

# Democracy for realists

## Holding up a mirror to the electorate

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Conventional accounts of how democracy works are flawed on a fundamental level, argue **Christopher Achen** and **Larry Bartels**. By accounting for the ways social identities shape voting behaviour, they present a new model that not only offers greater intellectual clarity but could make genuine political change possible.

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In the conventional view, democracy begins with the voters.<sup>1</sup> Ordinary people have preferences about what their government should do. They choose parties and leaders who will do those things, or they enact their preferences directly in referendums. In either case, in this view, what the majority wants becomes government policy – a highly attractive prospect in light of the dreary historical experience that human beings have generally endured with respect to governments. Democracy makes the people the rulers, and legitimacy derives from their consent. In Abraham Lincoln's stirring words in his Gettysburg address, democratic government is 'of the people, by the people, and for the people'. Robert Dahl emphasised 'the continued responsiveness of the government to the preferences of its citizens, considered as political equals'.<sup>2</sup> That way of thinking about democracy has passed into everyday wisdom in a great many countries around the globe, including places such as Britain and America whose political systems were originally constructed along very different lines. It constitutes a folk theory of democracy, a set of accessible, appealing ideas that assure people that they live under an ethically defensible form of government that has their interests at heart.

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 that presents a different and considerably darker view of contemporary democratic politics. The old frameworks will no longer do.

What are those conventional notions of democracy that, we argue, have outlived their time? There are many kinds of democratic theory, including participatory and deliberative versions that underlie institutions like New England town meetings. But among those that are applied to mass democracies, two main theories predominate: one popular with broad swathes of democratic society, and a second whose appeal is largely confined to scholars specialising in the study of elections.

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1 This article is adapted from Achen CH and Bartels LM (2016) *Democracy for Realists*, Princeton University Press, which will be published in April 2016.

2 Dahl Robert A (1971) *Polyarchy: Participation and Opposition*, Yale University Press: 1.

## ‘THE PEOPLE, YES’: POPULISM, AND ITS UNDOING

The first model – the *populist* ideal of democracy – emphasises the role of ordinary citizens in ‘determining the policies’ of democratic communities.<sup>3</sup> This 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. It also lies behind the Labour party’s emphasis on its annual conference, at which ordinary citizens are meant to set policy for the party in parliament. In its less rarified forms, populism has undergirded the folk theory of democracy celebrated in much patriotic democratic rhetoric. As the homespun poet of democracy Carl Sandburg proclaimed, ‘The People, Yes’.<sup>4</sup>

But *how* precisely should the people govern, according to the logic of the populist theory? In one version, the public elect leaders who *represent* their views. Joseph Schumpeter was a forceful critic of this doctrine, but he summarised it well: the citizenry ‘decide[s] issues through the election of individuals who are to assemble in order to carry out its will’.<sup>5</sup> In the other version of populism, 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.

Alas, the scholarship of the last half-century has demonstrated that the assumptions propping up both versions of populist democracy are highly unrealistic. That evidence shows 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 feelings and loyalties, not the facts of political life and government policy, are the primary drivers of political behavior. In consequence, in country after country, people’s policy preferences often match up poorly with the parties that they vote for.

When preferences and parties do match up, the cause is usually not the voters’ careful choice of the ideologically correct party for themselves. More often, the voters adopt the opinions of their parties and of other relevant social groups – ethnic, racial, religious and occupational. Thus election outcomes are well determined by powerful forces, but those forces are not primarily the ones that current theories of democracy believe should determine election results.

Much the same criticism applies to direct democracy. In America, states like California make extensive use of referendums. Its voters have often adopted naïve tax-cutting schemes that have eroded vital public services; wholly unworkable business regulations intended to repeal the law of supply and demand; and bald expressions of prejudice toward immigrants and minority groups. The populist spirit also animates America’s heavy reliance on primaries to nominate political candidates – a reliance that has

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3 Dahl RA (1998) *On Democracy*, Yale University Press: 37–38.

4 Sandburg C (1936) *The People, Yes*, Harcourt Brace & Company.

5 Schumpeter JA (1942) *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy*, Harper & Brothers: 250.

frequently (and not just in the current presidential election cycle) offered avenues to prominence for neophytes, demagogues and extremists.

In the welter of political claims and counterclaims, most people simply lack the time and relevant experience to sort out difficult truths from appealing dreams. That is no less true for Ivy League and Oxbridge dons than it is for average citizens. The folk theory doctrine of populist control relies for its persuasiveness on our exaggerated self-importance and our systematic self-deception about human capacities and motivations in the political realm.

## SELECTING A LEADER THROUGH THE REARVIEW MIRROR

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*. Dispensing with populist notions, Schumpeter 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’.<sup>6</sup> Or as the distinguished postwar Tory member of parliament LS Amery put it a decade later, government should be ‘of the people, for the people, with, but not by, the people’.<sup>7</sup>

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’.<sup>8</sup> 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, this turns out to work about as well in government as it would on the highway.

In our book, we consider cases in which leaders are clearly *not* responsible for good or bad outcomes – droughts and floods, for example. It turns out that voters routinely punish incumbents for bad weather, as Benjamin Disraeli observed in the 19th century and as voluminous statistical evidence has confirmed since then. We estimate, for example, that American voters’ retribution against the incumbent Democratic party for their states being too dry or too wet cost presidential candidate Al Gore seven states in 2000 – far more than his losing margin to George W Bush. We even study the political effects of the 1916 shark attacks in New Jersey, on which the film *Jaws* and its sequels were based. We find that in that case, too, the voters punished

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid: 284–285.

<sup>7</sup> Amery LS (1947) *Thoughts on the Constitution*. London: Oxford University Press: 20–21.

<sup>8</sup> Key VO (1966) *The Responsible Electorate: Rationality in Presidential Voting 1936–1960*, Harvard University Press: 61.

the incumbent president, Woodrow Wilson, for changes in their welfare that were clearly acts of God or nature. Citizens' ability (or inclination) to make sensible judgments about credit and blame is highly circumscribed. Thus retrospection is often *blind*, and political accountability will be greatly attenuated.

Voters are not very good at assessing responsibility for their pain, but they often also assess the pain itself in a peculiar way. The most prominent, politically significant and best-studied example of retrospective accountability is economic voting in US presidential elections. Scholars have repeatedly found that voters do indeed reward or punish presidential incumbents for real income growth or decline. 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 as well as a presumably more reliable benchmark of the incumbent's competence – is almost entirely discounted by voters when they go the polls.

## A LESS FLATTERING PORTRAIT OF THE VOTING PUBLIC

We also studied 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 found 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. The voters usually follow their parties, with various deviations primarily due to factors the government does not control. In a system with two major parties and 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'.<sup>9</sup> Rather, elections are capricious collective decisions based on considerations that ought, from the viewpoint of the folk theory, to be largely irrelevant – and which 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. Hence, this second conventional model of democracy, like the first, crumbles upon empirical inspection. A dramatic departure from the folk theory is needed to make sense of how democracy actually works. In particular, we believe that a democratic theory worthy of serious social influence must engage with the findings of modern social science.

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid: 4.

## A NEW MODEL: THE GROUP THEORY

In the final part of our book, we point toward a quite different way of thinking about democracy, which we refer to as the *group theory*. This model portrays citizens as, first and foremost, members of social groups, with (frequently numerous and complex) social identities and group attachments figuring crucially in their political loyalties and behaviour. We argue that this model provides a surer foundation for democratic theory than either populism or retrospective voting.

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, we make a sharp break with conventional political thought.

We present evidence in support of this third model. First, as one among many such examples in American history, we take up John F Kennedy's presidential candidacy in 1960, demonstrating the powerful role of religious identities in shaping responses to his Catholicism. 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 a response to the momentous partisan policy conflicts of the civil rights era.<sup>10</sup> Instead, we interpret the change 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. When voters are taking on a new partisanship, identities usually matter and ideologies usually do not.

Now it may be thought that this unfamiliar and somewhat shocking argument has to be wrong somewhere. After all, no matter what the well-known defects of the folk theory, when one listens to ordinary citizens they often sound quite coherent. Tories generally espouse judgments and policy views supporting their preferred candidates; so do Labour supporters. Maybe, somehow, all is well. Alas, we show that citizens' perceptions of parties' policy stands and their own policy views are significantly coloured by their party preferences. Voters sound as though they are in the right party because the party and its supporters have taught them what to say in order to rationalise those 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.

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<sup>10</sup> Carmines EG and Stimson JA (1989) *Issue Evolution: Race and the Transformation of American Politics*, Princeton University Press.

## A CASE STUDY: DEFICIT-DENIERS

We illustrate this phenomenon by examining beliefs about a highly salient and significant political fact – the size of the American 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 as though they were thinking and following their beliefs in making their partisan choices, but no one should be fooled. Democrats behaved in much the same way in denying Ronald Reagan’s success in taming inflation during his time in office.

Thus, making use of the media and the Internet, our parties and our social groups tell us what to think. The best-informed people often mimic the party line better than the less politically engaged. We infer 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 recognised that human life is group life.

## GET REAL: BEYOND FOLK THEORIES OF DEMOCRACY

In politics, powerful interest groups and identity groups abound, while many citizens have only weak organisations speaking for them. Thus every modern democracy is a long way from representing ‘the preferences of its citizens, considered as political equals’. In particular, America is a democracy, but it is not very democratic.

In our book, we try to face without flinching the logical consequences of what democracy’s most thoughtful observers have long seen, and what political scientists over the past several decades have demonstrated in meticulous detail: democratic citizens – all of us – have to think differently. All too often when we look at democracy we do so through rose-tinted glasses – glasses handed to us from the dead hands of Enlightenment thinkers. ‘One person, one vote’ acquires a glossy sheen, and we can see little else.

In consequence, we not only propose bad solutions – often enough, we cannot even see the problems. The gross inequalities of political power in contemporary democracies, on both the left and the right – are the most obvious instances of this. The daunting challenge of altering a deeply entrenched and powerfully defended status quo that embodies those inequalities is often obscured by simplistic folk-theoretic faith that the current system is directly responsive to its citizens, or that it could be

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made so if only a few bad apples were removed from office, or populist ideology were applied even more rigorously. Too many democratic reformers, even the successful ones, have squandered their energy on misguided or quixotic ideas of direct popular control that have left the powers that be comfortably undisturbed. Weakening the role of elected officials and party leaders in nominations is an important example, as is expanding the plebiscitary features of modern democracies.

What changes in society and government would be required to make democracy more effective? We have no blueprint. We are certain only that the old ways of thinking about democracy will not get us there. If the formal procedures of electoral democracy were the main tools ordinary citizens needed to produce responsive, accountable government, most contemporary democracies would already be working pretty well. But robust democracy is not primarily a matter of counting ballots. It is a power struggle in which ballots provide one rather limited source of clout, and ordinary citizens' interests are likely to matter only insofar as the organised groups representing those interests – including labour unions, consumer groups, and ethnic, racial, professional, fraternal, religious, civic, and neighborhood associations – are themselves politically engaged, well-resourced, and internally accountable. As a practical matter, that sort of healthy democratic struggle would require a degree of social and economic equality than no contemporary democracy even approximates.

Just as a critical step towards democracy occurred when people lost faith in the notion that the king had been anointed by God, we believe that abandoning the folk theory of democracy is a prerequisite to both greater intellectual clarity and genuine political change. A great deal of hard thinking and organising will be required to develop more sophisticated notions of real democracy, and to implement the deep transformations that will be required. None of us, as individual citizens, can do it alone. But one vital implication of our account is that more realistic party doctrines of democracy are central to progress. Developing them will require robust debate in journals like this one. The conventional wisdom about democracy too often leads us toward policies that fail to improve people's lives. A progressive agenda that can curb illegitimate inequality and serve the interests of ordinary citizens will require us to give up some cherished but badly outdated science, and to substitute for it a vision with honest 21st-century intellectual credentials.

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