

AN ANALYSIS

On Democracy

The Unnatural Art

HUMAN NATURE, EXCLUSION,
AND THE COSTUMES OF POWER

POLITICAL THEORY · HISTORY · HUMAN NATURE

Version 1

*Every democracy must first answer a question
that is not itself democratic: who counts as the
people?*

THE FRAME OF THIS VOLUME

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FRONT MATTER · I

The Frame — Who Is the Demos?

Before a single ballot is cast, before any constitution is written, every democracy must perform an act that is not itself democratic. It must decide who counts as the people. The Greek word *demos* means precisely that — the body of persons entitled to a share in rule — and the boundary drawn around it is the founding decision from which everything else follows. No vote can settle it, because the right to vote is exactly what is being apportioned. The people cannot democratically choose who the people are; the question is logically prior to the procedure. This is the quiet scandal at the base of the most admired political form in human history.

And it is always a choice of exclusion. To name an inside is to name an outside. Athens, which gave us the word, enfranchised perhaps a tenth to a fifth of the human beings living within its walls — free adult male citizens, the rest being women, resident foreigners, and the enslaved who did the work that left the citizens free to deliberate. The American founders drew the line around propertied white men. Nineteenth-century European franchises excluded women and the labouring poor by design, not by oversight. Every later widening — the end of property qualifications, women's suffrage, the dismantling of racial bars — was a renegotiation of the *demos*, and every one was fought with the ferocity reserved for changes that alter what a thing fundamentally is. The expansions feel, in retrospect, like the natural unfolding of a principle. At the time they were experienced as the admission of strangers into the family.

This volume takes that frame and holds it steady through everything that follows. The recurring questions are simple to state and uncomfortable to answer. Who is inside the demos, and who has been placed outside it? What inequality has this particular democracy chosen to build into its foundations and then call natural? And when a regime keeps the outward forms of popular rule while quietly changing who truly counts, at what point has it stopped being a democracy at all — and would anyone inside it notice the moment it crossed the line? These are not abstractions. They are the operating questions of the present century.

FRONT MATTER · II

A Lexicon of Modern Politics

The argument that follows leans on a vocabulary that has grown more precise — and more necessary — as the twenty-first century has produced regimes that older words struggle to name. The terms below are used throughout in the senses given here.

Demos — *the people, in the political sense*

The body of persons entitled to a share in governing. Its boundary is the constitutive act of any democracy and the central concern of this volume. Drawing it always includes some and excludes others.

Democracy

At its narrowest and most testable: a system in which rulers are chosen by, and can be removed by, the governed through regular competitive elections whose outcome is genuinely uncertain. Note what this minimal definition does *not* require — rights, fairness, tolerance, or wise results. It is a procedure for transferring power, nothing more.

Liberalism

Not an economic doctrine here, nor a position on the left-right axis, but the older political tradition holding that there are limits to what any government — even one with a majority behind it — may legitimately do to an individual. Its instruments are rights, due process, and the rule of law. Liberalism constrains power; democracy distributes it. They are distinct ideas that happen to live together.

Liberal Democracy

The "thick" form: majority rule fenced in by genuine rights, an independent judiciary, a free press, protected minorities, and the peaceful transfer of power. The two halves pull against each other by design — the liberal half exists precisely to tell the democratic half what it may not do.

Rights & Due Process

The counter-majoritarian core of liberalism: protections that hold even against the wishes of the majority, and fixed, fair procedures the state must follow before it acts against a person. A right that a 51 percent vote can suspend is not a right; it is a privilege on loan.

Institutional Independence

The capacity of courts, the press, electoral administrators, central banks, and civil society to act on their own logic rather than at the ruler's pleasure. It is the load-bearing wall of liberal democracy and the first target of those who would hollow one out — because hollowing it requires no coup, only patience.

Illiberal Democracy

A system that keeps the procedural shell of democracy — elections, a parliament, courts, newspapers — while gutting the liberal substance. Courts are packed, the press is bought or starved, opposition is harassed within the law. Coined as a warning by Fareed Zakaria in 1997, and later adopted, without embarrassment, as a self-description by Viktor Orbán.

Competitive Authoritarianism

Steven Levitsky and Lucan Way's term for regimes where elections are real but so systematically rigged in the incumbent's favour — through control of media, money, courts, and the state apparatus — that genuine turnover becomes nearly impossible. The contest exists; the field is tilted past the point of fairness.

The dominant authoritarian form of the age, precisely because it is harder to condemn than a tank in the street.

Delegative Democracy

Guillermo O'Donnell's term for a system in which a leader wins a real election and then treats the victory as a blank cheque — governing by decree, bypassing the legislature, treating courts and accountability as obstacles. The vote is honoured; everything that should follow from it is not.

Managed Democracy

The conscious engineering of democratic appearances while pre-arranging the outcomes — a stage-managed contest. Associated with the Kremlin's political technologists; the form is preserved as theatre while the result is decided in advance.

Herrenvolk Democracy — *"master-people" democracy*

Pierre van den Berghe's term for a system that is fully democratic *for the dominant group* and despotic toward everyone outside it. Genuine elections, debate, and civic life among the masters; subjection for the rest. Athens, the antebellum American South, and apartheid South Africa are the textbook cases. The decisive proof that democracy and brutal hierarchy are not opposites.

Anocracy

A mixed or incoherent regime, neither fully democratic nor fully authoritarian. Research on state fragility finds anocracies the most violence-prone of all, having neither democratic legitimacy nor authoritarian control. The dangerous middle ground that many states pass through — and where some get stuck.

Ochlocracy — *mob rule*

Democracy's degenerate endpoint in classical theory: the collapse of democratic norms into pure majoritarian violence and

demagoguery. Named by Polybius as the corrupt form of popular rule, and the ancient reminder that the people, too, have a tyrannical mode.

Authoritarianism

A governing style of centralized control and suppressed opposition that demands obedience but not belief. It wants you out of politics; what you think in private is largely your own affair. The most common form of non-democratic rule in history.

Totalitarianism

Something rarer and qualitatively different: a regime that demands not mere compliance but active, demonstrated conviction, and claims authority over every sphere of life. Where authoritarianism wants silence, totalitarianism wants your soul.

PART I

The Unnatural Animal

Democracy asks of human beings a kind of rationality, restraint, and good faith that the species does not reliably possess — and then is surprised when it does not get them.

There is a comforting story about democracy in which informed citizens weigh the issues, deliberate in good faith, and select representatives who carry out a coherent popular will toward the common good. It is a beautiful story. It is also, on the evidence, mostly fiction — and its falseness is not a recent discovery but one of the oldest observations in political thought. The trouble with democracy is not that it is badly run. The trouble is that it demands a citizen who does not exist.

The ancients saw it first and named it without flinching. In Book VIII of the *Republic*, Plato charts the degeneration of regimes — aristocracy decaying into timocracy, then oligarchy, then democracy, then tyranny — and his objection to democracy is not procedural but psychological. The democratic soul, he argues, treats all desires as equal, indulges appetite over reason, and mistakes licence for freedom; and from that disordered liberty rises the demagogue, the man who flatters the crowd, wins its love, and converts that love into unaccountable power. Tyranny, for Plato, is not the opposite of democracy. It is what democracy ripens into. Aristotle was friendlier to popular rule but no less clear-eyed about its failure mode, classing "democracy" itself among the deviant constitutions — majority rule in the narrow interest of the poor rather than the common good — and reserving praise for the mixed, moderate form he called polity. Polybius later completed the picture with *ochlocracy*, mob rule, the diseased fi-

nal stage in which the people themselves become the tyrant. The Greeks understood the pathologies of popular government as precisely as they understood the pathologies of kings.

The modern case is more devastating, because it is made from inside the liberal democracies by people who, on the whole, preferred them to the alternatives. Three works in particular dismantle the romantic theory from three different directions, and together they leave very little of it standing.

Schumpeter and the Death of the Common Good

Joseph Schumpeter's *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy* (1942) opens the demolition. Schumpeter calls the romantic story the "classical doctrine" of democracy — the idea that the people hold a definite, knowable view of the common good and elect representatives to enact it — and he argues that it fails at every joint. First, there is no common good with determinate content. People want genuinely different and incompatible things; even where they agree on an end, they disagree on the means; and many of the largest questions have no answer that reason alone can compel. Second, there is no authentic, pre-existing "will of the people" waiting to be expressed. What passes for popular will is largely manufactured — shaped, packaged, and sold by political entrepreneurs using the same techniques that sell commodities. Third, and most cutting, Schumpeter observes that the ordinary citizen, on entering the political field, tends to drop to a lower level of mental performance: arguing in a way he would recognize as childish within his own real interests, surrendering his critical faculties precisely where the stakes are highest and the feedback weakest.

Having cleared the ground, Schumpeter offers a replacement that has shaped political science ever since. Democracy, he proposes, is best understood not as rule by the people but as a

method: "that institutional arrangement for arriving at political decisions in which individuals acquire the power to decide by means of a competitive struggle for the people's vote." The people do not govern; they choose, periodically, which set of elites will govern them, much as consumers choose between competing firms. This is the elitist, or competitive, or minimalist theory of democracy, and its modern descendant — sharpened by Adam Przeworski into the lean proposition that democracy is simply a system in which incumbents can lose elections and leave — supplies the single most useful test in this entire booklet. We will return to it. For now the point is that Schumpeter rescued democracy by lowering the bar: it works not because it produces wisdom but because it produces a peaceful, repeatable way to throw the rascals out.

Caplan and the Irrational Voter

If Schumpeter showed that the popular will is manufactured, Bryan Caplan's *The Myth of the Rational Voter* (2007) shows that the raw material is defective to begin with. The earlier economic critique, descending from Anthony Downs, held that voters are *rationaly ignorant*: since a single vote almost never decides an election, it is not worth the cost of becoming informed, so people sensibly stay uninformed. Caplan's contribution is to argue that the problem is far worse than ignorance. Voters are not blank where information is missing; they are systematically *wrong*, and wrong in consistent, patterned directions. He calls this *rational irrationality*: because holding a false political belief costs the individual essentially nothing — your mistaken vote will not, by itself, change the outcome or land on your own head — people are free to indulge comforting falsehoods the way they indulge any other pleasurable consumption. Believing feels good; being right

brings no personal reward. So irrationality, on the cheap, becomes the rational thing to buy.

Caplan documents four biases that run reliably through the public mind, especially on economics: an *anti-market bias* that distrusts the price mechanism and sees profit as theft; an *anti-foreign bias* that underrates the gains from trade and treats other nations as rivals in a zero-sum contest; a *make-work bias* that values jobs over the production jobs are supposed to deliver, and so fears the labour-saving machine; and a *pessimistic bias* that consistently overstates how bad things are and how fast they are getting worse. The crucial structural point is that these errors do not cancel out. The optimistic defence of democracy — the "miracle of aggregation" — holds that random individual errors wash away in a large electorate, leaving the informed core to decide. That miracle requires the errors to be random. Caplan's biases are not random; they all lean the same way. Systematic error does not average to zero. It compounds, and the aggregate verdict of millions can be reliably, predictably mistaken.

Haidt and the Rider on the Elephant

Schumpeter and Caplan attack the cognitive premise of the romantic theory; Jonathan Haidt's *The Righteous Mind* (2012) removes its psychological foundation entirely. Drawing on a wide body of moral psychology, Haidt advances what he calls the *social intuitionist model*: moral and political judgments are made first, intuitively, automatically, and emotionally — and the reasoning we offer for them is mostly produced afterward, to justify a verdict already reached. His governing image is the rider and the elephant. The elephant is the vast, fast, automatic system of gut intuition; the rider is conscious reasoning, perched on top and convinced it is in charge. In fact the rider serves the elephant. Reasoning, in Haidt's phrase, behaves less like a judge weighing

evidence than like a press secretary — its job is not to find the truth but to defend whatever the elephant has already decided.

Haidt's second contribution, Moral Foundations Theory, explains why citizens who share a country can seem to inhabit different moral universes. Human morality, he argues, rests on several distinct foundations — care, fairness, loyalty, authority, sanctity, and liberty — and different political temperaments weight them differently, so that the same policy registers as obviously just to one side and obviously monstrous to the other. From this follows a conclusion that should trouble anyone who hopes to fix democracy with better information: you cannot reason a person out of a position the person did not reason into. Facts bounce off the elephant. And because shared moral commitments bind groups together — Haidt's formula is that morality "binds and blinds" — the very thing that creates political community is the thing that closes it to the world outside.

The Citizen Who Does Not Exist

Lay the three side by side and the romantic theory has nowhere left to stand. There is no determinate common good for the people to perceive (Schumpeter); the people's beliefs are systematically and self-servingly mistaken (Caplan); and the people do not reach their political convictions by reasoning at all, so no quantity of correct information can dislodge them (Haidt). The deliberative, informed, dispassionate citizen that the romantic account of democracy requires is the one human being the evidence most firmly says does not exist. This is the sense in which democracy is *unnatural* — not impossible, plainly, since it exists, but always running against the grain of the animal asked to operate it, and always at risk of being captured by those who understand the elephant better than they respect the rider. None of which is an argument against democracy. It is an argument

against the fairy tale, and for understanding what democracy actually is before asking it to bear weight it was never built to carry.

PART II

The Inescapable Inequality

There is no neutral procedure. Every voting system, every boundary, every rule chooses whose preferences are amplified and whose are quietly discounted.

If the citizen of the romantic theory does not exist, a harder consequence follows: a democracy of perfectly equal, perfectly rational citizens is not merely difficult to build but conceptually impossible, because the system must make choices that necessarily privilege some over others before any citizen casts a vote. The first and deepest of these is the one named in the Frame — the drawing of the demos. But even after that line is settled, inequality re-enters through the machinery itself, and it cannot be designed away, only chosen.

Consider the procedures. First-past-the-post electoral systems manufacture artificial majorities, rewarding parties whose support is geographically concentrated and annihilating those whose support is broad but thin — a party can win a third of the votes and a clear majority of seats, or win millions of votes and almost nothing. Proportional systems correct that distortion but introduce others, handing small parties leverage out of all proportion to their numbers and making the coalition broker, not the voter, the decisive actor. Malapportionment — the deliberate over-weighting of some districts — is built into many constitutions: the United States Senate gives a state of forty million and a state of half a million exactly two votes each, and the Electoral College carries that imbalance into the choice of the executive. District boundaries can be drawn to pack opponents into a few seats or scatter them across many. None of these is neutral. Each one se-

lects, in advance, whose voice will be amplified and whose will be muffled. The vote is formally equal; its weight never is.

Then there is the deliberate constraint placed on majorities from above — and here is where liberalism, as defined in the Lexicon, reveals itself as something separate from, and often opposed to, democracy. A bill of rights is an anti-democratic instrument in the literal sense: it exists to tell a majority, however large and however certain, that there are things it simply may not do — may not establish a religion, may not silence a critic, may not seize a person without process. Independent courts enforce these limits against the elected branches. This is *institutional independence* and *rights and due process* doing exactly what they were built to do: subtracting certain questions from the reach of the majority entirely. Tocqueville gave the danger they guard against its enduring name — the *tyranny of the majority* — and the whole liberal apparatus is the answer to it. Which means liberal democracy is not a single harmonious thing but a permanent, deliberate tension: the democratic half maximizes the majority's power, the liberal half fences it in, and the boundary between them is contested in every generation.

The conclusion is unavoidable. Because there is no procedure without distributional consequences, and no way to include everyone in the demos without first deciding what "everyone" means, every democracy must choose an inequality and then live with it — usually by naming it something else: tradition, the constitution, the rules of the game, common sense. The honest question is never whether a democracy contains a built-in inequality. It always does. The question is which one it has chosen, whom it serves, and whether the people disadvantaged by it have any peaceful means of changing it. A democracy that has frozen its founding inequality beyond the reach of reform has begun, quietly, to stop being one.

PART III

Democracy Without Progress

Nothing in the machinery of democracy requires it to be kind, tolerant, or just. It is a procedure for counting the preferences of whoever counts — and those preferences can be monstrous.

We are trained, in the liberal democracies, to hear "democracy" and "progress" as near-synonyms, as if the franchise itself bent toward justice. It does not. Democracy is a mechanism for aggregating the preferences of the demos, and it is utterly indifferent to the content of those preferences. If the demos is cruel, the democracy will be cruel. If the demos wants to enslave its neighbours, a perfectly functioning democracy will deliver the votes to do it. There is no clause in the procedure that filters for decency. A population of ruthless, patriarchal slavers can run textbook-clean elections, debate vigorously, transfer power peacefully among themselves — and remain, by every procedural measure, a democracy. This is not a hypothetical. It is most of the history of the form.

The concept that captures it is Pierre van den Berghe's *Herrenvolk democracy* — democracy for the master people, despotism for everyone else. The mechanism runs in full inside the dominant group while the subordinate groups are simply defined out of the demos and ruled, not represented. **Athens**, the birthplace of the word, is the founding case: dazzling democratic invention — selection by lot, the open assembly, rotation of office, equal speech among citizens — resting on a foundation of chattel slavery and the total exclusion of women and foreigners. And the Athenian demos, fully empowered, voted to execute Socrates, voted for the ruinous Sicilian Expedition, voted in plague-time

for the scapegoat and the purge. Democratic form; frequently terrible democratic substance. The point is not that Athens fell short of its ideals. The point is that there was no contradiction at all between its democracy and its brutality, because the brutality fell on people the democracy had defined as outside the people.

The **antebellum American South** is the cleanest modern instance, and the most instructive, because it defeats the easy charge of hypocrisy. The white men of the slave states enjoyed a genuinely vigorous democratic culture — fiercely contested elections, a free and partisan press among themselves, high rates of participation, real ideological debate — sitting directly atop the most violent institution in the nation's history. This was not a gap between principle and practice to be closed by moral progress. It was a coherent system, working as designed: define the demos by race, then run authentic democracy *within* that definition. **Apartheid South Africa** institutionalized the same logic into the twentieth century, holding real elections for whites while governing the Black majority as subjects. And the early franchises of nineteenth-century Europe did a gentler version of the same thing as a matter of explicit design, ruling women and the propertyless out of the demos rather than oppressing them within it.

The lesson is one the romantic theory cannot absorb and the present century cannot afford to forget. There is nothing in democracy that makes it progressive, tolerant, or liberal. Those are *additions* — the liberal constraints of Part II, the slow widening of the demos described in the Frame — bolted onto the bare procedure by long political struggle, and removable by the same means. A democracy can elect, again and again, governments that entrench traditional hierarchies, fuse church and state, pursue ethnic homogeneity, and defend the existing distribution of wealth and status with great ferocity, and remain a democracy throughout — right up to the moment those governments begin

dismantling the mechanism that could vote them out. Strip away the moral hopes we have attached to the word, and what remains is a machine for counting the will of the included. Everything decent about a given democracy lives in *who it includes* and *what it forbids itself to do* — never in the counting alone.

PART IV

The Reactionary Spirit

The conservative wants to preserve the democratic order. The reactionary regards democracy's expansion as the emergency that justifies destroying it. The line between them is a gradient, and you rarely see the moment it is crossed.

If democracy is not inherently progressive, then its expansions — each widening of the demos described in the Frame — are not the smooth unfolding of an accepted principle but a series of contested conquests, and every conquest provokes a counter-movement. This is the territory mapped by Zack Beauchamp in *The Reactionary Spirit* (2024), and it supplies the dynamic that ties this whole booklet together. Beauchamp's claim, building on Corey Robin's *The Reactionary Mind*, is that the deep premise of reaction is the conviction that some people are simply fit to rule others — and that when democracy threatens an existing hierarchy by admitting the previously excluded, the reactionary concludes it is right, even righteous, to overthrow democracy rather than permit the change.

The crucial move in Beauchamp's argument is a distinction the daily noise of politics tends to blur. The ordinary conservative seeks to *preserve* the democratic order, even while resisting particular changes within it. Even a radical, xenophobic far-right party may accept that it must win under the rules and surrender power if it loses. The reactionary is defined by neither goal nor intensity but by a structural relationship to democracy itself: the reactionary spirit arises specifically *in reaction to democratic expansion*, and it produces a politics willing to weaken or abolish the democratic mechanism rather than accept an outcome that

expansion would bring. What distinguishes it is not how right-wing it is. It is that it has stopped agreeing to lose.

This reframes the whole problem and exposes its central danger. The threat to a democracy is rarely the tank in the square; far more often it is the slow conversion of an *illiberal democracy* into a *competitive authoritarian* regime by an elected government that treats its own removal as illegitimate by definition — packing the courts, capturing the press, harassing the opposition, re-drawing the demos to lock in its advantage. And the deepest difficulty is that there is no bright line to defend. The distance between "a democracy producing harshly conservative outcomes," which is entirely within the form, and "a democracy producing reactionary outcomes that dismantle the form," which is its death, is not a wall but a gradient. A government can move along it one defensible-looking step at a time — a judicial reform here, a media regulation there, an electoral adjustment framed as fighting fraud — and the citizenry, reasoning like Haidt's press secretary in defence of an elephant that has already chosen its tribe, supplies justifications for each step. You usually cannot identify the moment the line was crossed until you are already standing on the far side of it, looking back.

PART V

Stripping the Costume

Strip away the ideology — left or right, sacred or secular, the people's will or the master race — and many systems that present themselves as opposites turn out to be the same machine in different dress.

Political systems advertise themselves by their costumes. The costume is the legitimating story a regime tells about why its power is rightful: the sovereign will of the people, the rebirth of the nation, the law of God, the abolition of class, the steady hand that keeps order. These stories feel like the essence of the thing. They are not. Beneath the costume is a machine, and the machine can be described without reference to the story at all. When you strip the ideology away and look only at the working parts, systems that present themselves as bitter opposites are revealed, with disturbing frequency, to be the same apparatus in different dress.

The machine has a small number of moving parts, and four questions expose all of them. *Who actually holds power* — one person, a narrow clique, or a genuinely contestable many? *Can the rulers lose and leave* — is there a real, periodic possibility of turnover, or is removal effectively foreclosed? *Are the checks intact* — do courts, press, and electoral umpires act on their own logic, or do they serve the ruler? And, separately, *how deep does power reach* — does it want only your obedience in the political sphere, or your active belief in every sphere of life? The legitimating story is the fifth element, but it is the costume, not the mechanism. Two of these questions do almost all the work. The single most clarifying is the Schumpeter–Przeworski test from

Part I: *can those in power actually lose an election and hand it over?* Nearly every disguise fails the moment you ask it plainly.

Set the regimes side by side on these parts and the convergence is stark. A mature *illiberal democracy*, a *competitive authoritarian state*, a *delegative democracy*, a *managed democracy*, and a single-party state all arrive at nearly the same configuration of the machine — power concentrated, checks captured or hollow, turnover foreclosed — while wearing radically different costumes. The right-wing competitive-authoritarian regime that drapes itself in the nation and the left-wing one-party state that drapes itself in the working class are, as governing machines, close cousins: concentrated unaccountable power, a captured judiciary, a press that serves the centre, an opposition allowed to exist but not to win. The same observation has long been made about the supposed polar opposites of the twentieth century — that fascism and Stalinism, ideological enemies to the death, were as *systems* nearly identical: concentrated power, suppressed dissent, a dehumanized out-group, a cult of the leader, the law bent to a single will. The ideology mainly tells you which group will be cast as the enemy. The machine tells you how the regime actually runs.

SYSTEM	WHO REALLY HOLDS POWER	CAN RULERS LOSE & LEAVE?	CHECKS IN-TACT?	THE COSTUME IT WEARS
Liberal democracy	A contestable many; power genuinely rotates	Yes — and they regularly do	Yes — courts, press, umpires independent	The sovereign will of the people, fenced by rights
Illiberal democracy	Elected leader & party; rivals shrinking	In theory; made very hard in practice	Hollowed — forms kept, substance gone	Still "the people" — but only the right people
Competitive authoritarianism	The incumbent, struc-	Almost never, despite		Democracy as theatre;

SYSTEM	WHO REALLY HOLDS POWER	CAN RULERS LOSE & LEAVE?	CHECKS IN-TACT?	THE COSTUME IT WEARS
	turally entrenched	real elections	Captured — serve the centre	the contest is rigged
Delegative democracy	One elected strongman, unconstrained	At the ballot, perhaps; not between	Bypassed — ruled by decree	The vote as a personal blank cheque
Managed democracy	Backstage technologists & their patron	No — outcomes arranged in advance	Stage-managed, not independent	A full democratic performance, pre-scripted
Authoritarianism (classic)	One ruler or a clique; no real vote	No — removal only by force	Subordinated to the ruler	Order, stability, tradition; belief optional
One-party state (communist / fascist)	The party; the leader within it	No — opposition forbidden outright	Fully captured & weaponized	Class abolished / nation reborn; belief demanded

The legitimating stories differ wildly. The machines, read across the middle three columns, converge.

The convergence is sharpest precisely where the costumes are loudest. A communist one-party state claims to govern in the name of the propertyless and to be marching toward a classless, eventually stateless society; a competitive-authoritarian nationalist regime claims to defend the true people against cosmopolitan elites and foreign threats. Hold the two costumes up and they could not look more opposed. Strip them off, and you find the same answers running down the middle of the table: power concentrated in a leader and an inner circle, no genuine possibility of losing office, courts and press converted into instruments. What differs in execution is mainly the fourth question — *how deep power reaches*. The classic authoritarian wants only your obedience and will leave your private life largely alone; the totalitarian

one-party state wants your active belief and reaches into every corner of life, demanding not silence but enthusiasm. That is a real and terrible difference. But it is a difference of depth and ambition, not of the basic mechanism of rule.

This is the practical payoff of stripping the costume, and the reason the exercise is worth the discomfort. It immunizes you against being governed by the brochure. A regime will always describe itself in the language of its legitimating story — the people's democracy, the guided democracy, the sovereign democracy, the illiberal democracy — and the adjective is chosen to keep the flattering noun. Do not argue with the costume. Ask the machine the four questions, and especially the one that cuts through every disguise at once: *when the people who hold power lose, do they actually leave?* A system that cannot answer yes is not a democracy, whatever it is wearing — and a system that can is one, however ugly its other choices may be.

PART VI

Democracies Under the Lens

Applied to the present, the demos question is rarely settled and rarely comfortable. What follows are analytical readings, not verdicts — and where the characterizations are contested, they are flagged as such.

The frame of this volume — *who is the demos, and is the line being redrawn?* — is most useful when it is pointed at the living world. What follows applies it to several contemporary cases. These are readings through a particular lens, drawing on the scholarship cited at the back; they are not pronouncements, and each is contested by serious people. The aim is to show the lens working, not to deliver a scorecard.

Hungary is the case the vocabulary was practically built for. Viktor Orbán did not merely drift toward *illiberal democracy*; he embraced the phrase in a 2014 speech as a positive programme, an "illiberal state" that keeps elections while rejecting the liberal constraints on the majority. Through the lens of the demos, the project reads as a redrawing of the national "we" around an ethnic-Magyar, Christian, anti-immigrant identity, with the machinery — courts, media ownership, electoral boundaries, university and civil-society funding — reshaped to entrench the governing party. Many scholars, including Levitsky and Way, now classify Hungary as having crossed from illiberal democracy into *competitive authoritarianism*: elections continue, but on a field tilted past the point where turnover is realistically possible. Supporters describe the same facts as the defence of national sovereignty and traditional values against external pressure. The lens

does not resolve that dispute; it locates it precisely, at the questions of who counts and whether the rulers can still lose.

The United States shows the demos question as a two-century argument that has never closed. The founding line was narrow — propertied white men — and the subsequent history is one long, contested widening: the end of property qualifications, the post-Civil-War amendments, women's suffrage, the Voting Rights Act of 1965. Read through the frame, the persistent battles of the present — over voter-identification laws, district-drawing, the handling of voter rolls, the franchise of citizens with criminal records — are continuations of the same fight over who effectively counts, with the two parties offering sharply opposed accounts of whether the issue is the integrity of the vote or its suppression. Layered atop this is a separate, well-documented concern raised in political science: that the policy influence of ordinary citizens has fallen sharply relative to that of wealthy individuals and organized interests, a drift toward *oligarchic* tendencies operating within intact democratic forms. These are genuinely disputed characterizations, and reasonable analysts weigh them differently; the frame's contribution is to keep the underlying question — *who really counts, and is the answer being narrowed?* — in clear view.

India poses the demos question in its starkest civic form: is the Indian people a secular, pluralist citizenry defined by the constitution, or a Hindu-majoritarian nation in which religious minorities hold a lesser membership? Critics argue that measures associated with the governing party — citizenship provisions read against the country's Muslim minority, pressure on independent media and civil society, the treatment of dissent — amount to a quiet redrawing of the demos along religious lines within a system that remains, formally and at vast scale, an electoral democracy with real and consequential elections. The government and

its supporters contest this reading directly, framing the same measures as security, national cohesion, and the correction of historic imbalances. Here the lens highlights a regime that, unlike Hungary, still sees genuine turnover at various levels — which is exactly why the contest over who belongs to the demos, rather than over whether elections happen at all, is the decisive battleground.

Israel presents the demos question in perhaps its most acute modern form, because the boundary of the people and the boundary of the governed do not coincide. Within its recognized borders it functions as a vigorous democracy, with fiercely competitive elections and real transfers of power. But the 2018 Nation-State Law, which defined national self-determination as unique to the Jewish people, sharpened a long-running tension between the state's Jewish and democratic commitments and the standing of its Arab citizens. And beyond the franchise lies the harder fact that millions of Palestinians in the occupied territories live under Israeli control without a vote in the state that governs key aspects of their lives — the structural signature, in van den Berghe's terms, of a system democratic for one people and not for another. Defenders point to existential security threats, the contested and unresolved status of the territories, and the full citizenship of Arab Israelis within the state proper. This is among the most bitterly disputed characterizations in contemporary politics, and it is offered here strictly as an application of the lens: where the demos ends, and who is governed beyond it, is the question the frame insists we keep asking.

One corrective belongs at the end, lest the lens read as a counsel of despair. The demos is not redrawn only inward. The whole moral history compressed into the Frame — abolition, universal suffrage, decolonization, the extension of full citizenship to the once-excluded — is the record of the line being pushed *outward*,

often against ferocious reaction, and made to stick. The contemporary cases show the boundary under pressure and, in places, contracting. They do not show that contraction is destiny. The frame's final lesson is the one the longer history teaches: the demos is never settled, the costume can change faster than the machine, and the boundary of "the people" is redrawn, in one direction or the other, by whichever generation troubles itself to fight over it.

BACK MATTER

References & Further Reading

The works below are grouped first by those drawn on directly in the argument, then by the wider literature a reader following these threads will want next.

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Version 1 — a working draft for revision.

Analytical readings are offered as such; contested cases are flagged in
the text.

Part of the *Hidden Sovereigns* project.