Peter Emerson

Defining Democracy

Voting Procedures in Decision-Making, Elections and Governance

2nd Edition

Springer

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Defining Democracy

To the intellectual diversity of our species, even if its place in the spectrum, which ranges from the stone to the divine, is so very very small.

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Foreword: To the Second Edition

I am delighted to see that Peter Emerson has continued to advocate consensual politics. This second edition, with its additional information on Rwanda and elsewhere, is an even more potent argument for reform of the adversarial structures which still serve in so many parliaments and international gatherings.

As the reader may know from my writings elsewhere, I have long since been an advocate of proportional voting. Given the current difficulties in Belgium, however, not to mention the precarious state of the power-sharing arrangements in so many conflict zones, I am drawn more and more to consider the potential of the more pluralist voting procedures outlined in these pages.

Arend Lijphart
La Jolla
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January 2011

Foreword: Democracy versus Majority Rule

I am very pleased to write this foreword to Peter Emerson's important and stimulating new book *Defining Democracy*. My research has focused on the comparative study of democratic institutions for many years, and I often find that the concept of democracy is defined and used either much too broadly or much too narrowly. An egregious example of the latter is that while, in principle, there is virtually unanimous agreement that one of the most basic criteria of democracy, if not *the* most important criterion, is universal suffrage, in practice many people use the term to describe political systems where the right to vote is not, or not yet, truly universal.

For instance, in his celebrated book *The Third Wave* (Norman, University of Oklahoma Press, 1991), Samuel P. Huntington argues that the first wave of transitions to democracy started as early as 1828, although in the entire nineteenth century there was only one country – New Zealand – that adopted truly universal suffrage, that is, the right to vote for both men and women *and* for the Maori minority; this happened toward the very end of the century, in 1893. However, women did not have the right to be candidates for public office in New Zealand until 1919 – a violation of another important democratic criterion: the right not only to vote but also to be elected. We must therefore conclude that it was not until the twentieth century that any democracy was established. (I must immediately add that I have ignored the right-to-vote criterion myself by, for instance, including Switzerland and the United States in my comparative studies of democracy even before the Swiss adopted full women's suffrage in 1971 and before the 1965 Voting Rights Act was passed in the United States.)

The main example of the term democracy being used too narrowly is when people define it, all too often, as the equivalent of majority rule. *Defining Democracy* is a most welcome and very forceful challenge and antidote to this widespread tendency. It is full of excellent alternative suggestions – written in a lively style – concerning preferable methods of voting in mass elections and better decision-making methods in legislative and other multi-member bodies.

In my own intellectual development, I have gradually become more and more critical of the majoritarian form of democracy. I started out, in my undergraduate and graduate student days in the late 1950s and early 1960s, as a great admirer of

the Westminster majoritarian model of democracy; at that time I regarded multi-party democracy with proportional representation, coalition cabinets, and so on – the kind of democracy practised in my native country of the Netherlands and to which I later attached the label of "consensus democracy" – as clearly inferior. In a later phase, from the mid-1960s to the mid-1980s, I became strongly aware of the dangers of majority-rule democracy for religiously and ethnically divided societies, but I still believed that it was the better choice for more homogeneous countries. Only from the mid-1980s on did I become more and more convinced that the consensus model of democracy was superior to the majoritarian model for all democracies and in almost all respects. Many commentators have pointed out that there are serious contradictions between what I have written in different publications and at different times. And they are quite right: I have changed my mind very radically on these matters!

As I read Peter Emerson's work, I think that he basically feels that majority rule is not, or only barely, democratic. I would not go so far as to argue that majoritarian democracy is really not democratic at all, but I do believe that consensus democracy is considerably *more* democratic than the majoritarian type. I hope and trust that *Defining Democracy* will help in furthering the knowledge and appreciation of the many excellent and perfectly democratic alternatives to majority rule.

Arend Lijphart
La Jolla
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June 2001

Preface

Any civilization... will present a number of bizarre features which [people] accept as perfectly natural because they are familiar.

(Miłosz 1985: *xv*)

The Simple Theory

Like many another civilization, the European version has acquired, adopted, or simply just failed to question, a number of extraordinary beliefs. On the economic side, for example, we have slowly but surely converted what was the old vice of usury into the modern virtue of credit. As a result, most countries, banks and people are in debt, and all are intertwined. It is in fact bizarre.[1]

Another myth relates to that which we call democracy, arguably one of the vaguest terms in common usage. Some have tried to tie it down with what they regard as specific expressions like "democratic centralism" (Máo Zédōng), "democratic dictatorship" (Sékou Touré) and "democratic collectivism" (Jawarharlal Nehru). Others have spoken of "bourgeois democracy", "proletarian democracy" (Vladimir Ilych Lenin) and "political democracy" (Fidel Castro). And then there are some other phrases like "majoritarian democracy", "consociational democracy" and "consensus democracy".

All of these terms, and especially the last three, refer to various interpretations of the word "democracy", and all envisage different structures of government. Little wonder, then, that today's democracies cover a wide spectrum of practice with but the one thread common to many of them: somewhere, at some stage or other, people cast a vote, and something, or someone, gains a majority.

[1]The banking crisis of 2009 has caused some people – not many – to now question this practice; suffice here to say that these words also appeared in the 2002 first edition.

This, apparently, is the key, which makes it all "democratic". It might involve an either/or vote on options ***A*** or ***B***, or it might be just a vote on ***A***, yes or no. As long as there is a vote which results in a clear majority, however, many people appear to be satisfied. Democracy is equated with majority rule and majority rule is assumed to be best effected by a majority vote. As we shall see, this too is bizarre.

> [People] are captivated... by what may be called the mystique of the majority; it is often thought to be the foundation of democracy that the will of a majority should be paramount.
>
> It is *not* the foundation of democracy, however... (Dummett 1997: 71)

Majority Voting in Practice

Decision-Making

In many instances of political decision-making, the "***A***-or-***B?***" question is the equivalent of the following: "Are you left-wing or right-wing?" The actual majority opinion, however, is often somewhere in the middle, in the realm of a silent majority. A better term would perhaps be the *silenced* majority, silenced by being presented with only two options, neither of which adequately represents their viewpoint? In some cases, then, the outcome of a majority vote will not even correspond with the real majority opinion, let alone "the will of the people".

Elections

Elections are also a little bizarre. Our elected members, it is said, represent their constituencies. As often as not, however, they primarily represent their party, and during the course of their tenure in office, they will probably do more for their party supporters in other constituencies than they will for many of their own electorates.

Governance

In theory and sometimes too in practice, a parliament represents *everybody*, albeit with varying degrees of fairness. Invariably, however, the elected chamber then splits into two and the executive represents only the bigger "half".

The Book

The first edition of this book was published as a *samizdat* in 2002. Since then, I have worked in East and Southern Africa; undertaken a study tour in Lebanon; lectured

in the United States and across Western Europe; observed many elections for the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, OSCE, in Central and Eastern Europe, from Kosovo to the Kyrgyz Republic; and most recently, in the wake of the Vladimir Putin / Mikhail Saakashvili war of 2008, I was a member of the EU monitoring mission in Georgia. Although these experiences have improved my knowledge of politics abroad, there are still many parts of the globe about which my knowledge is minimal. This may explain some inadequacies in the text, but I cannot use it as an excuse for them all.

The following pages examine the weaknesses of current "democratic" structures, and then consider some rather better procedures. The two chapters in Part I discuss decision-making, first the defects of present practice, and then a more inclusive *modus operandi*. In Part II, Chapters 3 and 4 examine electoral systems in a similar sequence, while Part III brings all of these ideas together in structures of government. In conclusion, the Epilogue then asks why such an inclusive ideal is not yet on most people's agenda. There are, in addition, four appendices, illustrating both what is wrong and occasionally what is right in voting procedures, and I have also added a chronology of mainly Western democracy, to show when and where it all developed, and where too it suffered so many setbacks.

Just one small note on the nomenclature: options and candidates are lettered from the beginning of the alphabet, ***A, B, C*** and so on; voters of alternate gender are called J, K, L etc.; and political parties are named ***W, X, Y*** and ***Z***.

Thanks

I would like to offer my thanks to those who, yet again, have helped to turn my thoughts into what I hope has become a coherent text. In particular, I wish to offer my appreciation to Alan Quilley, whose diligent red pen on both drafts often took up more space than my black print. My friendship with Phil Kearney also goes back many years, and it is often his ideas which then have the semblance of being mine; the title, to take the first example, is his.

Next I would like to thank all those who continue to give their support to the work I do in the de Borda Institute: first and foremost, to the patrons and committee members, all of whom have given their time and energies on a voluntary basis. Of these, Professors Elizabeth Meehan of Queen's University Belfast and John Baker of University College Dublin deserve especial mention, for she has given her name to many events, often in the role of chair, while John has done umpteen hours of technical work, developing computer programs and then analyzing votes. Another patron is Professor Arend Lijphart of the University of California, whose own personal journey away from majoritarianism has given him the perfect basis on which to write the foreword to this work. I must also thank those individuals and organizations that have helped to fund our endeavours, not least Stephen Pittam of the Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust, which gave the Institute its first grant; there

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are very few such NGOs which have survived for ten years and more on the basis of a lump sum of just £3,000.

Thanks too are due to those friends in like-minded associations such as the Society for Social Choice and Welfare, SCW, where Professors Hannu Nurmi (Turku), Don Saari (California) and Maurice Salles (Caen), have been very supportive. Without their explicit endorsement, the de Borda Institute would not have been able to wield as much influence as it now does. Meanwhile, at a local level, John Robb, Wes Holmes and other colleagues in the New Ireland Group, NIG, have often blown my trumpet, and it has been a joy to work with them. Another organization in which I have found much support and friendship is the Irish (and Northern Irish) Green Party, GP, where, thanks to Phil Kearney *et al,* consensus voting is now used on a regular basis. (Baker J 2008: 431–40) Hopefully, colleagues like Perry Walker of the New Economics Foundation and Gordon Burt in the Conflict Research Society will help to spread the practice in Britain. May I also mention a few brave hearts in the media, Roy Garland and William Graham of the *Irish News*, and Andy Pollak, formerly of the *Irish Times,* for they have supported some of the events which we have organized over the years, and questioned with their own pens the media's otherwise impregnable belief in majoritarianism. Acknowledgement too goes to Springer-Verlag for publishing this work and in particular to their editor, Barbara Fess; not everyone in the trade will take on a text which criticizes the bizarre. Lastly, yet most importantly, I want to say thanks indeed to those other friends not mentioned among the above, who have always given this very *un-Sovietski* dissident much needed support and encouragement.

Peter Emerson
Belfast
Northern Ireland

26 January 2011

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