Encyclopedia of Political Theory

Democracy

Democracy is a form of collective decision making that presupposes some form of equality among the participants. The term is used empirically and normatively, often simultaneously. It is often used to describe or distinguish one kind of political regime from another. A democratic system, for example, is one in which there are procedures and institutions for capturing the views of citizens and translating them into binding decisions. At the same time, however, these empirical descriptions often contain within them normative claims about the way institutions *ought* to be structured or behave. Thus, it can be said that one society (whether now or in the past) is more (or less) democratic than another. The ideal of equality is particularly important to the normative evaluation of democracy. A democratic political system, on this view, is one that manifests in its institutions and procedures a conception of its members as free and equal and thus owed equal respect.

If we look to the Greek roots of democracy *(demokratia), demos* refers to the people and *kratos* to power, capacity, or rule. Democracy, therefore, refers to the power or the capacity of the people to do certain things in the public realm.

These simple definitions, however, betray deep complexities. Who are "the people"? What kind of power do they exercise, and what is it, exactly, that they are supposed to do? It is particularly difficult to establish just who *the* people ought to be. Are they simply the mass of the adult population sharing the territory in question? Or should we define them as all those whose most important interests are affected by the law or policy under consideration? How and where do we draw the distinction between who is in and who is out?

Even if the people can be so identified, what is it that they do when they exercise their power? In general, we can distinguish between direct and indirect forms of democratic rule. Direct democracy implies that the people exercise some kind of direct control, or authority, over their society. Indirect democracy, on the other hand, implies that the people are represented by others who make decisions on their behalf (but who remain accountable to them in various ways). According to the former, exercising authority or control might entail not only participating in deliberations about the best course of action but having control over and responsibility for implementation. According to the latter,

being able to validate the decision-making processes of others—without necessarily having participated in the deliberations themselves—is enough.

Winston Churchill once quipped that democracy is the worst form of government, except for all the other forms that had been tried. Recent work in political science has investigated the conditions in which democratic government can emerge, produce coherent outcomes, and remain stable over time. The results of this research often seem to confirm Churchill's suspicion; democracy is the least bad of a range of possible systems, but it remains deeply imperfect. Political theorists, on the other hand, have generally focused on the normative evaluation of democracy. How can democracy be justified? Which kinds of democracy are morally desirable and why? What is the relation between democracy and other important values, such as liberty, equality, and social justice? What is the scope of democracy?

Justifying Democracy

Democracy can be justified in two general ways. First, we might consider democracy valuable in terms of the outcomes it tends to produce and thus offer instrumental arguments for its value. Second, we might think of democracy as intrinsically valuable. Political theorists almost always believe that political institutions have to be evaluated in some way in relation to the outcomes they produce. However, as we'll see, some think democracy needs to be defended in terms independent of the evaluation of its consequences.

Instrumental Arguments

John Stuart Mill (1806–1873) and John Dewey (1859–1952) thought that democratic decision making was valuable (in part) because it forced decision makers to take into account the interests of the many as opposed to the few. This meant that the interests of the many were better protected against the biases and indulgences of a self-serving elite. Widespread suffrage, open elections, and a free press forced elites and politicians

to pay attention to more than simply narrow sectional interests. Both Mill and Dewey also thought that democratic decision-making had positive epistemic benefits for society as a whole. Mill, for example, thought that the greater the variety of opinions canvassed and expressed, the more robust and meaningful the values of a liberal society would become for its members. He also thought people would become more tolerant and accommodating the greater the range of views they encountered. Dewey thought that given the nature of social and political problems, the greater the range and diversity of input into decision-making processes, the more likely decision makers would be able to arrive at the right answer. Dewey had a particularly rich conception of this aspect of democracy, which he sometimes referred to as a form of organized intelligence. For him, democracy was as much a mode of inquiry or activity as it was a mode of decision making. Democracy not only channels the diverse interests of the people but also helps them discover what their real (public) interests are.

Contemporary political theorists, drawing on formal political science and theories of institutional design, have argued in a similar vein. This research has attempted to show that democracies are best at organizing and mobilizing the dispersed knowledge of their societies in such a way that it enables them to remain dynamic, innovative, and self-correcting. Democracies, therefore, have a distinct advantage over authoritarian political systems: According to these arguments, they tend to be more stable and prosperous over the long term.

Another influential instrumental argument in favor of democracy is that it has positive benefits on the character of individuals. The opportunities a democratic system opens up for political participation call for—and at the same time help to cultivate—valuable capacities and skills. The cultivation of these virtues, in turn, ensures that the interests of the participants are protected in the course of democratic deliberation and decision making.

One problem with a purely instrumental approach to democracy, however, is that it might turn out that other (less democratic) political arrangements are much better at producing the outcomes we value. If what matters, for example, is the quality of decision making, then it might be that sealing off that discussion from nonexperts promotes better deliberation overall. Indeed, critics of democratic rule from Plato onward have

exploited this line of argument. This has led some political theorists to think there is more to the value of democracy than the outcomes it tends to produce.

Intrinsic Arguments

Democracy can be defended on intrinsic grounds. Recall the overlap between empirical and normative accounts of democracy. Democratic political arrangements are those that manifest, in their institutions and processes, a conception of the members as equals owed equal respect. The claim here is that *only* democratic political arrangements can deliver equal respect, and thus nondemocratic systems—hierarchical or authoritarian regimes, even if relatively benign—are inherently unjust.

The connection between democracy and equality was strongly emphasized by Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712–1778). For Rousseau, when the people assemble as a sovereign body, they do so as equals. If each of us is fundamentally free and equal, then any political association in which one is subject to authority must be consistent with these premises. The only form of political association that meets this standard, thinks Rousseau, is one in which each individual remains self-governing and is subject only to those laws of which he or she is the author. Interestingly, Rousseau was doubtful the conditions for genuine self-government could ever be met in the modern world, but his normative ideal has remained influential ever since (as well as a target for extensive criticism).

Robert Dahl referred to the relationship between a society of equals and democratic political arrangements as the logic of equality. A similar argument is made in relation to the ideal of public justification. If the laws and policies of a political **[p. 359 ↓]** community are legitimate only if they can be justified to each and every citizen, assuming a plurality of worldviews, then this too entails a commitment to democratic political arrangements. Democracy is valuable according to these arguments, not because of the outcomes it produces, but because of the way it manifests a commitment to the basic freedom and equality of each citizen.

There are, however, a number of challenges to this line of argument. First, there is the issue of interpreting and specifying the relevant ideals of freedom and equality.

What kind of equality are we talking about when we say that democracy advances or protects the interests of all equally? Another related problem is the persistence of disagreement. If we interpret the Rousseauian standard strictly, it is hard to imagine how anything other than consensus or unanimity could count as the appropriate standard for legitimacy because otherwise some people are being coerced against their will. However, disagreement is a permanent feature of politics. We need political decision-making procedures precisely because disagreement is so prevalent. One solution is to weaken the requirement for consensus and aim for only reasonable consensus or minimal consensus. The challenge then, however, is to distinguish between the reasonable and unreasonable and to show that even minimal consensus is possible against a background of deep disagreement. Majority rule, for example, might be one way to proceed in the face of disagreement because it holds out the promise of being part of a future majority if on the losing side today. However, we then face the problem of "persistent minorities" (the same group losing every time) and the "tyranny of the majority," problems that cut against the logic of equality at the heart of this conception of democracy.

Minimalist Democracy

Given the difficulty of identifying what exactly the general will of the people might be, and given the nature of large-scale, complex, and deeply diverse modern political societies, many theorists have suggested abandoning Rousseau's ideal. Joseph Schumpeter (1883–1950) provided a robust defense of a more minimalist or elite democracy. In *Capitalism, Socialism, and Democracy*, Schumpeter defined the democratic method as "that institutional arrangement for arriving at political decisions in which individuals acquire the power to decide by means of a competitive struggle for the people's vote" (p. 269). Applying a mode of analysis borrowed from neo-classical economics, Schumpeter denied there was any coherent "general will" to be discovered in the first place, and thus the idea that a society could be self-governing in Rousseau's sense was literally nonsense. Because individuals were driven by a jumble of ever-changing preferences and desires easily manipulated by elites and demagogues, what was required was responsible political leadership. Citizens still had an important role to play in electing and holding political leaders to account. But the development of policy

was to be driven by elites, not citizens. Electoral competition between political parties, not participation by individuals, was the mechanism for ensuring that proper decision making occurred.

For Schumpeter then, the value of democracy lay in the institutionalization of the competition for power. When working properly, democratic competition converts stones into paper ballots and ensures a peaceful transition of power between different groups. To ask for anything more of democracy is to ask for trouble.

Subsequent work in political science and social choice theory seemed to confirm many of Schumpeter's suspicions. Kenneth Arrow's famous "impossibility theorem" seemed to show that there was no universally workable way of aggregating individual preferences and values into coherent and stable collective decisions. Others questioned the rationality of voting, let alone greater participation, given the likelihood of your vote having any substantial impact on the actual outcome of an election. In short, democracy was chaotic, irrational, and strictly speaking, impossible.

Deliberative Democracy

Despite these challenges, and partly inspired by them, there has been a remarkable resurgence in the idea of deliberative democracy in recent years. Deliberative democrats accept that in large, complex societies, democracy will have to be organized in some way as a system of competitive representation. But they reject that this is all we can expect of democracy. For deliberative democrats, **[p. 360 ↓]** democracy provides the best means through which laws and policies can be justified to citizens considered as free and equal. Deliberative democracy represents an idea of political association in which the legitimacy of its terms and conditions proceed through public argument and reasoning among equal citizens.

The ideal is a demanding one. Deliberative democrats presuppose that members of such an association recognize each other as possessing the appropriate deliberative capacities and as capable of participating in the exchange of public reasoning and acting on the basis of that reasoning. They assume that there is a plurality of interests and preferences—accepting the challenge to Rousseau by minimalist conceptions of

democracy—but suggest that deliberative institutions can be designed in such a way that preferences can be shaped and transformed through deliberative processes prior to voting. And they insist that deliberation can be genuinely free only when the parties are formally *and* substantially equal. Citizens seek to advance their own interests and also to discover reasons that others can share when justifying the exercise of public political power. Thus, legitimacy is a product of common deliberation. But note that this does not necessarily mean *direct* participation. Indirect or mediated deliberation in the wider public sphere can be linked to the competitive process (exactly how is an important question).

One major objection to deliberative democracy, however, is that it is simply unrealizable in modern conditions and repeats the delusional vision of Rousseau. In response, there have been interesting attempts at designing real-world applications of deliberative principles, often with striking results. Nevertheless, it's not clear that these highly controlled experiments—such as citizens' juries, or "deliberation days"—really vindicate the applicability of the ideal to large-scale political processes. The relationship between these small-scale exercises in deliberation and the larger, competitive representation system (assuming it can't be abandoned entirely) remains unclear.

Agonistic Democracy

Another major concern is that deliberative democracy isn't democratic enough. First, because if citizens are expected to be reasonable in order to participate in common deliberation, then who decides what is reasonable? There is a tension between rule by deliberative reasons and rule by *democratic* deliberative reasons. For more radical critics of deliberative democracy, the demand for consensus lying behind the deliberative ideal—no matter how thin or indirect—is not only unrealistic but misconstrues a fundamental paradox at the heart of democracy: namely, the clash between freedom and equality. For these critics, we need to relinquish the ideal of consensus and embrace a more agonistic approach. According to this account, dissensus is a constitutive feature of democratic politics that can never be overcome. Persistent disagreement and contestation should, instead, be seen as markers of democratization itself and harnessed in such a way that antagonism is converted into agonistic respect for pluralism. Democracy is uncertain and contingent, given

the inherent tensions between freedom and equality, self-government and the rule of law, human rights and popular sovereignty. However, unlike the minimalists, pluralist and agonistic democrats take the unavoidability of these tensions not as a reason to downplay the promise of democracy, but as a constant invitation to renew its possibility.

Duncan Ivison

http://dx.doi.org/10.4135/9781412958660.n117
See also

Further Readings

Ackerman, B., ed. , & Fishkin, J., ed. (2004). Deliberation day . New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

Cohen, J., ed. (2002). Procedure and substance in deliberative democracy . In T. Christiano (Ed.), Philosophy and democracy . Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.

Connolly, W., ed. (2005). Pluralism . Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Dahl, R., ed. (1998). On democracy . New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

Mackie, G., ed. (2004). Democracy defended . Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

Mill, J. S., ed. (1862). Considerations on representative government . New York: Harper.

Mouffe, C., ed. (2000). The democratic paradox . London: Verso.

Ober, J., ed. (2008). Democracy and knowledge . Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Rawls, J., ed. (1996). Political liberalism . New York: Columbia University Press.

Rousseau, J., ed. (1968). The social contract (M. Cranston, Ed.). Harmondsworth, UK: Penguin. (Original work published 1762)

SAGE knowledge

Schumpeter, J., ed. (1956). Capitalism, socialism, and democracy . New York: Harper & Row.