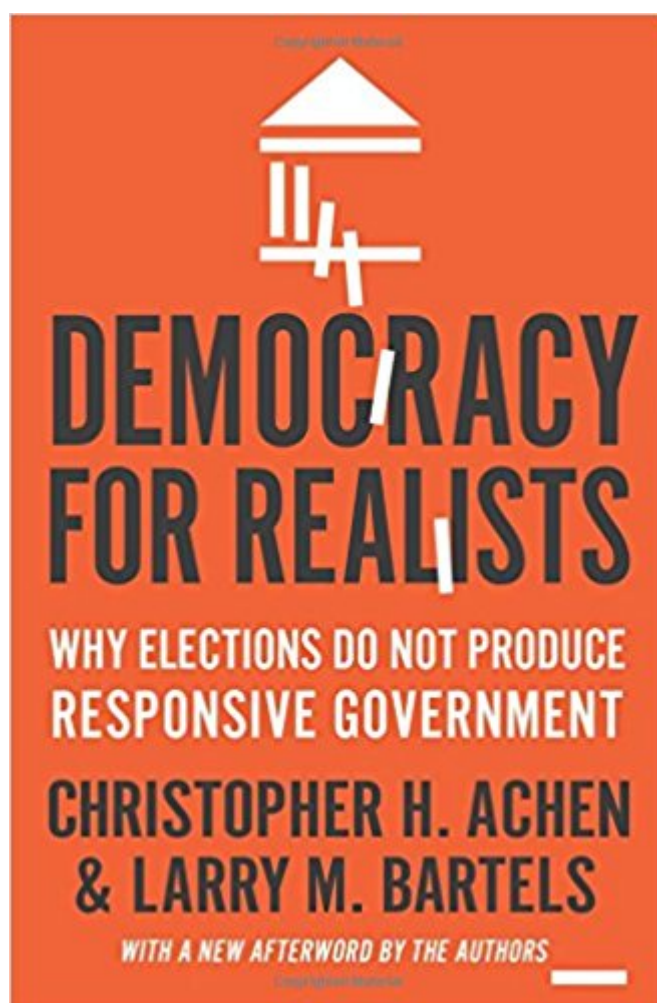


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Democracy For Realists: Why Elections Do Not Produce Responsive Government (Princeton Studies In Political Behavior)



Synopsis

Democracy for Realists assails the romantic folk-theory at the heart of contemporary thinking about democratic politics and government, and offers a provocative alternative view grounded in the actual human nature of democratic citizens. Christopher Achen and Larry Bartels deploy a wealth of social-scientific evidence, including ingenious original analyses of topics ranging from abortion politics and budget deficits to the Great Depression and shark attacks, to show that the familiar ideal of thoughtful citizens steering the ship of state from the voting booth is fundamentally misguided. They demonstrate that voters—even those who are well informed and politically engaged—mostly choose parties and candidates on the basis of social identities and partisan loyalties, not political issues. They also show that voters adjust their policy views and even their perceptions of basic matters of fact to match those loyalties. When parties are roughly evenly matched, elections often turn on irrelevant or misleading considerations such as economic spurts or downturns beyond the incumbents' control; the outcomes are essentially random. Thus, voters do not control the course of public policy, even indirectly. Achen and Bartels argue that democratic theory needs to be founded on identity groups and political parties, not on the preferences of individual voters. Democracy for Realists provides a powerful challenge to conventional thinking, pointing the way toward a fundamentally different understanding of the realities and potential of democratic government. Now with new analysis of the 2016 elections, Democracy for Realists provides a powerful challenge to conventional thinking, pointing the way toward a fundamentally different understanding of the realities and potential of democratic government.

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Customer Reviews

Winner of the 2017 David O. Sears Book Award, International Society of Political Psychology Winner of the 2017 PROSE Award in Government & Politics, Association of American Publishers One of Choice's Outstanding Academic Titles for 2016 "For decades, political scientists have blasted away at electoral models based primarily on the idea of rational choice. In the most recent and sophisticated entry in the field, *Democracy for Realists*, Christopher Achen and Larry Bartels argue that even well-informed and politically engaged voters mostly choose candidates based on their social identities and partisan loyalties. Judging from the 2016 polls, that theory looks pretty good."--E.J. Dionne, *Washington Post* "In an important recent book, *Democracy for Realists*, Christopher Achen and Larry Bartels show that 'group attachments' and 'social identities' are key to understanding voting behavior."--Fareed Zakaria, *Washington Post* "It flies in the face of decades of political science conventional wisdom about 'the rational voter' and other such dicta, but it seems to me obviously true, particularly in our age."--Michael Tomasky, *New York Review of Books* "[A] provocative book."--Edward Luce, *Financial Times* "*Democracy for Realists*, by Christopher Achen and Larry Bartels, shows that however cynical you are about the democratic process, it's worse than you think. All the flaws in cognition that psychologists have been teaching for decades make a mockery of the folk theory that democracy produces responsive governments."--Steven Pinker, *Harvard Crimson* "Brutally depressing."--Tyler Cowen, *Marginal Revolution* "One of the most bracing books of political science to arrive in a long time. . . . An impressively comprehensive statement on the limits of electoral democracy, a book that can both explain the emergence of Trump and potentially charts a new course for the field."--Lee Drutman, *Chronicle of Higher Education* "It will confirm much that you may already have intuited--issues do not much matter--and it may make you want to jump out of a window, if you didn't already."--Kevin Williamson, *National Review* (Summer Reading Recommendation) "The folk theory of American democracy is that citizens deliberate on the issues and choose a candidate. That is false. The truth, as political scientists Christopher Achen and Larry Bartels describe in *Democracy for Realists: Why Elections Do Not Produce Responsive Government*, is that voters are tribalistic."--Jamelle Bouie, *Slate* "A comprehensive analysis that lays the foundation for a discussion of necessary reforms and how they can be achieved."--Kirkus (starred review) "Their writing is clear, concise, and appropriately whimsical on occasion. Certain to become a classic."--Choice "*Democracy for Realists*

is essential reading for anyone interested in the problem of voter ignorance, and the future of democracy more generally. It illuminates a dangerous problem that may well bedevil democracy for a long time to come."--Ilya Somin, History News Network"Provocative, persuasive and unsettling, Democracy for Realists is a profoundly important--and timely--book."--Glenn Altschuler, Tulsa World"The most comprehensive recent study of the American voter."--Neal Miner, Honolulu Civil Beat"According to some conventional accounts of democracy, these systems work. Voters toss out incumbents in hard times and retain them in good times. . . . The genius of Achen and Bartels' work--the depressing genius of it--is the breadth of evidence they marshal that this is simply not the case."--Peter Loewen, Ottawa Citizen"The book might make dreary reading about the failings of democracy. But by applying what Achen and Bartels say to what is happening in the elections. . . . It is possible to make some sense."--Han Fook Kwang, Singapore Straits Times"An important book. The authors basically destroy our most cherished ideas about democracy."--Helio Schwartzman, Folha De S. Paulo"The 2016 election cycle has confounded a good deal of scholarship and punditry so far. But one book that's coming out smelling like a rose is Christopher Achen and Larry Bartels' new book Democracy for Realists: Why Elections Do Not Produce Responsive Government. This book's novel argument is that we've been thinking about democracy all wrong."--Seth Masket, Pacific Standard"This more than erudite book couldn't have been published at a more apt, if not fractious climate amid modern British and European political history. . . . Democracy for Realists will set minds thinking and trigger an array of debate; which, at the end of the day, is what democracy is all about."--David Marx Book Reviews"Democracy for Realists is essential reading for 2016, an empirically and theoretically rigorous political science treatise that debunks traditional defenses of democracy as a way to reflect the 'will of the people' or allow well-informed and rational voters to guide the country. In their place, Christopher Achen and Larry Bartels advance a theory of democracy grounded in group identities and social psychology."--Jason Furman, Bloomberg"The myth of the informed democratic voter is itself an example of long-ingrained, stubborn anti-knowledge. In their brilliant new Democracy for Realists, the political scientists Christopher H. Achen and Larry M. Bartels explain that laypeople and experts alike have developed a 'folk theory' holding that American democracy is built on an engaged electorate that casts its votes for rational policy reasons. Unfortunately, as Achen and Bartels demonstrate, decades of research have shredded this theory, stomped on it, and set the remains on fire."--Noah Berlatsky, Reason"One of last year's most-celebrated works of political science."--Eric Levitz, New York Magazine Daily Intelligencer"Democracy for Realists, which [I] have become a bit obsessed with . . . Is the political science equivalent of being told Santa

doesn't exist."--Ezra Klein, Vox

"In *Democracy for Realists*, Achen and Bartels explain that deep-seated social identities and group affiliations motivate political action far more than individual rationality does. They convincingly debunk what they term the "folk theory" of electoral democracy, an idealized view in which informed voters assess candidates on the basis of their own policy preferences or ideology and the leaders they elect then respond to the wishes of the majority, producing public policies that meet voters' demands. Drawing on a vast literature, Achen and Bartels argue that, in fact, most people are uninterested in politics and poorly informed about issues."--Suzanne Mettler, *Foreign Affairs*

"The most influential recent book on voting."--John Prideaux, *Economist*

"[Achen and Bartels] argue, contrary to the standard folk theory, that individuals are group-minded partisan members, and their reasons for voting in certain ways are based mainly on ideological or partisan grounds. Thus, group identity has more of an impact on electoral choice than policy. . . . [A] welcome addition to the literature on democratic theory and electoral politics."--Spiro Metaxas, *Political Studies Review*

"Two of America's smartest political scientists bid fair to transform our understanding of democracy. In our season of democratic discontent, this unsettling book could hardly be more timely. Must-reading for anyone interested in democratic theory and American politics."--Robert D. Putnam, author of *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* and *Our Kids: The American Dream in Crisis*

"*Democracy for Realists* is the single most important treatise on American democracy published in several decades. Achen and Bartels challenge just about every existing school of thought about electoral politics, policymaking, and government performance. They do not conclude with a counsel of despair for the future of American democracy, but they give no quarter to any notion that responsive government is possible without a more responsible citizenry."--John Dilulio, University of Pennsylvania

"It is impossible to overstate the significance of this magnum opus on democracy and democratic theory. Achen and Bartels lay waste to the folk theory of democracy through dazzling logic and rigorous empirical analysis. *Democracy for Realists* will become an instant classic, shaping our thinking on democracy for decades to come."--Thomas E. Mann, Brookings Institution and the University of California, Berkeley

"It is common in the history of science for scholars to bark up the wrong trees. Achen and Bartels make a strong case that spatial models of mass elections and the theory of retrospective voting are examples of wrong trees. Scholars, they argue, should now reorient toward group attachments as the foundation of democratic politics. All in all, this is a broad, deeply thoughtful, and courageous book."--John Zaller, University of California, Los Angeles

"Not since the work of Walter Lippmann, David Truman, Philip Converse, and Robert

Dahl have empirical democratic theorists made us think so deeply. Achen and Bartels demolish the folk theory of democracy in which politicians obtain mandates from rational voters. Instead, they propose an exciting new agenda that wrestles with the real democratic process in which political parties and interest groups fashion public policies to appeal to people's basic identities."--Henry E. Brady, coauthor of *The Unheavenly Chorus: Unequal Political Voice and the Broken Promise of American Democracy*"The best book to understand the 2016 campaign."--Matthew Yglesias"The most clear-eyed take on American democracy I have read in a long time."--Daniel W. Drezner, Tufts University"Democracy for Realists has the potential to become a classic. It raises questions that every democratic theorist and practitioner should take seriously. It is certain to provoke significant discussion."--Jane Mansbridge, Harvard University"Democracy for Realists is a terrific book. It takes on big questions, is brimming with smart analysis and crisp argumentation, and the writing is elegant. There is pleasure and provocation on nearly every page. Achen and Bartels have made a major contribution to modern social science."--Donald R. Kinder, coauthor of *The End of Race? Obama, 2008, and Racial Politics in America*

This is an excellent book, but a couple of caveats are probably warranted. The main one is that despite its down-to-earth title, this isn't really a book for general readers. The authors (hereafter A&B) mention in their preface that they hope the book will be useful for "colleagues and students" and that is the audience who will benefit most from reading it. Although the book isn't equation-heavy, its expository passages are nonetheless very dense in discussing fine points of quantitative social science techniques. Despite not being a political scientist, I do have a pretty decent appetite for quantitative arguments yet even I found myself rushing through some passages. An even stronger indicator that the book is directed to experts, though, is that the first big target of the argument, the so-called "folk theory" of popular sovereignty, is something whose usual embodiment is so stupendously implausible on its face that only professional training in rational choice theory could make it seem formidable. Broadly speaking, the folk theory is that elections are based on "issue voting," i.e., they can "reveal" the "preferences" of a majority of voters on a set of issues. Its usual folkloric form among the tribe of political scientists is something called the "spatial model" (@24-25). This involves a

belief in a one-dimensional political spectrum in which feasible policies are arrayed from left to right, and in which each political party is represented by a platform reflecting the policy it will enact if elected. (How platforms are reduced to a one-dimensional policies isn't explained in the book, but then again A&B aren't defenders of this theory.) Each voter is represented by an "ideal point" along the dimension, reflecting the policy she or he prefers to all others. Individual voters then try to "maximize their ideological satisfaction with the election outcome" by voting for the party closest to them on the ideological dimension. Later versions of the theory add more dimensions, but retain the assumption of an aggregative rational maximization process. A&B blow up this theory with evidence that most voters are woefully ignorant about issues and about parties' stances on them. While most of the book focuses on the US, some attention is also paid to major European countries, and it's in that context that A&E offer the factoid that depressed me most in the book: half of German voters couldn't tell whether the party "Die Linke" was on the political right or left. (@35; hint: the party's name means "The Left." In German.) Rather than choosing a party to support based on their individual point of view, it seems more that voters decide what party or candidate they want to support and then adopt his, her or its views as their own: as A&B put it, persuasion plays a bigger role than policy-oriented evaluation. The "folk theory" is dispatched quite early in the book. A long train of other victims follow, including such notions as that political primaries take power from politicians and give it to the people; that initiatives and referenda give voice to the wisdom of crowds; that elections give voters the power to evaluate politicians' performance retrospectively; that voters favor Presidential candidates who will improve the economy; and that a voter's ideological self-knowledge precedes her or his choice of which party to support. Each of A&B's arguments is supported by statistical data, including election returns, economic statistics, and survey data. Here's another caveat, though: some of A&B's assertions can't be understood without a great deal of quantitative sophistication and sometimes even sophistication won't lead the reader to the correct understanding. The example I have in mind is the assertion that voters respond more to changes in real disposable income per capita (RDlpc) than to GDP per capita: a higher RDlpc will mean a higher probability of a vote swing favoring an incumbent President (e.g. @184). I was skeptical about this for a couple of reasons. First, A&B also say that voters can't "respond to something they

can't first discern it. (@164) and you have to go out of your way to find RDI statistics, while GDP is constantly in the news. Second, if people didn't respond to RDIpc by reading about it, then the only other plausible way was if they felt it in their own wallets. But RDIpc is a mean (average) quantity, so it can go up even though most people's income stays flat or declines. Intuitively I figured that at least a majority of people would have to feel a higher income in their wallet in order to have an effect on an election and that this was very unlikely for most elections in the past 30 years, since US median income has been static or declining in most of that period. So I wrote to the authors about this issue. Each of them showed me I was wrong - but each in a different way. The first author who responded claimed he wasn't the expert on the issue, but showed me with a very simple example that even if 1/3 of the voters don't have any increase in RDI, 1/3 experience a -3% change in RDI, and 1/3 experience a +6% increase, then based on A&B's findings you would still expect +2% vote swing favoring the incumbent. (This still assumes that the income increase is shared fairly evenly within that top 1/3, but at least it shows that my knee-jerk majority assumption was fallacious.) The second author got back from a business trip a few days later and told me that actually an improved RDIpc could influence the voter even if it *never* hit her own wallet: a couple of studies have found that "voters, regardless of their own income levels, respond much more to income gains at the top of the distribution (95th percentile) than to income gains for their own income class, suggesting that "the mechanism by which aggregate income gains get translated into increases in political support is not a simple pocketbook response, but a more complicated sociological phenomenon. That's fascinating and a little scary -- will more people vote to reelect Pres. Trump or Clinton if he or she makes the rich get richer? -- but not what a typical reader would be able to divine from the book. (BTW, both authors were incredibly nice in their responses to my questions. But I suspect they'd prefer that only a very small fraction of their thousands of readers have the chutzpah to pepper them with questions as I did. So I hope they put both explanations into a subsequent edition.) A key claim of the book is that partisanship isn't driven by ideology, much less by issues or retrospective performance evaluation. Rather, party choice is strongly influenced by parents' preferences, by symbols, and especially by emotionally-grounded feelings of group identification. As much as I like to think of myself as sophisticated about issues, I have to admit that my own pattern as a US voter could be guessed pretty accurately on this basis, too (though I owe it to post-1980

figures like Elliott Abrams, Eric Cantor and Sheldon Edelman to bring me back more to issues and away from the ethnic solidarity that induced me once to vote for a Republican, in a 1974 Senate race). So does this mean that democracy is a waste of time? Not at all, in A&B's view. Elections still provide an "authoritative, widely accepted agreement about who should rule" (317). In a well-functioning system, they also provide party turnover, which is good for health and stability of the society. They also provide some incentives for a ruler to tolerate opposition although A&B point out that the notion that one can oppose incumbent rulers while still being loyal to the nation is one that only developed gradually in the US and UK during the 19th Century, and not earlier. (Japan is about 150 years behind the times, in this regard.) A&B seem to be saying that what should change, based on their observations, isn't how democracy is valued, but how it's studied. Group identification and power differentials need to be given more consideration. In contrast, the folk theory treats every voter as equal in power, and aggregates preferences in a Benthamite utilitarian fashion. (Jeremy Bentham, the founder of utilitarianism, denied that there was anything special about groups, and claimed that a community was nothing more than an aggregate of individuals.) In doing so, the folk theory "props up elite rule" (327), because it turns a blind eye to the unequal distribution of power. Based on this new point of view, the prerequisite for a "more effective democracy" would be "a greater degree of economic and social equality" (325) universal suffrage isn't sufficient. A&B are at a bit of a loss, though, to describe how to bring this about, as have been many generations of well-meaning people before them. I don't disagree with A&B, but I came away from the book thinking how very American it is. At least from the standpoint of political philosophy (as distinguished from political science), the notion that democracy is based on struggle between more and less powerful groups of people is already common in Europe and elsewhere. Leaving aside dyed-in-the-wool Marxists, the writings of Chantal Mouffe, Ernesto Laclau, Jacques Rancière, Christoph Illers and many others make this point often; even the blurb on a French children's book entitled "Les démocraties" that I picked up a few years ago notes that "la démocratie est toujours un combat". To be fair, in a late chapter A&B do describe how US political science used to be more group-oriented before getting hijacked by the economists' view of the world; but they leave out some modern work that continues this tradition, such as John P. McCormick's excellent "Machiavellian Democracy" (CUP 2011). As for

A&B's linkage between democracy and truer equality of power, the liberal Italian political philosopher Norberto Bobbio anticipated them somewhat in his *« Destra e sinistra »* (1994) (later translated as *« Left and Right »* [sic], but now out of print in English): he pointed out that the key distinction between left and right is that the "pole star of the left is greater equality. His meaning clearly is like the sort of equality of power that A&B describe • not just equality under the law, which is the sort of equality represented by the folk theory, and which Bobbio attributes to the center-right. While it would have been nice if some of these philosophers had been considered in the present book, their absence is forgivable: the book's purpose is to convince American political scientists to stop drinking the Kool-Aid of economic electoral theories that their profession has served up for many decades already. To an outsider, A&B make a convincing case. But will they change the minds of insiders? After all, macroeconomists stayed faithful to their theories despite the 2008 global financial crash. Expecting change from a mere book might be too ambitious a hope for realists.

Bartels and Achen challenge what they call the "folk theory of democracy. The "folk theory" seems to have its roots in the idea of the "rational man" • an Enlightenment idea, certainly, but one that seems to have made its way into popular politics. The idea is that democracy works (when it does) via choices of representatives or directly of policies as informed by their interests and values. Representatives and policies then reflect those choices • the government embodies and enacts the will of the people. Then they undertake a quantitative study of the validity of that folk theory. They actually examine two theories of rational voter behavior. The first is policy voting • that, in simple terms, voters vote for candidates with whom they share policy positions more than alternative candidates. Policy voting fails in part because voters are unable or don't take the time to discern the policy positions of candidates. And in fact, there is little actual policy alignment between voters and the candidates they vote for to support the hypothesis that such a thing is behind voters' behavior. This point echoes what Bartels showed in his earlier book, *Unequal Democracy* • that the policy positions of members of the House of Representatives do not correlate well with those of their constituents (particularly their lower income constituents). In fact, foreshadowing some later discussions on group identity and group influence, Achen and Bartels hint that where there is agreement between voters and candidates on policies,

the arrow of fit and influence may go in the opposite direction. Voters may not choose candidates who reflect their policy positions so much as adopt policy positions held by the candidates they choose. The second theory of rational voter behavior is retrospective rationality. Voters assess the performance of office holders and vote them in or out depending on performance, viewed in terms of the voters' individual or collective welfare. Retrospective rationality fails in part because voters do not separate factors influencing their welfare that are due to the office holders' action from those that are not. Famously, Woodrow Wilson lost re-election votes in New Jersey's shore area in 1916 due to shark attacks on swimmers. Wilson had nothing to do with the attacks of course, but statistical analysis shows that in fact he did suffer at the polls. Voters in the area felt things weren't going well, and they blamed the office holder. Achen and Bartels of course cite other cases, including a century long correlation of drought or severe rainfall with voters' behavior that punished incumbents. The second half of the book tries to pick up the pieces. Suppose the critique of "folk democracy" is correct. Voting behavior is not rational, in either sense of policy voting or retrospective assessment. What then? For some, the obvious response is to re-assert what has been disproven, but this time as a "should" rather than an "is". What we need is a more educated, more "rational" voter. Some readers may even at this point simply congratulate themselves as bucking the evidence, because they view themselves as exceptions, well-informed, rational voters. In fact, though, as Achen and Bartels show, the politically more informed voters are more, not less, likely to fail tests of rational voting behavior. Raising the information level of voters won't correct the problem. By contrast, Achen and Bartels pursue a "realist" theory of democracy. "In our view, a realist theory of democracy must be founded on a realistic theory of political psychology. At present, nothing of that kind exists." (p. 230). They don't pretend to have such a theory of political psychology themselves. But they believe they can begin. No such theory, they believe, can ignore the role of group identity. Research shows too clearly that policy positions, the starting point in the folk theory, are not the starting point at all, but are rather themselves heavily influenced if not produced by group identity. We adopt the policy positions we adopt, in large part because of the social group(s) with which we identify. Of course this is ideological anathema to individualists (themselves a group, of course, no matter how some would like to deny it). But Achen and Bartels stand on realist grounds, and they subject their hypothesis to case studies. These case studies are the partisan political realignments of the New Deal in the

1930s, Kennedy's Catholicism as a point of contention in 1960, the collapse of the solid Democratic south following the Jim Crow era, and the emergence of abortion as a powerful issue in the 1980s and 1990s. In each instance, they find compelling evidence, in the data, of powerful group influence. So what direction would all of this lead us in, if we maintain a democratic ideology? As the authors argue, we must pay much more attention to the roles of groups in generating political positions and policies. "Groups will include everything from political parties to unions to PACs to lobbyists to more informal citizen, professional, and business groups. How do these groups influence the thinking of the voting public, and how do they influence the policies of the political parties in power? In particular Achen and Bartels recommend applying scrutiny to the role of money (and other forms of inordinate power) in politics • some groups are advantaged in their ability to influence, obviously, by their ability to speak more often, more loudly, and with more skill than others. As a consequence they are in a position to advance their group interests more effectively. Doing anything about them is more easily said than done, of course, for the very reasons Achen and Bartels have cited. Bartels and Achen believe in democracy, and they are trying to determine how to help make it work. They believe in democracy in the sense that they believe a government that responds to and represents the interests of its people can be a positive force in their lives. Their obvious chagrin is with the fact, as shown in studies of voter behavior and the responsiveness of elected government, we neither have a responsive government nor do we behave at the polls in a way that will give us one. I think the critique is a needed one. There is a need for throwing a wrench into our popular political discourse. We toss around tired ideological claims and perceptions as self-proclaimed liberals, libertarians, conservatives or whatever like blunt and tired tools, even deluding ourselves into thinking our "side" of the debate to be enlightened. It is too easy to claim that the public, as a whole, is too uninformed or doesn't have sufficient time to educate itself for its role in a democratic system. Achen and Bartels don't deny that that is the case, but their point directs us away from such a fatiguing defeatism. Their arguments regarding the role of groups are not as tight, I think, as their critique of rational voting behavior. The notion of a "group" is itself pretty slippery and pretty complicated. I belong to many groups, with many associated identities • everything from explicit political affiliations to geographic identities, professional associations, cultural identities, and on and on. "My group identity", if we can speak of it in any unified way, might best be seen as some sort of complex vector space rather than a simple assignment to some uber-identity. With that in mind, I think Achen and Bartels do their best job here as challenging us to

think differently about political behavior. The simple model of individual political rationality doesn't work. And its failure isn't a matter of our failing to behave properly as voters - it fails because it is false to human political behavior per se. We don't fall into the influence of groups because we fail to behave adequately as rational individuals. The influence of groups is simply an aspect of human behavior (I would even say human rational behavior, although that would get us into a much bigger argument about what constitutes "rationality" and whether it can have inherently social aspects or must properly be conceived on the scale of the individual). Nothing could be more critical in reading this book than including yourself as a subject. It would be too easy to say that Achen and Bartels are talking about other people, not me. That's not true. In reading their book, I see that tendency - "Most people fail to live up to rational standards, but I know I do." But I am just like everyone else - I certainly have group identities, they certainly influence my perceptions, my judgements, and my political behavior. Thinking otherwise would be unbearably smug. As the authors say, "It is a book about the conceptual limitations of human beings - including the authors of this book and its readers."

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