Thomas Goebel, *A Government by the People: Direct Democracy in America, 1890-1940* (Chapel Hill, N.C.: University of North Carolina Press, 2002).

For direct democracy, this is the best of times and the worst of times. On one hand, U.S. ballots featured many more initiatives and referenda during the 1990s than in any other decade; Americans across the country cast advisory or binding votes on almost five hundred legislative matters great and small, social and economic, controversial and obscure. Clearly, many advocates believe that their elected representatives are corrupt, fatally unresponsive, or both, and that putting a question straight to the voters is therefore the best way to make good policy. But scholars increasingly condemn the initiative and referendum. David Broder's *Democracy Derailed* (2000), John Haskell's *Direct Democracy or Representative Government?* (2001), Larry Sabato, Howard Ernst, and Bruce Larson's edited collection *Dangerous Democracy?* (2001), and Richard J. Ellis' *Democratic Delusions* (2002) all argue, to paraphrase the old lapel button attacking the Moral Majority, that direct democracy is neither – not the direct connection with voters' preferences it purports to be, and not more democratic, either in procedure or substance, than lawmaking by elected representatives.

Thomas Goebel's *A Government by the People: Direct Democracy in America, 1890-1940* adds a vital historical dimension to this collective critique. Like other students of direct democracy, Goebel concludes that its devices are no panacea for the political and economic ills of the U.S. Goebel takes particular pains to demonstrate to the left that well-funded corporate interests have thoroughly taken over the initiative, referendum, and recall. But where others tend to focus on the present and to describe the conservative capture of ballot-question politics as a recent development – depicting California's tax-slashing Proposition 13 of 1978 as a turning point, for example – Goebel shows that the right-wing exploitation of direct democracy began almost a century ago. As one frustrated reformer lamented in 1915, "the referendum is the weapon of conservatism" (143).

Goebel's convincing demonstration that "virtually none of the problems [with direct democracy] most discussed today are in any way new" (193) may be his most impressive contribution to the present-day debate over the strengths and weaknesses of ballot measures. But it is by no means all he aims to do in *A Government by the People*, a slim, ambitious, and largely successful book. Indeed, his primary goal is to show that the true roots of the American direct democracy movement lie in the anti-monopoly and anti-trust politics of the nineteenth century. Second, Goebel interprets direct democracy's early-twentieth-century expansion in the United States as "both a social movement and a tactical choice" (6), attending to regional and local variations, interest-group politics, and essential institutional characteristics of American government. Finally, he shows that direct democracy was dogged from the start by the problems that

concern critics of the devices today: the dominance of professional signature-gatherers, consultants, and advertisers; the power of misleading and flagrantly propagandistic language; and the overwhelming need for huge sums of money. Ultimately, Goebel's is a cautionary tale – and a severe one, at that – for any modern-day progressives who still believe that ballot questions are the best way to slice through the stifling grip the two conservative parties hold on American electoral and lawmaking processes.

In the first few chapters of *A Government by the People,* Goebel makes his case for the anti-monopoly roots of the direct democracy movement and explains the spread of the devices in American states to 1920. Goebel traces anti-monopoly thought in American politics to the Founding era – as he writes, Populism was "the culmination of a long reform tradition and of a specific mode of economic analysis that reach[ed] back to the beginnings of the American republic" (20). That tradition was "populist republicanism," defined here as the "belief that state-sponsored privileges and monopolies led to economic inequality" (18). Massive inequities in wealth and power, in this view, were not the inevitable results of heartless industrial capitalism, but of state action – in particular, laws passed by corrupt legislatures. So while farmer cooperatives and trade unions focused their energies on the economic sphere, many Populists worked for change in the political arena, seeking to limit or do away with the special privileges of corporations, monopolistic land grants, and "protective legislation" of all sorts.

But reformers were stymied by state legislatures. Charles Francis Adams voiced a common view when he wrote that "probably no representative bodies were ever more thoroughly venal, more shamelessly corrupt, or more hopelessly beyond the reach of public opinion" than were many late-nineteenth-century state legislatures (26-27). By the 1890s, the increasing use of popular votes to ratify new state constitutions and their amendments had acquainted many Americans with the notion that some vital political questions must be subject to voters' direct approval. So when reformers caught wind of the use of referendum and initiative in Switzerland – largely through the writings of James W. Sullivan, a former printer, union activist, and Henry George supporter – many seized on the devices as a way to wrest political power "from a handful of pirates, gamblers, and corporation attorneys," as one Populist editor put it (34).

Goebel next turns to constitutional and theoretical disputes over direct democracy's place in American politics. Students of law and political thought may find this the most interesting section of the book: Goebel shows that disputes over the referendum, initiative, and recall brought a sharp, practical scrutiny to the meaning of terms such as democracy, republican government, and "the people." Some reformers attacked the Constitution itself as an instrument of class rule, but most claimed that direct democracy was fully in the evolving spirit of the document. Opponents raised the specter of "majority tyranny," and

argued that direct democracy laws violated the Constitution's guarantee of a "Republican Form of Government" in each state, but appellate courts allowed the reforms to stand.

Direct democracy spread unevenly across the United States in the first decades of the twentieth century. In the West, Goebel shows that structural features – weak parties, ticket-splitting voters, strong interest groups, and a more open political agenda – joined antimonopoly sentiment as factors favoring reform. In the South, however, racism largely thwarted reform. White Democrats had already instituted numerous devices to keep blacks out of politics, and feared that any change would threaten their control. As one North Carolina woman worried in a letter to reformer Judson King, "if the Initiative and Referendum should be passed, will the colored people and foreigners control our country?" (96). Virginian Woodrow Wilson contended that direct democracy – "a special question, so far as the South is concerned" – was not needed in the region because "actual, genuine representative government" already existed there (128). Reformers fared somewhat better in the northeast – Maine, Michigan, Ohio, and Massachusetts adopted some form of the initiative, referendum, and recall between 1908 and 1918 – but stronger parties and less fluid relationships between interest groups limited progress.

By 1912, the movement had peaked. Two changes explain why reform stalled: first, anti-monopoly populist republicanism lost its coherence as an economic theory and political program, and second, the increasingly partisan nature of disputes over direct democracy doomed the movement. Both explanations are paradoxical, and both are linked to the decline of Populism and the rise of Progressivism. As the economy became more nationalized and federal regulation of interstate commerce expanded, the activities of trusts and big corporations became an even more central political topic. At the same time, however, corporate power was increasingly understood to have economic rather than political causes, and therefore "the goal of regulation slowly replaced political reforms as the focus of anticorporate crusaders" (116). On the political front, meanwhile, support for direct democracy became "a weapon in factional infighting" (120) among some Progressive leaders. Politicians such as Theodore Roosevelt and Wilson – both of whom had earlier opposed direct democracy – now offered support, albeit in an uneven and somewhat tepid fashion. But that support compromised reformers' ability to build the broad, nonpartisan coalitions that had been crucial to earlier successes.

Serious differences divided many Progressives and direct-democracy reformers. Goebel argues that direct democracy formed an "integral part of the Progressive movement" (6), but here he shows that early Progressive authors had only contempt for the reforms. Herbert Croly emphasized state-building, efficiency, and centralized executive responsibility in *The Promise of American Life*; Walter Weyl wanted legislators to be trustees, not the mere delegates direct

democracy would convert them into – "repeaters of popular deliverances," "parrot-like political phonographs," as Weyl wrote in 1912 (122). Croly later supported an Oregon reform that enhanced both executive power and direct legislation, but still held that the initiative and referendum were "agencies of minority rule" which "fail absolutely" to strengthen enlightened collective action (124). Politicians from Robert La Follette to Roosevelt and Wilson only belatedly endorsed the measures, and Goebel strongly implies that their stances were more tactical than principled. In the end, H.L. Mencken's famous epitaph for Teddy Roosevelt's philosophy – "He didn't believe in democracy; he believed simply in government" – may best capture the tension between direct-democracy reformers and leading Progressives. Goebel could have devoted more space to the transition from Populist to Progressive direct democracy; readers who want closer scrutiny of that transition should read the fine chapter by Bruce E. Cain and Kenneth P. Miller in Sabato, Ernst, and Larson's *Dangerous Democracy?*. Cain and Miller argue persuasively that Populists and Progressives had fundamentally different motives in pursuing direct democracy, and contend that the Populist conception has prevailed.

Goebel concludes his narrative with a brief history of direct democracy from 1920 to World War II. This is particularly illuminating and colorful material. Groups which had successfully supported reform failed to make adequate use of it from the start – single-taxers, anti-saloon advocates, and labor all met defeat or only limited success on the ballots. Meanwhile, former opponents – business groups and others who saw the initiative, referendum, and recall as "the bastard triplets," in the words of one Santa Barbara attorney – were better organized and had more money, and employed the devices more effectively (143). Goebel demonstrates that direct democracy was from the beginning dominated by "permanent well-organized interests," as one frustrated reformer wrote in 1931; ballot questions were the very "bulwark of conservatism," another lamented (153). "All radical measures were defeated," concluded a comprehensive 1930 study of direct legislation in California, and direct democracy effected "no profound alteration in the composition, methods, or objective of the ruling elite," as political scientists V.O. Key and Winston Crouch wrote in 1939 (148, 154).

Goebel goes further, however. In a chapter entitled "Inventing Modern Politics," he shows that many of the most important (and most unpleasant) elements of twenty-first century politics were anticipated by California's first direct-democracy campaigns. Phenomenally expensive elections, the prominence of political consultants, advertisers, and other professional image-makers, and heavy reliance on public-opinion polls – all trace their roots not to the rise of television, but to early direct-democracy struggles in the Golden State. Through the 1920s, big utilities used huge amounts of money, flagrantly propagandistic mailings, and fake-grassroots organizations – known today as "astro-

turf" groups – to defeat plans for public development and ownership of water and power facilities. A Henry George-inspired single-tax plan was crushed by a 5-1 margin on the ballot in 1936, after a campaign that the victorious realtors said was won by "well directed publicity, cartoons, speeches, radio presentations, personal calls, [and] questionnaires" (170). Faced in the same year with a proposal to tax chain stores, a business strategist wrote that "a job of mass selling is to be done," and he and his allies proceeded to outspend reformers 15 to 1 to defeat the measure (172). Launching an antiunion initiative in 1938, business groups determined through extensive polling that California voters' "vague prejudices must be crystallized into effective and affirmative action on the initiative," and used what one of their own consultants called "artfully disguised and beautifully-sugarcoated propaganda" (176, 175). Their measure failed, however, demonstrating that while money is usually enough to defeat an initiative, cash alone is rarely sufficient to pass one.

Along with his regionally-organized, institutionally-sensitive analysis of the movement's uneven growth, this explanation of direct democracy's role in the creation of modern political tactics is one of the most fascinating sections of *A Government by the People*. Goebel has scrutinized dozens of manuscript collections and newspaper archives as well as hundreds of secondary sources, and delivers a comprehensive yet concise picture of the formative early years of direct democracy in the U.S.

Goebel tells the reader at the outset that he will emphasize the economic, anti-monopoly dimension of direct democracy's origins (4). If this means he wants to prove that antimonopoly sentiment dominated direct democracy's rise, he falls short. This is not at all a bad thing, however. For as Goebel's story becomes more complex and interesting, the reader becomes less convinced that the drive to abolish monopolies motivated most reformers. To be sure, he successfully demonstrates a broad and deep connection between economic discontent and the rise of the initiative and referendum. This is not an entirely new contribution to our understanding of the topic – other authors, including Broder and Ellis, come to the same judgment – but Goebel has made the case particularly well. In describing the diverse, often-delicate coalitions that drove reform, he tells a tale of preachers, prohibitionists, and farmers as well as union men and single-taxers; shopkeepers, socialists, and wealthy benefactors all hoped to effect change through direct democracy. At times leaders had to keep quiet the support of drys or suffragettes in order to hold their fragile movements together (77, 78), and some important reformers, such as William U'Ren in Oregon and minister Herbert Bigelow in Ohio, kept their "economic program in the background," lest it frighten away those with different goals (101). Another leader argued that direct legislation was "not an integral part of any economic theory or scheme" (129). If many citizens and legislators who supported reform were ignorant of – even opposed to – antimonopolist goals, there could not have been

a straight-line connection between the two. Goebel paints a fine picture of a complex and sometimes conflicted movement, but in so doing seems to modify his thesis, illustrating that the movement *arose* from economic protest, but *developed* only because of a much broader set of purposes.

In terms of political thought, Goebel fails to analyze the rise of direct democracy fully in the context of a *declining* faith in popular sovereignty and universal suffrage around the turn of the century, well-documented by authors such as Eric Foner, Alexander Keyssar, and Rogers M. Smith. As Foner observed in *The Story of American Freedom* (1998), "[a]mong elite thinkers, a retreat from the previous consensus in favor of manhood suffrage was among the most remarkable developments of the late nineteenth century." (119). Indeed, the late nineteenth century saw "a recrudescence of antidemocratic theorizing on the question of who was entitled to vote," as Morgan Kousser argued in *The Shaping of Southern Politics* (1974) (250-251). That retreat was confined neither to racists nor to Southerners. Goebel does not ignore such thought – indeed, he scatters pungent illustrations throughout the book (51, 57, 60, 92, 111, 128-129, 149). But while he notes that many direct-democracy advocates shared "an abiding skepticism in the competence of voters" (122), Goebel does not integrate such views into his core analysis of the movement's character and goals. Moreover, in a crucial early passage Goebel argues that reformers believed that "the people" were a "force of rectitude and honesty" who "would never act against their own interests" (26). Later, he writes of Walter Lippmann's disdain for the ability of "the people" to direct policy as if such views reflected a novel "shift in public and academic opinion" (134), but by 1922 a full generation of American elites had been familiar with such views. This retreat does not square with the central American political narrative of ceaseless democratization, and students of American thought and political development need a better understanding of how it shaped various political reforms of the era.

A Government by the People will prove useful for students of Populism, Progressivism, economic reform, and American political development. Liberal advocates and progressive reformers today, meanwhile, should not lose sleep if their own direct democracy campaigns – for public campaign financing, say, or against big-box development – rely on rich donors or employ the occasional misleading euphemism. Such is the beast; no "golden age" of popular reform is dishonored by such strategies. On the whole, though, Goebel's sobering message to the American left is that, as a tool to diminish the political influence of wealth and corporate power, direct legislation failed a long time ago.

Alec C. Ewald
University of Massachusetts-Amherst