MIROFF/SEIDELMAN/SWANSTROM

A READER IN AMERICAN POLITICS

Debating Democracy

DEBATING DEMOCRACY

A Reader in American Politics

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To our parents: Martin and Sophie Miroff, Herb and Thelma Seidelman, and Beatrice and Glenn Swanstrom

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PREFACE

Debating Democracy reflects our desire to put together a reader for introductory courses in American politics that makes democracy its unifying theme. Of course, Americans agree in the abstract about democracy, but in practice we often disagree about democracy's meaning and implications. To explore these crucial disagreements, we have constructed this reader around a series of debates about democracy in America.

Special Features of *Debating Democracy*

A number of features set *Debating Democracy* apart from other readers in American politics. First, the selections in our reader are organized around a common theme. All the chapters address one issue: the meaning and improvement of American democracy. Thus, reading through the selections has a cumulative effect, helping students to think clearly and deeply about democracy.

Second, *Debating Democracy* provides guidance for students in evaluating debates about democracy. Our experience as teachers of introductory courses in American politics suggests that debate-type readers can leave students confused, wondering how to respond to a bewildering array of different arguments. Many students conclude that political debates are just a matter of opinion, that there is no cumulative knowledge generated by debating the issues. To prevent such confusion, we provide an Introduction that gives students a framework for evaluating democratic debates. This framework is designed to help students develop their own political philosophies and critical abilities for analyzing political issues. In the end, we believe, engaging students in these democratic debates will help them to understand that democracy is a complex and contested idea and that although there is no One Truth, the search for democratic truths is well worth the effort.

In order to engage students in the search for democratic truths, we have included lively and clearly written selections from political leaders, journalists,

and scholars. In each case we have chosen two contrasting viewpoints on a controversial topic, and we believe these provocative debates will stimulate student interest and class discussions. To help students in evaluating the selections, we introduce each debate with a short essay that places the issue in a meaningful context and alerts the reader to be on the lookout for contrasting values and unstated assumptions.

Third, *Debating Democracy* seeks to generate further debate. After each set of selections we include questions that can be used by readers to analyze the issues or by teachers to spark class discussions. And we end with suggested readings that students can use to pursue the topic further.

For many instructors, an important goal in teaching an introductory course in American politics is to help students develop their writing skills. Many freshmen do not know how to write a thematic essay. Assigning essays on the debates in this book, thus requiring each student to take a stand on an issue and develop a cogent argument for his or her position, is a good way, we believe, to teach writing. This can be done by including essay questions on exams or by having students write a paper on one of the debate topics.

Structure of *Debating Democracy*

Debating Democracy has been structured to fit with almost all introductory texts in American politics. The selections cover topics usually found in introductory texts under such section headings as Foundations, Participation, Institutions, and Policy. We have also included debates on political economy and mass movements—subjects not covered in some texts—because we believe that these are important subjects for an understanding of American democracy.

The editors of this book make no claim to being impartial observers of democratic debates. We support the extension of democratic decision making into broader spheres of the economy and society with an emphasis on greater equality and community. Two selections included in the book that were written by the editors make clear our participatory democratic inclinations. These inclinations are further in evidence in a textbook we coauthored, *The Democratic Debate: An Introduction to American Politics* (Houghton Mifflin, 1995), which develops a popular democratic interpretation of American politics.

Although we make no claim to impartiality, we have made every effort in the chapters that follow to select the strongest arguments on both sides of the issue. The reader can be used with any textbook in American government, no matter what the political inclinations of the professor. The reader can also stand by itself as an introduction to the critical issues facing American democracy in the late twentieth century.

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The outside reviewers selected by Houghton Mifflin, whose names are listed below, were of more than usual help. Their incisive suggestions led us to change some of our selections and to improve our pedagogical framework in numerous ways. Their enthusiasm for the project reaffirmed our sense that there is a need for a debate-type reader focused on democracy.

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B. M.

R. S.

T. S.

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How to Read This Book

Democratic debates in the United States too often resemble demagoguery rather than dialogue. Consider the 1988 debates between George Bush and Michael Dukakis. One observer summed up the first debate this way: "Both candidates succeeded in following their own long-standing scripts, often with only minimal relationship to the reporters' questions."[1] With little chance for follow-up questions or rebuttal, the candidates often postured on issues and engaged in name calling. Bush labeled Dukakis a "liberal" who was soft on crime, and Dukakis called Bush "the Joe Isuzu* of American politics" for promising to cut taxes, fund new weapons systems, and pay for social programs all at once. Negative campaigning dominated the 1988 presidential election. Not surprisingly, according to a poll of the voters in 1988, only 59 percent said they had learned enough from the campaign to make valid judgments about the candidates.[2]

Democratic debates do not always have to be so uninformative. Partly in response to the negative campaigning in 1988, the 1992 debates were structured differently and they ended up being a better educational experience for the voters. The most significant innovation was the Richmond, Virginia,

* Joe Isuzu was a character in ads for Isuzu automobiles who made humorously outrageous claims for their cars.

town hall meeting on October 15, 1992, in which undecided voters asked questions directly of the candidates. A key moment came early in the debate when a woman criticized the candidates for "trashing their opponents' character" and asked: "Why can't your discussions and proposals reflect the genuine complexity and the difficulty of the issues to try to build a consensus around the best aspects of all proposals?"[3] From that moment on, the tone of the debate shifted and it became more difficult for the candidates to avoid the issues or engage in name calling.

The town hall format was popular with the participants and the voters. The questions were less polished but also less predictable and more representative of average voters' concerns. Many people felt that because the candidates were being asked questions by voters and not professional journalists, they felt compelled to speak more directly to the issues. As a participant in a Cincinnati focus group evaluating the town hall debate put it: "I thought the strength of this was that they [the candidates] were out to win the support of the audience and those that they represent. With the media, it seemed like they had an adversarial relationship."[4]

While far from perfect, the 1992 debates moved closer to a genuine democratic debate: the voters set the agenda and the candidates were forced to articulate principled stands on the issues. As a result, people learned more useful information about the candidates. In a true democracy, however, debates do not concern just who will be elected to office every few years; they address the issues of everyday life, extending from the television studios to dinner tables, from shop floors to classrooms.

Debate as the Lifeblood of Democracy

Debate as dialogue, not demagoguery, is the lifeblood of democracy. Democracy is the one form of government that requires leaders to give reasons for their decisions and defend them in public. Some theorists argue that free and fair deliberation, or debate, is not only a good method for arriving at democratic decisions but the essence of democracy itself.[5]

Debate is crucial to a democracy not just because it leads to better decisions but because it helps to create better citizens. Democratic debate requires that we be open-minded, that we listen to both sides. This process of listening attentively to different sides and examining their assumptions helps us to clarify and critically examine our own political values. As the nineteenth-century British political philosopher John Stuart Mill wrote:

> So essential is this discipline [attending equally and impartially to both sides] to a real understanding of moral and human subjects that, if opponents of all-important truths do not exist, it is indispensable to imagine them and supply them with the strongest arguments which the most skillful devil's advocate can conjure up.[6]

According to Mill, if we are not challenged in our beliefs, they become dead dogmas instead of living truths. (Consider what happened to communist ideologies in Eastern Europe, where they were never tested in public debate.) Once we have honed our skills analyzing political debates, we are less vulnerable to being manipulated by demagogues. By hearing the rhetoric and manipulation in others' speech, we are better able to purge it from our own.[7] Instead of basing our beliefs on unconscious prejudices or ethnocentric values, our political beliefs become consciously and freely chosen.

In order for a debate to be truly democratic it must be free and fair. In a free and fair debate the only power that is exerted is the power of reason. We are moved to adopt a position not by force but by the persuasiveness of the argument. In a democratic debate proponents argue for their position not by appealing to this or that private interest but by appealing to the public interest, the values and aspirations we share as a democratic people. Democracy is not simply a process for adding up individual preferences that citizens bring with them to the issues to see which side wins. In a democratic debate people are required to frame their arguments in terms of the public interest. And as citizens deliberate about the public interest through debates they are changed.[8]

Of course, in the real world no debate is perfectly free and fair, if only because one side has more resources to make itself heard. Nevertheless, we can approximate conditions of a free and fair debate, as we have attempted to do in the pages that follow. In this book we present examples of democratic debates that avoid, for the most part, begging (avoiding) the question, mudslinging, or manipulating stereotypes. In each case two contrasting views are presented on the same issue. The reader's task is to compare and contrast the two positions and decide which argument is most persuasive.

After reading the selections, readers may feel frustrated seeing that opponents can adopt diametrically opposed stands on the same issue depending on their point of view. It may seem as if political positions on the issues are simply based on your values, as if political judgments are simply a matter of opinion. Being able to understand divergent viewpoints other than our own, however, is the beginning of political toleration and insight. There is no One Truth on political issues that can be handed to you on a platter by experts. On the other hand, making public choices is *not* simply a matter of opinion. There are fundamental political values that Americans subscribe to and that we struggle to achieve in our political decisions. Political stands are not just a matter of opinion, because some decisions will promote the democratic public interest better than others.

The purpose of this introduction is to give the reader tools for evaluating democratic debates. The agreements and disagreements in American politics are not random; they exhibit patterns, and understanding these patterns can help orient you in the debates. In the pages that follow we draw a preliminary map of the territory of democratic debates in the United States to guide the reader in negotiating this difficult terrain. Your goal should not be just to take a stand on this or that issue but to clarify your own values and chart your own path in pursuit of the public interest of American democracy.

Democratic Debates: Conflict Within Consensus

In order for a true debate to occur there has to be both conflict and consensus. If there were not consensus, or agreement on basic values or standards of evaluation, the debaters would talk past each other, like two people speaking foreign tongues. Without some common standard of evaluation, there is no way to settle the debate. On the other hand, if there were no fundamental disagreements, the debate would be trivial and boring. Factual disagreements are not enough. Consider a debate between two political scientists about this question: How many people voted in the last election? The debate might be informative, but few people would care about the outcome because it does not engage deeply held values or beliefs. Factual disputes are important, but they rarely decide important political debates. Democratic debates are interesting and important when they engage us in struggles over the meaning and application of our basic values.

Judging a political debate is tricky. Political reasoning is different from economic reasoning or individual rational decision making. Political debates are rarely settled by toting up the costs and benefits of alternative courses of action and choosing the one that maximizes benefits over costs. It is not that costs and benefits do not matter; rather, what we see as benefits or costs depends on how we frame the issue. In political debates each side tries to get the audience to see the issue its way, to frame the issue in language that reinforces its position. On the issue of abortion, for example, is your position best described as pro-choice or pro-life? Should programs to help minorities be characterized as affirmative action or reverse discrimination? Clearly, the terms we use to describe a political position make a difference. Each term casts light on the issue in a different way, highlighting different values that are at stake in the controversy. The terms used to describe the abortion issue, for example, emphasize either the rights of the unborn fetus or the rights of the woman to control her body.

As the above examples illustrate, in political debates the outcome frequently hinges on the standard of evaluation itself, on what values and principles will be applied to the decision at hand. In political debates the issue is always what is good for the community as a whole, the public interest, not just some segment of the community. The selections that follow are all examples of debates over the meaning of the public interest in American democracy. In the United States, political debates, with the notable exception of slavery, have been characterized by consensus on basic democratic principles *combined with* conflicts over how best to realize those principles in practice.

As conflicts within a consensus, democratic debates in this country go back to its founding and the original debate over the U.S. Constitution more than two hundred years ago. Americans worship the Constitution as an almost divinely inspired document that embodies the highest ideals of democracy. Yet throughout history Americans have disagreed vehemently on what the Constitution means. This is not surprising. The Constitution was born as much in conflict and compromise as in consensus. In the words of former Supreme

Court Justice William J. Brennan, Jr., the framers "hid their differences in cloaks of generality."[9] The general language of the Constitution left many conflicts over specifics to later generations. The Constitution, for example, gave the federal government the power to provide for the "general welfare," but we have been debating ever since what this should include. Thus the Constitution is both a source of consensus, by embodying our ideals, and a source of conflict, by failing to specify exactly how those ideals should be applied in practice.[10]

Three Sources of Conflict

Behind the words of the Constitution lie three ideals that supposedly animate our system of government: *democracy, freedom,* and *equality.* Americans agree that we should have a government of, by, and for the people (as President Lincoln so eloquently put it), a government that treats everybody equally, and a government that achieves the maximum level of freedom consistent with an ordered society. These ideals seem simple, but they are not. While Americans are united in their aspirations, they are divided in their visions of how to achieve those aspirations.[11]

I. Democracy

Democracy comes from the Greek words *demos,* meaning "the people," and *kratein,* meaning "to rule." Hence, democracy means, simply, "rule by the people." Americans agree that democracy is the best form of government. They disagree, however, on what this means.

Elite (Limited) Democracy For some, democracy is basically a method for making decisions. According to this minimalist definition of democracy, a decision is democratic if it is made according to the criterion of majority rule. Of course, there are other requirements of democratic decision making, such as open nominations for office and free speech, but in any case once the basic conditions have been met, the resulting decision is by definition democratic.

Following the limited definition, the most important characteristic of a democracy is free and fair elections for choosing government officials. Democracy basically means the ability of citizens to choose their leaders.[12] Elites compete for the votes to win office, but once in office they have substantial autonomy to rule as they see fit. According to this view, ultimate power rests in the hands of the people at election time, but between elections they cede decision-making authority to elites who have the expertise and experience to make the right decisions in a technologically complex and dangerous world. We call this school of democracy *elite democracy.*[13]

Elite democrats favor a minimal definition of democracy not because it is ideal but because it is the only type of democracy that is achievable in large modern nation-states. Thus, as you will see in the selection by Richard Neustadt

on the presidency in Chapter 13, elite democrats are more comfortable with a powerful president who can energize the system. In response, Bruce Miroff, representing the popular democratic side, argues that powerful presidents can monopolize public space, transforming active citizens into mere spectators.

Popular (Expansive) Democracy. Opponents of elite democrats adopt a more demanding definition of democracy. They argue that you cannot call a decision democratic just because it came out of a democratic process. Democratic decisions must also respect certain values such as tolerance, a respect for individual freedom, and the attainment of a basic level of social and economic equality. If the majority rules in such a way as to violate people's rights or the policies result in tremendous inequalities of wealth, the system cannot be called democratic. For this group democracy means more than a political system with free and fair elections; it means an economy and society that reflect a democratic desire for equality and respect for differences.

For adherents of an expansive definition of democracy, democracy means more than going to the polls every few years; it means citizens participating in the institutions of society, including corporations, unions, and neighborhood associations. In Chapter 3, Samuel Bowles and Michael Edwards represent this position, calling for expanding democratic decision making into the economy. Countering the view of elite democrats that people are not interested in or capable of governing effectively, those who advocate a more participatory system argue that in an atmosphere of toleration, respect, and rough equality, citizens are capable of governing themselves fairly and effectively. We call those who advocate a more participatory conception of democracy *popular democrats.*[14]

II. Freedom

Most of us have a basic intuitive idea of freedom: to be free means being able to do what we want, without someone telling us what to do. Any time we are forced to do something against our will by somebody else, our freedom is reduced. Freedom seems like an exceedingly simple idea. Once again, however, we find that there is plenty of room for disagreement.

Negative (Freedom From) The central issue for freedom is deciding where to draw the line between the power of the group and the freedom of the individual. In other words, how far should government power extend, for any time the government imposes a tax or passes a law it limits someone's freedom. In a justly famous essay, *On Liberty*, the English political theorist John Stuart Mill argues that the only justification for government power over individuals is self-protection: "[T]he only purpose for which power can be rightfully exercised over any member of a civilized community, against his will, is to prevent harm to others."[15] In other words, your freedom to swing your arm ends where my nose begins.

Under Mill's view the purpose of government is to maximize individual freedom. Freedom is understood negatively, as freedom from external constraints. Since government actions always reduce individual freedom, their only justification is to counter other restrictions on our freedom, as when the government passes laws against robbery or assault. Clearly, this view places severe limits on what democracies can legitimately do, even under the principle of majority rule. If the majority passes laws that restrict someone's freedom, without being justified by the principle of self-protection, then it is no longer a true democracy because it is violating a basic democratic value.

Positive (Freedom To) In contrast to the negative conception of freedom—freedom *from*—there is an equally compelling positive definition of freedom—freedom *to*.[16] The positive conception of freedom recognizes that in order to have freedom, to exercise meaningful choice, we need to possess certain resources and to have certain capacities. Education, for example, increases our freedom because it increases our ability to imagine alternatives and find solutions to problems. Freedom, therefore, is not simply the absence of external coercion but freedom to get an education, travel to foreign countries, or receive expert medical care.

A positive conception of freedom justifies an expanded role for government and for citizens acting together in other ways. When government taxes us, it reduces negative freedom, but when it uses the money to build a highway or a public library it gives us a greater positive freedom to do things we previously were unable to do. Under the positive conception of freedom, the scope of freedom is increased when the capacity of individuals to act is enhanced by government action—whether that be protecting the right of workers to join a union (giving workers the ability to bargain over wages and working conditions) or requiring buildings to be handicapped-accessible (thus giving the handicapped access to places they were previously excluded from).[17]

Whether one subscribes to a positive or a negative conception of freedom will make a big difference in one's political philosophy. The negative conception of freedom is conducive to limited government and highlights the more acquisitive and competitive side of human nature. Under this view, the expansion of power in one part of society necessarily leads to a reduction of freedom in some other part of society. The selection by Milton Friedman on political economy in Chapter 3 is based on a negative conception of freedom. Friedman warns that too much government leads to coercion and a reduction in individual freedom, which is maximized by free competition in the marketplace. The positive conception of freedom emphasizes the more cooperative side of human beings. According to the positive conception of freedom, government as a form of social cooperation can actually expand the realm of freedom by bringing more and more matters of social importance under human control.