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978-0-521-14011-9 - Democracy and the Limits of Self-Government

Adam Przeworski

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Democracy and the Limits of Self-Government

The political institutions under which we live today evolved from a revolutionary idea that shook the world in the second part of the eighteenth century: that a people should govern itself. Nevertheless, if we judge contemporary democracies by the ideals of self-government, equality, and liberty, we find that democracy is not what it was dreamt to be. This book addresses central issues in democratic theory by analyzing the sources of widespread dissatisfaction with democracies around the world. With attention throughout to historical and cross-national variations, the focus is on the generic limits of democracy in promoting equality, effective participation, control of governments by citizens, and liberty. The conclusion is that, although some of this dissatisfaction occurs for good reason, some is based on an erroneous understanding of how democracy functions. Hence, although the analysis identifies the limits of democracy, it also points to directions for feasible reforms.

Adam Przeworski is the Carroll and Milton Petrie Professor of Politics at New York University. Previously, he was the Martin A. Ryerson Distinguished Service Professor at the University of Chicago. He is the author of thirteen books and numerous articles. His recent publications include *Democracy and Development*, co-authored with Michael R. Alvarez, José Antonio Cheibub, and Fernando Limongi (2000); *Democracy and the Rule of Law*, co-edited with José María Maravall (2003); and *States and Markets* (2003). He is the recipient of the 2001 Woodrow Wilson Prize and the 2010 Johan Skytte Prize.

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*To Joanne,
long overdue.*

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Preface

This book has autobiographical roots and they may help explain its motivation and its goals.

Growing up in communist Poland, I imagined democracy only dimly across a curtain, attracted mostly by the thrill of elections: parties compete, someone wins, someone loses, and even if their chances are unequal, no one knows how the game will end. It was like football, and I was passionate about football. So I read results of elections in foreign countries the same way I read scores of foreign soccer games. And, to increase the emotional stakes, I had my favorites in both: Swedish Social Democrats and Arsenal.

I was first exposed to democracy during the two years I spent in the United States between 1961 and 1963. Although the first textbook I was forced to read as a graduate student opened with the sentence “The United States has the best system of government in the world,” the experience was not inspiring. Still recovering from McCarthyism, the country was not the bastion of freedom it portrayed itself to be. I even had a personal adventure: A group of graduate students planned to picket a movie theater that would not show a sexually explicit foreign film. To organize the picket, we formed a political group, Student Association for Liberal Action. Then the leader of the group received a call from the local police chief, who met him at midnight in an underground garage and pointed out that our leader had several unpaid parking tickets, thus being liable to arrest. That was the end of liberal action. Even more than this Polish-style police repression, what I found dismaying was that both censorship and repression enjoyed the support of a majority of citizens of American

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democracy. Neither would have been true in Poland: Although communist leaders tended to be prudes, they just stuck age limits on movies and let it go at that. And even though police were omnipresent, I knew no one in Poland who thought that they were anything but a bunch of thugs. So instead of dutifully following the graduate program, I spent my time avidly swallowing Tocqueville's warnings about the tyranny of the majority and the reactions of German refugees from fascism to what they saw as "totalitarian democracy." I almost flunked out of the program, because some of my teachers thought that my readings were not "political science." Some of them defended me, so I made it through, and I returned to Poland with this image of democracy.

The experience, however, was not completely dissuasive, for I still thought that selecting rulers through elections was a good idea and, indeed, that it would make things better in my native country. There must have been someone within the communist leadership who thought the same, because in 1965 the Party suddenly decided to grant the people some voice in elections at the village level. Because communists were maniacs about keeping records, detailed results of these elections became available, and together with a colleague I analyzed them. We found that the people who were newly elected did not differ by any observable characteristics, party membership included, from those who were eliminated. Hence, we said, "Look, people were allowed to choose representatives they liked and to send away unpopular ones, and nothing else followed, nothing that could be seen as hurting communism or the Party." The article was published in the theoretical organ of the Polish United Workers (Communist) Party, *Nowe Drogi*. Two weeks later we were called in, together with our boss at the Polish Academy of Sciences, by the Party tsar in charge of ideology to his headquarters, a building that now houses the stock exchange. He must have seen through our intentions, for in his rage he called us "reformists, revisionists, Luxemburgists," and I do not remember what else. He also said "You will see," which was not a forecast about our eyesight. In the end, the sanction was that I could not travel abroad, but the Polish repressive system was not very efficient – nothing was – so that if you knew somebody who knew somebody, you could get around most political sanctions. The ban lasted about a year.¹

¹ In retrospect, I wonder why the comrade in question allowed the publication to begin with – ex officio he was the editor of the journal – and why my travel ban was relatively easily lifted. It may have been a setup; perhaps he wanted the message to become public but did not want to be associated with it, so he made a show of condemnation.

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When I returned to the United States in 1967, it was a different country. A suggestion to picket a movie theater would have been shouted down as “reformist.” The country emanated the fervor of a revolution: cultural and personal, not just political. It was one of those rare historical moments in which one felt free, perhaps because, as one of le Carré’s characters observes (in *Small Town in Germany*), “Freedom’s only real when you’re fighting for it.” One of the slogans directed against “the system” was “Power to the people,” which I found curious because I had been taught that power of the people *was* the system: This is what “democracy” means. Obviously, electoral power was not the power claimed by this slogan. Elections were about nothing: Democrats, Republicans, what’s the difference? The freedom to control one’s own life is not the kind of power that results from elections. I intensely shared this quest for freedom. I was also sympathetic to the claim that elections do not offer real choices, that as Bobbio (1989: 157) would later advise, “to pass a judgement today on the development of democracy in a given country the question must be asked, not ‘Who votes?’ but ‘On what issues can one vote?’” I did see the difference between systems in which, again in Bobbio’s language, “elites *propose* themselves and elites *impose* themselves.” But people have no power in a system ruled by elites: This is what we thought.

Power did fall into the hands of the people in a country where I arrived in 1970 – Chile. The people chanted euphorically that “*El pueblo unido jamás será vencido*,” the people united will never be defeated. However, either this inductive generalization is false or the people were far from united. President Allende was elected by a tiny plurality as the candidate of a coalition of divergent and quarrelsome forces. Stabbed in the back by a party that portrayed itself as centrist, Christian Democrats, Allende soon lost control over his own coalition, parts of which hallucinated about socialist revolution. Henry Kissinger proclaimed that Allende was elected “due to the irresponsibility of the Chilean people” – such was his understanding of democracy – and the U.S. government decided to restore responsibility by force. When the force was unleashed, on a September 11 (1973), it was ferocious.

The Chilean debacle transformed the Left. Until 1973 many people on the Left were ambivalent between the quest for their normative goals and their respect for democracy. I believe, by the way, that Allende himself was a committed democrat, whose vision of “the road to socialism” was one of gradual steps, only as large as would be supported by the popular will expressed at the polls. He was prepared to see socialist

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reforms defeated in elections and he never entertained the possibility of holding power against their result. In any case, the Chilean tragedy forced a choice, reminiscent of that faced by Social Democrats in the interwar period: Socialism or democracy first? The clearest response emerged from the debates within the Italian Communist Party and it was resolutely in favor of democracy. This response may have been originally motivated by strategic lessons from the Chilean experience; pushing the socialist program too vigorously, without sufficient popular support, would lead to tragedies. But soon the unconditional embrace of democracy found philosophical, normative, roots: With all its deficiencies, democracy is the only mechanism by which the people can implement their power and the only form of political freedom feasible in our world.

These reflections were taking place in a world in which barbarism was widespread. Brutal military governments ruled Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Greece, and Uruguay; authoritarian regimes were still killing people in Portugal and Spain; communists did the killing earlier so that intimidation was sufficient to maintain their oppressive rule. This was not the time to engage in critical reflections about democracy: Democracy was what was missing, an absence. So when a group of scholars, many of them pro-democracy activists in their countries, gathered at the Wilson Center in Washington in 1979 to analyze and strategize how this barbarism could be stopped, we thought in terms of “transition from,” from authoritarianism – that is, not “to” anything. Democracy was just what we did not like about authoritarianism. Hence, we studied transitions *to* democracy without asking questions about democracy. And we were not the first to do so: Shapiro (1999: 2) comments that “John Dewey’s comment on older democratic revolutions rings equally true of our own: They aimed less to implement an abstract democratic ideal than ‘to remedy evils experienced in consequence of prior political institutions’.”

The advent of democracy repeatedly, and inevitably, generated disenchantment. Indeed, O’Donnell (1993) colored the democratic grass from green all the way to brown: Democracy is compatible with inequality, irrationality, injustice, particularistic enforcement of laws, lies and obfuscation, a technocratic policy style, and even with a fair dose of arbitrary violence. Everyday life of democratic politics is not a spectacle that inspires awe: an endless squabble among petty ambitions, rhetoric designed to hide and mislead, shady connections between power and money, laws that make no pretense of justice, policies that reinforce privilege. No wonder, then, that having followed liberalization, transition,

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and consolidation, we have discovered that there is something still to improve: democracy.

The new catch phrase became “quality of democracy.” And it should be. As I look back, I cannot help but think that the world has become much better if this is what we worry about. Only now can people around the world engage in the luxury of taking a critical look at democracy. And they are taking that look. Moreover, as democracies emerged under exotic conditions, the complacency about institutional blueprints was shaken. Even the most parochial area students of them all – Americanists – ventured into a world outside the U.S. Congress, only to discover what a unique institution it is. Although the very first attempts to look beyond were terribly naive, some in fact just mindlessly arrogant – “imitate the U.S. institutions” – it quickly became apparent that democracy can come in all forms of variations and gradations. If we are to understand democracy, we have to be able to think of Chile, Poland, and the United States at the same time.

What I fear is that the disenchantment is as naive as was the hope. I am not afraid that a critical look would make democracy more brittle: I am convinced that in almost all countries that today enjoy democracy, it is there to stay. Nevertheless, unreasonable expectations about democracy feed populist appeals (see O’Donnell’s 1985 brilliant analysis of Argentina) while blinding us to feasible reforms.

There are different ways to think about the quality of democracy. Certainly, it cannot mean resemblance to the United States, “the best system of government in the world,” as all kinds of rating agencies would have it. According to the Freedom House, for example, citizens of the United States are free. They are free to vote, free to express their views in public, to form associations and political parties – except that almost one-half do not vote even in presidential elections, public speech is not free but sponsored by private interests, and no parties are ever formed. Are they free? To paraphrase Rosa Luxemburg, *is* one free or can one only *act* freely? Developing this theme would take us too far away from the topic of these ruminations, but there is one point I want to emphasize. Democracy is a system of positive rights but it does not automatically generate the conditions necessary for exercising these rights (Holmes and Sunstein 1999). As J. S. Mill observed, “without decent wages and universal reading, no government of public opinion is possible.” Nevertheless, there is nothing about democracy per se that guarantees that wages would be decent and reading universal. The nineteenth-century solution to this problem was to restrict citizenship to those who were in condition to use it. Today

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citizenship is nominally universal, but many people do not enjoy the conditions necessary to exercise it. Hence, we may be seeing a new monster: democracy without effective citizenship.

The approach in this book combines two perspectives. I found it enlightening to think about the historical evolution of representative institutions into what today we call democracy. My impression is that we still tend to evaluate contemporary democracies in terms of the ideals of the founders. Because some of these ideals were incoherent or unfeasible, we find democracies in which we live lacking. I believe that we need to free ourselves of these shackles. I am not claiming that this is a pioneering undertaking: I cite herein many authors whose traces I follow. Robert Dahl, for one, spent most of his life ruminating about the same issues. Along with Dahl, Hans Kelsen, Joseph Schumpeter, Anthony Downs, and Norberto Bobbio are among my intellectual guides. If I write this book, it is not because I find their answers faulty but because I find that many questions remain open.

As a history, my account is at times deliberately anachronistic. Taught by subsequent experience, we today can make distinctions our historical protagonists could not. Such distinctions vocalize their silences, illuminate their hidden assumptions, delineate their conceptual horizons. Hence, although the voices heard below are theirs, the analytical apparatus is ours.

History illuminates variations and gradations but cannot speak to limits and possibilities. To determine what democracy can and cannot achieve, we need analytical models. Hence, I am following different footsteps by relying on social choice theory. The four axioms introduced in the short mathematical note by May (1952) are normatively attractive and analytically useful for identifying limits of democracy and directions of feasible improvements. However, social choice theory goes only part way in elucidating some important aspects of democracy: equality in the economic realm, effectiveness of political participation, control of governments by citizens, and the scope of issues that should be subject to collective decisions. Hence, I also rely on other models.

Although the material of this book is historical and comparative, the motivation is normative. When I was in graduate school – some time ago – every political science department offered a course in Comparative Government and one in Political Philosophy, popularly dubbed “From Plato to NATO,” often taught by the same person. Comparative politics was the material with which to think about the great issues posed by venerated thinkers of the past. Yet over the past four decades these subjects became

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separated; indeed, history of political thought pretty much vanished from the curricula. But the history of thought is a history of issues about which we, in the end, care. I find it thrilling to ask what we have learned about these issues from our empirical knowledge of political institutions and events. I think we did learn, we are wiser, and we often see things more clearly than our intellectual forefathers. Unless, however, we bring our knowledge to bear on the big issues, it will remain sterile.

Throughout the book, I accompany textual analyses and historical narratives with analytical models and at times with statistical analyses. Like all authors, though, I want the book to be read. Hence, I hide technical material as much as possible. The inevitable cost is that some assertions may seem to be glib, but their origins should be transparent to a technical reader. Some issues, notably those concerning causality, are truly technical. I do not believe that history is driven by any “primary causes” or “ultimate instances,” whether ideas, forces of production, or institutions – but that means that everything is endogenous. If it is, then identifying causes is hard, if not impossible. Hence, often I can say only that some aspects of ideational, economic, and political life evolved together, without even trying to detect which were the causes and which the effects.

Because this is an autobiographical preface, it is also a place to acknowledge intellectual debts due to personal interactions, not just reading. I have been privileged by the willingness of several friends to teach me what I do not know and to warn me that I am wrong. Although I studied philosophy as an undergraduate, my learning of history of thought has been guided by Bernard Manin and Pasquale Pasquino, whose erudition has no limits. Jon Elster, John Ferejohn, Russell Hardin, Stephen Holmes, José María Maravall, John Roemer, and Pacho Sánchez-Cuenca repeatedly opened my eyes to issues I did not see and often made me change views. I learned from conversations with Luiz Carlos Bresser Pereira, Fernando Cortés, John Dunn, James Fearon, Krzysztof Ostrowski, Ian Shapiro, and Jerzy J. Wiatr. Finally, I am deeply grateful to Neal Beck for instructing me in statistics and to Jess Benhabib for private lessons in economics.

I have also been lucky to be able to learn from many of my former students. Quite a few thoughts that enter these pages are a result of collaborations with Mike Alvarez, Zé Cheibub, Carolina Curvale, Jen Gandhi, Fernando Limongi, Covadonga Meseguer, Sebastian Saiegh, James Vreeland, and the late Michael Wallerstein. Much of what I know and think about legislatures is due to Argelina Figueiredo, Fernando

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Limongi, and Sebastian Saiegh. Much of what I know about Latin American constitutionalism comes from José Antonio Aguilar, Robert Barros, and Roberto Gargarella. I learned about Argentine politics from Carlos Acuña and Julio Saguir, about Korea from Hyug-Baeg Im and Jeong-Hwa Lee, about China from Zhiyuan Cui and Gaochao He, about Chile from Patricio Navia, about Mexico from Jorge Buendia, about Brazil from Fernando Limongi. Tamar Asadurian, Anjali Bohlken Thomas, Carolina Curvale, and Sunny Kuniyathu participated in collecting the historical data used in this volume.

These personal debts find reflection in the pages that follow. I also have institutional debts: to the National Science Foundation for financing the project of which this book is a product and to New York University for awarding me ample opportunity to research and write.

As I repeat, I have been lucky. But my greatest luck has been to have spent most of my life – all the way through Poland, Chile, France, and the United States – with Her to whom this book is dedicated.