

# Fight for Real Democracy

By James Jordon

[Jordon is co-coordinator of the Alliance for Global Justice.]

The most important conflict in the world today is between neoliberal democracy and participatory democracy.

The historical meaning of liberal, as in liberal democracy, is the idea that the cornerstone right in democracy is the right to own and exploit private property for personal profit. During the rise of capitalism, this was not a necessarily unprogressive point of view. The fight for property rights and the right to profit was part and parcel of dismantling the systems of feudalism and nobility.

But liberalism never was as progressive as the common understanding of democracy; the idea of “one person, one vote” or the idea that “the people rule.” The fact is that in the earliest days of our country’s history, not only were slaves and women denied the right to vote, but also anyone who did not own a qualifying amount of property. Even today, one can see that property and wealth reign supreme.

Even before the bulk of us get to vote on candidates, there is a pre-primary, primary where corporate interests and political bosses choose a slate of candidates that we are then allowed to choose between. I can assure you that there has rarely, if ever, been a person elected as a Senator or Governor or President in this country who did not have the preapproval and the backing of certain sections of the propertied and the wealthy. Liberal democracy as well undermines the political organization and the voice of the community through the use of gerrymandered districts that are carved out by ruling powers so as to keep certain political tendencies in power, rather than to reflect actual community-based cohesion.



Marc Plattner is a Vice President of the US government funded National Endowment for Democracy. He tells us that, “Liberal democracy clearly favors the economic arrangements that foster globalization—namely, the market economy and an open international trading system...Liberalism is based on the natural rights and the desire for property...From the outset modern liberal democracy has been identified with a substantial freeing up of the economic sphere. For [philosopher John] Locke, ‘the great and chief end’ for which men unite under government ‘is the preservation of their property’....Thus at its very foundations, liberal democracy is bound up with a view that, while insisting on the indispensability of the political, in some sense puts it in the service of the economic.”

In this age of dwindling resources and decreased personal buying power and shrinking markets, big corporations are doing everything they can to gain access to natural resources, cheap labor, and new markets. Hence, neoliberalism is the idea that transnational, global corporations should be able to go anywhere on the face of the planet to exploit resources and bring home mega-profits to their shareholders and CEOs. The purpose of neoliberal democracy is to make sure that governments are in place that are friendly to big corporations and to the political and military aims of the US government as the protector and guarantor of transnational corporate rights. So when we hear about US government Democracy Promotion programs, we have to understand that these programs are part and parcel of a campaign to protect corporate interests backed up by military coercion.

Plattner spells this out in plain language: “Globalization has fostered democratization, and democratization has fostered globalization. Moreover, both trends generally have furthered American

interests and contributed to the strengthening of American power....It is worth emphasizing that the international order that sustains globalization is underpinned by American military predominance.”

So there you have it. Neoliberal democracy has substituted the idea of “one person, one vote,” with “one dollar, one vote.” And the ones with most the dollars are the transnational corporations.

However, we see emerging in Latin America today an alternative form of democracy — participatory democracy. This is not an entirely new form. We have seen examples and roots of this democracy through the ages, including examples such as the Six Nations Iroquois Confederacy, the Paris Commune of 1871, the early years of Tanzania’s independence, based on African concepts of community called Ujamaa, and the first five years of the Nicaraguan Revolution when popular organizations elected their representatives to the Council of State. Today, in Latin America, widely varied experiments in participatory democracy are breaking out in many countries, ranging from the autonomous movements of the Zapatistas in Mexico to the Bolivarian Revolution in Venezuela, and again in Nicaragua with the return of the FSLN to power.



*Community Councils in Venezuela bring democracy to the level where people can articulate their own needs and priorities.*

In Venezuela, for the first time, there are 33,000 Community Councils involved in every aspect of local decision-making and development. Venezuela has been developing hundreds of thousands of agricultural and other kinds of cooperative ventures and there is a movement of workers to take over and run factories that is actually favored by the government. Social programs for housing, health care, education, community media development and more are not only funded by the government, but they are implemented and run at the most basic, neighborhood levels.

So what is participatory democracy? It is a form of democracy that centers political decision-making and the implementation and direction of government programs in natural, organic community structures. Most importantly, it regards the resources of a nation — the natural, labor, and market and distribution

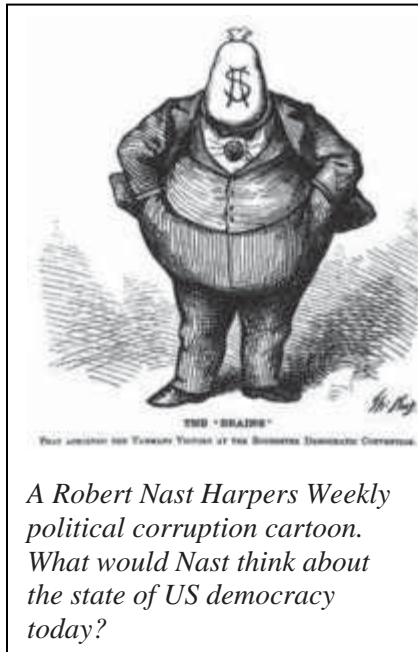
resources — as being inseparable from the communities with which they are intertwined.

Thus there is a fundamental conflict between neoliberal and participatory democracy. Whereas neoliberal democracy sees land and resources as property to be privatized and exploited for the profit of a wealthy elite with little or no connection to the land, participatory democracy sees land and resources as part and parcel of the community — a community that is completely integrated into its host ecosystem. Undoubtedly, the people who live in an ecosystem are going to develop resources in a more sustainable way than will any transnational corporation.

The big objection that the neoliberals make to participatory democracy is that it can lead to a kind of mob rule and the denial of inalienable rights. But for hundreds of years, indigenous people in Bolivia were ruled over by a European-descended minority. It took a participatory democratic movement to bring to power an indigenous movement and President. It took participatory democracy in Venezuela to reduce the poverty rate by 20% through more equitable sharing of the oil wealth. Under participatory democracy, union membership has doubled in Venezuela, and workers councils have direct power in implementing government programs. So the track record for protecting rights seems to be better with participatory democracy than with the liberal and neoliberal varieties.

What has elitist rule brought us here in the United States and the Americas? It brought us a North American Free Trade Agreement that has been destroying family farms and rural communities in Mexico, the United States, and Canada and led to the militarization of our Southern border. It has created a new

trail of tears of Mexican migrants from these rural areas seeking jobs as second-class workers with few rights. It brought us a war for oil in Iraq. It has brought us the current health care “reform” debate in which the majority support of the people for single payer healthcare is “off the table” because the insurance companies are the ones with the votes that count.



It is worth noting, too, that the militarization of the border and the Iraq war have done little for the people but much for these elite rulers and profit-mongers. Boeing Aircraft was operating at a loss until the US invaded Iraq and until the border wall started getting built — bringing it lucrative contracts. And every year since the invasion of Iraq, Exxon Mobil has broken world records for the huge profits it has turned.

The truth is, those in power try to scare us with phrases like “mob rule” and the implication that we are not fit for self-government. Well—participatory democracy is not perfect. In fact, it’s a grand and fluid experiment that will have its ups and downs. What this struggle is really about is communities and resources. Neoliberalism is theft. It is the theft of resources from communities and it is the theft of the very life and spirit of these communities. It is fundamentally against everything we think of as democracy.

The fact is that the United States government is involved in activities around the world that it calls Democracy Promotion programs, but which are really about influencing and manipulating elections in other countries. When that doesn’t work, they are willing to outright overthrow them, if need be, like they did in Haiti, Bulgaria, Mongolia and like they tried to do in Venezuela. There are a variety of institutions that carry out these programs.

For instance, the Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC) gives billions of dollars each year to impoverished nations for much needed aid. However, to get that aid, countries must agree to a checklist of austerity and “good government” measures entitled “Ruling Justly,” “Encouraging Economic Freedom,” and “Investing in People” that are graded and assessed by the MCC. The United States Agency for International Development, or USAID, is another government institution that funds vital, important aid programs, but it also funds campaigns and political parties in other countries and is thus deeply involved in manipulating governments and elections.

These and other organizations, however, also serve legitimate and important purposes in providing much needed aid. In that sense, they are reformable on some level. But for the misnamed National Endowment for Democracy, its one and only purpose is the manipulation of electoral processes around the world. In Latin America its interference is directed almost entirely at defeating the emergence of participatory democracy and returning Latin America to its status as the United States’ backyard and a transnational corporate playground.

Let’s quickly review a few examples of the NED’s handiwork:

The NED...

\* ...spent more than \$20 per voter in Nicaragua in 1990--more than had been spent by both candidates in the 1988 US Presidential election!

\* ...funded and set up meetings between organizations involved in the 2002 attempts to overthrow the elected government of Venezuela and has spent more than \$30 million dollars trying to influence various elections there.

- \* ...funds far right parties in Eastern Europe, even working with convicted Nazi collaborators like Lazslo Pasztor, of the NED funded Free Congress Foundation.
- \* ...funded, created, and trained most of the groups involved in the overthrow of Haiti's elected government in 2004, through its core institute, the International Republican Institute, chaired by John McCain. This led to the bloodiest year in Haiti in modern history.
- \* ...spends almost half its budget in support of the occupation of Iraq.
- \* ...funded the Cuban American National Foundation, which, in turn, funded a series of terrorists bombings of hotels and restaurants in Havana during the late 1990s.
- \* ...directly violated Mexican law by advising the campaigns of Vicente Fox in 2000 and Felipe Calderon in 2006, helping steal the elections from Center-Left candidates in what are widely believed to have been rigged elections.
- \* ...handpicked an opposition candidate to run for President in Belarus in 2006, then declared the election a fraud when he lost, even though their own polls showed the candidate only had single digit support.



The NED was founded in 1983 by an act of Congress and it is 95% funded by US taxes. However, the law that created the NED also designated it as a private organization. Therefore, it receives no significant or detailed oversight by any elected officials. In our names and with our taxes, it carries out a shadow foreign policy

behind out backs. Since only the Executive and Legislative branches are supposed to carry out US foreign policy, we of the Alliance for Global Justice and its Respect for Democracy Campaign maintain that the NED is unconstitutional.

Unfortunately, the NED also has broad bipartisan support. In the 2004 campaign, when Pres. Bush announced his intention to double the NED budget, John Kerry proposed it be tripled. In 2003, for the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the NED, Joe Biden sponsored legislation commending and reaffirming the NED's mission. It passed unanimously in the Senate and with one vote against in the House. Pres. Obama has pledged to increase the NED budget.

However, there have been some signs of positive change from the Obama administration. It is significant that in recent elections in Venezuela and El Salvador, responding to mass pressure, the State Department released statements that the US government regarded these elections as internal affairs. The campaign led by the Committee in Solidarity with the People of El Salvador (CISPES) was especially important in this regard.

The Alliance for Global Justice has established the Respect for Democracy Campaign ([www.respect4democracy.org](http://www.respect4democracy.org)) to mobilize actions when elections are coming up that are threatened by US and outside interference. We are especially focused on Latin America because of the emergence of alternative forms of Participatory Democracy that challenge the neoliberal model. To sign up for AfGJ alerts, which also include other intervention alerts and alerts in support of labor struggles, send an email to [James@AFGJ.org](mailto:James@AFGJ.org).