

What Democracy Prevents

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Abstract

Political theorists tend to justify democracy on the basis of the good things that can be expected to result from adopting it. However, there exist many expressions of what we might call “democratic anxiety.” These expressions identify a lacuna in our democratic theory, because they point not toward hopes that might be frustrated, but towards fears that might be realized. These fears or worries lead in two theoretically-fruitful directions. First, they permit the exploration of different ideal types of non-democracy, based on some particular set of anti-democratic worries or anxieties. Second, they allow us to develop richer justifications for democracy based not only on achieving some good but on avoiding the specific “bads” articulated by expressions of democratic anxiety. I speculate that democracy’s commitment to prevent these conditions from arising cannot be completely fulfilled, in the sense that full achievement of one of these goals will impair or compromise fulfillment of the others. This negative justification of democracy has connections to an older tradition in political theory that celebrates democracy not for what it actually provides, but rather for what it counterfactually prevents. Prior theorists have shown what an ideal democracy might look like, and how ours has fallen short. By contrast, I seek to show what the varieties of ideal non-democracy might look like, and in so doing, to help us understand the role that fear of these ideal types plays in sustaining our democratic aspirations.

Introduction

During the past decade, many observers have expressed anxiety about the prospects of democracy. Since 2010, the absolute number of democracies has declined and the quality

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of remaining democracies has eroded (Lührmann and Lindberg 2019). States around the world have been said to engage in “democratic backsliding” (Bermeo 2016, Mechovka, Lührmann and Lindberg 2017, Waldner and Lust 2018), which is understood as a partial or incomplete retrogression from democracy towards authoritarian rule, initiated by a democratically-elected regime (Figure 1). Because many instances of backsliding have involved the gradual erosion of democratic institutions rather than their replacement by explicitly non-democratic institutions (Haggard and Kaufman 2021), characterizing the resulting regimes has proved challenging.¹ In addition to the comprehensive category “non-democratic,” scholars have described such states as “authoritarian regimes,” “autocracies,” and (following Dahl 1971) open and closed “anocracies” (e.g. Polity IV).

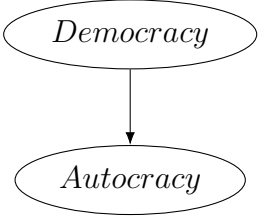


Figure 1: Retrogression occurs along a single pathway.

This spate of democratic backsliding occurs at a counterintuitive historical moment, just when the principle of popular sovereignty has come to be widely accepted by populations around the world (Bourke and Skinner 2016:6-14). Despite its ancient antecedents, the idea that the people are the ultimate source of political authority did not achieve broad, global acceptance until the second half of the twentieth century.² The diffusion of this principle has required incipient authoritarian regimes to alter the nature of their sales pitch. Under conditions of widespread belief in popular sovereignty,

¹Scholars of backsliding have introduced the useful distinction between instances of backsliding featuring the *erosion* of democratic institutions and those where outright *reversion* to authoritarian rule takes place (Haggard and Kaufman 2021).

²Consider the United Nations’ Declaration on Human Rights. Article 21 states that “The will of the people shall be the basis of the authority of government” (UNDHR). This article was ratified in 1948 by 48 of 58 member states, with none opposed, eight abstaining, and two not present.

would-be autocrats are forced to frame their proposals as in fact implementing the will of the people. A typical argument made by these regimes is that electoral competition leads in practice to a type of elite capture (or instability) that frustrates the popular will, and that the will of the people can only be truly expressed through the unique expertise of the autocrat or party. Widespread diffusion of the principle of popular sovereignty has altered the landscape on which democratic backsliding plays out, inducing autocrats to forego traditional coups d’etat or *autogolpes* in favor of maneuvers like “promissory coups” (Bermeo 2016) with the ostensible goal of restoring or improving democracy (Figure 2). As a result, modern non-democratic regimes imitate many of the features of electoral democracies, including elections (Guriev and Triesman 2020). In fact, more than 80% of non-democracies “elect” legislatures on a regular basis (Cruz, Keefer and Scartascini 2021).³

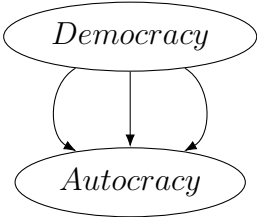


Figure 2: Retrogression via multiple, related pathways to a single end state.

While the global diffusion of a principle of popular rule might seem to indicate ideal conditions for democracy, we actually observe that commentators in democratic states tend to express substantial anxiety about their society’s prospects for continued democracy (e.g. Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018, Howell and Moe 2020). The varieties of democratic anxiety expressed by these observers illustrate vividly what proponents of

³Leaders in many of these non-democracies would no doubt equivocate about their state’s democratic status, arguing that the popular will can be effectively discerned and implemented only through the good offices of some party organization or charismatic individual, and that electoral democracy as practiced in North America and Western Europe actually frustrates the will of the people by subordinating it to elite electoral competition.

democracy fear and what they are trying to avoid, often coupled with prescriptions for action. For example, the political scientists Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt write, “North Carolina offers a window into what politics without guardrails looks like—and a possible glimpse into America’s future. When partisan rivals become enemies, political competition descends into warfare, and our institutions turn into weapons. The result is a system hovering constantly on the brink of crisis” (Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018:212).

These democratic anxieties identify a lacuna in our democratic theory. They point not towards hopes that might be frustrated, but towards fears that might be realized. These fears have been insufficiently studied by political theorists. By studying what the proponents of democracy are worried about, we may be able to develop richer justifications for democracy based not only on achieving some good but on avoiding the specific “bads” addressed by recent expressions of democratic anxiety. After a full investigation, we might choose to supplement existing positive justifications with others based on, say, preventing elite entrenchment or precluding the establishment of pure majority rule. This would be to expand the instrumental class of justifications, which is currently focused on the desirable states of affairs that democracy will provide or to which democracy will conduce. By contrast, I identify a neglected class of instrumental justifications, according to which democracy is desirable because it prevents certain undesirable states of affairs from occurring. This would be to expand the set of instrumental justifications to include not only what democracy provides, but also what it prevents.

In recent years, political theorists have explained the value of democracy both intrinsically, by reference to the desirable attributes of the democratic process itself, and instrumentally, by reference to the good things that can be expected to result from adopting it.⁴ Intrinsic arguments for democracy take several forms. Some theorists

⁴There also exists a corresponding set of arguments *against* democracy. See, e.g., Plato, *Republic*

appeal to democracy’s provision for equal social relations and the ensuing “relational equality” (Anderson 2009, Kolodny 2014, Viehoff 2014), while others see the liberty accruing to citizens through democratic arrangements as the major justification for a democratic regime, situating this liberty as lexically prior to any good outcomes that might result from violating it (Gould 1988). Finally, other intrinsic arguments involve the manner in which decisions are justified, taking democracy to be uniquely legitimate because of its propensity to provide public justification or give mutually acceptable reasons for action (Habermas 1996, Cohen 1996).⁵

The literature contains two main varieties of instrumental justification for democracy: those in which democracy is said to improve the character of participants, and those in which democracy is said to produce good outcomes. In the class of character-improving justifications, we learn that democracy may lead citizens themselves to become more autonomous, rational and moral (Mill 1861, Elster 2002), or that democracy may lead to increased empathy and respect among citizens (Hannon 2020). The “good outcomes” class of instrumental justifications can be further subdivided according to the standard by which these outcomes are judged. While some theorists contend that simply delivering what the people want (responsiveness) is sufficient to demonstrate democracy’s value (e.g. Gaus 1996, Sen 1999, Christiano 2011), others argue that democracy is desirable because it advances “correct” decisions according to some abstract, epistemic standard of correctness (e.g. Estlund 2002, Goodin 2003, Landemore 2013, Goodin and Spiekermann 2018). However, epistemic instrumental justifications for democracy have come into tension with a literature in political science focused on the epistemic shortcomings of democratic citizens (e.g. Converse 1964, Achen and Bar-

Book VI, IX; Hobbes, *Leviathan* ch. XIX, and The Old Oligarch (pseudo-Xenophon), *The Constitution of the Athenians*. Jason Brennan (2016) continues the tradition.

⁵Intrinsic accounts of democracy’s value typically also incorporate at least some instrumental elements, while focusing on the intrinsic benefits of democratic processes. Strong versions of instrumentalism flatly deny that other forms of justification are possible at all (e.g. Arneson 2002).

tels 2016). The apparent conflict between a desire for good outcomes and the epistemic incapacity of ordinary citizens has led some instrumentalists to explore alternatives to democracy that might also effectively promote human flourishing (Bell 2015, Brennan 2016).⁶

I am proposing an expansion of our instrumental justifications of democracy to encompass those states of affairs which democracy effectively serves to mitigate or prevent. In contrast to existing instrumental justifications, which are mostly framed positively, I suggest an exploration of what we might call “negative” justifications, found in expressions of anxiety about democracy. Negative justifications take some state of affairs to be normatively undesirable, and suggest that democracy is desirable because it makes that state of affairs less likely. A natural worry at this stage is that the presentation of these states of affairs in positive or negative terms is simply a matter of semantics. After all, we can simply invert the form of any positive claim to yield a negative claim, and vice versa. A measure calibrated to prevent war, say, might with equal justification be said to promote peace. Such fungible claims do not track any deep distinction, and it may seem unclear why we should expect the distinction between positive and negative approaches to be anything more than semantic. Call this the “mere semantics” objection. However, notice that we observe symmetry between preventing bad outcomes and producing good outcomes only where the set of bad outcomes is defined as the negation of the set of good outcomes (and vice versa). It is of course possible that expressions of anxiety about democracy track democratic theory in precisely this (merely semantic) way. As we have seen, democratic theorists think, among other things, that democracy may force rulers to account for the interests of disadvantaged citizens, or lead citizens to become more autonomous, rational and moral, or may simply lead us to “get it right” more often than nondemocracies according to some set of procedure-independent stan-

⁶See Appendix A (Figure 6) for a conceptual diagram of the literature discussed here.

dards. If expressions of anxiety about democracy take the form of a negation of this list, then the “mere semantics” objection would stand. But if the expressions of anxiety take as their target phenomena unrelated to or not easily situated as the negation of some positive aspiration, then there seems to be a qualitative difference between the set of positive justifications and the set of negative ones.⁷ If, as I expect, I find both types of expression of anxiety in the course of my research, this discussion seems to justify focusing on those negative justifications that are not simply negations of some positive aspiration, but rather on those that introduce some new idea, the negation of which is not found in the positive literature.

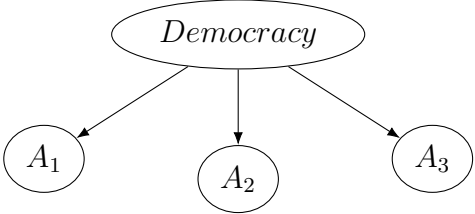


Figure 3: Retrogression via multiple pathways to distinct end states.

In addition, examining these negative justifications can provide us with analytic traction on the diverse and discordant states of affairs that democrats wish to prevent (Figure 3), revealing conflicts or disagreements that are obscured by positive theory. For example, we observe a strain of popular anxiety that the people do not sufficiently or effectively participate in politics (Getchell 2021), but also a countervailing strain of elite anxiety about *excessive* participation in politics by the people (Achen and Bartels 2016). Nevertheless, both groups consider that their anxieties are about “democracy,”

⁷That is, the set of good outcomes may not be easily conceptualized as the mere absence of the bad outcomes, and vice versa. For example, we might favor democracy because it is constituted by relations of social equality. The argument for democracy as an implementation of social equality is not equivalent to our reasons to avoid social inequality. The set of ways in which we could fail to realize social equality is large, and our reasons to avoid these states of affairs are unlikely to be the same as our reasons to achieve social equality, which we might base on something like the moral equality of persons. Contrast this with the earlier example involving peace and war.

and there exist venerable democratic traditions to which both groups can appeal in good faith. This conceptual variation drawn out by the negative approach is not uncovered by positive democratic theory. Notice how a positive claim, say that participation should be “effective” (e.g. Held 2016), occludes the conflict.⁸ It seems possible that these dimensions are in tension with one another, and that fully realizing all of them at once might be logically impossible. If this is correct, democratic theory will have to take account of an inherent tension among democracy’s negative commitments. By identifying the tradeoffs, we may come to see democracy as a compromise across multiple dimensions, rather than the full realization of any one of them (compare Munck 2009). It may be productive to view the tension among democracy’s negative commitments as bounding or limiting the conceptual space within which positive conceptions can be articulated.

Why a Negative Approach is Justified

In the preceding section, I outlined an approach to democratic theory that I characterized as negative, in the sense that it deals with what we want to avoid, rather than what we aspire to achieve. In this section, I will characterize the negative approach more fully, and then provide some additional justification for adopting it.

A paradigm of the negative approach I propose to adopt can be found in the work of Thomas Hobbes (1651). Hobbes’ argument for an absolute sovereign in Book I is

⁸Two possibilities present themselves here. On the one hand, we might attribute the disagreement between these perspectives to conceptual confusion, in which several elements of a univocal concept of democracy are being conflated. On the other hand, these expressions of anxiety about democracy might be in tension because the claimants are working with different concepts of democracy, concepts which might share a conceptual core but which are neither coextensive nor cointensive. Call the first of these “conceptual confusion” and the second “conceptual equivocation”. At this stage, I can only note the possibilities and acknowledge that they will lead to different research outputs, both of which strike me as interesting.

based not on some set of positive actions that the sovereign will take to benefit the citizenry, but rather on a state of affairs that the sovereign's presence will prevent - the war of all against all.⁹ His reasoning explores the circumstances that might eventuate in the *absence* of a sovereign, and he uses this model to concretize a set of anxieties that motivate what we might call a commitment to “anti-anarchy,” understood broadly.

Whatsoever therefore is consequent to a time of Warre, where every man is Enemy to every man; the same is consequent to the time, wherein men live without other security, than what their own strength, and their own invention shall furnish them withall. In such condition, there is no place for Industry; because the fruit thereof is uncertain: and consequently no Culture of the Earth; no Navigation, nor use of the commodities that may be imported by Sea; no commodious Building; no Instruments of moving, and removing things as require much force; no Knowledge of the face of the Earth; no account of Time; no Arts; no Letters; no Society; and which is worst of all, *continuall feare, and danger of violent death*; And the life of man solitary, poore, nasty, brutish, and short (I.xii, 9, my emphasis).

Hobbes is here highlighting states of affairs that have not yet eventuated in the society in question in order to motivate his own model of absolute sovereignty, which is offered for its utility at preventing these states of affairs. Similarly, I propose to reconstruct “anxious” arguments for democracy, focusing on what exactly would eventuate in its absence or abeyance. In the same way that Hobbes uses these anxieties to motivate his argument for an absolute sovereign, I wish to draw out justifications for democracy based on the possible futures that it helps us avoid. Just as Hobbes is led to explore the (Weberian) ideal-type state of nature that his sovereign is introduced to prevent or avoid, my project will take up the task of exploring the ideal types of non-democracy indicated by recent expressions of democratic anxiety.¹⁰

Positive and negative justifications of democracy are examples of conceptual frames:

⁹Hobbes also articulates positive arguments for the absolute sovereign in Book III.

¹⁰There is some question in the literature about the role that Hobbes intends the state of nature to play in his argument. I take this up below, in the course of a discussion of Weberian ideal types and their utility for my project.

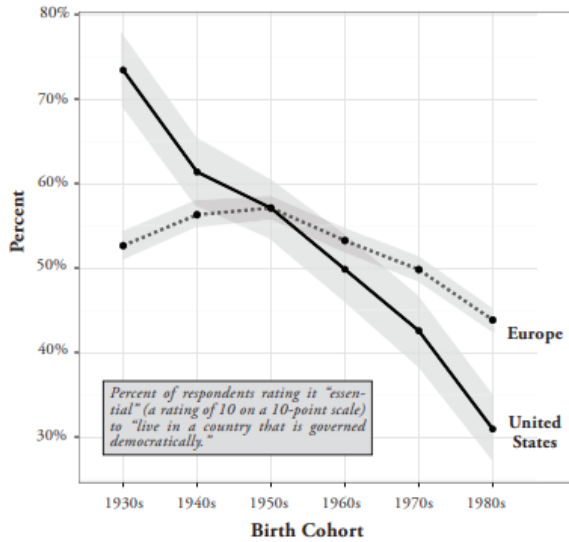
analytical tools used to make conceptual distinctions and organize ideas (Goffman 1974). Conceptual framing is inevitable and useful, but any particular conceptual frame will foreground some particular features of the subject in question, while relegating others to the background (Lakoff 1980). The decision by democratic theorists to focus on positive justifications has had several consequences. It has foregrounded normatively-laden concepts like equality and justice, leading us to evaluate our democracies according to the extent to which they further these objectives. It has also foregrounded democracy as a normative ideal, leading us to evaluate our existing democracies according to the extent to which they achieve or approximate our ideal(s) of democracy. Concomitantly, the decision to focus on positive justifications for democracy has made us less attentive to the positive “achievements” of non-democracy, such as despotism, elitism and chronic instability. A focus on the positive achievements of democracy has also pushed non-democracy itself into the background, depriving us of the conceptual tools required to adequately differentiate non-democratic regimes. Finally, because a focus on positive justifications motivates consideration of an ideal, and encourages us to enumerate the ways that our society has fallen short of that ideal, it creates expectations that, necessarily, remain unmet. A democratic citizen might well ask whether the positive theorists are in fact correct that democracy provides these things, and the theorists’ response is likely to be that the regime in question is not (yet) fully democratic. Dahl’s (1971) decision to situate democracy as an unattainable ideal follows naturally from this perspective.

The negative approach that I propose as a supplement to positive democratic theory is itself a conceptual frame, and introduces a different set of foci and blind spots. Rather than motivating a focus on ideal democracy, it forces us to pay attention to actual non-democracy by alerting us to the actual worries of citizens of existing democ-

racies. Rather than foregrounding concepts like equality and justice, it foregrounds a different set of normatively-laden concepts, such as despotism, tyranny, elitism, and instability. A consequence of the negative approach is that we may be too easily satisfied with a democracy that merely prevents, and that we may spuriously surrender some of our democratic aspirations out of fear of their possible consequences. For example, we might accept a democracy that prevents despotism and tyranny but in which institutional capture and corruption are rife, excluding the people from effective participation and a share in benefits. This is a characteristic peril of approaches that ask us to look at democracy as a floor rather than a ceiling, a political system perhaps suited to preventing capture and despotism but totally unsuited to the fulfilment of our positive aspirations (e.g. Bagg 2018). An exclusively negative justification might blind us to the ways in which human flourishing can be denied even under conditions of (say) non-tyranny, as well as making us less sensitive to the fundamental unfairness of differential social outcomes. The reason that I feel justified focusing on the negative approach in the present dissertation is that positive justifications have been so well-mined that I do not feel compelled to add to them. By combining positive and negative approaches, we may be able to arrive at a more accurate assessment of the value of our existing democracies. Our situation in a period of democratic recession calls for a humble approach to democratic theory, one that takes ordinary expressions of concern for democracy seriously. It is likely that studying what we are worried about losing will draw out some of the reasons why democracy is desirable in the first place.

As we have seen, in recent decades the democratic theory conversation has focused almost exclusively on positive justifications. Perhaps coincidentally, popular support for democracy has declined precipitously during the same period. We learn that democratic citizens have “become more cynical about the value of democracy as a political system,

FIGURE 1—“ESSENTIAL” TO LIVE IN A COUNTRY THAT IS GOVERNED DEMOCRATICALLY, BY AGE COHORT (DECADE OF BIRTH)



Source: World Values Surveys, Waves 5 and 6 (2005–14). Data pooled from EU member states. Valid responses: United States, 3,398; European Union, 25,789. Bootstrap 95 percent confidence intervals are shown in gray.

Figure 4: How essential is living in a democracy? (Foa and Mounk 2016:7).

less hopeful that anything they do might influence public policy, and more willing to express support for authoritarian alternatives” (Foa and Mounk 2016). At first glance, it is surprising that this decline in support for “democracy” should be conjoined with widespread diffusion of the idea of popular sovereignty. However, these developments may be connected. We can readily imagine that as the norm of popular sovereignty became more widely and deeply accepted, the variety of elite or technocratic control that has arguably prevailed for a century in many advanced industrial countries began to seem decreasingly acceptable as an expression or instantiation of democracy. It may be a mistake to interpret declining support for a form of governance revolving around elite electoral competition as a decline in support for self-government by citizens.

As a result, the “crisis of democratic legitimacy” may be in part the result of unfulfilled expectations. For example, the political theorist H el ene Landemore writes: “The crisis of democracy could be...a case of frustrated, perhaps even rising, democratic ex-

pectations coming to terms with the limitations of an existing paradigm” (2020:xii). But the way that we frame our justifications may affect the type of expectations we hold. For example, if we take democracy to be a political system that will implement equality, however defined, we will be justified in interpreting the persistence of inequality as a failure of democracy. By contrast, if we take democracy to be a prophylactic measure against severe political diseases like despotism, elitism and populism, we are more likely to be sanguine if our expectations concerning equality are sometimes disappointed. The most useful understanding of democracy probably lies between these extremes.

Taking a negative approach leads us to invert positive democratic theory’s image of the democratic citizen. Rather than stipulating perfection (perfect motivation, perfect compliance, etc.), I will ask what the value of democracy might be if we idealize imperfection, and imagine democratic citizens as more self-centered, less informed, and more riven by strife than they in fact are (compare Landa and Pevnick 2020a, 2020b). We surely want our justifications to be robust to some deterioration in motivations or compliance, at least those that have some non-trivial probability of occurring. Positive theorists have inadvertently heightened non-democracy’s appeal because the conceptual frame they employ highlights the features of democracy that fall short of a normative ideal. This choice has almost certainly influenced popular understandings of the desirability of democracy. Consider the noted astronomer Martin Rees, who writes: “Only an enlightened despot could push through the measures needed to navigate the 21st century safely...[t]he despot would willingly pay a higher insurance premium to guard against future catastrophes; he or she would generate a vast “sovereign wealth fund” to finance infrastructure and research and development at low interest rates... (Rees 2014).” Rees is intimately familiar with democracy’s failure to achieve its ideals, and

is imagining an authoritarian alternative that might more fully achieve them. Notice, however, that Rees applies standard idealizing assumptions used in positive democratic theory to the motivations and competence of the despot. This choice would seem to spoil the comparison, because Rees is comparing actual democracies to normatively idealized non-democracies. By contrast, I will preserve the comparison by making realistic assumptions about the undesirable aspects of citizen behavior across regime type, and then imagining these undesirable aspects being more completely or fully fulfilled.

In addition, the negative approach is well-suited to the present geopolitical situation. For the first time since 1989, multiple advanced industrial states are being governed in non-democratic ways. The attachment of older generations of democratic citizens to imperfect democracy is unsurprising, as they were intimately familiar with the alternative (and, they might say, inferior) ways that an advanced industrial state might be governed. This possibility space was gradually foreclosed during the second half of the twentieth century, principally through the so-called “liberal international order” founded by the United States in 1945-47, which exerted strong selection effects on the international system leading to a winnowing of alternative regime types (Ikenberry 2001). While the absence of plausible alternatives has played a causal role in democratic consolidation, leading democracy to eventually be considered “the only game in town” (Linz and Stepan 1996), it has also deprived younger generations of firsthand knowledge of the consequences of alternative political arrangements. Plausible alternatives to democracy have now reappeared. The democracy that the generations of the mid-20th century prized as a vastly preferable alternative to the authoritarian wave of the 1930s and 40s is much the same as the democracy that a quarter of American youths now consider to be a “bad” way of running the country (Foa and Mounk 2016); it is the comparison set that has changed. Justifying democracy on the basis of pre-

venting bad alternatives may have seemed irrelevant or orthogonal in the triumphalist closing decades of the twentieth century, and justifications turned naturally to how we might more fully achieve democracy's positive promise. Now that plausible alternatives to democracy have, for better or worse, returned to international prominence, it may prove useful to consider why a democracy that does not (or perhaps cannot) deliver on its positive promises might nevertheless deserve our devotion.

Finally, the negative approach can be a corrective to a tendency to equivocate between democratic and non-democratic regimes. The theologian Reinhold Niebuhr noted the surprising blindness of the political theorists of his era to the substantial differences between Germany and the United States, and the tendency of these theorists to equivocate between them. He argued that "modern liberal perfectionism" had a tendency to "distill moral perversity out of moral absolutes," in the sense that it was "unable to make significant distinctions between tyranny and freedom" and could "find no democracy pure enough to deserve its devotion" (Niebuhr 1940, x). Compare the political theorist Hélène Landemore, who writes that the United States is "blatantly failing to measure up to the idea of a regime that includes all equally in policy decisions" (2020:30). Prior theorists have shown what an ideal democracy might look like, and how ours has fallen short. By contrast, I seek to show what the varieties of ideal non-democracy might look like, and in so doing, to help us understand the role that fear of these ideal types plays in sustaining democratic aspirations.

Methodology

In this section, I explain how I plan to identify expressions of anxiety about democracy, and how the ensuing analysis will proceed. A crucial first step is to distinguish democratic anxieties from other forms of political anxiety. Because there exists a well-

documented tendency to assimilate to the concept of democracy all sorts of other desirable features of modern life (Przeworski et al. 2000), we should ask at the outset how to differentiate core features of democracy from peripheral or orthogonal concerns. The profligate use of the term “democracy” should make us wary that at least some of these expressions are spurious or contentious. A concern here is that because democracy is arguably an “essentially contested concept” (Gallie 1956), differentiation between core and peripheral features will be a matter of ongoing debate. This project does not require me to take a position on whether democracy is indeed an essentially contested concept, and I will proceed by simply noting correspondences between expressions of anxiety and existing models of democracy, rather than attempting to adjudicate among them.

To qualify as an explicitly democratic anxiety, an expression E should implicate or refer to some theory or model of democracy. We want to know whether the “democracy” implicated by the expression of anxiety is actually democratic. To be sure, the connections to a prior understanding of democracy will often be inchoate or muddled, but the concern expressed in E will be some form of the following: “We should worry about phenomenon X , because if X is left unaddressed, our democracy is/will be impaired in some way.” Notice that such expressions of anxiety will often conflict with one another, and in some cases will be mutually exclusive, as in the example given above. Nevertheless, conflicting expressions may still both count as expressions of specifically democratic anxiety, as long as they relate to distinct models of democracy that are themselves in tension. For example, both the claim that the people do not participate sufficiently in politics and the claim that the people participate excessively in politics can be related to models of democracy (in the second case, a Schumpeterian model of democracy as elite electoral competition) and can therefore be situated as demo-

cratic anxieties. However, this conceptual breadth is not unlimited. The claim that a democracy is deficient because it fails to enrich an elite, for example, is orthogonal even to Schumpeterian models. Expressions of anxiety related to democracy's tendency to undermine cultural particularism similarly find little support in democratic theory.

Once I have identified a set of democratic anxieties, I will attempt to identify the dimensions of variation along which the movement triggering the anxiety is expected to occur. The important observation that this project takes as its starting point is the possibility for departures from democracy to occur along multiple, theoretically-distinct dimensions. We should expect to see worries about a variety of retrogressions (“backsliding”), and the dimension(s) on which a particular retrogression occurs will indicate the type of backsliding going on, as well as the type of non-democratic regime that we should expect to result.¹¹ Retrogressions will take the form of a relaxation of one or more of the constraints imposed by democracy, constraints that prevent some particular undesirable state of affairs from arising. These constraints need not have been explicitly introduced as prophylactic measures against that particular democratic “bad,” but they do need to have the practical effect of making that undesirable future less likely to eventuate.

This process will yield a set of the undesirable futures that democracy serves to

¹¹A plausible objection here is that backsliding along the various dimensions I identify may in practice occur together, undermining the case for disambiguating them. While this is undoubtedly true in many cases, we will still wish to talk clearly about our observations. It is likely that different regimes will feature different balances of democratic retrogression on the several dimensions I identify, and that these distinctions will have implications for regime behavior. In addition, the measures required to mitigate the various democratic “bads” are not necessarily the same, and we might wish to sequence these measures in different ways depending on the particular mix of “bads” occurring in the society in question. The existence of distinct dimensions seems to matter, even if movement along them is in practice highly correlated. Notice that in order to formulate hypotheses about the causal sequence involved in observed cases of backsliding, we will require distinct concepts for the dimensions at issue. Finally, the definitions of democracy developed by empirical scholars also typically include multiple components, each of which makes an independent contribution to the underlying concept “democracy” (e.g. Boix et al. 2013, Geddes et al. 2014, but see minimalist conceptions of democracy such as Przeworski et al. 2000).

prevent, as well as a corresponding set of democratic constraints by which this is accomplished. I expect it to yield a picture of democracy as featuring some set of negative commitments, in the sense of undesirable states of affairs that democracy is serving to prevent. Properly theorizing democracy's negative commitments will require identifying the core features of each of these dimensions, and will require identifying the democratic constraints particular to each of them. In addition, it will be necessary to theorize the poles of each dimension, and to identify and enumerate the constraints that are added or removed as we move towards each pole. Finally, I will develop models of the non-democratic regimes that might result if a democratic society were to move all the way to the endpoint of the particular dimension in question. Although most of this work will occur in the completed dissertation, I will offer some early thoughts on democracy's commitment to prevent elitism, as a demonstration of the analysis I plan to undertake.

However, it will first be necessary to explain how I plan to model the non-democratic societies at the end points of the dimensions of variation uncovered by expressions of democratic anxiety. I suggest that Weberian ideal types are the most suitable way of exploring these endpoints, but this choice requires justification.

Why Ideal Types Are Needed

I propose to understand expressions of democratic anxiety by appealing to Weberian ideal types.¹² This requires justification. To study democracy, political scientists focus on existing regimes. Scholars who study politics aspire to say something about the existing political world, and a principal way to do this is to study the set of regimes that

¹²Ideal in the sense of fully realizing the attribute under consideration, not in the sense of achieving a normative goal or objective.

exist and have existed in the past. Ultimately, we do not simply wish to accumulate facts about these regimes, though this is of course desirable. We want in some sense to analyze or assess the regimes in question. This need not take the form of a strictly normative evaluation – we need not ask whether a particular regime is “good,” for example – but we may wish to know whether one regime exhibits a particular characteristic “more” or “less” than another.

In contrast to political scientists’ focus on existing regimes, political theorists have tended to focus on the development of normative ideals, often making use of hypothetical or imagined regimes featuring a degree of idealization with respect to circumstances, motivation or compliance (Valentini 2012). It is thought that this idealization will prove useful because it will allow us, through abstraction, to grasp the principles at issue in sharper relief than is possible through examination of actually-existing regimes, though some theorists have expressed concerns about using models so “detached from reality” to guide our political action (ibid:654).¹³

Returning briefly to Hobbes, we can usefully ask what role the state of nature plays in his argument. There is some question in the literature whether Hobbes intends the state of nature to be a live possibility, or whether it is meant to be a thought experiment making vivid the consequences of even incremental movement towards it (Dyzenhaus and Poole 2012). When Hobbes takes up an objection regarding whether the state of nature has ever existed (I.xiii, 11), he writes, “I believe it was never generally so, all over the world,” but proceeds to give examples (primitive societies, international relations, civil war) that show the *partial* realization of the state of nature. The example of civil war in particular draws out Hobbes’ view that the fully-specified state of nature is useful because it indicates the ultimate destination of a trend towards the diminishment of

¹³Other theorists have criticized ideal theories from the other direction, arguing that many such theories are excessively contaminated with facts (e.g. Cohen 2003).

“common power” apparent during civil war: “Howsoever, it may be perceived what manner of life there would be where there were no common power to fear, by the manner of life which men that have formerly lived under a peaceful government use to degenerate into, in a civil war” (I.xiii, 11). The implication here seems to be that the state of nature is an ideal type, and that although its full realization is difficult or impossible to imagine, it nevertheless anchors our intuitions about what movement in its direction involves. In a sense, we might say that the ideal draws out or makes vivid certain needs we have (like that for coordination on a common power) that our historical reality has obscured (because it has always featured a common power).¹⁴ The ideal type is a conceptual device for making sense of movement along some particular dimension, which in Hobbes’ case is the degree of political order.

The use of ideal types in conceptual analysis allows us to isolate and magnify the attributes of interest, which in this project are those attributes motivating expressions of democratic anxiety. These attributes are of interest precisely because they help us understand actually-existing regimes. The bundling of attributes inherent in actual regimes can impede analysis by focusing our attention on conceptually irrelevant factors. By appealing to ideal types, we can clarify which aspects of these regimes are driving our intuitions about the case in question. These ideal types will ultimately be stylized, hypothetical scenarios that serve to anchor our intuitions about some particular negative commitment (anti- x) under consideration. This will allow me to draw out implications of each negative commitment that are obscured in actually-existing regimes.¹⁵ Appealing to ideal types in this way will help clarify the often-imprecise expressions of anxiety about democracy by differentiating dimensions of variation that

¹⁴I thank David Wiens for helping me clarify this point.

¹⁵Consider, by way of analogy, the case of tragic drama. Tragedy helps us understand reality, and is often more useful to this end than actual accounts of reality, because tragedy strips away the extraneous features of particular situations, revealing a pattern or form that, though penetrated by innumerable variations, is nevertheless recognizable and useful as a guide to reality.

are often blurred in actual cases. For example, we can imagine an expression of anxiety that is ostensibly about elitism but that actually conflates worries about elitism and despotism. This might lead the speaker to advocate measures that they take to be a counterweight to elitism that are in fact counterweights to despotism.¹⁶ By appealing to qualitatively different ideal-type non-democratic societies, we can differentiate elements that are blended in discussion of actual cases.

Because actually-existing societies inevitably comprise collections or bundles of attributes, such extant examples are sometimes inefficient for the type of conceptual analysis that this project requires. This is because the range of examples that we observe in the real world does not exhibit the full range of conceptual variation possible at a theoretical level. It is often objected that we need not concern ourselves with imaginary or notional regimes, since ultimately our concern is to more fully understand variation in actual regimes. However, we do wish to make claims of the following type: regime *A* is *more* (or *less*) democratic than regime *B*. We might mean two things by such a claim: either that regime *A* resembles the most democratic regime of which we are aware more (or less) than does regime *B*, or that regime *A* bears a closer (lesser) resemblance to an ideal-type democracy than does regime *B*. If we accept the first meaning of the claim, the endpoints that we theorize will be actually-existing regimes. For these reasons, taking actual regimes as the conceptual limit of a complex process like democratization seems unjustified, because this choice yields absurdities when compounded over time.

An example from the measurement literature will clarify what I have in mind. Polity IV, which takes actual regimes as the endpoints of its measurement scale, records that the United States was more democratic in 1830 than in 1968 (Marshall et al. 2017). Recall that in 1830, approximately one in five members of the American *demos* was owned by another American, and at least two in the remaining four (women) were not

¹⁶The example was suggested by David Wiens.

permitted to vote. Although it is possible to tell a convincing story about the relationship of the United States to the most-democratic state in the system (itself in 1830, another state in 1968), the choice to use actual regimes as endpoints preserves the possibility of intratemporal comparison only by compromising intertemporal comparison, both within a single state and across multiple states. Put another way, if the most-democratic state in a system were to take substantial steps to deepen its democracy, a scale whose endpoints are actual regimes would register no change.¹⁷ The absurdities generated by this approach make it clear that treating the actual set as the possibility space is a substantial impediment to analysis, particularly where intertemporal comparison is involved.

Do we have good reasons to prefer a conceptual axis whose endpoints are given by resemblance to an ideal type? What, if anything, must be sacrificed to remedy the problem identified above with the use of actual regimes as endpoints? One might object that if our conceptual analysis abandons actual regimes as its endpoints, the resulting analysis will be less applicable to the real world than it might have been. It is clear that if we use ideal types in our conceptual analysis, our conceptual endpoints may have no real-world referents. It is less clear that this is a sacrifice, or that it compromises applicability to the real world. In fact, ideal-type endpoints may be in some sense beneficial, because they permit the kind of clarification and disambiguation just discussed. Recall also that the range of examples we observe in the real world seldom exhibits the full degree of conceptual variation possible at a theoretical level. If we wish to make comparative claims, ordinality is more effectively preserved across cases by comparing both comparands to an ideal type rather than directly to one another.¹⁸

¹⁷For example, Polity IV assigns the slaveholding United States a perfect score in 1849, but by 1865, despite the thirteenth, fourteenth and fifteenth amendments to the US constitution and the physical occupation of the country's slaveholding regions by a national government committed to reform, the assigned score drops from a 10 to a 7 (Marshall et al. 2017).

¹⁸It may be the case that the ideal types revealed by the negative approach are not quite so

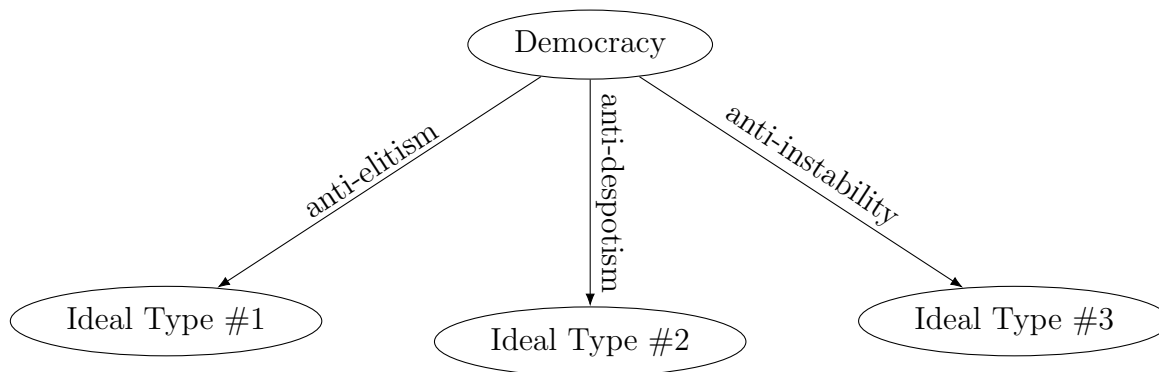


Figure 5: Retrogression from democracy along three distinct dimensions, leading to distinct non-democratic ideal-typical end states.

It seems that we may have good reasons not to define our conceptual endpoints in terms of what we actually observe, but rather in terms of what we can call a conceptual limit point: the point at which we can no longer imagine the characteristic in question being more fully or completely realized. When we consider expressions of democratic anxiety, it seems likely the relevant conceptual endpoints will be notional or ideal. For example, commentators have worried about rising elitism in the United States. For the reasons given above, it makes more sense to understand these worries in terms of what a society that fully embraced elitism might look like, rather than in terms of the most elite society actually available to us for comparative purposes. Proceeding in this way will require me to theorize the features of an ideal-type elite society, but one shorn of the other non-democratic “bads” that are also the object of democratic anxieties (Figure 5). This would be to imagine a society that retains all of democracy’s negative commitments except one: the commitment to prevent elite capture.

I expect to find that there is at least some tension between the negative commitments

unattainable as the positive ideal type of democracy. Because history (regrettably) seems to provide us with more information on dystopia than on utopia, it may be easier to make credible arguments about the pathway(s) from democracy to ideal non-democracy than from democracy to ideal democracy (I thank Sean Ingham for suggesting this possibility). The pathways with which we are familiar from actual historical experience may give us additional reasons to value the actual features of existing, imperfect democracies.

(anti- x) that characterize democracy. More concretely, I expect to find not only that the negative commitments come apart (in the sense that democracy's capacity to prevent, say, elitism, doesn't imply a capacity to prevent despotism), but, more strikingly, that fuller achievement of one particular negative commitment may compromise achievement of others (enhancing democracy's capacity to prevent, say, elitism might actually reduce or compromise its capacity to prevent despotism). The complete achievement of any one of these negative commitments may be in conflict with full achievement of the others. If our commitments to prevent various democratic "bads" from transpiring do in fact conflict with one another, it may be the case that fully achieving any one of them would preclude characterizing the resulting political system as a democracy. In that case, what we call democracy could, in fact, be a compromise among antipathies, vitiated by the exclusive pursuit of any one of them.¹⁹

As we have seen, political scientists tend to focus on existing regimes, whereas political theorists tend to focus on idealizations.²⁰ I wish to situate my project between these approaches. Ideal-typical models make vivid certain aspects of the actual cases we observe. Fundamentally, it is the threat posed by live possibilities that makes us nervous. But for the reasons explained above, the actual cases do not provide us with conceptual clarity. Ideal types help us clarify our thinking about what we find threatening about the actual cases. Many expressions of democratic anxiety are stated in terms of some actual regime, though often not the regime within which the anxiety is expressed. For example, the journalist Zack Beauchamp writes: "This is the lesson the Hungarian experience offers for the United States. A political party that was once dedicated to democracy can, over time, become so preoccupied with holding power that it no longer cares enough about the substance of democracy to play by the rules"

¹⁹Compare Plato, *Phaedo* 93a ff; see also Munck 2009:127-130.

²⁰Both of these statements are crass generalizations that are only accurate as a first approximation. My argument requires no more than this.

(Beauchamp 2018). Beauchamp is anxious about the prospects for continued democracy in the United States, and expresses this anxiety through a comparison with Hungary, an authoritarian state. This approach is typical.²¹ I seek to take these worries seriously, which will involve a focus on actual regimes. However, as I demonstrated above, making sense of these expressions and drawing out their implications will require me to theorize these worries and corresponding negative commitments in terms of their conceptual limit points. Taken in tandem, these observations point the way towards a methodology for this project. A focus on the “bads” that democracy prevents requires close attention to actual regimes, but developing a theory of democracy as the intersection of these negative commitments will require theorizing them in terms of ideal-type conceptual endpoints.

Proof-of-concept: Anti-Elitism

In this section, I will begin to develop one of the negative commitments that I discussed in general terms above. Expressions of democratic anxiety tend to fall into two broad categories. While some observers are more worried about the the distribution of political power and material benefits, others focus on the potential for unwarranted interference by the state in citizens’ lives. Call the first of these worries about distribution, and the second worries about domination.²² Notice that the worries come apart, in the sense that we can imagine situations where citizens are dominated by a gov-

²¹There is at least one additional type of democratic anxiety focused on comparisons of the state about which the anxiety is expressed with some ideal-type dystopia, often fictional. While less common, such expressions tend to more clearly identify the dimension of variation at issue.

²²My classification of these anxieties tracks a distinction that has been made by political theorists. Consider Locke’s distinction between despotism and tyranny. While Locke took despotism to be the holding of absolute power over another (Locke 1689 §172), he understood tyranny as the exercise of power beyond right (*ibid* §199). These concepts, while related, emphasize distinct aspects of powerlessness.

ernment despite possessing formal political powers, as well as situations where citizens possess no formal powers but are nevertheless not dominated. This section will focus on distributional anxieties. Expressions of distributional anxiety often focus on the outsized role some group is playing in the democratic process, either holding that this group captures a disproportionate share of benefits or that it unwarrantedly monopolizes political decisionmaking.

Worries about the role of a disproportionately favored group can be usefully characterized as worries about elitism, specifically about the proper role of elites in democratic politics. We can understand an elite in several distinct ways. While elites are typically said to display superiority along some particular dimension, the term is often used in a contentious way (“the elites don’t know anything”) implying that the speaker (1) acknowledges that the people described are thought to be superior in some sense, but (2) disputes the characterization. Two possibilities present themselves here: the elite may indeed display superiority along some relevant dimension (competence, say), or their elite status may simply be an accident of birth or status. Actual elites will comprise some blend of these types. Call the first type the *aristoi*, and the second type the *wellborn*.²³

We can further distinguish elite populations according to whether or not they admit new members. Call an elite open to new members a *permeable* elite, and one closed to

²³I use the plural *aristoi* in its etymological sense. Compare the usage employed by Vilfredo Pareto in his theory of the circulation of elites, set out in Volume II of *Cours d’Economie Politique* (1916). “We might call the theory *aristocratic*, understanding this word in its etymological sense of ἀριστος, the best. It rests on an indisputable fact: human beings are not equal, intellectually, physically or morally...It is, moreover, difficult to understand the sense in which many authors use the term “aristocracy”. Sometimes they seem to give it the usual meaning, which is to say of a community occupying the top of the social hierarchy; sometimes, when we make them see that such people can lie, intellectually and morally, below the group average, our authors complain and say that under the heading of aristocracy we should also encompass the [merely] wellborn” (Pareto 1916 §667, §1001; my translation). Confusingly, Pareto uses the terms *aristoi* and *aristocratie* while writing in French, as here, but when writing in Italian he uses the expression *classe eletta*, which we might translate as “the elect” or “the selected class.” Pareto also provides the French gloss *élite* [chosen/selected], but, for some reason, only when writing in Italian.

new members an *impermeable* elite. Because the individual interests of elite members lead them to erect barriers to entry, there is a long-term tendency for permeable elites to transmute themselves into impermeable elites.²⁴ In addition, we can introduce a further distinction between *political* and *non-political elites*, labelling as political elites those whose dimensions of competence (whether actual or assumed) involve or influence political decisions, and as non-political those elites whose competence does not influence political decisions, but whose elite status enables them to realize a disproportionate share of the gains from social cooperation. Because the formation of a political elite has direct implications for continued democracy, this discussion will focus on political elites.²⁵

I take as axiomatic the tendency of all societies to generate a political elite (Pareto 1935, Bourdieu 1979). Democratic societies are often uncomfortable with the existence of an elite of any kind, because its very existence seems to contradict basic democratic commitments to political and social equality. However, because the electoral mechanism necessarily selects for attributes that are not widely shared (Manin 1997), representative democracy has a tendency to empower those citizens who are distinct along some particular dimension, which is to say that it has a tendency to create political elites. It is therefore difficult to assert that a representative democracy ought not to feature a political elite. Instead, it has often been asserted that representative democracy requires the elite, and particularly the political elite, to be permeable. This is often thought to be best achieved through meritocracy, the notion that membership in the elite should be based on talent, effort or achievement.²⁶ Consequently, many

²⁴A salient example of such a transformation is the Venetian *serrata del maggior consiglio* in 1297 (Norwich 1982).

²⁵This is not to say that the development of an impermeable non-political elite has no implications for democracy. There is clearly a deep relationship between non-political elites and political elites, particularly in democracies where an ostensibly non-political elite can deploy its wealth to promote its political preferences. In the dissertation, I will take up both types of elite.

²⁶The definition is Michael Young's (1958), though I am for the moment suppressing the negative

expressions of democratic anxiety focus their attention on the operation (or not) of meritocracy.

Many observers claim that the impaired operation of meritocracy imperils democracy. The thought is that while meritocracy “done right” might conduce to the emergence of aristoi, meritocracy as practiced in existing democracies simply creates a class of wellborn with a disproportionate and unjustifiable claim on resources and political decisions. In short, “meritocracy no longer operates as promised” (Markovits 2019). The thought is that meritocracy as actually practiced has produced a hypereducated, superordinate working class, which has redirected innovation towards technologies that use elite labor at the expense of technologies that use non-elite labor, in ways that benefit elites at the expense of non-elites. The tendency of meritocracy to lead to political and economic inequality is taken by many observers to undermine its positive contributions. For example, some think that “[h]istorically high inequality in the United States not only gives some people a far louder voice than others in our political conversation, it also keeps some people from participating in democratic processes at all” (American Academy of Arts and Sciences 2019). This downside is taken to outweigh the efficiency gains of access to elite talent.

It is difficult to characterize an elite that is permeable on its face, but where existing elites have used the resources and influence accruing to their elite status to co-opt the selection mechanism, rendering the elite impermeable in practice. We can imagine two cases. In the first, there is a tight relationship between the selection criteria and the skills required for a political elite to discharge its duties. In such a situation, efforts by the elite to co-opt the selection mechanism would have the inadvertent result of

connotations that Young intended his neologism to convey. Note that we can imagine other ways that an elite could be permeable. For example, members of the elite could be chosen by a random draw from the whole population. However, under widespread conditions of popular sovereignty, merit is one of the only legitimate bases on which to organize an elite (in the sense of commanding widespread agreement) so I will consider it here as the main example of a permeable elite.

forming new entrants into aristoi, by a sort of happy accident. In the second case, there is little or no relationship between the skills required of a political elite and the activities through which that elite co-opts the selection mechanism, and the resulting elite is merely wellborn.²⁷ It seems fairly clear that the second case will lead to worse outcomes for the state than the first.

Not all observers who accept meritocracy as an ideal think that existing democracies are falling short. Some expressions of anxiety focus on the importance of preserving meritocracy against attacks made against it in the name of democracy. However, the dispute appears to involve a question of fact – whether or not existing meritocracies are in fact meritocratic – and there is broad agreement that *if they were*, meritocracy would be a good thing.

Although the idea of aristocracy grates on democratic sensibilities, in the modern age a true aristocracy, meaning the ascendancy of the talented, should be an aspiration. It need not mean an entrenched class insulated from the churning of competition. Indeed, it cannot mean that: In a society of careers truly open to talents, a real aristocracy will be constantly weeded and refreshed by upward – and downward – mobility driven by competition...It is a virtue of meritocracy that it produces inequality (Will 2021).

In contrast to these anxieties about an imperfect meritocracy, a properly-working meritocracy is also the target of substantial anxiety. The thought here is that the elite “is producing children who not only get ahead, but deserve to do so: they meet the standards of meritocracy better than their peers, and are thus worthy of the status they inherit” (The Economist 2015). These worries relate to the tendency I identified above for a permeable elite to erect barriers to entry. One of the most salient barriers to entry erected by modern elites is the attention paid to education. We hear that “as

²⁷We might imagine prestigious university degrees that confer few actual skills but serve as credentials for elite promotion, or more generally the acquisition of abstruse qualifications solely for their credentialing value. Compare the use of proficiency at Greek and Latin for administrative promotion in the British imperial system during the nineteenth century, or the central role of calligraphy on the Chinese civil service examinations (*keju*).

a top-notch education becomes the essential requirement for the best job, the rich can buy educational privileges for their children. Chief executives, lawyers and bankers then take their success, and that of their offspring, as clear proof of intellectual superiority” (Jucca 2021).

The feared consequences for democracy come in the form of a backlash from non-elites, who, it is said, are likely to give up on democracy if they learn that meritocracy favors elites. “The relentless rise of the intellectual elites, at the expense of the less affluent or less educated population, has had tangible consequences. The election of former U.S. President Donald Trump, Brexit and the rise of populist movements in Europe are partly a revolt of those left behind” (Jucca 2021). Some of these commentators define a political elite quite broadly, implying that anyone who benefits from meritocratic promotion is elite by definition. “The meritocratic class has mastered the old trick of consolidating wealth and passing privilege along at the expense of other people’s children. We are not innocent bystanders to the growing concentration of wealth in our time. We are the principal accomplices in a process that is slowly strangling the economy, destabilizing American politics, and eroding democracy” (Stewart 2018). The philosopher Michael Sandel takes this view²⁸, calling meritocracy a form of tyranny (Sandel 2021).²⁹

Observers who find that even properly-working meritocracy imperils democracy disagree about how the situation should be ameliorated. While there tends to be agree-

²⁸So, in some moods, does Daniel Markovits: “Merit is a sham” (Markovits 2019). Markovits fails to specify whether he is criticizing meritocracy as a concept or “meritocracy” as instantiated in existing societies, leading to considerable confusion.

²⁹To complicate matters, these positions can be appealed to insincerely, particularly by elites eager to enlist non-elite support in internecine elite rivalry. Consider the claim by Britain’s Justice Secretary Michael Gove that “the people of this country have had enough of experts” (Financial Times 2016). Antimeritocratic claims by successful meritocrats are common, and it is important yet difficult to distinguish the antimeritocratic claims made by elite scholars like Michael Sandel (Oxford), Daniel Markovits (Yale, Oxford) and Hélène Landemore (Harvard, Yale) from similar claims made by elite politicians like Josh Hawley (Stanford, Yale) and John Neely Kennedy (Oxford). All claim to oppose the meritocracy that elevated them to their present status, and it is difficult to evaluate their sincerity.

ment that “meritocracy as a system is unfixable, because it by definition creates those who not only lose out but feel that it’s their fault” (Jucca 2021), some commentators think that ameliorating this problem will require addressing the elite tendency to erect barriers to entry. This is presented as a necessary measure to keep non-elites from losing faith in democracy. “Loosening the link between birth and success would make America richer...[and] might also make the nation more cohesive. If Americans suspect that the game is rigged, they may be tempted to vote for demagogues of the right or left (The Economist 2015). Other observers think more drastic action is called for, because non-elites cannot be counted on to oppose a system that is facially neutral and in principle offers their children a chance at elite status: “a new aristocracy is doing what aristocracies do – passing on their privileges to their children – but under a meritocratic and educational guise that makes it harder for the have-nots to bemoan their lot” (Jucca 2021). These observers tend to focus on families who have been able to maintain elite status over many generations, arguing that such families have deployed their wealth to maintain their status rather than investing it in the society’s prosperity. Such rent-seeking behavior is argued to vitiate the social contract, and the remedy sought is typically some form of eye-watering taxation.

In healthy, equitable democratic societies, great fortunes dissipate over a few generations as initial wealth holders have children and grandchildren, pay their fair share of taxes, and make charitable gifts. But our country’s wealth is accumulating in fewer hands, including among people who may be up to seven generations removed from the original source...At a certain stage, some of these wealth holders — or their descendants — shift resources to consolidate their wealth, fend off competition, and create monopolies...they focus less on creating new wealth and more on preserving existing systems that extract ongoing rents from consumers and the real economy. America’s dynastic families, both old and new, are deploying a range of wealth preservation strategies to further concentrate wealth and power — power that is deployed to influence democratic institutions, depress civic imagination, and rig the rules to further entrench inequality.

There are several reasons we should be concerned about the formation of

inherited wealth dynasties and the larger hidden wealth-preservation system that makes them possible. These include the social and economic impacts of aggressive tax avoidance, the deepening of entrenched inequality, and the anti-democratic implications of hereditary dynasties of wealth and power. The emergence of wealth dynasties undermines how self-governing societies organize meaningful tax systems, raise revenue, and make public investments. The formation of inherited wealth dynasties also contributes to rapid growth in income and wealth inequality, fortifying oligarchic concentrations of financial and political muscle. This erodes economic opportunity and social mobility and ultimately threatens the very basis of our self-governing democracy (IPS 2021).³⁰

Other observers think that a properly-operating meritocracy will lead over time to a kind of technocratic governance that will scorn ordinary citizens as inexpert, preserving the outward forms of democracy but with technocrats exercising a gatekeeping and agenda-setting role, similar to some political theorists' conceptions of epistocracy. These concerns are particularly salient when a state faces novel or pressing challenges. For

³⁰Despite my claim that political and non-political elites are analytically separable, most instances of democratic anxiety treat them together, in the sense of attributing political consequences to the emergence of a non-political elite. For example, The Washington Post's editorial board writes: "A major reason for democratic capitalism's legitimacy crisis: the gap between this country's rich and all others grew significantly in the three decades after the fall of the Berlin Wall" (The Washington Post 2021), and another writer argues that "failure to check dynastic wealth...would pave the way for even greater billionaire dominance over politics" (Dubb 2021). This conjunction may be because, in a pluralistic society lacking consensus on status designations, there is a strong tendency for economic power to invade other spheres of value (Walzer 1983), and worries about the effects of economic inequality often subsume or displace worries about other forms of inequality. Other worries assert a direct link between economic inequality and political polarization. As one article explains, "[i]nequality undermines democratic resilience...increases political polarization, disrupts social cohesion and undermines trust in and support for democracy" (Cox 2017). Political grievances resulting from high inequality are prominent factors in many recent analyses of democratic "backsliding" (Boix 2003, Bermeo 2016, Haggard and Kaufman 2021). Some commentators advance the concern that economic inequality contributes to elitism by narrowing political participation (Lindberg 2019). Others worry about diminished influence, writing that as a result of widening inequality, "government is becoming less democratic, responsive mainly to the privileged and not a powerful instrument to correct disadvantages or to look out for the majority" (APSA 2004). This theme of elitism eroding democracy's ability to deliver results acceptable to all runs through much recent commentary (see Kurlantzick 2021). As a result of widespread economic inequality, "democracy...does not seem to be working for everyone" (Deaton 2019), and a common worry is that this will lead "citizens to give up on democratic government" (APSA 2004). Finally, the political science literature also uncovers a deep linkage between economic and political power, with some writers arguing that political inequalities necessarily accompany economic inequalities (e.g. Winters and Page 2009). For these reasons, I have taken concerns about the impact of economic inequality on the political process to be concerns about an emerging political elite, though I have treated as orthogonal concerns about the non-political impacts of economic inequality.

example, a Taiwanese democrat writes that “democracies have been transformed into technocracies during the global pandemic,” and that although such technocracies are “arguably more agile,” they fail to adequately represent the interests of all citizens (Lee 2021). The thought is that even the most well-meaning technocrats will be unable to accommodate the interests of non-elite populations because they will necessarily fail to understand them, leading non-elites to conclude that democracy fails to fulfil its promise (compare Held 2007).

Finally, some observers question the value of meritocracy *to society*, taking our focus on getting the most talented people into the right jobs as itself misplaced. While these arguments take a variety of forms, they tend to dispute the conception of merit lying at the heart of meritocracy. Proponents of this position span the ideological spectrum, employing incompatible definitions of merit but agreeing that the conception of merit articulated by proponents of meritocracy is overly narrow.

The modern meritocracy is a resentment-generating machine. But even leaving that aside, as a sorting device, it is batshit crazy. The ability to perform academic tasks during adolescence is nice to have, but organizing your society around it is absurd. That ability is not as important as the ability to work in teams; to sacrifice for the common good; to be honest, kind, and trustworthy; to be creative and self-motivated. A sensible society would reward such traits by conferring status on them. A sensible society would not celebrate the skills of a corporate consultant while slighting the skills of a home nurse (Brooks 2021).

We have, then, at least two forms of distributional worries about the role of a political elite. Some writers are worried about a form of elitism where the elite is permeable on its face but engages in a sort of tacit Venetian *serrata* that restricts genuine political power to its members, doing this by means of a credentialling arms race that may or may not lead to a high proportion of aristoi in the elite, depending on the relationship between “merit” and performance. These are at bottom worries about the tendency of permeable elites to erect barriers to entry that over time result in an impermeable

elite, which will then be free to monopolize political decisions in order to benefit itself. Call this the self-dealing case.

In contrast, others worries take the political elite to be genuinely permeable but assert that the process of elite formation leads newly-minted elites to have different interests and objectives than non-elites, and in addition that this process causes elites to emphasize their superior epistemic virtues. These features, in combination, lead political elites to insist that they can understand and cater to the interests of non-elites more fully than the non-elites themselves, thereby justifying their disproportionate political power. Fundamentally, these worries assert the impossibility of catering to non-elite needs without involving non-elites in the political process, and they express concern about allowing the elite to set the terms of debate by giving content to concepts like “merit” and “desert.” Call this the epistemological case.

Both of these anxieties can be situated within models of democracy prevalent among political theorists, specifically the model of participatory democracy that requires amelioration of inequality and the checking of unaccountable power. While it is unlikely that the democratic citizens expressing these anxieties were familiar with this model, such models are themselves attempts to make sense of our intuitions about what exactly our democracy requires for its perpetuation or reform, making the correspondence unsurprising. The barriers to entry that are the focus of worry in the self-dealing case confer unaccountable power on the elite, so a genuinely participatory democracy would seek to dismantle them. The epistemological case turns on the influence exerted by elites on the conceptual content employed by non-elites. This too is a form of unaccountable power (Lukes 1974) that a participatory democracy would find unacceptable.

Another strand of opinion, cutting across these two, holds that actual democratic government has not yet been tried, but would be an improvement on the postwar

status-quo in rich countries, which has featured electoral competition between elites rather than popular control of policy (e.g. Kahn 2017). These observers think that the “democracy” that characterizes our elections is an insufficiently full or robust expression of democracy, because it focuses on elite electoral competition at the expense of the public welfare. To the extent that this is democratic anxiety at all, it is anxiety about never having had democracy rather than losing it. The background concept of democracy invoked in these appeals includes an element of equality or fairness, though this is expressed more often in terms of equal freedoms than procedural or institutional equality (Dalton et al. 2007). Elitism is often seen as a frustration or violation of this freedom.

For a long time, economists, politicians, and philosophers alike have operated under the assumption that economic inequalities, though far from ideal, do not inhibit the process of democratic politics. Whatever the necessary components of a democracy are, they do not include equality of conditions...Democracies can exist even within societies with extreme wealth disparities. But this may only be true under a very simplistic notion of democracy. If we take democracy to be a system of collective self-government — where all citizens have the opportunity to influence politics even if some citizens have much more influence — then inequalities of conditions may not matter. But throughout the 20th century, progressive movements like the women’s and civil rights movements have put forth a more demanding ideal of democracy. On this view, democracies require citizens to not only have the ability to influence government, but to do so on equal terms (Che 2020).

A key element in these arguments is that it is structurally impossible to restrain elites from self-dealing. The thought is that democracy itself is allowing elitism to flourish, rather than, as above, that becoming less democratic will make a society more elitist. As a writer for UCSD’s student newspaper puts it, “[w]hen wealth cannot be separated from politics, wealth inequality translates to political inequality...Every person does not have an equal say in our governance when a small fraction of the citizens can shape policy through donations that the rest of the country cannot match. Which raises the

question: is equality an integral part of democracy? If it is — do we really live in a democratic republic?” (Getchell 2021). At the extreme, the mere presence of great disparities of wealth is taken to preclude the possibility of democracy at all (Savage 2021).

This brief survey is sufficient to bring to the surface the varieties of democratic anxiety relating to distributional concerns. I have argued that these concerns are best understood as concerns about the emergence or perpetuation of an elite, and the implications of that elite for democratic governance. In the next section, I will attempt to identify the specific features of democracy that work to prevent or allay concerns about elitism, and I will theorize an ideal-type elitist society in which these democratic features are absent, but which retains the remaining set of negative commitments.

Analysis

I have said that these worries about elitism are democratic anxieties, implying an associated model or theory of democracy to which the anxiety appeals. What concepts or models of democracy are implicated by these instances of anxiety? It is clear that models of democracy emphasizing elections to the exclusion of everything else (e.g. Przeworski et al. 2000) are conceptually inappropriate to treat these concerns, because these expressions of anxiety presuppose that democracy will be undermined by events that do not pertain to elections. Richer models abound, but one that seems a close fit for these arguments is the participatory model of democracy (Held 2007:215), which states that liberty and self-development are only possible through a “participatory society,” involving broad cultivation of political efficacy and a sense of ownership in all citizens. The model achieves this through, among other things, direct amelioration of inequality through redistribution and the minimization of unaccountable power centers

(compare Pateman 1970). So understood, democracy ideally constrains elitism through its commitment to effective procedural equality, whereby elite citizens are restrained from using their wealth or status to differentiate themselves from fellow citizens in political or judicial contexts (e.g. Pateman 1970, Held 2007). We can readily imagine that an elite society, whether permeable or impermeable, might struggle to achieve these goals. As the constraints imposed by procedural equality weaken, a regime will move away from ideal-type democracy along the anti-elitism axis, towards some ideal type of non-democracy yet to be defined.

What should we call a regime that has given up on political equality but retains other democratic commitments like those against domination? As we have seen, a permeable elite excludes non-elites on the basis of some qualification, often merit, while an impermeable elite excludes non-elites on the basis of accidental characteristics, such as birth. A first approximation with some plausibility is aristocracy. Historical aristocratic regimes have often been quite sensitive about non-domination (of aristocrats), despite the absence of anything resembling political equality among all citizens. We might also consider oligarchy as a label, in the sense of rule by society's richest elements in their own interest (Winters and Page 2009). It is significant that the development of democracy into oligarchy is itself the subject of a great deal of democratic anxiety (e.g. Volcker 2018, IPS 2021). However, aristocracy seems to be a more appropriate term because it brings to the surface the dispute about whether the elite are actually *aristoi* or are simply wellborn. I will provisionally call such a regime "elitist," though sharing many features with what we might call aristocracy, technocracy and oligarchy.

One way that democracy ideally prevents regression along the anti-elitism axis is through its commitment to a kind of political equality, expressed as equality before the law but also as equal access to institutions and equality of consideration by gov-

ernment. We can conceptualize political equality as an anti-aristocratic constraint on elitism, without which a democratic regime would quickly become undemocratic. This regression along the anti-elitism axis would take the form of limitations to political equality, and such limitations will lead us to characterize the society in question not as democratic but as elitist or aristocratic. Although most expressions of democratic anxiety take for granted the existence and desirability of concepts like meritocracy, it is clear that the progressive limitation of political equality would lead to the abandonment or revision of these objectives. We can readily imagine an elite becoming less permeable, perhaps at first retaining the imprimatur of permeability but eventually shedding even this in favor of the kind of embrace of inequality offered by early fascist theorists, where the inherent superiority of some is axiomatic (e.g. Gentile 1933). Another way that democracy ideally prevents elitism is its insistence that individuals are the best judges of their own good. This is an anti-technocratic mechanism, in the sense that it precludes ostensibly benevolent but actually paternalistic action on the part of elites by asserting that even the best-intentioned elites can only benefit non-elites by involving them in the decisionmaking process (Held 2007).

We can now begin to speculate about the conceptual endpoint. If preserving democracy from the threat of elitism has an anti-aristocratic and an anti-technocratic component, we can productively ask what a society would look like if one or both of these components were absent. This would be to situate a society at the non-democratic endpoint of the anti-elitism axis. Recall that such a society would be an ideal type rather than an actually-existing regime. What would a democracy fully shorn of its commitment to political equality look like? A difficulty that arises here is that we have to assume that the regime in question would retain the full set of democratic constraints except for those associated with elitism, but I have not yet specified what these other

constraints are. For the sake of the present exercise, let us assume that the regime retains its commitment to anti-despotism, which will likely involve, at a minimum, checks on the executive. I will also assume a further commitment to what I am provisionally calling “anti-anarchy,” that is, to some degree of political order, which will require, at a minimum, a near-monopoly on coercion.

Recapitulating our desiderata, we are looking for an ideal-type society without any commitment to political equality, but with strong commitments to non-domination and political order, which will require, respectively, checking the executive and monopolizing coercion. A fully aristocratic society would take action only in the interests of the elite, and a fully technocratic society would insist that its actions redounded to the public benefit in all cases. Recall that ideal types draw out points of interest to the exclusion of extraneous detail. Because works of art like novels and films also do this, it may be fruitful to look to imagined dystopias for clues to these ideal types.

Speculation at this stage will be necessarily incomplete, but the fully aristocratic society might bear strong resemblances to the society portrayed in Jack London’s *The Iron Heel* (1908). The Iron Heel is the name for an oligarchy that rules a fictionalized version of the United States. In this imagined dystopia, political power is entirely in the hands of the oligarchy, and various sections of the non-elite population (unions, soldiers) have been co-opted and induced to cooperate with the regime. The regime does not simply tell people what to do, but rather induces their cooperation through free economic competition, in the course of which the middle class is dispossessed and immiserized due to the greater resources available to the oligarchs. Most people disagree with the protagonist that this situation is exploitative, and many elements of the non-elite assert that they are in fact living in a more or less democratic society, despite the fact that the state only ever acts to benefit the elite.

The perils of technocracy seem subtler. A fully technocratic regime would likely overstate its access to objective truth, using it to shortcut the political process in just the “despotic” way anticipated by some political theorists (e.g. Arendt 1967). We can imagine a steadily-increasing paternalism, taking a form similar to the moralistic Victorian attitude towards the working poor (Orwell 1937). This would lead, in time, to a shaping of non-elite preferences by elites. A fully technocratic society might look something like Yevgeny Zamyatin’s novel *We* (1921). In this imagined dystopia, harmony prevails because elites have shaped the preferences of non-elites (with the important exception of the novel’s protagonist). The elite rule of the secret police (the Bureau of Guardians) is accomplished largely by reason, because the Guardians have gerrymandered the relevant conceptual content to lead non-elites to the right conclusions. Harmony and conformity prevail.

Taking these ideal-type non-democratic dystopias as conceptual endpoints allows us to see concerns about elitism in a new light. There exists a long-running conversation in democratic theory about the role of elites in democratic politics, and we can reconstruct this debate as occurring along the anti-elitism axis I have described here. For example, consider the Levellers, who were a political movement during the English Civil War (1642–1651) committed to popular sovereignty, religious tolerance, extended suffrage, and equality before the law. The Levellers were concerned to prevent monopolization of the benefits of government by a single class, and they thought that this was best achieved by insisting on extended suffrage. Their most prominent spokesman, Thomas Rainsborough, argued that broadly extending the franchise would effectively promote something like procedural equality.

I think that the poorest he that is in England hath a life to live, as the greatest he; and therefore truly, Sir, I think it’s clear, that every man that is to live under a government ought first by his own consent to put himself under that government; and I do think that the poorest man in England is

not bound in a strict sense to that government that he hath not had a voice to put himself under (Baker 2007).

We can situate the Levellers at the beginning of a debate that runs through Rousseau to Pareto, Mosca, Michels and Marx, and on to contemporary movements such as Occupy Wall Street. Although the debate is protean, it revolves around the extent to which a system that distributes benefits unevenly can coexist with genuine popular rule.

Finally, in addition to identifying the ideal-type non-democratic society associated with the absence of particular democratic constraints, my dissertation will also model the full achievement of each democratic constraint and discuss the tradeoffs required to achieve it, if any. As I suggested above, it may be the case that democracy's negative commitments come apart, in the strong sense that full achievement of any one of them may preclude full achievement of some or all of the others. Whether or not this is the case, we can speculate about what a society that fully achieved the goal of anti-elitism might look like. To fix ideas, recall that this would be a society in which a strong commitment to effective procedural equality motivated the disruption of independent power centers and prevented citizens from distinguishing themselves from one another in political or judicial contexts. What would a society that fully achieved this goal look like? We must admit that attempts at distinction are a difficult thing to repress, and that by blocking distinctions in some areas we will simply drive the action to other areas (Bourdieu 1979). Fully preventing citizens from distinguishing themselves in political or judicial contexts may require, *pace* Walzer (1983), preventing them from distinguishing themselves in any circumstances at all. We are, once again, driven to fiction for comparable societies. Consider Kurt Vonnegut's short story "Harrison Bergeron" (1961). Set in 2081, the story supposes that amendments to the US Constitution require full equality, such that Americans "are fully equal and not allowed to be smarter, better-looking, or more physically able than anyone else." The "Handicapper General"'s agents enforce

the equality laws, forcing citizens to wear “handicaps”: masks for the beautiful, loud radios to disrupt the thoughts of the intelligent, and heavy weights for the strong or athletic (Wikipedia, “Harrison Bergeron”).³¹ This seems like a society that has gone to the greatest imaginable lengths to prevent elitism. But in doing so, we see that it has had to compromise some of the other negative commitments that characterize democracy, in particular democracy’s commitment to prevent despotic rule. This conflict is an indication that there may be some incompatibility between the negative commitments such that the full achievement of all of them simultaneously is logically impossible.

Conclusion

The project that I am proposing departs from the positive justifications of democracy that have been common during the last several decades. However, it connects with an older tradition in political theory, one less concerned with what democracy will provide than with what it will prevent. The political catastrophes of the first half of the twentieth century led some political theorists to situate preventing their recurrence as a central goal of politics. Judith Shklar’s essay “The Liberalism of Fear” (1989) exemplifies this approach.³² Shklar argues that because systematic cruelty and fear make freedom impossible, liberalism ought to be principally concerned with preventing them (29). Shklar thinks that democracy’s role in sustaining liberalism involves empowering the broadest possible range of social actors (individuals and voluntary associations). Interestingly, although this empowerment may redound to individual benefit, any such benefit is merely epiphenomenal.

³¹Consider also the short story “The New Utopia” (1891) by the American author Jerome K. Jerome, in which the attractive or athletic have limbs forcibly amputated in the name of equality.

³²For Shklar, a liberal society is “also of necessity a democratic one” because only democracies provide sufficient equality of power to protect and assert rights, without which “freedom is but a hope” (Shklar 1989:37).

The importance of voluntary associations...is not the satisfaction that their members may derive from joining...but their ability to become significant units of social power and influence that can check, or at least alter, the assertions of other organized agents, both voluntary and governmental (30).

Similarly, although the liberalism of fear endorses systems of private property, this is done not because private property is intrinsically desirable or necessary for human flourishing, but rather “precisely because this is an indispensable and excellent way of limiting the long arm of government and of dividing social power” (31). Few contemporary theorists think this way. We are, understandably, preoccupied with the worthwhile goal of promoting human flourishing. As I have suggested, political theorists’ articulation of democracy’s positive achievements, though salutary, have created expectations that necessarily remain unmet. Because political theorists are not historians, we may be less attentive to the states of affairs that even an imperfect democracy prevents from eventuating.³³ Such events have not occurred in advanced industrial states within the lifetime of most political theorists, largely because many of us have been fortunate enough to live in imperfect democracies. These factors combine to obscure the perils that lie in wait for a state that weakens its democracy, and they promote equivocation between imperfect democracy and other types of regime. This is a mistake. Our justifiable focus on what democracy ideally provides has weakened our appreciation of what it actually prevents, making our current democratic moment seem unique and beyond history. For these reasons, I think the dissertation that I have described in these pages will be particularly timely.

³³It is worth noting the empirical point that in most contexts where democracy was adopted, it seems to have been adopted for negative, preventive reasons, rather than for the kinds of positive reasons articulated by many political theorists. To argue from this history would be to commit the so-called “genetic fallacy,” but recent work (Queloz 2017, Srinivasan 2019) indicates that genealogical arguments may have more promise than we might suppose.

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Appendix A

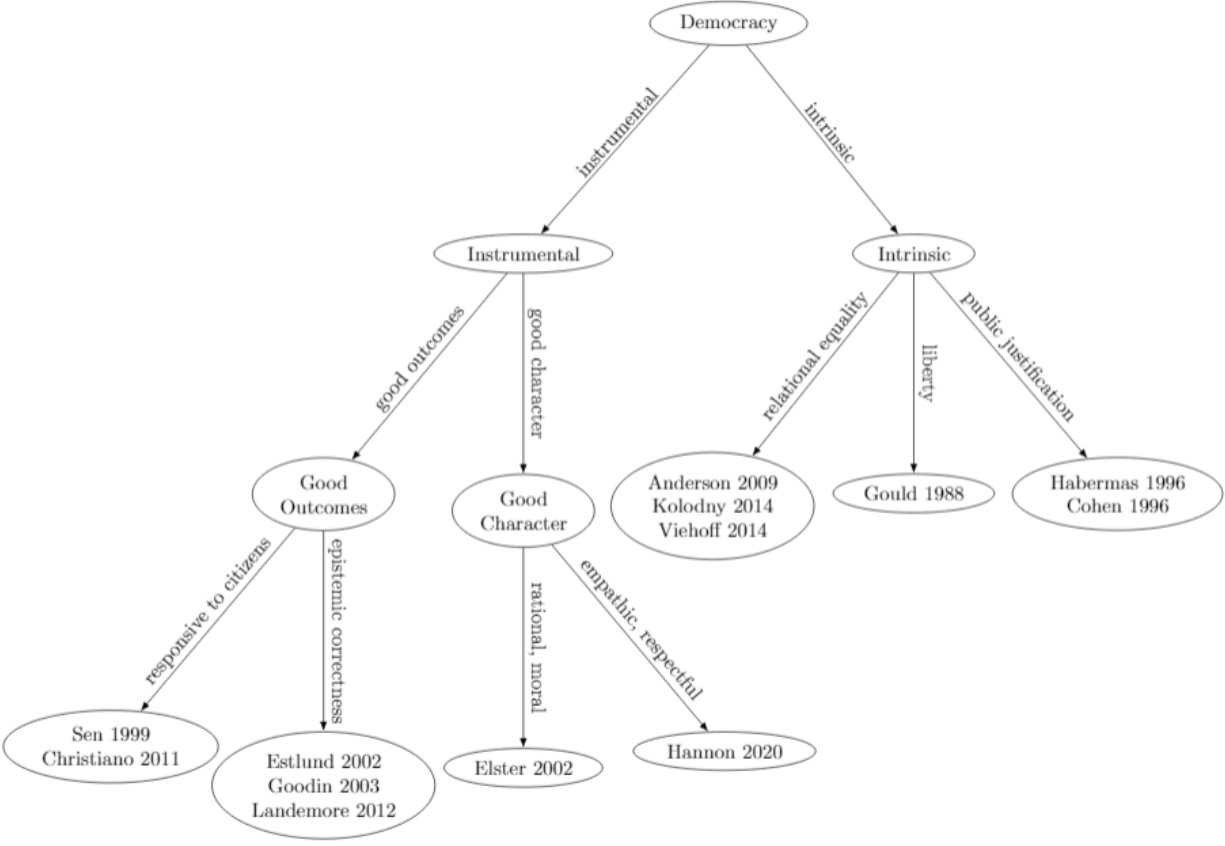


Figure 6: Instrumental and intrinsic arguments for democracy