

The Domestic Policy Association and American Democratic Thought:
An Informal History

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The Domestic Policy Association is rooted in participatory democratic theory and practice, and is part of a widespread response to a twentieth century version of democratic elitism. Formed in the wake of Vietnam and Watergate, the DPA is kin to grass roots democratic movements: like the neighborhood movement and voluntary associations, it represents a strong public reaction against rule by experts.

Since the founding of the Republic, Americans have argued that the individual has certain “natural rights,” among which is the right to govern himself. We call these rights “natural” because we believe they derive not from any institution but are accorded to us by virtue of our humanity. By contract, we consider government a human creation, an institution we build to protect our natural rights. As stated in the American Declaration of Independence, “We hold these truths to be self-evident: That all men are created equal; that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights; that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. That, to secure these rights, governments are instituted among men, . . .”

Government implies raw power. We know instinctively and historically that government has the power to crush individuals—to rob us of our rights, to seize our property, to throw us into jail, to disenfranchise us. Our founding fathers felt they had experienced such tyranny. They believed their rights as Englishmen had been violated by the British government, and they claimed that “whenever government becomes destructive” of the rights of man, “it is the right of the people to alter or to abolish it and to institute new government, . . .” They were not anarchists; they believed government an absolute necessity, but they understood that it must be structured to insure justice.

The government they formed is complex, in part participatory, in part elitist. It reveals their fear of two separate kinds of political tyranny, one practiced by government, the other practiced by the majority. In the first case, they wished to protect the people from government’s inherent tendency to exceed its legitimate authority, which elicited

their participatory thoughts. Arguing that a just government derives its power “from the consent of the governed,” they grounded all legitimate political authority in the people, making government responsible to them. The public’s right to grant its consent they guaranteed through frequent elections. Our founding fathers believed the rational individual the cornerstone of democratic society, and voting, that is, exercising the franchise, central to democracy.

Ironically, they were skeptical about democratic government: they feared the people’s passions, ill-formed public opinion, and popular majority control. These fears reveal their elitism, and found expression in their efforts to restrict direct participation by the people.

By design, the political system they created is not a popular democracy. It is a representative system, a republic. The Constitution guarantees our right to elect representatives—congressmen, senators, presidents—to make national policy on our behalf, but not to make that policy ourselves. The founding fathers’ theory of representation is crucial to their understanding of and faith in democratic government.

Informed by the British political thinker, Edmund Burke, they believed two kinds of representation possible: actual and virtual. Actual representation means literal representation. The elected representative votes according to the wishes of the majority of those he represents, and not according to what rational judgment and discourse suggest that he do. In actual representation, public polling can be critical, for the results tell the representative what the majority of his constituents think he should do. The actual representative acts as the majority’s proxy, potentially reducing the representative to a cowering figure before the latest poll.

Virtual representation, by contrast, is elitist, but nonetheless democratic. The majority elects its representatives, but when shaping public policy, the representative votes according to the dictates of his conscience—formed, we hope, through rational debate and discourse.

Our founding fathers abhorred actual representation; they feared any system driven by “mob rule.” To insure against such a system, they created a bicameral legislature...

For founding fathers virtual representation was the most rational way to govern a large, diverse society, but it constituted only minimal protection against the excesses to which democratic rule is often prone. Their fear of popular control also found expression in a limited franchise—they did not allow everyone to vote—and in a constitutional system of checks and balances. They intentionally made it difficult for a popularly-elected government to act and for the majority to exercise its will.

Given their fears, why did they claim that just government derives its power from the people? Why did they bother to be small ‘d’ democrats at all? If we choose to be cynical about their intent, we recognize that their renouncements about democracy allowed them to justify their right to revolution. If we choose to recognize their genius and their warning, we understand that they feared the political consequences of investing government with too much power, with final authority over which the people have no recourse. Like the popular will, government, they know, can be prone to exceed its authority if not checked.

In short, the founding fathers dedicated our government to two purposes which lie in constant tension, and which are often contradictory: a government basically democratic, that is, one which derives its powers from the consent of the governed, and one which will not allow the majority to act.

To reiterate, the founding fathers feared that they considered the destructive potential inherent in popular rule. They intentionally created a system of indirect political control and constitutional checks and balances to prohibit majority passions from becoming tyrannical, while maintaining the people’s right to elect their governors. In sum, a vital tension between participation and elitism lies at the very heart of our democratic government. It must represent the wishes of the majority, but it must keep that majority from doing whatever it deems fit.

Since the Civil War, we have moved away from the fears which informed the framers of the Constitution, steadily in the direction of popular rule: we expanded the franchise, provided for the direct election of senators, and now allow the public to participate directly in the decision-making process. Over the years we have amended the Constitution and passed legislation which makes possible more participation than at any previous time in our history, not less.

As we have expanded participation, we have become increasingly concerned, and rightly so, about what the citizenry needs to know to govern itself effectively and in good conscience. It is not a new problem. Thomas Jefferson, one of our most eminent political thinkers, understood that democracy and education are inextricably intertwined. He wished to be remembered for the Declaration of Independence and for his plan for the University of Virginia, a public institution. Jefferson, like many others, held that the basic responsibilities of citizenship require a general education. Rather than restrict political participation to the privileged, he labored for education of the masses at the public's expense. In a letter often quoted by the Domestic Policy Association, Jefferson wrote: "I know of no safe depository of the ultimate powers of society but the people themselves; and if we think them not enlightened enough to exercise their control with a wholesome discretion, the remedy is not to take it away from them, but to inform their discretion by education." He did not fear public participation, but he recognized that participation must be informed. This is more important today than in Thomas Jefferson's day.

In the wake of the First World War, a revised theory of democratic criticism gained credence among many political thinkers. It became particularly strong after Hitler's rise to power in Germany. Democratic elitists reacted against the excesses inherent in popular rule.

They argued that the public simply did not know enough, particularly in the 20th century, to govern themselves efficiently and effectively. Unlike Jefferson, they defended the government by experts—those with expert knowledge in some given field.

This development in political theory coincided with the development and growth of bureaucracy... We once believed it to be value neutral, neither participatory nor elitist. We allowed its power to grow steadily until curtailment became a major campaign issue of the late sixties and early seventies. With the Civil Rights movement, we discovered that the federal bureaucracy can be employed to reform society's ills. In truth, as Garry Wills claims, we use the federal bureaucracy as our compliant bureau—we ask it to remedy a variety of problems, social, economic, environmental. Investing it with broad regulatory power, we allowed the bureaucracy to grow in direct proportion to our complaint about social and economic injustice.

Despite success in the area of Civil Rights, we discovered in the late sixties that bureaucracy face of not just participatory democracy, but democratic elitism as well. We found ourselves saddled with an institution of our own making, but which seemed to have a will of its own. The public became conscience of two problems: the bureaucracy seems to be a haven for experts who believe themselves not the representatives of the public, but the government itself; and worse, the public began to realize the extent to which the bureaucracy can respond to special interests, but not to an ever elusive, ever intangible, common good. The system seemed further removed from public control than even the founding fathers would have considered healthy.

The crucial question became one of control: how could the people gain control of the bureaucracy? Our answer included a variety of citizen involvement programs...

These practical changes complemented a revitalized theory of participatory democracy and the rise of “new public administration,” one which intended to involve the public in the very business of the bureaucracy.

Those changes are fine and laudable and important. But what is the education side?

The Domestic Policy Association, I think, is a practical complement... Though we have mandated more public participation, via citizens’ involvement; we have neglected to address the question underlying Jefferson’s assumption in a practical way. Jefferson assumed the common school would educate the public in what it must know to govern itself well. He lived in a simpler age. The current rapidity of change, much of it technological and scientific, demands that we keep abreast of the currents of ideas almost on a daily basis.

As I see it, the DPA was created in the belief that a variety of institutions educate—schools, museums, community colleges, libraries, civic organizations, televisions, and even four-year institutions—and that they are well-equipped to inform the public’s discretion, not only so that the public might elect its representatives more thoughtfully, but so that the public might participate more effectively in other ways: on advisory committees and in public hearings for example. Local forums allow people to come together to solve their own problems—to govern themselves.