

POLITICAL SOCIOLOGY SERIES

Andrew J. Perrin

AMERICAN DEMOCRACY

FROM TOCQUEVILLE TO
TOWN HALLS TO TWITTER



American Democracy

From Tocqueville to Town Halls to Twitter

Andrew J. Perrin

polity

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For Jonah and Daniel

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Introduction

One witty friend, when I said I was writing a book about democracy, joked that it must be a work of historical fiction. Like all true wit, my friend's quip contains more than a grain of truth. In the United States and around the world, a host of indicators give people reason to be worried or even cynical about the way their democracy is working.

Americans have increasingly lost confidence in their government. Voter participation is low, rarely reaching much beyond 50 percent, and has remained so for over a century. A recent poll showed that Congress had only a 9 percent favorability rating, lower than Brussels sprouts, root canals, traffic, and even lice (Jensen 2013). Cynical, manipulating political actors can trick citizens into voting against their own interests (Frank 2004), and declining education and cultural marginalization exacerbate that (Bageant 2007). In a 2010 poll, 57 percent of Republicans said that President Obama was a Muslim; 45 percent that he "was not born in the United States," 38 percent that he is "doing many of the things that Hitler did," and even 24 percent that he "may be the Antichrist." Beyond the United States, democracy is "under pressure in many parts of the world," with more countries becoming less democratic than are becoming more so (Economist Intelligence Unit 2011).

Public "conversation" is just as worrisome. The media depict a landscape of an America deeply divided, "red state" vs. "blue state" as different cultures, different outlooks, entirely

different kinds of people. Media commentators on newly partisan cable television trade charged accusations and barbs in place of substantive, thoughtful discussion and information. Most Americans prefer not to talk about politics at all, and those who do tend to talk about politics with people they already agree with. Dialogue across lines of disagreement seems all too rare, and when it happens it is often uncivil, generating more heat than light.

The sheer amount of money needed to run for a major office in the United States means that all but the wealthiest candidates spend a disproportionate percentage of their time raising money, a problem exacerbated by the Supreme Court's *Citizens United* decision. Many candidates end up paying more attention to a few very wealthy donors than to the bulk of their constituents. Lawmakers seek to pursue their constituents' own interests, or their own party's concerns, without regard to the common good of the country (Mann and Orenstein 2012).

New presidential powers exercised by the George W. Bush administration after the September 11 attacks dramatically expanded the power of the president, thereby diminishing the public's ability to oversee and object (Scheppele 2006). Observers at the time worried that these expanded powers would be all but impossible for future presidents to renounce, since any president would always prefer more power to less. Indeed, the Obama administration maintained many of these new powers, further eroding the influence of public and congressional oversight (Spitzer 2012), and laying the groundwork for the revelations of government surveillance leaked by Edward Snowden in 2013.

In short, there are plenty of reasons to be skeptical of democracy's progress and pessimistic about its future. Many of these concerns have to do with the technical aspects of democracy: the structures of electoral and legislative processes that lawyers and political strategists hold in the foreground when talking about politics and democracy. Others deal with the changed media environment and the cultural disposition toward division and incivility.

This book offers a new way to think about democracy: a distinctly *sociological* perspective. Conventional accounts of democracy

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tend to focus on the institutions, rules, and systems of government. While these are important, the sociological perspective examines how these interact with social and cultural practices and beliefs. It studies the *polity*, not just the *government*. And while there are plenty of reasons to be worried, that sociological angle also offers reasons for optimism: for responding to my friend's cynicism with a degree of hope. I attempt to follow the advice of the great French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu: to "steer between 'never-been-seen-before' and 'the-way-it-always-has-been'" (Bourdieu 1999), avoiding both the breathless sense that everything is topsy-turvy and the blasé view that nothing is really new. To people who throw up their hands in despair at the state of contemporary democracy, I hope to offer reasons for optimism. For those who view democracy as, if not ascendant, at least safe, I hope to show some of the perils for real representation we face. The unique synergy of mobility, technology, and money that characterizes the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries is enough to make a committed democrat wring his hands in despair. It should also be enough to spur optimism for new ways of practicing and experiencing democracy.

As widespread as cynicism toward democracy is – and as justified as it is for various reasons – I believe American democracy isn't nearly so badly off as it seems, and democracy worldwide is also reasonably healthy. Furthermore, although an attentive, cynical citizenry may be good for keeping government in check, excessive cynicism about democracy has the potential to become a self-fulfilling prophecy: if citizens are generally disillusioned about their government, that government's performance itself may suffer.

In the United States, voter participation has returned to mid-1960s levels after years of fretting about decreasing turnout. And the public pressure to vote is sufficient to encourage as many as 20 percent of Americans who didn't vote to actually *lie* to survey interviewers, claiming that they *did* vote. Around the world, support among ordinary people for the principles of democracy is very high (Tessler and Gao 2005; Andersen 2012).

Mounting evidence shows that when we compare governmental

policies with public opinion polls, most of the time governments do what the people want them to do. Government decisions generally align fairly well with public opinion as measured in polls (Brooks and Manza 2013; Manza and Cook 2002), although there remains a large bias in favor of the wealthy (Gilens 2012; Schlozman et al. 2012). While the low level of trust in government can make citizens cynical and disengaged (Hetherington 2005), it also serves to gather people into “attentive publics,” paying close attention to government, ready to speak up if they don’t like government activities (Arnold 1990).

The sociological approach I present here justifies some optimism. This book is unabashedly centered on *American* democracy, and the particular historical, cultural, and institutional dynamics of the United States. Some examples are pulled from elsewhere in the world, but the main thrust of the book is a sociological account of democracy in the United States, with only passing references to other countries’ experiences.

Thinking Sociologically About Democracy

The French aristocrat Alexis de Tocqueville visited the young United States in 1831, sent by the French government to investigate the American prison system. The work he produced, *Democracy in America*, became a classic. *Democracy in America* is most often remembered for its identification of America as “a nation of joiners” and for its celebration of the young nation’s citizens’ tendency to assemble voluntarily to solve problems:

Americans of all ages, all conditions, and all minds are constantly joining together in groups. In addition to commercial and industrial associations in which everyone takes part, there are associations of a thousand other kinds: some religious, some moral, some grave, some trivial, some quite general and others quite particular, some huge and others tiny. Americans associate to give fetes, to found seminaries, to build inns, to erect churches, to distribute books, and to send missionaries to the antipodes. This is how they create hospitals, prisons, and schools. If, finally, they wish to publicize a truth or foster

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a sentiment with the help of a great example, they associate. Wherever there is a new undertaking, at the head of which you would expect to see in France the government and in England some great lord, in the United States you are sure to find an association.

In America I came across types of associations which I confess I had no idea existed, and I frequently admired the boundless skill of Americans in setting large numbers of people a common goal and inducing them to strive toward that goal voluntarily. (Tocqueville 2004 [1835], 595)

Tocqueville's analysis went well beyond joining. It emphasized the cultural roots of democracy in America. Americans were democratic, he claimed, because of the *ways they tended to associate*, their "habits of the heart" (331) and their rejection of old-fashioned hierarchies in favor of hierarchy based on accomplishments.

The men who inhabit the United States were never separated by privilege of any kind. They never knew the reciprocal relation of inferior and master, and since they neither fear nor hate one another, they never felt the need to call upon the sovereign to manage the details of their affairs. The destiny of the Americans is singular: they took from the aristocracy of England the idea of individual rights and the taste for local liberties, and they were able to preserve both because they had no aristocracy to fight. (799)

Tocqueville identified the foundation as well as the perils of political democracy in the *cultural practices* that characterized nineteenth-century American life. Alongside the tendencies to voluntarism and joining, he worried that the lack of moral regulation would lead toward internal strife and unfettered materialism (Kaledin 2011). Americans' *culture* formed both the promise and the peril of political democracy.

In focusing on the cultural and social elements of democracy, Tocqueville pioneered the sociology of democracy. American political *institutions* have changed enormously since Tocqueville. But the *cultural* configuration of American society – the tension between the individual and the collective, the tendency to reject

hierarchy and snobbery, the willingness to take voluntary action – has remained more or less intact through nearly two centuries. This book focuses on those sorts of questions: the *cultural* and *social* dynamics of democratic citizenship, particularly in the United States, and the ways political representation and electoral systems shape and are shaped by those dynamics.

In early democracies in Athens, in France, and in the early United States, rule by “the people” was understood to be collective: “the people” was not just the agglomeration of otherwise unrelated individuals, but what we might now call the *public*: a collective, culturally bound and socially related, that shares a common experience, orientation, or concern. Suppressed under regimes and in cultures where there was no literal or figurative space between the government, the economy, and people’s private lives, the public emerged when such opportunity opened (Habermas 1962).

The German term *Öffentlichkeit*, translated literally as “publicness,” describes the cultural precondition for democratic politics. People – not necessarily everyone, but some people – have to be able to think and talk in public terms. So important is the idea of a separate set of public concerns, distinct from concerns of family life, economic necessity, and governmental power, that *Öffentlichkeit* has sometimes been translated directly as “democracy,” as if publicness and democracy were the same thing (Jasanoff 2005, 74). It has been variously translated as “openness,” “publicness,” “publicity,” “public opinion,” and “public sphere” (Nowotny 2003). Its meaning is difficult to render in English, but at its core is the idea of an arena of human activity and concern devoted to collective life – the “civil sphere” (Alexander 2006) in which matters of common concern can be worked out and communicated. The sociology of democracy, therefore, is a sociology of *Öffentlichkeit*: a sociology of publics, their construction, and their effects: what the French political historian Pierre Rosanvallon refers to as “how an epoch, a country, or a social group may seek to construct responses to what, with greater or less precision, they perceive as a *problem*” (Rosanvallon 2006, 62).

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A sociological study of democracy must consider what cultural environments and practices foster publicness and successful democratic citizenship, since democracy is best understood as a cluster of cultural elements around political practices. Indeed, as Tocqueville worried, apparently democratic political systems can encourage antidemocratic cultures and behaviors. I suggest (especially in chapter 5) that precisely this is happening currently: that the democratic system of press freedom – certainly a core democratic value – is combining with privatizing communications technologies and industrialized media to result in a less democratic public culture. The opposite can also be true: “lively political activity and experiences of citizenship may actually thrive under conditions in which, perhaps even because, the state is fragile and national identification limited” (Wedeen 2008, 99). Neither of these is a reason to abandon democratic structures and institutions, of course. But they do press us to expand the scope of our thinking to examine the cultural and social dynamics of democracy as separate from, though dependent on, its formal processes, structures, and institutions.

This idea undermines what political scientists call the “minimalist” definition of democracy: that leadership is selected in competitive elections in which the outcome is uncertain (Schumpeter 1950; see also Wedeen 2008, 105–13). The minimalist conception misses what is most important about democracy: the interplay between democratic culture and democratic structure. Archibugi goes a bit further, emphasizing that democracy “may be summed up as *nonviolence*, *popular control*, and *political equality*” (Archibugi 2008, 26). Instead, I suggest that we understand the construction, maintenance, and characteristics of publics – including, but not limited to, “the public,” the collectivity of the entire country – as sociological questions in which political structures like elections, legislation, and rules are important actors but far from the principal focus.

Since the late 1980s, sociologists have developed and refined a conception of culture as a system of shared beliefs, practices, styles, skills, and habits that serve at once to motivate, constrain, and explain human action (Swidler 2001; Johnson-Hanks et

al. 2011; Vaisey 2009). *Culture in the mind* – the shared ways people within a culture think about issues – helps explain how societies produce *culture in the world*: the physical, technological, and textual artifacts that shape human behavior and, over time, refine and change culture in the mind. Culture in the mind helps explain why groups of people make some decisions and not others, why they think of some opportunities as more attractive than others, and why these decisions tend to be shared among groups of people. Culture in the world helps explain how these groups develop, use, and experience artifacts in the world: everything from media messages to communication technologies and voting systems. Cultural sociology offers the best tools for understanding democracy not just as a political system but as a social, cultural, and historical accomplishment.

I will therefore examine three interlocking areas to understand how publics form, persist, and die, and where they get their features. These are citizenship *practices*, *technologies*, and *institutions*. Practices are the everyday behaviors and habits of life: talking, reading, paying attention, voting. *Technologies* are patterned tools for accomplishing things: developed by humans for performing tasks, they enable some actions and constrain others, and so have important social and organizational effects. We naturally think of high technologies like computers and mobile phones, but the fixed line telephone, the voting booth, and the public opinion poll are also technologies. Technologies don't just determine what people do and don't do; people interpret technologies differently and use them in different ways (Orlikowski 1992, 2000). Finally, *institutions* are the organized rules and structures that govern democratic life: the electoral system, the legislative system, and the law, for example. Like technologies, these constrain and enable citizenship actions in particular ways. Traditional political science treatments of democracy focus on institutions and behaviors to the exclusion of practices and technologies. This book shows how practices, technologies, and institutions work together to represent publics, and how that process also helps to form and shape those publics.