

Democracy: the best regime in existence?

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*How can democracy lead to such successful outcomes when its defining characteristic, elections, are so flawed? **Danny Oppenheimer** and **Mike Edwards** draw on cutting-edge research in psychology and political science to investigate the question and suggest an answer. The authors argue that democracy works because regular elections, no matter how flawed, produce a variety of unintuitive, positive consequences. **Mark Fisher** is unconvinced however, finding that the authors fall into the trap of judging democracy by American standards.*



Democracy Despite Itself: Why a System That Shouldn't Work at All Works So Well.
Danny Oppenheimer and Mike Edwards. MIT Press. February 2012.

At a time when many citizens in democratic countries are frustrated with the direction that their government is heading, *Democracy Despite Itself* attempts to offer a great deal of reassurance. Written by Princeton psychology professor [Danny Oppenheimer](#) and [leftfielder.org](#) blogger Mike Edwards, the book seeks to prove the validity of Churchill's dictum on social scientific grounds, suggesting that democracy really isn't as bad as its well-studied weaknesses make it seem. Despite the widespread ignorance, irrationality, and impulsiveness of the voting public, as well as the institutional shortcomings of both state and news media, the authors argue that recent work by psychologists, behavioral economists and political scientists can ultimately prove that democracy remains the best system of government out there.

Aware that they are defending democracy in a time of increased cynicism (though, it should be made clear, when the authors say democracy they mean American democracy, and they admit as much), the authors do not try to gloss over its weaknesses. Rather, the first half of the book puts these weaknesses under the magnifying glass, using studies from a range of disciplines to empirically attest to their existence. Indeed, Oppenheimer and Edwards find that incompetency comes in all shapes and sizes within democracy, and it can be discovered in all corners of democratic life. In particular, social science research suggests that the general voting public is capable of only a very bounded rationality in the formation of their political preferences (and, more often, obvious irrationality), leaving elections and referendums to be decided by something quite different from good political judgment.

Lest we fall into despair (or worse, a revolutionary spirit), the second half of the book seeks to

'restore some sanity' and reaffirm the privileged position of democracy by the same means that it questioned it. Pointing to studies on civil liberties, procedural fairness, regime stability and others, Oppenheimer and Edwards argue that the previously identified weaknesses, despite being many, do not actually impede the salutary effects of democracy. Instead, their research suggests, because of the particular norms and values it inculcates so well, the advantageous effects of its electoral approach to regime change, and even, perhaps, voter ignorance itself, democracy is able to overcome its errors and outshine all of its competitors according to a number of different metrics.

Though professional social scientists will not likely find much that is altogether new in *Democracy Despite Itself*, many will agree that Oppenheimer and Edwards do an admirable job of synthesizing the existing literature into a concise and tractable argument. What is more, they accomplish this task in a style that is at once light, relaxed, and very clear, promising to make recent social scientific findings accessible to a much wider audience than before.

However, despite its charms, the authors' breeziness all too often translates into superficiality for *Democracy Despite Itself* to deliver on its ambitious promises. This is most conspicuously the case in the book's central (and truly massive) claim that, despite frequently irrational electoral outcomes, democracy remains the *best* form of government known to man. This claim – which has been considered and reconsidered since at least the time of Plato – receives just twelve pages of discussion before it is taken as settled and the authors move on to consider the reasons for it being the case. This brevity is suspicious in itself, but even more so are most of the arguments that fill these few pages.

For instance, the authors' first proof that democracy remains the best regime in existence comes from a juxtaposition of studies on global levels of democracy and global protection of civil liberties. This proof is obtained by cross referencing the 2010 Economist Intelligence Unit classification of how democratic various states were with two studies, one tracking the incarceration of dissenting journalists throughout the world, and the other ranking countries on their levels of religious toleration. Oppenheimer and Edwards find that, for both of the studies, democratic countries led the pack in the protection of civil liberties, and, in general, seemed to provide an environment in which 'human rights [could] take hold and prosper'. All of this is in accordance with the evidence, and the problem is not that this claim is false, but rather that it is necessarily true according to the EIU's survey. The protection of civil liberties was one of the central determinants of whether a country was considered democratic or not by the EIU, and every country deemed some type of a democracy, with one exception (Israel), scored very highly in terms of civil liberties (at least a 7 out of 10). Of the countries deemed 'full democracies', only the US and South Korea scored below a 9.12. The authors' first proof, then, isn't much more than a tautology, only really telling us that democracies exhibit more of the characteristic features of democracy than non-democracies. I should hope so!

Though it is also possible to quibble with the author's use of post-war Germany as a self-evident example of democracy's power to pacify countries, there is a bigger issue with Oppenheimer and Edward's discussion of democracy's superiority that needs to be raised. At no point in these twelve pages, or anywhere in the rest of the book, is the metric that is being used to rank the comparative excellences of regimes made explicit, and it's not clear that the authors have thought this through carefully. Rather, a host of studies are levied in order to demonstrate that democracies excel in areas which are assumed to be good (civil liberties, constitutional longevity, etc). However, if democracies really do inculcate norms, habits, and beliefs that reinforce belief in and allegiance to democracy, as the authors argue that they do, this would suggest that what the authors (both American) assume to be good will be strongly oriented towards the reinforcement of democratic legitimacy and values. The entire argument, then, is in danger of being entirely circular. By relying on the intuitive judgments of democratic citizens to determine which regime is best, we again fall into the problem of merely judging democracy by its own standards.

The quality of argument recovers somewhat as the authors move towards discussion the reasons why democracy succeeds despite its weaknesses, and it this reviewer's opinion that Oppenheimer and Edwards would have written a much more convincing work had they simply stuck to this argument and avoided the claim that democracy must therefore be 'best'. Nevertheless, there still remain many stones left unturned in this final section, and a more careful and probing discussion would have been welcome.

In the end, I can't help but be rather disappointed with the lack of rigor demonstrated by this book and its frequent deafness to possible counter-arguments. If you are looking for a study of democracy's comparative merits that is rigorous, thoughtful and ultimately convincing, it is my reluctant conclusion that you will have to go else where. However, if what you are seeking is either a pleasant read or a bit of ideological reassurance, *Democracy Despite Itself* will suit your purposes well.

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