

Robert G. Boatright

THE MOB CAME WIELDING PITCHFORKS,
BUT THEY HAD A GOOD STORY TO TELL

Abstract

Recent elections in Western democracies have brought into question the relationship between electoral mechanisms and democracy. I argue that while democratic impulses can be identified in political systems where elections either do not take place or are flawed, such impulses cannot be measured and are therefore destined to become the subject of ideological contestation. When elections do seem to produce undemocratic results, as has arguably been the case in the United States over the past decade, democratic narratives or “stories” can prevent further deterioration in the quality of democracy.

Contributors to this issue have been asked to consider whether there can be democracy without elections. Such a question requires, of course, that one present a working definition of democracy, a working definition of elections, and that (if one is not planning to argue in the affirmative) the first definition does not subsume the second (e.g. “democracy is a system of free and fair elections”). It also requires, I would argue, that somewhere there appears some standard of measurement. One would need to come up with a way to measure, for instance, degrees of “freedom” and “fairness” if one were to distinguish types of elections.

Such a question, then, rapidly becomes sufficiently daunting that providing a definitive answer within a few thousand words would, I think, challenge any political theorist. It also veers into the territory of many comparative politics scholars; there are many projects out there that seek to measure the quality of elections, the quality of democracy, and a variety of other aspects of government. I am a student of American politics, not a comparativist or a political theorist. My approach to this question, then, is to sidestep it, to propose two more important criteria for the preservation of democracy. One of these criteria is *accountability*. I expect that this claim will be relatively uncontroversial, but in practice it has a complicated relationship with elections. Elections can be means of rendering governments accountable to their citizens, but in many instances they fail – and these failures may, as the example of the United States shows, occur even in the absence of deliberate attempts to subvert the electoral process.

The second of these criteria is the existence of a *democratic story*. I expect this claim will strike readers as a somewhat more controversial, even, to coin a term, an “American-centric” one. I draw upon the work of political theorist Rogers Smith to argue that in order for democracy to persist in the face of antidemocratic movements or events, there must be a national narrative or story about the value of democracy. Some democratic

countries have these, some don't; but I would argue that such national stories do not exist (for long, or without serious challenges) in undemocratic nations. These stories need not have very much direct relationship to the features of the regime, and they need not even be entirely true. Yet, when the principles of such stories are widely accepted, they serve to organize and provide boundaries for political disputes.

The structure of this essay is simple. I explore what it might actually mean to talk about democracy without talking about elections. I then summarize some key characteristics of the failure of contemporary American elections to provide democratic accountability. I emphasize there that this is not, or at least not solely, a failure of a party or a politician, nor is it an antidemocratic scheme of any sort. I then turn to the persistence of the American democratic narrative – a persistence that might strike some readers as ironic or simply amusing, but which I suggest is a more effective check on antidemocratic tendencies than are elite norms or laws.

1. *Elections and Democracy*

First, here is an admittedly facile, yet very political science-y take on the initial question here. Can there be democracy without elections? To answer this, let us first, very briefly, follow the rules I have set above and make up some plausible definitions that aren't circular. There are, of course, many contemporary definitions either of what democracy is or what its correlates are¹. Although the ancient Greeks were not necessarily unambiguous supporters of democracy, I am sympathetic to at least part of the Greek definition. As Carnes Lord translates it, Aristotle's reference to democracy in the *Politics* (1279b 15, 1281a 15) is to a regime in which "the multitude" are "the authoritative element." By "the multitude," Aristotle is generally taken to mean the poor, but wealth is actually not as important for our purposes here as is the reference to *kyrios* (κύριος), the "authoritative element." Others have simply translated this as "sovereignty" or "rule," but both imply, to the modern reader, an office, while to me, being the "authoritative element" suggests merely that the people's wants, needs, desires, interests structure the activities of the regime. They carry weight or power. It is, to be sure, a more ambiguous term, but it gets us around the difficulty in thinking about who must actually sign laws or pay the bills. It is more about a relationship between public voice and political outcomes than it is about technical details. At the same time, the phrase seems to me to be narrower (and thus perhaps more technical or less threatening to rules and norms) than Rousseau's (1978) concept of the "general will."

Defining an election is somewhat less complicated. When some or all of the citizens are given the opportunity to state their preference for, or opposition to, a candidate, party, idea, or edict in a quantifiable fashion, let us call this an election. This definition allows us to include referendums and initiatives; different vote counting methods (that is, plurality voting, approval voting, Borda method, ranked choice voting, and so forth); retention elections; public and secret balloting; uncontested elections; and all other

¹ Warren (2017) provides a full description of such efforts.

variants. The question here is not whether one type of election is superior to any other type.

Let us consider four options in this pairing, depicted in Table 1. Some undemocratic political systems, such as North Korea, fail to hold elections at all. There are very few such nations in the world. It has long been common for clearly undemocratic regimes to use elections as a means of providing some sort of claim to legitimacy. In some instances, such as Saddam Hussein’s Iraq, the reported election results were clearly fraudulent. In other nations, the link between democracy and elections is more difficult to evaluate. Iran uses elections to choose its parliament and president, but the twelve-member Guardian Council (which is not popularly elected) determines which candidates can run and reserves many of the powers of governing for itself. In contemporary Russia, there is less evidence that anyone is deliberately excluded from the ballot, but state-run media confer an enormous advantage upon the governing party. Few observers would classify such regimes as being democratic in any meaningful sense.

<u>No Democracy, No Elections</u> (North Korea)	<u>No Democracy, Elections</u> (Iran, Russia)
<u>Democracy, No Elections</u> (Social movements? Deliberative democrats? Responsible corporations?)	<u>Democracy, Elections</u> (Western Europe, Canada, etc.)




Table 1: Hypothetical Scenarios

There are certainly hybrids here – systems that hold elections to some offices but not others, systems where the franchise is restricted in all sorts of ways, systems where the elections are rigged, or sort of rigged, in a multiplicity of different ways. But this is all descriptive political science – nongovernmental organizations such as Freedom House, Global Integrity, or the Electoral Integrity Project develop complex ways of measuring democracy, the quality of elections, political transparency, and other such things. It is perhaps most realistic to draw some sort of continuum along the righthand side of the table, from less democratic to more democratic electoral systems.

But this is not the question here – the question here is whether the lower lefthand box exists. What sorts of features might a democratic system without elections have? There are many possible scenarios:

One could imagine some sort of town meeting – style politics, or Quaker-style consensual government. Here, citizens deliberate, and ultimately it becomes obvious what the common will is. This is a nice idea, and sometimes it works, but it is hard to imagine as a governing philosophy. Even when it does work, there are always workarounds that look like elections. During my brief time on the faculty of Swarthmore College, a Quaker school, we needed to determine whether to abolish the school’s

football team. Quaker bylaws require unanimity, but there was none to be found. As a result, we unanimously decided that we needed to set aside the rules and take a vote. In any sort of “absolute democracy” or deliberative democracy set up, elections are implied, or the decisions taken are elections in practice, even if not in name. There may be differences in thresholds, or there may be differences between absolute democracy and representative democracy, but these are not important distinctions for the purposes of this question.

We could imagine a government that intuits what the people want even without elections, or without asking them. Such a system could be extrapolated from Hobbes’ *Leviathan*, in which the sovereign understands that his well-being is synonymous with that of the people, and he thus surrounds himself with the best advisers and most talented public servants, all of whom are dedicated to making the law clear and ensuring rational governance. If done right, this is what the people want, what informed and rational people want, or what people *should* want. This might be considered democratic, in the sense that the people get what is best for them. And if we educate the people well (again, as Hobbes recommends), then they will understand and want this. So, in a somewhat attenuated sense, the people are authoritative. Politicians can plunder, but they still do not have reasons to entirely ignore what the public wants.

A more benign version, perhaps, can even be drawn from Edmund Burke’s (1774) claim that legislators can understand “interests” without directly consulting the people about them, or from *Federalist* #49 and #51. In each of these cases, as for Hobbes, it is simply not that hard for politicians to discern what the people want. And in Burke’s argument, as in the *Federalist Papers* as well, elections are present, but are to be treated with caution. Madison understood that elections would be used by the different governmental actors to settle scores with each other, to legitimate their own ideas, in a manner not even that different from the fraudulent elections discussed above. *Federalist* #50’s consideration of periodic elections was a means of limiting the ability of elites to manipulate elections, but I do not think Madison thought he had solved the problem, nor that he would have argued that anyone should assume that the existence of elections rendered a government democratic. To the extent that the government of the *Federalist Papers* is democratic (which it isn’t, all that much), it is reliant on a more intangible sort of public spirit or sense of common purpose.

Third, we could perhaps focus our attention on things that look democratic but do not have the formal mechanisms of democracy. It is common, for instance, to contend that social movements or activist groups are democratic, and that their activities are not merely permissible in a democracy but are constitutive of it. Such a perspective could be drawn (and has been drawn by many, many people this year!) from Rousseau’s writings on the general will. A cynic, in addition, might point out that all formal elections or formal governmental activities are, to a degree, manipulated by elites and that “grassroots democracy” or some such construct is more authentic.

There are a range of such groups, to be certain, and there are norms that tend to be used in describing them. The notion that broadly based movements tend to become institutionalized is a staple of the U.S. interest group literature (e.g. McAdam 1999). The civil rights movement, the feminist movement, the environmental movement – all of these movements eventually became interest groups, with internal elections, a small elite

that governs, and a large membership that does little more than pay dues, if even that. In many instances, such organizations are not properly democratic at all – they are dependent on the philanthropy of a small number of wealthy individuals. At times, this becomes a matter of contestation – those on the left accuse conservative groups such as the Tea Party of being “Astroturf” organizations, cleverly constructed to look like citizen groups, and those on the right make similar allegations about liberal groups.

We can also make a case that there are similarities between the capitalist marketplace and democracy. Publicly held corporations have internal decisionmaking processes that look like elections, and the few businesses that still have unionized employees also have internal elections of a sort. Yet one could also argue that consumers ultimately wield some control over companies’ political activities, and that there is a rough democracy here. This democracy can be exercised in an informal way – corporations seek to engage in public-spirited acts or portray themselves in their advertisements as conforming to a society’s values in order to sell their products. It can also work in a somewhat more formal way, as manifested in boycotts, or in recent American actions like the “Grab Your Wallet” campaign against corporations that sell Trump-branded products or by the “Sleeping Giants” campaign to pressure companies into removing their advertisements from the *Breitbart* website.

It should be noted that the second and third categories here may feed off of each other – that is, a system run by elites without any direct public involvement may nonetheless be informed of public sentiment by the activities of citizen groups, and it may benefit through an effort to develop an intelligent understanding of what such activities do and do not mean. Politicians need to determine, for instance, whether an interest group actually represents a consequential section of the public or is conveying useful information. The corporations discussed above must determine whether consumer threats will actually impact their bottom line or reputation. In the absence of any real measurements, this sort of democracy becomes a guessing game.

Ultimately, therefore, this entire construct should strike the reader as being less than ideal. There is no meaningful way to measure gradations of democracy in this context, which is why there is no vertical arrow running down the lefthand side of the table. All we have here is a perception about the public will. And this perception will be flawed, for three reasons.

First, communication without some sort of measurement tool will always be oppositional. Those who are satisfied with the status quo will stay home. Those who feel threatened by a government’s choices may protest, but those who are satisfied will not take to the streets to announce their satisfaction – they will go about their lives.

Second, just as Madison feared, the lack of periodic elections may inspire government to manipulate the expression of public opinion. For a particularly extreme example of this, consider the beautiful public rallies held in North Korea. Citizens don matching colored clothing and engage in elaborate, choreographed displays of these colors at pro-government rallies. Westerners watching these things know, of course, that this is an activity sponsored and tightly controlled by the government. But there is no way for the observer to prove this, just as there is no way for the observer to prove that elites are not involved in choreographing other types of ostensibly spontaneous, public expressions.

And third, it is in the interest of those who engage in such activities to overstate the extent to which they represent public opinion. A standard paradigm in literature on interest group lobbying is a sort of iterated prisoner's dilemma (see, e.g., Kollman 1998). Any organization that purports to represent the public, or some significant percentage of it, has an incentive to overstate the support it, and its proposals, have. Politicians will evaluate communications from groups based on their beliefs about the level of support the group has. It is not always in the interest of politicians to force groups to demonstrate their support (especially because such support might take the form of voting against the politician, or otherwise showing their disapproval when the politician does not agree to the group's demands or requests). But there must be a means for groups to occasionally demonstrate their credibility. Even when there are elections, it is difficult for groups to provide unambiguous evidence that they do have public support. But without elections, such demonstrations are particularly difficult. Elections, one might say, are a blunt tool, but they must be part of the toolbox.

It simply is not possible to distinguish between a regime that responds to legitimate, independently developed preferences and one that actively manipulates and defines them. There can be participatory things that look democratic that are largely separate from elections. But there can also be a regime that is not democratic at all but in which citizens' expressions of their preferences represent views that are not supported by the majority, that are engineered in an undemocratic way, or are hostile toward democratic norms. It is simply not possible to tell the difference; one cannot empirically measure this sort of democracy. It may exist, but we cannot do much more than have a speculative conversation about it.

This, then, is the answer I would propose to the question here: we can have a conversation about what democracy looks like without elections, but it would be a conversation full of unsupported and unsupportable assertions, devoid of empirical evidence, and prone to manipulation by people who want to demonstrate some particular point of view about the commonweal. We could work to make up rules about how such a conversation should proceed – and in a moment I shall try to do so – but this is not, really, a conversation that democrats should want to have to have. It is possible, however, that at least in the United States, it is what we have to have at the moment.

2. When Elections Fail

The above discussion suggests, then, that elections are useful if we are to measure democracy or compare democracies. It should not be assumed, however, that elections are useful in the perpetuation or improvement of democracy. The United States – whose recent elections has surely prompted much of the handwringing about the quality of democracy of late – illustrates this point well. This was (and it is important to emphasize this here) the case before the 2016 election. Formally, nothing of any great consequence has changed in the mechanics of American elections themselves for a very long time.

It might be a bit melodramatic to argue that U.S. elections have “failed” in the sense that the term is used by comparative elections scholars. When Pippa Norris (2015, ch. 1), for instance, writes about election failure, she begins by citing the provision in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights that “the will of the people shall be the basis of the authority of government; this will shall be expressed in periodic and genuine elections which shall be by universal and equal suffrage and shall be held by secret vote or by equivalent free voting procedures.” Today, most democratic nations comply with the technical aspects of this provision – the secret ballot, near-universal suffrage, and periodic elections. Yet these rules do not by themselves ensure that the “will of the people,” whatever that is, prevails. Norris lists a host of problematic election practices that have the potential to skew elections. Not all of these are terrible things. For instance, the American norm that it is the responsibility of the individual citizen to register to vote, not the responsibility of the government to register citizens, does not seem like the stuff of tyranny even if it does deviate from international norms.

Yet behind the often arcane practice of election law, there lurk much larger sources of deviation from the general will. That is, there are reasons why people make election rules, and why practices may slowly become more and more problematic even without any master plan to undermine electoral democracy. One can make a case that it is these things that have changed – circumstances that have altered the utility of American elections in making politicians accountable to public preferences. Let us briefly consider three of these here:

Increasing Political Polarization

It is commonly agreed that the two major American parties’ congressional delegations are more polarized today than at any point in U.S. history. The number of votes in which the majority of one party opposes the majority of the other party has never been higher, and since 2010 there has not been any ideological overlap between the two parties. That is, the most conservative House or Senate Democrat is significantly more liberal than the most liberal Republican. Such circumstances might not be of concern in a Westminster-style parliament or in a proportional system, but it is unprecedented in the American two-party system. Figure 1 illustrates this change; here, each member of Congress’s ideology score (using the standard ideological measurement in the U.S., the DW-NOMINATE first dimension score) is shown on the Y-axis, with more conservative positions receiving a higher value, and the Democratic presidential candidate’s vote percentage in the state or district (a passable but imperfect measure of district ideology) is shown on the X-axis. During the 1980s, there was substantial overlap between the two parties; the parties were relatively close together; and both parties were somewhat responsive to district ideology. That is, even within parties, more liberal legislators represented more liberal districts and more conservative legislators represented more conservative districts. By the 2010s, the parties were further apart, there was no overlap, and the parties were much less responsive to district or state ideology. There is no relationship at all between district or state ideology and legislator ideology within the majority Republican Party.

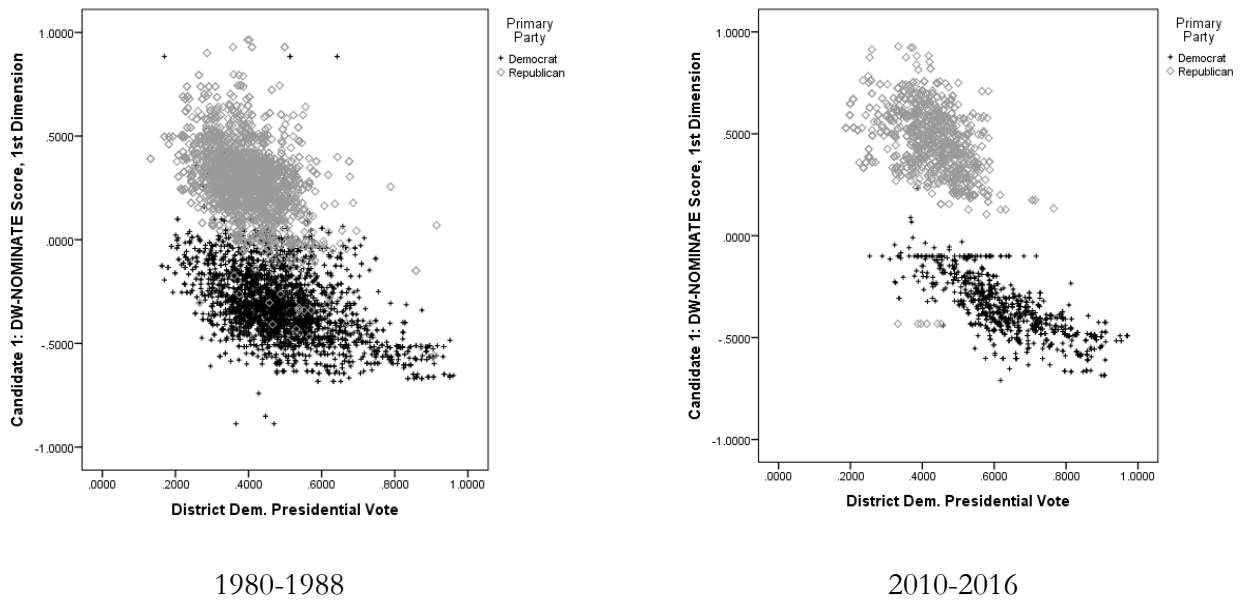


Figure 1: Ideological Positions of Members of U.S. Congress, 1980s and 2010s

It has been argued, with somewhat less evidence, that partisanship has increased in other aspects of American politics, as well. It is generally accepted that convention delegates, party activists, and high-information voters have become more ideologically polarized². It has been argued, although less conclusively, that primary voters have also become more polarized, and that Americans in general have become more polarized³.

Polarization has been implicated as the cause of a number of different political problems. Thomas Mann and Norman Ornstein's *It's Even Worse than it Looks* (2011), stands as perhaps the best-known argument about the problems of polarization. Mann and Ornstein describe how formerly uncontroversial bipartisan ideas have now become partisan, and how both parties (but the Republican Party in particular) will reject compromise for no other reason than to deny their opponents the ability to claim any sort of victory. Such a mindset, they argue, has led to a rejection of the rules and norms that structured elite political discourse in the United States. They argue further that this sort of approach is fundamentally incompatible with the two party checks and balances system of the U.S. Constitution.

More recently, political scientists Matt Grossmann and David Hopkins have argued in *Asymmetric Polarization* (2015) that increased polarization is largely a consequence of the fact that American political parties have become entirely different in their programmatic content. Republicans have, since at least the early 1960s, sought to develop a clear conservative ideology that structures all of their policy views; Democrats, on the other hand, have become a coalition of groups, and the party's program is not an ideological one but a patchwork of ideas designed to advantage the different groups that form its coalition. Neither party can really understand the other, and partisans of one party will be quick to demonize the other and to reject the other's ideas on their face – either out

² See, e.g., Lee 2016.

³ For a summary of these debates, see Fiorina 2009.

of the presumption that any Democratic idea is inconsistent with conservatism, or out of the presumption that any Republican idea must be discriminatory.

Both of these studies suggest that American polarization has become deeply enough rooted that party conflict is no longer really about ideology at all – it is about winners and losers. It is also not really conducive to developing a philosophy about governing. One can see some of these concerns in play since the 2016 election. Republicans, following the unexpected victory of a presidential candidate who broke with party orthodoxy on a number of issues, have quickly backed off from commitments to, among other things, free trade, international military alliances, and entitlement reform. Democrats, meanwhile, have become more supportive of corporate speech (because some corporations, after all, have espoused somewhat progressive views) and of the right of state governments to defy federal policies. Individual policies become a means toward an end, but beyond vanquishing one's opponents, it is not at all clear what that end is.

Declining Faith in Institutions

Americans' faith in political institutions has plummeted over the past forty years, and either as cause or consequence, the effectiveness of these institutions themselves has declined as well. It is easy to draw connections to polarization here – as Congress has become more polarized, public support for Congress has declined. One recent study found public support for Congress at less than ten percent (Bishop 2016); support for the president, for the government as a whole, for the court system, and for the criminal justice system all were at 35 percent or less, as compared to over fifty percent for each in the early 1990s. The media, the public schools, labor unions, and many other types of civil, nonpolitical institutions have exhibited similar declines. Public hostility toward political parties and “special interests,” a sentiment that has always a part of American politics, has reached an unprecedented level of late (Gold 2015). These phenomena are hardly unique to the United States; Russell Dalton (2004) has noted parallel trends in most Western democracies, and suggests that increased education levels, increased access to political news and information, and the increased transparency of governmental activities are to blame.

The political institutions of more concern to political scientists, however, are American political parties. Unlike Congress or the presidency – institutions that are constitutionally mandated, and so are not going anywhere – intermediary institutions such as parties, interest groups, and the like can be destroyed or weakened because they don't actually have to be there, or to do anything, at all. It can be hard for the layperson to know when this is happening, or, indeed, whether it has already happened. Back in 1926, Bernard Freyd argued that American parties had been supplanted by what he calls “parties” (the quotation marks are his), by shadowy, unaccountable entities who called themselves the Democratic and Republican Parties but were comprised of different people, had different goals, and offered different (and inferior) benefits to the public. Perhaps this happened then, perhaps this has happened recently. Who could know for sure?

To draw a somewhat inexact parallel: I live in a small New England city with many beautiful old churches – many of which look as if they stepped out of a picture postcard

of 18th century America. Many of these churches are not used any more, or have congregations a fraction of the size of what they used to have. Many of them are rather dingy on the inside. Yet a person driving through the city cannot be expected to know this, nor, perhaps, can someone who only shows up for church on Christmas. Similarly, someone who merely shows up to vote once or twice a year cannot know how healthy parties are. Unlike churches, of course, political parties are also particularly unpopular, as are their internal processes. When we see them, it does not summon fond memories of some real or imagined American past. While a church might hope some fraction of the Christmas attendees might be inspired to come on a different Sunday, parties generally do not have such hopes. We suspect that the people who show up for church on all of those other Sundays are better, or at least more altruistic, than we are; we suspect that those who are involved in party activities while we're not there are worse and more selfish. And even if we have thoughts about the nobility of past party leaders, we are likely to mythologize them to a sufficient degree that we will find our contemporary party activists lacking.

In her 2008 defense of political parties, *On the Side of the Angels*, Nancy Rosenblum notes that many definitions of political parties assume that their purpose is plunder or member self-interest; that is, our starting point in looking at parties is the assumption that they are not working to advance the public interest. What Rosenblum calls anti-partyism, then, represents a rejection of such claims, but anti-partyism itself is not an ideology or a plan in itself. Calls for clean government, for the combatting of corruption, or for governmental reform may at times find receptive audiences, but they do not give government any meaningful agenda for what to do, and thus they cannot last.

One extension of Rosenblum's argument is the admission that the fact that parties cannot openly announce their true, narrow aims – that they articulate their goals with reference to democratic principles or public goals – means that we will inevitably see parties as acting hypocritically. The few times that we don't – when we see parties that openly assert that they are uninterested in pursuing the public interest and are seeking to give one part of society an advantage over the other – things seem even worse; we perceive incipient class warfare.

Rosenblum's argument has found sympathetic audiences among quantitative political scientists; there have been many efforts to measure the decline in party strength. In my own work (Boatright 2011), I have sought to make a similar argument regarding the decline of traditional “reputation bearing” interest groups. In the case of parties and interest groups, the existence of a reputation and the urge to maintain that reputation beyond the election at hand – for purposes of winning future elections, in the case of parties, or of lobbying successfully, in the case of groups – put restraints on what is said in campaigns.

And yet, reform proposals nearly always weaken the power of parties and groups. Recent campaign finance reforms have done this to ongoing interest groups; the Bipartisan Campaign Reform Act (BCRA) of 2002 limited the power of interest groups and political parties to raise money and to run advertisements. The Supreme Court's *Citizens United v. FEC* decision removed some of these limits, but took the additional step of legitimating new interest groups, which came to be known as “super PACs”, that were essentially bank accounts with the infrastructure of ongoing organizations. This

had the effect of creating a new class of political groups that could successfully compete with parties and interest groups, thereby weakening them both. Both the BCRA and the decision repealing it harmed parties and groups. Other party reforms, such as the Democratic Party's recent decision to abandon its superdelegate rules in primary elections, have also been popular steps that weakened party organizations.

This is a common pattern across all institutions. We lose faith in our institutions; rather than strengthening them, we deliberately weaken them, or abandon them entirely. The logic is inescapable: if the quality of the news I received has declined, why should I pay more for it? If the public schools are failing, why should I send my children there? But it is not just a matter of turning away – the analogous behavior would be for me to actively work to tear down the failing school in my neighborhood, to call for firing the teachers or to otherwise prevent them from doing their jobs.

The problem of weakened institutions was on vivid display in the 2016 election. We implicitly believe that our institutions will constrain politicians' behavior, even as we deliberately weaken our institutions. Many of those who discounted Donald Trump's chances of winning the Republican nomination asserted that the Republican Party, or the media, or Republican elites would ultimately converge on a much safer choice. Yet the Republican establishment was not, in fact, there anymore. Political scientists had been warning that something like this would happen in primary elections as far back as the 1920s (e.g. Freyd 1926). It is remarkable that it took so long for them to be proven right.

The Changing Importance of Geography

Political divides in the United States are also less dependent on geography than they once were. Well into the twentieth century, American political parties were very different across regions of the country. The concerns of a New England Republican had very little to do with the concerns of a Nebraska Republican; the ideological views of a Southern Democrat were not very much like those of a Chicago Democrat. Economic concerns and employment were closely linked to geography, and ethnic culture as well was in many ways a function of region. 21st Century America still exhibits substantial geographic variation, but it has less to do with region and more to do with urbanization. For all practical purposes, San Francisco, Boston, Minneapolis, and Atlanta are the same places, politically, and rural or exurban areas of the country have more to do with each other than with the closest large city.

As this has happened, physical communities have also declined. It is now possible to telecommute to work from anywhere. Such work communities provide great opportunities for people in remote areas, but they come at the cost of creating an atomized, isolated work force. Similarly, a conservative in a Massachusetts college town or a liberal in rural Texas can connect to virtual political communities that reinforce their beliefs but draw them away from distinctly regional or local concerns. And in the social sphere, one's "friends" can be spread throughout the country, united by Facebook or a shared message board.

Geographic communities are in themselves a sort of institution, and a concern about the declining influence of geography blends into a strain of recent theorizing on community, exemplified by writers such as Robert Putnam (2016), Yuval Levin (2016),

and Charles Murray (2013). Despite the yawning ideological chasms between these three, each is concerned about the fraying of the bonds of physical or geographic communities (that is, the places where we are from) as people come to define themselves more and more according to particular tastes, ideological proclivities, or adopted characteristics (that is, where we are going). All of us certainly belong to both communities. But one of the reasons Putnam, Levin, and Murray are concerned that the bonds of the former have frayed is that those communities are actually more diverse (if not always racially or ethnically, then in terms of class, political beliefs, or life experience), and more dependent on mediating institutions (e.g. churches, schools, fraternal or civic groups) than the communities we select into. Selective communities, in these accounts, tend to have nasty feedback loops, where peoples' views are constantly reinforced by those who share the same esoteric interests that brought them together⁴. Paradoxically, even as Americans select into ideologically distinct physical communities, the nature of these communities matters less than it once did, and we select into even narrower virtual communities.

It is difficult to imagine what “accountability” to such communities looks like. Many of these communities are very political (and very politically influential), which may be part of the polarization story. Yet no institutions exist to aggregate or articulate views spread across such communities, and their very existence is cause, consequence, and accelerant of institutional failure. In a system of geographic representation, it is hard to see democratic elections providing accountability.

To reiterate, none of these changes are exclusively “bad” by themselves; in fact, a case can be made that each has normative benefits. Polarized parties make it easier for citizens to cast an informed vote; if a party label reliably conveys a full set of policy positions, then citizens do not have to spend very much time learning about individual candidates, and they are less likely to vote based on, for instance, the candidate's race, gender, personal attractiveness, demeanor, or anything else that is unrelated to policy. The decline of all sorts of institutions goes hand-in-hand with the increased ability of citizens to use new technology acquire information from different sources and/or from voices who might have gone unheard in the past. The gatekeepers are gone. And our work lives and social lives are less tied to where we live than ever before. These are all salutary things. They are things that our politicians have worked with us to bring about. And these are all things that have support from large majorities of the public. Yet collectively, they pose problems for democracy – we can elect people over whom no one has any control.

The congressional example of this makes this point clearly enough. As I have sought to show in Figure 1, the parties in Congress do not seem to respond to voter preferences any more, or in the same fashion that they once did. There are many formal rules that are implicated here: the drawing of congressional districts can now be done with laser-like precision, ensuring that more districts are safe for one party than was the case

⁴ There is a huge literature tying such communities to political polarization. As Vanderbilt (2016) notes, however, we often don't even know why we have selected into these. He approvingly quotes the protagonist from *Ghost World* on this point: “Maybe I don't even want to meet someone who shares my interests. I hate my interests!”

before; the American campaign finance system creates incentives for parties and interest groups to focus all of their spending on a very small number of competitive races while effectively ceding everything else; changes in the appointment of congressional committee chairs reward party loyalty; and the concentration of Democratic voters in major cities has resulted in comfortable Republican victories even in election years where Democratic candidates received more votes.

The 2016 presidential election poses a similar example – the Republican Party, despite its ideologically coherent congressional wing, its control of the House, the Senate, and a supermajority of statehouses and state legislatures, could not (for arguably the first time in recent history) decide on its choice or block a candidate who was at odds with party elites on many important issues. The unlikely victory of such a candidate has, as well, produced an administration that is not particularly accountable to anyone. None of the traditional Republican powerbrokers helped Trump, no interest groups conferred important endorsements, and no counsel from wise elder statesman helped in the election. As a consequence, the Trump cabinet is filled with people who have no ties to Republican orthodoxy, and there is little communication between the White House and Congress about what the Republican agenda should be. The administration still is operating with a skeleton staff, and members of congress respond daily to presidential tweets that provide ambiguous suggestions of what Trump’s actual views are.

It is not at all clear where this leads us. Facile comparisons between Trump and past totalitarian leaders have noted that democracies have at times destroyed themselves by electing openly undemocratic politicians. Yet analogies such as these do not fully reckon with the informational differences – totalitarian governments work to restrict information, but in the American context, there is arguably too much information, including much that is not true. Or, as one widely retweeted conservative tweet put things, “Donald Trump is such a terrifying fascist dictator that literally no one fears speaking out against him on literally any platform” (French 2017).

In our high information age, however, mass demonstrations or events are easier than ever to organize, but perhaps less consequential as a result. In just eight years, give or take, America has veered from the Obama campaign’s large public events to the Tea Party protests and Occupy protests to this year’s Trump rallies and now, anti-Trump rallies. These things all look on the surface like outpourings of Rousseauian public spiritedness, but they have differed greatly in how well they are tethered to elections and those other boring democratic devices. The Women’s March that took place the day after Donald Trump’s inauguration was, by some estimates, the largest protest event in U.S. history (Chenoweth and Pressman 2017). What does this mean? It is hard to say. Such events may serve to convince Americans on each side that there is some frightening populist force out there, somewhere, in America that wishes them harm. At a minimum, our encounters with such things suggest that tinkering with the mechanics of democracy is not the most pressing priority.

Does this mean that we should not focus on the mechanics of our elections? Probably not. They serve many useful functions above and beyond ensuring accountability. And they *can* be a means of establishing accountability. We can make them better. But we should not invest too much faith in them; otherwise, we risk exaggerating the potential results of these changes, yielding decade-long quests for reform that will leave us

disillusioned. Institutional or fixes – redistricting reform, campaign finance laws, voting laws, perhaps modified primary laws – are not nearly as important as much larger, more amorphous reforms, such as fixing our institutions, restoring cultural norms around civil debate, and so on. But we don't even know how to talk about these things, yet.

3. *What's Left when Elections Fail*

Let us return to the matter of measuring elections, however. The 2016 U.S. election ranked 55th in the Perceptions of Electoral Integrity survey of world elections⁵. There has been a lot of criticism of this survey and of the standards used, but even if one is inclined to quarrel with the methodology, it still seems quite plausible that we are quite far from the top of that list. I was one of the respondents in the survey (and in a pair of other similar surveys), and I think I speak for many other respondents when I say that I was impressed with the number of different governmental features that were included in the measurement of democracy, but that I also found cause to question whether all of them were, in fact about democracy and not about something else.

Iceland currently tops the Perceptions of Integrity list. Most western tourists who visit Iceland can understand why this might be so. Þingvellir, which is billed as the place where the first Icelandic parliament met, in 930 AD, is a standard part of the “Golden Circle” tourist circuit, and it is indeed a dramatic site, located right on the continental divide. The country's (unsuccessful) efforts to crowdsource its constitution, the unusually high number of women in its parliament, and other progressive aspects of its political system have made the country's politics unusually well-known to foreigners. It also doesn't hurt that the country currently has a very telegenic and approachable president and first lady, who can debate the merits of things like the appropriateness of different types of pizza toppings without seeming condescending.

So Iceland has a good story, and for the moment anyway, good messengers for that story as well. Forgive this bit of Yankee imperialism, though, but I would contend that Americans have a pretty good story, too. Even when our democracy falls short of our ideals, the account of how the American republic was founded, what it represents, how it has fixed some of its most notable flaws, is ubiquitous not only in the United States, but in much of the world. Although America has at times had nativist movements, or has had those who would argue that it is a white nation, a Christian nation, or some other type of place organized around something other than an idea, such claims simply have never been supported by evidence, or by the actual details of the dominant national story. If there were a ranking of the best national stories about democracy, it's hard to believe that ours would rank 55th.

This may sound jingoistic, but is actually, I think, an important point. One distinguishing feature of American democracy, at least from the inside, however, is that for the most part it doesn't appear to be that bad. Or at least, it didn't until the 2016 election. In retrospect, a lot of different stories about the election make a certain amount of sense. The Democratic Party nominated a historically weak candidate, someone who was inextricably tied to a regime that had turned its back on the people who had voted

⁵ The US report is available at <https://www.electoralintegrityproject.com/pei-us-2016/>; downloads of the full dataset are available at <https://dataverse.harvard.edu/dataverse/PEI>.

Democratic in previous decades. An inchoate mass of fed up working class voters, observing the “carnage” of postindustrial Midwestern cities, had grown disenchanted with the norms of democratic governance and was ready to offer up power to someone who promised to smash those norms. These all make for good stories, and they have propelled books such as J.D. Vance’s (2016) *Hillbilly Elegy* and Arlie Russell Hochschild’s (2016) *Strangers in their own Land* to the top of the bestseller list.

Some of the stories that have gotten swept up in the post-election rediscovery of middle American are clearly false – evocations of a mythical American that never really existed, as Paul Krugman (2017) has ably argued in regard to the effort to “bring back coal.” Yet the accuracy of all of these stories about the plight of Middle American working class whites is not what’s most important here. Rather, what matters is that their relevance is largely the consequence of a football stadium full of voters in three states, whose choices outweighed the millions of surplus votes Hillary Clinton racked up in California. Had things worked out differently, of course, we would have had very different narratives.

What all of these narratives, real and imagined, have in common is that they purport to say something about American democracy. Americans are arguably quite good at this. Even when our democracy has fallen short on various indices, or where it has fallen short on the sorts of things that Americans actually think about – matters of race, to mention the obvious one – there has been a story about the principles of American democracy or the direction in which that democracy was going. In the midst of what appears to be a populist moment in the United States (albeit with Twitter accounts taking the place of pitchforks), it is important to remember that most of the populist fervor in the United States has purported to be about returning us to some form, real or imagined, of constitutional democracy.

In his prescient 2003 book *Stories of Peoplehood*, political theorist Rogers Smith noted the difficulty of situating these national narratives within any standard political theory about democracy. Democracy, he argued, is a set of arrangements that requires the acceptance, at times, of victories by those who do not uphold its values. The election of such politicians, however, is not in itself necessarily a refutation of those values.

In developing a typology for these stories, Smith distinguishes between accounts that establish an idea or set of values as the ur story and accounts that rely on some sort of ethnic or geographic definition of peoplehood. This distinction is, of course, freighted with moral implications, but that is not really the issue here. What is of consequence, I think, is that the American story is largely about an idea.

Smith begins his book with a description of a national story, the Kyrgyz epic of Manas, an epic poem which rivals the great Greek epics but is largely unknown outside of Kyrgyzstan. Following the establishment of the Kyrgyz state in 1991, President Askar Akayev made a point of creating national celebrations of the poem. There was not necessarily anything undeserved about this, but the national story was manipulated for nation-building purposes. National stories are always subject to this sort of reinterpretation, and always have been – consider, for instance, the endurance of the founding Roman story and its malleability for all sorts of different types of regimes. One lesson of Mary Beard’s (2015, ch. 2) recounting of the uses of the Romulus and Remus

story, however, is that they are not infinitely malleable, despite the efforts of different regimes.

A well-established state, however, has a story that is particularly difficult to dislodge. For all of the talk about the “deep state” or the other institutional characteristics of democracy that stand in the way of people’s worst fears about a Trump administration, it seems to me that the basic narrative of what America is poses a more formidable barrier. There is a national story in the United States, and it is certainly one that is primarily about democracy, and only secondarily, if at all, about geography, ethnicity, or any other sort of national characteristic.

One of the paradoxes of democracy is that we want it to be inspirational, when in practice it usually is not. The quintessential New England town hall, in which citizens come together to deliberate about local issues, has long been one of the classic stories about American democracy. Yet every year, when I ask the students at the New England college where I teach to tell me their stories about town hall meetings, they invariably groan and tell me just how dull and unpleasant they are. There will always be a substantial distance between the practice of democracy and the stories we tell about it. This can be a source of aspiration, but also of disillusionment. It can cause us to look for democracy in places that are not really very well-suited for it.

As an example, consider contemporary protest politics in the United States. A favorite chant that emerged in anti-Trump rallies had to do with the very spectacle of the rallies themselves: “This is what democracy looks like.” Is that really the case? Who can know? But after the Trump victory, opponents latched on to a variety of different bits of spontaneous speechifying. These included the Twitter feeds that popped up from anonymous but displeased National Park Service employees (the “alt-NPS”), and later from bureaucrats in other government agencies; what appeared to be slyly anti-Trump advertisements that aired during the Super Bowl from sources as varied as Audi and a small Pennsylvania lumber company; and the satire of late night television hosts. These are all, to be certain, particularly flawed messengers, and there is something painfully ironic about people on the American left find it consoling that corporations want to celebrate diversity in their Super Bowl ads. Certainly it is much better to actually have a role to play in a normal, functioning government, to be able to see ourselves in more mundane democratic governmental practices. But this is not an option we have available at the moment. And business may currently be the least politically polarized, most stable American institution⁶.

This is also one of the things that seem to be a recurring irritation for people who have paid attention to the speeches, tweets, and other pronouncements that have issued from Trump and his subordinates. There is no real story about democracy here, other than the reminder that Trump won. Trump himself rarely mentions historical events in his speeches. In his inaugural address, he pointedly declined to discuss the constitution. The “make American great again” slogan has never been accompanied by any particular reference point – e.g. when, precisely, American was great in the way he envisions. Even when it comes to what would seem like basic reference points to history, such as making a statement on Holocaust Remembrance Day – his administration has avoided saying

⁶ See Bonica 2016 for an empirical argument on this point.

anything about real historical events. It is hard to know exactly what the plan here is, but it creates a sort of free-floating, contextless presidency – one that is unmoored not only from any American narrative of progress, but also from some of the core reference points of American conservatism. As *New York Times* columnist Richard Cohen (2017), among others, has argued, Trump is our first “ahistorical president.”

It certainly is possible to ascribe this peculiarity to authoritarian aims. In a widely circulated recent essay, University of Chicago law professors Aziz Huq and Tom Ginsberg (2017) have assessed the current U.S. situation according to different characteristics of what they call “democratic retrogression.” Retrogression, as they define it, is the slow abandonment of democracy, as opposed to the quicker and more deliberate actions involved in a coup or a revolution. One of these characteristics is “degradation of the public sphere.” Huq and Ginsberg describe many different steps governments may take to do this, including the harassment of opponents and the dissemination of false information. A case can certainly be made that this is taking place in the United States. The prevalence of an accepted democratic narrative, however, might be seen as a barrier against this. Perhaps over time that narrative might become stale. Yet the absence of a contrary narrative suggests that politicians do not have a reason for what they do – they are doing it just because they can.

This approach can certainly lead to some short term policy damage, but ultimately it may serve more to downsize or degrade the presidency – an outcome that many of Trump’s critics (on the left and on the right) may like. But the story that Americans tend to tell about democracy, about democratic values, constitutional principles, and such can’t really be replaced by nothing. It is as if that story has been put on the shelf for four, or eight years, or it has been handed from the government to the people.

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