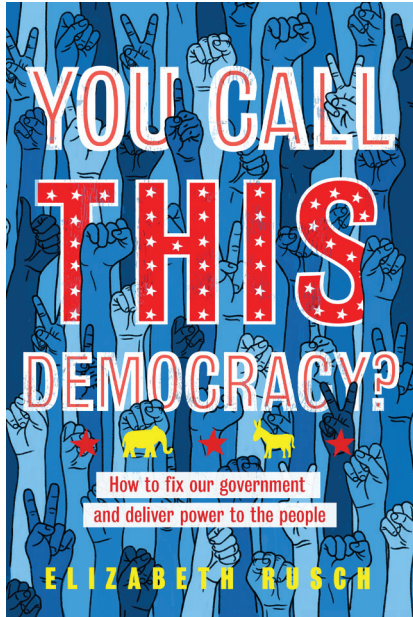


# You Call THIS Democracy?

by Elizabeth Rusch



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## About the Book

The political landscape has never been so tumultuous: issues with the electoral college, gerrymandering, voter suppression, and a lack of representation in the polls and in our leadership have led to Americans of all ages asking, What can we do about it?

The power to change lies with the citizens of this great country—especially teens! Rather than pointing fingers at people and political parties, *You Call THIS Democracy?* looks at flaws in the system—and offers a way out of the mess we are in. Each chapter breaks down a problem plaguing American democracy, exploring how it's undemocratic, offering possible solutions (with examples of real-life citizens who have already started working toward them), and suggesting ways to effect change—starting NOW!

## About the Author

Elizabeth Rusch lives in Portland, Oregon, with her husband and two kids. She has written more than one hundred magazine articles and more than a dozen acclaimed children's books. Liz has a background in economics and public policy. She once worked in the United States Senate as a staffer on the U.S. Senate Education and Labor Committee. There she advised

members on education issues; drafted legislation; met with nonprofits, interest groups and lobbyists; and wrote talking points, speeches, and press releases. The experience gave her an inside view into how the U.S. government really works. You can visit Liz online at [www.elizabethrusch.com](http://www.elizabethrusch.com) and follow her on Twitter @elizabethrusch. For updates and information about the state of our democracy, visit [youcallthis.com](http://youcallthis.com).

## Pre-Reading Discussion

- How would you define *democracy*?
- Do you feel like you live in a democracy? What makes you feel like you do and what makes you feel like you don't?
- Do you trust our government? Do you think it is effective? Why or why not?
- What important principles should a true democracy follow?
- What are some signs that a democracy is or is not working?
- What rights should citizens have in a democracy? What responsibilities do they have?
- Besides our government, where in your life have you seen democracy in action? How well did it function?
- What does the opening line of the preamble to the U.S. Constitution "We the People, in order to form a more perfect Union" mean to you today?
- Is working to reform our system of government patriotic or not?

## Overview Questions

- What do you consider the biggest problems with our country's democracy right now?
- What issues raised in the book interested you the most? Why? Do you have any experiences or connection to any issues raised in the book?
- What did you learn while reading that surprised you?
- Are there any problems you see with our democracy that were not raised in the book? Or other reforms you would like to see? What are they?
- What stories in the book did you find inspiring? Why?
- Do you think the power of the people can beat the

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power of money? Habit? Tradition?

- When have the people made change in our country? What did they have to do to make that change?
- If you could change one aspect of our government what would it be? What small things could you do to push for that change? What larger actions could you take? Who could you get to help you?

## Chapter 1: You Can't Vote for President

- Do you live in a spectator or a battleground state? Do you feel like the concerns of people in your state matter in a presidential election?
- Would you be more or less likely to vote if you knew you lived in a state where your vote would not influence the outcome?
- If our country's founders could see our nation as it exists now, would they have installed an Electoral College? Why or why not?
- Should the Electoral College be abolished? Why or why not?
- Is an interstate compact the right way to move toward a national popular vote? Why or why not?

- Imagine you could create any system to elect our president. What would it be and how would it work? What benefits would it have and what flaws do you foresee?

## Chapter 2: Strange Maps

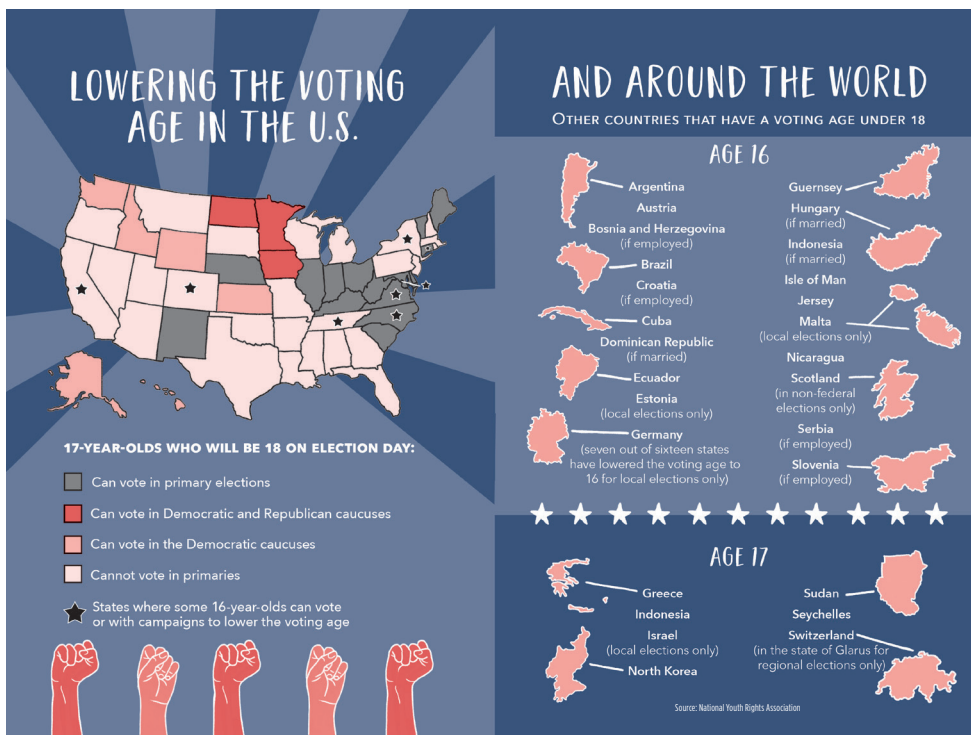
- Research your U.S. House of Representatives voting district. Based on the shape of the map, geographic features, and demographics represented in your district, are you living in a gerrymandered district?
- If you could write guidelines that everyone who draws voting districts must follow, what would they be?
- The Supreme Court considers gerrymandering undemocratic yet refuses to intervene. Why? What should be done given their reluctance to weigh in?

## Chapter 3: Unrepresentative Senate

- What role does the U.S. Senate play today? Does it aid our democracy or undermine it?
- If you could redesign the Senate to support our democracy, how would it function?
- Is there a way to design the Senate to be fair to both the majority party and the minority party? To both small and large states? To rural and urban states? To all citizens?

## Chapter 4: Elections for Sale

- Pick a local, state, or national candidate and research where they got money for their campaign. Did anything surprise you? Does this change how you see them? How might their donors have impacted their policies, if at all?
- How does dark money affect democracy? How might it affect the laws that are passed?
- Should money be considered a form of protected free speech as the Supreme Court ruled?
- Do you think corporations



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should have the same constitutional rights as citizens? Why or why not?

- Do you think enforcing full disclosure of all political donations would discourage big corporate spending? Or would contribution limits for corporations be more effective?
- Who would likely be opposed to limits on campaign contributions or campaign spending?
- How might our country be different if all elections were publicly funded?

## Chapter 5: The Right to Lie

- Do you think politicians should be allowed to lie in advertisement when businesses can't?
- Why do you think political lies are less regulated than lies to consumers?
- Which is worse for our democracy, dark money or false campaign ads? How are these problems intertwined?

## Chapter 6: Suppressing the Vote

- What do you think are the worst forms of voter suppression? Why? What should be done?
- How can we make voting accessible to the largest number of people?
- How does voter suppression combine with other flaws such as gerrymandering to disenfranchise certain populations?
- Should ID be required to vote? Why or why not? If yes, what kind? What should be done about people who do not have that form of ID?

## Chapter 7: Shut out of Statehood

- How would you feel if your state was not an official state? How might it affect your life?
- Research when your state became a state. What process did your state go through? How long did it take? How did your state's experience compare with the situation facing D.C. and Puerto Rico?
- What are the barriers to D.C. and Puerto Rican statehood? What could be done about them?
- How might D.C. and Puerto Rico benefit from statehood? How might the whole country benefit from their statehood? What are the downsides?

## Great Debates

Debate for and against the following statements.

The Electoral College should be abolished.

Citizens, not politicians, should draw voting district maps.

The Senate should be abolished.

Donations to political campaigns are a form of speech and should never be limited.

All elections should be 100 percent publicly funded.

Lying in political advertisements should be outlawed.

The government is responsible for registering all citizens to vote.

Washington, D.C., deserves statehood

Puerto Rico deserves statehood.

The right to vote shall not be infringed.

No citizen, not even criminals, should lose the right to vote.

The minimum voting age should be lowered to 16.

The minimum voting age should be lowered to 12.

Political parties should be required to field candidates who reflect the gender and racial make-up of their districts.

Voting should be mandatory for all citizens, with penalties for failure to vote.

## Chapter 8: Barred from Voting

- Why is voting linked to the criminal justice system? Should it be? Why or why not?
- Should felons or ex-felons have the right to vote? Why or why not?
- Is it fair for the voting rights of felons and ex-felons to vary depending on what state they live in?
- What negative consequences might come from felons and ex-felons voting? What might be some positive consequences?

## Chapter 9: Too Young to Vote

- What do you think is the youngest age someone should be allowed to vote. Why?
- Do you think 16 and 17 year olds are more likely or less likely to vote than 18 and 19 year olds. Why?
- What impact might allowing 16 and 17 year olds



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to vote have on the country?

- What impact might voting have on 16 and 17 year olds?

## Chapter 10: Real Representation

- Is it important that elected officials reflect the gender and racial make-up of their constituents? Why or why not?
- Should you consider whether a candidate increases the diversity when voting? Why or why not?
- What barriers do women, people of color and queer people face in running for office? What are some ways to overcome these barriers?
- Look up your state's current elected officials. Compare their gender and racial mix to fifty years ago. Has anything changed in terms of diversity? If so, what? If not, what are some things that could be done to create a more diverse collection of representatives?
- Would you consider running for office someday? Why or why not?

## Chapter 11: Voter Turnoff

- Do we really have democratic rule when a third to a half of people don't vote?
- How might our country be different if everyone voted?
- A friend or family member has told you they don't plan to vote because it's just a hassle and their vote won't matter. What would you say?
- What steps could you take to make sure more people in your community vote?
- Should voting be mandatory? What penalties or incentives should be given?

## Chapter 12: Let's Fix Our Democracy

- Imagine a democracy that is fair and runs smoothly. What does it look like? How might it affect your life?
- What issues do you care most about? How is progress on those issues being affected by how our democracy functions? What might happen if our democracy functioned more smoothly and equitably?

- If you could tell your elected representatives anything, what would it be? What is stopping you from sharing your thoughts, ideas, and needs with your representatives?
- What aspect of our democracy do you most want to see fixed? What small steps could you take to make that happen? What bigger steps could you take? What people and organizations could help you?
- List all the groups who would benefit from fixing our democracy? Who loses?

## Closing Discussion

- Our democracy grants many freedoms to citizens: freedom of speech, freedom of the press, and freedom to gather with fellow citizens. Why are these freedoms important to the functioning of a democracy?
- What role does technology play in our democracy? How does it support it and how does it undermine it? How could we better harness technology in the service of one person, one vote?
- If you could be a "founder" of our government today, what form of government would you set up? Why? How would it work? What challenges would your form of government face?
- A primary audience for this book is young adults. Why did the author write this book for young people? What role can they play in reforming our democracy?

### The website for this book, [youcallthis.com](http://youcallthis.com) includes:

Information on how YOUR state fares on these issues.

How you can get involved in YOUR state.

Additional articles and resources.

How to book the author for an inspiring talk about the state of our democracy.