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INTRODUCTION

DEMOCRACY'S REAL DEAL

In September 1787, Dr. Benjamin Franklin emerged from the Pennsylvania statehouse—today's Independence Hall. The summerlong Constitutional Convention, at which the Constitution of the United States of America was drafted, had just ended. After Franklin exited the building, he was confronted by Mrs. Elizabeth Powel, a prominent member of Philadelphia's intellectual and social elite. Eager for Franklin's take on the closed-door deliberations, she asked, "Well Doctor what have we got? A republic or a monarchy?" That is, would it be self-government by citizens or the rule of a boss? Franklin famously replied, "A republic—if you can keep it." It was both a promise and a warning.¹

At first glance, this often-repeated story portrays the eighty-one-year-old scientist, diplomat, and constitutional framer as a stern grandparent, surrendering keys to an inexperienced and perhaps irresponsible child: "OK, the new red, white, and blue family car is now yours, but don't crash it!" Franklin and his fellow "founding fathers" were leaving the convention, about to hand over a masterpiece of governmental design to American citizens, first for ratification and then making it work. They just hoped their fellow citizens would be up to those challenges.

But look again: Was it a masterpiece? The common answer has frequently been an unabashed "yes": the US Constitution has been revered as both the source and most perfect embodiment of America's democratic republic. But of the seventy delegates appointed by the thirteen states, only thirty-nine ultimately signed the document. Some of the

most prominent of the founders had deep doubts about the viability of their collective enterprise. More recently, the landmark document has been a target of skeptical critique and source of disappointment. Many Americans now complain that the Constitution was fatally flawed from the beginning—in its vague and awkward language, elitist avoidance of majority rule, and authorship by slave-owning hypocrites. For these critics, it is no masterpiece that Franklin helped design; indeed, it is a mess.

Reframing Pessimism

Negativity about the Constitution is part of a current trend of democratic pessimism. A generation ago, the collapse of the Soviet Union led to a wave of enthusiasm for democracy, and launched the spread of free and liberal governments around the world. Yet today, democratic systems everywhere are under pressure, polarized, and struggling with both internal and external authoritarian challenges. The worry is that democracy is dying. Commentary across national and global media suggests that its demise may be inevitable.

History offers a corrective. Yes, some democracies are faltering today, and many others collapsed in the past. But four exceptionally well-documented and highly influential democratic experiments—classical Athens, republican Rome, British parliamentarianism, and US constitutionalism—endured, or continue to endure, for multiple centuries. What can be learned from these cases about how democracies can, at least sometimes, survive? Could historical insights be applied to help save today's struggling democracies?

Those questions launched this book. We began by turning current pessimism on its head. Instead of inquiring into the causes of democracy's death, we looked to history's long survivors for clues to democracy's emergence, evolution, and strategies for persistence. Ancient Athenian democracy lasted close to two hundred years; republican Rome twice that; and British parliamentary governance developed slowly, but it started early and ever since the seventeenth century has evolved toward a democratic system. The United States' constitutional

government has held on through sharp partisan dissension and a bloody civil war for over two centuries. We asked ourselves how these systems of citizen self-government survived (or still survive) for so long: Is there some general pattern, some adaptive strategy, that enabled and sustained (even if unevenly) democracy across multiple generations? Can insight from comparative political history be harnessed to help renew modern democracy?

Democracy's Essence, Rise, and Survival

To tackle those issues, we posed two more basic questions. First, what *is* democracy? What essentially has it meant to those who created and sustained democratic societies? Second, how does it come into being?

Taking history as a guide to political theorizing, we concluded that democracy in its most basic sense means “no boss.” Democracy pertains when extensive, socially diverse bodies of citizens govern themselves, accepting no ruler except for one another. That is no mean feat, especially once societies grow beyond the tiny face-to-face communities that were the norm before the development of agriculture. Decision-making in any large organization is always difficult, but it is particularly complex when no individual or small group is in charge. A “bossless” community will always struggle to make decisions that are sufficiently pleasing to enough people to be supported with action. Because choices must be made, and because they cannot please everyone, the outcome will never be perfect. By its very nature, democratic governance is indeed messy—but not necessarily chaotic. Decisions can be made and followed if citizens devise the right procedures. But even the best procedures are useless unless citizens bring the right mindset and behaviors to the task: working together as political equals who prioritize finding common ground in spite of differing preferences and interests. That is to say, democracy can succeed if and when it is understood as a fundamental bargain among free and equal citizens—an agreement to work together to defend the things we the citizens hold in common.

Instead of viewing democracy as a static collection of laws and institutions, we reimagine it as an organic, living system—messy indeed, but

also purposeful. It operates to include and bond many diverse people who choose the freedom to make their own decisions and live by what they, together, decide. Democracy as bossless self-governance survives when citizens keep constructively and peacefully interacting and learning from one another, and when they reach for the benefits of freedom and shoulder the burdens of defending them. When they don't, democracy fails, and before long once free citizens find themselves answering to a boss.

On the second question—how democracy arises—we drew again on the rich historical record of our four cases. We sought to honor the best scholarly interpretations of political development in each case while going beyond a focus on democratic leaders and revolutions. Standard histories often underappreciate the process of negotiation that follows when the fighting stops—or that avoids fighting altogether. The centrality of bargaining to democracy, to its emergence and persistence, is the major theme of our book.

The Civic Bargain and Its Essential Conditions

Based on our analysis of historical cases, we contend that democracy is made possible and preserved over time by dealmaking and compromises. Democracy usually must be fought for (bosses like being bosses), but also requires bargaining. To consolidate and sustain self-government, citizens must agree to a *civic bargain*. Historically, civic bargains of different kinds have been struck and revised by democracies; we describe four of them in our case studies. Whether it is a written document like the US Constitution, coherent body of laws and legal precedents, or unwritten set of norms, the civic bargain specifies who is a citizen, how decisions are made, and what citizens owe one another. It determines how the “gives and gets”—the benefits and costs of ruling together for the common good—are distributed.

The civic bargain depends on and must in turn actively promote what we call the *essential conditions* of democracy—the conditions that are necessary for citizen self-governance. The seven conditions listed below are discussed in detail in chapter 1. They are elucidated in the historical

case studies of chapters 2–5 and revisited in our summary of findings in chapter 6.

1. **No Boss**—except one another: citizens govern themselves, directly or through accountable representatives
2. **Security and Welfare**: ensure common safety, freedom from harm, and basic means of living as a common good for all
3. **Citizenship Defined**: formally specify who is a citizen, and what that means, including the extent of citizens' equality, freedoms, and responsibilities
4. **Citizen-Led Institutions**: maintain institutions of decision-making and conflict resolution under the charge of members of the democracy
5. **Good Faith Compromise**: prefer common good compromise in political decisions over unilateral demands for perfection
6. **Civic Friendship**: act as “civic friends” with one another, not as enemies, smoothing the way to renegotiate bargains with one another and meet future challenges
7. **Civic Education**: provide civic learning and experiences for citizens, instilling the values and practices they need to keep bossless self-governance

Before those seven conditions are achieved, democracy remains at best an aspiration. The conditions come about, when they do, through a sequence of prior political bargains. When they are robustly sustained, democracy flourishes. When they start to break down, democracy struggles. When they are abandoned, democracy fails.

So what enabled long-enduring democracies to create the essential conditions, strike a durable civic bargain, and survive over time? Our answer echoes the evolutionary processes of a living system. The patterns of behavior that allow a system of self-government to take root also enable it to continue to grow and thrive. Democracy must adapt when threatened while still preserving its essential core. Threats may arise from internal dissension, foreign attempts at conquest, or both. Indeed, as we will see, existential threats have historically provided an incentive for citizens with competing interests to bargain with one another.

Democracies survive if and only if their citizens maintain a robust and adaptive civic bargain, making the necessary and necessarily imperfect deals to preserve security, welfare, and self-governance. Faced with new threats and opportunities, citizens must periodically reexamine and renegotiate the bargain, the terms on which they agreed to live together as a democratic community. For that, as we will emphasize throughout, the final condition—education of citizens, by citizens—is essential.

Back to Philadelphia

A less familiar story about Franklin at the 1787 Constitutional Convention is revealing of how a civic bargain is struck. As we detail in chapter 5, many state delegates had come to the convention with a shared assumption about what needed to be done, given the failure of the earlier and ineffective Articles of Confederation, which had failed to adequately ensure for the new nation's security and welfare: a no-boss system of self-government must be capable of competing with autocratic rivals by promoting effective cooperation across a diverse constituency. Other delegates came to share that core assumption as the proceedings unfolded.

But deep disagreements remained about how to do it. Happily, many of the men had previously served in the local colonial and state assemblies, and several had also fought in the revolution. Many were deeply read in history and political philosophy. They brought their beliefs and priorities from those experiences to the bargaining table, and actively attended to and learned from one another's arguments.

Most delegates had a sense of the goals and mechanics of self-governance that either needed to be affirmed or further developed: having just fought for liberation from the British king, they would tolerate no overarching boss. As a new free nation, they had to ensure their ability to defend themselves from external threats. In the aftermath of the recent farm debt rebellion of Daniel Shays and his Massachusetts armed mob, it was vital to secure the internal peace against domestic dissension. The chaos enabled by the earlier Articles of Confederation—

multiple currencies, local taxes, and inconsistent trade regulations—was impeding collective welfare by hampering economic development. There must be a shared understanding of who would be a citizen in the new nation, and what would be their rights and responsibilities. There had to be a framework for how public decisions would be made and conflicts resolved in order to coordinate local, state, and central administration—without a king. And there needed to be mechanisms of enforcing collective decisions.

But with the backdrop of the proverbial smiling devil, there was little shared agreement about how to accomplish such things. And there remained the burning issue of slavery, thought by many southern delegates to be essential to their state economies, and despised by others as contrary to the natural rights of all people, as proclaimed in the Declaration of Independence of 1776. The delegates tackled all of those questions as best as they could through three long months of heated argument, punctuated by negotiation, compromise, and renegotiation.

On the afternoon of September 17, a final draft of a new constitution lay before them. Most delegates saw it as an improvement over the old Articles of Confederation, but the level of support to approve it, and seek ratification and implementation, was unclear. Franklin came to the front of the room to signal his assent to the draft, hoping to encourage others to also vote “yea.” To add to his plea, he offered his personal reflections about what it had taken, from all of them working together, to reach this moment. In his aged frailty, he was seated beside his fellow Pennsylvania delegate, James Wilson, who read the speech aloud on Franklin’s behalf.

The Perfect Is the Enemy of the Common Good

The speech conveyed a tone humbler than Franklin would display the next day, when he blurted out his answer about “keeping the republic.” This day, still behind closed doors, he signaled more painful practicality, an eighty-one-year-old man chastened by the experience of a long and eventful career.

The speech began by asserting his agreement “to this Constitution with all its faults, if they are such,” but conceding as well that “there are several parts which I do not at present approve.” He then commented on the ego and irrationality of human nature, which he acknowledged no less for himself than others now listening: “Most men . . . think themselves in possession of all truth, and that wherever others differ from them it is for error.” Franklin next suggested the disputes arising from such assumptions often in fact worsen when many are gathered together for “joint wisdom” because they also bring to their tasks “their prejudices, their passions, their errors of opinion, their local interests, and their selfish views.” With all of that, Franklin expressed astonishment at how close to perfection the delegates had come with this draft of the Constitution—close, but not 100 percent, because perfection, he further implied, was not attainable in human endeavor. With still some lingering doubt, the speech nonetheless concluded with Franklin’s approval, as he acknowledged that important practical matters now hung in the balance: “I consent because I am not sure, that this [Constitution] is not the best. The opinions I have had of its errors, I sacrifice to the public good.”²

As the delegates mulled Franklin’s words, they knew all too well the specific controversies his carefully chosen philosophical language alluded to without naming. They had hammered out an agreement through disputes about the branches of government, central versus local financial authority, voting rights, and the fraught issue of slavery. Franklin was congratulating them for finding the compromise that was the best available while acknowledging its imperfections.

The delegates had agreed on a system *that ensured no overall boss*: the specific authority of the new president was critically constrained to minimize that risk, and the “balance of powers” would similarly limit any domineering attempts by the court or legislatures. They had *provided for the citizens’ collective security and basic welfare* by strengthening the financial and military authority of a national federal government over the local states—not too much, but enough, a majority believed, to remedy the weakness of the Articles of Confederation. They had *defined who would be a citizen and what that meant*, with rules and require-

ments about voting, immigration, and certain responsibilities and freedoms (albeit with, among other limits, a painful compromise about slaves). And they had designed *institutions of governance led wholly by citizens*, with a careful detail about the requirements and selection of officeholders and representatives for the presidency, legislature, and courts. They were able to *negotiate in good faith* because they treated each other as *civic friends* rather than enemies, and because they had been *educated* by formal learning, experience, and one another in the essentials of civic life.

Of course, there were still loopholes and loose ends, but the draft was overall good enough to move forward to the still-uncertain process of ratification. And Franklin reminded them of that. His speech emphasized what it took to strike a civic bargain among ambitious and opinionated human beings—to *prefer a common good compromise in political decisions over unilateral demands for perfection*.

Franklin and his fellow delegates recognized that the agreement was not a timeless masterpiece; they knew that it would be revised. It was an imperfect but living civic bargain for a living democracy; the search for a “more perfect union” (in the words of the Constitution’s famous prologue) would continue. The founding document set out a framework of self-governance that had the capacity to evolve, and it would have to do so if it were to survive. The challenges, tragedies, and successes of America in doing that are the subject of chapter 5.

In the aftermath of the convention, the thirty-nine delegates who signed the new Constitution were indeed eager to sell it to the citizens of the new nation; the Constitution was only a proposal until it was ratified by the states. Ratification was achieved through a public process of education—through reasoned arguments presented by citizens to citizens in newspapers and pamphlets about the nature of the governance proposed, and the rationale for the choices that were made in its design. Other forms and forums of the education of citizens have since been essential in sustaining American democracy. Civic education, both formal and informal, was also basic to striking and keeping the civic bargains of our other three historical cases. It was and is crucial to sustaining democracy.

With history as our guide, this book explains the fundamentals of democracy as collective self-governance. Our goal is to help you understand the key assumptions and imperatives that enable self-governance by citizens, and how democracy survives. It is a book not only about imperfection, compromise, and dealmaking, and how imminent and existential threats are an incentive to negotiation, but also about civic virtue and friendship. Bargaining must be pursued in a climate of goodwill if it is to meet inevitable steep challenges. We hope that having read this book, you will think differently about democracy's future—and about your own role as a citizen or would-be citizen in helping it to survive or letting it die.

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