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IS DEMOCRACY AN OPTION FOR THE REALIST?

ABSTRACT: *In Democracy for Realists, Christopher Achen and Larry Bartels argue that the depressingly well-established fact that people are woefully ignorant on politically relevant matters renders democratic ideals mere “fairy tales.” However, this iconoclasm stands in deep tension with the prescriptions they themselves end up offering towards the end of the book, which coincide to a surprising extent with those that have been offered by democrats for decades. This is a problem because, if we take seriously the type of data that Achen and Bartels rely on (and add to)—data that should make us realists in the sense of the book’s title—it is not clear that democracy in any recognizable sense remains an option for the realist.*

Keywords: *Christopher Achen, Larry Bartels, democratic realism, retrospective voting, social identity.*

Christopher Achen and Larry Bartels’s *Democracy for Realists: Why Elections Do Not Produce Responsive Government* (Princeton University Press, 2016), is a timely book, arriving as it does in the midst of several political outcomes that have made for a resurgence in skepticism about democracy. It brings a wealth of empirical and historical data to bear on the question of whether large parts of democratic theory and practice need to be reconsidered. And Achen and Bartels aren’t shy about what they take the answer to be: “All the conventional defenses of democratic government are at odds with demonstrable, centrally important facts of political life” in that “they do not portray human beings realistically, nor take honest account of our human limitations” (306).

Where these defenses of democracy go wrong, according to Achen and Bartels, is in their commitment to the “folk theory” of democracy. The folk theory “celebrates the wisdom of popular judgments by informed and engaged citizens” (9) and, crucially (since we would all presumably want to celebrate such a thing), it postulates that many of us in fact resemble such citizens. In Achen and Bartels’s telling, this theory lies behind a certain populist ideal in democratic theory and practice, which seeks to maximize the role of the public in policy making, including through referenda. The problem, the authors suggest, is that the empirical track record of attempts to implement this ideal reveals “a mishmash of heightened responsiveness to popular impulses, behind-the-scenes elite influence, and self-defeating choices stemming from the limited political expertise and attention of ordinary citizens” (86).

Of course, the fact that the public’s knowledge in the political domain is scant is not news to any serious student of politics or political philosophy. This also helps to explain the popularity of what becomes Achen and Bartels’s main target, once the populist ideal has been dealt with: the theory of retrospective voting. The retrospec-

tive theory does not require a terribly informed or even particularly engaged citizenry. It simply requires that voters pay attention to how they have fared under the incumbent candidate or party, and reward and punish them accordingly at the polls. On that account, the retrospective theory stands a good chance of accommodating limitations in knowledge and political interest on the part of the typical voter, while still giving the electorate a substantial role in shaping policy, at least indirectly, by picking leaders who will then select policies for them.

However, according to Achen and Bartels, even the retrospective theory asks too much of us. Granted, the theory is in line with the fact that “a virtual consensus has emerged that the electoral impact of economic conditions is real and substantial” (97-98), and specifically that there is “an impressive body of systematic evidence that voters reward incumbent politicians for good economic times and punish them for bad times” (146). In other words, voters do vote retrospectively. Unfortunately, they do so *myopically*. Thus, “the clear consensus in the literature is that recent economic performance is much more relevant at election time than earlier performance” (149). So while voters do tell the world *something* about how they feel by way of their votes, it is highly questionable whether that something creates anything resembling meaningful political accountability.

Achen and Bartels’s critique of the retrospective theory is highly convincing. But it sits uncomfortably with their overall project, which seeks to identify a substantial role for *identity* in voter choice. More specifically, as I will argue in the next section, the stronger their case is against the retrospective theory, the weaker their case will be for identity in the relevant sense playing an important role in how people vote. In subsequent sections I will then explore a further tension, this time between, on the one hand, the boldness of how the book starts out—with the claim that all defenses of democracy are mistaken, such that the main democratic ideals are mere “fairy tales”—and, on the other hand, the significant overlap between the prescriptions Achen and Bartels offer at the end of the book and those that have been offered by democrats for decades. I will argue that, if we take seriously the type of data that Achen and Bartels rely on (and add to) over the course of the bulk of the book—data that should make us realists in the sense of the book’s title—then it is not clear that democracy in any recognizable sense remains an option for the realist.

The Tension Between Economic Voting and Identity Voting

For myopic voting to be a problem for the retrospective theory, it has to be understood as a theory with *predictive* ambitions. (If understood as a normative theory about how voters *should* hold politicians to account, the fact that the typical voter is myopic would be less relevant.) Understood thus, it will make bad predictions about electoral outcomes, in assuming that voters will take into account a more pertinent set of factors than they actually do. A more realistic theory of voting behavior would presumably make no such assumptions. It is a bit surprising, then, that this is not what Achen and Bartels end up providing. While it seems that they are indeed in the business of offering a realistic theory of voting behavior, the remainder of the book is dedicated to a factor in such behavior that has very little to do with myopic economic considerations: “identity.”

Political philosophy is full of concepts that have multiple meanings that crucially affect the legitimacy of the arguments that invoke the concepts. Identity is one such

concept. So it is a worry that Achen and Bartels do not provide any explicit account of what identity is. But they give us some clues. Identities, they suggest, are separate from preferences, attitudes, and ideology (230). Moreover, identities “are not primarily about adherence to a group ideology or creed. They are emotional attachments that transcend thinking” (228). And whatever they are, they drive political behavior: “Most citizens support a party not because they have carefully calculated that its policy positions are closest to their own, but rather because ‘their kind’ of person belongs to that party” (307). And as for political preferences in particular, they flow from, rather than guide, identity membership: “Even among unusually well-informed and politically engaged people, the political preferences and judgments that look and feel like the bases of partisanship and voting behavior are, in reality, often *consequences* of party and group loyalties” (268).

Even in the absence of a fully worked-out account, you get a sense of what Achen and Bartels are after in their talk of identity. It is some form of felt and action-guiding social attachment grounded in emotion rather than reasoning. And, for purposes of spelling out my main worry about their use of “identity,” we really only need to have a clear sense of what identity *voting* is *not*. What it is not is *economic* voting, including myopic economic voting. After all, voting one way or the other simply (or even primarily) because I take my economic conditions to have been good or bad in the months leading up to an election would have to be a clear case of the very opposite of voting some particular way because that is what people of my kind do. And if that is correct, then there is a tension in Achen and Bartels’s story. If people vote primarily on the basis of entrenched group identities, then it would seem that purely economic considerations should not be so predictive. And yet it seems that they are, as Achen and Bartels argue that

it is possible to account for recent presidential election outcomes with a fair degree of precision solely on the basis of how long the incumbent party had been in power and how much real income growth voters experienced in the six months leading up to Election Day. Economic growth earlier in the president’s term seems to contribute little or nothing to the incumbent party’s electoral prospects. (153)

By the same token, if people vote primarily on the basis of economic considerations, then group identities should not be so predictive. Still, Achen and Bartels want to suggest that, “for most citizens most of the time, party and group loyalties are the primary drivers of vote choices” (299).

Why, the reader might ask, do Achen and Bartels have to commit to *either* identity or (myopic) economic considerations being the primary driver of voting behavior? Well, of course they do not. Both might play a role. But the fact remains that, the more predictive one of them is, the less predictive we should expect the other one to be, given—again—that how well or badly you have fared in the months leading up to an election would seem to be a very good example of something that is *not* part of your identity. This is a problem for Achen and Bartels, because it means that the stronger their case is against the retrospective theory on account of the influence on electoral outcome of myopic economic voting, the weaker will be their case for the claim that identity is, as they put it, “the most important factor in voters’ judgments” (232).

Maybe there is a way to have it both ways, but it is not clear to me how.

What Would Responsive Government Look Like?

But let us set that worry aside in order to consider another one. As we have seen, the retrospective theory is defective as a predictive tool. But what about the populist *normative* ideal?

Here, the problem is not simply, or even primarily, that the pursuit of this ideal often fails to generate government in line with the preferences of the people. After all, “giving groups of ordinary voters ‘some of what they want’ may not always be so desirable if what they want is a byproduct of affective tribal loyalties” (325). Underlying this claim is a distinction between preferences and interests, on account of which Achen and Bartels can also maintain that “even policies that are unambiguously preferred by a majority of citizens to the status quo may or may not be *good* policies in the broader sense of comporting with citizens’ interests” (76). Owing to such mismatches between preferences and interests, the main problem with the populist ideal is that, “far from empowering the citizenry, the plebiscitary implications of the folk theory have often damaged people’s real interests” (303).

But what constitutes people’s real interests? As in the case of identity, Achen and Bartels do not give us anything in the way of an account. This is a problem because it makes it difficult to get a handle on what they ultimately think a realistic democratic theory should look like, and specifically what it should have government be “responsive” to—to borrow a term from the book’s subtitle—if not simply to the preferences (as opposed to the real interests) of the people.

However, Achen and Bartels offer us some ideas toward the end of the book. At one point, they suggest that “competent leadership is critical; from the viewpoint of group theory, what that requires is forging effective political coalitions that serve people’s real interests” (323). This much follows fairly smoothly from aforementioned critique of the populist ideal, and in particular from the manner in which the simplistic desire for greater participation by people in the political process far from always yields good outcomes. But what Achen and Bartels have to say on the matter falls short of anything by way of a positive proposal for how to deliver the relevant type of coalitions. This holds, too, for the related suggestion that “effective democracy requires an appropriate balance between popular preferences and elite expertise” (303). They continue:

The point of reform should not simply be to maximize popular influence in the political process, but to facilitate *more effective* popular influence. We need to learn to let political parties and political leaders do their jobs, too. Simple-minded attempts to thwart or control political elites through initiatives, direct primaries, and term limits will often be counterproductive. (303)

This seems right. But it doesn’t tell us much about what concrete steps are likely to bring about effective popular influence. The most concrete proposal in the book is that we should reduce the influence of money in politics (326). That is likely a good idea and, as Achen and Bartels themselves note, also one that has been floated by many before them. In Achen and Bartels view, the motivation for such reform is that, when money plays a significant role in politics, it *excludes* people, in that it “privilege[s] the affluent relative to the poor, sophisticated insiders relative to ordinary people, and intense minorities relative to more complacent and inattentive majorities” (327). This is in line with what might be Achen and Bartels’s most developed pro-

posal, to the effect that “more effective democracy would require a greater degree of *economic and social equality*” (325). In more detail,

whether we assess the influence of the poor and minorities in terms of their expressed preferences or their apparent interests, the power imbalances are very large, and the resulting policy outcomes are far from those implied by any appealing democratic ideal. The theory of group politics provides a clearer explanation for why a more egalitarian society would result in a more egalitarian political process. The result would be an increase in the real political power of a variety of currently underrepresented groups, not all of them approved of by the editorial pages of either the *New York Times* or the *Wall Street Journal*. (326)

This sounds like a call for bringing more people into the democratic process, and in particular for the inclusion of those who are not currently represented. There are two interrelated problems with this, as far as Achen and Bartels’s project is concerned. First, if we take the group theory of politics to be the view that people’s voting behavior will primarily be a function of which groups they identify with, such that the political preferences they form as a result may be “a byproduct of affective tribal loyalties” (325), it is not clear why including those not currently represented should be expected to make for greater equality. That would supposedly only be the case if more complete forms of representation will tend to make for greater equality, and would, in so doing, also promote people’s real interests. But this is exactly the stuff of the populist ideal that Achen and Bartels are rightly skeptical about. In particular, if people do not know how to vote in a way that advances their real interests, why will further inclusion improve matters?

Why Should Realists Favor Responsiveness and Political Equality?

Which brings us to the second problem: Achen and Bartels’s suggestion that we need more equality and greater representation sounds a lot like what defenders of versions of the populist ideal have been arguing for.

Achen and Bartels acknowledge this (327). But it is still a problem. According to them, all conventional theories of democracy are misguided, but when it comes to time to present their own vision, we somehow end up with the outlines of exactly the type of recommendation (for more inclusion, more political equality, and so forth) that has been offered for decades, if not centuries. It is tempting to suggest that Achen and Bartels themselves are guilty of something they at one point accuse past authors of: “the authors examine the evidence, find the foundations of popular democratic theories inadequate, approach the edge of the critical abyss, and then skittishly back off, finding one or another reason why all must be—or soon will be—well after all” (298).

Here, it needs to be remembered where the book starts off. In the first chapter, Achen and Bartels discuss Robert Dahl’s characterizations of democracy, initially in terms of “the continued responsiveness of the government to the preferences of its citizens, considered as political equals” (Dahl 1971, 1), and later in terms of “effective participation,” “voting equality,” “enlightened understanding,” “control of the agenda,” and “inclusion of adults,” each of which is necessary for citizens to be “politically equal in determining the policies of the association” (Dahl 1998, 37-38). Achen and Bartels comment that “no existing government comes close to meeting all

of Dahl's criteria; in our view, no possible government could" (7). They also reject the argument that we should nevertheless attempt to *approximate* the satisfaction of these criteria. To this, the authors respond by suggesting that such attempts would only make sense if the criteria were not too unrealistic. Given that, in the paragraph that follows, they describe aforementioned Dahlian ideals as "fairy tales" (7), it seems reasonable to interpret Achen and Bartels as suggesting that the criteria are indeed too unrealistic.

Consider what this means: on Achen and Bartels's view, it might be that realism dictates that we should *not* strive for effective participation, voting equality, an enlightened understand on the part of the public, public control of the agenda, and the inclusion of (all) adults in the political process. Moreover, it might be that we should not set up government in such a way that it is continually responsive to the preferences of the people. (Perhaps it should be responsive to people's *real interests*—but we still do not know exactly what those interests consist in, so it is difficult to see exactly what that would amount to.) If that is correct—and in the next section I will argue that it is—it would seem that a realist theory of democracy would have to reject democracy.

Of course, it might be that what we know about the epistemic caliber of the public makes such a position perfectly reasonable. I am not assuming that only democratic arrangements are legitimate. Still, it is puzzling that a project that starts out boldly rejecting the core components of democratic government—including effective participation and voting equality—as fairy tales can end up with something as conventional as a call for campaign finance reform, and a prescription as dear to the democrat as increased inclusion of the disenfranchised. That is why the charge that Achen and Bartels are indeed backing off toward the end of the book does seem warranted. Which raises the question of where they would have ended up, had they not backed off.

Can the Realist Remain a Democrat?

Early on in the book, Achen and Bartels make no secret of where their allegiances lie. They clearly have a lot of respect for the "critical tradition"—critical of democracy, that is—of such observers as Schumpeter, Lippmann, and Niebuhr. However, all of these writers held that the epistemic caliber of the people is unimpressive enough to pose a significant problem for the *legitimacy* of democratic ideals, and Achen and Bartels agree, as we have seen.

Of course, widespread public ignorance, of the sort that Achen and Bartels spend most of their book documenting, does not *necessarily* pose a problem for democratic legitimacy. It might, for example, be the case that there is a certain power in large numbers, entailing that a large public is likely to outperform a smaller number of more competent individuals (cf. Condorcet [1785] 1976; Converse 1990; Surowiecki 2004; Hong and Page 2004; Landemore 2013). Or there might be something about the dynamics of democracy such that when members of the public engage one another in a critical and reasoned debate, they become more informed as a result (e.g. Gutmann and Thompson 2004; Talisse 2005). Ultimately, however, these proposals fail to throw doubt upon the idea that widespread public ignorance will in fact have a detrimental effect on the quality of democratic decision-making (e.g., Ahlstrom-Vij forthcoming). And Achen and Bartels seem to agree:

Faced with this evidence [of widespread public ignorance], many scholars in the final chapters of their books continue to express idealistic hope that institutional reform, civic education, improved mass media, more effective mobilization of the poor, or stronger moral exhortation might bring public opinion into closer correspondence with the standards of the folk theory. But in sober moments most acknowledge the repeated failures of all those prescriptions. (12)

Set aside the fact that Achen and Bartels themselves put forward several reforms like these toward the end of their book, as we have seen. Our concern now is with the following question: if we take seriously the epistemic shortcomings of the public, and also the failures of past prescriptions for bringing the public up to an acceptable level of political competence, can *democracy* really remain an option? It is not clear that it can—although it depends on what exactly we mean by (legitimate) “democracy.” On that score, however, Dahl’s criteria do seem fairly on the mark, particularly as they relate to *responsiveness on the part of government to the preferences of its citizens, participation, control of the agenda, voting equality, and the inclusion of adults* (presumably leaving room for the exclusion of non-citizens, and other established exclusions).

We saw earlier that Achen and Bartels label these criteria as “fairy tales,” and while that might at first be read as mere hyperbole, I think they are simply being true to the data they are working with here. So, let us go through the criteria in turn to see where a truly realistic assessment of the data, such as that provided in *Democracy for Realists*, leads us.

1. As we have seen, Achen and Bartels are explicit about not wanting to defend a form of government that is *responsive to the preferences of its citizens*, but rather one that is responsive to their true interests. So a realist theory would arguably not take on board that criterion.

2. Moreover, the authors’ take on referenda and other tools for direct democracy makes clear that there will certainly be many forms of *public participation* that are not to be encouraged.

3. The evidence invoked in relation to participation also calls into question the wisdom of public *control over*—or even just of substantial influence in setting—*the political agenda*.

4. Regarding *the inclusion of* (close to) *all adults*, the sheer volume of data that we have—and that Achen and Bartels reinforce in their discussion of the critical tradition and critique of the retrospective theory—would seem to build a strong case against anything resembling universal suffrage. Indeed, if the public’s knowledge (and interest) is as limited as the book suggests, and if we can assume with good reason that future attempts at ameliorating this will be as unsuccessful as past ones, why *should* there be anything resembling a universal franchise? As has been pointed out by Jason Brennan (2017), the worry is that “universal suffrage incentivizes most voters to make political decisions in an ignorant and irrational way, and then imposes these ignorant and irrational decisions on innocent people” (8).

Thus, we might be tempted to go along with John Stuart Mill ([1861] 2008), who famously suggested that “the benefits of completely universal suffrage cannot be obtained without bringing with them [. . .] a chance of more than equivalent evil” (339), and that the educated therefore should get more votes than the uneducated. But, if Achen and Bartels are right, even informed people (including, presumably, highly educated people) make their political judgments on the basis of group loyalties, many of which might be best described as tribal. What to do, then?

Assuming that there are at least *some* people able to make decisions that are in the real interest of the people at least *some* of the time—an assumption that is necessary for there to be *any* form of legitimate government, be it democratic or not—then we might still be left with some form of expert rule, if not the one Mill recommended. Consider, for example, Brennan’s (2011) defense of a system that would “restrict electoral power to citizens who can demonstrate competence” (701). This is not quite Plato’s Philosopher Kings, but it would likely mean that most people would have the same degree of electoral influence as Plato suggested, namely none. That is a voting equality of sorts, but clearly not of the kind the democrat has in mind.

Somewhere on this spectrum of different forms of expert rule seems to me where Achen and Bartels would have ended up, had they not backed off at the end of their book. Note that this is not an attempt at a *reductio* of their project. Again, I am not assuming that only democratic arrangements are politically legitimate. I have simply tried to reconstruct what seems the natural conclusion of Achen and Bartels’s project, based on the premises they accept. They clearly take seriously—indeed, they add to—the large amount of data we have on public ignorance. They also acknowledge the failures of past attempts at either improving the epistemic situation of the public or of identifying mechanisms that show why ignorance *among* the public does not mean an ignorant *public*. If I understand their view correctly, these are central among the facts that the realist takes on board and does not shy away from. But if that is so, I struggle to see how one can be a realist of the Achen and Bartels type and still maintain a commitment to anything resembling democracy. And, despite the end of their book, as well as its title, Achen and Bartels seem to agree—as they should, if what I have argued above is on point.

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