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ACTIVE LIBERTY

INTERPRETING OUR DEMOCRATIC
CONSTITUTION

STEPHEN BREYER

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*Interpreting Our
Democratic Constitution*

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VINTAGE BOOKS

A Division of Random House, Inc.

New York

Table of Contents

[*Title Page*](#)

[*Dedication*](#)

[*Praise*](#)

[*Acknowledgments*](#)

[*INTRODUCTION*](#)

[THE THEME: ACTIVE LIBERTY](#)

[THE THEME CONSIDERED . . .](#)

[. . . AS FALLING WITHIN AN INTERPRETIVE TRADITION . . .](#)

[. . . AND CONSISTENT WITH THE CONSTITUTION'S HISTORY](#)

[APPLICATIONS](#)

[THE PRINCIPLE OF ACTIVE LIBERTY](#)

[SPEECH](#)

[FEDERALISM](#)

[PRIVACY](#)

[AFFIRMATIVE ACTION](#)

[STATUTORY INTERPRETATION](#)

[Case One](#)

[Case Two](#)

[Case Three](#)

[ADMINISTRATIVE LAW](#)

[RECAPITULATION](#)

[A SERIOUS OBJECTION](#)

[EPILOGUE](#)

[Notes](#)

[About the Author](#)

[ALSO BY STEPHEN BREYER](#)

[Copyright Page](#)

To my brother and fellow judge, Chuck

Acclaim for Stephen Breyer's

ACTIVE LIBERTY

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Acknowledgments

This book originally took the form of the Tanner Lectures on Human Values presented at Harvard University in 2004. Gordon Wood and Robert George provided valuable commentary on those lectures. The University of Utah Press will publish an archival copy of the lectures and commentary. I presented an initial version of the Tanner Lectures as the James Madison Lecture at New York University Law School in 2001 (published as *Our Democratic Constitution*, 77 *New York University Law Review*, 2002).

I am grateful indeed for the time, effort, and advice of Paul Gewirtz and Robert Henry. I also very much appreciate the constructive commentary of the people who have read earlier drafts of this work, including Akhil Amar, Michael Boudin, Erwin Chemerinsky, Norman Dorsen, Ronald Dworkin, William Eskridge, Owen Fiss, Charles Fried, Elizabeth Garrett, Richard Pildes, Richard Posner, Robert Post, and Laurence Tribe; and, a special thanks, too, to Emma Rothschild. Their critiques, their ideas, and their suggestions have helped me enormously, adding much of value to the enterprise. I thank all those I have mentioned and others as well for their many contributions. I thank Patricia Hasler for my editor, and the others at Knopf who worked long, hard, and effectively at bringing this book to publication.

INTRODUCTION

The United States is a nation built upon principles of liberty. That liberty means not only freedom from government coercion but also the freedom to participate in the government itself. When Jefferson wrote, “I know no safe depository of the ultimate powers of the society but the people themselves,” his concern was for abuse of government power. But when he spoke of the rights of the citizen as “a participator in the government of affairs,” when Adams, his rival, added that all citizens have a “positive passion for the public good,” and when the Founders referred to “public liberty,” they had in mind more than freedom from a despotic government. They had invoked an idea of freedom as old as antiquity, the freedom of the individual citizen to participate in the government and thereby share with others the right to make or to control the nation’s public acts.¹

Writing thirty years after the adoption of the American Constitution and the beginnings of the French Revolution, the political philosopher Benjamin Constant emphasized the differences between these two kinds of liberty. He called them “the liberty of the ancients” and the “liberty of the moderns.” He described “the liberty of the ancients” as an active liberty. It consisted of a sharing of the nation’s sovereign authority among that nation’s citizens. From the citizen’s perspective it meant “an active and constant participation in collective power”; it included the citizen’s right to “deliberate in the public place,” to “vote for war or peace,” to “make treaties,” to “enact laws,” to examine the actions and accounts of those who administer government, and to hold them responsible for their misdeeds. From the nation’s perspective, it meant “submitting to all the citizens, without exception, the care and assessment of their most sacred interests.” This sharing of sovereign authority, Constant said, “enlarged” the citizens’ “minds, ennobled their thoughts,” and “established among them a kind of intellectual equality which forms the glory and the power of a people.”²

At the same time, ancient liberty was incomplete. It failed to protect the individual citizen from the tyranny of the majority. It provided a dismal pretext for those who advocated new “kinds of tyranny.” Having seen the Terror, Constant was well aware of the dangers of subjecting the individual to the unconstrained “authority of the group”; and he warned against “borrowing from the ancient republic the means” for governments “to oppress us.” Constant argued that governments must protect the “true modern liberty.” That liberty, “civil liberty,” freedom from government, consisted of the individual’s freedom to pursue his own interests and desires free of improper government interference.³

Constant argued that both kinds of liberty—ancient and modern—are critically important. A society that overemphasizes ancient liberty places too low a value upon the individual’s right to freedom from the majority. A society that overemphasizes modern liberty runs the risk that citizens, “enjoying the private independence and in the pursuit of their individual interests,” will “too easily renounce the rights to share political power.” We must “learn to combine the two together.”⁴

In this book, while conscious of the importance of modern liberty, I seek to call increased attention to the combination’s other half. I focus primarily upon the active liberty of the ancients, which

Constant called the people's right to "an active and constant participation in collective power." My thesis is that courts should take greater account of the Constitution's democratic nature when they interpret constitutional and statutory texts. That thesis encompasses well-known arguments for judicial modesty: The judge, compared to the legislator, lacks relevant expertise. The "people" must develop "the political experience" and they must obtain "the moral education and stimulus that come from . . . correcting their own errors." Judges, too, must display that doubt, caution, and prudence, that not being "too sure" of oneself, that Judge Learned Hand described as "the spirit of liberty."⁵

But my thesis reaches beyond these classic arguments. It finds in the Constitution's democratic objective not simply restraint on judicial power or an ancient counterpart of more modern protection but also a source of judicial authority and an interpretive aid to more effective protection of ancient and modern liberty alike. It finds a basic perspective that helps make sense of our Constitution's structure, illuminating aspects that otherwise seem less coherent. Through examples, my thesis illustrates how emphasizing this democratic objective can bring us closer to achieving the proper balance to which Constant referred. The examples suggest that increased emphasis upon that objective by judges when they interpret a legal text will yield better law—law that helps a community of individuals democratically find practical solutions to important contemporary social problems. The examples simultaneously illustrate the importance of a judge's considering practical consequences, that is, consequences valued in terms of constitutional purposes, when the interpretation of constitutional language is at issue.

In a word, my theme is democracy and the Constitution. I illustrate a democratic theme—"active liberty"—which resonates throughout the Constitution. In discussing its role, I hope to illustrate how this constitutional theme can affect a judge's interpretation of a constitutional text.⁶

To illustrate a theme is not to present a general theory of constitutional interpretation. Nonetheless, themes play an important role in a judge's work. Learned Hand once compared the task of interpreting a statute to that of interpreting a musical score. No particular theory guarantees that the interpreter can fully capture the composer's intent. It makes sense to ask a musician to emphasize one theme more than another. And one can understand an interpretation that approaches a great symphony from a "romantic," as opposed to a "classical," point of view. So might a judge pay greater attention to a document's democratic theme; and so might a judge view the Constitution through a more democratic lens. The matter is primarily one of approach, perspective, and emphasis. And approach, perspective, and emphasis, even if they are not theories, play a great role in law.⁷

For one thing, emphasis matters when judges face difficult questions of statutory or constitutional interpretation. All judges use similar basic tools to help them accomplish the task. They read the text's language along with related language in other parts of the document. They take account of its history, including history that shows what the language likely meant to those who wrote it. They look to tradition indicating how the relevant language was, and is, used in the law. They examine precedents interpreting the phrase, holding or suggesting what the phrase means and how it has been applied. They try to understand the phrase's purposes or (in respect to many constitutional phrases) the values that it embodies, and they consider the likely consequences of the interpretive alternative valued in terms of the phrase's purposes. But the fact that most judges agree that these basic elements—language, history, tradition, precedent, purpose, and consequence—are useful does not mean the

agree about just where and how to use them. Some judges emphasize the use of language, history, and tradition. Others emphasize purpose and consequence. These differences of emphasis matter—and the book will explain why.

For another thing, emphasis matters in respect to the specialized constitutional work of a Supreme Court Justice. In my view, that work, though appellate in nature, differs from the work of a lower appellate court in an important way. Because a Justice, unlike a judge on a trial or appellate court, faces a steady diet of constitutional cases, Supreme Court work leads the Justice to develop a view of the Constitution as a whole. My own view is likely similar to that of others insofar as I see the document as creating a coherent framework for a certain kind of government. Described generally, that government is democratic; it avoids concentration of too much power in too few hands; it protects personal liberty; it insists that the law respect each individual equally; and it acts only upon the basis of law itself. The document embodies these general objectives in discrete provisions. In respect to democratic government, for example, the Constitution insists that Congress meet at least once each year, that elections take place every two (or four or six) years, that representation be based upon census that must take place every decade; and it has gradually extended the right to vote to all adult men and women of every race and religion. (It also guarantees the states a “republican form of government.”)⁸

But my view can differ from the views of various others in the way in which I understand the relation between the Constitution’s democratic objective and its other general objectives. My view can differ in the comparative significance I attach to each general objective. And my view can differ in the way I understand how a particular objective should influence the interpretation of a broader provision and not just those provisions that refer to it directly. These differences too are often a matter of degree, a matter of perspective, or emphasis, rather than a radical disagreement about the general nature of the Constitution or its basic objectives.

Finally, the fact that members of historically different Supreme Courts have emphasized different constitutional themes, objectives, or approaches over time allows us to characterize a Court during a period of its history and to speak meaningfully about changes in the Court’s judicial “philosophy” over time. Thus, one can characterize the early nineteenth century as a period during which the Court, through its interpretations of the Constitution, helped to establish the authority of the federal government, including the federal judiciary. One can characterize the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries as a period during which the Court overly emphasized the Constitution’s protection of private property, as, for example, in *Lochner v. New York*, where (over the dissent of Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes) it held that state maximum hour laws violated “freedom of contract.” At the same time, that Court wrongly underemphasized the basic objectives of the Civil War amendments. It tended to ignore that those amendments sought to draw all citizens, irrespective of race, into the community, and that those amendments, in guaranteeing that the law would equal respect all “persons,” hoped to make the Constitution’s opening phrase, “We the People,” a political reality.⁹

Later Courts—the New Deal Court and the Warren Court—emphasized ways in which the Constitution protected the citizen’s “active liberty,” i.e., the scope of the right to participate in government. The former dismantled various *Lochner*-era distinctions, thereby expanding the

constitutional room available for citizens, through their elected representatives, to govern themselves. The latter interpreted the Civil War amendments in light of their basic purposes, thereby directing helping African Americans become full members of the nation's community of self-governing citizens—a community that the people had expanded through later amendments, for example, those extending the suffrage to women, and which the Court expanded further in its “one person, one vote” decisions. The Warren Court's emphasis (on the need to make the law's constitutional promises a legal reality) also led it to consider how the Civil War amendments (and later amendments) had changed the scope of pre-Civil War constitutional language, that is, by changing the assumptions, premises, or presuppositions upon which many earlier constitutional interpretations had rested. In doing so, it read the document as offering broader protection to “modern liberty” (protecting the citizen from government) as well. While I cannot easily characterize the current Court, I will suggest that it may have swung back too far, too often underemphasizing or overlooking the contemporary importance of active liberty.¹⁰

For all these reasons, it is clear that themes, approaches, and matters of emphasis can make a difference. This book will describe one such theme, that of active liberty. I shall show, through a set of six examples (focused on contemporary problems), how increased emphasis upon that theme can help judges interpret constitutional and statutory provisions. I shall link use of the theme to a broad interpretive approach that places considerable importance upon consequences; and I shall contrast that approach with others that place greater weight upon language, history, and tradition.

In the process, I hope to illustrate the work of a judge of a constitutional court; to justify use of the general interpretive approach I implicitly set forth; to explain why I believe that a different interpretive approach that undervalues consequences, by undervaluing related constitutional objectives, exacts a constitutional price that is too high; to focus increased attention upon the Constitution's democratic objective; and, in doing so, to promote reemphasis of those objectives as an important theme that significantly helps judges interpret the Constitution.

THE THEME: ACTIVE LIBERTY

THE THEME CONSIDERED . . .

The concept of active liberty—as I said at the outset—refers to a sharing of a nation’s sovereign authority among its people. Sovereignty involves the legitimacy of a governmental action. And sharing of sovereign authority suggests several kinds of connection between that legitimacy and the people.

For one thing, it should be possible to trace without much difficulty a line of authority for the making of governmental decisions back to the people themselves—either directly, or indirectly through those whom the people have chosen, perhaps instructed, to make certain kinds of decisions certain ways. And this authority must be broad. The people must have room to decide and leeway to make mistakes.

For another, the people themselves should participate in government—though their participation may vary in degree. Participation is most forceful when it is direct, involving, for example, voting in town meetings, political party membership, or issue- or interest-related activities. It is weak, but still minimally exists, to the extent that it is vicarious, reflected, say, in the understanding that each individual belongs to the political community with the right to participate should he or she choose to do so.

Finally, the people, and their representatives, must have the capacity to exercise their democratic responsibilities. They should possess the tools, such as information and education, necessary to participate and to govern effectively.

When I refer to active liberty, I mean to suggest connections of this kind between the people and their government—connections that involve responsibility, participation, and capacity. Moreover, active liberty cannot be understood in a vacuum, for it operates in the real world. And in the real world, institutions and methods of interpretation must be designed in a way such that this form of liberty is both sustainable over time and capable of translating the people’s will into sound policies.

. . . AS FALLING WITHIN AN INTERPRETIVE TRADITION . . .

The theme as I here consider it falls within an interpretive tradition. That tradition encompasses a particular view of *democracy*, as including not only the “rights of the whole people,” but also “the duties of the whole people.” And it calls for *judicial restraint*, basing that call upon both technical circumstance and democratic value. As to the first, “[c]ourts are ill-equipped to make the investigations which should precede” most legislation. As to the second, a judge’s “agreement or disagreement” about the wisdom of a law “has nothing to do with the right of a majority to embody their opinions in law.” For both kinds of reasons, even if a judge knows “what the just result should be,” that judge “is not to substitute even his juster will” for that of “the people.” In a constitutional democracy “a deep-seated conviction on the part of the people . . . is entitled to great respect.”¹

That tradition sees texts as driven by *purposes*. The judge should try to find and “honestly . . . say what was the underlying purpose expressed” in a statute. The judge should read constitutional language “as the revelation of the great purposes which were intended to be achieved by the Constitution” itself, a “framework for” and a “continuing instrument of government.” The judge should recognize that the Constitution will apply to “new subject matter . . . with which the framers were not familiar.” Thus, the judge, whether applying statute or Constitution, should “reconstruct the past solution imaginatively in its setting and project the purposes which inspired it upon the concrete occasions which arise for their decision.” Since law is connected to life, judges, in applying a text in light of its purpose, should look to *consequences*, including “contemporary conditions, social, industrial, and political, of the community to be affected.” And since “the purpose of construction is the ascertainment of meaning, nothing that is logically relevant should be excluded.”²

That tradition does not expect highly general instructions themselves to determine the outcome of difficult concrete cases where language is open-ended and precisely defined purpose is difficult to ascertain. Certain constitutional language, for example, reflects “fundamental aspirations and . . . ‘moods,’ embodied in provisions like the due process and equal protection clauses, which were designed not to be precise and positive directions for rules of action.” A judge, when interpreting such open-ended provisions, must avoid being “willful, in the sense of enforcing individual views.” A judge cannot “enforce whatever he thinks best.” “In the exercise of” the “high power” of judicial review, says Justice Louis Brandeis, “we must be ever on our guard, lest we erect our prejudices into legal principles.” At the same time, a judge must avoid being “wooden, in uncritically resting on formulae in assuming the familiar to be the necessary, in not realizing that any problem can be solved if only one principle is involved but that unfortunately all controversies of importance involve if not conflict at least an interplay of principles.”³

How, then, is the judge to act between the bounds of the “willful” and the “wooden”? The tradition answers with an *attitude*, an attitude that hesitates to rely upon any single theory or grand view of law or of interpretation, or of the Constitution. It champions the need to search for purposes; it calls for restraint, asking judges to “speak . . . humbly as the voice of the law.” And it finds in the democratic

nature of our system more than simply a justification for judicial restraint. Holmes reminds the judge as a general matter to allow “[c]onsiderable latitude . . . for differences of view.” And Learned Hand describes both legislative and judicial democratic attitudes when he says that the “spirit which seeks to understand the minds of other men and women,” the “spirit which weighs their interests alongside its own without bias,” is the “spirit of liberty” itself.⁴

My discussion of active liberty falls within the broad outlines of the tradition these statements suggest. But it takes place in a different time. The statements I quote, from Holmes, Brandeis, Stone, Frankfurter, and Hand, must be read in light of later decisions that abolished legal segregation, that gave life to the Constitution’s liberty-protecting promises, that helped to make “We the People” a phrase that finally includes those whom the Constitution originally and intentionally ignored. This discussion welcomes those decisions as furthering the Constitution’s basic objectives. One of my objectives is to illustrate why one can, without philosophical contradiction, essentially embrace the later decisions without essentially abandoning the traditional attitude. That is to say, the philosophical tension is sometimes less than some have imagined.⁵

. . . AND CONSISTENT WITH THE CONSTITUTION'S HISTORY

Is it reasonable from a historical perspective to view the Constitution as centrally focused upon active liberty, upon the right of individuals to participate in democratic self-government? I believe so. I have already listed various constitutional provisions that specifically further that objective. And the non-standard historical accounts of the writing of the Constitution—in the works, for example, of Gordon Wood and Bernard Bailyn—make clear that active liberty, the principle of participatory self-government, was a primary force shaping the system of government that the document creates.¹

The primarily democratic nature of the Constitution's governmental structure has not always seemed obvious. John Adams, for example, understood the Constitution as seeking to create an Aristotelian "mixed" form of government. Our government, like the British government, would reflect the structure of eighteenth-century society. The House of Representatives, like the House of Commons, would constitute the "democratical branch" of the new federal government, embodying the people's basic decency and common sense. The Senate, like the House of Lords, would represent the aristocratic element of society, embodying its wisdom while checking the people's sometimes "barbarous . . . and cruel" passions. The Executive would represent the monarchical element of society, with the President serving as a mediator, a balancer, helping to keep social forces in equilibrium.²

But Adams himself recognized that his notions of constitutionalism were not widely shared. As historians now tell us that by the time the Constitution was ratified by the states, the more "aristocratic" concept held by some of the Framers was a minority view. Rather, the document created a governmental structure that reflected the view that sovereign authority originated in the people; that the "Right to legislate is originally in every Member of the Community." An important imperative was modified but also reinforced this right, namely the need to protect individual liberty (i.e., the liberty of the moderns). The right was also subject to an important constraint, namely the need for workable government. The term "every Member" did not then include women or slaves; the "Community" was not theirs. But the Constitution's structure, viewed in terms of the narrow "Community" of the time, was nonetheless democratic and set the stage for that community's later democratic expansion.³

Democracy, of course, could not mean a Greek city-state. The nation's geographic size, along with its large and growing population, would prevent replication at the national level of the Athenian agora or a New England town meeting. The people would have to delegate the day-to-day work of governance. But the people could continue to share sovereign authority; they could continue to participate actively in the governing processes. "Delegated democracy" need not represent a significant departure from democratic principle.⁴

Moreover, in the view of modern historians, much post-revolutionary (pre-constitutional) American political thought was characterized by suspicion of government, hostility to the Executive Branch, and a confidence in democracy as the best check upon government's oppressive tendencies. The form

colonists, now Americans, saw “radical destruction” of “magisterial authority” as the way—perhaps the only way—to keep power in check, to prevent its arbitrary exercise. They embraced the concept “public liberty,” believing that “liberty in a State is self-government.” They considered a free people to be a people that government cannot oppress, for the reason that the people have “a constitution check upon the power to oppress.” Thus, during the time between the end of the Revolutionary War and the writing of the Constitution, the American public came to the conclusion that democratic principles must underlie the structure of post-revolutionary government.⁵

After the Revolution the citizens of many former colonies translated their democratic beliefs into highly democratic forms of state government. Pennsylvania, for example, experimented with a constitution that abolished the position of governor, substituting a twelve-member elected council; created a unicameral legislature with one-year terms; imposed strict four-year term limits; insisted that all public decision-making take place in public; and provided for a board of censors, a kind of statewide grand jury with separately elected members who would investigate all actions by the legislature and report to the public. Indeed, in many of the colonies governors were forbidden to participate in the lawmaking function; impeachment was common; and terms of office were short. Most Americans accepted the Whig maxim, “where annual elections end, tyranny begins.”⁶

Why then did the Framers not write and the states not ratify a Constitution that contained similar democratic structures? Why did they not, like Pennsylvania, approximate a closer-to-Athenian version of democracy? Why did they create so complex a form of government, placing more distance between electors and elected than even the needs of “delegation” of democratic authority might demand?

The reason, in part, is that experience with many of these initial forms of democratic government had proved disappointing. Pennsylvanians found that their government enacted conflicting policies reflecting the vagaries of shifting public opinion; that through debt repudiation it had produced an insecure climate for business; and that those within government—a continuously changing group—were often at war with one another. Similarly, Massachusetts saw in Shays’s Rebellion a public that would fight to avoid not only debt repayment but also taxation of any sort. Other states had faced similar, though perhaps less dramatic, difficulties.⁷

Nonetheless, despite these difficulties, the Framers did not abandon their basically democratic outlook. That is the main point. They wrote a Constitution that begins with the words “We the People.” The words are not “we the people of 1787.” Rather their words, legal scholar Alexander Meiklejohn tells us, mean that “it is agreed, and with every passing moment it is re-agreed, that the people of the United States shall be self-governed.”⁸

The Constitution subsequently implements its Preamble by vesting legislative power in a House of Representatives and a Senate—both bodies made up of individuals who are ultimately responsible to the people. Article I specifies that members of the House will be “chosen every second Year by the People of the several States,” i.e., by voters who “shall have the qualifications requisite for electors in the most numerous branch of the state legislature.” That article also originally specified that senators would be “chosen by” state “legislatures.” But in so specifying, the Framers did not seek to model the “Senate” upon the House of Lords. Rather, eighteenth-century supporters of a Senate argued that the second legislative body would *increase* democracy by providing for “double representation.” The

pointed out that citizens chose their state legislators through elections. And given the importance of the senatorial position, it seems likely that the voters would have held their state legislators to account for their national senatorial choices.⁹

Article II vests executive power in a President, selected by an Electoral College, not the voters. But this mechanism does not create a presidency free from democratic control. Rather, the Constitution grants state legislators, elected by and accountable to the people, the power to determine how to select the state's electors. In 1789, this meant election by legislators in five states, by the people in four states, and by mixed methods in two states (two states did not participate). By 1832 it meant electors chosen directly by the people in every state but South Carolina (which switched to popular election after the Civil War). This popular connection now means (and meant at the time) that the President and senators would consider themselves responsible to, or representing the interests of, not a particular social class, but "We the People."¹⁰

Thus, James Wilson, an influential figure at the Constitutional Convention, summed up the Framers' conception of the nonlegislative branches as follows:

*The executive, and judicial power are now drawn from the same source, are now animated by the same principles, and are now directed to the same ends, with the legislative authority: they who execute the laws, and they who administer the laws, are so much the servants, and therefore as much the friends of the people, as those who make them.*¹¹

And John Taylor, writing in 1790, described the Constitution's structure in terms that are difficult to reconcile with a retreat from democratic principle. "Power," he said, "is first divided between the government and the people, reserving to the people, the control of the dividend allotted to the government." The government's allotment of power is then "distributed in quotas still more minute to its various branches. But though the power is dispersed, the people themselves continue to control the policy-making activities of these different branches of government."¹²

One might argue that these descriptions vastly overstate the Framers' commitment to democracy. As I have just said, the Constitution seems to create a governmental structure far more complex, and in part far more distant from the people, than principles of delegated democracy demand. Does not that fact reflect a profound retreat from democratic structure, in the direction, as Adams suggested, of aristocratic government?

Not necessarily so. That is because we can find in these same constitutional facts not so much a retreat from democratic principle as an effort to produce a government committed to democratic principle that would prove practically workable and that also, as a practical matter, would help protect individuals against oppression. Thus, we can find in the Constitution's structural complexity an effort to produce a form of democracy that would prevent any single group of individuals from exercising too much power, thereby helping to protect an individual's (modern) fundamental liberty. And we can find in that structural complexity an effort to create a form of democratic government likely to escape those tendencies to produce the self-destructive public policies that the Pennsylvania and Massachusetts experiments had revealed, a form of democratic government that could produce legislation that would match the needs of the nation.

Consider, for example, what James Madison called the problem of “faction.” As described by Gordon Wood, the problem grew out of the fact that the new nation encompassed divergent social, economic, and religious interests. There were “rich and poor; creditors and debtors; a landed interest, a monied interest, a mercantile interest, a manufacturing interest” and numerous subdivisions within each category. The states’ post-revolutionary experience demonstrated that the natural tendency of these groups was to choose representatives not for their “abilities, integrity, or patriotism” but for their willingness to act solely to advance the group’s particular interests. This often meant that “the great objects” of society were “sacrificed constantly to local views.” The unicameral state legislatures, with their small electoral districts, large numbers of seats, and annual terms, might have come close to the Athenian vision of true democracy. But these bodies were “bulging and fluctuating” and “filled with such narrow-minded politicians who constantly mistook ‘the particular circle’ in which they moved for the ‘general voice’ of society.” The Framers’ goal was to “secure the public good against private rights against the danger of [factionalism], and at the same time to preserve the spirit and form of popular government.”¹³

How did they achieve that goal? Madison said that the answer was to broaden the electoral base so that more members of government owe their position to the many. “If elected officials were concerned with only the interest of those who elected them, then their outlook was most easily broadened by enlarging their electorate.” The base could not be made too broad, to the point where the elected official loses contact with the voter. But it must be broad enough to stifle the propensity “to rash measures and the facility of forming and executing them.” It must be broad enough so that “no ordinary common interest or passion will be likely to unite a majority of the whole number in an unjust pursuit.” Madison predicted that this broadening would also have the effect of drawing out “representatives whose enlightened views and virtuous sentiments render them superior to local prejudices and to schemes of injustice” and more likely to pursue the true interests of the nation. What is more, a bicameral legislature would prevent usurpation of the people’s ultimate power by forcing the designing men to control two houses instead of one and by dividing the “trust” of the people between “different bodies of men, who might watch & check each other.”¹⁴

Consistent with Madison’s analysis, the Constitution provides that a House member’s electoral district will remain small whereas a senator’s district and the President’s district will encompass the entire state and the entire nation respectively. The larger districts, by including many diverse interests, lessen the likelihood that a particular faction will win influence at the expense of the general well-being of a constituency’s citizens. Moreover, House members can serve only two-year terms and need to be only twenty-five years old, but senators serve for six years and must be thirty. The President, though serving for four years, must be thirty-five. The longer the terms of office and the older the minimum required age, the greater the insulation from short-term caprice of public sentiment and the more likely the elected official would be a proven leader rather than an untested political heir. At the same time, senators and the President would remain responsible to the people through election, by state legislators or through the Electoral College.¹⁵

Consider too the way in which the Constitution’s original structure helped to protect the individual from oppressive governmental action, an objective as important to the early Americans as was the need to assure that the federal government’s powers sprang from, and that it was accountable to, the people. Many initially had denied any possible conflict between the goals, for they believed that

thoroughly democratic government based on public liberty would naturally protect the individual rights of its citizens. They thought that securing “the right of the people to participate” in the government was the best way to secure the modern liberty of individuals. But the state government experiments in less disciplined democracy had proved disappointing in this respect as well, bringing about what some called a new form of despotism.¹⁶

Thus, the Constitution contains structural safeguards. One set of safeguards consists of a complex structure with checks and balances among federal branches, along with delegation to the federal government of limited powers, which diffused power and prevented impetuous action by the central government. One could understand an independent judiciary as providing additional protection, for judges could interpret the Constitution’s delegation of limited powers to the federal government, excluding the authority to take action that deprived individual citizens of their (negative) liberty. State constitutions added further protections to curb the excesses of state government. But many of those who wrote and ratified the Constitution believed that neither the “liberty of the ancients” alone nor that liberty embodied in a complex constitutional structure would prove sufficient. And they added the Bill of Rights with explicit protections against government interference with certain fundamental personal liberties.

The important point is that history permits me to answer affirmatively my original question, namely, historically speaking can one reasonably view the Constitution as focused upon democratic self-government? The answer is that from a historical perspective, one can reasonably view the Constitution as focusing upon active liberty, both as important in itself and as a partial means to help secure individual (modern) freedom. The Framers included elements designed to “control and mitigate” the ill effects of more direct forms of democratic government, but in doing so, the Framers “did not see themselves as repudiating either the Revolution or popular government.” Rather, they were “saving both from their excesses.” The act of ratifying the Constitution, by means of specifying state elections with broad voter eligibility rules, signaled the democratic character of the document itself.¹⁷

As history has made clear, the original Constitution was insufficient. It did not include a majority of the nation within its “democratic community.” It took a civil war and eighty years of racial segregation before the slaves and their descendants could begin to think of the Constitution as their own. Nor did women receive the right to vote until 1920. The “people” had to amend the Constitution, not only to extend its democratic base but also to expand and more fully to secure basic individual (modern) liberty.

But the original document sowed the democratic seed. Madison described something fundamental about American government, then and now, when he said the Constitution is a “charter . . . of power . . . granted by liberty,” not (as in Europe) a “charter of liberty . . . granted by power.”¹⁸ He described the public creed when, in Federalist Number 39, he said:

*It is evident that no other form [of government] would be reconcilable with the genius of the people of America; with the fundamental principles of the Revolution; or with that honorable determination which animates every votary of freedom to rest all our political experiments on the capacity of mankind for self-government.*¹⁹

For present purposes this description will suffice. It supports a certain view of the origin of the Constitution's primary objective. That view sees the Constitution as furthering active liberty, and creating a form of government in which all citizens share the government's authority, participating in the creation of public policy. It understands the Constitution's structural complexity as responding to certain practical needs, for delegation, for nondestructive (and hopefully sound) public policies, and for protection of basic individual freedoms. And it views the Constitution's democratic imperative as accommodating, even insisting upon, these practical needs. Later amendments to a degree transformed the Constitution; but in doing so, they also confirmed and perfected underlying constitutional goals that, in part, were already there.

In sum, our constitutional history has been a quest for workable government, workable democratic government, workable democratic government protective of individual personal liberty. Our central commitment has been to "government of the people, by the people, for the people." And the applications following illustrate how this constitutional understanding helps interpret the Constitution—in a way that helps to resolve problems related to *modern* government.

APPLICATIONS

The principle of active liberty—the need to make room for democratic decision-making—argues for judicial modesty in constitutional decision-making, a form of judicial restraint. But there is more to that. Increased recognition of the Constitution’s democratic objective—and an appreciation of the role courts can play in securing that objective—can help guide judges both as actors in the deliberative process and as substantive interpreters of relevant constitutional and statutory provisions. Examples drawn from the areas of free speech, federalism, privacy, equal protection, statutory interpretation, and judicial review of administrative action will show how this is so. Each example considers modern government-related problems that call for a democratically based response. And each raises difficult questions of constitutional or statutory interpretation. In each instance I believe that increased recognition of the Constitution’s democratic objective can help judges deal more effectively with interpretive issues, thereby helping communities deal better with the problems they have called those issues into being.

SPEECH

The first example focuses on the First Amendment and how it applies if the government seeks to regulate certain activities affecting speech, in particular campaign finance, corporate advertising about matters of public concern, and drugstore advertising informing the public that custom-made pharmaceuticals are available. These examples show the importance of reading the First Amendment not in isolation but as seeking to maintain a system of free expression designed to further a basic constitutional purpose: creating and maintaining democratic decision-making institutions.

The example begins where courts normally begin in First Amendment cases. They try to classify the speech at issue, distinguishing among different speech-related activities for the purpose of applying a strict, moderately strict, or totally relaxed presumption of unconstitutionality. Is the speech “political speech,” calling for a strong pro-speech presumption, “commercial speech,” calling for a mid-range presumption, or simply a form of economic regulation presumed constitutional?

Should courts begin in this way? Some argue that making these kinds of categorical distinctions is misplaced enterprise. The Constitution’s language makes no such distinction. It simply protects “the freedom of speech” from government restriction. “Speech is speech and that is the end of the matter.” But to limit distinctions to the point at which First Amendment law embodies the slogan “speech is speech” cannot work. And the fact that the First Amendment seeks to protect active liberty as well as modern liberty helps to explain why.¹

The democratic government that the Constitution creates now regulates a host of activities that inevitably take place through the medium of speech. Today’s workers manipulate information, not wood or metal. And the modern information-based workplace, no less than its more materially based predecessors, requires the application of community standards seeking to assure, for example, the absence of anti-competitive restraints; the accuracy of information; the absence of discrimination; the protection of health, safety, the environment, the consumer; and so forth.

Laws that embody these standards obviously affect speech. Warranty laws require private firms to include on labels statements of a specified content. Securities laws and consumer protection laws insist upon the disclosure of information that businesses might prefer to keep private. Health laws forbid tobacco advertising, say, to children. Anti-discrimination laws insist that employers prevent employees from making certain kinds of statements. Communications laws require cable broadcasters to provide network access. Campaign finance laws restrict citizen contributions to candidates.

To treat all these instances alike, to scrutinize them all as if they all represented a similar kind of legislative effort to restrain a citizen’s “modern liberty” to speak, would lump together too many different kinds of activities under the aegis of a single standard, thereby creating a dilemma. On the one hand, if strong First Amendment standards were to apply across the board, they would prevent democratically elected government from creating necessary regulation. The strong free speech guarantees needed to protect the structural democratic governing process, if applied without

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