

*Representation and Responsibility:
Ethics and Public Office*

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Representation is the contested relationship at the heart of our democracy. It is contested because the theory and practice of democratic representation have never been in close alignment. In theory citizens should trust elected representatives and representatives should devote themselves exclusively to citizens' interests. In theory, representatives should be either the trustees or the delegates of the citizens who elect them. In practice citizens do not usually share collective interests: it is up to the representative to discern, as best he or she can, what those interests might be, and while voters may want to control their representatives through strict instructions and a clear mandate, in practice this strict control of a representative rarely occurs. Furthermore, voters commonly distrust politicians and politicians return the sentiment by serving their own party and pecuniary interests at their constituents' expense. A central question about democracy is whether this gulf between politicians and the people is a corrigible vice or a necessary evil.

I have stood for national public office—won two elections, lost the third—so, methodologically speaking, this essay, and the lecture from which it is based, is a piece of anthropology, a report based on participant observation by an academic who experienced *le grandeur et la misère* of political life firsthand.¹ I do not have a theory of representation to offer so much as a thick description of what it is like to *be* a representative of the people. My purpose is to make representation strange so that we can look at it with fresh eyes.

Contemporary democratic electorates, from my own experience, are in a semipermanent state of unhappiness about the faithfulness and trustworthiness of their representation. Unhappiness, however, is not necessarily a sign of dysfunction. Some degree of popular discontent with representation is a critical sign that citizens actually care about the state of their democracy and the quality of the people elected to serve them. Some degree of suspicion toward the motives, conduct, and hidden agendas of these representatives should be a permanent feature of any functioning democratic system. Politicians should feel under a constant obligation, not just at election times, to justify their conduct, and voters are fully entitled to be skeptical about these justifications. Political trust should be conditional, earned through service and revoked for disservice.

Equally, however, some degree of qualified trust between politicians and the people is essential if democratic systems are to function at all. Politicians must be allowed some discretion in the exercise of their role in order to do politics. Discretion implies a limited grant of trust.

Limited trust implies some degree of tolerance on the part of voters for the ordinary human failings of representatives. Electorates are right to insist, for example, on tough regimes to force politicians to account for public money, but it would not be wise for them to seek to police every last penny or to even assume that full accountability is always desirable. A politician filling in disclosure forms is not doing his real job. His real job is doing politics on behalf of his constituents, making legislative deals, and securing concessions from functionaries and office-holders. A politician's effectiveness requires ingenious exercises of lawful discretion, and if electorates want effective politicians, they must trust them with some leeway to compromise, make a deal, or find a way to untie some bureaucratic knot. This means that full transparency is not always desirable in a democracy. Meetings open to the public and to the press are not where the business of politics will actually be done. Once politicians are in the spotlight of public scrutiny, they cannot make the deals between competing interests that make democracy work. They need to work in closed rooms where they have room to maneuver, persuade, and compromise. Transparency boxes politicians in and usually reduces their effectiveness. In short, politicians must be allowed to do politics.

Doing politics is a morally hazardous business, and corruption is an ever-present temptation. It is wise for electorates to distinguish between occasional and endemic varieties of malfeasance.² Occasional corruption should always be punished because it can become endemic, but only the endemic kind poses a threat to democracy itself. Once every political transaction involves a bribe, it empties democratic participation of any point. Why bother to vote if your representative can be bought and sold? This is a question millions of Brazilian voters asked themselves after their Supreme Court determined in the Mensalão case in 2013 that the Lula government had paid legislators, in both the opposition and the government, to vote for specific bills in the Brazilian legislature.³

As democracy requires some basic honesty in the use of public money, it also requires some minimal respect for truth. If politicians only pretend to be truthful, the electorate will only pretend to listen and democratic trust will evaporate. The truthfulness of democratic debate is a relative thing at best, and the rhetoric of democracy has always had aspects of charade and pretense about it. A free press exists to hold the charade up to ridicule and reveal the gap between promise and performance, rhetoric and reality. It is through the rough-and-tumble of adversarial argument in a free press that democracy inches its way toward the minimum degree of shared truth about society's problems needed in order to solve them.

It is never exactly clear, however, when this rough-and-tumble ceases to generate shared truth, when a democratic system passes beyond political charade to cruel and empty show, yet when it does, democracy is in danger. There is some point at which complete corrosion of trust becomes palpable. Once it becomes received wisdom that all politicians lie, that all of them are corrupt, that nothing said in the public square is to be believed, the legitimacy of democratic institutions begins to collapse. Once citizens cease to believe a word their politicians say, they begin to desert the voting booths altogether or turn, in growing numbers, to authoritarian alternatives that promise an end to “parliamentary cretinism” and the empty and self-dealing charade of political life.⁴

Democracy, on this preliminary account, is on permanent trial, and its future is never secure. Many democracies, especially the new ones that emerged after 1989, are beset with structural corruption.⁵ Others are vulnerable to authoritarian takeover. The fate that befell democracy in Weimar Germany is never safely in the past. It continues to represent a possible future. Democracy is never secure even in societies with long-standing democratic traditions. The trust that makes democracy work is a fragile thing, vulnerable to corruption, betrayal, and disillusion.

Trust can be lost not simply because politicians become corrupt, but because they fail, over a period of time, to solve the problems—runaway inflation, protracted depression, aggravated social conflict, or external threat—that democratic politics simply must solve if it is to maintain the confidence of voters. Weimar democracy failed to solve the problems that plagued German society in the 1920s.⁶ It remains an open question whether European societies with recent authoritarian pasts—Greece, Portugal, Spain, for example—can preserve their democracies into the future.

Trust is not a public relations confection, though politicians and their acolytes often act as if it were. Trust cannot be faked and it cannot be manufactured. Democratic leaders either solve the problems society presents them or don't, either maintain some degree of honesty in public affairs or don't. If democracy fails objective tests such as these, trust in democratic solutions will evaporate.

Even those democracies that are objectively successful may nevertheless struggle to maintain public trust for their politicians. Cynical intellectual fashions take root, even in successful democracies that encourage the public to scorn and deride those who seek public office. It becomes fashionable for democratic electorates who are not ill served by their political class to regard them nonetheless with aversion. Again, some suspicion of

office seekers is a sign of a healthy democracy. People seeking public office should have their bona fides put to the test, but sometimes the suspicion of politicians goes too far.

The electorate's attitude toward politicians is largely constructed in and through the press, and the press has an enduring, self-validating interest in portraying politicians in an unsavory light. This negative image enables them to sell themselves—and their products—as defenders of their readers' interests. While many journalists do defend readers' interests and accord the politicians they cover basic professional respect, the lazy contempt that so many of the media express toward elected officials inflicts upon the honest many an opprobrium appropriate only toward the dishonest few. Cynical hostility toward public service is an especially easy commodity for the press to purvey in societies like our own where the careers that do evoke admiration are all associated with fame, sexual attraction, money, or a combination of the three and public service can be dismissed as both venal and banal by comparison.

These are some of the symptoms of the discontents at the heart of modern democratic representation. Some are corrigible, and some are simply integral to democratic life in capitalist society. Already we have identified three elements that must be corrigible if democracy is to endure. Democracies must control corruption, even if they cannot eliminate it altogether. Second, democracies must be seen to address the problems that can pull a society apart. Third, democracies must continue to be able to recruit qualified people to serve in public office. When democracies address these problems, they endure. When they do not, revolutionary or authoritarian alternatives become possible. Representative democracy is in an unending competition with authoritarian alternatives, and that is why its defense, mostly through the honest exercise of delegated authority by ordinary men and women, is so necessary.

In healthy democracies that do serve their people well, the people may still continue to regard their politicians with suspicion. This indeed may be a sign of robust health. Some of democracy's discontents, in other words, are both intrinsic and necessary to the invigilation of representation itself.

Representative democracy comes in many shapes and sizes, though most of the academic literature on the subject still appears to believe that the entire world is America. In fact, Madison's wonderful machinery is ever more exceptional in a world of proliferating alternative models of democratic government. Parliamentary democracy on the British model gives much more power to the executive than the American variant. The

presidential systems of democracy observable in France and in Latin America also privilege executive power over the legislative, and in few democracies does the judicial branch exercise the enormous power enjoyed by the Supreme Court of the United States. If, as the development economists say, institutions matter, they matter greatly in the way they define the representative's political function. The representative role is framed by constitutional conventions and political cultures that either struggle against or turn a blind eye to the abuses to which their system is prone. In some democracies, corruption is a problem of bad apples; in others the entire barrel is rotten.

Democracies also differ fundamentally over the very boundaries of politics itself. The jurisdiction of a representative, the ambit of his or her power, depends on what democratic systems define as a political question, one to be adjudicated in the battle for power between parties versus those that must be taken out of politics and left to the bureaucracy, the judiciary, or the free adjudication of civil society. Each society demarcates which "spoils" are to be fought over in politics and the questions that should and shouldn't be called "political." The appropriate realm for political patronage, for example, is demarcated differently in Britain and the United States.⁷ In Britain the upper reaches of the bureaucracy are not changed after every election. In America the incoming president and his party have the power to nominate political appointees to an extensive range of high executive offices, subject to congressional approval.

Similarly, liberal democracies demarcate the realm of justice from politics in different ways. In many US states local judges run for election, while north of the border in Canada, all judges are appointed, on the contrary view that election would compromise judicial impartiality.

Democracies also differ in the way they demarcate the boundaries between politics and other realms of power. In some African democracies and in many poor postcolonial societies, power is "stacked." Zimbabwe's politics is a zero-sum game in which, if you have political power, you win everything, and if you lose, you lose all access to state resources, patronage and preferment. Elections in Kenya and Nigeria determine who gets key economic posts, concessions, and monopolies.⁸

Western liberal democracies, by contrast, have had more time to develop, and they have learned from some of their mistakes. Power is "destacked," and the space for politics is cantoned to ensure that political power, at least in theory, does not confer economic, social, or cultural advantage. The cantonnement of politics is liberal democracy's answer to the

problem of corruption. The less power that flows through a representative's hands, the less likely his exercise of it will be venal.

In practice, of course, especially in the United States, economic interests spend billions of dollars on lobbyists to pressure politicians into granting them a regulatory environment that will be favorable to their profit seeking.⁹ To the extent that powerful interests secure outcomes that harm the less powerful, the power of big money corrupts the representative function, even when no overt bribery or corrupt practice occurs.

There are those who claim that lobbying and the outsize influence of big money in American politics are among the incorrigible features of American democracy. This view can be sustained only by ignoring the success of other liberal democracies—Australia, Canada, Britain, France, and Germany, for example—in enforcing campaign finance limits, campaign advertising restrictions, and strict controls on lobbying activity, all in the name of safeguarding the integrity of their democratic processes.¹⁰

These reforms have helped to insulate democracy from the pressure of big money, but they have also had another consequence: reducing the scope and discretion of representative politics. Democratic reform in Canada, Europe, and also in the United States has been centrally concerned with restricting political opportunities for privilege, patronage, and preferment. In the United States, Progressive Era reforms transferred to civil service commissions and publicly appointed bodies the functions once left in the hands of elected politicians and the functions once accorded to legislatures. Since the 1950s, activist judiciaries have also taken power away from elected authorities. These developments entrenched the practice of taking an ever-larger set of key decisions “out of politics.”

Anyone elected to a legislature in a modern democracy soon becomes aware that he or she serves at the end of a long historical process that has taken power away from where they sit and vested it elsewhere, in executives, courts, and administrative bodies. The hollowing out of the representative function may have been designed to reduce the opportunities for “politics,” but it's not clear that this serves the interests of citizens. They are frequently disappointed to discover how little power their elected representatives actually enjoy.

My own political experience was spent in a Canadian democratic system that, more than most, has restricted the scope of legislative politics. Unlike the American system, the Canadian Constitution did not entitle me to initiate spending bills, and so my legislative responsibilities were restricted to line-by-line scrutiny of bills in committee, followed by party votes on the

legislation itself. Unlike an American congressman, I did not enjoy much latitude in relation to partisan discipline. I toed the party line in the hope that when I became leader, I could lay down the line myself. Unlike an American congressman, on the other hand, I was protected from the influence of big money by a robustly independent national elections commission.

The Canadian system gives the prime minister and leader of the opposition more control over MPs than any other system on the British model.¹¹ Free votes were rare, whipped votes were the norm, and opportunities to vote one's conscience were few and far between. Our winner-takes-all electoral system does not allow voters to register second- or third-order preferences and thus does not encourage coalition formation in our legislature. As a result, our party politics is more partisan and adversarial than those in western Europe, where coalition formation is the rule. On the other hand, unlike list systems used in Israel and some European democracies, I represented a constituency composed of around eighty thousand eligible voters and came to believe that representation is most likely to be accountable when a representative is responsible to electors living in a determinate electoral district.

Finally, my entire political career was spent in the opposition. I never experienced the ethical dilemmas of a government backbencher: whether to "go along to get along" or to defy your party on a matter of principle. The issue I did face in opposition was whether to oppose everything the government proposed, irrespective of its merits. Opposition for opposition's sake is the *modus operandi* of most parties out of power, but it is precisely the political "game playing" that active and attentive voters so despise, wishing politicians would support or oppose measures on merit alone. Realistically, legislators rarely decide measures on merit alone, and opposition politicians generally oppose government measures whatever their merits. When I asked a former prime minister who had been leader of the opposition what his advice might be once I became leader, he looked at me as if I were mad and thundered, "Just oppose! Oppose everything!"

Needless to say, I took a different view of my responsibilities. On a few important occasions I persuaded my party to vote in favor of government measures because I thought they were right for the country. When you do so, you quickly discover that the political credit for good measures goes to the government who initiates them, not the opposition who supports them. There are few rewards for bipartisan behavior in opposition. The leader who advised me always to oppose found his way to power eventually, and I did not.

The opposition's duty indeed is to oppose and, through criticism and amendment, to make legislation serve the public interest. Government measures are put to the test of adversarial justification in committee and in the chamber itself. The opposition is called "loyal," to remind the public that, for all the venom of parliamentary debate, opposition is integral to the proper functioning of a democratic system. Indeed, it is in opposition that you are supposed to learn how to govern. In a functioning democracy, all parties in opposition properly deserve to be treated as a government in waiting, though the government in office and the media rarely do. In a free society, one would expect government and opposition to compete on equal terms. In reality, the media accord the government a platform the opposition can only envy.

One of the defining features of a proper democracy is that it must "normalize" and "naturalize" disagreement, for it is through structured disagreement that democracy arrives at its rough-and-ready version of the public interest. Adversarial justification is democracy's chosen method for establishing the public good. If so, opponents are supposed to accept each other's basic loyalty and legitimacy.

Democracy is, or ought to be, a politics of adversaries, never a politics of enemies. An adversary today is a potential ally tomorrow. An enemy can never become an ally. An enemy is to be destroyed. The politics of compromise is impossible unless the opposition enjoys the status of loyal and legitimate adversary.

Democracy, being a system of structured antagonism, must find ways to contain the emotions that antagonism inevitably arouses. The representative function demands restraint in the face of the temptation to think of politics in the metaphors of war, as a battle in which no holds are barred.

When adversaries grapple for power, it is only too easy to treat each other as enemies. A democratic politician has to keep asking himself whether, in his attack on an opponent, he has crossed the line that separates legitimate public criticism from mendacious advantage seeking. In the heat of the moment, the line can be hard to discern, let alone respect. Winning at all costs becomes a self-sufficient justification.

Where democracy has gone under, as in Weimar Germany, the politics of adversaries was replaced by a politics of enemies, and politics soon spilled out of the legislature into the streets, where violence soon settled all questions.¹² Perhaps only in contemporary Greece does economic crisis risk producing a polarization this extreme. Elsewhere, for all the complaints

about excessive partisanship, no democratic system has broken down as they did so widely in the Europe of the 1930s.

Democracy has proved its resilience but at a cost. Public disenchantment with excessive partisanship is nearly universal in the United States, Canada, and the United Kingdom. For a considerable portion of the active democratic public, “politics” itself has acquired a bad name. The word has degenerated into a term of abuse for any form of spiteful, dogmatic, rhetorical game playing whose essential purpose is to obscure rather than reveal the essential public issues at hand.

Nevertheless, democracy itself does offer a remedy for excessive partisanship. Electorates relish combat and they like fighters, but they frequently punish those who hit below the belt, and by sanctioning bad behavior at the polls voters help ensure that democratic combat remains a contest between adversaries, not enemies.

Indeed, we should add this to our original list of essential conditions of democratic health. Democratic representation works when institutions control corruption, when debate is sufficiently truthful to allow democracy to address society’s real problems, when a culture of public service survives, and finally when democratic opponents treat each other as adversaries, not as enemies.

In this way, democratic institutions, when they work as they should, discipline the participants to observe basic restraints in combat. Even so, the individual representative has to internalize these restraints, and it can be hard to be restrained when you come under attack. A good politician has to learn, sometimes through gritted teeth, never to take anything personally and that revenge is a dish, as they say, best served cold.

A representative works within an institutional morality that sequences his obligations in a preference order that is clear: party first, constituents second, conscience third. He no longer speaks in his own name but in the name of those who voted for him. His authority derives from them, not from his own previously acquired standing or prestige. It is a humbling discipline to acknowledge that you serve the people and that your own personal certainties must give way to their opinions. Max Weber’s great essay “Politics as a Vocation” is surely right when it says that politicians cannot afford to guide themselves by an ethic of ultimate ends alone. If they wish to achieve power, they must obey an ethics of responsibility: one that gives priority not to personal conscience or ethical ideology, but service to party and the public.¹³

Inevitably, however, situations will arise, once or twice in a political career, when party interest points one way, constituents' interest points another, and conscience points in a third direction. If you vote against the party, you will face sanctions. If you betray your constituents, you will not be reelected, and if you vote against your conscience, you will have to live with your troubled soul for the rest of your life. Such are the joys of politics. The challenge cannot be ducked by toeing the party line on every occasion, since institutional role morality cannot absolve you of personal responsibility. The shoe will pinch eventually. A representative can preserve honor and integrity only by pushing against party loyalty and personal ambition and by forcing upon himself the burden of making the difficult decision to disobey.

There are resignation matters in life, though the honorable tradition of falling upon your sword is more of a quaint memory than a living example. Nothing, I think, would do more to refurbish the image of the representative in the eyes of the people than the occasional resignation on a matter of principle. These sacrifices will always be rare, but they restore the honor of much more than the person who makes them.

I said earlier that my purpose is to make representation strange. The strangeness of representation derives from the fact that in a mass democracy, a representative can never actually know all, or even many, of the individuals he represents. Most of the time, he preaches to the choir, to the small cadre of loyal party supporters whose enthusiasm he must maintain if he is to secure their help at election time. The larger electorate remains a mystery that even sophisticated polling cannot always unravel. A politician is always aware that he serves an absent and capricious god, whose rulings are final and whose justice is inscrutable.

The sovereign people, moreover, come in all shapes and sizes, religions, races, and language groups. In many democracies—India, Belgium, Spain, Canada, for example—there may be one national electorate, but it is divided into absolutely distinct linguistic, cultural, and religious groups, requiring radically different messages, platforms, and strategies in the same national campaign. In multilingual, multinational democracies such as these, the conflict between representing a particular linguistic, national, or ethnic interest and serving the general interest can be acute, even painful. One of the moral glories of modern representative democracy is that it allows people who do not share the same origins to share the same political space, but this moral achievement depends critically on representatives being able to engage in constructive political brokerage in which the

overriding common goal of national unity is never put in jeopardy. All too often, however, democracies founder—as they did in the former Yugoslavia, when representative politicians put ethnic and sectional interests ahead of the compromises necessary for national unity. Here is another place where the fragility of representative democracy becomes apparent and its moral importance becomes clear. Representation would be an easy matter if voters shared this conception of the moral value of democracy as the glue of multiethnic societies. In practice, voters, whatever their race, ethnicity, or religion, may privilege their own ethnic interests ahead of national unity. In the former Yugoslavia, representative politicians, aiding and abetting the fears and hopes of their electors, used their first experience of democracy to tear a functioning multiethnic society apart. In these circumstances, it is a rare and courageous politician who will be able to defend multiethnic democracy against the fissiparous ethnic demands of his own electorate.

In more settled democracies, where multiethnic cooperation is a stable norm, self-government may not be threatened by ethnic factionalism, but it can be undermined by indifference. Taking your own democracy for granted is one of the more dangerous privileges of self-rule. In Canada and many other advanced democracies, only 60 percent of voters actually bother to turn out.¹⁴ So many voters remain silent that a representative does not so much speak in their name as ventriloquize what they would have said had they bothered to show up.

In order to grasp this act of ventriloquism, we need to distinguish two meanings of representation. To be a representative of the people, a politician must, in effect, create a representation *of* the people and offer it to them as an image of who they are. This is how to understand a politician's speeches, proposals, and electoral platforms. They are gift offerings designed to elicit a sense of recognition. It is as if the politician is offering the voter a mirror in which they gaze at themselves. If they approve of this portrait, they will trust the politician to represent that image. In other words, a representative represents a representation. He serves an abstraction known as the people and earns the right to do so by presenting them with a flattering picture that they recognize.

Flattery and seduction have always been central to the relation between voter and representative, but the class assumptions that order this relation have changed as societies have become more egalitarian. Edmund Burke's "Letter to the Electors of Bristol" of 1774 and James Madison's Tenth Federalist of 1787, two classic accounts of representation, shared the

tacit assumption that a representative was superior to the people in some respect, whether by education, wealth, or social standing.¹⁵ Modern representatives work from the premise that representation is a privilege to be earned from equals, not an entitlement to be claimed from your inferiors.

Here, however, norms and reality diverge. Politicians seeking election are commonly richer or better educated than those they represent and wouldn't get the chance to stand unless they were, but they can seek election only on the claim that they are no better, but also no worse, than those they seek to represent. This obliges a display of "the common touch," a parade of ordinariness that is highly self-conscious and anything but ordinary. Yet this demotic game playing is essential if the representative is to persuade the voter that he is representative "of" them.

Representatives seek "standing" with voters, the right to a hearing. Standing is not the same as popularity. Voters are looking to respect a representative, but they find it difficult to respect someone with whom they cannot identify, someone whose life or experience differs markedly from their own. They want to see themselves reflected in those they elect.

If they become convinced, for example, by your opponents that you are "just visiting," someone without fixed attachment to the locale you seek to represent, you cannot win their trust. Likewise, a person who feels entitled to represent others, or is foolish enough to convey that impression, will lose. Representation is a privilege earned by proving that you are "one" with those you seek to represent, by means of every cunning simulacra of genuineness strangers have ever used to sell each other suspect goods.

Once elected, you will never know why, in individual cases, they voted for you, what they "see" in you, and you can be sure they do not trust you very far. The idea that they entrust you with a mandate or legislative instructions of a specific kind is to give them too much credit. It is to claim, in effect, that in endorsing you, they have endorsed your legislative program. They do no such thing. In my experience, voters' acquaintance with party platforms is minimal, while their radar for personality is sophisticated indeed. They cast their ballots not on the basis of a careful assessment of rival platforms, but on the basis of quite subtle readings of the character of rival candidates. If it is you they choose, it is up to you to decide what mandate you have been given, that is, what margin of discretion, what exercise of your own judgment, you can safely exercise in their name.

The academic literature on democracy argues over the question of whether a representative is a trustee or a delegate of citizens' interests.¹⁶ In the trustee model, a representative has the freedom to act in what he

conceives to be the best interests of the people, restrained only by the obligation to give a full account of his trusteeship. In the delegate model, a representative has no freedom at all: elections confer a mandate, and his hold on office depends on fidelity to that mandate.

In my experience, neither model accurately describes the representative function very well. The trustee model assumes there is a trust to be administered, that is, a shared conception of public interest, which it is the business of the representative to execute, according to his discretion. The delegate model makes the same assumption, while attempting to eliminate representative discretion altogether. Neither takes account of the highly political character of a representative's work: the bargaining, haggling, promise-making, promise-breaking activity, the rough-and-tumble deliberation through which the public interest is discovered and then enacted.

A representative is neither a trustee nor a delegate of citizens' interests. He does *politics* for them. While he is doing politics for them, he cannot be sure, with any precision, that he actually *has* their support.

Politics is often defined as a profession, but the professions we can all think of—lawyers, doctors, and professors—work within a relatively stable agreement with their clients about the nature of their responsibilities. This contract is policed by the professions' codes of conduct. Politics is not a profession like these because of the inherent contestability and instability in the very definition of the role: delegate, trustee, servant of the people, servant of the party, and so on. Indeed, democracy itself is an irresolvable argument about how these duties should be exercised. So if it's not a profession and if the art of being a politician can be learned, but cannot be taught, what is the role to be called?

I will revert to Max Weber and label politics a "calling" or "vocation." It remains a personal, that is, charismatic, form of devotion to an absent god—the democratic electorate, the only deity left in a desacralized world. It is a calling in the further sense that sinful human nature is transformed into self-sacrificing public service. From pretending to serve citizens, politicians may actually end up doing so. The worst features of human nature (avarice, ambition, lust for glory and fame) are transmuted through service into some of our best features (sacrifice, devotion to justice and the public good).

The contested demands of the role and the mysterious character of popular sovereignty explain why most politicians' experience of representation is one of anxiety. Given that they serve a *Deus absconditus*, politicians experience the secular equivalent of the Calvinist anxiety about

salvation, which, not coincidentally, is called “election.” Like the Calvinist believer, a politician never lives to enjoy a state of grace. Except in the most gerrymandered of political systems, he does not have security of tenure. He holds office at pleasure. He cannot be sure, at any moment, whether he truly enjoys the electorate’s “confidence,” and he can be certain that if that confidence is withdrawn, it can occur with brutal swiftness.

The politician also knows that the voters’ decision to vote for him was a complex amalgam of conviction, intuition, and last-minute impulse.¹⁷ The fundamental transaction—the vote—in which a representative is accorded the right to serve is bedeviled by false consciousness and bad faith on both sides. Voters are routinely deceived by the guileful lies of the politician, and voters’ choices are routinely befuddled by their own inattention and impulsiveness. Both sides know the transaction is dubious.

The legitimacy of representative democracy, therefore, does not derive from confidence on the voters’ part in the rationality of their own electoral choice. The legitimacy of representation depends on the public’s recognition of the unavoidable necessity of delegation in any society that has passed beyond the possibility of direct government by the people. Representation accomplishes the delegation required once public and private realms are separate, once a division of labor arises to allow the voting mass of the population to go about their different avocations while leaving public business to specialists.

This delegation is properly mistrustful, since citizens, in an age of equality like our own, rightly believe they are better judges of their own interests than any delegated strangers and rightly believe that if they had the time, they could do the job at least as well themselves.

Direct democracy—the personal participation of citizens in the daily management of public affairs—remains an appealing alternative utopia precisely because representative democracy can seem a poor bargain by comparison. Our experience of politicians is so disillusioning that we recurrently dream of bringing back the Athenian agora when citizens deliberated directly and in person on public affairs.

Jurisdictions such as California that have experimented with forms of direct democracy—referenda, proposition ballots, and recall initiatives—have shown that these well-meant expedients can lead to ungovernable insolvency. Swiss cantons have done better with direct democracy, but most of us do not live in small face-to-face communities that are also rich and safe from external attack. Direct democracy may not be applicable to the problems of large-scale mass societies, but its many failures have not

tarnished its appeal as a utopia. This is a sign that representative democracy creates a permanent longing for an alternative.

Indeed, the discontent continues to grow. In the nineteenth century, representatives were an information elite who drew their prestige from inherited wealth, social status, and university education. In the twentieth century, their privileged status has ebbed away. Nowadays, voters may have as much information as their representatives, and this only increases their scorn and mistrust. Yet they have no alternative but to consign public business to them, since, to paraphrase Oscar Wilde, direct democracy is a good idea but it takes up too many evenings.

New digital technologies are supposed to make direct democracy practicable. The Internet certainly facilitates two-way communication between the people and their representatives, but this may only increase the discontent and suspicion between them. The more voters and representatives see of each other and exchange views, the less they may like each other, especially if we remember how easy it is to succumb to uninhibited malice in cyberspace.

These discontents—the dislike of the public for politicians and the scorn of politicians for those they represent—are not transitory phenomena, but integral to the unstable relation between democratic sovereignty and representation itself. The people resent having to have representatives at all, and representatives resent the malign accountability imposed upon them by a suspicious public.

Equally, the people don't like being fooled, and they sense, rightly, that the political arts that earn their trust are a systematic exercise in manipulation. Democratic electorates have always been aware that the right to represent them is extorted through the dubious and irrational means that Max Weber called charisma. Charisma is a suspect attribute, unstable, irrational, hysterical even, and the power acquired by charismatic leaders depends on the manipulation of deep longings—for father and mother figures, for submission, for exaltation, for worship—that load the run-of-the-mill representative with expectations he or she is bound to disappoint. Yet these expectations are inextinguishable in any modern democracy.

Representation can never be fully captured, as dour public service and its responsibilities cannot be fully cantoned by an ethics of accountability and transparency, admirable as these virtues might be. A representative is also chosen in the oft-disappointed hope that he or she will lead and inspire. The charismatic elements of politics are what people both love and fear about political life: they want to follow charismatic leaders, but

they are, at least most of the time, sufficiently adult to want to keep leaders under control and to be on guard against letting their own emotions carry them too far toward worship.

Charisma is integral to representative politics because it is the solution to the problem of trust that bedevils representation itself. Trust is manufactured by charisma, by smiles, good teeth, fine clothes, winning ways, courtesy, grandeur, a sense of humor, comic timing, and what Baldesar Castiglione in *The Book of the Courtier*, written at the court of the Duke of Mantua five hundred years ago, called *sprezzatura*, the mysterious art of making social interactions with strangers seem easy.¹⁸ Voters know that in succumbing to *sprezzatura*, they are succumbing to interpersonal sorcery, and they do so with some unease. Being seduced, they know, is very different from being convinced, and they would like democratic choice to be a matter of being convinced. But seduction is pleasant and voters do succumb repeatedly. Elections offer voters their sole means of escape from charisma's hold, allowing voters to break the spell and cast the spellbinder from office.

Political life, from the electorate's point of view, is an unending cycle of hope and disillusion, faith ignited and dashed, over and over. When electoral choice is experienced as seduction, it can leave a bitter aftertaste of shame, anger, and regret. One response by voters to this cycle of seduction and disillusion is to bureaucratize the relation between politicians and the people, to return politicians to delegate status, whether through strict accountability regimens or strict requirements to vote according to electoral mandates. Tea Party Republicanism is an attempt, among other things, to discipline congressmen who take the Tea Party pledge to strict obedience to a tax-cutting, government-slashing electoral mandate.¹⁹

These low-trust models of the representative relation are a common response to "scandals" that leave the public feeling their trust has been abused. But they often eventuate in what Yael Tamir has called "malignant accountability."²⁰ Politicians are so tied up in obedience to mandate or accountability regimens that they are unable to do their jobs. When politicians can't do politics, institutions that depend on compromise seize up, and this only deepens the alienation and mistrust between representative and citizens. And in the end, voters still look for leaders, not for delegates, for politicians, not for ideologues. They still look for inspiration, even when they fear they will be disappointed.

Voters' experience of their own sovereignty is both unhappy and ironic. They are told they are the source of all power yet often feel powerless,

unable to control the representatives who exercise power in their name, unable, positively, to shape policy and government according to their desires. Representatives, for their part, may exercise the sovereignty of the people, but they feel equally disempowered. In their cups, they will bemoan the fact that they serve at the beck and call of an ungrateful public and their ever-changing whims. Worse, they have little or no control over the bureaucracies they are constitutionally charged to supervise. A back-bench opposition member of Parliament can find it disillusioning to be vested with the authority conferred by the people, yet at the same time to be helpless to assist them in their battles with the officious bureaucracy. A democratic system intended to empower both the people and their representatives can leave both feeling disempowered.

What are we to make of this sobering account? I would, paradoxically, draw a more positive conclusion than you might expect.

The dynamism of democracy, its eternally unfinished character, derives from permanent, structural discontent with representation, with the voters feeling that they could do the job better than those they elect, and the representatives feeling that they have failed the people or that the people have failed them. This structural disillusion is actually the enduring engine of democratic reform, the psychic source of all the attempts to improve democratic systems and render them accountable to the people.

The democratic relationship may be fraught with discontent, but it is nonetheless founded in consent. Because consent is at its core, it is, like marriage, capable of renewal and rediscovery. Politicians and public alike know that there really is no alternative. Direct democracy is not practicable, populism is a flight from reality, and authoritarianism is downright dangerous. Thus far our democracies have held together through an economic crisis that seventy years ago led to fascism and war. We should take heart from this and rededicate ourselves to democracy's promise.

Our belief that democracy is the only viable political future derives from the reasonable assumption that authoritarian alternatives will always depend for their survival on coercion and can never acquire the legitimacy of consent. Sooner or later, in China, Russia, Singapore, all the authoritarian regimes that currently celebrate their superiority, the people, the absent god, will return to the public square and demand rights and justice, failing which, they will take power back into their own hands.

In all authoritarian forms of rule, the possibility of revolution lies before the regime as a potential nemesis. This renders authoritarianism brittle, vulnerable to convulsion. Democracy, by contrast, has put its

revolutions behind it. Change in a democracy means restoration, returning to the people the sovereignty that has been confiscated from them by venal representatives, uncaring bureaucrats, and overreaching ministers. The cure for democracy's discontents lies, as always, in the people themselves, in the anger that arises out of disappointed hope. The remedy lies in their hands: finding representatives who will serve them truly, who will strive to be worthy of the calling.

Democracy's legitimacy cannot depend on the promise of magic solutions or radiant tomorrows. With revolution behind it, not before it, democracy has no finality, no goal toward which it is tending. It must justify itself by how it operates every day, in the indefinitely renewed labor of guaranteeing to succeeding generations the freedom that is its saving virtue. It is anxious work to walk forever toward an ever-receding horizon line. Citizens and representatives alike will find a journey without the promise of a radiant tomorrow unfulfilling, but such are the disquiets of people blessed with historical luck and the good fortune of freedom. We must keep to the path, continue the march, because if we look around, look from our zones of safety to zones of danger, look to the deserted public squares of authoritarian regimes, we know that there can be worse, much worse.

NOTES

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1. The author ran for public office in the Canadian federal election of January 23, 2006, winning a seat in the Canadian House of Commons, representing the Toronto-area riding of Etobicoke Lakeshore. He was returned to office in the federal election of October 14, 2008, and became leader of the Liberal Party of Canada and leader of the Official Opposition in May 2009. He lost his seat in the federal election of May 2, 2011, and resigned his position as leader of the Liberal Party of Canada thereafter. His political career is described in *Fire and Ashes: Success and Failure in Politics* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013).
2. Mark E. Warren, "What Does Corruption Mean in a Democracy?," *American Journal of Political Science* 48, no. 2 (2004): 328–43.
3. <http://report.globalintegrity.org/Brazil/2009/timeline>; <http://www.argentinaindependent.com/currentaffairs/mensalao-the-implications-of-brazil%E2%80%99s-largest-corruption-scandal/>; <http://www.hrw.org/world-report-2012/world-report-2012-brazil>; <http://www.business-anti-corruption.com/en/country-profiles/the-americas/brazil/corruption-levels/judicial-system/>; <http://www.bfna.org/publication/incre-brazil-expert-report>; <http://www.bti>

- project.de/fileadmin/Inhalte/reports/2012/pdf/BTI%202012%20Brazil.pdf; http://www.transparency.org/country#BRA_DataResearch.
4. The phrase “parliamentary cretinism” is to be found in Karl Marx, *The 18th Brumaire of Louis Napoleon* (New York, 1852).
 5. http://www.nytimes.com/2013/07/23/world/europe/czech-ex-premier-acknowledges-fault-in-corruption-scandal.html?_r=0. See also country reports, Hungary, Slovenia, Slovakia, and Poland, <http://www.transparencyinternational.org>.
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 12. Carl Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*, translated by G. Schwab (1932; reprint, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007).
 13. Max Weber, “Politics as Vocation,” in *From Max Weber*, edited by H. H. Gerth and C. W. Mills (London: Routledge, 2009).
 14. <http://www.elections.ca/content.aspx?section=res&dir=rec/part/estim/41ge&document=report41&lang=e>.
 15. Edmund Burke, <http://www.elections.ca/content.aspx?section=res&dir=rec/part/estim/41ge&document=report41&lang=e>; James Madison, <http://www.constitution.org/fed/federaro.htm>.
 16. <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/political-representation/>; Hanna Pitkin, *The Concept of Representation* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967); Jane Mansbridge, “Rethinking Representation,” *American Political Science Review* 97, no. 4 (2003): 515–28; Jane Mansbridge, “A Selection Model of Representation,” *Journal of Political Philosophy* 17, no. 4 (2009): 369–98.
 17. Michael D. McDonald, Silvia M. Mendes, and Ian Budge, “What Are Elections For? Conferring the Median Mandate,” *British Journal of Political Science* 34, no. 1 (2004): 1–26.
 18. Baldesar Castiglione, *The Book of the Courtier* (London: Penguin, 2004).
 19. Theda Skocpol and Vanessa Williamson, *The Tea Party and the Remaking of Republican Conservatism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012).
 20. Yael Tamir, “Malignant Accountability,” presented at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, Toronto, March 20, 2013.