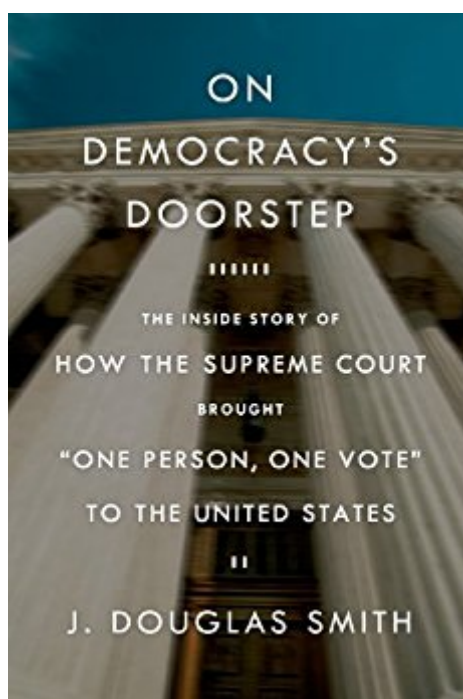


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On Democracy's Doorstep: The Inside Story Of How The Supreme Court Brought "One Person, One Vote" To The United States



Synopsis

A Washington Post Notable Work of Nonfiction
A Slate Best Book of 2014
The inside story of the Supreme Court decisions that brought true democracy to the United States
As chief justice of the U.S. Supreme Court, Earl Warren is most often remembered for landmark rulings in favor of desegregation and the rights of the accused. But Warren himself identified a lesser known group of cases— "Baker v. Carr, Reynolds v. Sims, and their companions"—as his most important work. J. Douglas Smith's *On Democracy's Doorstep* masterfully recounts the tumultuous and often overlooked events that established the principle of "one person, one vote" in the United States. Before the Warren Court acted, American democracy was in poor order. As citizens migrated to urban areas, legislative boundaries remained the same, giving rural lawmakers from sparsely populated districts disproportionate political power—a power they often used on behalf of influential business interests. Smith shows how activists ranging from city boosters in Tennessee to the League of Women Voters worked to end malapportionment, incurring the wrath of chambers of commerce and southern segregationists as they did so. Despite a conspiracy of legislative inaction and a 1946 Supreme Court decision that instructed the judiciary not to enter the "political thicket," advocates did not lose hope. As Smith shows, they skillfully used the Fourteenth Amendment's Equal Protection Clause to argue for radical judicial intervention. Smith vividly depicts the unfolding drama as Attorney General Robert F. Kennedy pressed for change, Solicitor General Archibald Cox cautiously held back, young clerks pushed the justices toward ever-bolder reform, and the powerful Senate Minority Leader Everett Dirksen obsessively sought to reverse the judicial revolution that had upended state governments from California to Virginia. Today, following the Court's recent controversial decisions on voting rights and campaign finance, the battles described in *On Democracy's Doorstep* have increasing relevance. With erudition and verve, Smith illuminates this neglected episode of American political history and confronts its profound consequences.

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Customer Reviews

I received a copy of this book through a giveaway on GoodReads and the following is my honest opinion. In high school history had always been my best subject with about a 93 average, from the 10th to the 12th grade. The depth and breadth of the information author, J. Douglas Smith, has covered in his book is extraordinary when compared to what I'd been taught. One would think given the democracy we reportedly live in; one person one, one vote has always been the way part of the democratic process. "On Democracy's Doorstep" proves the contrary had actually existed prior to the Supreme Court decisions which corrected this situation. The politics used by both parties, the Democrats and the Republicans, to maintain the levels of apportionment they've enjoyed for decades; as well as the gerrymandering of districts even within the same party to keep a particular individual in office would be deemed by those unfamiliar to the "Game of Politics" to be unbelievable. To read about the details described by the author concerning the shenanigans pulled by both parties to keep their status quo is a real eye-opener to the uninitiated common citizen of the United States. I'm therefore giving Mr. Smith my thanks and 5 STARS for opening the door and removing the "veil of secrecy" to the issue of "one person, one vote" for all those who read his book.

This is a superb book which tells the full story of the apportionment cases, decided by the Supreme Court in the early 1960's. It tells of the lawyers who brought the cases, the arguments before the courts, and, best of all, much about the inner tensions of the Court. At the beginning few thought that both houses of the legislature needed to be based on people. States vigorously argued that other factors should be able to be considered but the logic of only people being entitled to

representation prevailed and Chief Justice Warren, speaking for six Justices, held that people are to be represented, not acres or trees. After June 15, 1964, Senator Dirksen tried to have the states call for a constitutional convention and almost succeeded in getting 34 states to do so. I had not realized how close he came to such a convention. Fortunately Senator Paul Douglas and other Senators fought Dirksen and after a few years all the state legislatures were in compliance with the one person, one vote principle. This book is extremely well researched and tells well an exciting story. I do not see how the account could be better.

This is a fine book that carefully traces the numerous cases making their way to the Supreme Court regarding the blatant malapportionment of state legislatures that had evolved in America by the early 1960s. In a sense the subtitle should be reversed to state that the book addresses "how the United States brought 'one person, one vote' to the Supreme Court," given how much time and research the author has devoted to the origins of the cases the Court considered. I grew up in St. Louis in the 1950s and was appalled to realize how malapportioned the Missouri legislature was. When I got the chance to study these cases in graduate school, I was delighted to see how decisively the Court had struck down this undemocratic practice. My only quibble is that the author delves into so many examples of malapportionment, giving due credit to so many attorneys who worked on these cases on a mostly pro bono basis, that it is sometimes difficult to keep them all straight.

This is a superb book that expertly tells the history of democracy's fundamental promise: one person, one vote. It couldn't be more timely, and as someone who read Smith's previous book, he again demonstrates why he wins awards for narrative nonfiction. This is also superbly told history.

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