In *Democracy for Realists*, Christopher H. Achen and Larry Bartels critically examine the underlying assumptions and conventional wisdom about how democracy works, using data on real voter behavior from across nations and decades. The most important of the assumptions the authors examine is what they label the “folk theory of democracy.” Folk theory is what constitutes the everyday view of how democracy works; in this view, the voters have preferences about what government should do. They then vote their conscience by electing officials who will enact the voters’ preferred policy or by voting in referendums in ways that match their preferences. In this way, the policy preferences shared by the majority of the people becomes government policy.

This folk theory of democracy is underpinned by ideas that came out of the Enlightenment in 18th century Europe — that humans are logical and can make rational assessments of their circumstances and act accordingly. This is the concept behind the “rational economic actor” assumption that underlies classical economics. In recent years, however, the rational economic actor assumption has been called into question by accumulating experimental evidence, prompting a reconsideration of not only the folk theory of democracy, but also other existing theories of democracy that have attempted to lend greater scientific rigor to the folk view. This, in turn, may change our conception of how citizens interact with their government.

**A SHAKY FOUNDATION**

A number of studies have shown that most citizens in democratic countries don’t take much interest in politics and don’t make a serious effort to inform themselves about public issues, other than cursory attention to the news media. This fact is probably not a revelation for most readers, but more detailed studies demonstrate just how shaky a foundation the “rational voter” concept is for democracy. For example, one of the many studies Achen and Bartels cite asked Americans in the mid-1980s to express their approval for various public policies, also testing how cosmetic changes in the wording of the policy affected their support. To illustrate, about two-thirds of people said that the federal government was spending too little on “assistance to the poor,” but not quite one quarter said the government was spending too little on “welfare.” It is doubtful that such a large gap can be accounted for any differences in the precise programmatic
interventions that might be implied by "welfare" versus "assistance to the poor." Rather, the negative connotation of the term "welfare," especially in the mid-1980s, leads to lower levels of support. Hence, if voters' support for a policy can change based on cosmetic wording changes, how can they vote rationally?

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Given the practical failings of the rational voter model, political parties are a commonly offered solution. The theory is that political parties bring some rationality to the political process by creating packages of positions that allow voters to pick the party that most closely matches their preferences. This simplifies decisions for voters, making it unnecessary for them to have a thorough understanding of a candidate’s policy positions. However, studies show that most citizens don't even have a clear understanding of what the political parties stand for. Instead, citizens tend to identify with some sort of ethnic, racial, occupational, religious affiliation, or some other social grouping, which then leads them to identify with one party or another (i.e., whichever party their social grouping typically associates with). They then either adopt the political positions the party holds or delude themselves into thinking that the positions of the party match their own views. Either way, party and group allegiances are the primary drivers of voter choice, rather than voter choice being the driver of party positions.

To illustrate how the phenomena of how political parties molds preferences, Achen and Bartels discuss the case of social security privatization in the 2004 U.S. presidential election. Before this election, social security privatization was an obscure, rather technical policy proposal not much discussed other than among policy analysts. During the election, both presidential candidates ran a large number of advertisements promoting their support for or opposition to the proposal. As the advertisements accumulated, a statistical measurement showed voters' preferences for or against the policy became increasingly correlated with their choice of candidate. On its surface, this might seem like voters rationally choosing a candidate based on each candidate's policy position on social security privatization relative to the voters' preferences. Correlation is not causation, however, and a more detailed follow-up analysis, including personal interviews with a number of voters, showed that the increasing correlation was, in fact, due to voters learning about positions held by their preferred candidate and then adopting that position themselves.

Another theory that attempts to ascribe rationality to voter behavior is the "retrospective" voting model. The concept is that even if citizens can't prospectively determine which candidate represents the best combination of policy positions, they can at least remove officials who fail to perform once in office. But this assumes that voters are rationally able to weigh their total change in welfare over the official's term in office and ascribe how much of that change is due to the official's actions. Achen and Bartels show that this assumption does not hold in practice. One particularly striking example is the re-election campaign of Woodrow Wilson in 1916, where a series of high-profile shark attacks in the New Jersey Shore area caused Wilson's share of votes to drop by as much as 10 percentage points. Wilson didn't cause the attacks and the role of the federal government at the time was such that federal intervention to prevent or remediate the attacks was not a realistic possibility.

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WHAT THE DATA IMPLY

Democracy for Realists provides extensive evidence and examples to support its questioning of the traditional conceptions of democracy, but what about the implications of this data? The direc-
The way to make government better is not to maximize either popular control or professional control, but to facilitate more effective citizen engagement in order to gain the best of popular input and professional expertise.

Achen and Bartels do not believe their findings imply that government should be more technocratic (i.e., dominated by expert opinion). After all, the same psychological forces that undermine the assumptions behind the “rational voter” and “rational economic actor” also prevent us from assuming that the “rational public servant” is the sure way forward to better government. As the authors point out, some prominent intellectuals of the antebellum era defended slavery — the experts are capable of grave errors as well.

Hence, the way to make government better is not to maximize either popular control or professional control, but to facilitate more effective citizen engagement in order to gain the best of popular input and professional expertise.

AN ESSENTIAL POINT

A final and essential point of Democracy for Realists is to recognize that group or partisan loyalties, not rational policy preferences, are at the heart of democratic politics. This means that our thinking about public engagement must evolve beyond an assumption of enlightened individual citizens to recognize the roles of social groupings and social identity in democratic decision making.

Notes


2. Here the authors summarize the work of Gabriel Lenz, associate professor of political science at the University of California Berkeley.

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