



PRINCETON STUDIES IN
Political Behavior

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DEMOCRACY FOR REALISTS

*Why Elections Do Not Produce
Responsive Government*

With a new afterword by the authors

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CHAPTER ONE

Democratic Ideals and Realities

The democratic idealists of practically all schools of thought have managed to remain remarkably oblivious to the obvious facts.

—Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness* (1944, 40)

In the conventional view, democracy begins with the voters. Ordinary people have preferences about what their government should do. They choose leaders who will do those things, or they enact their preferences directly in referendums. In either case, what the majority wants becomes government policy—a highly attractive prospect in light of most human experience with governments. Democracy makes the people the rulers, and legitimacy derives from their consent. In Abraham Lincoln's stirring words from the Gettysburg Address, democratic government is "of the people, by the people, and for the people." That way of thinking about democracy has passed into everyday wisdom, not just in the United States but in a great many other countries around the globe. It constitutes a kind of "folk theory" of democracy, a set of accessible, appealing ideas assuring people that they live under an ethically defensible form of government that has their interests at heart.¹

Unfortunately, while the folk theory of democracy has flourished as an ideal, its credibility has been severely undercut by a growing body of scientific evidence presenting a different and considerably darker view of democratic politics. That evidence demonstrates that the great majority of citizens pay little attention to politics. At election time, they are swayed by how they feel about "the nature of the times," especially the current state of the economy, and by political loyalties typically acquired in childhood. Those loyalties, not

¹ We thank Jane Mansbridge for emphasizing the centrality of this concept in our argument.

the facts of political life and government policy, are the primary drivers of political behavior. Election outcomes turn out to be largely random events from the viewpoint of contemporary democratic theory. That is, elections are well determined by powerful forces, but those forces are not the ones that current theories of democracy believe should determine how elections come out. Hence the old frameworks will no longer do.

We want to persuade the reader to think about democracy in a fundamentally different way. We are not in the business of encouraging liberals to become conservatives or vice versa. Books of that kind are plentiful enough. Rather we show both liberals and conservatives that the mental framework they bring to democratic life, while it may once have seemed defensible, can now be maintained only by willful denial of a great deal of credible evidence. However disheartening the task, intellectual honesty requires all of us to grapple with the corrosive implications of that evidence for our understanding of democracy. That is what this book aims to do.

TWO CONTEMPORARY APPROACHES TO DEMOCRACY

What are the conventional notions of democracy that we argue have outlived their time? We consider two main types of theory, one popular with broad swatches of democratic society and a second whose appeal is largely confined to scholars specializing in the study of elections.²

The first model, which we refer to as the *populist* ideal of democracy, emphasizes the role of ordinary citizens in “determining the policies” of democratic communities (Dahl 1998, 37–38). As we will see, this populist notion of popular sovereignty has inspired a good deal of sophisticated academic thinking derived from Enlightenment concepts of human nature and the political views of 19th-century British liberalism. In its less rarified forms it has

2 These two models by no means exhaust the variety of meanings of democracy around the world, or even within the United States. For example, the (overlapping) traditions of *participatory democracy*, *face-to-face democracy*, and *deliberative democracy* have received a great deal of attention from academic theorists (Pateman 1970; Barber 1984; Habermas 1994; Fishkin 1995; Benhabib 1996; Gutmann and Thompson 1996; Sanders 1997; Macedo 1999; Cohen 2003), and they have been implemented with more or less success in a variety of settings, especially in small groups and local communities (Mansbridge 1980; Mendelberg and Oleske 2000; Fung 2004; Karpowitz 2006). However, notwithstanding some creative attempts to employ small-scale deliberative exercises as simulations of how mass publics *would* decide controversial issues in a deliberative fashion (Fishkin 1991; 2009), these models seem to us to be less relevant for understanding democratic politics on a national scale than those we consider here.

also undergirded the folk theory of democracy celebrated in much Fourth of July rhetoric. As the homespun poet of democracy Carl Sandburg (1936) proclaimed, “The People, Yes.”

But *how* precisely shall the people govern according to the populist theory? In subsequent chapters, we shall examine two different accounts of how populist democracy might work. In one, the public “decide[s] issues through the election of individuals who are to assemble in order to carry out its will,” as an unsympathetic critic of this account put it (Schumpeter 1942, 250). In the other, the people rule through “direct democracy,” choosing policies themselves via initiative and referendum procedures. Both representative democracy and direct democracy loom large in popular understanding of democratic self-government. But as we shall see, the assumptions undergirding both versions of populist democracy are highly unrealistic.

The second contemporary model in defense of democracy is less widely popular, though more persuasive to most political scientists. This model focuses on elections as mechanisms for *leadership selection*. In contrast to the populist model, which he characterized as “the classical doctrine of democracy,” Joseph Schumpeter (1942, 269) famously defined the democratic method as “that institutional arrangement for arriving at political decisions in which individuals acquire the power to decide by means of a competitive struggle for the people’s vote.”³ Dispensing with the notion that “the people itself decide issues” by electing those who will “carry out its will,” Schumpeter (1942, 284–285) insisted that “democracy does not mean and cannot mean that the people actually rule in any obvious sense of the terms ‘people’ and ‘rule.’ Democracy means only that the people have the opportunity of accepting or refusing the men who are to rule them.”

Schumpeter gave little attention to the criteria by which voters would—or *should*—choose among potential rulers. However, subsequent scholars have fleshed out his account. The most influential model of democratic selection in contemporary political science is the *retrospective theory of voting*, which portrays “the electorate in its great, and perhaps principal, role as an appraiser of past events, past performance, and past actions” (Key 1966, 61).

3 Pateman (1970, 3–5, 16–20) correctly pointed out that no such “classical theorists” exist; but she acknowledged that “one could extract something which bears a family resemblance to Schumpeter’s definition of the ‘classical’ theory” from the 19th-century works of Jeremy Bentham and James Mill, among others. Some popular writers in the Progressive Era, such as William Allen White (1910), nicely exemplify the viewpoint that Schumpeter criticized. The high hopes for public opinion surveys as a guiding force for democratic policy-making reflect the same Progressive logic (Gallup 1940/1968).

In this view, election outcomes hinge not on ideas, but on public approval or disapproval of the actual performance of incumbent political leaders. This model of democratic accountability appeals to skeptical scholars because it puts much less pressure on the voters to have elaborate, well-informed policy views. Ordinary citizens are allowed to drive the automobile of state simply by looking in the rearview mirror. Alas, we find that this works about as well in government as it would on the highway. Thus, we will argue that this second model of democracy, like the first, crumbles upon empirical inspection.

Hence we must think again. The concluding part of this book shows why a dramatically different framework is needed to make sense of how democracy actually works. We will argue that voters, even the most informed voters, typically make choices not on the basis of policy preferences or ideology, but on the basis of who they are—their social identities. In turn, those social identities shape how they think, what they think, and where they belong in the party system. But if voting behavior primarily reflects and reinforces voters' social loyalties, it is a mistake to suppose that elections result in popular control of public policy. Thus, our approach makes a sharp break with conventional thinking. The result may not be very comfortable or comforting. Nonetheless, we believe that a democratic theory worthy of serious social influence must engage with the findings of modern social science. Subsequent chapters attempt to do just that.

BUT ISN'T DEMOCRACY DOING JUST FINE?

At this point, the reader may be wondering whether all this is just some arcane academic dispute of no consequence to the health of actual democracies. After all, the very idea of democratic government carries enormous prestige in contemporary political discourse. For example, the World Values Survey asked ordinary people in dozens of countries around the world, "How important is it to you to live in a country that is governed democratically?" Majorities in many countries said "absolutely important"—a score of ten on a one-to-ten scale. Figure 1.1 shows the average responses on the one-to-ten scale for the 34 most populous countries in the survey.⁴ Americans may be surprised to see that the United States (with an average rating of 8.4) is unremarkable in its enthusiasm for democracy. Adherence to the ideal is nearly universal.

⁴ These data are from the sixth (2010–2014) wave of the World Values Survey (accessed July 4, 2014). The data and additional documentation are available online at <http://www.worldvaluessurvey.org/wvs.jsp>.

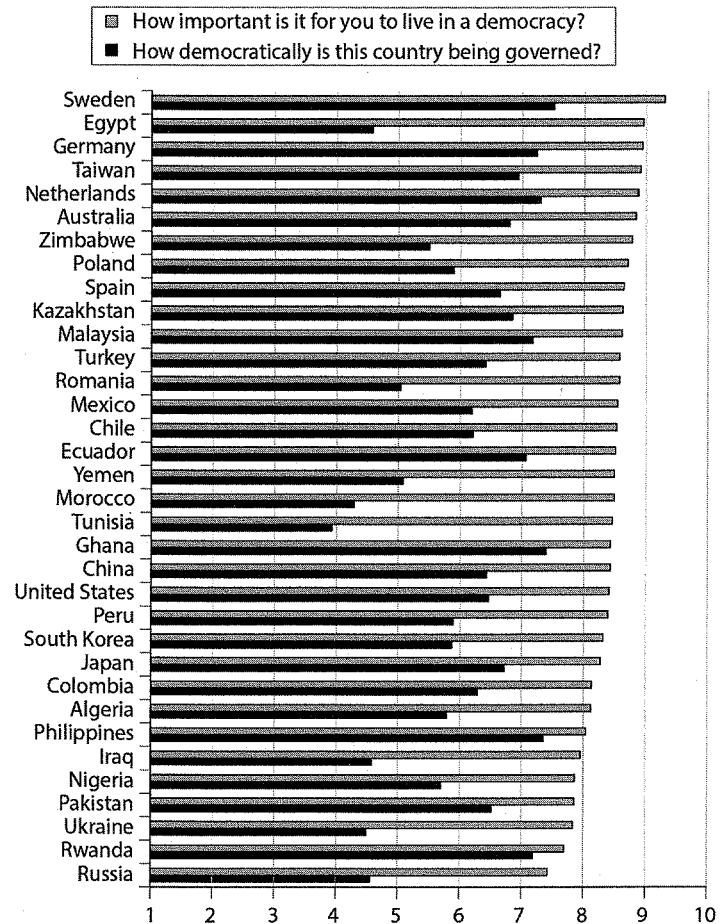


Figure 1.1. Democratic Aspirations and Perceptions, 2010–2014

Perhaps for this reason, nearly all contemporary political regimes, no matter how repressive, claim to be democracies of some sort. What is more surprising is that their citizens mostly believe them. Respondents in the World Values Survey were also asked, "And how democratically is this country being governed today?" Again, figure 1.1 summarizes their responses. In every

country there was a gap between attachment to democracy as an ideal and perceptions of democratic reality. Nevertheless, perceptions of democratic reality were surprisingly robust in such unlikely places as Rwanda, Malaysia, and Kazakhstan. Even the Chinese respondents were virtually indistinguishable from Americans, not only in their enthusiasm for democracy as an ideal but also in their assessment of how democratically their own country is currently being governed. However various the conceptions of democracy, most people almost everywhere accept the proposition that their own political system is (somehow) democratic—and even more accept the proposition that democracy is (somehow) a good thing.

In the face of this universal acclaim, why tamper with conventional thinking about democracy? If it ain't broke, the reader may think, don't fix it. The problem is that the universal agreement does not extend much beyond the use of the word "democracy" itself. *What* makes a country democratic and *why* that is a good thing have generated much less agreement. The meanings that Western, communist, fascist, and tinhorn dictatorial governments have attached to democracy have very little in common, as the following exchange from the British television program *Yes, Prime Minister* (season 1, episode 6, 1986) satirized:

SIR HUMPHREY: East Yemen, isn't that a democracy?

SIR RICHARD: Its full name is the People's Democratic Republic of East Yemen.

SIR HUMPHREY: Ah I see, so it's a communist dictatorship.⁵

Even in Western scholarly treatments, the criteria for qualifying as a democracy (or "polyarchy," to use Robert Dahl's less freighted term) vary markedly from one author to the next, and may extend to half a dozen or more items (Dahl 1989, 221; Przeworski et al. 2000, 13–55). At one point in his long career, Dahl (1971, 1) emphasized "the continued responsiveness of the government to the preferences of its citizens, considered as political equals." Decades later, he elaborated by specifying criteria for a democratic process—"effective participation," "voting equality," "enlightened understanding," "control of the agenda," and "inclusion of adults"—arguing that "each is necessary" if citizens are to be "politically equal in determining the policies of the association" (Dahl 1998, 37–38).

⁵ We are indebted to Patrick Fournier for this reference.

Unfortunately for democratic theory, how all this is to be achieved remains frustratingly vague. No existing government comes close to meeting all of Dahl's criteria; in our view, no possible government could. What then is the value of such an unattainable definition? Dahl (1998, 42) himself acknowledged that "no state has ever possessed a government that fully measured up to the criteria of a democratic process"—and, indeed, "none is likely to." But he went on to write, "Yet as I hope to show, the criteria provide highly serviceable standards for measuring the achievements and possibilities of democratic government. . . . They do provide standards against which to measure the performance of actual associations that claim to be democratic. They can serve as guides for shaping and reshaping concrete arrangements, constitutions, practices, and political institutions. For all those who aspire to democracy, they can also generate relevant questions and help in the search for answers." Other democratic theorists routinely follow Dahl on this point. Even if reality necessarily fails to correspond to the ideals, they argue, the ideals are valuable and should serve as the basis for modifying or reconstructing the reality. But for this argument to make sense, it must at least be the case that the ideals are not *too* unrealistic. More than a century ago, Graham Wallas (1908, 127) skewered the logic of unrealizable ideals:⁶ "No doctor would now begin a medical treatise by saying, 'the ideal man requires no food, and is impervious to the action of bacteria, but this ideal is far removed from the actualities of any known population.' No modern treatise on pedagogy begins with the statement that 'the ideal boy knows things without being taught them, and his sole wish is the advancement of science, but no boys at all like this have ever existed.'"

If conventional democratic ideals amount to fairy tales, then we are left with no assurance that all the scholarly definitions and all the popular endorsements are of any use in making government contribute to human welfare. Hopelessly naive theories are a poor guide to policy, often distracting reformers from attainable incremental improvements along entirely different lines. As Walter Lippmann (1925, 39) put it, the unattainable ideal of "the omniscient, sovereign citizen" is bad in just the same sense that "it is bad for a fat man to try to be a ballet dancer."

⁶ Wallas is worth reading for his early advocacy of psychology as a tool for understanding politics, but his scholarship is sometimes less than reliable. In the passage quoted here, Wallas was disputing a remark due to Bryce, but taken out of context, and he got the title of Bryce's famous *American Commonwealth* wrong as well.

The views of ordinary citizens themselves provide intimations that not all is well with democratic theory. Despite their conventional obeisance to the civic religion, significant doubts and qualifications emerge. The gaps between democratic aspirations and perceptions of democratic reality summarized in figure 1.1 are indicative. In the United States, for example, 46% of the respondents in the World Values Survey said that it is “absolutely important” to them “to live in a country that is governed democratically,” but only 7% said that the country is actually being governed in a “completely democratic” manner.⁷ Other surveys have exposed a good deal of schizophrenia about the meaning of democracy. For example, a substantial majority of Americans say that democratic government is a very important factor in the nation’s success;⁸ but most also believe that “the government is pretty much run by a few big interests looking out for themselves.”⁹ On one hand, we are a free people controlling our own special form of government, the envy of the world. At the same time, we are badly governed by incompetent and untrustworthy politicians beholden to special interests. We are simultaneously dreamily idealistic and grimly pessimistic.

Prominent intellectuals, too, have embodied both these contradictory impulses. In “The Democratic Spirit” (1847), a bombastic Walt Whitman exalted “democracy with its manly heart and its lion strength,” from which “we are to expect the great FUTURE of this Western World! a scope involving such unparalleled human happiness and rational freedom, to such unnumbered myriads, that the heart of a true *man* leaps with a mighty joy only to think of it!” But a quarter century later, in the midst of a wrenching period

7 These results are from the World Values Survey (<http://www.worldvaluessurvey.org/WVSONline.jsp>). “Absolutely important” and “completely democratic” refer to responses of 10 on the 1–10 scales employed in both questions.

8 In a 2011 survey by the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, 72% of Americans rated democratic government as a “very important” factor in America’s success—below natural resources (82%) and military strength (77%) but above the free market system (70%) and religious faith and values (63%). In the same survey, 48% of the respondents said that America is “the greatest country in the world,” while an additional 42% said it is “one of the greatest countries in the world” (<http://www.people-press.org/2011/11/03/section-4-views-of-the-nation/>).

9 An item included in most American National Election Studies surveys conducted over the past half century asks, “Would you say the government is pretty much run by a few big interests looking out for themselves or that it is run for the benefit of all the people?” In 2008, 69% of the respondents chose “run by a few big interests” and 29% chose “for the benefit of all the people.” In 16 separate surveys conducted from 1974 through 2008, respondents chose “run by a few big interests” by an average margin of 65% to 29% (http://www.electionstudies.org/nsguide/2ndtable/t5a_2_1.htm).

of democratization—the incorporation of millions of former slaves and the reintegration of millions of former rebels into the American polity following the Civil War—Whitman (1871, 4) addressed a prophetic essay, *Democratic Vistas*, to “him or her within whose thought rages the battle, advancing, retreating, between Democracy’s convictions, aspirations, and the People’s crudeness, vice, caprices.”

Whitman promised readers of *Democratic Vistas* that he would “not gloss over the appalling dangers of universal suffrage in the United States,” and he acknowledged that the American politics and society of his day were “cankered, crude, superstitious, and rotten. . . . The spectacle is appalling.” Nevertheless, he expressed “unshaken faith in the elements of the American masses” and confidence that “the fruition of Democracy, on aught like a grand scale, resides altogether in the future,” to come to “its flower and fruits in manners, in the highest forms of interaction between men, and their beliefs—in Religion, Literature, colleges, and schools—Democracy in all public and private life” (Whitman 1871, 4, 11, 15, 33). Like many citizens of modern democracies, Whitman clung to the belief that democracy could and would be perfected, despite the “appalling” spectacle of democracy in practice.

Thus, popular thinkers and scholars alike have combined enthusiasm for democracy, however vaguely defined, with a clear-eyed realization that democratic practice is, by the standards of the folk theory, dispiriting almost everywhere. In most cases, they have simply ignored the conceptual contradictions or attributed the failings of democracy to corrupt leaders or faulty institutions. Occasionally, though, the ideal itself has come under suspicion, and it is to that line of democratic thought that we now turn.

THE CRITICAL TRADITION

The folk theory of democracy celebrates the wisdom of popular judgments by informed and engaged citizens. The reality is quite different. Human beings are busy with their lives. Most have school or a job consuming many hours of the day. They also have meals to prepare, homes to clean, and bills to pay. They may have children to raise or elderly parents to care for. They may also be coping with unemployment, business reverses, illness, addictions, divorce, or other personal and family troubles. For most, leisure time is at a premium. Sorting out which presidential candidate has the right foreign policy toward Asia is not a high priority for them. Without shirking more immediate and more important obligations, people cannot engage in much well-informed, thoughtful political deliberation, nor should they.

Recognizing that actual people are far from the unrealistic ideal citizens of the folk theory, disappointed observers have often adopted a judgmental tone, implicitly assuming that the folk theory provides the appropriate moral standard for citizens, which few meet. At the end of the 19th century, for example, James Bryce (1894, 250) observed "how little solidity and substance there is in the political or social beliefs of nineteen persons out of every twenty. These beliefs, when examined, mostly resolve themselves into two or three prejudices and aversions, two or three prepossessions for a particular leader or party or section of a party, two or three phrases or catchwords suggesting or embodying arguments which the man who repeats them has not analyzed." He might have added that the remaining one in twenty exhibit the limits of rationality, too. Nevertheless, however unaware of his own human limitations Bryce may have been, in our view he was not wrong about the fact of widespread citizen inattention. Indeed, the past century of political science has done remarkably little to alter the basic outlines of his portrait of public opinion. Even in the midst of the Progressive Era, the fundamental veracity of that portrait and its troubling implications for folk democratic theory were clear enough to those willing to see them. The great political scientist and Harvard University president A. Lawrence Lowell (1913, 233), for example, noted with respect to democracy that "there has probably never existed a political system of which men have not tried to demonstrate the perfection," but he dismissed as "fallacious" all theories "based on the assumption that the multitude is omniscient" and "all reforms that presuppose a radical change in human nature."

Three other distinguished scholars of the era also saw the tension between conventional democratic ideals and dreary reality. Schumpeter (1942, 262) acidly observed that citizens are especially prone "to yield to extra-rational or irrational prejudice and impulse" in the political sphere. By comparison with other realms of life, he argued (Schumpeter 1942, 261), "the typical citizen drops down to a lower level of mental performance as soon as he enters the political field. He argues and analyzes in a way which he would readily recognize as infantile within the sphere of his real interests."

Walter Lippmann (1914; 1922; 1925) faced more squarely than other commentators of his time the inevitable limits of human cognitive ability in politics. "Once you touch the biographies of human beings," he wrote (1914, 215), "the notion that political beliefs are logically determined collapses like a pricked balloon." He saw that the cherished ideas and judgments we bring to politics are stereotypes and simplifications with little room for adjustment as the facts change (1922, 16): "For the real environment is altogether too big, too complex, and too fleeting for direct acquaintance. We are not equipped

to deal with so much subtlety, so much variety, so many permutations and combinations. And although we have to act in that environment, we have to reconstruct it on a simpler model before we can manage it." Lippmann remains the deepest and most thoughtful of the modern critics of the psychological foundations of the folk theory of democracy.

Reinhold Niebuhr (1932; 1944) noted that human judgment is not just overwhelmed by the complexity of the political world, as Lippmann emphasized, but in addition is profoundly warped by self-interest and the will to power. And he perceived clearly that the idealistic justification of democracy as human rationality in pursuit of the common good serves only too well to provide cover for those who profit from the distortions and biases in the policy-making processes of actual democracies: "The will to power uses reason as kings used courtiers and chaplains to add grace to their enterprise" (Niebuhr 1932, 44).

These and other critical thinkers struggled to put democracy on an intellectually respectable foundation, taking account of human nature as they knew it. But in the era in which they wrote, few could hear. It was all too easy and convenient to dismiss the entire intellectual lineage as elitist and cynical, a mere literary tradition based on nothing but jaundiced interpretations of personal experience. Subsequent scholarly generations have also disliked the various racial and religious prejudices of the time, which these men sometimes shared. By the 1950s and 1960s, skeptical writers like Wallas, Lowell, John Dickinson (1930), and even Lippmann and Niebuhr were no longer much read by students of politics.

Meanwhile, however, new tools emerged for investigating political behavior, most notably scientific survey research, whose findings were much harder to glibly dismiss. The pioneering survey research of Paul Lazarsfeld and his colleagues at Columbia University (Lazarsfeld, Berelson, and Gaudet 1948; Berelson, Lazarsfeld, and McPhee 1954), of Angus Campbell and his colleagues at the University of Michigan (Campbell et al. 1960), and of other early analysts of electoral choice produced a rather bleak portrait of habitual, socially determined political behavior, once again calling into question whether citizens could perform the role that the folk theory of democracy seemed to require of them.

Philip Converse (1964) extended this seminal work, building a new, more formidable case for skepticism regarding the idealized image of democratic citizens, this time substituting random national samples for the insightful but less systematic observations of Bryce, Lippmann, Niebuhr, and Schumpeter. Converse's essay set off a vibrant decades-long critical discussion of his

methodology and the inferences he drew from his findings, but few public opinion scholars disputed the central point he made—that judged by the standards of the folk theory, the political “belief systems” of ordinary citizens are generally thin, disorganized, and ideologically incoherent.

In chapter 2 we will argue that Converse’s argument is, if anything, even better supported a half century later than it was when he wrote. A vast amount of supporting evidence has been added to his dispiriting comparison of actual human political cognition with the expectations derived from the folk theory of democracy. Well-informed citizens, too, have come in for their share of criticism, since their well-organized “ideological” thinking often turns out to be just a rather mechanical reflection of what their favorite group and party leaders have instructed them to think. Faced with this evidence, many scholars in the final chapters of their books continue to express idealistic hope that institutional reform, civic education, improved mass media, more effective mobilization of the poor, or stronger moral exhortation might bring public opinion into closer correspondence with the standards of the folk theory. But in sober moments most acknowledge the repeated failures of all those prescriptions.

Thus, scholars, too, persist uneasily in their schizophrenia, recognizing the power of the critical arguments but hoping against hope that those arguments can somehow be discredited or evaded, allowing the lackluster reality of democratic practice to be squared with conventional idealistic democratic thinking. Often, their attempts to bolster the tattered theoretical status quo bring them back to Winston Churchill’s claim that “democracy is the worst form of government except all those others that have been tried from time to time.”¹⁰ But that is a distinctly un-idealistic defense of democracy—and no defense at all of the folk theory of democracy.

THE PLAN OF THIS BOOK

Our view is that conventional thinking about democracy has collapsed in the face of modern social-scientific research. This book first documents the

10 The authors of *The American Voter* adopted this view (Campbell et al. 1960, 545). An updated version of Churchill’s argument is that democracy promotes freedom, human development, and material well-being (Dahl 1989; Mueller 1999; Przeworski et al. 2000). Demonstrating causal effects in this domain is very hard, but even if they exist, this line of argument generally does not speak to *how* democracy matters and how it should be organized to work better.

collapse, then points toward more reliable foundations that could support a vigorous rebuilding.

Our treatise on democracy does not begin with ideal boys. And while it does begin with democratic ideals, we *test* those ideals, not merely explicate and affirm them. We hope to contribute both to the improvement of democratic theory and to the improvement of democracy. After all, as Dahl (1956, 52) recognized, “There is a great variety of empirical facts that one needs to know, or have some hunches about, before one can rationally decide on the kinds of political rules one wants to follow in the real world.”

Our empirical facts are drawn predominantly from the democratic system we know best, that of the United States. However, we refer frequently to other democratic systems as well, and we believe that our findings are likely to be of considerable relevance even in countries that differ from the United States—and from each other—in many important historical, institutional, and cultural respects. While history, institutions, and culture surely shape specific democratic practices in important ways, they do not, as best we can tell, lead to fundamentally different conclusions about the central issues we raise in this book.

Our analyses range over the past century of American political history, from the reelection of Woodrow Wilson in 1916 to that of Barack Obama in 2012. We consider the great New Deal realignment of the 1930s, the political transformation of the South during and after the civil rights struggles of the 1960s, the ramifications of the Watergate scandal in the 1970s, and the interplay of politics and religion in shaping baby boomers’ views regarding the fraught issue of abortion over the course of their adult lives. Each of these case studies is intended to assess or illustrate specific aspects of our general account of democratic politics; but each is also intended to contribute to a broad portrait of the workings of democracy in America and elsewhere.

In chapter 2 we take up the subject of popular sovereignty. As Donald Kinder has observed, “if ordinary citizens were to reason ideologically, as political elites presumably do, then the prospects for democratic control would be enhanced.” Thus, “the extraordinary interest in the possibility of ideological reasoning was and still is an expression of concern for the quality and very possibility of democratic forms of government” (Kinder 1983, 391). For example, the influential “spatial model” of electoral competition (Downs 1957; Enelow and Hinich 1984) has provided an elegant theoretical account of how ideological reasoning by ordinary citizens could enhance the prospects for democratic control over political elites.

Unfortunately from this perspective, Converse (1964) found that “the vast majority of Americans” are “thoroughly innocent of ideology” (Kinder 1983, 391)—and that finding has been “largely sustained” by subsequent scholarship (Kinder 1983, 401). The available evidence suggests that citizens of other advanced democracies are similar to Americans in this respect. Thus, Converse’s work raises a significant challenge not only to the spatial model, but to a great deal of scholarly and popular thinking about how policy decisions might be justified on democratic grounds.

In chapter 2 we survey a substantial body of scholarly work demonstrating that most democratic citizens are uninterested in politics, poorly informed, and unwilling or unable to convey coherent policy preferences through “issue voting.” How, then, are elections supposed to ensure ideological responsiveness to the popular will? In our view, they do not. The populist ideal of electoral democracy, for all its elegance and attractiveness, is largely irrelevant in practice, leaving elected officials mostly free to pursue their own notions of the public good or to respond to party and interest group pressures.

In chapter 3 we turn our attention from electoral representation to “direct democracy,” a medley of institutional reforms intended to enhance the role of ordinary citizens (and minimize the role of professional politicians) in processes of democratic decision-making. Reforms of this sort have been a common response to the perceived failings of existing democratic procedures in the United States and elsewhere—a simplistic reflection of the Progressive faith that “the cure for the ills of democracy is more democracy.”¹¹ However, in light of our portrait of ordinary citizens in chapter 2, it should not be surprising that naive efforts to let them directly manage the machinery of democracy often go badly astray. People are just too busy with their own lives to measure up to the standards that conventional democratic theory sets for them.

Those who doubt the practical importance of the folk theory of democracy will find its influence arising repeatedly in the history of American political reform. For example, reformers of the Democratic Party’s presidential nominating process in the 1970s echoed the Progressive adage that “the cure

11 Jane Mansbridge pointed out to us that the Progressive reformer Jane Addams (1902, 11–12) used this phrase in her book on *Democracy and Social Ethics*. John Dewey (1927, 146) is more often quoted by devotees of populist democracy, but his version of the argument was more nuanced than they have generally recognized, emphasizing “the interest of the public” (our emphasis) and the difficulty of “enabl[ing] the public to form and manifest its purposes . . . more authoritatively” rather than simply advocating a more direct translation of existing public preferences into policy.

for the ills of democracy is more democracy” (Commission on Party Structure and Delegate Selection 1970, 14). The resulting proliferation of direct primaries ultimately made both major parties’ presidential nominations “more democratic” in crude populist terms while diluting the influence of political professionals, whose firsthand knowledge of the competing candidates’ strengths and weaknesses had helped to weed out amateurs and demagogues (Polsby 1983).¹²

Similarly, we argue in chapter 3 that the adoption of initiative and referendum processes in many states has mostly empowered “millionaires and interest groups that use their wealth to achieve their own policy goals” (Broder 2000, 1). And when they do allow ordinary citizens to shape policy, the results can be distinctly counterproductive. For example, the most careful study we know of the impact of direct democracy on public services found that voters in Illinois seized the opportunity to curtail fire district budgets, dangerously degrading the quality of their fire protection—and possibly costing themselves more in insurance rate increases than they saved in taxes by doing so (Tessin 2009).

If popular sovereignty is so difficult to achieve—and such a mixed blessing in any case—then what is the point of having elections? One idea that has gained considerable currency among scholars in the past 50 years is that voters can control elected officials by assessing their performance in office and voting to reelect or replace them accordingly. In chapter 4, we outline this logic of *retrospective voting* and its implications for democracy and for democratic theory.

Then in chapter 5 we focus on how well citizens are able to assess responsibility for changes in their own welfare. Since there are many realms of politics, economics, and society in which leaders’ responsibility for good or bad outcomes is far from clear, we consider cases in which leaders are clearly *not* responsible for good or bad outcomes—droughts, floods, and shark attacks. We find that voters punish incumbent politicians for changes in their welfare that are clearly acts of God or nature. That suggests that their ability (or their inclination) to make sensible judgments regarding credit and blame is highly circumscribed. In that case, retrospection will be *blind*, and political accountability will be greatly attenuated.

12 The most detailed recent study of the presidential nominating process argued that professional politicians subsequently regained much of their control, so that primary voters now mostly ratify the choices made by party elites in the “invisible primary” preceding the public campaign (Cohen et al. 2008).

If voters are not very good at assessing responsibility for changes in their own welfare, neither are they very good at *recognizing* those changes. Chapter 6 provides a detailed analysis of the most prominent and politically significant example of retrospective accountability, economic voting in U.S. presidential elections. There, we find that voters do indeed reward or punish incumbents for real income growth. However, the voters are *myopic*, focusing almost entirely on income growth in the months just before each election. The performance of the economy over the course of a president's entire term—which provides a better measure of changes in voters' welfare, and presumably provides a more reliable benchmark of the incumbent's competence as well—is almost entirely discounted by voters when they go the polls.

In chapter 7 we focus on voting behavior in the midst of the most severe economic crisis in American history, the Great Depression of the 1930s. Here, one might think, was an emergency that would focus voters' minds on momentous policy choices, shaping the course of government and public policy for decades to come. The stakes were indeed momentous. Yet we find that voters in the 1930s behaved much as they do at other times—punishing their leaders at the polls when economic conditions worsened and rewarding them when economic conditions improved, with short memories and little apparent regard for ideology or policy.

The primary implication of our analyses of retrospective voting is that election outcomes are mostly just erratic reflections of the current balance of partisan loyalties in a given political system. In a two-party system with competitive elections, that means that the choice between the candidates is essentially a coin toss. Thus, the picture that emerges is not “a portrait of citizens moved to considered decision as they play their solemn role of making and unmaking governments” (Key 1966, 4). Rather, elections are capricious collective decisions based on considerations that ought, from the viewpoint of the folk theory, to be largely irrelevant—and that will, in any case, soon be forgotten by the voters themselves. We conclude that the retrospective model of democracy simply will not bear the normative weight that its proponents want to place on it.

If voters are not good at retrospective voting, what is left? In the final part of the book, we point toward a quite different way of thinking about democracy. In chapter 8 we lay out a third model of democracy, which we refer to as the *group theory* of democracy. This model portrays citizens first and foremost as members of social groups, with (no doubt numerous and complex) social identities and group attachments figuring crucially in their political loyalties

and behavior. We argue that this model provides a surer foundation for democratic theory than either populism or retrospective voting.

In chapter 9 we present evidence in support of this third model. We consider three significant examples of partisan change. First, we demonstrate the powerful role of religious identities in shaping responses to John Kennedy's presidential candidacy in 1960. Second, we explore the partisan realignment of the South over the past half century. The demise of the Democratic “Solid South” has typically been interpreted as an instance of “issue evolution” in response to the momentous partisan policy conflicts of the civil rights era (Carmines and Stimson 1989); but we interpret it as primarily a matter of social identity, as white southerners—even those with moderate racial views—increasingly came to feel that the Democratic Party no longer belonged to people like them.

Next, we examine the evolution and impact of citizens' views regarding the highly charged issue of abortion. As the Democratic and Republican parties took increasingly clear, opposing stands on the issue through the 1980s and 1990s, partisan identities often came into conflict with gender identities. We show that this conflict was resolved in quite different ways for women and for men. A substantial number of women gravitated to the party sharing their view about abortion, reflecting the deep significance of the issue for women. Men, on the other hand, more often changed their view about abortion to comport with their partisanship—in effect, letting their party tell them what to think about one of the most contentious moral issues in contemporary American politics. In both cases, identity was politically powerful in ways that the folk theory of democracy obscures or ignores.

Now it may be thought that, for all the apparent defects of the folk theory, when one listens to ordinary citizens they often sound quite coherent. Democrats generally espouse judgments and policy views supporting their preferred candidates; so do Republicans. Maybe all is well somehow. In chapter 10 we take up this possibility. We show that citizens' perceptions of parties' policy stands and their own policy views are significantly colored by their party preferences. Even on purely factual questions with clear right answers, citizens are sometimes willing to believe the opposite if it makes them feel better about their partisanship and vote choices. We illustrate this phenomenon by examining beliefs about a highly salient and significant political fact—the size of the federal budget deficit. The deficit had decreased by more than half during Bill Clinton's first term as president; yet most Republicans in a 1996 survey managed to convince themselves that it had increased. Even many Democrats

and Independents had too little real information to get the facts right, but for Republicans the lack of information was compounded by a partisan desire to see a Democratic administration in a negative light. Indeed, moderately well-informed Republicans had *less* accurate beliefs than the least informed; a modicum of information was sufficient to discern what they should *want* to be true, but not enough to discern what was in fact true. They sounded like they were thinking, but no one should be fooled. Democrats behaved in much the same way on other issues.

We conclude that group and partisan loyalties, not policy preferences or ideologies, are fundamental in democratic politics. Thus, a realistic theory of democracy must be built, not on the French Enlightenment, on British liberalism, or on American Progressivism, with their devotion to human rationality and monadic individualism, but instead on the insights of the critics of these traditions, who recognized that human life is group life.

Our focus in this book is primarily on empirical analysis rather than on prescription. Nonetheless, we recognize an obligation, both intellectual and civic, to consider the implications of our analysis for democratic practice. What are the tangible costs of attempting to live by an unrealistic theory of democracy? And what would a more realistic theory of democracy imply about the appropriate structuring of political processes and institutions? In chapter 11 we trace the implications of our analysis for the question of what it would mean to have “more”—and better—democracy.

THE CHALLENGE: TAKING ON THE DIVINE RIGHT OF THE PEOPLE

The task before us is not easy. Democracy is the justifying political ideology of our era. It is inevitably very difficult for any of us to recognize the intellectual constraints and contradictions entailed by our own preconceptions and normative commitments to it. As one of the preeminent contemporary scholars of American politics, James Stimson (2004, 170), wrote, “The word ‘democracy’ is bound up with symbolism, belief, patriotism, and a quasi-religious commitment. It is imbued with our self-identity as Americans. Democracy is the civil religion of America.” Dahl (1961, 317) put it even more bluntly: “To reject the democratic creed is in effect to refuse to be an American.”

Some useful perspective on this aspect of contemporary thinking about democracy may be provided by recalling political thought in early modern times regarding the divine right of kings. The idea that kings were divinely anointed had a long history in human thought, and not just in the West;

Chinese emperors, too, needed “the mandate of heaven.” The idea was highly functional, providing a sturdy basis for political stability—as many astute observers recognized. However, the chronic gap between kingly ideals and realities was a source of severe ideological strain.

The doctrine of “The King’s Two Bodies” (Kantorowicz 1957) provided useful leeway for understanding and accommodating the fact that mortal rulers were often manifestly less than divine in bearing and behavior. On this view, the king always intended to rule well and justly, but he was sometimes misled. As Edmund Morgan (1988, 30) described the situation in 17th-century England, “A host of ambitious schemers, according to the Commons’ view, continually caught the king’s natural ear and misinformed him in order to procure benefits to themselves. But the king in his body politic always wanted what was best for his subjects, all his subjects, and surely no subject could know better what that was than the combined representatives of all his subjects. ‘If anything fall out unhappily,’ said Sir Robert Phelps, ‘it is not King Charles that advised himself, but King Charles misadvised by others and misled by misordered counsel.’” In their time, these ideas were widely credited among thoughtful people and important scholars. But of course, genuine political progress depended on abandoning this entire way of thinking.

In our view, the ideal of popular sovereignty plays much the same role in contemporary democratic ideology that the divine right of kings played in the monarchical era. It is “a quasi-religious commitment,” in Stimson’s terms, a fiction providing legitimacy and stability to political systems whose actual workings are manifestly—and inevitably—rather less than divine. The fiction feels natural within the Enlightenment mind-set of rationality and human perfectibility. Thoughtful people and important scholars believe it. And its credibility is bolstered by the undeniable practical successes of many of the political systems that invoke it.

The fiction of popular sovereignty is so much the sturdier—and more useful to our own ambitious schemers and powerful interests who profit from its fallacies—for being notoriously hard to pin down. As Henry Maine (1885, 185) wrote long ago, “the devotee of Democracy is much in the same position as the Greeks with their oracles. All agreed that the voice of an oracle was the voice of a god; but everybody allowed that when he spoke he was not as intelligible as might be desired.” Thus, policies and practices that are unjust or simply unsuccessful can always be attributed to some mistranslation or temporary deflection of the people’s will, with “special interests” trotted out to play the role played by “ambitious schemers” in 17th-century England. We even have our own “two bodies” doctrine: when majorities go seriously astray,

it is not the people that "advised themselves," but rather the people misadvised by others and misled by misordered counsel. "The people are never corrupted," said Rousseau, "but sometimes deceived."

In all these ways, conventional thought has avoided the painful task of grappling seriously with all the evidence undermining the standard versions of democratic theory. "Well, yes, there are problems," we say, and then we turn back to the impossible dream. In consequence, cheerful illusions and wish fulfillment have dominated both popular and scholarly thought about democracy for two centuries. Democratic theory has sailed along as if no iceberg had struck and the engine room were not taking on water. But the damage to the intellectual structure is very real.

Both the allure and the cost of romanticism in this domain were eloquently described by political philosopher John Dunn (1999, 342–343) in an essay on democratic political accountability:

To be ruled is both necessary and inherently discomfiting (as well as dangerous). For our rulers to be accountable to us softens its intrinsic humiliations, probably sets some hazy limits to the harms that they will voluntarily choose to do to us collectively, and thus diminishes some of the dangers to which their rule may expose us. To suggest that we can ever hope to have the power to make them act just as we would wish them to suggests that it is really we, not they, who are ruling. This is an illusion, and probably a somewhat malign illusion: either a self-deception, or an instance of being deceived by others, or very probably both.

Dunn went on to say that "a political science that did justice to democracy (in all its ambiguity) would have to be one in which the presence of these perceptions and sentiments was recognized and explained, and their consequences accurately assessed, not one in which their existence was denied or dismissed as irrational in the first instance."

The history of democratic thought—including much contemporary political science—is marked by an addiction to romantic theories. As with any addiction, the first step toward recovery is to admit that we have a problem. Thus, our first aim in this book is to document the gap between democratic ideals and realities. Then we will make a start toward the more sober understanding of democracy advocated by Dunn.