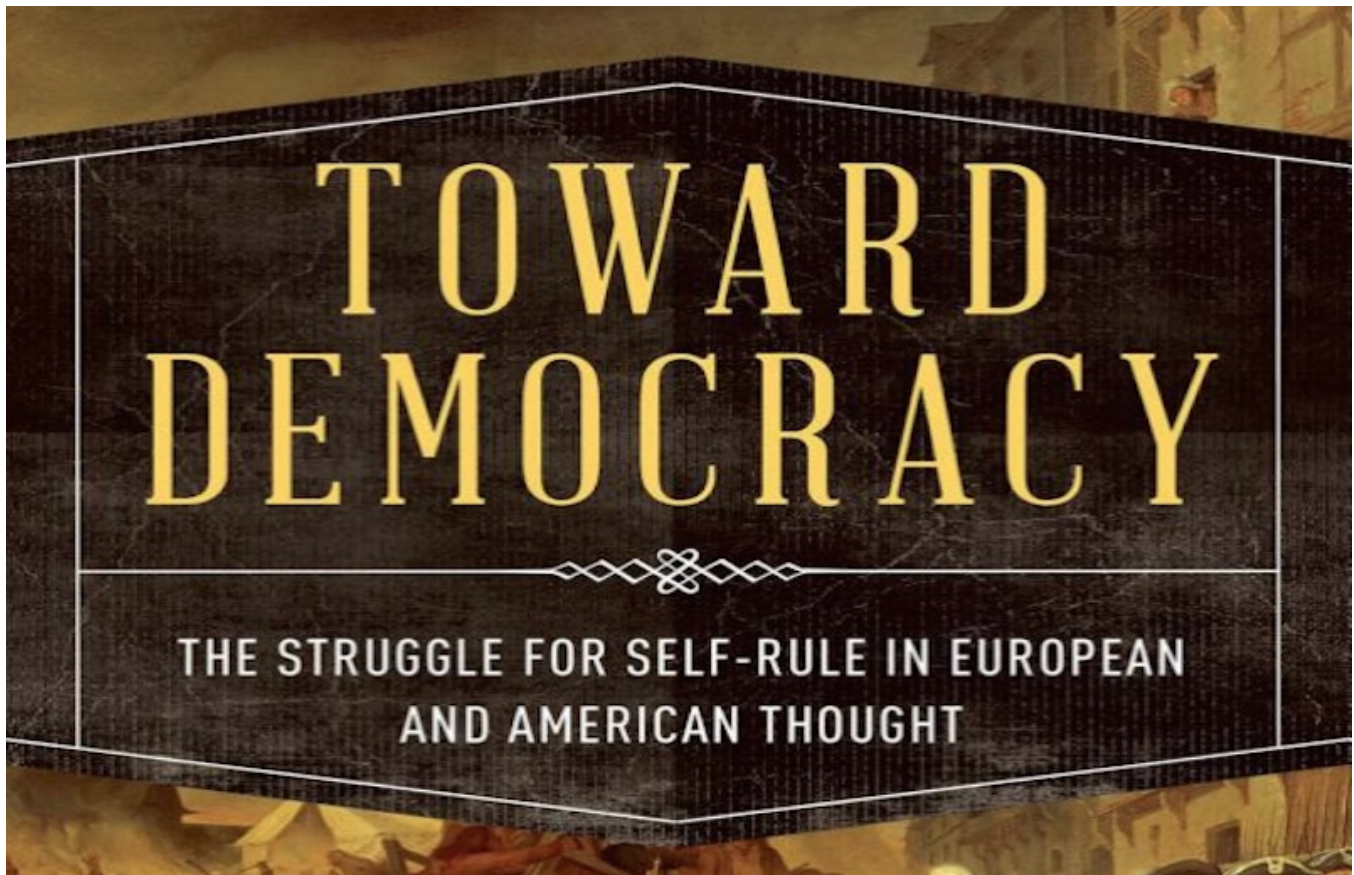




Toward Democracy: The Struggle for Self-Rule in European and American Thought

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Detail from book cover of "Toward Democracy"

James T. Kloppenberg

Joanne J. Myers

Introduction

JOANNE MYERS: Good evening, everyone. I'm Joanne Myers, and on behalf of the Carnegie Council I'd like to welcome you to this Public Affairs program.

Our speaker is James T. Kloppenberg, and he is the Charles Warren Professor of American History at Harvard and teaches European and American intellectual history. Today he will be discussing his recently published magnum

opus, entitled [Toward Democracy: The Struggle for Self-Rule in European and American Thought](#). For more on our illustrious guest, please take a moment to read his bio, a copy of which you all should have received when you checked in. We are so pleased to have him here today.

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With the recent [election](#) of [Donald Trump](#) there is in America a resurgence of interest in democracy. Many are wondering whether democracy as we have experienced it in our time, with its guarantees of civil liberties and protections from tyrannical rulers, is being eroded. It is understandable, then, that questions about what it means, why it has succeeded, and how and why it has failed are part of the daily discourse.

One way to address these issues is to review the concepts and institutions of representative government and to look at how they developed over time. In *Toward Democracy* Professor Kloppenberg does just that. By providing an account of the many revolutions in ideas and practices that took place from 1600 to 1900, our speaker provides a context from which we can see how democracy evolved from a term of abuse to a widely shared governing ideal that focuses on the rights of citizens and their ability to govern rather than on a government that is only interested in control.

For Professor Kloppenberg, democracy is distinctive; it does not stress institutions or practices. He writes that the essence of democracy isn't "one man, one vote," it isn't majority rule, and it isn't the principle of political representation. Rather, it lies in the combination of individual autonomy and an ethical ideal requiring self-restraint and reciprocity. In other words, it's a willingness to think in other people's shoes and act accordingly, a political version of the [Golden Rule](#).

In today's political climate, when our political system is threatened by polarization and extremism, one wonders whether those with the power to govern can exercise the necessary self-restraint and genuine concern for the other so that in the end democracy will prevail.

To guide us in our thinking, please join me in giving a very warm welcome to our guest today, Professor Kloppenberg. Thank you for joining us.

Remarks

JAMES KLOPPENBERG: Thank you, Joanne, for that excellent introduction. It captures the argument of the book so well that perhaps I should just go right to the Q&A. But I'll try to fill it out a little bit.

It's a pleasure to be with you this evening. Though it's tempting to focus on 2016 and 2017, I'm here to put our contemporary situation in historical perspective. This is a big book, as you can see from Joanne holding it on the podium, but I'm determined to keep my remarks to under 35 minutes so that we can have plenty of time for discussion.

I want to explain why I think the book matters in 2017. I think it's crucial to see that democracy rests on a foundation that is not often appreciated, a foundation that I call an "ethic of reciprocity," a foundation that I think is currently under attack in American public life. To get to that, I'm going to dive right into the substance of the book.

My history of democracy in European and American thought begins with [Michel de Montaigne](#), a French writer who lived during the [wars of religion](#) that convulsed Europe throughout the 16th century. From his chateau east of Bordeaux in Southwestern France, Montaigne could see the roaming bands of Catholic and Protestant soldiers that made life in the region [insecure for decades](#) and sometimes made it a living hell. From Montaigne's perspective, nothing done by the so-called "savages" who had been recently discovered in the New World could match the barbarity or the cruelty of Europe's religious wars.

If you visit Montaigne's chateau today, you get a sense of the life that he lived. In his study where he created the [book of essays](#) that rank among the most important writings of the early modern era, you can still see painted on the beams of his ceiling his watchwords, the words he lived by. These include the words that he had inscribed on a medal that he had cast for himself. One side reads *Je m'abstiens* (I restrain myself) and on the verso *Que sais-je?* (what do I know?). Those qualities—restraint and humility—lay at the heart of Montaigne's personal creed, along with two other values, his emphasis on autonomy or self-rule and his ethic of reciprocity. Those four values—restraint, humility, autonomy, and reciprocity—are central to my argument concerning democracy as a way of life, the conception of self-government whose history I trace in *Toward Democracy*, and that explains why I am so worried about our current situation.

It is certainly true that institutions and legal safeguards have been an essential part of understandings of democracy from the ancient world to the present. Social scientists have agreed that the defining features of democracy include a wide suffrage, the independent authority of elected officials, civil liberties, and the rule of law. But as crucial as those institutions are, from a historian's point of view they are too narrow, too thin, and too static if we focus only on those institutions.

Such an approach is too narrow to allow us to see the diverse forms of democracy and the stutter-step ironies and tragedies of its emergence from the 16th through the 19th centuries. It's too thin to capture the cultural preconditions without which democracy is impossible; it's too static because all of these qualities of self-government have changed and continue to change over time. That's why I thought we needed a new history of democracy in the Atlantic world. I had no idea when I started working on this 20 years ago that when it was finally published it would be as timely as I fear it has become.

Some of these cultural preconditions are especially crucial. Restraint, humility, and the ethic of reciprocity are required if people are going to allow their worst enemies to govern if they win an election. That willingness is always fragile, and it can be destroyed with disastrous consequences. Think how rare those qualities have been; think how often elections in emerging democracies just precipitate a new round of civil war between rival ethnic groups, rival religious groups, groups inhabiting different regions with different histories or traditions, or groups loyal to a defeated leader.

The second principle of democracy is a commitment to autonomy, the independence of the individual who internalizes and follows legal and ethical norms. Without that commitment to autonomy, majority rule is not enough because any group of three can yield a majority of two committed to enslaving the other one. Yet all of these values—restraint, humility, reciprocity, and autonomy, like the principle of popular sovereignty itself—are delicate and

multidimensional cultural constructs, internally unstable and very difficult to fit together using the blunt instrument of politics.

As if that weren't bad enough, successful democracies depend on preserving cultural resources that the struggle to achieve democracy erodes and sometimes destroys. To complicate matters further, the successful achievement of democracy has often unleashed forces that can endanger the cultural resources on which democracy depends, a dynamic that we're watching play out in our own day.

The word "democracy," as I'm sure many of you know, descends from the Greek words for "the people" (the demos) and power (kratos). It has always meant popular government, but for most of Western history it has been a term of abuse, not the almost universally accepted ideal it has become in recent decades. The word itself entered European discourse only in 1260 with the [translation](#) of [Aristotle's Politics](#) into Latin, when the Dominican monks who were charged with purifying Aristotle's pagan texts invented the term *democratia* for popular government.

Widespread challenges to hierarchy and to the rule of monarchy and aristocracy, challenges that can properly be called "democratic" because they rested on new assertions about the capacity of ordinary people, emerged only in the 16th and 17th centuries, when the ideas of [Renaissance](#) humanism mingled with [radical varieties of Christianity](#) to shake the foundations of European culture.

From the appearance of [Thomas More's Utopia](#) in 1516 to [the peasant rebellions](#) of the 1520s and the rapid spread of [Calvinism](#), revolutionary ideas about the capacity of ordinary people challenged prevailing practices of governance. As religious warfare intensified throughout Europe in the 16th century, the contagious savagery that inspired Montaigne's emphasis on restraint and humility infected much of European culture. The only alternative to endless carnage appeared to be unchallengeable authority. For that reason, the anti-democratic ideas of royal absolutism came to be the dominant force in both the theory and the practice of politics.

Democracy in Europe and America developed against the backdrop of those murderous wars of religion and the authoritarian regimes that emerged to bring order to that chaos. Early modern misgivings about popular government have to be understood against the background of violence perpetrated by ordinary people against other ordinary people for more than a century. I think that most scholars have neglected that gruesome history that lies behind the emergence of democracy, a history of horrific violence, and I think that's the reason why we so complacently dismiss as elitism the misgivings about democracy that were expressed in the 17th and 18th centuries. That might also explain why scholars today fail to acknowledge just how revolutionary the ideas and experiments with limited or partial popular government were in the context of those wars of religion.

American historians in the middle of the 20th century took for granted that the story of America was, among other things, a story of democracy. Today, many American historians assume the opposite. In one recent [study](#), the only democratic communities in early America are to be found aboard pirate ships. It is now standard for historians of 18th-century America to lament the shortcomings of the [Revolution](#) and to treat the [Constitution](#) as a retreat from democracy.

I think those judgments are unbalanced. The history of early America contains a history of democracy, and it's not a story of triumph, but neither is it a fiction. It is instead the history of struggles between people with different and often incompatible ideas about autonomy, reciprocity, authority, community, and, perhaps above all, about salvation.

In the early 17th century few of those who engineered the institutions and practices of popular government on either side of the Atlantic thought of themselves as democrats. They associated that idea with the absence of restraint, with the degradation of government, and with the indulgence of sin. Even so, some of the first English settlers to North America embraced for religious reasons the doctrine of self-rule that had led them to emigrate from Anglican England and establish their own communities of saints in the harsh climate and isolation of New

England.

[Puritans](#) such as [Roger Williams](#) and [Thomas Hooker](#) set up self-governing colonies in places like Providence and Hartford to escape the authority of the Church of England and that of people such as [John Winthrop](#), the governor of Massachusetts, people who were just as firmly committed to the idea of divine sovereignty as Williams and Hooker were to the idea of popular sovereignty. It is sometimes forgotten that some of the towns and colonies established in the first half of the 17th century self-consciously chose the word "democracy" to describe the form of government they were putting in place. Whatever we might think of such colonies—which excluded women from positions of authority and permitted slave-owning—these new settlements conceived of themselves as democracies. I think we're missing something if we fail to pay attention to the reasons why they used that word.

Struggles developed within these colonies almost immediately, and important differences separated New England from the colonies to their south. But all of England's North American colonies developed forms of self-rule in their legislative assemblies, even those that lacked the particular institutions of town meeting that were so pivotal in New England. When [Alexis de Tocqueville](#) visited the United States in the 1830s, he called the New England town the "cradle of democracy." I think he was right. I disagree with those who claim that there was no democracy in early America, and I'll be happy to talk further about the reasons for that in the Q&A.

At roughly the same time that these New Englanders were experimenting with forms of self-government in the 1630s and 1640s, the ideas of religious dissenters back home were plunging England into [civil war](#). The English "[Levellers](#)," as they were called by their enemies, argued for replacing monarchy with forms of popular government that were similar in important respects to the experiments bubbling up across the Atlantic.

Whereas democrats in New England became the leading figures of new colonies, such as Providence and Hartford, the ideas promulgated by the Levellers led to the execution of King [Charles I](#) and the bloody struggle in the English Civil War that eventuated in the protectorate under [Oliver Cromwell](#). The Leveller leaders were imprisoned, put to death, or otherwise marginalized as dangerous radicals. When the monarchy was [restored](#) in 1660 under [Charles II](#), the story of popular government in England pretty much came to an end until today, when the [monarchy](#), against all odds, is as popular as ever. Not until the 20th century was the word "democracy" used in mainstream English political life as anything but an epithet.

Although the so-called "[Glorious Revolution](#)" of 1688 is usually characterized as a triumph of English liberty, particularly in North Ireland, it is more accurately described I think as a coup d'état, in which one [family of Protestants](#) replaced a ruling [family of Catholics](#). The consequences of the revolution for popular government in England were almost nil.

Across the Atlantic, though, 1688 was more significant because the new royal governors, when they were charged with reasserting the power of the English crown, discovered that the colonial assemblies were increasingly likely to challenge royal authority and to assert their own power to govern themselves. A minister in Ipswich, Massachusetts, with the appropriate name [John Wise](#), argued in 1717 that what he called "democratical" government is the original form and all others are defective derivatives. Significantly, the voters of Massachusetts voted to approve Wise's plan for self-government. In the aftermath of 1688, strikingly different convictions concerning the legitimacy of popular sovereignty and the practice of self-rule were already becoming established throughout England's North American colonies and the differences from Mother England were becoming more pronounced.

My study of democracy provides extensive analysis of the writings of many prominent theorists and many less well-known people who struggled to flesh out the meanings of democracy as it developed over a long period of time on both sides of the Atlantic. I examined the staccato process whereby ideas and proposals emerged and were debated; experiments with democracy were conducted, sometimes deliberately, sometimes inadvertently, or for different purposes; and the results were then assessed, sometimes positively and just as often negatively.

To reiterate, radical ideas about self-rule—ideas advanced in England by the Levellers; by [James Harrington](#); later by [John Locke](#), who was harried into exile; and by [Algernon Sidney](#), who was put to death—those ideas were decisively rejected in England. But in England's North American colonies such ideas were not only embraced, as they were by John Wise, they were also institutionalized and they were defended against royal authority. Those were the ideas that later became the armature of 18th-century American resistance to Britain.

In short, the seeds of America's democratic Revolution were planted long before the 1760s and 1770s, long before [Alexander Hamilton](#) met [Aaron Burr](#). Those seeds developed into different forms depending on the institutional soil and the cultural climates prevailing in the different colonies, but they all pointed in the direction of self-government.

The cluster of ideas characterized as the 18th-century [Enlightenment](#) certainly fed that process of growth. My analysis of the Enlightenment places America's democratic Revolution—and perhaps even more controversially, America's democratic Constitution—in the framework of European ideas that informed the Americans' thinking, including the ideas of that notorious radical, [Jean-Jacques Rousseau](#).

Rousseau was much more influential in America than has been recognized, and that is one of the principal arguments of my book. When Rousseau proposed actual, rather than hypothetical, constitutional arrangements, as he did when he was invited to write frameworks for [Poland](#) and for [Corsica](#), he envisioned regimes of representative democracy. He intended his idea of the general will, which is often caricatured as a blueprint for totalitarianism, merely to clarify the difference between the common good—by definition, what is in the public interest—and the momentary will of the majority, which he called the "will of all," which has to be measured against something more permanent, something more enduring, something more like a constitution than a public opinion poll.

The constitutions that Rousseau proposed for Poland and Corsica were more similar to than different from those that emerged from the English colonies that [separated](#) from Britain in 1776 and the document produced by the [Constitutional Convention](#) in Philadelphia in 1787.

The templates for the U.S. Constitution were forged during the years of the Revolution, when each of the colonies either revised its charter to establish its own form of democratic government or wrote a new constitution. In tribute to his indispensable contributions to the debates that led up to this break from England, it was [John Adams](#) who was selected to write the [constitution for Massachusetts](#), which remains 237 years later the fundamental law of the commonwealth, and it was this document that became the template for four of the other constitutions that were then written.

The constitution that Adams framed, as he himself wrote proudly, was "Locke, Sidney, and Rousseau reduced to practice." Its purpose was to promote the general will. As furious as Adams later became with the [French Revolution](#) and all it stood for, in the 1770s he had found much wisdom in Rousseau. He recommended that both his wife [Abigail](#) and his daughter [Nabby](#) read Rousseau, and the central ideas of the social contract pop up again and again in Adams' speeches and writings.

Disagreements among Americans ran deep in the 1780s. There was widespread dissatisfaction with the flimsy union created by the [Articles of Confederation](#) that prompted the calling of the Constitutional Convention in 1787.

Scholars in the last century have disagreed about how we should understand that Constitution almost as vigorously as Americans disagreed over it during the debates over ratification. But I think the best studies of recent years show that the Constitution cemented, rather than betrayed, the new nation's commitment to democracy.

The two leading architects of the Constitution, [James Madison](#) of Virginia and [James Wilson](#) of Pennsylvania, from first to last saw themselves as working for the creation of a democratic form of government. But they believed that a democracy could survive only if the dual dangers of democracy—unrest leading to anarchy or the reestablishment of

tyranny—could be harnessed by democratic means.

From Madison's perspective, the various checks and balances of the federal plan, and especially the various filters that operated from the local to the state and then the national government, would do just that. Those institutions would provide, as Madison put it in the first speech he gave in the Constitutional Convention, "the only defense against the inconveniences of democracy consistent with a democratic form of government." This was Madison's first speech at the Constitutional Convention. "What we want," he says, "is a form of government that provides a defense against the inconveniences of democracy consistent with a democratic form of government."

Representative democracy would ensure that only those whom Madison called "virtuous"—by which he meant people capable of seeing beyond narrow self-interest to the common good—would be chosen to serve in positions of authority. One of the principal objectives of my book is to establish—or I would say more accurately to reestablish—the essentially democratic nature of the American Revolution and the U.S. Constitution. For the first century after its ratification, no one in the United States or Europe doubted that the United States was the first democratic nation. I think we need to pay attention to the reasons why they made that judgment rather than assuming that we were right and they were wrong.

Few scholars have realized that in Pennsylvania at the Constitutional Convention in Philadelphia Madison's principal ally, James Wilson, wrote the most decisive and influential speeches in favor of the Constitution with a copy of Rousseau's [The Social Contract](#) at his elbow. The purpose of the Constitution, as both Madison and Wilson said over and over, was to "secure justice through democracy." They envisioned a form of government that would not empower self-interested individuals or enable majorities to form around particular interests, but would instead provide the cultural resources as well as the institutional framework necessary to enable citizens of the new nation to defend democracy against its dangers. Representative democracy would provide the best means to the end that Rousseau and Wilson called the "general will" and that John Adams and Madison more often called the "common interest" or the "public good."

Well, if regicide and Restoration snuffed out the flickering idea of popular government in England, and if revolution and constitution-writing secured the principles and practice of democracy in the United States, the failure of the French Revolution left a much more complicated legacy. It metamorphosed from its originally moderate forms to its fatal explosion when it turned into a renewed war of religion.

Initially, those who challenged [Louis XVI](#) in 1789 envisioned a constitutional monarchy in which royal power would be checked by reinvigorated aristocratic and clerical authorities. But those enjoying power and privilege in France had little experience making bargains and forging compromises of the sort that Americans had been making for a century in their local and their colonial assemblies. As the French National Assembly forged a new framework and popular demands escalated, the monarchy, the aristocracy, and the Catholic Church all dug in their heels not only against increasingly insistent forms of popular rebellion but against each other. First the Revolution wiped out the ancient feudal laws that had governed social and economic relations for centuries. Then, it proclaimed the rights of man and of the citizen in a nation of subjects who had enjoyed no such rights before.

Instead of developing over time, constrained within legal limits and balanced against citizens' obligations, as Americans experienced with rights had matured for a century through the often frustrating exercise of popular sovereignty, the rights declared by the French Revolution were proclaimed absolute and unassailable. The exercise of Reason (with a capital R) was thought capable of achieving results that Montaigne, as a veteran of religious wars and a champion of humility and restraint, would have recognized as impossible. But when you're certain you know the truth, you do not need to compromise with those who do not.

The [French] Revolution, confident that it embodied such truth, did not need to bargain with those who opposed it. Thus, in 1790 the Revolution committed what I consider the most catastrophic of its many strategic errors when it

proclaimed the [Civil Constitution of the Clergy](#). That step, which transformed Catholic priests into civil servants, forced them to declare allegiance to a regime that most of them already distrusted and that many of them—and an increasingly large number of their parishioners—now hated with a burning passion.

When Louis XVI tried to escape from Paris, when aristocrats began abandoning their estates to seek refuge across France's borders and allied with the nation's enemies, those who were left to govern a new regime in France found themselves in an impossible situation. First they tried a [constitutional monarchy](#), but it failed within a year. Then, with enemy armies massing on their borders and the nation itself threatening to fall apart, the [Jacobin](#) vanguard declared a second revolution and set out to consolidate its authority by purging its enemies. The tragedy of the French Revolution was that those enemies, both domestic and foreign, really did intend to destroy it, and revolutionaries resorted to terror at home and war abroad because there seemed to be no alternative.

After [Robespierre](#) declared [terror](#) the order of the day, anyone who resisted could be accused of treason. Not only aristocrats and the royal family but thousands of ordinary people were put to death. And eventually, not only those who clung to tradition but fervent revolutionaries, such as [Danton](#) and eventually even Robespierre, found themselves condemned to death as "enemies of the people."

When the Revolution spun out of control and became a civil war, it had the same consequences as the bloody wars of religion that rocked all of Europe two centuries earlier. Again, years of violence ended in the restoration of absolutism, first under [Napoleon](#) and then under a restored monarchy as the only alternative to continuing carnage.

The failure of the French Revolution intensified the earlier conviction of most Europeans that democracy inevitably ends in anarchy. Not only did it poison the idea of popular government on the continent and in Britain, it prompted many of those in the United States who had created the world's first democratic nation to turn against what they had done. Some, like John Adams, reacted in horror against the orgies of violence in France, and the tenor of Adams' writings about popular government itself turned bitter.

The resulting animosities not only turned friends against each other, as it turned Adams against his longtime friend and ally [Jefferson](#), it gave rise to the first party system in the United States. In the mid-1790s partisan rivals now began to call each other "traitors," a development that was incomprehensible outside the context of the tragic failure of the French Revolution. That champion of popular government John Adams, who had found inspiration in Rousseau's idea of the general will, now renounced everything French and declared democracy the "work of the devil."

That's why the [election](#) of Jefferson in 1800 was so crucial. When in his [inaugural](#) he said, "We are all [Federalists](#); we are all [Republicans](#)," he meant it. He wanted to insist that what joined Americans together despite the bitterness of the rivalries during the 1790s was so much more important than what divided it. That led to what became the [Era of Good Feelings](#), the disappearance of the first party system. But that Era of Good Feelings would not last.

In the final chapters of my book I compare the distinctive paths followed by the United States, Great Britain, and France as they became more or less democratic during the 19th century. The rapid expansion of the suffrage during the early 19th century in the United States shows, I think, that the Constitution did provide the framework for an increasingly inclusive democracy.

But in the book I do not celebrate the supposedly egalitarian ethos of [Andrew Jackson](#) and his followers, those who called themselves "[democrats](#)" but were called by their opponents—quite properly, I think—the "Jackson party." Instead, I show how this so-called "democracy" worked. It was a democracy of masters authorized by the assent of ordinary white men, and it functioned in practice to bolster slavery and white male supremacy.

The Jackson party rolled back the limited gains made by women in the era of the Revolution and it [legitimated](#) the

[removal of Indians](#) from their homelands in the South [to the Indian Territory](#) that is now Oklahoma. Instead, I show that it was Jackson's critics, the [Whigs](#), long the whipping boys of self-styled American democrats, who were the people in the United States who championed education and the causes of disenfranchised women, slaves, and Native Americans.

I've noted that de Tocqueville's analysis of American democracy is important to my argument. De Tocqueville owed deep debts to his New England informants during his stay in Boston, and his conception of American democracy depended on those New Englanders' own ethic of reciprocity, a sensibility that they correctly understood to be descended from earlier Christian and classical republican ideals and that they explained to Tocqueville lay beneath the institution of the New England town meeting. That sensibility was shared by [Abolitionists](#), by champions of women's rights, such as [Frederick Douglass](#), [Harriet Beecher Stowe](#), and [Margaret Fuller](#). It was a worldview antithetical to the emphasis on the primacy of self-interest that had been central to much anti-Federalist discourse during the debates over the Constitution and that was central, I think, to Jacksonian democracy.

The sensibility of those antebellum reformers with its emphasis on the ethic of reciprocity reached a crescendo in the [presidency](#) of [Abraham Lincoln](#). Lincoln understood better than most of his contemporaries the underlying premises of democracy, and his words are just as powerful in 2017 as they were during his lifetime. In one of his first public [speeches](#) before the Young Men's Lyceum in Springfield, Illinois, in 1838, Lincoln condemned the brutal murder of an innocent black man by a pro-slavery mob. He warned that such lawlessness threatened what Lincoln called "America's as yet undecided experiment, testing the capability of a people to govern themselves."

Initially, Americans' shared animosity against Britain had enabled Americans to project their hatreds outward. But now, what Lincoln called "the basest principles of our nature" had returned in the crusade to preserve, and even expand, slavery. The passions being whipped up on both sides of that struggle now endangered the nation. Lincoln's own ideas about race evolved painfully slowly over the rest of his life until he reached a conviction concerning the evil of slavery that Frederick Douglass described as "zealous, radical, and determined."

No matter how determined Lincoln became to end slavery, he always tried to balance his own ideas with his understanding of the convictions of white Southerners. In his [first inaugural](#) he pleaded with the South not to secede but instead to continue to debate slavery. He concluded with the familiar appeal to what he called the "better angels of our nature"—the commitment to reciprocity, the commitment violated by slavery—that he thought all Americans could come to share across the color line.

Even in the greatest of his [speeches at Gettysburg](#), and then in his [second inaugural](#) when the outcome of the [war](#) had finally become clear, Lincoln refused the gloating triumphalism of most Northerners. Instead, he pledged to "bind up the nation's wounds, to achieve and cherish a just and lasting peace by acting with malice toward none and charity toward all." For Lincoln, finishing the work of the war did not mean continued violence, vengeance, or retribution, but the slow, steady work of rebuilding the nation on a broader foundation of justice, a foundation that would now include those so long excluded.

In the disheartening retreat from democracy after the Civil War, white Americans in the North as well as the South revealed the depth of their racism. They also revealed that their commitment to the ethic of reciprocity that was prized by the Whigs, by de Tocqueville, and by Lincoln was rooted in soil far too rocky to survive. Of course, democracy continued to develop after the end of the American Civil War and the failure of [Reconstruction](#) to uproot the culture of white supremacy.

In England the Reform Acts of [1832](#), [1867](#), and [1884](#) gradually widened the suffrage, and in the 20th century the aristocracy slowly and reluctantly eased its stranglehold on government in Britain.

In France after 1871 the [Third Republic](#) finally established the principle of popular sovereignty after cycles of

revolution and restoration had kept the condition of "[les misérables](#)" as miserable as ever and had enabled the aristocracy and the haute bourgeoisie to stave off the challenges to their rule.

In German-speaking Europe these struggles were even more protracted. Only after [World War II](#) was democracy at last planted in the soil of Central Europe with the spadework done, one might say, by bayonets.

All the principles undergirding the triumph of democracy were clearly articulated in the middle decades of the 19th century, nowhere more clearly than in the writings of [John Stuart Mill](#), not only in his classic [On Liberty](#) but also in his [critiques of slavery and the Confederacy](#), and in his and his wife, [Harriet Taylor Mill's essay on the subjection of women](#) with its compelling arguments for women's rights. Mill, his good friend de Tocqueville, and the American whom Mill most admired, Abraham Lincoln, are the central figures in the concluding chapters of *Toward Democracy*.

I want to close this evening with some general reflections on democracy in Europe and America that I hope will generate some discussion.

The wounds that opened during the U.S. Civil War have not healed. The divide between the Confederacy and the Union remains the principal cultural divide in the United States today, the divide that continues to shape our political discourse and that threatens the ethic of reciprocity in American democracy. If you trace the lines of the most vociferous criticism of the 21st-century Democratic Party in general, and of former President [Barack Obama](#) in particular, those lines lead back to the Confederacy, to its tenacious defense of the rule of white men over everyone else in America and to its resistance to the authority of the federal government.

The Civil War had tragic and lasting consequences for American democracy. In its aftermath the suffrage and civil liberties expanded in the North and contracted in the South. Slavery was abolished, but forms of racial segregation were reconfigured and reinvigorated until the [Civil Rights Movement](#) at last forced the nation to dismantle the regime of [Jim Crow](#).

I contend that the U.S. Civil War had the same long-term consequences as the 16th-century wars of religion, the 17th-century English Civil War, and the 18th-century French Revolution. Like those conflicts, the American Civil War poisoned the ethic of reciprocity on which democracy depends. It sanctified the liberty of some individuals, notably white men, at the expense of others. Like all civil wars, it left a legacy of hatred and distrust that has made further progress toward democracy less likely rather than more likely even today, a century and a half later.

Democracy begins in bloodshed and it comes to life only through conflict. In the Atlantic world from the 16th through the end of the 19th century at least, when that conflict has taken the shape of civil war, it has meant if not the end, then at least the indefinite suspension, of the trust on which democracy must rest. Montaigne was right to emphasize the importance of restraint and humility as well as autonomy and reciprocity. In the absence of those qualities, he believed that individuals would prize freedom only to dominate others and democracy would be impossible.

In such circumstances only absolute authority could ensure peace. When we look at the history of democracy in Europe and America, it is apparent that the struggles to achieve self-government have often generated conflicts that have weakened the cultural conditions necessary for democracy to survive.

In America our current culture of hyper-partisanship tends to reinforce the destructive tendencies toward self-righteousness, dogmatism, and intolerance, and to threaten the sensibilities on which democracy depends. To conclude with the title of my book's final chapter, that dynamic has been "the tragic irony of democracy."

Questions

QUESTION: Susan Gitelson.

Thank you very much for this very clear and somewhat upsetting history of what we've been going through. But it's particularly pertinent now, when many of us took democracy for granted, that's what America's all about, and yet we have seen the rise of populism and bringing out the rule of white men and a glorification of Jacksonian democracy and so many other things plus autocracy. So where are we now, and how do we get back to a purer form of Montaigne's democracy?

JAMES KLOPPENBERG: I think it's incumbent on those of us who are opposed to what is happening now not to back ourselves into an equally intransigent form of resistance that could be compared to the intransigent forms of resistance that the Republican Party used in opposing everything that Barack Obama presented. That's a temptation, and I can understand the temptation.

But I think it remains necessary to work toward finding common ground. That is painful because we too—those of us who are opposed to the [current administration](#)—are not immune to the feelings of self-righteous vengeance that drives people when they feel that they have been wronged or some terrible evil is being committed.

I think we have to recognize, as a number of commentators have pointed out, that, much as many of us find it incomprehensible that our current president was elected, he clearly was speaking to something in the electorate that we do not understand. Until and unless we come to understand that, then perhaps we are doomed to continue moving in this direction.

Clearly there is a great deal of unhappiness with the form of government and the continuing increase in inequality in America. The people at the bottom have taken a variety of avenues for their unhappiness. Some of them have moved in the direction of the [alt-right](#); others were drawn to [Bernie Sanders](#) and my beloved senator, [Elizabeth Warren](#). But that discontent is real, and it's not going away, whether this administration goes away or not.

So I think the challenge is to rebuild—those people who are committed to a progressive politics—the grassroots versions of that progressive politics and be a respectful loyal opposition inclined toward problem-solving rather than simple intransigence.

QUESTION: Allen Young.

When you speak about democracy, you've been talking basically about political democracy, about government. Certainly in the 20th century many people brought up the idea of social democracy, that you can't separate politics from economics and that economic democracy is necessary to support a truly liberal political democracy. To what extent do you think that the two help each other, and to what extent do they separate from each other?

JAMES KLOPPENBERG: I promise I didn't plant this question, but that's really the crucial argument of the book, that if we think of democracy simply as "one person, one vote," we've got it all wrong. It has this ethical dimension to it, and from the perspective of—I'm inclined to say everybody but Alexander Hamilton in the 18th century—if you saw economic inequality emerging it would kill democracy. John Adams believed that; Madison believed it; Jefferson believed it; [Franklin](#) believed it; James Wilson believed it. Hamilton is the outlier, who thought that an interlocking directorate of the wealthy was what was going to make America great. Everybody else was in agreement that, from the ancient world on, it was understood that self-government would only work if the people had sufficient independence as individuals to feel as though they had a share in the government.

That's the central argument, I think, in de Tocqueville, that what makes possible the internalizing of this ethic of reciprocity which manifests itself in town meeting, manifests itself in the jury—the point of a jury is that you have to come to see each other's point of view because you have to come to a decision—that requires this sensibility that de

Tocqueville thought was so crucial. He argued, invoking the 18th-century writers who had made these arguments, that this can only work if people are more equal rather than more unequal.

The contrast he drew between the French aristocracy that owned everything and had all the political power and everyone else who had neither was from his perspective the reason why France was destined not to nurture a democracy and why the United States, if it could contain these dynamics that were beginning in the Jackson era to spread apart different people in the different regions, then could continue to survive as a democracy.

I think it's a very real question whether, unless we address the question of inequality, we will move back in the direction of what I see as a vibrant democracy. Thank you for that question.

QUESTION: Ron Berenbeim.

Just some thoughts that I'd like your comments on. First of all, I think that when it comes to massive inequality there are real facts here. In the 1950s, when I was growing up, I think the chief executive officer made something like 35 times what the median employee did, and today I think the number is well over 300. This is sustained and exacerbated by an ideology that lowering the tax rates for those rich people is the way to make everyone else rich, something that has certainly been disproved.

Second—and someone here may be able to correct me—I believe that [Hillary Clinton](#) won about 88 percent of the 200 largest counties in America, which suggests that where people live in cities and where they're not isolated from the cultural resources that cities have and from diverse populations, they tend to be more tolerant of one another and they tend to vote for candidates who reflect that view. Those are two ideas.

JAMES KLOPPENBERG: There are two different dynamics at work here. You're exactly right on the economic inequality. It was roughly in the 30s in the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s, and it has ballooned since then. Just last week I was lecturing on the 1930s and showed a slide of a Congress of Industrial Organizations strike at the General Motors plant at the immediate end of World War II, and there was a banner protesting what CEO [Charles Wilson](#) of General Motors made—and it gave the figure, which was unfortunately not legible in the slide—and it was probably about 20 times what the line workers at GM made at the time, and that was an outrage.

Why was that an outrage then and not now? [George H. W. Bush](#) referred to this as "[voodoo economics](#)," and we've seen the consequences of that voodoo economics ever since 1980. Unless that is arrested, unless that ideology that drives that approach is arrested somehow, I think things are only likely to get worse.

The complicated factor about, again, the figure you quoted, which is accurate, about the ways in which urban America voted relative to the ways in which rural America voted, there are two dynamics.

You might think that many of the people in those rural areas who are doing even less well than many people in the inner cities of urban America would be moving in the direction of some sort of progressive reform. Not so. Part of the reason for that is a sense of cultural alienation that the shots are being called by a different set of people, those called "elites"—probably including a lot of people in this room—who are thought to be culturally so different from people—we were talking about [Hillbilly Elegy](#) and about the attempts to make sense of how rural Americans, whether in Appalachia or in Louisiana, in [Arlie Hochschild's book](#), see the world.

That, I guess, is just a way of restating what I said a little bit earlier. I don't understand that worldview myself, but I think it is very important for us to understand what's driving it. I think we can get the economic part, we can make the argument, "Look, you're being excluded from whatever economic growth there is systematically by these policies." But if the cultural issues are more important to voters, then they're not going to care about that. They're going to vote for their "team" as they see it rather than for the policies that you and I might think would actually be

in their best interest.

QUESTION: Don Simmons.

Two quick questions about modalities that are suggested by recent events. Do you consider decisions made by popular referenda to be more democratic fundamentally than decisions made by elected representatives in a republican form of government?

Second, we seem to be living through the [disappearance of the filibuster in the U.S. Senate](#). Is that an expression of increasing democracy?

JAMES KLOPPENBERG: Both very good questions.

There is often a distinction drawn between direct democracy, and the referendum is an example of direct democracy, and representative democracy, where decisions are made by elected officials. In principle, in the abstract, one would argue that referenda are necessarily a better reflection of the public.

What has been found in California, where there have been more referenda than anyplace else in the world I think, is that it's as easy to buy a referendum vote as it is to buy the election of an official. When you follow the money in most referenda in California, it tends to be interested parties with deep pockets that can sway the electorate. Not always.

The other thing that happens with referenda is that you get a kind of volatility built into the system that makes it very hard for anybody to know exactly what the rules are.

This is where political scientists, I think, disagree with each other. There has been a lot of energy devoted to making sense of this. So, in principle, yes, but in the reality of not just campaign finance but also referendum finance, it doesn't work quite as well as we might think it would.

What's going on in the Senate, especially with the [confirmation hearings](#), is deeply disturbing. The [Founders](#) put these institutional brakes into the system precisely to avoid what they considered to be the danger of majoritarian tyranny. The Times' lead [editorial](#) this morning about the politicization of the Supreme Court I think is deeply troubling, because the idea was that if you divided power enough—not that nothing could happen, but that the people who would emerge through all of these different systems of diffusion of power would be the people who saw more broadly the general interest of the public.

The pinnacle of that was supposed to be the Supreme Court. Now we see Supreme Court justices being considered as partisan, every bit as partisan as anybody else in the government. That was never anybody's idea at the outset. It is very hard for me to see how that's the original meaning of the Constitution, for anybody who knows anything about 18th-century political theory. That's a deeply unsettling development.

Again, this is where, as a person on the left, I find myself in an awkward situation, because in principle these counter-majoritarian brakes on authority look non-democratic. When they're being exercised by our enemies, we think, That's an outrage! How could they do that? But when we do it, it's a little bit different.

I think there's trouble here, in that it's almost impossible now to find the common ground. Those of us who are of a certain age remember when even [Dwight Eisenhower](#)—I can't pretend that I remember this; I was three years old—in 1954, when Dwight Eisenhower gave his message to Congress about taxation, he declared paying your taxes to be one of the most important responsibilities that a citizen has. You should tell that to [Paul Ryan](#), who thinks evading taxes is now the American dream.

The Republican Party in the 1950s and through most of the 1960s accepted the [New Deal](#), accepted that social compact that we were all in it together. What has happened since then is that this ideology of "every man for himself" is an ideology that I consider inimical to American democracy.

That's the reason, when asked who I would compare our current president to, I said Andrew Jackson. I was astonished by the fact that he has now taken this on as something he is proud of. He wants to be the Indian fighter; he wants to be the person who removed Indians; he wants to be the slave owner; he wants to be the tough guy. Okay. That's fine, but that's not the America that I think the 18th-century framers of the Constitution had in mind.

QUESTION: One question. I grew up in post-World War II Germany, and—I'll be very blunt—when I came to this country I was overwhelmed with the thought that America is an experiment in democracy. It took many years before I could really absorb this and understand the positive and the negative.

What I'm really addressing is you mentioned that under current circumstances we have to make compromises, and I am so up in arms with what I call—and I'm sure most people here, my friends and myself, don't have an answer—but I do believe it is utter naivete to believe that in this country with this president we can make compromises.

And my German past, which I spent retrospectively my whole academic career basically on trying to figure out how was Germany possible during [Hitler](#)—but I think we do not understand in this country at this point the power of hatred and of irrationalism that is not open to negotiations or compromises. I look at Germany between 1933 and 1939. Every country in Europe bent over backwards to accommodate Hitler, to be reasonable, blah, blah.

I don't know what the answer is, but I just feel the word "compromise" sets me off. I'm so sorry.

JAMES KLOPPENBERG: Understood. That's fine. But the question is whether you meet hatred with hatred or whether you meet hatred with something else.

QUESTION: My question is: I think the 2016 election—one of the things that I thought it brought out foremost was the [Electoral College](#) and whether it's still relevant in elections nowadays. What are your thoughts? Is the Electoral College even democratic anymore?

QUESTION: David Musher.

You've described the decline of morality in democracy. You've also mentioned the decline in the marketplace because, after all, [Adam Smith](#) was a professor of ethics and logic and morality. Over the same period of time, there has been a change and an increase in ethical relativism. Do you think there's a relationship between the two?

QUESTION: My name is Ellen. I'm from Norway.

In Norway we have a lot of strong political parties. So my question to you is, do you think that this power with regard to the political parties here in the United States, if they are fueling this dialectic position as opposed to a more multiparty position with parties?

JAMES KLOPPENBERG: If one could by fiat put the Electoral College out of business, it would be wonderful. It would require a constitutional amendment, and constitutional amendments these days are very difficult to do. But I agree with you that it no longer serves a purpose. Given the technology of the 21st century, I think the concerns that drove the framers to put it in place are no longer salient.

Adam Smith was a professor of moral philosophy and revised his [The Theory of Moral Sentiments](#) three times. He wrote [The Wealth of Nations](#) and let it go; it wasn't that important to him. Moral philosophy was crucial to him, and he thought you couldn't have a capitalist society unless individuals internalized what he called the "impartial

spectator"—what we might call the "conscience." In the absence of that conscience, setting people free would lead to catastrophe, and that is, I think, what we're witnessing ourselves. In the absence of a shared religious framework, which Adam Smith took for granted in Scotland, ethical diversity at least seems to me almost inevitable. It is part of the price of pluralism that people are going to have different ethical frameworks.

My point here is that one has to be willing to weigh the interests of other people and their perspectives in a democracy if a democracy is going to function. I don't think that means everybody needs to share the same moral philosophy or ground their ethical orientation on the same principles. But if people declare themselves immune to morality, not to have any concern with the morality of their decisions because the only thing that matters is "what's good for me," then I think democracy is in very serious trouble. We hear almost every day from someone who seems to think exactly that.

Finally, on multiparty systems, I think the jury is out. Multiparty systems are spinning in directions in Europe, as well, that are unsettling to Europeans—I expect they are to you. I think, again, political scientists, people who study comparative politics, have made good arguments for the superiority of that model as a way of enabling people to express views that initially might seem less attractive but become more attractive through a multiparty system. It's hard to do that in a two-party system, given our first-past-the-post system, where the person who gets the most votes wins. Again, to do anything about that would require a constitutional amendment, and I don't think that's as likely as anything else.

So it seems to me the likeliest thing is that those of us who are as angry as the woman from Germany is, and as many of us are, is to organize and is to mobilize.

JOANNE MYERS: Thank you so much for laying the seeds. Thank you. That was great.

JAMES KLOPPENBERG: Thank you.

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