Give it to the People

Video Transcript

In the 2004 movie, National Treasure, our hero, Ben Gates discusses with FBI Agent Sadusky what to do with the enormous historical treasure they find.

Sadusky: The Templars and the Freemasons believed that the treasure was too great for any one man to have, not even a king. That's why they went to such lengths to keep it hidden.

Ben Gates: That's right. The founding fathers believed the same thing about government. I figure their solution will work for the treasure too.

Sadusky: Give it to the people.

“Give it to the people.” A democracy. Yet, nowhere is the word "democracy" mentioned in the Declaration of Independence or the U.S. Constitution. How could that be? Our government is a democracy, isn't it?

It’s important to remember that democracies did not originate with the founding of the United States. Ancient Greece and Rome both had forms of democratic governments. The word democracy actually comes from two Greek words, meaning a form of government that gives power to the people. But how, when, and to which people? The answers to those questions have changed throughout history.

Interestingly, the founders feared democratic rule. James Madison expressed this attitude in Federalist #10: "...instability, injustice, and confusion... have in truth been the mortal disease under which popular governments everywhere perished..." In the late 18th-century, rule by the people was thought to lead to disorder and disruption. Yet, a democratically-based government was still seen as superior to the monarchies of Europe.
In present-day New England, many small towns hold town meetings in which citizens can decide on important issues by directly voting, much like the citizens of ancient Athens. This is an example of a direct democracy, and these meetings are one of the few instances of direct democracy that still operate today. Decisions are made by all citizens, not their representatives.

But, could a direct democracy work in a large, diverse population spread over a geographical distance? Generally, the answer has been no. As a solution, the Romans developed the republic: an indirect, or representative, democracy. In this system, representatives are chosen by the people to make decisions for them. The representative body solves the problems of direct democracy by being a manageable size for doing government business. The founders even preferred the term republic to democracy because it described a system they generally preferred: the people’s interests are represented by more knowledgeable, or wealthier, citizens who were responsible to those that elected them. Today we tend to use the terms republic and democracy interchangeably.

While democracies have come in many shapes and sizes (as reflected by the different answers to questions of how, when, and to which people power is given), the key is, “Who has the power?” If the answer is the people, then the government is a democracy. And since history has shown that government is too much power for one person, let’s “give it to the people!”

About this transcript:

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