

Laboratories Of Autocracy - David Pepper Discusses His New Book At A Recent Community Issues Forum

(by Bill Woods for StreetVibes)

Considerable concern currently exists that extreme right wing groups and many leaders and members of the Republican Party are promoting anti-democratic policies and ideas that would lead to more autocratic government in this country. A new book by David Pepper documents how many of these policies initially emerged at the state level. At a recent Community Issues Forum, Pepper discussed his timely new work, "Laboratories of Autocracy: A Wakeup Call From Behind The Lines." The book depicts how state legislatures in states like Ohio have been the laboratories for anti-democratic legislation for the last quarter century.

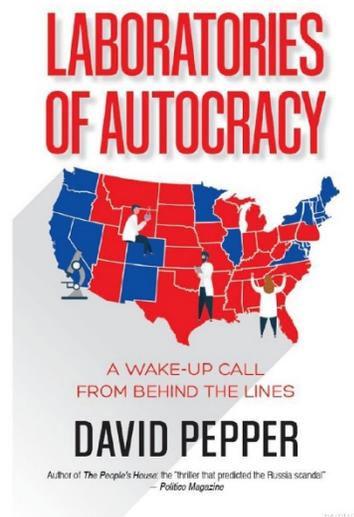


Although state governments during the early 1900s were labeled "laboratories of democracy" due to their reform legislation, Pepper shows how various conservative and right wing groups and causes saw the states in recent years as the best environments for promoting their causes and for suppressing the democratic institutions that might thwart them. These groups and causes include gun lobbyists, anti-abortion organizations, white evangelical groups, and corporate interests that oppose regulations or new taxes. They usually found a home in the Republican Party, and they realized their minority positions would not thrive in an open democratic process.

Although state governments possess a lot of public authority concerning economic and social policy, and they establish most of the legislation administering election procedures, they receive minimal news media coverage and average citizens pay little attention to their activities. Thus, this arena became the primary lab for this anti-democratic agenda.

At least in Ohio, Pepper writes from an insider's vantage point of witnessing how politics operates. A Cincinnati native, he served on City Council. In recent years as Chairman of the Ohio Democratic Party, he saw up close the operations of the Republican Party and its allies. After retiring from this post, he decided to write about what he describes as this ongoing movement to put in place a less open and less democratic system of government.

His book describes how Ohio and a number of other states controlled by the Republican Party launched a campaign to enact a series of voter suppression laws over the years. Rigid voter ID-laws emerged as the most effective way to make it difficult for low-income people and a more transient population to register and vote. A second Republican priority in these states was maintaining and enhancing a system of highly gerrymandered representative districts. So successful was the gerrymandering process in a state like Ohio that its almost even number of Democratic and Republican voters were divided into districts that insured that a large majority of Congressional and state seats would be held by GOP law makers. In fact, Ohio Republicans went too far in 2011, and its extremely partisan map spurred the passage of two anti-gerrymandering Constitutional



Amendments in 2015 and 2018.

In those states documented in Pepper's book where legislatures methodically promoted voter suppression policies, the author also shows that laws favorable to the anti-democratic allies of the Republican Party were often passed. Laws limiting abortions or supporting the gun lobby are examples cited by Pepper. He was very clear in making the connections between anti-democratic groups, their causes, and voter suppression. He further emphasized this movement's highly organized, well financed, and almost daily approach to its cause.

In his Community Issues Forum presentation, Pepper put forward the thesis that pro-democracy groups and activists also need such an approach if they hope to preserve a healthy democracy in this country. He noted that the Democratic Party and other progressive groups involved in politics have tended to take democracy for granted, ignored state legislative activities, and treated campaigns as having starting and ending dates. Recent events show that democracy cannot be taken for granted, and it requires reformers who will tend to its health on a daily basis and at all levels of government including the state legislatures.

Groups like Common Cause and the League of Women Voters already try to play this role in public life. Pepper would respond that much more organizing and action will be required to address the current political crisis. He plans to write another book that will focus on strategies and solutions. For now, activists can be thankful to have "Laboratories of Autocracy," a work that so ably documents how we got to our present situation.