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# Democracy For Realists: Why Elections Do Not Produce Responsive Government (Princeton Studies In Political Behavior)



## DEMOCRACY FOR REALISTS

*Why Elections Do Not Produce  
Responsive Government*

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## Synopsis

Democracy for Realists assails the romantic folk-theory at the heart of contemporary thinking about democratic politics and government, and offers a provocative alternative view grounded in the actual human nature of democratic citizens. Christopher Achen and Larry Bartels deploy a wealth of social-scientific evidence, including ingenious original analyses of topics ranging from abortion politics and budget deficits to the Great Depression and shark attacks, to show that the familiar ideal of thoughtful citizens steering the ship of state from the voting booth is fundamentally misguided. They demonstrate that voters— even those who are well informed and politically engaged— mostly choose parties and candidates on the basis of social identities and partisan loyalties, not political issues. They also show that voters adjust their policy views and even their perceptions of basic matters of fact to match those loyalties. When parties are roughly evenly matched, elections often turn on irrelevant or misleading considerations such as economic spurts or downturns beyond the incumbents' control; the outcomes are essentially random. Thus, voters do not control the course of public policy, even indirectly. Achen and Bartels argue that democratic theory needs to be founded on identity groups and political parties, not on the preferences of individual voters. Democracy for Realists provides a powerful challenge to conventional thinking, pointing the way toward a fundamentally different understanding of the realities and potential of democratic government.

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## Customer Reviews

This is an excellent book, but a couple of caveats are probably warranted. The main one is that despite its down-to-earth title, this isn't really a book for general readers. The authors (hereafter A&B) mention in their preface that they hope the book will be useful for "colleagues and students" "present and future professional political scientists" and that is the audience who will benefit most from reading it. Although the book isn't equation-heavy, its expository passages are nonetheless very dense in discussing fine points of quantitative social science techniques. Despite not being a political scientist, I do have a pretty decent appetite for quantitative arguments yet even I found myself rushing through some passages. An even stronger indicator that the book is directed to experts, though, is that the first big target of the argument, the so-called "folk theory" of popular sovereignty, is something whose usual embodiment is so stupendously implausible on its face that only professional training in rational choice theory could make it seem formidable. Broadly speaking, the folk theory is that elections are based on "issue voting," i.e., they can "reveal" the "preferences" "code words revealing the influence of neoclassical economics" of a majority of voters on a set of issues. Its usual folkloric form among the tribe of political scientists is something called the "spatial model" (@24-25). This involves a belief in a one-dimensional political spectrum in which feasible policies are arrayed from left to right, and in which each political party is represented by a platform reflecting the policy it will enact if elected. (How platforms are reduced to a one-dimensional policies isn't explained in the book, but then again A&B aren't defenders of this theory.

The credibility of the folk theory of democracy ('of the people, by the people, and for the people' - Abraham Lincoln; 'the people are their own rulers') has been undercut by a growing body of scientific evidence presenting a darker view. The evidence demonstrates that the great majority of citizens pay little attention to politics, are swayed at election time by the current state of the economy, and political loyalties typically are acquired in childhood. The populist ideal of democracy emphasizes the role of ordinary citizens in determining the policies of democratic communities - either via 'direct democracy' choosing policies themselves via initiative and referendum policies, or

representative democracy elections of individuals who assemble to carry out its will. Nearly all contemporary political regimes claim to be democracies of some sort. (North Korea is one of the most repressive governments, but still labels itself the 'Democratic People's Republic of Korea.') Their citizens mostly believe them. The folk theory of democracy celebrates the wisdom of popular judgments by informal and engaged citizens. Reality is that people have busy lives - school and/or jobs, meals to prepare, homes to clean, children and older parents to care for. They may also be coping with unemployment, illness, addiction, family troubles. Sorting out which candidate has the best foreign policy towards eg. Asia is not a priority for them. (And that one small aspect of issues our government deals with today.) Unfortunately, the multitude is not omniscient. The real environment is simply too subtle and filled with variety.

Bartels and Achen challenge what they call the "folk theory of democracy." The "folk theory" seems to have its roots in the idea of the "rational man" - an Enlightenment idea, certainly, but one that seems to have made its way into popular politics. The idea is that democracy works (when it does) via choices of representatives or directly of policies as informed by their interests and values. Representatives and policies then reflect those choices - the government embodies and enacts the will of the people. Then they undertake a quantitative study of the validity of that folk theory. They actually examine two theories of rational voter behavior. The first is policy voting - that, in simple terms, voters vote for candidates with whom they share policy positions more than alternative candidates. Policy voting fails in part because voters are unable or don't take the time to discern the policy positions of candidates. And in fact, there is little actual policy alignment between voters and the candidates they vote for to support the hypothesis that such a thing is behind voters' behavior. This point echoes what Bartels showed in his earlier book, *Unequal Democracy* - that the policy positions of members of the House of Representatives do not correlate well with those of their constituents (particularly their lower income constituents). In fact, foreshadowing some later discussions on group identity and group influence, Achen and Bartels hint that where there is agreement between voters and candidates on policies, the arrow of fit and influence may go in the opposite direction. Voters may not choose candidates who reflect their policy positions so much as adopt policy positions held by the candidates they choose.

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