

ISSUE BRIEF

“Information to Action”

Topic: Founders/Democracy

Title: *THE FOUNDERS WERE SKEPTICAL OF “MAJORITY RULES” DEMOCRACY*, by Joshua Charles

We live in a time when many justify the most outrageous ideas upon the pretext of “democracy.” What few realize is that many of the American Founders were downright skeptical of democracy.

But what do we mean by “democracy”? Simply this: a democracy is that form of government in which the majority of individuals, at any time, on any issue, regardless of outcome, always rule. At first, it seems reasonable, even fair. But a sliver of thought reveals the grave issues with such a system—issues which should not be particularly difficult to imagine in a post-March 2020 world in which many former certainties have fallen by the wayside. Such a system would involve nothing less than all your property, rights, and security for yourself and your loved ones would be up for grabs if merely 50% + 1 of your fellow citizens could be convinced that such would be in their interest.

As such, democracy, according to the Founders, places all human rights and duties in danger by subjecting them to no controlling principle except the will of the majority. All ties of religion, morality, tradition, and the like, are naturally dissolved in such a society and form of government. This, the Founders argued, would lay the groundwork for the control of society not by the *many* (as demagogues often claim), but by the *few*, who by their wealth, talents, and connections would control the masses. In short, many of the Founders argued, “democracy” throughout history had often provided oligarchy with its most effective disguise.

“The truth is, and let it humble our pride, the most ferocious of all animals, when his passions are roused to fury and are uncontrolled, is man,” wrote Fisher Ames, a lesser-known Founding Father who supported the ratification of the Constitution. *“[A]nd of all governments, the worst is that which never fails to excite, but was never found to restrain those passions, that is, democracy.”* This, Ames observed, would result in the following: *“The sovereign power being nominally in the hands of all, will be effectively within the grasp of a few; and, therefore, by the very laws of nature, a few will combine, intrigue, lie, and fight to engross it to themselves.”*

Likewise, John Adams wrote the following to his fellow Founder and friend, Benjamin Rush, in his post-presidency retirement: *“Democracy is always so horribly bloody that it is always short-lived, and its atrocious cruelties are never checked but by extinguishing all popular elections to the great offices of state. I hope Americans will reflect upon these things before it is too late.”* And to his fellow ex-President Thomas Jefferson, he wrote: *“Democracy will envy all, contend with all, endeavor to pull down all, and when by chance it happens to get the upper hand for a short time, it will be revengeful, bloody, and cruel.”*

The fundamental error of democracy is this: it subjects all things to a majority vote. As such, no principle of religion, morality, law, or right, can stand firm and strong so long as merely 50% + 1 of the people can be convinced it should be pushed aside. The passions of the people are no longer bound by law—they *are* the law. Such a system is inherently unstable, which human nature abhors. Democracy thereby directly empowers not the many, but the few who may direct and control such passions.

This is why the Founders gave us a Constitutional Republic, not a democracy—a subject to be pursued in future issues.