

holds sway, making this authoritative, albeit overly detailed biography of an extraordinary figure in American history and jurisprudence very timely.

The Roots of American Individualism: Political Myth in the Age of Jackson
By Alex Zakaras. Princeton University Press, 2022, 432 pp.

Zakaras makes a powerful argument that the Jacksonian era (1820–50), generally treated by historians as a politically unimportant interlude between the founding of the United States and the Civil War, was instead a seminal time that saw the formation of the narrative of a uniquely American individualism, which still shapes politics today. Three overlapping myths—of the “independent proprietor” (think of the striving farmer, the small businessman, and other enterprising, hard-working individuals); of the “rights bearer” (a definition of Americanness that imagined Americans as exiles united against political oppression and religious persecution); and of the “self-made man”—emerged during those decades, describing related ideas of personal freedom and American exceptionalism. Although Americans embraced these notions as self-evident truths, they were in fact idealized stories of a country whose people, economic institutions, and enormous tracts of land made it uniquely favorable to individual independence. But these myths also made personal failure the fault of the individual rather than in part the result of wider forces or lack of support; struggling people had only themselves to blame. Unlike with

most political ideas, liberals and conservatives jointly subscribed to these myths. Then and now, these ideas defined “a shared terrain on which anyone hoping for a broad audience was constrained to argue.” In his closing chapter, Zakaras leaves history for a compelling exploration of how these individualist myths still shape American political thought and societal expectations, especially regarding the appropriate role of the state and acceptable levels of inequality.

Western Europe

ANDREW MORAVCSIK

Democracy Erodes From the Top: Leaders, Citizens, and the Challenge of Populism in Europe
BY LARRY M. BARTELS. Princeton University Press, 2023, 280 pp.

Barfels, a leading analyst of electoral democracy and public opinion in the United States, turns here to a central question in European politics: Do right-wing populist parties pose a threat to democracy, moderate politics, and multilateral cooperation? His point in this important book is simple yet powerful. Public opinion doesn't support the notion advanced by journalists and policy analysts that financial crises, mass migration, an undemocratic EU technocracy, warfare, and so-called wokeness have undermined popular support for moderate democratic politics. Ordinary Europeans support democratic moderation now as much as they did 20 years ago. In fact, Europeans have

more positive attitudes toward migrants, are more trusting of democracy, and perceive the EU more favorably than they did in previous decades. Yet these trends do not mean democracy is safe. Rather, the public is in truth a bystander to politics, as democracy erodes from the top. It is the machinations of political elites that have led to the decline of democracy, multilateralism, and tolerance in countries such as Hungary, Poland, Serbia, and the United Kingdom. To eliminate the incentives for this type of behavior, political institutions must be reformed—a subject Bartels could take up in another book.

*A Troubled Constitutional Future:
Northern Ireland After Brexit*

BY MARY MURPHY AND JONATHAN
EVERSHED. Agenda, 2022, 208 pp.

The 1998 Anglo-Irish Good Friday Agreement seemed to resolve decades of conflict between nationalists and unionists in Northern Ireland. The EU had done much to advance this constitutional settlement, not just by offering a forum for informal discussions but also by reducing the significance of sovereign borders, allowing people to move with ease across the border between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. Yet Brexit has called this peaceful arrangement into question. This study provides a sober explanation of how and why this thorny situation has developed. It is a story that baffles outsiders, largely because it involves partisan opportunism. Most Northern Irish political parties had opposed Brexit, but the ruling Democratic Unionist Party exploited its essential role in former British Prime

Minister Theresa May's parliamentary majority to veto compromises that would have allowed Northern Ireland to adopt certain EU regulations and thereby avoid having to erect a border in the Irish Sea. But May's successor, Boris Johnson, betrayed the DUP. He accepted the 2020 Anglo-Irish Protocol, which established border controls effectively in the Irish Sea and allowed Northern Ireland to remain subject to EU regulations, smoothing the rest of the United Kingdom's path to a hard Brexit. Although people in Northern Ireland are unlikely to support the reunification of Ireland immediately, these developments will likely lead to the renegotiation of the 1998 agreement, the consequences of which remain unknown.

France: An Adventure History

BY GRAHAM ROBB. Norton, 2022,
544 pp.

This book belongs to a contemporary genre—Robb calls it “slow history”—in which authors travel around on foot or by old-fashioned conveyance and recount tales about the history of the spots they visit. Robb, a British popular historian, delves into the past and present of France from the seat of his bicycle, on which he has logged over 14,000 miles crisscrossing the country. He also boasts of spending four years doing extensive library research. Accordingly, he meanders quite a bit while visiting France, detouring unexpectedly to dawdle over details. Some topics he discusses are well known, such as the origins and rituals of the Tour de France, the turn-of-the-twentieth-century political scandal known as the Dreyfus Affair, and current

French President Emmanuel Macron's inability to inspire public affection. Others are obscure, such as tales of ancient Goth chieftains, quirky medieval craftsmen, and old stores. Yet the improbable result is an exceptionally entertaining book. Even the timid reader will find passages of engaging and often witty storytelling, while adventurous ones may chart an itinerary for an upcoming trip.

The Death of Consensus: 100 Years of British Political Nightmares

BY PHIL TINLINE. Hurst, 2022, 472 pp.

When I first cracked this book, the British Prime Minister Liz Truss's Conservative government—itsself the result of the shambolic collapse of governments led by David Cameron, Theresa May, and Boris Johnson—was less than 40 days old and already in its death throes. With interest rates rising and poll numbers plummeting, Truss fired her chancellor and reversed her signature tax reform policy, only to resign within days. What better moment to read this book about British political disasters by a prolific BBC writer and documentarian? Tinline offers an engaging anecdote-packed history based on the view that politics is driven not by hope but by fear. Politics lurches from crisis to crisis, with change occurring when politicians propose some way to exit a nightmare. The Great Depression and World War II encouraged necessary government intervention and social welfare provision. Thatcherism arose in response to the Winter of Discontent in 1978–79, when the Labour Party could not govern a gridlocked society or tame unreasonable unions.

And the 2008 financial crisis, the Brexit debacle, the COVID-19 pandemic and, more recently, economic inequality and mismanagement are dismantling the Thatcherite model. Tinline clearly hopes that a more European-style center-left politics will take hold in the United Kingdom, but he does not explain why.

Personality and Power: Builders and Destroyers of Modern Europe

BY IAN KERSHAW. Penguin Press, 2022, 512 pp.

In this book, a veteran biographical historian revisits a question that has attracted the attention of famous thinkers as varied as Thomas Carlyle, Leo Tolstoy, and Karl Marx: What role do prominent individuals play in world history? The book's core lies in 11 breezy vignettes about dead white male European politicians (plus Margaret Thatcher). Experts may object to the thinness of the chapter-length pocket histories, each of which draws on a handful of well-known secondary sources, yet generalist readers may find them entertaining. More troubling is the ambivalence of Kershaw's conclusions: Adolf Hitler and Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev seem to have had more of an individual impact than the others, yet he does not really account for their significance. Nor does he seem curious about more puzzling findings, for example, that even the most successful leaders fail as often as they succeed. In the end, his explicit conclusions—crises, concentrated power, and broad popular support create leadership opportunities, which require tenacity and skill to exploit—still beg the question with which he began.