

A Democratic Paradox?¹

Robert A. Dahl*

The Paradox: In many of the oldest and most stable democratic countries, citizens possess little confidence in some key democratic institutions. Yet most citizens continue to believe in the desirability of democracy.

Let me offer some of the most telling evidence for this paradox.

- In his study of the four southern European democracies, Leonardo Morlino found a discrepancy between the low levels of satisfaction with 'the way democracy works' and the high levels of belief in the view that democracy is preferable to any other regime.²
- More recently, Hans-Dieter Klingemann has shown that in the most highly democratic countries, including those both of older creation and of newer vintage, a very high proportion of citizens support democracy as an ideal form of government. Yet with few exceptions, only a minority of citizens in these countries have much confidence in the performance of their governments.³
- Contrary to some previous work indicating that rather low levels of confidence in government performance have been a steady state, a forthcoming multi-authored work on the Trilateral Democracies⁴ presents impressive evidence showing that in a disturbing number of the advanced democratic countries citizens' confidence in several major democratic institutions has undergone a significant decline since the 1980s or earlier.⁵ In these countries, citizens have significantly less confidence, for example, in the extent to which politicians and parliaments care about their opinions.⁶ On a scale of confidence in five public institutions, in the early 1990s confidence had dropped significantly from the previous decade in all but two of 17 countries.⁷ The causes of the decline are by no means clear and may well vary in different countries.⁸

Yet these studies show that the decline in confidence in political institutions has not been accompanied by a decline in confidence in democracy. On the contrary, despite their disdain for some key democratic political insti-

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tutions, citizens in democratic countries continue to express high levels of support for democracy as a system.

What are we to make of this paradox? And what does it mean for the future?

Understanding the Paradox: What Do People Mean by Democracy? Why Do They Value It?

If people in democratic countries continue to express their support for democracy, what is it, exactly, that they wish to support? What do they value about a democratic system? How can people who seem to have little regard for actual democratic institutions and leaders nonetheless strongly approve of democracy as the best system of government?

It is ironic, if not downright shocking, that amidst the enormous amount of survey data about democratic institutions, political participation, attitudes, ideologies, beliefs, and so on, we have astoundingly little evidence in answer to a seemingly simple question: when people say they support democracy, what is it that they wish to support? So far as I am aware, the evidence to answer this question is sparse.

A Theoretical Digression: Two Dimensions of Democracy

Before examining such evidence as I have been able to find, let me call attention to certain aspects of democracy both as an ideal and as a set of actual practices and institutions. Sometimes we conceive of democracy as an ideal, goal, aim, or standard, one that is perhaps unachievable but nonetheless highly relevant not only for classifying and judging political systems (e.g. as democratic or nondemocratic, more democratic or less democratic, moving toward greater democracy or toward a decline in democracy), but also for fashioning strategies of democratization, designing appropriate political institutions, and so on. At other times, however, we judge actual systems to be democratic, even though they fall short, probably far short, of the ideal, as when we say that the United States, France, and Sweden, for example, are democracies. It is possible, though we cannot be altogether certain, that many citizens think of democracy in both ways: as an ideal to be attained and also as an actually existing government exemplified, at least in important ways, in their own political system.

Although no model of democracy can claim universal acceptability, it is useful to consider ideal democracy as a political system that might be designed for members of an association who were willing to treat one another, for political purposes, as political equals. Although the members of the association might, and indeed almost certainly would, view one another as unequal in other respects, if they were to assume that all of them

possess equal rights to participate fully in making the policies, rules, laws, or other decisions that they are then expected (or required) to obey, then an association of political equals formed to govern a state would, ideally, have to satisfy several criteria. To save time, and because I have described them elsewhere, I shall omit these criteria here.⁹

As we all know, democratic ideals are too demanding to be fully achieved in the actual world of human society. So we need to ask: under the imperfect conditions of the real world, what political institutions would be necessary in order to achieve democratic goals so far as may be possible in governing an actual state? And by an 'actual state', I now mean, as we generally do today, a state capable of governing a large-scale unit of the magnitude of a country in our present world.

Most of us will agree that the minimal set of political institutions necessary for modern representative democratic government to exist in a political unit the size of a country are pretty much equivalent to the half dozen or so that I have sometimes called polyarchy. Again, I will omit describing these institutions here.

The point I do want to make, however, is this: if I reflect on the ideal criteria and the political institutions they require for large-scale democratic government in the actual world of human societies, I detect at least two dimensions. I am going to call them the First and Second Dimensions of democracy.

As to the First Dimension, each criterion and each political institution presupposes the existence of an enforceable set of rights and opportunities: rights and opportunities that citizens may choose to exercise and act on. The criteria of ideal democracy imply, for example, a right held by citizens to have one's vote counted equally. So, too, the political institutions of actual democracy all imply as necessary to them certain rights and opportunities. Indeed, they imply a complex body of enforceable rights and opportunities: to participate in electing representatives; to enjoy freedom of expression, inquiry, discussion, and deliberation in the widest sense; to form associations with others for inquiry and political action; rights and opportunities to citizenship; and more. These rights and opportunities are not merely abstract moral obligations. In order for the basic democratic institutions to exist in actuality, the necessary rights and opportunities must also exist, not simply on paper but as effective rights and opportunities that are enforceable and enforced by law and practice. A country without these necessary rights and opportunities would, as a consequence, also lack the fundamental political institutions required for democracy.

But having rights and opportunities is not strictly equivalent to using them. That I possess the right to discuss politics freely with my fellow citizens does not necessarily mean that I will actually engage in political discussion. I may even choose not to vote – as a great many American and

Swiss citizens do. The Second Dimension of democracy, then, is actual participation in political life. Obviously this Second Dimension is important. The continuing existence of a democratic order would seem to require that citizens, or at least some of them, sometimes do actually participate in political life by exercising their rights and do act on the opportunities guaranteed to them.

Yet it is an all too common mistake to interpret democracy as if it were embodied only in its Second Dimension, to see democracy simply as a matter of political participation, and to assume that if some people in democratic countries say they value democracy it must be because they receive enjoyment or satisfaction from actually participating in political life. And if it turns out that they do not particularly enjoy participating in political life and do not engage much in it, then it might seem to follow that they do not care much about democracy.

As should be obvious by now, to view democracy in this fashion is simply wrong. It is wrong because it ignores what may well be the most important element of democracy, its First Dimension. In short, this mistaken view overlooks the fundamental political rights and opportunities that, both as an ideal and an actuality, are intrinsic elements of democracy.

What Do Surveys Show?

Nearly a half-century of surveys provides overwhelming evidence that citizens do not put much value on actually participating themselves in political life. If democracy were to consist only of its Second Dimension then a majority of citizens in democratic countries would give it at best their weak support and at worst none at all. For some years now surveys have revealed over and over again that few citizens in any democratic country participate in political life in ways other than voting, or perhaps occasionally signing a petition. For most people, even discussing politics is by no means a frequent event.¹⁰ Yet the fact that many citizens do not take full advantage of all the rights and opportunities provided by a democratic system should not be interpreted to mean that they are indifferent to their possession of these rights and opportunities. Indeed, when so many people in democratic countries say they value democracy, might they not value it primarily for its First Dimension, not the Second?

Lamentably, it is precisely on this question that the plentiful flow of survey evidence diminishes to a trickle. This trickle consists of several surveys in West Germany and the Netherlands. When respondents in those countries were asked to indicate the necessary characteristics of democracy, the results were striking. To an overwhelming proportion of people, the necessary features were precisely those of the First Dimension. What is

more, a survey taken in East Germany in 1990 showed that respondents identified the same characteristics.¹¹

But if this is what people mean by democracy, then it is a small and entirely permissible move to conclude that when citizens in these countries, and probably elsewhere, indicate that they support 'democracy', what they have in mind are the values and institutions of the First Dimension.

If that is so, then we have here the explanation of our paradox. Although a majority of citizens in most democratic countries may view participating in political life as neither very urgent nor particularly rewarding, and though many may be dissatisfied with the way their government works, overwhelming majorities of citizens do value the rights and opportunities their democratic system of government provides to them. To be sure, they may choose not to exercise their rights or to seize their opportunities very often. Yet their views are definitely not internally inconsistent.

Dissatisfaction with the way their government works might in the long run weaken the confidence of some citizens in the value of the First Dimension of democracy, and thus weaken their support for democracy. Other citizens may conclude, on the contrary, that they will simply have to participate more actively in political life in order to mend the defects they see in the operation of their democratic government.

They are less likely to do so, however, if they do not possess some idea of plausible remedies and solutions. Has not the time arrived, then, when political scientists, constitutional lawyers, and others who are concerned about the future of democracy should take up this challenge and look for feasible ways of remedying the defects that so many citizens see in the way their governments operate?

NOTES

1. Reprinted by permission of *Political Science Quarterly* 115 (2000), 35–40.
2. See Table 3.3 and Figure 7.1 in Morlino (1998).
3. Among nine countries with democratic governments of over 40 years' duration, the mean support for democracy in 1996 was 88 percent, ranging from 75 percent in Finland to 93 percent in West Germany, Norway, and Sweden. Among 13 democratic systems of less than 40 years' duration, support averaged 86 percent, ranging from 78 percent in Brazil to 95 percent in Croatia. In contrast, among the older democracies only 32 percent of the citizens on average rated the performance of their governments highly. Except for Norway (70 percent), only a minority of citizens ranked the performance of their governments as 'high', ranging from 46 percent in Switzerland to 12 percent in Japan. 'Performance' was on a 13-point scale that combined 'performance of the system for governing', 'performance of people in national office', 'confidence in parliament', and 'confidence in government'. See Tables 2.7–2.9 in Klingemann (1999).
4. These are the 17 'Trilateral Democracies' described in the 1975 report of the Trilateral Commission.
5. See Putnam et al. (2000). The data I present here, and the page numbers cited, are from chapters drawn from the book which were given as papers at the annual meeting of the American Political Science Association, Atlanta, 2–6 September 1999.

6. See Tables 1.1 and 1.2 in Putnam et al. (2000).
7. In Northern Ireland and France the small decline was not statistically significant. In the Netherlands it was significant at $p < 0.05$, in the others at $p < 0.01$. See Table 3.3 in Newton & Norris (1999, 92).
8. Although a decline in 'social capital' may account for the decline in confidence in some countries, as Robert Putnam has suggested, Susan Pharr argues convincingly that in Japan the decline is primarily a result of citizens' perception of official corruption. That may also be true in Italy, France, and Germany (Pharr 2000, 255ff).
9. See, for example, Dahl (1989; 1999).
10. Thus, 'for the European Community as a whole, averaged over the entire period 1973-92 . . . 17 percent said they discussed politics frequently, and 34 percent said that they never do so' (Topf 1995).
11. On Germany, see Fuchs et al. (1999); on the Netherlands, see Thomassen (1999).

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