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Extreme Democracy: Deep confidence in the people By Mitch Ratcliffe

Human society evolves. For millennia it has proceeded toward a more scalable and widely distributed form of social control, toward egalitarian politics and markets, toward democracy. From the first tiny democracies in Greek city-states, in which a few citizens controlled the fate of populations of free and enslaved men, women and children to today's continental democracies, the history of human civilization has drifted toward greater participation by people in the decisions that affect their lives. And society is still only halfway, if that far, along the path to egalitarian participation in social decision-making.

The first decade of the 21st century represents a unique moment in history, as the economic sphere of life has leapt far ahead of the civil sphere and a correction, a great catching up, is at hand. This is a book for people who want to use technology to make that correction happen, to place control of society firmly in the hands of citizens.

Expectations about the availability of information and the right to express an opinion among citizens around the world have been transformed by the availability of ubiquitous mass media and the Internet. In advanced economies, activist organizations like MoveOn.org have brought two million progressive contributors to bear on wide-ranging issues, from censuring President Clinton to the Bush-Cheney energy bill of 2004. Howard Dean's campaign for president transformed the limits of fund-raising early in presidential campaigns. Around the world in 2002 and 2003, people organized protests for and (primarily) against the U.S. invasion of Iraq through email, mailing lists and text messaging, bringing millions into the streets in an unprecedented expression of public sentiment. In the developing world, radio and small presses are changing the flow of

information as individual citizens call in to talk about what they've read and seen that affects their lives. Internet, when it is widely available in Africa and Central Asia, could replace bullets as revolutionary tools.

At the same time, citizens of the developed and underdeveloped world are impatient as they have never been before for change and opportunity. People have come to expect instant gratification of their economic desires while the processes of government have, by comparison, remained largely unresponsive. Yet for centuries, technology of religious and civic governance preceded innovation in the economic sphere. The priest and the king were the models for the organization of the master-and-slave and feudal economic systems; early corporations developed on the council model of the Italian republic; the modern corporation's ability to scale was built on the experience of Prussian governmental organizations. Government led the way until very recently in history, the last few seconds in the timeframe of human civilization.

With the invention of the mass media, privately owned newspapers began to reorganize the process of policy-making through public debate, a trend amplified by television, which sped the delivery of, and public deliberation about, news about events. Since then government has increasingly adopted the pace and priorities of the private sector rather than leading the way. Computation and the Internet, which have accelerated the process of innovation in the private sector while introducing a radically decentralized approach to decision-making, are about to revolutionize public governance, as well.

What happens when people deal with their own problems? The tools available today and that are just over the governmental horizon deliver on the dreams of liberals and conservatives—though each come at it from a different perspective. Liberals would like people to have their government organize to provide sustenance to the needy and address social problems that hold back portions of the population; conservatives would like to see people organize their own solutions, and when government needs to play a part in those solutions, it can, if led by the people. In a densely networked world, citizens can organize to address social problems; they can use the mechanisms of government to finance the filling of potholes or providing universal healthcare, allowing for new ideas to come from anywhere. In an extreme democracy, every citizen is a potential leader, not just a voter.

“Extreme democracy” is a political philosophy of the information era that puts people in charge of the entire political process. It suggests a deliberative process that places total confidence in the people, opening the policy-making process to many centers of power through deeply networked coalitions that can be organized around local, national and international issues. It emphasizes the importance of tools designed to break down barriers to collaboration and access to power, acknowledging that political realities can

be altered by building on rapidly advancing generations of technology and that human organizations are transformed by new political expectations and practices made possible by technology.

Extreme democracy is not direct democracy, which assumes all people must be involved in every decision in order for the process to be just and democratic. Direct democracy is inefficient, regardless of the tools available to voters, because it creates as many, if not more, opportunities for obstruction of social decisions as a representative democracy. Rather, we assume that every debate one feels is important will be open to participation; that governance is not the realm of specialists and that activism is a critical popular element in making a just society. Extreme democracy can exist alongside and through co-evolution with the representative systems in place today; it changes the nature of representation, as the introduction of sophisticated networked applications have reinvented the corporate decision-making process.

Rather than debate how involved a citizen should be or fret over the lack of involvement among citizens of advanced democracies, the extreme democracy model focuses on the act of participation and assumes that anyone in a democracy is free to act politically. If individuals are constrained from action, they are not free, not citizens but subjects.

The basic unit of organization in an extreme democracy is the activist, a citizen engaged with an issue of concern about which they are willing to invest their time and effort to evolve relevant policy, whether at the local, state, national or international level. They engage their fellow citizens seeking support rather than demanding it at the point of a gun. Small groups of activists have changed the world repeatedly and at every stage in history. Martin Luther was an ecclesiastical political activist and Martin Luther King was a civil rights activist. Gandhi was a political activist, just like Benjamin Franklin and Nelson Mandela, though Franklin finally advocated a violent break with England and Mandela laid his guns down before he successfully ousted the apartheid government of South Africa.

Activists, like citizens, may become representatives or they may, having achieved success, go home until the next issue they care about comes to public debate. The key idea is that activism and citizenship are on a continuum that describes both active and passive citizenship; for the most part, people do not take action in politics, choosing to vote on issues raised by others, but at any time they are free and able, using the tools available to all citizens, to become activists. One might be an activist about a single issue or many; the principal of extreme democracy is that when one cares about an issue, they should be free to become deeply involved in public decisions about that issue.

Extreme democracy, taking a cue from the recent evolution of software development towards a practice known as “extreme programming,” anticipates a politics based on lowered friction in communication that increases the diversity of ideas and opinions that can be brought to bear on the development of public policy. Using the communications channels available to people in advanced economies today, activists can form teams locally or across the globe to develop new options and policy alternatives, for example an idea about financing public schools or road repairs in a small city or an energy and conservation policy for the United States. Extreme democracy is predicated on the belief that policy can be developed by small groups based on simple steps and extensive communication among affected parties and those responsible for carrying out policy. Finally, based on the experience of extreme programming, which ships an incomplete but sufficient software release and draws on the experience of real people using it to roll out a series of improvements, extreme democracy argues that policy and governmental systems, instead of remaining relatively rigid for decades, can be improved constantly through feedback and re-calibration.

At the same time, extreme democracy recognizes that there are challenges inherent in unbridled communications. The more people brought into contact the greater the potential for conflict and the more difficult it becomes to reach a compromise or even recognize commonality across large groups of people. A densely networked society can be infected by vile ideas about race, faith and class that unleash tyrannies that claim to be “populist” and patriotic while justifying the killing or jailing or enslavement of millions. It has happened dozens of times in the past century. Those with unqualified faith in tools for doing politics need to open their eyes to the potential for abuse and its consequences.

When I told my 10-year-old about this book, he said, “You mean the more we change democracy, the more we have to change?” Indeed, it’s that simple, but history and politics are always more complex because they deal with the details of many lives. To begin, we have to understand politics and its role in human life.

“Politics” in current usage sounds like a curse upon our houses. “I think the country is tired of people playing politics all the time in Washington. And I believe that they're holding this man's nomination up for political purposes. It's not fair, and it's not right,” President George W. Bush said of the nomination of Judge Charles Pickering to the federal court in the spring of

2002¹ and accusations of “politics” are rampant in the national dialogue. These charges come from all sides of the political conversation.

The value of political change is usually determined by the way people feel about politics in the first place. Dissatisfaction drives change, so the political process is strewn with the disgruntled. Many Americans, indeed, many people around the world, believe politics is “broken”.² This, however, is like arguing that the human circulatory system is designed wrong. Politics is a reflection of the times and the people, and today, in the United States, the populace is split very evenly between the political parties. Public discourse is the process humans have used to organize themselves and worked out their differences for all time. Since politics is a process and not an artifact, this human process changes over time and never breaks or requires replacement—getting rid of or replacing politics with another process would be tantamount to a shop clerk deciding she has a bad heart and trying to do a transplant herself, starting by murdering the first person who walks into the shop because they seemed like a good choice for a donor heart. The body politic cannot be put on bypass while a new political system is installed. We’re part of an evolving system and have to live through it.

Politics is simply the debate about society’s options that seeks to refine the quality of life through the allocation of resources, rights, responsibility and opportunity; embracing politics as an essential aspect of our humanity invigorates existence. Anyone who has had the experience of participating in a political campaign in which they were listened to and engaged in real debate about what the campaign or candidate should stand for knows the thrill. When Democrats talk of Howard Dean’s having “revitalized the party,” they really mean that the Dean campaign was the venue in which many people first experienced the rush of political participation. It feels good, like sex does, because it is how we participate in making our world.

“Politics” is the “science and art of government; the science dealing with the form, organization, and administration of a state or part of one, and with the regulation of its relations with other states,” as well as “the branch of moral philosophy dealing with the state or social organism as a whole,” according to the Oxford English Dictionary. In other words, politics is the practice of participating in the making of a direction for society. It does 2,500 years and more of human history an injustice to denigrate politics. “Politics” made its appearance in the English language in the 16th century and, in fact, it was a derogatory description of human action (“he’s playing politics”) before it was referred to as simply a science, the practice of governing. The practice of

¹ “President Calls on Senate to Stop Playing Politics,” Remarks by President George W. Bush during a photo opportunity, March 6, 2002. <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2002/03/20020306-5.html>

² “Politics is broken. We are left with a de-moralized populace, and a power-hungry elite.” Bill Bradley, <http://www.antidote.org.uk/html/transformativcitizenship.htm>

politics, though, predates the first English judgments of its meaning by more than 2000 years.

Pericles, in his funeral oration over the Athenian dead after the first year of the Peloponnesian War, laid out the complete confidence that the city had in its people to rule themselves when he said “Although a few may originate a policy, we are all able to judge it.” The democracy in Athens did not survive the war. The idea did survive, and has informed every democratic movement since. It is emblematic of a long debate about the best political order for a society, as elites have contested with egalitarians over who is fit to rule, which has provided the two extreme poles of political philosophy since. In *The Discourses*, Machiavelli describes the debate in simple terms, that of the ability of a people to reason:

The demands of a free populace, too, are very seldom harmful to liberty, for they are due either to the populace being oppressed or to the suspicion that it is going to be oppressed, and, should these impressions be false, a remedy is provided in the public platform on which some man of standing can get up, appeal to the crowd, and show it is mistaken. And though, as Tully remarks, the populace may be ignorant, it is capable of grasping the truth and readily yields when a man, worthy of confidence, lays the truth before it.³

The people’s judgment is where a democrat’s confidence rests and, if the people are well informed by a responsible government and press, if they are socialized to value participation, it is a confidence well placed. Democracy is government by the people, simple as that. And it may be applied to a narrow set of social questions or very broadly, depending on the degree of choice available in society and the competing institutions, such as the market, for making social choices.

As Machiavelli knew, it is a mistake to think that exercising total power is the sole end of politics—his notorious advice to the prince was to balance the use of raw power with strategic concessions to the people and rivals. When absolute power guides politicians, politics is a metaphorical war for absolute control and not a mechanism for a plurality of ideas and opinions to inform public policy.

Unfortunately, the pursuit of absolute power is the rule of the day in politics and it is tearing the middle ground out from under the people as the rise of a networked society begins. As the potential number and range of connections available between people are increasingly dense and varied, the political center should be expanding to accommodate more perspectives; instead it is being eaten away by extremists who are shearing off constituencies from the center. If every one of these factions treats politics as a zero-sum game, where no compromise is possible, networked politics will lead to unending strife.

³ Niccolò Machiavelli, *The Discourses*, Penguin Books, New York, 1998, pp. 114-115

As citizens organize to address very specific needs or issues through the networks growing around them, the necessity for a new perception of political practice is increased by orders of magnitude, becoming more pressing with every geometric increase in the number of connections available within society. The borders and barriers to cooperation based on the pokey and expensive communications of the steam ship and telegraphic era are falling for obvious and visible reasons.

Change begins with the actions of individuals, who organize, collaborate and plan, forming groups that coalesce into movements. That is, politics and parties have played an essential role in the aggregation of resources and reservoirs of influence that can be applied from one election cycle to the next. The permanent infrastructures of political parties may not disappear, but they will be altered irrevocably by the rise of the networked society.

What President Bush is attacking when he talks about “playing politics” is partisanship, which has concerned American presidents since the administration of George Washington, who condemned political parties as one of the greatest threats to the nascent United States. Politics is only a Bad Thing for someone on the losing end of a policy decision, without anything to show for their efforts; zero-sum politics leaves a lot of folks feeling this way and provides a handy bludgeon for the party in power to use against opponents. As evidenced by the account⁴ of Vice President Cheney’s comment that the Bush Administration could slash taxes because the Republicans had won the midterm election in 1992—”This is our due,” he said—President Bush practices the most extreme zero-sum politics the United States has ever seen while denouncing it.

Partisan debate conducted with respect for all parties rather than disdain, however, has been the foundation of discourse about the broad brush strokes that describe American history. Without Thomas Jefferson’s Republican Party’s (the direct ancestor of today’s Democratic Party) militancy on behalf of yeoman farmers and Westerners, some say the United States would have become a monarchy. Abraham Lincoln helped to bring the Republican Party into being over the issues of slavery and a national identity that transcended regional differences. Theodore Roosevelt first converted the Republican Party, then the nation, to a program of governmental power on behalf of the citizen in contrast to the corporations that dominated the “Gilded Age.” Woodrow Wilson and the Democrats set the United States on a course as the guardian of freedom that prepared the country to fight Nazism and Communism. Franklin Roosevelt’s New Deal altered the role of government and placed the welfare of the individual citizen at the epicenter of social investment through government. Ronald Reagan challenged the

⁴ Ron Suskind, *The Price of Loyalty*, Simon & Schuster, New York, 2004.

notion of a welfare state and introduced a concept of patriarchal state that defends Judeo-Christian values with the ferocity once reserved for Communists. And, because partisan perspective does inform everything, there is something for everyone to object to in this description of important sea changes in American politics. Political parties have served an important purpose in that they have helped a large and barely connected society retain networks of activists and patronage that were necessary to sustain power across large regions over long periods of time.

Political parties are very much like corporations were before the advent of the networked computer. They are hierarchical and rigid with leadership that is hard to displace or enter on any terms other than those laid down by the longest serving veterans. As the networked computer broke down the old boys' networks within companies and opened the membrane surrounding senior management, not to mention unleashing a wave of outsourcing and exporting of formerly core assets to partners and overseas, the Internet is about to hollow out the major political parties.

What had been the preserve of the national and state organizations—voter records management, fund-raising and allocation of support and funds—can be handled at the periphery of the political system for the first time, allowing many smaller organizations to exert influence and trade for support with other groups. Because people now can come together through networks to work together on issues of common concern or to trade support on issues, the parties will likely migrate to purely national campaigns that must activate networks of support that are superfluous at the local and state level.

As more people connect and learn through the Internet, public debate about the direction government should take has reached a critical mass that could transform the very notion of democratic systems. This transition will not end differences of opinion, nor will it abolish ideology from public debate. It will simply make the debate more fluid, with many more specific perspectives represented, because the massive party infrastructures are becoming more porous. The Howard Dean campaign, where it was possible to find far-left Democrats hoping to stop the war in Iraq working together with moderate and center-right Republicans angry about runaway deficits, demonstrates how an extremely democratic technology can bring together many perspectives. Its massive fund-raising success of the during 2003 and early 2004, which built a war chest of \$45 million for a candidate who began his quest for the White House as an asterisk, is the proof point for the transformation of politics via network. That campaign failed for a variety of reasons, but the example is a clear statement about people's willingness to work together despite their differences when they see a clear opportunity to make a difference.

Citizens can make this a watershed era by taking the initiative and seizing the reins of power from the professionals struggling to regain control of the process and working with them to restructure campaign strategy. The decades ahead could mark a profound break in political history, if people understand and act on this opportunity.