Something that has irked me for most of my informed life has been on how vaguely and incapably many liberal scholars define the curious social construction we call a democracy or a republic.

For example, as much as my indoctrinated sense of nationalism wounds me to criticise an Australian philosopher, Philip Pettit in *On* *the People’s Terms: A Republican Theory and Model of Democracy* claims it is necessary for a republican state to ensure the equal freedom of all its citizens. Although that certainly seems to be an effective way to remain a stable and functioning republic, I’m utterly unconvinced it is **necessary** for a republican state to ensure equal freedom of all its citizens. Note, I’m not saying a republic shouldn’t aim to ensure the equal freedom of all its citizens, I’m merely saying it’s not necessary for a republic to do so – in the same way that building roads to an election booth is not necessary to be a republic, but would certainly make sense to ensure people can vote.

I find this trap often manifests in the tendency of liberal thinkers, from the enlightenment on, to assert certain first principles republics are built upon that simply are not first principles at all, and really ought to be reduced further. For example, in the above claim Pettit rationalises at his core that citizens must not be under the power of another, they must have autonomy, they must be *sui juris*. But this cannot be the first rock upon which you build your ideological framework, because that principle immediately begets a deeper question to be asked there – why must all citizens not be dominated by another? And the answer to that question will beget another, and another.

If we return to the analogy of building roads to an election booth, what is necessary in that example is that people vote – building a road to the election booth is a higher idea that obfuscates the first principle that more meaningfully informs us about the nature of a republic.

If we explore Pettit’s idea – in the event a republic fails to ensure all its citizens remain equally free, what might we see? Perhaps the wealthy obtain power over most of the citizenry. The dominated *alieni juris* can vote, and they vote as per their wealthy patron’s demands instead of their own beliefs or interests. The state no longer follows the popular consensus, but rather the consensus of a wealthy elite. And so, the democratic republic passes into oligarchy much to Socrates’ delight.

It’s clear then that the tension was not specifically that some citizens were less equal than other citizens, but rather that the state was no longer accountable to all citizens. If the republic could have ensured it was still accountable to the people’s genuine wills, even while they were being dominated by others in action, the republic would continue to be. In my opinion, what is necessary in Pettit’s case is not that all citizens have equal freedom, but rather that the collective will of the citizenry can hold the government accountable. If a government could somehow determine a way to ensure the popular will is followed whilst also allowing some citizens to be subjected to others, then surely, we could have a perfectly functioning republic where some voting citizens are enslaved by others. And of course, some radicals might argue that has formerly been, and continues to be the status quo already.

I’ve chosen Pettit’s work not because his *‘Three Core Ideas’* are uniquely disagreeable, but because his book is of sufficient calibre that my mind has stored his ideas at a most easy place for me to access. I could repeat this exercise ad nauseum through almost all other thinkers’ frameworks that I’ve encountered over my lifetime.

Of course, given human’s predisposition to define things, and academics habit of redefining things everyone already understands, I’ve encountered many frameworks for explaining what makes a democracy or a republic ‘tick’. Some I might even label “good enough”. But there is only a single framework I have encountered that I have been universally satisfied by.

It was written by Tim Sonnreich in a pamphlet used for teaching students how to argue from first principles in competitive debating tournaments. An odd source, I’ll happily admit, but the value of knowledge is not determined on the calibre of journal its published in.

Given the texts’ relatively obscure nature I felt it appropriate to summarise the framework in a medium accessible to a different group of scholars.

[SUMMARY HERE]

1. That the state must always be representative of the citizenry,

2. That the state must always be accountable to the citizenry, and

3. That most of the citizenry must participate in the political system.

It is my position that those three ideas, even in their academically primitive state, illuminate the insides of a republic far clearer than any other framework I have ever been exposed to.