

# Participatory Democracy and Civil Society

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## ABSTRACT

For the true essence of democracy, its important that civil society is allowed to actively participate in decision making of the state machinery. Participatory democracy as a mode of conduct protects the rights of the citizens as ruling authority is responsible towards them and denial of that can result in change in authority. Democracy cannot be reduced to procedures only ,but the representative government should guarantee the protection of individual rights in the state. Individuals in the state should feel that they have effective participation in public life either by supporting or criticizing policies formulated by government.

## HIGHLIGHTS

- ❶ Democracy protects citizens rights as ruling authority is responsible towards them.
- ❷ No popular power can be described as democratic if it has not been achieved by an act of free choice.
- ❸ Democratization is not just a process of implanting formal institutions but it's a project of norm creation and cultural change.
- ❹ Democracy in civil society would have a requisite of rulers to be the representative of the people.

**Keywords:** Civil society, political inclusiveness, political coercion, democratic liberalism, collective life

*“Trying to understand democracy is like reaching into a black plastic bag. You can feel a large object, but accurate description is difficult because the shape is extremely complex. In particular, it seems to jet out in two directions. On one side democracy appears as a decision-making method (Schumpeter, 1966) and as a set of political institutions that embody, to varying degrees, certain basic democratic principles, (Dahl, 1989; Beetham, 1999). On the other, we see a revival of the ancient notion of democracy as a civic virtue, as a way of life, as a mode of interpersonal conduct oriented to what is good for all. In other words, as an ethical ideal, (Ardent, 1973; Carter, 1973; Putnam, 1999)*

— Ricardo Blaug

The common dictionary meaning of ‘democracy’ appears to be “self-government” or “rule by the people”. Power is derived from the authority of the people. Seymour Lipset was one of the first commentators to provide a definition of democracy by giving a special emphasis to procedures. He defines it as a procedure guaranteeing majority rule and minority rights. Democracy (in a complex society) is defined as a political system which supplies regular constitutional opportunities

for changing the governing officials. It is a social mechanism for the resolution of the problems of societal decision making among conflicting interest groups. It permits the largest possible part of the population to influence these decisions through their ability to choose

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among alternative contenders for political office. This definition implies a number of specific conditions: (a) a “political formula”, a system of beliefs legitimizing the democratic system and specifying the units like parties, free press and so forth which are legitimized; (b) one set of political leaders in office; and (c) one or more sets of leaders, out of office which act as a legitimate opposition attempting to gain office (Lipset, 1959).

Henry B. Mayo identifies four principles for a system to be democratic; (1) Popular control of policymakers (2) Political equality (3) Effectiveness of political control or political freedoms and (4) Majority rule. He defines a democratic polity as “one in which public policies are made on a majority basis, by representatives subject to effective popular control at periodic elections which are conducted on the principle of political equality and under conditions of political freedom” (Mayo, 1960).

While discussing the form of democracy Joseph Schumpeter remarks, “The democratic method is 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.” The role of the people in a democracy is to produce a government or else an intermediate body which in turn will produce a national executive or government. He says, what distinguishes democracy from other forms of government is not what rulers are supposed to do or how they come to be rulers. The crux of the matter is the selection of the supreme makers of law and policy. It is easier to discover whether rulers get their authority by competing for the people’s vote than to discover whether they use it to give effect to the people’s will. The competition must, he analyses, be ‘free competition for a free vote’ (Schumpeter, 1950). In the opinion of Plamenatz, there is democracy where rulers are politically responsible to their subjects. There is political responsibility where two conditions hold: where citizens are free to criticize their rulers and to come together to make demands on them, to win support for the policies they favour and the beliefs they hold; and where the supreme makers of law and policy are elected to their offices at free and periodic elections. The criteria for determining whether these conditions hold are not easily defined.

Democratic institutions serve as channels of transmitting and receiving messages and feedback from the general population and governing elites. Institutions come into existence as concrete manifestations of needs and desires of the population. David Held argues that the effective participation of equally free citizens who engage in public life to form their likes and preferences, to express reason for supporting one action rather than another and to debate them in the appropriate public arena constitutes one of the basic institutional requisites of a democracy.

Further enlightened understanding of the processes and events of the political life with adequate and equal opportunities along with all the knowledge needed to examine and affirm their choices on any matter creates another condition for the better functioning of the political system. Citizens should also have the authority what matters are and are not on the public agenda, subject to conditions and constraints imposed by the public law. It also requires that every citizen should be assured that his/her judgement will be counted as equal in weight to the judgements of other citizens at the decisive moments of collective decision making. In addition the political processes should ensure that all citizens are secured with equal rights in the society along with the right to vote and contest any post open to the electoral process (David held, 1995).

A measurement of democracy sensitive to the extent of popular control must be based on principles that lead to higher levels of control. Zehra F. Arat has identified these as; Participation, inclusiveness, competitiveness and civil liberties (Zehra Arat, 1999).

- ❖ **Participation** – the component of participation includes measure of the extent to which the popular consent is sought in selecting people for the decision making offices.
- ❖ **Inclusiveness of the process** – Even when popular consent is sought in selecting representatives, the process of selection may still be closed to segments of the population. Restrictions may be imposed according to gender, race, education, property etc.

- ❖ **Competitiveness** – The competitiveness of the political system refers to the extent to which the electorate is provided with choice.
- ❖ **Civil liberties or government coerciveness** – Because of lack of reliable information on the extent to which governments recognize and respect civil liberties. Thus, the equation for measuring democraticness is:

$$\text{Score of Democraticness} = \text{Participation} + \text{Inclusiveness} + \text{Competitiveness} - \text{Coerciveness}$$

So, if we define democracy as the freedom of the ruled to choose their rulers at regular intervals, we have a clear definition of the institutional mechanism without which democracy cannot exist. No popular power can be described as democratic if it has not been achieved or renewed by an act of free choice. Nor there can be democracy if a significant proportion of the ruled do not have a right to vote.

### Democracy and Civil Society

Many scholars argue that democracy exists when there is a political space that can protect citizens' rights from the omnipotence of the state. So, this definition contradicts the idea that there can be a direct correlation between people and power. Democracy exists when the distance between state and private life is recognized and preserved by political institutions and the law. Democracy, in the views of Alain Touraine is not reducible to procedures because, it represents a set of mediations between a unitary state and a multiplicity of social actors. The basic rights of individuals must be guaranteed. What is more important is that individuals must feel that they are citizens and must participate in the construction of collective life (Touraine, 1997).

He further says, the two worlds of state and civil society must remain separate but they must also be bound together by the representativity of political leadership. The three dimensions of democracy „ respect for basic rights, citizenship and the representativity of leaders are complementary. It is their independence that constitutes democracy.

The first requirement of democracy is that rulers should be representatives of the people. This implies the existence of social actors and of political agents who are representatives. Moreover, civil society is made up of a plurality of social actors so democracy cannot be representative unless it is pluralistic. All democrats reject the image of a homogenous society and agree that the nation is a political figure rather than a social actor. A political society that does not recognize the plurality of social actors and relations cannot be democratic, even if the government or party in power insists that it has the support of the majority (*ibid*).

The second characteristic of a democratic society is that voters are and regard themselves as citizens. The freedom to choose rulers is meaningless if the ruled are not interested in the government and if they feel no sense of belonging to a political society but merely to a family, a village, a professional category etc. the government is often seen as belonging to a world that is divorced from the world of ordinary people. As the saying goes 'they do not live in the same world as we'.

Third, freedom of choice cannot exist if there are no limitations on the power of rulers. Their power must be limited by both the existence of elections and more concretely by respect for laws within which power can be exercised. In sum, the representation of interests combined with the limitation of power within a political society provides the most accurate definition of democracy.

Scholars like Luckham, Goetz and Kaldor have distinguished democratic institutions from democratic politics (Luckham, 2003). The distinction between democratic institutions and democratic politics parallels the distinction between formal or procedural democracy and substantive democracy which was originally introduced by De Tocquivelle. Formal democracy refers to institutions, procedures or routines of democratic systems. Substantive democracy refers to the redistribution of power, the degree to which citizens can participate in the decisions which affect their lives.

This distinction is significant because according to David Beetham even inside the formal structures of

democratic institutions, all forms of politics are not democratic. Democratic politics require not only political contestation but that contestation should also be tempered by certain basic moral and political principles which include popular control over governments and political elites and political equality among all citizens. Democratic institutions have been created to meet many goals like - to enable participation either directly or through elections, to avoid tyranny by autocratic rulers, to promote open and fair competition for power on the basis of the popular vote, to ensure the accountability of governments and to provide a forum for rational discussion of political problems or conflicting social interests (Beetham, 1994).

Democratic politics practices aim to hold democratic institutions to their democratic promise by the following:

1. Ensuring open and effective challenges to governments and their policies through free and fair elections,
2. Increasing citizens' participation at all levels of political authority,
3. Ensuring fully inclusive citizenship based on respect for gender, cultural and other differences,
4. Providing accessible procedures through which rights and entitlements can be guaranteed and
5. Maximising the accountability and transparency of the holders of political power and bureaucratic office at all levels of government (*ibid*).

Democratic politics is broader than the processes of political contestation. Democratic politics thus depends upon a culture of participation, an active civil society, a pluralistic media, competing political parties etc., through which all citizens can, if they want to acquire a political voice. It is through democratic politics that governments and democratic institutions acquire legitimacy and are made accountable to their citizens.

Democratization is not just a process of implanting formal institutions of liberal democracy, but it's a project of norm creation and cultural change. Democratic institutions can create incentives for democratic politics. They can also build conditions to resolve problems of inequality and conflict (Zehra, 1999). Democratic liberalism is a

system in which individual and group liberties are well protected and autonomous spheres of civil society and private life exist. A vigorous civil society enhances not only accountability but also the representativeness and vitality of democracy. A dense network of autonomous voluntary associations and mass media is necessary to scrutinize and check state power. They also enhance legitimacy of democracy by providing new means to express political interests, by increasing the political awareness, efficiency and confidence of citizens and recruiting new political leaders.

### Participatory Democracy

Democracy or what Robert Dahl terms "polyarchy" denotes a system of government that meets three essential conditions (Dahl, 1971). Meaningful and extensive competition among individuals and organized groups (especially political parties) for all effective positions of government power, at regular intervals and excluding the use of force; a highly inclusive level of political participation in the selection of leaders and policies, at least through regular and fair elections such that no major social group is excluded; and a level of civil and political liberties freedom of expression, freedom for the press, freedom to form and join organizations sufficient to ensure the integrity of political competition and participation.

Different models of democracy have maximised different goals. Broadly, a distinction can be made between popular or direct models of democracy for which Athens is the paradigmatic example and liberal representative models for which U.S Constitution is the reference point. The liberal representative model put far more emphasis on institutions than the Athenian model. In the liberal model tyranny was to be avoided by control of the executive assured through the separation of powers. Individual rights were given primary importance. Citizens enjoyed rights to security, private property and liberty, but primarily as individuals rather than as members of groups or communities (Zehra Arat, 1999).

Twentieth century democracy brought a contradictory fusion of the institutions of the liberal state with the politics of participatory democracy. It is the product

of the two overlapping historical revolutions which established 'modern' politics. The first was the bourgeoisie revolution and second was the political mobilization of the broad mass of citizens. As Huber and others have argued that, this second democratic revolution not only increased citizens' involvement in the affairs of the government, but also expanded the concept of citizenship itself to cover economic, social as well as political entitlements. It introduced the idea of social democracy not as an alternative system of rule to liberal democracy but to ensure the responsiveness of the latter to the demands of social justice (Huber, 1997).

The degree to which democracy is actualized in a community is not determined by its formal structures. That structure may or may not be instrumental in realizing the processes of decision-making that are genuinely participatory. Carl Cohen says, processes are 'goings-on' and democratic processes are a certain sort of 'goings-on'. This is why he asserts democracy is never complete, never accomplished. It is a way of doing things and that way is more or less fully actualized in the doing. Indeed, a healthy democracy will be constantly experimenting with its forms to create instruments for promoting more genuine participation. Democracy is government by the people, in the sense that people and members of the community participate in the determination of policy for the community as a whole. Democracy is constituted by participation which makes democracy possible (Cohen, 1971).

So, it can be concluded that democracy in civil society would have a requisite of rulers to be the representative of the people. Democracy cannot be representative of the people unless it represents the pluralistic character of civil society. People should have the sense of belongingness to a particular society and participation in decision making process of Government in civil society. The power of rulers must have limitations to make participatory democracy effective and workable in civil society.

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