

## Democracy's Golden Rules

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James T. Kloppenberg, [Toward Democracy: The Struggle for Self-Rule in European and American Thought](#) (2016).

These are interesting times to be an historian of democracy. Historians are beginning to explore the myriad ways that people outside of and even within political officialdom have pressed their claims for recognition, respect, and inclusion in politics, governance, and society. This work is steadily reshaping our understanding of the historical relationships between law, democracy, and the state. At the same time, we have witnessed recently the emergence of a politics that appears to many to have up-ended many of our ideas and practices of democracy. Political ethics of virulent self-aggrandizement, relentless [short-term thinking](#), and [total retaliation](#), in particular, are increasingly prominent. In this moment of heightened attention the question persists: what is *democracy*?

Too often we reduce democracy to principles like majoritarianism, egalitarianism, or to institutions like voting and elections. In *Toward Democracy*, James Kloppenberg refuses to be cabined by reductionist or essentialist conceptions of democracy. Instead, his focus is on how Western thinkers developed an ethical (as opposed to an institutional) framework for democracy, a set of “principles” and “premises” which, he claims, grew out of Christianity. These ethics form a dissonant political harmony that makes democracy a fragile political experiment, containing both the highest aspirations of humanity and the seeds for their betrayal.

*Toward Democracy* falls within the “monumental” category of books, both in terms of size and scope. Not only is the book around 900 pages of text and reference footnotes, but Kloppenberg also has made available separately [500 pages of historiographical notes](#). Substantively, his intellectual history surveys more than two millennia of ideas impacting the development of democracy in Western civilization, focusing mostly on French, English, and American ideas and practices from the 16th-19th centuries. However, Kloppenberg is most interested in understanding and explaining both the emergence of a democratic system in the United States and its transatlantic effects. Along the way he offers novel re-interpretations of the work and significance of thinkers from John Winthrop and Roger Sherman to John Locke, Montesquieu, John Adams, James Madison, and Alexis de Tocqueville.

But what caught my attention about this book, and what I want to focus on here, is Kloppenberg’s conception of democracy, which he defines broadly as the “shared assumption that all citizens should have the capacity to shape their own lives within boundaries established by the standards and traditions of their communities, and that all citizens should be able to participate equally in shaping those standards and revising those traditions.” (P. 5.) This shared assumption of what would come to be known in the nineteenth century as “ordered liberty” attempts to develop simultaneously the capacities of both the individual and the community, and is founded upon a set of basic “principles” — popular sovereignty, autonomy, and equality. The question, of course, how exactly democratic theorists sought to achieve this simultaneous cultivation of individual autonomy and public good?

For Kloppenberg, democracy is as much “an ethical ideal” as a set of institutions. In fact, I think it’s fair to say that he prioritizes the ethical over the institutional. One of his most important insights is that democracy’s ethical ideal can be traced to basic Judeo-Christian principles—especially the golden rule which admonishes believers to treat others with respect. Christianity helped to shape democracy by inculcating ethics of humility, mercy, forgiveness, and equal respect for others, which shaped democracy’s “underlying premises”: deliberation, pluralism, and reciprocity.

Kloppenberg argues that the ethic of reciprocity is perhaps the most important democratic premise. It forces citizens to

respect and weigh distinct aspirations and worldviews, facilitates ancillary ethics of modesty, humility, and benevolence, and recognizes the human inability to identify absolute truths. Pluralism and deliberation are the means by which reciprocity is extended politically. Pluralism denies any “fixed unitary conception of the good life,” while deliberation is a mechanism for generating “provisional truths” through a process of “free inquiry.” (P. 9-11.)

These premises – reciprocity, pluralism, and deliberation — provide popular sovereignty’s motive power. Popular sovereignty can operate only if truth is provisional. Once truth becomes absolute self-government (in both senses) is at an end, individuals can no longer shape their own destiny, nor can they participate in shaping or revising the standard and traditions of their communities.

Democracy’s promise, however, is always haunted by its potential for irony and tragedy. As Kloppenberg explains, “recurrent creations of social and political arrangements that, although often initially appearing to mirror popular desires, ended up either freeing previously repressed impulses that undermined democracy or generating other pressures that produced new and unanticipated forms of dependency and hierarchy.” (P. 13.) If political victory is interpreted as the final rather than the provisional Word, for instance, and the institutions supporting and promoting deliberation, pluralism, and reciprocity are weak, the results can be catastrophic, as in the French Revolution, the Revolutions of 1848, or later, in the Weimar Republic.

It is impossible to read *Toward Democracy* without thinking about our current political climate. The democratic principles and premises that Kloppenberg develops seem a long way from the emerging ethics of self-aggrandizement, short-term thinking, and total retaliation. Total retaliation (the impulse to tear down political and economic institutions) can only subvert democracy’s principles and premises. American institutions are, of course, stronger and more developed than those of nineteenth-century European nations, but it is fair to ponder where we sit today between the promise and tragedy of democracy. Kloppenberg has given us a set of tools for reflecting upon and thinking through this question both as historians and citizens.

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