Introduction

For the past decade we have been studying Americans' attitudes toward their government. Since dissatisfaction is common and since we believe dissatisfaction with government can be dangerous, we were moved to ask people about the particular type of government that might increase levels of satisfaction. Their answers, properly interpreted, directly contradict standard elite interpretations of popular desires. Specifically, pundits, politicians, and even many social scientists believe that Americans are populists, that they distrust any decision maker who is not an ordinary person or who is not at least intimately connected to ordinary people. Americans prefer to rule themselves, the argument goes, and will support any reform that empowers the people at the expense of elites. Only if direct democracy is not feasible will they accept a representative system and even then only if representatives act simply as mouthpieces for the people's wishes – wishes that individuals are eager to offer to elected officials if only those officials would listen.

THE BOOK'S THESIS

But this conventional description has been put together with remarkably little direct input from ordinary Americans. When we started listening to the people and taking seriously what they had to say, we were led to conclude that this conventional wisdom was not just somewhat misguided, it was backward. The last thing people want is to be more involved in political decision making: They do not want to make political decisions themselves; they do not want to provide much input to those who are assigned to make these decisions; and they would rather not know all the details of the decision-making

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process. Most people have strong feelings on few if any of the issues the government needs to address and would much prefer to spend their time in nonpolitical pursuits.

Rather than wanting a more active, participatory democracy, a remarkable number of people want what we call stealth democracy. Stealth aircraft such as B-2 bombers are difficult to see with standard radar techniques, yet everyone knows they exist. Similarly, the people want democratic procedures to exist but not to be visible on a routine basis. But how can people in a stealth democracy hold government accountable for its policy decisions? The focus of this question is actually off the mark. The people as a whole tend to be quite indifferent to policies and therefore are not eager to hold government accountable for the policies it produces. This does not mean people think no mechanism for government accountability is necessary; they just do not want the mechanism to come into play except in unusual circumstances. The people want to be able to make democracy visible and accountable on those rare occasions when they *are* motivated to be involved. They want to know that the opportunity will be there for them even though they probably have no current intention of getting involved in government or even of paying attention to it. Just as stealth bombers can be made to show up on radar when desired, the people want to know that their government will become visible, accountable, and representative should they decide such traits are warranted. Until that time, however, most people prefer not to be involved and therefore desire unobtrusive accountability.

How could conventional wisdom have gone so wrong? Easy. Although the people dislike a political system built on sustained public involvement, there is something they dislike even more: a political system in which decision makers – for no reason other than the fact that they are in a position to make decisions – accrue benefits at the expense of non-decision makers. Just as children are often less concerned with acquiring a privilege than with preventing their siblings from acquiring a privilege, citizens are usually less concerned with obtaining a policy outcome than with preventing others from using the process to feather their own nests. Since the people constitute one obvious check on the ability of decision makers to be self-serving, it often appears as though the people want more political influence for themselves, when in fact they just do not want decision makers to be able to take advantage of them.

As we write these words, efforts continue to be made to form a stable new government in Afghanistan subsequent to the military

defeat of the Taliban. The American press is filled with references to the need to bring democracy to Afghanistan. Our suspicion is that the Afghani people have little desire for democracy. Instead, the Uzbekis primarily want a government in which it will be impossible for the Hazaras to get the upper hand; the Hazaras want to be assured the Tajiks will not be able to take advantage of them; the Tajiks are worried about certain Pashtun tribes; those Pashtun tribes seek protection against the use of power by other Pashtun tribes; and so on. In the United States, traditional allegiance to individual rights and a more established ability to enforce those rights have obviously given some observers the impression that Americans desire something more from their political arrangements, but in truth those who think Americans lack the Afghanis' basic sensitivity to the perceived power of outgroups are fooling themselves.

Evidence of the people's desire to avoid politics is widespread, but most observers still find it difficult to take this evidence at face value. People must really want to participate but are just turned off by some aspect of the political system, right? If we could only tinker with the problematic aspects of the system, then the people's true participatory colors would shine for all to see, right? As a result of this mind-set, when the people say they do not like politics and do not want to participate in politics, they are simply ignored. Elite observers claim to know what the people really want – and that is to be involved, richly and consistently, in the political arena. If people are not involved, these observers automatically deem the system in dire need of repair.

We do not deny that the American political system could be improved in numerous ways, but we do deny that these improvements would generate significant long-term increases in meaningful participation on the part of the public. Participation in politics is low not because of the difficulty of registration requirements or the dearth of places for citizens to discuss politics, not because of the sometimes unseemly nature of debate in Congress or displeasure with a particular public policy. Participation in politics is low because people do not like politics even in the best of circumstances; in other words, they simply do not like the process of openly arriving at a decision in the face of diverse opinions. They do not like politics when they view it from afar and they certainly do not like politics when they participate in it themselves.

After the September 11, 2001, terrorist attack on the Pentagon in Washington and the World Trade Center in New York and during

the subsequent war in Afghanistan, Americans' attitudes toward government improved markedly over the (already relatively high) levels of the late 1990s and early 2000s. Nine out of ten people approved of the job being done by President George W. Bush, three out of four approved of the job being done by Congress, and overall trust and confidence in government rose to levels not seen in forty years (Gallup 2001). Of course, the predictable surge of patriotism and the associated rally-around-the-flag effect were the main causes of these remarkable poll numbers, but it would be a mistake to ignore the fact that this was also a time when government was working the way the people think it should work. Objectives in the wake of the attack were widely shared (strike back at Osama bin Laden and the Taliban in Afghanistan and do whatever it takes to secure Americans at home), partisan disputes were practically invisible, special interests were silent, and media interpretations rarely implied that politicians were taking action for self-interested (i.e., political) reasons. Americans shared a common enemy, and except for that brief time when House leaders committed the serious public relations blunder of closing the body in the wake of the anthrax scare, people generally believed that politicians were acting to promote the general interest. This is an important reason attitudes toward government were so favorable in the months after September 11.

Those who persist in claiming that people approve of government only when it becomes more accountable have much more difficulty explaining trends in public opinion after September 11. Did the government become more responsive, more accountable, more sensitive to the people's every whim during this time? Hardly. Did people become more involved in the making of high-level political decisions? Not in the least. If anything, power flowed away from the more accountable parts of government, such as Congress, state governments, and the people themselves and toward more detached elements such as the military, the President, and appointed individuals in the upper levels of the administration. In point of fact, government accountability and responsiveness declined, yet people's attitudes toward government improved dramatically. People do not want responsiveness and accountability in government; they want responsiveness and accountability to be unnecessary.

When people's aversion to politics is accepted as a basic and sensible trait, the normative implications are far-reaching. For at least 150 years, theorists have believed that popular involvement in the political process would lead to better decisions, better people, and a

more legitimate political system. But why should getting people to do something they do not want to do make them feel the system is more legitimate? Why should it make them happier people? And why should it make for better policy decisions? The answer, of course, is that none of these improvements should be expected. Moreover, none of them seems to occur. An encouraging but all-too-recent trend is empirical testing of the claims normative theorists have long been making about the benefits of greater public involvement in politics. One searches this empirical literature in vain for credible evidence that participation in real political processes leads participants to be more approving of that process, to be more understanding of other people, or to be better able to produce successful policy decisions. In fact, quite often this empirical work suggests that participation has a negative effect on decisions, the political system, and people. The belief that participatory democracy is preferable to other political processes crumbles with disconcerting ease as soon as people's desire to avoid politics is accepted as fact.

These claims are bold and will not go down well in many quarters. Some people have devoted their lives to finding ways of promoting political participation on the assumption that it would make government and people better. We take no particular pleasure in disagreeing with these well-meaning, dedicated democrats. But the evidence, while certainly open to alternative interpretations, suggests to us that it is time to consider the possibility that political participation is not the universal solution advocates often aver. We hasten to point out that there are situations in which participation can have the beneficial consequences advocates so badly want it to have. As we document below in the book, these situations are likely to occur when the people involved recognize diversity in society and appreciate the frustrations inherent in democratic decision making in the context of this diversity. The consequences of participation that result from this enlightened understanding are completely different from the consequences of untutored participation that is too often grudging and artificially induced.

So our disagreement with those touting the glories of participatory democracy is only over their belief that any participation of any sort is good. We believe a proper reading of the evidence suggests that the consequences of popular participation are often neutral or negative; thus, we believe a key task of future research is determining those limited situations in which participation can be beneficial. The solution to the problems of the political system is not as simple

as just getting people involved. Instead, we must encourage involve-
ment that is based on an appreciation of democracy and, as hereti-
cal as it may seem, discourage involvement that is not. The naive
faith that increased contact with the political process will always be
a plus must be abandoned for the empirically sound realization that
people's reactions to political participation vary widely. Only under
limited circumstances will heightened participation benefit the
person and the system.

THE BOOK'S ORGANIZATION

The three parts of this book are quite distinct, and since some
readers may be interested in one part more than the others, we now
provide brief descriptions of each. The argument we sketched above
is predicated on the belief that political processes matter; that is, that
people are quite concerned with how government works, not
just with what it produces. In this we are encouraging an important
shift in thinking, since the study of politics has too long operated
under the assumption that people are so concerned with results
that the mechanism for obtaining results is largely irrelevant to
them. In short, the common belief has been that, as far as the people
are concerned, the ends justify the means. We provide evidence in
Part I that people actually are concerned with the process as well as
the outcome. Contrary to popular belief, many people have vague
policy preferences and crystal-clear process preferences, so their
actions can be understood only if we investigate these process
preferences.

In Part I our dominant concern is in distinguishing process vari-
ables from the more commonly employed policy variables and then
demonstrating that process variables matter. The details of the par-
ticular processes people prefer are left to later. In fact, to the extent
we do address people's specific preferences, the presentation in Part
I is so undeveloped as to be misleading. For example, in this part we
use a simple spectrum that ranges only from decision making exclu-
sively by the people to decision making exclusively by elected offi-
cials. By limiting attention to such a basic process distinction (and
by not including decision making by non-self-serving elites as an
option), we actually leave the inaccurate impression that people do
want to be more involved in decision making. Further, in this part
we make no distinction among the many different ways in which the
people could participate in political decisions, such as being per-

sonally involved in structured or in unstructured deliberative set-
tings, influencing decision makers, voting for decision makers, or
voting on ballot measures (initiatives and referenda). Even so, the
advantage of Part I's overly simplistic process spectrum is that it
allows us to distinguish process preferences from policy preferences
and to demonstrate the importance of process satisfaction in explain-
ing numerous important political phenomena. The message of Part
I, then, is that, contrary to assumptions about the centrality of policy,
process matters, too.

After identifying, measuring, distinguishing, and demonstrating
the importance of process concerns in Part I, the issue in Part II be-
comes precisely which processes people prefer. If people are con-
cerned with how government works, just how do they want it to work?
To answer this question, we use results from (1) numerous items in
a specially designed national survey conducted in the late spring of
1998, and (2) extensive focus group sessions held around the nation
a few months earlier. This multimethod approach allows us to des-
cribe people's views of government, their reactions to particular
reform proposals, their opinions of the political capabilities of ordi-
nary people, and their thoughts on the role of politicians (and other
possible decision makers) in a properly working polity.

In the last chapter of Part II (Chapter 6) these findings are
brought together to make the case summarized above, that the kind
of government people want is one in which ordinary people do not
have to get involved. We show that people want to distance them-
selves from government not because of a system defect but because
many people are simply averse to political conflict and many others
believe political conflict is unnecessary and an indication that some-
thing is wrong with governmental procedures. People believe that
Americans all have the same basic goals, and they are consequently
turned off by political debate and deal making that presuppose an
absence of consensus. People believe these activities would be unnec-
essary if decision makers were in tune with the (consensual) public
interest rather than with cacophonous special interests. Add to this
the perceived lack of importance of most policies and people tend
to view political procedures as a complete waste of time. The pro-
cesses people really want would not be provided by the populist
reform agenda they often embrace; it would be provided by a stealth
democratic arrangement in which decisions are made by neutral
decision makers who do not require sustained input from the people
in order to function.

Having established in Part I the importance of understanding the people's process preferences and having established in Part II the particular kind of governmental process desired by the people, we turn in Part III to the issue of whether or not it would be a good idea to modify the workings of government to make them more consistent with the people's process preferences. As such, whereas Parts I and II are largely empirical, Part III contains less data and is more theoretical. The issue shifts to the nature and wisdom of the changes in the polity indicated by people's preference for stealth as opposed to participatory democracy. Readers interested in the more grounded and empirical nature of people's process desires may wish to concentrate on the first two parts of the book, whereas readers more interested in normative arguments flowing from the empirical findings may want to spend more time with Part III, perhaps after reading Chapter 6 to help them get oriented.

Since the empirical findings suggest that people want to withdraw from politics even more than they already have, the central task in Part III is tallying the pros and cons of popular participation in the political process. Only by knowing the likely consequences of reduced participation can we know whether stealth democracy is something that should be encouraged. As noted above, the assumption of theorists has long been that participation is good. We detail their arguments in Chapter 7 before critiquing them in Chapter 8. Our conclusion is that the alleged benefits of more participatory political procedures are based on wishful thinking rather than real evidence. This appears to be true of each of the many proposed styles of popular participation. For example, neither encouraging people to join voluntary community groups nor pushing them into face-to-face discussions of controversial issues with opponents seems to produce useful outcomes, since the former shields people too much from the divisiveness that they need to appreciate and the latter shields them too little. Not only is the evidence lacking for the claim that more participatory involvement in zero-sum politics enhances people, decisions, and system legitimacy, empirical work actually provides evidence that popular involvement can have negative consequences. Though more work needs to be done before such a conclusion is accepted as fact, our findings regarding people's aversion to politics (note that we are not claiming people lack ability) would help to account for why these negative consequences occur.

Should people be given the stealth democratic procedures so many of them crave or should we continue to labor under the false

hope, propagated by so many well-intentioned elites, that if we just alter yet another voter registration requirement or invite people to more coffee klatches, if we make Congress more responsive, if we create minipopuli or electronic town hall meetings or citizen fora or deliberative public opinion polls, then people will eagerly participate? In the book's final full-length chapter, Chapter 9, we address this question. As is apparent from the way we phrase the question, we believe that Americans' motivation to avoid politics is deep and not the result of particular defects in the current system. It is politics they do not like, not a particular version of politics. We believe people's intense desire to give decision-making authority to someone else and to give those decision makers wide berth as long as they are barred from taking advantage of their position for personal gain should be taken seriously. After all, avoiding a distasteful activity makes perfect sense and aversion to being played for a sucker is a core trait of human social behavior, if recent work in social psychology and experimental economics is to be believed, as we think it should.

At the same time, while people's preferences for a form of stealth democracy are understandable, we are not convinced they are wise. In our view, elite prescriptions for altering democratic political procedures in the United States are out of touch with the preferences of the people and, as a result, are doomed to failure. But just as it is a mistake to blithely ignore the people's wishes, so too is it a mistake to follow slavishly those wishes. While it is possible to envision political structures capable of preventing decision makers from ever being perceived as acting in their own interest, it is not easy – particularly if these decision makers are to be accorded standard First Amendment rights and particularly in light of people's tendency to suspect self-interest absent clear evidence to the contrary. Moreover, to the extent people have (or can be made to have) any policy preferences at all, stealth democracy becomes more problematic. The implication of people's process preferences, as we have described them, is that people tend to believe that all policy solutions driven by a concern for the general welfare (rather than special interests) are more or less acceptable, or at least not worth arguing about. People's perception seems to be that the common good is not debatable but rather will be apparent if selfishness can be stripped away. In this, we believe the people are wrong.

Disagreements about the best way to promote the common good in general and about individual policy issues are not necessarily an

indication that those disagreeing have suddenly gone over to the
dark side of pursuing self-interests or special interests. People need
to understand that disagreements can occur among people of good
heart and that some debating and compromising will be necessary
to resolve these disagreements and come to a collective solution.
As such, education designed to increase people's appreciation of de-
mocracy needs to be a crucial element of efforts to improve the
current situation. Stealth democracy is what the people want and as
such is preferable to the many permutations of participatory de-
mocracy being touted today. But we argue that it is not a particularly
feasible form of democracy and its allure rests on erroneous
assumptions. Limiting the ability of elected officials to be self-serving
is only a partial solution.

But the primary goal of our study is not to advocate certain sys-
temic reforms; it is to discover people's political process preferences.
These preferences, properly understood, suggest that the ultimate
danger for the American polity is not, after all is said and done, that
a populace bent on collecting power in its own hands will destroy
any opportunity for Burkean and Madisonian sensibilities to be dis-
played by suitably detached elected officials. Rather, the deeper
danger is that people will seize the first opportunity to tune out of
politics in favor of government by autopilot, and, ironically, the main
reason they do not is the perception that politicians are self-serving.
If people had a greater number of clear policy preferences and if
they recognized that other people had different but nonetheless
legitimate preferences, political participation, especially delibera-
tion, could have beneficial consequences. But since many people
care deeply about only a few policy items on the government's
agenda and assume their fellow citizens are the same, people's main
political goal is often limited to nothing more than achieving a
process that will prevent decision makers from benefiting themselves.
Thus, when people are moved to involve themselves in politics, it is
usually because they believe decision makers have found a way to take
advantage of their positions. Consequently, political participation in
the United States is often connected to resentment, dissatisfaction,
and puzzlement rather than to legitimacy, trust, and enlightenment.

Before turning to the data, two caveats are in order. First, we
readily admit that the evidence we present in support of our inter-
pretations is suggestive, not conclusive. For the time being, we will
be content if our work encourages political observers at least to ques-
tion traditional assumptions such as (1) people care about policy