Rescuing Democracy

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On Friday 10 February 2012, a panel of scientists met in London to prepare a statement for the Rio+20 Earth Summit that was scheduled for June, 20 years after the original Earth Summit. All of the panellists were winners of the prestigious Blue Planet prize, often seen as the Nobel Prize for environmental science. They concluded that we can forget about fixing the planet’s ecosystems and climate until we have fixed government systems. The chair of the meeting, the UK government’s chief environmental science advisor Bob Watson (cited in Pearce 2012a), declared: ‘We are disillusioned. The current political system is broken…Essentially nothing has changed in 20 years. We are not remotely on a course to be sustainable.’ He identified the top environmental priorities as ending the fossil-fuel era to curb climate change and investing in limiting population by making contraception available to everyone. But neither is likely to happen because, as climate modeller Syukuro Manabe (Pearce 2012a) of the US National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration observed, ‘the political system is not motivated to worry about the future.’

Four months later in June at Rio+20, AFP (2012) reported that veteran observers who watched the 10–day event drag to a close yesterday shook their heads in dismay.
To them, it was a fresh failure by the United Nations system, after the near-disastrous 2009 Copenhagen climate summit, to respond to eco-perils that are now approaching at express speed.

‘It’s a demonstration of political impotence, of system paralysis, and it makes me feel pessimistic about the system’s ability to deliver,’ said Laurence Tubiana, director of the French think-tank, the Institute for Sustainable Development and International Relations.

These negative assessments of the performance of governments around the world include democracies as being dangerously incompetent. Three years later, the 2015 Paris climate summit gave little reason to change this view. Although this Conference of the Parties expressed a desire to limit global warming to 1.5°C above preindustrial levels (rather than the riskier target of 2°C), it was noted by Michael Grubb of University College London (cited in Le Page 2015) that: ‘All the evidence from the past 15 years leads me to conclude that actually delivering 1.5°C is simply incompatible with democracy.’ The abandonment at Paris of legally binding national targets for reducing greenhouse gas emissions in favour of voluntary targets (Intended Nationally Determined Contributions or INDCs) might be taken as confirming Grubb’s assessment—that governments have given up on effectively addressing the problem. The INDCs pledged at Paris are expected to lead to warming of around 3°C, but this is hoped to be avoided by a ‘ratchet mechanism’ in which INDCs may be voluntarily increased at five-year intervals. Although a high and rapidly rising price on carbon is needed to deter fossil fuel use and drive emission reductions, the Paris agreement does not require any nation to implement this measure (Le Page 2015). The reaction of climate scientist James Hansen (cited by Le Page 2015) to the Paris agreement was: ‘It’s just worthless words. There is no action, just promises. As long as fossil fuels appear to be the cheapest fuels out there, they will be continued to be burned.’

A forecast of such government failure might have been seen more than a decade before in an observation by Eran Vigoda (2002, 530), political scientist at the University of Haifa:
Constitutions, legislatures, federal and local structures, as well as electoral institutions are in slow but significant decline in many Western societies. They suffer from increasing alienation, distrust, and cynicism among citizens; they encourage passivism and raise barriers before original individual involvement in state affairs.

Many other scholars have expressed similar views on democratic government. Political scientists April Carter and Geoffrey Stokes (2002, 2) have stated that despite ‘general agreement on the political benefits of liberal democracy, there is a widespread sense that its present institutions are not operating satisfactorily’. Nine years later, political sociologist Claus Offe (2011, 447) wrote: ‘Democracies, and by far not just the new ones among them, are not functioning well.’ Before any of those observers, sociologist Anthony Giddens (2000, 90) had described the problem in these terms:

Democracy is spreading around the world… yet in the mature democracies, which the rest of the world is supposed to be copying, there is widespread disillusionment with democratic processes. In most Western countries, levels of trust in politicians have dropped over the past years. Fewer people turn out to vote than used to, particularly in the US. More and more people say they are uninterested in parliamentary politics, especially among the younger generation.

In Australia, political scientists Janette Hartz-Karp and Lyn Carson (2009, 10) have noted that

the recent *Democratic Audit of Australia* and other studies tell a story of falling confidence in our political system. Symptoms include low levels of citizen engagement, apathy, and cynicism toward politics, declining membership in and public support for political parties, and growing numbers of young Australians seeking to avoid mandatory voter registration. (Australia makes voting compulsory at all levels of government.) Some observers trace the malaise to a ‘democratic deficit’ — institutional arrangements and conduct that appear at odds with the normative ideals of democracy, including
fationalism within parties, the intentional polarization of issues by political partisans, the over-simplification of issues in the news media, and the short time horizon of the policy-making process.

President Emeritus of Harvard, Derek Bok (2001), has written a detailed analysis of why the federal government of the United States has fallen into disrepute and offers many approaches to reform. However his proposals are piecemeal and he doubts their potential to fully address the problem. Public policy scholar at Yale, Peter Schuck (2014), has written a comprehensive analysis of the failure of US federal governments to implement existing domestic programs, but does not address failure to produce adequate law, policy and programs. According to the Quality of Government Institute at Sweden’s University of Gothenburg, dysfunction at this deeper level can be minimized only by installing institutions that are impartial and competent (Rothstein 2011). One precondition for competence is that the whole system of institutions is simple, so that the voting public can easily see who is responsible for existing policies and laws and respond accordingly at the next election. As discussed later, this precondition is not well provided by the US system.

Concerns about democratic government are expressed not only by social scientists, but also by some politicians in liberal democracies. Former Vice President of the US, Al Gore (2007) has declared that democracy is broken and needs fixing. In a farewell speech to Congress, Senator Bill Bradley (cited in Dalton 2004, 2) gave an alarming assessment of American democracy.

Democracy is paralyzed not just because politicians are needlessly partisan, although we are. The process is broken at a deeper level, and it won’t be fixed by replacing one set of elected officials with another … Citizens believe that politicians are controlled: by special interests who give them money, by parties which crush their independence, by ambition for higher office that makes them hedge their position rather than call it like they really see it, and by pollsters who convince them that only focus-group phrases can guar-
čaree them victory… Voters distrust government so deeply and so consistently that they are not willing to accept the results of virtually any decision made by this political process.

Ex-leader of the Australian Labor Party, Mark Latham (Barns 2007) has urged young people not to become politicians. The finance minister in the Australian Rudd and Gillard governments, Lindsay Tanner, abandoned politics in the lead up to the 2010 Federal election and subsequently complained that it was a deceptive ‘sideshow’:

The creation of appearances is now far more important for leading politicians than the generation of outcomes. This produces a good deal of deception, and…a collective mentality of cynicism and manipulation. Policy initiatives are measured by their media impact, not by their effect… I am very pessimistic about the future of Australian politics, as the sideshow syndrome seeps ever more insidiously into every tiny corner of government… (Tanner 2011).

Barry Cohen (2008, 3), Federal Minister for the Environment from 1983 to 1987 in the Australian Hawke government, has lamented that ‘governments never connect the dots between increasing population numbers and the ‘crises’ that daily beset our citizens’. In looking at the 2006 UN forecast of a world population of 9.2 billion by 2050, Boris Johnson (2008), who was elected as the Conservative Party’s candidate for Mayor of London in 2008 and 2012, expostulated:

How the hell can we witter on about tackling global warming, and reducing consumption, when we are continuing to add so relentlessly to the number of consumers? The answer is politics, and political cowardice… It is time we had a grown-up discussion about the optimum quantity of human beings in this country and on this planet.

Many scientists recognize that problems are neglected or made worse by liberal democratic governments. For example, social
epidemiologists Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett (2009, 4, 5) express concern at their neglect of inequality:

Mainstream politics no longer taps into these issues [of unsatisfied social needs] and has abandoned the attempt to provide a shared vision capable of inspiring us to create a better society. As voters, we have lost sight of any collective belief that society could be different. Instead of a better society, the only thing that almost everyone strives for is to better their own position — as individuals — within the existing society.

Economics Commissioner on the UK Sustainable Development Commission, Tim Jackson (2009, 167–8), describes liberal democracies as ‘deeply conflicted’ with ‘institutional schizophrenia’ that compels them to promote economic growth while they struggle to protect public goods from that growth. He declares that a ‘new vision of governance … is critical.’ Eminent Australian economist Ross Garnaut (cited in Spratt 2011, 30) has called his country’s political response to global warming ‘The great Australian complacency’. Kevin Anderson, director of the UK Tyndall Centre for Climate Change, and his colleague Alice Bows (cited in Spratt 2011, 29) have expressed alarm at political incompetence: ‘Put bluntly, while the rhetoric of policy is to reduce emissions in line with avoiding dangerous climate change, most policy advice is to accept a high probability of extremely dangerous climate change rather than propose radical and immediate reductions.’

Early this century in the United Kingdom, persistently poor voter turnouts at elections prompted the Joseph Rowntree Trusts to conduct an inquiry. This reported that membership of the three main parties in the UK in 2001 was less than 25 per cent of its 1964 level (POWERInquiry 2006, 46) and that ‘two separate studies found significant aggregate falls in party membership across thirteen and sixteen established democracies respectively since the 1950s’ (POWERInquiry 2006, 51). Similarly, Danish political scientists Jørgen Goul Andersen and Jens Hoff (2001) found that in the Scandinavian democracies, participation has
declined in conventional forms of politics, such as turnout at elections and membership of parties. However, they also found that, in an informal sense, interest in politics is not diminishing because Scandinavians are turning to single issue forms of participation and ‘small democracy’ in the workplace. This turn from party politics to issue politics is noted by Sian Kevill (cited in Smith 2005, 96), one of the directors of the BBC iCan website that facilitates citizen involvement on public issue campaigns in the UK. ‘People don’t approach politics through party allegiances any more … they approach it through an issue, and this site [BBC iCan] makes it easier for people to connect into politics through an issue.’ Kevill’s view is supported by Australian political scientist Judith Brett (2007, 12):

Party identification was once the strongest predictor of how a person would vote, for the great majority of the electorate… Partisanship was habitual and it simplified the political world… party rhetoric at election time reminded people of their traditional allegiances, activating the existing party loyalty that would deliver the vote. The electorate still contains such people, but their numbers are declining. Across the western world, partisanship is on the wane and electorates are becoming more volatile. People change their vote between elections, between state and federal, between lower and upper houses. People identify with a party but vote for another as a protest. Or people identify not much with any party but make up their minds once the campaign is underway, based on issues and their judgements of the leaders.

In surveying democratic politics in Australia, environmental scientist David Yencken and legal scholar Nicola Henry (2008, 17) have assessed that

Australians are generally satisfied and proud of their democracy, but… There is widespread evidence of voter cynicism about politics and politicians in Australia and elsewhere. Opinion poll after opinion poll has shown low confidence in the standing of politicians and in the confidence of Australians in political institutions… [research
shows] a one-third decline of belief in the moral standards of members of parliament over the preceding two decades.

Yencken and Henry offer several possible causes of this lack of confidence: a blurring of differences between the major parties as each seeks to cater to the mainstream majority of voters; the rarity of bipartisan concern for the country, as each party declares the others incompetent; apathy and retreat by citizens worn out and wearied by a myriad of issues; and disenchantment with governments that are neither transparent nor accountable and that do not facilitate meaningful public participation.

Robert Reich, who was US Secretary of Labor in the Clinton Administration, notes the growth of a similar cynicism and sense of powerlessness in his country. In 1964, 36 per cent of Americans felt ‘public officials don’t care much what people like me think’ (Reich 2007, 5). By 2000 that sentiment was shared by more than 60 per cent. In 1964, almost two-thirds of Americans believed government was run for the benefit of all and only 29 per cent said it was ‘run by a few big interests looking out only for themselves’ (Reich 2007, 5). But by 2000, the ratio was almost reversed: only 35 per cent believed government was run for the benefit of all, while more than 60 per cent thought it was run by a few big interests.

In surveying the fortunes of democracy around the world over the previous four decades, the founding coeditor of The Journal of Democracy, Larry Diamond (2009, 20), noted that a ‘wave of liberation began in 1974 in Portugal’. At that time barely a quarter of the world’s states were democratic in the minimal sense of choosing their politicians by regular, free and fair elections based on universal suffrage. Over the next twenty years, dictatorships were replaced by freely elected governments in southern Europe, then in Latin America, followed by East Asia.

Finally, an explosion of freedom in the early ’90s… spread democracy from Moscow to Pretoria… In recent years, however, this mighty tide has receded… [starting] in 1999, with the military coup in Pakistan, an upheaval welcomed by a public weary of endemic
signs of failure … Many emerging democracies were experiencing similar crises … Thanks to bad governance and popular disaffection, democracy has lost ground. Since the start of the democratic wave, 24 states have reverted to authoritarian rule. Two thirds of these reversals have occurred in the past nine years — and included some big and important states such as Russia, Venezuela, Bangladesh, Thailand … Nigeria and the Philippines. (Diamond 2009, 20–21)

Diamond also noted that democratic government was facing difficulties in Bolivia, Ecuador, Turkey, South Africa and Ukraine. Although observing some successes such as Indonesia, Brazil, Ghana and, very tentatively, Pakistan, he concluded that around 60 democracies were insecure, that many could fail and ‘need deep reforms to strengthen their democratic institutions and improve governance’ (Diamond 2009, 22).

Several organisations provide comparative rankings of the democratic qualities of national governments. One of the most respected is that of The Economist Intelligence Unit’s Democracy Index (EIUDI), and it supports Diamond’s claims by indicating that although almost half of the world’s 165 independent states and two territories (excluding 27 micro-states) can currently be considered democracies, only 26 of these are rated as ‘full democracies’, while 53 are ‘flawed democracies’. Of the remaining countries, 33 are assessed as ‘hybrid regimes’ (authoritarian but with some democratic features) and 55 as ‘authoritarian regimes’ (Economist 2010, 1). Comparing this assessment with its previous survey of 2008, The Economist (2010, 1) observed: ‘Now democracy is in retreat. The dominant pattern in all regions over the past two years has been backsliding on previously attained progress in democratisation.’ The US-based non-governmental organisation (NGO) Freedom House also finds a serious reversal in the recent fortunes of liberal democracy, with 2007 being the second year in succession in which ‘freedom retreated’ (Economist 2008b, 12). A large part of this has been the rapid reversal of democratic reforms made in the aftermath of the breakup of the
Soviet Union. However, this experience in Eastern Europe and the Commonwealth of Independent States is not unique.

Major reversals have taken place before—a democratisation wave after the second world war ended with more than 20 countries subsequently sliding back to authoritarianism. That sort of rollback is not currently evident, but the threat of backsliding now greatly outweighs the possibility of further gains… But trends such as globalisation, increasing education and expanding middle classes would have tended to favour the organic development of democracy. These underlying forces, even if developing at a slower pace than in the recent past, suggest that the retreat from democracy will not be permanent. (Economist 2010, 21).

Only a few months after this assessment, its optimistic side appeared to be finding justification as authoritarian regimes in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Syria, Yemen, Bahrain and other middle east and north African countries were shaken or toppled by popular resistance. However, as the revolutionaries tried to install and maintain democracy, they apparently found that the necessary dialogue, compromise and inclusiveness was incompatible with their revolutionary and religious sentiments. A few years later, as this is written, only Tunisia has made a successful transition.

Evidence that many established democracies are in trouble is accompanied by theoretical predictions of democratic failure, at least in terms of competence if not of viability. Scholars working in the research program of ‘public choice’ (which uses the ‘rational choice’ method) are prominent in having ‘elaborated a long list of arguments for why democracy fails to deliver ‘good’ policy’ (Leeson 2006, 357). One of the founders of public choice, James Buchanan (2003, 8), observed that, in ‘a very real sense, public choice became a set of theories of governmental failures.’ Public choice economist Bryan Caplan outlines one of these theories:

In economic jargon, democracy has a built-in externality. An irrational voter does not hurt only himself. He also hurts everyone
who is, as a result of his irrationality, more likely to live under mis-guided policies. Since most of the cost of voter irrationality is external — paid for by other people, why not indulge? If enough voters think this way, socially injurious policies win by popular demand. (2008, 3, Caplan’s emphasis)

Economists Charles Blankart and Gerrit Koester (2006) have suggested that government failure is predicted, identified and explained much more in public choice than in mainstream political science because the scholars in each area ask different questions. International relations theorist Hans J. Morgenthau (cited in Blankart and Koester 2006, 189) has observed that political science ‘deals with the nature, the accumulation, the distribution, the exercise, and the control of power on all levels of social interaction, with special emphasis upon the power of the state’. Blankart and Koester (2006, 190) therefore note that political scientists ask: What are the institutions and constraints that allow the accumulation, distribution, exercise, and control of power here and now — and not under some alternative, not yet existing framework? And they focus on the coercive power of the state… [But for public choice scholars] the relevant question in constitutional analysis is not limited to what effects existing institutions have … public choice focuses on suggestions for institutional improvements based on constitutional analysis.

In addition to the work of public choice theorists, that of comparative political scientists implies that many democratic governments fail in some ways, for a major purpose of their comparisons is to assess which forms of democracy function best (e.g Lijphart 2012; Rothstein 2011). Further recognition by political science of this failure is the development over the last thirty years of the theory that democratic government would be improved by more public participation, provided that it is deliberative. Political scientist Graham Smith (2001, 72) has observed that ‘deliberative democracy is fast establishing itself as a new orthodoxy within contemporary democratic theory’, and the
motivation for this appears to have been expressed by political philosopher Iris Marion Young (2000, 132): ‘All existing representative democracies could be improved by additional procedures and fora through which citizens discuss with one another and with representatives their evaluation of policies representatives have supported.’ So the deliberative orthodoxy in political science not only views democracies as being dysfunctional to some extent, but identifies a deficit of competent input by citizens as a major cause.

This ‘deliberative turn’ in democratic theory has been preceded and accompanied by a host of practical attempts by both concerned citizens and political scientists to facilitate constructive political participation by the public, many of which are listed in Participedia (www.participedia.net). Some of these attempts are simply to increase participation and others include, or focus on, the facilitation of public deliberation. The latter effort has been mainly to develop and implement forums that conduct facilitated deliberation of a specific issue for a limited time. A very large forum of this type is that of AmericaSpeaks, which has run one in which five thousand citizens took part. Other deliberative designs, such as consensus conferences, citizen juries, citizens’ assemblies and deliberative opinion polls, convene smaller groups so that it is easier for their participants to hear, question and consider the views of the other members of the group. In the US, the National Issues Forums run by the Kettering Foundation invite citizens to gather in groups up to the size of a town hall meeting, in which they discuss issues framed by carefully written booklets.

To encourage participation rather than deliberation, on-line polling is employed by NGOs such as MoveOn in the US, Get-up! in Australia and Avaaz and Change.org internationally. A more hands-on form of participation is participatory budgeting (PB), which was initiated by the city of Porto Alegre, Brazil. This enables citizens to decide how their public funds are to be spent, and it is now used in about 180 Brazilian municipalities, one Brazilian state and a number of other cities across Latin America. As the PB system delegates executive power to citizens
rather than legislative power, it tends to be participatory rather than comprehensively deliberative. The German ‘delegative’ experiment of Liquid Democracy tries to facilitate participation by enabling citizens to delegate their vote to other voters. In Tasmania, Australia, a community consultation process based on Oregon Shines, called Tasmania Together, monitors development goals for the period 2000–2020 that it devised for the state at the outset of that period. Although Tasmania Together was intended to engage citizens, it has virtually no deliberative capacity (Crowley 2009), and after a few years was quietly sidelined by the government that introduced it.

In all liberal democracies, the rather passive public participation produced by public opinion polls is accorded high political status by both the public and politicians. Many business associations and other special interest groups (including NGOs such as Greenpeace, The Wilderness Society and Amnesty International) provide indirect participation with lobbying services for their members and sympathizers. In Washington the number of lobbyists has grown enormously since 1970, so that by 1999 there were more than 60,000, spending almost US$2 billion a year, while a ‘similar tide of corporate lobbying has engulfed other global capitals in recent years’ (Reich 2007, 136). The amount spent on lobbying the American federal government in 2009 has been estimated to have been US$3.5 billion (Economist 2011a). By 2012 all government lobbying in the US was thought to employ around 100,000 lobbyists spending US$6–8 billion per year (Loomis 2013).

Most of these activities, whether deliberative or participatory or both, are attempts to provoke responses from democratic governments on issues concerning public goods. As political scientist Francis Fukuyama (2014, 482–4) notes, some of these attempts are intended to promote what their organisers and lobbyists consider is in the public interest, and others are aimed at obtaining private goods for special interests at the cost of public goods (see §2.1 below for definitions of those types of goods). These activities can all be considered to make democracy more participatory, shifting it a little from representative
towards direct democracy. An obvious problem with moving in this direction is to make sure that the opportunity to influence government is distributed equally to all citizens, so that each has the same democratic ability to say which public goods are to be provided and to what degree their private goods are to be surrendered to make this possible. Another problem is to make sure that this democratic voice is informed by public deliberation about the benefits and costs of specific public goods.

Many scholars focus on erosion of political support as a major problem for democracy. Political scientist Russell Dalton (2004, 199–200) has described this as a ‘pattern of ‘dissatisfied democrats’ or ‘critical citizens’ who want to improve the democratic process, rather than one of anti-system critics of democracy.’ Instead of starting with an analysis of the causes of such dissatisfaction, this book begins by investigating liberal democratic governments’ failures to provide public goods. If this reveals such failure and why it occurs, it should indicate how it might be prevented. Any success with such measures might then help to restore political support, but the primary aim here is to achieve better government rather than less critical citizens.

Reich has given a view of democratic failure that contrasts with the view taken in this book. His interpretation of the growing sense of political powerlessness in American citizens is not so much that this is a sign that democracy is failing, but that capitalism has become extremely good at what it does, so that it has now become ‘supercapitalism’ and is therefore increasingly able to assert itself over government. He states that the ‘triumph of supercapitalism has led, indirectly and unwittingly, to the decline of democracy’ (Reich 2007, 224). However, it is argued here in Chapter 2 that it is more useful to view the causality as reversed — to view this decline as a failure of democratic government to provide public goods, which as pointed out in §2.1, includes intangible things such as cooperation and prudent restraint of self-interest. In order to produce public goods, government (as also discussed in §2.1) must compete for the necessary resources with those who would use them to produce private goods. These resources include many public goods, so govern-
ment must compete against capitalism to prevent it converting them into private goods. So this ‘decline’ should be seen as failure by democratic government, which allows capitalism to win the competition and grow into ‘supercapitalism’. This increased capacity of capitalism focuses the people’s interests more firmly onto private goods, so public goods are further neglected and government failure consolidates.

Several decades ago, economist Fred Hirsch (1977, 18) surveyed the interaction of the market and politics, noting that the market provides a full range of choice between alternative piece-meal, discrete, marginal adjustments, but no facility for selection between alternative states… By contrast, the political mechanism, through which preference between alternative states could in principle be posed, has not yet developed a satisfactory system for such decision [making]… [Hence] both the market and the political system … cannot deliver on what the public takes to be their promise.

So Hirsch blamed the political system for making decisions that limited the welfare that could be gained from public and private goods. Economists Luis Carvalho and Joao Rodrigues (2006, 344) observe that the ‘contradictions touched upon by Hirsch 30 years ago have not yet been surpassed. On the contrary they are probably operative in a new phase of capitalism … which took root in the 80s and consolidated in the 90s.’

There are, therefore, signs from many sources that liberal democracy malfunctions to a serious degree. Perhaps the spectacle of these difficulties encourages authoritarian behaviour such as the democratic backsliding of Russia under Vladimir Putin and Dmitry Medvedev, the continuation of repressive control by the Chinese Communist Party and the restrictiveness of government in Singapore, which fails to rate as even a flawed democracy, being classed as a hybrid regime by the EIUDI (Economist 2010, 5). Consistent with that rating, Kishore Mahbubani (2008, 18, 21), Dean of the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy, has given qualified support to authoritarian government for societies in difficult circumstances, by emphasizing that social order
contributes more to the freedom of citizens than their freedom to express themselves politically. Perhaps the challenge for liberal democracy is to restructure itself so that it provides freedom of political expression in a way that enhances, rather than threatens, social order. Political journalist and author Fareed Zakaria (2003, 255–6) has called for this type of reform:

The greatest danger of unfettered and dysfunctional democracy is that it will discredit democracy itself, casting all popular governance into a shadowy light. This would not be unprecedented. Every wave of democracy has been followed by setbacks in which the system is seen as inadequate and new alternatives have been proposed by ambitious leaders and welcomed by frustrated people… It is worth remembering that the embrace of communism and fascism in the 1930s did not seem as crazy at the time as it does now… As we enter the twenty-first century, our task is to make democracy safe for the world.

Zakaria’s call has been virtually ignored, with one consequence arguably being the global financial crisis of 2007–08. This demonstrated fundamental weaknesses in democratic systems, for they had steadily accumulated dangerous levels of debt by deregulating banking and expanding entitlements. Disillusionment with democratic governments then increased as they ‘bailed out bankers with taxpayers’ money and then stood by impotently as financiers continued to pay themselves huge bonuses’ (Economist 2014a, 48). In contrast to this frustration, the Chinese elite argue that their model—tight control by the Communist Party, coupled with a relentless effort to recruit talented people into its upper ranks—is more efficient than democracy and less susceptible to gridlock. The political leadership changes every decade or so, and there is a constant supply of fresh talent as party cadres are promoted based on their ability to hit targets…

Many Chinese are prepared to put up with their system if it delivers growth. The 2013 Pew Survey of Global Attitudes showed that 85% of Chinese were ‘very satisfied’ with their country’s direc-
tion, compared with 31% of Americans. Some Chinese intellectuals have become positively boastful. Zhang Weiwei of Fudan University argues that democracy is destroying the West, and particularly America, because it institutionalises gridlock, trivialises decision-making and throws up second-rate presidents like George Bush junior … Wang Jisi … of Beijing University, has observed that ‘many developing countries that have introduced Western values and political systems are experiencing disorder and chaos’ and that China offers an alternative model. Countries from Africa (Rwanda) to the Middle East (Dubai) to South East Asia (Vietnam) are taking this advice seriously. (Economist 2014a, 48–49)

Former Science Counsellor at the US embassy in Beijing, Deborah Seligsohn (2015, 43), adds weight to these assessments of the competitiveness of the Chinese system with her observation that the ‘Chinese government is good at collecting taxes, and does not have to deal with the same political opposition to taxation as the US and Europe.’

As the examples given in this chapter indicate, our focus is on democratic governance at large scales, such as national and global, rather than local. Part 1 now follows, looking for features common to all democracies that seem likely to cause government failure. If we can identify such features, we then have a diagnosis that might indicate a general prescription for improving democratic performance. As we shall see, that diagnosis emphasizes the significance of failure at large scales.