

Rolison, W. Edward. 2023. *On Democracy: Essays on Principles Fundamental to American Government and the 2020 Presidential Election*. Parker, CO: Outskirts Press.

This reflective tome builds on a long career of teaching and researching in political science. Sweeping in its scope with over 400 pages, Rolison's book is a pedagogical memoir framed by lots of political analysis and lessons learned over the years. As the author notes, the heart of this book is a prioritized "list of fundamental principles of American democracy and of the United States Constitution" (p. iii). The book is organized according to Rolison's conceptual taxonomy of factors that sustain democracy. He has developed this list of principles over decades of teaching American government. It weaves an enormous gathering of Rolison's reactions about how American politics has played out over time with several of his newer essays that together comprise this book. He draws upon his class lecture notes and other interesting tidbits including a letter of political wisdom addressed to his young grandnephew. The book delves into political theory, both past and present. Intermixed are occasional (and probably therapeutic) diatribes against Donald Trump and associated threats to democracy.

On the surface, the book is clearly organized. Rolison was obviously inspired by the title, structure, and style of the "Conditions Favorable and Unfavorable" for democracy as outlined in Dahl's *On Democracy* (1998, Part IV). Rolison's work here is much more than a simple derivation of a political science classic. Rolison's *On Democracy* offers much more extensive and updated ideas about the primary and tangential principles essential for the success of American governance. The book's high ambitions are dampened by Rolison's desire to appeal to *both* students and professors. This strategy often works at cross purposes as the author swings back and forth between very elemental ideas to grand, sophisticated concepts. In other words, the book at times seems to be geared toward students and then other times it seems intended for advanced scholars. This choice of intended audiences is problematic for the

book overall.

The author says that he has written this book “specifically with students in mind” and intends it to be “a supplement to American government courses” (p. iv). Accordingly, each section starts at a very basic level—apropos for freshmen students. But then the author will suddenly veer into complex political philosophy and deep analysis of the American constitutional system. He then devotes much time in critical analysis of dense political theory not really accessible to most undergraduates—at least not without devoting better preparatory narrative. Part of this problem would be solved by a more careful sequencing of information, so that students could learn along the way and follow his train of thought. Newer concepts could build on those already introduced. As one example of this problem, Rolison discusses early in his introduction the constitutional basis for the “police power” held by American states (p. xxii), but he never bothers to actually define “police power” until nearly halfway through the book (p. 162). If the author’s purpose is to help students develop competence as citizens by becoming more knowledgeable about the inner workings of American democracy, the book fails to help them progress in sequential fashion toward that goal. As a teacher of American government myself, I know that a phrase like “police power” needs to be carefully explained so that students can comprehend that the concept goes far beyond criminal law enforcement. Likewise, Rolison uses the word “liberal” (p. xxvii) before he ever begins to explain the distinction between classical liberalism and modern liberalism.

Sometimes, Rolison will inexplicably and completely contradict himself. For example, he states, “The Supreme Court finally engaged in some judicial legislation in *Roe v. Wade*” (p. 93). Much later in the book, he asserts, “The Court, however, was not legislating in *Roe* or *Casey*; it was simply doing what courts do—it was finding fundamental and constitutional rights imbedded in the concept of ‘liberty’ protected from state infringement by the Four-

teenth Amendment” (p. 203). Well, which is it?

Rolison’s book would probably have been better served going through a traditional academic publisher that would have likely provided a much more thorough editorial treatment on grammatical, organizational, and substantive grounds. A traditional academic publisher might also recommend that *On Democracy* would better serve contemporary students with a few more features such as in-set narratives and sidebar definitions. In another missed opportunity, Rolison frequently points to other resources with little preview about what those scholars contribute to the discussion. As a case in point, he ends his third chapter by stating with undue brevity, “A deep dive into this more positive concept of ‘nationalism’ can be found in Liah Greenfield’s book, *National: Five Roads to Modernity* (1992)” (p. 43). Most readers would appreciate a bit more elaboration. Hopefully, the author can make some adjustments to better reach the needs of students if he decides to come out with a second edition.

After reading and reflecting on Rolison’s words, I think the better purpose served is his other articulated goal of providing professors with “a source for their lectures on fundamental principles” (p. iv). In spite of *and perhaps because* of his numerous digressions sprinkled throughout, I really learned a lot! I have known Rolison as a respected colleague for nearly thirty years now and was part of the process that recently awarded him the well-deserved Bob Darcy Lifetime Achievement Award by the Oklahoma Political Science Association. But I have to admit, that I did not fully appreciate the brilliance of this man’s mind until reading this work. He has distilled a lifetime of wisdom into a road map especially useful for new scholars of American politics. For that reason alone, this book is worth the price of admission!

The flavor of *On Democracy* is revealed almost immediately in its organization. The book is divided into five main parts initiated at the front end with prefatory material including his prologue, a

“Preface” and “Addendum” in the style of personal journal entries, and a reprint of Lincoln’s Gettysburg Address.” Lincoln’s last line which states the hope that American democracy “shall not perish from the earth” really sets the stage for the high stakes that concerns this author. Rolison’s mission is to help preserve American democracy for future generations. Part I consists of “Six Philosophical Principles of American Democracy” including corresponding essays on natural rights/natural law, belief in rationality, individualism, liberty, equality, and justice. Part II consists of “Six Conditional Principles Conducive to American Democracy” including a favorable economy, an underlying consensus to play by the rules of democracy, fragmentation of power, an informed citizenry, a two-party system, and willingness to compromise. Part III covers procedural principles such as elections, a loyal opposition, majority rule tempered by minority rights, and free speech. Part IV is a ragtag collection of additional principles such as federalism, judicial review, religious freedom, and prohibition against emoluments. Part V contains an essay on “Democratic Collapse” and “The Trump Challenge.” He then concludes the rest of the book with an eclectic selection of items including an essay on “The Future of American Democracy,” and a letter to his teenage grandnephew explaining the “isms” starting with fascism. The rest of the appendices include speeches by Barack Obama and Joe Biden, and then the Declaration of Independence, the Articles of Confederation, and the U.S. Constitution.

Rolison does an excellent job setting up conversations with the great political philosophers of the past. For example, he conducts a thought experiment asking about how Thomas Hobbes would react to the analysis by most modern political scientists that voters fail to live up to the ideal of being fully informed and making rational choices. Rolison concludes bluntly that Hobbes would say, “I told you so.” He brings into the conversation numerous other political philosophers such as Plato, John Locke, John Stuart Mill, and John Rawls. Some of Aristotle’s political observations would likely clarify Rolison’s discussion about Locke’s social contract

requiring rulers to govern in the interests of the people. Aristotle described six forms of government: monarchy, tyranny, aristocracy, oligarchy, republic (polity), and democracy. The difference between each is whether or not they rule in the interests of the ruler or in the interest of all (Aristotle, trans. 1981, p. 190). That was the very point Locke was making and Aristotle's typology still works well with students.

His chapter, "Principle Number Three: Belief in Individualism, Not Extreme Nationalism" sets up a false dichotomy in terms of the American system. Although he is correct in his initial assessment about the importance of the individual, Rolison completely disregards the importance of Madisonian pluralism in this context. In a similar vein, Rolison says that the American creed requires electoral equality by which he defines as "one person, one vote" (p. 24). Of course, that is a commonly understood view of this concept, but he does not qualify this definition within a federalist system through which the setup of the Senate and of the Electoral College distorts the one-person, one-vote standard.

Rolison is an unabashed fan of America's two-party system (pp. 50-60). He provides a few succinct explanations about how the parties emerged so quickly even though the Constitution never explicitly references their existence. These include the "single-member, winner-take-all" electoral districts and the success of major parties of co-opting the platforms of third-party competitors. He credits the two-party system as a major reason the United States has "enjoyed mostly stable, responsive, and responsible government" (p. 53). He then laments how Trump has hijacked the Republican Party by appealing to the darkest side of America's political soul by championing xenophobia and appealing to authoritarian tendencies. He questions the fate of the American political system when one of its major parties is on a fast track to autocracy (p. 59). Yet, for all his praise for the advantages of a two-party system and his grave reservations about its demise, he never makes one of the more obvious recommendation which is to rebuild the strength of

America's parties. The rise of candidate-centered politics, emergence of new media, and the role of dark money are among many explanations offered by political scientists for the weakening of the two-party system. Where is Rolison's clarion call to restore the vigor of American parties?

The author states in his "Principle Number Thirteen" that "American democracy requires that elections be free, fair, and frequent" (p. 75). Rolison must have missed the large and longstanding body of literature that suggests that the overwhelming number of elections that occur at all levels of the government in the United States plays a significant role in diminishing voter turnout (see Boyd, 1986; Jackman and Miller, 1995; Lijphart, 1997; Franklin, 2001; Rallings, 2003; and Kostelka, Krejcova, and Wuttke, 2023). To be fair, I think that Rolison is really referring to *regular* elections, but of course that would ruin the appealing alliteration.

Arguably the Beatles' best albums (and my favorite) is *Abbey Road*. Although it was not the last released, it was the last made by the four Beatles together. They knew it would be their last time in the studio. So, they took many of their best songs not fully developed and cobbled them together. This medley of songs appears on Side B of *Abbey Road* and is perhaps their very best demonstration of absolute genius. Rolison may have produced something very similar with this book. This collection of essays covering so many disparate themes demonstrates an enviable level of brilliance. It is an important contribution to the study and teaching of American politics. So much provocative material is presented here that a proper analysis of this book would need to be even longer than this book. Like many great books, this one is not easy to categorize and can be frustrating. But it is also enlightening and consistently thought provoking.

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