

REBOOTING DEMOCRACY

Rebooting Democracy

A CITIZEN'S GUIDE TO
REINVENTING POLITICS

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Thistle



Publishing

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Em memória do meu pai, Filipe Arriaga.

CONTENTS

Acknowledgments.....	i
Introduction	1
A brief detour: 10 reasons why politicians fail to represent us (and always will)	9
Delegation and irreflection: the twin roots of failed political representation	27
#1 Discovering citizen deliberation in the Pacific Northwest	39
#2 Voting like the Irish while campaigning like the French	54
#3 Keeping a tight grip: the Swiss-Oregonian lock	66
#4 Learning from the British tabloid press	72
#5 Recovering our distance vision in Saint Petersburg	78
Conclusion	89
Postscript	113

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REBOOTING DEMOCRACY

INTRODUCTION

Knowing that your vital interests are affected by factors beyond your control is a recipe for stress. It's not what democracies should be about. But it has become the new normal.—Joris Luyendijk, author of The Guardian's banking blog, reflecting on the recent financial crisis

This is a short book with a simple premise: our democracies are failing and we need to regain control of our future. I will propose five concrete measures that could allow us to do so, yet my true goal is to help initiate a public debate about how we can reform our political systems.

Who is this “we” that I write about? “We” are the citizens who find ourselves living in so-called representative democracies and increasingly questioning what that truly means. You might be Greek and trying to halt a draconian “austerity” program that is wrecking your country and that you never voted for. You might be a US citizen who opposes your administration’s eagerness to embark upon yet another military adventure in the Middle East. You might be one of the millions of Brazilians who have taken to the streets, outraged with a political class that finds money to invest in sports stadiums but neglects essential public services. You might be British and still incredulous that your government has been complicit in secretly building a global surveillance machine that records everything we do online. You might be one of the many thousands of protesters who—for various

REBOOTING DEMOCRACY

other reasons—have recently come together in places as diverse as Istanbul, Kiev, Madrid, Sofia or even in the small Sussex village of Balcombe.

Or, on the contrary, you might not have particularly strong political views but still believe—like the vast majority of citizens in any “democratic” country—that the political class simply isn’t accountable to the general population. The last few years have made it evident that this is no longer a concern just for a handful of activists with specific agendas. It concerns all of us.

You might call yourself a progressive, a conservative, a libertarian, an environmentalist, an anarchist or an *I-don't-believe-in-politics*-ist. It doesn’t matter. Nor does it matter what angers you the most: corrupt and self-serving politicians; inaction over global warming; our nations continuously racking up debt; the erosion of your civil liberties; or the unjust wars fought in your name. What matters is that—whatever our nationality, political orientation and main grievances might be—we all realize that those who govern us do not represent us. That shared awareness unites us, and it means that we can do something about it.



We live in societies gripped by palpable, widespread frustration. We all know how bogus the promise at the core of our political systems is. Yet, and without actually believing it for a second, we desperately cling to the fiction that voting every four or five years ensures that the politicians we elect will represent our interests. We try to ignore evidence to the contrary, though this realization dates back at least 250 years. Even for Rousseau, it was already evident that, in a democracy, “the . . . people believe themselves to be free, but they are gravely mistaken. They are free only during the

INTRODUCTION

election of their parliament. When the election is over, they become slaves again.”

In today’s materially affluent societies, much of our frustration stems from feeling that our lives are determined largely by external factors over which we have no control. We might oppose our government’s radical measures, but against a determined political class there is little that even massive street protests can do. A majority of the population might watch in disbelief as politicians concoct an excuse to launch a military strike against some faraway nation, but no number of enraged tweets will keep the jet fighters on the ground. It may gall us to see yet another government decision favoring a business conglomerate at the expense of the public interest or another politician buying votes with expensive bridges or other public works for which future generations will pay. Yet we read it in the news, feel the bitter taste in our mouths and . . . swallow it because that is all we can do.

This sensation of powerlessness is something most of us know all too well. All over the globe, large parts of the population find themselves with no control over the crucial decisions that their political classes make, some of which will bind them for generations to come.



Yet feeling we have control over our lives is a fundamental human need. In fact, a growing body of research confirms that a strong sense of autonomy is one of the essential elements for mental well-being. For psychologists working on this topic, “autonomy” has a well-defined meaning. It is not about being independent of others. Instead, autonomy means that one has substantial control over one’s activities and endorses the values implicit in them. In other words, an

autonomous person is a “reasonably free” agent who has a say in how things get done.

For example, studies of workplace satisfaction have found that one of the defining characteristics of a satisfying job is a sense of autonomy—that is, feeling that we have some control over how we do our job. This is something that most of us can easily relate to: when at work, few things are as frustrating and soul-deadening as having company rules and/or a supervisor who tell us exactly how we should go about the most minute aspect of our tasks, leaving us no space for choice or creativity in our work. The space for choice and “having a say” in what we do is exactly what autonomy is about and why it matters for our mental and emotional well-being.

Not surprisingly, autonomy has been found to play a key role in many other areas as diverse as how well children do in school; patient outcomes in health care; the performance of athletes; and even attempts at predicting the general levels of self-reported “happiness” across different countries. From here, it is hardly a stretch to suggest that feeling powerless over the crucial political decisions that affect us all may well be an important element of our societal malaise.



If the mere *feeling* of powerlessness is causing such widespread frustration and deadening our souls, then our *actual* powerlessness is harming us in an even more direct way. Our present inability to take meaningful collective action on issues such as climate change and the fragility of the financial system threatens us in very real, palpable ways. There is widespread concern over these problems among the citizens of developed countries. Yet our political leaders seem unable—or unwilling—to deal with them in a timely manner.

INTRODUCTION

If there really is such generalized frustration and unvented anger towards our political system, one might wonder what explains the absence of widespread social unrest. The answer to this question has two parts.

The first has to do with economics. In some regions of the world, it is still half-possible to maintain the illusion that we continue to live according to a “shared prosperity” model. This is perhaps most notably the case in some countries of northern Europe, where the combined effect of accumulated wealth, high living standards and a tradition of redistributive policies successfully masks the fact that we citizens are no longer in control.

Let’s look at what has been happening in parts of the world where this mask of prosperity has slipped. A two-hour Easyjet flight is all it takes to bridge these two universes.¹ Across southern Europe, massive protests and social unrest have become widespread. In Athens, Madrid and Lisbon, you will hear protesters mention banks, the EU and the IMF—but, most often, you will hear them accusing their *national* politicians of not truly representing the citizens who elected them.

Granted, it can be easy to read too much into rally slogans, but there seems to be a salutary and widespread awareness that it is ultimately not an economic but a *democratic* crisis that Europeans have been living through. And it is where this veil of prosperity is falling off that the true nature of our “democracies” becomes most visible.

The second, and probably more important, reason why this frustration hasn’t yet fully materialized into a serious threat to our political system is our continued inability to propose clear, convincing alternatives. For example, we—the citizens—have to account for the paradox of the “Indigna-

¹ Paul Mason’s *Why It’s Kicking Off Everywhere: The New Global Revolutions* offers a glimpse into this other reality.

dos" and "Occupy" protest movements that successfully mobilized enormous crowds in the wake of the 2008-2010 banking crisis but seem to have (so far?) left no lasting mark on our political landscape(s). Or consider publishing phenomena such as the late Stéphane Hessel's "Indignez-vous!" in France and the anthology "Reacciona" in Spain, books that brilliantly speak to the public's frustration. Like the protest movements, these books garnered huge public attention but did not give rise to sustained social movements working towards reform.

I take the somewhat unfashionable view that much of the power of modern-day protest movements is lost whenever they fail to articulate a list of concrete demands.² Our repeated inability to do so has led many to believe the fiction that there are no credible alternatives, that we are stuck with the-world-as-it-is and that the best we can hope for is occasional progress in a policy domain we care about. The main goal of this book is to help foster a debate that can eventually change this state of affairs.



We all have our own grievances over policy matters. Some of the more common ones have already been mentioned, but others include the decline (or, if you are lucky, stagnation) of real wages, the dismantling of social services, the way immigration is handled or any number of other important issues. My purpose here is not to engage with any of these substantive matters.

Instead, it is more important that we realize that our political system is at the root of our problems. Unfortunately, and unlike a number of worthy causes, talk of broken governance

² For the opposite argument, see David Graeber's *The Democracy Project: A History, A Crisis, A Movement*.

INTRODUCTION

systems sounds positively boring. But it only seems so because we keep mistaking the forest for the trees. No matter what our personal dissatisfactions are, the ultimate problem is the fact that our politicians—for a variety of reasons discussed in the next chapter—simply do not represent us. In a sense, most social, economic and environmental ills are merely *symptoms* of this disease. Of course we should keep fighting those symptoms, but it is also about time that we start addressing the *source* from which they all stem. And that source—in all of its decidedly unsexy glory—is the profound brokenness of our democracies.



Among other things, this means that voting out one politician or party to bring in a different one will *not* solve our problems. Time has made it clear that this is not merely an issue of casting. If the play stinks, replacing the actors will not make it any better.



So, if our political system is the problem, what can be done about it? This book argues for five specific measures. The first four address our central concern: namely, increasing citizens' control over their government and, thus, ensuring that it acts in line with the public interest. The fifth proposal focuses on defining this very notion of "public interest" in a way that is adequately long-term oriented rather than myopic. None of these ideas has any tie to traditional notions of "left" or "right."

This book is most definitely a "version 1.0." Its goal, as mentioned earlier, is to draw attention to the problem and have us start a discussion of how to get out of this quagmire.

REBOOTING DEMOCRACY

To be a part of that discussion and to learn about upcoming events, don't forget to join us at **<http://rebootdemocracy.org>**.

In the rest of the book, I will be your guide on two brief tours. The first combines insights from the social sciences with commonplace observations about our political reality. On this journey, I will introduce you to the web of interlocking mechanisms that prevents elected officials from truly representing the public interest. On the second tour, I will take you around the globe in search of ideas for reforming our democracies. We will witness the range from successful, thriving institutions to well-meaning but ultimately failed attempts at reform, not forgetting a glimpse into Soviet architecture and acrimonious nighttime meetings in an old palace in Lisbon. We will try to learn something from all of these.

Let's get started.

A BRIEF DETOUR: 10 REASONS WHY POLITICIANS FAIL TO REPRESENT US (AND ALWAYS WILL)

Why can we more easily conceive of a catastrophic event ending life on this planet than even small changes to our current economic order?—Slavoj Žižek, in The Pervert's Guide to Ideology

Although there is widespread support for the idea that those in power do not represent the public interest, we often fail to give adequate thought to *why* this is so. Let's look at some possible explanations.

As it will become clear, I draw on varied sources. Some of the factors discussed below are recurrent themes in the media and in general political discourse; others come from well-established results in the social sciences. This diversity of perspectives is a good thing, as it promises a richer understanding of why democratic representation fails.

What nearly all of these explanations have in common, though, is that they point towards this failure having *structural* causes. In other words, the problem is in the political system itself. An improved understanding of its limitations will be helpful when considering how we can reform it.

Note: The term “public interest” will come up a lot in this book. It might be worthwhile to keep two simple insights in mind. First, and as the influential political scientist Jane Mansbridge remarked, the fact that it is famously difficult to agree on what this term means does not really reduce its practical usefulness. So, I will not be shy about using it—even if in these pages I haven’t personally tried my hand at solving this ages-old philosophical debate. Second, and for reasons discussed at length in the next chapter, we can, however, confidently say that the public interest is *not* always the same as the wishes of the majority as captured, for example, in the latest opinion poll. This is an important distinction that will be useful at several points in the book.

1. Corruption

When citizens are asked why politicians fail to meet their expectations, corruption figures prominently in many of their answers. The term can, however, refer to a number of quite different phenomena, only some of which are clearly unlawful in most countries.

In its most brazen form, corruption involves the illicit exchange of money for political favors. However, the concept can also encompass conflicts of interest, as when a politician has active professional and/or financial ties to a company that he regulates. Or it could refer to substantial campaign contributions, which—even if they are legal—are likely to be “remembered” by politicians once they are in power. Finally, we can also speak of corruption when discussing the policy consequences of the pervasive “revolving door” arrangements, by which government officials know that they will likely be offered lucrative positions (e.g., as consultants or

board members) in the same private-sector companies that they previously gently regulated and/or gave hefty public contracts to.

2. Electoral politics gives politicians the wrong incentives

Other problems result from politicians simply trying to be reelected. Though elections are the main mechanism through which we (periodically) control politicians, elections also provide a set of “wrong” incentives for them. A politician seeking reelection will often become a demagogue, appealing to the public’s emotions, rather than their reason, to easily win their votes. Political candidates will, for the same reason, shy away from any necessary reforms that might come at an electoral cost—especially if the rationale for those reforms becomes evident only when one adopts a long-term view. Political inaction on the issue of climate change is a prime example of this.

3. Mainstream politics attracts the wrong kind of people

As of the early twenty-first century, it seems likely that most people who decide to start a professional career in politics are driven more by a pursuit of power—or, just as depressingly, a combination of ambition and a lack of comparably remunerated career alternatives—than by any genuine attachment to an ideal of public service. As a result, the political class tends to be populated by quite a peculiar group of people. This exemplifies a broader phenomenon known in the social sciences as “self-selection”: when participation in an activity is voluntary, it will often end up attracting a “crowd” with particular characteristics.

If we apply this idea to those who choose a career in politics, we come up with two possibilities. The first is that, nowadays, those who join a mainstream political party and devote themselves to artfully climbing its ranks are doing so because of a strong urge to serve the public. This does not seem too likely. A second explanation seems more plausible: that self-interest and a desire for power are what drive them to enter politics. And, obviously, these are precisely the two worst possible traits for someone whose job it is to represent the public.

4. Politicians feel themselves immune to control by the public

Though it may, at first, appear to contradict the “electioneering” perils described above, the reverse also happens. In a great number of important decisions, politicians feel invulnerable to public opposition and, thus, press ahead with measures that a vast majority of the population objects to. Unfortunately for us, that often seems to be the case with major, highly contentious decisions that will affect us for several generations. In most countries, there is no mechanism for citizens to effectively block a measure being advanced by their elected government and parliament. Politicians know this and often exploit this absence of fine-grained popular control over their actions by pushing through controversial measures that the public opposes soon after taking office. Clearly, they hope that the issue will be long forgotten by the time they come up for reelection.

It is hard to overstate how perverse the combination of these two factors—electioneering perils (reason #2) and the threat of *not* being reelected failing to deter behavior against the public interest—actually is. In the worst possible way, the

threat of not being reelected seems to make our politicians eager to please us in the most superficial ways (e.g., by ceding to populist demands on the scandalous topic du jour), while feeling immune to our disapproval over serious policy choices (e.g., going to war on false pretexts, signing major international treaties that severely limit national sovereignty and/or privatizing large chunks of the public sector).

5. Parties and elections morally corrupt our political leaders

Another possible explanation is that our elected leaders initially enter politics as well-meaning, public-spirited individuals but that the process through which they are selected morally corrupts them. The difficult task of rising through the ranks of their own party makes them lose sight of the common good, instead “training” them to focus on small-minded career advancement. They learn to please the higher ranks—in whose hands their future lies—at all costs. In countries in which political campaigning relies heavily on private funds, seeking campaign contributions from wealthy donors and well-funded organizations further compromises their ideals of public service. At the end of the process, actually running for office in an election also further degrades their morals. After all, winning the public’s favor in a modern-day election is not easy, and the prerequisites for doing so appear to include learning how to bend the truth and taking a lax attitude towards personal or ideological loyalties.³

³ A good illustration of the different facets of this process can be found in George Clooney’s 2011 film *The Ides of March*.

6. The effect of norms on elected politicians: “politics as usual”

Besides the corrupting effect of the process through which they are selected, we also need to consider the role of what we might call the “dominant culture” in politics. Once elected, politicians do not work in a vacuum. Instead, they become a part of a professional field with its own norms, traditions and habits. As social scientists have extensively documented, someone who enters a profession will, in a variety of both conscious and unconscious ways, be subject to pressures to conform to the norms of that field. New-comers to professional politics are no different. Even the most determined and well-meaning among them will, upon taking office, enter a world in which all social or professional interactions encourage them—subtly or not so subtly—to play along and not make too many waves. Over time, they learn to respect “the way things are usually done around here” and, ultimately, conform to the status quo.

Ironically, another part of the social norms guiding professional politics pushes people in the opposite direction—often with dire consequences. In our political culture, elected office holders feel pressure to “leave a mark” of some sort. Thus, their inclination not to rock the boat is offset by a strong desire to be known for one or two career-defining Faustian projects. These can range from major infrastructure investments to drastically reforming the nation’s public sector—or even to a deadly war, always justified “for humanitarian reasons,” in a faraway land. Unfortunately for us, these “projects” are undertaken in a political culture that does not support reasoned public debate. Instead, our leaders see themselves as enlightened visionaries who single-handedly bring about much-needed reform in the face of wide-

spread opposition from “backward” citizens who “just don’t understand” the need for action.

Thus, the social norms guiding professional politics succeed in simultaneously harming the public interest in two seemingly contradictory ways. Our elected politicians are both pulled towards inaction in matters where change is required and encouraged to make “daring” major decisions without public consultation. Unfortunately, experience strongly suggests that such bouts of proactivity by elected leaders in the face of public disapproval only very rarely work to our benefit. Much more often, they appear to serve either the private interests of the politicians’ associates or merely their need for self-aggrandizement.

7. The psychological effects of power and identification with other elites

The social sciences offer us two other insights into how politicians operate. These have to do with power and what happens when politicians spend time dealing with other influential individuals.

First, social psychologists have found that individuals who experience a sense of power become less able to empathize with others. Politicians, by virtue of their jobs, are likely to perceive themselves as power holders and, thus, to be unable to adopt the perspective of those affected by their decisions. As their political careers develop over the years, and they come closer to attaining positions of greater power, politicians will gradually become less and less able to put themselves in the shoes of the average citizen.

Second, we know that a sense of identification with a social group—i.e., perceiving oneself as “belonging” to a certain group—is a powerful determinant of attitudes and

behavior. Individuals identify with groups with whom they believe they share significant traits. The result can range anywhere from calling yourself British to emphasizing your ethnic background or even simply saying you are a supporter of your local football club. Those would all be examples of more “explicit” forms of self-categorization. However, sometimes identities can also take more “latent” or “implicit” forms. Think, for example, of an immigrant developing a new sense of national identity or someone who recently switched careers. In those (and other) situations, individuals can combine within themselves several identities, sometimes without even being fully aware of it. Needless to say, we all categorize ourselves—be it in more or less conscious fashion—into a variety of groups.

What happens next, though, is even more interesting. A body of work in social psychology known as “social identity theory” describes how, once people identify with a certain group, that sense of belonging significantly affects their attitudes and behavior. They develop an increasingly positive image of fellow group members. They experience a sense of loyalty to the group and exhibit, either consciously or unconsciously, a much greater inclination to help and cooperate with other group members. At the same time, group members start to perceive members of the “out-group”—i.e., those who are seen as *not* belonging to the group—in a less positive way and find it increasingly difficult to empathize with them. As a result, the group member becomes less prone to help and cooperate with them.

These ideas can help us understand the behavior of our elected political class. We know that, over the course of their duties, acting politicians will spend many of their waking hours dealing with members of other powerful elites. They will, for example, spend vast amounts of time interacting

with representatives of large corporations and other established interest groups.

We can easily envision how this process unfolds. Locked in meeting rooms with members of the business sector for countless hours, our elected representatives will, over time, develop a shared sense of belonging to something we might call the “economic-political elite.” After all, the actions of politicians and business leaders jointly determine many of the crucial decisions we collectively care about. It is only natural that, over the course of time, most politicians will start to see business leaders as their peers in the process of policy-making.

Employing the lessons of social identity theory, it becomes easy to predict what happens next. Politicians become increasingly sympathetic to the arguments presented by the other members of this elite they belong to. Over time, they adopt, more and more, the logic of business, and the demands/arguments of other groups will become harder and harder to understand. Perhaps most distressing is that this process can take place in a largely unconscious way. Politicians themselves might often be unaware of the ties and the growing sense of identification that they are developing with their peers in the business community; yet, whether or not they are aware, the consequences will be just as real.

Therefore, we have at least two distinct psychological mechanisms that can help us understand how our elected politicians will, over time, become increasingly unable to adopt the perspective of the common citizen—and all the while their way of thinking will continue to grow closer and closer to that of other powerful factions in society.

8. Ideology as a bias

However, it is not just a sense of power and identification with other elites that can bias politicians' reasoning. Powerful ideas warp the way we think, too—especially when those ideas are fundamental to our way of seeing the world or we are known for espousing them.⁴

As cognitive psychologists have learned, we are very good at filtering information according to how well it fits our worldview. In a process known as “confirmation bias,” we tend to welcome all information that validates our pre-conceptions and to discredit any that challenges our thinking. This process largely ensures that we will tend to (re)confirm our views and continue acting according to them—even when evidence overwhelmingly points in a different direction.

A discussion of “ideology” will seem strange to some, given that many tend to think that modern-day politicians are mostly free of sincere political convictions and are mainly engaged in a mixture of optimizing their chances of reelection and catering to private interests. This view is correct, but even spineless politicians operate within a set of beliefs about how the world works—beliefs that they might have picked up from their colleagues, party elders or simply the broader political milieu. It is in that sense that we can speak of them being “ideological.”

This—and the dramatic effect it can have on public policy—is so painfully clear as of 2014. In recent years, both sides of the Atlantic have lived through an ill-timed drive for “austerity” or “deficit cutting” that has threatened to

⁴ Admittedly, we all tend to reserve the word “ideology” for those ideas we disagree with. In this section, I will use it to refer to ideas that seem to fly in the face of most available evidence and, yet, are so strong that they seem largely unaffected by it.

cripple the economy and (at least in the case of Europe) keep many millions of young people in long-term unemployment. The amazing thing is that the “political consensus” that has emerged among mainstream politicians has flown in the face of nearly everything we know about economics, as well as the public views of countless respected economists.

For example, regarding the US fiscal debate, Nobel-prize-winning economist Paul Krugman wrote that it was “dominated by *things everyone knows* that happen not to be true.” One of them is the notion that the US was going through a fiscal crisis *in the first place*. Similarly, Joseph Stiglitz, yet another Nobel laureate in economics, remarked that in Europe, “the cure is not working and there is no hope that it will,” calling austerity measures “deeply misguided.”

Obviously, several other factors influenced the behavior of the European and US political classes. However, much of what we witnessed was the result of ideology—often with the undertones of a morality play—winning out over reason and evidence.

A narrative built on feelings of guilt and a need to atone for alleged past sins—years of “living above our means”; a public that was complicit in the “irresponsible,” “spend-thrift” ways of earlier governments; etc.—was a common theme across the Atlantic. In the US, it got combined with a general ideological discomfort among its political class with the idea of public spending. In Europe, it blends in with the sacralization of the Euro, made clear in the words of Mario Draghi, the president of the European Central Bank, when he said that the European leadership would do “whatever it takes” to ensure the survival of the common currency. Other ideological elements are the deep-seated, extreme aversion of German politicians (and, by implication, the ECB) to any

risk of inflation and, on the part of a subset of European politicians, the desire to use this crisis as an opportunity for dismantling parts of the state.

In both cases, the insularity of our political classes—and the way they exert power from the comfort of the little “bubble” in which they live—leaves them and their preconceptions safely unchallenged. Thus, inherited notions continue to shape the debate and guide public policy over crucial matters, without pesky reality getting in the way.

9. The political class is not demographically representative of the general population

These issues are further complicated by the simple fact that the political class is, in demographic terms, highly unrepresentative of the general citizenry. It will come as no surprise that, in most of our countries, the average politician is a white male with a comparatively privileged socio-economic background.

In and of itself, this is not necessarily a problem: it is conceivable that—with *adequate checks and controls*—a politician meeting that description could truly represent the interests of the general population. However, given the lack of strong accountability mechanisms, serious problems arise from the fact that the vast majority of our political representatives effectively belong to a separate caste. Members of this caste are extremely unlikely to ever suffer from many of the issues that plague significant parts of the population (e.g., difficulty paying the bills, the threat of unemployment, lack of adequate health care or worries about street crime in their neighborhood). They know perfectly well that holding an elected post will ensure their livelihoods well into the future, in the form of cozy public-sector and/or corporate appointments once they no longer succeed in getting reelected.

As one might expect, this huge gap between the life conditions of our rulers and the reality inhabited by large parts of the population means that it is very difficult for politicians to even grasp the consequences of many of their decisions on the lives of citizens. And if merely *grasping* those consequences is already that hard, then it is virtually hopeless that politicians would be able to experience the empathy required to fully gauge the consequences of their decisions.

Not surprisingly, in demographic terms, our political class is remarkably similar to another relevant group: the same business elite—and the representatives of other powerful established interests—we discussed earlier. Those meeting rooms where they all get together are largely populated by white males used to a privileged life. In several countries, most of them will even be alumni of the same two or three prestigious universities.

As described earlier, the psychological process of identification with a group—and its pernicious consequences—is fueled by the sharing of traits between the individual and other group members. The large extent to which our elected representatives and those speaking on behalf of big business share demographic traits and/or backgrounds is yet another reason to fear that our representatives will unduly identify with members of that other group and, thus, fail to adequately represent us.

10. Perhaps the world functions in such a way that politicians' hands are effectively tied

An altogether different explanation also needs to be included in this list. It is possible that what we perceive as the gap between what our elected leaders do and the public interest is not actually due to some perversion of their

mandates but, instead, to the sheer impossibility of acting in a fundamentally different way. Perhaps politicians, once they take office, discover that they are largely impotent to change even relatively minor aspects of how our societies function. This powerlessness could be due to various factors.

It could stem from the need to negotiate with other political actors (e.g., by striking a deal with other parties in order to secure approval in parliament for a given measure). This need for political compromise between parties helps explain why our representatives might not succeed in bringing about real change.

Or it could be due to the political dependence of our elected leaders on the business sector. As political scientists have been discussing for the past forty years, in our societies, the government is largely dependent on the private sector when it comes to job and wealth creation. These also happen to be the two main criteria by which the general population judges the government when election time arrives. (As Bill Clinton's campaign strategist famously put it, "[it's] the economy, stupid.") Combined, these two elements ensure that our elected leaders will necessarily be quite eager to cater to the interests of the business sector; otherwise, business will suffer, unemployment will rise and the politicians' chances of reelection will be severely hampered.

A modern variant of this same argument stresses the interconnectedness of our economies. According to its proponents, if a government adopts measures that the business sector deems less than desirable, then corporations will simply shift their activity to some other place on the globe, leaving in their wake unemployment and a missed opportunity for increasing local prosperity. At the same time, global financial markets might "punish" the offending country by demanding higher interest rates for loans to people and

businesses based there, which would, in turn, wreak further havoc on its economy.

Finally, yet another way in which our leaders might be powerless is by virtue of international agreements and/or membership in international institutions. According to this argument, belonging to bodies such as the European Union and World Trade Organization puts severe limits on what political leaders might achieve. An increasing number of decisions are made at the supranational level, and national governments have little choice but to implement them.



As I already pointed out, these factors interact with each other in a variety of ways. One example is how electoral considerations contribute to several of the other problems identified above. Obviously, maximizing their chances of reelection plays a key role in cultivating a short-term, demagogical orientation among our leaders. It also makes them particularly eager to play the internal power games within their party to the best of their advantage—no matter how much they might need to compromise their principles in the process. Electoral considerations can also go as far as making many political measures (seem) utterly impossible to put into practice. For example, the prospect of negative media coverage discussing job losses caused by a new piece of environmental regulation can make its adoption politically unviable—and thus contribute to the “politicians’ hands are tied” syndrome.

Similarly, a variety of these factors combine to explain the often-suspect proximity of our political leaders to the corporate world. One part of the story is their dependence on the business sector to generate levels of economic growth that will smooth the way to reelection. Another has to do with demographic and psychological factors, such as the

similarity and strong sense of identification between members of our political and economic elites. Finally, any instance of corruption—no matter whether it is more- or less-overt—will also further cement that relationship, as will a political culture that tolerates it.

When we look at the big picture—i.e., these different factors interacting with one another—it is hard to imagine a mischievous deity coming up with a political system that could possibly be *worse*-equipped than our current one to address the serious challenges facing us. What we *can* be confident of is that only under rare conditions would a professional politician ever take any action that would risk affecting her country's position in the reigning international political/economic order. One consequence of this is that pressing global issues—such as regulating an out-of-control financial sector and addressing climate change, to name but two examples—have little chance of making substantial progress outside of the murky, unreliable processes of international conferences.⁵



With this said, things get interesting—and worrisome—when some of the major behavioral drivers governing the political class pull in opposite directions. This is the situation

⁵ As David Runciman argues in *The Confidence Trap: A History of Democracy in Crisis from World War I to the Present*, our democracies *do* have a track record of eventually addressing crucial issues—but only when these problems have escalated into full-blown crises and push society to a breaking point. Obviously, this provides little comfort. How long until our leaders badly miscalculate the need for urgent action? And—for those who take this as evidence of how “self-correcting” and “adaptable” our democracies are—who will be held accountable for all the avoidable human suffering incurred while politicians drag their feet?

in which Europeans have recently found themselves, and it provides an exemplary case study of the limitations of electoral politics.⁶

The European financial crisis has placed the continent's political class in the crossfire between what are perhaps the two central drivers of its behavior: conformity to the international economic order and the desire not to openly antagonize large numbers of voters to a level that will generate electoral backlash (or even more serious social unrest). Both are ultimately forms of fear, as we will see.

All politicians (in northern and southern Europe alike) fear the consequences of challenging the ruling economic order. In short: the Euro must be preserved at all costs; the European Central Bank's mandate will remain largely unchanged; and sovereign debts are to be honored.

In northern European countries, electoral considerations cause politicians to also fear being seen as enabling "hand-outs" or displaying "forgiveness" towards the "lazy," indebted southerners. This means that northern politicians will be very reluctant to take the steps that could restore the viability of the ruling economic order. At the same time, many of their private banks (and their broader economies) will be in deep trouble if southern nations collapse and abandon the Euro in a "disorderly" way. They are, thus, in a bind.

In southern European countries, something equally (if not *more*) perverse is happening. Politicians fear the electoral repercussions of imposing the cuts demanded by their northern sponsors. But most of them fear *even more* the electoral consequences of being held responsible for their countries leaving the Euro zone.

⁶ Readers to whom the recent European crisis is of no special interest can skip over these final paragraphs without hesitation. They are included merely as an illustration of the ideas discussed earlier in this chapter.

In the face of such a serious threat to the prosperity of the whole continent, the European political class is paralyzed by fear. For now, they seem unable to take either of the two viable courses of action: 1) salvaging the economies of the indebted nations appears impossible because substantial debt haircuts are off the table, inflation remains a taboo and the leaders in northern countries are unable to commit to the mutualization of sovereign debt and assume shared responsibility for future bank rescues; and 2) having southern countries abandon the Euro and go back to their former national currencies in an orderly manner seems impossible because no office-holding southern European politician dares to consider it as an option.

In the middle of all this noise, the bigger questions naturally are forgotten. In particular, it is easy to forget the extent to which this entire situation is the result of another epic failure of democratic representation. The European political elite introduced the Euro in 1999 through a project that largely sidelined the European citizenry. At the time, our Promethean leaders were so collectively enamored of the “Great European Project” that they pressed ahead, paying little attention to the serious concerns of countless economists and the skepticism of much of the population. Almost twenty years later, in the midst of yet another wave of highly undemocratic decision-making, Europeans are now asked to collectively pay the price for these follies.⁷

⁷ Recent events in countries such as Poland and Latvia attest just how powerful these forces really are. With the extreme gravity of the European financial crisis plain for all to see, political leaders in both of these nations are aggressively pushing for their countries to adopt the Euro, even in face of widespread public opposition.

DELEGATION AND IRREFLECTION: THE TWIN ROOTS OF FAILED POLITICAL REPRESENTATION

Having sketched out the ways in which political representation is bound to continue failing us, let me pause briefly to ask what lies at the source of these problems. After all, and as most of us learned in school, representative democracy promised to be an effective solution to the challenge of public governance.

At the heart of this book lies the notion that there are twin causes for these problems.

Delegation

The first of these is our unquestioning faith in delegation. Being able to delegate tasks to others is obviously a vital aspect of our societies. However, delegation can work only if there are mechanisms in place to ensure the proper alignment between the wishes of the person delegating the task (in economics jargon, the “principal”) and the actions of her representative (the “agent”).

These mechanisms can take a variety of forms. One would be incentives to perform well: if the agent’s performance can be easily and reliably evaluated, then the principal can set goals for the agent to achieve and agree to reward (or punish) him accordingly.

Another driver of the agent’s “good behavior” can be social norms. Even in the absence of oversight, social

norms—such as a culture that promotes honesty, professionalism or, in the specific case of politics, a commitment to an ideal of public service—will often induce the agent to act according to the principal’s best interests.

A third important factor in aligning the interests of the principal and the behavior of the agent can be emotional ties. The existence of a mutually treasured relationship between the two parties—or even just a sense of identification between the agent and the principal—will often succeed in making delegation work.

With regard to the issue of political representation, how well can these three mechanisms work for us? Might they actually be effective in making politicians truly represent the public interest? The answer, unfortunately, is not very encouraging. Let’s see why they are likely to fail us.

Emotional ties, or even just a mere sense of identification, between members of our political class and the general population won’t help us much. As argued in the previous chapter, most politicians belong to a caste that lives in a world quite different from that of the bulk of the population. They will have few reasons to care for—or identify with—those on the other side of that divide. In fact, they are most likely to identify with *other elites* in our society, not with the general citizenry. This means that emotional ties will, if anything, *worsen* the chances of delegation working as we intended it to.

Nor can we rely on social norms. Even if, in some parts of the globe, there arguably existed, at some point in the second half of the twentieth century, a true culture of public service, evidence suggests that it is now almost universally extinct. If media accounts are any indication, a culture of cutthroat electioneering and PR strategizing currently dominates the field of professional politics. It is, thus, highly unlikely that social norms of (for example)

“serving the public interest” will ensure proper behavior by the political class.

This brings us to the central issue of how well incentives (coupled with an oversight mechanism) can help us keep tabs on the political class. After all, that’s precisely what our representative democracies place their faith in.

In the case of political representation, a politician’s prime incentive for good behavior is being reelected. Elections are the oversight mechanism: according to one of the central myths of our democracies, that is the time when citizens “pass judgment” on the performance of the incumbent leaders/party and collectively decide whether they are worthy of reelection.

Now, to evaluate how reasonable our collective faith in this mechanism really is, briefly entertain the following analogy. We will take our cue from introductory courses in microeconomics, in which the principal-agent problem is commonly presented by adopting the perspective of a shop owner (the principal) who decides to hire a manager (the agent) to supervise the daily operation of his business.

The question we should ask ourselves is: in the absence of strong social norms and/or an emotional tie between the two, how reasonable is it to expect that the manager will perform his job satisfactorily if the shop owner were to drop by the store every four years to check on how well business is going? Would anyone be amazed if, under these conditions, the manager were to disregard the interests of the shop owner, only quickly trying to cover up his lackadaisical or self-enriching behavior right before the shop owner’s visit?

Even though this situation already looks bad enough—you might ask yourself if you would ever consider becoming a partner in such a store—the reality of political representation is far worse. To get a grasp of why that is so, let’s continue

with the shop analogy. Doing so will introduce us to the second cause of failed political representation.⁸

Decision-making without reflection

We already know that the owner thinks it is enough to drop by every four years. Now, suppose that, when he does so, he merely takes a cursory glance at the manager's performance and takes neither the time nor the effort to reflect on the manager's decisions and how they have impacted his business. The owner neglects to study the accounting books or to hear what others can tell him about how well the business is being run. Instead, he lets his "instincts" (or "gut feelings") determine his evaluation of the manager's performance.

In a similarly thoughtless manner, during his brief visits to the store, the owner also considers the option of having the manager replaced. In line with his general approach, he

⁸ Before proceeding, though, it is worthwhile to highlight that misplaced expectations regarding delegation are a much broader problem that is also starkly present in the corporate world. In recent years, there has been talk of a "shareholder spring" (shareholders rising in protest against excessive executive compensation), but the depth of the problem is perhaps even better illustrated by the continued reckless behavior at banks. Whenever managers and the traders they oversee sustainedly engage in practices that put the very existence of the whole bank at stake—thus risking wiping out all the capital invested by shareholders whose interests they supposedly represent—our notions of delegation deserve some serious rethinking. These problems are addressed at length in *The Battle for the Soul of Capitalism* by John Bogle (founder of Vanguard, one of the world's largest mutual fund companies) and his later joint work with Alfred Rappaport (professor at the Kellogg Graduate School of Management at Northwestern University), *Saving Capitalism From Short-Termism*.

quickly reaches a decision on this issue, too: he skims the resumés of a couple of job candidates and soon makes up his mind whether any of them intuitively strikes him as “serious” and “up to the job.”



It’s quite obvious what is wrong with the shop owner’s behavior. His coming bankruptcy will be due to a combination of two factors: first, he delegated control of his store to the manager and, second, he believed that a cursory, unreflective and “gut-driven” overview of the manager’s performance every four years would be enough to keep the business on course.

The parallel with our system of political representation should be obvious. When we are asked, in an election, to “evaluate” how well our politicians have been serving us, we do a similarly poor job. We all, including “informed” citizens who follow the news, neglect to thoroughly study the most important policy issues. We vote for a candidate based largely on what are little more than “gut feelings” regarding her honesty and reasonableness. At best, we have picked up a few tidbits from friends and the media that we take as truly revealing of that candidate’s character.

These already precarious judgments are also considerably influenced by how much sympathy each of us has for the party a given politician represents. Here, again, the powerful psychological mechanism of identification rears its head (we met it before in our discussion of how politicians will tend to identify with other elites). In this case, social identification almost inevitably leads us to exaggerate the virtues of politicians belonging to the party we favor. Conversely, we tend to find the faults of the other parties’ representatives particularly damning. Again, we often reach

these conclusions unconsciously, and these processes influence our judgments without us even being aware of them. As one might expect, our ability to competently judge the performance of politicians at election time is, thus, further weakened.

It should be clear that we voters are not to “blame” for our failure to adequately judge the performance of our representatives. After all, doing so would require us to engage in a careful analysis of the policy issues facing our societies. Only then could we properly evaluate our politicians according to how well they performed on those issues. But the truth is that it is simply not realistic to expect citizens to engage in that kind of in-depth analysis.

Look at this from the perspective of any individual citizen. The amount of information that she would need to analyze to reach an adequately informed decision about just a handful of major policy issues is staggering. In a representative democracy, that same citizen knows that her single vote is bound to have only the tiniest impact on the outcome of an election—after all, she is just one among millions of voters. The amount of work involved in thoroughly analyzing a policy issue/option, combined with the extremely low likelihood that a single vote will significantly affect the outcome of an election, makes it reasonable for individual voters to abstain from digging deep into any issues. That is why political scientists speak of voters’ “rational ignorance”: in a modern-day representative democracy, it simply does not pay for the voter to be fully informed on policy issues.



Even if we somehow managed to overcome rational ignorance, and citizens developed an inclination to be “reasonably good shop owners” who gather some of the

available information before making election decisions, matters wouldn't necessarily be significantly better.

Virtually all voters will still rely on their own *individual* consumption of information *from secondary sources* when forming an opinion about a politician or policy topic. Media reports, arguments by interest groups in favor/against a given politician or policy measure, and the public statements of politicians, commentators and other opinion-makers are all likely to play a key role in shaping voters' views. This introduces a number of interrelated problems that are very difficult to overcome.

The cornerstone of these problems is that this wealth of information will tend to be processed by individuals in largely the same "snap," unreflective manner that currently plagues most voters' judgment of politicians. We read a couple of articles, perhaps catch a debate on TV and form "an opinion."

While doing so, we favor some media outlets or commentators over others, deeming some as trustworthy and others as less reliable. Likewise, we label specific news stories as important and credible, while relegating others to the back of our minds. We do all this in a largely unconscious way.

Remember our earlier discussion of "confirmation bias"? We will accept and believe news and other information that agrees with our worldview, while we will tend to discount any conflicting evidence. This largely ensures that, even if voters tried to be better-informed on matters, they would quite likely end up merely reinforcing their pre-existing, "intuitive" views on the issue(s).

To get a notion of how precarious the "opinions" we all form really are, consider that virtually none of them will ever be subject to the rigors of even the most basic adversarial challenge.⁹

⁹ At least beyond the casual exchange of a couple of provocative

Most of us would agree that, when facing an important decision, it is quite reasonable to ask others for feedback and, hopefully, have a reasoned discussion about which course to take. With the benefit of their insights and experiences, you stand a very real chance of improving the quality of your decisions.

However, voters' political views rarely, if ever, get exposed to the light of day. In fact, they have quite a dark, depressing life cycle: they emerge from a murky, deeply flawed information-gathering process, live a largely unquestioned existence in the depths of their carrier's mind and, finally, seep out to leave their mark on a secret ballot. With the exception, perhaps, of mushrooms, nothing good grows in the dark. So, it should be evident that opinions formed this way are at odds with the kind of careful, reasoned decision-making required of citizens when it comes to politics.¹⁰



A second, closely related problem with the way we voters decide on political matters is that, by basing our views on our private "digestion" of information coming from secondary sources, we collectively become easy prey for manipulation by special-interest groups. The reason for this

remarks between friends or family members of different political persuasions, both of whom are guaranteed to stick to well-defined roles during the exchange—e.g., "the liberal" and "the conservative"—and none of them actually considering the content of the other's remarks.

¹⁰ In recent years, the virtues of spontaneous, instinctive decision-making have been popularized in books such as Malcolm Gladwell's *Blink: The Power Of Thinking Without Thinking*. I hope it is easy to (intuitively!) recognize that complex policy issues (e.g., how to properly regulate the financial sector) don't quite have an "intuitively evident" solution.

is that any “encounter” between a voter and these secondary sources will necessarily be a highly asymmetric one.

Discussing markets as distinct as the global cotton trade and modern-day financial markets, the economic sociologist Michel Callon has described how an “uneven distribution of calculative capabilities” commonly leads to market power and transactions that most would deem as “rigged.” In the age of high-frequency trading, for example, no amateur day-trader—no matter how skilled—is a match for hedge funds armed with dozens of brilliant mathematicians and powerful computers. It is important that we come to realize that the “electoral market”—i.e., the market for votes in which our futures are decided—is equally rigged. Given the resources available to the political class and special-interest groups, the political views of each of us (taken in isolation) are easy prey.

Politicians and special-interest groups invest large amounts of time, effort and other resources into making their public image as appealing as possible to large segments of the population. They hire PR professionals and run countless focus groups to test variations of their “message,” subsequently honing it according to the feedback they receive from these groups so that the average voter will take its main points as “intuitively true” and, thus, will leave them unquestioned. And they spend enormous amounts of money to guarantee that this message is delivered to you in the format—and at the time and place—that is most likely to have an impact on your voting behavior.

Think about the average voter, who is busy going about her life—juggling work and family issues while trying to complete all the tasks on her to-do list. Time for reflection and pondering is not something she has a lot of. Now, add to this picture a flurry of expertly crafted political messages, each of them promoting a different candidate and all tar-

geted at her. To think that the outcome of this process might be even remotely described as a reasoned, careful pondering of different political points of view is very optimistic, to say the least. Yet, incredibly, we stick to the fiction that elections provide us with an adequate mechanism to accurately evaluate and compare the political options presented to us.

Perhaps the closest analogue is that of entering a modern-day supermarket believing that you will buy “strictly what you need.” While walking down an aisle, you are bombarded with a variety of stimuli carefully engineered to induce largely unconscious responses that will lead to impulse shopping. Even the physical layout of the store itself is the result of many hours spent studying how to maximize the number of products you are exposed to and the amount of time you will spend inside it—since the more products you walk past and the longer your visit, the more you are likely to buy.

As voters, we are likewise stuck on the receiving end of this kind of deeply asymmetric “cognitive warfare.” An intelligent, well-meaning voter who relies on the passive, individual consumption of secondary sources is condemned to be largely overpowered by the combination of vast resources and state-of-the-art marketing techniques aimed at influencing his views. Competition among different political messages will, at best, result in the party with the most appealing message—often the one with the largest marketing budget—winning the public vote. And we can easily agree that is not what a democracy should be run on.

As long as our political systems relegate us to the role of a voter who relies on “gut feelings” and secondary sources of information, we will be vulnerable to rhetoric and manipulation. Thus, we will continue to be unable to critically engage with the messages we are exposed to, and politicians and special-interest groups will continue to have their way.



In summary, there are two problems at the root of the failure of democratic representation:

- 1) We have *delegated power* to the political class and hardly supervise it.
- 2) As voters, we are condemned to *unreflective and easy-to-influence decision-making*. Even if we were inclined to effectively supervise politicians, this would severely limit our ability to do so.

Together, these problems present a real challenge. On the one hand, we can entrust power to a political elite who is able to minimally ponder policy issues—but who is also almost totally unaccountable to the general population. (This is what we have been doing so far.) On the other, we can give voters a stronger voice through, for example, a more direct form of democracy, but the risk is that they will speak in an uninformed, non-thinking way. Neither seems an especially promising approach.



Let's return for a moment to the hypothetical case of a shop owner and his manager. Some of you may have felt—rightly so—that the comparison was an oversimplification. After all, the shop belongs to a single individual, while, in our societies, millions of us are ultimately in charge.

At first sight, this adds a whole other layer of complexity to the problem: it introduces a need for collective decision-making. If the shop were, in fact, owned by millions of people, then the issue would no longer simply be how to

ensure that the manager's actions are in line with the owners' interests. Before worrying about that, the owners would first need to collectively agree on *what they want*. More concretely, they would need to find a way to jointly decide on matters and speak with a single voice.

At the core of this book lies the notion that this additional difficulty actually holds the key to solving the *other* problems we've already identified (that is, ensuring effective representation and avoiding thoughtless decision-making). That key is *citizen deliberation*, and we will come back to it repeatedly throughout the rest of this book.