

## Culture, Values, and Identities

# Democracy for the Few

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A review and application of *Degenerations of Democracy*, by Craig Calhoun, Dilip Parameshwar Gaonkar, and Charles Taylor (hereafter, CGT); *Liberalism and Its Discontents*, by Francis Fukuyama; and *How Democracies Live*, by Stein Ringen.

A strengthened liberal democratic culture is essential for the health and vitality of democracy. This culture is made up of three components: a cluster of liberal values (rule of law, freedom, equality, and reason), a democratic governing system grounded in popular sovereignty, and a collective experience of shared respect for liberal values and democratic institutions. Has this culture lost its strength? Is the collective experience and belief in democratic legitimacy disappearing? Are liberal values increasingly contested? All of the theorists under review address these questions. And for all, the answer is “yes, but....” They make strikingly similar arguments about the sources of this culture’s strength, the causes of its current weakness, and how it can be strengthened. The general thrust of these books is this: a strong liberal democracy rests on three cultural foundations: the strength of social bonds, the level of deliberative civil discourse, and the level of economic equality. The main challenge to this threefold foundation’s strength is neoliberalism, which all authors agree has led to liberal democracy’s decline. I draw on this argument as a guide to assess the strength of liberal democracy in a small population living in rural Alpine County, California. I find that although it is relatively small and isolated, the drivers of democratic decline have found their way into this tiny community. Some aspects of liberal democratic culture have remained strong (voter turnout and volunteerism are high, and many citizens serve in elected office and on government committees); others, however, have weak roots that were never cultivated and continue to weaken further (equality, inclusion, open debate). Finally, I suggest that to strengthen liberal democracy, citizens must participate in it and leaders must work for the good of the entire community, not just the few.

## INTRODUCTION

A strengthened liberal democratic culture will save democracy from degeneration, discontent, and decline. That culture is made up of three ingredients: (1) a cluster of liberal values that includes the rule of law, individual freedom, equal rights, and reason; (2) a governing system that enshrines “the people” as the sovereign source of all political legitimacy, is accountable to the people, and is limited in its powers by a constitution that protects individual rights and freedoms; and (3) a collective experience of shared respect for liberal values and democratic institutions passed down through generations into the minds and hearts of individuals. Democracy’s strength depends on the people’s contin-

uing belief in the legitimacy of a democratic governing system, and the depth and continuity of shared liberal values.

Has this culture lost its strength? Is the collective experience and belief in democratic legitimacy disappearing? Are liberal values increasingly contested? All of the theorists under review here address these questions. And for all, the answer is “yes, but....” Despite some clear differences, they make strikingly similar arguments about the sources of this culture’s strength, causes of its current weakness, and how it can be strengthened.

I begin by summarizing their arguments. The general thrust of these books is this: a strong liberal democratic culture is determined by three factors: the strength of social bonds, the level of deliberative debate, and the level of economic equality. These factors provide the foundation for a strong and vibrant democracy. The main challenge to this

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foundation's strength is neoliberalism, which has given rise to deregulation, free trade, and tax cuts for the rich. Neoliberalism has dramatically weakened the foundations of liberal democratic culture and has led to liberal democracy's decline.

In the second section of this essay, I draw on this argument as a guide to assess the strength of liberal democracy in a small population living in rural Alpine County, California. I find that although it is relatively isolated and is the smallest county in California, the drivers of democratic decline have found their way into this tiny community. Some aspects of liberal democratic culture have remained strong (voter turnout and volunteerism are high, and many citizens serve in elected office and on committees); others, however, have weak roots that were never cultivated and continue to weaken further (equality, inclusion, open debate). Finally, I suggest remedies that might strengthen democracy in this small community.

## WHAT IS A LIBERAL DEMOCRATIC CULTURE?

Stein Ringen, Craig Calhoun, and Francis Fukuyama all believe that liberal democratic<sup>1</sup> culture<sup>2</sup> is essential for the health and vitality of democracy, but they differ on where this culture comes from and how it is nurtured. Following Jefferson and Tocqueville, Ringen believes that it emerges from the common people and cannot be imposed from above. For him, strong democracy depends on ways of thinking, beliefs, and habits of mutual trust and confidence. Calhoun also believes that democratic culture is nurtured in grassroots communities, but he emphasizes the importance of historical commemorations and rhetorical continuity in fostering a sense of shared liberal identity and democratic purpose. Fukuyama, on the other hand, argues that it is liberal institutions that create, protect, and perpetuate both liberal norms and a democratic governing system. He sees liberal democratic institutions as the primary vehicles for the development and maintenance of liberal democratic culture. Bringing their views together, I treat institutions and culture as intertwined and mutually reinforcing. I use the concept of "liberal democratic culture" to embrace them both.

What does this culture look like? In all three works, we read that a citizenry imbued with liberal democracy's norms and principles and a respect for its institutions will *take for granted* that the rule of law trumps the rule of power and violence. It will *take for granted* a commitment to the freedom of expression and tolerance of opposing opinions. This commitment allows for the exchange of ideas and the airing of diverse perspectives, which can help to prevent the spread of propaganda and misinformation. The citizenry of

a liberal democracy will also *take for granted* that elected officials and their decisions are worthy because they are *chosen* by the people. But it will also *take for granted* that these officials can develop oligarchic tendencies and must therefore be closely watched and subject to a clipping of their wings, lest they betray that trust. Finally, a liberal democratic culture is based on the shared belief that the common good must be prioritized over the interests of any individual or group. Although they disagree on the source of that common good, they all agree that a liberal democratic culture seeks to promote the well-being and flourishing of all members of society, rather than privileging the few.

## THE THREE FOUNDATIONS OF LIBERAL DEMOCRATIC CULTURE

For all theorists under review, this culture's survival is dependent on and embedded in three important foundations: (1) a social foundation that connects citizens of diverse interests and identities together; (2) a deliberative foundation that rests on the constant exercise of reason in open discussion of political issues; and (3) a political foundation that steps into the free market to prevent extreme poverty. Overall, these three foundations work together to support the survival and stability of a culture by fostering social cohesion, promoting reasoned decision-making, and addressing economic inequalities.

### SOCIAL CONNECTIONS AND THE IMPORTANCE OF A LOCAL PUBLIC SPHERE

The first foundation of a liberal democratic culture is a social order that nurtures solidarity among citizens. This begins with a robust public space into which all citizens enter freely and are treated as equals (Tocqueville 1840, vol. 2). It is a place where human connections can be created and sustained across fault lines of difference. These connections are based on tolerance, a shared sense of belonging, and the freedom of citizens to see themselves as equal members of a common and diverse polity (CGT 2022, 133). From those connections emerges a solidarity that "knits citizens together," allowing them to trust each other and freely cooperate in creating a democratic society (CGT 2022, 2).

All three books agree that this solidarity is best created at the local level. This insight is something new in the annals of democratic theory; indeed, it is rarely studied. This is odd, since Tocqueville long ago argued that American democracy was strong *because of* the very strength of local communities. His views on local democracy have long been considered axiomatic in the American ideological canon, but scholars neglected to adequately test them. The three

1 All of the authors use the term "liberal" in the classical sense, meaning freedom from autocracy and adherence to the rule of law. For example, in his effort to limit freedoms in Hungary, Victor Orban called his preferred governing system an "illiberal democracy." The discussion of "democracy" in this essay refers to liberal democracy.

2 Fukuyama mentions culture only once. Nonetheless, Charles Mathews argues that Fukuyama's focus on institutions and his set of axioms for individuals really *is* a culture, despite the fact that he does not use that word. Fukuyama himself states that successful liberal societies have their own culture and understanding of the good life (2022, 152).

books under review are a plea to end this neglect. Each author in his own way suggests that we lift the study of local democracy out of what Ringen calls “the theoretical shadows” (2022, 186).

A study of local government is important because liberal democracy relies on the devolution of power to the lowest appropriate levels of government. Therefore, Fukuyama (2022, 148) notes, decisions should be made at the local level whenever possible, rather than being imposed from above. Calhoun (CGT 2022, 77) and Calhoun and Taylor (CGT 2022, 235–38) elaborate on this insight when they point out that daily life in a local rural community reveals problems that go unseen at higher levels. Larger environmental problems, for example, are readily evident in the everyday life of a small rural community and can be dealt with at the community level. Environmental degradation damages *specific* rivers and destroys *specific* crops. Citizens directly experience that damage and clamor to compel local government to repair the harm. Local politics to resolve issues like these are therefore more practical than partisan as people come together to address common problems that are there for all to see and experience.

Civic participation in *local politics* deepens liberal democratic culture over time. According to Ringen (2022, 110), there are two parts to this participation. Voting provides both the experience of *equality* with one’s neighbors and the experience of individual political *power*. Both reinforce a commitment to the principles of individual rights and popular sovereignty. The second component is the experience of participating in governance, or “ruling.” Participating in local governance can give individuals the opportunity to gain experience in decision-making and policy-making, which can be valuable in other areas of life. Overall, civic participation in local politics is a crucial way for individuals to contribute to the health and vitality of their community and to the overall health of liberal democratic society.

## DELIBERATION

Deliberation is the second foundation of a healthy liberal democratic culture. It is the process by which individuals engage in constructive discussions, debates, and decision-making processes that are based on logic, reason, and factual information. This type of dialogue is crucial because it helps to create a shared understanding of issues and challenges facing the community. Especially if opinions differ about how to resolve those issues, deliberation can lead to the development of more informed and effective policies. In order for deliberation to be effective, however, it must be based on the integrity of public language. This means that individuals must be able to trust that the information they are receiving is truthful and accurate. If the integrity of public language is compromised, then the deliberative process can be undermined and the health of democratic

culture will be at risk. Therefore, it is important for liberal democracies to prioritize the importance of truthful information and reasoned argument in public discourse. As Ringen says, truthful, constructive discourse “is the fertilizer needed for a democratic political culture to flourish...” because “consensus, cooperation, and social order depend on it” (2022, 71, 111). He speaks for the others when he writes that civil discourse is not only the fertilizer but also the “lifeblood of a living democratic culture” (111).

## MODERATION OF ECONOMIC INEQUALITY

Third, a liberal democratic culture is highly dependent on a political foundation that steps in to prevent extreme poverty. All three authors are resigned to the view that there will always be social tension between the rich and the poor, but that *extreme* poverty prevents impoverished citizens from standing on equal footing with others. In looking for a time when the cultural foundations of liberal democracy were strongest, all of our theorists point to the postwar period between 1945 and 1975. As liberal democratic governments created and strengthened social safety nets, they moderated the inequalities that market competition creates. Partly because of this moderation, these years saw growing prosperity and falling economic inequality in Europe and the United States. This allowed all citizens to participate in the postwar life of new and renewed democracies.<sup>3</sup>

## DEGENERATION, DISCONTENT, AND DANGER: THREATS TO LIBERAL DEMOCRACY’S CULTURE AND INSTITUTIONS

All three books caution that these three foundational elements of liberal democratic culture are under threat. As Fukuyama watched statistics for civil and political rights fall around the world and dictators such as Putin, Xi, and Erdogan rise, he wrote that “It’s clear [that] liberalism has been in retreat in recent years (2022 viii)” Calhoun and Taylor (CGT 2022, 208) warn of resurgent far-right movements and their declarations of willingness to overthrow democracy in order to save “whiteness” and Western civilization. They rage at the decline in mainstream and local media and the polarizing effect of social media in all mature democracies. As evidence of degeneration of liberal democratic culture, they cite broken political parties, corruption, endless lies and misinformation, and voting rights restrictions in the United States. The COVID-19 pandemic, financial crises, and climate change have tested the strength of democracy’s cultural foundations and found them wanting.

In all three books, unbridled capitalism—neoliberalism—is the central culprit threatening to destroy those foundations. Neoliberalism has created an economic sur-

<sup>3</sup> Calhoun and Taylor and Fukuyama refer to the period as *les trente glorieuses* (the glorious thirty years—i.e., the French term for the period).

plus flowing into the hands of the rich and superrich, keeping it out of the hands of ordinary people. It allows the rich to avoid taxes, shrinking the capacity of democracies to maintain social safety nets and nurture the public sphere. In Fukuyama's words, neoliberalism has not only steered society toward "grotesque inequalities" (2022, 17) but has also sharply weakened the ability of democratic governments to protect their citizens. The other theorists agree. Ringen adds that extreme economic inequality distorts the political process in favor of the rich, creating a "free for all in the use of private and corporate money as a political resource" (2022, 24). Not only has neoliberalism unraveled safety nets and tilted elections in favor of candidates preferred by the rich, in doing so, it has frayed the bonds that knit communities together, and undermined the values of equality and freedom. Calhoun and Taylor (CGT 2022, 138) argue that vast inequalities of wealth and the absence of social protection make some people freer and less equal than others. It is in this sense that economic inequality polarizes liberal democracies.

This growing chasm of economic inequality and the outsize role of money in politics *disrupts* social connections across class lines and *disempowers* large groups of citizens who are the very source of democratic legitimacy. Grotesque inequality excludes the poor from participating in the life of liberal democratic communities. When people are excluded from the benefits of liberal democracy, they begin to turn against it.

#### DEGENERATION OF LOCAL DEMOCRACY

Neoliberalism tramples local communities in very specific ways. Karl Polanyi, in *The Great Transformation*, saw that enclosures and nineteenth-century industrialization disembedded people from traditional social connections and obligations and destroyed local rural communities as people fled to factory jobs in the cities. Calhoun (CGT 2022, 89–105) argues that the globalization of commerce and technological transformation in the twenty-first century have similarly undermined place-based local communities; consolidation of school districts has weakened the identity and cohesion of towns; small towns have lost local businesses; young people are fleeing them; local hospitals are shuttered. Neoliberal globalization disempowers citizens of these communities through its distant sources of pollution, consumer products, and food. The decline of locality ruptures human relations to place and attachment to the environment. The associative life of the community fragments, as businesses and public spaces close.

#### HAS LIBERAL DEMOCRACY ACTUALLY WEAKENED? A CASE STUDY OF LOCAL DEMOCRACY IN A SMALL COMMUNITY

So far, the discussion has been a summary of the three theoretical arguments about liberal democracy's current crisis. Do these arguments hold in the real world? To find answers, I take on Ringen's challenge to lift the study of local democracy from the shadows. My focus is Alpine County,

a small California community in the Eastern Sierra mountains bordering on western Nevada and near Lake Tahoe, a popular recreation area. As of the 2020 census, Alpine County's population was 1,204, making it California's least populous county. The county seat and largest community is Markleeville, with a population of 191. Alpine County is a place of breathtaking natural beauty, with high granite peaks, clear blue lakes, the rushing Carson River, and rich forest and pastureland of pine, sage, bunchgrass, and manzanita. Much of Alpine County lies at around 6,000 feet in elevation, and Markleeville is nestled in a small valley between five high mountain passes, two of which are closed during the winter months. There are no supermarkets, shopping malls, or fast food restaurants anywhere in the county's 750 square miles. The federal government owns the majority of the land in Alpine County, which is divided into three national forests. The rest is owned by the county and by private citizens and companies. My initial expectation was that democracy would thrive in this small community; government, by necessity of its size and the problems it faces, is nonpartisan; ideological divisions among the citizenry are few, and people are relatively unaffected by the cold civil war raging between Republicans and Democrats in the rest of the United States.

#### DEMOGRAPHICS

The community is composed of three socioeconomic groups. First, middle-class and relatively affluent white Americans make up 65 percent of the population. Most are college-educated, liberal, NPR-listening professionals or retired professionals. A sizable portion is made up of libertarians and business-oriented conservatives of the pre-2016 era. A scattered few are angry, right-wing extremists. A second group is composed of impoverished, struggling white Americans living in a relatively isolated mobile home park away from the rest. The third group is composed of Native Americans from the Washoe Tribe, representing 20 percent of the population; almost half of this population lives below the poverty line, but unlike the poor whites, are eligible as a tribe for funding and services from the federal government. Those living under the poverty line in these two groups represent about 20 percent of the population, twice the average percentage of those impoverished citizens living in California as a whole. African Americans and Latinos together represent less than 10 percent of the population. More than a quarter of the county's residents are sixty-five or older, compared with fewer than 15 percent statewide.

#### HISTORY

Alpine County was the ancestral winter home of the Washoe people. Aided by a Washoe guide, Kit Carson and John C. Frémont were the first white explorers to discover the area in 1844. Discovery of gold and silver spurred development, and the white population ballooned to 11,000, pushing the Native population off the land. The white immigrant population depleted natural resources; ranchers clear-cut forests to create meadows for their cattle; live-

stock replaced native herbivores; the logging industry denuded old-growth forests to support the mining industry. Many of the miners had emigrated from the South, during and after the Civil War. They left Confederate traces; the most visible was their name for a massive rock formation—Jefferson Davis Peak. By 1870 the white population had declined to 685, due to the demonetization of silver and its abundance in neighboring Nevada. It was one hundred years later, in 1970, that congress allotted the Washoe tribe eighty acres of barren, rocky land, ten miles from Markleeville, to establish Hung-A-Lel-Ti. In a concerted effort within the tribe and the liberal and enlightened conservative faction of Alpine County, the name of Jefferson Davis Peak was changed in 2020 to Da-ek Dow Go-et Mountain, its Washoe name, over the objection of the all-white Alpine County Historical Society.

### CRISES

The end of the silver boom left Alpine County relatively unchanged for many decades. Today it looks very much like it did fifty years ago, except that a number of new second homes now dot the landscape. Nature and the climate play a large role in shaping the life of the population, and the county has struggled with years of drought caused by climate change. Two years of the COVID-19 pandemic severely injured local business between 2020 and 2022. Tourism was first halted and then reduced to a trickle. In the summer of 2021, the Tamarack Fire burned for more than four weeks and destroyed 68,637 acres in the county, threatening Markleeville and causing the entire town and surrounding communities to evacuate, leaving a ring of sooty hillsides and black, naked trees. After the fire, a private developer clear-cut burned trees and living vegetation on the mountain slopes above the town, depriving wildlife of its habitat and turning the soil to dirt and ash. A year later, a flash flood—with no understory to stop it because of fire and clear-cutting—sent tons of mud and debris down those slopes onto the highway below, blocking a three-mile stretch of the road and oozing into kitchens and basements of homes and businesses along the highway. Families who had fled their homes a year earlier were now trapped within them, with no way to leave town. Cars were swept into embankments, and debris flow formed an impassable river across roads.

How has liberal democracy fared in Alpine County during these years of crisis? Has its culture weathered these particular calamities? How has it fared in the face of the longer-term onslaught of neoliberalism, with its accompanying rise in poverty and inequality, its decimation of local economies, the flight of the community's youth, and its power to break community solidarity and capacity for liberation? Let us turn to an examination of the fate of the three foundations of liberal democratic culture in Alpine County.

### SOCIAL CONNECTIONS AND PUBLIC SPACE

One might expect that the public sphere and its capacity to nurture social connections in a mountain community

like Alpine would be quite small and thin. The citizenry of Alpine County is individualistic and independent. People often live miles from their nearest neighbors; closer neighbors are separated by stands of trees; all must trek to Nevada or over a mountain pass to shop for provisions. Many residents are relatively new; they have fled from crowded cities where they found themselves stressed and anonymous, despite city conveniences. They moved to Alpine County seeking the freedom and individual empowerment of mountain living. Others grew up there as descendants of Washoe Natives, miners, and adventurers.

Surprisingly, then, for a large segment of the populace, the community is vibrant and open, with equal access for all, although not all take part in community activities. Alpine's public sphere is made up of periodic town halls, meetings of citizen associations, county and citizen-sponsored events, open meetings of the five-member county board of supervisors and all county commissions. The public can attend and speak at these meetings, and many people do. Following Tocqueville's observation, other informal but organized public groupings have formed over time, knitting together a rich web of social relationships. Citizens volunteer together, eat together, and participate in leisure activities, educational activities, and recreation. They work to improve their environment in voluntary associations, like the Alpine Watershed Group, the Alpine Trails Association, and the Alpine Biomass Collaborative. Each year the Markleeville Enhancement Club holds two "cleanup" days, on which the town community is invited to work together, pulling weeds, picking up trash, and planting flowers. The Alpine Watershed Group holds a Markleeville Creek Day each year, on which citizens work to combat erosion of the watershed. The Alpine Trails Association invites citizens to participate in building and repairing hiking trails. Months after the Tamarack Fire, the Watershed Group held a day of tree planting on which community members were invited to go into the burned forest and plant seedlings. Sixty-five people volunteered. Finally, as in most disasters everywhere, neighbors helped each other evacuate during the fire and clean up debris when they returned. During and after the mudslide, citizens spontaneously congregated to fill sandbags and shovel mud from neighbors' basements and living rooms and away from houses and businesses. They banded together to make signs and openly protest the slow pace of road repair. Even the children participated in the protest.

Many of these activities are facilitated by government institutions using taxpayer funds, both directly and through government grants. In Fukuyama's words, government agencies "coordinate social activity" (2022, 4) and enable cooperation. For example, all are invited to participate in county-initiated programs such as a Friday free lunch open to all, free yoga classes, holistic health classes, guided meditations, and field trips to free events, paid for by the county. The county hosts an inexpensive dial-a-ride service for those without transportation. Through each of the activities, organized by county institutions, outside grants, or simply common community commitment, citizens come to know one another; they create a sense of belonging, a tol-

erance of difference, pride of contributing, recognition of equal membership in the community, recognition of shared interests, individual creativity, and a shared identity. Political differences are put aside; one rarely knows the political party affiliations of one's neighbors. Certainly people notice when neighbors don't participate in volunteer activities or attend meetings. But there is no coercion; people participate freely in the community, and a sense of solidarity is palpable. Some work harder and participate in more activities than others, but that does not mean that social cohesion is lacking.

But although the web of social relations is dense and cohesive among those who participate in public space, it is not inclusive and therefore not enough to build the trust needed for a strong democratic culture. Calhoun and Taylor write that "cohesion becomes democratic only when it can (in principle) be freely chosen in equal proportion by *all* and when its benefits are shared equally by *all*" (CGT 2022, 133). Alpine's public sphere, while open to all, attracts primarily the white, middle class population, a population that is on average whiter and more affluent than that of the state as a whole. The very affluent do not participate. One rarely sees an African American at community events. Few tribal members, and fewer impoverished white citizens take part in or enjoy the fruits of social solidarity.

Alpine County scores higher on civic participation, the second factor that knits people together and deepens democratic culture. Ringen argues that there are two components of civic participation that deepen democratic culture: voting and participating in local governance. Gaonkar adds maintaining government accountability as a third component. Alpine county has a high rate of voter participation in every election. (In the 2022 midterm elections, it had a 68 percent voter turnout.) In fact, it comes in first or second place in California voter turnout in almost every national election. It also scores high on citizen participation in governance. Many citizens of the county participate in governance at some point in their lives. Many run for office, be it a judicial office, the school board, or the board of supervisors. Participation on commissions and county committees is voluntary, and there is some social pressure to volunteer for *something*.

The third component of a robust public sphere is government accountability. Those who govern and make decisions for the entire community must be accountable to those who elect them. They must be reminded from time to time that the "people" are the true source of political legitimacy and authority in a democracy. One danger in a representative democracy is that the governing elite, once elected, can isolate themselves from citizens who elected them and ignore the issues that are of concern to them.

## THE BIOMASS FACILITY CONTROVERSY

The controversy over placing a biomass energy plant in Alpine County and its resolution provides an interesting case study in democratic accountability. In the November 2022 election, citizens gathered enough signatures to put a measure on the ballot (Measure D) that would tie the hands of county officials if they worked to bring a biomass facility

to Alpine. A biomass facility is an energy plant that burns forest debris and thinned trees, converting them to heat and electricity. Two county supervisors had long promoted the placement of a facility in Alpine County. The Tamarack Fire energized their efforts even more.

Many citizens balked at the idea of bringing a biomass facility to Alpine County. Proponents of a biomass plant initially argued that it would bring jobs to Alpine County; after the Tamarack Fire, they argued that clearing the understory and burning it in the plant would protect residents from the threat of fire. Opponents of a biomass plant argued that such an industrial plant would mar the natural beauty of the area, would cost millions of dollars, and would require care and feeding around the clock. Large trucks would be required to bring forest debris to the facility, and large storage spaces would be required to store that debris. A biomass plant would emit almost as much CO<sub>2</sub> as coal plants and would not be needed, since there are other biomass plants nearby.

Opponents of the idea of bringing such a facility to Alpine County wrote a ballot measure, Measure D, that would prohibit the county from studying, permitting, and zoning for a biomass plant. Those opponents came from a broad coalition of *fiscal conservatives* who did not trust elected officials to promote the common good by bringing the plant to the county, *environmentalists* who opposed the CO<sub>2</sub> emissions of such a plant, *naturalists* who did not want the forest to be denuded, and *ordinary citizens* who wanted to live in an unspoiled environment.

Those who opposed Measure D (those who did not want a ban on biomass facilities) included current and former *public officials*, *county employees*, their *allies*, their *spouses*, and *ordinary citizens* who believed in the value of biomass plants in Alpine County and were, by association, members of the political elite. Only two public officials firmly believed in the value of biomass facilities in Alpine County. All opponents of the measure to ban the plants also treasured the beautiful natural environment, but they trusted government and believed that it should retain the power to make the decision about whether and when a biomass plant would be feasible.

Measure D won by almost 5 percentage points and exceeded expectations. By banning the plants and therefore tying the government's hands, the win underlined Thomas Jefferson's words: "What country can preserve its liberties if rulers are not warned from time to time that their people preserve the spirit of resistance" (quoted in Calhoun, Gaonkar, and Taylor 2022, 268). These words don't always ring true; some measures and propositions are initiated by Big Money in their own interest, and sometimes those who gather signatures are well paid and come—even swarm in—from the "outside." But it appears that Jefferson's words ring true in this case. Citizens wrote the petition, gathered the signatures, and paid for advertising flyers out of their own pockets. We shall see below that some misinformation played a role in the campaign, but both sides engaged in it. The important point here is that Measure D proclaimed for all to see that ballot measures are baked into the democratic system in many states to empower citizens directly and

remind the political elite that real authority in a democracy rests in the hands of the people. A constituent-initiated measure on the ballot signals to the people's elected representatives that periodic elections are not the *only* way to keep leaders accountable or show them whether or not they are trusted. The win suggests that voter trust in government on this, and perhaps on other issues, is low.

#### DELIBERATION, DISCOURSE, AND DEBATE

Liberal democracy depends on the practices of free speech and deliberative discussion. Factual and truthful information, reasoned argument, and the absence of personal attack and vitriol are crucial to that discussion. Face-to-face objective and rational discussion is most effective. Emotion, however, cannot be banned from liberal democratic discourse and debate. What is tricky, however, is to *respectfully* express emotion without personal attacks, exaggeration, and misinformation. Without respect and civility, rational debate cannot occur. Without honest discussion, friendships remain shallow and the obligations and joys of social connections fade.

This foundation of democratic culture is weak in Alpine County on two counts: the absence of open discussion and the intrusion of misinformation into the issue.

Community members report that it is difficult to discuss controversial topics with neighbors. If one such topic is raised, neighbors and friends change the subject, even if they might agree. Open disagreement is subtly discouraged, lest it cause a rift among friends.

In the controversy surrounding Measure D, self-censorship curtailed discussion and debate. Beginning with the petition to tie government's hands on this issue, it was rightly perceived by some as an attack on the board of supervisors and on the county government in general. On the other hand, many supporters of the measure believed that the public had no voice in discussions over the viability of a biomass plant in the county. Some supporters saw Measure D as an effort to restrict government policy and spending, but for others it was simply a way to reject biomass plants in the county. When the pro-biomass facility faction was being formed, leaders looked for those who would serve on the "Committee to Vote NO on Measure D." Three people who were approached refused to serve, saying that they would lose friends if they did.

In addition to self-censorship, a more formal, county-sponsored town hall was canceled. The opponents of Measure D demanded that it be conducted by "experts" on forest resilience and biomass plants, and proponents wanted it to be a broader discussion of the measure's pros and cons. The opposition had access to several organizations in the region working on forest resilience. Professionals from these organizations were long known to them and cultivated by the Alpine Biomass Collective. Those who wrote Measure D argued that they did not oppose discussion of forest resilience, but they wanted the discussion to also focus on other issues surrounding the placement of a biomass plant in the county: noise, dust, CO<sub>2</sub> emissions, a negative impact on property values, and ugliness of a power plant in the unspoiled mountain environment. They as a commit-

tee had researched and documented these issues and argued that discussion of them did not require special expertise. Furthermore, they argued that there was no time to find appropriate experts who would support their position in a wider discussion. Time was indeed short; the election would be held three weeks from the time negotiations over a town hall were taking place. Nonetheless, the group actually contacted one expert who opposed biomass plants but would speak only for a fee. This group had no deep pockets and could not afford to pay.

Because neither side would accept the proposed town hall agenda of the other, the county clerk decided that the county would not sponsor a town hall. But because the town hall had been the one chance of holding a community forum for reasoned debate and discussion, emotions began to run high, rumors and recriminations circulated, and comments about the issue quickly became personal. One interviewee who supported Measure D said of the county supervisors who advocated for biomass plants in the county: "they are elitists with a hidden agenda.... They have a secret plan to bring a biomass plant here." Another said, "We do not need experts to tell us what we feel about a power plant here." Fukuyama warns of this fear of the "hidden agendas of the elites. . . . [a fear which often] denied the possibility of true objectivity and instead valued subjective feelings and emotions as a source of authenticity" (2022, 113). Fear of hidden agendas and of secret meetings with developers stalked the pro-Measure D faction. Fear gripped opponents of Measure D as well. They rightly claimed that proponents were spreading falsehoods and conspiracy theories about a hidden agenda. Their pro-biomass plant agenda was open for all to see. They began to counter with their own half-truths and misinformation. Proponents claimed that they had not seen that agenda. Although those who spread misinformation were a distinct minority, mutual fear undermined any effort to engage in rational deliberation. After the town was canceled, the "No on Measure D" group held a community meeting in which invited speakers attempted to convince the public that biomass plants would be the only way to stop the threat of wildfire. Although the moderator, a strong proponent of biomass plants, permitted questions, he curtailed public discussion on other issues concerning biomass plants important to supporters of Measure D.

A second factor that weakened deliberation around this measure was the use of social media as the only outlet for open expression. Our theorists caution readers about the dangers of using social media as a substitute for deliberation, and they warn that social media can be used as a means of harassment. Social media, they argue, provide the means for vicious violation of privacy and dignity. This leads to heightened political polarization and distrust.

Discussion on social media intensified the controversy in damaging ways. Face-to-face meetings were not viable because a town hall was canceled, and Alpine County does not have a newspaper; debate moved to the social media platform Nextdoor. Some posts and comments about the issue were civil and informative on both sides, but when misinformation popped up, comments derided the person

who posted the information, rather than offering correction. Personal attack would be inserted, inviting a counter-attack and an escalation of vicious comments. As Calhoun, Gaonkar, and Taylor write, “social media as sources of information and opinion intensify the creation of . . . echo chambers” (CGT 2022, 29). Echo chambers consisting of “likes” and comments were created on Nextdoor and continued during the monthlong voting period. Discussions of the issue on Nextdoor proved useless in fostering rational discourse and deliberation. In fact, the opposite occurred: each side hardened its stance against the other; those seeking factual information were left in the dark, and the digital public space for discussion fractured. The rancor expressed in discussion on Nextdoor exposed the danger of social media to democratic deliberation and community connections.

The weakness of deliberation on this issue, along with the social media vitriol, exposed and exacerbated a growing distrust in government. Many had come to perceive that the Alpine County government was tone-deaf to issues that concerned the public. Several residents reported that supervisors refused to provide funding to stock the rivers with fish, thus discouraging tourism; they let the only children’s playground fall into disrepair; county officials permitted luxury developments while refusing to consider funding for affordable housing. When the mudslide halted all traffic in and out of Markleeville, they hesitated to pressure the state to quickly repair the highway. Ordinary citizens successfully organized to exert that pressure on both the county and the California state government, threatening to disrupt a board of supervisors meeting with a protest. One supervisor managed to reach the state governor, who informed the official in charge of transportation, but the public perception was that citizen protest and phone calls to highway officials speeded up the repair. Not long after Measure D’s defeat, the board of supervisors gave themselves a 33 percent raise while many citizens argued that salaries and benefits to new county employees were reduced, discouraging people from seeking county employment. The vote on Measure D, repudiating the local government, was possibly a symbolic act of festering citizen distrust.

Ultimately, this rupture of the public space through silence and vitriol around Measure D represented the age-old and universal conflict between political elites and ordinary citizens. As Gaonkar (CGT 2022, 161) points out, the tension between the elites and the masses never fully disappears. This is the case even in a small community, where political elites and citizens are neighbors who meet at the grocery store, on the hiking trails, and at the recycling stations. It is this tension, exacerbated by the constraints on deliberation and the free-for-all of social media, that frays the civic solidarity that knits citizens together.

#### ECONOMIC DECLINE, POVERTY, AND PRECARIETY

Globalization and neoliberalism have taken their toll on Alpine County. The town, which once boasted a vibrant art scene and dynamic business sector, now has only two restaurants, a café, a post office, and a general store. Two private ski resorts, a natural hot springs, a disc golf course, proximity to Lake Tahoe, fishing opportunities, and ample

summer recreation keep tourism and local business barely alive. Fire destroyed the hot springs infrastructure, and in 2022 it remained closed. Because the hot springs are part of a state park, local citizens were at the mercy of the state government for repair and opening.

Alpine County’s population has declined as young people have moved on and the threat of fire has given pause to those who once contemplated moving there. Shopping at Walmart in Nevada is much cheaper, with more choice of goods, than shopping at the small Markleeville general store. Waiters, carpenters, and salespeople cannot afford to live in Alpine County and must commute from Nevada. All of the authors point out that corporate decisions made far away constrain individual choice. This is true in Alpine County. As is the case for other small rural towns, the area is in economic decline.

Recall that for all the theorists under consideration here, it is extreme inequality that creates extreme poverty, and poverty harms and weakens liberal democracy. All three theorists write that because impoverishment excludes citizens from participating in the community, democratic governments must take measures to prevent it. This is true in Alpine County. Although the county will provide free and inexpensive medical and mental health services, and although several affluent white residents tutor underserved children, hire the unemployed as laborers, and provide aid to families who have experienced a tragedy, elected officials and government institutions—like governments at all levels in the United States—have failed to find effective ways to mitigate this poverty. As noted above, 20 percent of the county’s population lives below the poverty line, and a third of those are under age eighteen. Ten percent of those under the poverty line are age sixty-five or over.

Gaping inequality and abject poverty are palpable in Alpine County. Large homes and ranches dominate the landscape in the affluent, white areas of Markleeville and its Woodfords suburb. River Ranch, a gated community of large mansions and estates, stands proud among the sage and pine of the Mesa Vista neighborhood. Not far away, the thirty-unit mobile home park with a faulty septic system and rows of dilapidated trailers on dusty roads sits in the woods of the Sierra Pines colony. The trailers appear to be no match for Sierra winters. The families in Sierra Pines are white and poor. Their poverty is propelled by many forces—low wages, destitution, lack of opportunity, bad luck, divorce, depression, and addiction, to name just a few. They represent 10 percent of the Markleeville/Woodfords area. They also represent 50 percent of the county population living under the poverty line. They do not participate in the life of the community, and most are not registered to vote; few have adequate heat, cooling, and transportation; many are disabled; most do not have transportation and live far from recreation and parks; they do not attend the free lunches or field trips. Although all community activities are open to them and the county offers the inexpensive dial-a-ride van to transport them to activities, appointments, and shopping, there are no public spaces in their part of the Alpine community, and they are loathe to attend activities where they know no one. They



do not read the same books, watch the same films, make risotto, or play pickleball. They cannot afford to frequent the same restaurants. Shame, stress, alcoholism, drug dependency, disability, and depression keep them away. Many report that they refuse to vote. None from this population have served in public office. There is little attention paid to the structural problems that have swept residents into this place. Residents do not complain about their dire situation for fear of being displaced if the property is condemned. As a community, Sierra Pines residents are excluded from liberal democratic culture in all of its aspects. That exclusion politically disempowers them and has turned many of them against democracy. In addition to the lack of public deliberation, this deals a second harsh blow to the county's democratic culture.

The remainder of the impoverished population lives in Hung-A-Lel-Ti, the Washoe community, which is also a stone's throw from affluent River Ranch. In 2016 unemployment in the community hovered around 80 percent. That number has been cut in half by CHIPS, a regional nonprofit organization created to employ Native men and women to restore their ancestral lands in the Tahoe Basin, Alpine County, and beyond. CHIPS pays around \$15 per hour; the work is physically difficult, seasonal, and contingent on available projects; the wages are not enough to support a family. Drugs and alcohol are rampant within the community, even among CHIPS employees. Complaints about these thorny problems as lingering effects of white colonialism are widespread. Poverty, isolation, and distrust are dark clouds looming over the Hung-A-Lel-Ti community.

Poverty, isolation, and distrust are dark clouds looming over the Hung-A-Lel-Ti community. Although the county clerk and the sheriff are tribal members and highly respected county officials and although several tribal members are county employees, poverty and the problems that it spawns have long prevented this community from entering into the dense web of social networks enjoyed by the middle-class and affluent white population. Few tribal members come into Markleeville to shop and eat. Few come to meetings and events. For the most part, tribal members do not participate in the county's community life. The November midterm election saw only a 30 percent voter turnout in the Hung-A-Lel-Ti community. Lingering racism, colonialism, and a desire to engage only in traditional cultural practices with other Native people serve to prevent integration into the white community. And the white community expresses little desire to integrate the Washoe people into their public spaces. As in Sierra Pines, poverty contributes to the exclusion of Washoe people from the vibrant democratic culture that white Alpine County enjoys.

## REMEDIES

### ENCOURAGING SOCIAL EQUALITY AND SOCIAL SOLIDARITY

The theorists we have discussed here all argue that a thriving democracy requires governments to use their revenue at every level to strengthen the social safety net and reduce extreme poverty. A small county with an even smaller tax base will struggle with this requirement. Funds must come from higher levels of government. Alpine County's leadership must pound the pavement in Sacramento, California's capital, and Washington, DC, to raise funds to alleviate this poverty. Above all, Alpine desperately needs affordable, livable housing.

Beyond the safety net, however, citizens and political elites can create spaces that reduce the realm where money and wealth matter and that enable everyone to inhabit public space and participate as an equal in social relationships. Public parks, a children's playground, sports clubs, sports facilities, and libraries are good examples of such spaces. If these spaces were created and nurtured, the more affluent residents would come to know that Sierra Pines and Hung-A-Lel-Ti residents are their intellectual and moral equals, and that the only real difference between them and these impoverished communities is the opportunities they have had.

One way to create those spaces and encourage all groups to participate would be for the organizers of community activities to hold them at Sierra Pines or Hung-A-Lel-Ti. Already the Friday lunches are served at Hung-A-Lel-Ti twice a month, and the white population also attends (sometimes they are the only attendees); these free lunches can easily be served at Sierra Pines. Other integrative programs are also possible at either place: music festivals, chili cook-offs, quilting circles, holiday parties, and Easter egg hunts are possible examples. The community can also form intermural sports teams and hold fishing contests, in which people from all three groups are encouraged to participate. Almost half of the students in the elementary school are Native Americans. The Alpine County Unified School District Board could and should hold most of its meetings at Hung-A-Lel-Ti, making it easy for all parents to attend, particularly because many Native parents do not have transportation. The County dial-a-ride service should be enlisted to bring parents to board meetings. Integrating the communities in these and many other ways can build trust; trust builds friendships, and a virtuous circle can begin. Within that circle, members of all groups are likely to be more responsive to encouragement to vote and run for local office.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> The Washoe community area is also a county supervisorial district, and a member of that community always sits on the county board of supervisors.

## ENCOURAGING DELIBERATION

All theorists under consideration here have a facile approach to solving the problem of absence of deliberation; Ringen believes that all that is needed for open discussion is freedom of expression and available information. People will then be “discussing, asking, quarreling, demanding, pushing, [and] resisting” (2022, 192). In Alpine County, that legal freedom exists, but the needed discussion is absent. Similarly, Fukuyama exhorts his readers to simply be honest about their views and to compromise, to use the scientific method to unearth basic facts. But he does not tell them how this will come about in a community where citizens shy away from controversy for fear that they will upset their friends and neighbors. Calhoun, Gaonkar, and Taylor (yCGT 2022, 265) suggest that if social media were moderated and made more responsible, discussion and deliberation could take place. Certainly this is the case, but it is not enough. We *do* need fact-checked news media that is moderated for content and for civility. But in Alpine County, a newspaper is glaringly absent.

None of the theorists under consideration here have mentioned the most import force that can strengthen the ability to deliberate: the role of education. It is within educational institutions (which Fukuyama appallingly neglects to include in his list of the institutional foundations of democracy) that students learn to treat each other with dignity and to treat the process of learning with respect. Beginning in elementary school, students must learn to separate fact from opinion; they can learn civility in expressing opinions and relaying facts, and in disagreeing with their classmates. They can directly experience a strengthening of friendships that comes from civil, respectful discussions. Teachers must model civility by showing respect for all of their students. And it is in school that children learn the scientific method that Fukuyama so appreciates. There they learn how to think clearly and critically and come to know that no scientific finding is ever final. Education is the inculcation and accumulation of knowledge, the core of deliberation. And knowledge is based on evidence, not authority. Educational institutions teach that what we know is never final; knowledge develops and grows with experiment, debate, research, mistakes, failures, and experience. Our educational system must teach us all to be lifelong learners who learn from each other in open discussion. Alpine County is small enough that the school board and superintendent can discuss the importance of these points with teachers and help instill them in the curriculum.

County government should continually build trust among voters. It is the absence of deliberation that has undermined public trust in Alpine County government and political elites in general. It is the absence of trust that caused people to turn to social media and thereby make deliberation even more difficult. Government officials should reexamine its level of responsiveness to constituents and commitment to the common good. It should work to spend taxpayer money on bringing tourism to Alpine County, support county businesses, stock fish for tourists and locals, make the main street an attractive destination, provide a timely response to crisis, alleviate the suffering of those

who face precarity, and above all be transparent to citizens about decisions and finances. Citizens of Alpine County have put their board of supervisors on notice with their vote on Measure D. It is now that government’s time to restore trust.

## CONCLUSION

An examination of the state of liberal democracy in Alpine County exposes the myth that democratic culture will naturally flourish in a small rural community. The idealized narratives of Jefferson and Tocqueville never rang quite true. Jefferson was, in fact, talking about sprawling plantations and wealthy landowners and ignoring their enslaved laborers dotting the bucolic landscape that he gazed upon. And although Tocqueville scorned slavery, Native American genocide, and Americans’ love of riches, he neglected to account for how racist exclusion and the potential for vast economic inequality could tear apart the democratic culture of his idyllic small-town democracy. His fascination with American equality blinded him to the reality of hierarchies and tensions between elites and masses at all levels in American society. But his myth is kept alive in countless political campaign speeches across America, with pronouncements like this from presidential candidate Pete Buttigieg in 2019: “we would be well served if Washington started to look more like our best run cities and small towns rather than the other way around” (town hall, Austin, Texas, March 10, 2019). In fact, small-town America is ravaged by the opioid crisis, homelessness, poor health, hunger, and the same tragedies that plague the poor in Alpine County.

A study of Alpine County’s political culture has also exposed weaknesses and lacunae in the works of the theorists under review here. These works are often permeated with smug, didactic vagueness, long diatribes, and ideas that trail off, sometimes leaving little to hold on to. Nonetheless their pages are bursting with the authors’ infectious love of liberal democracy. The theorists considered here recoil when writing of their experience of its absence in China and Russia, and its indifferent neglect and twisted deformations in the United States. Whatever the weaknesses of these works, we come away from reading them knowing that the three foundations of democracy are fused to a deep bedrock of respect for the dignity and equality of every human being. We come away knowing that we can build democratic practices on the foundation that that bedrock provides. We can teach children and remind adults that voting, for example, is a precious gift that gives each of us *freedom* to choose our rulers and *power* over them to put them in office, boot them out, and clip their wings. The act of voting and participating in community building, deliberation, and pressure on our leaders to reduce poverty and expand public space and open deliberation puts us on an *equal* footing with everyone else, no matter our social class, race, or income. We are also free to take Thomas Jefferson’s words, quoted above, to heart and *revolt* when necessary, putting leaders on notice that they are there at our behest. We can learn to love liberal democracy only when we participate in

it and when our leaders earn our trust. They can earn that trust only when they demonstrate that they are working for the good of the entire community, not just the few.

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## COMPETING INTERESTS

The author has no competing interests to disclose.

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