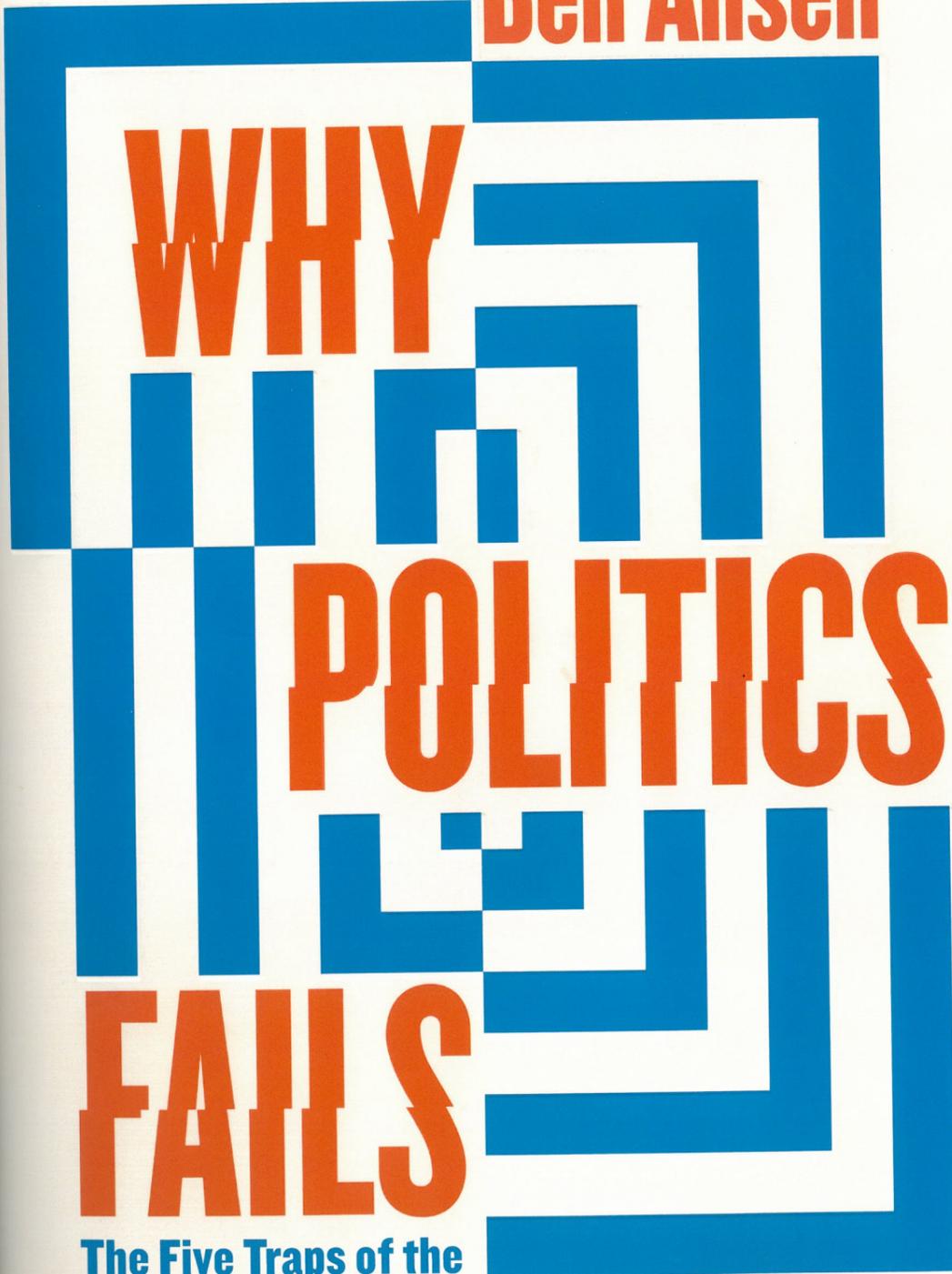


**Ben Ansell**



**WHY  
WHY  
POLITICS  
FAILS**

**The Five Traps of the  
Modern World – and  
How to Escape Them**

## I. Westminster: Wednesday, 27 March 2019

We arrived at the entrance to the House of Commons in London an hour early. We had expected long lines. The media had been in a frenzy ever since Prime Minister Theresa May's third attempt at passing a Brexit bill had been emphatically defeated. British political circles were abuzz about next steps, next moves. British political parties had lost control of their own Members of Parliament (MPs). Democracy didn't seem to be working. And chaos was ensuing. Was there a way out of the parliamentary gridlock? Surely Parliament must be able to agree on something?

Iain McLean and I had been invited to Parliament to provide advice to MPs seeking to find a solution. We made our way past statues of long-dead leaders to the committee rooms, upstairs. Here we sat on green suede chairs in an empty corridor, waiting for our hosts. Iain is probably Britain's leading expert on electoral rules, the author of a book titled *What's Wrong with the British Constitution?* If anyone could devise a system that might break the logjam, it was Iain. I was there as backup, as a specialist on political institutions. But what if even Iain, with or without my assistance, couldn't find a solution? What if Brexit was too complicated for any system to resolve?

Shouldn't this all have been simpler? The EU referendum of 2016 was a momentous event in British political history. 'Brexit', as the unexpected decision to leave the European Union has become known, was a simple vote over a seemingly simple question: 'Should the United Kingdom remain a member of the European Union or leave the European Union?' Leave won by 52 to 48 per cent – a sign perhaps of a divided country, but a clear victory nonetheless. Democracy at work.

The trouble came when politicians had to decide what kind of Brexit should be implemented. The people had spoken. But what were they saying? There are lots of countries in Europe that are not

members of the European Union: from Norway to Switzerland to Turkey and Russia. Some, like the Norwegians and Swiss, have very close relationships, mirroring European Union laws and allowing free immigration of European nationals. Others such as Turkey have the same trade policy as the European Union but precious little else. And still others – Russia, Armenia, Azerbaijan – are kept very much at arm's length from the European Union. So 'Leave the European Union?' – Yes. But how?

For the past three years Theresa May had tried to come up with an answer. Moving from the simple binary question to exactly how to disentangle the United Kingdom from an organization it had been part of for over forty years proved nightmarish. All kinds of decisions had to be made that were not on the ballot. Should the UK remain part of the EU's 'single market', which would prevent limits on EU immigration? Should the UK remain part of the EU's 'customs union' and forgo the chance of having its own trade deals? Or should the UK abandon all cooperation with the EU and strike out entirely alone, economic repercussions be damned?

A particular problem lay with Northern Ireland. After generations of violent conflict, the Good Friday Agreement in 1998 had ushered in two decades of peace between Catholic and Protestant communities. But it relied in part on the European Union – membership by both Britain and Ireland meant that there was no economic border between Ireland and Northern Ireland. The British public had voted to leave the EU. But that in turn meant the prospect of a 'hard border' with Ireland, which might destabilize peace. The simple Brexit vote again turned out to have rather more complex consequences, many of which voters – and politicians – had not anticipated.

May's own solution tried to straddle these challenges, balancing uneasily like a polar explorer standing on ice floes drifting apart. She would exit the single market to control immigration. She would exit the customs union so Britain could strike trade deals. But she also offered a 'backstop', which postponed Britain diverging from EU rules or trade policy until some solution to the Irish question could be found. The backstop meant Britain would remain in the EU's legislative orbit for untold years to come.

It was a compromise that satisfied few people. May tried to pass her Brexit bill three times in early 2019. Each time, it was defeated by a rather odd coalition. Some Brexit-supporting Conservative politicians voted against it because it was not 'proper Brexit'. They wanted to leave the European Union completely – do or die, come what may. Brexit-opposing Labour politicians voted against the bill because it was, well, Brexit. They wanted a second referendum, presumably to get a new answer.

A simple popular vote among two options had become an almighty mess once it became clear that there were many more than two ways of 'Brexiting'. Theresa May's bill did indeed guarantee the UK formally left the European Union, as the public had demanded. It was the 'how' that was the problem. Democracy was proving difficult.

Iain and I walked up the silent corridors to a horseshoe-shaped table in the parliamentary committee rooms where just two MPs, one Conservative and one Labour, were waiting. In British politics it's very unusual for a Conservative MP to side with a Labour MP over their own government, but they had both recognized the need to cooperate on this issue. With the government bill defeated, and at least five different potential Brexit bills floating around, plus a referendum on whether to call the whole thing off, they wanted to know if there was any method for Parliament to choose among them. In other words, could democracy be made to work?

We presented a series of different voting systems that Parliament could use to come to a choice. Each had its own merits. Some favoured compromise options. Others would produce a clear, if polarizing, decision. And still other voting systems explored whether any option could even meet with the vague approval of a majority of MPs.

After we had set out the pros and cons of each of these voting rules, the Conservative MP stopped us. He had figured out the obvious conclusion: MPs couldn't agree on anything, so they also wouldn't agree on a rule to agree on something. Each voting system would favour different ultimate outcomes. So choosing a voting system became a proxy for the debate at hand. We were back to square one.

But they did have one plan already up their sleeves. That evening a series of 'indicative votes' over Brexit options were scheduled. The

simplest possible procedure was adopted – ‘approval voting’, whereby each option was considered on its own and MPs were asked simply to say whether they approved of that option. Surely, this would help figure out the set of options that MPs could abide and then leave the trickier task of choosing among them for another day.

The approval votes were cast as we were leaving Westminster. Division bells rang out and MPs scampered off to mark down which options they could live with. As Iain and I grabbed a post-meeting drink and debriefed at a pub opposite Parliament, where Big Ben had just struck nine, I looked at my Twitter feed to see the voting numbers roll in. One by one the different policies met their fate. Not a single policy was approved by a majority of MPs. Faced with a myriad of different options, parliamentary democracy had frozen in stasis.

By and large, we want democracy in principle, but it’s often impossible to deliver in practice. And this is the heart of the democracy trap: *there’s no such thing as the ‘will of the people’*. The British public had spoken. But Parliament couldn’t deliver. Even when democracy had been boiled down into a Leave/Remain binary, it seemed to be impossible to actually figure out how to implement it in practice. Life is generally more complex than simple ‘yes’/‘no’ questions – there are multiple trade-offs, different ways of carrying out an instruction. So when it came to actually carrying out Brexit, was there really any clear ‘will of the people’ at all? Apparently not.

## 2. What is Democracy?

Democracy seems to be a goal we can all agree on. Even those of us who don’t live in democracies. The World Values Survey regularly asks people: ‘How important is it for you to live in a country that is governed democratically?’, scoring their answer from 0 to 10. It’s not surprising that in established democracies, such as Denmark and Germany, three quarters of people give democracy the full 10/10 score. But in many countries that are very far from democratic – China, Egypt, Zimbabwe, Venezuela – around two thirds of people give the importance of democracy at least 9/10. It’s possible people view democracy through different lenses; perhaps even that Chinese citizens think that their one-party state is a ‘people’s democracy’. Not everyone might want ‘Western’ democracy. But in principle most people seem to want a say in how their countries are run.

The idea of democracy – quite literally, ‘rule by the people’ – is a powerful and universal one. And although social scientists differ in their precise definitions of democracy, it’s this idea of self-government that is at its core. All of us should be involved in the making of political decisions that affect us.

Yet democracy regularly produces outcomes that aren’t consensual. Often people disagree. And it is this disagreement that is at the heart of the democracy trap: *there’s no such thing as the ‘will of the people’*.

As we saw with Brexit, when people don’t agree, the results can be chaotic. To get what they want they will strategize, they will manipulate and they will misrepresent. Our individual incentives to try and get the outcome we want will end up overwhelming our ability to come to any kind of stable collective agreement. Every time we look like we have consensus, it can be derailed by a new proposal from someone unhappy with the outcome.

Even if we avoid chaos and finally make collective decisions, that doesn’t mean we’ve resolved our disagreements. Democracy often

devolves into a shouting match between winners and losers, pulling apart friends and neighbours, polarizing us. Making democracy work – stopping politics from failing – will force us to balance on the knife-edge between chaos and polarization.

Even democracy's strongest defenders have recognized its imperfections, as with Winston Churchill's famous aphorism that 'democracy is the worst form of government except for all those other forms that have been tried from time to time'. But what do we mean by 'democracy'? And why, given its imperfections, is it desirable? Generations of political scientists have furiously debated these questions – which gives a sense of how contested democracy is, as well as of the ability of academics to argue endlessly for the sake of it. Buried at the core of this debate is some consensus. The most famous – and for us useful – definition comes from Joseph Schumpeter, an Austrian, born in 1883 in what is now the Czech Republic.

Schumpeter was very sure of himself. His stated ambitions included being the greatest economist in the world, the best horse-man in Austria and the finest lover in Vienna. He claimed to have succeeded in two of these goals but was ambiguous about which. Schumpeter was rather clearer about how we should think about democracy. For Schumpeter, whatever else might be important about democracy, its core is acquiring 'the power to decide by means of a competitive struggle for the people's vote'.

This simple sentence has three big implications. First, 'the people's vote': the mass public is the final arbiter of who rules. Second, 'competitive struggle': there's no point in the public voting if there is only one option to vote for. And third, 'acquiring the right to decide': there's also no point in voting if the successful candidate can't actually do anything.

Notice there's nothing here that guarantees democracies get good politicians. But at least 'the people' will be able to throw them out if they're terrible. That doesn't sound brilliant, which explains Churchill's wry aphorism. But think about what happens if we violate any of these three maxims of democracy.

If we remove 'the people's vote', who has the right to decide?

Presumably some small elite – what Aristotle called an 'oligarchy'. Elites often have rather partial interests: wealthy people generally don't like being taxed or having ancient privileges removed. Moreover, without 'the people' as a whole being able to decide, whole groups are excluded or oppressed: women in Britain before 1918, African Americans in the US until 1965.

Of course, this raises the highly contested question of who 'the people' actually are. Some countries, such as Romania, allow all their citizens living abroad to vote; others, such as the UK, allow some immigrants to vote (those from the Commonwealth), but not others (EU citizens). Until quite recently, people under the age of twenty-one were deprived of the vote. Nonetheless, universal suffrage is something that (almost) all of us agree is crucial to 'democracy'.

How about if we remove the 'competitive struggle'? Well, then we end up with the kinds of mass elections where 99 per cent of people just so happen to vote for Saddam Hussein. When we look at leaders around the world winning supermajorities of the vote, most of us don't think 'wow, that leader is so popular, if only we too had a leader that 90 per cent of us wanted'. We tend, justifiably, to be more sceptical. And though people in democratic countries often complain that they have no real choice and that parties are a cartel, compared to a country like Russia, where elections are a foregone conclusion, these claims are exaggerations. People on the left in the United States often bemoan a perceived choice between a right-wing party and a centre party. But those two parties at least fight tooth and nail to win. They compete. They offer alternative solutions to common problems.

Finally, what if we remove 'the power to decide'? Many monarchies in nineteenth-century Europe kept ultimate power even as they permitted elections and legislatures. The nobility and the church often gave themselves a veto over elected politicians. The aristocrats of the House of Lords in Britain kept this right until 1911, using it to block taxation of their land. Kaiser Wilhelm in late nineteenth-century Germany was able to ignore the elected parliament – and, with his Chancellor, Otto von Bismarck, to prevent the threatening socialist movement from gaining power through elections. Even today, in countries such as Thailand and Morocco that have the ostensible

trappings of democracy – parties, legislatures, elections – monarchs retain the right to punish criticism, however meek.

So, at its core, democracy is about the people voting, competition among prospective leaders and elections actually mattering in terms of what policies get made. You might find this kind of definition too minimalist, but even once we have established the basics – free, fair and competitive elections to decide who rules – an enormous number of differences remain *among* democracies.

In particular, we might care about how well democracies protect individual rights and freedoms and thereby prevent elected majorities from overriding the interests of minorities. Guaranteed freedoms of speech, association and conscience; protection of property from arbitrary expropriation by the government; legal systems that can enforce these rules; and respect for long-standing norms in parliament – all of these are keystones of *liberal democracy*.

Liberal democracies are like a strengthened version of the kinds of electoral democracies that Schumpeter advocated. They are not simply ‘rule of the people’ – indeed, they often constrain ‘the people’ by preventing victorious parties from carrying out all their wishes. They chain up winners to make sure they don’t exploit losers. And they do so by creating or sustaining institutions that are not always themselves democratically elected – courts, ombudsmen, central banks, religious associations, newspapers, trade unions. They develop norms and procedures that prevent election-winners from shutting down legislatures or extending their time in office.

There is, then, a paradox at the heart of the liberal democracies that are home to most readers of this book. To escape the democracy trap, we have to tame democracy with institutions and norms that don’t just give the winners of elections what they want. Rule of the people can’t be entirely unconstrained. In fact, to make democracy work, we have to constrain it. These norms and institutions can help us prevent the chaos and polarization of the democracy trap and stop our politics from failing.

Democracy may be a popular idea, but does it actually produce good outcomes? Breathless journalistic accounts of China’s economic rise

have often had an implicit critique of liberal democracy – ‘Look at how an authoritarian state can build glistening new infrastructure without having to worry about following pettifogging rules.’ Similar stories have been told innumerable times – about Stalin’s industrialization of the Soviet Union, Brazil’s economic ‘miracle’ under military government in the 1960s, the ‘Asian Tigers’ of Taiwan and South Korea booming under authoritarian leadership in the 1980s.

But for every authoritarian boom there are several busts. And, save for the oil-rich Gulf states and perhaps contemporary China, almost all wealthy countries today are democracies. Economic growth tends to be more sustainable in democracies because they can course-correct. In authoritarian countries, bureaucrats and local leaders may fear giving the ruling regime bad news, so they lie, misrepresent, or hide unhelpful information. The disastrous performance of the Russian army in the invasion of Ukraine arguably reflected an unwillingness of army leaders to accurately state their preparedness to Vladimir Putin. A similar pattern plays out in economic development. Amartya Sen has argued that democracies don’t suffer from famines because the press is able to warn of their impending arrival and leaders need to respond to their citizens.

Finally, democracies, ruled by the people, are more likely to legislate on behalf of the people. In particular, middle-income voters are likely to demand universal services and benefits. Democracies are incentivized to provide those policies because elections both force parties to make popular promises and hold them accountable if they fail to deliver. As an example, when countries democratize, they tend to spend around a third more on public education and to shift their focus from spending on universities that benefit the elite to primary education for the masses. Democracies also produce better human outcomes – they reduce infant mortality and raise literacy and immunization rates. Despite the challenges of the democracy trap, democracies are better able to provide for their citizens than their authoritarian rivals. It is no coincidence that the historical rise of democracy has produced an era of unprecedentedly high global living standards. Let’s now turn to that history.

*The history of democracy*

The history of democracy has been a history of the democracy trap. The stable liberal democracies that many of us live in today are survivors. They are those democracies that have the layers of institutions and long-standing norms of rule-following that fend off the democracy trap. Democracy may have originated in classical Athens but even here it did so only fleetingly. For centuries, rule of the people has been fragile, easily descending into chaos, demagoguery and ultimately tyranny. Stable, consolidated democracy is less than a century old.

Democracy's relative youth might be surprising. Folk wisdom often dates the origins of democracy to ancient Greece, or perhaps to the American Declaration of Independence, the French Revolution or Victorian Britain. But if we insist on Schumpeter's three maxims – the people's vote, competitive struggle and the right to decide – we discover that many famous examples of 'democracy' don't necessarily qualify.

Take Britain for example. Despite the former Prime Minister Boris Johnson's claim that Britain is the 'home of democracy', that home was constructed gradually, room by room. The signing of Magna Carta in 1215 placed limits on the power of the monarchy. But the winners of that agreement were the people who owned land in medieval England, not the far greater number of people who ploughed it. In England the right of the winners to 'decide' was only guaranteed when the hereditary House of Lords lost its power to block legislation in 1911. And it was only by 1928 that universal suffrage was expanded to place men and women on equal terms. Even then, business-owners got two votes – one for their home, one for their business – as did graduates of Oxford and Cambridge. This double-counting lasted all the way until 1950. On this measure Britain has only been a democracy for seventy-odd years.

We can tell a similar tale with another long-standing democracy: America. It is certainly the case that America had a wide electoral franchise following independence in 1776. But it applied only to free

men. Women were not enfranchised until the Nineteenth Amendment was ratified in 1920. And African Americans, despite the emancipation of slaves in 1865, were electorally oppressed, usually violently, until the Civil Rights Act a full century later.

Other countries with long histories of supposed democracy also failed to extend that beyond their male citizens. Until the twentieth century, women were banned from voting in every country save New Zealand. France introduced universal male suffrage initially, and briefly, in 1792 following the French Revolution, and again for good from the Second Republic of 1848; but France did not give women voting rights until a century later in 1945. Switzerland gave men the right to vote in 1848 but did not extend it to women until 1971, with the canton of Appenzell Innerrhoden holding out until 1990. Full Swiss democracy is as old as a typical millennial.

When we look at the granddaddy of them all, ancient Athenian democracy, we also see a murkier picture than the glossy image passed down through the ages. Democracy in Athens was highly participative, exhausting even. Around one tenth of the electorate met forty times a year in a citizens' assembly, and citizens were also selected by lot to serve on a daily agenda-setting council and on citizens' juries of 200–500 people. Clearly this kind of super-participative system would be hard to scale up – in today's America it would mean an assembly of around twenty-five million people. But it did mean that all citizens were fully engaged in every aspect of civic decision-making, and it has been extolled by people worried about an apathetic citizenry ever since.

However, this participation was possible only for a small subset of Athenian residents – male citizens. Women were entirely excluded. Slaves were also excluded. As were resident foreigners and indeed anyone without Athenian lineage. Athens could afford participative democracy because most of the work and commerce was being done by women and non-citizens. There is a striking parallel in early nineteenth-century America: the hyper-participative democracy lauded by Alexis de Tocqueville was one where only free white men were granted political rights. What's more, unconstrained Athenian democracy was both polarizing – it was Athenian citizens who sentenced Socrates to death

for 'corrupting the minds of the youth' – and unstable, collapsing into tyranny and oligarchy over the centuries.

So what we think of as modern democracy is younger than lore suggests. Standing back from individual examples, what does the overall trend of democracy look like? Political scientists often talk about three 'waves' of democracy. The first wave started with the shocks of the American and French Revolutions, continued with the more gradual extension of the franchise in the United Kingdom, and culminated in the widespread creation of democratic republics in Western Europe at the end of the First World War.

But waves, by their nature, crest then crash. In the 1920s and especially 1930s, fascist regimes overturned democracy in Germany, Italy and Spain, and Stalin deepened the authoritarian nature of Soviet Russia.

After this reversal, there was a second democratic wave in the post-Second World War era as Germany, Italy and a number of ex-colonies, notably India, democratized. This was again followed by a second reversal in the 1960s and 1970s as a number of Latin American and African countries tipped into military juntas or personal rule, from Pinochet in Chile to the Argentinian generals to Muammar Gaddafi, Mobutu Sese Soko and Idi Amin.

Finally, a third wave of democratization began with Portugal in 1974, accelerated with transitions in Spain, Greece, Argentina and Brazil through the 1980s, and exploded with the fall of the Soviet Union and the democratization of Eastern Europe in the early 1990s. This was the time of Francis Fukuyama's (oft-misunderstood) book *The End of History*, where he argued that the ideas of liberal democracy had won out over their rivals, possibly for good.

Those ideas are still powerful. But we've already seen that Schumpeter's electoral definition of democracy is not the same thing as 'liberal democracy'. Almost every country in the world now permits all adults to vote – only a few countries in the Middle East (the UAE, Saudi Arabia) restrict voting. But the sticking point is whether their vote matters. Since the turn of the twenty-first century, popular elections have continued to spread almost everywhere but the other institutions that make up democracy are under concerted attack.

Countries from Russia to Turkey to Venezuela have slid back into 'electoral authoritarianism' – elections take place, but they don't really decide anything. Even in countries such as Poland, where democratic elections remain free, fair and contested, other core parts of liberal democracy – the courts, the free press – are under pressure.

Democracy without supporting liberal institutions has often degenerated into aggressive populism. The Hungarian populist Prime Minister, Viktor Orbán, has explicitly argued he is creating an 'illiberal' democracy. One hundred years ago, this distinction would not have made sense – most countries that began granting the right to vote already had substantial legal protections for speech, association and so forth. But the past few decades have seen the rise of many democracies where such rights are not guaranteed and hence where the teeth of the democracy trap are at their sharpest.

We should be careful not to dismiss all electoral democracies – having the right to vote is preferable to no elections at all. But, as we will see, democracy without constraining liberal institutions can be both chaotic and polarized. Majority rule without limits is dangerous. What is to stop a rogue leader from ignoring elections that vote them out? Recall that in politics there is no third party we can call on to enforce our promises – so shouldn't this leader be able to close down any opposition? Such threats, after the 6 January 2021 insurrection in America, have become much realer to even citizens of wealthy democracies. It requires strong institutions to keep democracy alive.

Democracy is both ancient and modern. Some of the ideas about a true rule of the masses date to the classical era. But, around the world, actually existing democracy is not much older than the transistor radio. It has been a struggle of centuries to attain the right to rule ourselves, and the threat of backsliding is ever present. Even then, democracy is an imperfect system. Democracy doesn't guarantee that we actually get good politicians. Nevertheless, imperfect as it is, there are some obvious benefits to democracy too.

We get representation – if we want something, we have the right to vote for it and to stand for office to argue for it. This doesn't

guarantee politicians will look like us or think like us. Far from it. But if that genuinely concerns us we can step up and change it ourselves. Almost any voter in a democracy could be the leader of that democracy.

We get accountability – at least in theory. We can throw our politicians out when they do a bad job. We can punish their misdemeanours at the voting booth. And when parties produce manifestos, at the next election we can judge them on how well they lived up to their promises.

And, finally, we get self-government. We own our choices and decisions. Democracy allows us to correct our errors, to avoid bowing obediently to the choices of our ancestors. We are treated with respect by the political system, as citizens, not subjects. Democracy frees us to shape the world as we see fit. There's just one catch. Who are 'we'?

### 3. The Democracy Trap

If democracy is so desirable, why is it so hard to make democratic decisions? The problems with democracy stem from the fact that countries are not like individual people. They are, instead, groups of self-interested individuals. And the way we make our minds up individually does not translate cleanly into making clear collective decisions. In fact, our individual incentives to get what each of us wants may prevent us from coming to any agreement at all – our politics might fail completely. We get caught in the democracy trap: *there's no such thing as the 'will of the people'*.

A 'will of the people' only exists in the most banal case: when we all already agree. Democratic institutions such as different voting rules cannot conjure up a single, collective vision because they either fall prey to the strategic manipulation of self-interested voters or produce nonsensical answers. Think back to Brexit: MPs couldn't even agree on a voting system to make a decision because what had seemed a simple choice between Leave and Remain turned into a myriad different ways of Brexiting.

Once you have more than two choices, democratic voting can always produce chaos and indecision. But we don't always see chaos. That's because political parties can impose order, though only at the cost of ever-growing polarization. We make decisions but ones that might split the country in half, with festering resentment on both sides. That's where the Brexit debate left British party politics. The Conservative Party became a party of Leave, and Labour a party of Remain (even though both parties had been initially split), with politicians bemoaning bitter 'Remainers' or gloating 'Brexiteers'.

How can we make democratic politics succeed when we don't agree and avoid being bedevilled by chaos and polarization? To answer this question, we need to explore the democracy trap.