

Ballots and Bullets

di Murray N. Rothbard

Perhaps the leading argument for democracy is that it substitutes “ballots for bullets”: that it replaces the inconvenient and disruptive processes of violent change by peaceful changes expressing the majority will. Some democrats have defined democracy as majority rule, while others have placed on this rule the limitation that minorities must themselves be left free to try to become a majority. But, whichever the definition, the peaceful change argument is the dominant one. (The other major argument for democracy is that the decisions of the majority are always, or almost always, morally right, but support for this article of faith has dwindled in recent years.)

Yet though pervasive, the peaceful change argument has been simply accepted with little or no analysis. In particular, no one has investigated the problem: is the existing form of democracy really compatible with this argument, and what specific form of government does the argument entail? Instead it has been simply assumed that any type of democracy automatically receives its credentials from the peaceful change doctrine.

But let us investigate the doctrine a little further. What it really holds is that, in the long run, majority opinion rules under any form of government, and that therefore it is better to let it rule peacefully, as in a democracy, rather than force the majority to take to the streets periodically in a violent coup or revolution. Ballots then substitute for bullets in a very precise way: for democratic election yields that very result which *would have been* attained if the majority had had to test its strength against the minority in violent combat.

Here, then, we have a criterion for democracy imposed by the peaceful change argument: that the result be the same as would have ensued from a test of combat. It is important to realize that this criterion is rigorously implied by the argument, and that, if we accept the argument, and we also find that a certain form of democracy leads systematically to results which are very wide of this “bullet-substitute” mark, then we must either reject that form of democracy or give up the argument.

How, then, does American democracy, or the democracy of any other state, fare when we test it against our criterion? Perhaps the most fundamental democratic form (violated only in the small number of traditional university plural votes in England) is that each man has one vote. Even though the practicalities of electoral allocation often weight the votes of rural or other areas, the democratic ideal is universally considered to be one vote per man, and this is generally pretty well approached in practice. But, if we try to justify this arrangement by the peaceful-change argument, we run up against fundamental difficulties.

In the first place, physical power is manifestly not equally distributed. In a test of combat, women, old people, and the sick would do very badly. On the peaceful change argument, therefore, there is no justification whatever for giving these physically feeble groups the vote. And not only would they have to be barred from voting, but so also would we have to bar 4-F's [ineligible for the draft because of medical problems] and all citizens who could not pass a test for physical combat fitness. On the other hand, there should obviously be no literacy test, since literacy has no relation to a man's combat potential. In addition to barring all those not fit for combat from voting, we would clearly have to give plural votes to all who have been militarily trained (such as soldiers and policemen), for it is obvious that a group of highly-trained fighters could easily defeat a far more numerous group of amateurs, even if equally robust.

In addition to ignoring the inequalities of physical power and combat fitness, there is another way in which existing democracies fail to live up to the logical requirements of the peaceful change thesis. This failure stems from another basic inequality: inequality of *interest* or intensity belief. Thus, 60% of the population may oppose a certain policy, or political party, while only 40% favor it. In a democracy, this policy or party will be defeated. But the bulk of the 40% may favor the measure, or

candidate, passionately and enthusiastically, and therefore would be most willing, in the absence of democracy, to engage in a combat test. But the 60% majority may have only very slight interest in the issue. In a democratic election, one vote by a apathetic only faintly interested person, is allowed to offset the vote of a passionate partisan.

Yet because of their lack of interest, perhaps none of the majority would have been willing to enter into combat. Hence, if we accept the peaceful change thesis of democracy as a substitute for bullets, we must agree that a democratic process that gives an apathetic man the same weight as an enthusiast cannot meet our own criterion. The apathetic would never enter a test of combat, and therefore existing democracies systematically distort electoral results in relation to the hypothetical results of combat.

It is probable that no procedure of democratic voting could be satisfactory in meeting this problem. But certainly much could be done to alter present forms to bring them closer to our test. The whole trend of current democracies has been to make voting easier for the people; but this violates the test directly, because this means that it has been made ever easier for the apathetic to register their votes. But the more weight we give to the votes of the apathetic, the farther away is democracy from satisfying its own criterion. Clearly, what is needed is to make voting far more *difficult*, to insure that only the more intensely interested people will vote. A moderate poll tax, not large enough to keep out a mass of enthusiasts who could not afford to pay, large enough to discourage the indifferent, would be very helpful.

Perhaps another useful step would be to remove all names from the ballot, thereby requiring all voters to write in their favorite candidates themselves. Not only would this eliminate the decidedly undemocratic special privilege that the State gives to those whose names it prints on the ballot, but it would also bring us closer to our criterion, for a voter who doesn't know the name of his favorite candidate would hardly have fought in the streets in his behalf.

Thus, we see that the peaceful change argument, far from endorsing all existing democracies, requires vital and radical changes in existing democratic structures. To account for differences in strength, all those citizens not for combat would have to be deprived of the vote, and plural votes would be indicated for soldiers and policemen. To account for differences in interest and enthusiasm, voting would have to be made difficult rather than easy, including the imposition of a universal poll tax. And even then, it is probably that serious distortions would remain, for no mere adjustments in voting rules could match the interest required to induce the citizen to fight in the streets for his program or party. It is possible, then, that the peaceful change argument is self-contradictory, and the criterion can never be fulfilled. But even if we disregard this inherent distortions the existing democracies could certainly never be justified by the argument, and radical changes such as we have outlined would be required.

We have seen that democracy such as the world has known it, marked especially by free (non-priced) voting, and one vote for every person, cannot be supported, and is indeed negated by, the dominant, peaceful-change argument for democracy. One or the other, the argument or the system, must be abandoned.