

Christopher H. Achen & Larry M. Bartels. *Democracy for Realists: Why Elections Do Not Produce Responsive Government*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2016, 408 pages.

Democracy for Realists is an ambitious project that sets its sights at nothing less than turning our conception of democracy and the enlightened, wise citizens—an ideal that has ruled both the popular and academic imagination for over two centuries—upside down. Christopher H. Achen and Larry M. Bartels invite the readers to “think about democracy in a fundamentally different way” and make the case that there is a large, consistent and irreconcilable gap between the idealized picture of enlightened voter behavior in what the authors term the “folk theory of democracy” and voter behavior in actual politics. Although they draw their research mostly from the American context, they provide some comparative examples to emphasize that this is not a specifically American problem. When democratic institutions fail, a popular response is to demand a more democratic system that will translate the true will of the citizenry to the ballot. However, chapter after chapter, the book demonstrates that, empirically speaking, “more democratic” electoral institutions do not lead to better or more rational policy outcomes and that the accumulation of evidence from the past century reveals that voters neither reward competence nor punish incompetence in government. What then, is the political scientist to make of this? Achen and Bartels start with a simple yet groundbreaking proposal: Let us drop the democratic ideal in our imaginations for a less appealing but more realistic understanding of democracy and voter behavior. Let us see politics as it is, rather than interpret reality to fit our preconceived notions of what democracy should be and how citizens should act. In other words, let us describe the political world as it is, not as it should be. However, this axiomatic suggestion is a quite difficult if not impossible task for political scientists to accomplish. It requires the painful admission of an enduring and theory-driven blindness about one of the most central topics in the discipline as well as the development of new theoretical approaches and a new research agenda. There is a possibility that *Democracy for Realists* may share the fate of some excellent works and ideas that challenge the scholarly consensus of their time and be largely ignored like many of the findings and ideas they catalog. However, the timing of the publication is in accordance with the zeitgeist. Both the public and academia are ready for a fresh perspective on electoral politics. Many are at a loss to explain the recent rise of populist politicians and parties across the globe, and the folk theory of democracy fails to deliver a convincing explanation. The authors lay out a research agenda that engages with the qualms of a populace disillusioned with electoral outcomes and the seemingly increasing fragility of some of the most established democracies. Political scientists are also much more receptive to an attack on the old theories of voter behavior thanks to the relatively new but bustling field of political psychology. The portrait of the political person, severely limited in her capacity to evaluate political issues and judge the ideological proximity or effectiveness of elected officials, as laid out in the book, fits squarely in the evolving research agenda of the field which has been—not so quietly or subtly—undermining the concept of the rational and informed citizen.

The book consists of ten chapters, but it can be divided into three main sections. The first section lays the theoretical foundations by tracing the rise of the folk theory of democracy while implying its imminent

demise by cataloging an impressive number of quotes from prominent thinkers, statesmen, and political science scholars against the idea that voters have a grasp on policy positions and decide on the basis of rational deliberation and careful evaluation of candidates.

The second section is a delightfully ruthless dismantling of the folk theory of democracy by providing empirical evidence of highly entertaining yet deeply disturbing examples of voter irrationality. The book presents a litany of voter offenses. Shark attacks affected American presidential elections, but one of the biggest health crises of the 20th century did not. Towns voted to close their fire departments only to pay more for increased insurance premiums than they would have paid for the fire department. Voters tend to punish the incumbent during times of hardship, including periods of bad weather, regardless of how well the incumbent handles the challenges. The state of the economy in only the election year has an impact on voting behavior because voters seem to forget how well or how badly the economy did in previous years. Unfortunately, the book suffers from a few shortcomings in its treatment of the quantitative data in this otherwise brilliant section. Some of the conclusions drawn from early and mid-20th century are too circumstantial given the limitations of the data from these periods. The authors choose to forgo control variables where more complex regression models would be warranted and in one case, they overgeneralize the results from a very small sample of respondents.

The third and final section offers an answer to the puzzle that constitutes the heart of the book: If voters do not vote rationally according to their self-interest or ideology, how do they vote? As is often the case with the best social science theories, the answer appears all too obvious once it is revealed. Achen and Bartels argue that people are social beings that have strong ties to groups that signal them what to believe and how to act in all aspects of life, and voting is no exception. In other words, all politics is identity politics. Political party identification is crucial, but unlike theories postulating that voters choose parties that are closest to their policy positions, *Democracy for Realists* illustrates that often the link of causality is the other way around and people determine their policy positions based on the cues they receive from their parties unless those cues conflict with a group identity that is more central to them than their party identification. Thus, political parties also act as a form of identity group. But recognizing the centrality of group identity in politics is easier said than done.

As the authors point out, their theory presents new methodological challenges to political scientists. The widely utilized opinion surveys in political science assume that voters are individuals whose motives can be measured by items that ignore the social dimension of their attitudes and behaviors. Experiments, which are becoming more popular in political psychology, also isolate individuals from their social environment. Their political behavior in such contexts may not approximate their real behavior. Lastly, the mathematical modeling of voter behavior by rational choice theorists would be rendered mostly useless, if we accepted the group theory of democracy. It seems that we cannot answer the questions raised by this new approach with the methodological tools of old theories, but *Democracy for Realists* is content with raising these issues for now. The book focuses more on taking down the theory of folk democracy than on defending the identity group-centric theory of democracy. Although it is the culmination of almost two decades of research by the authors, we can presume that it will be the starting point of a new research agenda for many students of voting behavior.

The language of *Democracy for Realists* is not heavily loaded with political science jargon. It is peppered with many enjoyable quotes and entertaining if depressing stories about electoral politics. Although it is intended mainly for political science scholars, the book is accessible to the lay audience interested in understanding why people vote the way they do. It is one of those rare scholarly works that have the potential to capture the attention and imagination of academics as well as the broader public.

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