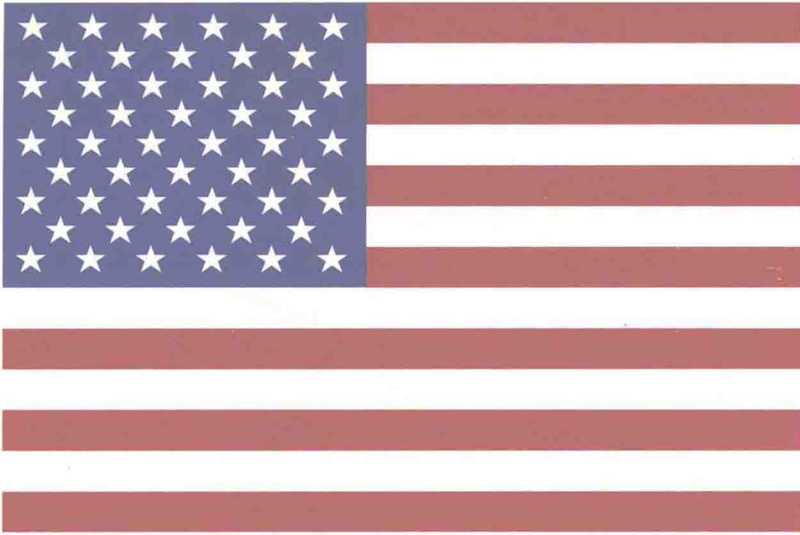


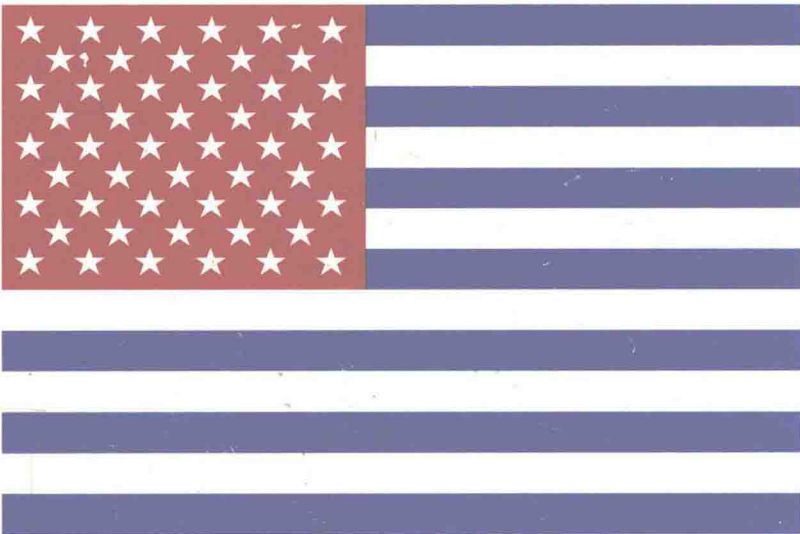
Miroff | Seidelman | Swanstrom



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# DEBATING DEMOCRACY

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A READER IN AMERICAN POLITICS

Third Edition

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A Reader in American Politics

Third Edition

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However unwillingly a person who has a strong opinion may admit the possibility that his opinion may be false, he ought to be moved by the consideration that, however true it may be, if it is not fully, frequently, and fearlessly discussed, it will be held as a dead dogma, not as a living truth.

John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty* (1859)

We have been very pleased by readers' and reviewers' enthusiastic reactions to the first two editions 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 third 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 more 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 two editions, 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. Our participatory democratic inclinations are evident 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 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 at the beginning of the twenty-first century.

## New to the Third Edition

In response to readers' and reviewers' suggestions and the changing landscape of American politics, about one-third of the selections in the third edition are new.

There are four new chapters:

- Chapter 2 Democracy: Overrated or Undervalued?
- Chapter 4 Culture Wars: Are We Facing a Moral Collapse?
- Chapter 17 Economic Inequality: A Threat to Democracy?
- Chapter 18 The United States and the Global Economy: Serving Citizens or Corporate Elites?

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

- Chapter 6 Civil Liberties: Does the First Amendment Permit Religious Expression in Public Institutions?
- Chapter 9 The New Media: Corporate Wasteland or Democratic Frontier?

Other new features include:

- A new essay by Clawson, Neustadt, and Weller, debating Bradley A. Smith on campaign finance reform (Chapter 11).
- Additional or updated web sites for further research at the end of each chapter.

## Acknowledgments

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B. M.

R. S.

T. S.



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# How to Read This Book

One of the more revealing exchanges in the recent race for president occurred on *Meet the Press*, a well-known Sunday morning political talk show. This particular program featured a debate between Vice President Al Gore and his challenger for the Democratic nomination, former U.S. Senator Bill Bradley. During a discussion of unregulated campaign contributions (called "soft money"), Gore made a surprising proposal: that both candidates agree to eliminate all television and radio commercials and instead debate twice a week until the nomination was decided.<sup>1</sup>

Bradley reacted to Gore's offer with disdain, calling it a "ridiculous proposal." "The point is," Bradley explained, "a political campaign is not just a performance for people which is what this is, but it is rather, a dialogue . . . with people, Al."

Gore persisted: "We could call it the 'Meet the Press' agreement," Gore said. "We could have two debates every single week and get rid of the television and radio commercials. I'm willing to do it right now, if you're willing to shake on it." Sitting just inches away from Bradley, Gore held out his hand.

"Al, that's good. I like that hand," said Bradley, spurning Gore's outstretched hand and then dismissing Gore's offer as "nothing but a ploy."

"Debates aren't ploys," Gore said.

"No," Bradley replied, "to come out here and shake my hand, that's nothing but a ploy."

Whether Gore's proposal was a cynical ploy or a sincere offer, the exchange tells us much about the limits of democratic debates in the midst of a political campaign. Ironically, Bradley tried to base his run for the presidency on being a new type of candidate—an antipolitician politician, someone who would stick to the issues, articulate his vision of where the country should go, and never "go negative." A centerpiece of his run for president was campaign finance reform designed to reduce the role of big money in elections.

At the same time that he campaigned against the role of money in elections, however, Bradley knew that he needed all the money he could get his hands on to have a chance of winning. The reason is simple: Bradley's name recognition was far behind Vice President Gore's and the only way to make up for that was to spend lots of money on ads. Gore knew that Bradley depended on ads and therefore could never agree to give them up. Gore's outstretched hand, however, would provide an irresistible photo opportunity, with the message that Bradley said he wanted to reform the campaign finance system, but when offered an opportunity to do just that by Gore, he refused. Gore's ploy put Bradley on the defensive.

Gore hardly came off as the pure reformer, however. His criticism of ads became itself a kind of ad focused on image more than substance. Voters are cynical about politicians, and therefore Gore was vulnerable to Bradley's charge that his offer was insincere, representing "nothing but a ploy" to manipulate symbols instead of talking about substance.

As democratic debates, presidential debates leave much to be desired. The candidates treat them as opportunities to project a presidential image instead of explaining their political philosophies and policy positions. The candidates and their handlers devote endless amounts of time and money to finding out what the voters want to hear. Drilled on what to say, instead of debating each other, the candidates often speak past each other in order to stay "on message." The media cover the debates like sporting contests, focusing not on substance but on who won or lost the image contest. Following each debate, the "spin meisters" rush out to convince the media that their candidate won.

The debates that we have gathered together in this book are far different from what we are used to in political debates. 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. We present arguments by authors who are experts on the issues. They concentrate on the issue at hand, not on their image. Each gets equal time. For the most part, they avoid begging (avoiding) the question, mudslinging, or manipulating stereotypes. The contest is decided not by who has the most money or who projects the best image but by who has the best arguments using logical reasoning and facts.

Political debates are not just methods for acquiring information in elections; they are the heart of a democratic system. 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 is the essence of democracy itself.<sup>2</sup>

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.<sup>3</sup>

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.<sup>4</sup> 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 positions 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.<sup>5</sup> And as citizens deliberate about the public interest through debates, they are changed.<sup>6</sup>

In this book we have gathered two contrasting arguments on each of the most pressing issues facing democracy in the United States. The reader's task is to compare 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 you, 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 readers 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 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 right of the unborn fetus or the right 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.”<sup>7</sup> 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.<sup>8</sup>

## 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.<sup>9</sup> Democracy, freedom, and equality are what political theorists call “essentially contested concepts.”<sup>10</sup>