

# The Academy of Political Science

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## *POLITICAL SCIENCE QUARTERLY*

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Volume 120 · Number 1 · Spring 2005

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*Political Science Quarterly*

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**Ordinary People in Extraordinary Times: The Citizenry and the Breakdown of Democracy** by Nancy Bermeo. Princeton, NJ, Princeton University Press, 2003. 272 pp. Cloth, \$60.00; paper, \$19.95.

This impressive and engaging book tackles important theoretical questions related to the breakdown of democracy. As her title indicates, Nancy Bermeo chooses to focus on “ordinary people,” and she delivers a careful empirical assessment of their role in times of democratic crisis. Her work provides a firm foundation for reshaping the debate about the causes of democratic breakdown.

Bermeo builds her argument and explanation on two main criticisms of the existing social science literature on the collapse of democracy. First, she points out that “the spotlight has fallen most often on political elites” (p. 3), with the result that we remain in the dark about the role of ordinary people during the extraordinary times of democratic crisis. Second, she claims that the “common wisdom” account of democratic breakdown places blame on ordinary people, who are viewed as abandoning democracy and turning to various nondemocratic extremes. In other words, even though ordinary people have not been the object of much empirical scrutiny, they are said to figure prominently, and negatively, in the conventional explanation for the collapse of democracy (p. 63).

Bermeo seeks to rectify both of these shortcomings by showing that most ordinary people have remained loyal democrats, even in times of democratic upheaval, and that it was actually political and military *elites* who were responsible for the decisions that led to the destruction of fragile democratic institutions. In that sense, by overturning the mistaken understanding about the responsibility of ordinary people, Bermeo’s findings indirectly justify restoring the “spotlight” to the elite level.

The book’s first chapter consists of a theoretical synthesis of various debates connected to the “literature on democracy” (p. 7). With conceptual and stylistic ease, Bermeo weaves together a nuanced and insightful discussion of civil society, ordinary citizens, and political parties. She also introduces the crucial conceptual distinction between “the highly visible polarization of civic groups in public spaces and the less visible polarization of opinion expressed in elections and in polls” (p. 20). The rest of the book goes on to show that the latter type of polarization is much less typical than is commonly believed, whereas the former has usually been decisive.

The empirical portions of the book incorporate a broad and rich cross-regional and cross-temporal analytic perspective. The second chapter sweeps through thirteen cases of interwar democratic breakdown, highlighting the mechanisms by which fragile institutions failed to meet the domestic and international challenges they faced. And although the presentation of each of these cases may seem a bit repetitive at times, the evidence appears overwhelming: in every case—including the frequently cited case of Weimar Germany—Bermeo shows that ordinary people did *not* abandon democracy in favor of polarization.

The chapter about interwar Europe is followed by in-depth case studies of postwar democratic collapse in Brazil, Uruguay, Chile, and Argentina. These four chapters constitute the bulk of the volume, and they allow Bermeo to develop her causal argument about polarization in much greater detail. Finally, Bermeo's provocative and wide-ranging conclusion puts her arguments into a broader and more contemporary context.

Overall, this book is an exemplary work of comparative politics. It is elegantly written, and contains innovative theoretical arguments, sound historical research, and broad and compelling empirical comparisons. The one difficulty with the argument involves the tension between the importance of ordinary people and that of elites. This tension starts with the title, which suggests a book about ordinary people as heroes of democracy. But the argument is ultimately much more modest in scope than its initial framing suggests: ordinary people may not have supported or caused the collapse of fragile democracies, but they could not save them either. And although Bermeo shows convincingly that ordinary people are not democratic deserters, in the end, it becomes clear just how powerless they are in the face of determined, divided, and destructive elites.

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**Deliberation Day** by Bruce Ackerman and James S. Fishkin. *New Haven, CT, Yale University Press, 2004. 288 pp. \$30.00.*

By all accounts, civic engagement in America is on the wane. What can be done to reverse this trend? Bruce Ackerman and James Fishkin offer a provocative and novel solution to what they believe is this crisis of democracy. In *Deliberation Day*, they propose the creation of a two-day national holiday for structured debate of the political issues at stake in presidential elections (and perhaps congressional elections as well). During this "Deliberation Day," potential voters would be paid a substantial sum of money to meet with their fellow citizens, listen to national party leaders answer questions generated by ordinary Americans, and debate critical issues. Citizens would not be asked to vote for a particular candidate, but would come away from Deliberation Day more engaged with the substance of politics.

The ideas at the core of this book are good ones. Research on reform of electoral laws has shown that making it easier for people to vote will only marginally increase political participation. To truly broaden the scope of participation in America, reformers need to focus instead on increasing political interest and engagement. Building on deliberative polling experiments, Ackerman and Fishkin show that structured political discussion can achieve this goal. When people discuss political matters in such an environment, they sometimes change their minds, but always become more interested in politics.