonderful job of making wonky procedures of direct democracy accessible to the average citizen who wants to create social and political change within their community, state, or nation. The book is initially nonpartisan, even though it is obviously written by a partisan politician, and simply asks the reader to consider targeted civic engagement as an effective mechanism of participation. Dollens does not paint an idealistic picture of what citizens can accomplish, he is referencing and painstakingly explaining how critical tools such as citizen-led ballot initiatives and referendums are to “mitigate polarization and reestablish trust in government institutions” (p. 11).

In Chapter 1, “Power to the People”, Dollens summarizes a history of populism in the United States, particularly within Oklahoma’s founding and contemporary politics that enshrines direct democracy for the citizens as tools to guard against government overreach and ensuring that the voices of the citizens are harnessed and heard. Dollens does a bit of Political Science 101 in explaining the definitions of ballot measures, initiatives, and veto referendums as well as the frustratingly simple (yet oft confused) concept of our democratic republic. While these are obvious concepts to those of us in the field who are teaching on a daily basis, we must recall

that the average American has not been acquainted with the tools of direct democracy, much less being instructed on how to wield these tools to create change. It would be easy for Dollens, much like a professor, to simply espouse the definitions and instruct the reader on how to utilize the tools available, but he goes further by providing anecdotal evidence from other states of how citizens have successfully implemented change using direct democracy and direct participation.

Chapter 2 focuses on the rise and spread of the ballot initiative during the Progressive Era, and the impact that the process has had on contemporary American politics. Again, Dollens makes use of an example of the ballot initiative's use in American politics to create change, specifically, to restore voting rights for former felons in Florida.

Chapter 3 provides a call to action for citizens as there is a concerted attack on the tools of direct democracy at both the national and state level. Dollens notes the efforts to raise the threshold for passing ballot measures, requiring background checks for signature-gatherers, and increasing the number of valid signatures needed to be certified and placed on the ballot for voters. Dollens meticulously explains the threat of losing the tools of direct democracy or them being manipulated in a manner that renders them dysfunctional in the future, and the impact of losing those tools on the average citizen. In many instances, he does so by using states that have implemented such restrictive measures and the consequences of doing so. It is admirable that Dollens mentions the problem of mis-and-disinformation and the need for increased media literacy in 21st-century American politics. The chapter ends with a call to action to protect direct democracy and the power of the people to use these tools to affect change.

Chapter 4 is my favorite as it provides information on a variety of methods that citizens can use to stay informed and engaged politically. Dollens' suggestions include joining advocacy and

community groups, spreading awareness, and staying informed. What is so useful about this chapter is that Dollens provides a detailed list of advocacy groups and community organizations that work at a state and national level to support democracy, including the Ballot Initiative Strategy Center, Represent US, and Vote Save America. There is no guesswork involved, Dollens has provided a literal roadmap to engagement for the democratic citizen to take advantage of immediately.

In Chapter 5, Dollens responds to common criticisms of direct democracy and provides solutions that we can pursue to mitigate these varying issues that plague American politics, including voter fatigue and unintended consequences.

Within Chapters 6 and 7, Dollens provides a step-by-step guide on how to pass a ballot measure, starting with identifying the problem as well as a solution, and how to go about getting to the end goal. The list includes suggestions of who to contact, organizations that may be working in the same area or on the same goal, as well as practical advice regarding setting budgets, recruiting volunteers, and engaging donors. Chapters 8 and 9 go into detail about what to expect once your ballot language is approved and going about conducting an efficient signature-gathering campaign; Chapter 8 even includes sample language to initiate a conversation with a potential signer.

Overall, the book is a heartening use of political capital to better engage citizens and educate them on how best to utilize the tools of direct democracy for themselves. Dollens does an excellent job at keeping what could be a dry ‘how-to’ topic relevant, applicable, and accessible to everyday Americans who are looking to make a change in their lives. Dollens concludes aptly, “As we conclude this guide, step into your role with confidence. The future of direct democracy—and indeed, the broader landscape of our democratic governance—rests in the hands of those who dare to make a difference. The time to act is now. Are you ready to leave your

mark?"

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