

## ISSUE BRIEF

### *“Information to Action”*

**Topic:** Representative Governance

**Title:** *A REPUBLIC VS. A DEMOCRACY* by Joshua Charles

One of the great myths of American history is that we were founded as a “democracy.” Quite the opposite is true.

For the Founders, a “democracy” was a form of government in which everything was decided by popular vote. Their study of history led them to the conclusion that such a form of government was likely to devolve into tyranny or chaos, because the passions of the crowd would overcome their sense of justice, and this would cause them to violate the rights of their fellow citizens. Such warnings had been offered by many voices over the ages, including ancient Greeks such as Plato and Aristotle, with whom the Founders were intimately familiar.

One exemplary example of this “founding distaste” for democracy comes from a lesser-known, but highly influential Founder, Fisher Ames, who wrote as follows in his 1803 essay, “The Dangers of American Liberty”:

*But in democratic states there will be factions. 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. All history bears testimony that this attempt has never yet been disappointed...*

*The revolution [in America] will proceed in exactly the same way, but not with so rapid a pace, as that of France.*

Ames was not alone in believing that democracy—pure popular control—would always end violently, as it had done during the French Revolution. He continued:

*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; and of all governments, the worst is that which never fails to excite, but was never found to restrain those passions, that is, democracy.*

Virtually all the Founders felt similarly (and those who were the most populist, such as Thomas Jefferson, wanted the federal government to have virtually no power). For example, in an 1814 letter, [John Adams wrote as follows](#):

*Remember Democracy never lasts long. It soon wastes exhausts and murders itself. There never was a Democracy Yet, that did not commit suicide. It is in vain to Say*

*that Democracy is less vain, less proud, less selfish, less ambitious or less avaricious than Aristocracy or Monarchy. It is not true in Fact and nowhere appears in history. Those Passions are the same in all Men under all forms of Simple Government, and when unchecked, produce the same Effects of Fraud Violence and Cruelty. When clear Prospects are opened before Vanity, Pride, Avarice or Ambition, for their easy gratification, it is hard for the most considerate Philosophers and the most conscientious Moralists to resist the temptation. Individuals have conquered themselves, Nations and large Bodies of Men, never.*

James Madison, the “Father of the Constitution,” and one of the authors of the famous “Federalist Papers,” concurred with these assessments, and [wrote of the “cure” for democracy being a Republic](#):

*Hence it is that such democracies have ever been spectacles of turbulence and contention; have ever been found incompatible with personal security or the rights of property; and have in general been as short in their lives as they have been violent in their deaths. Theoretic politicians, who have patronized this species of government, have erroneously supposed that by reducing mankind to a perfect equality in their political rights, they would, at the same time, be perfectly equalized and assimilated in their possessions, their opinions, and their passions.*

*A republic, by which I mean a government in which the scheme of representation takes place, opens a different prospect, and promises the cure for which we are seeking.*

Madison asserted that a “Republic” differed from a democracy in two essential respects: the power of government was delegated to a small group of citizens on behalf of all the rest; and a Republic could be much bigger than a democracy, in both territory and population.

This smaller group of citizens who would actually control the government would be “whose wisdom may best discern the true interest of their country, and whose patriotism and love of justice will be least likely to sacrifice it to temporary or partial considerations.” It was essential, he argued, that the passions of the mob not become the controlling force in government. Rather, these passions must be sifted by the wisdom of statesmen.

For the government to simply comply with the minority, the Founders argued, was completely contrary to the American idea of government. This reality is evident throughout the Constitution, where power was divided among multiple branches, between the federal and state governments, and even amending the Constitution required a super-majority vote. The popular will, the Founders argued, can change from moment to moment. With it, the rights of minorities may be violated by the will of the majority.

That is why the system they created was, they always insisted, not a democracy, but a Republic.