

# **BEYOND THE BALLOT BOX: THE MEANING AND SUBSTANCE OF DEMOCRACY**

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## **Abstract**

This paper seeks to make a theoretical contribution to the concept of democracy. The conceptualization of democracy is widely linked with periodic elections that allow citizens to choose their leaders. However, this paper argues that democracy is more than just a matter of holding elections every few years. This narrow definition overlooks the substance and meaning of democracy, which encompasses a broad range of values and principles beyond the mere act of voting. In particular, the paper highlights three key dimensions of democracy that are critical for its meaningfulness: (1) participation and empowerment, (2) transparency and accountability, and (3) deliberation and collaboration. Through a review of existing literature, the paper demonstrates that these dimensions are interrelated and mutually reinforcing, and contribute to a more robust and sustainable democracy. The paper concludes by arguing that while elections are an important component of democracy, they are not an end in themselves, but rather one of the many tools that can help facilitate and reinforce a meaningful democracy.

**Keywords:** substantive democracy, procedural democracy, elections, participation, deliberation

## **Introduction**

Recent years have witnessed a disconcerting trend in various corners of the world—the rise of democracy backsliding, coupled with the ascent of authoritarianism and populism. While, democracy is seen as a beacon of freedom, equality, and collective governance, democratic institutions are facing mounting challenges and societies are grappling with shifting political landscapes. Countries that for long have been considered democratic, are challenged by authoritarian and democratic leaders and the success stories of the post-communist countries such as Hungary and Poland, are no longer considered successful and have experienced democratic backsliding. According to the Bertelsmann Stifung's Transformation Index (BTI), in 2023 there are more autocratically governed states than democracies. Among the 137 countries surveyed, only 67 are still classified as democracies.

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Therefore, it has become imperative to delve deeper into the very essence of democracy. This academic paper embarks on an exploration of democracy's multifaceted dimensions, aiming to shed light on its intricate meanings and implications, particularly in the wake of the contemporary surge in authoritarian and populist tendencies.

One of the main debates around the meaning of democracy is that between 'procedural democracy' and 'substantive' democracy, which has been part of the history of the modern democracy since its establishment. The debate is mainly focused on the meaning of democracy and its main characteristics. Such debate is considered as imperative in the consolidated democracies, and it is even more so in the post-communist countries. Back in 1997, Kaldor and Vejdova claimed that the Central and Eastern European countries were experiencing a new variant of democracy, which was influenced by the communist legacies of these countries (1997, p.61). Almost a decade later, while exploring the dynamic relationship between democratization and the process of EU integration in the context of the post-communist countries, Vachudova (2005) argued that post-communist countries moved with different pace towards democratization. She highlighted domestic factors, initial conditions after the collapse of communism, historical legacies and regional differences as factors that influenced the democratization process and the EU integration of these countries. Countries with stronger institutions, less corruption, and a more educated populace at the onset of their transition had an advantage in democratizing. The legacy of the communist era varied from one country to another, impacting their trajectories. In terms of regional influences, countries in CEE, especially those with interaction with Western Europe, tended to have smoother transition compared to some nations in the Balkans or the former Soviet Union. Furthermore, in countries where civil society was active, robust, and engaged, democratic reforms were more likely to take hold.

In mid 1990s, Gatti claimed that '20 of these states [were] facing the prospect of neither democracy nor totalitarianism' and that democracy [was] facing 'a partial retrenchment' (1996, p. 169). For him, the transition [was] producing a group of semi-authoritarian (and therefore semi-democratic), nationalist, populist regimes that may permit free enterprise, [...] allow free parliamentary debates [...], and even tolerate something resembling a free press' (pp. 169-170). The fear of Gatti was that the greatest part of the 27 post-communist countries would become semi-authoritarian or semi-democratic regimes with limited freedom to elect new leaders, curtailed rights to criticize the state's highest authorities, self-censored "free" press, and circumscribed right to strike for trade unions. In these regimes, people are left alone to practice their religion, pursue the education they want and travel abroad, and thus there is no interference of the state in the private sphere (p. 194-196). Obviously, Gatti depicts a system where there is no public life in the sense that people don't participate in the public sphere, and they don't have real power on the elected officials. After thirty years of communism collapse the fear of Gatti remains

real and true. The deterioration of democracy in Poland, Hungary, Serbia and many other countries of Southeast and Central Europe is an indication that democracy is in perils and as such it is important to have a good understanding of it.

As mentioned earlier, democracy is backsliding in the consolidated democracies as well. In his book “Ruling the Void: The Hollowing of Western Democracy”, Mair (2014) argues that representative democracy in the Western democracies is experiencing changes due to many factors. First there is a marked decline in popular engagement with mainstream parties which is evident in lower voter turn outs, reduced party memberships and a general feeling of disconnect between citizens and their representatives. Second, political parties have moved to the center, leading thus to a narrowing of policy choices offered to the electorate. Third, there’s been an increasing reliance on technocrats, and independent bodies to make crucial policy decisions which have contributed to the wakening of the link between citizens and their representatives. European Union (EU) as a supranational entity has altered the dynamics of national politics because as more powers are shifted to the EU level, the national parliaments have lost some of their influence, which strengthen the feeling that national democratic institutions are less relevant. With the decline in popular engagement and the convergence of mainstream parties, a void emerges in the political space, a void which can be filled by populist parties, technocrats or other non-traditional political actors which can lead to more volatile landscapes, as seen in various Western democracies. In this context it is of paramount importance to discuss on democracy, what it is and how should it be understood.

This paper is an attempt to delve into the debate on the meaning of democracy, discuss on the scholars’ points of view and propose how democracy should be understood. The paper is divided in four parts. The first part gives a presentation of the problem of defining democracy and an introduction to the main debates. The second part present what is understood with meaningful democracy and the third part present the main arguments of the scholars that argue that democracy is procedural. The final part concludes that in order to be functional, democracy should be meaningful.

## **1. The debate: what is democracy?**

There is a plethora of authors who have been and still are engaged in providing a theoretical framework for democracy. The term itself means rule by the people and ‘a more precise definition is difficult to formulate, because democracy is a dynamic entity that has acquired many different meanings over the course of time’ (Sörensen, 1998, p. 23). Although difficult to agree on a definition on democracy (Mair, 2014, p. 105-6), the scholars have, at least, delimited ‘the territory within which the debate ... has taken place’ (p. 9). The territory of this debate extends from a minimalist conception of democracy (first conceptualized by Schumpeter and dubbed as ‘minimalist’ by Przeworski) which relies simply on the elections as a mechanism to

choose political leadership to a more comprehensive, substantial one, which considers as democratic only a society where the citizens have a final control on the political agenda and on distribution of resources (Sørensen, 1998, p. 9-10). These models delimit the territory of the analysis conducted in this paper as well.

Conceptualizing democracy poses a difficult task to accomplish. The vast literature which praises it or highlights its shortcomings is an indication of this. There are scholars, who criticize democracy for poor judgment being based on voters who are ignorant, ideologically biased, uninformed and prejudices (Carpini and Keeter, 1996; Ahlstrom - Vij, 2012). For Brennan, reducing the number of democratic processes, such as restricting the electorate to more knowledgeable citizens, could be the solution (Brennan and Landemore, 2021). On the other hand, Landemore, argues that more inclusive democratic processes, such as referenda and direct democracy, could help improve democracy (Brennan and Landemore, 2021). Another proposed solution is to educate the electorate about democratic facts and procedures by appealing to their agential interests or introducing monetary incentives for learning (Somin, 2023). There are scholars who praise democracy for addressing complex problems of contemporaneity with the help of an electorate which by being very diverse is the only which could provide solutions to these complex problems (in Samrazija and Cassam, 2023, p. 2). These perspectives attempt to address the challenges facing democratic systems and to enhance the participation and engagement of citizens in democratic processes. However, the effectiveness of these proposed solutions is still a matter of ongoing debate among scholars.

The paper will be focused on exploring what is meant with ‘meaningful’ and ‘minimalist democracy’. The ‘meaningful democracy’ is rather a normative approach of explaining the democracy, while the ‘minimalist model’ claims to be ‘realistic’ and based on empirical evidence. Although one of the competing paradigms is normative and the other is descriptive, the demarcation is not that sharp and both models embark on normative and descriptive reasoning at the same time. It is because of this similarity in methodology that the comparison among the two conceptualizations of democracy becomes possible.

The debate is focused on the contemporary society, in the countries considered as consolidated democracy, where democracy has become ‘the only game in town’ (Linz and Stepan, 1996, p. 5). It is important to establish such frontiers of discussion, otherwise the quasi-democratic countries, one-party systems, dictatorships which hold elections far from being fair, would bring implications in our discussion, which are not the aim of this paper, neither possible to be dealt within.

The paper explores the models of democracy, mainly focused on the meaningful and electoral aspects of it. Furthermore, it compares the two models by embarking on normative and descriptive analysis, in order to reach to a conclusion. It concludes that democracy ought to be meaningful and as such it cannot be reduced to simply holding elections once every few years.

## 2. Meaningful democracy

Scholars tend to use the word substantive, rather than meaningful. Therefore, in this analysis the two terms will be interchanged with each-other, but conveying the same meaning. There are cases when scholars don't use either of the terms, but all the same we will consider them as substantive or meaningful conceptualizations, since, in addition to the 'electing of leaders' dimension, they offer other dimensions to the concept of democracy. For example, according to Barry (1974) "The normal way of understanding the term "democracy" is to suppose that it refers to the internal distribution of power within a political unit ... [A] state is democratic if the government acts in accordance with the wishes of the citizens—and it is not less democratic if there are some things of concern to the citizens that the state has limited control over, like sea pollution, nuclear war or worldwide inflation (pp. 494-5).

Following in the same vein, Cohen considers as intrinsic to democracy the dimension of participation of the members of a community in their own government. According to him '[d]emocracy is that system of community government in which, by and large, the members of a community participate, or may participate, directly or indirectly, in making of decisions which affect them all (1971, p. 7). For him this participation is continuous since policy is not established once and for all but is in continuous change due to changes in the socio-economic environment. For him participation in decision-making doesn't mean that right decisions are consequently taken. Even when a decision is not the best, if it is the result of a participatory process, then the community which made possible this, is a democratic community. For him, democracy is not confined within the boundaries of procedures, such as voting. On the contrary, democracy is constituted by 'the living process of citizen participation [and] not the forms through which it may be realized' (1970, p. 1).

Schmitter and Karl, consider as dimensions of democracy: accountability, cooperation, freedom, and deliberation (1991, pp. 76-79). Rulers are held accountable for their actions by citizens. Cooperation is essential even when during elections we have competing political leaders and parties. But in order to compete they should cooperate with each other: 'They must be capable of acting collectively through parties, associations, and movements in order to select candidates, articulate preferences, petition authorities, and influence policies' (p. 79). One may notice that in order for democracy to function are needed not only parties to participate in elections, but a web of organizations, associations and movements that mobilize people and make possible for them to make known their views and interests as well as ensure the accountability of the political leaders. Furthermore, this web of organizations, as well as all freedoms (of thought and expression), makes possible the deliberation among citizens. Deliberation is needed to 'discover their common needs, and to resolve their differences without relying on some supreme central authority' (p. 79).

Liberalism gives a small contribution toward the model of meaningful democracy. There are different liberal-democrat theories but only in one of them, the development democracy, we find a concern for democracy itself and thus for it to be meaningful. Since central to liberalism is the notion of ‘freedom’, it is understandable that everything, democracy included, will be a dependant variable of ‘freedom’ and will be judged and evaluated based on criterions that derive from such notion. With regard to development democracy, it considers as imperative the participation of the individual in political life, because this ensures protection of their interests and ‘an informed, committed and developing citizenry. Political involvement is essential to the highest and harmonious expansion of individual capacities’ (Held, 2006, p. 92). Followers of deliberative democracy consider deliberation as very essential to democracy because “the terms and conditions of political association proceed through the free and reasoned assent of its citizens. The ‘mutual justifiability’ of political decisions is the legitimate basis for seeking solutions to collective problems” (p. 253).

For Held, democracy would be meaningful or ‘worth its name’ if citizens had the actual power to actively participate in state’s decision-making process. This participation should be guaranteed by a bill of rights and should be considered as an entitlement for all citizens (2006, p. 261, 277). Furthermore, the political decisions should be accountable and deliberation should organize the political life which should be central all people’s lives. For him people are not divided by conflicting interests and values, but rather they belong to ‘a plurality of identities, cultural forms and interests, each perhaps articulating different prescriptive regimes’ and in such a context ‘democracy is seen ... to offer a basis for tolerating, discussing and negotiating difference (2006, p. 261). Democracy is the only system in which disputes can be negotiated in a fair and just way. Held introduces the ‘principle of autonomy’ according which ‘persons ... should be free and equal in the process of deliberation about the conditions of their own lives and in the determination of these conditions, so long as they do not deploy [the political] framework to negate the rights of others’ (p. 264). Citizens should enjoy the conditions for ‘effective participation’ and ‘enlightened understanding’, otherwise they will be marginalized and not in the position to pursue collective decision-making effectively. Held, develops fully the idea of ‘principle of autonomy’ and explain how it should function, but this is not the purpose of this paper and thus we will not explore further this model.

Anderson (2006) proposes a new way to approach democracy. She praises the diversity and deliberation of the wide array of people who constitute ‘The Sovereign People’, who only by being so diverse and having the possibility to deliberate can provide solutions to the pressing social problems. She comments that the diversity of the people is intrinsic to democracy, because ‘citizens from different walks of life have different experiences of problems and policies of public interest’, and their deliberation becomes valuable because it is a ‘means of pooling this asymmetrically

distributed information' (p. 14). The conditions surrounding a deliberative process can either facilitate or hinder the production of the knowledge and insights that are necessary for democratic inquiry to work effectively in solving collective problems. Scholars of deliberative democracy have recognized that the informal public spheres where opinion-forming processes occur on a daily basis are a crucial aspect of a democratic society's broader deliberative system (Habermas, 1996, pp. 21-30; Mansbridge et al., 2012).

In addition to deliberation, Dewey emphasizes the importance of other democratic institutions that help sustain its dynamism and capacity for change. Dewey argues that periodic elections, a free press that questions state power, petitions to the government, public opinion polling, protests, and public comment on proposed administrative regulations all play a vital role in institutionalizing fallibilism and an experimental attitude with respect to state policies. These mechanisms provide feedback and accountability, which help governments revise their policies based on evidence obtained from the public. In Dewey's view, votes and talk reinforce one another, with votes helping to ensure that government officials take citizens' verbal feedback seriously, and talk helping to define and articulate the message conveyed by votes. Dewey believed that legal arrangements such as representation and periodic elections alone were not enough for democracy to work effectively. He believed that culture had to change too, so that citizens at large would welcome diversity and discussion and adopt an experimental attitude toward social arrangements. (Dewey, 1981, p. 167)

The conceptualizations of meaningful democracy mentioned above are congruent in that participation and accountability are essential to democracy. Freedom, cooperation, solidarity, development, equality are other dimensions which have been seen as intrinsic to democracy from certain scholars. Therefore, we will consider as meaningful a system which presents if not all, at least some of these characteristics. However, the minimalist conceptualization of democracy, considers that none of these is essential and democracy is but just a method to ensure political leadership. In the following section we will explore in more details these school of thought.

### **3. Minimalist conception of democracy: Schumpeter and Przeworski**

Schumpeter is one of the representatives of the minimalist conception of democracy. He is against of what he considered as the classical conceptualization of democracy, that is the political system "which realizes the common good by making the people itself decide issues through the election of individuals who are to assemble in order to carry out its will." Schumpeter offered a less philosophical and normative conceptualization of democracy. For him '[t]he 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'

(1992 [1942], p. 269). The competitive elections provide a criterion which helps distinguish democratic government from others. According to his “theory of competitive leadership” competition is among political leaders who provide a competitive offering to the people. This means that the interests of people, or groups of population, are addressed only when the political leaders make them part of the political agenda, because ‘even if strong and definite they remain latent, often for decades, until they are called to life by some political leader who turns them into political factors’ (p. 270).

The competition among political offerings functions similarly with that in the economic sphere. The political offer is like the economical one: it’s looking for voters who, likewise in the market, will choose among various offerings. Voting or the electoral method, as he calls it, is ‘the only one available for communities of any size’ (p. 271). Since elections are conducted periodically, it means that by voting people not only choose those who will govern in the coming period, but they choose as well whether those who are currently holding the office will remain or leave. Elections have the functions of producing and evicting a government. The first means the acceptance of a leader or a group of leaders, while the second means the withdrawal of this acceptance. The ‘withdrawal function’ is the only mean by which electorates can control the political leaders; ‘[...]electorates normally do not control their political leaders in any way except by refusing to re-elect them or the parliamentary majorities that support them’ (p. 272). Finally, Schumpeter concludes that it is not the rule of the people but the rule of majority: “people is a mosaic that [majority] fails to ‘represent’” (p. 273).

Przeworski follows Schumpeter in his logic. He comments that democracy is just but elections. It does not ‘assure either rationality, or representation, or equality’ (1999, p. 43). It does not assure rationality because individual interests are not harmonious and there is no ‘one collective interests that everyone wants to be coercively enforced’ (p. 31). On the contrary interests are often in conflict and as such none could claim the ultimate rationality. It does not assure representation, because the rulers are selected based on the ‘majority’ rule, which means that they - theoretically - represents the interests of the majority which is not equal to the common interest. Lastly, it does not assure equality because it is ‘obvious’. This last one is a claim made on empirical evidence, while ‘why it is so remains perplexing’ (p. 43). According to him, elections make possible that democracy ‘survives’. Elections mediate conflicts of values and interests, and since these last ones are always present even ‘in the end all coalitions have been formed, the practical consensus has been elaborated, and all arguments have been exhausted’ (p. 45). This mediation avoids any bloodshed and assuring their ‘peaceful regulation’ (p. 45). Przeworski’s paradigm is procedural. He considers as imperative the voting process and not the discussions and ideas which guided the people in such process. What counts the most in the end is ‘the counting heads, the sheer force of numbers, not...the validity of reasons’ (p. 48). The state functions because the ‘winner’ - voting

generates ‘winners’ and ‘losers’ - is vested with authority, and power to exercise coercions and ensure obedience of all people, whether they have voted pro or con the said winner. When all have accepted the rules of game, which means participate in voting and accept its results, and act accordingly, then democracy is legitimate. (p. 48). However, voting is not just a process which enables to find out who the winners are, and thus who will govern; simultaneously it presents an ‘information about passions, values, and interests’ (p. 48).

Both Schumpeter and Przeworski claim that they are giving a realist description of democracy. Nonetheless, those who defend the meaningful model of democracy have another account on that. In the following section we will see the arguments that defenders of meaningful democracy use to tell that democracy is not just election but much more than that.

## Conclusions

The minimalist conception of democracy has been highly criticized by the defenders of meaningful democracy. Held comments that the minimalist conception claims to represent empirical evidence, which does not help to refute the normative ideals of democracy. Therefore, if the reality shows that there are no political equality and equal participation, it does not mean that people should not try to pursue their achievement (1991, p. 153). Moreover, Held argues against the claim that the bulk of population is not interested and not involved in politics and that it lacks capacity and will for agency. He observes that politics is about health, education, employment and unemployment, inequality and social conflict, environment, war, peace, which are not at all remote from people’s lives; on the contrary they are, and consequently politics is, essential to their lives (1991, p. 153).

Indeed, the history of democracy is the history of the marginalised groups who have claimed their rights. It is the history of slaves, women, blacks, workers, homosexuals, environmentalists and the list could go longer with new groups which identify themselves as marginalised. The change didn’t come from the political leaders, but from those who were directly affected by government’s political agenda. Finally, Held argues against the Schumpeter’s claim that peoples’ participation in election is simply a mean to elect political leadership. Held comments that even in the case when people are manipulated and have not participated in agenda setting, they believe that they have done so. When they elect the leaders, they do so because they consider them right, correct, worthy and their representatives (1991, p. 156).

Another critique to the minimalist model is that it does not analyse the periods between elections. Schmitter and Karl, note that ‘during intervals between elections, citizens can seek to influence public policy through a wide variety of other intermediaries: interest associations, social movements, locality groupings, clientelist arrangements, and so forth’ (1991, p. 78). Indeed, the existence of a civil society is considered imperative to democracy even to scholars such as Dahl who

has designed a procedural model of democracy. Przeworski claims to have followed the line of Dahl (1996, p. 39) when defending the minimalist conceptualization of democracy. Even though Dahl considers elections to be important for democracy, he considers important too, other features such as the freedom to form and join organizations, freedom of expression and alternative sources of information (1982, p. 10). In such context, it is rather difficult for the political leaders to manipulate the people, because they will be challenged by other organizations, which simultaneously provide information that could comply and/or contradict with what these political leaders state. Consequently, these organizations can mobilize people against a political agenda in which they [the people] didn't participate. Thus, democracy even when performs bad is not simply elections.

We may also add that the minimalist model lack in analysing the periods between elections. Schmitter and Karl, notes that 'during intervals between elections, citizens can seek to influence public policy through a wide variety of other intermediaries: interest associations, social movements, locality groupings, clientelist arrangements, and so forth' (1991, p. 78). Indeed, the existence of a civil society is considered imperative to democracy even to scholars such as Dahl who has designed a procedural model of democracy. Przeworski claims to have followed the line of Dahl (1996, p. 39) when defending the minimalist conceptualization of democracy. While being procedural and considering elections as important, Dahl, considers as essential to democracy - among others - the freedom to form and join organizations, freedom of expression and alternative sources of information (1982, p. 10). Freedom to form and join organizations, means that such organization exist or should exist and with 'organizations' is not meant only political parties. Furthermore, freedom of expression is not limited only to the expression of votes, but of expression in a wider sense. It is an expression that could be materialized in various organizations. This freedom of expression is linked with 'alternative source of information'. This last one is very important because it means that the political leaders are not the only ones who possess the information. Therefore, their attempts to manipulate the people will be challenged by other organizations, associations which simultaneously provide information that could comply and/or contradict with what these political leaders state. Hence, when rights are institutionalized, democracy even when performs bad is not simply elections.

So far, we have been pointing out the weakness of minimalist democracy theory. Nonetheless, we still need to prove that democracy should be meaningful, not because the minimalist theory is not convincing, but because there are valid reasons to defend an approach which opts for meaningfulness. An understanding of the system of governance will help to do this. A system of governance, determines how to have access and who can have access to the principal public offices. Thus, it establishes the characteristics that actors should have and should have not in order to have access in the public offices and at the same time it establishes the strategies that actors should

use in order to have such access. Finally, all these rules and strategies should be institutionalized in a constitution (Schmitter and Karl, 1991, p.76).

Furthermore, although democracy is commonly viewed as a form of government, its implications go beyond that. The experience of living in a democratic society or not can have a significant influence on one's personal and collective identities. Additionally, democracy can be regarded as a set of activities that individuals engage in, including but not limited to casting votes, collaborating to make decisions, identifying resources to tackle problems, and working together to achieve shared goals (Mathews, 2014, pp. 118-120).

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