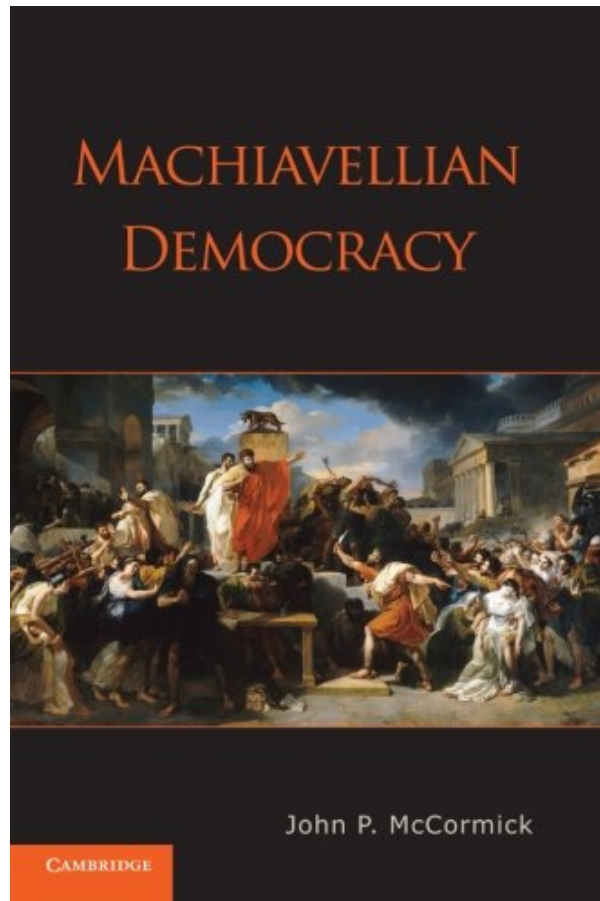


# MACHIAVELLIAN DEMOCRACY BY JOHN P. MCCORMICK



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## Review

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"John P. McCormick's *Machiavellian Democracy* is a remarkable and outstanding exercise in political theory. A work of impeccable scholarship, it shows a profound grasp of Machiavelli, his thought and his politics. The book is a significant contribution to contemporary civic republican thought and to democratic theory. McCormick's is a dazzling achievement: fluent and thoughtful, theoretically trenchant, penetrating and insightful in its originality and power."

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Intensifying economic and political inequality poses a dangerous threat to the liberty of democratic citizens. Mounting evidence suggests that economic power, not popular will, determines public policy, and that elections consistently fail to keep public officials accountable to the people. John P. McCormick confronts this dire situation through a dramatic reinterpretation of Niccol- Machiavelli's political thought. Highlighting previously neglected democratic strains in Machiavelli's major writings, McCormick excavates institutions through which the common people of ancient, medieval, and Renaissance republics constrained the power of wealthy citizens and public magistrates, and he imagines how such institutions might be revived today. Machiavellian Democracy fundamentally reassesses one of the central figures in the Western political canon and decisively intervenes into current debates over institutional design and democratic reform. Inspired by Machiavelli's thoughts on economic class, political accountability and popular empowerment, McCormick proposes a citizen body that excludes socioeconomic and political elites and grants randomly selected common people significant veto, legislative, and censure authority within government and over public officials.

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Recapturing Machiavelli Away from his Captors

By Wayne Lusvardi

John McCormick has written a paradigm-busting book on 15th Century political thinker Niccolo Machiavelli's concept of democracy. The book has gathered much attention and reviews in academic circles, where it has been received with reported hostility. But the book deserves a review on Amazon and a wider audience of "the People" (the Popolo) rather than just academic elites.

McCormick's thesis is that many other political thinkers including --James Madison, Leo Strauss, and the Cambridge School of Republicanism -- have ripped off Machiavelli's conception of good government as support for republicanism (with a small "r"). As McCormick points out Machiavelli's ideas explicitly support a populist version of democracy. Indeed, McCormick's understanding of how cunning and oppressive political elites control information, set the agenda of public opinion, twist facts to favor them, and squelch opposition by smearing them describes those who have co-opted Machiavelli's ideas for their own ends.

It is no wonder the book has been received with hostility by academics that tend to be dependent on government and taxing elites for their livelihoods. Many critics say McCormick's book doesn't adequately describe such elites as Bill Gates or Rupert Murdoch. But McCormick isn't referring to capitalist elites because in the 15th Century Capitalism didn't exist and corporations, defined as separate from government, didn't either. Machiavelli, and McCormick, are both talking about government elites.

McCormick calls for the creation of a modern day college of Tribunes, as in ancient Rome, that represented the People. McCormick makes a good case that they should be chosen by lottery not election; should not be wealthy; should not be an elite member of government already; and should be empowered to veto other legislative bodies. McCormick advocates "affirmative action" for the People. He says that what the People lack is not just the proper conception of democracy, but also a set of institutions to check and hold elites accountable.

My only difficulty with McCormick's breakthrough book is that if a Tribune position is going to be created it also should not be drawn from those in poverty or the Plebian class either. In modern day America, as in ancient Rome, the Patricians and the Plebians have formed a coalition against the middle class (read Thomas F. Madden, *Empires of Trust: How Rome Built and America is Building a New World*). Affirmative action and ACORN already exists along with countless nonprofits advocating for the poor. What doesn't exist is affirmative action for the common people who are not members of unions. Hence, the recent rise of the Tea Party.

However, equating the Tea Party with Machiavelli's conception of the Popolo (people) would likely make most academics cringe, including McCormick who sees redistributionists such as Paul Krugman, Theta Scopol, Thomas Frank, and Kevin Phillips as modern Tribunes for the social class of the poor he erroneously believes there are no institutions for. Thus, McCormick's book again proves his thesis by trying to appropriate Machiavelli for the author's own ends just as he accuses others of doing.

At the end of his book McCormick uses the state of California as an example of Machiavellian democracy with ballot initiatives and recall elections. But most ballot initiatives in California are bankrolled by wealthy elites for their own purposes. Take Prop 71, the California Stem Cell Research Initiative of 2004 that was supported by a real estate developer to set up a \$3 billion full employment act for him and a highly educated class of technocrats in a state that is broke. Moreover, the stem cell bureaucracy is redundant as both private



sector venture capital funding and NIH grants provide most of the funding for stem cell research already.

And as we can see by the California state budget deficit crisis of 2009 and thereafter, the Gubernatorial recall election of 2003 didn't work out as envisioned. California has been more of a test tube to confirm Machiavelli's ideas of how "the Grandi" or Patrician class in forming a coalition with unions and the poor, have brought about a near collapse of a sovereign government. Some county governments in California are facing a wave of debt that would exceed their entire annual operating budgets just to pay for public pensions. What California needs is an infusion of people's institutions as McCormick advocates, cut not necessarily more advocacy institutions for the poor. The entire California Real Estate Bubble was partly caused by trying to provide cheap money and easy qualifying mortgages for the rentier class to move into ownership housing. This failed miserably as all Marxist materialist-only solutions often do.

Unfortunately, McCormick picked an unfortunate title for his book. Machiavellian means to be manipulative to the People he is trying to write for. "Was Machiavelli a Democrat?" or "Capturing Machiavelli" may be a more appropriate title.

But this is a good book that should be read with a critical eye when it comes to the ideological tug-of-war over Machiavelli's ideas. Nonetheless, it will help you rethink any notions you have about representative republican government, popular election as opposed to lotteries, and why it is important to create institutions for under-represented social classes from this well written book.

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Democracy in Crisis?

By T Paterson Byrne

The author tackles what may be the biggest problem of the 21st century: how to restore democracy to American democracy (and those of the West).

Today's society is dominated by a moneyed elite with an agenda, which effectively demands specific government policies from would-be leaders in return for financial support, and in order to avoid media attack. Reforming this arrangement may be no small task as the elite can be expected to use its resources to defend its entrenched position. The author's study of the past when similar problems have existed provides valuable guidance.

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Five Stars

By Tiago Losso

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