overly constitutional approach and relying perhaps too heavily on democratic discourse. Emphasizing factors like scale, place, and how power was exercised in actual practice, Mouritsen counters that the involvement of the poor—the vast majority—in the political affairs of Rome was exceedingly limited. At the *contiones,* "the people" were present more as a political concept than physically in attendance. The capacity of the *comitium* was at most 4,000 people for a demos of some five million citizens—who were themselves a privileged minority among tens of millions of non-citizens and slaves. The heavy time demands of direct democracy on these citizens trying to eke out a living would have been a major burden. Whatever democracy really meant or achieved in Rome (and Athens), it clearly did not aid the lower classes materially. There was a steady accumulation of wealth and power upward toward oligarchs as debt and poverty worsened among the *plebs.*

The premise from the outset of *Oligarchy* is that oligarchs and oligarchy are a social and political by-product of extreme material stratification in society, not a function of the presence or absence of democracy. Democracy matters enormously. But it neither defines nor displaces oligarchy. Oligarchs are empowered by concentrated wealth in dictatorships and democracies alike, and the cases in the book suggest that there is no necessary link between electoral democracy and stronger constraints on the capacity of oligarchs to exert their material power.

Regarding mass challenges to oligarchs, it is a theme constantly in the background as one among several threats oligarchs confront as they pursue strategies of wealth defense—although not always the most serious threat. The role of crises is also present, including the ones oligarchs help create (as in the Indonesian financial-political implosion). Equally important is how oligarchic power tends to be most potent during "the politics of the ordinary." Economic crises, wars, people power movements, and even people power moments can disrupt and reshape oligarchy, but not necessarily in ways that benefit common citizens politically or economically. The extent of popular organization is vitally important at these junctures—a point that recurs throughout *Oligarchy,* but admittedly is not its focus.

What of the effort to distinguish oligarchic and elite theories? "Iron law" theories of elites from Pareto to Michels rely mainly on social complexity. The only antidote is radical social simplification. By contrast, oligarchs cease to exist when no actors hold huge private fortunes—thereby eliminating the motive among a tiny minority to deploy material power for wealth defense. The twentieth century witnessed several instances of oligarchs being utterly erased, although the societies that erased them still had elites. Oligarchs and elites are both manifestations of minority power and influence, but they rest on very distinct power resources involving very different politics throughout history. The book argues that oligarchy is pervasive and durable, but not inevitable.

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— Jeffrey A. Winters, *Northwestern University*

Imagine an America in which indictments by the people could be brought against Richard Nixon and Henry Kissinger for the secret bombing of neutral Cambodia that killed thousands of civilians and paved the way for the rise of the murderous Khmer Rouge regime. Imagine a college of tribunes, drawn by lot exclusively from the pool of ordinary citizens, that could initiate charges against George W. Bush, Dick Cheney, Donald Rumsfeld, and John Yoo as torturers, or indict the heads of financial institutions for the crimes that triggered economic ruin in 2008. Consider how different American democracy might be if its governing institutions included a body of and for the *plebs,* empowered to veto one major piece of legislation a year (perhaps the recent extension of the Bush tax cuts) or oversee an annual national referendum (maybe on a single-payer health insurance plan).

These are the otherwise unimaginable possibilities that arise from John P. McCormick's important book *Machiavellian Democracy.* Setting aside for the moment the problem of how people's tribunes might be introduced into modern democracy, the significance of this work lies in the powerful critique it contains of contemporary representative institutions. Not only does this book challenge central pillars of electoral democracy's legitimacy, but it does so through a careful reading of Machiavelli that convincingly recasts this paragon of elite cunning and survival as a determined champion of real democracy for the lower classes. By charting the path to a more robust democracy through Machiavelli, McCormick provides us with an arresting reinterpretation of both the governing form and the thinker.

The central defect of modern democracy is that it cannot constrain the enormous power of wealthy oligarchs. McCormick also mentions the problem of controlling non-wealthy political elites. But his analysis and the architecture of the remedies he envisions strongly emphasize material considerations. Electoral democracies permit the ultra-rich to exert exaggerated power and political influence, and "encourage political and economic elites to enrich themselves at the public's expense and encroach upon the liberty of ordinary citizens" (p. vii). Even under the most ideal conditions of full suffrage and free participation, the distorting role of money in electoral politics produces an "aristocratic effect" (p. 92). Democracy in the United States and elsewhere is, in reality, an "elective oligarchy." Such "oligarchic republics" lack the institutional means to prevent the rich from dominating everyone else (pp. 11, 175–77).

The book concentrates our attention on this serious "crisis of political accountability" (p. vii). McCormick's target is not wealth stratification—at least not directly. He



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accepts economic inequality and the asymmetric power it confers as a fact of life (p. 13), dispensing with the hope that stratification can be overcome altogether as an orthodox Marxist illusion (p. 190, n. 15). The problem lies, rather, in allowing democracy to carry on as if these inequalities of wealth and power do not distort representative government. Existing democracies are what he terms "class anonymous"—the population is viewed as materially homogeneous and treated as equally empowered. There is nothing built into the institutional DNA of modern democracy that acknowledges, much less checks, the power of the rich. The solution for McCormick lies in institutional reforms that are explicitly "class specific" downward toward the lower classes by design, rather than effectively class-specific upward for the rich by default. This will "compensate poorer citizens politically for their lack of material resources" (pp. 12–13).

McCormick is not interested in tinkering at the margins with things like campaign finance reform or the Super-Pacs unleashed by the recent *Citizens United* decision. The central message of his book is that modern democracy will continue to favor the wealthy unless fairly radical institutional reforms, at least by post-seventeenth-century standards, are adopted. Only then can materially stratified societies attain a modicum of political equality—a power reorientation that he does not expect will be used by the many against the few to pursue economic equality.

This is the point at which Machiavelli enters the discussion. It is hard to imagine a more provocative way to spark a vigorous debate about correcting the mass-oppressive character of modern democracy than to invoke the writings of Niccolò Machiavelli, particularly his *Discourses* and the political proposals to Pope Leo presented in the "Discursus on Florentine Affairs." Although J. G. A. Pocock has suggested that contemporary North Atlantic republicanism traces its origins to a pivotal "Machiavellian Moment," McCormick counters that it was instead the regrettable *rejection* of Machiavelli's pro-plebian proposals and institutional innovations at this key historical juncture that accounts for democracy's subsequent oligarchic form. It was another Florentine of the period, Francesco Guicciardini, whose "aristocratically inflected" republican model incorporated elections and a senate, who supplied the "constitutional template" of modern representative governments (p. 9).

McCormick presents an examination of the radically different paradigm Machiavelli advocated—one which offers the "overlooked institutional and social alternatives" available to address democracy's oligarchic defects. He has published several recent articles on this topic, but the book format allows him to go into much greater depth, including an intriguing "thought experiment" that proposes an updated version of Machiavellian Democracy as an amendment to the US Constitution (p. 183). Its centerpiece is the establishment of a People's Tribunate of 51 nonwealthy citizens, selected by lottery, who would sit for nonrenewable terms of one year and wield powers modeled on the tribunes of Rome. Eligibility would be limited to those in the bottom 90% of incomes who have never held public office. This college of tribunes would supplement the federal branches of government currently dominated by oligarchs. It would have the power to veto one piece of congressional legislation, one executive order, and one Supreme Court decision each year. It could initiate a national referendum on any issue and conduct it in a manner that explicitly blocks wealthy interests from shaping the debate and vote. And finally, a super-majority of tribunes could initiate impeachment proceedings against one federal official each year from each branch of government.

McCormick's proposal attacks fundamental, even sacred, legitimations of contemporary democracy in three ways. The first is that we must embrace deliberate and selective *exclusion* as the means to achieve a more robust democracy, rather than universal-holistic inclusion. The justification is that democracy is incapable of representing majority interests in wealth-stratified societies unless the rich are strategically excluded from becoming or influencing the people's representatives. The second is that full democracy requires institutions that are not only divided by branch and function but also separated by class. This alternative is strikingly different from notions of improving representation of workers through corporatist arrangements, or of minorities through proportional schemes, within a unified set of democratic institutions that are supposed to empower all citizens jointly. McCormick offers a formula for democratic enhancement that rests on absolute *institutional separation* for the People's Tribunate.

And finally, in an attack on what he terms the "hegemony of elections," McCormick calls for greater representation of the people and their interests, not by electoral campaigns involving expressive voting but by *random class sampling* using lotteries (p. 171). The goal is not to give voice to any particular set of views, but rather to ensure a powerful (and nonsubordinate) seat at the governing table for representative members of the socioeconomic majority. This matters because oligarchs do not just dominate democratic politics by funding right-wing think tanks that strongly tilt the political agenda in their favor, or narrow the spectrum of successful candidates through "wealth primaries" that they finance (see Spencer Overton, "The Donor Class," *University of Pennsylvania Law Review* 152 [2004]: 73–118), or flood the democratic process with lobbying resources to support and subvert policies that impinge on their core interests. They benefit also from the fact that the majority of government representatives across all branches and at all levels are themselves far more wealthy than average citizens, whose economic perspective they neither share nor promote.

In the first systematic study of its kind since Donald Matthews's (1954) *The Social Background of Political*



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*Decisionmakers,* Nicholas Carnes ("By the Upper Class, For the Upper Class?" Ph.D. diss. Princeton University, 2011) shows that the class profile of American legislators is an important determinant of their policy choices in office. In other words, competitive elections already function as a method of socioeconomic sampling that yields significant democratic representation for the rich. McCormick's insistence on oligarch-proof lotteries to select tribunes merely extends the representational benefits of sampling to the rest of society. By suggesting that the only viable path to genuine representation is through reforms that involve strategic exclusion, institutional separation, and random socioeconomic sampling, McCormick has dealt a debilitating blow to the institutions and practices that are central to modern democratic legitimacy.

This critique is no idle exercise in abstraction or fancy. The stated objective of *Machiavellian Democracy* is to provide the "intellectual resources" that can address the "participatory and accountability deficiencies of contemporary democracies" (p. 172). McCormick seeks to unsettle the status quo, erode hegemonic ideas, challenge accepted democratic forms, and ultimately transform them. This is democratic theory with democratizing intent—which, to be effective, does not necessarily require him to offer a clear political road map leading to these changes. The power of the pen unfolds in indeterminate ways. But at a minimum, given the centrality of the Roman example for his very serious democratic project, McCormick must address whether the conditions under which the Roman tribunate came into existence would also be necessary for similar reforms to be adopted in modern times.

Although the author acknowledges the role upheaval from below played in adopting this major reform, he does not discuss the relevance of this factor in getting contemporary American oligarchs to accept a People's Tribunate. Like the patricians of Rome, they have every reason to use all means at their disposal to obstruct the creation of a powerful institution that would be exclusively for the plebs. This observation is all the more significant in light of the fact that the absence of a mass movement in Florence was likely the most important reason Machiavelli's own proposals for a neo-Roman tribunate went nowhere and were largely forgotten. If a profound threat from below is a necessary condition for converting Machiavellian Democracy from a thought experiment to an adopted reform, it means that lower classes must exert considerable mobilizational power as a precondition for gaining augmented formal institutional power. The entire thrust of this book suggests, however, that oligarchic domination of existing democracies forecloses electoral campaigns as an effective vehicle for such a mobilization. How a society might get a new class-specific tribunate without a class-based crisis is not examined.

Invoking the example of Roman tribunes has the important effect of establishing the ancient heritage and validity of democratic institutions based on class. The fact that Machiavelli presents an idealized version of the Roman experience in his writings—a point that could have been emphasized more in the opening sections of the book—cuts two ways for McCormick's arguments. On the one hand, Machiavelli's exaggerations about popular empowerment in Rome strengthen the important revisionist claim that he was determined, even to the point of excess, in his efforts to champion democracy for the plebs in his own time. On the other hand, the practical case for Machiavellian Democracy in the modern era is somewhat weakened if the tribunate of the plebs in Rome, the only example we have, fell disappointingly short of empowering ordinary citizens and taming oligarchs.

Whether Rome was a democracy with oligarchic elements (Fergus Millar, *The Roman Republic in Political Thought,* 2002) or an oligarchy with democratic elements (Henrik Mouritsen, *Plebs and Politics in the Late Roman Republic,* 2001; Karl-Joachim Hölkeskamp, *Rekonstruktionen einer Republik,* 2004) cannot be settled here. What is clear is that the plebs constituted a propertied (and thus privileged) minority of free male citizens numbering in the hundreds of thousands, within a Roman urban sprawl of a few million. Above the plebs were senators and knights who were between 500 and 50,000 times more wealthy, and below them were roughly 45 million slaves and landless farmers throughout the empire. What we also know is that despite participating in public meetings, popular assemblies, and having a class-specific tribunate, the plebs of Rome became *more* landless and impoverished during the two centuries before Julius Caesar, while oligarchs grew richer. McCormick acknowledges this (p. 78), but he does not explore whether it implies that even class-specific institutions fail to provide an adequate check on oligarchic power.

McCormick wants to leverage the example of the Roman case for modern purposes without necessarily being constrained by the limitations of class representation and empowerment of the era. This is reasonable in light of the major advances in people power in recent centuries (Roman plebs enjoyed few liberal freedoms). What has not changed, presumably, is the socioeconomic justification for having a college of tribunes in the first place—representation based on class is pointless if it does not promise to address class. Following Machiavelli, McCormick not only expects the tribunate to serve as a locus of lower-class power but also believes it would and should institutionalize a heightened class animosity. Oligarchs should not fear this more class-conscious majority because, according to Machiavelli, it is the *grandi* who possess the natural "humor" or "appetite" to oppress, whereas the appetite of the plebs is aggressive only in self-defense. They mainly want to be left alone (pp. 45–50). McCormick faithfully presents this way of thinking about class dispositions as belonging to Machiavelli, though he appears at one point to embrace it as his own as well (p. 181).



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If oligarchs are defined socially and empowered politically by wealth, and if wealth defense is their existential political project, then a clash with an empowered and class-conscious majority seems inevitable—certainly from the perspective of alarmed oligarchs, who would view policies ranging from higher taxes to wealth redistribution as highly predatory. And if such a clash is not inevitable, why have a people's tribunate at all? Machiavelli's position is that "the grandi must be granted a prominent place lest they perpetrate oligarchic or princely coups" (p. 103). McCormick avoids the thorny problem of oligarchic reaction mainly by not specifying the sorts of policies modern tribunes would champion. It is unclear, for instance, how different tribune-initiated policies would be from those already produced by the electoral oligarchies he critiques. Nor do we get a sense of the limits of oligarchic tolerance in the face of a potentially aggressive tribunate.

These matters are important for McCormick's arguments and for the more robust democracy he wants to help establish. But they do not detract from the sweep and impact of this book. Scholars like Jane Mansbridge and Nadia Urbinati have helped define the contours of contemporary notions of representation. But no work in political theory today goes as far as McCormick's in its critique of the failings of modern democratic representation on class grounds. Although different in analytical style, this work also adds a fresh and important perspective to a body of American scholarship that includes Larry Bartels, Martin Gilens, Nicholas Carnes, Benjamin Page, Herbert Jacob, Paul Pierson, and Jacob Hacker. All of these writers take seriously the problems of class and democracy, or what McCormick terms the "persistence of political inequality in the age of mass suffrage" (p. 171). But none envisions the sorts of institutional remedies he advances. His work merits wide attention in debates about democracy and especially Machiavelli's contributions to its modern forms.

### Response to Jeffrey Winters's review of *Machiavellian Democracy*

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— John. P. McCormick

I heartily thank Jeffrey Winters for his sharp and insightful, generous yet critical, review of *Machiavellian Democracy*. I will confine my response to Winters's two most penetrating criticisms of the book.

Winters appropriately demands from *Machiavellian Democracy* a better account of the kind of political mobilization necessary to institute the recommended class-specific and randomizing institutions that would make the workings of contemporary representative governments more democratic. This raises not only the issue of class-consciousness on the part of non-wealthy citizens (which may be insufficiently intense today), but also of the concrete leverage that common citizens must command in order to effectively pursue democratic reforms in our time. Ancient *demoi* and plebeians collectively threatened to withhold their war-making capacities from the state in order to gain pro-democratic concessions from the oligarchs of their regimes. Worker-citizens in nineteenth- and twentieth-century North America and Europe achieved comparable, if arguably less substantive, results by withholding their labor power from industrial economies and/or by threatening to do so. Unfortunately, there doesn't seem to be an asset shared by modern plebeians, the wielding or withholding of which would extort democratic reforms from contemporary political-economic elites.

As the present economic crisis persists, perhaps the "Occupy" movement, and others like it, will gain broader support, and rhetoric like "Main Street versus Wall Street" will become increasingly pervasive among average citizens. But even if citizens protest more widely and with greater intensity the fact that growing economic inequality is radically exacerbating political inequality, what will they use to extract democratic reforms from modern oligarchs and their political proxies? Consumer power is a possible, but deeply unsatisfying, answer for several reasons. For instance, even if, say, the internet were to better facilitate mass consumers' ability to coordinate their purchasing leverage against corporate power, it remains to be seen whether it can reproduce the political benefits afforded to democracy historically by citizens organized as armed forces or in trade unions. The close proximity, shared sacrifice and cooperative action fostered by such military and economic arrangements created uniquely tight solidarity among soldiers and workers, enabling them to exercise formidable collective power against political and socio-economic elites.

Moreover, Winters rightfully detects some reticence on my part to spell out the redistributive ends to which a modern tribunate might be put—or even to admit that such ends might exist. There are at least two justifications for such hesitation, one substantive, one rhetorical. On the one hand, the book's objective is to highlight forgotten means by which average democratic citizens might more directly and effectively decide policy outcomes themselves, leaving aside what those outcomes, in a more specific sense, might be. One could argue that democracy's raison d'être is primarily meaningful political equality, and socio-economic equality only to the extent that it impacts the former.

On the other hand, progressive reforms are always more effectively attained when their advocates declare that they are intended to achieve moderate ends. Indeed, the Roman nobility was quite surprised and dismayed by the extensive political and socio-economic ends to which Roman plebs eventually put the plebeian tribunate. An infamous Machiavellian maxim is apropos here: Prudent political actors do not request from their adversaries weapons with which they openly declare they will kill such enemies; they obtain the weapons and then use them however they wish.



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