

DEMOCRATIC FAILURES
AND THE ETHICS
OF DEMOCRACY

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PENN

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Introduction

American democracy is in a bad state. This is obvious from current affairs, but it has been known for a long time. Almost a century ago, Walter Lippmann insisted that “the citizen gives but a little of his time to public affairs, has but a casual interest in fact and but a poor appetite for theory.”¹ He came to believe that that “the individual man . . . does not know what is happening, why it is happening, what ought to happen.”² Joseph Schumpeter, two decades later, expressed a similar view. He claimed that “the typical citizen drops down to a lower level of mental performance as soon as he enters the political field. He argues and analyzes in a way which he would readily recognize as infantile within the sphere of his real interests. He becomes a primitive again.”³ Both thought that the ideals behind American democracy clashed with the reality of American politics. American citizens were too cognitively unsophisticated to realize the high-flown values of democratic theorists.

This was an empirical claim about the nature of American citizens. But the type of evidence Lippmann and Schumpeter had for it left a lot to be desired. Their methods were journalistic. They kept up on current affairs, talked to people, and read history. Yet, as they wrote, the scientific basis of political science was being transformed. The great leap forward was the representative survey. This allowed one to ask a small number of people a question and find out how millions would have answered. All that you needed to do was make sure that the people you asked matched the broader population on key demographic factors. If the broader population was 10 percent Catholic, your respondents should be 10 percent Catholic; if the broader population was 50 percent male, your respondents should be 50 percent male. With such surveys in hand, political scientists no longer needed to rely on anecdote and conjecture when talking about the general public. For the first time, they could justify generalizations about American citizens.

This methodological advance bore fruit in the 1950s. Paul Lazarsfeld and his colleagues at Columbia University used representative surveys to study small communities like Erie County, Ohio, and Elmira, New York. They concluded that voters in such places were ignorant, irrational, and apathetic about political issues.⁴ Such voters were “unable to satisfy the requirements for a democratic system of government outlined by political theorists.”⁵ At the University of Michigan, Angus Campbell and his colleagues used representative surveys to study the American public in general. They emphasized “the low emotional involvement of the electorate in politics; its slight awareness of public affairs; its failure to think in structured, ideological terms; and its pervasive sense of attachment to one or the other of the two major parties.”⁶ Later, Philip Converse found that “large parts of an electorate do not have meaningful beliefs, even on issues that have formed the basis for intense political controversy amongst elites for substantial periods of time.”⁷ According to Converse, voters didn’t even have preferences between different policies. Systematic study seemed to corroborate the pessimistic view of American citizens advanced by Lippmann and Schumpeter.

These studies were the first rigorous examinations of the American public. What followed, over the next seventy years, was a cornucopia of scientific studies of American politics. One of the most prominent recent examples is Christopher Achen and Larry Bartels’s *Democracy for Realists*. They continue the critique of American citizens, but they turn their attention to whether ordinary citizens vote for incumbents who perform well. They argue that voters are “blind” and “myopic.” They’re blind in the sense that they punish governments “willy-nilly for bad times, including bad times clearly due to events beyond the government’s control.”⁸ They’re myopic in the sense that they focus “almost entirely on income growth in the months just before the election.”⁹ This, they conclude, makes elections a game of “musical chairs.”¹⁰ It makes elections the random replacement of one raft of rulers for another. Achen and Bartels think that this means American democracy does not achieve the values we might ordinarily ascribe to it. For them, as for the preceding writers, the nature of American voters creates a vast gulf between normative ideals and political reality.

These writers all focus on what ordinary voters are like. A different strand of research focuses on the power of political and economic elites. Sociologists conducted much of the early work in this vein. Charles Mills, in his book *The Power Elite*, argues that a small number of people make almost all of the important decisions in the United States.¹¹ These people draw their power from their

roles in institutions: the government, corporations, or the military. According to Mills, they form a social class. They marry one another and share a common outlook on the nation's problems. William Domhoff, another sociologist, suggested that it was economic and corporate elites who really hold political power in the United States.¹² His story is that such people finance foundations and think-tanks, which shape the space of acceptable policy proposals, and they finance campaigns, especially primary campaigns. According to these stories, what ails American democracy is not found in the hearts and minds of voters. It is found in the fact that voters are not being given a fair shake at all. Political power is concentrated in a small number of elite hands.

Providing good evidence for this kind of story required new methodological advances. Again, the most important advances were advances in measurement. To evaluate who representatives actually respond to, one needed a summary measure of how representatives vote. In the 1980s, Keith Poole and Howard Rosenthal developed such a measure.¹³ This allowed several authors to show how far congressional voting behavior differed from constituent preferences. Later, Poole used this measure to depict congresspeople as ideologues.¹⁴ He claimed that they start office with an ideology and stick to it throughout their long tenures. They do not respond to their constituents. Similarly, Joseph Bafumi and Michael Herro observe that when a district changes party hands, the voting behavior of its representative dramatically changes.¹⁵ How a representative votes is a function of their party affiliation rather than of what their constituents want. The picture of elections that emerges from this work is one in which voters can choose the party affiliation of their representative but can exert very little control on that representative when they are in office. Elected representatives are not, in this picture, under popular control.

This work addresses the autonomous influence of political elites in American policymaking. But what about that of economic elites? The rigorous study of this is surprisingly recent. It has been very difficult to quantify the influence the wealthy have over American politics. Larry Bartels made one breakthrough: he compared how the voting behavior of an elected representative varied with the policy preferences of their different constituents. The question here is whether and to what extent representatives vote more in line with the preferences of their richer constituents. He finds that “the modern Senate comes a good deal closer to equal representation of *wealth* than to equal representation of *citizens*.”¹⁶ Martin Gilens made another breakthrough: he looked at how policy changes varied with the preferences of different groups. Again, this required crucial advances in measurement—Gilens had to evaluate

how policy changed on almost two thousand issues between 1981 and 2002. He found that “the preferences of the vast majority of Americans appear to have essentially no impact on which policies the government does or doesn’t adopt.”¹⁷ Bartels and Gilens both concluded that economic elites have disproportionate power over American government.

Let’s consider one final strand of critical work on American democracy: work on political participation. In the 1950s, the dominant picture of such participation was a sunny one: in this picture—the pluralist picture—policy-making was the product of conflict between interest groups, and this led to an equitable distribution of power. The idea was that everyone had roughly equal access to the interest group system. Over time, this picture began to break down. Eric Schattschneider, famously, claimed that “the flaw in the pluralist heaven is that the heavenly chorus sings with a strong upper-class accent.”¹⁸ More recently, Kay Schlozman and his colleagues carefully tracked the nature and composition of contemporary political participation. They found that it is richer, better-educated Americans who petition their representatives and take part in interest groups. They concluded that “not only is the heavenly chorus of voices not inclusive of all but it is also not representative.”¹⁹ Again, the worry is that the ills of American democracy hinge not on the cognitive shortcomings of ordinary citizens but rather on the malapportionment of political power.

This body of work represents a great scientific advance. We now know more about American democracy than we ever have before. Yet the picture of American democracy that it paints is a dark one. It is disquieting to find out that voters are blind and myopic. It is disturbing to find out that citizens are ill-informed and that political elites are not under the control of their constituents. But why, exactly, are these results disquieting? Why do these empirical findings actually matter to the achievement of democratic values? The standard approach to such questions conceptualizes them in instrumental terms. The approach is to work out the bad causal consequences of empirical phenomena. Achen and Bartels, for example, worry about the putative blindness and myopia of voters because it stops them from being able to “select competent leaders and discipline those leaders to pursue the voters’ well-being.”²⁰ Bryan Caplan, for instance, worries about voter rationality because “irrational beliefs lead to foolish policies.”²¹ The underlying idea is that, as Jason Brennan puts it, “the only reason to favor democracy over any other political system is that it is more effective at producing just results”: democracy is valuable if and when it has good consequences.²² Thus, the idea goes,

these empirical findings matter only insofar as they mean our democracies do not have such consequences.

This is a deeply unsatisfactory approach. Most importantly, that is because democracy is not valuable merely due to its putative good consequences. Democracy is also valuable in itself. It is not only instrumentally valuable but also intrinsically valuable. This thought is commonplace in normative political theory. Thinkers such as Thomas Christiano, Niko Kolodny, and Daniel Viehoff locate the key source of this value in equality. The idea is that democracies are egalitarian in a way that other political systems are not.²³ A different view, advocated historically by Jean-Jacques Rousseau and contemporarily by Anna Stilz, is that democracy somehow helps citizens to rule themselves—it contributes to their autonomy.²⁴ These thinkers differ in exactly how they construe the intrinsic value of democracy, but they all agree that democracy is valuable for reasons that go beyond its mere causal consequences. Normative political theorists almost invariably attribute intrinsic value to democracy.

Why should one believe democracy has intrinsic value? The *prima facie* case for this view is that an instrumentally ideal autocracy misses out on some of the value of democracy. Imagine we had a benevolent dictator, who always made good laws and never abused their power. Such a dictatorship could have consequences that are at least as good as a democracy's. Indeed, it might have better consequences: it seems highly plausible that Singapore, for example, would have had worse polices were it a democracy in 1965. Yet, still, there is reason to prefer democracy to even such an enlightened autocracy. There is reason to prefer ruling ourselves on conditions of equality than to be ruled by Lee Kuan Yew. So, the value of democracy cannot be wholly instrumental. Democracy is valuable not just because of its causal consequences but also because of its intrinsic nature. But, if democracy is intrinsically valuable, it is very odd to think that the aforementioned empirical results matter only instrumentally. Political ignorance or voter irrationality or the power of the wealthy do not seem to matter just because they lead to worse policy. They matter because they undermine the intrinsic value of democracy. Explaining the significance of empirical results relies on a truncated picture of democratic values.

Additionally, the ways in which these empirical results disquiet us would be peculiar were we disquieted solely by their consequences. It is very difficult to find out the consequences of any large-scale political phenomenon. Doing so requires careful comparative study. To establish the effects of political ignorance, for example, one would have to compare how polities with different

levels of political ignorance did with respect to policy. One could only be confident that political ignorance has bad effects if more voter ignorance went along with worse policy. The same goes for voter irrationality, myopia, blindness, and the lack of popular control over political elites. But almost nobody who is disquieted by the aforementioned empirical findings engages in the comparative study of their effects. The disquiet does not seem to require any real evidence that the relevant empirical phenomena are instrumentally bad. And this, too, is strong reason to think that our concern with them is not a solely instrumental concern. The upshot of this is that political science has given us a detailed account of how American democracy functions without providing us with a satisfactory evaluation of that functioning. Our empirical description of U.S. politics has outstripped our normative understanding of it.

The main aim of this book is to rectify this problem. It is to connect the enormous body of empirical work on how American democracy functions with contemporary thinking about what makes democracy valuable. In my view, equality and autonomy both constitute critical aspects of democracy's value. Democracy is intrinsically valuable because, on the one hand, it is essential for egalitarian social relationships and, on the other, it can make citizens joint authors of their political affairs. By connecting these values to empirical findings, we will achieve two things. First, we will illuminate the normative significance of those findings. We will show why such findings matter and why they disquiet or disturb us. Second, we will come to a comprehensive account of how well American democracy achieves democratic ideals. Most generally, doing this will combine the fruits of normative political theory with those of empirical political science. It will show the concrete application of theories about what makes democracy valuable and the normative import of results about how real-world democracies function.

The connection between equality, autonomy, and empirical results is complicated: it takes, roughly, a whole book to spell out. It is of course transparent in some cases. When the wealthy have much more power over policymaking than the poor, for example, this clearly impairs democratic equality. But, in most cases, the connection is opaquer. Consider political ignorance, or polarization, or voting on the basis of one's group identity rather than on policy issues. Do these undermine equality or self-rule? If so, how? The answers to these questions, I think, should not seem immediately obvious. To give the correct story of how each phenomenon undermines intrinsic democratic values requires thoroughly understanding those values and carefully connecting

them to the observed phenomena. Most of this book consists of giving the detailed explanations of how specific empirical findings matter to democratic values. Collectively, however, these specific explanations do generate a general conclusion. It is not a particularly surprising one: American democracy falls very far short of democratic ideals. It does not achieve democratic values to any substantial degree. When it comes to intrinsic democratic values, the United States is a failed democracy.

The secondary aim of this book is to explain why this matters. Typically, those who consider this question talk about institutional reform. The idea is that the failures of U.S. democracy mean that the United States should change its institutions. Pessimists think such failures mean we should give up on democratic decision-making. Walter Lippmann and Jason Brennan, for example, both claim that we should cede power to experts.²⁵ Optimists suggests American institutions can, with reform, achieve more of democracy's value. Achen and Bartels, for instance, propose campaign finance reform.²⁶ Such institutional reform proposals are often interesting and important. Yet they act as a mirror to princes—they make most sense when addressed to those who can actually affect the nature of our institutions. Unfortunately, very few of us are princes; very few of us have the ability to enact, or even much influence, institutional reforms. So, issues of institutional reform will not be my main focus (although I will have much to say about them). Instead, my focus is on ethical questions about our individual behavior. It is on how the failures of American democracy affect how we ought to act.

To answer these ethical questions, we must observe that there is a distinctive ethics of democracy. That means that citizens of well-functioning democracies have distinctive rights and duties. The most foundational part of this ethics concerns political obligations and political legitimacy. In democracies, citizens have moral obligations to obey the laws and those laws can be legitimately enforced. Neither is true in non-democracies. Citizens of autocracies don't make a moral mistake by disobeying the autocrat's edicts, nor can they be permissibly coerced on the basis of those edicts. Additionally, the ethics of democracy constrains the proper forms of political competition. Political competition in a well-functioning democracy is not a no-holds-barred conflict. You should respect the autonomy and care about the well-being of your opponents. You should avoid subordinating them in service to your political goals. And the ethics of democracy affects how you should participate in politics. This is clearest when we come to voting behavior. Citizens in

well-functioning democracies should think carefully about policy issues and then vote for what is best for the country as a whole. They fail in their civic duty if they vote incompetently or self-interestedly, or simply don't vote at all. These requirements all depend on democratic values. It is because democracy realizes certain intrinsic values that citizens of democracy are in a special normative situation.

The most radical claim I will make in this book is that the failures of American democracy undercuts the ethics of democracy. Because the United States does not achieve democratic values to any substantial degree, American citizens do not have the obligations that they would have in a well-functioning democracy. Most importantly, that means that American citizens are not obligated to obey the laws and those laws cannot be permissibly enforced. The failures of American democracy undermine the normative standing of the American state; they support a distinctive version of philosophical anarchism. Additionally, it means that American citizens, or at least many of them, are not bound by the constraints on competition and participation that would bind them in a well-functioning democracy. They needn't care much about their political opponents and they needn't vote in a public-spirited manner. So, the failures of American democracy matter to us ordinary people as well as to princes. Those failures have a profound impact on the rights and duties of all American citizens.

America and Beyond

My focus is on the contemporary United States. This is not, however, a book about current affairs: it's not, for example, a book about Donald Trump. I will sometimes touch on current affairs, but my focus is on deep features of American politics. These are features that go back much farther than 2016 and will not dissipate by 2024 or 2028. Some of these features are inextricably linked to current conflict in U.S. politics. In Chapter 7, for example, I'll discuss polarization. American politics has been polarizing for around forty years and this has provided the setting against which many current events have played out. But political ignorance, voter irrationality, and widespread apathy go back much farther than the 1970s. This is the background against which all American politics have played out, not just that of the last five or ten years. It is the import of such longstanding features of U.S. politics that I seek to illuminate.

My focus is on the United States, rather than on Switzerland or India or Germany. There are three reasons for this. First, the United States is objectively important. What happens in U.S. politics has more of an influence on the rest of the world than does what happens in any other country's politics. Second, and not unrelatedly, non-Americans are intensely interested in American politics. British people, for example, often have detailed views about domestic U.S. disputes but know very little about those of India or Italy. Third, and most importantly, American democracy is the most empirically well-studied democracy in the world. This is because the United States contains disproportionately many of the world's political scientists and such people tend to study the country they live in. This means we know much more about how American politics works than we do about how Swedish or Brazilian politics work, and so we can talk much more concretely about the failures of American democracy than about those of these other states.

One might reasonably wonder, though, how much of what I have to say generalizes beyond the U.S. case. Many of my conclusions in this book are straightforwardly normative. They are conclusions about what makes democracy valuable and how the achievement of those values connects to the rights and duties of citizens. These, I believe, apply to any democracy whatsoever. Many of the conclusion are about how empirical phenomena connect to such democratic values. These apply, in conditional form, to any democracy whatsoever. For example, I will argue that political ignorance undermines the achievement of self-rule. The claim is not that political ignorance in the United States alone undermines said achievement but rather that political ignorance in any country undermines that achievement. Both normative and conditional claims, then, generalize universally.

Yet I also come to more concrete conclusions about U.S. democracy—I come to conclusions about the ways in which it falls short of democratic ideals. One might wonder the extent to which these conclusions generalize to other democracies. Here, it is useful to distinguish between two different kinds of democratic failure: elite-level failures and mass-level failures. Elite-level failures are failures that have the most to do with the features of political elites. They consist in how the features of political elites undermine the achievement of democratic values. These include the lack of popular control elected representatives are under, the influence of money and interest groups on American policymaking, and the fact that, when representatives do listen to their constituents, they mainly listen to their own supporters. Mass-level failures have the most to do with the features of ordinary

citizens. They consist in how the features of the mass public undermine the achievement of democratic values. These include the cognitive shortcomings of ordinary citizens, their voting behavior, and the various kinds of polarization in American society. These different kinds of failure generalize to different degrees.

Mass-level democratic failures often do generalize. Consider, for instance, political ignorance. It may be that American voters don't know much about American politics. But they are not dramatically less informed than voters in other democracies. It's not as if French or Brazilian voters know much more about politics than do American voters, or that British voters are fixated on policy issues while American voters ignore them.²⁷ Findings about voting behavior and cognitive sophistication seem to extend to most large democracies. Matters are obviously different when it comes to polarization—not every democracy is polarized to the same extent as American democracy. However, many countries have experienced a similar sort of polarization to that in the United States. Hungary, Poland, Turkey and Thailand are all good examples. In each case, society has divided into two mutually antagonistic groups and this has led to serious political conflict.²⁸ What I say about polarization in the American context applies to these other countries.

Elite-level democratic failures less clearly generalize. Some perhaps don't generalize to other developed countries much at all. Money talks so loudly in American politics because of America's weak campaign finance restrictions. Plausibly, it talks much more quietly in the politics of Western European countries because they have saner campaign finance laws.²⁹ Some are more likely to generalize, but we lack the evidence to know for sure. It is, for example, very plausible that Australian politicians listen more to their own supporters than to other people, but I know of no quantitative evidence for this claim. The status of popular control of elected representatives is also a little unclear. It is plausible that, in many countries (India, for example), representatives are under no more popular control than they are in the United States. But it is also plausible that, in some countries (Sweden, for instance), representatives are under tighter popular control than they are in the U.S. We need more empirical work on these issues to establish exactly the extent to which the elite-level failures of U.S. democracy occur in other polities. My hope is that by establishing the normative import of such questions one can encourage such work to be conducted. But, in any case, I take the U.S. case to be important enough to avoid letting normative exploration hinge on a fully generalizable empirical investigation.

The Plan

The book is split into four parts. Part I concerns democratic ideals and democratic ethics. This involves articulating a comprehensive account of intrinsic democratic values and connecting these values to the rights and duties of citizens. Part II and Part III make up the core of the book. The chapters in these parts are organized around specific democratic failures. In Part II, I explore failures that concern the elite level of American politics—that is, failures that hinge on the features of political elites. In Part III, I explore failures that concern the mass-level of American politics—those that hinge on the features of ordinary citizens. In the final part of the book, Part IV, I sum up the picture of American democracy I've painted in the preceding chapters and make clear its consequences for both institutional design and the normative situation of those subject to the American state. Each chapter is self-contained and so they can be read in whatever order the reader wishes, but it is best to read Chapter 1 before turning to the rest of the book.

I'll now give a more detailed plan for the book. In Chapter 1, I advance my account of what makes democracy valuable. My account is pluralistic. On the one hand, democracy helps realize equality. This has a negative and a positive aspect. Negatively, democracy helps undermine objectionably inegalitarian relationships—relationships akin to caste hierarchies. Positively, democracy helps realize attractive egalitarian relationships—relationships akin to friendship. On the other hand, democracy helps realize self-rule. It helps ensure that political affairs manifest the will of the people. This, too, has a positive and a negative aspect. Negatively, democracy helps mitigate the standing threat government coercion poses to its citizens' freedom—the threat coercion anywhere poses to freedom. Positively, it helps realize an attractive kind of collective autonomy—a notion of autonomy on which citizens are joint authors of their social and political affairs. I outline each of these values and show how my account of them is superior to alternative accounts.

In Chapter 2, I connect democratic values to the rights and duties of citizens. Partly, this involves arguing that the state's authority hinges on achieving democratic values: when a state achieves neither democratic equality nor self-rule for its citizens, those citizens lack a duty to obey its laws. This is because, on the one hand, achieving these values is a prerequisite for many traditional accounts of how political authority ought to work. On the other hand, in non-democracies, citizens have positive reason to avoid obeying the law. That reason is egalitarian: obeying autocratic laws exacerbates inequality. Additionally,

I argue that state legitimacy hinges on achieving democratic values: when a state does not achieve many of these values, it may not coercively enforce its laws. The argument here involves identifying a very weighty objection to coercion and arguing that this objection can only be disabled by achieving democratic values. The upshot of these arguments is that democracy is deontically distinctive: only democratic states have authority and legitimacy.

In Chapter 3, I argue that American legislators are not under much popular control. The empirical evidence in this chapter concerns how legislators vote in Congress. Members of Congress do not vote as they would were they under the control of their constituents. This matters because popular control is necessary to reconcile representative democracy with democratic equality. On the face of it, representative democracies are not egalitarian institutions: representatives have much more power than ordinary citizens. Were representatives under popular control, this would be anodyne; that they are not means it undermines equality. Additionally, I explore what institutions might help with this problem. I argue that directly democratic institutions would do the trick. Greater use of initiatives and referendums would help ameliorate the issues caused by the lack of popular control over representatives.

In Chapter 4, I explore the import of wealth and organized interest groups in American politics. First, I bring together the empirical evidence that money begets political power in the United States. This is straightforwardly problematic for both self-rule and democratic equality. Additionally, I evaluate the case for campaign finance reform as an institutional response to this problem. Second, I look at the empirical evidence on interest group power in the United States. Here the evidence is that businesses dominate the universe of interest groups and that, within non-business interest groups, those that represent the more privileged strata of society are more powerful. These facts undercut self-rule by severing the causal link between citizen preferences and government policies and undercut equality by granting interest group leaders and people who are represented by powerful interest groups excessive political power.

In Chapter 5, I focus on two empirical phenomena: alternation and inertia. The first phenomenon consists in the fact that the parties alternate in power and, when in power, each party listens mainly to its own supporters. The second phenomenon consists in the fact that it is very difficult for even a majority party to change policy in the American political system. I explore how these phenomena interact with democratic values. The normatively interesting thing about this task is that both these phenomena are temporal

phenomena, in that they involve essential reference to temporal change. Thus, understanding their significance requires spelling out an account of the temporal dimensions of democratic values. I defend demanding accounts of these dimensions. In my view, democratic equality requires equal power at every time and self-rule requires that government policies are the product of intentions you still have at the time those policies are enacted. This means alternation undermines equality and inertia impairs self-rule.

In Chapter 6, I look at the cognitive shortcomings of ordinary citizens. We're ignorant: we don't know much about politics. We're irrational: we bend the evidence to show our side in the best possible light. And we're malleable: we let political elites determine our political opinions. I argue that these shortcomings make achieving much of the value of self-rule impossible. This is because achieving this value requires autonomously influencing what our government does. The problem arises from the fact that there are epistemic and independence conditions on autonomy. To act autonomously, we must know about the consequences of our actions. And our actions must be, in a certain sense, independent of other people: we cannot merely be someone else's puppet. The ignorance and irrationality of ordinary citizens violate the epistemic condition of autonomy. Our malleability violates the independence condition. Thus, the features of ordinary citizens make it very difficult for them to rule themselves.

In Chapter 7, I investigate how the polarization of American politics interacts with democratic values. This requires distinguishing between different kinds of polarization. One kind of polarization consists in the political parties at the elite level getting further apart ideologically. I argue that this is good for self-rule. It gives citizens more diverse options. A second kind of polarization is affective—it consists in ordinary citizens of different parties loathing one another. This undermines democratic equality: it replaces attractive relationships of civic friendship with intrinsically objectionable relationships of civic enmity. The third and fourth kind of polarization are both more Republican than Democratic phenomena. They consist in Republican officeholders trading the public good for partisan advantage and in the growing authoritarianism of the Republican Party. These both undermine democratic equality. They also transform the normative situation of Democrats. In a well-functioning democracy, there are certain constraints about how one may compete politically. One must try to justify policies on public grounds and one must avoid subordinating one's opposition. The asymmetric violation of these constraints by Republican officials means that Democrats are not bound by them.

In Chapter 8, we turn to the import of different kinds of voting behavior. When voting, citizens have many motivations. Some vote on issues. They vote for a candidate because they share that candidate's policy positions. Some vote on performance. They vote for a candidate because they think that that candidate will produce the best outcomes in office. Some vote on group identities. They vote for a candidate because that candidate is connected to their social group. I begin by surveying the evidence on the prevalence of each kind of voting behavior. Issue voting is actually very rare: most voters are mainly driven by the incumbent's performance or by their group identities. I argue that this makes it very difficult for citizen preferences to be manifested in policies. And, more distinctively, it severs civic friendships. Specifically, when privileged groups vote on group identities, they fail to be committed to the equality of their fellow citizens. I then explore how, in these non-ideal conditions, American voters ought to vote. Were America an ideal democracy, American voters would have reason to vote on the issues. But, in reality, American voters merely have reason to avoid voting on privileged group identities.

The concluding chapter, Chapter 9, sums up the ways in which American democracy falls short of democratic ideals and reiterates why these shortfalls matter. The failures of American democracy are multifarious and deep. Collectively, they mean that American democracy realizes very little of what makes democracy valuable. From Chapter 2, we have the premise that authority and legitimacy hinge on democratic values. It follows that the American state lacks authority and legitimacy. Additionally, I explore the institutional reforms that are supported by this conclusion. In part, these are directly democratic reforms—greater use of the initiative and referendums would improve U.S. democracy. However, the failures of U.S. democracy also undercut the argument against technocratic governing institutions. Institutions that give more power to unelected bureaucrats or judges, rather than elected legislators, are more defensible when legislatures achieve little that is of democratic value. The upshot of this is that the failures of American democracy, as charted in Chapters 3–8, have far-reaching consequences for practical issues.