A century of political science has undercut the populist ideal of democracy, in which elections allow citizens to direct the course of public policy through issue voting. Retrospective voting, which simply requires citizens to reward or punish incumbents sensibly for past performance, provides a much more plausible theory of electoral democracy. But retrospective voting is harder than it sounds. Achen and Bartels find that voters’ retrospective judgments are too blind, myopic, and random to reliably select competent leaders or to produce strong incentives for leaders to pursue voters’ long-run well-being. Democracy must be justified on other grounds.

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Charles S. Hyneman Lecture
Monday March 24, 4:00pm
Social Science Research Commons, Woodburn 200

Democracy for Realists