



“The People” and our Freedom

Central to the politics of states with democratically-constituted governments is the notion that all sovereignty resides in “the People.” In no place and at no time has this idea been more prevalent than in contemporary America. It is an idea that both Democrats and Republicans peddle furiously. In spite of its popularity, however, it is a fiction. Worse, it is an invidious fiction.

First of all, it needs to be noted that all talk of “the American *People*” simultaneously reflects an abysmal ignorance of the kind of order — [a Constitutional Republic](#) — that our Founding Fathers left us while further undermining that order. No member of the founding generation would ever have thought to describe the inhabitants of [these United States](#) as a single *people*. On no reading of America at any time during its history could the citizenry be interpreted in terms of the monolith suggested by the language of “the People.”



America has never been anything at all like a “[community](#).” A community is distinguished by “the *common good*” that its residents share, a substantive satisfaction toward the realization of which every member is expected to contribute. The case of the [early Christians](#) illustrate as clearly as any the nature of a genuine community, for in the communities that they formed each member knew every other and all were expected to share their resources for the sake of achieving the end of charity.

Some have argued that the classical Greek [polis](#), the [Roman Republic](#), and even [the medieval kingdom](#) were alike instances of community. Whether such arguments succeed is another matter. In any event, these bygone entities didn’t remotely approximate the size of America at the time of its founding, much less its size today.

A community is a many-become-one, a “*we*” transformed into an “*I*.” Like the term “Society” when used to characterize a state, so too the phrase “the People” doesn’t just conceal but actually *denies* just those two critical and inextricably bound phenomena of which our liberty as Americans is constituted: our individuality and our federalism.

If Americans constituted a “People,” then allocating all authority and power to the national government would make sense, for only a national government could govern — or *lead* — such a large group. If Americans were a “People,” then it is proper that the individual states should be nothing but tributaries to the national government. But our individuality, our liberty, as Americans depends upon a decentralization of authority and a broad dispersion of power. And this in turn means that beyond a



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narrow set of functions specified in the Constitution, the federal government is to be subservient to the states.

There is still another way in which politicians seek to insure that our Founders' vision becomes one of history's relics. In promoting the idea that elected representatives are supposed to refrain from exercising their own judgment by invariably acting in accordance with the wishes of their constituents — *the People* — politicians foster the myth that the American order is a *Democracy* — not a *Republic*.

"Democracy" is an ambiguous term, it is true, but in the popular contemporary imagination, there is no question that it denotes not just a *morally* superior form of government, but a *morally supreme* one. And it is considered morally supreme because of the *egalitarian* principle that is held to be at its heart. Democracies, we have heard it said more times than we can count, affirm "*human rights*" and "*human dignity*." Democracies treat everyone *equally*. It is precisely because of the leveling impulse intrinsic to "democracies," their "passion for equality," as [Tocqueville](#) put it, that our Founders held democracies in low esteem. It is exactly due to this that they worked strenuously to make America into something *other than* a democracy.

When Americans, including and especially the members of the conservative and Tea Party movements, describe politicians as "working" for them, or when they view a prospective or actual candidate's *business* expertise as a credential for holding government office, they actually strengthen the federal government and, thus, erode ever further the once taken for granted belief that the states are sovereign.

To put it succinctly, the prevalence of the term "the American People" and like terms weakens individual freedom.



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