Democratic Theory and Political Science: A Pragmatic Method of Constructive Engagement

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This article develops two conceptual tools to synthesize democratic theory and the empirical study of institutions. The first is a standard to assess conceptions of democracy called pragmatic equilibrium. *A conception of democracy is in pragmatic equilibrium just in case the consequences of its institutional prescriptions realize its values well and better than any other feasible institutional arrangements across a wide range of problems and contexts. Pragmatic equilibrium is a kind of Rawlsian reflective equilibrium. The second is a* method of practical reasoning *about the consequences of alternative institutional choices that brings conceptions of democracy closer to pragmatic equilibrium. These two ideas are then applied to four conceptions of democracy—minimal, aggregative, deliberative, and participatory—and to two governance problems—deciding rules of political structure and minority tyranny—to show how each conception can improve through reflection on the empirical consequences of various institutional arrangements.*

The tragedy of the world is that those who are imaginative have but slight experience, and those who are experienced have feeble imaginations. Fools act on imagination without knowledge, and pedants act on knowledge without imagination. (Alfred North Whitehead, "The Universities and Their Function" [1927]).

Sharp boundaries currently separate normative political theory from empirical political science. Rogers Smith (2003, 76) notes that the major works in political theory from the 1960s through the 1980s composed by Strauss, Rawls, Nozick, Derrida, Dworkin, Foucault, Ackerman, Riker and Habermas "display only limited direct engagement either with contemporary political issues or with empirical social science." Ian Shapiro (2003, 2) laments that "Normative and explanatory theories of democracy grow out of literatures that proceed, for the most part, along separate tracks, largely uninformed by one another." This division of labor has become a segregation of thought that now poses a fundamental obstacle to progress in democratic theory. Debates among the major contending conceptions of democracy—direct, representative, participatory, minimal, deliberative, and aggregative—proceed largely without the benefit of empirical evidence about whether the arrangements and practices they recommend are feasible, could be stable, or whether they would produce desirable outcomes. Democratic theorists frequently help themselves to so-called "stylized facts" to construct arguments that are valid but not necessarily true. Ascer-

taining truth requires replacing those stylized facts with real ones. That, in turn, entails bridging normative and empirical research. But how, precisely, should democratic theorists engage with empirical political science?

At least two research strategies have combined normative and empirical inquiry. Some scholars, often seeking to identify more desirable forms of political life, have sought to understand particular institutions that exhibit attractive democratic characteristics. Carole Pateman and Jane Mansbridge—two of the most important theorists of participatory democracy—studied actual worker-managed organizations (Mansbridge 1980; Pateman 1975) to develop their ideals of democracy. Similarly, scholars have pursued inductive research on institutions such as the New England Town meeting (Bryan 2004; Mansbridge), urban bureaucracies (Cohen and Sabel 1997; Fung 2004), and experimental deliberative arenas (Fishkin 1995). This research strategy has revealed democratically promising institutional possibilities. But the difficulty of generalization is its fundamental limitation. The successes of these practices often depend upon the rarified circumstances of their construction. It is therefore difficult to connect these inductive projects to broader conceptions of democracy that are intended to apply across a wide range of problems, circumstances, scales, and times.

William Galston (2003), among others, notes that "grand political theories are rich sources of empirical conjectures." Political scientists have extracted falsifiable hypotheses from democratic theories or used empirical findings to qualify and criticize conceptions of democracy. Studies of juries, for example, reveal that their deliberations often reflect gender and social biases (Sanders 1997). Cass Sunstein (2000) has found that deliberation can cause participants to polarize rather than to moderate their views or reach consensus. In a recent book, Diana Mutz (2006) uses survey evidence to argue that there is a trade-off between the social heterogeneity that democratic theorists favor (e.g., Young 2002) and the extent of political engagement. Decades of research in political participation has established that well off individuals participate more than

those who are disadvantaged, and that this tendency is exacerbated in more intensive forms of participation (Nagel 1987, 58). Thus it may be difficult to reconcile participatory and egalitarian commitments.

In principle, democratic theories should be tested and developed in just this way. However, the tension between the empirical, scientific desire to establish general explanations and the normative goal of imagining more attractive forms of political life has complicated the dialog. Specifically, such general empirical findings may not apply to theorists' heavily qualified and conditioned arguments. In their own studies of deliberative polling, for example, James Fishkin and his colleagues find no strong tendency toward group polarization or domination (Fishkin and Luskin 2004) perhaps because those deliberations are moderated and because participants receive balanced briefing materials (Manin 2005). Similarly, scholars of participatory democracy have identified institutional designs in which socially and economically disadvantaged individuals are actually overrepresented and so reverse the predominant positive correlation between status and political engagement (Baiocchi 2005; Heller and Isaac 2003). Empirical investigators might respond by conditioning their investigations to examine political participation or deliberation under the circumscribed, favorable conditions that political theorists stipulate. The price of this normative relevance, however, would be that their findings would lack generality; they would no longer be studying deliberation or participation as such, or even as it typically occurs.

I propose here a more general and systematic approach to synthesizing the normative and empirical study of democratic institutions. The basic and unobjectionable idea grounding this approach is that democratic theories should be consequentially consistent. Any ideal or conception of democracy is composed of both an account of important values, such as self-rule, accountability, political equality, and liberty, and a prescription about governance institutions such as elections, deliberation, or direct participation. The institutional recommendations of any conception should yield consequences that advance its central values. When a conception of democracy has institutional consequences that are consistent with its values, I say that it is in *pragmatic equilibrium*.[1] If a conception of democracy proposes institutions whose consequences turn out on empirical investigation to be inconsistent with its values, then it should be revised or discarded.

There is no reason to suppose that democratic theorists of different casts will converge on a unique pragmatic equilibrium point; there may be many pragmatic equilibria. A theorist who begins from Schumpeterian values and institutions may reach a very different pragmatic equilibrium point than one who begins from a deliberative conception; consequences acceptable to one will be rejected by the other. Furthermore, a conception of democracy that is consequentially consistent in this way may nevertheless be deeply flawed, perhaps because its values are morally objectionable. The standard of pragmatic equilibrium is not the only measure of a democratic theory, though it is one that has been hitherto neglected. The rest of this article develops the standard of pragmatic equilibrium, articulates a method of practical reasoning through which empirical research can inform the development of democratic theories that meet that standard, and then applies the method to several conceptions of democracy and political problems.

The pragmatic equilibrium standard and the method of practical reasoning respond to calls of critics such as Shapiro (2002) and Smith (2003) for political theorists to engage contemporary social problems more explicitly and empirical research more directly. Perhaps following the inclinations of Dewey himself (Putnam 1995, 209), Smith has suggested that reconnecting normative work to practical concerns and empirical research entails a turn away from the "grand theories" of the 1960s and 1970s. But the pragmatic equilibrium approach—itself inspired by that grand theorist John Rawls—begins with ambitious models of democracy and seeks to improve them through encounters with contemporary problems and empirical realities. The synthesis of political theory with empirical research should aim to produce conceptions of democracy that are more, not less, grand in the sense that they combine an attractive and complete account of the values of democratic order together with demonstrations of empirical and institutional plausibility that available conceptions of democracy now lack.

PRAGMATIC EQUILIBRIUM

A conception of democracy articulates the central values that regulate collective decisions and actions in a democratic society, provides a benchmark against which to judge existing institutions, and guides efforts to improve those institutions (Pettit 1997, 102). Much of the debate in democratic theory concerns whether elite, pluralist, deliberative, participatory, or other conceptions are attractive and feasible. Every conception of democracy must possess at least three components to be complete. First, it must offer an articulation of the values that relate collective decisions and actions to the interests and views of the individuals who compose a collectivity. All democrats adhere to the value of *nontyranny*—that no individual or group should decide collective issues regardless of others' interests and preferences. Beyond that, different kinds of democrats variously endorse other values, such as public accountability, self-government, reasoned rule, common good, political equality, private liberty, self-actualization, and competent government. Second, every democratic conception must recommend institutions—for example, political liberties, competitive elections, universal suffrage, civic associations, referenda, town meetings, and peak bargaining arrangements—that advance its

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[1] The final section describes the way in which pragmatic equilibrium is a species of reflective equilibrium as articulated by John Rawls (Rawls 1951, 1971). The method of reflective equilibrium has received sustained discussion in political philosophy (e.g., Daniels 1996; Scanlon 2002).

underlying values. Third, values and institutional pre-scriptions are typically connected deductively by pre-suming empirical facts—often quite stylized—about the political psychology and capabilities of individuals and about sociopolitical dynamics. The conceptions of democracy that normative theory produces can thus be conceived as packages of values, facts, and institutions in which institutional prescriptions are deduced from core values and presumed facts.

A conception of democracy is in pragmatic equilibrium just in case:

PE1. The consequences of
PE2. the institutions that it prescribes
PE3. realize its values
PE4. well and better than any other feasible institu-tional arrangements
PE5. over a wide range of problems and contexts.

Pragmatic equilibrium thus specifies a relationship among underlying values and goals, institutional pre-scriptions, and the empirical consequences of those prescriptions. This formulation of pragmatic equilib-rium articulates a consequentialist standard that is at one level unobjectionable. Conceptions of democ-racy offer institutional prescriptions to realize certain values.

Applying the standard of pragmatic equilibrium is straightforward in principle but complicated in prac-tice. The first step begins with a well-specified concep-tion of democracy—one with clearly articulated values and institutional prescriptions such as those in the main streams of democratic theory. The second step is to de-lineate a set of problems that require collective decision and action (PE5). Because there are infinitely many social and political problems, it is sensible to begin with the large categories of public problems that are important to citizens and to democratic governance. These might include not only national decisions relat-ing to social, economic, regulatory, and foreign policy but also local concerns such as education and commu-nity safety. The third step is to test that conception by noting the consequences—through direct observation when possible and informed reflection otherwise—of making collective decisions through the institutions prescribed by the democratic conception under review (PE1, PE3). Fourth, the theorist then specifies the al-ternative ways in which collective decisions might be made for the problem in question and assesses the consequences of those alternatives (PE4). Again, it is impossible in practice to assess all feasible alternatives, so one reasonable way to proceed is by analyzing the most common ways of making the kinds of decisions in question together with uncommon methods that seem likely to have normatively desirable properties. If the originally prescribed institutions yield superior consequences, then that conception of democracy is in pragmatic equilibrium.

This standard creates a close link between normative theory and empirical research that is related to classical pragmatism, and especially to the political thought of John Dewey, in five distinct ways.

First, classical pragmatism takes problems as the source of reflective intelligence (Dewey 1896) and it takes interpersonal problems, or externalities, that arise from social and political interactions as the source of political institutions (Dewey 1954, 34–35). Pragmatic equilibrium takes problems and the contexts in which they occur as the domain of democratic theories. Just as theories of justice formulate judgments and princi-ples to resolve disagreements between competing in-terests (Rawls 1951, 177), democratic theories describe the values and principles that should guide collective decisions about social problems. The same underly-ing values and principles may well require different decision-making arrangements for different problems and contexts. A democrat for whom deliberation and public reason are cardinal values need not prescribe citizen deliberation, or even deliberation, for every problem. This focus on variations in problems and contexts is analogous to the rejection of universal-ism and the problem-driven approach to empirical in-vestigation urged by Donald Green and Ian Shapiro (Green and Shapiro 1996; Shapiro 2005, 51–99). *Ce-teris paribus*, a conception of democracy that encom-passes a wider range of problems and contexts is better—because it is more complete—than one that addresses fewer problems and contexts. For example, a conception of democracy that successfully accounts for collective decision-making at the local, national, and international levels is better than one that covers only the national level.

Second, as classical pragmatism holds that the mean-ing of an idea or belief is given by its practical conse-quences (James 1975, 28–29; Pierce 1878), pragmatic equilibrium focuses attention on the consequences of institutional designs (PE3). Third, pragmatists are fal-libilists; they "recognize that even those beliefs about which [they] are most convinced may turn out to be false" (Knight and Johnson 1996, 567). The pragmatic equilibrium standard focuses theoretical attention on the mistakes of democratic conceptions. In particular, a democratic conception is false when the facts of the world depart from its stylized facts; its institutions are likely then to generate consequences that fail to realize its values. The following sections show how such unan-ticipated consequences render the major conceptions of democracy unstable in the sense that they are conse-quentially inconsistent; this is what it means to be out of pragmatic equilibrium.

Fourth, pragmatic equilibrium focuses on institu-tional variation and choice. There are many ways to or-ganize collective decision-making in democracies and Dewey writes that the task of political analysis is to un-derstand them (Dewey 1954, 100; Knight and Johnson 1999, 583): "All intelligent political criticism is com-parative. It deals not with all-or-none situations, but with practical alternatives." The menu of institutional alternatives is far richer than the dichotomy between representative and participatory democracy supposes, and most of the items on that menu remain empirically and normatively unexplored. PE2 and PE4 of the above formulation stress this diversity and the importance of exploring institutional designs.

Fifth, the approach offers one way to make sense of the pragmatic rejection of the dichotomy between facts and values (Putnam 1995). In particular, pragmatic equilibrium and the method for reaching it reciprocally determine the democratic values and institutional consequences that constitute a democratic conception.

Much of the recent scholarship on pragmatism in political theory has addressed its substantive political and institutional implications. Richard Posner (2003), for example, contends that contemporary pragmatists ought to endorse minimal, Schumpeterian institutions. Knight and Johnson (1996) respond that pragmatism entails radical democratic commitments. Though they disagree fundamentally with each other, both Posner and Knight and Johnson maintain a pragmatic orientation toward evidence that is shared by the approach laid out here. They seek to support their democratic conceptions with empirical materials and positive political theories (Knight and Johnson 1999). In contrast to these views, the idea of pragmatic equilibrium and its associated method of practical reasoning is initially neutral with respect to substantive conceptions of democracy. It is constructed as a tool for democratic theorizing rather than as a way to justify a particular model, position, or set of values. Prior to applying the test, there are no special reasons to think that minimal conceptions will fare any better (or worse) than radical democratic ones. Still less does pragmatic equilibrium include classical pragmatic commitments such as Dewey's endorsement of participatory institutions or his ethical ideal of growth, human flourishing, and self-realization (MacGilvray 2004, 132–33).

PRACTICAL REASONING ABOUT INSTITUTIONS AND VALUES

When a conception of democracy fails the test of pragmatic equilibrium, it may be modified in ways that bring it closer to fulfilling that standard. One straightforward procedure is to treat institutions instrumentally, as means to realize ends that are given by the values of a democratic conception. A procedure of revision would then search the space of feasible institutional alternatives for the combination that maximizes the accomplishment of the values of a democratic conception over the relevant range of problems. But the difficulty with this instrumental approach is that institutions are deeply connected to the democratic values they advance. Imagine a Schumpeterian who begins with a commitment to a certain kind of official accountability and to citizens' private liberty as basic values, but then realizes the facts of the world favor quite participatory arrangements to achieve these ends. Such outcomes can create pressures on a conception of democracy to revise not only its institutional prescriptions but also its underlying values.

The approach to pragmatic equilibrium favored here subjects both the values and the institutions of a democratic conception to revision through reflection. This procedure extends Henry Richardson's (1994, 57–61; 2002) account of practical reasoning for individual agents. According to Richardson, individual deliberation is not just instrumental; individuals' interests and goals can change when they act in concrete situations as a result of reflection, interaction, and discussion. *Pace homo economus*, it is a completely ordinary experience for individuals to use their practical reason not only to select the means that best satisfy their preferences and accomplish their goals but also to deliberate about ends themselves. When faced with new information, experiences, or situations, individuals may come to see the vagueness in their goals, recognize contradictions among them, and even adopt new ends. Imagine a rational politician whose overriding purpose is reelection. Surveying the field of possible wedge issues, he seizes on the scourge of homelessness (about which he knows little) as a means to political victory. But after meeting homeless men and women and their children during the campaign, he takes a genuine interest in their welfare. He becomes unable to stomach the cynicism that treating homeless people only as a means to electoral victory requires. Indeed, after his successful reelection, he occasionally supports policies that benefit the homeless in his city but that cost him votes. Homelessness begins for him as a means to the end of political success but it becomes an end in itself (Richardson 1994, 82–86).

Analogously, a democratic theorist may adjust the institutional and ethical commitments of his conception of democracy by reasoning practically about which institutions will work best and then about what is democratically valuable. To illustrate, consider the stages through which practical reason about a problem in context can work to internally transform a conception of democracy. Suppose that some city actually adopts a participatory democratic system of neighborhood assemblies to govern important local concerns such as the provision of city services, urban infrastructure, and land use. That city, furthermore, makes substantial investments that create favorable conditions for the success of this participatory endeavor—it funds community organizers to mobilize participants and training workshops to equip them to take on the work of sublocal governance. If these arrangements generate effective and just public decisions through a deliberative process that transforms individuals into more public regarding citizens, then a participatory conception of democracy is vindicated for at least this context.

Unintended consequences, however, may trigger the second step of the practical reasoning process. In many contexts, real facts do not conform to the stylized facts of a conception of democracy. Reality thus intrudes on theory by invalidating its institutional deduction. Suppose, for example, that in some neighborhoods where participation is high, so many people show up to meetings that decision processes become unwieldy and many can only listen and observe rather than express and engage. In others, too few participate to make decisions competently. The system ends up working best where a handful of residents take a deep and ongoing interest in these affairs. The individuals in that small

group gain the expertise necessary to comprehend the complexity of urban governance choices. They serve as a focal point for other neighbors who lack participatory inclinations to communicate their needs and interests. And they are generous and representative, so they produce public goods and perform genuine service.

The third step of this reasoning process involves revision of the conception of democracy in light of such new facts and experiences. The participatory democrat might respond by searching for other institutional forms that better vindicate his prior value commitments (to political equality, self-government, reasoned rule, and participation). In light of this experience, he may come to think that the best institutions for realizing participatory democracy involve small groups of relative amateurs focusing on public problems in a sustained way, rather than on larger groups (in principle everyone) that deliberate less intensively. So long as there are enough small groups and issues so that everyone participates in some decisions (but not everyone in any particular decisions or anyone in every decision), he may regard his values as well served. More deeply, the participatory democrat might also revise the values that ground his conception. This experience might show, for example, that making wise infrastructure or land use decisions is difficult work and he might come to appreciate more deeply the consequences of bad decisions. This realization might promote a previously subordinate value—that of governmental competence. He may also soften his objection to representation and thus respecify his notion of participation when he recognizes that what the small groups of volunteers in the neighborhood association are doing is in part representing the interests and views of those who do not participate directly.

In this third step, then, incommodious facts trigger the revision of a conception of democracy in two possible ways. When facts may make it clear that a received institutional prescription (everyone should participate in direct deliberation) fails to advance the values (self-government, participation, political equality) that justify it, the first response is to cast about for alternative institutional arrangements that better realize those values. A second response is to revise the democratic values themselves in ways that respond to the possibilities and constraints revealed by empirical analysis or reduce vagueness or inconsistency in a conception's values.

This process of practical reasoning occurs within a single conception of democracy. But if facts of contexts break the tight connection between configurations of democratic values and their institutional implications, then there is at least a possibility of agreement—in particular contexts—between previously antithetical conceptions of democracy. It may be, for example, that a Schumpeterian comes to acknowledge all of the failures of governance through a corrupt representative machinery in some city and to support the same institutions as a participatory democrat there. They may agree upon the same set of institutions based upon their very different unreconstructed value commitments. Or,

more deeply, they may rearticulate the values that ground their respective conceptions of democracy in ways that are more compatible with one another. In the urban governance example, the Schumpeterian may come to think that the ordinary citizens need not "fall to a lower level of mental performance" at least when considering local issues and thus that some stronger notion of self-government is possible and desirable (Schumpeter 1942, 262). He may also come to think that in particular hostile contexts, extensive citizen participation is necessary for effective public accountability.

This method shows only that it is possible for proponents of particular conceptions of democracy to revise them rationally by reflecting upon the consequences of political practices, not that they will necessarily do so. For many problems, compelling evidence regarding the comparative effects of alternative institutions may be unavailable. In such cases, conceptions of democracy should make their empirical and institutional speculations explicit to facilitate further investigation. Even when faced with substantial disconfirming evidence, however, commonplace cognitive and social biases may lead theorists to ignore or reject it. The recent history and sociology of science has demonstrated that physicists and chemists often resist new facts that would require them to revise their settled theories. Political theorists are not immune from these same tendencies. But it is possible to mitigate their effects. Theorists who engage in practical reasoning should seek the stance of inquiry of Rawls's (1951) "competent judges." A competent judge "exhibits a desire to consider questions with an open mind, and consequently . . . is . . . always willing to reconsider it in light of further evidence and reasons" and "knows, or tries to know, his own emotional, intellectual, and moral predilections and makes a conscious effort to take them into account in weighing the merits of any question." This formulation is highly congenial to the emphasis that American pragmatists such as Pierce, James, and Dewey placed on actively seeking experiences and evidence that falsify beliefs and their hostility to dogma (Putnam 1995, 171). The standard of pragmatic equilibrium vastly enlarges the range of potentially disconfirming data, and so the sources of reflection and refinement, by demanding that democratic theories account for the results of empirical research.

A related concern stems from the inevitable sensitivity of assessments to the specific problems and alternatives subjected to analysis through the pragmatic equilibrium standard. Suppose that we have reached what appears to be a pragmatic equilibrium for some conception of democracy by working through many contemporary problems and institutional prescriptions. It may be that considering additional problems or other institutions would reveal that this point is not a pragmatic equilibrium at all. Since the argument for any particular pragmatic equilibrium depends on the cases that have been selected to reach it, the method is vulnerable to selection bias. In this regard, however, it does not differ from most empirical methods and the general remedies apply. Those defending a conception—and their

critics—should seek to test it with ever more problems and alternatives. Though the illustrations of practical reasoning below utilize brief case study materials, this method should in principle incorporate quantitative empirical studies as well. Even so, such a process can never be exhaustive. But in the course of progressively developing a conception of democracy, its values and institutions become more adequate, relevant, feasible, and actionable as it incorporates additional problems and contexts.

FOUR CONCEPTIONS OF DEMOCRACY

To understand how the pragmatic equilibrium standard and the practical reasoning procedure operate in practice, consider four major conceptions of democracy—minimal, aggregative, deliberative, and participatory—as value-deduced institutional packages.[2] Each of these conceptions occupies a large place in political theory because it captures widespread intuitions about democracy. Each offers an attractive account of the values and institutions that ought to organize contemporary societies. Each has partisans who regard their conception as coherent and valid as well as critics who regard it as inconsistent, implausible, or otherwise unattractive. Perhaps for these reasons, there has not been much progress in resolving disputes between these dramatically different views. These are not the only conceptions of democracy. Indeed, other conceptions such as Theodore Lowi's (1989) juridical democracy or Bruce Ackerman's (1991) dualist democracy, might already be closer to pragmatic equilibrium. It would be desirable to test those and many others as well. I illustrate pragmatic equilibrium with four established democratic conceptions because they contrast a wide range of sensibilities about what is democratically valuable and institutionally feasible (cf. Rawls 1971, 122). Also, part of the value of these two tools lies in bringing conceptions closer to pragmatic equilibrium, not just validating those—if any such exist—that are already there. If some of these conceptions already pass the test, then pragmatic equilibrium is a logic of justification for them. However, the next two sections show how each conception falls short of the standard.

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[2] I associate these four conceptions with particular prominent democratic theorists who articulate versions of each view. The conceptions, however, are specified to convey general characteristics rather than the specific views of particular theorists. Some theorists' views contain elements of more than one conception. In passages where he describes democracy as a political market, for example, Schumpeter articulates an aggregative conception of democracy that is more demanding than the minimal position usually associated with him (Schumpeter 1942). Similarly, the aggregative conception described here is more economistic than Robert Dahl's actual view. There are many flavors of deliberative democracy, and this account weaves together only certain strands of that rich literature. For purposes of elucidation, each view is characterized in sufficient detail to reason about its probable responses to various dilemmas. Each rendering captures essential elements of the theorists of each tradition, though none reflects the richness of any particular theorist's full view.

The practical reasoning process then provides a logic of discovery to improve each flawed conception's values and institutions.

Minimal Democracy

Of the four conceptions, minimal democracy has the least ambitious expectations. On this account, democracy is more desirable than are other systems of government because it renders political leaders accountable to its citizens and because it protects private liberties (Posner 2003; Przeworksi 1999; Riker 1982; Schumpeter 1942). The minimal democrat rejects more demanding norms of decision making such as self-government, reasoned rule, and pursuit of a common good because he thinks that straightforward facts about political psychology and individual political capacities make them impossible. He agrees with public-opinion scholars who find that most citizens are remarkably uninformed about public affairs and that they have no coherent views, or quite stupid ones, on most issues. Even if citizens miraculously became more intelligent and well informed, the impossibility theorems of social choice theory—which show that under quite general conditions and constraints there is no unique way to combine the preferences of many individuals into a single aggregated choice—render terms like "self-government," "reasoned rule," and "common good" nonsensical.

In light of these chastening political realities, the minimal democrat favors regular competitive elections as the central political institution. He does not think that elections enable citizens to rule themselves by selecting the leaders or policies that they want. Instead, elections confer the right to rule on the victorious party or candidate until the next election. Elections thus realize the value of public accountability by providing regular occasions for leaders to explain themselves to citizens and for citizens to sanction leaders. Elections manifest the value of political equality when every adult has an equal right to stand for office and to vote. Competitive elections protect private liberty by enabling citizens to eject leaders who violate them. Furthermore, elections advance these values of public accountability, political equality, and protection of private liberty without requiring too much time, energy, or commitment from citizens or asking more of them than is psychologically or sociologically plausible (Kateb 1981).

Aggregative Democracy

In contrast to the minimal view, aggregative democrats hold that citizens can and do have rational political preferences and views and that these can be sensibly combined. In this ideal, the opinions and judgments of citizens determine the content of laws, policies, and public actions (Dahl 1989). Aggregative democrats are well aware of the research in political science and social theory that leads minimal democrats to be skeptical about more demanding notions of democracy, but they reject their conclusions. In many contexts, for example, it is perfectly sensible to map citizens' preferences

along a single dimension—say left to right—and then ask whether the actions of government respond to the preferences of the majority. Aggregative democrats thus think it reasonable to say that government is more democratic when laws and policies lie closer to the position of the median voter (Black 1948; Downs 1957; Hacker and Pierson 2005). Implicitly or explicitly, most empirical political scientists hold the aggregative norm of democracy.

Aggregative democracy begins with the value of self-government. If self-government is possible, there are many reasons to favor it as a central democratic value. One Millian starting point is that individuals are generally the best judges of their own interests and welfare (Dahl 1989). Therefore, laws and policies should flow from the views of citizens. Political equality has two important dimensions in the aggregative conception. First, if every individual is the best judge of his own interest and each person's interest should count equally in determining law and public policy, then citizens should have equal opportunities to participate effectively and influence political decisions. But developing coherent and consistent political views and opinions that accurately reflect one's interests is not easy to do in complex contemporary societies. The second dimension of political equality thus requires that citizens enjoy equal opportunities to develop "enlightened understandings" about their political choices and preferences (1989, 111–12).

Aggregative democracy places less emphasis on three other values—reasoned rule, private liberty, and the common good—though these are not absent. Reason, or perhaps rationality, figures into the cognitive processes of reaching enlightened understanding (Dahl 1991). There are many issues on which individuals are uncertain or confused. Illumination requires information, discussion, and argument. Basic liberties such as freedom of association, conscience, person, and personal property are thus important to facilitate the development of political understanding, effective political participation, and autonomy. Aggregative democrats lack any thick sense of a common good beyond the good of a democratic process that generates laws and policies that flow from, and advance the welfare of, diverse citizens. Because the aggregative conception focuses on how decisions ought to be made rather than questions of policy and implementation, it places no particular priority on the value competence in government.

What kinds of institutions advance this notion of democracy as self-government and political equality? Aggregative democrats favor many of the same mechanisms that minimalists desire, but hold them to more demanding normative standards. Free and fair competitive elections, equal rights to hold political office, and universal suffrage help to ensure that the interests and views of each citizen will be counted equally in the process of making collective decisions. Beyond these devices, aggregative democrats typically also support freedom for and provision of resources to secondary associations, freedom of expression, and a robust press (Dahl 1989, 221–22).

Deliberative Democracy

On the deliberative conception of democracy, policies and laws should not only result from the views of citizens in aggregate, but also be compatible with the wishes of each citizen taken individually. To the aggregative democrat, the diversity of cultures and values in modern society renders this proposition incredibly demanding (just as the aggregative notion of self-government seems absurd to the minimal democrat). Nevertheless, deliberative democrats maintain that public decisions can meet this standard appropriately interpreted. Laws and policies should be based on reasons that all citizens can accept. Reasoned rule is a stringent interpretation of self-government that entails nontyranny and public accountability. Because reasoned rule is itself justified by the importance of individual autonomy, political equality is the second key value of deliberative democracy. Everyone's autonomy is equally important, and each citizen should have equal opportunities to offer and accept the reasons that justify collective rules and actions. Several other values are less central but still important in this deliberative view. Certain individual liberties are necessary for citizens to form and judge views autonomously, prior to and in the course of political deliberation (Cohen 1996). If citizens succeed in generating laws and policies that they agree are backed by reasons, then the content of those laws is a good that they have in common. When the process of deliberation applies not just to the formation of policy, but to its specification and implementation, talk can make government more competent (Freeman 2002; Richardson 2002).

Deliberative democrats favor institutions that subject political decision making to reason. In Joshua Cohen's (1989) formulation, which many (but not all) deliberative democrats endorse, public institutions should "mirror" an ideal deliberative process of collective decision making in which equal citizens govern themselves by making decisions that are backed by reasons that all others can accept. Most deliberative democrats believe that the conventional institutions of civil society, political parties, representative legislatures, courts, and administrative agencies can be reformed to create a complex political division of labor that advances the values of self-government through the reasoned rule of equal citizens (Cohen 1989, 1996; Gutmann and Thompson 1996; Habermas 1996; Richardson 2002).

In Richardson's (2002) account, for example, a robust public—composed of secondary associations, interest coalitions, and the public sphere broadly—develops relatively general political positions, arguments, and perspectives. The electoral process selects politicians who represent these views. Unlike the aggregative conception in which elections and legislatures should select the position of median voter or otherwise aggregate citizens' preferences, the role of legislatures in this account is to further elaborate values that emerge from public opinion and to forge deep compromises between opposing views. Because new values can emerge and existing values can be reordered

through legislative deliberation, decisions produced there need not correspond to the position of the median voter. But because legislative decisions are necessarily general, laws cannot be passed on to administrative agencies as unambiguous orders (Richardson 2002, 114–29). Instead, administrative agencies should themselves deliberate about the means to implement laws. In the course of their deliberations, tensions within ends arise and practical reason should be deployed to make ends more specific, actionable, and coherent. Because the process of agency rule-making and "execution" is deliberative, not technical, interested citizens should be invited to contribute.

Participatory Democracy

Though the value of participation is independent from deliberation (Cohen and Fung 2004), contemporary participatory conceptions of democracy also emphasize the importance of deliberation. As with the deliberative conception, participatory democrats such as Benjamin Barber agree that democracy is best conceived in terms of the values of self-government, political equality, and reasoned rule (Barber 1984, 1988–89). Against the distributed and delegated institutions just described, however, Barber holds that citizens must take part directly—"not necessarily at every level and in every instance, but frequently enough and in particular when basic policies are being decided and when significant power is being deployed" in deliberative rule by themselves making arguments, hearing them, inventing new policies, and choosing among alternative laws (1984, 151). Many participatory democrats understand democracy as a community in which citizens resolve disputes and common dilemmas through a process of deliberative self-legislation that transforms "private individuals into free citizens and . . . private interests into public goods" (1984, 151).

In the participatory conception, citizens engage directly with one another to fashion laws and policies that solve problems that they face together. Direct participation is important in this view for at least three general reasons. First, such laws and policies are democratically valuable. When they secure the active agreement of citizens, laws yield superior outcomes from the perspective of each party. Because cooperation is rooted in measures that are genuinely endorsed by each party, it achieves much more than liberal toleration or accommodation. Second, the solution is valuable because the parties created it themselves. The participatory production process confers value upon the resulting product; citizens take pride in their work. Finally, parties transform themselves and each other in democratically valuable ways through participation. In deliberating about alternatives and their own values, each party gains an appreciation for the needs of others and reorganizes his own values accordingly. Writ large, this transformation of individual desires and dispositions makes the ideal of a self-governing community possible through the

creation of common goals, public ends, and provisional, flexible consensus (Barber 1984, 168).

The transformation of private individuals into citizens thus has two moments. Both require direct participation. There is an active moment in which individuals assert creative solutions to public problems. There is also a reciprocal moment in which citizens are themselves transformed when they recognize the partiality of their perspectives and consequently enlarge their own interests and values in ways that generate consensus around common ends. In this way, participation produces a politics that works not only to citizens' "mutual advantage, but also to the advantage of their mutuality" (Barber 1984, 118).

This participatory conception of democracy implies far more extensive changes to the structures of representative government than the aggregative and deliberative views. Wide ranging institutional reforms are needed to enable citizens to directly discuss and decide issues of public concern (Barber 1984, 261–311). Participatory democracy in a large and complex nation requires at least three novel political structures. First, following a strand of thought that runs through Jefferson and Dewey to the community control movement of the 1960s, there should be a comprehensive national system of local assemblies in every rural, suburban, and urban place. Such assemblies would enable individuals to consider local and national issues in face-to-face interaction with one another. This political intimacy is essential for citizens to appreciate the interests and perspectives of those who disagree with them and to transform their own views in light of those differences. Like the New England town meetings that inspire them, local assemblies should be vested with public power over local policies. Second, to curb the parochial tendencies of these assemblies, citizens should engage one another across great geographic distances. Though they have not yet been used effectively to this end, information and communication technologies could create national town meetings in which citizens from across a large nation discuss with one another national issues such as health care, social security, and foreign policy. But political participation is radically incomplete without decision and action. Unless they actually make decisions together, they do not create the public policies that organize their collective life and they take political discussions much less seriously. Therefore, a third important reform is a national initiative and referendum process. This directly democratic mechanism would avoid the plebiscitary evils of many state level referendums by fostering citizen deliberation through institutional design. In particular, the issues decided by referendum would be deliberated in local assemblies and national town meetings. Many other measures might foster competent and informed political participation, but these three create empowered forums that are essential for a participatory democracy that deliberates and decides matters of national scale.

The next two sections show how these four conceptions of democracy are out of equilibrium with respect to two major problems: making political rules and minority tyranny.

RULES OF THE GAME

From time to time, every democratic system must revise the arrangements through which political leaders are selected. These changes include adjusting the boundaries of electoral districts as well as altering voting rules, for example, by shifting from majority rule to proportional representation. Such procedural revisions are less common but more fundamental than the formulation of routine laws and policies. They also reveal substantial difficulties in the four conceptions of democracy.

Consider three alternatives for deciding such questions:

I1. Elected representatives, authorized to make other laws and policies, also make decisions about political rules.

I2. Politically insulated and/or neutral experts—such as jurists, mathematicians, or civil servants—resolve such matters. In 20 American states and Canada, redistricting decisions are made at least in part through independent or bipartisan commissions (McDonald 2004).

I3. A body of ordinary citizens, as in a criminal jury, decides the issue. In 2004, the Canadian province of British Columbia created a Citizens' Assembly composed of 160 randomly selected individuals from across the province to deliberate about whether B.C. should replace its majoritarian electoral system with some form of proportional representation.

Empirical evidence regarding the consequences of the first alternative (**I1**) poses problems for the first three conceptions of democracy (McDonald 2004). Even if legislators are properly authorized to make many kinds of laws and policies, it may not be appropriate for them to fashion the rules according to which they gain and lose those powers. In such decisions, many elected officials may be principally interested in crafting rules that protect their incumbent individual or partisan advantages, whereas their electors desire nearly the opposite: extensive political competition or wide choice among representatives. In U.S. states, redistricting decisions occur primarily through the ordinary legislative process. Thirty-eight states make their Congressional redistricting plans and 26 compose the electoral boundaries of their state legislatures in this way. Two outcomes tend to result. If one or other party controls the legislature, they produce partisan gerrymanders that favor the controlling majority. If control of government is divided between the houses of a state's legislature, or between the legislature and the executive, lawmakers tend to ratify a compromise incumbent protection plan in which each party makes its own seats safe. A rule-making process whose central result is to protect the prerogatives of those who make the rules has little democratic value.

Commissions of experts (**I2** earlier) are the principal alternative to ordinary legislative processes in fashioning the rules of politics (Thompson 2002, 173–79). Compared to legislative redistricting, such com-

missions seem attractive for two reasons. First, they may be politically insulated from the corrosive calculus of incumbent advantage. Second, these commissions may be composed of individuals who possess legal, mathematical, ethical, or political expertise that enables them to make wise decisions. But autonomy is difficult to achieve when the stakes are so high. Most redistricting commissions in the United States do not even pretend to possess such independence. Members are frequently appointed because of their political affiliation and reliability. As a result, U.S. redistricting commissions often make decisions that resemble the incumbent-protecting outcomes of ordinary legislative processes.

But a degree of political insulation is possible. In Arizona, for example, a popular referendum in 2000 created a distinctive redistricting commission that operates with evident independence. State legislators appoint four members, two from each major party, from a pool created by the judicial appointments panel. Those four members then appoint a fifth, politically unaffiliated, member to serve as chair. The commission's charge is to develop a redistricting map that is attentive to compactness, existing boundaries, and competitiveness. The law prohibits the commission from considering party registration and voting history data in the initial phase of the mapping process, and from identifying the locations of incumbents' or candidates' residences altogether. The commission approves maps by majority vote and their plans are not subject to legislative review or gubernatorial veto. Though it is widely acknowledged as an exemplar of independent commission redistricting (Macedo et al. 2005, 58), the Arizona process is not without difficulties. Hispanic democrats have sued Arizona on the grounds that the map fails to produce sufficiently compact districts and the city of Flagstaff has sued on the ground that the commission failed to respect traditional communities of interest. Since 1992, more than 90% of incumbents seeking reelection in Arizona have won (Thompson 2002).

The important criterion of independence, however, does not substantially differentiate well-constituted commissions (**I2**) from citizens' assemblies (**I3**). Indeed, a group of randomly selected citizens may be more politically autonomous than notables who have been vetted by legislators. But an assembly of experts may be more competent than one composed of ordinary citizens. Conversely, the enduring popularity of juries in criminal and civil trials (Abramson 2000; Gastil 2000; Leib 2004) suggests that the lay character of citizen assemblies confers a certain democratic legitimacy and virtue. They may introduce popular values and perspectives without the freight of partisan self-interest.

If there is a sharp and inevitable trade-off between the competence of expert commissions and the popular sentiments and legitimacy of citizens' assemblies, then different conceptions of democracy will balance these reasons differently. If, on the other hand, ordinary citizens generally possess or can with reasonable effort acquire the knowledge and skills necessary to make

wise decisions in this area, then (other factors equal) considered judgment favors assemblies of citizens over experts deploying their technical prowess.

A recent experience from Canada suggests that ordinary citizens can acquire the competence necessary to design political institutions. The Liberal Party government of British Columbia recently created a participatory mechanism to recommend whether the province should keep its system of single-member, plurality-winner elections or replace it with some other voting system (British Columbia Citizens' Assembly on Electoral Reform 2004). The Citizens' Assembly was composed of 160 citizens who had been randomly selected from provincial voting lists. To assure a degree of descriptive representativeness, selection was stratified by region and gender.[3] The Assembly convened every other weekend for day-and-a-half-long meetings over the course of a year. Over this time, members learned about various electoral designs, attended open meetings to solicit public opinions, and deliberated about the merits of various voting systems. Attendance was very high—around 94%.

Members decided that B.C.'s electoral system ought to serve three fundamental values: fairness, understood as proportionality in the allocation of legislative seats; local representation, understood as the connection between an elected representative and her geographic constituency; and voter choice, understood as the number of candidates and parties. To analyze the merits of alternatives, members simulated the operation of various voting systems. Eventually, Assembly members settled on two alternatives—a mixed member proportional (MMP) system and a version of the single transferable vote (STV). The STV option defeated MMP by a 123 to 31 in a vote of Assembly members. Bypassing the legislature, the citizens of British Columbia considered this recommendation in a provincial referendum in May 2005. The threshold for passage consisted of a "double-majority" of (i) more than 60% of the total ballots cast and (ii) more than 50% of the ballots cast in 48 of the 79 constituencies (i.e., a simple majority in more than 60% of the ridings). The measure won a majority in all but two of the constituencies, but it garnered only 57.4% of the total vote. Though the result fell just short of the required super-majority threshold, it appears that many voters did consider the Assembly process legitimate. As of this writing, the Liberal Party government has announced that it will hold a second referendum on the Citizens' Assembly proposal in 2008 to allow time for greater public debate. The situation

also creates a certain awkwardness; the Liberal Party holds power by virtue of an electoral system that a majority has voted against.

Experience and analysis does not yet provide definitive conclusions regarding the consequences of these different institutional arrangements. Suppose, however, that the following propositions—backed by the compressed descriptions cited earlier—are true. First, elected officials will act to advance their own electoral prospects rather than other important values such as competitiveness or the coherence of districts when given the opportunity to make rules of the game. Second, citizens' assemblies are more easily insulated from undue political influence than expert commissions. Third, it is possible and feasible to structure a citizens' assembly in such a way that the participants gain sufficient mastery of the subject. That is, suppose that the alleged success of the British Columbia Citizens' Assembly can be repeated for other voting rules decisions and for electoral redistricting. These consequences compel revision to the four conceptions of democracy.

Prior to confronting these realities, the minimal democrat favors the prevalent method of redistricting in the United States: let the legislature work it out. After that, he supports the expert commission due to its presumed expertise, and his last choice (again for reasons of competence) is the citizens' assembly. His initial institutional preference ordering is **I1** > **I2** > **I3**. On considering the facts just stipulated, he must alter this ordering along with deeper elements of his democratic conception because the institution (**I1**) he favors fails to advance his values. Letting a team of politicians make the rules of the game at one point in time undermines the competitiveness of the institution later, and competition is the lynchpin of public accountability for him. For similar reasons, he cannot support commissions that have difficulty maintaining their independence, **I2**. He is quite surprised that participants in the Citizens' Assembly managed to gain the topical mastery that they evidently did and that they were able to endorse a common solution. So, at least in this case, he reluctantly supports **I3** instrumentally, as a set of institutions that better advances his democratic values of public accountability and private liberty.

But these revisions in his assessment of individual political capacities and appropriate institutional forms also lead to shifts in his underlying values. Reflecting on the Citizens' Assembly, he comes to see how direct citizen participation can be valuable (perhaps even indispensable) to periodically check the power of elites. The Citizens' Assembly experience also opens for him a limited sense of possibility regarding the values of common good and self-government. All citizens do have in common the good of an electoral system that preserves competition among elites. A kind of democratic self-government does seem possible in determining the content of that system, though he remains skeptical that these values are relevant for other issues.

The Citizens' Assembly is a peculiar institution for the aggregative democrat because it successfully combines the interests of British Columbians but does so

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[3] The formation of the Citizens' Assembly was relatively complicated. The convening organization invited 23,000 randomly selected individuals to participate via letter. From these, 1,715 responded positively. Those individuals were then invited to selection meetings across the province, and 964 of them attended. The Assembly process was explained to them, and those who wished to be considered entered their names into a lottery. Out of this pool, one woman and one man were selected from each electoral district, yielding 158 people. First Nations peoples were not represented in this list, and the conveners added two aboriginal members, one man and one woman. The addition of the Assembly's chair brought the total to 161 members.

by privileging a handful of citizens. The aggregative democrat has little difficulty accepting the facts about institutional alternatives stipulated earlier. Given the incentives that institutions create, there is ample reason to think that the conclusions of a Citizens' Assembly would match more closely the interests of citizens at large than a legislative committee or commission of experts (Dahl 1989, 338–41). The institution thus offers the aggregative democrat a better way to establish rules that make good on his commitments to political equality and self-government. But the Assembly's experience is also troubling and may cause him to rethink the values of his conception in at least two ways. First, Assembly participants did not calculate their positions based on their own advantage. Instead, they developed a consensus around values that an electoral system should serve and then deliberated about which system best advances those values. This evidence presses the aggregative democrat to incorporate the possibility of deeper, deliberative agreement on fundamental questions such as design of the political structure. Second, he may be pressed to weaken his commitment to self-rule through universal participation, at least on complex and obscure issues such as electoral design. Most citizens of British Columbia—and most members of the Assembly when they began—had no command of alternatives such as MMP and STV systems. Over the course of their deliberations, many of the Assembly's members became expert on these issues and so quite unlike the electorate at large. If their decision has democratic value, it is in part because Assembly members came to have views that were more informed and wiser than the general electorate and because they exercised more authority over that decision than other citizens.

The Citizens' Assembly experience triggers relatively minor instrumental revisions for the deliberative democrat. It helps settle what was for him an open question: whether a legislative committee, independent commission, or popular assembly is more likely to produce electoral policies backed by reasons that are acceptable to all. In revising his view in this minor way, he moves closer to deliberative democrats who favor direct citizen participation (Fishkin 1995; Gastil 2000; Leib 2004) than those who view representative bodies as the main sites of political deliberation (Bessette 1997; Richardson 2002). But his central commitment to self-government understood as reasoned rule survives unscathed.

Although the directly deliberative character of **I3** makes it preferable to **I1** and **I2** for the participatory democrat, he objects to the extremely limited scope of participation in the Citizens' Assembly; 160 people is a miniscule fraction of the population. Especially for decisions of quasi-constitutional importance, he favors shifting more authority to citizens at large. For example, a Citizens' Assembly might frame several options and then put them to the entire electorate through a referendum (Barber 1984, 281–89). Suppose, however, that quality of deliberation in the wide-open public sphere—even under quite favorable conditions—is necessarily substantially lower than that of a Citizens' Assembly.

This unanticipated trade-off between two important values—the quality of a decision and the quantity of popular participation—would compel revision in the participatory conception. The participatory democrat might, for example, revise his institutional prescription to fit a weaker principle of participation in which (i) every citizen participates in some important public decisions, (ii) no citizen participates in every decision, (iii) there is no decision in which every citizen participates intensely, and (iv) some citizens participate intensely in every important public decision. That is, some participate in the Citizens' Assembly about voting rules, others in decisions about electoral districts, and still others in the governance of public services. That institutional vision—in which everyone benefits from some experiences of face-to-face self-government—may be the best feasible reconciliation of the values of participation and competence. But that revision would compel a reconsideration of the values of the participatory conception. In particular, it would force the participatory democrat to acknowledge the important role for representation; even in a citizens' assembly, participants represent the broader population in a certain sense.

TYRANNY OF MINORITIES

Decisions about political structure are by definition extraordinary and perhaps a democratic conception should not be much faulted for failing to account for them. A far more common problem in the governance of all contemporary democracies is the tyranny of powerful minority factions. Though democratic theorists have focused on majority tyranny and its remedies, minority tyranny remains a large and daunting challenge in every society. There are many kinds of minority tyranny and many have been rejected by pluralist critics—such as the notion that governments of capitalist societies operate as executive committees of the bourgeoisie—as either too vague to verify or plainly incorrect (Dahl 1989, 265–79). Nevertheless, political science has established at least four major sources of unequal influence: material resources that can be translated into political influence (tyranny of the rich, see Cohen and Rogers 1983), knowledge (tyranny of experts, see Dahl 1989), strategic position (tyranny of concentrated interests, see Lowi 1989 and Wilson 1980), and institutional advantage (e.g., residents of small states vs. those of large ones).

In the urban areas of many developing countries and some developed ones, these sources of minority tyranny conspire to create a politics of patronage whose consequences are rejected by the four conceptions of democracy. When governance is infected with patronage, politicians make decisions about public investments in clinics, schools, houses, roads, and other basic infrastructure by selecting contractors and employers who advance their political fortunes rather than selecting projects to improve public welfare. Those who benefit from using public infrastructure are typically much more numerous, and so more difficult to organize, than the producers who gain by reaping public funds to

build that infrastructure. Producers can therefore exert undue influence on decisions about what gets built by whom. In classic clientelist arrangements, they exert greater influence still by using their resources to organize popular support for politicians who direct favors to them. These arrangements are frequently protected from scrutiny and reform by the shield of expertise. Politicians, line departments, and contractors all benefit from claiming that such decisions are the province of analysts and technicians.

"Participatory Budgeting" (Orçamento Participativo, or OP) is a method of allocating public investments that has addressed the challenge of patronage. It was developed first in the southern Brazilian city of Porto Alegre and has spread in recent years to dozens of other cities in South America. Prior to 1989, control over municipal funds in Porto Alegre lay principally in the hands of city councilors. They made these investments according to a logic of patronage in which benefits were doled out in exchange for the support of well-organized groups of contractors and well-off residents. In 1989, the left-wing Workers' Party (Partido dos Trabalhadores, or PT) was elected to the city executive based in part on its promises to empower the city's civic organizations. Over the next 2 years, they developed the OP (Abers 2000; Avritzer 2002; Baiocchi 2003, 2005). The mechanism shifts decisions over the capital portion of the budget from the city council to a system of neighborhood and citywide popular assemblies. Through a complex annual cycle of open meetings, citizens and civic associations meet to determine investment priorities. The infrastructure portion of the city's budget results from aggregating these priorities.

Though it is a procedural reform, the Participatory Budget was born of a substantive motive to "invert" public spending priorities by shifting them away from the wealthy areas of the city to poor neighborhoods. It has achieved that goal remarkably well, and Porto Alegre's poor residents enjoy better public goods and services as a result. The percentage of neighborhoods with running water has increased from 75% to 98%, sewer coverage has grown from 45% to 98%, and the number of families offered housing assistance grew 16-fold since the initiation of the OP. Furthermore, the reforms seem to have suppressed patron–client relationships. In surveys, 18% of long-time neighborhood association leaders admit to engaging in client–patron exchanges of benefits for political support, whereas only 2% of leaders who became active after the initiation of the OP did so (Baiocchi 2005). Another study found that 41% of associations secured benefits by directly contacting politicians prior to the OP, whereas none relied on such unmediated channels after its establishment (Avritzer 2003).

Suppose that there is a set of sociopolitical urban conditions under which allocating power over public infrastructure decisions to elected officials (**I1**) or public agencies (**I2**) will result in patronage. But adopting a system of participatory budgeting (**I3**) reduces patronage. These empirical assertions may be a fair characterization of the recent history of Porto Alegre and other cities in developing countries.

These consequences press the minimal, deliberative, and participatory conceptions closer to the aggregative one. Nothing about the consequences of **I1** or **I2** is inconsistent with the minimal democrat's emphasis on competitive elections or with its underlying commitments to public accountability and nontyranny. If patronage problems rise above some threshold—say under investing in public health to the extent that an epidemic strikes—the party in power would presumably suffer electoral consequences. Instead, pressure on the minimal conception comes not from the ills of patronage but from the possibility of a coherent and more demanding conception of self-governance revealed by the Participatory Budgeting experience. Minimal democracy favors comparatively low standards of public accountability in part because it supposes that citizens' preferences are unclear or unwise. The Participatory Budget shows that there are conditions under which citizens can have clear and reasonable preferences over issues concerning basic urban infrastructure and that feasible political institutions can make government responsive to those preferences. In these circumstances at least, the minimal democrat's skepticism regarding the existence and rationality of citizens' desires is unwarranted.

In light of these possibilities, the minimal democrat is compelled to revise the values of his conception. In particular, the very same reasons that justify the threshold of public accountability provided by competitive elections also favor increased governmental responsiveness when that notion is sensible, as it is in the case of Porto Alegre. Institutionally, competitive elections are for the minimal democrat an instrument of public accountability. If the invention of the Participatory Budget is more efficacious in that regard, it calls for revision of his institutional prescription.

The Participatory Budget is more congenial to the aggregative conception. It constitutes the discovery of a form of direct participation for a relatively large city that seems to allow greater opportunities for participation and more responsive government than the aggregative democrat had previously supposed possible. Adoption of participatory budgeting is a relatively minor instrumental revision to the institutions of the aggregative conception that requires no adjustment of its underlying democratic values.

Residents may deliberate to an extent when they discuss the merits of various projects for the quality of neighborhood life. Even then, decisions in the Participatory Budget may revolve centrally around (aggregative) bargaining to satisfy individuals' needs and wants. Insofar as participants assert their interests and preferences without offering reasons to one another and pay little attention to any good that they have in common, the Participatory Budget falls short of deliberative expectations. But the gains from a more deliberative OP are unclear. Unlike deep moral disputes or conflicts over the rules of a common political system, the best reasons to support one public infrastructure choice—a clinic versus a school or paved street—over another may well hinge on the extent to which those choices satisfy preferences fairly. If so, then infrastructure

investment decisions constitute an area in which de-
liberation reduces to aggregation; cases in which pref-
erence aggregation is the most reasonable procedure
are degenerate instances of deliberation. It isn't that
the participatory budget isn't deliberative, but rather
that deliberative accounts add little, in this case, to the
aggregative one.

The empirical assertions that drive these revisions
depend on circumstances of institutional and politi-
cal development. The extravagant participation that
Participatory Budgeting requires can be regarded as
a cost, but one worth paying to reduce corruption. If
some fortunate cities possess professional bureaucra-
cies, competitive elections, and vigorous media that are
sufficient to generate honest and competent infrastruc-
ture investment decisions, then many of the reasons to
favor participation fall away. The various conceptions
of democracy would then diverge on institutional pre-
scriptions. Minimal and perhaps aggregative democrats
would favor representative arrangements whereas par-
ticipatory democrats would still value the opportunities
for direct citizen engagement created by the Participa-
tory Budget.

These empirically informed thought experiments
show how challenges such as minority tyranny can
create occasions for rationally revising conceptions of
democracy. Clear pressure for revision comes from the
unintended and undesirable consequences of institu-
tions recommended by various conceptions of democ-
racy. But these institutional mismatches arise in turn
because various problems and contexts make differ-
ent democratic values salient and urgent. With making
fair political rules, deliberation and constrained forms
of citizen participation can be instrumentally valuable
even to a minimal democrat due to the difficulties of
political insulation faced by the other alternatives. With
minority tyranny in urban clientelism, by contrast, fair-
ness is secured primarily by institutions that accurately
aggregate preferences over public goods and services,
and public deliberation seems to be less relevant to the
problem.

At minimum, these reflections suggest that each of
the pure conceptions of democracy is institutionally
incomplete. Each will be compelled to adopt ethical
commitments and practices from the other views in the
course of justifying particular democratic institutions
in context. That is, the deliberative democrat will likely
be compelled to make room for elements interest ag-
gregation, and the minimal democrat may incorporate
occasional deliberation and even direct participation.
But this analysis does not produce a substantive judg-
ment about the relative promise of the four concep-
tions of democracy. That would require considering
many more problems and institutions. Other issues
and contexts—perhaps political stability in transition
societies (Przeworksi 1999) or issues in which technical
expertise is indispensable but difficult to acquire (Dahl
1989, 332–35)—might well highlight the comparative
advantage of minimal democracy as a starting point.
Nevertheless, these applications illustrate how prac-
tical reasoning presses existing conceptions of democ-
racy to develop institutional prescriptions and underly-

ing values that are more differentiated and conditional
in order to respect the complex texture of contempo-
rary problems and conditions.

PRAGMATIC AND REFLECTIVE EQUILIBRIUM

Pragmatic equilibrium as a standard for conceptions
of democracy is a species of John Rawls' (1951, 1971,
46–53) general idea of reflective equilibrium. Several
differences between democratic theories and theories
of justice make the version of reflective equilibrium
developed here—a variant that focuses upon empiri-
cal consequences—more useful for the assessment and
development of democratic conceptions than Rawls'
formulation.

Rawls offers reflective equilibrium as a test for, and
method of developing, principles of justice (Harman
2004; Pettit 1997). Reflective equilibrium seeks fit be-
tween considered moral judgments in a limited set of
settled cases on one hand and, on the other, a con-
ception of justice composed of general principles that
yield judgments in those and other cases (Daniels 1996;
Scanlon 2002). Rawls writes that "A conception of jus-
tice characterizes our moral sensibility when the every-
day judgments we do make are in accordance with its
principles" (1971, 46). Reaching reflective equilibrium
is not simply a matter of inducing principles of justice
that best fit the data of considered judgments; rather it
is a dialogic process that works back and forth between
principles and judgments. That is, an appealing set of
principles that generates a verdict contrary to strong
moral intuition may cause one to revise one's judgment
in that case in order to achieve greater coherence across
many cases.

Pragmatic equilibrium shares this dialectical struc-
ture. The major difference is that its "data" consist of
empirical evidence about the consequences of institu-
tions rather than considered moral judgments. Three
considerations necessitate this shift. First, democratic
theory lacks the sort of relevant reliable judgments that
Rawls contends are available for theories of justice.
Even an intuition as basic as "one person, one vote"
is contradicted by common and well-justified practices
such as reserved legislative seats for women or minori-
ties and the representation of political units without re-
gard to population as in the U.S. Senate and the United
Nations.[4] Second, insofar as we possess them, unthe-
orized beliefs about how collective political decisions
should be organized likely grow out of acculturated
background notions of government and democracy
already in society—for example, participatory, repre-
sentative, or elite convictions. If these judgments stem
from more systematic conceptions of democracy, then a
reflective equilibrium that relies on them would be cir-
cular. Third, Rawls correctly supposed that substantial
advances could be made in determining correct princi-
ples of social justice based on already known empirical
facts and that the hard work—or at least his part of

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[4] I thank Joshua Cohen for this example.

it—lay in normative judgment. I believe that this is not the case for democratic theories. The disputes among them are often inextricably empirical. Nevertheless, the pragmatic variant of reflective equilibrium maintains the insight that general conceptions, principles, and values must be disciplined by the everyday results of the phenomena they regulate. With conceptions of democracy, those results relate principally to the consequences of institutions. Such assessments require the help of political science and sociology; they are inaccessible through the sort of tranquil and educated introspection that reveals the content of considered moral judgments. For that reason, the method for testing and improving conceptions of democracy described here requires a working relationship—an intellectual synthesis—between political theory and political science in a way that is more immediate than for theories of justice.

After his discussion in *A Theory of Justice*, Rawls (1974) and subsequent theorists (Daniels 1996; Scanlon 2002) distinguished between narrow and wide reflective equilibrium. Pragmatic equilibrium is in one sense narrow but in another sense wide. In narrow reflective equilibrium, one works between a particular conception of justice (say, utilitarianism, libertarianism, or a Kantian view) and considered judgments about cases. This procedure may allow for "the smoothing out of certain irregularities" (Rawls 1971, 49) without subjecting the initial conception to fundamentally different and challenging alternatives. To attain wide reflective equilibrium, by contrast, one compares all of the possible conceptions of justice against one another to find the conception that best coheres with one's considered judgments. Rawls argues for his device of the Original Position and its veil of ignorance as justified by reflective equilibrium considerations. His pairwise comparison of the two principles with competing conceptions of justice is an argument that his two principles are those that survive the test of wide reflective equilibrium (Daniels 1996, 48–50).

The concept of pragmatic equilibrium is clearly a kind of narrow reflective equilibrium. Each conception of democracy evolves to more coherent and consistent points through the practical reasoning process beginning from its initial values and institutional prescriptions. Pragmatic equilibrium as stated earlier offers no analog to the Original Position, no Archimedean point from which to compare minimal, aggregative, deliberative, participatory, and other conceptions of democracy. It may be that democratic theorists will develop such a device in the future. Or, it may be that a widely compelling justification for one pragmatic equilibrium democratic conception over the others will never be available because differences of fundamental values are too deep or, as Dewey (1927, 31–32) thought, because the interplay among changing problems, appropriate institutions, and related values renders all such equilibria temporary. These important questions lie beyond the current enterprise.

But the current level of development of conceptions of democracy, deliberative theory notwithstanding, is such that attaining the coherence among values, in-

stitutions, and consequences that pragmatic equilibrium requires—even temporarily—would be a breakthrough. Despite decades of work on both participatory and deliberative democracy, there is little in the way of suggestions at all, much less agreement, regarding the sorts of institutions that those conceptions require. Furthermore, working toward narrowly reflective, pragmatic equilibria for various conceptions of democracy may well eliminate some conceptions as unfeasible or undesirable. The process of conceptual development through practical reasoning may also reduce the extent of the differences among the conceptions. I think it likely, for example, that the minimal conception will, on reflection, shift toward the aggregative one and that the participatory conception will be pressed toward the deliberative one. The contribution of narrow reflective equilibrium to the development of democratic conceptions is large and more important at this juncture in political theory than for theories of justice that are by comparison mature.

Another way to distinguish narrow from wide reflective equilibrium, orthogonal to the first, refers to the sources of information used in making considered judgments that discipline more systematic and principled conceptions. On this dimension, narrow reflective equilibrium draws only on firm judgments that stand independently of most contingent and empirical considerations. Reflection that is wide on this dimension draws on the full range of knowledge about contexts, institutional alternatives, consequences, and other "all things considered" concerns. One can interpret Rawls moving from narrow to wide reflective equilibrium in this sense when he describes the "four-stage sequence" in which the veil of ignorance is gradually lifted to allow increasing amounts of information in the selection of principles of justice, constitutional design, legislation, and finally administration, adjudication, and citizen action (Rawls 1971, 195–201). These two dimensions of wide and narrow reflective equilibrium are depicted in Table 1.

In *A Theory of Justice*, the course of Rawls' reflective equilibrium moves schematically from I to III and then IV in the cells above. That is, he takes the conceptions of justice that have been worked out in political philosophy (I) and then develops the device of the original position to select the preferred conception of justice (III). For those two principles, he works out the institutional implications in light of the facts of advanced industrial societies (IV).

I have suggested a different course for the development and justification of conceptions of democracy that moves schematically from I to II without speculating about whether or how to move to IV. Democratic theorists should widen their sources of inspiration and constraint to include the disciplined consideration of the consequences of the fullest range of institutional alternatives for collective decision making and action. That course of practical reasoning toward pragmatic equilibrium would enhance the plausibility, feasibility, and coherence of the major conceptions of democracy and others as well. Practical reasoning may also

TABLE 1.   Four Varieties of Reflective Equilibrium

		Range of Evidence Considered	
		Narrow — Judgments about cases include only firm and settled verdicts accessible to all competent judges	Wide — Judgments about cases include complex information about circumstances and consequences
Range of Conceptions Considered	Narrow — Considers only one conception of justice or democracy	I. Political theory within a single tradition (e.g., utilitarianism, deliberative democratic theory)	II. Pragmatic Equilibrium: incorporates democratic theory and political science
	Wide — Adjudicates between conceptions of justice and democracy	III. Original Position and pairwise comparison of conceptions of justice (*TJ*, Pt.I)	IV. Four stage sequence leading to constitutional democracy (*TJ*, Pt. II)

reduce the extent of disagreement between contending conceptions at the level of institutions and specific problems. Those two advances would mark substantial progress in political theory. Achieving them, however, requires synthesizing the normative and empirical study of democracy.

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