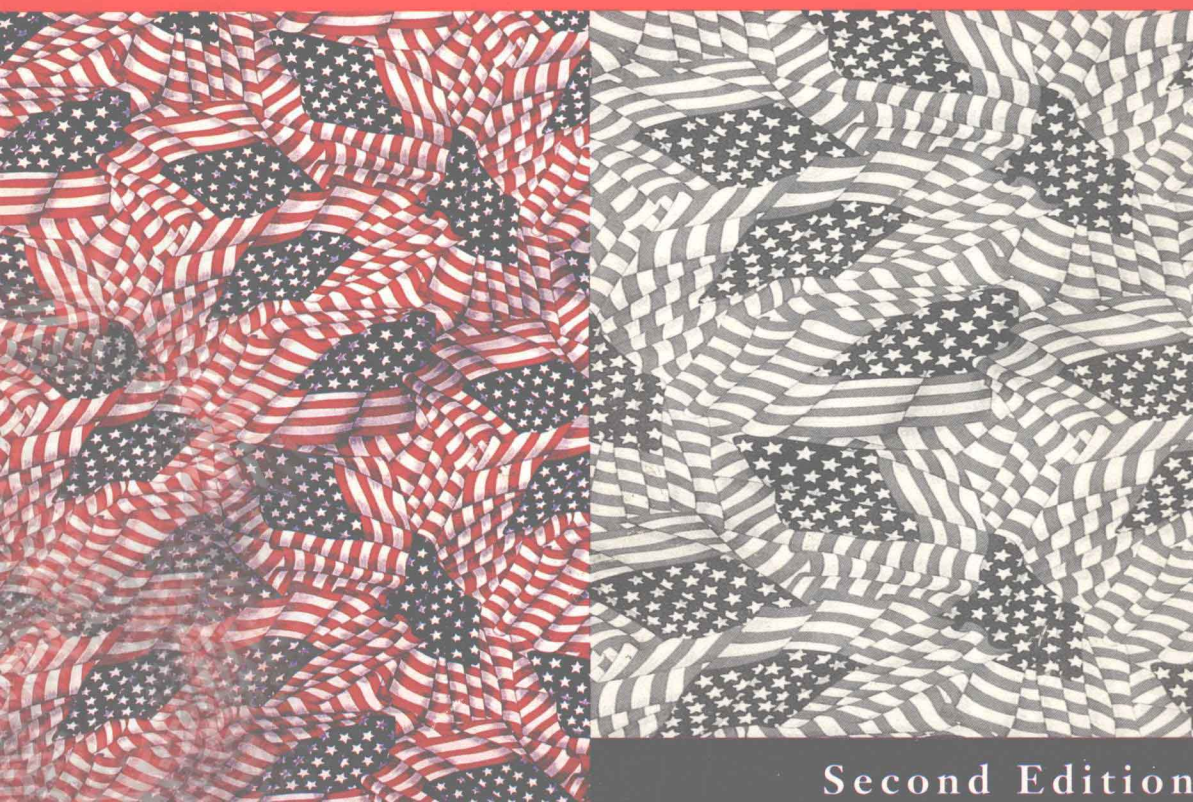


Miroff • Seidelman • Swanstrom

Debating Democracy

A Reader in American Politics



Second Edition

DEBATING DEMOCRACY

A Reader in American Politics

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DEBATING DEMOCRACY

We have been very pleased by readers' and reviewers' enthusiastic reactions to the first edition of *Debating Democracy*. They warmly endorsed our belief in the need for a reader for 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, the second edition is constructed around a series of debates about democracy in America.

Special Features of *Debating Democracy*

Debating Democracy is different from other readers in American politics. The selections in our reader are organized around a common theme. All the chapters address 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.

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, highly praised by reviewers of the first edition, 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 views on a controversial topic. 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 hidden assumptions.

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. We end with suggested readings and web sites that students can use to pursue the topic further.

Each chapter in the book can be used as the basis for a structured in-class debate. Our own introductory lecture courses have discussion sections of ten to twenty students led by teaching assistants. The TA divides the class in two and assigns each group one side in the debate. The students are asked to meet outside of class and prepare their arguments based on the readings. A session of the discussion section is then devoted to a formal debate. We do two or three of these structured debates in the course of a semester. Students enjoy these debates and often report that this is the high point of the course for them.

Following the formal debates, each student is required to write a short paper setting out the arguments of her or his side and rebutting the arguments of the other side. We are convinced that this exercise helps students to achieve what is often an important goal in introductory American politics courses: improving writing skills. Requiring students to take a stand on a political issue and develop a coherent argument for their position in a thematic essay is an effective way, we believe, to teach writing.

Structure of *Debating Democracy*

Debating Democracy has been structured to fit with almost all introductory texts in American politics. We cover topics usually covered in an introductory text but we have also included debates on political economy and political activism because we believe 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 greater emphasis on equality and community. Two selections that were written by the editors make clear our participatory democratic inclinations. These inclinations are further in evidence in our textbook, *The Democratic Debate: An Introduction to American Politics*, Second Edition (Houghton Mifflin, 1998).

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 issues. The reader can be used with any textbook in American gov-

ernment, 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 at the end of the twentieth century.

New to the Second Edition

In response to readers' and reviewers' suggestions and the changing landscape of American politics, about 40 percent of the selections in the second edition are new.

There are three new chapters:

- Chapter 2 The New Federalism: Does It Create Laboratories of Democracy or a Race to the Bottom?
- Chapter 12 Political Participation: Are Generation Xers Political Slackers or Innovators?
- Chapter 15 Bureaucracy: Should It Be "Banished" from Democracy?

In addition, there are three new debates in existing chapters:

- Chapter 6 Civil Rights: How Far Have We Progressed?
- Chapter 11 Campaigns and Elections: Organized Money versus Organized People?
- Chapter 17 U.S. Foreign Policy and the Global Marketplace: Corporations versus Citizens?

Other new features are:

A new essay by Miroff on the presidency, debating Neustadt, is included in Chapter 14.

Several selections from the first edition have been shortened to make them more easily accessible.

Addresses of web sites for further research are included at the end of each chapter.

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incisive suggestions led us to change some selections, add new subjects, and improve our pedagogical framework.

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B. M.

R. S.

T. S.

DEBATING DEMOCRACY

C O N T E N T S

P R E F A C E ix

I N T R O D U C T I O N How to Read This Book 1

C H A P T E R 1

The Founding: Debating the Constitution 14

James Madison, *Federalist No. 10* 17

Brutus, *Anti-federalist Paper*, 18 October 1787 23

C H A P T E R 2

The New Federalism: Does It Create Laboratories of Democracy or a Race to the Bottom? 31

William D. Eggers and John O'Leary, *Beyond the Beltway* 34

John D. Donahue, *The Devil in Devolution* 39

C H A P T E R 3

American Values: Individualism versus Community 46

Frances Moore Lappé, *Debating American Values* 49

C H A P T E R 4

Political Economy: How Democratic Is the Free Market Economy? 64

Milton Friedman, *Capitalism and Freedom* 67

Samuel Bowles and Richard Edwards, <i>The Market Erodes Democratic Government</i>	77
C H A P T E R 5	
Civil Liberties: Does Democracy Require Limits on Freedom of Expression?	88
Anthony Lewis (Moderator), <i>Debating Hate Speech and Pornography: Floyd Abrams versus Catharine A. MacKinnon</i>	91
C H A P T E R 6	
Civil Rights: How Far Have We Progressed?	107
Stephan Thernstrom and Abigail Thernstrom, <i>One Nation, Indivisible</i>	110
David K. Shipler, <i>A Country of Strangers</i>	119
C H A P T E R 7	
Public Opinion: Wise or Ignorant?	129
Robert Nisbet, <i>Public Opinion versus Popular Opinion</i>	132
Benjamin Page and Robert Shapiro, <i>Public Opinion Is a Wise Judge</i>	142
C H A P T E R 8	
The Media: Vast Wasteland or New Frontier?	155
Jarol B. Manheim, <i>Packaging the People</i>	158
Douglas Rushkoff, <i>People Shape the Media</i>	167
C H A P T E R 9	
Do Voting and Nonvoting Matter?	178
Ruy Teixeira, <i>Voter Turnout in America: Ten Myths</i>	181
Raymond Seidelman, <i>Bringing Non-Voters in Would Transform American Politics</i>	187
C H A P T E R 10	
America's Political Parties: Channels for Voters or Conduits for Cash?	199
Xandra Kayden, <i>Alive and Well and Living in Washington: The American Political Parties</i>	202
William Greider, <i>Rancid Populism</i>	213

C H A P T E R 11**Campaigns and Elections: Organized Money versus Organized People? 226**Bradley A. Smith, *Free Speech Requires Campaign Money* 229Randy Kehler and Martin Jezer, *Campaign Cash: Dollars versus Democracy* 235**C H A P T E R 12****Political Participation: Are Generation Xers Political Slackers or Innovators? 246**Neil Howe and Bill Strauss, *The 13th Generation: Caring Less for Good Reason* 249Matthew Moseley, *America's Youth: New Forms of Political Engagement* 255**C H A P T E R 13****Congress: Can It Serve the Public Good? 261**Morris P. Fiorina, *The Rise of the Washington Establishment* 264Joseph M. Bessette, *Congress and Deliberative Democracy* 272**C H A P T E R 14****The Presidency: Popular or Elite Democracy? 281**Richard E. Neustadt, *The Power to Persuade* 283Bruce Miroff, *The Presidency and Elite Democracy* 290**C H A P T E R 15****Bureaucracy: Should It Be "Banished" from Democracy? 299**David Osborne and Ted Gaebler, *Reinventing Government* 302Charles T. Goodsell, *The Case for Bureaucracy* 309**C H A P T E R 16****The Judiciary: What Should Its Role Be in a Democracy? 319**Attorney General Edwin Meese III, *A Jurisprudence of Original Intention* 321Justice William J. Brennan, Jr., *Reading the Constitution as Twentieth-Century Americans* 327

C H A P T E R 17	
U.S. Foreign Policy and the Global Marketplace: Corporations versus Citizens?	337
Jeffrey E. Garten, <i>America Needs a Pro-Business Foreign Policy</i>	341
David C. Korten, <i>When Corporations Rule the World</i>	349
<i>Credits</i>	359

How to Read This Book

As democratic debates, the quadrennial presidential debates leave much to be desired. For the most part, the candidates treat them not as debates about their political philosophies and policies but as image contests. Each tries to project a presidential image while highlighting flaws in the opponent's character. The candidates and their handlers devote endless amounts of time and money to surveys and focus groups, trying to find out what the voters want to hear. Drilled on what to say, the candidates often resemble puppets, repeating the same facts and slogans over and over again, regardless of the question. Instead of debating each other, they speak past each other in order to stay "on message." The media promote these tendencies by covering the debates like a sporting contest, focusing not on substance but on who won or lost the image contest. Following each debate, the "spin meisters" from each party rush out to convince the media that their candidate won.

The 1996 presidential debates exhibited all of these flaws. Finding himself far behind in the polls, Dole saw the debates as a last chance to frame the election to his advantage. Instead of articulating his philosophy and policies, Dole chose to attack Clinton on the character issue. Early in the second debate Dole went on the attack: "Many American people have lost their faith in government. They see scandals on almost a daily basis. They see ethical

problems in the White House.”¹ The problem was that Dole had an image problem himself; voters perceived him as dour and mean-spirited, and this made it difficult for him to attack aggressively. His handlers wanted him to be warmer and smile more. Dole never really went after Clinton on the character issue the way many partisan Republicans wanted him to. Probably the biggest problem for Dole, however, was that most Americans were not very concerned about the character issue; they were much more concerned about the policies that would affect them.

Enjoying a double-digit lead, President Clinton approached the debates very differently from Dole: so long as he did not make a mistake, he would probably win the election. Clinton played it safe, taking credit over and over again for a healthy economy and the fact that the nation was not at war. By moving to the right on issues like the death penalty, balancing the budget, and family values, Clinton made it more difficult for Dole to attack him. Dole was reduced at one point to calling Clinton a “stealth liberal.” Clinton’s vague centrism muddled the debate. To appeal to liberals, Clinton stressed small policies, like the Family Leave Act, and accused Dole, somewhat unfairly, of wanting to dismantle Medicare. A master of policy details, Clinton repeatedly bested Dole with his knowledge of how policies worked. Neither Clinton’s lengthy disquisitions on policies nor his vague generalities (like “a bridge to the 21st century”), however, told voters much about his philosophy of government or vision for the future. Summing up the first debate, *Newsweek* put it this way: “Facing off, Clinton and Dole seemed to cover a lot of ground. But on the big issues, both tended to duck and distort.”²

The second presidential debate was improved by a town hall format that had been first introduced in 1992 in response to negative campaigning. In the 1996 town hall debate, 113 undecided voters from the San Diego area were chosen to ask questions directly of the candidates. The town hall format was popular with participants and with the voters. The questions tend to be less polished but also less predictable and more representative of average voters’ concerns. Many people felt that because the questions were being asked by ordinary citizens and not professional journalists, the candidates felt compelled to speak more directly to the issues and avoid name calling. In both 1992 and 1996, the participants were not interested in hearing the candidates, as one woman put it, “trashing their opponents’ character.”³ While far from perfect, the town hall format moved the presidential debates closer to a genuine democratic debate: the voters set the agenda, and the candidates were forced to articulate how they would respond to the concerns of ordinary citizens.

In a true democracy, debates do not just concern who will be elected to office every few years; they address the issues of everyday life, and they occur every day, extending from television studios to dinner tables, from shop floors to classrooms. Even though political debates can become heated because they involve our most deeply held beliefs, democracies do not deny anyone the right to disagree. In a democracy we recognize that no one has a monopoly on the truth. Debates are not tangential to democracy; they are central to its meaning. “Agreeing to disagree” is the essence of democracy.

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.⁴

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.⁵

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.⁶ 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.⁷ 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 no 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