

Too much or too little democracy? Some reflections on Democracy for Realists

By Thomas E. Mann

DEMOCRATIC DISCONTENT



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In late May 2016, Donald Trump became the presumptive Republican nominee for president of the United States. With the last of his competitors dropping out weeks earlier, he was able to win a majority of delegates before the end of the primary season. While his official nomination awaits the July Republican National Convention in Cleveland, that now appears a mere formality.

Trump is arguably the most unlikely, unsuitable, and unpopular presidential nominee of a major party in American history. He is a businessman, specializing in marketing the Trump brand; a reality television star, with no experience whatsoever in public office or the military; and a relatively recent convert to the Republican Party. Before entering the 2016 presidential campaign, he was best known in the political world for championing the “birther” movement denying President Obama’s citizenship. During his months of campaigning, he has evidenced scant knowledge of American domestic and foreign policy, few fixed (much less considered) views on issues confronting the country and the world, and a temperament that appears to be an exceptionally poor fit with the position of president of the United States. In the felicitous words of my Brookings colleague Ben Wittes, “Trump’s speeches reflect a degree of grandiosity, narcissism, impulsivity, lack of self command, and instinct to attack his political opponents that are unusual even within the end-of-the-bell-curve emotional zone reserved for politicians.”¹

This easily puts him in the company of previous American populist demagogues, but he is the first to come this close to the White House. His hostile takeover of the Republican Party (or, in Dan Balz’s

¹ Benjamin Wittes, “Trump and the Powers of the American Presidency (Part I), LAWFARE, May 25, 2016. <https://www.lawfareblog.com/trump-and-powers-american-presidency-part-i>

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words, “borrowing the GOP brand”)² prompted highly visible though futile and ephemeral resistance among many of its prominent leaders and broader concerns about the threat of authoritarianism and tyranny in American public life.³

A major party presidential nomination, to be sure, is not a general election victory, and many expect Trump to be vanquished in November, ending his flirtation with

elective office. He is deeply unpopular with the broad electorate; he has offended large segments of the public, and his candidacy conjures up such a parade of horrors for American democracy and the standing of the United States in the world that his election is unimaginable. That said, unimaginable is not impossible.

The Trump phenomenon did not come out of nowhere and is by no means limited to the United States. Economic strains in the aftermath of globalization, deindustrialization and the global financial crisis/Great Recession, the changing ethnic and religious composition of societies, the flood of refugees from war-torn countries in the Middle East, and the all-too visible threat of terrorism has strengthened right-wing populist movements and parties in Europe.

In the United States, growing economic inequality, diminished prospects for working and middle class citizens with low skills and no college degrees, decades of high levels of legal and illegal immigration, and the partisan realignment of the South have coincided with a sharp increase in political polarization and an extended period of dysfunctional politics. Hyperpartisanship has bred tribalism which, in the American constitutional system of checks and balances, means that divided party government—the most common form of partisan control at the national level in recent decades—is less an invitation to bargain than a formula for vehement opposition and gridlock. Rough parity between the parties has produced an unusually competitive struggle for control of the White House and Congress, which reinforces partisan team play set in motion by the more distinctive ideological postures of the two parties. Public trust in government and confidence in the workings of Congress have hit rock bottom.

It should be no surprise that Trump’s march to the presidential nomination took place within the Republican Party.⁴ As Norm Ornstein and I argued four years ago, the GOP “has become an insurgent outlier—ideologically extreme; contemptuous of the inherited social and economic policy regime; scornful of compromise; unpersuaded by conventional understanding of facts, evidence, and science; and dismissive of the legitimacy of its political opposition.”⁵ Its deep cultural pessimism, unbridled attacks on government, automatic opposition to and unbending obstruction of the opposition party president, mobilization of populist anger, and then failure to deliver on the “impossible” promises made to party rank-and-file succeeded in making the country appear ungovernable. What better political environment for an outsider, anti-establishment candidate promising strong leadership to “make America great again”?

² Dan Balz, “Trump is borrowing the GOP brand” Washington Post, May 26, 2016. https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/trump-is-borrowing-the-gop-brand-hell-resist-bending-to-party-leaders/2016/05/26/b503390c-2347-11e6-aa84-42391ba52c91_story.html

³ Andrew Sullivan, “America Has Never Been So Ripe for Tyranny,” *New York Magazine* (April 2016) <http://nymag.com/daily/intelligencer/2016/04/america-tyranny-donald-trump.html>; and Robert Kagan, “This is How Fascism Comes to America,” Washington Post (May 18, 2015) https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/this-is-how-fascism-comes-to-america/2016/05/17/c4e32c58-1c47-11e6-8c7b-6931e66333e7_story.html.

⁴ See, for example, Andrew Prokop, “The political scientist who saw Trump’s rise coming” Vox.com, May 6, 2016 <http://www.vox.com/2016/5/6/11598838/donald-trump-predictions-norm-ornstein> and Mike Lofgren, “Donald Trump’s Unsurprising Surprise” consortiumnews.com, May 12, 2016 <https://consortiumnews.com/2016/05/12/donald-trumps-unsurprising-surprise/>.

⁵ Thomas E. Mann and Norman J. Ornstein, *It’s Even Worse Than It Looks: How the American Constitutional System Collided with the New Politics of Extremism* (Basic Books, 2012, 2016).

Trump's rejection of a number of his party's ideological pillars—including trade agreements, the restructuring of entitlements, moral and religious traditionalism, and an aggressive foreign policy—have led many Republican intellectuals and leaders to regard him as a pretender, but his message is attractive to many Americans who have suffered psychological as well as material injury from vast social and economic changes. That includes his aggressive and extreme position on immigration, which appeals to those upset about the country's march toward a population with a majority of minorities. His confident authoritarian posture resonates with that segment of the population whose personal status has been diminished and whose resentment is focused on a government seen as serving the interests of others.

Republicans dominated but did not monopolize the populist appeals and sentiments in the 2016 presidential nominating contests. Bernie Sanders took full advantage of a liberal populist market on the Democratic side among millennials, working class whites, independents, and those expressing unhappiness with the incremental accomplishments during the Obama years, and mounted an unexpectedly serious challenge to the party favorite, Hillary Clinton. Sanders' broad objectives—providing universal health care and access to college, getting big money out of politics, and opposing international trade agreements—were mostly uncontroversial among Democratic regulars. However, his self-designation as a democratic socialist, demonization of all political elites for being corrupt and selling out to special interests, embrace of specific policies that are more utopian than evidence-based and practical, and call for a highly implausible “democratic revolution” left him well behind Clinton in the popular vote in primaries and caucuses and among pledged delegates and “superdelegates.”

Unlike Trump, Sanders lost his party's presidential nomination; he will eventually bend to reality and support Hillary Clinton in the general election while at the same time trying to shift the party's agenda leftward. His appearance in the 2016 presidential sweepstakes has complicated Clinton's general election strategy but poses no existential threat to the Democratic Party or the stability of American democracy.

DEMOCRATIC EXCESS OR DEMOCRATIC DEFICIT

The rise of Trump adds urgency to long standing concerns about the health of American democracy. Two opposing arguments about why he succeeded in garnering the Republican nomination—too much or too little democracy—have also defined a central disagreement among those seeking to diagnose and remedy ongoing governing problems.

The subtitle of Andrew Sullivan's article referenced above, “Democracies end when they are too democratic,” concisely defines one pole of the argument. “To guard our democracy from the tyranny of the majority and the passions of the mob,” the Founding Fathers constructed barriers between the popular will and the exercise of power.⁶ They designed an extended commercial republic requiring majorities to be built from coalitions of minorities through a process of accommodation and compromise. This meant representative, not direct democracy, with popular sovereignty achieved mostly through indirect means, leaving the prime responsibility for elections and governing with political elites. Sullivan argues that most of those limits on the popular will, especially when it comes to selecting presidents, have eroded over time, leaving us with a media democracy fueled by “feeling, emotion, and narcissism, rather than reason, empiricism, and public-spiritedness.” Trump mobilized his “true believers” from amongst those moved by “frustration simmering with rage” and no political party elites could stop him.⁷

⁶ Andrew Sullivan, *op. cit.*

⁷ *Ibid.*

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Michael Lind makes the opposite case. “(T)he problem is not an excess of democracy, but a democratic deficit that has provoked a demagogic backlash.”⁸ The donor class has a stranglehold on the political system by screening out candidates with different views (unless they are movement icons, self-financed billionaires, or celebrities). Declining voter participation by lower income and less educated Americans gives the actual electorate a disproportionate affluent cast. Decision-making on

many issues of importance to voters has shifted influence away from the ballot box: from Congress to the courts, the executive branch, and unelected bodies such like transnational committees that negotiate trade deals. City and county governments have too little freedom from federal and state governments, further limiting the influence of ordinary citizens. Many Trump voters agree that “people like me don’t have any say.” Lind asks “[w]hat if these and other voters who feel powerless really are?”

Lee Drutman, Lind’s colleague at New America, makes a similar argument. “Trump arose because the Republican Party was institutionally too strong for too long, which made it too easy for elites to decide among themselves and take their voters for granted.”⁹ Many of the policies they pursued—lower taxes on the wealthy, more trade deals, more immigration and less public spending—never had “much support among most Republican voters, especially those working-class whites whose economic fortunes failed to improve as promised.” Trump saw the opening and seized it, not worrying about the reaction of the Republican establishment because he had no need for their support.

These opposing arguments—fears of too much or too little democracy—have been staples of the political reform movement for some time. They were present at the founding in battles between Federalists and Anti-Federalists and in the early years of the republic. The democratic forces unleashed by the American Revolution overwhelmed the republican cautions of many of the framers in the decades following the ratification of the Constitution. “They found it difficult to accept the democratic fact that their fate now rested on the opinions and votes of small-souled and largely unreflective ordinary people.”¹⁰

James Morone’s *The Democratic Wish*¹¹ nicely captured how these democratic aspirations and demands have often constrained the building and nurturing of public institutions needed to deliver the effective governance the public seeks. At the same time, the steady expansion of democracy through the inclusion of previously excluded groups is an achievement in which Americans rightly take pride. Sean Wilentz observed in *The Rise of American Democracy* that groups representing what the 18th century simply called “the many” have won “the power not simply to select their governors but to oversee the institutions of government, as office holders and as citizens free to assemble and criticize those in office.”¹²

The choice, of course, has seldom been either/or. Ensuring the legitimate rights of citizens in our republic while building and maintaining effective political institutions and processes is a challenge democratic theorists and practitioners

⁸ Michael Lind, “Is There Too Much Democracy in America or Too Little?” *The New York Times Sunday Review* (May 15, 2016).

⁹ Lee Drutman, “Donald Trump is the inevitable backlash to a too-strong Republican Party” Polyarchy, Vox.com May 4, 2016). <http://www.vox.com/polyarchy/2016/5/4/11591386/gop-created-trump>.

¹⁰ Gordon S. Wood. *The Radicalism of the American Revolution* (A. A. Knopf, 1992) 367.

¹¹ James Morone, *Public Participation and the Limits of American Government* (Basic Books, 1991).

¹² Sean Wilentz, *The Rise of American Democracy: Jefferson to Lincoln* (Norton, 2005).

continue to wrestle with. While some reformers cling to the old adage that “the cure for the ills of democracy is more democracy,” many others accept as a given that both political elites and democratic citizens contribute to our democratic discontent and both are essential to any improvement.

Over the last year or so, Richard Pildes,¹³ Bruce Cain,¹⁴ and Jonathan Rauch¹⁵ published provocative critiques of democratic excesses in American politics and prescriptions for mending our broken politics primarily through the strengthening of political parties. Mark Schmitt wrote a review essay of the recent writings of these and sympathetic colleagues¹⁶ and then E. J. Dionne, Jr. and I followed with an essay responding to Rauch and other “new political realists.”¹⁷ Each of these works tries to accomplish two not-so-simple tasks: understanding how the American system went awry and how best to shepherd it back.

Christopher Achen and Larry Bartels have just published *Democracy for Realists*,¹⁸ an ambitious and important treatise on American democracy that promises to enrich these debates about our democratic discontents. This paper will summarize some of the book’s major arguments and findings, briefly discuss two scholarly demurrals, and conclude with thoughts on how the political reform community might profitably mine this new scholarship.

DEMOCRACY FOR REALISTS

Achen and Bartels follow a long line of distinguished thinkers and scholars who have questioned the capacity and inclination of citizens to play the pivotal role anticipated for them in popular conceptions of democracy. As the authors note, this realist political tradition goes at least as far back as the classical philosophers of Western thought and was a central consideration of James Madison and other Framers of the American constitution. Graham Wallas, A. Lawrence Lowell, Walter Lippmann, Reinhold Niebuhr and Joseph Schumpeter all “struggled to put democracy on an intellectually respectable foundation, taking account of human nature as they knew it.” (A&B, p. 11) Contemporary social scientists, most importantly Philip Converse, built a powerful case for skepticism regarding the idealized image of democratic citizens. “The political ‘belief systems’ of ordinary citizens are generally thin, disorganized, and ideologically incoherent.” (p. 12)

Conventional democratic ideals amount to fairy tales.

What makes this new book by Achen and Bartels so unsettling is its withering assault on both popular and scholarly conceptions of democracy. The first is the Fourth of July notion of democracy, a civil religion reflected in Lincoln’s stirring words at Gettysburg—“of the people, by the people, and for the people”—and bound up with American identity and patriotism. The second is the two major scholarly enterprises undertaken to build more realistic theoretical bases for democracy accountability—the populist “spatial models” of mass

¹³ Richard S. Pildes, “Romanticizing Democracy, Political Fragmentation, and the Decline of American Government,” *The Yale Law Journal* 124:804 (2014).

¹⁴ Bruce E. Cain, *Democracy More or Less: America’s Political Reform Quandry* (Cambridge University Press, 2015).

¹⁵ Jonathan Rauch, “Political realism: How hacks, machines, big money, and back-room deals can strengthen American democracy,” Brookings Institution (May 2015). <http://www.brookings.edu/research/reports2/2015/05/political-realism-rauch>.

¹⁶ Mark Schmitt, “Democratic Romanticism and Its Critics” *Democracy Journal*, no. 36 (Spring 2015) <http://democracyjournal.org/magazine/36/democratic-romanticism-and-its-critics/>.

¹⁷ Thomas E. Mann and E. J. Dionne, Jr., “The futility of nostalgia and the romanticism of the new political realists: why praising the 19th-century political machine won’t solve the 21st century’s problems” Brookings (June 2015) <http://www.brookings.edu/research/reports2/2015/06/futility-nostalgia-romanticism-new-political-realists-mann-dionne>.

¹⁸ Christopher H. Achen & Larry M. Bartels, *Democracy for Realists: Why Elections Do Not Produce Responsive Government*. (Princeton University Press, 2016).

elections and the leadership-selection based theory of retrospective voting. Achen and Bartels are unabashed in concluding that the idealized folk theory of democracy, even in its most respectable scholarly form, cannot withstand the empirical findings that have accumulated over a generation. Neither can its less-demanding scholarly alternative. Conventional democratic ideals, they assert, amount to fairy tales. “Hopelessly naive theories are a poor guide to policy, often distracting reformers from attainable incremental improvements along entirely different lines.” (p. 7) In the end, they argue that the primary sources of partisan loyalties and voting behavior are social identities, group attachments, and myopic retrospections, not policy preferences, ideological principles, or thoughtful assessments of government performance. Democratic theory and practice need to reflect that reality.

THE REASONING OR RATIONALIZING VOTER?

Achen and Bartels are not public scolds. They believe human beings are busy with their lives. They have personal responsibilities—to their families, at school or work, in their homes and neighborhoods, coping with financial problems or health issues—that put a premium on leisure time. “Without shirking more immediate and more important obligations, people cannot engage in much well-informed, thoughtful political deliberation, nor should they.” (p. 9) The problem, they assert, is unrealistic ideals, not widespread failure to live up to them. That “most citizens are uninterested in politics, poorly informed, and unwilling or unable to convey coherent policy preferences through issue voting” (p. 14) is a reality unlikely to be altered by better civic education, universal voting participation, or more opportunities for direct democracy. They soberly note that professors, themselves included, are not immune from many of the shortcomings of idealized democratic citizens.

Increased ideological coherence in an era of partisan polarization might offer one avenue for linkage but is weakened by the findings that relatively few voters have ideologically consistent policy preferences and most don't know what political “left” and “right” mean.

Achen and Bartels are not persuaded by those scholars who have argued that rationally ignorant voters can nonetheless find ways of linking their individual policy preferences to the “correct” electoral choices. They note that modern cognitive psychology reveals the indeterminacy of preferences and “calls into question the most fundamental assumption of populist democratic theory—that citizens have definite preferences to be elicited and aggregated through some well-specified process of collective choice.” (p. 31) Increased ideological coherence in an era of partisan polarization might offer one avenue for linkage but is weakened by the findings that relatively few voters have ideologically consistent policy preferences and most don't know what political “left”

and “right” mean. Information shortcuts or heuristics for voters to reach rational electoral decisions even though they lack detailed knowledge about candidates and policies sound promising, but the evidence of rationality, by their account, doesn't go much beyond voters looking reasonable or seeming to be influenced by plausibly relevant considerations. Claims of the importance of issue voting in elections, the pillar of spatial models of elections and a subject of vast scholarship and considerable disagreement, are addressed by the authors and decisively rejected. Achen and Bartels confront the complexities of establishing a causal link between the issue preferences and vote choice and conclude that candidate choices determine issue positions, not vice versa. Persuasion and rationalization, not reasoning and rationality, characterize the thought processes of democratic citizens in the realm of issues.

In their view, popular control of government through electoral mandates is a mirage. They quote Robert Dahl in *A Preface to Democratic Theory* to that effect: “A good deal of traditional democratic theory leads us to expect more from national elections than they can possibly provide. We expect elections to reveal the “will” or the preferences of a majority on a set of issues. This is one thing elections rarely do, except in an almost trivial fashion.” (p. 21)

RETROSPECTIVE ACCOUNTABILITY

If elections cannot provide, in Dahl’s words, “the continued responsiveness of the government to the preferences of its citizens,” might a less demanding version of democratic theory, one more consistent with the empirical realities of democratic citizens, be available? That alternative, a performance-based retrospective theory of voting, was developed in seminal works by V. O. Key (1966), Morris Fiorina (1981), and Gerald Kramer (1971). Despite knowing little about the details of public policy, voters could exert control over their leaders simply by assessing the performance of incumbent officials, rewarding success and punishing failure. These and many other scholars portrayed retrospective voting as evidence of the fundamental rationality of American voters and elections. (p. 91-92)

Achen and Bartels “attach great importance to the realism, empirical power, and normative appeal of the retrospective voting,” and devote four chapters to outlining its logic and exploring how well it works in actual elections. Their findings are not encouraging for theorists of retrospective voting. Voters have difficulty attributing responsibility for changes in their own welfare, sometimes punishing incumbents for changes that are clearly acts of God or nature. In the face of this blind retrospection, political accountability is greatly attenuated. Voters also aren’t very good at recognizing those changes. While they do reward or punish incumbents for real economic growth, they focus almost entirely on growth in the months leading up to the election, not on the performance of the economy over the course of a president’s entire term. This myopia produces a weaker benchmark for assessing the incumbent’s competence but also creates perverse incentives for presidents in managing the economy. Even in the Great Depression of the 1930s, when the stakes were momentous, voters “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.” (p. 16)

Achen and Bartels mince no words in drawing the primary implication of their analyses of retrospective voting: “(E)lection 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 the choice between the candidates is essentially a coin toss.” (p.16)

A GROUP THEORY OF DEMOCRACY

If neither the populist theory of democracy, in which the political preferences of ordinary people are the foundation of good government, nor the retrospective voting theory of democracy, in which citizens with modest information can control the actions of their leaders, passes the tests of scientific accuracy and political reality, what remains? In Chapter 8, Achen and Bartels advocate a return to the group theory of democracy, one built on the “great achievement of the 19th- and early 20th-century social science—the explicit recognition as a foundational principle that human beings everywhere live in groups and that human thought is deeply conditioned by culture, including

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group subcultures.” (p. 216) Their discussion of mental life as group life, and how a powerful realist tradition in social science arose in opposition to the rationalistic Enlightenment liberalism, lays the groundwork for a fascinating tour of the rise and decline of the group theory of politics in the last century. That includes Arthur Bentley’s *The Process of Government*, published in 1908, which emphasized the importance of groups in politics, not just as vehicles for pressuring government but as the mainsprings of attitudes and interests, as well as the pluralist theorists of the 1950s and 1960s and their critics.

Achen and Bartels believe that a realistic theory of democracy must be founded on a realistic theory of political psychology. That requires bringing social identities more centrally into the study of politics now dominated by individual preferences. They begin that task by illustrating how during several critical periods in American history, social identities trumped political reasoning in shaping the politics of religion, race, and abortion. They follow with an account of how partisan identity shapes perceptions, not just of candidates and issues, but also of simple facts. Daniel Patrick Moynihan famously said “Everyone is entitled to his own opinions but not his own facts.” But the frequent, still stunning evidence of partisan identities and loyalties producing dramatically different accounts of real conditions or trends suggests that opinions and facts are not so clearly distinguishable.

If the point of democracy is to reflect ordinary citizens’ preferences in the policy-making process on an egalitarian basis, we are bound to be disappointed.

The authors do not shy away from considering the most spectacular failure of 20th-century democratic politics, Hitler’s rise to power via the ballot box. They make a compelling case that neither populist democracy nor retrospective voting can account for this appalling high-jacking of Weimar democracy. “Hitler’s electoral success,” they conclude, “is a story of identity groups, just as elections virtually always are.” (p. 315)

Their goal is not to bury democracy but to resuscitate it based on less idealistic and more realistic underpinnings. “If we are correct in claiming that group ties and social identities are the most important bases of political commitments and behavior, and that election outcomes have little real policy content, what are the implications for democracy and for democratic theory?” (p. 319) We could do no better, in their view, than going back to the future—returning to the insights of E. E. Schattschneider and the scholars whose works reflect those insights. It means beginning with actual policy-making processes in which political elites of one kind or another are the critical actors, and returning power and influence to the center of attention. It means better understanding groups—who is represented and who is not, how inequalities of group resources are translated into policy outcomes, the extent to which political entrepreneurs and activists are faithful agents of their groups, how the political influence of groups interests vary with the nature of the party system, and how political coalitions that serve people’s real interests are forged and maintained.

What would a truer and deeper democracy look like? If the point of democracy is to reflect ordinary citizens’ preferences in the policy-making process on an egalitarian basis, we are bound to be disappointed. But a more egalitarian society might produce a more egalitarian political process, with an increase in the real political power of a variety of currently underrepresented groups. “Abandoning the folk theory of democracy is a prerequisite to both greater intellectual clarity and real political change. Too many democratic reformers have squandered their energy on misguided or quixotic ideas. Further political and social progress will require thinking more clearly about the contributions and limitations of citizens, groups, and political parties in the actual process of government.” (p.328)

SCHOLARLY DEMURRALS

Achen and Bartels have written a powerful, searing critique of contemporary empirical democratic theory that is likely to shape thinking on democracy for decades to come. They have no illusions that their case is consensual or their arguments and evidence airtight. In their almost two decades of work on this book, including many presentations of and reactions to working papers that formed the basis for much of the manuscript, they encountered plenty of sharp differences with scholars and discomfort among practitioners and commentators. Much of this is discussed in the book but differences remain.

Few scholars take exception to their portrayal of democratic citizens as relatively inattentive to politics, uninformed about the substance of policies and the policymaking process, and lacking well-reasoned and consistent ideological views. But some do conclude that many voters have *enough* attentiveness, information, and capacity for ideological thinking to cast rational ballots on the choices before them that reflect their individual preferences. Others argue there are good reasons people know so little about politics and that well-conceived steps can be taken to improve citizens' political knowledge and civic competence. Here I very briefly characterize the recent work of two scholars who differ from Achen and Bartels in these ways.

The first demurrals is represented by Paul Sniderman, based on decades of public opinion research and summarized in *The Democratic Faith*,¹⁹ his 2014 Castle Lectures in Ethics, Politics and Economics at Yale University. Sniderman's research has focused on two main questions. The first is the problem of consistency in the choices citizens make – that is, their ability to choose the alternative that best reflects their preferences in light of their thin stock of information about politics and public affairs. Sniderman observes that the public is made up of subsets of citizens who systematically differ in the degree of organization of their ideas. Those relatively well informed about politics can take advantage of judgmental shortcuts. One such shortcut is readily available because the party system simplifies and organizes the alternatives. Party identification is partly a social identity but for many a reliable source of liberal (for Democrats) and conservative (for Republicans) guidance. The second question has to do with prejudice and intolerance. The thrust of his research is that the well-documented presence and potency of racism and ethnocentrism in the citizenry is matched if not fully balanced by genuine respect and good will toward minorities among another segment of the citizenry. He offers a similar account of public reactions to threats to civil liberties and the democratic order.

Both of these subjects are characterized by conceptual complexity and methodological disputes that I will not attempt to describe or resolve here. The takeaway is that Sniderman offers a full-throated defense of reasoning democratic citizens, a skepticism of the relative wisdom of political elites, and the centrality of popular sovereignty to American democracy.

Another example of scholarly differences with Achen and Bartels is provided by Arthur Lupia in his new book, *Uninformed*.²⁰ Lupia was a central participant in the early research on the utility of cues or heuristics in facilitating low-information rationality by citizens. He has worked for years with scientists and educators to figure out how to increase public knowledge and competence on a range of important topics. This book describes a framework for providing information about politics that is more valuable and more relevant to more people. There are many things about politics that people do not know but people do not need to know “all the facts” to make competent choices.

¹⁹ Paul M. Sniderman, *The Democratic Faith* (Yale University Press, N.D.)

²⁰ Arthur Lupia, *Uninformed: Why People Know So Little About Politics and What We Can Do About It* (Oxford University Press, 2016).

The central actors in the book are what Lupia calls “civic educators”—teachers, scientists, faith leaders, issue advocates, journalists, reporters, and political campaigners who seek to help us to adapt to our ignorance by providing information that citizens can use to align their beliefs and actions with certain facts and values.

Sniderman and Lupia in different ways both attach substantial importance to the heuristics of low-information voting. Achen and Bartels engage this assertion but come away believing that there is less there than meets the eye. On other matters, however, the differences are less stark. They all agree that the most informed and active citizens are the ones most likely to be committed partisans who view the political world through the lenses of their parties; that parties, officeholders and candidates importantly structure the choices presented to voters; that ideologies are forged by political elites; that subsets of the public can become informed and purposive actors, especially when mobilized as interest groups or social movements; and perhaps, even if not stated explicitly, that government performance and policy outcomes are shaped more by the resources and machinations of groups and party networks than by the popular will measured by individual preferences.

The normative perspectives of scholars matters as well. Achen and Bartels believe that citizens and elections are held to impossible, idealistic standards in the folk theory of democracy, which perpetuate myths, provide cover for those taking advantage of outsized resources, and work against government responsiveness. Sniderman and Lupia are offended by those who dismiss citizens as ignorant and incompetent and seek through their research and teaching to defend their dignity and demonstrate the rationality and efficacy of their behavior in American democracy.

What then are some of the implications of this rich vein of scholarly work for the practice and improvement of American democracy?

IMPLICATIONS FOR THE PRACTICE AND IMPROVEMENT OF AMERICAN DEMOCRACY

Democracy for Realists was completed before the 2016 presidential nominating contests took shape; there was no opportunity for the authors to weigh in on the rise of Donald Trump and the challenge for the Democratic nomination waged by Bernie Sanders. Shortly after the book’s release, the authors published two opinion pieces, one defending the legitimacy of a brokered Republican convention when that remained a possibility,²¹ and the other challenging the premise that Sanders’ surprising success in his race with Hillary Clinton is primarily due to his liberal policy positions.²² These columns illustrate two elements of the folk theory of democracy debunked in their book. One is that “the people” alone can and must choose their own leaders; there is no legitimate role for deliberation by political professionals, even under the unusual circumstances in which a majority of the voters have not agreed upon a choice. The other is that elections are decided by voters’ carefully weighing competing candidates’ stands on major issues; in this case, Sanders’s surprising support must signal a momentous shift to the left among Democrats.

Are we then to conclude that Achen and Bartels, like Andrew Sullivan, believe that the threat to American democracy represented by Donald Trump is a consequence of democratic excesses? My reading suggests no. They are fully aware of the forces driving the rise of the extreme right in many parts of Europe, including countries with a democratic

²¹ Christopher H. Achen and Larry M. Bartels, “The presidential primaries are out of control – and the party conventions are broken” Los Angeles Times (May 2, 2016). <http://www.latimes.com/opinion/op-ed/la-oe-0502-bartels-achen-primary-obsession-20160502-story.html>.

²² Christopher H. Achen and Larry M. Bartels, “Do Sanders Supporters Favor His Policies? the new YorkTimes, May 23, 2016. http://www.nytimes.com/2016/05/23/opinion/campaign-stops/do-sanders-supporters-favor-his-policies.html?_r=0.

ethos and electoral system unlike our own. As my colleague, E. J. Dionne, Jr. has observed: “Trumpism is not an American original. Almost every plank in his vaguely defined platform is derivative of the European Far Right. It is gaining ground on the basis of opposition to immigration, fears of terrorism and crime, economic nationalism, and promises of a government wielding a muscular hand against the forces of disorder.”²³

Achen and Bartels do look askance at “democratizing” reforms such as the Progressive Era direct primary elections and referenda and initiatives as well as the more recent changes in the presidential nominating process. But their skepticism is based not on unwavering confidence in the wisdom of political elites but on the unrealistic expectations of how citizens think and act in the electoral arena. They believe, as I do, that having institutional safeguards in place, such as automatic delegate status for top party leaders and elected officials (“superdelegates”) at Democratic National Conventions, even though seldom if ever dispositive on the choice of nominee, is prudential and should be considered a legitimate democratic caution.

No one seriously contemplating the likely general election matchup between Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump can fail to anticipate stunning, even frightening consequences, many not easily captured by ideological positioning.

Moreover, nothing I read in their book leads me to believe they would take exception with Lee Drutman’s argument discussed earlier that Republican party leaders paved the way for a Trump-like populist challenge within their own party by failing to address the expressed concerns of a significant part of their coalition and by their relentless, delegitimizing attacks on government and those elected to serve in it.

While Achen and Bartels believe we place too much of the burden of steering the ship of state on elections, with outcomes often random and myopic, their case is not anti-democratic. Elections matter because the choices presented by the competing parties and candidates diverge in significant ways, even if those differences are not determined by individual citizens. No one seriously contemplating the likely general election matchup between Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump can fail to anticipate stunning, even frightening consequences, many not easily captured by ideological positioning. The winning team’s leaders and program are significant for many aspects of public policy if not always the dominant factors in a complex process in which groups inside and outside government compete to influence policy and its implementation. The power of these groups, based partly on the resources they have to bring to bear on issues of greatest concern to them, determines how well government serves the interests of the citizenry. In the authors’ view, the real democratic deficit is the asymmetry in political resources and representation of different segments of American society.

One final issue, possibly the most perplexing one emerging from the book, at least for me, is the importance and utility of increasing voting participation. I fully understand the rationale of Achen and Bartels in throwing cold water on the many reform efforts to enhance the position of citizens in American democracy. Many such efforts set a very high, idealistic standard for democratic citizens they cannot possibly meet. But in the real world of contemporary American politics, including the prominence of social identities and group (including partisan) loyalties they skillfully describe, differential turnout levels can be decisive in election outcomes. There is nothing unrealistic about the Democratic and Republican parties working through legal and campaign means to increase or decrease turnout. The level and

²³ E. J. Dionne, Jr., “Trumpism: Made in Europe” Washington Post, May 25, 2016. https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/trumpism-made-in-europe/2016/05/25/b83fd94a-22a2-11e6-9e7f-57890b612299_story.html

composition of the drop-off in turnout from presidential to midterm elections has real consequences. The same is true of the historically low rates of voting in primary elections. When Achen and Bartels dismiss the importance and likely consequence of “universal franchise” (which I take to mean compulsory voting), I am puzzled. If, as they argue, the asymmetry of political resources leads to vastly different levels of responsiveness, why wouldn’t a more representative electorate (based on education levels, income and age) narrow those differences?

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