

**Miroff, B., Seidelman, R., & Swanstrom, T. (2003). *Debating democracy: A reader in American politics, 4<sup>th</sup> Ed.* Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company.**

Almost everybody in America believes in democracy. When Americans are asked by interviewers about basic questions of majority rule, equality of opportunity, or individual freedom, more than 95 percent profess a belief in democratic values. As our introduction to this book suggests, however, once we probe a bit deeper into what Americans think democracy means, we find that they are not at all of one mind about how far democracy should extend into political, social, and economic life. Elite democrats believe that democracy is a valuable method for selecting those who will govern us, but they are skeptical about the political capacities and interests of ordinary citizens and want important decisions left to those with experience and expertise. Popular democrats distrust elites as potentially self-serving and believe that under the right circumstances ordinary citizens are both capable of and entitled to a significant share in deciding public matters.

The debate over democracy began at the time of the nation's founding and has continued to this day. In the previous chapter, we saw Federalists and Anti-federalists arguing about whether the American experiment in self-government should rest on elite democracy or popular democracy. To James Madison, only a national republic manned by a deliberative elite, who could filter out the irrational passions of the public, could sustain the American experiment. In the eyes of Brutus, this national republic would breed an oppressive aristocracy, who would crush popular democracy, which must be rooted in law-abiding and virtuous citizens and flourish at the local and state levels.

Although the Federalists prevailed in the original American debate over democracy, securing the ratification of the Constitution, nineteenth-century America looked more like the Anti-federalists' (and Thomas Jefferson's) vision of democracy than the Federalists'. For most of the century, political and economic life was small scale and decentralized, with the federal government in Washington, D.C., exercising only limited powers. Nineteenth-century America witnessed the establishment of the most democratic society the world had contained since the Golden Era of democracy in ancient Athens. Levels of political involvement and rates of voting among ordinary citizens were remarkably high—much higher, in fact, than they would be a century later. To be sure, this was a white man's democracy; Native Americans, African Americans, and women paid a high price for white men's freedoms, and the latter two groups had to launch long and painful struggles for democratic inclusion that would not achieve much success until the twentieth century.

The transformation of the United States between the Civil War and World War I from a largely agrarian and decentralized society into an urbanized and industrialized nation called into question the popular democratic assumptions held by the heirs of the Anti-federalists and Jefferson. Could ordinary citizens obtain, understand, and act on the increasingly complex information that characterized modern American society? America's premier journalist, Walter Lippmann, argued in the 1920s that ordinary citizens viewed the world through stereotypes, simplistic pictures that distorted reality, and that effective government for the industrial age required a greater emphasis on trained, dispassionate experts. Agreeing with Lippmann that the American public had been eclipsed by forces that seemed beyond its control, America's premier philosopher, John Dewey, warned of the elitist tendencies of Lippmann's experts. Dewey sought to revive popular democracy in face-to-face communities where ordinary citizens, informed by the latest findings of social science, would participate in public affairs.

In the 1950s (like the 1920s, a decade of apparent public apathy), Lippmann's argument received reinforcement from the empirical surveys conducted by political scientists. Most Americans, these surveys suggested, were not very interested in political life, did not know much about public affairs, and did not participate at very high levels in politics. Prevailing American conceptions about democracy would have to be modified, many political scientists now argued, to reflect what Robert Dahl called "citizenship without politics." But a minority of political scientists began in the 1960s to object, on both theoretical and empirical grounds, to this redefinition of democracy, claiming that the new perspective was less democratic realism than it was democratic elitism. These critics found support among the emerging political movements that would mark the 1960s as a decade of popular democratic upsurge. Students for a Democratic Society (SDS), the most important organization of the '60s New Left, gave the period its political watchword:

*participatory democracy.*

Our selections in this chapter, excerpted from books published in 1999, are two of the latest versions of America's enduring debate over democracy. John Mueller attacks what he considers to be the romantic and unrealistic conception of democracy put forward by popular democrats. All that is required for democracy, Mueller contends, is a political system that eschews violence and that allows citizens to criticize, pressure, and remove those in power. Democracy, he suggests, will always consist of a messy, unequal conflict for advantage among special interests. What it will never achieve, he argues, are the misty ideals of popular democrats: political equality, participation, and an enlightened citizenry. Holding democracy to these standards only fosters cynicism. Mueller's analysis updates the classic elite democratic perspective of Madison, Lippmann, and Dahl.

Paul Rogat Loeb represents the popular democratic perspective of the Anti-federalists, Jefferson, Dewey, and SDS. He ascribes the widespread cynicism about politics in the 1990s not to the romantic ideals of popular democrats but to the skeptical views of public involvement broadcast by the dominant forces in American society. "We've all but forgotten," he writes, "that public participation is the very soul of democratic citizenship, and how much it can enrich our lives." In our selection, Loeb tells the story of Pete Knutson (one of many stories in his book), a commercial fisherman who organized his fellow fishermen, environmentalists, and Native Americans to defeat an initiative by large industries that would have destroyed salmon spawning grounds. Loeb argues that active citizenship is required both to fulfill our responsibility to take care of the common good and to grow as individuals in psychological and spiritual depth.

Evaluating the debate between Mueller and Loeb should help to clarify your own conception of democracy. Do you believe, with Mueller, that Americans have many more interesting things to do than spend their time on political pursuits? Or do you believe, with Loeb, that political involvement is necessary for a sense of freedom and personal dignity? Do you believe, with Mueller, that self-interest and inequality will always characterize democracy and that attempts to reduce their influence through political and economic reforms will inevitably fail? Or do you believe, with Loeb, that politics can also reflect our more social impulses and can redress political and economic injustices? Above all, do you agree with Mueller that acceptance of elite democracy is the only realistic perspective, or do you agree with Loeb that the abandonment of popular democracy is a surrender to cynicism?