

Robert A Dahl

Polyarchy

PARTICIPATION AND OPPOSITION

# POLYARCHY

## Participation and Opposition

by Robert A. Dahl

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## **POLYARCHY**

**To the memory of  
Mary  
and her hopes**

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R.A.D.

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## 1. DEMOCRATIZATION AND PUBLIC OPPOSITION

Given a regime in which the opponents of the government cannot openly and legally organize into political parties in order to oppose the government in free and fair elections, what conditions favor or impede a transformation into a regime in which they can? That is the question with which this book is concerned.

### Concepts

Since the development of a political system that allows for opposition, rivalry, or competition between a government and its opponents is an important aspect of democratization, this book is necessarily about one aspect of democratization. But the two processes—democratization and the development of public opposition—are not, in my view, identical. A full description of the differences could lead us into a tedious exploration of a semantic bog. To avoid this detour, I hope I may be allowed to indicate rather summarily some of my assumptions without much in the way of defense or elaboration.

I assume that a key characteristic of a democracy is the continuing responsiveness of the government to the preferences of its citizens, considered as political equals. What

other characteristics might be required for a system to be strictly democratic, I do not intend to consider here. In this book I should like to reserve the term "democracy" for a political system one of the characteristics of which is the quality of being completely or almost completely responsive to all its citizens. Whether such a system actually exists, has existed, or can exist need not concern us for the moment. Surely one can conceive a hypothetical system of this kind; such a conception has served as an ideal, or part of an ideal, for many people. As a hypothetical system, one end of a scale, or a limiting state of affairs, it can (like a perfect vacuum) serve as a basis for estimating the degree to which various systems approach this theoretical limit.

I assume further that in order for a government to continue over a period of time to be responsive to the preferences of its citizens, considered as political equals, all full citizens must have unimpaired opportunities:

1. To formulate their preferences
2. To signify their preferences to their fellow citizens and the government by individual and collective action
3. To have their preferences weighed equally in the conduct of the government, that is, weighted with no discrimination because of the content or source of the preference

These, then, appear to me to be three necessary conditions for a democracy, though they are probably not sufficient. Next, I assume that for these three opportunities to exist among a large number of people, such as the number of people who comprise most nation-states at the present time, the institutions of the society must provide at least eight guarantees. These are indicated in table 1.1.

I am going to make the further assumption that the connections between the guarantees and the three fundamental

opportunities are sufficiently evident to need no further elaboration here.<sup>1</sup>

Table 1.1. Some Requirements for a Democracy  
among a Large Number of People

For the opportunity to:	The following institutional guarantees are required:
I. Formulate preferences	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Freedom to form and join organizations</li> <li>2. Freedom of expression</li> <li>3. Right to vote</li> <li>4. Right of political leaders to compete for support</li> <li>5. Alternative sources of information</li> </ol>
II. Signify preferences	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Freedom to form and join organizations</li> <li>2. Freedom of expression</li> <li>3. Right to vote</li> <li>4. Eligibility for public office</li> <li>5. Right of political leaders to compete for support</li> <li>6. Alternative sources of information</li> <li>7. Free and fair elections</li> </ol>
III. Have preferences weighted equally in conduct of government	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Freedom to form and join organizations</li> <li>2. Freedom of expression</li> <li>3. Right to vote</li> <li>4. Eligibility for public office</li> <li>5. Right of political leaders to compete for support               <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>5a. Right of political leaders to compete for votes</li> </ol> </li> <li>6. Alternative sources of information</li> <li>7. Free and fair elections</li> <li>8. Institutions for making government policies depend on votes and other expressions of preference</li> </ol>

Now from examination of the list of eight institutional guarantees, it appears that they might provide us with a theoretical scale along which it would be possible to order

1. Some of the relationships are discussed in my *A Preface to Democratic Theory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1956), pp. 63-81, and in Robert A. Dahl and Charles E. Lindblom, *Politics, Economics and Welfare* (New York: Harper, 1953), chaps. 10 and 11.

different political systems. Upon closer examination, however, it appears that the eight guarantees might be fruitfully interpreted as constituting two somewhat different theoretical dimensions of democratization.

1. Both historically and at the present time, regimes vary enormously in the extent to which the eight institutional conditions are openly available, publicly employed, and fully guaranteed to at least some members of the political system who wish to contest the conduct of the government. Thus a scale reflecting these eight conditions would enable us to compare different regimes according to the extent of permissible opposition, public contestation, or political competition.<sup>2</sup> However, since a regime might permit opposition to a very small or a very large proportion of the population, clearly we need a second dimension.

2. Both historically and contemporaneously, regimes also vary in the proportion of the population entitled to participate on a more or less equal plane in controlling and contesting the conduct of the government: to participate, so to speak, in the system of public contestation. A scale reflecting the breadth of the right to participate in public contestation would enable us to compare different regimes according to their inclusiveness.

The right to vote in free and fair elections, for example, partakes of both dimensions. When a regime grants this right to some of its citizens, it moves toward greater public contestation. But the larger the proportion of citizens who enjoy the right, the more inclusive the regime.

Public contestation and inclusiveness vary somewhat independently. Britain had a highly developed system of public contestation by the end of the eighteenth century, but only a miniscule fraction of the population was fully included in

2. Throughout this book the terms liberalization, political competition, competitive politics, public contestation, and public opposition are used interchangeably to refer to this dimension, and regimes relatively high on this dimension are frequently referred to as competitive regimes.

it until after the expansion of the suffrage in 1867 and 1884. Switzerland has one of the most fully developed systems of public contestation in the world. Probably few people would challenge the view that the Swiss regime is highly "democratic." Yet the feminine half of the Swiss population is still excluded from national elections. By contrast, the USSR still has almost no system of public contestation, though it does have universal suffrage. In fact one of the most striking changes during this century has been the virtual disappearance of an outright denial of the legitimacy of popular participation in government. Only a handful of countries have failed to grant at least a ritualistic vote to their citizens and to hold at least nominal elections; even the most repressive dictators usually pay some lip service today to the legitimate right of the people to participate in the government, that is, to participate in "governing" though not in public contestation.

Needless to say, in the absence of the right to oppose the right to "participate" is stripped of a very large part of the significance it has in a country where public contestation exists. A country with universal suffrage and a completely repressive government would provide fewer opportunities for oppositions, surely, than a country with a narrow suffrage but a highly tolerant government. Consequently, when countries are ranked solely according to their inclusiveness, not taking into account the surrounding circumstances, the results are anomalous. Nonetheless, as long as we keep clearly in mind the fact that the extent of the "suffrage" or, more generally, the right to participate indicates only *one* characteristic of systems, a characteristic that cannot be interpreted except in the context of other characteristics, it is useful to distinguish between regimes according to their inclusiveness.

Suppose, then, that we think of democratization as made up of at least two dimensions: public contestation and the right to participate. (Figure 1.1) Doubtless most readers believe that democratization involves more than these two di-

mensions; in a moment I shall discuss a third dimension. But I propose to limit the discussion here to these two. For the point has already emerged, I think: developing a system of public contestation is not necessarily equivalent to full democratization.

To display the relationship between public contestation and democratization more clearly, let us now lay out the

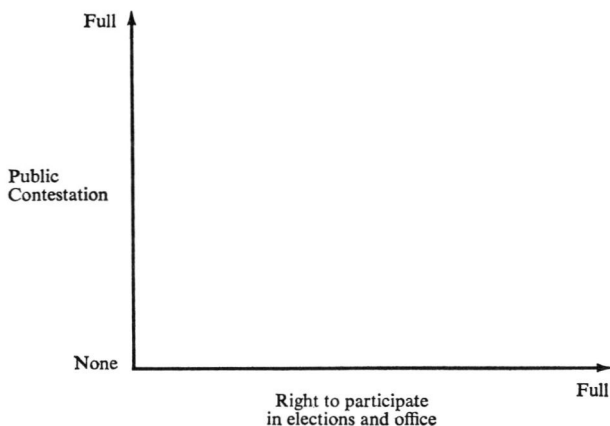


FIGURE 1.1 Two Theoretical Dimensions of Democratization

two dimensions as in figure 1.2.<sup>3</sup> Since a regime may be located, theoretically, anywhere in the space bounded by the two dimensions, it is at once obvious that our terminology for regimes is almost hopelessly inadequate, for it is a terminology invariably based upon classifying rather than ranking. The space enclosed by our two dimensions could of course be cut up into any number of cells, each of which might be given a name. But the purposes of this book make an elaborate typology redundant. Let me instead provide a small vocabulary—a reasonable one, I hope—that will en-

3. An array of 114 countries along these two dimensions will be found in appendix A, table A-1.

able me to speak precisely enough about the kinds of changes in regimes that I want to discuss.

Let me call a regime near the lower left corner of figure 1.2 a closed hegemony. If a hegemonic regime shifts upward, as along path I, then it is moving toward greater public contestation. Without stretching language too far, one could say that a change in this direction involves the liberalization

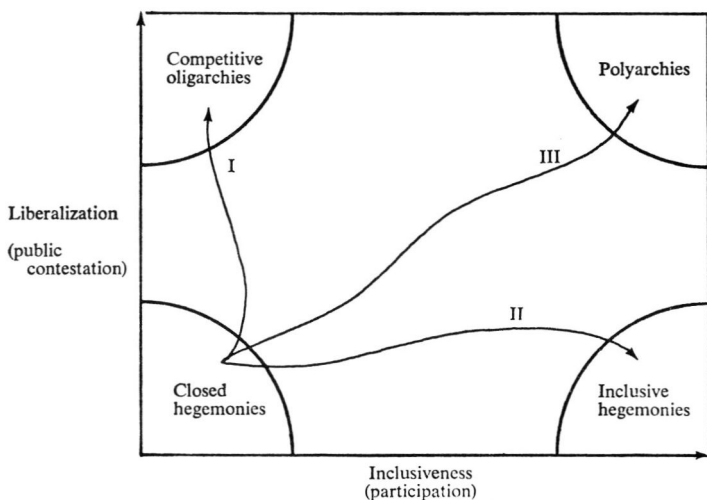


FIGURE 1.2 Liberalization, Inclusiveness, and Democratization

of a regime; alternatively one might say that the regime becomes more competitive. If a regime changes to provide greater participation, as along path II, it might be said to change toward greater popularization, or that it is becoming inclusive. A regime might change along one dimension and not the other. If we call a regime near the upper left corner a competitive oligarchy, then path I represents a change from a closed hegemony to a competitive oligarchy. But a closed hegemony might also become more inclusive without

liberalizing, i.e., without increasing the opportunities for public contestation, as along path II. In this case the regime changes from a closed to an inclusive hegemony.

Democracy might be conceived of as lying at the upper right corner. But since democracy may involve more dimensions than the two in figure 1.2, and since (in my view) no large system in the real world is fully democratized, I prefer to call real world systems that are closest to the upper right corner polyarchies. Any change in a regime that moves it upward and to the right, for example along path III, may be said to represent some degree of democratization. Polyarchies, then, may be thought of as relatively (but incompletely) democratized regimes, or, to put it in another way, polyarchies are regimes that have been substantially popularized and liberalized, that is, highly inclusive and extensively open to public contestation.

You will notice that although I have given names to regimes lying near the four corners, the large space in the middle of the figure is not named, nor is it subdivided. The absence of names partly reflects the historic tendency to classify regimes in terms of extreme types; it also reflects my own desire to avoid redundant terminology. The lack of nomenclature does not mean a lack of regimes; in fact, perhaps the preponderant number of national regimes in the world today would fall into the mid-area. Many significant changes in regimes, then, involve shifts within, into, or out of this important central area, as these regimes become more (or less) inclusive and increase (or reduce) opportunities for public contestation. In order to refer to regimes in this large middle area, I shall sometimes resort to the terms near or nearly: a nearly hegemonic regime has somewhat more opportunities for public contestation than a hegemonic regime; a near-polyarchy could be quite inclusive but would have more severe restrictions on public contestation than a full polyarchy, or it might provide opportunities for public

contestation comparable to those of a full polyarchy and yet be somewhat less inclusive.<sup>4</sup>

The need to use terms like these later on in this book testifies to the utility of classification; the arbitrariness of the boundaries between "full" and "near" testifies to the inadequacy of any classification. So long as we keep firmly in mind that the terms are useful but rather arbitrary ways of dividing up the space in figure 1.2, the concepts will serve their purpose.

4. The problem of terminology is formidable, since it seems impossible to find terms already in use that do not carry with them a large freight of ambiguity and surplus meaning. The reader should remind himself that the terms used here are employed throughout the book, to the best of my ability, only with the meanings indicated in the preceding paragraphs. Some readers will doubtless resist the term polyarchy as an alternative to the word democracy, but it is important to maintain the distinction between democracy as an ideal system and the institutional arrangements that have come to be regarded as a kind of imperfect approximation of an ideal, and experience shows, I believe, that when the same term is used for both, needless confusion and essentially irrelevant semantic arguments get in the way of the analysis. At the opposite corner, hegemony is not altogether satisfactory; yet given the meaning I have indicated, the term hegemonic seems to me more appropriate than hierarchical, monocratic, absolutist, autocratic, despotic, authoritarian, totalitarian, etc. My use of the term "contestation" in "public contestation" is well within normal (if infrequent) English usage; in English contestation means to contest, which means to make something the subject of dispute, contention, or litigation, and its most immediate synonyms are to dispute, challenge, or vie. The utility of the term was, however, first suggested to me by Bertrand de Jouvenel's "The Means of Contestation," *Government and Opposition* 1 (January 1966): 155-74. Jouvenel's usage is similar to my own, as is the identical French term he used in the original, meaning: *débat, objection, conflit, opposition*. In the same issue of this journal, however, Ghita Ionescu ("Control and Contestation in Some One-Party States" pp. 240-50) uses the term in its narrower but currently quite common meaning as "the anti-system, basic and permanent postulates of any opposition on the grounds of fundamental, dichotomic differences of opinion and ideologies" (p. 241). Clearly this is a more restricted definition of the concept than the one I use here and that, I believe, Jouvenel uses in his essay.

## The Question Restated

The question with which this chapter opens can now be restated as follows:

1. What conditions increase or decrease the chances of democratizing a hegemonic or nearly hegemonic regime?
2. More specifically, what factors increase or decrease the chances of public contestation?
3. Even more specifically, what factors increase or decrease the chances of public contestation in a highly inclusive regime, that is, a polyarchy?

## Qualifications

This book, then, is about the conditions under which systems of public contestation are likely to develop and exist. Because public contestation is an aspect of democratization, this book is necessarily to some extent about democratization, as I noted at the beginning of this chapter. But it is important to keep in mind that the focus here excludes a number of important matters that would be considered in an analysis of democratization.

It is convenient to think of democratization as consisting of several broad historical transformations. One is the transformation of hegemonies and competitive oligarchies into near-polyarchies. This was, in essence, the process at work in the Western world during the nineteenth century. A second is the transformation of near-polyarchies into full polyarchies. This was what occurred in Europe in the three decades or so that spanned the end of the last century and the First World War. A third is the further democratization of full polyarchies. This historical process can perhaps be dated to the rapid development of the democratic welfare state after the onset of the Great Depression; interrupted by the Second World War, the process seems to have renewed itself