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Article Author: Christopher Achen and Larry M. Bartels
Journal Title: Democracy for Realists: Why Elections Do Not Produce Responsive Government
Journal Volume:
Journal Issue:
Journal Month/Date:
Journal Year: 2016
Pages: 52-89, 297-328
TN: 3470461

Call Number: JF1001 .A34 2016 (College Reserve)
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CHAPTER THREE

Tumbling Down into a Democratical Republick: "Pure Democracy" and the Pitfalls of Popular Control

Critics of the magistrates are also responsible. Their argument is, "The people ought to decide": the people accept that invitation readily; and thus the authority of all the magistrates is undermined.


The Founders of the American political system had a complex understanding of the role of the people in a republican government. As they proclaimed in the Declaration of Independence, governments are instituted to secure the "unalienable Rights" of "all men," and they derive "their just powers from the consent of the governed." However, the Founders also believed that direct popular control of government would be dangerous and undesirable. Thus, James Madison famously argued in Federalist Number 10 that the system of representation they proposed would "refine and enlarge the public views, by passing them through the medium of a chosen body of citizens, whose wisdom may best discern the true interest of their country, and whose patriotism and love of justice will be least likely to sacrifice it to temporary or partial considerations. Under such a regulation, it may well happen that the public voice, pronounced by the representatives of the people, will be more consonant to the public good than if pronounced by the people themselves, convened for the purpose."

The judgments and worries of the Founders regarding "the people themselves" seem rather distant in the 21st century. Living in a proudly "democratic" country that has come to unchallenged wealth and international power, most
Americans today would be hard-pressed to define the difference between a democracy and a republic, much less to defend a preference for one over the other. For most contemporary Americans, democracy means rule by the people, democracy is unambiguously good, and the only possible cure for the ills of democracy is more democracy. The set of ideas that we have referred to as "the folk theory of democracy" is triumphant.

This striking evolution in our popular understanding of democracy reflects—and has probably also contributed to—a long history of periodic frustration with governmental performance. Whenever existing political institutions have seemed to fail, Americans have cast about for "reforms." But in a political culture dominated by a naive view of popular sovereignty, plausible "reforms" must be construed and defended as "more democratic" than the existing institutions they are intended to supplant. As Bruce Cain (2015, 7) put it, "The general drift of American political reform has been to try to fix the problems of representative democracy by creating more opportunities for citizens to observe, participate in, and control their government's actions. There is in American political culture a strong implicit faith in popular sovereignty as the remedy to government corruption, misrepresentation, and incompetence."2

This tendency has been reinforced by a paucity of respectable alternative political theories. (It has also been bolstered by self-interested politicians happy to turn the rhetoric of popular sovereignty to their own ends.) Thus, power has repeatedly been withdrawn from political parties and elected politicians and "bestowed" directly on voters. American political history has come to be celebrated as a long battle between ordinary people and a series of grasping oligarchies thwarting the popular will. And the story is inevitably told with a happy ending—a triumph of ever-expanding self-government and popular control.3

In this chapter, we scrutinize that self-congratulatory tale by examining how and why some of America's key political institutions have become "democratized," and with what effects. In chapter 2, we surveyed a variety of

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1 Fashionable insistence on the distinction in some conservative intellectual circles has probably made little difference in this respect, although the association of republicanism with Republicanism may have added an extraneous partisan coloration to the debate.

2 Cain's study of "America's political reform quandary" assessed these issues and a variety of others—including campaign finance, election administration, redistricting, government transparency, and lobbying regulations—from a perspective quite similar in spirit to ours.

3 Efforts to expand the scope of popular control have sometimes gone hand in hand with efforts to extend enfranchisement, but the two aims are logically distinct. In our view, any defensible definition of democracy, regardless of the precise role it assigns to voters, entails universal adult suffrage.
formidable challenges to realizing the populist ideal in the realm of electoral politics. It would be surprising if a centuries-long process of expanding popular control and "direct democracy" did not entail some substantial pitfalls and unintended consequences stemming from the same underlying difficulties. In our telling, it has.

In the 1950s and 1960s, for example, many American towns and cities decided whether to add fluoride compounds to their drinking water. The scientific evidence that fluoride reduced tooth decay was compelling, and cities whose administrators or city councils made the decision without a referendum overwhelmingly adopted fluoridation. However, when the measure went to the voters, 60% of the time the electorate voted it down. Nor were the losses confined to less educated parts of the country. Cambridge, Massachusetts, home to Harvard and MIT, voted three times, defeating it, then passing it by the narrowest of margins, and then defeating it decisively on the third try (Crain, Katz, and Rosenthal 1969, 4, 48).

Around the country, voters who rejected fluoridation saved themselves a few pennies in taxes per year in return for many unpleasant visits to the dentist and substantial dental bills. Thus, the "more democracy" they had, the more likely they were to harm their finances and their children. Why the self-defeating choices? The simple answer is that the voters were confused. Crackpots, rogue doctors, and extreme right-wing interest groups all fought fluoridation, and many voters, including a substantial fraction of those with college educations, could not sort out the self-appointed gurus from the competent experts.4

The same sort of popular confusion has arisen in recent years with respect to childhood immunizations. Parents getting their medical information from unreliable sources have sought to exempt their children from inoculation. In states that have responded to public pressure for easy exemptions, outbreaks of long-suppressed diseases like measles and pertussis have resulted (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention 2015).

In this chapter we consider the two most significant attempts to bring the actual practice of American politics into closer alignment with the folk theory of democracy—the periodic movement to "democratize" party nominations, and the proliferation of initiative and referendum procedures at the

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4 In this period, the television comedian Jack Paar once had a studio audience consisting mostly of dentists attending a local convention. He asked all those who favored fluoridation to raise their hands. Nearly every hand went up. Those opposed? No hands were raised. "Gee," exclaimed Paar in mock surprise, "I thought it was a controversial issue" (Mueller 1966, 64).
state and local levels. In both these domains, “reforms” have been motivated by a populist desire to increase the influence of ordinary citizens on governmental decision-making. In both domains, reformers have believed that they could increase the influence of ordinary citizens by reducing the influence of professional politicians—elected officials and party managers. In this chapter we summarize the history of these “populist” reforms and their all-too-predictable pitfalls. But first, we provide a brief sketch of their intellectual and political roots in the dramatic long evolution of Americans’ popular understanding of democracy.

THE TRIUMPH OF POPULAR SOVEREIGNTY IN AMERICAN POLITICAL CULTURE

America was founded in an era in which respectable political thought took a firmly antidemocratic line. In the wake of the English Civil War a century earlier, the Earl of Shaftesbury had argued in parliament that monarchy could be sustained only with the support of an army or the nobility. “If you will not have one, you must have the other, or else the Monarch cannot long support itself from tumbling down into a Democratic Republic.” Historian Edmund Morgan (1988, 103) added, “It went without saying that no one wanted England to tumble down there.”

When 18th-century political theorists wrote of popular sovereignty, they often had in mind a kind of virtual popular consent that imposed no practical limitations on kings, churches, or the few nascent aristocratic representative bodies. Such theoretical circumspection was wise. Algernon Sidney had been hanged in 1683 for unpublished notes “in which he assigned the origin and limitation of government to the people, with a right to depose rulers who betrayed their trust” (Morgan 1988, 104–105). Even Rousseau, the apostle of democracy writing just a decade before the adoption of the U.S. Constitution, argued that democracy was possible only in small states. His theories posed no direct threat to the French absolutism of his day.

But popular sovereignty in colonial America had a muscular reality that would have shocked and frightened circumspect theorists of virtual popular

5 We do not take up a much older instance of direct democracy—New England town meetings. The available evidence about them is much thinner than that for party reforms and referendums, and scholarly opinion about their performance is mixed (Mansbridge 1980, chaps. 9–11; Bryan 2004).

6 For a more detailed history of American thought regarding populist democracy and its limitations, see de Grazia (1951, chaps. 5 and 6).
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consent. In the most "democratic" of the colonies, Rhode Island, "elections were bitterly fought, and fraud—stuffing the ballot box, for example—was not uncommon. . . . The Assembly itself was frequently the scene of disorder: shrill charges, deals, and undignified squabbles. Most Rhode Islanders apparently enjoyed and valued all this political smoke, and the politicians played their parts with enthusiasm if not aplomb. But not everyone found the spectacle of brawling politicians and a large and apparently unstable electorate to his liking" (Middlekauff 1982, 97).

In the run-up to the American Revolution, prosaic grievances such as the Townshend Duties and the Stamp Act were transmuted into occasions for popular resistance to British oppression. Political theory put a glossy sheen on the customary human reluctance to pay taxes. Colonial elites eager to resist British rule exploited popular discontent to bolster their own political standing. Resistance turned to violence. During the agitation over the Stamp Act, Massachusetts representatives of the Crown had their homes burned and their lives threatened by thugs chanting popular political slogans. Local militias were unwilling or unable to stop them. Throughout the colonies, other officials fearing similar fates resigned their offices (Middlekauff 1982, 89–96).

To many respectable observers, the experience of democracy in colonial America simply reaffirmed the lesson of theory and history: the common people were not a reliable foundation for government. Rhode Island's tumultuous populist politics were frequently cited, in the Federalist Papers and elsewhere, as a prime example of unstable democracy.7

The understanding of democracy reflected in the U.S. Constitution was shaped by the Founders' intellectual heritage and political experiences. They wanted a stable government with a constitution that would protect prosperous landowners like themselves, as Charles Beard (1913) famously argued. Even Thomas Jefferson, often remembered as a dedicated democrat in a republican age, was anxious to limit the influence of the urban masses (Hofstadter 1973, chap. 1). Thus, the Constitution provided for significant limitations

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7 Perhaps fittingly, then, ratification of the Constitution itself became entangled in Rhode Island's contentious debtor-versus-creditor politics. The state held out for three years before finally ratifying, the last state to do so, after several referendums and elections. Adroit maneuvering by Rhode Island politicians to let the legislature decide, together with progress on state debts and the fortuitous absences of key legislative opponents, was necessary to achieve ratification despite substantial opposition among ordinary citizens who could not grasp the momentous implications of remaining outside the new confederation (Conley 1988; Kaminski 1989).
on popular rule, including a separation of powers among largely independent branches of government, federalism, and indirect election of the president and the Senate. Central to the Constitution was a balance between popular forces and experienced leadership. Benjamin Franklin famously called it "a republic, Madam, if you can keep it"—thus suggesting that even a republic with limited democratic elements might be subject to fatal instability.

The American Revolution had been justified in the Declaration of Independence and in much other rhetoric of the time as a legitimate uprising of a sovereign people against a tyrannical king—just the sort of hypothetical possibility envisaged in European theory, though not one that respectable opinion in Britain at the time was prepared to take seriously as a practical possibility. Yet as Morgan (1988, 306) noted, "From its inception in the England of the 1640s the sovereignty of the people has been filled with surprises for those who invoked it."

The revolution brought social turmoil along with political upheaval. The colonial governors and military officials who had been prominent members of upper-crust society in the colonies were gone. Citizen loyalists, too, were discredited; many had fled. The quasi-aristocratic Federalist Party, often frankly contemptuous of ordinary citizens, constructed and then dominated the new government; but their role would prove to be short-lived. By the early 19th century they, too, were gone.

The Federalists’ bitter opponent, Thomas Jefferson, became president in 1801, and politics for the next quarter century would be dominated by the proudly self-proclaimed “Democratic Republicans.” In that period, American culture and society underwent dramatic change. According to Stanley Elkins and Eric McKitrick (1993, 5), “It can probably be said that the principal components for a structure of norms and social values most appropriate to the working of a capitalist, democratic, equalitarian culture were fully in place by about 1830, though not very much before then.”

Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. characterized this period of American history as “the age of Jackson,” in honor of the man whose mixed moral character and forceful presidency redefined American politics. Coming to the nation’s highest office from a frontier background and military fame in the War of 1812, Andrew Jackson took additional steps toward democratizing the country. Certainly his inauguration, with frontiersmen traipsing through the White House and leaving mud on the carpets, seemed to his countrymen to have begun not just a new administration, but a new era in American politics. Jackson’s position in the momentous battle over the National Bank was bolstered by the fact that “everyone, from right to left, believed, with more or fewer
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qualifications, that sovereignty belonged to the people" and that the behavior of the banks "violated the national faith in popular rule" (Schlesinger 1945, 123). As Elkins and McKitrick noted, when Tocqueville arrived in America it was this new structure of norms and social values that he so memorably described: “The people reign over the American political world as God reigns over the universe,” he wrote (Tocqueville 1848, 60). America was tumbling down into a new experiment in large-scale democracy.

Popular rule had become more consequential due in part to the expansion of the franchise. Increasingly, the states modified or eliminated property requirements for voting. Jefferson’s party, now known simply as the Democrats, had every incentive to enfranchise immigrants and the poor by reducing property qualifications. The Whigs, the competing party in this era, often moved in the same direction to avoid blame for obstructing the inevitable (Keyssar 2000, chap. 2), even as they bemoaned the fact that “the Republic has degenerated into a Democracy” (Wilentz 2005, 425).

The franchise extensions were a significant, if limited, step forward. “Rule by the people,” which in practice had often been limited to a minority of white males, now increasingly came to include non-native-born white men and those without property. (Women and African-Americans were, of course, still excluded in Jackson’s era and for decades thereafter.)

The convulsion of the Civil War swept away slavery in the South and created yet another set of democratizing reforms. More than any American war before or since, this momentous conflict fought on native soil engulfed the entire country. For many northerners, the long war gradually came to represent a moral crusade, and military victory made the morality of the Union cause a politically irresistible idea. African-Americans were constitutionally enfranchised and increasingly allowed in practice to vote. Though the South would take a long step backward after Reconstruction was ended in the 1870s, and the substance of legal racial equality was tenuous everywhere, nonetheless the principle that all adult males were eligible to vote had become established in most of the country.

The war stimulated the further development of northern manufacturing and Republican political loyalties. Over the next half century, a laissez-faire Republican ascendancy and an industrial jump-start set off a period of nation building and economic expansion. Steamship lines, gold, silver, and copper mines, oil, railroads, lumbering, steel manufacture, banking—all added to the national wealth and created vast personal fortunes. Fabulously wealthy "robber barons," unimpeded by government regulation or income taxes, alienated large numbers of ordinary farmers, miners, and workingmen by their
rapacious pricing, abusive labor relations, and bribery of elected officials. State legislatures frequently fell under their control, particularly in the western states. Standard Oil in California, the Anaconda Copper Mining Company in Montana, and several others achieved near strangleholds on their state governments (Olin 1968; Clinch 1970).

The periodic economic contractions that punctuated the development of the industrial United States in the second half of the 19th century enhanced the appeal of third parties. Farmers, facing the most volatile conditions and some of the worst monopoly exploitation by the railroads, were a particular source of political agitation and third-party movements (Hofstadter 1955; Goodwyn 1976). Combining with western miners and southern cotton farmers, the rural protestors coalesced into a broad-based popular movement under the banner of Populism, mounting a third-party presidential campaign in 1892 and becoming a major party in several states. Because they saw themselves in bondage to Eastern monopolies, their platform was antimonopoly. Because they saw themselves in bondage to big-city political machines, their platform was also anti-political party and pro-direct democracy. As before in American history, extension of popular control was seen as the solution to contemporary evils.

During the Panic of 1893 economic distress became widespread. William Jennings Bryan's fusion campaign in 1896, uniting Democrats and Populists, roared through the western states, the South, and parts of the Midwest. Bryan received 80% of the vote in Montana, for example, and the fusion ticket swept Republicans from the state government that year. The campaign frightened the centers of Republican dominance, but William McKinley held the East, the Pacific Coast, and the upper Midwest, and Bryan ultimately fell well short of the electoral votes needed for election. Though he was to run twice more as the Democratic nominee, the Populists and their economic grievances declined rapidly in political importance. With little understanding of the need for party organization and broad coalition building, their political naiveté had proven costly.

The next period of extensive democratization, in the first decades of the 20th century, left a more significant institutional legacy. Heavy immigration was changing the character of American cities, and urban political machines were powerful players in both political parties. Reformers saw boss control, big-city Catholics, and crooked party machines as an unholy coalition that formed the chief obstacle to national political and social progress. Occasional splits in the GOP ranks produced "progressive" candidates running against both Democrats and Republicans. The Progressives eventually became a
third-party force in many states, albeit with a distinctly antiparty inclination. The resulting tensions between ideology and organizational needs were to bedevil the Progressives' attempts to displace the two major parties; ultimately the Progressives went the way of the Populists. However, the progressive wings of the two main parties, under the leadership of Theodore Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson, took a page from the Populists, enacting very limited versions of "trust-busting," labor rights, the income tax, and direct primaries, all of which had their initial legislative successes in this period. Without third-party competition, however, the two principal parties soon lapsed back into political quietism.

The democratic theory animating the Populists and Progressives was the folk theory of democracy. Those ideas directed their reform efforts along a particular path, providing a script for American reform movements that was to have fateful consequences for them and their successors down to the present era. Their allegiance to the folk theory hindered both their theorizing and their practical political efforts. However, to be fair to them, the central theoretical and practical dilemmas they faced remain thorny ones: What is the appropriate role of political parties in a democracy? And when parties stray from that role, how are they to be reformed? We now turn to those conundrums.

"A SIMPLE FAITH IN DEMOCRACY": PARTY REFORM

The internal workings of political parties pose puzzling challenges for democratic theory. Even under the most optimistic assumptions, elections can reflect "the will of the people" only within the limited compass of a fixed choice among candidates, generally those put forward by viable party organizations. Who gets to choose those candidates?

The Founders did not foresee the rise of political parties. To find a doctrine of parties paralleling their view that popular opinion and elite judgment need to be balanced, one must look to later eras. One view, put forth most forcefully by E. E. Schattschneider (1942, 60), is that the role of ordinary citizens in selecting nominees is and can only be highly indirect: "The sovereignty of the voter consists in his freedom of choice just as the sovereignty of the consumer in the economic system consists in his freedom to trade in a competitive market. . . . Democracy is not to be found in the parties but between the parties."

Like other aspects of the Founders' quest for balance, however, Schattschneider's conception of parties as private associations of political elites, dis-
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disciplined only by the competitive market of general elections, has fared poorly over the course of American history. Indeed, as V. O. Key, Jr. (1964, 395) noted in a textbook summary of procedural reforms over 150 years, "Each major step in the development of the nominating process has marked a further obeisance to the doctrine that the will of the rank and file of party membership should prevail." According to Austin Ranney (1975, 105), for example, "the earliest party reforms were intended to make parties more representative of their supporters. For the nomination of candidates for statewide offices, the legislative caucuses replaced mass meetings in the capital cities—mainly to better represent, it was said, the party faithful living in other areas. The legislative caucuses then generally gave way to 'mixed' caucuses to better represent party members in districts with no party legislators."

A further step was taken when Andrew Jackson was nominated for his second term by the country's first national party convention, thus removing presidential nominations from congressional caucuses and (putatively) from elite control. Jackson himself profited politically from the arrangement, of course, but the rationale was democratization; as A. Lawrence Lowell (1913, 234) wrote, "the convention was adopted because the legislative caucus was thought undemocratic."

The convention system was considered suitably "democratic" for some 80 years following its adoption, until it was superseded by "the most radical of all the party reforms adopted in the whole course of American history" (Ranney 1975, 121), the direct primary. The direct primary represented an unprecedented attempt to impose the folk theory of democracy on the nominating process. In making the adoption of the direct primary a centerpiece of his 1900 Wisconsin gubernatorial campaign, Robert La Follette appealed to "the sovereign right that each citizen shall for himself exercise his choice by direct vote, without the intervention or interference of any political agency." "No longer," La Follette promised, "will there stand between the voter and the official a political machine with a complicated system of caucuses and conventions, by the easy manipulation of which it thwarts the will of the voter and rules official conduct" (quoted by Ranney 1975, 124–125). La Follette was eventually the 1924 Progressive candidate for president, but the antiparty spirit of that movement is already apparent in these remarks two dozen years earlier. As Key (1942, 373–374) put it, "The advocates of the direct primary had a simple faith in democracy; they thought that if the people, the rank and file of the party membership, only were given an opportunity to express their will through some such mechanism as the direct primary, candidates would be selected who would be devoted to the interests of the people as a whole."
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Some canny political scientists were immediately skeptical. For example, Henry Jones Ford (1909, 2) noted that

one continually hears the declaration that the direct primary will take power from the politicians and give it to the people. This is pure nonsense. Politics has been, is, and always will be carried on by politicians, just as art is carried on by artists, engineering by engineers, business by businessmen. All that the direct primary, or any other political reform, can do is to affect the character of the politicians by altering the conditions that govern political activity, thus determining its extent and quality. The direct primary may take advantage and opportunity from one set of politicians and confer them upon another set, but politicians there will always be so long as there is politics.

Experience with the direct primary system soon confirmed Ford’s view. By 1910, an Iowa journalist complained that “the politicians already control the machinery more than they did under the old caucus system, and they are only kindergartners in the business as yet” (Horack 1910, 185). More than three decades later, the leading scholarly observer of political parties noted that “whatever the nature of the nominating process, a relatively small, cohesive group tends to take the lead in organizing support for candidates... Under the direct primary the party organization remained and changed its methods so as to adapt them to the new machinery of nominations” (Key 1942, 390). But as we will see, the resulting indirect methods of party control were not always successful. The “relatively small, cohesive group” that controlled nominations has often turned out to be a set of unelected, intense minorities or well-heeled private interests. They learned to play the primary nomination game, too, and the simple, honest citizens envisaged by the folk theory were no match for them. The system produced nominees very far from the reformers’ expectations.

From the beginning, experience with the primary system has been disheartening. In the early period, the machines learned to herd voters to the polls. The resulting overrepresentation of the lower classes appalled some observers (Millspaugh 1916, 715–716). According to Reynolds (2006, 227–228),

Like many electoral reforms past and those to come, the direct primary proved to be a disappointment to its most avid supporters... Low voter turnout mocked the reformers’ image of a public-spirited John Q. Citizen impatient to make his voice heard... By World War
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I, enthusiasm for direct nominations had burned itself out across the country. During the 1920s, when political exposés denounced the enormous sums required to win a primary, a brief backlash induced three states to return to the convention system. Despite the disappointment and negative publicity that it aroused, the direct primary remained a fixture of American politics. A cohort of politicians had come to power through its mechanisms and they had no incentive to return to the convention system. If direct nominations chastened those who placed so much confidence in the electorate, the system did address the needs of the hustling candidates who placed it on the statute books.

Whether for these reasons or through simple institutional inertia, the direct primary has remained the predominant mechanism for nominating candidates at most levels of the American political system throughout the past century.

The failures of the folk theory as a guide to party reform became particularly clear in the wake of the remarkably contentious 1968 Democratic presidential nomination contest, which saw the rise of antiwar insurgent Eugene McCarthy, the withdrawal under pressure of incumbent president Lyndon Johnson, riots sparked by the assassination of civil rights leader Martin Luther King, Jr., and the assassination on the final night of the primary season of one of the leading contenders, Robert Kennedy. Despite this tumult, the Democratic convention delegates—most of whom had actually been selected before any of these events occurred—settled on Johnson’s political heir, Hubert Humphrey, as their nominee. He lost the general election.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the apparent unresponsiveness of the delegate selection process to the dramatic events of 1968 provoked demands for democratization. Advocates of reform echoed their predecessors in the Progressive Era, asking “the American people whether or not they will demand a greater voice in decisions affecting the world in which they live or whether they will leave such decisions to professional party elites, officeholders, bureaucrats, or others” (Saloma and Sontag 1972, 352). The Democratic Party’s McGovern-Fraser Commission itself announced that “popular control of the Democratic Party is necessary for its survival” (Commission on Party Structure and Delegate Selection 1970, 49).

One consequence of the McGovern-Fraser reforms was to dramatically increase the share of convention delegates selected in primaries, from 40% in 1968 to about 60% in 1972 and more than 70% by 1976—a dramatic change in the mixed system of primaries, caucuses, and conventions that had persisted
since the Progressive Era. This consequence seems not to have been intended, or even foreseen, by the reformers themselves. According to Ranney (1975, 205), himself a member of the McGovern-Fraser Commission, "most of the commissioners strongly preferred a reformed national convention to a national presidential primary or a major increase in the number of state presidential primaries. And we believed that if we made the party's nonprimary delegate selection processes more open and fair, participation in them would increase greatly and consequently the demand for more primaries would fade away. But quite the opposite happened."

In his textbook summary of American party reform through the early 1960s, Key (1964, 393) had noted that the direct primary "came in on a wave of belief that here was a means by which the 'people' might rule without much interposition by 'politicians.'" Nevertheless, Key claimed, "Second thoughts have tended toward the view that ways and means should be found by which party organization might play a legitimate and effective role in nominations, a recognition of the elemental necessity for organized leadership in a democratic politics." If so, those second thoughts about the legitimate role of organized leadership turned out to be fleeting; just a few years later, in the pressure of the next political crisis, they were readily set aside in one more attempt to invent "a means by which the 'people' might rule."

The result of the McGovern-Fraser Commission reforms was indeed to produce a more "open" presidential nominating process, with less effective control by party elites and a good deal of instability and unpredictability generated by the complex dynamic interaction among candidates, journalists, the public, and voters in specific primary states (Bartels 1988). In 1972, Democratic insiders overwhelmingly favored Senator Edmund Muskie as their nominee, but Muskie's candidacy collapsed in New Hampshire and the nomination went to liberal maverick McGovern. In 1976, the primaries produced an even more audacious choice, Jimmy Carter—a candidate with such negligible party credentials that a Gallup poll in December 1974 had failed to list him among 31 potential candidates for the Democratic nomination. Meanwhile, on the Republican side, conservative insurgent Ronald Reagan mounted the strongest challenge in living memory to a sitting president—a challenge fueled by a string of primary victories, notwithstanding Gerald Ford's four-to-one advantage in endorsements by party insiders (Cohen et al. 2008, 176). And in 1980 and 1984, endorsement leaders Carter, Reagan, and

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8 Although the reforms were initially limited to the Democratic Party, Republicans soon followed suit; by 1976, 70% of Republican convention delegates were selected in primaries.

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Walter Mondale all had to survive substantial primary challenges in order to win their nominations.

In their detailed study of "presidential nominations before and after reform," Marty Cohen and coauthors (2008) argued that the disruptions of the nominating process stemming from the McGovern-Fraser Commission reforms were temporary, and that "by the 1980s, both parties were back on an even keel and effectively controlling the nomination process" (Cohen et al. 2008, 159). The effectiveness of that control may be cast in some doubt by the fact that party elites have conspicuously failed to coordinate in three of the four most recent nomination contests.9 Nevertheless, the preponderance of Republican endorsements for Mitt Romney in 2012 was very much in keeping with Cohen and his colleagues' (2008, 3) emphasis on the efforts of party insiders to "scrutinize and winnow the field before voters get involved, attempt to build coalitions behind a single preferred candidate, and sway voters to ratify their choice."10

Of course, popular sovereignty in the presidential nominating process is greatly circumscribed if primary voters merely "ratify" the choices made by party elites. But even with party elites to "scrutinize and winnow the field before voters get involved," the complexity of the choices facing primary voters can be daunting. The most systematic assessment of how well they manage that complexity is Richard Lau's study of "correct voting" in the 2012 primary campaign. According to Lau (2013, 331), "voters in U.S. nominating contests do much worse than voters in general election campaigns, often barely doing better than chance in selecting the candidate who best represents their own values and priorities." For example, in January 2012, in the earliest stage of a three-way race for the Democratic nomination, "barely 30% of Democratic voters managed to select the candidate who, as far as I could tell, best represented

9 In 2004, a record low 5% of Democratic governors endorsed any candidate before the start of the primaries, and eventual nominee John Kerry trailed Richard Gephardt and Howard Dean in weighted endorsements (Cohen et al. 2008, 177). Unpublished tabulations provided by Hans Noel indicate that Republican endorsements in 2008 were split among John McCain (35%), Rudy Giuliani (32%), and Mitt Romney (27%), while Democratic endorsements were split between Hillary Clinton (44%) and John Edwards (43%), with Barack Obama far behind (9%).

10 Noel and his colleagues have not yet tabulated 2012 endorsement data, but blogger Nate Silver and others reported that Romney secured the lion's share of early endorsements (http://fivethirtyeight.blogs.nytimes.com/2011/11/25/romney-dominating-race-for-endorsements/?_r=0). Rick Perry, Herman Cain, and Newt Gingrich all led in the polls at one time or another during 2011, but only Perry garnered significant support from party leaders, and that support dried up after he faltered on the campaign trail.
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their own interests"; later in the primary season, with only two remaining candidates (Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama), and after months of additional media coverage of the campaign, that proportion had increased to 56%—"at least now better than chance—but not by much" (Lau 2013, 339).

How has greater popular influence in the presidential nominating process affected the quality of the candidates selected? We know of no authoritative answer to that question. However, historians’ ratings of presidents suggest that the quality of winning candidates has not improved—and has probably declined—with the advent of a more “open” system in the 1970s.11 The average quality of presidents was distinctly lower in the first quarter century following reform (from Jimmy Carter through Bill Clinton) than in the preceding quarter century; and early assessments of George W. Bush and Barack Obama suggest that their presidencies will not significantly boost the post-reform average.12 By this rough test, at least, “obeisance to the doctrine that the will of the rank and file of party membership should prevail” (Key 1964, 395) has entailed real costs.

We have told the story of the extension of the primary system as though it were a battle of ideas. But of course, throughout American history, debates about desirable democratic procedures have not been carried out in the abstract. They have always been entangled with struggles for substantive political advantage. In 1824, “politicos in all camps recognized” that the traditional congressional caucus system would probably nominate William Crawford; thus, “how people felt about the proper nominating method was correlated very highly indeed with which candidate they supported” (Raney 1975, 66). In 1832, “America’s second great party reform was accomplished, not because the principle of nomination by delegate conventions won more adherents

11 We thank Kay Schlozman for suggesting a comparison of this sort. Our summary measure of history’s judgment of each president is based on the average of four distinct rankings compiled by (1) historian Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. in 1996, (2) the Wall Street Journal in 2005, (3) the C-SPAN cable television network in 2009, and (4) Siena College in 2010. Rating presidents is a challenging business, and we are well aware of the inevitable limitations of these four sets of ratings.

12 The average rating of pre-reform presidents since World War II (Harry Truman, Dwight Eisenhower, John Kennedy, Lyndon Johnson, and Richard Nixon) on a 40-point summary scale combining the judgments of numerous historians and other experts is 25.6. The average rating of post-reform presidents (Jimmy Carter, Ronald Reagan, George H. W. Bush, and Bill Clinton) is 19.7. Including Gerald Ford (who won a primary-dominated nomination in 1976, but as an unelected incumbent) in the post-reform group would lower its average rating, increasing the disparity between the two groups. Early ratings of George W. Bush are consistently poor, while those of Barack Obama are somewhat above average (though assessments of recent presidents often alter significantly with the passage of time).
than the principle of nomination by legislative caucuses, but largely because the dominant factional interests... decided that national conventions would make things easier for them” (Ranney 1975, 69).

Similarly, Ranney (1975, 122) noted that the most influential champion of the direct primary, Robert La Follette, was inspired “to destroy boss rule at its very roots” when the Republican Party bosses of Wisconsin twice passed him over for the gubernatorial nomination. And in the early 1970s, George McGovern helped to engineer the Democratic Party’s new rules for delegate selection as cochair of the party’s McGovern-Fraser Commission, and “praised them repeatedly during his campaign for the 1972 nomination”; but less than a year later he advocated repealing some of the most significant rules changes. Asked why McGovern’s views had changed, “an aide said, ‘We were running for president then’” (Ranney 1975, 73–74).

Group conflict also played a role in reform efforts in every period, perhaps most obviously in the Progressive Era. As with other elements of the Progressive reform agenda, enthusiasm for direct primaries was based in part on the reformers’ expectations that the new system would work to the advantage of people like them—typically well-established, prejudiced Protestants appalled by Catholic immigrants and big-city corruption. According to John Reynolds (2006, 160), “The reform element appealed for greater participation in the nominating process, particularly by those commonly referred to as ‘the respectable element.’ They condemned the influence of those they branded ‘the worst class of citizens’ at the caucuses and primaries.”

Thus no knowledgeable scholar will deny the powerful influence of party strategy and group conflict on the history of American party reform. Yet these battles were not raw power politics. Invocations of the folk theory have always given the proponents of “democratization” a considerable advantage. Hence with a few fits and starts, American history has proceeded steadily away from the sophisticated notions of balance enshrined in the Constitution and inexorably toward a larger direct popular control as envisaged in the simplistic folk theory.

To a lesser extent, the same process has played out in other democratic political systems with equally mixed results. For example, Spies and Kaiser (2014, 585–586) noted that “many Western European parties have reformed their procedures for candidate selection” in ways that produced “more inclusive nomination procedures,” but that these reforms “have come along with some unintended and undesired consequences.” Systematic comparisons of “inclusive” and “centralized” parties have found that greater “transparency, participation and accessibility of intra-party decisions” makes parties slightly less
representative of voters than in "centralized" systems where party elites choose the candidates (Hazan and Rahat 2010; Spies and Kaiser 2014).

"THE ABSOLUTE SOVEREIGNTY OF THE PEOPLE":
THE INITIATIVE AND REFERENDUM

Just as the adoption of the direct primary represented an attempt to circumvent party bosses and allow every citizen to "exercise his choice by direct vote, without the intervention or interference of any political agency," so also the contemporaneous movement to establish initiative and referendum procedures represented an attempt to circumvent elected legislatures by establishing "the power of the people to make or unmake laws." The aim was nothing less than "to restore the absolute sovereignty of the people—to make this in fact as well as in name, a government of, for and by the people," as one of the leading proponents of direct democracy, Senator Jonathan Bourne, Jr. (1912, 4, 3), put it.

Perceptive observers recognized the initiative and referendum movement as a reflection of dissatisfaction with the day-to-day realities of legislative politics at the turn of the 20th century. For example, A. Lawrence Lowell's study of Public Opinion and Popular Government (1913) proceeded directly from a chapter on "Loss of Confidence in Representative Bodies" to one on "Direct Popular Action." According to Lowell (1913, 131), "The growing distrust of legislative assemblies is due partly to the actual defects they have displayed, and partly to popular exaggeration of their faults." Henry Jones Ford (1912, 72) was less measured in his assessment, arguing that "the American people despise legislatures, not because they are averse to representative government, but because legislatures are in fact despicable."

Certainly there was much to despise about the legislatures of the Gilded Age, which were often severely malapportioned in favor of rural interests, heavily influenced by party machines, and directly or indirectly controlled by powerful corporate interests. The head of the Direct Legislative League (quoted by Broder 2000, 32) argued in a 1900 pamphlet that "representative government has been tested on these shores for over a century. In many cases it is better than the older forms. It has been acclaimed a finality. But it has borne its legitimate fruits, and they are the dead sea apples of corruption and insidious injustice. Representative government is a failure. . . . Interest coincides with justice, not in government, but in self-government; not in any form of rule by others, but in pure democracy, where the people rule themselves."
While some proponents of "pure democracy" viewed corruption and injustice as the "legitimate fruits" of representative government, others viewed representative government as legitimate in principle and direct democracy as an extraordinary expedient for addressing the current political crisis. For example, Ford (1912, 70) argued that the leaders of the initiative and referendum movement in Oregon "do not seek to destroy representative government; they want to get rid of a base imitation and introduce the real thing. When they accomplish the reorganization of public authority that they intend, they expect to drop the initiative and referendum out of ordinary use. They will then be kept in reserve simply for emergency use." Presumably Ford would be surprised to learn that the "emergency" afflicting Oregon's representative government has now lasted for more than a century; between 2000 and 2012, Oregon voters considered 107 statewide ballot measures (including initiatives and constitutional amendments referred by the state legislature).

Political scientists of the Progressive Era recognized that it might be "wiser ... to confine the referendum to questions involving general principles alone, and to the class of matters where the public is normally familiar with the facts required for a decision, than to extend it promiscuously to questions where a rational opinion can be formed only by a knowledge of details with which the ordinary man does not readily become acquainted" (Lowell 1913, 161). Unfortunately, they could suggest no reliable means for distinguishing matters on which ordinary citizens might be expected to have rational opinions from those that would be best left to legislatures.

Lowell (1913, 184–185) argued that "the size of the vote is a measure of public interest in the matter; and hence an indication of the extent to which the people are likely to have studied the facts necessary for a decision, and thereby formed a genuine opinion about the law. A decision by a majority of the votes actually cast upon a question is doubtless the most natural method to pursue in the case of a popular vote, but that such a result expresses public opinion may sometimes be a political fiction rather than a fact." In extreme cases, this sort of "political fiction" might be obvious to all; Lowell (1913, 188) pointed to cases in Massachusetts and Michigan where constitutional amendments were adopted despite being approved by fewer than 3% of those who went to the polls. However, that sort of judgment could be made only in retrospect, and in any case an initiative procedure justified as a way "to restore the absolute sovereignty of the people," as Senator Bourne had it, could not easily be reconciled with any systematic recognition of the possibility that "public opinion may sometimes be a political fiction rather than a fact."
Chapter Three

Ironically, the institutions of direct democracy themselves were often established on the basis of less than overwhelming popular support. Table 3.1 provides a summary of statewide votes on measures establishing initiative and referendum procedures, popular recall of public officials, and related Progressive institutional reforms from 1904 through 1912; these measures were culled from Lowell’s (1913) complete list of statewide initiatives and referendums during this formative period. In each case, the table shows the yes and no votes as percentages of the total election turnout, as well as the “roll-off”—the percentage of voters who went to the polls but did not vote on the specific measure listed.

It is clear from the results presented in Table 3.1 that direct democracy almost always garnered plurality support when put to the voters. Indeed, in 16 of the 17 cases in the table, yes votes outnumbered no votes; the sole exception was a 1910 effort to expand the role of initiatives, referendums, and recall in Oregon, which had already accumulated extensive experience with those institutions. On the other hand, it is also striking that a third or more of voters failed to vote on many of these measures, and most of the measures that were adopted actually failed to win support from a majority of those who showed up at the polls. For example, proposals for a general initiative procedure and recall of public officers on the 1912 Nevada ballot garnered pluralities of eight- and ten-to-one among those who cast votes, but still failed to win absolute majorities because almost half the voters who went to the polls declined to support or oppose them. Maine and Colorado had similar experiences. The Progressive stronghold of Minnesota, however, required an absolute majority at the polls to approve a constitutional amendment to establish the initiative and referendum. Despite very large pluralities in favor at two successive attempts, roll-off doomed the measure. The effort to establish the initiative and referendum in Minnesota then went into abeyance for more than half a century (Achen and Bartels 2007).

The record of voting behavior on “direct democracy” measures in the early 20th century may seem to suggest that initiatives and referendums only rarely registered what Lowell referred to as “genuine opinion.” However, it is instructive to contrast the parallel record of voting behavior in a domain in which public interest seems to have been a good deal higher. Table 3.2 presents the results of all 15 statewide initiative and referendum votes between 1904 and 1912 pertaining to prohibition, local option, and liquor licensing and

13 Lowell (1913, Appendix B) lists two statewide initiatives in Oregon in 1904, 11 (including constitutional amendments) in 1906, 19 in 1908, and 32 in 1910.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Direct primary law, Oregon, 1904</th>
<th>Yes (%)</th>
<th>No (%)</th>
<th>Roll-off (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>For direct legislation on local affairs, Oregon, 1906</td>
<td>49.4</td>
<td>17.3</td>
<td>33.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Act instructing legislators to vote for U.S. senator receiving highest popular vote, Oregon, 1908</td>
<td>59.7</td>
<td>18.1</td>
<td>22.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To make all public officials subject to recall, Oregon, 1908</td>
<td>50.1</td>
<td>26.6</td>
<td>23.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To extend the initiative, referendum, and recall, Oregon, 1910</td>
<td>30.8</td>
<td>36.9</td>
<td>32.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Direct primary law, Maine, 1911</td>
<td>46.7</td>
<td>15.4</td>
<td>37.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To extend the recall to all public officers, Arizona, 1912</td>
<td>68.6</td>
<td>15.6</td>
<td>15.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To provide for the recall of all elective officials, Arkansas, 1912</td>
<td>42.4</td>
<td>34.6</td>
<td>23.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To provide for recall of public officers, Colorado, 1912</td>
<td>20.4</td>
<td>15.0</td>
<td>64.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To provide that ballots at elections shall not contain party lists of candidates, Colorado, 1912</td>
<td>16.5</td>
<td>15.0</td>
<td>68.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To provide for recall by the people of judicial decisions holding laws unconstitutional, Colorado, 1912</td>
<td>21.1</td>
<td>15.5</td>
<td>63.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To create direct primaries, Montana, 1912</td>
<td>58.2</td>
<td>16.1</td>
<td>25.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>For direct nomination of U.S. senators, Montana, 1912</td>
<td>57.2</td>
<td>15.6</td>
<td>27.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>For direct vote on party preferences on candidates for president, Montana, 1912</td>
<td>58.0</td>
<td>15.2</td>
<td>26.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To introduce a general initiative for constitutional amendments and laws, Nevada, 1912</td>
<td>49.7</td>
<td>5.1</td>
<td>45.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To subject all public officers, state and local, to recall, Nevada, 1912</td>
<td>48.1</td>
<td>5.9</td>
<td>46.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Direct primary law proposed by initiative, but enacted by legislature, South Dakota, 1912</td>
<td>45.7</td>
<td>25.8</td>
<td>28.5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| Average | 45.8  | 18.2  | 35.9  |

Including votes on initiative and referendum, recall of public officials, nonpartisan ballots, primaries, and direct election of U.S. senators.

Tabulations based on data provided by Lowell (1913, Appendix B).
Table 3.2. Referendum and Initiative Votes on Prohibition, 1904–1912

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Proposal</th>
<th>Yes (%)</th>
<th>No (%)</th>
<th>Roll-off (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Local option liquor law, Oregon, 1904</td>
<td>43.6</td>
<td>40.5</td>
<td>15.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>For local option, Oregon, 1906</td>
<td>36.6</td>
<td>46.7</td>
<td>16.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To provide a state agency for sale of liquor, Oklahoma, 1908</td>
<td>41.3</td>
<td>47.6</td>
<td>11.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To give local governments exclusive power to grant licenses for sale of liquor, etc., Oregon, 1908</td>
<td>33.8</td>
<td>44.9</td>
<td>21.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>For licensing, restricting, and regulating manufacture and sale of intoxicating liquors, South Dakota, 1908</td>
<td>34.3</td>
<td>36.4</td>
<td>29.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prohibition of the sale of liquor, Missouri, 1910</td>
<td>30.9</td>
<td>63.3</td>
<td>5.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To introduce local option, Oklahoma, 1910</td>
<td>41.2</td>
<td>49.5</td>
<td>9.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To regulate the sale of intoxicating liquors, Oregon, 1910</td>
<td>35.5</td>
<td>52.9</td>
<td>11.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To prohibit manufacture and sale of intoxicating liquors, Oregon, 1910</td>
<td>36.2</td>
<td>50.9</td>
<td>12.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>On intoxicating liquors, South Dakota, 1910</td>
<td>40.1</td>
<td>52.3</td>
<td>7.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Repeal of prohibition of the sale of liquor, Maine, 1911</td>
<td>42.6</td>
<td>43.1</td>
<td>14.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prohibition law, Arkansas, 1912</td>
<td>40.1</td>
<td>49.3</td>
<td>10.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amendment for statewide prohibition, Colorado, 1912</td>
<td>28.9</td>
<td>44.4</td>
<td>26.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To enforce liquor laws by search and seizure, Colorado, 1912</td>
<td>24.6</td>
<td>30.1</td>
<td>45.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To give to cities and towns the exclusive right to regulate liquor licenses, Oregon, 1912</td>
<td>44.3</td>
<td>42.2</td>
<td>13.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average</td>
<td>36.9</td>
<td>46.3</td>
<td>16.8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Including votes on prohibition, local option, and liquor licensing and regulation. *Tabulations based on data provided by Lowell (1913, Appendix B).*
regulation. On most of these votes, more than 85% of those who went to the polls voted Yes or No; the average roll-off was less than half that in table 3.1. In Maine in 1911, repeal of prohibition failed narrowly, drawing less than 15% roll-off. In Colorado in 1912, more than twice as many voters saw fit to express their views about prohibition as about popular recall of public officers or nonpartisan ballots. Clearly, voters could be moved to vote on issues they viewed as important in their day-to-day lives; but for many, the political institutions and procedures of "direct democracy" did not rise to that level, even in an era of unusual political ferment. Citizens in the Progressive Era seem not to have been much different in this respect from the politically disengaged contemporary citizens we portrayed in chapter 2.

"THE PEOPLE THEMSELVES"?

A century after the wave of Progressive Era reforms, more than 20 U.S. states have had substantial experience with direct democracy in action. What light does that experience shed on the virtues and pitfalls of "pure democracy"?

One key question is whether the establishment of initiative and referendum procedures has, in fact, shifted power from political elites and special interests to ordinary citizens, as Progressive Era reformers had hoped. From the start, skeptics claimed that "what the initiative really does is to transfer that function [of framing laws] from official lawmakers to non-official lawmakers. But every such non-official lawmaker, being self-appointed and extra-constitutional, occupies an irresponsible position very similar to that of the party machine boss who holds no public office" (Hollingsworth 1912, 38).

Indeed, it did not take long for "non-official lawmakers" to begin to exploit opportunities for political entrepreneurship under direct democracy. According to the "father and chief apostle" of Oregon's direct democracy movement at the turn of the 20th century, W. S. U'Ren, "just as soon as we got the initiative and referendum through we organized the 'People's Power League' to back up measures we wanted the people to vote on." Asked whether "the people of Oregon always vote the way you want them to," U'Ren replied, "They always have thus far" (Hollingsworth 1912, 39–40).

Concerns about behind-the-scenes influence in the initiative process have recurred throughout the century-long history of direct democracy in the

14 A tabulation by the Initiative & Referendum Institute listed 27 states with initiative or referendum processes (including 21 with both). All but a handful of these processes were established in the first two decades of the 20th century.
American states. For example, V. O. Key, Jr. and Winston Crouch (1939, cited by de Grazia 1951, 157) observed of California in the 1930s that “the initiators of propositions have usually been pressure organizations representing interests—commercial, industrial, financial, religious, political—which have been unable to persuade the legislature to follow a particular line of action.” In a 2000 book titled Democracy Derailed, political journalist David Broder similarly argued that “wealthy individuals and special interests . . . have learned all too well how to subvert the process to their own purposes” (Broder 2000, 243). “Though derived from a reform favored by Populists and Progressives as a cure for special-interest influence,” Broder wrote (2000, 1, 167), “this method of lawmaking has become the favored tool of millionaires and interest groups that use their wealth to achieve their own policy goals—a lucrative business for a new set of political entrepreneurs. . . . What was striking to me as I traveled the initiative states was the discovery that so many of the measures had been designed by a handful of people and were being sold with their dollars. Whether their motivations were financial or ideological, they had mounted this Populist warhorse and were riding it hell-for-leather to achieve their own purposes.”

Another 15 years later, Bruce Cain—a political scientist with extensive practical experience in California politics—argued that attempting “to check or bypass representative government” via direct democracy simply empowers “a new class of election entrepreneurs” by delegating to them the tasks of “formulating policy, organizing the effort to get something on the ballot, and providing voters with the information and cues they need to make a decision.” Whereas “average citizens will sporadically give input to government when something really matters to them,” Cain (2015, 8–9) noted, “organized interests are a constant presence.”

Pessimistic assessments of the relative influence of “average citizens” and “organized interests” are common among observers of the initiative process. However, a more systematic analysis by John Matsusaka of the policy consequences of employing the initiative process has challenged the notion “that special interests use the initiative to thwart the will of the voters” (Matsusaka 2004, 53). Comparing fiscal policies in states with and without the initiative process over a period of three decades, Matsusaka identified three significant differences:

- First, “the initiative reduces total government spending” by about 4%.
Pitfalls of Popular Control

• Second, “the initiative shifts spending from state to local governments.”

• And third, “the initiative shifts the sources of revenue from taxes to user fees and charges for services,” allowing “fewer possibilities for redistribution of wealth” (Matsusaka 2004, 52).

Drawing on survey data from a variety of sources, Matsusaka argued that each of these policy shifts was broadly consistent with the preferences of ordinary Americans and, plausibly, with the preferences of ordinary citizens in the affected states.

Now in one sense, Matsusaka’s findings are utterly unsurprising. Any policy adopted by referendum or initiative must, by definition, be preferred by a majority of voters—and probably, barring substantial biases in turnout, by a majority of citizens—to the status quo. However, as we noted in chapter 2, the range of policies that can be sold to a majority of the voters may be very broad indeed, leaving plenty of room for “wealthy individuals and special interests” to further “their own purposes,” as Broder put it, through agenda-setting and framing. The tax reductions that Matsusaka finds in initiative states are particularly likely to disproportionally benefit the prosperous.

This sort of selective appeal to popular opinion is especially likely in narrower, complex, less salient policy domains where public preferences are unclear or nonexistent. However, the fundamental indeterminacy of public preferences is sometimes evident even on highly salient issues. An unusually clear example arose when voters in a Houston referendum declined to abolish the city’s affirmative action program. According to a New York Times report (Verhovek 1997),

The fundamental truth that seems to have emerged from the debate here is that the future of affirmative action may depend more than anything else on the language in which it is framed. . . . Affirmative-action

15 In November 2012, for example, Californians voted on initiatives concerning tax treatment of multistate businesses, labeling of genetically engineered foods, human trafficking penalties, whether auto insurance pricing should vary with drivers’ histories of insurance coverage, and State Senate redistricting, among other issues. In Oregon, voters decided whether to eliminate real estate transfer taxes, authorize a casino in Multnomah County, ban commercial salmon fishing with gillnets on the Columbia River, and change the terminology referring to the three branches of state government in the state constitution.

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proponents around the nation hailed not just the result of Houston’s vote, but the phrasing of the referendum as a straight up-or-down call on affirmative action, and they said that is the way the question should be put to voters elsewhere. Its opponents, meanwhile, who are already in court challenging the City Council’s broad rewording as illegal, denounced it as a heavy-handed way of obscuring the principles that were really at stake.

Who is to decide what principles are “really at stake” in a policy choice like the one facing voters in Houston? If we accept, at least for the sake of argument, that a referendum employing the wording originally proposed by opponents of affirmative action would have passed, as opinion polls indicated and most observers seem to have believed, would that result have been more or less legitimate than the actual, opposite result? The doctrine of “direct democracy” provides no sensible way to answer such questions.

In any case, even policies that are unambiguously preferred by a majority of citizens to the status quo may or may not be good policies in the broader sense of comporting with citizens’ interests. Matsusaka (2004, 71) was careful to emphasize that his evidence “does not tell us whether the initiative process is a good or bad form of government. The evidence simply shows that the initiative promotes the will of the majority.” However, a broader literature review coauthored by Matsusaka and Arthur Lupia was much less circumspect in this regard, arguing that “every such study to date [assessing the impact of direct democracy on policy] points to higher-quality (or no worse) decisions when the institutions of direct democracy are available” (Lupia and Matsusaka 2004, 475).

What constitutes a “higher-quality” decision? As Lupia and Matsusaka (2004, 474) acknowledged, “it is difficult to come up with an objective definition of a good or bad policy.” Thus, the evidence they offer ranges from anodyne (“in this respect, the initiative process does not lead to prima facie irrational public policies”) to heroically indirect (Swiss survey researchers “find happier people in cantons with more direct democracy, after controlling for income and other demographics”).

Any balanced assessment of the impact of direct democracy would have to weigh evidence of this sort against more concrete evidence from a variety of studies of specific instances of government by initiative in which “the will of the majority” has produced policies that are seemingly at odds with citizens’ interests. For example, one of the more popular uses of initiatives in the modern era has been to impose term limits on elected officials. In the early 1990s,
term limit measures were approved by voters in 20 of the 24 states allowing initiatives.\textsuperscript{16} Although some of these measures were subsequently struck down by courts, voters have shown considerable persistence in supporting term limits; for example, Nebraska voters approved successive term limit initiatives in 1992, 1994, 1996, and 2000.\textsuperscript{17}

Supporters of term limit initiatives have displayed little regard for the cautions of political scientists regarding the likely unintended consequences of these measures. For example, in the run-up to the vote on California's term limit initiative, political scientist Nelson Polsby (1990) argued that "term limitations just shift power from elected officials to the relatively inaccessible officials, bureaucrats and influence peddlers who surround them." Polsby's assessment is broadly consistent with subsequent evidence from surveys of state legislators in states with and without term limits, which found that legislative leaders lost significant influence in the term-limited states, while governors, legislative staffs, and bureaucrats gained influence (Carey, Niemi, and Powell 1998).

Thad Kousser's (2005) detailed examination of the impact of term limits documented a variety of negative implications for legislative performance—as Kousser's title summarized it, a "dismantling of state legislative professionalism." For example, legislative committees received less deference in states with term limits, presumably because "shortened time horizons reduce the incentives of members to specialize in a policy area" (Kousser 2005, 206). In addition, "term-limited legislatures play a diminished role in crafting the state's budget," a pattern Kousser (2005, 207) attributed to "less politically canny" legislators "giving up more ground to the executive branch" in budget negotiations. Finally, term-limited legislatures "produce less innovative policies," as gauged by their lesser utilization of flexibility in federal program guidelines and by their lower receipt of innovation awards from the Council of State Governments (Kousser 2005, 207). Meanwhile, contrary to the expectations of proponents, "term limit initiatives have not filled legislatures with citizen members" (Kousser 2005, 205); instead, experienced professional politicians

\textsuperscript{16} Our tabulation is based on the list of statewide initiatives on the website of the Initiative & Referendum Institute, www.iandrinstitute.org.

\textsuperscript{17} In 1995 the U.S. Supreme Court invalidated state-mandated term limits for federal office holders. State courts have overturned a variety of successful term limit initiatives on narrower grounds. Courts have also overturned "informed voter laws" designed to pressure members of Congress to institute federal term limits (for example, by printing the phrase "disregarded voters' instructions on term limits" on the ballot if they failed to support a constitutional amendment imposing term limits).
have mostly been replaced by less experienced professional politicians moving up the career ladder from local government positions.

More recently, proponents of electoral reform have turned from term limits back to the nominating process. A century ago, the establishment of direct primaries marked the triumph of “the doctrine that the will of the rank and file of party membership should prevail,” as Key (1964, 395) put it. But why, recent reformers ask, if popular sovereignty is our paramount value, should the choice of nominees be left to “the rank and file of party membership” rather than to the public as a whole?

In some states, “open primaries” have long allowed nonmembers to participate in the choice of party nominees. In 1996, California voters adopted a constitutional amendment instituting a “blanket primary” in which primary voters could choose on a race-by-race basis which party’s primary to participate in. Although blanket primaries were subsequently declared unconstitutional by the U.S. Supreme Court, the short-lived experiment provided an opportunity to gauge the impact of more “open” primary rules. The result, according to a study by Will Bullock and Joshua Clinton (2011, 916), was that elected officials “move[d] away from the ideological extremists in their own party after the adoption of the blanket primary,” but only in “the most moderate districts—of which there are increasingly fewer.” Thus, “simply allowing more registered voters to participate in primaries is unlikely to be the panacea for elite polarization in legislatures that many believe.” A broader study by Eric McGhee and his coauthors likewise suggested that “the openness of a primary election has little, if any, effect on the extremity of the politicians it produces” (McGhee et al. 2014, 337).

Not to be deterred, California voters in 2010 adopted another formula for instituting a more “open” primary process, the so-called top two primary system. The top two system takes the logic of popular sovereignty one step further by replacing separate party primaries with a single ballot listing all the candidates for a given office regardless of their party affiliations; primary voters vote for any one, and the top two vote-getters, regardless of party affiliation, advance to the general election. According to one prominent proponent, replacing party primary elections with the top two system would be “a direct, simple fix” for the “hyper-partisanship and legislative dysfunction now gripping American politics.”

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In its first test, in 2012, the California top two primary seemed no more effectual than previous reforms; the Los Angeles Times headlined, “Few Centrists Advance in California’s New Primary System.”19 A survey experiment comparing vote choices under the old and new ballot rules (Ahler, Citrin, and Lenz 2013, 33) helped to explain why: “Voters need fine-grained knowledge of candidates’ positions to vote as advocates of electoral reform predict they will upon the adoption of open primaries. Voters in the 2012 California primaries struggled to distinguish between candidates from the same party and were especially unfamiliar with challengers’ positions. As a result, although voters tended to be moderate and a sizeable portion were willing to break party ranks, the average voter was ill-equipped to do so in a way that led them to select more centrist candidates in contests for House and state Senate.”

Of course, to say that the top two primary has (so far) been ineffective in achieving the stated aim of its proponents is not to prove that it is a bad policy. More experience and broader analysis will be necessary to weigh its advantages and disadvantages. However, it does seem clear that the simplistic hopes of its backers were torpedoed by voters’ lack of “fine-grained knowledge”—a lack that has loomed large in many criticisms of direct democracy more generally. As Cain (2015, 6) noted, “populist” reform is likely to fail “when it overestimates citizen capacity and commitment and when it ignores the critical role that intermediaries inevitably play in any large democracy.”

CITIZEN COMPETENCE AND THE PRICE OF POPULAR CONTROL

In The Age of Reform, Richard Hofstadter (1955, 260–261) explicated the Progressives’ enthusiasm for the folk theory of democracy by describing the mythical “Man of Good Will” at “the core of their conception of politics”: “It was assumed that somehow he would really be capable of informing himself in ample detail about the many issues that he would have to pass on, and that he could master their intricacies sufficiently to pass intelligent judgment. Without such assumptions the entire movement for such reforms as the initiative, the referendum and recall is unintelligible.” As we saw in chapter 2, contemporary political scientists have found little evidence of ordinary citizens mastering the intricacies of political issues. Nonetheless, some political scientists, at least, have expressed considerable confidence in the ability

of ordinary citizens to exercise effective popular sovereignty via initiatives and referendums through the same sorts of heuristic processes we considered there. For example, Lupia and Matsusaka’s (2004, 467) literature review highlighted “a frequent finding in new studies of direct democracy . . . that voters are competent to make the kinds of policy decisions with which direct democracy confronts them.” Sometimes, of course, the issues underlying an initiative are simple or consensual, and the voters get it right. But can they do so when genuine policy complexities are involved?

The primary empirical evidence cited in support of the optimistic view came from Lupia’s (1994) own exit poll of 339 Los Angeles voters on a series of five 1988 auto insurance initiatives. Lupia measured both detailed knowledge of the provisions of the various initiatives and knowledge of the insurance industry’s position on each initiative. He found that “respondents who possessed relatively low levels of factual (or encyclopedic) knowledge about the initiatives used their knowledge of insurance industry preferences to emulate the behavior of those respondents who had relatively high levels of factual knowledge” (Lupia 1994, 72). According to Lupia and Matsusaka (2004, 468), this finding “demonstrated that voters can use simple pieces of information as substitutes for the detailed information that political surveys show them to lack.”

Alas, as James Kuklinski and Paul Quirk (2000, 158) pointed out, “being relatively well informed falls far short of being well informed.” Lupia’s relatively well-informed voters overwhelmingly supported a proposal mandating a 20% rollback of auto insurance rates—a superficially appealing but shortsighted (and, as it turned out, unworkable) attempt to repeal the law of supply and demand. Thus, “the evidence from the California referendum

20 Lupia’s knowledge measure was based on 20 questions with binary responses. The median knowledge score was 12, only slightly better than chance; almost 30% of the respondents scored below 10, worse than they should have by guessing randomly. Moreover, the main effects of knowledge on vote choices on most of the propositions were modest in magnitude (and quite imprecisely estimated), suggesting that the information captured by the knowledge scale was probably of rather limited relevance even to those who possessed it.

21 According to law professor Stephen Sugarman (1990, 683), “in the two years since its adoption Proposition 103 has primarily provided employment for lawyers, actuaries and expert witnesses in the field of insurance. Many of its key provisions have yet to be implemented, and, looking down the road, there is good reason to doubt that any of its substantive goals will be achieved absent additional changes in the law.” A decade later, a consumer watchdog group noted that “most insurance rates in California remained frozen” for five years “pending conclusion of the legal challenges and final compliance by insurance companies with the rollback requirement.” In 1995, a new insurance commissioner “lifted the rate freeze and has since stirred controversy by refusing to implement or enforce many of 103’s statutory requirements, including the ‘prior approval’ process, despite excessive premium levels in the state.”
suggests that even relatively well informed citizens responded heavily to extraneous factors—dislike of insurance companies and wishful thinking about their rates, for example—rather than making an informed assessment of the merits of the five proposals on the ballot (Kuklinski and Quirk 2000, 158).

The only other empirical evidence cited in support of the claim "that voters are competent to make the kinds of policy decisions with which direct democracy confronts them" (Lupia and Matsusaka 2004, 467) came from Shaun Bowler and Todd Donovan’s book, Demanding Choices: Opinion, Voting, and Direct Democracy. Lupia and Matsusaka (2004, 469) quoted Bowler and Donovan’s (1998, 168) conclusion that voters “appear able to figure out what they are for and against in ways that make sense in terms of their underlying values and interests. . . . Just as legislators do, these voters make choices purposefully, using available information.”

In most domains, making choices on that basis would be considered a very low standard of competence. One would not want to engage a surgeon or fly with a pilot who proposed to “make choices purposefully, using available information.” Indeed, Donovan and Bowler’s evidence is by no means uniformly optimistic in its implications for the quality of policies adopted via direct democracy. For example, Broder (2000, 219) cited Donovan and Bowler in support of the view that “the tax limitation measures (like Prop. 13) that pass so readily when presented to the voters often have the perverse effect of reducing expenditures on popular public services—like parks and libraries—below what the public wants.”

Oddly, Lupia and Matsusaka’s survey of the effects of direct democracy made no mention of California’s Proposition 13, which set off a national “tax revolt” by sharply limiting and redistributing the state’s property tax burden. In ignoring the single most consequential policy adopted by initiative in the modern era, Lupia and Matsusaka also overlooked the single most detailed empirical analysis of voters’ decision-making under direct democracy, David Sears and Jack Citrin’s book-length study of Proposition 13 and related tax and spending issues. Sears and Citrin (1985, 217) found little evidence that voters reasoned very carefully from their basic preferences about taxation and spending and the effects they forecast of these tax-reform measures, to a vote decision. Nor did the rationalizations

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for self-interest, however logically “appropriate,” always direct people to the equally appropriate vote decision. For example, it was not primarily the public employees’ self-protectiveness toward their own wages that led them to oppose the tax revolt, nor did parents’ preferences about school spending affect their votes on Proposition 13 any more strongly than non-parents’ preferences affected theirs. Throughout our data the voters seem to respond to symbols in an affectively consistent but not necessarily logical or reasoned way.

Sears and Citrin (1985, 217) grappled with the apparent irrationality of voters wanting “something for nothing,” as the subtitle of their book put it:

Throughout most of the tax revolt period the electorate wanted “smaller government” but also the same or increased spending on specific services. . . . But this combination quite clearly involves a logical tension, and there were no other beliefs that we could add into that particular equation that would render that combination more sensible. We thought that perhaps voters believed services could be maintained, and government shrunk, as well, if only waste were eliminated. Or perhaps the inconsistency held primarily among unsophisticated voters, who might not realize the two goals were incompatible; or that voters equated “big government” with some especially unpopular services (such as welfare), and wanted to cut those but maintain others thought to be more essential (such as police and fire protection). Or perhaps voters were indulging a wish-fulfilling mood when responding to surveys, and only confront the hard tradeoffs between taxes and services when faced with them explicitly at the ballot box. But none of these escape routes succeeded in explaining away this basic anomaly: it prevailed even among people believing in small amounts of waste, the most sophisticated voters, and both liberals and conservatives.

When voters insist on getting “something for nothing,” the cost is likely to be higher than they realize. One striking example of perverse consequences comes from an unusually careful empirical study of the impact of direct democracy on the actual quality of government services, Jeff Tessin’s (2009) analysis of fire protection services in Illinois.²² In the early 1990s, some

²² The findings presented in Tessin’s 2009 Princeton University dissertation have not been published. Thus, with his permission, we summarize them in some detail here.
counties in Illinois began requiring local governments to obtain voter approval for increases in property tax levies exceeding the rate of inflation. The referendum requirement was instituted in five suburban counties bordering Chicago in 1991, in Cook County (including Chicago) in 1994, and (on the basis of county-wide referendums initiated by county boards) in 34 downstate counties over the subsequent 13 years. Tessin exploited both geographical and temporal variation in this institutional requirement to examine the impact of tax referendums on the quality of fire protection services provided by Illinois fire districts—special districts akin to school districts that operate largely independent of county governments.

As Tessin (2009, 87–88) noted, there is relatively little political disagreement regarding the desirability of high-quality fire protection, and a good deal of consensus among experts about “how to measure the quality of fire services in practice.” Moreover, local idiosyncrasies in proposing and adopting referendum requirements meant that affected and unaffected downstate fire districts were similar in many key respects. (Tessin excluded Chicago districts from his analysis due to lack of a comparable area with different laws.) Thus, this seemingly narrow case allows for an unusually compelling empirical assessment of the impact of popular control on the quality of an important public service.

As might be expected based on Matsusaka’s (2004) findings, Tessin found that fire districts affected by the referendum requirement experienced slower growth in tax revenues. With a variety of potentially important demographic and political characteristics statistically controlled, Tessin found that districts with referendum requirements experienced average annual revenue growth of 3.9%, as compared with 6.2% in districts without referendum requirements. As a result, the typical household’s property tax bill increased by 43 cents less per year in districts with referendum requirements ($1.07 versus $1.50).

What would those additional 43 cents annually have bought? According to a retired fire chief interviewed by Tessin, the referendum requirement significantly constrained the resources of affected fire districts, causing them to reduce training and defer maintenance and replacement of capital equipment. The result was a measurable degradation in the quality of fire protection services. Using data recorded in the National Fire Incident Reporting System, Tessin showed that the average response time across all Illinois fire districts during the period covered by his analysis was 11.5 minutes—far above the widely accepted 4- to 5-minute adequate response standard. But in fire districts with referendum requirements, average response times were almost one minute (about 7%) higher than in comparable districts without referendum requirements. He noted (2009, 94–95) that this difference is “substantively
large based on widely-accepted fire safety standards” and “represents a serious decline in public safety.” Moreover, the impact of the referendum requirement on average response times appeared to increase the longer the requirement was in force, from about 45 seconds in the first four years following implementation of the referendum requirement to 80 seconds thereafter, presumably reflecting the cumulative effect on training and equipment maintenance and replacement of smaller tax increases over several years.

Tessin (2009, 96–97) considered the possibility that “voters rationally traded lower taxes for higher response times.” However, he noted that “most citizens want to maintain or improve fire services, even when survey questions draw attention to the trade-off between services and spending,” and that, in any case, “the tax savings that voters enjoyed may have been smaller than what they would have saved on their homeowners insurance policies with better fire protection.” Thus, he concluded that “given more power over policy inputs, voters produced worse outcomes than those produced by the counterfactual institutions, in which public officials had more independence from public opinion.”

The risks of inadequate fire protection were seen in graphic form during the 1991 Oakland Hills Firestorm in California. This terrifying fire “destroyed more than 3000 homes, killed 25 people and seriously injured more than 150 others during a 24 hour period” (Simon and Dooling 2013, 1415). According to the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), long-standing drought conditions and high winds made the firefighting difficult, but the 1978 passage of the Proposition 13 tax-cutting initiative exacerbated the difficulties. The proposition eliminated a number of firefighting companies and reduced the staffing of those that remained. Funds for removal of dead trees were also cut drastically. When the fire began, the result was an uncontrollable conflagration for many hours. Although detailed voting data for the fire-stricken area itself seem to be unavailable, the sad irony is that the victims had probably voted heavily for Proposition 13: the Piedmont area of Oakland, at the edge of the fire, had voted 73% in favor (Simon and Dooling 2013, 1420). Direct democracy had overruled the judgment of fire professionals, with horrific results.

Of course, most results of direct democracy are less dire. Tessin found cases in which provisions increasing direct public control of policy produced no discernible decline in the quality of government services. For example, laws requiring voter approval of bonds to pay for sewers and prisons had no apparent ill effects on the frequency of sewer overflows or prison overcrowding. Yet even this seemingly good news for the folk theory turned out to be
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illusory. The voters continued their self-defeating votes in these elections. But they were saved by public officials who quietly created work-arounds to keep the voters from harming themselves, using “a variety of tools, such as user fees and unguaranteed bonds, to adopt their preferred policies over the median voter’s objection” (Tessin 2009, 196). However, “the elite discretion needed to maintain performance is not always cost-free. . . . Because unguaranteed bonds typically have higher transaction costs, due to higher interest rates and the need for more services from banks and bond lawyers, voters pay a price for a largely symbolic form of popular control. The quality of prisons and sewers are no different under direct and representative democracy, but public officials must spend significant time, effort, and tax dollars to compensate for voter-imposed spending cuts” (Tessin 2009, 198).

Whereas Tessin’s analysis focused on the impact of more direct public control on government spending and performance, Michael Sances’s (2015) analysis of property tax assessments in New York towns focused on the impact of electoral accountability on the equity and efficiency of governments’ tax policies. Gradually over a 25-year period, hundreds of New York towns switched from electing to appointing their property assessors.23 Comparing assessments in the same towns before and after the switch (allowing for persistent differences across towns and statewide fluctuations from year to year), Sances found that direct election of assessors reduced the probability of conducting an assessment in any given year by 9 percentage points, increasing the average time between reassessments from about five years to nine years. The main effect of less frequent assessments was to benefit affluent homeowners at the expense of others; Sances estimated that directly electing assessors increased the average advantage in effective tax rates for the most expensive homes (relative to the least expensive homes) by 26 percentage points. In this instance, greater “electoral accountability” mostly seems to have involved catering to the interests of an affluent (and probably more attentive) minority of the electorate.

The lesson we draw from these studies is not that some direct popular control of policy-making is always undesirable. Rather, it is often costly, sometimes frighteningly costly—and a political culture that uncritically equates “good government” with “more democracy” will be ill equipped to sensibly weigh the benefits of greater popular control against the costs.

23 These institutional changes, which cut against the broader trend toward more popular oversight or even direct involvement in the making of public policy, were adopted under pressure from the state government.
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CONCLUSION

As a blueprint for government, the folk theory is hopelessly flawed. Primaries and referendums with no admixture of party or legislative influence exemplify the failure. Overlooking "the elemental necessity for organized leadership in a democratic politics" (Key 1964, 393) has produced a mishmash of heightened responsiveness to popular impulses, behind-the-scenes elite influence, and self-defeating choices stemming from the limited political expertise and attention of ordinary citizens. Something different is needed to break the cycle of blind plebiscitary reforms and ensuing political dysfunction.

That is not to suggest that every aspect of American politics has been sufficiently democratized. For example, we suspect that American government would function better if the poor were better organized and more economically secure, if turnout in elections were higher and more equal, and if campaigns were financed with public funds rather than with contributions from billionaires, ideologues, and special interest groups. In Cain's (2015) terms, these are instances in which "populist" and "pluralist" reform impulses point in the same direction. But contemporary thinking about democracy is too often simplistic in its understanding of the role of the public in the democratic process. In consequence, it provides little help in creating political institutions that would make ordinary people's interests more effective in government decision-making.

As we have emphasized, the Founders believed that popular preferences needed to be tempered by political experience and judgment. That is, they believed in both political leadership and popular influence—neither would be right all the time, but balance would help correct the flaws of each. Thus they opposed both kingship and majoritarianism.

Nowadays, we often cloak our political practices in the Founders' authority while downplaying or even rejecting the importance of leadership in their political thinking. In this regard, Charles Beard did us a great favor. By reminding us of the wealth and conservatism of the Founders, Beard's classic Economic Interpretation of the Constitution (1913) made the tensions between contemporary thinking about popular rule and the logic of the revered Constitution psychologically manageable. The republican principles of the Founders are now conveniently dismissed as the elitist and aristocratic trappings of a bygone era. Hence, coping with the deep differences between their sophisticated ideas and our simplicities, which would not be easy, becomes happily unnecessary.

This conceptual laziness has consequences. Faced with the inevitable occasional failures of our political institutions, we cast about for curative
measures. But we have only one cure we trust. Throughout American history, calls for "political reform" have nearly always entailed calls for greater "democratization." But the medicine has rarely been applied thoughtfully. It is as if we prescribed powerful antibiotics for every illness. Sometimes they have cured, sometimes they have been a harmless waste, and sometimes they have caused organ damage, seizures, or psychosis.

In their influential early study of primary elections, Charles Merriam and Louise Overacker alluded to criticisms of the then-still-new mode of popular participation in the nominating process. "Most of the objections raised against primaries," they wrote in the conclusion of their book (1928, 355), "apply to elections as well as to universal suffrage, and to the whole plan of democracy. Disbelievers in popular government are constantly asserting that many are incompetent, that many are indifferent, that many are lax, lazy, and drifting, that nothing can come from this mediocre mass of yokels and boobs, that the mass should abdicate in favor of the few and kiss the rod that condescends to rule them, thanking God that they are allowed to live and be cared for by their betters—these are common charges among those to whom modern democracy is unwelcome."

Merriam and Overacker's shrill dismissal of the critics of primary elections betrays a moral certitude regarding the nature and value of "modern democracy" that is perhaps even more common now than it was when they wrote, in the immediate wake of the Progressive Era.24 Now, as then, standing up for "popular government" in opposition to "the few" conveys an immediate and more or less automatic rhetorical advantage. Even writers whose professional expertise will not let them pretend that people are attentive or well informed find it helpful to wrap themselves in the flag in their uplifting conclusions. We have argued in this chapter for a quite different understanding of American democratic history, one in which simplistic faith in "popular government" has often outpaced its usefulness as a practical mechanism for policy-making.

In America, as elsewhere, the movement toward greater power for ordinary citizens began as an overdue corrective against centuries of domination by military, economic, religious, and cultural elites. For centuries, "more democracy" was a good idea as well as an appealing ideal. But nothing that simple is a defensible all-purpose theory of government. In time, democratization

24 Their dismissal of concerns about citizen competence also seems at odds with their own qualms about voters, expressed earlier in the same book (Merriam and Overacker 1928, 288): "Simple comments often seem astonishing to the electors, who appear not to know in what world they are living."
In the wake of Warren Miller and Donald Stokes's (1963) landmark study of "Constituency Influence in Congress," political scientists, too, have largely taken to studying political representation by measuring the fidelity with which elected representatives "just follow" the preferences of their constituents, whether on broad issue dimensions of the sort analyzed by Miller and Stokes or specific roll call votes or overall liberal-conservative ideology (e.g., Miller 1964; Converse and Pierce 1986; Bartels 1991; Esaiasson and Holmberg 1996; Clinton 2006; Bafumi and Herron 2010). Even when subsequent scholars have not explicitly endorsed the instructed delegate model of representation, they have often implicitly accepted it as the appropriate benchmark for empirical analysis (as noted by Achen 1978, who ended by accepting it himself). The influence of the trustee model has declined substantially by comparison, due in no small part to the fact that "judgment" and "best interests" are much harder to measure than the constituency preferences reflected in opinion polls.

Alas, as we saw in chapter 2, empirical studies of representation grounded in the instructed delegate model have produced very mixed results. The positions of elected officials are usually no more than mildly correlated with those of their constituents. Apparent disparities are persistent and sometimes substantial, notwithstanding the pressures toward congruence arising from electoral competition. Whether those disparities are attributable to—or plausibly justifiable in terms of—a trustee model of representation is, for now, simply unknown.

Faced with that fact, and with an eye toward the manifest failures of the folk theory, many political scientists have devoted increasing attention to a different conception of the meaning of elections, closer in spirit to the trustee model. In this alternative conception, the point of elections is not to mimic the policy outcomes of "direct democracy" by constraining elected officials to pursue the policy preferences of their constituents. Ordinary citizens have too little free time for political study and thought to make that theory work well. Rather, elections are seen as a mechanism by which voters can hold elected officials accountable, after the fact, for the success or failure of whatever policies they choose to pursue.

This alternative view, which we set out in chapter 4, has seemed to many scholars to offer a more tenable and appealing model of democracy than the folk theory. In chapters 5, 6, and 7, we assess how well this alternative model of democracy works in practice.
CHAPTER ELEVEN

Groups and Power: Toward a Realist Theory of Democracy

One consequence of our reliance on old definitions is that the modern American does not look at democracy before he defines it; he defines it first and then is confused by what he sees... We become cynical about democracy because the public does not act the way the simplistic definition of democracy says that it should act, or we try to whip the public into doing things it does not want to do, is unable to do, and has too much sense to do. The crisis here is not a crisis in democracy but a crisis in theory.

—E. E. Schattschneider, The Semisovereign People (1960, 127, 131)

Proponents of democracy have long thought that human dignity required self-government. People should choose their leaders at the polls and hold them accountable. Voters should be represented, not just governed. Reflecting Enlightenment optimism about human nature, along with skepticism about tradition and hierarchy, the argument for democracy supposed that good citizens would engage in thoughtful monitoring of their government. The abuses of kings, aristocrats, commissars, and dictators would be eliminated. Democratic norms would be enforced by the shared values of an enlightened populace. Mistakes would occur, of course, but they would be the people's own mistakes, and thus susceptible to quick recognition and reversal. Most of the time, democratic government would be very good government indeed.

As we have seen, this folk theory of democracy came to dominate American thinking, both popular and scholarly. Sovereignty rests with the people. A government derives its just powers not merely from the consent of the governed, but from their political judgments. That foundational logic now constitutes the accepted popular wisdom in virtually every established democracy,
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even in those whose original logic was quite different, such as parliamentary systems.

Widespread consensus for more than a century about the best form of government and its justification has impeded thought. "Why is democracy the best form of government?" has not struck most democratic citizens as a challenging question. And when that question has been asked, bromides and platitudes have generally sufficed as answers. Proponents of democracy have seldom found hard-nosed critics scrutinizing their logic and evidence, line by line.

Despite the cultural centrality of the folk theory of democracy, a few thoughtful observers in every era have recognized the limitations of conventional democratic thought and of the 19th-century liberal conceptual framework on which it is based, as we saw in chapter 1. Thus, a critical tradition is by no means lacking. Indeed, our observation in this book that Fourth of July rhetoric is a poor guide to understanding public opinion and elections in contemporary democracies breaks little genuinely new ground. For more than a century after the rise of mass democracy, skeptical commentators pointed out gaps between romanticized democratic theory and the actually workings of democracy, a tradition that continues to the present day (Milne and Mackenzie 1958, chap. 13; Riker 1982; Mueller 1999; Przeworski 2010). Every few years, another book, perhaps employing new data and the fashionable scientific methodology of the season, announces similar findings. In most cases, the authors examine the evidence, find the foundations of popular democratic theories inadequate, approach the edge of the critical abyss, and then skittishly back off, finding one or another reason why all must be—or soon will be—well after all. Defenses of the conventional faith, conceding a few difficulties but affirming the fundamental verities, generally predominate in both popular and scholarly conversation.

Those defenses, never very plausible to begin with, are by now in tatters. Few scholars of political behavior take them seriously as an empirical account of democracy. However, many thinkers implicitly or explicitly continue to embrace the folk theory as a normative benchmark, and few draw the seemingly logical conclusion that a new and distinctively different theory is needed.

Unfortunately, we are not prepared to supply, in this concluding chapter, a well-worked-out, new theory of democracy. However, we do summarize our evidence regarding the failures of existing theories of democracy, clear some of the intellectual ground on which a more realistic theory might be built, and highlight some of the key concepts and concerns that are likely to loom
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large in it. For example, we show that our framework best fits the evidence from the greatest electoral disaster of the 20th century, the victory of Adolf Hitler in the final free elections of Weimar Germany. And, for readers who may be more interested in democracy than in democratic theory, we also consider some of the practical implications of our analysis for efforts to construct a truly "more democratic" political system. But first we review the argument and evidence presented in this book and where they have brought us out.

DEMOCRATIC CITIZENS AND
THE POPULIST IDEAL OF DEMOCRACY

The assumptions underlying the folk theory of democracy are very stringent. Can ordinary people, busy with their lives and with no firsthand experience of policy-making or public administration, do what the theory expects them to do? Can they formulate policy preferences, assess where candidates stand on the issues, set aside cognitive biases and group prejudices, and then choose a candidate who embodies an uplifting version of their own policy views? Can human nature meet those demands? Aristotle famously said that "a human being is by nature a political animal." But what kind of animal is that? The promise and the limits of democracy turn on the answer to that question.

As we showed in chapter 2, the answer is that real people are not much like the citizens imagined by the folk theory. Numerous studies have demonstrated that most residents of democratic countries have little interest in politics and do not follow news of public affairs beyond browsing the headlines. They do not know the details of even salient policy debates, they do not have a firm understanding of what the political parties stand for, and they often vote for parties whose long-standing issue positions are at odds with their own. Mostly, they identify with ethnic, racial, occupational, religious, or other sorts of groups, and often—whether through group ties or hereditary loyalties—with a political party. Even the more attentive citizens mostly adopt the policy positions of the parties as their own: they are mirrors of the parties, not masters. For most citizens most of the time, party and group loyalties are the primary drivers of vote choices.

Thus, the folk theory of democracy fails. For the same reasons, so do scholarly renditions of the folk theory, including mathematical versions like the spatial theory of voting, as we have seen. The folk theory is like the ether theory of electromagnetic and gravitational forces: it is based on 19th-century intellectual foundations, and the empirical evidence has passed it by. Moreover, the internal contradictions in that conceptual framework, illuminated
by Arrow’s theorem, cut off all obvious escape routes from the conclusion that the folk theory is fundamentally unworkable.

Chapter 2 also discussed the notion that voters can use “cues” to get the right political answers without following the news or understanding government policies. Some scholars have placed great stock in that idea (Popkin 1991; Lupia 1994; Lupia and McCubbins 1998). Unfortunately, as we saw in chapter 2, the idea works much less well in practice than in theory. Many voters pay no attention to the relevant cues; others find them hard to interpret—often because the cues are less informative than their proponents suppose. In any case, taking cues is no protection from thinking and voting wrong, and people do a great deal of that (Bartels 1996; Lau and Redlawsk 1997; Althaus 1998). The so-called miracle of aggregation—summing the choices of many citizens and hoping that their errors are offsetting—tends to dilute the resulting “errors,” but certainly does not eliminate them, as we also saw in chapter 2. Thus, cues won’t save populist theories of democracy.

Nor will party government, at least in its usual guise. As we discussed in chapter 9, many democratic citizens have durable partisan loyalties. Often those loyalties become part of the voter’s social identity (“party identification”). If partisan loyalties reflected voters’ considered ideological judgments, then the powerful impact of partisanship in elections would reflect thoughtful democratic citizenship, and voters would be electing representatives who reliably shared their political commitments. For historical reasons, this version of electoral theory has been most influential in Europe, but it is also reflected in American discussions of “the doctrine of responsible party government” (Scharttsneider 1942; Committee on Political Parties 1950; Ranney 1962), and in some empirical studies of voting inspired by the “spatial model” of Anthony Downs (1957), which we examined in chapter 2.

The main problem with this defense of democracy is that partisanship often has little real ideological content. As we have seen, while most voters do have at least a few more or less strongly held issue preferences, those preferences rarely cohere into consistent ideological positions. Nor need they neatly match the platform of any particular party. Most important, citizens often choose parties for reasons unrelated to ideology. As a result, the policies

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1 As we noted in chapter 10, many democratic countries lack “party identification” in the American sense, but the great majority exhibit continuing voter loyalty to parties or party groupings at the ballot box.

2 Jeffrey Grynaviski (2010) provided a sophisticated, updated account of partisan voting and party government in the contemporary United States.
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espoused by political parties are routinely at odds with the preferences of the people who vote for them, even after partisan loyalists adjust some of their ideas to match those of their party, as we saw in chapters 2 and 10. Whatever it is that partisan loyalties represent, it is mostly not ideology or issue congruence. The parties represent their voters, if they do, in some quite different way. Partisanship arises because a party presided over an economic recovery from a devastating depression, or because the party embodies bonds of racial or ethnic or class solidarity, or simply because we have been taught since childhood that a particular party represents “people like us.” Issue congruence between parties and their voters, insofar as it exists, is largely a byproduct of these other connections, most of them lacking policy content.³

Academic theorists of democracy (with the notable exception of Rosenblum 2008) have shown little enthusiasm for political parties and partisanship. Indeed, they have often seemed unimpressed by mere electoral democracy, and thus uninterested in the pressing questions of institutional design and legitimacy raised by analyses like ours. Instead, much (and much of the best) contemporary political theory has focused on highly idealistic models of participatory or deliberative democracy (Pateman 1970; Barber 1984; Habermas 1994; Fishkin 1995; Benhabib 1996; Gutmann and Thompson 1996; Macedo 1999; Cohen 2003). These models of democracy emphasize—indeed, they often simply assume—rationality, mutual consideration, and the patient exchange of publicly justified reasons for supporting specific policies. Thus, they rest on essentially the same unrealistic expectations about human nature embodied in the folk theory. And like the folk theory, they are significantly undermined by what has been learned since the Enlightenment about human cognition and social life (Sanders 1997; Mendelberg and Oleske 2000).

Whatever else deliberation in its more refined and philosophically approved forms may have going for it, it is very likely to be distinctly undemocratic in practice, since “many people do not have much desire to engage in political debate to begin with” (Mutz 2006, 10) and are intensely averse to political disagreement (Eliasoph 1998; Hibbing and Theiss-Morse 2002). Hence, they often fall silent in deliberative settings, letting better-educated and more prominent citizens dominate, as Mansbridge (1980, chaps. 9–11) found in New England town meetings. This is a telling indication that

³ Of course, as we saw in chapter 2, voters' expressed views during political campaigns often match those of their party, but that correlation mostly occurs because the parties and candidates teach their voters what to say, not vice versa (Lenz 2012).

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theorists of deliberative democracy are "try[ing] to whip the public into doing things it does not want to do, is unable to do, and has too much sense to do" (Schattschneider 1960, 131). Most ordinary citizens do not want politics to be more like a philosophy seminar.

Perhaps for that reason, the practical impact of deliberative theory has been quite modest. The most cited and studied attempts to "scale up" these idealized models of democratic decision-making were large-scale, government-sponsored "citizens' assemblies" intended to consider changes in the election laws of the Canadian provinces of British Columbia and Ontario (Warren and Pearse 2008; Fournier et al. 2011). In each case, a body of ordinary citizens engaged in an elaborately funded year-long process of education, consultation, and deliberation aimed at recommending a new voting rule to be employed in provincial elections. And in each case, their nearly unanimous recommendation was decisively rejected by their fellow citizens in a subsequent referendum. We do not know what combination of deliberative shortcomings, public inattention, and partisan conflict may have been to blame; but if the point of the assemblies was to shape the judgment of the broader electorate, this seemingly worthwhile Canadian initiative was an expensive, dramatic failure.

While political theories grounded in misguided assumptions about human nature are usually of little practical import, the dispute over the folk theory and its alternatives is not just an academic squabble, a tempest in a classroom teapot. The folk theory has also structured how everyday citizens and important political figures have understood American government and American ideals. In consequence, foolish reform movements have relied on its teachings, giving us flat-earth pronouncements about how government should work. As we saw in chapter 3, the results in American politics—excessive reliance on referendums at the state level and the dilution of the influence of knowledgeable party officials in the choice of presidential candidates—have strengthened the hand of narrow interest groups and often resulted in self-defeating choices by the electorate. We argued, for example, that voters' choices made a mess of car insurance, damaged their children's dental health, and even let homes be burned down. In the same way, every presidential primary season exposes the

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4 In British Columbia, the final report of the citizen assembly was issued in the midst of the holiday season and put to a vote in a provincial general election five months later, with very little coverage of the proposed electoral reform. The proposal received 58% of the vote, with 60% needed for enactment. When a second referendum was held four years later with much greater media coverage, support for the proposed reform fell to 39%. Ontario had only a single referendum, scheduled two years after the report of the citizen assembly was issued. It, too, produced less than 40% support for the citizen assembly's recommendation.
dangers of voter fatigue with familiar, experienced politicians and their enthusiasm for hopelessly unqualified but clever demagogues known only from a few television appearances.

As we have seen, effective democracy requires an appropriate balance between popular preferences and elite expertise. The point of reform should not simply be to maximize popular influence in the political process, but to facilitate more effective popular influence. We need to learn to let political parties and political leaders do their jobs, too. Simple-minded attempts to thwart or control political elites through initiatives, direct primaries, and term limits will often be counterproductive. Far from empowering the citizenry, the plebiscitary implications of the folk theory have often damaged people's real interests.

In this book, we have argued that citizens in contemporary democracies exhibit profound limitations, just as human beings always have. But too much thinking about democracy takes at face value the self-justifying rationalizations we supply for ourselves, papering over the reality of how we actually think and act. In the theory, as in our self-images, we are well-informed, thoughtful, fair-minded people dedicated to the good of all. In reality, as Schattschneider (1960, 131) observed, "the public does not act the way the simplistic definition of democracy says that it should act."

DEMOCRATIC CITIZENS AND THE RETROSPECTIVE THEORY OF DEMOCRACY

Mountains of evidence have accumulated establishing the limitations of people's thinking about political issues and ideology. From the viewpoint of the naive folk theory, it is all quite depressing. In consequence, contemporary scholars of public opinion and electoral politics have sought to rethink the role of citizens in democratic systems. Many of them have turned to evaluations of political leaders and governmental performance as the primary basis of ordinary citizens' political thinking and behavior. As we saw in chapter 4, the resulting theory of retrospective voting offers more scope for political leadership than the conventional populist theory does, and it takes more realistic account of the limits of citizens' political knowledge. It requires only that voters know whether times have been good or bad under the current administration. If times have been good, voters should reelect the incumbents; if times have been bad, voters should throw the bums out.

However, as we also saw in chapter 4, for this mechanism to work effectively, voters must do two things well. First, they must be able to discern the
specific role of the government's diligence and competence in producing the pain or pleasure they experience. Punishing the incumbents for events beyond their control makes no more sense than kicking the dog to get back at a difficult boss at work. And second, they must be able to evaluate sensibly whether times have been good or bad under the incumbent government. This may sound simple, but it is not. Citizens are unlikely to know whether crime has gone up or down, only whether gruesome murders appear in the local news. Their judgments about the seriousness of environmental threats are virtually uncorrelated with those of experts. Even in the domain of the economy, where detailed statistical information is plentiful and retrospective voting is a powerful electoral force, voters may fixate on current conditions to the neglect of the incumbent's full record.

Hence, as we have shown, citizens routinely fail in both these respects. Our analyses in chapter 5 of "blind retrospection" show that governments are punished willy-nilly for bad times, including bad times clearly due to events beyond the government's control. Voters along the Jersey Shore punished the incumbent president, Woodrow Wilson, for the panic and economic dislocation stemming from a dramatic series of shark attacks in 1916, reducing his vote share there by as much as 10 percentage points. Wilson was not responsible for the shark attacks; there was nothing he or his administration could have done to prevent them; remediation in the form of disaster assistance or unemployment benefits would have required legislation, bureaucratic capacity, and a conception of the role of government that did not exist at the time. Yet the voters punished anyway.

Even if some concrete dereliction on the part of Wilson's administration might have justified the political disaffection along the Jersey Shore in 1916, it would not account for the fact that incumbents are routinely punished for conditions beyond their control. We showed in chapter 5 that over the course of the entire 20th century, the president's party suffered at the polls in times and places that were too wet or too dry. Presidents do not cause droughts, and there is nothing they can do to prevent them. Nowadays, they can do something to ameliorate their effects, but that in itself does not account for the electoral pattern we discerned. If some incumbents were being punished for worse-than-average responses to droughts and floods, then just as many should have been rewarded for better-than-average responses. Yet, over the course of an entire century, the voters punished incumbents much more often than they rewarded them.

These findings suggest that voters have great difficulty making sensible attributions of responsibility for hard times. However, it is still more troubling
to find that voters have great difficulty simply assessing whether times have been good or bad over the course of an incumbent's term in office. In chapter 6 we examined electoral responses to economic conditions—the most familiar and intensively studied instance of retrospective voting. We found, as other scholars have, that voters are extremely sensitive to income growth in the months leading up to elections. However, rather than simply celebrating this consistent electoral response to objective economic conditions, we proceeded to explore its implications for effective political accountability. The downside of sensitivity to short-term income growth is a remarkable insensitivity to long-term economic performance. Our analyses indicated that income growth before the election year had little effect on the incumbent party's prospects at the polls. Jimmy Carter in the 1980 presidential election was punished for an election-year recession, despite considerable economic growth earlier in his term; Ronald Reagan in 1984 was reelected in a landslide thanks to an election-year boom, despite lackluster growth earlier in his term.

Because economic conditions fluctuate substantially over time, this myopic quirk in voters' assessments of economic performance induces substantial randomness in electoral rewards and punishments, in the sense that voters will reward and punish for reasons unrelated to competence. One implication is that myopic voters are unlikely to succeed in selecting competent economic managers; and indeed we find no evidence that their assessments of incumbent administrations predict subsequent economic performance. Another implication is that myopic voters are unlikely to succeed in motivating incumbents to pursue sustained economic growth, since there is little electoral payoff for growth outside the election year; and indeed we find a substantial "electoral cycle" in economic performance, with real income growth peaking in election years and falling substantially after the polls close.

In ordinary times, the foibles we have identified in retrospective voting significantly hamper prospects for effective political accountability. That is a substantial blow to the view that retrospection might provide an attractive alternative to the populist understanding of elections. However, one might still think that moments of crisis focus voters' minds, allowing for more sensible retrospective verdicts or even for meaningful collective judgments about the appropriate course of public policy. Thus, in chapter 7 we turned to the Great Depression, the greatest domestic crisis in modern American history. Did voters in the 1930s transcend the pattern of myopic retrospective voting evident in chapter 6?

Our conclusion is that they did not. Whereas previous scholars have characterized Franklin Roosevelt's landslide reelection in 1936 as a popular
ratification of his New Deal agenda, we found that his electoral support in 1936 was grounded in the same sensitivity to election-year income growth we documented in chapter 6. Indeed, our analysis suggests that if the recession of 1938 had occurred two years earlier, FDR would not have been reelected, bringing the New Deal (and the New Deal realignment of the American party system) to a shuddering halt, long before the many achievements of his subsequent terms.

Our interpretation of U.S. voting behavior in the 1930s as myopically retrospective rather than ideological is bolstered by considering Depression-era election outcomes elsewhere. Simply put, the American notion of an ideological realignment does not travel well. Where conservatives were in power when the Depression hit, as in the United States, they were generally replaced by more liberal parties. But where relatively leftist governments were in power they were often replaced by more conservative parties, as in Britain and Australia. When coalition politics or successive failures in office discredited all the viable mainstream parties, unhappy citizens turned to extremist parties or to violent protest. Thus, for example, the Canadian prairie province of Alberta replaced its agrarian socialist government with the Social Credit Party, an untried funny-money party led by a charismatic radio preacher. The economy revived (as it did in other parts of Canada, the United States, and elsewhere at the same time), and the Social Credit Party became the dominant force in provincial politics for decades thereafter.

Academic theorists of democracy sometimes dismiss the retrospective theory of political accountability as a hopelessly thin and uninspiring account of democracy. Our concern is different—that it simply does not work. Our analyses cast profound doubt on retrospective voting as a reliable basis for good government. Thus, the retrospective theory of democracy will not bear the normative weight that its enthusiastic proponents want to place on it. Politics is a complex subject. Voters may indeed find retrospective judgment “easier” than sophisticated ideological reasoning, but not easy enough.

Where does this leave the current state of democratic theory? The short answer is: in a shambles. All the conventional defenses of democratic government are at odds with demonstrable, centrally important facts of political life. One has to believe six impossible things before breakfast to take real comfort in any of them. Some of the standard defenses romanticize human nature, some mathematize it, and others bowdlerize it, but they all have one thing in common: they do not portray human beings realistically, nor take honest account of our human limitations. For democratic theorists, that is the central challenge, which we addressed in the final third of this book.
DEMOCRATIC CITIZENS AND SOCIAL GROUPS

James Madison argued in Federalist Number 10 and Number 51 that in politics, human beings are not angels. We care more about ourselves than about the common good, and we are prone to faction. Madison's insights have been extended and deepened in the two centuries since he wrote, as we reviewed in chapter 8. Factions are visible in group attachments of all kinds—kinship, ethnic, racial, religious, occupational, and national—and they are powerful in political life (Bentley 1908). Contemporary understandings of "identity" in politics have reinforced and deepened this long-standing intellectual tradition of seeing people as embedded in human groups that are meaningful to them. Religious, ethnic, occupational, and other affiliations all range from nominal to central in people's lives. When people define themselves in terms of one of these categories, they have an identity.

The most important "factions" in politics are the parties, and they are central to any realist view of electoral politics. We have argued that voters choose political parties, first and foremost, in order to align themselves with the appropriate coalition of social groups. Most citizens support a party not because they have carefully calculated that its policy positions are closest to their own, but rather because "their kind" of person belongs to that party. When people are asked what they like and dislike about political parties, or what characterizes the different parties, they often talk about perceived ties between the parties and prominent social groups (Campbell et al. 1960, chap. 10). Their own partisan identities are likewise frequently bound up in their social identities and commitments.

Thus, we found in chapter 9 that ethnic groups in Boston responded to the New Deal in quite different ways, and that group politics rather than policy calculations seemed to account most satisfactorily for those differences. Similarly, Catholics and Protestants in 1960 responded to John F. Kennedy quite differently than they had to previous (and subsequent) Democratic presidential candidates—not because his policy platform departed significantly from his party's traditional stances, but because his own identity as a Catholic activated powerful cultural loyalties and antipathies. And, most dramatically, we interpreted the monumental partisan realignment of southern whites in the second half of the 20th century as primarily driven not by changes in the

5 Note that this formulation is different from the older notion that parties are coalitions of interest groups. Social groups may or may not have organized interest groups representing them.
party's racial policy commitments but by changes in the political resonance of (white) southern identity. Thus, white southerners who felt most warmly about "southerners" as a group were the biggest contributors to the massive partisan shift; their attachment to the Democratic Party declined by almost 40 points over the course of four decades, while the corresponding decline among those with neutral feelings toward "southerners" was less than half as large. By comparison, policy preferences seem to have been much less important; Democratic support declined at fairly similar rates among supporters and opponents of racial integration, while views about government aid to blacks only sharply distinguished Democrats and Republicans beginning in the 1980s, well into the long process of realignment.

We also explored in chapter 9 how people balance multiple group identities, focusing in particular on the case of abortion. Changes in the party’s policy stands over the course of the 1980s and 1990s produced significant conflicts for pro-choice Republicans and pro-life Democrats. Both were increasingly faced with a contradiction between their own views about abortion and those of their party. As a result, almost half of pro-choice Republican women in 1982 abandoned the party by 1997; but the effect was much smaller among men—a difference we attribute to the greater significance of abortion in the gender identities of women than of men. Conversely, and perhaps more surprisingly, we also found substantial changes in views about abortion in response to partisan influence, especially among men. For example, more than half of pro-life men who were Democrats in 1982 adopted pro-choice views by 1997, while only about one-fourth of pro-life men who were Republicans in 1982 did so. The difference reflects the impact of partisan loyalties and rhetoric on people’s views about one of the most salient and wrenching moral issues of the era.

Our analysis of abortion politics sheds useful light on a common circumstance—friction between politically inconsistent social identities. A career military officer whose military service is central to his life may gravitate to his country's conservative nationalist party, even if his union family background makes him uncomfortable with the party’s frequent pro-business stands. A member of the clergy whose vocation is defined by service to the poor may identify with the left-leaning social democratic party, even if that party is often lukewarm about religious groups. People sort out their group loyalties in ways that are meaningful to them, giving priority to some commitments while downplaying others. The result is that no group's members belong exclusively to one party. But that is an implication of our account, not a disconfirmation of it. Partisan loyalties reflect the way people understand
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their own lives, jobs, religious views, ancestral identities, family traditions, and personal ties. For ordinary citizens, parties make sense—if they make sense at all—in social identity terms, not as ideological frameworks.

When political candidates court the support of groups, they are judged in part on whether they can "speak our language." Small-business owners, union members, evangelical Christians, international corporations—each of these has a set of ongoing concerns and challenges, and a vocabulary for discussing them. Knowing those concerns, using that vocabulary, and making commitments to take them seriously is likely to be crucial for a politician to win their support (Fenno 1978).

Of course, talk is not the same thing as action. The problem of holding politicians accountable for pursuing group interests involves significant difficulties. The task may be simplified when the politicians themselves are members of the relevant groups. For example, David Broockman (2013) found that African-American legislators were considerably more likely than comparable white legislators to provide assistance to African-American citizens living outside their districts. And Nicholas Carnes (2013) showed that members of Congress with personal experience working in blue-collar jobs took significantly more liberal positions on economic policy issues as a result, even after allowing for the effects of party, district characteristics, and other factors. Similarly, Barry Burden (2007) showed that a variety of personal characteristics of American legislators sometimes cause them to deviate from party orthodoxy.

Thus, the familiar tendency for voters to gravitate toward political leaders of their own stripe—a backward, tribal dereliction of duty in some high-brow versions of the folk theory—may have concrete payoffs. More often, however, the party does not or cannot do much for the group. Usually, that seems not to matter (Egan 2013). That fact underlines the point that group politics does not automatically mitigate the challenges to effective political accountability we examined in chapter 4.

**VOTER RATIONALITY AND RATIONALIZATION**

In interviews, citizens often sound more ideological and conventionally "rational" than our description of them would suggest. That fact has led some scholars, particularly those who do fieldwork with extensive personal interviews, to suppose that somehow all the other scientific evidence is misleading. People make good sense: just listen to them!

Alas, as we showed in chapter 10, the apparent rationality is itself often misleading—a byproduct rather than the foundation of group politics.
Citizens tend to adopt the views of the parties and groups they favor. If they are unusually highly engaged in politics, they may even develop ideological frameworks rationalizing their group loyalties and denigrating those of their political opponents. Sometimes they even construct convenient "facts" to help support their group loyalties. The reasoned explanations they provide for their own beliefs and behavior are often just post hoc justifications of their social or partisan loyalties. Well-informed citizens are likely to have more elaborate and internally consistent worldviews than inattentive people do, but that just reflects the fact that their rationalizations are better rehearsed. For example, as we saw in the case of the budget deficit, the political beliefs of more attentive, knowledgeable citizens are often more subject to partisan bias than those of their less attentive neighbors. For most people most of the time, social identities and partisan loyalties color political perceptions as well as political opinions.

The role of political "sophistication" in analyses of this sort underlines the fact that the task of being a good citizen by the standards of conventional democratic theory is too hard for everyone. Attentive readers will already have surmised our view of intellectuals in politics, but for clarity, we spell it out here. The historical record leaves little doubt that the educated, including the highly educated, have gone astray in their moral and political judgments as often as anyone else. In the antebellum era, prominent southern professors and university administrators often defended slavery (Faust 1981). Brilliant 19th-century German professors helped give shape to German nationalism and the racial identity theories that led to Nazism, and German university students in the 1930s were often enthusiastic supporters of Hitler (Meinecke 1925, esp. 377–433; Kershaw 1998, 76, 80). Protestant and secular professors backed Otto von Bismarck's campaign to suppress the civil liberties of Catholics in 19th-century Germany (Gross 2004). Crude prejudice against Catholics, Jews, and others was common among American intellectuals until recent decades, too (Billington 1938; McGreevy 2003).

More recently, 20th-century communism attracted many highly educated people around the world. Numerous French intellectuals supported Russian communism well after its crimes had been exposed (Aron 1957; Caute 1964). Radical Chinese intellectuals backed Mao Zedong's campaign to establish his regime and keep it in power—a regime that eventually became, not just a relentless oppressor of intellectuals, but the most murderous government in the history of the world (Goldman 1981; Townsend and Womack 1986, 58–62). In the United States, prominent political science professors became advisors to the American government during the disastrous Vietnam
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War, while others naively favored Ho Chi Minh in his ultimately successful effort to establish a repressive communist state in that country (Halberstam 1972).

Of course, a great many other people in each of these countries made the same or other equally appalling judgments. The point is simply that, as Gustave Le Bon (1895, 122) put it more than a century ago, "It does not follow because an individual knows Greek or mathematics, is an architect, a veterinary surgeon, a doctor, or a barrister, that he is endowed with a special intelligence of social questions. . . . Were the electorate solely composed of persons stuffed with sciences their votes would be no better than those emitted at present." Gifted in their own spheres, artists and intellectuals have no special expertise in politics. In our political judgments and actions, we all make mistakes, sometimes even morally indefensible errors. Thus, when we say that voters routinely err, we mean all voters. This is not a book about the political misjudgments of people with modest educations. It is a book about the conceptual limitations of human beings—including the authors of this book and its readers. As Walter Lippmann (1925, 10–11) remarked, "I have not happened to meet anybody, from a President of the United States to a professor of political science, who came anywhere near to embodying the accepted ideal of the sovereign and omniscient citizen."

A REALIST VIEW OF ELECTIONS

How, then, do elections actually work? In the contemporary United States, Democrats, Republicans, and Independents make up roughly equal shares of the population. Political campaigns consist in large part of reminding voters of their partisan identities—"mobilizing" them to support their group at the polls. Formal communications by the groups and informal communication networks among group members also help citizens understand how their identity groups connect to the candidates and parties (Harris-Lacewell 2004).

In consequence, the great majority of Democrats and Republicans consistently support their party in each election. As the first American political scientist, Francis Lieber (1839, 427–430), observed long ago, political parties teach us what to think about politics much more often than we teach them. Thus, at election time, voters choose a party validating their social and political identities, then rationalize their decisions with appropriate party-supplied reasons. The specific circumstances of a given election may occasionally inspire significant defections from standing partisan loyalties; but those, too,
often reflect the heightened salience of specific religious, racial, or gender identities rather than voters' issue preferences. Many self-described "Independents" disdain party labels but admit to "leaning" toward one party or the other. They are subject to many of the same forces, and end up acting more or less like partisans at the polls (Keith et al. 1992). And because the parties are of approximately equal size, all these effects approximately cancel out at the ballot box.

Vote choices by "pure" Independents are different. While they, too, have group ties and social identities, they are often quite unclear about which groups "belong" in which party. Typically less-informed, they may fail to grasp what is at stake in the choice of one party or another, much less where their overall interests lie. Thus, they are often swept along by the familiarity of an incumbent, the charisma of a fresh challenger, or a sense that it is "time for a change," even when the government did not cause the current unsatisfactory situation and cannot greatly alter it. When the party balance is close—and there seems to be a "law of the pendulum" ensuring that it usually will be close in two-party systems (Lowell 1898; Munro 1928, chap. 3; Stokes and Iversen 1962; Bartels 1998)—election outcomes turn on how these "swing voters" happen to feel when they go to the polls. As Philip Converse (1962, 578) put it, "Not only is the electorate as a whole quite uninformed, but it is the least informed members within the electorate who seem to hold the critical balance of power, in the sense that alternations in governing party depend disproportionately on shifts in their sentiment."

The result is that, from the viewpoint of governmental representativeness and accountability, election outcomes are essentially random choices among the available parties—musical chairs. Elections that "throw the bums out" typically do not produce genuine policy mandates, not even when they are landslide. They simply put a different elite coalition in charge. This bloodless change of government is a great deal better than bloody revolution, but it is not deliberate policy change. The parties have policy views and they carry them out when in office, but most voters are not listening, or are simply thinking what their party tells them they should be thinking. This is what an honest view of electoral democracy looks like. It is a blunder to expect elections to deliver more.

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6 Exceptions occur when coalition politics make it impossible to assign clear responsibility for the performance of the government or when alternatives to the incumbent government are themselves uncertain or not credible, as in Japan throughout much of the post-war period (Powell and Whitten 1993; Anderson 2007).
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Thus, the policy views of elected officials tend to be only roughly similar to the views of the people who elected them. The politicians belong to the parties, and the parties and other groups try to shape people’s policy views, sometimes successfully and sometimes not.\(^7\) Hence politicians will be—very imperfectly, sometimes only erratically—“representative” of their constituents’ policy views. But the relationship between constituents’ opinions and their representative’s policy choices is correlation, not causation.\(^8\) And in any case, as Miller and Stokes (1963) discovered long ago, the correlations are often quite modest—much smaller than those one would expect from the folk theory of democracy.

Findings of this sort imply that issue congruence is not the heart and soul of democratic representation. Rather, voters primarily look for politicians who match their identities.\(^9\) If we are right about that, then the correlations should be powerful between the identities of politicians and the identities of their electorates. In contemporary American politics, perhaps the most powerful social identity is race. Thus, our argument implies that heavily African-American districts will elect African-Americans and heavily white districts will elect white representatives. And they should do so nearly all the time. Indeed they do. In the 2014–2015 U.S. House of Representatives, for example, 98% of the districts with black majorities elected black representatives. Conversely, just 5% of the districts with white majorities elected African-Americans.\(^10\) This overwhelming correlation provides a powerful illustration of the importance of identity congruence in electoral politics. By comparison, as we showed in chapter 2, moderately liberal districts elected Republicans 46% of the time, while moderately conservative districts elected Democrats 25% of the time. Clearly in this case, and more subtly in many others, democratic representation is more about identities than about issue congruence.

\(^7\) Party ideologies, developed to help their coalition cohere, can also take on a life of their own and lead parties away from the interests of their coalition. We do not pursue this important topic here.

\(^8\) We have both worked in the tradition pioneered by Miller and Stokes (1963), in which the policy choices of legislators are compared with those of their constituents (Achen 1978; Bartels 1991). However, we now believe that those relationships are primarily of descriptive interest—that is, not causal.

\(^9\) Of course, most people have more than one politically meaningful group membership, an important topic in group theory for more than a century (Simmel 1908).

\(^10\) The data were assembled by Stephen Wolf for the Daily Kos, and accessed July 18, 2015 at https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1LGZQ9AxxPHjE0RlEShNEBiHT-GrjFglNmc43AXnR8dwHMc/edit?pli=1#gid=1978064869, which lists his sources.
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The power of this viewpoint is appallingly illustrated by the most spectacular failure of 20th-century democratic politics, Hitler’s rise to power via the ballot box. The observer in the grip of the folk theory asks, how could Germans have favored those policies? Indeed, anti-Semitism was common in Germany, as it was in most other European countries at the time. But in the view of most scholars, German voters first decided whether they liked Hitler as a potential leader, and then if they did, they adopted his policy views, including his views about “the Jewish question.” They would have agreed with whatever he proposed. “[People] were drawn to anti-Semitism because they were drawn to Nazism, not the other way round” (Allen 1984, 77; for similar judgments, see Hamilton 1982, chap. 13; Fritzsche 1998, passim; Kershaw 2002, chap. 6).

Of course, Hitler’s anti-Semitism was undoubtedly crucial to a minority of voters, but its appeal was limited. As detailed studies of Nazi election propaganda show, “Antisemitism had not been a top priority issue for the Nazis in the last elections of the Weimar Republic” (Gellately 2001, 24). The policy preferences of Hitler’s voters are the wrong place to look for the mainsprings of his rise, just as the platforms of candidates and the ideologies of voters are the wrong place to look for the mainsprings of more typical democratic elections.

Many observers have also invoked retrospective voting to account for Hitler’s electoral success, suggesting that Germans voted for the Nazis because times were hard and because the mainstream political parties had been discredited by prolonged economic distress.11 In consequence, the Nazi vote, especially in the early elections, had a “catchall” quality, as protest voters in all regions and social classes were swept into Hitler’s coalition (Falter 1990). After Hitler attained power, unemployment declined and Hitler’s popularity rose. Speaking as many Germans did after the war, one woman said of Hitler’s rise to the chancellorship in the midst of protests over unemployment and food shortages, “And naturally all that changed with one blow. My husband immediately got a job, too, and everyone got a job and bread and therefore people were naturally pro-Hitler” (Owings 1993, 177). It is not easy to imagine a clearer example of blind retrospection, nor a more damaging blow to retrospection as a defense of democracy.

11 The supporting literature is far too extensive to cite here. Kershaw (1998, chaps. 9 and 10, esp. 333–336 and 389–391) provided a comprehensive review. Hamilton’s (1982) is the most knowledgeable English-language treatment of Weimar elections and the most conversant with political science theory and evidence, though he focuses primarily on religion and social class rather than economic retrospection.

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Retrospection in hard times affects nearly everyone, and thus it tends to produce "uniform swing," a similar shift of all electoral districts against the incumbents and toward the out parties (Butler and Stokes 1974, 140–151). Retrospection in this simple sense, however, does not account well for Hitler’s vote. Many voters in areas dominated by the Socialist and Communist parties resisted him, and Catholics, especially in rural areas, were nearly immune to his appeal (see, for example, Hamilton 1982, chap. 13). Those two identity groups each had very nearly the same percentage of the vote in the 1932 Reichstag elections as they had had in 1924—a notable anomaly from the standpoint of conventional retrospective explanations. What had collapsed were the old Protestant nationalist parties, the third identity grouping defining German electoral politics since the Wilhelmine period (Lepsius 1966; Burnham 1972; Rohe 1990a; 1990b). The Nazis largely replaced those parties. In the last more or less honest elections of the Weimar era, in 1932, the parties of the right got almost exactly the same total proportion of the vote that they had received in 1924. The difference was that the Nazis were now by far the largest among them, averaging just over a third of the total vote.

Thus, Hitler’s electoral success is a story of identity groups, just as elections virtually always are, but identity groups of a certain kind—not, for example, social classes. Hitler spoke the language of German nationalism in a period of post-war humiliation. Protestant nationalists recognized him as one of their own, though initially not a very respectable exemplar. However, as the horrors of the Depression deepened and made them desperate, they abandoned other parties of the same kind for the sort of strong leadership that Hitler promised. Other parts of the electorate were almost unmoved: Hitler was clearly and decisively anti-socialist and non-Catholic, and thus not one of theirs. Hence economic retrospection mattered, but not in the blanket way that many have supposed. It changed the votes of only a fraction of the electorate, and its impact was sharply channeled by Weimar’s political identity groups.

When an economy fails, explanations of all kinds will be put forward, some of them simultaneously ugly and popular, as happened in the United States in the Great Depression (Brinkley 1982) and has happened repeatedly

12 Social class has received vast attention in the literature on Weimar, particularly in the first decades after the war. An extensive debate ensued over which classes were more important to Hitler (Hamilton 1982, chaps. 2–3). Unfortunately, most scholars in this tradition paid little or no attention to detailed election returns. In our view, subsequent scholarship has established that traditional social class analysis is, at best, of secondary causal relevance for understanding Hitler’s electoral appeal.
in post-war France (Shields 2007) and many other places. Scapegoats are often proposed. Hitler’s anti-Semitism is a particularly frightening example. But the actual causal explanations for left- and right-wing populist extremism lie elsewhere than in ideology. As we argued in chapter 5, to be successful, popular movements need a crisis, blind retrospection, and a message that plays to the identity and self-understanding of a substantial group in the population (Cantril 1941, chap. 3). The epidemic of support for Hitler is a case in point. The comforting view that there was something particularly evil about Germans and that the rest of us are immune will always have appeal for some. In truth, however, the desire for a strong leader who can identify domestic enemies and who promises to do something about them without worrying overmuch about legalities—those germs, mutated to fit the particular local subcultures, are latent in every democratic electorate, waiting for sufficiently widespread human suffering to provide conditions for their explosive spread.

**WHAT IS GOOD ABOUT DEMOCRACY?**

Having argued that the most prominent popular and scholarly intellectual defenses of democracy are incompatible with the empirical evidence, we can easily imagine (and indeed, have already heard) some irritated readers asking pointedly, “Well, would you rather live in a dictatorship?” The answer, for the record, is no. We, too, are inspired and heartened when a government of torturers collapses, when the Berlin Wall comes down, or when an unarmed young man faces down a tank during the Tiananmen demonstrations in China. But that does not make our argument any less persuasive. It merely demonstrates that actual democratic processes have quite real practical virtues unrelated to the idealistic virtues ascribed to them in the folk theory of democracy.

As we noted in chapter 1, proponents of the folk theory faced with its unreality often fall back on Winston Churchill’s pragmatic argument that contemporary democratic procedures are generally better than anything else that has been tried. We agree with that assessment. But if the folk theory cannot account for the pragmatic successes of democratic politics, other factors must make the difference. But *which* other factors? Getting a clearer picture of *why* democracy is a good political system—what it does or doesn’t accomplish, which features and processes are essential to its success, which are not, and how it could be made to work more fairly—seems important as an intellectual challenge, as a practical guide, and as an ethical imperative.
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An independent judiciary, freedom of speech and assembly, and other features of democratic institutions and culture are undoubtedly important; but our primary focus here is on the central mechanism in the folk theory of democracy, elections. In our view, the most concrete and potentially important benefits of elections are not those envisioned in the folk theory. First, and perhaps most obviously, elections generally provide authoritative, widely accepted agreement about who shall rule. In the United States, for example, even the bitterly contested 2000 presidential election—which turned on a few hundred votes in a single state and a much-criticized five-to-four Supreme Court decision—was widely accepted as legitimate. A few Democratic partisans continued to grumble that the election had been “stolen”; but the winner, George W. Bush, took office without bloodshed, or even significant protest, and public attention quickly turned to other matters. As V. O. Key, Jr. (1961b, 487) once wrote, elections “have within themselves more than a trace of the lottery. That, of course, is not necessarily undesirable so long as all concerned abide by the toss of the coin.”

Moreover, in well-functioning democratic systems, parties that win office are inevitably defeated at a subsequent election. They may be defeated more or less randomly, due to droughts, floods, or untimely economic slumps, but they are defeated nonetheless. Moreover, voters seem increasingly likely to reject the incumbent party the longer it has held office, reinforcing the tendency for governmental power to change hands. This turnover is a key indicator of democratic health and stability. It implies that no one group or coalition can become entrenched in power, unlike in dictatorships or one-party states where power is often exercised persistently by a single privileged segment of society. And because the losers in each election can reasonably expect the wheel of political fortune to turn in the not-too-distant future, they are more likely to accept the outcome than to take to the streets.

Third, electoral competition also provides some incentives for rulers at any given moment to tolerate opposition. The notion that citizens can oppose the incumbent rulers and organize to replace them, yet remain loyal to the

13 Systematic attempts to distinguish the specific effect of electoral processes from other aspects of democracy are surprisingly rare. John Mueller (1999, 140–145) deemed elections “useful, but not essential,” pointing to Mexico and British Hong Kong as “cases of what might be called democracies without elections.” Matthew Cleary (2010, 188) provided a detailed examination of the impact of a substantial increase in electoral competition in Mexico; he concluded that “electoral competition does not make Mexican municipal governments more responsive to the interests of their citizens,” and that direct, informal participation in municipal governance is a far more important spur to responsiveness.
nation, is fundamental both to real democracy and to social harmony. But it is a very difficult concept, one that arrived surprisingly late in democratic theorizing. The Founders of the American Constitution warned against faction and did not foresee the importance of political parties. The concept of "His Majesty's Loyal Opposition" developed gradually over the course of the 19th century, as experience with party conflict in the world's oldest large-scale democracies demonstrated the importance and legitimacy of parties, especially opposition parties (Lieber 1839, 427–430; Hofstadter 1969).

Unfortunately, even many citizens in well-functioning democracies fail to see the importance of organized political opposition. Freedom is to faction what air is to fire, Madison said. But ordinary citizens often dislike the conflict and bickering that comes with freedom (Eliason 1998). They wish their elected officials would just do the people's work without so much squabbling amongst themselves (Hibbing and Theiss-Morse 2002). They dislike the compromises that result when many different groups are free to propose alternative policies, leaving politicians to adjust their differences. Voters want "a real leader, not a politician," by which they generally mean that their own ideas should be adopted and other people's opinions disregarded, because views different from their own are obviously self-interested and erroneous. To the contrary, politicians with vision who are also skilled at creative compromise are the soul of successful democracy, and they exemplify real leadership (see for example, Hargrove 2014). But this way of thinking about leadership is not much taught in schools nor emphasized in Fourth of July speeches. Hence, where this central aspect of democracy is concerned, many voters just do not get it.

Fourth, a long tradition in political theory stemming from John Stuart Mill (1861, chap. 3) has emphasized the potential benefits of democratic citizenship for the development of human character (Pateman 1970). Empirical scholarship focusing squarely on effects of this sort is scant, but it suggests that democratic political engagement may indeed have important implications for civic competence and other virtues (Finkel 1985; 1987; Campbell 2003; Mettler 2005). Thus, participation in democratic processes may contribute to better citizenship, producing both self-reinforcing improvements in "civic culture" (Almond and Verba 1963) and broader contributions to human development.

Finally, reelection-seeking politicians in well-functioning democracies will strive to avoid being caught violating consensual ethical norms in their society. As Key (1961a, 282) put it, public opinion in a democracy "establishes vague limits of permissiveness within which governmental action may occur
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without arousing a commotion.” Thus, no president will strangle a kitten on the White House lawn in view of the television cameras. Easily managed governmental tasks will get taken care of, too. Chicago mayors will either get the snow cleared or be replaced, as Mayor Michael Bilandic learned in the winter of 1979. Openly taking bribes will generally be punished. When the causal chain is clear, the outcome is unambiguous, and the evaluation is widely shared, accountability will be enforced (Arnold 1990, chap. 3). So long as a free press can report dubious goings-on and a literate public can learn about them, politicians have strong incentives to avoid doing what is widely despised. Violations occur, of course, but they are expensive; removal from office is likely. By contrast, in dictatorships, moral or financial corruption is more common because public outrage has no obvious, organized outlet. This is a modest victory for political accountability.

Real as these benefits are, however, they have relatively little to do with the day-to-day workings of a national government, which only rarely concern kittens, snow removal, or anything similar. The causal chain for most important social events is complex and untraceable. As we have seen throughout this book, even the most attentive citizens mostly cannot figure it out. This is the flaw in John Dewey’s (1927, 207) clever analogy for the role of public opinion in representative government, that the cobbler can repair a shoe but only the wearer can say where it pinches. That is a good model for dealing with cobblers and dentists, but a poor one for dealing with presidents. In politics, thousands of cobblers are at work, and pinches come and go, many with nobody at fault. Ordinary citizens with limited free hours in their day are very unlikely to learn who deserves credit or blame for the pains they suffer.

Thus, it should come as no surprise that the real benefits of democracy are mostly quite different from those envisioned in the folk theory of democracy. They are real benefits nonetheless, and constitute a substantial, albeit limited argument in favor of democratic systems compared to their authoritarian alternatives. However, they do little to answer the broader questions of whether and how everyday democratic policy-making promotes people’s interests when they are judging politicians on entirely different grounds.

POWER AND IDENTITY GROUPS

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? Once the folk theory and retrospective
voting theory are discarded, the answer is not obvious. The optimistic notion that policy-making is sharply constrained by public preferences runs aground on the fact that pressures from parties, interest groups, and the wealthy routinely trump broad left-leaning majorities on issues like the minimum wage and social spending, while pressures from parties, interest groups, and educated elites trump broad right-leaning majorities on issues like silent prayer in schools and parental notification for minors seeking an abortion (Bartels 2008; Gilens 2012; Page, Bartels, and Seawright 2013).

In every society, policy-making is a job for specialists. Policies are made by political elites of one kind or another, including elected officials, government bureaucrats, interest groups, and judges (Hansen 1985; 1991; Rothenberg 1992; Baumgartner et al. 2009). As we noted in chapter 3, "Politics has been, is, and always will be carried on by politicians, just as art is carried on by artists, engineering by engineers, business by businessmen" (Ford 1909, 2).

One need not spend much time in Washington, D.C., or any other capital city of a democracy to learn that, for the great majority of issues that the government decides, no "ordinary citizens" are actually involved in the policy-making process. Occasionally, politically engaged and well-financed groups of citizens do manage to bend democratic governments to some of their wishes, but such movements are rare. Day to day, few such influences exist, as close observers of the policy-making process have long noted (Lindblom 1968, chap. 6). For example, Jacobs and Page (2005) found that the views of U.S. foreign-policy-makers were strongly responsive to elite and expert opinion, but not to the opinions of ordinary citizens.

A broader empirical study of American policy-making by Matt Grossmann came to a similar conclusion. Drawing on 268 policy histories covering 790 notable policy enactments in 14 distinct domestic policy domains, Grossmann (2014, 12–13) found that presidents, agency heads, influential members of Congress, and relevant advocacy groups made policy—in other words, parties and interest groups. He wrote that "American policymaking is rarely responsive to the public; the role of opinion and elections is limited and inconsistent. . . . The patterns do not comport with the textbook view of political institutions, macro-level theories, or the hopeful image of government 'by the people.'" The complexity of modern societies ensures that the policy-making process cannot be organized like a New England town meeting.

Descriptions of the actual policy-making process return repeatedly to the same concepts—power and influence. Some officials, groups, and organizations are powerful; others are not, as classic studies of the policy-making
process have emphasized (Truman 1951; Dahl 1956; 1961; Banfield 1961; Lindblom 1965). The resulting differences between them in getting their way are enormous. Sheer group size helps, but wealth, social prestige, and access to media of communication and persuasion often bring greater power, both in their own right and as resources facilitating organization. Thus, it is hardly surprising that, as E. E. Schattschneider (1960, 34–35) famously put it, "The flaw in the pluralist heaven is that the heavenly chorus sings with a strong upper-class accent." Similarly, contemporary political scientists (e.g., Schlozman, Verba, and Brady 2012) have provided detailed analyses of the dramatic socioeconomic biases in group politics.

Understanding group conflict in power terms is not a new idea: "Whatever social problem we confront, whatever persons come into our field of view, the first questions involved will always be: To what groups do these persons belong? What are the interests of these groups? What sort of means do the groups use to promote their interests? How strong are these groups, as compared with groups that have conflicting interests? These questions go to the tap root of all social interpretation" (Small 1905, 497, emphasis original). In the same way, prominent political scientists have long thought that power was central to the discipline, and they have written about it frequently in books with titles like Political Power (Merriam 1934), Power and Society (Lasswell and Kaplan, 1950), and (again) Political Power (Bell, Edwards, and Wagner 1969). But in more recent years, and especially in democratic theory, the topic is too often neglected. In the folk theory and in retrospective voting models, every citizen is equal by assumption. Voting is supposed to equalize power: The rich and the poor all have one vote apiece, and they can listen to arguments and vote their interests equally well. But as we have shown, that naive view flies in the face of a great deal of social-scientific evidence.

If voters are to have their interests represented in the policy-making process, then, interest groups and parties have to do the work. And the organizations representing different interests have to have power in the policy-making process proportional to their presence in the electorate. The rich, the well-placed, and the well-organized cannot have extra power to advance their interests. Too often, as we have seen, naive reformers have imagined that the pseudo-democratization bestowed by plebiscites would solve all these problems cheaply and easily. To the contrary, spelling out the simple normative perspective of equal power in the context of an honest description of

14 Of course, not everything in politics reduces to power and raw competition among groups and parties. Nonetheless, they are central to understanding policy outcomes.
the policy-making process makes it only too clear how far we have to go to become seriously democratic. It also makes clear how hard the conceptual task will be of devising the right institutional arrangements, and how bitterly those reforms will be opposed by the groups that profit from the current inequalities and the ensuing injustices.

What are the mechanisms that would lead to more democracy in a realist sense? We have already mentioned the biases stemming from differences in resources among organized groups, but assessing the political and policy implications of those biases is still largely a matter of rough extrapolation and guesswork (Baumgartner et al. 2009; Gilens 2012, chap. 5). So is the role of unorganized groups. While “potential interest groups” (Truman 1951, chap. 2) are not entirely powerless, they are at a distinct disadvantage vis-à-vis organized groups. But not nearly enough is known about how much and why.

Thus, the implications of group politics for democracy depend in substantial part on the extent to which relevant political interests are, in fact, organized and active in elections and in the policy-making process. Does the roster of interest group headquarters on K Street in Washington adequately reflect the range of group interests in American society? That seems unlikely. As Matt Grossmann (2012, 15–16) summarized his study of national advocacy organizations, “a few ideological, occupational, and ethnic groups have a great deal of political representation, but most public groups in each of these categories have minimal representation.” A great deal has been written about American interest groups, but detailed studies of their overall representativeness and differences in their relative power are in short supply.

We also need to know more about how interest groups acquire their clout. Presumably they influence their members to vote in ways that advance their interests, which in turn makes politicians listen to their policy proposals. But how, and how effectively, do groups actually do that? Peter Odegard (1928) studied the Anti-Saloon League’s communications with its supporters, and Oliver Garceau (1941) wrote about the American Medical Association, but recent studies of political influence using modern research tools and data are exceedingly rare. How successful are interest groups’ attempts to influence their followers’ opinions and votes? David Truman (1949) studied labor unions’ influence attempts and Christopher Kenny, Michael McBurnett, and David Bordua (2004) investigated the National Rifle Association, but again the evidence is uncomfortably thin.

The representation of group interests in the policy-making process also hinges significantly on the extent to which political entrepreneurs and activists are faithful agents of their groups. The problems of monitoring and
accountability that we explored in our analysis of retrospective voting in chapters 4 to 7 also arise in the relationship between citizens and group leaders. Groups are relatively homogeneous: Does that make it easier for citizens to monitor the leadership? And how much does group organization matter to responsiveness? In a classic study of the internal politics of a progressive labor union, the International Typographical Union, sociologists Seymour Martin Lipset, Martin Trow, and James S. Coleman (1956) argued that favorable social circumstances produced a rare exception to the usual pattern of oligarchic leadership (Michels 1915). Unfortunately, we know of no comparably detailed contemporary studies of the internal politics of politically significant groups.15

Finally, the political influence of group interests is likely to vary considerably with the nature of the party system. Scholars of party politics have recently revived the notion that parties are, first and foremost, coalitions of groups (Bawn et al. 2012); but they have offered no simple formula for predicting how a given constellation of social groups will coalesce into a specific configuration of partisan conflict, how coalitions made up of groups with distinct interests will manage their internal tensions, or how political institutions will shape the processes of intra- and interparty bargaining that translate group interests into public policy. In systems where parliamentary representation is allocated in proportion to party strength, small parties representing isolated social groups may hold outsized power in the making or breaking of governments, as has sometimes been the case with ultra-conservative religious parties in Israel. On the other hand, political leaders in majoritarian systems may organize party coalitions and partisan conflict in ways that, for better or worse, effectively submerge certain group interests.

At its best, the process of interest aggregation in majoritarian systems may involve shearing off the more self-interested or damaging or wicked demands of component groups, resulting in a stronger and more coherent electoral coalition. We argued in chapter 3 that competent leadership is critical; from the viewpoint of group theory, what that requires is forging effective political coalitions that serve people’s real interests. Franklin Roosevelt accomplished

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15 John Gaventa (1980) devoted one chapter of his book on quiescence and rebellion in Appalachia to the failure of the United Mine Workers union to represent the interests of Appalachian coal miners. Lawrence Rothenberg (1992) used data on the members of the good-government lobbying group Common Cause to ask whether “joining, activism, or the threat of departure” by group members affected “the behavior of group leaders in determining organizational goals.” In neither case was the fidelity of group leaders to the interests of group members a primary focus of analysis.
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exactly that, overcoming the prior failures of the Populists and the Progressives (Hofstadter 1955). On the other hand, the "second party system" in the antebellum U.S. united "the plain Republicans of the North with Southern planters" in a national Democratic Party whose primary effect was to paper over the explosive issue of slavery. Indeed, Martin Van Buren recommended the cross-sectional alliance to his prospective southern allies on the grounds that it would stifle "the clamor against the Southern Influence and African Slavery" (Remini 1959; Cohen et al. 2008, 65–70).

We know too little about how parties shape their governing ideas and policy platforms. With a few important exceptions (notably, Gerring 2001 and Noel 2013), contemporary political scientists have devoted little attention to this topic, despite the obvious importance of party ideologies as vehicles for composing, rationalizing, and (perhaps) elevating group interests. Herbert Croly's (1909) impact on the development of the American welfare state is an important illustration of how new ideologies change party policy. As Hans Noel (2013, 3) puts it, "Croly was among the first to articulate the importance of large-scale government intervention on behalf of the less fortunate," a position that was "not so supported, even by progressives, at the end of the nineteenth century." Of course, "Croly's position is widely held today by liberals in the United States" (Noel 2013, 3), and the policies of Democratic presidents since Franklin Roosevelt have been profoundly affected by that ideology.

What, then, can we say about the implications of group politics for democracy? As we noted in chapter 2, John Zaller (2012, 623) has pointed out the simple, appealing implication of the economic theory of democracy proposed by Anthony Downs: "The rationally ignorant median voter gets what he wants without much effort." In contrast, according to Zaller, "What might be called the group-politics view of democracy is not so optimistic: Organized policy demanders routinely get what they want at the expense of the unorganized; but groups of ordinary voters—if sufficiently numerous, cohesive, attentive, and pivotal—also get some of what they want."

Evaluations of the policies produced by group politics are often, knowingly or unknowingly, grounded in the normative framework inherited from

16 Exemplary historical treatments touching upon these issues include Sombart's (1906) study of the failure of American socialism, Schorske's (1955) analysis of the early 20th-century split in German socialist parties, Rossiter's (1955) investigation of the evolution of American conservative thought, and Beer's (1966) treatment of the self-understanding of British political parties, to name just a few.
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the folk theory of democracy. Every victory of popular preferences over organized groups is celebrated. From that perspective, Zaller's tempered assessment of actual patterns of political influence is unlikely to inspire much optimistic Fourth of July rhetoric. But it is a realistic characterization of the actual workings of democratic government.

From a broader perspective, taking the psychology underlying the group theory of democracy seriously might lead to quite different normative conclusions. Giving groups of ordinary voters "some of what they want" may not always be so desirable if what they want is a byproduct of affective tribal loyalties. The politics of new democracies in developing countries provide sobering examples—but then, so do the politics of 20th-century Germany and many other wealthy, cultured democratic countries. A more compelling normative assessment will require a clearer empirical understanding of how group politics works. At present, normative thinking about democracy and democratic reform is hopelessly entangled with the unrealistic empirical assumptions of the folk theory.

WHAT WOULD IT MEAN TO HAVE "MORE DEMOCRACY"?

One of the most deleterious consequences of adherence to unrealistic ideas about democracy is that it keeps us from seeing what a truer and deeper democracy would be like. As we saw in chapter 3, the default assumption among proponents of the folk theory has long been that "the cure for the ills of democracy is more democracy." The empirical evidence presented in this book seems to us to make their notion of what that means untenable. For example, by the normative standards enshrined in the folk theory, the point of democracy is to reflect ordinary citizens' preferences in the policy-making process on an egalitarian basis. Given the empirical assumptions of the folk theory, a system with universal enfranchisement should lead more or less automatically to that end. In fact, anyone who looks at actual democratic processes finds a very different reality.

New thinking about both ideals and realities will be required if democracies are to become truly more democratic. Our account of group politics points to a variety of potentially significant reforms, but we will focus on just one here. In our view, more effective democracy would require a greater degree of economic and social equality. The most powerful players in the policy game are the educated, the wealthy, and the well-connected. Corporations have more clout than workers; major media outlets are more powerful than
independent bloggers; affluent citizens’ views matter more than those of the poor; and members of ethnic and racial majority groups are policy “winners” more often than members of minority groups. For decades, no informed observer has imagined otherwise, but in recent years quantitative evidence has begun to provide a somewhat more precise sense of the magnitudes of these imbalances (Bartels 2008, chap. 9; Griffin and Newman 2008; Gilens 2012; Gilens and Page 2014). This work has shown that, whether we assess the influence of the poor and minorities in terms of their expressed preferences or their apparent interests, the power imbalances are very large, and the resulting policy outcomes are far from those implied by any appealing democratic ideal.

The theory of group politics provides a clearer explanation for why a more egalitarian society would result in a more egalitarian political process. The result would be an increase in the real political power of a variety of currently underrepresented groups, not all of them approved of by the editorial pages of either the New York Times or the Wall Street Journal. The policy views of both corporate interests and college professors would get less weight in a fairer process.

The problem, of course, is how to accomplish such a change. At the moment, Americans lack the ideas, the will, and the political organization. Protest groups come along regularly; but because their political thinking is so bound up in the folk theory of democracy, they resist the leadership, organization, and coalition-building that would give them clout and staying power. They quickly fade, leaving everything much as it was.

A (somewhat) less daunting aim would be simply to reduce the most direct effects of existing differences in wealth in the democratic process. Rich people, large corporations, and business associations everywhere spend considerable sums financing politicians’ campaigns and lobbying them between elections. But few established democracies do as little as the United States does to limit the distorting effects of money in the democratic process. Congress has made periodic attempts to regulate lobbying and campaign contributions, usually in ways that tend to protect the interests of incumbent politicians regardless of party or ideology, but sometimes in ways that would have helped level the playing field. However, in recent years conservative majorities on the Supreme Court have increasingly employed 19th-century liberalism’s logic that buying elections is a form of free speech, and therefore protected under the Constitution, to gut restrictions on political contributions.

Most of the time, the big contributors are Republicans, and so this set of rules advantages the Republican Party, causing a predictable enthusiasm for the undemocratic status quo in that party. But the biases are not unique to Republicans. Because money, access, and intensity matter, both parties—and,
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for that matter, most political groups—privilege the affluent relative to the poor, sophisticated insiders relative to ordinary people, and intense minorities relative to more complacent and inattentive majorities. Those biases grease the squeaking wheels and help minimize protest. But reducing the influence of money in American elections is a clear implication of the vision of democracy we have set out. Thinking of campaign spending as free speech is naive when it is not disingenuous.

Of course, many proponents of the folk theory of democracy also argue for campaign finance reform and a more egalitarian society. But their interest in those reforms does more to contradict than to reflect their faith in the folk theory. By the logic of populism, universal suffrage in itself should be sufficient to mitigate the inequalities of political influence that we have identified. If campaign spending sways election outcomes, it does so because voters are not the principled “issue voters” envisioned in the folk theory. If campaign contributions influence policy, they do so because elections fail to enforce the allegiance of real flesh-and-blood policy-makers to the policy preferences of the median voter. Real politics is much more complex—and much more strongly shaped by unequal clout—than the fastidious vision of the folk theory suggests. Serious political reform must face that fact squarely.

We do not mean to suggest that these or any other reforms would correct all the problems of American democracy or of any other democracy. Government remains an all-too-human enterprise, not so different from business, religion, education, and every other aspect of public life. But misleading theories are not neutral, and they are not costless. In current thinking about democracy, bad ideas dominate public discourse. Romantic notions of democracy sound good and have emotion on their side. Let the people rule! Generations of thoughtful Americans have promoted with genuine sincerity reforms deriving from the folk theory of democracy. But they tend to be badly flawed in practice, primarily because they make life all too easy for special interests. Especially at the state level, proponents of mind-numbing clichés about giving power to ordinary people bear considerable responsibility for the domination of government by narrowly self-interested groups. In reforming government, good intentions and high-sounding rhetoric are not enough. In the end, it is the folk theory that props up elite rule, and it is unrepresentative elites that most profit from the convenient justifications it provides for their activities.

At the moment, America is a democracy, but it is not very democratic. In this book, we have tried 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, we bring rose-colored glasses when we look at democracy, glasses handed to us from the dead hands of Enlightenment thinkers. In consequence, we not only propose bad solutions; often enough, we cannot even see the problems. The gross inequalities of political power in contemporary America are the most obvious instance. 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 in the responsiveness of the current system to its citizens.

We recognize that the view of democracy offered in this book is less cheery than the romantic alternatives, and thus less appealing—at least initially. Moreover, as we have acknowledged, our approach raises a host of problems and questions for which political scientists—ourselves very much included—have no ready answers. Nevertheless, just as a critical step toward 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 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. We have attempted to take steps in that direction; but there is a great deal more to do.