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John P. McCormick
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Machiavellian Democracy

Intensifying economic and political inequality poses a dangerous threat to the liberty of democratic citizens. Mounting evidence suggests that economic power, not popular will, determines public policy, and that elections consistently fail to keep public officials accountable to the people. John P. McCormick confronts this dire situation through a dramatic reinterpretation of Niccolò Machiavelli's political thought. Highlighting previously neglected democratic strains in Machiavelli's major writings, McCormick excavates institutions through which the common people of ancient, medieval, and Renaissance republics constrained the power of wealthy citizens and public magistrates, and he imagines how such institutions might be revived today. *Machiavellian Democracy* fundamentally reassesses one of the central figures in the Western political canon and decisively intervenes into current debates over institutional design and democratic reform. Inspired by Machiavelli's thoughts on economic class, political accountability, and popular empowerment, McCormick proposes a citizen body that excludes socioeconomic and political elites and grants randomly selected common people significant veto, legislative, and censure authority within government and over public officials.

John P. McCormick is Professor of Political Science at the University of Chicago. He was educated at Queens College, City University of New York (CUNY), and the University of Chicago. He has been a Fulbright scholar in Bremen, Germany; a Monnet Fellow at the European University Institute, Florence; and a Radcliffe Fellow at Harvard University. McCormick is the author of *Carl Schmitt's Critique of Liberalism: Against Politics as Technology* and *Weber, Habermas, and Transformations of the European State: Constitutional, Social, and Supranational Democracy*. He has published numerous articles on contemporary democratic theory, Florentine political and constitutional thought, and twentieth-century German legal, political, and social theory in scholarly journals, including *Modern Law Review*, *American Political Science Review*, and *Political Theory*.

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Contents

<i>Preface</i>	<i>page</i> vii
<i>Abbreviations for Machiavelli's Writings</i>	xi
Introduction: Liberty, Inequality, and Popular Government	I
PART I	
1 Peoples, Patricians, and the Prince	21
2 Democratic Republics and the Oppressive Appetite of Young Nobles	36
PART II	
3 The Benefits and Limits of Popular Participation and Judgment	65
4 Elections, Lotteries, and Class-Specific Institutions	91
5 Political Trials and "the Free Way of Life"	114
PART III	
6 Republicanism and Democracy	141
7 Post-Electoral Republics and the People's Tribune Revived	170
<i>Notes</i>	189
<i>Acknowledgments</i>	221
<i>Works Cited</i>	225
<i>Index</i>	247

Preface

A crisis of political accountability besets contemporary democracy. Mounting evidence suggests that elections, even “free and fair” ones, do not elevate to office individuals who are especially responsive to the political aspirations and expectations of their constituents. Moreover, democratic governments seem decreasingly adept at preventing society’s wealthiest members from wielding excessive influence over law and policy making. Rather than facilitating popular rule, electoral democracies appear to permit and perhaps even encourage political and economic elites to enrich themselves at the public’s expense and encroach upon the liberty of ordinary citizens. The inability of citizens to control the behavior of public officials and counteract the power and privilege of the wealthy poses a grave threat to the quality of political representation today; it severely debilitates conditions of liberty and equality within the republics of our age.

Inspired by the most astute analyst of republics from earlier ages, Niccolò Machiavelli, this book reconsiders constitutional measures and institutional techniques that popular governments before modern democracy devised to surveil and control political and economic elites. In order to repel the threat that such elites posed to liberty and equality, common citizens within traditional republics proposed and often enacted accountability measures far more extensive than competitive elections. Guided by Machiavelli’s endorsement of such measures and his extensive analyses of the Venetian, Florentine, and, especially, Roman constitutions, I have identified the following components of a robust, extra-electoral model of elite accountability and popular empowerment: offices or assemblies that exclude the wealthiest citizens from eligibility; magistrate appointment procedures that combine lottery and election; and political trials in which the entire citizenry acts as ultimate judge over prosecutions and appeals. I name the type of popular government that incorporates such institutions “Machiavellian Democracy.”

Historically, political and economic elites within republics resisted popular demands for such institutions, and the numerous philosophers and historians

who served as spokesmen for aristocratic republics stridently denounced such measures. Indeed, thinkers such as Aristotle, Cicero, Guicciardini, and Madison, who preferred constitutional arrangements that in important respects insulate political and economic elites from popular control, have dominated Western political thought. Before significant numbers of European and colonial intellectuals began to champion progressive and radical democratic movements in the nineteenth century, Machiavelli was arguably the only major intellectual advocate of republics in which the people vigorously contest and constrain the behavior of political and economic elites by extra-electoral means. In this Machiavellian spirit, I conclude the book with reform proposals drawn from elite-constraining and citizen-enabling measures debated or enacted in notable ancient, medieval, and Renaissance republics – most important among them, the institution that earns Machiavelli’s highest praise, the tribunes of the plebs from republican Rome. Specifically, I propose, as a thought experiment, a “People’s Tribune” to be amended to the United States Constitution.

Institutional prescriptions aside, this book accentuates the fundamentally populist – that is, citizen-empowering – and anti-elitist foundation of Machiavelli’s political thought. I ultimately suggest that Machiavelli ought to be interpreted as a democrat and not a “republican” – at least not as the influential “Cambridge School” approach to intellectual history defines “republicanism” and as it depicts the illustrious Florentine secretary’s relationship to it. As already mentioned, the vast majority of republics emulated and their advocates espoused aristocratic rather than democratic constitutional models. Therefore, I will argue, republicanism generally indulged, in theory and practice, far more dominance of domestic politics by socioeconomic elites than Cambridge-associated or -influenced scholars such as John Pocock, Quentin Skinner, and Philip Pettit acknowledge, and certainly more than Machiavelli’s writings ever countenance. Such commentators consistently ignore or acutely underplay Machiavelli’s endorsement of class-specific offices, extra-electoral modes of appointing and punishing public officials, and assemblies where common citizens broadly discuss and directly decide public policy.

On my interpretation, Machiavelli prompts us to rethink fundamentally the institutional and cultural requirements of political participation and elite accountability within popular government. Unlike republicans such as Cicero, Guicciardini, the young Madison, or later advocates of electoral democracy such as Walter Bagehot and Joseph Schumpeter, Machiavelli seeks to mitigate rather than simply exploit common citizens’ general deference to socioeconomic and political elites. Indeed, liberty, according to Machiavelli, depends on institutions that respond to and even further encourage a popular disposition of distrust, bordering on animosity, toward wealthy and prominent members of the citizenry and the government.

In short, *Machiavellian Democracy* refocuses attention on the necessity of properly institutionalized class conflict for healthy domestic politics within popular governments. It revives Machiavelli’s forgotten lesson that the resources of wealthy citizens and the wide discretion enjoyed by officeholders pose the

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[More information](#)

Preface

ix

principal threats to liberty in such regimes – *not* the purported ignorance, apathy, and caprice of common citizens. This book reevaluates the institutions that Machiavelli and democratic republicans thought necessary to confront these dire threats to the liberties of common citizens and their polities and it considers ways that such institutions might be revived today.

Abbreviations for Machiavelli's Writings

- D** *Discourses on Titus Livy's First Ten Books* (c. 1513–17).
Niccolò Machiavelli, *Discorsi sopra la prima deca di Tito Livio*. In
Opere I: I Primi Scritti Politici. Edited by Corrado Vivanti (Torino:
Einaudi-Gallimard, 1997), 193–525.
- DF** *Discursus on Florentine Affairs* (1519–20).
Niccolò Machiavelli, *Discursus Florentinarum rerum post mortem
iunioris Laurentii Medicis*. In *Opere I*, 733–45.
- FH** *Florentine Histories* (1532).
Niccolò Machiavelli, *Istorie Fiorentine*. Edited by Franco Gaeta
(Milano: Feltrinelli, 1962), 68–577.
- P** *The Prince, or On Principalities* (1513).
Niccolò Machiavelli, *Il Principe*. In *Opere I*, 114–92.