These days, the idea of democratic government is immensely popular among people all over the world. Substantial majorities of people in virtually every country believe that democracies make it possible for the preferences of informed citizens about their own self-interests and the collective good to become national policy.

Unfortunately, according to Christopher Achen, a professor of politics at Princeton University, and Larry Bartels, a professor of public policy at Vanderbilt University, democratic politics doesn’t often work that way. In “Democracy for Realists,” Achen and Bartels use sophisticated quantitative methods to demonstrate that in the United States (and, by implication, in other countries as well) most voters are neither interested in nor knowledgeable about politics — and don’t choose candidates based on policy preferences or ideology. Provocative, persuasive and unsettling, “Democracy for Realists” is a profoundly important — and timely — book.

When they cast their ballots, the authors reveal, voters are swayed by their feelings about recent events, including those not under the control of elected officials. In 1916, for example, shark attacks reduced President Woodrow Wilson’s votes in beach counties in New Jersey by about 10 percent. The authors estimate that in 2000, drought-induced “climatic retribution” cost Al Gore seven states — Arizona, Louisiana, Nevada, Florida, New Hampshire, Tennessee and Missouri. Most important, in election after election, voters focus only on economic growth (or stagnation) in the six months before they cast ballots, even though data for two quarters are not a sound way of assessing an incumbent’s performance.

Achen and Bartels agree with many of their fellow political scientists that the policy position of voters (including those who are well-educated and affluent) are influenced substantially by their ethnic, racial,
religious and gender identities. Group attachments, particularly loyalty to a political party, the authors’ point out, also shape voters’ perceptions of reality. Although the inflation rate under President Reagan fell from 13.5 percent in 1980 to 4.1 percent in 1988, more than half of Democrats claimed that it had gotten worse. Although the deficit under President Clinton fell from $255 billion in 1993 to $107 billion in 1996, more than half of Republicans said it had increased.

Convinced, with Winston Churchill, that democracy is better than anything else that has been tried, Achen and Bartels praise it for promoting authoritative, generally accepted agreement over who shall rule; preventing one party from becoming entrenched in power; providing incentives for rulers to tolerate dissent; emphasizing the benefits of citizenship for the development of character; and generating incentives for politicians to behave ethically.

Achen and Bartels insist, however, that “adherence to unrealistic ideas about democracy keeps us from seeing what a truer democracy would be like.” They do not believe that “the cure for the ills of democracy is more democracy.”

And they conclude with a warning: “the desire for a strong leader who can identify domestic enemies and who promises to do something about them without worrying overmuch about legalities, these germs … are latent in every democratic electorate,” waiting for suffering and anger “to provide conditions for their explosive spread.”

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