Ten Questions about Democracy

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INTRODUCTION

A symposium on the ethics of democracy has the potential to be absolutely fascinating but carries the risk of being utterly confusing. The former is because the moral legitimacy of democracy is so regularly taken for granted. Having thirteen distinguished scholars pierce that veil to explore democracy's virtues and vices and to seek its moral justification promises to be wonderfully enlightening. The latter is because the term 'democracy' is used to refer to such a diverse array of political arrangements that discussants regularly talk past one another. It is difficult to come to an understanding about the normative quality of a system of governance if the interlocutors are talking about different things.

The purpose of this introductory essay is to nudge the symposium toward the fascinating end of the spectrum and away from the confusing end. To do this, I pose ten questions designed to focus attention on the essential nature of democracy and several of the key normative issues surrounding it. I also suggest some tentative and perhaps controversial answers to these questions, which, if they are misguided, may be corrected by our main authors.

QUESTION 1: WHAT IS DEMOCRACY?

Democracy is a method of collective decision making. A collective choice is a choice made for a group of people that binds all members of the group.[1] This is in contraposition to individual choice, which is a choice that each person can make for himself or herself.

What color tie to wear today, what to have for lunch, and what movie to see tonight are all individual choices. So are whether to get married and to whom; what to major in at university and what career to pursue; and what political party to support and whom to vote for. All such choices govern only the conduct of the individual doing the choosing and are made by the individual alone. Democracy plays no role in such individual choices. There would be no point in voting on whom each of us should vote for.

Where the family should go on summer vacation, what date the tennis club should hold its annual tournament, and whether the department should extend an offer to Professor Smith are all collective choices. So are whether the county should increase the property tax, whether the

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[1] *See* Tom Christiano, *Democracy,* THE STANFORD ENCYCLOPEDIA OF PHILOSOPHY (Edward Zalta ed., 2018) (2006) [https://perma.cc/PPB3-ZCBN].

state should prohibit abortion, and whether the United States should impose tariffs on goods imported from Mexico or launch a military attack on Iran. Such choices govern all members of the relevant group, whether a family, club, department, county, state, or nation. Because each individual cannot decide what to do in such matters for himself or herself, there must be some method for making the necessary choice. Democracy is such a method. Taking a vote of the members of the group is one way of determining what the collective choice should be.

QUESTION 2: WHAT ARE THE ESSENTIAL CHARACTERISTICS OF DEMOCRACY?

This is anything but a simple question. There is no way to answer it without taking a normative stand on at least some issues. For present purposes, I suggest that we regard the two essential characteristics of democracy as: 1) majority rule,[2] and 2) an electoral system in which all members of the relevant group have an equal vote. This is an intentionally broad definition that includes both direct democracy and representative systems in which the electors vote for others who make the actual policy decisions.

Nothing in the definition of democracy requires either of these characteristics. A decision-making system that had less than universal suffrage or required a super-majority to implement policy or in which some votes counted more than others would technically still be a democracy. So, in restricting our discussion to systems that have these two characteristics, I am imposing normative limitations on what we are calling a democracy. For purposes of this symposium, however, I feel justified in doing so, in part to keep our discussion focused on the centrally important issues, and in part because most contemporary political theorists incorporate the requirement of universal equal suffrage into their justification for democracy.[3] Thus, for purposes of this symposium, we can understand democracy as a system of collective decision making in which all those bound by the outcome have an equal say in selecting it, and the option that receives the greatest amount of support is implemented.

Note that, apart from the right to vote, the possession of any particular set of individual rights by citizens is *not* an essential characteristic of democracy. This leads directly to Question 3.

QUESTION 3: WHAT IS THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN DEMOCRACY AND INDIVIDUAL RIGHTS?

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[2]In this context, I am not using the term 'majority rule' literally, but more loosely to indicate a system in which the person or policy that receives the most votes is the person who should take office or the policy that should be adopted. Thus, a decision system that adopted an outcome that was supported by a plurality would still constitute a democracy.

[3]*See, e.g.,* Carl Cohen, *Have I a Right to a Voice in the Decisions that Affect My Life?,* 5 NOUS 63, 67 (1971) ("democracy is to be understood as the government of a community through the participation of the governed."); JOHN RAWLS, A THEORY OF JUSTICE 221-22 (1971) ("the principle of (equal) participation . . . requires that all citizens are to have an equal right to take part in, and to determine the outcome of, the constitutional process that establishes the laws with which they are to comply. . . . If the state is to exercise a final and coercive authority over a certain territory, and if it is in this way to affect permanently men's prospects in life, then the constitutional process should preserve the equal representation of the original position to the degree that this is practicable."); ROBERT DAHL, AFTER THE REVOLUTION?: AUTHORITY IN A GOOD SOCIETY 64 (1990) ("Everyone who is affected by the decisions of a government should have the right to participate in that government."). *See also* Sofia Näsström, *The Challenge of the All-Affected Principle,* 59 POL. STUD. 116, 118 (2011); Antoinette Scherz, *The Legitimacy of the Demos: Who Should Be Included in the Demos and on What Grounds?,* 4 LIVING REVIEWS IN DEMOCRACY 1, 4 (2013).

Individual rights are limitations on the range of application of democracy. Democracy is a method of collective decision making. Individual rights empower individuals to make certain decisions for themselves. They identify the set of decisions that are not subject to collective decision making. By thus carving out a range of issues that are not determined by majority vote, individual rights are explicitly anti-democratic in nature.

Much confusion arises from the common practice of referring to political regimes that include guaranteed individual rights simply as democracies. When this is done, the value individuals gain from the possession of rights is conflated with the value they gain from living under a system of majority rule, making a coherent evaluation of democracy virtually impossible.

For example, the federal government of the United States is often referred to as a democracy. And indeed, the members of Congress and the President are elected by majority vote and empowered to make collective decisions for the residents of the country. Yet this democratic power is limited by the Bill of Rights which tells Congress what it may not do by majority vote. These rights prevent the majority from restricting freedom of speech or religion, from taking private property without just compensation, from denying individuals the right to trial by jury or the assistance of counsel, etc. These rights constitute the anti-democratic aspect of the federal government. Nevertheless, when people in the United States are asked why they support democratic government, they regularly answer that it is because in the United States one is free to speak one's mind, is free to worship as one chooses, is secure in one's property, and cannot be punished without due process of law.

Some of this confusion can be eliminated by being careful to distinguish between liberal democracies–democratic governments limited by a set of guaranteed individual rights–and pure (or illiberal) democracies–democratic government without such limitations. I say *some* confusion can be eliminated because, in the absence of a clearly specified set of individual rights, what constitutes a liberal democracy is itself a rich source of confusion. A liberal democracy that guarantees its citizens only the rights to life, liberty, and property is considerably different from one that also guarantees them a living wage, health insurance, or a subsidized university education. But this leads to Question 4.

QUESTION 4: WHAT IS THE PROPER RANGE OF COLLECTIVE CHOICE?

In essence, this is the fundamental question of political philosophy. The realms of majority rule and individual liberty are inversely proportional. The greater the range of matters subject to collective choice, the smaller the range of matters subject to individual choice. An unlimited democracy would leave no room for individual rights. Individual liberty would simply be whatever matters had not yet been subject to majority vote. A polity that guaranteed its citizens a broad array of (negative) individual rights would be one with a small scope for majority rule. Democratic decision making may be ethically justified for a certain range of issues and ethically unjustified for others. To properly evaluate democracy, we need a theoretical basis for distinguishing individual interests that are so important that they should remain entirely within the individual's control from important societal interests that should be subject to collective choice. Any progress that this symposium makes toward identifying such a principled distinction will significantly add to our understanding.

QUESTION 5: WHAT IS THE ETHICAL JUSTIFICATION FOR DEMOCRACY?

Under the assumption that there is a legitimate realm of collective choice, what justifies democratic decision making within that realm? Majority rule is not the only form of collective choice. Decisions could be made by a counsel of experts, or by philosopher-kings, or by individuals chosen by lot, or by voters with college degrees, etc. What makes decision making by majority rule with universal suffrage ethically superior to the other alternatives?

One possible answer is consent. If all parties that will be bound voluntarily agree to make decisions by majority vote, then each is ethically obligated to accept and abide by the outcome of the vote. This is not very helpful, however. In the first place, it applies only to those situations in which all parties have actually consented to the democratic decision-making process. This may be the case with private organizations and clubs, but it is rarely the case with polities of any size. Secondly, consent does not provide a justification for democracy any more than it does for any of the alternatives. If all parties consent to be governed by a counsel of experts, philosopher-kings, individuals chosen by lot, or those with college degrees, they would be equally ethically obligated to accept and abide by the outcome of those decision-making procedures.

Tacit consent—consent inferred from failing to leave a democratically governed polity—fares no better. Even if it could overcome the familiar objection that remaining when faced with a choice between accepting an unwanted imposition or leaving does not imply consent to the imposition, tacit consent no more justifies democratic governance with universal suffrage than it does dictatorship or monarchy as long as there is the right of exit.

Most advocates of democracy adhere to some form of the "all affected interests principle" that holds that "[e]veryone who is affected by the decisions of a government should have the right to participate in that government."[4] This principle may indeed be a necessary condition for an ethically justified democracy, but by itself it provides a justification for only universal suffrage, not for collective decision making by majority rule. The all affected interests principle correctly states that one is entitled to a say in the decisions that will bind him or her, but this does not imply that one is entitled to a say in decisions that will bind others. This principle establishes that *if* collective decision making via majority rule is ethically justified, *then* there should be universal suffrage. But it does nothing to establish that collective decision making via majority rule is, in fact, ethically justified.

So what does establish this? Plato's *Republic* provides an extended discussion designed to show that justice is not the interest of the stronger.[5] Why doesn't this equally show that justice is not the interest of the more numerous? What is it about having more people on your side that justifies one in making rules that all must obey?

The answer could be a consequentialist one. Perhaps making collective decisions by majority rule with universal suffrage is the most effective way to achieve other important

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[4]ROBERT DAHL, AFTER THE REVOLUTION?: AUTHORITY IN A GOOD SOCIETY 64 (1990). *See also* Robert Goodin, *Enfranchising All-Affected Interests, and its Alternatives*, 35 PHIL. & PUB. AFF., 40, 49 (2007). In fact, the all-affected interest principle is almost certainly too broad and is better stated as an all-subjected principle that holds that all (and only) those who will be bound by the outcome of the democratic process; that is, those who are subject to the democratically enacted law are entitled to a say in its creation. For a more detailed discussion of this, see John Hasnas, *Should Corporations Have the Right to Vote? A Paradox in the Theory of Corporate Moral Agency*, 150 J. BUS. ETHICS 657, 662 (2018).

[5]1 PLATO, THE REPUBLIC 338c-347e (Paul Shorey trans., Harvard University Press 1969) (c. 380 B.C.E.).

underlying moral values. Perhaps democratic governance is the best way to produce a peaceful society or a prosperous one or one in which all people are treated with proper respect. Perhaps it is the best way to preserve a large realm of individual liberty. Or perhaps human nature is such that it is the only way of obtaining the practical cooperation of diverse parties. But all of these are empirical claims that require investigation. None can be accepted *a priori* or by merely quoting Winston Churchill.[6] Comparative assessments must be made not only between democracy and more autocratic and oppressive regimes, but also between democracy and various forms of epistocracy,[7] democracy and social welfare states, and democracy and liberal or libertarian regimes.

Historical experience provides some support for the claim that the smaller the scope of collective choice by majority rule within a polity, the closer the connection between democratic governance and the desired underlying moral ends. But if this is the case, then only liberal democracies can be justified on a consequentialist basis, and it is always an open question how large the democratic element of the regime may become before becoming destructive of the ends. This observation leads to Question 6.

QUESTION 6: HOW MUCH LIBERTY MUST BE SACRIFICED TO MAINTAIN A WELL-FUNCTIONING DEMOCRACY?

Democracy, as we are using the term, technically requires only that all members of the group or polity have an equal vote and that the program supported by the most votes be implemented. Yet, few advocates of democracy believe that it is enough for all to merely possess the right to vote; it must also be the case that each person's vote has equal value and represents the individual's autonomous choice. Hence, buying and selling votes is typically banned as is the use of personal threats or offers to affect how others vote. Generally speaking, a well-functioning democracy is one in which individuals are not subject to undue influences in deciding how to vote.

But this immediately raises the question of what constitutes an undue influence. The larger the scope of collective choice–the more of life that is subject to majority rule, the greater the incentive to attempt to influence the outcome of votes. If the majority can redistribute wealth, then wealthy individuals and highly capitalized corporations will use their wealth to protect or enhance their economic interests. Some ways of using one's wealth are unobjectionable. Others may undermine the value of less wealthy people's vote. But which is which? Wealthy people and companies can afford to purchase newspaper, television, and radio ads; sponsor rallies; and fund social media campaigns in support of their preferred policies or candidates. They can also make large donations to candidates of their choice to increase the candidates' ability to communicate his or her message to large numbers of people.[8] They can influence public opinion on political subjects to a much greater degree than can the vast majority of the electorate.

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[6] Justifications for democracy regularly cite Churchill's aphorism that "democracy is the worst form of Government except for all those other forms that have been tried from time to time." WINSTON CHURCHILL, CHURCHILL BY HIMSELF: THE DEFINITIVE COLLECTION OF QUOTATIONS 574 (Richard Langworth ed., 2008).

[7] *See, e.g.*, JASON BRENNAN, AGAINST DEMOCRACY (2016).

[8] Eugene McCarthy relied on a small number of "mega-givers" to mount his anti-war primary challenge to Lyndon Johnson in 1968 that caused Johnson not to run for re-election. *See* John Samples, *A Free Speech Kind of Thing*, Cato Institute (Dec. 15, 2005) https://www.cato.org/publications/commentary/free-speech-kind-thing [https://perma.cc/WDH5-53RU].

Is this normatively comparable to vote buying? Does this mean that wealthy parties' freedom to engage in political activity must be restricted? But aren't the wealthy a small minority that is at risk of having their wealth expropriated by the majority? How can they protect their interests if they cannot use their wealth to amplify their voice?

More generally, it is traditionally argued that freedom of speech is a necessary condition for democratic government.[9] The claim is that unless voters can hear from all sides, they cannot cast a truly informed, autonomous vote.[10] Yet, individuals' ability to cast an informed, autonomous vote can also be undermined if they are bombarded by misrepresentations of fact, false attributions, technically true but deceptively misleading characterizations of people and events, and venal and hateful viewpoints. How much restriction on freedom of speech is necessary to ensure that the voting process is not corrupted, and how much is so much that the restrictions themselves corrupt the process?

QUESTION 7: DOES DEMOCRACY UNDERMINE COOPERATION?

In the realm of individual choice, everyone decides what to do for himself or herself. Therefore, assuming a system of criminal law that reasonably restrains the use of violence, each person needs the voluntary cooperation of others to advance his or her ends. Thus, liberty creates an incentive for cooperative behavior. And because cooperation makes all parties better off, liberty is potentially a win-win game.

In contrast, in the realm of democratic collective choice, everyone must conform his or her behavior to the will of the majority. Thus, democracy is a winner-take-all game that creates an incentive to defeat one's opponents at all costs.

Liberty gives us reason to view others as potential friends and as a source of benefits. Democracy gives us reason to view those who disagree with us as opponents who, if they attain great enough numbers, can impose losses on us.

Over the course of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, the scope of collective choice governed by the United States federal government has continually expanded as the scope of unregulated individual choice on the market has shrunk. So has the degree of political polarization. According to a study by the Pew Research Center, 58% of Republicans and 55% of Democrats have a very unfavorable impression of the opposing party, and 45% of Republicans and 41% of Democrats currently view the opposing party's policies as "so misguided that they threaten the nation's well-being."[11] Things have grown so polarized that significant percentages of the population do not want their children to marry a person from the opposing political

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[9] *See* F.A. HAYEK, THE CONSTITUTION OF LIBERTY 109 (1960) ("The conception that government should be guided by majority opinion makes sense only if that opinion is independent of government . . . . It requires, therefore, the existence of a large sphere independent of majority control in which the opinions of the individuals are formed.").

[10] *See, e.g.*, United States v. United Auto Workers, 352 U.S. 567, 594 (1957) (Douglas, J., dissenting) ("Under our Constitution it is We the People who are sovereign. The people have the final say. The legislators are their spokesmen. The people determine through their votes the destiny of the nation. It is therefore important—vitally important—that all channels of communication be open to them during every election, that no point of view be restrained or barred, and that the people have access to the views of every group in the community.").

[11] Pew Research Center, *Partisanship and Political Animosity in 2016* (June 2016), http://www.people-press.org/2016/06/22/partisanship-and-political-animosity-in-2016/ [https://perma.cc/TW6C-T2JZ].

party.[12]

Is this increasing polarization an inevitable side effect of increasing the scope of democratic decision making? Does increasing the ability of the majority to redistribute resources and regulate other peoples' personal behavior transform other members of society from potential cooperators into potential threats? Liberal democracy is sometimes defended as productive of social harmony. If it is, could this be due to the liberal (anti-majoritarian) features of the system, which incentivize cooperation, rather than the democratic (majoritarian) features, which engender strife?

QUESTION 8: WHAT IS THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN DEMOCRACY AND TRUTH?

Under democratic government, the policies that should be implemented are those that are supported by the majority (assuming universal suffrage). But the policies that are supported by the majority may be unrelated to the goals the majority wants to achieve. For example, a majority that wanted to stop illegal immigration could vote for a politician who promises to build a wall across the southern border of the United States, even though, as a matter of fact, this would have almost no effect on illegal immigration. Or a majority that wanted to help the poorest members of society could vote to raise the minimum wage to $15 per hour, even though this would reduce employment for the poorest unskilled workers. There doesn't seem to be a necessary connection between what people want and what they vote for. In fact, if, as Bryan Caplan argues, a significant proportion of the population holds systematically biased beliefs about economics,[13] such divergence is likely to be common.

The reason for this may have to do with the different incentives at work in individual and collective choice. When making individual choices, most of us pay close attention to the facts of reality. We look both ways before we cross the street. When we drive, we stop at red lights and refrain from driving ninety miles per hour through residential streets. We consider how much money we make in deciding how much money to spend. We comparison shop; consider the prospects for return before making investments; perform regular maintenance on our cars and homes; and purchase automobile, life, health, and homeowner's insurance. We don't just walk up and take other people's stuff.

We do this because each of us would personally suffer the consequences of ignoring the facts of reality. Failure to look both ways means that we might be hit by a car. Reckless driving means that we might crash. Profligate spending means that we might go bankrupt. Failure to comparison shop, invest carefully, perform necessary maintenance, and purchase insurance means that we may suffer financial losses. Failure to observe property rights means that we may be punched in the nose.

In contrast, when making collective choices, many of us pay little attention to empirics. When we engage in democratic decision making, we indulge our imagination and vote for the way we want the world to be. We feel compassion for low-skilled, low-wage workers, so we

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[12]*See* Shanto Iyengar, Gaurav Sood & Yphtach Lelkes, *"Affect, Not Ideology: A Social Identity Perspective on Polarization*, 76 PUB. OPINION Q. 405 (2012). *See also* Shanto Iyengar & Sean J. Westwood, *Fear and Loathing Across Party Lines: New Evidence on Group Polarization*, 59 AM. J. POL. SCIENCE, 690, 703-04 (2014) ("Compared with the most salient social divide in American, society–race–partisanship elicits more extreme evaluations and behavioral responses to ingroups and outgroups.").

[13]*See* BRYAN CAPLAN, THE MYTH OF THE RATIONAL VOTER 23– 49 (2007).

vote to raise the minimum wage to $15 per hour. We are horrified by mass shootings at schools, so we vote to ban or restrict possession of guns. We are afraid of the effects of narcotics on youth, so we vote to prohibit their use, possession, and sale. We are concerned about the plight of the elderly and the poor, the quality of the public schools, and the readiness of the military, so we vote to increase social security benefits, wage a war on poverty, pass the No Child Left Behind Act, and increase the defense budget.

Because voting one way rather than another imposes no direct consequences on us personally, there is little reason to consider the way the world actually works. Thus, we vote to increase the minimum wage without considering the effects such an increase will have on those who run small businesses or whether it will increase unemployment. We vote for gun control measures without considering whether criminals or the mentally disturbed will actually be deterred by the need to obtain their guns illegally. We vote for a war on drugs without considering whether doing so will create a black market for drugs and the violent crime associated with the sale of banned substances, despite the nation's experience with alcohol prohibition. And we vote to spend money on today's elderly, poor, public schools, and military without considering the effects continual deficit spending will have on economic growth and the well-being of the next generation.

The incentive structure of democratic decision making encourages people to engage in wishful thinking. For any identified social problem, voters are free to imagine a simple solution for it untethered to considerations of economic and psychological feasibility. They may then vote for candidates who support their solution and feel good about themselves for doing so. If their preferred candidates win, they consider the problem solved. If, after a while, the problem hasn't disappeared, they regard that as due to insufficient funding, or inadequate enforcement, or the influence of malign special interests, or the obstructionism of the narrow-minded or bigoted or hyper-partisan members of the opposing party. One might say that in a democracy, who wins elections is not determined by what is true; what is thought to be true is determined by who wins elections.

QUESTION 9: DOES A COMMITMENT TO DEMOCRACY REQUIRE DOUBLETHINK?

In his dystopian novel *1984*, George Orwell defined the concept of doublethink as "[t]he power of holding two contradictory beliefs in one's mind simultaneously and accepting both of them."[14] In 1962, Richard Wollheim published an article suggesting that a commitment to democracy required individuals to possess precisely this power.[15] Wollheim asked us to imagine a committed democrat who sincerely believes that social policy should be determined by a democratic process. When such a person votes on whether a particular policy should be adopted, he or she is expressing his or her personal belief on the matter. Now imagine that after the votes are counted, the democratic process indicates that a policy inconsistent with the one that person supports should be adopted. Our committed democrat now must simultaneously believe that the policy he or she opposed should be adopted based on his or her belief that social policy should be determined by the democratic process and that it should not be adopted based on his or her personal belief about the policy. Thus, to maintain a commitment to democracy, one must be

[14]GEORGE ORWELL, NINETEEN EIGHTY-FOUR 220 (1949).
[15]Richard Wollheim, *A Paradox in the Theory of Democracy, in* PHILOSOPHY, POLITICS AND SOCIETY (Peter Laslett & W.G. Runciman eds., 2d ser., 1962).

willing to believe both that a particular policy should be and should not be adopted.

As an example, imagine that Donald Trump, a candidate for President of the United States, campaigns on a platform of building a wall across the southern border of the United States, temporarily banning Muslims from entering the United States, and imposing tariffs on products manufactured overseas. Further imagine that Debbie Democrat, a firm believer in democratic governance, strongly opposes all of these measures and believes that their adoption is both immoral and would be disastrous for the country. Accordingly, she votes for the opposing candidate. However, after the votes are counted, Donald Trump is elected President. Debbie Democrat is now in the uncomfortable position of simultaneously believing that a wall should be built across the southern border of the United States, Muslims should be temporarily banned from entering the United States, and tariffs should be imposed on products manufactured overseas based on her belief that social policy should be determined by the democratic process and that none of these measures should be adopted based on her personal belief that they are immoral and counterproductive.

Debbie's commitment to democracy places her in a difficult psychological position. If she is to remain true to her belief in democracy, she should support the adoption of the three policies, wait until the next election, and hope for a result more in line with her personal beliefs at that time. But then she would be supporting policies that she personally believes to be immoral. On the other hand, she could vigorously oppose the policies on the basis of her personal beliefs–she could demonstrate against their adoption, file lawsuits to prevent their implementation, engage in lobbying efforts to derail them, and perhaps even engage in acts of civil disobedience in hopes of undermining them. But because doing so means abandoning the belief that social policy should be determined by the outcome of the democratic process, what point would there be in her voting in the next election? A commitment to democracy is vacuous if it consists in nothing more than the belief that social policy should be determined by the democratic process only when the side one supports wins the election.

So, does democracy require people like Debbie to engage in doublethink?

QUESTION 10: IS DEMOCRACY A RELIGION?

Politically, democracy purports to be one among many systems of government. As such, it should be subject to evidence-based evaluation. Whether democratic government is desirable should be determined by an empirical investigation of whether it produces better results than alternative ways of organizing society, however "better" is understood. Yet, most people's commitment to democracy seems to be impervious to disconfirming evidence.

We revere Athenian democracy. Yet before becoming a true democracy, Athens was the most powerful of the Greek city-states in control of a far-flung commercial empire. Within thirty years of becoming a democracy, Athens was a totally defeated city, shorn of its empire and under the control of thirty tyrants installed by Sparta. This was due in part to its citizens voting to execute ten of its top generals in the midst of the Peloponnesian War; to send a military expedition to Sicily under the command of the expedition's main opponent after exiling its main advocate; and to ignore a clear warning of disaster before the naval battle that sealed the city's ultimate defeat. This hardly seems like a record of achievement that recommends democratic government.

I understand that over the last few decades analogies to Nazi Germany have fallen into

disfavor, but in this context, it seems acceptable to point out that Hitler came to power in a parliamentary democracy.

In the United States, laws segregating the races, banning miscegenation, and criminalizing homosexual relationships were all democratically enacted, requiring explicitly anti-democratic action by the Supreme Court to overturn them.

Yet, none of these observations puts a dent in most people's faith that democracy is ethically justified and absolutely necessary. Democracy is reflexively defended as self-government without ever asking who the self is, or as the best form of government without ever making a comparative assessment.

For centuries, people believed in the divine right of kings–that God endowed kings with their right to rule. Because this was a matter of faith, no amount of evidence that their king was patently not the type of person an all-knowing, all-good god would choose as a ruler could undermine believers' commitment to the theory. Although putatively a theory of political authority, it was, in fact, a religious doctrine.

In the present-day United States, people believe in democracy–that, when there is universal suffrage, the majority has the right to rule. Every four years people go to the polls in the belief that if they elect the right people, the country will balance the budget or win the war on poverty or stem the flow of illegal immigration or end foreign military entanglements. Yet, year after year, the federal deficit increases, poverty persists, illegal immigration continues, and United States troops remain in Korea or Vietnam or Iraq or Afghanistan. Apparently, no amount of evidence that majority rule does not result in the desired policy outcomes can undermine believers' commitment to democracy.

Much of the world abandoned the concept of the divine right of kings long ago. Today, at least in the West, there is a widespread commitment to democratic government. Yet, it is far from clear that this commitment is derived from any evidence-based comparative analysis of alternatives. It seems to simply be a matter of faith that democracy is the proper form of government. Thus, the final question of this brief introduction is whether, in moving from belief in the divine right of kings to belief in democracy, we merely replaced a religious commitment to monarchy with a quasi-religious commitment to democracy. Does the fact that those who argue against democracy typically receive angry rather than reasoned responses suggest that democracy is today's religion?