

ABSTRACT

Recent empirical research has transformed our understanding of autocratic institutions (Magaloni 2006; Gandhi 2008; Schedler 2009). Yet democratic theorists remain laser-focused on idyllic polities, often contending that egalitarian conditions are necessary for democratically authoritative decisions, decisions citizens have a duty to obey. (Waldron 1999; Buchanan 2002; Shapiro 2002; Christiano 2008; Estlund 2008; Kolodny 2014B; Viehoff 2014B). Those analyses neglect most real-world democracies and autocracies. This essay fills that fundamental gap, outlining the difficulties of applying theories of democratic authority to real-world regimes and challenging long-standing views about democratic authority. Focusing on autocrats that lose elections (e.g. Sri Lanka 2015), I outline the authority of flawed procedures. Flawed elections are unjustifiably biased toward incumbents. But under certain conditions, ignoring an incumbent's loss would require not treating one's fellow citizens as equals. Under those conditions, therefore, citizens are bound to obey those electoral outcomes—i.e. flawed procedures can be authoritative.