

THE DEMOCRACY, STRAIGHT-UP! PROJECT

The Democratic Ownership of Law

Legislative Alienation, Political Agency, and Equal Sovereignty

— CHAPTER SEVEN —

Hegemony and Democratic Common Sense

Dahlia Hart and Tiffany Engels

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Hegemony and Democratic Common Sense

7.1 The power that does not look like power

Political domination is easiest to recognize when it issues commands, excludes opponents, censors speech, imprisons dissenters, or openly reserves authority for a privileged class. It is more difficult to identify when an institutional order is accepted as the normal form of freedom itself. In that case, the central relationship of power may disappear from view not because it is secret, but because the concepts used to describe political life have already incorporated it.

Representative government in contemporary democracies is sustained by law, administration, organized interests, professional expertise, electoral competition, and, ultimately, the coercive capacities of the state. It is also sustained by a common understanding of what democracy is. Citizens are taught that they govern because they choose officeholders. Representatives are described as possessing power on behalf of the people. Elections are treated as the decisive moment at which popular sovereignty becomes institutionally real. The interval between elections is then understood as a period during which authorized officials govern, subject to public influence and eventual electoral judgment.

Within that conceptual frame, the separation of citizens from the final legislative decision does not appear as alienation. It appears as democracy operating at scale. The representative's independent vote appears not as the transfer of a citizen's legislative authority, but as the practical expression of that authority. Public pressure, consultation, advocacy, and electoral accountability can therefore be described as forms of self-government even when the citizen does not retain the decision-right through which a proposal becomes law.

The durability of this understanding cannot be explained adequately by propaganda. It does not depend upon a centrally directed campaign to deceive the population, nor upon the bad faith of every teacher, scholar, journalist, reformer, civil servant, or officeholder who uses the language of representative democracy. The relevant beliefs are reproduced through ordinary institutional life. They are embedded in procedures, professional roles, civics lessons, research questions, funding categories, news routines, legal doctrines, and the practical calculations of people trying to accomplish worthwhile purposes within the world as it exists.

This chapter develops an account of that reproduction through the concept of *hegemony*. The term is used here to identify the process by which a historically particular organization of political authority becomes incorporated into common sense: the background understanding that defines what counts as democracy, realism, competence, participation, and responsible reform before explicit argument begins.

The claim is not that representative institutions are imaginary or that every justification offered for them is ideological camouflage. Representation performs indispensable functions. Large communities require communication, coordination, specialization, drafting, administration, negotiation, and the organized transmission of interests. The hegemonic move occurs when these functions are treated as necessarily entailing independent ownership of the legislative decision by representatives. A contingent institutional arrangement becomes fused with the general possibility of organized government.

Hegemony therefore concerns more than which answers people give. It concerns which questions appear intelligible. A political culture may argue intensely over who should be elected, which party should govern, how districts should be drawn, how campaigns should be financed, and how representatives should be made more

responsive while leaving unasked whether representatives should possess the final legislative authority in the first place. The space of disagreement can be wide while the underlying relation remains outside dispute.

The theory of democratic ownership must explain this closure without reproducing it in reverse. It cannot merely declare that others have been deceived and that it alone has escaped ideology. Its own concepts arise from a historical location, a practical project, and a particular diagnosis of democratic failure. A credible critique of hegemony must therefore be reflexive. It must expose inherited assumptions while submitting its own assumptions to the same demand for clarification and test.

The purpose of conceptual emancipation is not to replace one common sense with another that is immune from criticism. It is to recover the capacity to see an institutional arrangement as an arrangement: made rather than natural, contingent rather than necessary, defensible only by arguments that can be stated and examined.

Power is most secure when its institutional form supplies the vocabulary through which power is understood.

7.2 Gramsci and the enlargement of political power

Antonio Gramsci developed the concept of hegemony while trying to understand why class rule in the advanced capitalist societies of Western Europe could not be explained by coercion or economic control alone. State power mattered, but the state was not exhausted by police, courts, prisons, armies, and formal government. Durable rule also depended upon institutions and practices within civil society: schools, churches, newspapers, associations, parties, professions, and cultural organizations through which people acquired identities, expectations, moral vocabularies, and accounts of the social world (Gramsci 1971).

Gramsci's hegemony is often reduced to the phrase *cultural domination*. That description is too thin. Hegemony is not simply the broadcasting of ruling-class ideas into passive minds. It is a form of leadership through which a dominant group presents its direction of society as compatible with a wider conception of the common good. It combines intellectual and moral leadership with material organization, practical alliances, selective concessions, and the ability to incorporate interests beyond the dominant group's narrowest demands. Coercion remains available, but much of social order is maintained through consent, confidence, habit, dependence, and the absence of a credible alternative.

This account matters for democratic theory because an institutional order need not persuade citizens that they are powerless. It can secure consent more effectively by teaching them to understand the powers they do possess as the relevant substance of self-rule. The vote for an officeholder is real. Freedom of speech is real. Parties genuinely compete. Movements sometimes change policy. Representatives can be defeated. Courts can restrain government. Public opinion can alter political incentives. These democratic elements are not fabrications.

Hegemony works by organizing the meaning of those elements. Electoral choice becomes ownership of government. Influence upon a representative becomes participation in the legislative decision. The removability of an officeholder becomes continuing control of the authority held between elections. The genuine openness of the system to some forms of contestation helps legitimate the boundary placed around others.

This is why the theory developed here does not describe representative democracy simply as a fraud. A fraudulent election may fabricate votes or conceal a predetermined result. Hegemonic representation is more complicated. It provides consequential political opportunities while establishing the terms under which those opportunities will be interpreted. The citizen can act, but the available action is routed toward selecting, persuading, assisting, pressuring, or replacing a decision-owner.

Gramsci also insisted that hegemony is never complete. Common sense is not a seamless doctrine imposed from above. It is historically layered, internally contradictory, and composed of inherited fragments from religion, philosophy, folklore, practical experience, political struggle, and previous social orders. Within common sense, Gramsci identified elements of *good sense*: insights produced through lived experience that can conflict with the official organization of meaning.

Democratic common sense contains precisely such a contradiction. Citizens are told that the people rule, yet they regularly describe elected officials as failing to listen to them. They call government *ours* while speaking of lawmakers as *they*. They insist that public officials work for the people while accepting that those officials possess the final vote. The language of popular ownership coexists with the experience of legislative distance.

The contradiction is not merely verbal. It records two institutional realities. Citizens are recognized as the source of legitimacy, but representatives possess the operative decision-right. The language of democracy preserves the first reality; ordinary political experience continually reveals the second. Hegemony stabilizes the relationship by treating the separation as the necessary mechanism through which popular sovereignty becomes practical.

The concept of legislative alienation gives democratic good sense a more exact object. It translates the recurring intuition that government has become detached from the people into a claim about the allocation of authority. The problem is not only that officials are unresponsive. It is that responsiveness is demanded from people who own the decision because the citizens themselves do not retain it.

Gramsci's framework therefore helps explain both stability and possibility. Representative ownership is reproduced through institutions and common sense, but the democratic promise embedded in those institutions supplies resources for its criticism. Conceptual change need not invent the value of self-government. It can recover that value from a political language that already affirms it while revealing the institutional relation the language has concealed.

7.3 Hegemony is not propaganda

Propaganda is purposeful communication designed to shape belief or action. It may deceive, simplify, exaggerate, mobilize, or selectively frame evidence. Political systems use propaganda, and representative institutions are no exception. Yet propaganda cannot account for the deepest stability of democratic common sense.

First, much of the relevant reproduction occurs without a propagandist. A teacher explains the three branches of government using the accepted curriculum. A journalist asks how a bill will affect an incumbent's reelection. A political scientist measures representation through congruence between public preferences and legislative outcomes. A nonprofit trains citizens to contact their representatives. A foundation classifies a grant under civic engagement. A court describes elected legislators as the people's representatives. Each actor may be accurate within an established institutional vocabulary. No deception is required.

Second, hegemonic beliefs are enacted before they are stated. Citizens learn the meaning of political authority by encountering forms, offices, procedures, and consequences. A ballot lists candidates rather than bills. A legislative website provides a form for contacting the officeholder. A public hearing receives comments and then closes before officials decide. A school election selects a student president. The architecture teaches a relation: citizens speak, choose, advise, and judge; officeholders decide.

Third, propaganda ordinarily presupposes a distinction between the message and a reality that the message distorts. Hegemony helps constitute the social reality to which the message refers. When law grants representatives the final vote, when organizations structure themselves around influencing representatives, and when careers and resources are allocated through that system, the representative frame is not merely an inaccurate description. It is the

practical world actors inhabit. Its ideological power lies partly in presenting the existing organization of action as the only organization that could be serious.

Fourth, propaganda suggests an audience external to the producer. Hegemony is participatory. Citizens reproduce representative common sense when they organize entirely around electoral victory, celebrate access to officeholders as empowerment, or evaluate reforms only by their effects on candidate competition. Reformers reproduce it when they translate democratic aspirations into strategies that leave legislative ownership untouched. Critics reproduce it when they describe the public as unfit for an authority the public has never been allowed to exercise.

Althusser's account of ideology emphasizes that institutions do not merely communicate ideas; they constitute subjects through practices (Althusser 1971). The citizen is addressed as a voter, constituent, taxpayer, stakeholder, supporter, donor, volunteer, or member of the public. Each identity enables action, but none necessarily identifies the citizen as a continuing co-owner of legislative authority. The institutional subject learns where to stand in relation to the decision.

The concept of interpellation can be overstated if it makes persons appear entirely produced by institutional discourse. People occupy multiple roles, resist official identities, and improvise meanings. Yet the insight remains useful: political agency is not exercised from a neutral position outside institutions. Institutions name the agent and specify the recognized forms through which the agent may act.

The distinction between propaganda and hegemony also changes the ethics of critique. If representative common sense were maintained chiefly by lies, exposure would be sufficient. Correct the falsehood and the public would see the truth. If it is maintained through material organization, professional routines, legitimate achievements, and practical dependence, argument alone cannot dissolve it. New concepts must be joined to credible institutions through which people can experience a different relationship to authority.

A theory of democratic ownership therefore cannot rely upon denunciation. Calling citizens brainwashed or reformers complicit would mistake a social relation for a personal defect. The problem is not that people have failed an intelligence test. It is that the existing system has organized what intelligence can readily perceive as possible.

7.4 Common sense as sedimented history

The sociology of knowledge begins from the proposition that thought is socially situated. Categories do not arrive in individual consciousness fully formed and independent of history. They are inherited through language, institutions, education, occupational practice, and interaction. This does not make every belief false. It means that what appears self-evident has a social history (Mannheim 1936).

Berger and Luckmann describe institutional reality as a dialectical process of externalization, objectivation, and internalization (Berger and Luckmann 1966). Human beings create recurring practices. Those practices become typified and institutionalized. Later generations encounter the resulting institutions as objective features of the world. Through socialization, the institutional order is internalized as reality.

Representative democracy illustrates the sequence. Particular historical struggles produced legislatures, parties, constituencies, electoral rules, and doctrines of representation. These institutions stabilized into roles and procedures. The representative became a recognizable kind of political actor; the constituent became another. The arrangement acquired legal, ceremonial, and moral legitimacy. New citizens then entered a world in which democracy already meant choosing representatives.

Once objectivated, the institution conceals its own contingency. The legislature appears not as one historically developed method of allocating legislative authority but as the political organ naturally suited to making law. Elections appear not as a mechanism for selecting temporary decision-owners but as the definitive act of collective

self-government. The category of *representative democracy* joins the institution to the value so tightly that criticism of the institutional allocation of authority can sound like criticism of democracy itself.

Legitimation completes the process by explaining why the arrangement is right, necessary, or inevitable. Large populations cannot gather in one place. Policy is complex. Citizens lack time. Expertise is required. Direct rule would produce instability, demagoguery, majority oppression, or informational overload. Representatives refine public opinion, negotiate compromises, and take responsibility. Each proposition identifies a genuine problem. Together they support a conclusion that does not logically follow without further argument: because governing labor must be divided, legislative authority must be independently owned by a limited class of officeholders.

The distinction between labor and authority interrupts that conclusion. Scale requires organization, not necessarily alienation. Complexity requires specialization, not necessarily sovereignty for specialists. Time scarcity requires delegation, not necessarily irreversible transfer. Negotiation requires agents, not necessarily final decision ownership by the negotiator. The hegemonic force of the representative frame lies in treating functional requirements as a single package with a particular allocation of authority.

Common sense is sedimented because each generation inherits not only the current arrangement but the accumulated justifications of previous arrangements. Arguments once used to defend property qualifications, educated rule, national filtration, or distrust of popular judgment may survive in softened form after explicit exclusion has been rejected. The citizen is formally equal but still imagined as epistemically dependent. The people are sovereign but require a class authorized to determine what their sovereignty means in practice.

Historical sediment also explains why political language can contain incompatible layers. The republican citizen, liberal rights-bearer, partisan voter, consumer of public services, member of a nation, and sovereign people coexist within the same discourse. People move among these identities without constructing a systematic theory. Hegemony does not require philosophical consistency. It requires an institutional pattern capable of absorbing inconsistency without placing its central authority relation at risk.

The theory of democratic ownership is itself an attempt at reclassification. It isolates the final legislative decision-right from the surrounding bundle of representative functions. Once isolated, that right can be examined as an allocation rather than accepted as a natural accompaniment of coordination. The conceptual operation is simple, but its implications are extensive: the institution that was formerly seen as democracy's necessary form can be assessed as one possible organization of democratic labor and authority.

7.5 Institutions teach the standards by which they are judged

Institutions do not merely process preferences formed elsewhere. They shape preferences, identities, expectations, and standards of appropriateness. New institutionalist theory challenged accounts in which politics could be reduced to the strategic behavior of individuals with fixed interests. Rules and organizations influence what actors regard as a legitimate objective, a proper role, a realistic strategy, and an acceptable explanation (March and Olsen 1984; 1989).

This influence is especially important when an institution defines its own criteria of evaluation. Representative government is commonly judged by the fairness of elections, the competitiveness of parties, the responsiveness of officials, the protection of rights, the integrity of administration, and the correspondence between public preferences and policy. These are meaningful standards. But they begin after the allocation of the legislative decision-right has been settled.

A legislature can receive high marks for responsiveness even though the responsive official retains the authority to decide. A party system can become more competitive without altering the citizen's institutional position. Campaign finance can become more equal while candidates still compete for ownership of the legislative vote.

Deliberative reforms can improve the quality of advice delivered to decision-makers without transferring decision authority to participants.

The institutional frame therefore generates a family of problems and a family of remedies. When citizens are dissatisfied, the available diagnoses include poor candidates, polarization, corruption, gerrymandering, money, misinformation, weak parties, excessive parties, low turnout, incivility, ideological extremism, inadequate deliberation, or insufficient civic knowledge. Each may be real. Because the institution defines democracy as representative authorization, the deeper allocation of authority remains background rather than object.

This is an example of endogenous evaluation. The system supplies the standards through which the system is criticized. Reform appears ambitious when it improves performance within the accepted relation and unserious when it questions that relation. The boundary of realism is institutional before it is empirical.

Meyer and Rowan's account of formal structure as myth and ceremony adds another dimension (Meyer and Rowan 1977). Organizations adopt recognized forms not only because those forms are technically efficient but because conformity supplies legitimacy, resources, stability, and survival. DiMaggio and Powell describe coercive, mimetic, and normative processes through which organizations in a field become increasingly similar (DiMaggio and Powell 1983).

Democracy-reform organizations operate in such a field. They confront legal constraints, donor expectations, professional norms, media categories, partnerships, and models supplied by established organizations. A campaign with a recognized legislative target, measurable voter contacts, reputable expert endorsements, and a familiar theory of change is easier to explain and fund than a project seeking to reorganize legislative sovereignty. Under uncertainty, organizations imitate forms that have already been recognized as serious.

This does not mean the familiar form is always ineffective. Standardization can preserve knowledge and prevent repeated mistakes. Professional norms can improve competence. Legal strategy requires attention to actual law. The point is that organizational survival and conceptual adequacy are not the same criterion. A field may reward projects that are legible within its assumptions while filtering out projects that challenge those assumptions before their merits are tested.

The consequence is cumulative. Institutions shape organizations; organizations train professionals; professionals define responsible practice; responsible practice reinforces the institutions. No actor controls the cycle. Its power lies in coordination without command.

7.6 The naturalization of elections as self-government

Elections combine several distinct political functions. They express preferences, authorize officeholders, distribute positions, organize competition, confer legitimacy, permit peaceful replacement, and provide information about public support. In liberal democracies they are indispensable mechanisms of accountability and succession.

The hegemonic equation begins when these functions are condensed into a stronger proposition: through elections, the people govern themselves.

That proposition can mean at least three different things.

First, it may mean that the government is selected by the people rather than imposed by inheritance, military force, or an unaccountable party. This is an important democratic achievement.

Second, it may mean that officeholders have incentives to anticipate public judgment and remain responsive to public preferences. This is a claim about accountability.

Third, it may mean that the people remain authors of the laws enacted during the officeholder's term. This is a claim about sovereignty.

The first two do not establish the third. Selecting a person who will decide is not identical to retaining the decision. Influencing that person's future incentives is not identical to possessing the authority the person exercises. The electoral relation can be democratic in selection and accountability while remaining alienated in the ownership of legislative decisions.

The ambiguity is sustained by the word *authorization*. In one sense, citizens authorize an officeholder to occupy a legally defined role. In another, they are said to authorize the particular decisions later made within that role. Yet elections usually bundle thousands of possible future decisions, many unknown at the time of voting, into a choice among candidates. Voters may support a candidate for conflicting reasons, against an opponent, because of party identity, or as the least objectionable option. The election can authorize the officeholder's legal status without establishing public authorship of every subsequent legislative act.

Representative theory has long struggled with this gap. Mandate theories seek to connect elections to promised policies. Trustee theories defend independent judgment. Descriptive representation asks whether representatives resemble the represented. Substantive representation asks whether they act for represented interests. Symbolic representation concerns the beliefs and feelings through which people accept a representative as standing for them (Pitkin 1967).

Each concept identifies a relationship worth studying. None should be silently converted into continuing ownership by the represented of the representative's vote. The representative may communicate, advocate, resemble, symbolize, deliberate, negotiate, and labor for others while still independently possessing the final decision.

The naturalization of elections also depends upon contrast. Electoral democracy is commonly compared with dictatorship, monarchy, one-party rule, or military government. Against those alternatives, competitive elections correctly appear as a major expansion of freedom. The relevant comparison for democratic ownership is different. It compares electoral selection of decision-owners with an institution in which citizens retain recoverable legislative authority while delegating labor and, when desired, the exercise of their vote.

When the second comparison is absent, criticism of electoral sovereignty can be mistaken for indifference to elections. The theory developed here makes no such claim. Elections can remain valuable for selecting administrators, executives, judges where appropriate, delegates, moderators, or persons who perform specialized public functions. The question is whether choosing personnel must entail surrendering the legislative decision-right.

The hegemonic frame answers yes before the question is asked. Conceptual emancipation reopens it.

7.7 The asymmetric burden of proof

Established institutions and proposed alternatives are rarely judged by the same evidentiary standard. The familiar system is evaluated through its actual achievements, mitigations, and possibilities for reform. Its failures are treated as problems to be managed. An unfamiliar system is often evaluated through its worst conceivable failure. Its advocates are asked to demonstrate in advance that manipulation, incompetence, capture, instability, apathy, extremism, majority oppression, technological failure, and unintended consequences will not occur.

Some asymmetry is rational. Existing institutions have a historical record. Alternatives contain uncertainty. Prudence requires attention to transition costs and unknown risks. A theory that proposes a new allocation of authority carries a burden of explanation.

The hegemonic asymmetry goes further. Familiarity converts recurring harm into background conditions. Electoral dependence on donors, policy distortion, legislative bottlenecks, weak issue-by-issue accountability, and

public powerlessness become regrettable features of politics. The same possibility of distortion in an alternative is treated as a refutation of the alternative's principle.

The difference can be expressed as a contrast between *repair presumption* and *disqualification presumption*. When representative government fails, the presumption is that it should be repaired. When a nonrepresentative allocation of legislative authority encounters a plausible difficulty, the presumption is that it should be disqualified.

This double standard is not maintained only by defenders of the status quo. Reformers often reproduce it because their proposals seek recognition as improvements to representative democracy. Establishing seriousness may require affirming the foundational competence of existing institutions while describing the reform as a correction at the margins. The more radical the proposed change, the more effort must be devoted to proving compatibility with accepted categories.

The perfection demand has a moral dimension. Because direct voter authority is associated with danger, its advocates are asked to guarantee good outcomes. Representative institutions are permitted to produce war, corruption, exclusion, policy failure, and preventable suffering without losing their classification as democratic. A voter-sovereign institution may be denied that classification because voters could make an unjust decision.

No political system can satisfy a guarantee of harmlessness. Representatives, judges, experts, parties, and administrators are fallible. The question is comparative: where is authority located, how visible are errors, how reversible are delegations, how can affected people organize correction, and what kinds of capture are made easier or harder?

A symmetric inquiry would ask of every model:

- Who possesses the final decision-right?
- What information reaches that decision-maker?
- How can authority be delegated, recovered, and audited?
- What burdens fall upon ordinary participants?
- How are minorities protected and grievances introduced?
- What forms of capture are likely?
- How are errors detected and reversed?
- Which predictions can be tested?

The purpose of symmetry is not to lower the standard for Straight-Up institutions. It is to raise the standard for all institutions. Familiarity is evidence of endurance, not proof of necessity. Novelty is evidence of uncertainty, not proof of impossibility.

7.8 Professional fields and the boundaries of responsible thought

Modern political life is organized through professions. Lawyers interpret constitutional authority. Political scientists classify regimes and measure representation. Public administrators develop procedures. Journalists identify newsworthy actors. Campaign professionals mobilize voters. Nonprofit specialists design civic programs. Each profession develops expertise, ethical standards, career ladders, methods, and recognized objects of work.

Professionalization improves political capacity. Complex institutions cannot function through undifferentiated goodwill. The difficulty arises when a professional field's practical object becomes mistaken for the full object of democratic theory.

A campaign professional works with candidates, messages, turnout, and electoral coalitions. A reform that changes campaign incentives is legible; a reform that makes the candidate's legislative vote subordinate to an external voter-controlled institution may appear to threaten the profession's organizing assumptions. A legislative scholar studies roll calls, committees, parties, agenda control, and bargaining among officeholders. Citizens enter the

analysis as voters, constituents, preference distributions, interest groups, or public opinion. The final legislative act is observed at the point where authorized officials cast votes.

The field need not deny popular sovereignty. It operationalizes popular sovereignty through variables available within representative institutions. Over time, the operational definition can become the theoretical definition.

Bourdieu's concepts of field, capital, and doxa help explain this process (Bourdieu 1977; 1991). A field is a structured arena in which actors occupy positions, compete for valued resources, and acquire a practical sense of what can be said and done effectively. Doxa identifies the assumptions so deeply embedded in the field that they are not ordinarily experienced as positions. They define the game.

In the political field, accepted forms of capital include office, credentials, donor networks, media visibility, organizational membership, technical knowledge, and access to decision-makers. A person seeking influence rationally accumulates these resources. The strategy is not evidence of moral failure. It is adapted to an institutional environment in which a small number of actors own consequential decisions.

The same adaptation can narrow imagination. A proposal that cannot be translated into a bill, campaign, court claim, grant category, academic variable, or recognized movement demand may remain professionally invisible. It lacks not necessarily merit but *field legibility*.

This helps explain why the question "Who owns the legislative decision?" can sound simultaneously elementary and foreign. It is elementary because every roll-call vote has a legally identified owner. It is foreign because the professional field ordinarily treats that allocation as part of the definition of a legislature rather than a variable open to redesign.

A reflexive democratic theory should therefore ask how its own professional location shapes its questions. Scholars who study existing institutions can provide indispensable evidence about behavior, incentives, and history. They can also inherit the ontology of the institutions they study. The remedy is not anti-intellectualism. It is reflexivity: the disciplined examination of how methods, careers, and available data structure the boundaries of inquiry.

7.9 Civic education and the reproduction of political roles

Civic education introduces new members to the political community. It teaches constitutional history, rights, institutional procedures, public responsibilities, and the skills required for participation. In a democracy, such education is a form of infrastructure for agency.

It is also a mechanism of institutional reproduction.

A curriculum must simplify. It selects which institutions to name, which relationships to emphasize, and which actions to present as normal. When civics is organized around branches of government, elections, parties, and the duty to contact representatives, it teaches more than factual structure. It teaches the citizen's location within that structure.

The student learns that citizens vote, representatives legislate, executives administer, and courts interpret. The sequence is descriptively accurate. Its normative implication often remains unstated: because this is how democratic government works, this is what democratic self-government means.

Mock elections reinforce the lesson. Students select officeholders and experience electoral competition. Less common is a sustained simulation in which every student retains a bill-level decision-right, delegates it conditionally, organizes in small groups, and reclaims it when desired. The absent exercise is conceptually important. Institutional imagination develops partly through the forms people rehearse.

Civic education also tends to moralize participation. The good citizen becomes informed, votes, volunteers, listens respectfully, compromises, and avoids misinformation. These are valuable dispositions. Yet the moral

curriculum can reproduce the change-the-voters-first logic described in Chapter Six. The citizen is prepared to participate responsibly in a structure whose allocation of authority is not itself presented for examination.

A democratic-ownership curriculum would not abandon constitutional facts or electoral skills. It would add a different series of questions:

- Which actor possesses the final authority at each stage of lawmaking?
- What can a citizen do when persuasion fails?
- Which delegations are revocable?
- How does public input become, or fail to become, a public decision?
- What institutional alternatives can separate necessary governing labor from ownership of the vote?

The aim would not be indoctrination into Straight-Up doctrine. It would be conceptual literacy about authority. Students should be able to distinguish influence from decision, consultation from control, authorization of an officeholder from authorship of a law, and delegation from alienation. They could then defend representative ownership if they found the arguments persuasive. What matters is that the allocation becomes visible enough to defend.

Education reproduces hegemony when it presents inherited institutions as the natural grammar of citizenship. It contributes to emancipation when it teaches citizens to examine the grammar itself.

7.10 Reform organizations and the discipline of attainable change

Democracy-reform organizations occupy a difficult position. They confront urgent harms while operating inside the institutions they seek to change. They need money, staff, legal advice, coalitions, public credibility, media access, and achievable campaigns. They must convert broad dissatisfaction into objectives that people can understand and institutions can process.

These pressures favor reform proposals with a visible point of intervention. Redistricting can be assigned to commissions. Voting rules can be changed by statute or initiative. Campaign-finance requirements can be litigated or legislated. Ethics rules can be drafted. Civic programs can count participants. Each target is consequential and, at least in principle, measurable.

Reorganization of legislative sovereignty is harder to classify. It may not initially require a change in formal law, yet it seeks to create an institution whose instructions become politically binding upon an elected representative. Its early outputs may include membership, delegated authority, internal decisions, and credible compliance rather than familiar statutory victories. A funder or partner may reasonably ask where the reform fits.

This creates what may be called *grant legibility*: the capacity of a project to translate itself into recognized problem categories, activities, deliverables, and theories of change. Legibility is necessary for organizational coordination. It also selects among ideas. Projects aligned with existing categories can appear concrete before they have proven effective; projects that challenge the categories can appear vague even when their institutional logic is precise.

The pressure is not uniquely financial. Coalitions require common language. Media coverage requires a recognizable conflict. Volunteers need tasks. Organizations protect reputations built through previous work. Staff members possess expertise suited to certain campaigns. A proposal that questions representative ownership may unsettle relationships with the officeholders, parties, scholars, and institutions upon whom reform work often depends.

The resulting moderation may be principled, strategic, or simply prudent. A reform organization can reasonably conclude that a radical proposal is legally risky, empirically untested, or politically premature. Hegemony should not become a device for dismissing every objection as evidence of capture.

The analytical question is narrower: do the organizational conditions under which reform is pursued systematically favor remedies that leave the underlying allocation of legislative authority intact? If so, the reform field may produce substantial innovation within a stable constitutional imagination.

This possibility explains a recurring pattern. Public frustration with concentrated political power is translated into better representation, fairer elections, greater access, improved deliberation, or stronger accountability. Each translation addresses a genuine dimension of the problem. The transformation from *the public should possess the decision* to *the decision-maker should respond better to the public* occurs so naturally that it may not be recognized as a reduction.

The theory of democratic ownership does not ask reform organizations to abandon attainable work. It asks them to identify the level at which each reform operates. Does it alter the quality of influence, the selection of representatives, the distribution of access, or the ownership of the legislative decision? Clear classification would allow complementary reforms to cooperate without treating all democratic improvement as equivalent.

7.11 Academic disciplines and the inherited object of democracy

Academic inquiry is among the most important sources of conceptual emancipation. It preserves historical memory, develops methods, tests claims, and subjects political ideals to criticism. It also operates through disciplinary divisions that can fragment the object under study.

Political theory examines legitimacy, justice, authority, and representation. Comparative politics classifies regimes and electoral systems. American politics studies Congress, parties, public opinion, and institutions. Public administration studies implementation. Law examines constitutional doctrine and statutory authority. Sociology studies organizations, movements, inequality, and knowledge. Economics models incentives and collective choice. Each discipline sees part of the relation between citizens and law.

The legislative decision-right can disappear between them. Legal scholarship identifies who formally possesses it but may treat that allocation as constitutional structure. Political science analyzes how the holder behaves. Democratic theory asks whether the holder represents others legitimately. Public-opinion research measures what citizens want. Movement studies analyze how outsiders exert pressure. The possibility that the decision-right itself could remain with citizens while its exercise and supporting labor are distributed does not fit comfortably into any inherited division.

Data reinforce the boundary. Existing systems generate records of candidate elections, campaign donations, roll-call votes, committee assignments, lobbying contacts, surveys, and policy outcomes. Researchers can study those records with increasing sophistication. A voter-sovereign legislature that has not yet existed at scale generates no comparable dataset. The absence of evidence is real, but it can be misinterpreted as evidence that the object is unreal.

This creates an epistemic asymmetry between explanation and invention. Academic disciplines are generally better equipped to explain institutions that have stabilized than to evaluate architectures that combine familiar mechanisms in unfamiliar ways. The problem is not lack of intelligence. It is the relationship between methods and objects.

Institutional proposals therefore risk falling into a gap. To theorists they may seem excessively technical. To empirical researchers they may seem insufficiently instantiated. To engineers they may seem normatively underspecified. To activists they may seem too academic. A project that crosses these boundaries must do unusual integrative labor merely to become an object of evaluation.

Hegemony enters when disciplinary limitations become ontological conclusions. Because an institution has not generated a recognized literature, it is treated as conceptually incoherent. Because citizens have not exercised a

particular form of authority, findings from institutions that deny that authority are generalized to predict how they would behave if they possessed it. Because participation has been advisory or episodic, its observed limits are treated as limits of consequential self-government.

The appropriate response is not to exempt new models from evidence. It is to distinguish kinds of claim. Normative arguments can establish why equal legislative standing matters. Structural analysis can derive requirements and identify failure modes. Existing research can provide partial evidence about component mechanisms. Simulation and software can test procedures. Implementation can generate evidence unavailable in advance.

Academic common sense becomes emancipatory when it recognizes the boundary between what present evidence refutes and what present institutions have never allowed evidence to test.

7.12 Political language and the grammar of subordinate agency

Political language does not merely label relationships. It organizes them.

A *constituent* is a person represented by an officeholder. The term identifies membership in a district, but it also positions the citizen in relation to the representative. A constituent requests, petitions, thanks, criticizes, or replaces. The representative decides.

A citizen is said to have *voice*. Voice matters, but the metaphor presupposes a listener. Someone else possesses the institutional capacity to convert speech into action.

Citizens seek *access*. Access presupposes a gate and an actor authorized to open it.

Public bodies conduct *consultation*. Consultation can improve decisions, but the consulted do not necessarily own the result.

Officials are held *accountable*. Accountability may discipline power after it has been exercised. It does not by itself locate authority before or during the decision.

Representatives are urged to *listen*. The moral demand is appropriate, but its recurrence reveals the institutional asymmetry. A sovereign public would require procedures for decision, not merely virtues of listening from decision-owners.

The term *participation* is especially elastic. It can mean voting for candidates, attending a hearing, answering a survey, joining a deliberative forum, protesting, volunteering, donating, serving on an advisory board, signing a petition, or casting a binding legislative vote. When all are grouped under one word, differences in authority disappear.

Representation is equally expansive. It can mean depicting a population, speaking for an interest, communicating a preference, acting as an advocate, symbolizing a community, performing delegated labor, or independently casting the final vote. The last function is bundled with the others and acquires legitimacy from their value.

The language of democracy therefore contains what may be called a *grammar of subordinate agency*. Citizens are active, but their recognized actions are organized around another actor's decision. They are not silent or inert. They campaign, deliberate, mobilize, and influence. Their activity is real and often consequential. The grammar specifies that consequential public action must ordinarily pass through an authorized decision-owner.

This is why the simple sentence "Choosing who will govern you is not self-government" can feel provocative. It violates the accepted grammar. In ordinary democratic speech, choosing governors is precisely what self-government means. The sentence separates two concepts that the institutional vocabulary has joined.

Conceptual emancipation requires a more discriminating language. It does not demean influence, voice, access, consultation, accountability, participation, or representation. It identifies what each can and cannot establish. Once separated, they can be valued without being mistaken for sovereignty.

A political community gains theoretical clarity when it can say: the citizens were consulted but did not decide; the representative was accountable but independently owned the vote; the delegate performed labor while the member retained authority; the public influenced the law but did not author it. Precision makes the allocation of power visible.

7.13 Tacit compromise as a mechanism of stability

Hegemony persists not only through belief but through accommodation. People may recognize defects in an institution while continuing to act as though its foundations are nonnegotiable. They do not necessarily affirm the institution as ideal. They accept it as the terrain upon which meaningful action must occur.

This book uses the term *tacit compromise* for one mechanism of that accommodation.

Tacit compromise is not a secret agreement among elites. It is an uncoordinated convergence in which actors suspend a deeper challenge in exchange for the possibility of accomplishing partial goods within the existing structure. The officeholder accepts donor dependence to remain electorally viable. The reformer accepts representative ownership to win a procedural improvement. The scholar brackets first-order questions of sovereignty to study measurable behavior. The journalist relies upon official sources to meet deadlines. The citizen supports an imperfect candidate to prevent a worse result.

Each decision can be individually rational and morally defensible. Together they reproduce the institutional relation everyone privately experiences as inadequate.

The compromise is tacit because its terms are rarely stated. No actor says: *We agree not to question who owns legislative authority, and in return each of us will receive a limited opportunity to influence those who do.* The bargain emerges from repeated adaptation. Those who refuse it may lose access, credibility, employment, electoral viability, or the ability to secure immediate benefits for others.

Tacit compromise differs from hypocrisy. A person can sincerely believe that present constraints make incremental action necessary. It differs from corruption because the benefit need not be private. A movement may moderate a demand to protect vulnerable people through an attainable reform. It differs from simple coercion because actors retain choices, though the costs of those choices are structured unequally.

Its hegemonic effect lies in the narrowing of temporal imagination. The deeper transformation is postponed because current harms demand practical action. Each postponement is reasonable. The sequence has no natural endpoint. Emergency becomes normal politics, and the institution's foundation remains perpetually outside the agenda.

Tacit compromise also affects language. The strongest critique is translated into terms that decision-owners can accept. *The people should govern* becomes *leaders should listen*. *Citizens should own the lawmaking decision* becomes *citizens deserve a seat at the table*. *Legislative alienation* becomes *a trust deficit*. The translation may open doors, but it can also remove the object that made the critique distinctive.

The concept should not be used to condemn compromise as such. Politics requires compromise among values, interests, and strategies. The relevant question is what is being compromised and who retains the authority to define the feasible. A compromise over policy among equal decision-holders differs from a compromise through which some persons accept permanent subordination in order to influence those who decide.

Tacit compromise stabilizes hegemony when accommodation to the existing allocation of authority becomes the unspoken price of being recognized as politically responsible.

7.14 Enticement to self-interest and the recruitment of challengers

A second mechanism of hegemonic stability is *enticement to self-interest*. Political systems do not rely only upon persuading people that the system is just. They also offer pathways through which energetic, ambitious, knowledgeable, and morally committed people can acquire influence, status, resources, and meaningful work inside it.

The representative system creates valuable roles: candidate, officeholder, staff member, consultant, organizer, journalist, scholar, lobbyist, advocate, foundation officer, nonprofit director, party official, and recognized public intellectual. Many occupants of these roles perform indispensable service. The point is not that they have been bought. It is that the existing allocation of authority organizes ambition toward competition for proximity to decision-owners.

A person outraged by political exclusion can run for office. A movement leader can become an adviser. A critic can secure a fellowship, grant, column, appointment, or organizational platform. An outsider can become an insider capable of producing real benefits. The path is often attractive precisely because it is not purely selfish. Personal advancement and public purpose can reinforce one another.

Gramsci's discussions of *transformism* illuminate this process: opposition leaders and energies can be absorbed into an existing governing formation, altering it while reducing the possibility of an independent counterformation (Gramsci 1971). The absorption need not leave everything unchanged. Institutions often incorporate reforms, new groups, and new moral claims. That adaptability is a source of resilience.

Enticement operates at ordinary levels as well. Partisans are offered the hope that their side will soon control the same powers they currently condemn. A citizen who experiences powerlessness can identify with a candidate who promises to wield power on the citizen's behalf. The possibility of winning converts opposition to concentrated authority into competition to control it.

The system thus distributes aspirational shares in decision ownership without distributing the decision-right itself. People can imagine becoming the representative, influencing the representative, working for the representative, or helping elect the representative. The structure recruits agency by directing it upward.

This mechanism helps explain the durability of alternating partisan outrage. A party denounces executive overreach, procedural manipulation, donor influence, or legislative obstruction when out of power and defends similar capacities when control changes hands. The inconsistency is not only moral weakness. The institutional prize remains concentrated, and each side has reason to preserve powers it expects eventually to hold.

Enticement to self-interest should be distinguished from a claim that all political motivation is selfish. The mechanism is stronger because it attaches personal incentives to legitimate commitments. Career, recognition, access, group loyalty, and the desire to help can converge. A person need not choose between conscience and advantage; the institution offers a role in which they appear aligned.

A voter-sovereign system would not abolish ambition or informal hierarchy. Delegates, experts, organizers, and communicators would still acquire reputation and influence. The design question is whether those rewards carry independent ownership of others' legislative authority. Recoverable delegation attempts to preserve pathways for leadership while preventing leadership from becoming a separate property in the decision.

The critique is therefore institutional rather than ascetic. Democracy does not require people without ambition. It requires an architecture in which ambition cannot secure an unrecoverable title to rule.

7.15 Hegemony without villains

Critiques of ideology often become moral dramas. One group manipulates; another is deceived. Intellectuals expose the lie; ordinary people awaken. This structure is rhetorically satisfying and sociologically weak.

Representative common sense is reproduced by people with conflicting interests and sincere commitments. Teachers want students to understand government. Journalists want accurate and timely reporting. Scholars want valid explanations. Reformers want achievable improvements. Officeholders may genuinely regard independent judgment as a duty. Citizens may rationally prefer delegation because political attention is costly.

The problem does not disappear because intentions are good. Nor do good intentions prove the system legitimate. They show why explanation must operate at the level of relations, incentives, roles, and categories rather than personal wickedness.

Lukes's multidimensional account of power is helpful here (Lukes 2005). Power is exercised not only in observable conflict but in agenda control and in the shaping of perceptions, preferences, and grievances. Bachrach and Baratz similarly emphasized that power can operate by keeping issues outside decision processes (Bachrach and Baratz 1962). The present argument adds that a political relation may remain outside the agenda because the institution supplies no ordinary category through which participants experience it as a decision.

No committee needs to prohibit discussion of legislative ownership. The question can fail to arise because legislatures are defined as bodies of representatives. No censor must suppress a voter-sovereign proposal. It can be dismissed as impractical before its mechanisms are specified because practical government is equated with representative decision ownership.

Gaventa's analysis of quiescence likewise shows that the absence of visible conflict does not establish the absence of power (Gaventa 1980). People may adapt expectations to longstanding inequalities, anticipate defeat, or lack institutions through which grievances can become effective. Yet adaptation is never total. Hidden doubts, local knowledge, and experiences of contradiction persist.

The phrase *brainwashing* is especially unhelpful. It imagines an originally autonomous mind overwritten by an external program. Hegemony is more ordinary and more difficult. People learn political reality through participation in it. They possess evidence for many of their beliefs. They encounter costs when they act outside accepted channels. They can be reflective and still conclude that no viable alternative exists.

A nonmoralizing account also protects the theory from self-flattery. Advocates of democratic ownership are not uniquely immune to social construction, career incentives, group identity, or motivated reasoning. They may overvalue their own architecture, understate transition risks, interpret criticism defensively, or create a new professional field with its own doxa.

The test of a critique is not the purity of its authors. It is whether the distinctions it introduces improve explanation, whether its claims survive comparison, and whether the institution it proposes remains open to correction by the people whose authority it organizes.

7.16 Crisis, contradiction, and the limits of representative common sense

Hegemony is strongest when institutions can interpret their own failures as reasons for renewal rather than reasons to question their foundations. A scandal produces ethics reform. Low turnout produces mobilization. Polarization produces dialogue. Donor influence produces disclosure. Unresponsive government produces a new electoral campaign. The repair may be valuable, and the central relation survives.

A hegemonic order becomes vulnerable when its accepted language can no longer reconcile promise and experience. Gramsci used the idea of organic crisis to describe situations in which established leadership loses

authority and inherited forms no longer organize consent effectively. The concept should not be applied casually. Dissatisfaction alone does not create a new order. Crisis can strengthen authoritarianism, cynicism, withdrawal, or nostalgic restoration as easily as democracy.

Still, the contradiction between popular sovereignty and legislative alienation creates a recurring instability. Citizens are promised government by the people but experience politics as competition for influence over officeholders. When policy repeatedly diverges from durable public demands, when elected majorities cannot enact announced programs, or when both parties appear dependent upon concentrated institutions, dissatisfaction may exceed the explanatory capacity of ordinary reform language.

The response often remains personalized. Bad leaders, corrupt politicians, ignorant voters, malicious parties, or wealthy donors are blamed. Each may contribute. Personalization protects the architecture by locating failure in occupants rather than relationships. The next candidate, movement, election, or civic campaign can restore faith.

Structural critique becomes possible when repeated disappointments are connected to the allocation of the decision-right. The question changes from *Why do our representatives keep failing us?* to *Why must public self-government depend upon persuading independent owners of legislative authority?*

This conceptual shift does not automatically mobilize people. A structural diagnosis without a practicable alternative can deepen despair. Hegemony is not displaced by criticism alone; a countervailing conception must become organized in institutions capable of performing the work that the old common sense treated as impossible.

The Straight-Up System seeks to provide such an institutional hypothesis. Its four parameters - voter sovereignty, voluntary human-scale association, layered aggregation, and revocable delegation - are intended to demonstrate that authority can remain with citizens while labor and attention are distributed. Whether the combined architecture succeeds is an empirical question. Its conceptual importance lies in making a previously fused package divisible.

Once representation is separated from decision ownership, the debate changes. Critics can ask whether direct standing is secure, whether proxies concentrate, whether small groups exclude, whether layers distort, whether turnout is sufficient, and whether the institution can survive attack. These are difficult questions. They are questions about a visible model rather than assertions that no alternative to alienated authority can be imagined.

7.17 Conceptual emancipation

Conceptual emancipation is the recovery of the ability to identify, separate, and test assumptions that have become embedded in common sense. It is not freedom from all inherited concepts. Thought requires language, history, and social knowledge. Nor is it the revelation of a final vocabulary beyond ideology.

Its first operation is *denaturalization*. Institutions are redescribed as historical arrangements rather than expressions of necessity. The representative legislature becomes one method of organizing authority, not the self-evident meaning of democracy.

Its second operation is *disaggregation*. Bundled concepts are separated. Elections are distinguished from self-government. Representation is divided into communication, advocacy, embodiment, delegated labor, and decision ownership. Accountability is separated from continuing control. Expertise is separated from sovereignty. Scale is separated from alienation.

Its third operation is *authority tracing*. Analysis follows a proposal through agenda formation, drafting, amendment, voting, enactment, implementation, and correction. At each stage it asks who possesses the capacity to decide, who can intervene, and whether delegated authority can be recovered.

Its fourth operation is *symmetrical comparison*. Existing and proposed systems are assessed using the same questions. Familiar harms are not normalized, and novel risks are not ignored. Both architectures are examined for participation burdens, information quality, capture, minority protection, resilience, and corrigibility.

Its fifth operation is *counterfactual construction*. A claim of necessity is tested by specifying an alternative mechanism. If representation is said to be necessary for scale, can communication and delegation be preserved while the final vote remains recoverable? If expertise is said to require independence, can experts control technical labor without owning political authority? If citizens lack time, can default proxies reduce labor without making delegation permanent?

Its sixth operation is *empirical humility*. Some claims can be established conceptually; others require evidence. The moral equality of recognized citizens is not proved by a pilot project. The stability of a particular delegation network cannot be derived from moral equality. A serious theory states which claims are normative, structural, historical, or predictive.

Its seventh operation is *reflexivity*. The new framework must identify its own blind spots and institutional interests. Straight-Up language can itself become hegemonic. Terms such as voter sovereignty, affinity, recursion, and recoverability can harden into slogans that conceal failure. An organization built to establish democratic ownership can accumulate control over software, procedure, or public interpretation. Conceptual emancipation therefore includes the right to criticize and revise the emancipatory vocabulary.

Freire's account of conscientization is relevant insofar as it describes reflection upon the conditions of action joined to practical transformation (Freire 1970). Yet the relation must not be cast as enlightened teachers bringing consciousness to passive citizens. People already possess experiences that contradict official descriptions. The role of theory is to provide distinctions through which those experiences can be connected, argued, and organized.

Conceptual emancipation is achieved when citizens can recognize that a familiar political opportunity is not the same as the authority claimed in its name. A vote for a representative may be valuable without being self-government. Consultation may be respectful without being sovereignty. A responsive legislature may be preferable to an unresponsive one while both remain forms of legislative alienation.

Seeing the distinction does not dictate the institutional conclusion. It makes the conclusion a matter of judgment rather than inheritance.

7.18 Testing democratic common sense

A critique of hegemony becomes self-sealing when disagreement is interpreted as proof that the dissenter remains trapped within ideology. The theory of democratic ownership must avoid that error. Representative government may survive examination because its defenders offer compelling arguments, not because everyone who accepts it has been socialized into submission.

Inherited assumptions should therefore be translated into propositions that can be assessed.

Representative ownership is necessary for scale. This proposition requires a demonstration that large populations cannot retain individual legislative standing while organizing communication, specialization, and aggregation through other means.

Citizens lack the time required for legislative sovereignty. This requires comparison between the labor demanded by direct standing and the labor demanded by elections, advocacy, crisis mobilization, and living under uncorrected policy. It also requires models of optional delegation and episodic participation.

Experts must possess final authority because policy is complex. This requires an argument that epistemic competence creates a title to political sovereignty rather than a reason for citizens to rely upon expert labor and advice.

Elections provide sufficient continuing control. This requires analysis of bundling, timing, issue specificity, candidate dependence, and whether periodic removal allows citizens to direct particular legislative acts.

Direct authority would intensify capture or demagoguery. This requires comparative models of influence under concentrated and distributed decision ownership, including the cost, visibility, durability, and reversibility of capture.

Citizens do not want to govern. This requires distinction between unwillingness to perform permanent political labor and unwillingness to retain authority. It must consider whether observed disengagement is partly produced by low efficacy and indirect participation.

Representative independence protects minorities and rights. This requires historical and institutional comparison, not idealization of representatives or majorities. Rights protection may depend upon constitutional procedures, courts, dispersed vetoes, and organized minorities rather than the alienation of every citizen's legislative vote.

The purpose of this translation is not to make every philosophical question experimentally decidable. It is to prevent necessity claims from drawing strength merely from familiarity. Once stated precisely, some will receive strong support, some will require institutional safeguards, and some may dissolve into avoidable design assumptions.

The same discipline applies to Straight-Up claims. Revocability may fail to prevent proxy concentration. Affinity groups may reproduce exclusion. Layered aggregation may distort information. Direct voting may be too burdensome. Software may create new administrators with effective sovereignty. A credible project specifies these risks before success and identifies evidence that would require redesign.

Hegemony is challenged most responsibly not by asserting that common sense is false, but by converting common sense into a question space.

7.19 From democratic common sense to democratic ownership

Representative democracy possesses extraordinary historical legitimacy because it joined popular authorization to institutions capable of governing large states. It displaced hereditary claims, enabled peaceful competition, widened suffrage, protected important freedoms, and created channels through which organized publics could influence law. Any account that treats this history as mere deception is inadequate.

The hegemonic limitation lies elsewhere. Representative government became not one historically important form of democratization but the default meaning of democracy. Its allocation of legislative authority disappeared into the concept used to justify it. The people were said to rule because they selected the people who ruled.

The result is a democratic common sense organized around subordinate agency. Citizens possess voice, access, influence, consultation, participation, and electoral judgment. These powers matter. They operate around a final legislative decision held elsewhere.

Gramsci, the sociology of knowledge, ideology theory, and institutionalism help explain how such a relation can reproduce itself without centralized deception. Institutions become objective reality. Professional fields organize what counts as serious work. Language fuses representation with sovereignty. Reform organizations adapt to legal and funding environments. Civic education teaches inherited roles. Actors make tacit compromises to achieve immediate goods. Ambitious challengers are recruited into pathways of influence and office. Familiar harms receive a presumption of repair; unfamiliar arrangements face a presumption of disqualification.

None of these mechanisms proves that representative ownership is wrong. They explain why its necessity can appear self-evident before the normative and institutional arguments are made.

The theory of democratic ownership begins by suspending that self-evidence. It asks whether the division of governing labor requires the alienation of legislative authority. It asks whether citizens can authorize assistance,

delegate work, rely upon expertise, organize through layers, and participate intermittently while retaining an equal and recoverable relationship to the final decision.

The conceptual achievement is modest but foundational. It changes a statement of identity into a hypothesis.

Elections are democratic mechanisms. They are not, without further argument, identical to self-government.

Representatives perform necessary work. They do not, without further argument, require independent ownership of the legislative vote.

Citizens may choose not to exercise authority directly. That choice does not, without further argument, require the loss of the authority they decline to exercise.

A political order becomes available for democratic judgment when people can distinguish the institution from the value it claims to embody. Conceptual emancipation is the moment at which the familiar ceases to be the measure of the possible.

**The first achievement of democratic theory is not to supply the correct institution.
It is to make the ownership of authority visible enough that the public can decide.**

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