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HEROES OR VILLAINS?

IMAGES OF CITIZENS AND CIVIL SOCIETY IN THE LITERATURE ON DEMOCRACY

TELEVISION MAKES IT EASY to find and disseminate heroic images of ordinary people in the dramas of democratization. The vision of a solitary Chinese dissident standing bravely in front of a rolling tank in Tiananmen Square is not easily forgotten. Nor is it easy to forget the images of thousands of other people who faced down forces of coercion in different parts of the world: frail-looking Philippine nuns protecting ballot boxes for the People's Power Movement, burly Polish workers occupying shipyards in the name of Solidarity, and determined Argentine mothers marching defiantly in the Plaza de Mayo in the name of missing children and lost rights. These images have their counterparts in most stories of democratization. They testify to the ubiquity of courage and to the depth of the longing for liberty.

These images also help explain our current fascination with an abstraction called "civil society." Like most abstractions, this term means different things to different people. I use it as shorthand for the networks of formal and informal associations that mediate between individual actors and the state. These networks may function for good or for evil. For me the term "civil" conveys location rather than approbation.¹ Yet there can be little doubt that these networks facilitate the heroic actions we see on film, for they draw individuals out of private worlds and into public spaces. They also offer the fellowship, resources, and reinforcement that make acts of defiance seem feasible. The names of the ordinary people who act heroically are not widely known—but the networks they pass through are named and remem-

¹"Civil society" is a neutral term for me, though I recognize that it is a normatively positive political goal for many others. Philippe Schmitter discusses the negative and ultimately anti-democratic elements of civil society in "Some Reflections about the Concept of Civil Society (in General) and Its Role in the Liberalization and Democratization of Europe (in Particular)," an unpublished manuscript presented at the conference "Civil Society before Democracy" at Princeton University, October 1996. Jan Kubik gives a helpful overview of the various meanings of the term in *Civil Society before Democracy*, ed. Nancy Bermeo and Philip Nord (New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 2000).

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bered. Student organizations, church groups, trade unions, and women's groups have a salience in our literature that their individual members usually lack. It is not surprising that civil society became the "celebrity" of our recent democratic transitions.² Celebrity status requires a name, and the ordinary people who were often the real heroes of these transitions remain, for the most part, anonymous.

Whatever its origins, our contemporary reverence for civil society is profoundly connected with our current thinking on the durability and quality of democracy. This chapter opens with a brief discussion of these connections and then moves on to argue four related points: first, that civil society was cast in a much more ambiguous role in our recent past; second, that this ambiguous role was closely related to suspicions about ordinary people and their commitment to democracy; third, that these suspicions are reflected in our theories of party systems and voting; and finally, that these suspicions, and the theories they gave rise to, require reexamination.

Civil Society and Democracy

Civil Society as Salvation

Civil society is cast in a heroic role in a wide variety of works that deal with democratization. The role most easily connected with contemporary newsreels portrays civil society as a barrier to tyranny. Tocqueville writes that the growth of civil society's component institutions "should be regarded, not as the best, but as the *only* means of preserving freedom."³ A broad spectrum of contemporary analysts agrees. We read that civil society is a necessary defense against the "monstrous state,"⁴ that it provides "reservoirs of resistance to arbitrary or tyrannical action,"⁵ and that without political associations, societies everywhere will be completely dominated by "the central power apparatus."⁶ Civil society not only "lays down limits on the actions of the state,"⁷ but

² Linz and Stepan, *Problems of Democratic Transition*, 9.

³ Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America* (New York: Vintage Books, 1945), 341.

⁴ Francisco Weffort, "Why Democracy?" in *Democratizing Brazil*, ed. Alfred Stepan (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 349.

⁵ Philippe Schmitter, "Some Propositions about Civil Society and the Consolidation of Democracy" (unpublished manuscript, 1993), 24. Also in *Polis* (Moscow) vol. 5, no. 35 (1996) (in Russian).

⁶ Seymour Martin Lipset, "Social Requisites of Democracy Revisited" (unpublished presidential address, American Sociological Association, 1993), 29–30.

⁷ Edward Shils, "The Virtue of Civil Society," *Government and Opposition* 26, no. 1 (1991): 4. For similar views, see John Keane, "Introduction," in *Civil Society and the State*, ed. John Keane (New York: Verso, 1988), 61; and George Kolankiewicz, "The Reconstruc-

also counterbalances,⁸ “penetrates,” “fragments,” and “decentralizes” state power.⁹

Another strand of argument presents civil society as the basis of good and effective government. According to this view, civil society provides state elites with “clear counsel” on “authentic,” rather than contrived, needs.¹⁰ It “presents authorities with more aggregated, reliable and actionable information”¹¹ and thereby plays “a central role in resolving problems of successful governance.”¹² Strong civil societies “support progress towards . . . greater social and economic equality.”¹³ Strong civil societies “expect better government” and then “get it (in part because of their own efforts).”¹⁴

We connect civil society with good government because we believe that civic associations affect their individual members in salutary ways. Civil society is often portrayed as a school for the training of democratic citizens. It is the space which provides “the taste and habit of self-rule.”¹⁵ It is the place for citizens to learn the “civic manners” that make “opposition less rancorous.”¹⁶ The actual “experience of civil society . . . seems to work against intolerance and even materialism.”¹⁷ It is a place where citizens are able to relate themselves “effectively and meaningfully” to their political systems and thereby gain a sense of efficacy.¹⁸ Participation in civic organizations “inculcates skills of cooperation as well as a sense of shared responsibility for collective endeavors.”¹⁹ It “quicken[s] political awareness . . . dispels isolation and

tion of Citizenship: Reverse Incorporation in Eastern Europe,” in *Constructing Capitalism*, ed. Kazimierz Z. Poznanski (San Francisco: Westview Press, 1992), 144.

⁸ Dietrich Rueschemeyer, Eveline Huber Stephens, and John D. Stephens, *Capitalist Development and Democracy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 6. The authors write that civil society provides a “counterweight to state power.”

⁹ Charles Taylor, “Modes of Civil Society,” *Public Culture* 3, no. 1 (Fall 1990): 117.

¹⁰ Michael Bernhard, “Civil Society and Democratic Transition in East Central Europe,” *Political Science Quarterly* 108, no. 2 (1993): 314; and George Kolankiewicz, “The Reconstruction of Citizenship: Reverse Incorporation in Eastern Europe,” in Poznanski, *Constructing Capitalism*, 142.

¹¹ Schmitter, “Some Propositions,” 24.

¹² Joshua Cohen and Joel Rogers, “Secondary Associations and Democratic Governance,” *Politics and Society* Special Issue 20, no. 4 (1992), 394.

¹³ Rueschemeyer et al., *Capitalist Development and Democracy*, 10–11.

¹⁴ Robert Putnam, *Making Democracy Work* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), 182.

¹⁵ Taylor, “Modes of Civil Society,” 115. This is a perspective Taylor shares with Montesquieu. It is part of what he calls the M-stream vision of civil society.

¹⁶ Shils, “The Virtue of Civil Society,” 13.

¹⁷ Michael Walzer, “The Idea of Civil Society,” *Dissent* 38, no. 2 (1991): 300–301.

¹⁸ Gabriel Almond and Sidney Verba, *The Civic Culture* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1963), 245.

¹⁹ Putnam, *Making Democracy Work*, 90. See also John A. Booth and Patricia Bayer Richard, “Civil Society and Political Context in Central America,” in *Beyond Tocqueville: Civil*

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mutual distrust,"²⁰ and "broadens the participants' sense of self, developing the 'I' into the 'We.'" ²¹ Democratically organized associations may "influence political behavior [even] more than underlying personal values, no matter how authoritarian."²²

Having accorded civil society a role that is both positive and powerful, it makes sense that scholars would use their assessments of particular civil societies as bases for political projections. Civil society is now an "independent variable" of great importance. We read that the "weak civic traditions" of the formerly Communist regimes make their successful democratization highly problematic,²³ that the "flatness" of civil society in the Eastern European states creates grave problems for their elected politicians,²⁴ and that its "undeveloped, semi-atomized" nature provides a seedbed for dangerous populism.²⁵ Believing, along with Victor Perez-Diaz, that successful democratizations are possible "only if, and only to the extent that, a civil society or something like it, either predates the transition or becomes established in the course of it,"²⁶ scholars and policy makers now define the creation of civic associations in new democracies as an "urgent need."²⁷

Our arguments about the dangers of civil society's weakness have their counterparts in arguments about the merits of "density." If sparse associational life is problematic for democracy, it makes sense to argue that dense organizational landscapes are beneficial. The argument for the merits of density takes many forms. We read that "a dense social

Society and the Social Capital Debate in Comparative Perspective, ed. Bob Edwards, Michael Foley, and Mario Diani (Hanover, N.H.: University Press of New England, 2001), 43.

²⁰ Putnam, *Making Democracy Work*, 89 and 138. Lipset makes a similar argument in "Social Requisites of Democracy Revisited," 31.

²¹ Robert Putnam, "Bowling Alone: America's Declining Social Capital," *Journal of Democracy* 6, no. 1 (January 1995): 67.

²² Seymour Martin Lipset, *Political Man* (Garden City, N.Y.: Anchor Books, 1960), 91.

²³ Putnam, *Making Democracy Work*, 183.

²⁴ Juan Linz and Alfred Stepan, "Political Identities and Electoral Sequences: Spain, the Soviet Union, and Yugoslavia," *Daedalus* 121, no. 2 (1992): 132.

²⁵ Jean Cohen and Andrew Arato, *Civil Society and Political Theory* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1992), 69.

²⁶ Victor Perez-Diaz, *The Return of Civil Society* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993), 40.

²⁷ Hannan Rose, "From Command to Free Polities," *Political Quarterly* 64, no. 2 (April/June 1993): 165. For other statements on the urgency of reshaping civil society in former communist regimes, see Michael Bernhard, "Civil Society and Democratic Transition," 326; and Laurence Whitehead, "'Reform of State' and 'Regulation of the Market,'" *World Development* 21, no. 8 (1993): 14. Thomas Carothers critiques programs for funding civil society abroad in *Assisting Democracy Abroad: The Learning Curve* (Washington D.C.: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 1999).

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infrastructure of secondary associations" is a requisite for improving "wages, skills, productivity and competitiveness,"²⁸ that "a dense network of secondary associations both embodies and contributes to effective social collaboration,"²⁹ that "the density of [civil society's] networks prevents radical polarization," and that the "growing organizational density of civil society" constitutes both "an underpinning for the political organization of subordinate classes" and an essential "counterweight to the overwhelming power of the state."³⁰ A dense civil society seems to have many merits. Indeed, it is hard to think of another political configuration that brings so much to so many. But, as is always the case in politics, the drama is more complicated as we move in closer and examine individual actors in greater depth.

Civil Society as Spoiler

The positive image I have sketched above is vivid in our contemporary literature and a composite of the work of some of the most (deservedly) influential scholars in the field of politics. Yet only a short while ago our literature portrayed civil society in a very different light. In the literature of the 1970s civil society is more often cast in an ambiguous role. The terms used to discuss civil society are different—scholars write of "interest groups," "class associations," and "popular organizations" instead—but the message in this older literature is very clear: an overly active society can harm democracy.

Rather than being portrayed as the possible savior of democracy, civil society is often cast in the role of spoiler: it is portrayed as sometimes asking too much—as spoiling the chances for democracy's survival. Almond and Verba's path-breaking study of the "civic culture" helped to lay the foundation for this ambivalent vision. The civic culture—the political culture particularly appropriate for democracy—is a "blend of activity and passivity."³¹ It is one in which "there is political activity, but not so much as to destroy governmental authority; there is involvement and commitment, but they are moderated; there is political cleavage, but it is held in check."³² The "intensity of the individu-

²⁸ Cohen and Rogers, "Secondary Associations and Democratic Governance," 395, synthesizing the work of others.

²⁹ Putnam, *Making Democracy Work*, 90.

³⁰ Walzer, "The Idea of Civil Society," 300; Rueschemeyer et al., *Capitalist Development and Democracy*, 77. See also p. 50.

³¹ Almond and Verba, *The Civic Culture*, 369.

³² *Ibid.*, 360.

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al's political involvement and activity" must be moderated for democracy to thrive.³³

Throughout the sixties and seventies, the collapse of democracies *was* preceded by intense "political involvement and activity" on the part of organized students, peasants, and workers—so the carriers of this more ambivalent vision had little trouble making their case. In 1968, Samuel Huntington captured the ambiguities of popular participation in his theory of mass praetorianism. He drew a distinction between "institutionalized societies," in which the expansion of civil society "reduces tensions,"³⁴ and "praetorian societies," in which "the participation of new groups *exacerbates*" tensions.³⁵ In praetorian societies, people participate in politics more than ever before, but they have failed to cultivate the "art of associating together." The problem is not confined to the subordinate classes. In fact, "societies which have high levels of middle-class political participation have strong tendencies toward instability" as well.³⁶

A broad range of scholars made the connection between a highly activist society and democratic instability. Even in works that focus on political elites, we read that elite links to the various elements of civil society are a major explanation for the shortcomings of elite behavior. Linz writes that alliances between political leaders and "the Church, the Vatican, Masonry, big business, or high finance" create suspicions and exacerbate crises.³⁷ He writes that "those identified with specific social interests," such as "the working class," "the trade unions," or "the Church," "are least able to give foremost consideration to the persistence of institutions," and their "unwavering commitment" to democracy *per se* "becomes extremely unlikely."³⁸ Linz never writes that the elements of civil society should not be allowed to organize, but he does imply that they should be kept at a distance from actual rulers—especially in times of crisis. Organization is fine, but direct connections with those in power is problematic.

Though he writes from a very different perspective, Guillermo O'Donnell in his seminal work on the origins of bureaucratic authoritarianism also casts civil society in an ambiguous role. Like nearly all of his colleagues at the time, O'Donnell does not use the term civil

³³ *Ibid.*, 339.

³⁴ Samuel P. Huntington, *Political Order in Changing Societies* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1968), 197–98.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 5.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 87.

³⁷ Juan J. Linz, *Crisis, Breakdown, and Reequilibration* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978), 68–69.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 53.

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society itself, but he explicitly adopts the theory of mass praetorianism³⁹ and argues that “the pre-coup Argentine and Brazilian governments were *victimized* by” praetorian coalitions.⁴⁰ His explanation for the breakdown of democratic regimes is materialist, but it is the ensemble of organizations within civil society at a stage of “high modernization” that ultimately explains why bureaucratic authoritarian regimes emerge. When a certain stage of development allows even the base of society to get organized, the trouble begins. O’Donnell writes that when “the consumption and power participation preferences of the popular sector are high and are articulated with continuity and important *organizational* support,” elected politicians in dependent economies face “a barely manageable schedule of political demands.”⁴¹ In their attempt to respond to the “very real” threats from the mobilized citizenry, “governments tended to adopt whatever policies best satisfied the sector that was most threatening at a given time, but the zero-sum conditions meant that each such policy decision raised new threats from other powerful sectors.”⁴²

The connection between the empowerment of organized sectors of society and ineffective policy-making is made quite explicitly by other scholars. Huntington explains that an “excess of democracy” and “increased popular participation” may erode a government’s capacity “to deal with issues requiring subtle understanding and delicate handling.”⁴³ Albert Hirshman provides a related cautionary message in his work on “voice”—his more elegant term for interest articulation. “Voice,” he writes, “can be overdone: the discontent . . . could become so harassing that their protests would at some point hinder rather than help.” In a passage which explicitly draws on the work of Almond and Verba he concludes, “[A] mixture of alert *and* inert citizens, or even an alternation of involvement and withdrawal, may actually serve democracy better than total, permanent activism or total apathy.”⁴⁴ Likewise Linz argues that the problems of governance are made “particularly difficult” by the fact that democratic leaders depend on “party organization . . . middle-level cadres” and “leaders of special interest groups.” The “increasing infiltration of interest groups at the grass-

³⁹ Guillermo A. O’Donnell, *Modernization and Bureaucratic-Authoritarianism* (Berkeley: Institute of International Studies, University of California, 1979), 143–44.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 74. He also states that they collaborated in praetorianism.

⁴¹ *Ibid.* Emphasis added.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 143–44.

⁴³ Huntington, *Political Order*, 430–31.

⁴⁴ Albert Hirshman, *Exit, Voice, and Loyalty* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1970), 31–32. There is a longer elaboration of the argument that “elites must be allowed to make decisions” on p. 32. The emphasis here is mine.

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roots level by emerging leaders identified with . . . disloyal oppositions tends to further limit the political leadership's freedom of action in terms of system interests.⁴⁵ Linz's concept of "disloyal opposition" reminds us that some of the associations embodied in civil society may be openly opposed to democracy itself.

The portrait of civil society in these works from the 1960s and the 1970s is very different from the portrait we see most frequently today. Rather than associating civil society with the stabilization of democracy, or with good and efficient government, these earlier works emphasize an association with *ineffective* policy-making and *instability* instead.

This more ambivalent vision of civil society has backward and forward linkages. Tocqueville was quick to point out that unrestrained liberty of associations could be a source of advantage for some nations and a "cause of destruction" for others.⁴⁶ In more recent work, one can detect a certain caution about civil society on the Left. Rueschemeyer, Stephens, and Stephens, taking their cue from Gramsci, point out that the organizations of civil society may serve as conduits for the ideologies of the dominant classes;⁴⁷ Walzer reminds us that civil society "generates radically unequal power relationships," if left to itself;⁴⁸ and Cohen and Arato, quoting Juan Corradi, caution that the mobilization of civil society can have demobilizing consequences: "Fear of the regime can easily be replaced by society's fear of itself."⁴⁹

Even if these undesirable scenarios are avoided, Philippe Schmitter points out that civil society "is not an unmitigated blessing for democracy" anyway. The policies that emerge from a robust civil society may be "biased, wrongheaded and too long in the making."⁵⁰ Sheri Berman argues persuasively that the "vigor of associational life" may serve to "undermine and delegitimize" the formal political structures on which democracy rests.⁵¹ As Keith Whittington puts it, "Civil society may be as much a threat to democratic institutions as a support."⁵²

⁴⁵ Linz, *Crisis, Breakdown, and Reequilibration*, 53.

⁴⁶ Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 256. He also argued that "the unrestrained liberty of association for political purposes is the privilege which a people is longest in learning to exercise" (pp. 202–3).

⁴⁷ Rueschemeyer et al., *Capitalist Development and Democracy*, 274.

⁴⁸ Walzer, "The Idea of Civil Society," 302.

⁴⁹ Cohen and Arrato, *Civil Society and Political Theory*, 617.

⁵⁰ Schmitter, "Some Propositions about Civil Society," 24–25; Cohen and Rogers, "Secondary Associations and Democratic Governance," 401–2.

⁵¹ Sheri Berman, "Civil Society and the Collapse of the Weimar Republic," *World Politics* 49, no. 3 (April 1997): 414.

⁵² Keith Whittington, "Revisiting Tocqueville's America: Society, Politics and Association in the Nineteenth Century," in Edwards et al., *Beyond Tocqueville*, 22. Edwards et al.

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Cautions about civil society are thus still with us, even in some of the literature that celebrates the connection between democracy and dense associational life. Yet the existence of two distinct visions of civil society raises important questions with profound political implications. When does civil society present us with its most desirable visage? When does its opposite face appear? Translated into vernacular language, these abstract questions bring us back to the subject of ordinary citizens. When do ordinary people swell the ranks of anti-democratic groups and when do they support democratic groups instead? The vast literature on political authoritarianism gives us a number of leads on how these questions might be answered, and it is to this literature that we turn in our next section.

Suspect Citizens and Parties as Constraints

Much of the literature on authoritarianism casts the ordinary citizen in an ignoble role. Ordinary people are often depicted as somehow ill-suited for the freedoms and power that democracy affords. The sympathies of the authors who make these arguments vary, but their negative assessments are unmistakable. Their assessments are also unmistakably linked to the more negative visions of civil society summarized above, for if civic associations can work against democracy, it is logical that the individual actors who compose them be blamed.

Blame emerges from a variety of quarters and falls on a broad range of ordinary actors. Profound suspicions about the political wisdom of ordinary people date from at least the fifth century BC. Aristotle was deeply suspicious of the wisdom of the poor and thought that "superior individuals deserved superior political powers."⁵³ He and other Greek philosophers were often quoted by conservatives seeking to restrict the franchise, but suspicions were voiced outside of conservative circles as well. J. S. Mill lamented "the ignorance and especially the selfishness and brutality of the mass."⁵⁴ Proudhon argued that suffrage

conclude their collection with a reminder that associations "may limit members' connections with the wider community; they may include some and exclude others; they may serve selfish and/or antisocial as well as civic ends and they may battle one another furiously over the nature of the 'public good' " (p. 272).

⁵³ Aristotle, *The Politics* (Baltimore: Penguin, 1962), 121–22, 238–40. "If the majority, having laid their hands on everything, distribute the possessions of the few, they are obviously destroying the state" (pp. 121–22). Aristotle's distrust, however, was not limited to the less wealthy; he feared the power of tyrants and the rich for the same reasons. See Joshua Ober, *Mass and Elite in Democratic Athens* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989), 295.

⁵⁴ Schmitter, "Some Propositions about Civil Society," 24–25; Cohen and Rogers, "Secondary Associations and Democratic Governance," 401–2.

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for the uneducated was “the stumbling bloc of liberty” and not “an instrument of progress” at all. Beatrice Webb wrote (as late as 1884) that she could not comprehend the argument for universal suffrage or the related “democratic theory that . . . you produce wisdom” by “multiplying ignorant opinions indefinitely.”⁵⁵

In these and many other early arguments, ordinary people were suspect citizens because they lacked basic education. As education became more readily available, the poor judgment of the common man was attributed to ignorance of a more general sort, as well as isolation, frustration, and patterns of child rearing. The rise of Fascism produced strong incentives to understand what became known as the “authoritarian personality,”⁵⁶ but interest in the nexus between individual temperaments and political systems went far beyond students of psychology. Seymour Martin Lipset’s award-winning study *Political Man* presents a highly influential perspective on the authoritarian potential of a whole range of classes. Coming to the “gradual realization that extremist and intolerant movements in modern society are more likely to be based on the lower classes” than on any other, Lipset was particularly concerned with “working class authoritarianism” and found its roots in “low education, low participation, . . . little reading, isolated occupations, economic insecurity and authoritarian family patterns.”⁵⁷ He concluded that, “other things being equal,” “the lower strata” “will be more attracted to an extremist movement than to a moderate and democratic one.”⁵⁸

Lipset’s suspicions about ordinary people’s political tendencies are not confined to the working class. He argues that “each major social stratum has both democratic and extremist expressions,” and that for any stratum, extremist, authoritarian tendencies can be activated by “crisis” and “displacement.”⁵⁹ In trying to discern which social group would destabilize the “conditions of the democratic order” in any particular case, Lipset concluded: “The real question to answer is which strata are most ‘displaced’ in each country? In some it is the new working class . . . in others, it is the small business-men and other relatively independent entrepreneurs. . . . In still others, it is the conservative and traditionalist elements.”⁶⁰

⁵⁵ Levin, *The Specter of Democracy*, 62–63. Webb later recanted her position.

⁵⁶ For early classics, see Theodor Adorno et al., *The Authoritarian Personality* (New York: Harper, 1950); and R. Christie and M. Jahoda, eds., *Studies in the Scope and Method of the Authoritarian Personality* (Glencoe, Ill.: Free Press, 1954).

⁵⁷ Lipset, *Political Man*, 87, 100–101.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 92.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 127, 116.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 136.

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Lipset seems to have drawn his conclusions with reluctance. He takes care to emphasize both his personal commitment to democracy and his position as “a man of the left,”⁶¹ but one senses that he does this precisely because he is the bearer of such bad news. According to his findings, ordinary people of many sorts are only conditionally committed to democracy. In times of crisis they cannot be trusted to resist the allure of authoritarianism unrestrained.

Though Lipset’s conclusions did not go unchallenged,⁶² they were mirrored in a broad range of studies that focused explicitly on the breakdown of democracy. Whether the theories found the roots of democratic failure in poor leadership, economic collapse, or flawed political structures, ordinary people were always a major medium through which cause became effect. Inadequate leaders rose to power with the votes of ordinary people. Economic problems went unsolved because popular ignorance and impatience constrained policy-makers. Political structures were deemed inadequate because they allowed popular passions too much latitude. Juan Linz synthesized the common wisdom in his seminal essay on the breakdown of democratic regimes, writing: The fall of the . . . system is usually the result of a shift in loyalty by citizens of weak commitment, by the apolitical, as a result of a crisis of legitimacy, efficacy or effectiveness. If these citizens had not shifted their allegiance, the previous rulers would have been able to resist the change.⁶³

The scholars who drew these conclusions about “citizens of weak commitment” were generally not of weak commitment themselves.⁶⁴ On the contrary, the desire to maintain and consolidate electoral democracy despite the citizenry’s alleged inadequacies led many scholars to focus on questions of institutional design. What sorts of political institutions could best constrain the popular tendencies that worked against democracy?

This question and others like it stimulated a wave of research and writing on political parties and party systems. Political parties became

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, xxi. For a more extended discussion of Lipset’s commitment to democracy, see pp. xix–xxxvi.

⁶² Alejandro Portes offers a compelling challenge in “Political Primitivism, Differential Socialization, and Lower-Class Leftist Radicalism,” *American Sociological Review*, vol. 36, no. 5 (October 1971). See also S. Miller and Frank Riessman, “Working-Class Authoritarianism: A Critique of Lipset,” *British Journal of Sociology* 12, no. 3 (September 1961).

⁶³ Linz, *Crisis, Breakdown, and Reequilibration*, 44.

⁶⁴ In a festschrift for Juan Linz, for example, Lipset writes that Linz “favored a classically liberal democratic Spain.” Seymour Martin Lipset, “Juan Linz: Colleague—Student—Friend,” in *Politics, Society, and Democracy: Comparative Studies*, ed. H. E. Chehabi and Alfred Stepan (Boulder: Westview Press, 1995), 3–4.

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(and remain) one of the principal means of controlling the less desirable instincts of a suspect citizenry. Observing the association between weak parties and frail democracies in both interwar Europe and the Third World, a broad range of scholars forged a link between strong parties and viable democracies.

Samuel Huntington laid out a clear and influential argument for the remedial effects of political parties in 1968. As “parties develop strength,” he wrote, they “become the buckle which binds one social force to another. . . . They create regularized procedures for leadership succession, . . . for the assimilation of new groups,” and thus for “the basis of stability and orderly change.”⁶⁵

These are no mean achievements, and the reliance on parties as a primary means for counteracting the destabilizing forces in society is still very much with us. Lipset, who referred explicitly to the positive role of parties in *Political Man*, wrote much more recently that political parties are “the most important mediating institutions between the citizenry and the state,” and that “having at least two parties with an *uncritically loyal* mass base comes close to being a necessary condition” for democratic stability.⁶⁶ Scott Mainwaring and Timothy Scully convey a similar message in their 1995 survey of party systems in Latin America: “The nature of parties and party systems shapes the prospects that stable democracy will emerge, whether it will be accorded legitimacy and whether effective policy-making will result.” For these and many other authors, parties “shape” the prospects of political systems by shaping the messages that citizens get and send. Mainwaring and Scully state clearly, “Parties [make] it easier for citizens with little time and little political information to participate in politics.” Parties “take positions on key issues rending society and, by so doing, put order into what would otherwise be a cacophony of dissonant conflicts. . . . The way [parties] shape the political agenda—*giving voice to certain interests and conflicts while simultaneously muting others*—enhances or diminishes prospects for effective government and stable democracy.”⁶⁷ For all these authors, parties seem to exercise their positive role by being agents of constraint. Constraint is presumably needed because at least some citizens cannot be trusted either to recognize or to petition for the common good without guidance.

The literature on *party systems* suggests that parties themselves must be constrained and thus that ordinary people must be doubly harn-

⁶⁵ Huntington, *Political Order*, 405.

⁶⁶ Lipset, “Social Requisites of Democracy Revisited,” 34–35.

⁶⁷ Scott Mainwaring and Timothy Scully, eds., *Building Democratic Institutions: Party Systems in Latin America* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995), 2–3.

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essed. Giovanni Sartori's model of polarized pluralism provides a highly influential argument to this effect. Drawn from the experience of democracies that failed, Sartori's message is that party systems (and party elites) must restrain the forces of polarity inherent in political democracies. If party systems fail to constrain both the ideological range and the number of parties in the national legislature, centrifugal forces will tear democracy apart.

The idea that societies contain "centrifugal forces" and that systemic breakdown is a result of unrestrained polarization is common throughout the literature, but Sartori's theory deserves special attention because of its wide acceptance and its detailed elaboration. Polarization, according to Sartori, is a "synthetic characteristic" of party systems, meaning it is the outcome of system characteristics. It exists when relevant anti-system parties sit "two poles apart" on the Left-Right spectrum, when mutually exclusive, bilateral oppositions flank the government, and when "centripetal" or "moderating drives" are discouraged by the existence of parties at the metrical center of the political spectrum. Under polarized pluralism, we see "the likely prevalence of centrifugal drives over centripetal ones, . . . the enfeeblement of the center [and] a persistent loss of votes to one of the extreme ends (or even to both.)"⁶⁸

The connection between polarization and the breakdown of democracy is made most explicitly in an important article written by Sartori and Giacomo Sani. Sani and Sartori insist that "working democracy and polarization are inversely related," and "that the best single explanatory variable for stable versus unstable, functioning vs. non-functioning, successful versus immobile and easy versus difficult democracy is polarization."⁶⁹

This vision of polarization is especially relevant to our puzzle about when ordinary people join the ranks of anti-democratic groups, because the flight to the poles of a political spectrum is often, if not always, seen as a challenge to democracy from the base.

How often is this story enacted? Does the polarization metaphor capture the drama of what actually transpires as democracies collapse? My answers are elaborated in the historical chapters that follow. Briefly put, they involve the following main points. Ordinary people often

⁶⁸ Giovanni Sartori, *Parties and Party Systems: A Framework for Analysis* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1976), 132–34. Sartori's full definition of polarized pluralism involves three characteristics not mentioned above: ideological patterning, irresponsible oppositions, and the politics of outbidding (pp. 137–39).

⁶⁹ Giacomo Sani and Giovanni Sartori, "Polarization, Fragmentation and Competition in Western Democracies," in *Western European Party Systems*, ed. Hans Daalder and Peter Mair (Beverly Hills: Sage, 1983), 337.

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play a peripheral role in the breakdown of democracy. In the cases where their role is more central, it is only partially captured by the polarization metaphor. We have often mistaken the polarization of select and relatively small groups in civil society for polarization in society as a whole. In the vast majority of the cases explored here, and in the majority of democracies that have broken down historically, voters did not polarize in the way predicted, nor did public opinion in general shift toward the anti-democratic poles of the Left-Right political spectrum. We must distinguish between the highly visible polarization of civic groups in public spaces and the less visible polarization of opinion expressed in elections and in polls. When we make these distinctions, we find that popular defection from democracy is not as common as some of the more tragic cases of democratic collapse have led us to believe. Our understanding of regime breakdown will improve with more careful analysis of who defects from democracy and how.⁷⁰

⁷⁰ Ruth Collier has completed a compelling study of how important working-class mobilization has been in bringing about third-wave democracies. I look instead at the role of workers and others in bringing about dictatorship. See Ruth Berins Collier, *Paths toward Democracy: The Working Class and Elites in Western Europe and South America* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999).