

Heather K. Gerken, *The Democracy Index: Why Our Election System is Failing and How to Fix It.*

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Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009. pp.181. ISBN: 978-1-4008-2991-0.

- 1 How can anyone who followed the 2000 Bush-Gore presidential election forget the fiasco that ensued in the state of Florida? The discrepancies, allegations, and ultimately, the necessity of a recount, marred America's claim of having a well-oiled electoral system and smooth functioning democracy. In part, this book by Heather K. Gerken is a response to the national and international embarrassment emerging from that election. But as the author reveals, the 2000 presidential election merely represents one example of many shortcomings in a system which is in dire need of reform. As she states right from the beginning, the American "election system is run badly" and is highly dysfunctional (1).
- 2 In this well-researched and scholarly volume, Gerken makes the case for creating a tool to address the various problems and inefficiencies of the system. The general mismanagement in American electoral practices includes problems not just in regard to nationwide presidential elections but also at the congressional and local levels. From problems with computer software and ballots, to long voting lines and non-functioning voting machines, there is a growing national consensus, according to Gerken, that reform is needed if the U.S. is to remain a vibrant democracy and a model for other countries to emulate. She points out, quite accurately, that the U.S. system is highly decentralized; in many respects this is where some of the key problems begin. Another source of tension emerges from the partisan practices of local officials which at best can be characterized

as unprofessional. As Gerken states, this “unusual combination of partisanship and localism not only results in a poorly run system, but makes change hard to come by” (4).

- 3 The author goes on to point out that there have been calls for change in the past, many of them in fact coming from the congress itself. But change is slow to come in a highly complex and heavily bureaucratized system where local interests or regional politics override the desire for an efficient electoral system. Gerken, however, makes the argument that her approach is novel. Its centerpiece is what she calls a Democracy Index which would rank states and localities on their election performance. Essentially the Index would focus on issues which matter to voters: “how long did you spend in line? how many ballots were discarded? how often did voting machines break down? The Index would tell voters not only whether things are working in their own state, but how their state compares to its neighbors” (5). Such an index would clearly distill all such relevant data so that one could ascertain which practices and policies are most successful which in turn would lead to the emulation of those successful practices in other localities and states looking for solutions to their electoral shortcomings.
- 4 As the reader works through the volume it becomes clear that running an election system is no easy task. The argument can perhaps be made that greater centralization will simply lead to increased inefficiencies and discrepancies. Gerken makes clear that this is not the solution, insisting that a Democracy Index will provide meaningful data for individuals, groups and organizations to deploy particular strategies or formulas that could effectively work in a given locality. The Index would impact three domains within the reform effort, “giving voters the information they need to hold election officials accountable, putting pressure on policymakers to do the right thing, and helping administrators police themselves” (9). Gerken goes on to explain the actual ‘mechanics’ of putting together a Democracy Index in some detail, which is highly helpful for the reader keen on such a project.
- 5 Before emphasizing other strengths of the book I would like to merely point out some concerns one might have with Gerken’s efforts. In general, her topic is a highly specialized one which would appeal to a particular type of reader interested in electoral politics and reform-minded advisement. So, should the reader find these topics unappealing then there is clearly little reason to invest the time into reading it. Secondly, one who is wary of ‘how to’ books might want to avoid *The Democracy Index* altogether, since it devotes itself to generating a reform-minded mentality among the voting public. Thirdly, perhaps Gerken ought to address the larger issue of political apathy in the U.S. and how this impacts on voter turn-out during local and national elections. By and large what I am suggesting here is that prior to the implementation of any broad sweeping reforms it would be important to see regeneration in American civil society, both at the local community level and at the larger national level. This would establish a strong base from which serious reform might emerge. Finally, some might argue that Gerken’s suggestions for a Democracy Index do not go far enough, in that it is far too conservative a program. Should perhaps greater changes take place first at the structural level? Should the electoral system be changed? What about the weaknesses of the electoral college in presidential races? Is it somewhat alienating for American voters to see presidents elected who have a lower popular vote but a higher electoral vote than their competitor? Perhaps these suggestions are too radical for American society to swallow, especially if we acknowledge the slow rate of change or absence of change related to election reform.

- 6 Despite these observations, Gerken's intervention is an important contribution to an issue whose time has come: American electoral reform. Her recommendations for creating a Democracy Index are both practical and grounded in facilitating constructive changes in electoral practices. Gerken's call for reform as articulated in *The Democracy Index* should form the basis of any platform intent on initiating electoral reform, and in turn is a volume that would appeal to individuals passionate about socio-political change.
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