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Democracy: Optimal Illusions and Grim Realities

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The nature of democracy has been debated for several millennia as philosophers and other thinkers have speculated about what it is, what it might become, and what it ought to be. After democracy actually came into being in large countries some 200 years ago, however, a remarkable dilemma emerged.

On the one hand, democracy worked rather well by the values most theorists and idealists have held to be important. When compared to competing forms of government and methods for organizing society, democracy has characteristically produced societies that have been humane, flexible, productive, and vigorous, and under this system leaders have somehow emerged who at least in comparison with your average string of kings or czars or dictators have generally been responsive, responsible, able, and dedicated.

On the other hand, democracy didn't come out looking the way many theorists and idealists imagined it could or should. It has been characterized by a great deal of unsightly and factionalized squabbling by self interested, shortsighted people and groups, and its policy outcomes have often been the result of a notably unequal contest over who could most adroitly pressure and manipulate the system. Even more distressingly, the citizenry seems disinclined to display anything remotely resembling the deliberative qualities many theorists have been inclined to see as a central requirement for the system to work properly. Indeed, far from becoming the attentive, if unpolished, public policy wonks espoused in many of the theories and images, real people in real democracies often display an almost monumental lack of political interest and knowledge.

Inspired by their optimal illusion and confounded by grim democratic reality, disappointed theorists, idealists, and reformers have generally taken one of two courses to deal with this mismatch. One is to retreat into the vapor and to conclude that democracy, as it turns out, doesn't really exist at all, but that it is just some sort of attractive goal. Thus, in February 1990, Czechoslovak president Václav Havel patiently explained to the Congress of the world's oldest democracy that the country it represented still hadn't made it and, actually, never would: "As long as people are people, democracy in the full sense of the word will always be no more than an ideal; one may approach it as one would a horizon, in ways that may be better or worse, but it can never be fully attained. In this sense you are also merely approaching democracy".²

The other recourse is to stress dilemma. For example, one analysis first notes that, "in theory, a democracy requires knowledgeable citizens," and then goes on to observe that "for the last 200 years the United States has survived as a stable democracy, despite continued evidence of an uninformed public." It labels this "the paradox of modern democracy".³

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Inspired by such thinking, democratic theorists, idealists, and reformers have sought to perfect the system, attempting to refashion democratic institutions and their human constituents to more nearly approximate the qualities called for in the theories and in the ideals that derive from some of the theories. As part of this effort, reformers have frequently tried to make the process more politically equal and to control the play of "special interests." They have also sought to elevate democracy's constituents to match such rarified images as the one projected by John F. Kennedy: "Democracy is a difficult kind of government. It requires the highest qualities of self-discipline, restraint, a willingness to make commitments and sacrifices for the general interest, and it also requires knowledge" [4](#)

By contrast, it seems to me that the fault in the mismatch between democracy's image and its reality lies more with the ideals than with the facts, more in the stars than in ourselves, as Shakespeare's Cassius didn't put it. After all, if my theory tells me the moon is made of green cheese and then a spacepersonage inconveniently brings home a lunar soil sample composed entirely of dirt and rock, even my closest friends would be disinclined to label the resulting conundrum a "paradox." Most people would be so ungracious as to suggest that my theory has been soundly disconfirmed. And they would probably deride any effort to implant the moon with green cheese in order to make it more closely resemble my theory.

Nonetheless, many of those exalting the democratic ideal hold that things would be much better if democracy in practice were more nearly to approach its attractive theoretical ideal. They urge, therefore, that there should be continual efforts to make people more equal politically and to refashion democratic decisionmaking so that it is more nearly a process of deliberative consensus carried out, or watched over, by a citizenry that is active and enlightened or at least knowledgeable.

Often these reforms seem to be advocated for their own sake. That is, it is held to be important for democracies to more closely approximate the democratic ideal because it is important for democracies to more closely approximate the democratic ideal. Sidney Verba and Norman Nie, for example, declare that "if democracy is interpreted as rule by the people then...the more participation there is in decisions, the more democracy there is" [5](#) They do not maintain that decisions or policies will somehow be objectively better that is, they do not suggest that there is something wrong, even rotten, in, say, the state of Switzerland, and then argue that a higher voter turnout there would likely fix it. Rather, reformers often essentially conclude that participation or equality or deliberation or knowledge are important for their own sake.

I do not necessarily oppose the reformers' efforts, but I think it unlikely, realistically, that much progress can be made. And in this paper I suggest there may actually be some negative consequences to the quest to close the very considerable mismatch between the democratic idealists impossible dream and what I take to be its grimy and unavoidable reality.

To begin with, it seems to me that constantly stressing the clash between democracy's shining ideal image and its decidedly unlovely reality often induces, or at any rate reinforces, a cynicism about the democratic process that is uncomprehending and mostly (though not entirely) undesirable. The cynicism about the form so commonly found in democracies, and so often lamented by democratic idealists, in fact is partly maybe even substantially caused by them.

Second, I suggest that the continual overselling of equality by democratic idealists has encouraged the rise of a destructive and profoundly antidemocratic form I call it hyperdemocracy when this ideal is transferred to the economic realm. At various times, important activists, like Vladimir Lenin, have come to the (correct) conclusion that democracy allows the rich minority to protect its advantages and thus that democracy cannot deliver anything like strict economic

equality. Therefore, they have sensibly, if murderously, concluded that the only way to achieve true economic equality is to crush democracy itself.

I argue, third, that adherence to the democratic image can logically lead some minorities to fear that, if the form is actually about equality, majority rule, and active participation, they stand to be persecuted in a democracy. In fact, it happens that democracy has a rather good, if far from perfect, record for dealing with minorities in large part because selective minority agitation is facilitated by majority apathy or inattentiveness. But minorities can be led to rebel in misguided desperation if they take the democratic ideal too seriously.

Finally, I append a few cautionary comments about the burgeoning field of transitology which sometimes tends to advance a perspective that can inspire a damaging short term perspective in new democracies, and I also question the usefulness of the concept of "democratic consolidation."

Cynicism about the Democratic Process

Democratic reformers, theorists, and image makers often express alarm at the almost palpable cynicism routinely expressed by the public in democracies, both ones which have been around for a while and ones which have only recently emerged. Indeed, cynicism about the form seems to be the quality people most quickly pick up when their country turns democratic.[6](#)

A number of studies argue that things have gotten worse on this score lately, at least in the United States, where it is held that cynicism, discontent, frustration, and a sense of disempowerment and helplessness have markedly increased since the 1960s. For example, in a provocative recent book Michael Sandel points to polls showing that more people in the 1990s than in the 1960s say they distrust government to do what is right, think it wastes a lot of money, and feel it is run by a few big interests rather than for the benefit of all. He blames this increase on Vietnam, the assassinations of Robert Kennedy and Martin Luther King (but not on the inconveniently early one of John Kennedy), Watergate, the inflation of the 1970s, oil shocks, the Iran hostage crisis, the stagnation of middle class incomes, the escalating deficit, crime, drugs, urban decay, and various other problems. Others, like Robert Putnam, add that there has also been an alarming decline in interpersonal trust over that period and attribute this to congenial press negativism or to that perennial receiver of brickbats, television.[7](#)

Interestingly, Sandel and Putnam do not notably allege so much that government has actually become less competent or trustworthy or more wasteful or interest dominated, but only that people have come to feel that this is so. Thus, Sandel argues that people feel a "loss of mastery" or a "sense of disempowerment," not that they actually have less "mastery" or "empowerment" than in days of old.[8](#) The problem, therefore, apparently is not so much with reality as with perception.

The implications of these studies is that trust and confidence in the United States have traditionally, that is, until the middle or late 1960s, been high. But quite a bit of data suggest that, although expressions of cynicism may have been relatively low in the early 1960s, the seeming increase in cynicism and distrust since that time is more nearly a return to normal levels. Consider, for example, the responses of Americans to two questions asked at various points over the last half century:

	If you had a son, would you like him to go into politics as a life's work?			Do you think most people can be trusted?	
	Yes	No		Yes	No
1945	21	68	1948	66	30
1953	20	70	1952	68	30
1955	26	60	1953	57	39
1962	23	69	Jan 1954	62	34
1965	36	54	Nov 1954	66	32
1973	23	64	1957	75	22
1991	24	72	1963	77	21
1993	22	70	1983	56	56
1994	25	71			
1995	32	63			

Similarly, turnout rates reached a sort of peak in the early 1960s and afterwards returned to more normal levels, and confidence in the United States Congress peaked in the mid 1960s before declining again. More broadly, there is good reason to believe that political participation even in the "golden years" of American politics before the Civil War were, contrary to the usual supposition, marked mainly by apathy and political cynicism.⁹

In addition, if one examines the 1945-60 period when, according to Sandel, a "sense of mastery prevailed" it is quite easy to generate a list of calamities that rivals the one he delineates for the later one: food and housing shortages, continuous labor unrest, the rise of the Cold War, the fall of China, McCarthyism, Communist victory in Indochina, racial tensions over school integration, the continuous humiliations due to Sputnik and the space race, the rise of Castro, various scandals over corruption in the government, incompetence at Suez, US impotence when Soviet tanks crushed Hungarian independence, the arms race, continuing crises over Berlin, the looming threat of thermonuclear war, and, above all, the Korean War.¹⁰

In fact, during Sandel's age of mastery a huge sociological or pop sociological literature was spawned about "alienation," "lonely crowds," the sameness of ticky-tacky suburban developments, conformity, and grey flannel suits, as well as about how terrible it was that American soldiers allowed themselves to be brainwashed in Korea, that the clean cut Charles Van Doren lied on a prime time television quiz show, and that CIA spy Francis Gary Powers neglected to kill himself when his U2 spy plane was downed over the Soviet Union.¹¹

Thus, even granting that political cynicism may have risen in recent decades, the quality itself seems more nearly to be a constant than a variable quality in American politics. And while this rise of cynicism may be mostly undesirable, it is hardly terminal: long and extensive experience with democracy suggests that E.J. Dionne is patently wrong when he argues that "a nation that hates politics will not long survive as a democracy" as is Michael Nelson when he asserts that democracy "cannot long endure on a foundation of cynicism and indifference".¹²

To counter such lamentable, or at any rate widely lamented, qualities, democratic thinkers have resolved to reform the democracies and the peoples who make them up more nearly to approximate their ideal images of what it, and they, should be like. Thus, Sandel suggests that democracy "depends" on a "civic life" which we must "restore" (thereby implying

that it once really existed). This apparently means we must share in self rule which in turn requires "the capacity to deliberate well about the common good," which further implies that "citizens must possess certain excellences of character, judgment, and concern for the whole." A tall agenda, clearly, but he sees hope for "our impoverished civic life" in campaigns like those in New England against WalMart stores where "civic values" triumph over "consumer values" and people (that is, groups of dedicated, self-interested agitators) array themselves around such uplifting slogans as "I'd rather have a viable community than a cheap pair of underwear".¹³

Putnam also tends to idolize town meeting decision making, and he urges the reversal of what he perceives to be "a broad and continuing erosion of civic engagement" and consequently of "social capital".¹⁴ Like Sandel, however, he writes at a time in which the American economy is soaring, and he fails to indicate that the trend he laments has actually had any tangible negative policy consequences.

In contrast to these perspectives, it seems to me that democratic cynicism stems not as much from the inadequacies of people or of democracy as from the ministrations of the image makers: people contrast democratic reality with its ideal image, note a huge discrepancy, and logically become cynical about the process. If cynicism about the form is a problem, what may need to be reformed is not so much the system as the theory and perhaps the theorists.

I should stress again that I do not hold efforts to increase political equality, deliberative consensus, participation, and knowledge necessarily to be undesirable. However, I do think that long experience with democracy suggests that it is hopeless to imagine that things can be changed a great deal. Inequality, disagreement, apathy, and ignorance seem to be normal, not abnormal, in a democracy, and to a considerable degree the beauty of the form is that it works despite these qualities or, in some important respects, because of them.¹⁵

The Quest for Political Equality

The notion that all men are created equal suggests that people are born equal that is, that none should necessarily be denied political opportunity merely because of their hereditary entrance into the wrong social or economic class or because they do not adhere to the visions or dictates of a particular ideological group. The notion does not suggest, however, that people must necessarily be equal in their impact on the political system, but this damaging extrapolation is often made by reformers, at least as a goal to be quested after.

An extensive study on the issue of equality by a team of political scientists finds, none too surprisingly, that people in a real democracy like the United States differ in the degree to which they affect the political system. Political effectiveness, the study concludes, depends on three varying factors: resources, especially time, money, and skills; psychological engagement with politics; and "access to networks through which individuals can be recruited to political life." The variance of effectiveness, the authors then conclude, poses a "threat to the democratic principle of equal protection of interests." Another analyst, reviewing their findings, makes a similar observation: "liberal democracies fail to live up to the norm of equal responsiveness to the interests of each citizen".¹⁶

But instead of seeking to reform the system or the people who make it up, we may want instead to abandon, or at least substantially to modify, the principle and the norm. They clearly express a romantic perspective about democracy, a perspective which has now been fully and repeatedly disconfirmed in practice. Democracies are responsive and attentive to the interests of

the citizenry at least when compared to other forms of government but they are nowhere near equally responsive to the interests of each citizen.

Related is the perennial clamor against "special interests." As the futile struggle for campaign finance reform in the United States suggests, people who want or need to influence public policy are very likely to find ways to do so no matter how clever the laws that seek to restrict them. As Gil Troy observes, "for all the pious hopes, the goal of the Watergate era reforms to remove the influence of money from presidential elections was, in hard and inescapable fact, ridiculous." (He also notes that the entire cost of the 1996 elections was about 25 percent of what Procter & Gamble routinely spends every year to market its products.) A rare voice of realism amid all the sanctimonious, politically correct bluster from politicians about campaign finance reform in the United States in the 1990s was that of Senator Robert Bennett of Utah: "rich people will always have influence in politics, and the solution is not to create barriers that cause the rich people to spend even more money to hire lawyers and consultants to find ways around the law to get the same results".[.17](#)

In the end, "special interests" can be effectively reined in only by abandoning democracy itself because their activities are absolutely vital to the form. Indeed, it is quite incredible that two prominent Washington reporters merely deem it "simplistic" to argue that "people with common interests should not attempt to sway government policy." In a democracy the free, competitive play of "special interests" is fundamental. To reform this out of existence would be uncomprehending and profoundly antidemocratic.[.18](#)

Most of the agitation against political inequality is focused on the special privileges business is presumed to enjoy. For example, concern is voiced that the attention of public officials can be differently arrested: "a phone call from the CEO of a major employer in the district may carry considerably more weight than one from an unknown constituent".[.19](#) It is possible, of course, that the unweighty and unknown constituent has just come up with a plan which will achieve permanent worldwide bliss in the course of the next six months, but, since there are only 24 hours in a day, public officials (like the rest of us) are forced to ration their time, and they are probably correct to assume, as a first approximation at least, that the concerns of a major employer are likely to be of wider relevance to more people than are those of the hapless lone constituent.

But if the CEO's access advantage to a timepressured politician is somehow reprehensible and must be reformed, what about other inequalities that is, why focus only on economic ones? A telephone call from a big time political columnist like David Broder of the Washington Post is likely to get the politician's attention even faster than that of the CEO. Should the influential David Broder hold off on his next column until the rest of us deserving unknowns have had a chance to put in our two cents in the same forum? Inequalities like these are simply and unavoidably endemic to the whole political system as, indeed, they are to life itself. It may be possible to reduce this inequality, but it is difficult to imagine a reform that could possibly raise the political impact of the average factory worker or even of the average business executive remotely to equal that enjoyed by Broder.

Robert Dahl aptly notes that "significant inequalities in power have been a universal feature of human relationships throughout recorded history; they exist today in all democratic systems." This, he concludes, "falls short of the criteria of the democratic process" and the result is a "serious problem for democratic theory and practice".[.20](#) But it seems to me that the "serious problem" may lie not so much with the universal fact of inequality, but rather with the theory and

with the "criteria of the democratic process" which, as Dahl essentially suggests, have clearly, repeatedly, consistently, and overwhelmingly been demonstrated to be fanciful.

Dahl, on the other hand, seeks to come up with a method by means of which citizens can "possess the political resources they would require in order to participate in political life pretty much as equals." He doesn't suggest that pretty much all of us should have something like an equal crack at the oped page of the Washington Post, but he does place quite a bit of hope in "telecommunications." These, he suggests, could be used to provide "virtually every citizen" with "information about public issues" and to establish "interactive systems" to "participate in discussions with experts, policymakers, and fellow citizens".[.21](#)

Perhaps because newspapers, magazines, television, libraries, public meetings, telephones, and talk radio already supply much of this, and perhaps because most people freely choose to ignore this mass of readily available information, Dahl then essentially seems to abandon the equality theme by suggesting that what we really need is simply "a critical mass of well informed citizens large enough and active enough to anchor the process, an 'attentive public,' as Gabriel Almond put it many years ago," favorably citing a book written forty years earlier that concluded that such a helpful elite group already substantially exists.[.22](#)

Finally, Dahl resolves to save elective democracy for the future almost it seems by proposing to abandon it. To guarantee that at least part of the attentive public be "representative," he suggests that a group of some thousand citizens be selected by random methods (rather than by elective ones) and that it then be forced or hired to deliberate issues of the day (by telecommunications) and from time to time to "announce its choices." These choices would complement those made by elected bodies that already happen to exist and would "derive their authority from the legitimacy of democracy." Using methods like this, "citizens in an advanced democratic country would discover others" and "the democratic process could be adapted once again to a world that little resembles the world in which democratic ideas and practices first came to life." Such romantic devices are necessary, Dahl concludes thunderingly, because "the democracy of our successors will not and cannot be the democracy of our predecessors".[.23](#) In my opinion, it clearly will and it just as clearly can.

The Quest for Deliberative Consensus

Rather than accepting democracy for what centuries of experience have shown it to be, many democrats both in old democracies like the U.S. and in new ones like those in post Communist Europe get angry when democracy allows them to watch the process in all its chaotic, unkempt finery. Instead of accepting Bismarck's wisdom comparing the making of laws to the making of sausages, many people continue to quest for an illusive, and, I think, illusory, ideal, one which suggests that lawmaking under democracy, in contrast to all other sorts, should be characterized by careful deliberation and consensual resolution in which the views of honest and naive little people, like moviemaker Frank Capra's mythical Mr. Smith, should eventually prevail.[.24](#)

Thus Dionne lauds "the belief that self government is not a drab necessity but a joy to be treasured," in which "politics is not simply a grubby confrontation of competing interests but an area in which citizens can learn from each other and discover an 'enlightened self interest'".[.25](#) However, in real world decisionmaking grubbiness almost always prevails over joy for the simple, elemental reason that people happen to disagree, often profoundly, about many key issues.[.26](#) People seem to have an aversion to haggling, and in result the practice has been virtually eliminated at the retail level in advanced capitalist countries. A comparable aversion to

political contention, however, cannot be serviced because contention is both inevitable and necessary. Nonetheless, people contrast Bismarkian grubbiness with the image projected by Dionne and others, and they often come to dismiss it all as unseemly bickering "politics as usual" and become cynical. Effectively, however, politics as usual is the same as democracy in action.

Thus, in the United States, Congress and the President often slump in popularity whenever they are caught in the act of trying to solve or resolve a difficult and contentious problem. In October 1990, for example, President George Bush and the Democrats went at each other over the budget: there was a difficult deficit to confront, and this required such painful remedies as spending cuts or tax increases or (as it turned out) both. In due course they worked out a sensible compromise, but people, incensed over all the furor, started screaming as the cover of the October 22, 1990 issue of U.S. News and World Report headlined to "throw the bums out." The popularity of both Congress and the President reached conspicuous lows.[27](#)

A bit more recently, it could be argued that the health care debate in the United States in 1993 and 1994 showed democracy at its finest. A problem the voters had sensibly determined to be important was addressed and debated. President Bill Clinton had a solution, others in Congress had theirs, affected interested groups appropriately weighed in with theirs, and months of thoughtful and nuanced (if sometimes confusing and boring) discussion of this difficult topic took place. Admittedly, a solution (apparent or real) to this complicated concern was not smoothly worked out in two years of effort, but the problem did not have to be solved immediately, and there was plenty of time in the next years to come up with judicious remedies with this groundwork laid something, indeed, that substantially happened. Yet voters, few of whom paid much attention to the substance of the often tedious debate, dismissed it all as "bickering," cried "gridlock," and often became angry and cynical.[28](#)

Two of Washington's top reporters, David Broder and Haynes Johnson, have written a book on this episode. In tone and substance the book continually suggests that the system failed in the health care debate indeed, that the public was "duped." Despite the abundant evidence arrayed in their book of the wide ranging discussion that took place on the issue, they somehow manage to conclude that a "great public debate" about health care never occurred. Yet the authors acknowledge that "Where no strong consensus exists, major change should wait" which is exactly what happened.[29](#)

As they note, the experience may have heightened popular cynicism about the process. However, some of that came from books like theirs which suggest that democracy really ought somehow to be different from what history has regularly and consistently shown it to be: a disorderly, manipulative, but often remarkably productive, muddle.

At any rate, after this experience, the popularity both of the President and of Congress predictably plummeted. Exacting revenge in the 1994 elections for the unpleasant untidiness, the voters threw out many of the leading bums, particularly the ones who had started the contentious debate in response to the voters' earlier concerns. Thus, an analysis of exit polls in the election finds "no unifying theme" among the voters except for "an overall distaste for government." It suggests Clinton got the election's message, such as it was, when he concluded that the voters were saying "Look, we just don't like what we see when we watch Washington. And you haven't done much about that. It's too partisan, too interest group oriented, things don't get done. There's too many people up there playing politics".[30](#)

Emerging from this experience was a swelling demand for term limits and perhaps for a third party under two quite remarkable assumptions: 1) that the voters elected under such altered

conditions will behave notably different from the ones elected under the present ones, and 2) that people are somehow being unfairly manipulated when, despite their vigorously expressed cynicism about politicians, they regularly and overwhelmingly reelect incumbents.³¹

When politicians respond to what they think their constituents want they are routinely accused of "pandering to public opinion" and of "doing anything to be elected." When they go in a direction different from what public opinion seems to dictate, they are accused of "ignoring the will of the people" and "pandering to special interests." If they have sharp differences, they are accused of polarizing the situation, "encouraging an 'either/or' politics based on ideological preconceptions rather than a 'both/and' politics based on ideas that broadly unite us".³² If they manage to agree, they are accused of selling out principle for a Tweedledum and Tweedledee metooism. It's a tough racket.

Related is the concern about "negative campaigning." The implication of such criticism, apparently, is that if politicians can't say something nice about other politicians, they shouldn't say anything at all. As William Riker has observed, however, by any standard of what reasonable discourse should be like, there is nothing wrong or indecent about negative campaigning if it helps to differentiate candidates and issues as it almost always does. Moreover, it is a commonplace in democratic campaigns, never more so than in the intensely contentious ratification campaign for the since sanctified United States Constitution.³³

In an important study of political campaigning, Stephen Ansolabehere and Shanto Iyengar find that campaign advertising including negative advertising "informs voters about the candidates' positions and makes it more likely that voters will take their own preferences on the issues into account when choosing between the candidates." Therefore they conclude that political advertising, particularly television advertising, "actually fosters the democratic ideals of an informed and reasoning electorate."

However, at the same time Ansolabehere and Iyengar are greatly concerned because negative campaign advertising increases the voters' cynicism about the electoral process and because it is taken by some voters, particularly nonpartisan ones, to be "a signal of the dysfunctional and unresponsive nature of the political process itself," causing them to lose interest in voting, thereby "eroding the participatory ethos of the American public." To help "short circuit this cycle of negativity," they consider several remedies. One might be to encourage journalists and media watchers to police the ads, but they find that this approach gives the negative ads even more play and that the negativity of press coverage of negative ads only adds to the problem. More promising, they suggest, is to charge candidates more for negative ads than for positive ones and to strengthen party campaign organizations on the (highly dubious) grounds that "party centered campaigns remove the incentive to air personal attacks".³⁴

Thus, on the one hand a study finds that negative advertising clarifies and informs; on the other that it alienates some members of the voting public who have, despite hundreds of years of disconfirmation, fallen for the mythical notion that democracy is about deliberative consensus. The fault clearly lies with the myth, not with the reality, but instead of seeking to abandon the endlessly attractive, if thoroughly discredited myth, we are urged to mellow the reality in hopes that it will somehow come to resemble it.³⁵

At any rate, like other democratic values and practices, negativity does seem to be something new democracies pick up with considerable ease. A report from Paraguay after a mere two years of experience with the political form observed that "newspaper, television, and radio reports are filled with mudslinging worthy of the most mature democracy".³⁶ That, it seems, is the way democracy is. To be deeply offended by it is fundamentally misguided.

The problem in all this, as John Hibbing and Elizabeth Theiss Morse have aptly put it, is that people lack "an appreciation for the ugliness of democracy." In fact, "true democratic processes in any realistic environment are bound to be slow, to be built on compromise, and to make apparent the absence of clean, certain answers to important questions of the day." Yet, people want "both procedural efficiency and procedural equity," a sort of "stealth democracy".³⁷

Actually, the unpleasantness is not really peculiar to democracy; it applies to lawmaking more generally. The problem is heightened in a democracy because all interests can participate, because people are allowed freely to speak their minds thereby enhancing its natural disorderliness and also because the decisionmaking process is comparatively open in all its rampant, chaotic, appalling finery.³⁸ Reformers and idealists who yearn for consensus and closure only enhance the public's unrealistic and uncomprehending misperception, and consequently they heighten cynicism about the process.

There are a number of potential solutions to this problem, if problem it be. One, of course, is for lawmakers simply not to appear to do much of anything, and, indeed, in early 1998 when the most visible accomplishment of the American Congress was to rename an airport, the popularity of the institution soared.³⁹ But this approach is clearly infeasible overall, and it is hardly desirable from the standpoint of decision making. Nor is an effort to make decision making less grubby likely to be either successful or sensible. Even Hibbing and Theiss Morse toy with the suggestions that "ways must be found to limit the influence of key actors" like interest groups, and that "important steps need to be taken to reassure people that monied interests are not getting preferential treatment".⁴⁰ But the interplay of interests (virtually all of them "monied") is at the very heart of the process, and it simply cannot and should not go away. Moreover, some interests will inevitably get "preferential treatment" that is, what they want while others will not.

More hopeful, following another suggestion of Hibbing and Theiss Morse, might be to seek to educate the public more nearly to understand and appreciate democracy's inevitable and congenital ugliness. However, because of the popular and apparently universal belief tirelessly fostered by democratic theorists and idealists that democracy really ought to be much different than it has always and everywhere been, this effort, too, is unlikely to be very successful. Nonetheless, it might be refreshing sometime to hear a politician and even the occasional educator rise above sanctimony for a moment and frankly admit that "special interests," far from being a distorting evil, are what the whole thing is all about, and that, in the words of playwright John Mortimer, "freedom is perpetual fussing".⁴¹

The Quest for Participation

Democratic theorists, idealists, and imagemakers maintain that "democratic states require...participation in order to flourish," or that "a politically active citizenry is a requisite of any theory of democracy," or that "democracy was built on the principle that political participation was not only the privilege of every man, but a necessity in ensuring the efficiency and prosperity of the democratic system," or that "high levels of electoral participation are essential for guaranteeing that government represents the public as a whole," or that "to make a democracy that works, we need citizens who are engaged".⁴²

But we now have over 200 years of experience with living, breathing, messy democracy, and truly significant participation has almost never been achieved anywhere. Since democracy exists, it simply can't be true that wide participation is a notable requirement, requisite,

guarantee, need, or necessity for it to prosper or work. Routinely, huge numbers of citizens even in fact, especially--in "mature" democracies simply decline to participate, and the trend in participation seems to be, if anything, mostly downward. In the United States, nearly half of those eligible fail to vote even in high visibility elections and only a few percent ever actively participate in politics. The final winner of a recent election for the mayor of Rochester, NY, received only about 6 percent of the vote of the total electorate. (However, he is a very popular choice: if everybody had voted, he would almost certainly have achieved the same victory.) Switzerland is Europe's oldest democracy, and it also boasts the continent's lowest voter turnout.⁴³

Statistics like these frequently inspire a great deal of concern after all, it is argued, "political participation" is one of the "basic democratic ideals".⁴⁴ But it may be more useful to reshape democratic theories and ideals to take notice of the elemental fact that democracy works even though it often fails to inspire (or require) very much in the way of participation from its citizenry.

And it might also be asked, why, exactly, is it so important for citizens to participate? Most analyses suggest that nonvoters do not differ all that much from voters in their policy concerns, though there are some (controversial) suggestions that leftist parties might do a bit better in some countries if everyone were forced to vote.⁴⁵ However, once in office, responsible leftist and rightist parties both face the same essential constraining conditions and, despite their ideologies and campaign promises, often do not differ all that much from each other in their actual policies frequently to the disillusionment and disgust of their supporters who may come to feel they have been conned.

Some hold voting to be important because "of the problem of legitimacy." The idea is that "as fewer and fewer citizens participate in elections, the extent to which government truly rests on the consent of the governed may be called into question;" moreover the "quality of the link between elites and citizens" will erode.⁴⁶ Actually, such callings into question seem to happen mostly when a candidate, like Bill Clinton in 1992, gets less than half of the recorded vote and these are principally inspired by partisan maneuvering by the losers to undercut any claim that the winner has a mandate. And in local elections, the often exceedingly low turnout and participation levels rarely even cause much notice: I have yet to hear anyone suggest that the mayor of Rochester is illegitimate or "unlinked" because hardly anybody managed to make it to the polls when he was elected.

Moreover, it really seems to strain credulity to suggest that "if people feel distant from the electoral process, they can take no pride in the successes of the government." No pride? It seems that even nonvoters celebrated victory in the Gulf War. Or that nonvoters "avoid responsibility for the problems facing the nation".⁴⁷ But nonvoters seem to have no more difficulty than voters in routinely (and sometimes even correctly) blaming the politicians for whatever is wrong. And it is simply too glib to conclude that "if you don't vote, you don't count".⁴⁸ If that were true, women would never have gotten the vote, slavery would still exist, and there would never have been prison reform or legislation aiding the homeless.

There are also claims that low turnout levels "contribute to the problem of an unrepresentative policy agenda." But it is difficult to understand what this could possibly mean or, better, what a "representative policy agenda" would look like. Agendas are set by people actively trying to pursue their interests; they are not out there somewhere in the miasma waiting for us objectively to grasp them. As Steven Rosenstone and John Mark Hansen argue, "political participation is the product of strategic interactions of citizens and leaders." People "participate

when politicians, political parties, interest groups, and activists persuade them to get involved." Thus, there will not be an "ideal" or even "normal" degree of participation. Rather, participation will increase when "salient issues reach the public agenda...when governments approach crucial decisions...when competitive election campaigns stimulate, when social movements inspire".[49](#)

Hundreds of years of experience, then, suggest that the pursuit of participation for the sake of participation is rather quixotic. Instead, applying a philosophical observation attributed to impresario Sol Hurok, perhaps we should accept the fact that "if people don't want to come, nothing will stop them." Moreover, discontent and cynicism about the system itself (and consequently nonvoting perhaps) are increased when alarmists passionately lament that many people, as they have throughout democratic eternity, freely decide to pursue interests they find more pressing than politics, and manage to come up with more interesting things to do on election day than go through the often inconsequential ritual of voting. (Sometimes, actually, nonvoters, by the very act of not voting, may be indicating their concerns and preferences more eloquently than those who actually vote).[50](#)

The Quest for an Enlightened Citizenry

"If a nation expects to be ignorant and free," Thomas Jefferson once said, "it expects what never was and never will be".[51](#) Pretty much ever since those memorable words were issued, the United States has managed to be both, and with considerable alacrity.

Fortunately for America, eternal vigilance has not proven to be the price of democracy it can come quite a bit cheaper. In ideal democracies, James Bryce once suggested, "the average citizen will give close and constant attention to public affairs, recognizing that this is his interest as well as his duty," but not in real ones. And Horace Mann's ringing prediction that "with universal suffrage, there must be universal elevation of character, intellectual and moral, or there will be universal mismanagement and calamity" has proven untrue.[52](#)

Nonetheless, democratic idealists continue to insist that "democracies require responsibility." Or they contend that democracy "relies on informed popular judgment and political vigilance." Or they persist in defining democracy "as a political system in which people actively attend to what is significant".[53](#) One would think it would be obvious by now that democracy works despite the fact that it often fails to inspire or require very much in the way of responsibility and knowledge from its citizenry. Democracy does feed on the bandying about of information, but that is going to happen pretty much automatically when people are free to ferret it out and to exchange it. Democracy clearly does not require that people generally be well informed, responsible, or actively attentive.

Recent surveys find that around half the American people haven't the foggiest idea which party controls the Senate or what the first ten amendments of the Constitution are called or what the Fifth Amendment does or who their congressional representative or senators are. Moreover, this lack of knowledge has generally increased (particularly when education is controlled for) since the 1940s.[54](#) A month after the Republican victory in the 1994 election that propelled the vocal and energetic Newt Gingrich into the Speakership of the House of Representatives and into the media stratosphere, a national poll found that 50 percent hadn't heard enough about Gingrich even to have an opinion about him. Four months later, after endless publicity over Gingrich's varying fortunes and after Time magazine had designated him its "Man of the Year," that number had not changed (so much for the power of the press).[55](#) In a poll conducted two years later, half were still unable to indicate who the speaker was. Meanwhile, less than 20 percent guessed

correctly that over the preceding 20 years air pollution and the number of the elderly living in poverty had declined, and most people were of the wildly distorted impression that foreign aid comprised a larger share of the federal budget than Medicare.[56](#)

It is not entirely clear why one should expect people to spend a lot of time worrying about politics when democratic capitalism not only leaves them free to choose other ways to get their kicks, but in its seemingly infinite quest for variety is constantly developing seductive distractions. Democratic theorists and idealists may be intensely interested in government and its processes, but it verges on the arrogant, even the selfrighteous, to suggest that other people are somehow inadequate or derelict unless they share the same curious passion.[57](#)

And, in the end, the insistence that terrible things will happen unless the citizenry becomes addicted to CSPAN can lead to cynicism about the process by those who note that "The Beverly Hillbillies" (or whatever) enjoys vastly higher ratings.

Cynicism and Resistance to Demagogues

Cynicism about the process may be a standard pose among citizens in democracies, one substantially inspired by the very people who so passionately bemoan it. This pose, derived in my view from a fundamental incomprehension about how democracy works, is probably undesirable, and it can certainly become tedious. But I do not wish to argue that cynicism is necessarily a bad thing in all cases.

One of the classic objections to democracy, voiced by Plato and many others, is the supposed susceptibility of the masses to the wily seductions of demagogues. Apathy and common sense have probably helped with this potential problem, but so also has a substantial, if often unfair and undeserved, wariness about politicians. Indeed, in many post Communist countries a healthy distrust of all politicians has probably been important, as Stephen Holmes suggests, in keeping extremists from gaining much political ground there.[58](#)

Hyperdemocracy

Tocqueville once observed that "democratic institutions awaken and foster a passion for equality which they can never entirely satisfy".[59](#) At its extreme this passion has proven to be extremely destructive.

I have argued that under democracy people are inevitably and substantially unequal in their impact on the political system, though individuals retain the freedom to alter their political weight on an issue of concern to them and regularly do so. As part of process, people of wealth or "advantage" have generally been quite capable of using their position to guide or manipulate the political system to keep it from confiscating their wealth or severely diminishing their advantages. Thus, as Martin McGuire and Mancur Olson point out, no democracy has ever voted to eliminate private property.[60](#)

Because of this phenomenon, there seems to be no realistic hope of achieving the ideal of true equality that democratic imagemakers often seem to revere particularly as it relates to economic equality unless democracy itself is destroyed.

Agitators like Vladimir Leninhyperdemocrats, they might be called have followed exactly this logic. He begins by observing, correctly, that under democracy the same people rich and wellborn like him tend to retain their privileges, and, citing Marx, he caricatures capitalist democracy as a condition in which the "oppressed" are "allowed, once every few years, to decide

which particular representatives of the oppressing class should be in parliament to represent and oppress them." To sever this control he proposes a "modification of democracy" characterized by the "suppression by force" of the capitalist class, a process which would ultimately lead, he assures us, to a condition of "equality of labour and equality of wages".⁶¹ Thus the logic of the democrat's idealistic and romantic emphasis on equality can lead to calls for democracy's suppression.⁶²

In fact, of course, Leninism is profoundly antidemocratic not only in its ultimate conclusions, but in its starting assumptions. In the end, democracy trusts the common sense and reasonableness of ordinary people, and it leaves them free to think and to contribute as they wish even if this sometimes (or even often) leads to results some might consider ill advised, even foolish. By contrast, the version of Communism that took hold in Lenin's Soviet Union and elsewhere was based on the theory that ordinary people actually don't know what is good for them, taking as conclusive proof of this the very fact that rich people are able to maintain much of their advantage in democracies. From this they conclude that ordinary people have had their heads filled with all sorts of devious capitalistic propaganda giving them a "false consciousness" about life and about the class conflict. Accordingly, it was necessary for an elite group of revolutionary, conspiratorial intellectuals, styling itself the "vanguard of the proletariat," to think for the naive, manipulated, and unaware masses, and to organize their activities until they came to their senses.⁶³

The Rebellion of Minorities

The problem of convincing minority peoples to accept democratic rule is heightened by democracy's idealistic association with political equality, majority rule, and active political participation by the mass of people. Taking these three notions at face value, a national or other minority particularly one that knows it inspires considerable hostility in the majority can quite logically come to fear persecution in a democratic system since it will obviously be outnumbered by its perceived enemies. This perception can lead to despair, desperation, and rebellion. Democratic imagemakers characteristically argue that the minority's only hope is that the majority will somehow treat it with respect, tolerance, and good will an argument that in many cases will never be remotely persuasive.

Democracy has actually had a good, if imperfect, record of dealing with minority issues, particularly when compared to other forms of government. But this is not so much because democratic majorities have been notably tolerant of minority concerns. Rather, it stems from the opportunities that democracy affords minorities to increase their effective political weight to become more equal, more important, than their arithmetical size would imply on issues that concern them. This holds even for groups held in considerable contempt by the majority, like homosexuals. Moreover, the fact that most people most of the time pay little attention to politics the phenomenon of political apathy helps interested minorities to protect their rights and to assert their interests, particularly when they are reasonably persistent and circumspect about it.

The civil wars in Croatia and in BosniaHercegovina in the early 1990s were triggered, in part at least, because Serbs there did not understand this democratic reality and instead reacted or overreacted to the conventional democratic image. Believing inaccurately that democracy is centrally built around political equality, active participation, and majority rule, they responded to alarmists and propagandists who claimed that they would mainly face persecution in a

democracy in which they were outnumbered.[64](#) (Something similar might be said for Kosovars in Serbia and for Palestinians in, and in areas occupied by, Israel.)

Experience suggests, by contrast, that the Serbs could well have substantially maintained their interests, identity, and dignity if the system had remained essentially democratic. (Although democracy came under substantial assault in war raked Croatia and BosniaHercegovina, it is remarkable how much of it survived and persisted even under those conditions, and it is reasonable to expect that it would have remained fairly well developed in part because of pressures from the West if war had been avoided.) In the process the Serbs would probably have found that, to a considerable degree, their numerical inferiority was largely an arithmetic technicality. This seems, for example, substantially to have been the experience since 1989 in Bulgaria for the Turkish minority (which had been severely persecuted under the Communists) and in Lithuania of the Polish minority.[65](#)

However, it must be conceded that there are no certain guarantees. At times a majority that is sufficiently large and determined can indeed persecute the minority in a democracy. Obviously, whites in the American south were able for decades to keep blacks from participating effectively in the political system although that condition rather quickly broke down when blacks effectively organized. And, though the American constitution has a specific guarantee against unreasonable seizures, the property of Japanese Americans was often summarily confiscated during World War II. What is impressive, however, is how unusual such arbitrary seizures have been in democracies.

Democracy routinely and necessarily leaves a minority free to organize peacefully to protect itself, and it provides legal mechanisms for the minority to express its views and to pressure the government for recognition and for relief of grievances. There is no such regular, systematic, or necessary assurance in other systems.

The Trouble with Transitology

A couple of Polish writers were discussing conditions in their country on a street corner in Warsaw fairly recently. At one point, one reflected, "I think we all must now believe that this is it."

In my view most of the post Communist countries of central and Eastern Europe as well as many of the new democracies elsewhere have essentially completed their transition to democracy: they are already full fledged democracies by the nonideal standards I have proposed in this book. Judging from 200 years of experience with democracy, what they have now is, pretty much, it. In all likelihood, things will never get much better.

There will, of course, be continued political change in these countries and some of this will be quite important. Politicians will come and go; some parties will fall and others will rise in voter favor (with luck perhaps the beer drinkers party will once again capture seats in the Polish parliament); constitutional and legal structures will undergo development; controversial issues will emerge and decline; economic and trade policies will be reshaped and refined; governmental subsidies will be increased and decreased; tax laws will be altered. But, barring some sort of violent upheaval, the time of fundamental change is substantially over in many of these countries, and further developments will take place in environments which are essentially democratic. The societies may become more or less efficient, humane, responsible, productive, corrupt, civil, or effective, but these changes will probably have to come about within (or despite) the present political framework, not through further fundamental institutional transformation.[66](#)

Accordingly, it may now be sensible to decrease the talk of "transition" and to put a quiet, dignified end to the new field of transitology at least as it applies to countries like Poland. Transitological thinking may cause people in the new democracies in Europe and elsewhere to continue to think that things may become substantially different hopefully bettering the future.⁶⁷ Thus, not only are transitologists sometimes spreading visions that will never come to pass, but their perspective can inspire or reinforce a short term point of view that is undesirable from a political standpoint and even more so from an economic one.⁶⁸

There may be similar misdirecting mischief in the related notion of "consolidation." Democracies do become more or less democratic, a phenomenon traced in various democracy ratings schemes such as those put out regularly by Freedom House, and it is certainly appropriate to keep track of the new democracies and to become concerned by any retreat that might take place if, for example, opposition leaders are harassed or if organized protesters are forcibly stifled or if newspapers find it difficult to publish facts the government considers inconvenient. For example, Peru in the 1990s lost some of its democratic character and Chile in 1973 abandoned democracy almost entirely for several years, and it is sensible to be sensitive to such changes.

But to seek to establish a point at which a country becomes "consolidated" may not be terribly helpful since, as with Chile in 1973, this condition can be overthrown at any time by sufficiently dedicated and effective antidemocrats some of whom might have even have previously been democrats.⁶⁹

Many new democracies, then, have fully completed their transitions and are about as "consolidated" as any country is likely to get. And, like the older democracies that are their model, the new democracies are unlikely ever to achieve orderly deliberation, political equality, or wide and enlightened participation by the mass of the public.⁷⁰

Rather than urging them on to impossible perfection, it would probably be better to take the less idealistic approach adopted by the Polish writer, Adam Michnik. He suggests that we color democracy gray and notes that it frequently "chooses banality over excellence, shrewdness over nobility, empty promise over true competence." At its core, he points out, democracy is "a continuous articulation of particular interests, a diligent search for compromise among them, a marketplace for passions, emotions, hatreds, and hopes." But it is also "eternal imperfection, a mixture of sinfulness, saintliness, and monkey business." Yet only democracy has the "capacity to question itself" and the "capacity to correct its own mistakes," and "only gray democracy, with its human rights, with institutions of civil society, can replace weapons with arguments".⁷¹

Only pretty good, perhaps, but that's about as good as it gets.

Endnotes

1. From John Mueller, Capitalism, Democracy, and Ralph's Pretty Good Grocery , to be published by Princeton University Press, Fall 1999.

2. Address to a Joint Session of the United States Congress, 21 February 1990.

3. Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996, 22. As so often happens, this conclusion ignores the country's notably unstable Civil War.

4. Kennedy 1964, 539.

5. Verba and Nice 1972, 1.
6. Hibbing and TheissMorse 1995, 150.
7. Sandel 1996, 4, 294297. Putnam 1995a, 1995b. See also Morin and Balz 1996, Uslaner 1993, Elshtain 1995.
8. Sandel 1996, 323.
9. Table data from Wilson Quarterly, Spring 1997, p. 121; Niemi et al., 1989, 303. The rise in the 1965 data in the first table may be a lingering effect of the John Kennedy assassination of 1963. On turnout: see Nardulli et al. 1996. On confidence in Congress: Hibbing and TheissMorse 1995, 3435. Golden years: Altschuler and Blumin 1997. On the 1960s, see also Schudson 1998, 302
10. Sense of mastery: Sandel 1996, 202. On the considerable effects of the Korean War on public opinion, see Mueller 1973, Mueller 1977, Mueller 1979, Mueller 1989.
11. For example, in 1960 Murray Levin declared that "voters find voting to be meaningless...the electoral process to be a sham...the average voter feels that politicians are selfish and irresponsible...they indicate a widespread disgust and disillusionment with the political process and politicians in general." (1960, 58, 61). And in the same year, Harvard's Kenneth Keniston, while acknowledging that there remained "pockets of enthusiasm," managed to miss any sense of mastery in the age, arguing instead that "there has seldom been as great confusion about what is valid and good as there is now" and found the age characterized by "alienation, estrangement, separation, withdrawal, indifference, disaffection, apathy, noninvolvement, neutralism" (1960, 16162). On this issue, see also Schudson 1998, 300.
12. Dionne 1991, 355. Nelson 1995, 72.
13. Sandel 1996, 6, 318, 33435, 351.
14. Putnam 1995a, 77. See also Elshtain 1995, ch. 1. James Madison (1788), on the other hand, found societies in which a small number of citizens assemble and administer government in person to be susceptible to mischievous passions and interests and "have ever been spectacles of turbulence and contention; have ever been found incompatible with personal security or the rights of property; and have in general been as short in their lives as they have been violent in their deaths."
15. On some of these issues, see also Schmitter and Karl 1991, 8384.
16. Verba, Schlozman, Brady, and Nice 1993, 267, 314. Mansbridge 1997, 423.
17. Troy 1997, 28, 31. Bennett: Rosenbaum 1997. On this issue, see also Samuelson 1995, Heard 1960, Sorauf 1988.
18. Broder and Johnson 1996, 630. For an excellent discussion of this issue, see Schlozman and Tierney 1986, ch. 15.
19. Verba, Schlozman and Brady 1995, 13. See also Broder and Johnson 1996, 63031. Without full explanation, Lindblom simply and casually labels this phenomenon "undemocratic" (1977, 169).

20. Dahl 1989, 271, 279.
21. Dahl 1989, 322, 339.
22. Dahl 1989, 339. Almond 1950; see also Neuman 1986.
23. Dahl 1989, 340. On efforts to set up something of a device like this, see Fishkin 1995; for a critique of the results, see Merckle 1996. On the use of random methods to choose leaders in Greek democracy, see Dahl 1989, 19.
24. Russell Baker delicately opines that Capra's "Mr. Smith Goes to Washington" is a "childish slur on the American political system" and "the worst movie ever made about a politician." "The portrait of the Senate is absurd and vicious. Mr. Smith himself is a boob so dense that he should never have been allowed to go to Podunk, much less to Washington" (1998).
25. Dionne 1991, 354.
26. In addition, because of the existence of cyclic preferences in the collective (shifting majorities may prefer A to B and B to C, but also C to A), it is often logically impossible to discover a true majority preference, a phenomenon that is central to Riker's analysis of democracy (1982).
27. See Patterson and Magleby 1992, 544; Mueller 1994, 180; Hibbing and TheissMorse 1995, 14.
28. See Toner 1994.
29. Broder and Johnson 1996, 628.
30. Berke 1994.
31. Nelson observes that "in 1992, the same voters who in 14 states imposed term limits on members of Congress reelected all but six of the 116 incumbents who were running for reelection in their states, including 70 who had been in office longer than the term limit those voters were imposing" (1995, 76).
32. Dionne 1991, 15.
33. Riker 1996, ch. 5; see also Popkin 1991, 23436.
34. Ansolabehere and Iyengar 1995, 89, 12, 14, 16, 145, 15056.
35. Interestingly, the most famous sustained instance of negative campaigning was probably Harry Truman's colorful and successful give'emhell presidential campaign of 1948, but reformers don't seem to be concerned about that one. It may be that the recent popular cynicism about negative campaigning is being caused not so much by the campaigning itself as by the campaign against negative campaigning.
36. Economist, 16 May 1991, 48.
37. Hibbing and TheissMorse 1995, 18, 19, 157.

38. In general, local television news is more highly evaluated and trusted than national television in surveys in the United States, a difference that may arise from the fact that local news tends to avoid controversy while national news frequently wallows in it.
39. For data: Gallup Poll Monthly, February 1998, 16. On this phenomenon more generally, see Hibbing and TheissMorse 1995, 36.
40. Hibbing and TheissMorse 1995, 81, 105.
41. Hibbing and TheissMorse 1995, 157. Mortimer quoted, Harrison 1997.
42. Lienesch 1992, 1011. Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996, 224. Junn 1991, 193. Ansolabehere and Iyengar 1995, 145. Fishkin 1995, 176.
43. Lijphart 1997, 5. Conway 1991, ch. 1. Switzerland: Teixeira 1992, 8; Lijphart 1997, 5; Burnham 1987, 107.
44. Lijphart 1997, 5.
45. Teixeira 1992, 101. Lijphart 1997, 25.
46. Teixeira 1992, 1013.
47. Ansolabehere and Iyengar 1995, 145.
48. Burnham 1987, 99.
49. Policy agenda: Teixeira 1992, 102. Rosenstone and Hansen 1993, 22829; see also Rothenberg 1992.
50. Some analysts, like Putnam argue for participation more broadly and contend that the key to making democracy work is not so much political participation as the presence of "dense networks of social exchange." (Actually, however, he seems to be arguing that such networks may be more helpful for effective government than for democracy itself when he concludes that "good government" is a "by-product of singing groups and soccer clubs" (1993, 172, 196, emphasis added; see also Laitin 1995, 173).) Putnam has extrapolated these conclusions, developed from an analysis of Italy, to the United States, but fails to demonstrate that the lamented decline in such things as PTA membership and the rise of television viewing has had detrimental policy consequences (1995a, 1995b; for critiques, see Lemann 1996, Norris 1996, Ladd 1996, Economist, 18 February 1995, 2122, Schudson 1998, 294-314).
51. Quoted, Delli Carpini and Keeler 1996, 1.
52. Bryce 1921, vol. 1, 48. Mann quoted, Sandel 1996, 165.
53. Lienesch 1992, 1011; Lakoff 1996, 326; Bellah et al. 1991, 273. One observer urges rather improbably that America will get back on the road to the democratic ideal "only when we have figured out how to use television to teach the essence of citizenship, the virtues of individual sacrifice in the common good and the nobility necessary to make democracy work" (Squires 1990).
54. Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996. See also Berelson 1952, 318.

55. CBS News/New York Times Poll release, December 14, 1994. Toner 1995.
56. Washington Post/Kaiser Family Foundation/Harvard University Survey Project, "Why Don't Americans Trust the Government?" 1996. See also Morin 1996.
57. Many studies have determined that it is the politically interested who are the most politically active. It is also doubtless true that those most interested in unidentified flying objects are the ones most likely to join UFO clubs. UFO enthusiasts, however, get no special credit by political theorists for servicing their particular obsession, while politics junkies are lauded because they seem to be fulfilling a higher, theory-sanctified function.
58. Holmes 1996, 3334.
59. Tocqueville 1990, vol. 1, 201.
60. McGuire and Olson 1996, 94. Reviewing several studies of new democracies, Nancy Bermeo observes, to her dismay, that "in every enduring case, dramatic redistributions of property were postponed, circumscribed, or rolled back" (1990, 365). See also Przeworski 1986, 63.
61. Lenin 1932, 73, 82. See also Meyer 1957, 6670.
62. However, the ultimate irony of all this is that under the schemes and devices and mechanisms put together by the Lenin and his followers, economic equality was not really reduced. See Bergson 1984; Dye and Zeigler 1988; Kuteinikov 1990.
63. See Meyer 1957, 1956, 92103; Cook 1991, 24856.
64. For a discussion, see Cohen 1995, 131, 246; Bennett 1995, 137142; Woodward 1995, 228, 241, 279.
65. See Gordon and Troxel 1995; Ganev 1997; Châtelot 1997; Stokes 1993, 701.
66. See also Stokes 1993, 7014; Mueller 1996; Marody 1997.
67. None too surprisingly, cynicism about democracy has flourished in the new democracies of eastern and central Europe. Of course, politicians there have to deal daily there with messy issues that are hugely difficult and painful: in the early 1990s, as American politicians agonized over whether flag burning should be banned or whether the gasoline tax should be raised a few cents, politicians in Poland alone privatized more businesses than had previously been privatized in the entire history of the human race and created a banking system in less time than it takes in the west to train a bank examiner (Fischer and Gelb 1991, 99, 100). For all that, however, cynicism may not be much greater than in the "mature" democracies of the West. One analyst is shocked at a poll showing that 79 percent of the Romanian population feels politicians were "ready to promise anything to get votes" while 65 percent say politicians are more interested in strengthening their own parties than in solving the country's problems (Shafir 1993, 18)-disapproval rates likely to be found in the West as well. Another asserts that Russian voters have "lost their faith in all politicians" (Rutland 1994/95, 6). However, while only 6 percent of polled in Russia in 1994 said they trust political parties (Rose 1994, 53), a poll in the United States in the same year discovered only 10 percent willing to rate the "honesty and ethical standards" of congressmen as "very high" or "high," tidily placing them 25th on a list of 26, just ahead of car salesmen (McAneny and Moore 1994, 24), and a 1995 poll in Britain found that 73 percent of Britons considered the ruling Conservative

Party to be "very sleazy and disreputable" (Harper's, February 1995, 11). Richard Rose argues that "the communist regime has left a legacy of distrust" (1994, 53), but, as noted earlier, there is plenty of evidence to suggest the United States has managed to pick up the legacy without that experience. He also concludes that "An election produces a representative government if those elected are trusted representatives of those who voted for them. The current Russian government is democratically elected but distrusted" (Rose 1994, 53), but much the same could be said for the United States at almost any point in its history. On a scale of political distrust developed from polls conducted in the 1990s, Japan scored highest; Poland, Russia, and Estonia registered on the same plane as Britain; East Germany, Bulgaria, and the Czech Republic were all a bit lower than West Germany; and Slovenia was level with the United States (Mason 1995, 69).

68. On this issue, see also Holmes 1996. Actually, the theory-derived notion that low participation implies low legitimacy can be dangerously self-fulfilling. For example, a romanticism about political participation has helped lead to the rather bizarre and even potentially disruptive legal requirement in some post-Communist countries that at least 25 or 50 percent of the electorate must participate for an election to be valid. If this were the law in the United States, of course, huge numbers of elected offices would be vacant.

69. There can also be definitional turmoil. By the definition used by Higley and Gunther in one able effort to deal with this tricky concept (1992), it seems likely that Canada could not be considered to be a "consolidated" democracy since devoted secessionists are numbered among its political elite.

70. Actually, if broad political participation is an important standard, many post-Communist countries are more democratic than the United States. For example, in the 1994 parliamentary elections in Ukraine some 5,833 candidates competed in the country's 450 electoral districts, and of these, 62 percent by "simple groups of voters." Moreover, turnout "reached a surprisingly high average of about 75 percent" (RFE/RL Daily Report, 1 March 1994; 29 March 1994). And, by contrast with the American public's impressive ignorance about who Newt Gingrich might be, a poll conducted in Slovakia in October 1993, when the country was only 10 months old, asked its respondents about a long list of 31 politicians, many of them quite obscure, and found only 8 cases in which the Slovak public's ignorance level reached that of the Americans' about Gingrich (FOCUS 1993, 1011).

71. Michnik 1997, 18.

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