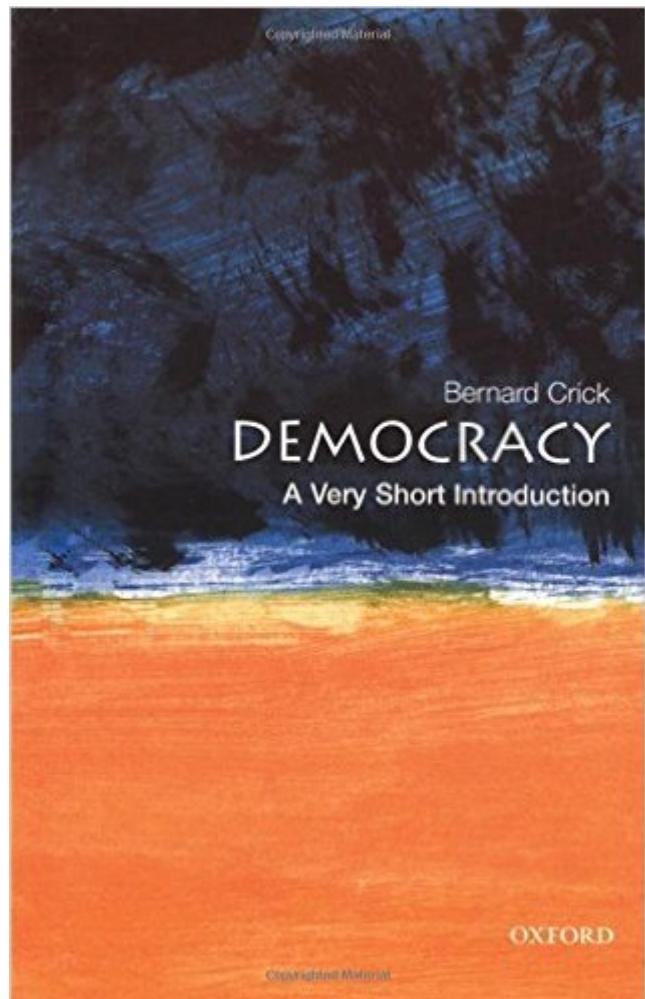


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Democracy: A Very Short Introduction



Synopsis

No political concept is more used, and misused, than that of democracy. Nearly every regime today claims to be democratic, but not all "democracies" allow free politics, and free politics existed long before democratic franchises. This book is a short account of the history of the doctrine and practice of democracy, from ancient Greece and Rome through the American, French, and Russian revolutions, and of the usages and practices associated with it in the modern world. It argues that democracy is a necessary but not a sufficient condition for good government, and that ideas of the rule of law, and of human rights, should in some situations limit democratic claims.

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Customer Reviews

Democracy is spoken of as the panacea for the world's woes. Fukuyama's END OF HISTORY seemed to operate just on this premise. Crick's book focuses on democracy's historical evolution, its polyvalent adaptations and its transformation into republicanism. Following his essay from Greece to Rome to American and European democracy, we see how democracy is not necessarily another way of saying just and/or good politics. Most interesting are the final chapters on the conditions needed for a democratic polity and the responsibilities of the individual in a system of democratic citizenship. He ends with a nice quote from Reinhold Niebuhr, "Man's inclination to justice makes democracy possible; but man's capacity for injustice makes it necessary."

Bernard Crick's contribution to Oxford's Very Short Introduction series, like so many of the volumes

dealing with political thought, is long on history and short on philosophy. Perhaps this is as it must be in such tiny books. (I'm actually beginning to lose faith in the whole VSI project, to be honest.) But it's nonetheless frustrating. In his *Democracy*, Crick devotes a good part of his energy to discussing the history of democracy, beginning with the Greco-Roman ideal, working through the republicanism of Machiavelli, and culminating in the French, American, and British experiments in the modern and contemporary eras. All of this is to the good, although a bit whirlwindish. But the hard puzzles of figuring out what democracy is and whether it's as admirable as we like to think in the West tend to be shortchanged in the second half of the book. Crick discusses de Tocqueville's worry that American-style democracy leads to a leveling-down, but doesn't analyze the factors that contribute to such a possibility. He recognizes that populism and majoritarianism are dangers in democracies, but doesn't ask whether they're endemic to them. He worries that consumerist democracies ask too little of their citizens (especially when compared to the republican models), but fails to provide explanations. And toward the end of the book, almost as if he's run out of steam, Crick's chapters are little more than checklists of characteristics for responsible citizenship and bona fida democracies. To his credit, however, he refuses to fall into the easy discourse of describing democracy as the magic bullet (a tendency especially prevalent in the U.S. for the past ten years or so). Democracy must stress liberty, but also equality of human rights. A decent read, but I'd recommend skipping this one and going instead straight to Crick's *In Defence of Politics*.^{*} Page 109.

Despite its title, this book is certainly not well-suited for students, such as undergraduates, who are new to studying the history and politics of democracy. The book suffers from two main flaws: the author's meandering, pretentious, and sometimes incoherent writing style; and his assumptions of what the audience of this book (presumably younger students just being introduced to this subfield) already knows. Crick mentions everything from Gospel verses, to Scottish poetry, to long French and Latin expressions, which he sometimes neglects to translate for monolingual English-speakers. He also includes personal anecdotes from JFK's assassination to tales of students in his lectures, which seem to have little or ambiguous relevance to the text. The entire text is rife with unnecessary allusions, which more often than not would confound anyone who would need to read a "very short introduction" such as this. In sum, it would seem that Crick used this work to showcase his knowledge rather than introduce students to a vastly interesting and important field of study. The book serves almost as a challenge to graduates and professors themselves to see whether they understand all of the allusions, recognize the works and names mentioned, and can make it through

the gobbledegook which attempts to conceal bad writing. The book does include a good amount of detail, but for its purpose - to be compendious yet comprehensible - Crick fails. Students would be better off reading a longer, but more approachable work, and Oxford should consider publishing a new version of this volume, authored by someone who understands the purpose of an introduction and can write appropriately for it.

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