

THE BIG PICTURE

A THEORETICAL INTRODUCTION

Aspecter is haunting the United States—the specter of authoritarianism. While that force has long inhabited the realms of household and workplace, government-sponsored authoritarianism has grown over the course of my lifetime, a period when the country was supposedly becoming more democratic. Indeed, over the past fifty-plus years, a punitive, militarized, authoritarian mentality has increasingly animated federal policy, as evidenced by the “war on crime,” “the war on drugs,” “the war on terror,” and now the war on immigrants, all of which have bolstered police, prison, military, and surveillance apparatuses, and aggrandized the executive branch over the legislative.¹ This is a serious problem because authoritarianism is the polar opposite of democratic republicanism, the type of government we are supposed to have in the United States.

Most democracies do not die suddenly because of a dramatic coup d'état but rather erode over time, as ambitious powermongers gain control, and political elites either cannot stop them or choose appeasement, generally the latter.² I have worried about the coercive power of the state ever since I became politically active during the Reagan years. In the 1990s, I found the bipartisan support for rigid and unjust, “tough on crime” policies during the Clinton administration—like “three strikes, you’re out”—deeply troubling, but when the administration of George W. Bush started torturing people in the Middle East and few objected, I thought our republic had reached its nadir. Then President Obama refused to hold the perpetrators accountable and actually continued, and in some cases expanded, the coercive power of the state, and my dismay increased even more.

Subsequently, under the presidency of Donald Trump, the authoritarian threat grew stronger and spread wider. For example, while the Obama administration has been widely condemned for deporting over three million undocumented people, it targeted those convicted of serious crimes and new arrivals. Trump, in contrast, aspired to remove all undocumented immigrants, regardless of any mitigating circumstances, and pursued that goal in a way designed to sow terror in Latinx communities, all over the country. That is, he sent heavily armed Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) agents deep into communities—searching for people even at sensitive locations, like courthouses, schools, and hospitals—to arrest anyone without papers, including those who have lived in the US for decades and have committed no crimes, and then held them in detention camps with inhumane conditions, while they awaited deportation.³ Meanwhile, down at the border, the Trump administration started snatching little children from the arms of their asylum-seeking parents and keeping them in cages, in an attempt to deter border-crossing, even though they knew many families would never be reunited—a gross violation of human rights. While many people protested in outrage, nearly half of US citizens approved of Trump’s anti-immigrant agenda, apparently having no problem with the blatant exercise of arbitrary power by agents of their so-called democratic government.⁴

In the last year of his term, Trump started using blatantly authoritarian tactics against his own citizens, during the Black Lives Matter protests held after the videotaped murder of George Floyd by a white police officer. While the mistreatment of undocumented people is unacceptable in my view, Trump’s attacks on US citizens constitutes an escalating level of authoritarianism. In *How Democracies Die*, Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt present “a set of four behavioral warning signs that can help us know an authoritarian when we see one. We should worry when a politician” denies the legitimacy of his opponents, infringes on their civil liberties, tolerates or encourages the use of violence by his supporters, or rejects the rules of the democratic game.⁵ Trump has repeatedly done all those things. For example, on the last day of May 2020 his attorney general ordered National Guard troops to tear-gas a multiracial group of US citizens who were simply exercising their constitutionally protected right to peacefully protest and not breaking any laws. The soldiers used flash grenades, rubber bullets, and low-flying Blackhawk helicopters—war-zone style—to clear Lafayette Square, so the president could walk to a nearby church and pose for a photograph, holding a Bible like a plaque at an awards banquet. Before the photo op, Trump explicitly expressed the

desire to “dominate” the streets, threatened to use the “heavily armed” US military against his own people in cities around the country and called for violence and long prison sentences as “retribution” against protesters, whom he called “terrorists.”⁶ And while this behavior—a “fascist performance,” according to Masha Gessen⁷—elicited widespread pushback from military leaders and many others, 41 percent of Republicans said they approved of Trump’s tactics in a poll conducted several days after the Lafayette Square offensive.⁸

Then, in July, the Trump administration did something I never thought I would see in the United States, when he ordered unidentifiable federal agents—a secret police—to abduct protesters from the streets of Portland, Oregon, pull them into unmarked vans, and hold them without charges.⁹ Also in Portland, US Marshalls extrajudicially executed an anti-fascist protester, who supposedly killed a right-wing extremist, and Trump praised them for it. “We sent in the US Marshalls,” Trump said. “They knew who he was; they didn’t want to arrest him; and in 15 minutes that ended” with his death.¹⁰ In light of these attacks on the civil liberties and legitimacy of his political opponents and the use of violence to retaliate against them, a September poll found that 86 percent of Republicans in Oregon approved of Trump’s response to the Portland protesters, although the majority of voters overall disapproved.¹¹

When the 2020 presidential election finally arrived, Joe Biden won by seven million votes, yet seventy-four million people still voted for Trump, the second highest in US history. Indeed, if Trump had not bungled the coronavirus pandemic so badly, and consequently tanked the economy, he likely would have won. After his multiple attempts at voter suppression failed, Trump took his authoritarianism to the next level by refusing to accept the outcome of the democratic election, denying the legitimacy of the incoming president, interfering with the peaceful transfer of power, and encouraging a violent insurrection at the Capitol that has been exposed as a failed attempt at a coup. While this unprecedented attack on US democracy resulted in a wide range of consequences for Trump and created some dissension within his party, 87 percent of Republicans continue to support him.¹² Who knows the ways in which the right-wing attacks on our democracy will continue to unfold after the Trump years or the number of people who will continue to support him?

Authoritarianism has become a very real threat to our democratic republic. This book focuses however, not primarily on governing elites and the right-wing agenda, but rather on our country’s overall political culture and the surprising susceptibility of Democrats to authoritarian

tactics. When I entered the realm of Democratic Party politics in 2011, after twenty years in the college classroom teaching political theory at a variety of levels and working with the national civic engagement movement and deliberative democracy community, I had a lot of ideas about the ways that democracy should operate, and although I knew that politics-as-usual did not operate according to those ideals, I had no idea about the extent of the crisis in which we now find ourselves. I had long understood the disconnection between citizens and government and wondered if government in the United States really had the consent of the people, a necessary prerequisite for legitimacy. I knew that the government did a lot of terrible things in our name, and that the term *corporate oligarchy* better describes the system of government in the United States than does *democracy* or *republic*.

Yet I also thought the problem rested largely with elites, with our elected officials who care more about their donors and career trajectories than the public good. I expected that everyday people, especially Democrats and self-proclaimed progressives, would have internalized a commitment to democratic values from having lived in a place that many proclaim to be the greatest democracy in the world, and I trusted that the Democratic Party (DP), unlike the “Grand Old Party” of the Republicans (GOP), supported an engaged citizenry, democratic practices, free and open public discourse, and the accountability of elected representatives to the people.

When I stepped into the arena of electoral politics, however, I discovered that things are worse than I thought. Not only do we not have a democratic government, but we have only the thinnest of democratic cultures in our society, even within the Democratic Party itself. Having spent eight years occupying various leadership positions within the party in two very different states—district party chair, candidate for state senate, county executive committee member, precinct captain, steering committee member, state convention delegate, local progressive caucus president, and member of the statewide progressive caucus board—and lobbying Democrats in the state legislature, I have learned that not only does the Democratic Party serve the interests of big donors and the professional class, much more than working or even middle-class people, but Democratic Party operatives and representatives often seem more concerned about shoring up their own power, squashing dissent, and demanding that people fall in line than engaging everyday people or fighting for economic justice for all.¹³ We need a strong party, committed to democratic values and practices, that can articulate a vision that mobilizes the people to fight for progressive change, but we do not have one.

Nor do we have the democratic culture needed to undergird the republican institutions that allow us to govern ourselves. As the specter of authoritarianism threatens our republic, the people of the United States stand at a crossroads. As we look to the left, we can see that our deteriorating quality of life is spurring demands for transformative change, as exemplified by the rise of democratic socialism with calls for single-payer health care, higher wages, paid sick leave, a green jobs program, free college tuition, student loan forgiveness, and guaranteed housing, as well as the widespread, multiracial uprising against racist policing and mass incarceration that mobilized in the wake of George Floyd's murder by a white police officer in 2020. On the right-hand side, however, we see quasi-fascist, white supremacist forces strengthening, with people blaming societal problems on minorities and foreigners, resorting to violence and threats, and putting their faith in a demagogic leader who actually proclaimed, "I am the only one who can make America truly great again!"¹⁴ Instead of greatness, however, Trump's reign yielded increasing attacks on republican institutions and democratic norms and fed polarization to the point where Democrats are talking about democracy's death and Republicans about civil war.

In order to move forward in a positive direction, we need a revolutionary party that will address the deteriorating economic situation that makes people amenable to authoritarianism and articulate a vision that mobilizes the people to fight for progressive change. Back in the 1930s, when democracy previously came face to face with its possible demise, Antonio Gramsci, writing from Mussolini's prison, called the people's revolutionary party "The Modern Prince," a mysterious term that allowed him to evade censorship. In this book, I reconnect with Gramsci's vision of a revolutionary party, but I call it the Modern Prince Collective to emphasize the necessary plurality of that entity. Like Gramsci, I argue that building support for a party that truly represents the people will require consciousness-raising to help people see the ways in which the ruling class perpetuates its power culturally and possibilities for transformation.

DEFINING OUR TERMS

Before moving forward with my argument, I want to clarify some of the terms I use in the book. During the "Age of Democratic Revolution" in the so-called long eighteenth century (1788–1815), US founders drew on both civic republicanism and Lockean liberalism in articulating our country's

public philosophy.¹⁵ Over time, the less democratic, more individualistic discourse of liberalism became dominant. Indeed, at this point, most politicians in the United States are actually liberals in the philosophical sense, in that they derive their underlying assumptions from the tradition that began with John Locke, who saw people as atomistic individuals, driven by self-interest and possessive of rights, including the right to private property; who viewed the market economy as natural and desirable; and who wanted only limited government that could act as an umpire for competing interests, governing via the rule of law, applied impartially to all.¹⁶ While many in the general public think only Democrats are liberals and Republicans are conservatives, in the philosophical sense, both parties draw on the tradition of liberal individualism, as do libertarians. This can be confusing, so in order to distinguish between the so-called “tax and spend” liberals in the Democratic party and the philosophical liberals in the Republican Party, political theorists started using the term *neoliberal* to refer to those who favor a deregulated market economy and minimal government, as opposed to those who wanted to use the government to create equal opportunity so that all individuals can compete fairly.

Over time, *neoliberal* seems to have replaced *liberal* in popular discourse with some critics calling anyone who supports a market mechanism neoliberal, even left-leaning reformers like Elizabeth Warren. While this may work for those interested in blasting Warren from the left, I do not find it helpful to collapse ideological categories like that. Warren stands to the left of liberal centrists, such as Hillary Clinton and Nancy Pelosi, even if she sometimes waffles or panders, and Clinton and Pelosi stand to the left of people like Mitt Romney and Paul Ryan, who are neoliberals in the original sense. Painting everyone with the brush of neoliberalism obscures important differences.

The Democratic Party includes people who hold a range of positions, including the neoliberal “blue dogs,” who resemble the liberal Republicans of yore, and liberal centrists, who favor social equality but staunchly defend capitalism, like Pelosi and Clinton, as well as Barack Obama and Joe Biden (also known as “establishment Dems”), as well as left-leaning liberals, like Elizabeth Warren, who supports highly regulated, welfare-state capitalism, and democratic socialists, like Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (AOC) and Rashida Tlaib, who reject the underlying assumptions of liberalism.¹⁷ That is why AOC correctly commented, “In any other country, Joe Biden and I would not be in the same party.”¹⁸ In other words, the Democratic Party has no overarching ideology. Indeed, some say it is just a conglomeration of interest groups.¹⁹

The term *progressive* is equally confusing. These days it seems that everyone in the Democratic Party claims the “progressive” label, even people like Pelosi, who refuses to support single-payer Medicare for All or the Green New Deal, which she dismisses as “the Green Dream or whatever they call it.”²⁰ When it comes to defining “progressive,” people draw the line in different places, and in my experience, many use the term as a euphemism for pro-gay, but to me it must include support for economic justice, as well as a commitment to social equality in terms of gender, race, sexual orientation, gender identity, and ability. In other words, in my view, left-leaning liberals are progressive, but centrist neoliberals are not.

When I use the term *progressive* in this book, it functions as an umbrella term that includes both left-leaning liberals, like Elizabeth Warren, and democratic socialists, like Bernie Sanders. I do not love the term progressive because of its squishiness, but it is hard to avoid, especially with the DP in the process of splitting into centrist versus progressive camps. When I talk about advancing the “progressive agenda,” I refer to issues that could unite left-leaning liberals and democratic socialists. That type of coalition makes sense because ideologies are best understood as existing on a continuum, so a sharp break does not necessarily exist between left-leaning liberalism and democratic socialism, at least when it comes to policies.

The term *republic* is also misunderstood. The modern tradition of republicanism began with Niccolò Machiavelli, author of *The Prince*, whom Gramsci references with the term “Modern Prince.”²¹ Best known as the quintessential theorist of power, Machiavelli is often depicted as a malevolent figure. In actuality, however, he spent his life advocating republicanism, a democratic form of self-rule that stands in opposition to authoritarianism, royalist or otherwise, and is defined by a commitment to both popular sovereignty and the rule of law.²² Machiavelli’s views were fundamentally “democratic and anti-elitist.”²³ He wanted the people to make laws for themselves in popular assemblies and have the arms needed to defend themselves against ambitious, wannabe tyrants.²⁴

Machiavelli served for many years in the government of the Florentine republic. When the Medici family overthrew the republic in 1512 and reestablished monarchy, they told Machiavelli, “You’re fired,” locked him up, and tortured him for weeks for being an enemy of their royalist regime. Released from prison but shut out of power, Machiavelli focused on writing texts and engaging intellectually with political friends. It was during this period that he wrote his most famous book, *The Prince*, about methods of gaining and maintaining power. While on the surface *The*

Prince appears to advocate monarchy, to the contrary, as many scholars have argued, the volume actually offers instructions that, if followed, would lead to the establishment of a republic.²⁵ The volume instructs the Prince to arm the common people, whom Machiavelli considers more honest, decent, and just than elites, and crush the ambitions of self-styled nobles who seek to aggrandize themselves, their families, and their cronies.²⁶

Living under sixteenth-century feudalism, Machiavelli looked to a wise, individual Prince to represent the collective will of the people as the leader of a unified state. In the more democratic twentieth-century, Gramsci did not want a singular ruler to unify the people; instead, he looked to a revolutionary party to organize and express the collective will of the people and enact cultural and economic reforms, an entity he identified as the “Modern Prince.”²⁷ Today in the twenty-first century, as We the People hopefully approach the end of four decades of neoliberal hegemony, we too need a mass party to unify and fight for the well-being of the 99% against the tyranny of the 1%. As stated earlier, I call that new party the Modern Prince Collective—a term meant to invoke both popular sovereignty and collective action. Indeed, to begin a new, more humane era, we must move away from the rule of largely unaccountable elites—one-percenters, career politicians, and other powermongers—and toward a more democratic vision of collaborative rule, historically embodied in the concept of a republic.

When I use the term *republic* throughout this book, I define it as it has been defined throughout most of history, as a democratic form of government, characterized by popular sovereignty, political and economic equality, the rule of law, and freedom from arbitrary power.²⁸ While the membership category of citizen within traditional republican political theory excluded women, the ideals articulated could, I have argued elsewhere, become gender inclusive.²⁹ In any event, the long-standing historic definition of republicanism entails a much more robust vision of self-rule—strong democracy—than the reductionist definition proffered by James Madison in Federalist 10, where he calls it “a government in which the scheme of representation takes place” with a “small number of citizens elected by the rest” to govern in their place.³⁰

Because the United States was founded as a republic, defined by Madison in reductionist terms, some people in the general public like to assert that “the United States is a republic not a democracy,” as if that claim somehow wipes away any appeals to democratic principles. It does not for two reasons. First, in their origins, *democracy* and *republic* were

simply Greek and Roman words for the same thing: popular government—the people rule (*demos + kratos*) and public thing (*res publica*).³¹ Second, even if the term *republic* did mean representative government, that would still be a form of democracy. Indeed, even according to Madison's view, representatives are not supposed to rule in the interest of just themselves, their party, or their donors. He claims representatives will “refine and enlarge the *public views*” and create a “*public voice*” that is “consonant to the *public good*”—and the public ostensibly includes everyone. Representatives of the public must “discern the true interest of *their country*.”³² And since they are elected, they will be held accountable to the people, which means democracy. Consequently, the United States is a republic and also a democracy. Either term is correct, and I use both in this book.

Third, in using the term *republic* and focusing on the United States, I do not mean to condone nationalism. To the contrary, I hope for the emergence of an international federation of constitutional republics, living together in harmony, each a free society, governed democratically within the bounds of the rule of law. Because this vision allows people to govern themselves, a variety of cultures can flourish within this framework. I focus on the “American republic” only because that is where I live and have been politically active, not because I consider it an exceptional beacon for the world.

OUR “MACHIAVELLIAN MOMENT”

Machiavelli, having lived through the destruction of a republic by the return of royalist authoritarianism, knew that a republic, once established, must be carefully protected, lest it deteriorate over time. Contemporary political theorist J. G. A. Pocock argues that every republic ends up facing what he calls the “Machiavellian moment,” when it has to figure out strategies to maintain itself as time passes, civic practices weaken, and founding ideals recede in memory.³³

Today, in the United States, we face our own Machiavellian moment. That is to say, many of the important republican ideals articulated at the founding, albeit in embryonic form, have begun to erode. While not fully implemented because of slavery, white supremacy, and male dominance, in their universalized and idealized form, those revolutionary republican claims include respect for the human dignity and equality of all people, an inclusive popular sovereignty, and protection from arbitrary power in

multiple spheres. While those principles were never fully realized in the US context, today they face erosion by the perennial allure of hierarchy, domination, and cruelty, which threaten the future of republican self-rule.

At the close of the Constitutional Convention in 1787, a woman approached Benjamin Franklin and asked, “Well, Doctor, what have we got—a Republic or a Monarchy?” Franklin famously replied, “A Republic, if you can keep it.”³⁴ With that comment, Franklin suggested that many forces pose a threat to the ongoing ability of people to govern themselves for the common good through the rule of law. Coming from monarchical societies, the Founders feared the continuation of royalist thinking, the reestablishment of powerful familial dynasties, feudalist hierarchy, and habits of deference in their new world, and they implemented a number of institutional safeguards to prevent that from happening. While, theoretically, giving the people sovereignty provides the primary safeguard, the Founders also created a divided government that protects liberty by pitting ambitious actors against each other to constrain their power. To quote Madison again, “Ambition must be made to counter ambition.”³⁵ So, for example, in theory members of Congress would never yield their constitutional control over declarations of war to the president, give up their authority to hold him accountable through impeachment, or defer to him in terms of the legislation they pass; members of Congress would jealously guard their own power and prerogatives.

Liberty requires constraints on arbitrary power, but in the contemporary era, will traditional methods still work? The election of Trump made visible the specter of authoritarianism once again. He seems to consider himself above the law, like a king or prince. Will our system of checks and balances effectively constrain him? Will civilian control of the military prevent dictatorship? Do people still have in their hearts a commitment to the democratic values that make a free, self-governing society possible? Did they ever?

A cultural commitment to democratic values is key for a republic’s continuation over time. During the Age of Democratic Revolution, republican theorist Jean-Jacques Rousseau argued that constitutional, civil, and criminal law must be supplemented by a “fourth” type of law, “the most important of all” that “is graven not in marble or in bronze, but, in the hearts of the Citizens; which is the State’s genuine constitution; which daily gathers new force; which, when the other laws age or die out, revives or replaces them, and imperceptibly substitutes the force of habit for that of authority. I speak of morals, customs, and above all

opinion.”³⁶ He believed that engagement in civic practices would instill democratic values, in people’s hearts, which is the reason he emphasized participatory citizenship.³⁷

As fascism rose within democratic societies in the 1930s, Gramsci also emphasized the important role culture plays in undergirding political power, and the need for cultural change to precede political change. That is to say, Gramsci emphasized that the ruling class maintains its power not predominantly through violence and force but by disseminating its cultural values throughout society, so that everyday people accept them as common sense, as inevitable, a force he calls *hegemony*. Gramsci scholar Carl Boggs explains it this way: “By *hegemony*, Gramsci meant the permeation throughout civil society—including a whole range of structures and activities like trade unions, schools, the churches, and the family—of an entire system of values, attitudes, beliefs, morality, etc. that is in one way or another supportive of the established order and the class interests that dominate it. . . . To the extent that this prevailing consciousness is internalized by the broad masses, it becomes part of ‘common sense.’”³⁸

This raises the questions, asked by scholar Terry Eagleton: “How is the working class to take power in a social formation where the dominant power is subtly, pervasively diffused throughout habitual daily practices, intimately interwoven with ‘culture’ itself, inscribed in the very texture of our experience from nursery school to funeral parlour? How do we combat a power which has become the ‘common sense’ of a whole social order?”³⁹ Gramsci’s framework suggests that given the reality of ruling class hegemony, left organizing must focus first on the “realm of values and customs, speech habits and ritual practices,” before we can make significant political change.⁴⁰

Gramsci believes that before revolutionaries can take power, they must work to change people’s consciousness—their hearts and minds. This contrasts with his revolutionary predecessor Vladimir Lenin’s view that revolutionaries should seize political power first and then work on legitimation. Lenin’s position made sense in the context of Czarist Russia where common people did not support the state or the political system. In the United States, however, left activists have to deal with the problem of everyday people thinking our neoliberal, capitalist, oligarchic regime is natural, inevitable, righteous, or at least more desirable than the socialist alternative.

Gramsci emphasizes that if the consciousness of people does not change, then new revolutionary leaders will simply rule over people who have a mentality suitable to the previous regime and over time that will pull

society back to the way it was. For example, progressives gaining control in the world of power politics that currently exists in the United States and elsewhere will not lead to radical change because people will continue to be either ambitious powermongers or deferential minions, which still leaves society susceptible to the forces of royalism—or fascism. That is not a foundation upon which a democratic socialist society can firmly stand.

I have learned from my experiences in the realm of US party politics that we need cultural change in this country. People in general do not appear to have a gut-level understanding of and allegiance to democratic values, nor do they clearly oppose authoritarianism. Perhaps this should come as no surprise. Throughout its history, the United States has been fractured by an important rhetorical commitment to equality and popular sovereignty intertwined with deep-rooted practices that perpetuate unjust systems of racial and gender oppression, as well as a capitalist economic system in which the wealth produced by the many becomes the private property of the few. While we loudly tout our democratic bona fides—even taking it upon ourselves to “democratize” other countries with guns and bombs—we actually live in a “bully nation,” in which democratic practices are not the norm in our homes, schools, or workplaces.⁴¹ Moreover, few opportunities exist in communities for people to become accustomed to participating in democratic self-rule, beyond simply voting—and many do not even do that. Since practices cultivate habits and beliefs, the generalized lack of commitment to democratic values makes sense.

I am far from unaware of the massive injustices that exist in the world, yet I find myself continually shocked anew when faced with cruelty and injustice. During the Bush-Cheney years, I marveled in horror at the lack of outrage over our government’s use of torture at Abu Ghraib and other black sites, a true hallmark of authoritarianism. Being raised with the Cold War narrative that the United States of America respects human rights and the rule of law, I could not understand it when people not only failed to get upset but actually seemed to endorse, even enjoy, the torture and degradation of other human beings. I have had a similar reaction to the police killings of unarmed Black men and women, to the cruelties meted out daily in our prisons, and to the wide range of atrocities perpetrated by Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), particularly the roundups, deportations, family separations, kids in cages, and concentration camps at the border.⁴²

I have come to believe that tribalism, cruelty, and authoritarianism do not need to be explained. Sadly, they seem to be the default position of

humankind. The values that need to be explained are respect for human rights, due process, and democratic self-rule. Democracy is a fragile achievement that requires the creation of a democratic culture as its underpinning and opportunities for people to develop democratic virtues, such as caring about the public good, critical thinking, truth-telling, and *democratic courage*, which I define as the willingness to stand up to power in defense of democratic values. This definition of democratic courage adds to the four types of courage articulated by Richard Avramenko. He talks about martial courage, based on the willingness to risk one's life; political courage that values the use of reason in the political realm; moral courage that fosters autonomy; and economic courage connected to self-interest rightly understood.⁴³ My invocation of courage does not track directly onto any of these conceptions. As a child, I was taught by my Christian parents to have moral courage, which involves an allegiance to "goodness—correctness—of character and behavior that arises from the conscience," so that I could strive to be autonomously righteous in an earthly world riddled with sin.⁴⁴ The concept of *democratic courage* I advocate in this text is not that, nor is it reducible to the battle of ideas in the realm of reason. I define *democratic courage* as the willingness to stand up to power—in terms of both systems and individuals—in defense of democratic values.

OUR ANTI-CIVIC CULTURE

As noted, the importance of democratic culture has long been of concern to scholars of politics. In 1963, Gabriel Almond and Sidney Verba published the now-classic study *The Civic Culture*, in which they wondered whether democracy would be able to spread worldwide. "The democratic state offers the ordinary man the opportunity to take part in the political decision-making process as an influential citizen," they write. "If the democratic model of the participatory state is to develop in these new nations, it will require more than the formal institutions of democracy—universal suffrage, the political party, the elective legislature. These in fact are also part of the totalitarian participation pattern, in a formal if not functional sense. A democratic form of participatory political system requires as well a political culture consistent with it."⁴⁵

Norms and attitudes matter for democracy, they argue, but they surprisingly eschew the participatory values I view as essential to a healthy democracy. Instead, they stress the importance of citizens having

only a passive allegiance to that which they call the “myth of democratic citizenship.” That is to say, the civic culture works best, they argue, when the citizen maintains the mere “perception that he can be an influential citizen” but chooses not to engage.⁴⁶ This allows space for elites to govern. “A citizen within the civic culture has, then, a reserve of influence. He is not constantly involved in politics, nor does he actively oversee the behavior of political decision makers. But he does have the potential to act if there is need.”⁴⁷ Or, at least he thinks he does. “That politics has relatively little importance for citizens is an important part of the mechanism by which the set of inconsistent political orientations keeps political elites in check without checking them so tightly as to make them ineffective.”⁴⁸

Since the publication of *The Civic Culture*, some scholars believe citizens have transitioned from passive to active; however, in my experience the myth of democratic citizenship is alive and well.⁴⁹ We know most citizens do not get involved, and only around half usually vote in presidential elections, yet many people seem to believe that individuals really could rise up and take control, if they chose to do so. For example, in his farewell address to the American public, President Obama said, “Ultimately, . . . our democracy . . . needs you. . . . If something needs fixing, lace up your shoes and do some organizing. If you’re disappointed by your elected officials, grab a clipboard, get some signatures, and run for office yourself.”⁵⁰ State and party will yield, if only people get involved, Obama suggests.

He makes it sound so easy. His democratic optimism remains undaunted by revelations that Democratic Party insiders worked to sabotage the 2016 campaign of Bernie Sanders, who dared to run in the primary against the establishment-selected candidate; by the party’s attempts to blacklist individuals and organizations that support progressive challenges in primaries, even in safe Democratic districts or where there is no Democratic incumbent; by arguments about the power of billionaires and the military-industrial-intelligence complex to influence policy-making; or by the barriers to fair elections posed by gerrymandering and voter suppression.⁵¹ While I respect Obama’s desire to stimulate civic engagement, making change is not as simple as “Hey! ‘Grab a clipboard . . . and run for office.’” A lot of impediments exist, including some from within the Democratic Party itself.

Many of my Facebook friends believe that voting and running for office are the most effective ways to make change, possibly even the only way. Sometimes it seems like their response to every issue is, “Vote!” For

example, on the heels of President Trump's illegal and unconstitutional assassination of Iranian major general Qasem Soleimani in January 2020, I posted about the importance of mobilizing an antiwar movement to prevent further escalation, and an online friend suggested that I volunteer to do voter registration for the Democratic Party. Given that the Democratic Party has been generally complicit with militarization and war-making, I failed to grasp the logic of his post.

Many of my Facebook friends aspire to energize people to get more involved, and they want to take over the Democratic Party from the left. Others, however, hold an extremely unrealistic view of individual efficacy, illustrating the "myth of democratic citizenship." For example, when I criticized the superdelegate system during the Democratic primary in 2016 for rigging the system against Bernie Sanders, an academic friend posted on my Facebook page: "Claire, I hope you are going to the convention and will be leading the argument for this kind of structural change within the party rules! You would be a great advocate for taking the party in a new direction!" I found this comment stunningly naïve, especially coming from someone with a PhD in political science. Even if I had still been a local Democratic Party chair and had successfully won the competitive election for one of the few delegate slots, I would not have been allowed to grab the mic at the DNC convention and argue for structural change. It just doesn't work that way. The event is highly scripted and controlled by elites.

While never that naïve, I used to believe that people really could make change, if they just got more involved. Indeed, I spent my entire academic career encouraging students to get involved and writing books and articles about civic participation and democratic practices. Then I entered the realm of electoral politics myself. I could maintain optimism while operating in the realm of theory. In the realm of practice, however, I came face to face with the grim reality of power politics—a realm in which We the People are sidelined and have no party to advocate for us. Yet the hegemonic belief that people could make change, if they really wanted to, functions to keep people invested in a system that disenfranchises them, serving the interests of wealthy donors rather than everyday people.

My currently critical view derives largely from my experiences working inside the Democratic Party in both blue state Delaware and red state Florida. When I combine my experiential learning with what I know from reading on political theory, politics, and history, I no longer have an optimistic view about the ability of everyday people to make change by running for office or working to move the Democratic Party to the left.

Yet it's hard to abandon the idea of working for change inside the party because the DP is often the only game in town.⁵² On the other hand, perhaps an alternative might emerge in the future, given the emergence of a visible socialist movement in the United States that can exert pressure from outside the party.

CHAPTER SUMMARIES

This autoethnographic political memoir mines my personal experiences in electoral and social movement politics for lessons on the condition of US politics and culture and combines that knowledge with insights gleaned from reading and observation.⁵³ While my particular experiences occurred in particular places with particular people, I have found from sharing my stories with folks all over the country that the types of incidents I experienced are far from unique. Consequently, this book is not about blue state Delaware or red state Florida in particular, but about US politics in general.

This memoir uses personal experiences to illustrate the book's larger argument about the state of "our democracy," as well as to tell a hopefully interesting personal story. I have chosen to use archetypal nicknames for some individuals featured in my stories, particularly those I cast in a negative light, because their identities are irrelevant to the points I am making in this book. People close to the drama will know who the characters are, and their identities are discoverable, but for most readers the inclusion of their names would add nothing to their understanding of the book's argument, so why call out the bad actors by name? In fact, using their names would make the stories sound more idiosyncratic than I believe they are. In other words, it is my contention that the incidents I experienced speak to larger political and cultural dynamics and so could have unfolded with different individuals playing those same roles.

In addition, I focus solely on the problems of the Democratic Party in this book because I have no direct experience of Republican Party dynamics. I expect, however, that some of my criticisms of authoritarian tendencies within the DP would resonate with Republicans as well. Indeed, given that Republicans often explicitly support authoritarianism, internal party dynamics might be even worse.

The first two chapters of this book overview my experiences before moving to Delaware and getting involved with the Democratic Party.

Chapter 1 begins with the political situation in the year of my birth and tells a personal and a political story simultaneously. I share the process by which I became an activist as a young person, my embrace of feminism during college, and my activist experiences in the 1980s. Chapter 2 overviews the work I did as a professional political theorist at universities, both inside and outside the classroom. I explain the robust understanding of democracy and socialism I acquired during graduate school, my attempt to contest hegemonic beliefs held by my students, and my efforts to provide civic education to prepare them for active participation in democracy. I also discuss some gender-based challenges I encountered as I attempted to segue my career into higher education administration, before leaving the academy altogether.

The subsequent four chapters recount my experiences with the Democratic Party. Chapter 3 tells the story of running for the Delaware State Senate in 2014, trying to actualize some of the principles I learned from decades of work on democratic theory and practice. Chapter 4 analyzes the campaign with hindsight. As it turns out, during the actual campaign, I could not see the extent to which it was a pre-Trump year, and I also failed to recognize the good ole boy culture that enveloped me and would produce a Trump win two years later. Chapter 5 builds on my discussion of good ole boy culture to make that case that we face a “Machiavellian moment” right now in the United States: The habits of deference people have developed over time now threaten to recreate the royalist mindset that the Age of Democratic Revolution wanted to annihilate. Chapter 6 exposes the quasi-authoritarian culture that exists within the Democratic Party and the barriers to left-wing politics posed by party leaders.

The book concludes with some lessons learned from my experiences in the field. I titled this book *Battling the Prince* because that phrase references three sets of problems that need to be addressed. First, battling the prince means waging war on all the little Prince wannabes in our democratic republic who feel entitled to rule over us with unaccountable power, the bullies who expect deference in the political world, from Trump on down to the local level. Second, battling the prince also refers to the metaphorical Prince inside our heads, the royalist mindset that can develop in any of us who want to make our lives easier by simply deferring to power. Rousseau said we are “born free” yet are “everywhere . . . in chains.”⁵⁴ Part of that enchainment comes from societal power structures, but some comes from within ourselves. We need both raised consciousness—“wokeness” in today’s parlance—and democratic courage to win

that battle. Finally, battling the prince refers to my vision of making sure the 1% is battling the Modern Prince Collective. In waging that war, we must remember that we have “nothing to lose” but our “chains,” and we have “a world to win.”⁵⁵