



Parliamentary Book Shelf

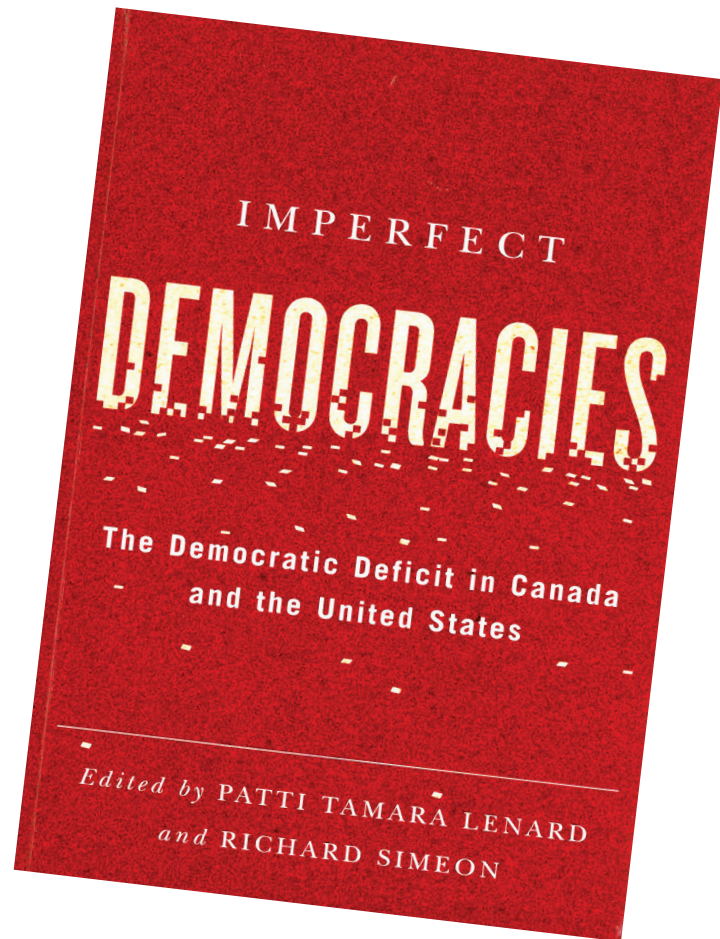
Imperfect Democracies: The Democratic Deficit in Canada and the United States by Patti Tamara Lenard and Richard Simeon, UBC Press, Vancouver, 2013, 360pp.

Reforming the Senate, ensuring backbench MPs have a voice, alternative voting systems to first-past-the-post, and election finance reform are all issues that Canadians have debated since our inception as a nation. Likewise, the power of the executive branch, a do-nothing congress, political finance & Super PACs, and reforming the legal system have preoccupied policy-makers in the US. In each case, these reforms are debated on the basis that they will, or will not, help to create a more democratic society.

In *Imperfect Democracies*, various authors explore the many aspects of what is perceived as a “democratic deficit” in both Canada and the US. Drawing on a rich body of recent literature, these scholars explore a diverse array of themes from citizen expectations, electoral reform, campaign finance, the balance of powers, and the jury system. The 19 contributors conclude that in our fallible democracy, there exists a “democratic deficit,” or in other words, a separation between citizen expectations of their democracy and the actual performance of their democratic institutions. This collection is not designed to be the answer to a long held historical question regarding the state of democracy in Canada and the US, but

rather is designed to reorient the debate in order to “guide future research into the nature of democratic dissatisfaction” (327). Nor is this book endeavouring to place a value judgment on the relative merits of Canadian and American democracies; although both experience a perceived democratic deficit, neither is deemed better or worse; yet citizens in Canada and the US

do not complain of a deficit in the same ways. The democratic deficit, then, stems from both a broader institutional skepticism held by citizens of most western democracies (beginning roughly 40 years ago), as well as historical differences that have shaped and defined each nation’s democratic institutions (and as such, each nation’s citizen expectations of those institutions).



This book is recommended for students of politics (from upper-year undergraduates onward), scholars, policy-makers and politicians, or anyone contemplating the difference between what we expect of our democratic institutions and what those institutions actually deliver. The authors of this collection have done an excellent job of framing these issues within an international context (in particular, the EU), as well as placing them in an historical context. For example, in his chapter on electoral reform in Canada, John C. Courtney describes “five principle electoral reforms since confederation,” including the extension of the franchise to women during the First World War as well as the creation of the Office of the Chief Electoral Officer in 1920 (112-113). As such, readers from

a broad selection of disciplines will not be lost in this text. In addition to framing the debate, some of the authors have chosen to recommend solutions to the democratic deficit. For instance, David Docherty endorses the idea that the committee system be reformed because “they provide a somewhat less partisan forum for debate” and as a result they “enhance both democracy and the legitimacy of the parliamentary process” (199). As such, this collection will not only inform students, scholars, and policy-makers; it will provoke a much-needed intellectual debate over issues typically saturated in hyperbole.

This book does not, and cannot, provide all of the answers to these complex issues. The authors cannot precisely pinpoint the exact nature and

extent of the democratic deficit. Much of their data on gauging the democratic deficit stems from an array of citizen surveys which the authors themselves acknowledge as problematic. But even within the data that has been collected we are still left with many points of conjecture. For instance, when citizens perceive a democratic deficit, is it because institutions fail to serve them? Or, on the other hand, is it due to the individual actors that comprise those institutions? Is the democratic deficit due to decreasing performance of institutions, or is it due to rising expectations among citizens? These are not easy issues to tackle, and *Imperfect Democracies* offers steady ground for diving in.

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