1.
Size and Democracy

As the population of the United States grows—from just over 5 million in 1800 to 76 million in 1900 to more than 281 million in 2000—the country's political system ratchets up and away from the average citizen.[1] The increase in population, the growth of scale, and the remoteness from power all feed estrangement from modern representative government. In little New Hampshire and Vermont, representatives in the lower house have approximately 3,800 and 4,100 constituents, respectively.[2] However, legislative districts in large states approach—and sometimes even surpass—the average size of congressional districts.[3] When Madison and the framers first introduced the idea of direct election of representatives to a national Congress, they proposed congressional districts of 30,000 constituents. At the time, these were astonishingly large districts, and many Anti-Federalists refused to vote for the new Constitution because they felt districts of this size made a mockery of representation.[4] Today, we would relish a return to such intimate scale. Madison's own electoral experience points to the startling change in scale. After co-authoring *The Federalist Papers*, he returned to Virginia to run for a seat in the new House of Representatives against another future president, James Monroe. Campaigning hard, Madison eked

out a victory by 1,308 votes to Monroe's 973—a vote total far below what it takes to win a school board election today.[5]

The problem of scale is so daunting that we rarely give it much thought. The small-town society that Tocqueville admired disappeared with the industrial revolution and the urbanization of the early twentieth century. The Progressives grappled with these dramatic changes, but the full impact of massive scale was not felt until the latter part of the twentieth century. In 1950 only half of all Americans lived in major metropolitan areas; by the mid-1990s four in five did. The number of people who live in towns and rural areas fell from 44 percent in 1950 to 20 percent in 1996. At the same time, the proportion living in central cities has remained steady—averaging 32 percent across the last half of the twentieth century. The greatest increase came in the suburbs where the population exploded from 23 percent in 1950 to 49 percent in 1996.[6] In 2000, 85 million Americans lived in urban centers, 140 million lived in metropolitan suburbs, and 56 million lived outside the big metropolitan areas—23 million in cities and 33 million in rural areas.[7]

For those living in giant metropolitan regions, the dilemma of scale is that much more real. We know some of our neighbors, but not all, and some of our best friends may live a time zone or two across the country. Beyond the community association and local school board, our connection to political power can be faint. In Houston, a city council of 14 represents 4 million people. In Los Angeles County, 5 county supervisors represent 9.5 million people. In New York, 62 state senators represent 19 million constituents. In Florida, the population jumped from 9.7 million in 1980 to 16.3 million in 2001 while the number of state legislators remains constant at 160.[8]

In the beginning, the national numbers were small. Just after the American Revolution, the newly established United States' population stood at 2,780,400. By the 1830s, when Tocqueville visited and penned *Democracy in America*, the population had grown to more than 15 million. When Lincoln addressed the fallen at Gettysburg, the combined population of North and South totaled roughly 33 million. When Theodore Roosevelt discovered the bully pulpit and spent New Year's Day shaking hands with as many White House visitors as wanted to greet him, the head count was more

than 80 million.[9] At the start of the Jazz Age, the total stood at 106 million. When Franklin Roosevelt took the oath of office during the Great Depression, 127 million Americans looked to him for guidance. By the Korean War, our numbers totaled 151 million. At the end of the 1960s, the numbers reached 203 million, then 226 million in 1980, and 248 million in 1990; at the start of the new millennium, the U.S. Census counted 281,421,906 Americans.[10] The Census Bureau estimate for 2010 is 308,936,000. [11] We are, in many respects, a long way from the Revolution.

Globally, the numbers are staggering. In 1925 there were approximately 2 billion people on planet Earth; by 1975 that number had doubled to 4 billion; by 1990 we had reached 5.3 billion; by 2006 the number of mouths to feed reached 6.5 billion.[12] In 1800, there were only six cities that had more than half a million people: Beijing, Canton, Istanbul, London, Paris, and Tokyo. By 1990, approximately 800 cities had surpassed the half-million mark. At least 270 cities had more than 1 million residents, and 14 topped 10 million.[13] The demographic volcano and the accompanying dilemma of scale have many repercussions. If we do not keep the world economy growing as rapidly as the population, we risk a dramatic rise in famine, nation-state breakdown, and terror. If we do not figure out how to deal with environmental challenges such as global warming, we could destroy the earth's thin ecosphere. And if we do not take steps to deal with the challenge that scale presents to government, popular sovereignty could become a relic of the past.

But is the dramatic increase in scale really a problem for democracy? At the beginning of the twentieth century, only a few nations were democratic, and even those restricted the franchise to men. Today, 122 nations meet the criteria of allowing all adult citizens to vote in regular elections.[14] It is not hard to hold elections, but it is hard to make democracy meaningful. The challenge is to construct a political system that supports and sustains a robust civic culture. Civil society and democratic institutions are intimately related. Elections have been held in post-Saddam Iraq, but few would call Iraq a democracy. Real democracy has a qualitative dimension. As Tocqueville recognized, democracy is most importantly about mores, those habits of thought and action that sustain civic involvement. In other words, the global expansion of democracy is one thing; the quality of the democratic experience is another. After the struggles of the twentieth cen-

tury, American politics finally opened its doors. Women and minorities have fought hard to gain equal standing with white Anglo-Saxon males. American society has become much more inclusive, yet the political philosopher Sheldon Wolin makes a telling observation when he says, "Americans no longer feel democracy in their bones."[15] In certain respects, our current political life is only a shadow of what it was in Abraham Lincoln's day when the United States was a nation of small towns, and our population was approximately a tenth of what it is today.

As scale grows, our grasp of "reality" becomes twisted. Today a large part of what we know is filtered and experienced through television and other media. In the 1920s, Walter Lippmann famously wrote about the "world out there and the pictures in our heads." Today, multinational corporations and mass marketing have helped create a celebrity culture where Hollywood stars have the glamour, money, and image to become governors and even president. Daniel Boorstin warned about a society dominated by pseudo-events—events such as photo ops and press conferences that are manufactured solely to be reported—and coined the contemporary definition of celebrity as "a person who is known for his well-knownness."[16] Mid-twentieth-century writers fretted about mass society, but at the beginning the twenty-first-century Americans are not as isolated and alienated as some social critics feared. Most people are ensconced in routines, families, and friends. "Fears that city life produces larger numbers of relatively isolated, alienated individuals lacking strong ties and a sense of community" were exaggerated.[17] Alienation and anomie are not the problem; the challenge of scale is. In their book, *Size and Democracy*, Dahl and Edward Tufte write:

> As the inexorable thrust of population growth makes a small country large and a large country gigantic, demands are often heard for bringing government closer to the people, for grassroots democracy. Small units are often said to facilitate democracy better than larger units; hence the larger units must be broken up into smaller units, where grass-roots democracy is possible—regions, states, cities, neighborhoods. At the same time, there are complaints that the smaller units are incapable of handling their problems, and demands are heard for larger units such as metropolitan areas, a United States of Europe, a world federation.[18]

This, in a nutshell, is the dilemma of scale.

Today, with one national government, 50 state governments, and 87,849 local governments—3,043 counties, 19,431 municipalities, 16,506 townships, 13,522 school districts, and 35,356 special districts—the United States has a decentralized form of public administration.[19] We have plenty of chances to participate and influence events, locally. Traditionally, average citizens have participated in "self-rule" through the city council and school board. Yet, this approach is no longer adequate.[20] As public problems grow beyond local capacities, critical decisions get pushed to the state and national level. School funding decisions too often depend on the governor's budget. Local economic growth waxes and wanes with regional and global investment decisions. Transnational corporations generate neighborhood environmental hazards, and cleanup depends on federal budgetary priorities. "Think globally, act locally" only goes so far.

The United States, the most populous Western democracy, has just 535 federal legislators in Washington, DC, who represent nearly 300 million people. This ratio is extremely low. With one member of the House of Representatives for every 650,000 Americans, our connection with the federal government is stretched thin. The number of representatives in the House has not changed since 1910, when the 435 members each represented approximately 200,000 constituents.[21] Of course, one way to increase representation would be to increase the size of the House of Representatives. But unless we quadruple the size of the House to nearly 2,000 members, constituents in the home districts will not notice a difference. And radically increasing the size of the House would make it wildly unwieldy and difficult to run. In contrast to the 100-member Senate, it is already hard for House members to get to know many of their fellow politicians.[22] As any recent visitor can attest, Capitol Hill, especially on the House side, is a maze of offices crowded with staff.

For some, the issue of scale is moot.[23] After all, what are we supposed to do? Ask people to stop having children? For most Americans, questions about the public schools, taxes, economic growth, the environment, civil rights, and health coverage are front and center. Yet, our ability to make genuine progress on issues such as these is related to how well the public understands the challenges the nation confronts, which, in turn, is connected to the problem of scale and how we conduct politics in a mass society.

THE RATIO OF ELECTORS TO REPRESENTATIVES

The crucial question is precisely how to fashion the connection between elites and regular citizens. Today, we rely on voting, which has been slipping for four decades; opinion surveys, which measure off-the-top-of-the-head reactions; and interest groups, which focus on a narrow agenda with little regard for the big picture. All are inadequate. How can the connection between political elites and citizens be strengthened? Is it possible to improve the pattern and character of political discourse and its ties to rational government? These are critical questions for the future of democracy in the United States.

The connection between political elites and the public is problematic, in large part, because we have a high ratio of electors to representatives. The high ratio, first and foremost, transforms national legislators into a special elite class—economically and socially—living at great remove from those who vote for them. The 535 members of Congress are a breed apart. As one political scientist has written—they are *the* Washington establishment with longevity that outlasts presidents and their administrations.[24] Even state representatives, at least in large states, are elected royalty, with fawning personal staffs and a frenetic professional life in which they are in constant motion, running from one meeting to the next, whether chairing the subcommittee on banking or speaking to a high-tech lobby group or dining with wealthy donors. Within their world, legislators are the center of attention, the star attraction, the king or queen of their domain. It is not so much that national legislators are economically and socially part of the upper strata—though many are, given the cost of winning a seat in Congress. What is more important is the psychological distance that gradually grows between them and their constituents. True, successful politicians develop what Richard Fenno calls a "home style" for dealing with constituents back in the district.[25] But this technique masks the psychological distance that naturally grows when elected officials take up residence in Washington, DC or the state capital and become players in the capitol scene. Representatives, like all of us, are creatures of habits and time constraints. House members meet with constituents back home, but often these are people who constitute the politician's political base. Core supporters have access; people from the opposition are a nuisance. It is human

nature; put yourself in the shoes of your congressman or congresswoman. After a tough week in Washington, DC, and a red-eye flight back home, whom would you want to have breakfast with on Saturday morning?

The great distance—physical and psychological—between national legislators and voters makes it hard for the representatives to know the lives and the problems of their constituents. And it makes it more difficult for constituents to hold their representatives accountable. A century ago, Roberto Michels made an argument that organization inevitably leads to oligarchy. When you have a representative structure of governance, said Michels, those elected to office and those who vote cannot help but develop different perspectives, wants, and needs. Michels developed his "iron law of oligarchy" in regard to labor unions and political parties, but his argument takes on additional force when examining the U.S. national system where many senators are millionaires and each House member "represents" 650,000 constituents.[26]

Obviously, competitive elections and retirements mean we get a circulation of elites, so we are not dealing with a rigid, static oligarchy. Thus, in one sense, Michels is wrong. Such is the argument that democratic theorists such as Joseph Schumpeter and Dahl use to refute Michels.[27] But, in another sense, Michels is right. That national elected officials are an elite political class, largely separate and distinct from everyday voters, remains a very real problem for modern democratic states—especially large ones such as the United States. Of course, it was widespread resentment of the politicians as a segregated and privileged class that fueled the drive for term limits on legislators in the early 1990s. Term limits is an ill-conceived reform, yet the impulse is understandable. Granted, Americans are not going to give up on representative government; participatory democracy is clearly utopian, and authoritarian politics is not an option. So the question becomes, Can we do something about the absurdly high ratio of electors to national representatives that now exists?

Setting a lofty standard, our goal should be to make it within reach for Americans to govern themselves as much as possible and not be governed by others, no matter how well-intentioned. This was Jefferson's aim, and it should be ours.[28] Any other perspective leads down the road to guardianship—benign or brutal. So argues Dahl, the leading democratic scholar of the postwar era.[29] But how? Radicals of the 1960s insisted on "participa-

tory democracy." Direct democracy, inspired by Rousseau, can only be a romantic reaction against the modern nation-state and the reality of great size and complexity.[30] Burned out by the struggle for civil rights and protests against the Vietnam War, 1960s radicals ran into the brick wall of scale and never figured out how to marry participatory democracy to representative government.[31] The early Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) was inspired by Jefferson, John Dewey, and C. Wright Mills, not Mao. But the SDS and other activists of the 1960s never reconciled their anti-elite rhetoric with the necessity of representative government. It was never quite clear how the participatory democrats proposed to run a society based on complex institutions, and Dahl made precisely this point in *After the Revolution?* (1970). As David Brooks explains in *Bobos in Paradise*, the college rebels of the 1960s succeeded in transforming American society. Today, the American upper middle class is a blend of bohemian and bourgeois values.[32] Culturally, the 1960s generation won. Politically they lost.

True, the 1960s resulted in an opening up of institutions, a more critical attitude toward those in authority, and an expansion of direct mass democracy in terms of the presidential primary system and state initiatives. The attack on the old regime blew apart the traditional party system. But these changes are not all positive. More to the point, the push for participatory democracy ran aground. In most respects, politically we are no closer to participatory democracy than we were in 1959. Suspicious of elites and hierarchy, participatory democrats of the 1960s and 1970s idealized New England town meetings, small cooperatives, and workplace democracy—situations where small scale made versions of participatory democracy possible.[33] As such, the hard work of actually crafting a feasible plan for allowing greater participation in the national representative system was deferred.

A big, complex society requires elites. Some commentators, such as Lippmann in the 1920s and *Newsweek International* Editor Fareed Zakaria, today say we should delegate authority to elites and experts who know what to do.[34] Obviously, we must do this to a certain extent. But many important issues are not just technical; they involve fundamental political and moral choices. To argue that technocrats and the elite political caste have the expertise and the wisdom to do the right thing is to

delegate a significant chunk of popular sovereignty. In sum, neither the participatory nor the elitist options are satisfactory.

THE PROBLEM WITH PUBLIC OPINION

In a massive country such as the United States, polling is the primary means by which we gauge what the public thinks. A presidential pollster explains polling this way: "It defies logic that interviews with 800 Americans will accurately mirror the opinions of 250 million of their countrymen. But the laws of science seem crazy . . . I've seen it time and again."[35] The latest poll numbers trumpet from the media on a daily basis. Opinion surveys, conducted by CNN, Zogby, Gallup, or any of a dozen highly esteemed polls, are widely accepted as legitimate expressions of the public's voice.[36] Yet, a number of academic researchers now question "their usefulness as mirrors of the public mind."[37]

Public opinion research is not flawed; rather, the substance being measured presents the difficulty. Practitioners have long recognized problems with how question order, wording, sampling errors, and nonresponses can skew conclusions. But the real conundrum is the public's low level of political knowledge, its uneven distribution, and people's willingness to spew out opinions when they know next to nothing about what is being asked. Scott Althaus says the problem is "so pervasive as to call into question whether opinion surveys can tell us reliably what the people really want."[38] On the one hand, modern polling gives us a scientifically valid measure of what the public is thinking. Statistical sampling and margins of error allow political scientists and pollsters to accurately gauge what the public is thinking at any one time. If we lacked random sampling, a perfectly credible and widely accepted method of measuring preferences, our knowledge of the political universe would be severely curtailed. On the other hand, there is the old problem of "garbage in, garbage out." If most of the public pays little attention to public affairs, and a majority of those polled know very little about, say, the situation in Iraq or the major planks of the president's energy initiative, having an accurate picture of their views, while a good thing, does not change the fact that scant knowledge and minimal thought lie behind the answers. Princeton's Larry Bartels states the problem succinctly: "Citizens have attitudes but not pref-

erences."[39] The people who are polled are statistically representative of the mass public and, sadly, its ignorance.[40]

Political scientist Samuel Popkin, a veteran of Democratic presidential campaigns, says voters may not be well-informed, but that, working from cues, stereotypes, and information gathered from daily life, they make rational choices when it come to politics. Voters, Popkin says, neither form opinions irrationally nor change them capriciously. They do, however, employ information shortcuts. Following Anthony Downs's analysis of how people make efficient use of information, Popkin argues that citizens take cues from bits of information and then use their own life experience to "complete the picture." Most Americans possess only rudimentary civics knowledge, but, says Popkin, working from what they know they can "read" presidential candidates fairly well.[41] A key part of what the average voter does is to look to pundits, political elites, and politically sophisticated friends for help.

> Most citizens don't study the details but look at the bottom line. Are we at war? Is the economy healthy? Most people entrust the rest to experts and specialists. What is important is that there are perhaps five percent who are activists and news junkies who do pay close attention. If they see that something is seriously wrong in the country, they sound the alarm and then ordinary people start paying attention.[42]

The increased education level of citizens means more people follow national and international issues, but Popkin says whatever education level they have, voters use "information shortcuts and cost-saving devices . . . to assess ideology, platforms, individual competence and character."[43] As a result, presidential campaigns work hard to win the contest of short-cut symbols—Willie Horton in 1988, health care and welfare reform in 1992, and the contest over John Kerry's Vietnam service in 2004, for example. A single appearance can be critical if it crystallizes an impression of the candidate—Clinton's comment on Sister Soulja in 1992, Howard Dean's scream speech after the Iowa Caucuses in 2004, and President Bush's edginess and apparent discomfort in the first 2004 presidential debate.[44] It is far easier to develop a narrative about the kind of person Candidate X or Y is than to evaluate the candidate's policy recommendations.

While Popkin focuses on presidential campaigns, John Zaller examines mass opinion from a wider perspective. In his influential *The Nature and Origins of Mass Opinion*, he looks at how individuals convert political information and argument into political opinions.[45] The prevailing view of many citizens and political observers is that citizens have preferences about major policies and that these preferences then largely determine the actions of politicians and governments. But Zaller views public opinion as a function of elite debate. His working assumption is that "elite communications shape mass opinion rather than vice versa."[46] Citizens have preferences, but their opinions are the product of the deliberation and argument among the elites.[47]

Ordinary citizens are often said to have a strong voice on major policy, while lobbyists, interest groups, policy experts, and government officials prevail on issues of low visibility.[48] There are two important caveats to this received wisdom. First, even on major issues, the public's opinion is very much a reflection of elite debate. If there is elite consensus about national or international policy, says Zaller, "the public can do little more than follow the elite consensus on what should be done." The early stages of the Vietnam conflict fit this pattern, as did the 1990 Persian Gulf War. The Bush Sr. administration's mobilization of public support for the first Gulf War was a striking example. "When Iraq invaded Kuwait in August 1990 only a small fraction of Americans were aware that Kuwait existed. Yet within two weeks, public support for the use of American troops to prevent further Iraqi aggression was topping 80 percent in the polls." When elites divide, the public splits as well, following elites who share their general ideological position.[49] Second, increasingly, politicians and their top strategists use polls to "find the most effective ways to move public opinion closer to their own desired policies." The politicians' own policy goals, and those of ideological activists, drive policy initiatives. More and more, polls are used not to find out what the public wants, but to identify the best arguments, symbols, and buzz words by which to "sell" the policy.[50] The research forces us to reevaluate how much independence and autonomy the mass public has from elite opinion. Zaller sums up the gist of his argument thus:

> People are continuously exposed to a stream of political news and information, much of it valenced so as to push public opinion in

> one direction or the other. But, owing to the generally low levels of attention to politics in this country, most people on most issues are relatively uncritical about the ideas they internalize. In consequence, they fill up their minds with large stores of only partially consistent ideas, arguments, and considerations. When asked a survey question, they call to mind as many of these ideas as are immediately accessible in memory and use them to make choices among the options offered them. But they make these choices in great haste—typically on the basis of one or perhaps two considerations that happen to be at the 'top of the head' at the moment of response.[51]

For example, if asked about defense spending, most people would answer the question based on the latest news item on that topic—say a nightly news story on a defense procurement scandal. "The psychological literature on opinion change lends great support to the notion that individuals typically fail to reason for themselves about the persuasive communications they encounter. Instead, people rely on cues about the 'source' of a message in deciding what to think of it."[52] As to why this is the case, Zaller argues that this is what we should expect given how unusual it is for the average person to be asked his or her opinion on a matter of public importance. The phone rarely rings with the ABC News or the *New York Times* pollster on the other end of the line ready to listen to our words of wisdom.

Historian Robert Wiebe cautions that opinion polls in the large nation state are no substitute for more vigorous democracy. Even when the public is paying attention, polls often are "pseudoparticipatory proxies that create an illusion of citizens actually having a say in their government."[53] We give polls too much credence when we treat them as serious measurements of public opinion. If opinion surveys actually worked the way they are advertised—if they actually counted people's thoughtful consideration of an issue rather than being off-the-cuff reactions—then the magic numbers generated would command respect. As it is, public opinion polls are inaccurate because much of what they measure is so ill-considered; they are fraudulent because they give the public a sense of participation that can best be described as mythical.

Polls do not engage us; they do not cause us to think; they do not ask us to grapple with the issues at hand, to weigh competing demands, to

ponder tradeoffs and the possible consequences of different courses of action.[54] Public opinion surveys are the political equivalent of game shows. Being called to the stage and asked whether the prize is hidden behind door 1 or door 2 is such a random occurrence that there is no reason for us to prepare for the contest, much less take the experience seriously. The contestant wants to win the prize, but there is no ongoing purpose to the experience; it is separate and apart from daily life.

COLD WAR HANGOVER

Another, less visible, but critical reason why Americans feel lost in the large republic is a change in the very language of democracy. Today, politicians, journalists, and citizens continually talk about the "democratic process." It is so ingrained in our political consciousness that we rarely reflect on why we speak about democracy this way. We just accept it. But there is a reason—the fear of communism during the Cold War. The great struggle with the Soviet Union dominated American life for nearly half a century.[55]

Nearly two decades after the fall of the Berlin Wall, we remain imprisoned inside a Cold War view of democracy and its possibilities. Facing the Marxist-Leninist threat, Americans spoke of democracy in a new way, not so much as shared values and citizen participation but as a set of formal rights and procedures.[56] This was no accident. The shift—from a demanding ideal that no country has yet achieved, to institutional procedures that ensure free and fair elections—fit an ideological need. The new definition made the choice between East and West stark and simple—elections or Stalin.[57] The procedural account of democracy does not aspire to educate citizens or to encourage greater participation. Instead, discussion, deliberation, and political give-and-take are left to interest groups and a specialized, technically informed elite.[58]

Fighting the Soviet Empire required a simple concept of democracy that could be applied to many countries and would allow the United States to present itself as the paragon of democracy. Schumpeter supplied the tool by redefining democracy as a "political method" in which the political elite is forced to compete for mass favor in periodic elections. The leading Western economist of his generation after Keynes, Schumpeter developed

the "democratic process" as a powerful weapon—an ideological combination punch when combined with George Kennan's strategy of geopolitical containment.[59] After his *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy* (1942), Western nations with competitive elections and procedural norms came to be seen as fully democratic, and the meaning of democracy was abridged to individual freedom as communist regimes were sharply criticized on procedural grounds.[60]

In arguing for his "realistic" understanding of democracy, Schumpeter says the democratic method is that "institutional method for arriving at political decisions in which individuals acquire the power to decide by means of a competitive struggle for the people's vote."[61] Competition for leadership becomes the distinctive feature of a democratic political system. Thus, if the electorate has the power of eviction, then a political system is democratic: "democracy does not mean and cannot mean that the people actually rule in any obvious sense of the terms 'people' and 'rule.' *Democracy means only that the people have the opportunity of accepting or refusing the men who are to rule them.*"[62] Schumpeter drew an explicit parallel between democratic politics and economics. His analogy can be briefly stated: competitive struggle between potential leaders/firms for votes/profits has the indirect effect of producing legislation/goods for citizens/consumers. In Schumpeter's economic theory, the entrepreneur is presented as the dynamic force in the system. Likewise, in his democratic theory, the leader plays this role while the voter becomes a consumer who can only accept or reject what the political entrepreneur has to offer.[63] For Schumpeter and his followers, politics is just another market, another aspect of the division of labor, something we can safely delegate to special pleaders, consultants, and the political class.[64]

Confronting the totalitarian regimes of Nazi Germany, the Soviet Union and Communist China, a majority of Americans came to accept this more restricted, more cautious, less ambitious view of democracy. Hitler's rise to power led many in the West to think twice about the wisdom of mass participation; the logic of the postwar confrontation between the United States and the Sino-Soviet empire necessitated an identification of American democracy with freedom, individual rights, and private enterprise. At the same time, cold warriors downplayed the central democratic values of equality and community. The reason was simple: equality and fraternity, unlike liberty, are key values in socialist as well as democratic thought.[65]

Faced with an imminent loss of basic liberties and freedoms, Americans shifted to a tough but meager understanding of democracy based on rights and processes. Almost imperceptibly, in a short space of time, Americans accepted a radically reductionist understanding of democracy quite different from the democratic vision of Jefferson, Lincoln, and Progressive thinkers such as Herbert Croly and Dewey.[66] As the meaning of democracy was reduced to individual freedoms and regular elections between competing elites, an important beginning stage of democracy was crystallized into the ideal itself. In the 1950s, Louis Hartz warned that communism was being allowed to redefine "the issue of our internal freedom in terms of our external life."[67] Unfortunately, that process continues today—accentuated by America's imperial status and the global war on terror.[68]

With Carthage defeated, the question facing us modern Romans is, Do we continue to hold a minimal definition of democracy, one that accepts a growing gap between citizens and the political elite as being of little consequence, or do we work to articulate and put into practice a more demanding understanding of democracy?

Clearly, democracy as "competitive elites" is preferred over more authoritarian forms of politics. Yet it is severely reductionist and teaches us to tolerate—and gradually accept as normal—an enormous gap between the political elite and the public and a great deal of inequality, apathy, and lack of community. These may not be problems for the procedural view, but they are problems for us. The Cold War's hidden cost is the chill it put on democracy in America. Redefining democracy as the "democratic process" was akin to chemotherapy. It helped slay the communist cancer abroad, but left politics in a weakened condition at home at a time when new challenges demand, not languor, but democratic vitality.

DIRECT DEMOCRACY TRAP

A final reason we have such a difficult time dealing with the problem of scale is the habit of thinking of democracy primarily in two ways—direct democracy and standard representative government. Schumpeter and Jean-Jacques Rousseau are the seminal writers on modern representative and participatory democracy, respectively, and most institutional thought about democracy hovers around these two poles. Schumpeter says people

have the right to accept or reject those who make the decisions, but that between elections the public should stay quiet. Participation, civic virtue, and vigorous democratic dialogue are of little consequence. Madison, the original theorist of modern representative government, is also elitist, but Schumpeter pushes this stance to the limit.

On the other democratic extreme, we find Rousseau, the eighteenth-century author of *The Social Contract* and patron saint of modern participatory democrats.[69] He famously favored tiny republics filled with virtuous citizens and gave modern articulation to the ancient Greek understanding of democracy. [70] In contrast to Schumpeter, Rousseau insists that political power exercised by individual leaders must be directed by and under the authority of "the freely expressed will of the people as sovereign."[71] A radical direct democrat, Rousseau says that representation is the death of democracy: "The English people thinks it is free. It greatly deceives itself; it is free only during the election of the members of Parliament. As soon as they are elected, it is a slave, it is nothing . . . the instant a people chooses representatives, it is no longer free; it no longer exists." [72]

Given his controversial, complex, and radical views, some wonder whether Rousseau was a democrat at all.[73] But it is a serious misreading of Rousseau to deny his commitment to democracy. He is an exhilarating, idealistic, penetrating, and most uncompromising thinker. Reading Rousseau and James Miller's masterful *Rousseau: Dreamer of Democracy*, it is hard not to feel the sense of excitement, fulfillment, and possibilities to be found in the ideal of direct democratic participation.[74] Ironically, Rousseau is difficult to fathom because he is unrelenting and absolute in his pursuit of freedom and democracy.

At bottom, Rousseau's philosophy is not about democracy but about freedom. The *Social Contract* opens with the famous statement: "Man was/is born free, and everywhere he is in chains." Man was born free before civilization existed, and every man or woman is born with a natural freedom to choose whether or not to obey others. "And everywhere he is [in] chains," questions the legitimacy of every government—whether constitutional democracy or authoritarian dictatorship. Rousseau's project is to show how individuals can indeed maintain their freedom in society—a very difficult task, but a possible one in the perfect social order. For Rousseau, democracy and freedom are undeniably

linked because a democratic social order is the only one where freedom is possible. A guide to the philosophically pure, Rousseau says that if a people truly want to be free and if they prize human freedom above all other goods, they must follow a strict regimen.

In book III, chapter IV: "On Democracy," he writes:

> Consider how many things that are hard to combine are presupposed by this form of government. First, a very small State where the people is easily assembled and where each citizen can easily know all the others. Second, great simplicity of mores, which prevents a multitude of business and knotty discussions. Next, a great equality of ranks and fortunes, without which equality of rights and authority could not subsist for long. Finally, little or no luxury, because either luxury is the result of wealth, or it makes wealth necessary. It corrupts both rich and poor, the one by possessing, the other by coveting. It sells out the homeland to indolence and vanity; it deprives the State of all its citizens by enslaving some of them to others and all of them to opinion.[75]

It is clear that Rousseau is writing a treatise on the principles of democracy "fit for but a few times and a few places."[76] Three paragraphs after listing the above conditions he states, "If there were a people of Gods, it would govern itself democratically. Such a perfect government is not suited to men."[77]

Rousseau's vision stands in stark contrast to two basic realities of modern society. In his democracy, representative government is not allowed and, thus, the citizen body must be very small for citizens to assemble and directly decide laws and policy. In addition, Rousseau's citizens must be radically similar—not diverse—to ensure that they will have harmonious interests and can agree on a general good. On both counts, size and diversity, the United States is fundamentally unsuited for his philosophy.

In many respects, Rousseau's philosophy was a radical rejection of modern life and, thus, his most passionate followers are often viewed as hopeless romantics.[78] This raises the question, If Rousseau is so unsuited to modern life, why is he so important to us as a philosopher of democracy? First, we all live in the shadow of his dream. He is the writer most responsible for igniting the French Revolution—the greatest of the demo-

cratic revolutions—and spreading its message. Before Rousseau, aristocracy and feudalism were the norm. After Rousseau, popular sovereignty is the starting point, and the question becomes how much aristocracy we are willing to tolerate in a democratic society. By transforming the meaning of sovereignty from something that endowed kings with special powers to something that belonged to the people, he became the rare political theorist who did, in fact, change history. Second, Rousseau combines the modern era's yearning for individual freedom with the ancient Greek understanding of democracy as direct participation of citizens in shaping their common life. He argued that freedom is the greatest good and that democracy is the only government capable of protecting and perfecting it.[79] These ideas are commonplace conjecture in the modern world—consider President Bush's justification for the war in Iraq—but Rousseau, in large part, helped make it so. Third, emerging from the French Revolution three paths all owe a debt to Rousseau. Representative democracy requires the abolition of feudal privilege and the idea of equality before the law—two goals Rousseau sought. Dictatorial democracy of the modern totalitarian type concentrates the powers of the government in "enlightened leaders" who are willing to force people "to be free." And direct democracy aims to realize lawmaking "as an activity undertaken by the people themselves."[80]

Of course, few political thinkers take as extreme positions as Schumpeter and Rousseau and, in fact, most political theorists take a middle position. Still, in the United States most discussion about democratic institutions remains focused on either small-scale participatory democracy or full-scale representative government. In fact, only with the Progressive reformers early in the twentieth century do we find sustained democratic inventiveness in the middle of the spectrum. The 1960s experiments with small-scale direct democracy expired when the protests over the Vietnam War and civil rights ended. Most Americans have never doubted that traditional representative democracy is the only possible way to operate a modern society. The overwhelming majority of Americans understands that, except in very small communities, democracy must mean representative government. Totalitarian regimes and radical fundamentalists present the most serious challenge to modern democracy, not romantic dreamers of pastoral democracy.

OUR CHALLENGE

Our challenge is to develop and operate from a more flexible institutional outlook than those offered by Schumpeter and Rousseau. At the beginning of the twentieth century, the Progressive reformers devised the initiative and the mass primary by taking the basic principle of direct democracy—every citizen should have a vote on policy—and pushing the town meeting to a grand scale. Yet, government by mass direct democracy—witness California's destructive obsession with initiatives—is problematic, to put it mildly.[81] First, hot-button propositions are not instruments of sound public policy. They are campaign weapons. Designed by political consultants to appeal to specific groups in the electorate, many initiatives are flawed and incoherent. They make bad law. Second, the primary system opens up the selection process for candidates, but unless practiced on a scale such as New Hampshire—where the running joke is that voters feel deprived if they've only met the presidential candidates twice—the average voter has no clearer picture of the candidates than in the general election. And scheduling all the major primaries between the end of January and the beginning of March biases the presidential system toward super fund-raisers and the super wealthy. The evidence is in: mass direct democracy is anemic. Voters are uninformed, manipulated by slanted television ads, and rarely determine the agenda on which they vote. The juggernaut of ballot initiatives in states across the nation during the past three decades seems to have as its goal an "automatic pilot system" of government, writes Peter Schrag, with scant involvement by the electorate "beyond occasional trips to the polls to vote on yet more initiatives."[82]

If traditional representative government is unsatisfactory, because it allows for little participation and deliberation by average citizens, and traditional direct democracy is inadequate, because it is focused only on small communal settings, what can we do? Confronting this dilemma early in the twentieth century, the Progressive reformers thought they had the answer when they invented *direct mass* democracy. At the start of the twenty-first century, having exhausted the direct mass democracy option, it is time to reexamine representative democracy. Is there another way to reach the middle ground between small-scale participatory democracy and traditional representative government? In the twenty-first century, fruitful re-

form will start and unfold from the representative pole. Table 1 displays the choices before us.

Table 1

Schema No. 1

	DIRECT DEMOCRACY	MIDDLE GROUND	STANDARD REPRESENTATIVE GOVERNMENT
18th century	Rousseau		Madison/Schumpeter
20th century		**initiative primary** direct mass democracy	
21st century		??????????????????????	