

Evaluating American Democracy in 2025 through the Lense of Ranney and Kendall

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Donald Trump's provocative rhetoric carried him to the White House twice in a decade. For most of that time political commentators debated whether to label him a populist. Since his 2024 election a consensus seems to have developed that Donald Trump is a populist.

Like many political concepts, however, populism is an ill-defined term both in popular usage and in Political Science. It is generally taken to mean a political appeal to the sensibilities of the large bloc of working-class voters who feel marginalized by the current political situation. Populist leaders around the world, whether on the political left or on the right, are said to tend toward authoritarianism. But this view conflicts with the historical experience of populism in the United States, wherein populists often served as catalysts of democratic reform. The important question is not whether US politics are becoming more populist, but whether they are becoming less democratic.

In the early days of his second term Trump moved rapidly to implement the policies he espoused in his campaign. He did not hesitate to use executive orders, patronage hiring, and budgetary discretion to reverse actions taken by the previous president. These administrative tactics have his opponents expressing dismay that Trump is using authoritarian tactics, destroying democracy and the Constitution.

Seventy-five years ago, two majoritarian political theorists developed a democratic model for assessing America's political parties. Austin Ranney and Willmoore Kendall's 1956 *Democracy and the American Party System* raise the question, "to what extent does our party system conform to the model of democracy?" (Ranney and Kendall 1956, 56).

This paper applies Ranney and Kendall's majoritarian theory to the today's Republican and Democratic parties, as an exercise in assessing the current state of the parties in 2025. It addresses these questions, are Trump and the Republicans acting within the democratic system? Is the Democratic Party acting democratic?

Ranney and Kendall

Austin Ranney was president of the American Political Science Association and editor of the *American Political Science Review*. Though he never subscribed to the Responsible Parties Model, Ranney considered E. E. Schattschneider to be his mentor. He was active in the Democratic Party, serving on its McGovern-Fraser Commission (Polsby and Wolfinger 2006).

His coauthor, Willmoore Kendall was an avid conservative. While teaching at Yale, Kendall became a mentor to William F. Buckley and a cofounder of *National Review*. Kendall began his academic journey as a socialist, briefly calling himself a Communist. But, during the Cold War he became a Central Intelligence Group (forerunner of the CIA) propagandist and an anti-communist. His evolution in thought affected his view of democracy, prompting him in 1966 to write his own rejoinder to his 1941 *John Locke and the Doctrine of Majority Rule*, calling his earlier work "naïve" (See Owen 2021).

While coming from very different partisan points of view, what united Ranney and Kendall was their love of scholarship and their preference for majority rule. They consider the New England town meeting to be the ideal democracy. But, clearly, that model is not scalable to a nation the size of the United States. So, a system of representation that is responsive to the desires of the majority is required.

In addition to New England style democracy, Ranney & Kendall express a strong preference for popular consensus. Strict majority rule should only be imposed when consensus is not possible. Of course, consensus is sometimes difficult to find in a large and diverse nation. It requires discussion and deliberation. It often requires time to develop. A representative system that provides for consensus building is ideal in their view.

Obviously, there are many systems of representation in use around the world. What criteria should be used to determine whether or not such a system builds consensus and is responsive to the majority? And, do American political parties contribute to that responsiveness or blunt it?

Model Democracy

An extensive model is proposed in chapter 3 of *Democracy and the American Party System*. It is outlined in Figure 1.

Figure 1 about here

Using the New England town meeting as an ideal type, the model develops four concepts: popular sovereignty, political equality, popular consultation and majority rule. The first two are straight forward. Popular sovereignty is the idea that “the whole people of the nation must have the same full power over the nation’s government and affairs that the whole people of the town have over the town’s government and affairs” (Ranney and Kendall 1956, 43). Although they are unclear about what they mean by the whole people of the nation, it seems to imply eligible voters. For political equality they specify that each of the “citizens” must “enjoy the same political rights (to be heard, to have their interest and preferences taken into account, to vote when there is voting to be done) that, the members of the model town meeting enjoy” (Ranney and Kendall 1956, 43).

The popular consultation of the town hall is harder to replicate in a vast nation-state. It requires a representative assembly. Through elections the assembly is subordinate to the voters and makes the decisions the voters would make if present. The assembly holds other elected officials accountable. Popular consultation also requires that the full facts of a matter be communicated to the public and that “the citizens participate in the development of public policy as well as give or withhold consent to such proposals” (Ranney and Kendall 1956, 55).

Majority rule is even more tricky. Much of Ranney and Kendall’s theory is based on the tension they see between their two favorite principles – majority rule and

consensus building. They always prefer consensus to rule by mere majority. A chief benefit of the town hall is the ability to discuss issues and develop consensus. However, sometimes consensus cannot be reached, or time is short. In both instances they subscribe to a 50 percent plus one choice.

Although they support the right of the majority to rule, they firmly believe that bare majorities should rarely impose their will on the minority. In a later work, Kendall (1972) observed that the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965 resulted from strong bipartisan consensus, producing a stable coalition that effectively settled the issue. By contrast, Owen (2018) points out that the Affordable Care Act (Obamacare), passed by a narrow Democratic majority and zero Republican votes, identifies a demarcation line in the American political climate.

Ranney and Kendall urge majorities to “forbear from tyranny and minorities from irredentism and civil war” (1956, 55). The tension between strict majority rule and consensus building becomes a critical piece of their evaluation of the American party system and a part of their critique of the Responsible Parties Model.

Defining Parties

Prior to American political parties receiving privileged legal status, they were identified through functions they perform. Ranney & Kendall define parties as “autonomous organized groups that make nominations and contest elections in hope of eventually gaining and exercising control of the personnel and policies of government” (pg 85). Parties recruit and support candidates for office, and they grant candidates the use of their label. Many interest groups do some of these things, but few do all of them.

The most important characteristic of American parties is that they are loose confederations of state and local organizations and not monolithic entities controlled by a national boss. Parties that originated in the early days of Congress were coalitions of policy allies. This led to the need to organize in the states, so as to win more seats in Congress, and to control state legislatures, who chose U.S. Senators and presidential electors. As a result, in the early days of the republic the relationship between congressional leaders and state leaders was a key to gaining power. National leaders could provide policy wins and patronage jobs to state leaders, but only if state leaders could deliver Senators, electors and votes for congressional candidates.

In 1828 this need to build state level organizations produced a national convention. At the behest of Andrew Jackson, state leaders came together to nominate him for president and rally a campaign for him to be elected. From this event emerged a tradition that every four years state leaders meet to select a candidate for president and to rally a campaign. The national convention is by party rules and by tradition the ultimate governing body of each party. Thus 196 years later parties remain a loose coalition of state organizations.

At the state and local level, parties also are loose knit coalitions. With only a few well-known exceptions,¹ rarely does a single party boss have monolithic control over a state or local party. As Ranney and Kendall describe it, “He (the party boss) may perhaps ignore some of them (the voters) over the long periods and most of them over short periods; but never many of them for very long” (p. 256).

Parties are best understood as a multifaceted tripod. They originated as legislative caucuses, emerged as state and local organizations, and are totally dependent upon voters. This caused Key (1942) to describe them as the party in government, the party in organization, and the party in the electorate.

The party in government makes the policy decisions and controls the patronage, as a result its leaders comprise the center of power. However, to the extent that each legislator is independent of his or her peers, the legislative body lacks the cohesion for a strong leader to emerge. And, to the extent that legislators are dependent upon the party organizations back home to deliver votes and keep them in office, the power sometimes shifts to the formal state or local organization.

State and local organization leaders are elected, at the polls in some states or at caucuses and conventions in other states. These are often factional fights within the party ranks. From time-to-time strong leaders emerge and take control of the party apparatus. Often infighting keeps these organizations weak. Parties have gained recognition as political organizations under state laws and thus remain relevant, even when they are weak. And they play a prominent role every four years at the presidential nominating convention.

Voters hold the ultimate power over both the party in organization and the party in government. In the American context it is difficult to determine which voters to describe as party members. In most countries joining a party is a conscious decision that likely includes paying dues and agreeing to a level of activism. Most voters are not party members. In the U.S. registering to vote is a conscious decision. Most American voters associate their name with a party when they first register. After that, Americans have little or no loyalty to the party. Voters often vote for candidates of other parties. Only about 5 percent of voters take an active part in campaigns (Daniller and Gilberstadt 2020). For Ranney and Kendall straight party “ticket voters” constitute the party in the electorate (p. 202).

Taken together these loosely connected elected officials, these weak state and local organizations and these largely apathetic voters form an amorphous coalition described as a political party. Do they facilitate democratic governance? Or, are they a threat to democracy – by being too powerful, or by being too weak?

Evaluating Parties the Parties of 1956

Having developed an extensive model of democratic governance early in the book, Ranney and Kendall focus their evaluation of the state of American political parties in 1956 on popular consultation and majority rule. They raise three specific criteria: creative discussion, fostering consensus, and majority rule.

Encouraging creative discussion of innovative policy ideas among the public is not a strong suit of the two major parties. Parties are designed to win elections, not inspire discussion. They tend to use crisis rhetoric to motivate supporters, rather than encourage conversations about creative solutions. Thus, the discussion between the parties is not beneficial. However, the conversation outside of the parties between various pressure groups is more creative and does generally result in a compromise that no one fully likes, but that almost everyone can accept. Ranney and Kendall

conclude that the American political system achieves the goal of creative discussion, even if the parties themselves contribute little to that success.

“Parties make their best showing” in fostering consensus, according to Ranney and Kendall (p. 517). They achieve consensus in two ways. First, they promote a shared set of American values that help hold the society together. Second, they compete for support among every group in society, forcing pluralist compromise and general moderation of policy stances. This is to the chagrin of responsible party advocates.

Majority rule does emerge from the two-party system. It aggregates opinion within the two major parties, rather than between several smaller parties. The majority coalition is usually built on support for an individual candidate, rather than a set of policy mandates. And, these popular majorities arise as “bundles of compromise” (p. 524).

Overall, Ranney and Kendall give the two major American parties of 1956 a passing grade as a useful instrument of democracy. The system is not perfect, but it is good in their view. It aggregates pluralist voices, fosters consensus and produces majority coalitions. Although, those coalitions tend to be built around personalities and not policies.

Throughout the book they describe parties in exquisite detail. Their 1956 description illuminates much about the parties of 2025. The model of democratic governance described in Chapter 3 also remains relevant for evaluating parties today. Having developed such detail, it seems a bit odd that they focused their evaluation on three somewhat related criteria and ignored large parts of their model.

Evaluating the Parties of 2025

Figure 1 outlines the detailed model of democratic governance developed by Ranney and Kendall in 1956. That model is based on four major principles: the people must be sovereign, everyone has a right to participate in decision making, representatives need to both communicate ideas to their constituents and hear feedback from them, and consensus should be built, but where that is not possible the majority should rule.

The question arises; how do American parties measure up to these standards in 2025? What is the state of the parties based on the Ranney and Kendall model?

Of course, parties are only one aspect of the American political system. To the extent that parties control the system, through Congress and the presidency, an evaluation of the overall system may be in order. But the focus of this paper is on the activities of the parties within the system. This focus puts many things outside the scope of this evaluation, but it narrows the discussion to an evaluation of the parties themselves. The parties in government, parties in organization and the parties in the electorate are the focus in these remaining pages.

The first criterion of democratic governance in the model is popular sovereignty. This is the idea that the people rule. Ranney and Kendall specifically use the words “full power” and “the whole people.” Of course, the U.S. Constitution is based on the idea of popular sovereignty, but even today it clearly does not include all of the people. For example, people under the age of 18 are excluded and in some states people with

felony convictions are excluded. What role do the parties play in facilitating popular sovereignty?

Through their primary processes parties help aggregate voters' voices and narrow the choices to a more manageable list. They also provide voting cues, reducing the voter's need to research every candidate. Without this aggregation and these cues the number of decisions would overwhelm most voters. Of course, various states use different types of primaries and scholars will debate which is most effective. Most would agree that primaries give the people greater voice than party conventions or party bosses. Primaries, in some form, are ubiquitous in 2025. The parties facilitate voters' choices through primaries and voting cues, making it possible for the people to rule.

The second criterion of democratic governance in the model is political equality. With a few exceptions, in general every citizen above the age of 18 is allowed to participate in the American political system. The question is, do the parties help facilitate their participation? There are many opportunities for participation, and the parties drive most of them. Parties are actively involved in voter registration leading up to an election. Campaigns seek volunteers and paid staff. Parties participate in town hall meetings and sometimes host them. This is an area where the lines between the formal party in organization, the much less identifiable party in the electorate, and the independently operated campaigns for seats in government become jumbled. But, parties do work hard around election time to bring as many people as possible into the decision-making process.

The third criterion is popular consultation. Here the model offers five subpoints. A representative assembly is the first sub-criterion. Obviously, the American system is based on representative assemblies at every level of government – from school board to the U.S. Senate. The second sub-criterion is that the assemblies are subordinate to the people. Through the election process each assembly member is subordinate to the people. As mentioned above, parties facilitate this representation and subordination.

Evaluating the remaining criteria require more elaboration. The third sub-criterion under popular consultation is that the assembly makes the decisions the people would make if they were present. Of course, it is impossible to know what decision 235 million voting age citizens would make if they were all in the same room for a discussion. If a national referendum was held, it would be possible to know how about half of them (the half that turned out for the election) would vote. But, the Constitution does not provide for national referendums. Beyond that, it requires some faith in the representation system to know what choice voters would make on any given policy if everyone was present for the deliberation. The parties aggregate opinion and simplify choices. The resulting compromises leave almost everyone frustrated. The result is often a policy no one would choose alone, but a majority might choose if they were in the room for the deliberation. The parties certainly facilitate bringing a wide variety of voices into the room – everyone from Sen. Bernie Sanders to Rep. Thomas Massie.

The fourth sub-criterion is that assembly members hold other public officials accountable. Some may argue that the failure of the Congress to remove Bill Clinton or Donald Trump from the presidency is an indication that the parties in Congress do not perform this function well. On the other hand, the investigations, the trials, and the votes were highly partisan. Congress has launched many other investigations of public officials, most of which are highly partisan. The parties do provide an accountability

mechanism. In fact, investigations have become so pervasive that both parties are likely abusing this power. The need to reign in this overreach became apparent in June of 2025 when 128 Congressional Democrats joined Republicans in blocking an impeachment resolution aimed at President Trump.

The House did cast bi-partisan votes to expel George Santos from Congress. The Senate was in the process of investigating Bob Menendez when he ultimately resigned after he was convicted of crimes and sentenced to prison. Clearly, at least in some cases, the parties are engaged in holding public official accountable for their misdeeds.

Assemblies hold officials accountable in other ways as well. Passing laws, holding budget hearings, and holding confirmation hearings are a few. These hearing and votes also tend to be highly partisan affairs. Without the competition between parties, the opposition would likely be less well organized and less effective at bringing issues to the fore.

The fifth sub-criterion for popular consultation is communications from policy makers to the public. Office holders (the party in government) issue frequent press releases and statements. They hold partisan press conferences and email talking points to their partisans around the country almost daily. They flood social media with commentary. In that sense they are highly communicative. But, these statements tend to be more heated rhetoric than facts. Of course, there are facts underlying the rhetoric. Overall, the parties do provide a lot of information to the voters who wish to pay attention.

The sixth sub-criterion is citizens participating in the development of policy proposals. Public officials frequently hold electronic town hall meetings where constituents are invited to dial in and join a conversation with their representatives. There are numerous examples of state officials inviting the public to submit ideas via a website. When Marco Rubio was Speaker of the Florida House, he asked Floridians for 100 ideas to improve the state. Oklahoma Speaker Lance Cargill duplicated the effort with 100 Ideas for Oklahoma. Most recently Oklahoma Speaker Kyle Hilbert established a website where citizens can recommend spending cuts. These are just a few examples of how the party in government is soliciting ideas from the public.

Of course, it could be argued that all of this communication is for show, or that it is ineffective. But the parties have more channels of communication open to them, and they are using them more than ever. This is particularly true of the parties in government, but party organizations also use these tools. Objectively, political communication is more democratic than ever. Citizens are invited to participate in more ways than ever before.

The most important aspect of this model of democratic governance is majority rule. Majority opinion can be fleeting. Pundits like to track presidential approval polls or right track/wrong track polls. These clearly demonstrate that opinion can vary greatly in a matter of weeks. The focus of the discussion below will be on opinion at the time of the decision.

Support of at least half of the community is the first sub-criterion. The vast majority of decisions that government makes are so obscure that the public is unaware. Where they are aware, public opinion is rarely measured in a formal way. However, there are a few high profile issues where public opinion is widely reported.

Presidential elections are the only national vote.² In two of the last seven elections (2000 & 2016) the candidate who received the plurality of the vote did not win the election. In a third race (2024) the winner did not receive a majority. So, frequently the parties' work is not facilitating a majority opinion decision.

Of course, winning the popular vote is not how presidential elections are settled. The Electoral College determines the winner, and the parties are involved in every aspect of the Electoral College. The parties nominate electors in each state. Parties make strategic decisions about where and how to campaign. The party in organization is at the height of its activity and power during the presidential election. The Electoral College consistently produces a majority winner, even when there is not a majority winner in the national vote total.

Perhaps the most publicly debated legislation of 2025 was the budget reconciliation package, the bill President Trump labeled the One Big Beautiful Bill. He chose that title because he wanted the vast majority of his legislative agenda placed in a single legislative vehicle that was exempt from the Senate filibuster. Eventually, the bill passed the House and Senate by the narrowest of margins and with only Republican votes. Clearly, the parties facilitated the result on both sides. Did the majority opinion prevail?

Like most omnibus bills, the budget reconciliation package had provisions that polled well and provisions that were unpopular. According to a mid-June Fox News poll 58 percent opposed the overall bill, only 38 percent supported. A Washington Post/Ipsos poll found that sixty-five percent supported no tax on tips and 72 percent supported increasing the child tax credit. Cuts to Medicaid and tax cuts for the wealthy were deeply unpopular (Bowman 2025).

In the model Ranney and Kendall argue that consensus is preferable to slim majorities, even though they are majoritarians at heart. They expect policy outcomes to be bundles of compromise that hardly anyone fully supports, but no party finds intolerable. That does not seem to be the approach by either party in recent years. So, parties are not doing well at producing policy decisions or presidential results supported by a majority of voters.

The second sub-criterion of majority rule is that the majority of the assembly has power equal to a town meeting. While the example above suggests that the majority in Congress has the power to impose its will on the minority, this is not always the case. Because of the constant threat of a filibuster, it takes 60 votes in the Senate to pass most legislation. Also, both the House and the Senate can agree, yet the president can issue a veto. So, majority rule is somewhat limited in Congress and in most American legislatures. In as much as parties facilitate majorities, they also wield the filibuster and the veto to thwart majorities.

The third sub-criterion is that majority and minority parties promote loyalty to the community. Majorities should "forbear from tyranny." Minorities should abstain from "irredentism and civil war." When majorities move forward without any attempt to conciliate the minority as they did with the 2025 reconciliation package and the rescission package that followed, they are failing this criterion. When minorities call their opposition traitors and use heated rhetoric that incites their supporters to violent protest, they are failing at this criterion. Of course, there are plenty of examples in both parties of this failure. Trump on January 6, 2017 calling for his supporters to march to the

Capitol and “fight like hell,” Schumer saying Trump is “acting like a king, a despot, a wannabe dictator,” (The Guardian 2025) or Jeffries accusing Trump of an “unconstitutional assault on the American way of life” (2025) are just a few examples.

The fourth sub-criterion is “creative discussion” and a good faith effort by all to find what is best for the community. As in 1956, most of the creative discussion in 2025 occurs behind the scenes. As noted above, there are many opportunities for citizens to share their ideas. But, the incentive for public officials and candidates is to avoid commenting on any idea that has not been fully vetted. Every public statement is recorded and archived somewhere (YouTube, Twitter-X, etc.) and used as campaign fodder later. So, public officials, candidates and party officials cannot afford to explore creative ideas in public forums. Interest group coalitions do explore innovative proposals in semi-private closed-door meetings, but that is best described as outside of the party rather than a party function.

While each side may be making a good faith effort to find the best solution to issues for the whole community, once ideas become public they very quickly become partisan. The two major parties seem more interested in scoring political points than in working together to find the best solution.

It should be noted that at the state legislative level the vast majority of bills pass the legislature with overwhelming support from both parties. Opposition is often bipartisan as well. It is only a few controversial bills that display the partisanship seen in Congress. So, perhaps the parties in government at the state level score better on this criterion than the parties in Congress.

Reserving strict majority rule for emergency situations when there is not time to seek consensus is the final sub-criterion of majority rule in this model of democratic governance. The majority party in Congress has been able to act, especially in times of unified government. But the majorities have been so narrow that near consensus must be reached within the majority faction before they can act. That has left little to no room for negotiation and consensus within the whole body. This criterion suggests that Congressional leaders should take the time to seek a broader consensus. However the way the parties are pitted against one another, bi-partisan consensus may not be possible in this highly charged partisan environment.

Figure 2 summarizes this evaluation of the current state of the parties, based on the 1956 model of democratic governance. The results indicate that parties do provide services essential to democratic governance. They make democracy more possible by aggregating opinion and simplifying choices. They provide essential leadership and engage in competition. Unfortunately, the competition between the parties has become so intense that they are detracting from democratic governance by imposing the will of narrow majorities and failing to seek solutions that build a broader consensus within society.

Figure 2 about here

Responsible Parties Model

For decades political scientists have urged American political parties to provide a choice, not an echo (Page 1978). The idea that parties should provide distinct policy choices was enshrined in the American Political Science Association's 1950 report *Toward a More Responsible Two-Party System*. The diversity of ideas within the parties in Congress was thought to weaken the parties' brand and confuse voters. The suggestion was that greater party discipline would realign political choices around policy ideas.

Modern media (including partisan cable news and social media) and campaign finance law (like *Citizens United*) have focused voters' attention on a few big national issues and brought about a partisan sorting. These phenomena also make it more difficult for public officials to compromise. Currently, the parties are as programmatic and polarizing as any time since the 1930s.

A more recent APSA report argues that this partisan polarization has led to a loss of restraint within the parties (APSA 2023). Responsible parties should not only provide clear choices, but they should uphold democratic governance through forbearance and tolerance. Instead, parties are using their power to impose tyranny of the majority.

Applying the 1956 model of democratic governance, as seen in Figure 2, modern parties are not doing well with forbearance, tolerance, deliberation, or compromise. In the past, institutional norms grew out of the concept that any precedent established by a majority may haunt them when they find themselves in the minority. The unrelenting push to implement the majority's policies has weakened these restraints.

Populism's Role

The recent decline in institutional norms, particularly those associated with Congress and the presidency, has been accompanied by an increasing use of populist rhetoric in campaigns. Donald Trump gained vote share in communities with heavy union membership and in rural areas. Trump called his policies "common sense." Democratic candidates have openly moved toward more populist socialist proposals.

While the Democrats held majorities in the U.S. House and Senate institutionalists in both parties managed to hold the more extreme elements of their caucuses in check. Speaker Nancy Pelosi reigned in an early threat of revolt by "The Squad." Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer and Minority Leader Mitch McConnell cooperated to pass budget resolutions and other critical legislation. However, the populist legislators in both parties made this cooperation very difficult. Democrats in the Senate were continuously engaged in a debate over ending the filibuster and Court packing. Vice President Kamala Harris cast the most tie breaking votes in the history of

the Senate (NYT 2023). Despite these struggles, the institutional traditionalist prevailed on most issues.

When Republicans gained a narrow majority in the House, the challenge grew for institutionalists. With Trump in the White House and Republicans controlling the Senate, many institutional norms are falling. This decline in institutional structures is directly related to the rise of anti-establishment resentment within the Republican voting coalition. Trump campaigned on immigration, tariffs, and wasteful government spending. To deliver on these promises, he and his supporters in Congress have been willing to push the envelope on informal traditions within the House and Senate, while claiming that they are staying within the limits of the formal rules.

Are Parties Facilitating Democracy?

The 1956 model of democratic governance applied here indicates that the American system scores well on popular sovereignty and political equality. The two major parties facilitate these results by aggregating opinion and simplifying choices. The parties have more tools available to them for popular consultation than ever before, and they are using them.

However, the increase in “narrowcasting” (Ranney 1990) has led to a rise in specifically partisan appeals by both parties. Political communication from both parties tends to demonize the other side, making it difficult to compromise or to work together inside the governing institutions. These hyper-partisan campaigns have produced narrow victories in the presidential election and narrow majorities in both chambers of Congress. The desire to deliver on their party’s promises, over the objections, sometimes the intense objections, of the minority, is causing institutional norms to breakdown.

This may, in fact, be producing majority rule on a number of issues. However, the willingness of narrow majorities to impose their will on the minority is destroying the esprit de corps. Democratic governance is about more than simple majority rule. It must include building support for the overall system. A lack of forbearance and tolerance lends itself to tyranny of the majority and bitter recalcitrance by the minority.

Parties Must Facilitate Democratic Compromise

The American political system has had many populist moments in the past. The Articles of Confederation were designed to keep decision making close to the people. Andrew Jackson greatly built up the Democratic Party by using a campaign convention and patronage. The populist movement of the late 1800s paved the way for the rise of Theodore Roosevelt. There are many other examples in the states – famously Wisconsin, Louisiana, Nebraska, and Oklahoma. The country survived the upheaval of these populist or democratic upsurges. Important reforms came from each of these eras – the Constitution, the parties, the direct election of U.S. Senators, and the primaries. Each of these reforms brought the voices of the people more directly into political decision making.³

Political power in the U.S. has shifted regularly between the parties, even though Republicans enjoyed a long period of dominance after the Civil War and Democrats

during the Great Depression and World War II. Political leaders recognize that the precedents they set and the norms they create will be in place when their party moves into the minority. This realization creates a constraint that preserves some prerogatives for the minority.

Democratic governance is about more than just majority rule. It requires that political leaders build public trust in the system. It requires that enough minority views be incorporated into the final result that the minority feels like it has a stake in the result. Those who declare that compromise between the parties produces a uniparty miss the point of democratic deliberation. Parties can be responsible and responsive without being polarizing. Party leaders can clarify choices for voters without undermining the legitimacy of the opposition.

Party leaders on both sides need to act with forbearance and tolerance. They should engage the public in a discussion of creative solutions that look out for the interest of the entire community. They should seek consensus where possible and reserve forcing narrow majority action for rare occasions.

Figures

Figure 1: Ranney and Kendall's Criteria for Democratic Governance

- 1) Popular Sovereignty – Full power resides with the whole people.
- 2) Political Equality – Each of the citizens has a right to participate in the decision-making process.
- 3) Popular Consultation –
 - a. representative assembly,
 - b. elected assembly subordinate to the people,
 - c. assembly makes decisions the people would make if present,
 - d. assembly holds other public officials accountable,
 - e. facts are communicated to the public,
 - f. citizens participate in the development of proposals.
- 4) Majority Rule –
 - a. At least half of the community supports every decision,
 - b. Majority of assembly has power equal to a town hall,
 - c. To realize their “values” and to keep everyone “loyal to the community”
 - i. Majorities “forebear from tyranny”
 - ii. Minorities forebear “from irredentism and civil war”
 - d. Decisions based on “creative discussion in which all the members of the community are trying to find out what is best for the community.”
 - e. Voting and majority rule are for when “action is needed in a hurry and there is not sufficient time for a full ‘sense of the community.’”

See pages 54-55 in *Democracy and the American Party System*.

Figure 2: Evaluation of Parties Contribution to Democratic Governance Based on Ranney and Kendall's 1956 Criteria

+ indicates that parties contribute to democratic governance	
- indicates that parties reduce democratic governance	
1) Popular Sovereignty – Full power resides with the whole people.	+
2) Political Equality – Each of the citizens has a right to participate in the decision-making process.	+
3) Popular Consultation –	
a. representative assembly,	+
b. elected assembly subordinate to the people,	+
c. assembly makes decisions the people would make if present,	+
d. assembly holds other public officials accountable,	+
e. facts are communicated to the public,	+
f. citizens participate in the development of proposals.	+
4) Majority Rule –	
a. At least half of the community supports every decision,	-
b. Majority of assembly has power equal to a town hall,	-
c. To realize their “values” and to keep everyone “loyal to the community”	
i. Majorities “forebear from tyranny”	-
ii. Minorities forebear “from irredentism and civil war”	-
d. Decisions based on “creative discussion in which all the members of the community are trying to find out what is best for the community.”	-
e. Voting and majority rule are for when “action is needed in a hurry and there is not sufficient time for a full ‘sense of the community.’”	-
3c is very tough to judge. We are speculating here that if everyone was in the room and forced to compromise, they would come to the same or a similar compromise.	

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¹ Ray C. Bliss' Ohio Republican Party is one of those exceptions.

² The presidential vote is actually state votes viewed as a national vote total.

³ The anti-federalists argued the Constitution did not raise the people's voice, but the Constitution facilitated action whereas the Articles thwarted action.