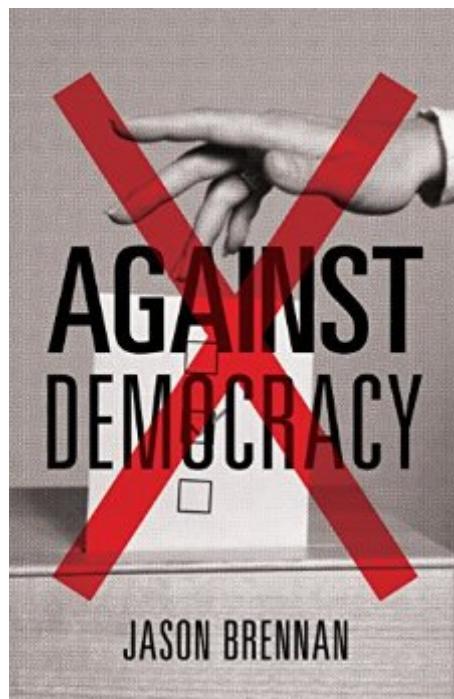


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# Against Democracy



## Synopsis

Most people believe democracy is a uniquely just form of government. They believe people have the right to an equal share of political power. And they believe that political participation is good for usâ "it empowers us, helps us get what we want, and tends to make us smarter, more virtuous, and more caring for one another. These are some of our most cherished ideas about democracy. But, Jason Brennan says, they are all wrong. In this trenchant book, Brennan argues that democracy should be judged by its resultsâ "and the results are not good enough. Just as defendants have a right to a fair trial, citizens have a right to competent government. But democracy is the rule of the ignorant and the irrational, and it all too often falls short. Furthermore, no one has a fundamental right to any share of political power, and exercising political power does most of us little good. On the contrary, a wide range of social science research shows that political participation and democratic deliberation actually tend to make people worseâ "more irrational, biased, and mean. Given this grim picture, Brennan argues that a new system of governmentâ "epistocracy, the rule of the knowledgeableâ "may be better than democracy, and that itâ "s time to experiment and find out. A challenging critique of democracy and the first sustained defense of the rule of the knowledgeable, *Against Democracy* is essential reading for scholars and students of politics across the disciplines.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

The day after the Brexit referendum, the top internet search requests were for “benefits of EU membership.” This compactly explains Jason Brennan’s thesis in *Against Democracy*. Democracy is an operating system, nothing more. If you give it bad input. His main argument boils down to governance being instrumental. If there is a better instrument than democracy, then we should use it and reap the benefits. Because in democracy, “knowledge and rationality do not pay, while ignorance and irrationality go unpunished.” A US senator is worth an average of \$14 million, and a congressman \$6 million. This is not even representative democracy; this is the Ruling Class. Democracy isn’t working. Brennan says the only thing democracy has going for it is that we haven’t found anything consistently better. Absolute power might corrupt absolutely, but so does politics. It seems to improve nothing. If you get voters away from politics, everything will improve. He says there are three broad categories of voters, only one of which provides valid input. Hobbits know and are pleased to know nothing. Their input is worse than flipping a coin. Hooligans hold tightly to political positions despite the facts. Their votes are fixed and wasted. Vulcans analyze, are open to new sources and can convincingly take different sides. They seek correction so as not to appear in error. Brennan’s solution is an epistocracy. The epistocracy is a collection of the brightest Vulcans. They have to pass a test: economics, immigration, environment “everything. Only they get to vote. It keeps politics away from the masses, and (in Brennan’s theory) leads to more effective government. The main problem with epistocracy is visible today.

Jason Brennan is The Man Who Was Born Yesterday. His book is incisive, insightful, interesting, funny, and well-informed. It delivers a sound and compelling case that democracy is fatally flawed. But everything he says in “Against Democracy” lacks depth, because he thinks that history began roughly twenty-four hours ago. So, while his analysis of democracy is good, his prescriptions are unbelievably shallow and poorly thought-out, making the book very like a delicious-looking piece of cake that is wholly stale upon the eating. Perhaps this is not surprising, since Brennan is a Millennial (born in 1979), and the wisdom of the ages does not appear to figure heavily in his thinking. Moreover, Brennan self-identifies, not in this book but elsewhere, as a “bleeding heart libertarian.” This appears to be a libertarian who trims his views, especially on controversial social

issues of the day, such that he continues to be invited to East Coast dinner parties, where history is apparently not a hot topic of discussion. Beyond its shallow historical vision, though, the major problem with “Against Democracy” is an equally shallow and more centrally fatal conception of “knowledge.” The author claims his book is an argument for epistocracy “rule by the knowledgeable.” ( “Epistocracy” is a 2003 neologism, although the general concept is not new.) Brennan, in one of his very rare acknowledgements that anyone engaged in relevant political thinking prior to John Rawls, remarks that Plato, to the extent he endorsed a “philosopher king,” was an epistocrat.

Jason Brennan has written a stimulating, interesting book with many insights on politics, with a focus on electoral democracy. His model of a typical electorate consists of the ignorant and uninterested (hobbits); politically committed and partisan enthusiasts (hooligans); and impartial, logical people (the relatively uncommon vulcans). Brennan shows in great detail the weaknesses of the electoral system, and the almost certain failures it brings with it. Only outright dictatorships are worse. What he proposes is a system of limited electorate, an “epistocracy,” which would guide the government to rational decisions and policies. This would depend on persuading society that the right to vote is not really valuable (and he shows that an individual vote is almost worthless!), and voting should not important to one’s prestige or status in society. Brennan writes with clarity and occasional humor. He must be a very engaging teacher! He manages to avoid mentioning his own policy positions until almost halfway through the book: he has varied views which do not fit exclusively any of the easy labels with which we are familiar, but he is largely libertarian, and I found this somewhat surprising. That is not because libertarians do not recognize the obvious faults of mass democracy. What surprises me is that he does not promote for the most obvious solution to the problem with the electoral system, and that is to allow government only the smallest possible control of our lives. Make elections less important. That would take place in a strict constitutional system, like the one we used to have before the courts blew away the limits on federal power, and invented spurious “rights” to be enforced arbitrarily on everyone.

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