

Vlad Andrei Terteleac

**BOOK REVIEW: DEMOCRACY FOR REALISTS:  
WHY ELECTIONS DO NOT PRODUCE RESPONSIVE  
GOVERNMENT. BY CHRISTOPHER H. ACHEN AND  
LARRY M. BARTELS. PRINCETON, NJ: PRINCETON  
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Vlad Andrei Terteleac  
National University of Political  
Science and Public Administration,  
Faculty of Political Science  
Bucharest Center for Political Theory  
vlad.terteleac@bcept.eu

It is already a commonplace to say that recent political events (usually the Brexit referendum and the US presidential elections are brought into discussion) shed a skeptical light on the quality of citizens' inputs in the democratic process. For some, especially those working in the public choice tradition, these recent civic displays didn't come as news. The idea that citizens of large democracies hardly have any incentives to acquire and process political information is not a marginal prediction of this research programme, but one of its cornerstones. Given this fact, there is a feeling, especially in the ranks of public choice researchers, that contemporary democratic theory seems hardly ever bothered to engage with the empirical literature that seeks to picture how real existing democracies function and how citizens actually behave when it comes to such matters as voting or debating politics. Recent books and articles that take an issue both with this idealized account found in some conceptions of democracy and, to a certain extent, with democracy itself should, then, come as no surprise. Jason Brennan's *Against Democracy* (2016) stands out in this literature as a work of primarily normative democratic theory that offers a qualified argument for the superiority of a form of epistocracy over democracy.

Christopher Achen and Larry Bartels do not excel in their book when it comes to substantial normative arguments. Truth be told, this is far from being their main aim. Rather, they seek to argue that, given the evidence at our disposal, the dominant models of democracy found both in the public culture of contemporary democracies and in the works of different authors are all untenable ways of thinking about this political regime. When it comes to the dominant conception of democracy in the public mind, what we encounter is the so-called *folk theory of democracy* – the idea that voters have preferences about what a government should do and by voting they choose those leaders (or express their opinions in referendums) that will turn their preferences into reality, the democratic process being the most efficient way of assuring that “what the majority wants becomes government policy” (p.1). This diffuse view originates in some broader theoretical articulations – precisely, the authors take issue with what they call the populist model of democracy and its two incarnations, representative and direct democracy. Besides this, they also discuss and discredit another important model of democracy – the Schumpeterian notion of democracy as a mechanism for

leadership selection, particularly through retrospective voting.<sup>[1]</sup>

The guiding idea behind what is called, following Dahl, populistic democracy is that of popular sovereignty. The simplest way of understanding sovereignty is by asking who decides between policy alternatives in a given state. Of course, in populistic democracy, the answer is the people, but this still leaves open the discussion about the particular mechanisms through which the citizens express their preferences. One answer is the aggregation of individual preferences through the electoral competition of parties and candidates, with the spatial model as “the most systematic and sophisticated instantiation of the populist ideal” (p.23). *In nuce*, the original version of the spatial model as it is presented by Downs (1957) models the *political space* as a single ideological dimension with alternative policies ranging from left to right, *the voter* as having an ideal point in this dimension which is nothing else than the preferred policy alternative and *the parties* as each presenting a platform that consists of the policies that will be enacted once in power. Given the assumption that voters will maximize their ideological satisfaction and parties will maximize votes as a proxy for the benefits enjoyed once the elections are won, the main prediction is that parties will concentrate around the median voter or, in other terms, around the political center (p.24-25).<sup>[2]</sup> The main challenges are those coming from social choice theory, contesting the very logical structure of this and similar theories when the aggregation of individual preferences is constrained by some reasonable and widely-accepted conditions, besides majority voting.

This logical challenge, as the authors call it, is not the only type of problem faced by populistic democracy and, by implication, by the naïve folk theory. The other comes from the survey of public opinion casting a shadow of skepticism on the fundamental element in this whole model of democracy, the fact that voters have preferences. The authors discuss, among other things, the pervasive framing effects and the manner in which different wording of a question affect the answers given by citizens. A host of other studies of the American voter are employed in their exposition, drawing especially on the works of Converse (1964) and his findings that the ordinary citizen has no consistent beliefs on any issues, not even on those topics hotly contested between political elites (p.32). Moreover, they disparage the idea of issue-voting, deeply impregnated in the spatial model, arguing for a rather reverse relation between voting and issue-positioning; for example, a study of Lenz (2012), which examines the 2000 presidential elections indicates that voters rather learned the position their preferred candidate had on Social Security privatization and then made it their own (p. 44).

The other mechanism by which popular sovereignty may be actualized is that of direct participation, an idea taken by Achen and Bartels as the typical American answer to democratic failure. As they put it: “For most contemporary Americans, democracy means rule by the people, democracy is unambiguously good, and the only possible cure for the ills of democracy is more democracy” (p. 53). This is usually

1 Before presenting the specific considerations that make them deflate these traditional conceptions of democracy, I should make the observation that most of the empirical facts that support their views are collected from the political system of the United States.

2 This holds only for a two-party system.

translated into two types of measures – on the one hand, the so-called democratization of the nomination process of parties; on the other hand, the spread of referendums, especially at local and state levels. The authors observe that the adoption of the first measure is rarely an effect of a serious public debate, but rather a game of special interests, citing the example of Robert La Follette, “the most influential champion of the direct primary (...) inspired *to destroy boss rule at its very roots* when the Republican party bosses of Wisconsin twice passed him over for the gubernatorial nomination” (p. 67). Referendums, too, aim at restoring the will of people when trust in representatives is lost, but the data used by the authors tends that, even in the Progressive Era, a largely apathetic citizen, much like the familiar citizen of contemporary democracies, was the norm, not the exception. Moreover, it is hardly clear that a direct democracy is bulletproof when facing the influence of the political elite, especially in the initiative process of new referendums.

The other paradigm discussed by the authors was formulated as a response to the different variations of the folk theory of democracy, especially by Schumpeter, who offers what we may call a thin view of democracy as the mechanism through which elites are selected in office for a period of time. In this view, public control can be exercised without demanding too much from citizens in terms of informing themselves. Rather, all that is asked is an evaluative effort for each election by looking at how well the leaders performed while in office. Although it has many benefits, such as a better empirical account of “fluctuations in the electoral fortunes of incumbent leaders and parties” (p.91) or a realistic view of leaders in comparison with the “hapless automatons” of the spatial model, the retrospective theory of political accountability still fails as an explanatory device given the difficulties faced by voters in assessing changes in their own welfare and, even more importantly, the general incapacity of correctly linking these changes to different measures and actions on the part of the government. Moreover, empirical data tends to suggest a landscape with rather myopic voters that, while taking into account the economic performance of a government, are limited to a short-time perspective in assessing this performance.

In the last chapter of their book, based on their argument that politics, especially elections, are much more about group ties and social identities than rational deliberation or policy voting, Achen and Bartels offer a short normative discussion, but without much substantial content, asking, in what I take to be a rhetorical manner, what are the implications of the prevalence of group politics for a democracy. I don’t think the authors offer any satisfactory answer to this and where some incipient form can be found it doesn’t seem clearly assumed. But this is not a book where one should expect to find cogent normative arguments - its strength resides in setting the non-ideal constraints when theorizing about democracy. From this point on, it’s the job of the normative theorists to intervene. Its primary and most important task is, I believe, to formulate a clear position in the ideal/non-ideal debate when it comes to democratic theory, asking to what extent, to borrow Rousseau’s classic phrase, we should be *taking men as they are* and how much of our normative output should be affected by this.

In this endeavor, *Democracy for Realists* is not just a helpful handbook that collects and systematizes a huge amount of empirical studies, but, in many respects, *the main* handbook those engaged in normative democratic theory should use. Of course,

it is not only trained philosophers and political scientists that would greatly benefit from this work, but anyone interested in a clearly written and comprehensive study of some of the pathologies of modern democracy.

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