

Bernd Reiter Calls for a New Democratic Imagination in TEDx Talk



Lubbock, Texas Mar 5, 2026 (IssueWire.com) - In a thought-provoking TEDx Talk titled *“Voting Could Be the Problem with Democracy,”* political scientist and Fulbright Distinguished Chair **Bernd Reiter, Ph.D.**, challenges one of the most widely accepted assumptions of modern politics: that voting alone equals democracy.

Drawing on more than 20 years of research on democracy, racism, nationalism, and inequality, Reiter argues that societies around the world are facing two interconnected crises: a crisis of politics and a crisis of capitalism. At the heart of both, he contends, lies a broken promise.

“The core promise of democracy is self-rule. The core promise of markets is equal opportunity and fairness. In most countries, we have lost both.”

Democracy Has Become a Spectator Sport

In the TEDx Talk, Reiter asserts that representative democracy has turned citizens into passive observers. Elections, once seen as the hallmark of freedom, may now function as a substitute for genuine participation. Politics has become a spectacle, he explains, dominated by elites while citizens feel increasingly alienated and powerless.

Rather than asking what has gone wrong, Reiter shifts the conversation toward solutions already practiced in different times and places — from ancient Athens to Switzerland, Vermont town halls, and

Indigenous governance systems.

Extreme Inequality Undermines Opportunity

Reiter also addresses the structural consequences of wealth concentration. Through examples of billionaires, inherited capital, and elite educational access, he illustrates how compound interest and accumulated wealth make upward mobility increasingly unattainable.

When wealth reproduces itself faster than labor can compensate, he argues, equal opportunity becomes a myth.

Practical — Not Utopian — Alternatives

Far from offering abstract theory, Reiter outlines concrete proposals in the talk, including:

- Civic duty in lawmaking, similar to jury duty
- Empowering local communities to make binding financial and policy decisions
- Legal limits on political power and influence
- Maximum wage and wealth caps to preserve fairness and opportunity

“These ideas are not utopian,” Reiter emphasizes. “They have existed before. They are already practiced in different parts of the world.”

Expanding the Conversation

Reiter has explored these themes extensively in widely read public essays that expand on the ideas discussed in his TEDx Talk:

- **“Voting Could Be the Problem with Democracy,”** *The Conversation* (2019)
<https://theconversation.com/voting-could-be-the-problem-with-democracy-123952>
- **“In a world where political polarization and disengagement are denting democracy, does Botswana’s ‘kgotla’ system hold the key?”** *The Conversation* (2024)
<https://theconversation.com/in-a-world-where-political-polarization-and-disengagement-are-denting-democracy-does-botswanas-kgotla-system-hold-the-key-242358>
- **“Can theater save democracy? It’s not an idle question – it’s happened before.”** *Salon* (2025)
<https://www.salon.com/2025/04/13/can-theater-save-democracy-its-not-an-idle-question--its-happened-before/>

Together, these writings explore innovative democratic practices from around the world and challenge readers to imagine new ways of organizing political life.

A Call to Reclaim Self-Rule

A professor at Texas Tech University and former director at the University of South Florida, Reiter has dedicated his career to bridging scholarship and public engagement. His TEDx Talk represents a shift from diagnosing democratic decline to studying and advocating viable alternatives.

At its core, the message is simple yet radical:

Democracy means self-rule — and self-rule cannot be delegated.

The talk invites audiences to rethink political participation, economic fairness, and the possibilities for organizing society beyond the limits of current systems.

Watch the full TEDx Talk here:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ViPwZA-baWg>

Media & Booking Information

Bernd Reiter, Ph.D., is available for keynote speeches, university lectures, consulting, and advisory engagements.

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