



Parag Khanna Says Save America By Imposing Technocracy

Parag Khanna's book, *Technocracy in America*, would turn the nation upside down, but he misrepresents Technocracy as some kind of benevolent partnership between democracy and civil experts.

His argument is disarming and provocative, but wrong on all counts. He does not acknowledge that the U.S. Constitution is what made America great in the first place, so it is easy for him to say that replacing it with a pseudo-constitution would 'fix' our problems. □ TN Editor

If the American Century is the past, geopolitical analyst Parag Khanna studies the future. A "new global order has arrived," he declared in a hotly debated 2008 [essay](#), "Waving Goodbye to Hegemony," marking the rise of Europe and China as new pillars of a multipolar world. The intervening years have largely proved him correct.

Khanna, of course, has a uniquely global perspective: born in India,

raised in the United Arab Emirates, educated in New York and Washington. A policy-wonk wunderkind, he held jobs at the Council on Foreign Relations, World Economic Forum, and the Brookings Institution before publishing his first book at the age of 30. Critics bristled at his precociousness, but Khanna barreled on, picking up fellowships and consulting gigs, hosting an MTV show, and advising U.S. special forces in Iraq and Afghanistan.

The rise of Donald Trump has, in many ways, accelerated the trends Khanna identified earlier in his career—and made him even more skeptical of American governance. Now in his 40s and living in Singapore, the peripatetic think tanker hopped on the phone with *Fast Company* to talk politics, power, and how to save the presidency from the president.

Fast Company: Let's start by talking about what's broken in the American political system. If there's one thing that both parties agree on, it's that Washington is too polarized, too partisan to function. What's your diagnosis?

Parag Khanna: There's a difference between politics and government. I'm not trying to be a hairsplitting academic, but I want it to be clear that these are not synonymous terms. So when we say things like, "What's broken in American government?" We turn right away to politics, as if fixing politics would fix government.

But that is a very, very critical point. One of the most important ways to diminish the corrosive impact of partisan politics and money in politics and so forth is to have a government that has its own independent characteristics and bureaucracy and institutions.

FC: You tackle some of these issues in your 2017 book, *Technocracy in America*, which offers some pretty radical solutions.

PK: Critics sometimes get confused by the term technocracy, which is in no way antithetical to democracy. On the contrary, I advocate radically more democracy. One obvious step is to lower the voting age, which is something that's being considered or initiated in countries like Switzerland and elsewhere. The most significant step would be

mandatory voting, such as exists in Australia. Perhaps the only way to genuinely ensure the statistical legitimacy of an election is to have a high voter turnout. Some even propose that younger peoples' votes should count more than those of the elderly.

Then the question is, how do you faithfully translate the will of the people into actual policy, or at least into policy options?

So that is the kind of thing that can also be legislated and structured. If you look at California or Switzerland or New Zealand, there are essentially parliamentary committees to take various citizen initiatives and to consider the proposals in committees, to reconcile them and put them forward as potential legislation.

Compare that to the national American system, in which candidates run on a particular platform but then have to make lots of broad compromises and wind up doing very little on any of the aspects of their agenda.

FC: And voters end up feeling exhausted or ignored.

PK: You need to have strong independent institutions that are able to pursue universal agreed-upon policies in a long term way that transcends particular election cycles. In the United States, there's this problem where we pass Obamacare and then we try to repeal Obamacare. Or with infrastructure, after the financial crisis, we agree that we're going to spend trillions on infrastructure, then we issue the infrastructure bonds—and bonds are meant to have a 30-year maturity—then we terminate those bonds within two years.

I mean, that's the kind of behavior you expect from Argentina, right? So once you decide that something is in the long-term national interest, the key is to invest authority in parastatal entities—bodies run independently of the government but reporting to it. Social Security and Fannie Mae, and the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau, are supposed to be run like this.

There's nothing radical or abnormal about creating a national infrastructure governance authority, for example, once you've decided

you're going to spend trillions of dollars on roads and bridges. In fact, no citizen or bondholder in their right mind would ever invest on something that important if it were subject to day-to-day politics.

Think about Norway and its oil fund: it's independently managed, but it has a supervisory board consisting of democratically elected lawmakers and the prime minister, and they're overseeing it and receiving reports annually. It's as democratic as it gets, but it's independently managed by experts.

FC: What you call technocracy, then, is more like government by civil servants.

PK: Technocracy is a term that originates in 19th century France, after the country was humiliated in the Franco-Prussian War in the 1870s. The Third Republic wanted to find a way to overcome their decadence. And so they created the famous Grandes écoles academies that are meant to train government elites across a wide range of fields.

So the first thing around technocracy is that it is about public administration, a strong civil service—competent, meritocratic, independent management of the state. The second aspect is utilitarianism. In other words, the moral function of a technocratic regime is the welfare of the people. The greatest good for the greatest number. Otherwise, it becomes a system that's subject to elite capture. Finally, you need feedback loops between the civil service and the people.

The word technocracy fell into disrepute in the mid 20th century when it came to be associated with the Soviet Union and Communist China—apparatchiks and mandarins driving their economies into the ground. Then it got tied up with the idea of the “best of the brightest” dragging us through the Vietnam War.

But it was used very wrongly all along in the same way that today, if you were to confuse technocracy and authoritarianism, you'd pretty much be missing the point. Some of the most technocratic countries are Germany, Switzerland, Finland, New Zealand, and Canada.

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