

(Speech delivered April 5, 2014, at Democracy for the USA's Democracy Forum 2014)

I'd like to begin my talk with a little allegory. There's this man, let's call him Mr. America. He has a very large house, pretty much a castle, and it sits on a very large plot of land, with trees and lakes and wild animals roaming around. So this man is quite rich. He works hard at his job and makes a lot of money. It's his extremely productive labor that produces the wealth that he owns. So you'd think that this man would be happy, that he would be in a good situation. But he's not. He has a problem, a really big problem. He doesn't actually control his estate. He has no say about what happens in his house or on his land. The constitution of the country he lives in has set it up so that all he can do is elect a butler every few years, and then it's this butler, not the man, who completely runs the show in the man's house and on his property. It's the butler, not the man, who decides when meals are served and what kind of food the family eats. It's the butler, not the man, who decides when it's time to make repairs or improvements on the house, and what those are going to be: whether to repave the driveway or repair the roof, whether to add a bedroom or a pool; and how much money to spend on all these things. It's the butler, not the man, who decides whether to plant more trees or cut them down, whether to draw water from the lakes or dump sewage into them, whether to allow hunters on the property to hunt the animals, whether to allow oil drilling or mining for minerals on the land, and if so, how environmentally destructive these things are going to be allowed to be. Naturally, the butler has his own personal ideas and interests concerning all of these things, and it's just sheer luck if his interests match those of the man and his family. In fact, far more often than not the family opposes the decisions of the butler, oftentimes vehemently. They often consider the butler's decisions and actions to be very bad and extremely costly and damaging. If they were in control, they would do things much differently. So the man and his family are understandably extremely frustrated. They can tell the butler what they want done but he doesn't have to listen. When they get exceptionally angry they get together and organize little protests. They march up to the butler's office on the top floor of the house and hold demonstrations there. Occasionally the butler relents and listens to the family, or at least pretends to, since he lives in their house and it's not a good idea to be in a completely hostile relationship with them. But usually he ignores them completely, or else he gives them some bs story and proceeds to do exactly what he wants for his own purposes. Remember, according to the country's constitution he's the legitimate decision-maker in the house, not the family.

So that's my obvious allegory. And the obvious question is: "What kind of homeowner is this man?" A man/woman is supposed to be the master in his own castle. What kind of master is this that I just described? Since when is the butler--a mere servant--and not the homeowner the ruler in the house? Can you imagine a situation more absurd? Well, I'm sorry to say that this is precisely our situation in the United States, the situation of the American people. We do not rule ourselves. This politics of ours that we have to deal with every day is utterly, fundamentally wrong. And the essential problem is that we're ruled by an elite within our society, a distinct ruling club, in other words a ruling class. Way back in the 1950s a brilliant political scientist named C. Wright Mills, in a masterful analysis of American politics, appropriately called this ruling class "the power elite." So as a matter of plain fact and common sense American government is an oligarchy, the rule of the few--and a tyranny. Tyrannies are not limited to regimes where everybody cowers in their home at night waiting for the dreaded knock on the door, meaning they'll be hauled off to be tortured or killed. Tyranny can and does exist in more subtle forms than that. The purpose of this organization, DUSA, is to overturn the oligarchical, tyrannical system of government that we're living under. We're of the opinion that the country needs democracy, which is a totally different form of government from what we now have. Before I describe what we mean by "democracy," I'd like to point out that we're in good company in our radical critique of the American system of government.

In the late 1700s, when the U.S. Constitution was first being formulated and debated (around 1787 to 1789) there were these people called Antifederalists, who opposed the system being set up by the Founders (Federalists: James Madison, George Washington, John Adams, Alexander Hamilton, etc.). Now the Founders knew what a democracy was. They had heard of Athens. They had heard plenty about Athens. In fact for a thousand years throughout medieval Europe Athens was notorious for having been a democracy. The Founders didn't know the details of the institutions of the Athenian democracy--these have been discovered only recently by modern historians and archeologists--but they knew that it was basically the rule of the common people rather than any elite. And they absolutely abhorred it! The Founders were virulently anti-democratic. They deliberately chose to make the new government a representative system rather than a democracy. So although they used populist language and said things like, "Hey, we're providing for free elections, so this government is derived from the people," and "We're not setting up a nobility with distinct privileges," what they really wanted was a government of, by, and for the upper class. And this is in fact what

they achieved. They knew that electing a tiny number of persons to a distant government (65 representatives and 26 senators--91 Congressmen total) would naturally and inevitably result in only prominent people, members of the natural aristocracy, being elected to high office. It was the Antifederalists who were relatively democratic. They were opposed to the remote, unaccountable, elite government being set up by the Founders. They wanted actual rule by the people. This means that the government should be a true representation of the people--in other words it should consist of a representative sample of the people, so that just like most Americans are humble folk rather than rich persons or lawyers, the legislature should consist mostly of humble folk, not rich people and lawyers. But rule by the people is not what the Constitution set up, and the Antifederalists tirelessly pillaged the Constitution for this fact, saying that it was establishing an oligarchy, an aristocracy, a tyranny, despotism, and slavery. Those were the words they used, repeatedly and emphatically. For instance, one of the Pennsylvania Antifederalists, who wrote under the pseudonym of "Centinel," declared that "[this] system which was pompously displayed as the perfection of government, proves upon examination to be the most odious system of tyranny that was ever projected--a many-headed hydra of despotism." Centinel and the other Antifederalists were right.

I'd like to skip to another era in American history that sheds light on the nature of our system of government: the age of the Machine. Most of you have heard of the Daley Machine of the first Mayor Daley here in Chicago. In fact the Machine was born in the late 1800s in several big cities of the country. And a funny thing is that most of the big-city machines were Democratic machines (run by the Democratic Party), including the biggest and most notorious of them all: Tammany Hall of New York City. Tammany Hall was colossally corrupt, off the scale corrupt. The Boss of the Democratic Party and his associates stole from the city treasury like there was no tomorrow, like it was their personal bank account. They also used the police to extort money from prostitution rings and from city merchants, and to enable all kinds of fraud by Machine goons at the polls during election times. And although Machine politicians famously supplied the poor with buckets of coal in the winter and turkeys on holidays, they mainly catered to their own interests and the interests of industrialists and financiers, who would give them kickbacks for contracts (for instance streetcar lines). The ethos and the principles of Machine politicians were best summarized by one of the great sages of Machine politics, George Washington Plunkitt of Tammany Hall. (Bootblack stand, pontificate.) In his lectures on Machine politics he summed up his method in a couple of phrases: One was "I seen my opportunities and I took 'em" (saying -> epitaph). And the

other was "honest graft" (legalized theft), which he approved of and encouraged. He explicitly preached that the aim of the politician was and should be to take advantage of all the wheeling and dealing that came his way in his office, in order to accumulate as much wealth for himself as possible. The Democratic Party leaders acted like the purpose of government was to make them individually rich. And the Democratic Party rank and file acted like the purpose of government was to supply them with jobs and perks. As for the public good, to the Democratic Party this was a distant, secondary consideration. The Machine was a thoroughly self-serving enterprise. Now, remember that it controlled numerous city governments in this country for over a hundred years, and arguably exists in many cities to this day, just in a different form. So a study of the Democratic Machine teaches us not only about a particular phase of American politics in the past, as if it were some quaint relic. It actually tells us a lot about the enduring essence and the true nature of the representative system, of electoral politics, and of the Democratic Party. And the lesson is this: When the reins of government in a society are held by just a handful of individuals, and the mechanism for filling the offices of government is elections, the result is always the rule of an elite, principally in the interests of that elite--whether this elite is from the Republican Party, the Democratic Party, or any other party. Politicians as a group find all kinds of ways to enrich themselves at the public's expense and to wield power for their own selfish purposes: good apples in the barrel of politicians are the exception, not the rule. By its very nature representative/electoral politics is not, has never been, and will never be in the interests of the people. It's the furthest thing from democracy that you can imagine.

OK, so what exactly is democracy? Ancient Athens is the best, and certainly the best documented, example of actual democracy in history. The citizens ruled themselves. And the key to the Athenian democracy was its political institutions, in other words its constitution. The foremost institution of the Athenian democracy was the Assembly; this was the legislature. The Assembly was the meeting of the citizens every ten days or so on the side of a hill called the Pnyx, in which they decided on all major policies collectively. We know most about the Athenian's military and foreign policies, since these were documented by the historian Thucydides in his *History of the Peloponnesian War*, but there's plenty of evidence that they decided on economic policies and many other things as well. The second key institution of the Athenian democracy was the Council of Five Hundred; this was the executive, and the principal function of this body was to draw up the agenda of issues for the Assembly to consider. So, to generalize, the legislature in a democracy consists of sovereign community assemblies--one in the

case of Athens, many in a larger society. All the people gather together regularly to decide on major policies, actions, and laws. The executive and bureaucratic part of the government is a set of councils of several hundred citizens each, chosen randomly from the entire citizen population (true representative sample/microcosm). In a democracy both the legislature (the Assemblies) and the executive (the Councils) are made up of ordinary citizens, not elites or tools of elites. The people thus actually rule themselves. [Diagram handout: In a large democratic society there are assemblies in every community and executive councils at all levels of government--community, city, state, and national.]

Finally, I'd like to touch on the subject of initiatives and referendums, because lately these have been offered as an alternative to the representative system. After all, isn't this the embodiment of democracy: people voting directly on issues by placing them on the ballot? I think a little bit of history is in order here. These mechanisms--the initiative and referendum, also known as direct democracy--were introduced into some American states by the Progressives during the Progressive Era, around the turn of the twentieth century. They had studied these mechanisms in Switzerland, where they originated, or at least they had heard about them. The Progressives were fed up with the elitist Gilded Age politics of robber barons buying and selling politicians, even whole legislatures, and they wanted a corrective to this sort of thing. It's important to remember that these reformers never meant to replace the representative system with the I&R (note: just initiative). They just wanted to add some method by which the people could occasionally override unresponsive governments. So the initiative is a grafting of a single democratic mechanism onto a mainly representative structure. The initiative is not, and cannot stand as, an entire democratic system. It doesn't amount to democracy for a number of reasons. (1) There's still the entire panoply of full-time representative institutions: governors and state legislatures, mayors and city councils, and unelected judiciaries, not to mention president, Congress, and Supreme Court. These are all elitist institutions and they're still mainly in charge; they remain enormously powerful. (2) Ballot measures come along only every couple of years at election times; they don't constitute continuous government: constant rule or management. (3) Propositions are for the most part put on the ballot by rich individuals or well-moneyed organizations. It takes a huge amount of money to wage initiative campaigns for and against measures--nowadays these require even more money than candidate elections. It takes a lot of money to collect signatures and run ads on TV and radio, and you generally have to pay a professional ballot measure company to do the job for you. So the initiative process is for the most part controlled by the rich, just like representative politics.

Ordinary people generally do not determine what issues make it to the ballot: they don't determine the agenda of politics. (4) Ballot measure campaigns are almost completely carried out through the corporate media. Not only does this mean that it's a big-money game, it also means that people don't gather together, as they do in a democracy, to investigate, discuss, analyze, and debate the issues. They mostly just listen to sound-bite ads and show up on election day--it's another form of passive, spectator politics. (5) The initiative has been called "laws without government." Government is about control, about sovereignty, which is a continuous, comprehensive sort of thing. In a democracy the people are in continuous control of what goes on in their society. But the initiative is not an effective method of overall control. It's a haphazard process where random laws, loosely or not at all connected to larger, comprehensive policies, are placed on the ballot only every couple of years, by random rich people or powerful organizations. For instance you get propositions to ban the sale of fur coats, but not to address larger environmental issues like species extinction or fossil fuel consumption. You get narrow, anti-property tax initiatives, not rational, coherent tax policies that provide for adequate revenue for social needs and societal infrastructure. You get measures on casinos because the owners of casinos have tons of money, but not on state-sponsored gambling like the lottery or on sensible funding of education. In other words the initiative is piecemeal, haphazard legislation--I think of it as "hot-button issue" politics or "boutique" politics. It's not at all full democracy.

To conclude, what this country needs is truly fundamental change. We need an entirely new system of government, a democratic system of government. And democracy requires a special kind of governmental machinery, a specific set of institutions like those I described. The bottom-line, essential feature of democracy is people gathering together in person to discuss and decide on the issues they themselves want to deal with.