Defending Democracy: Fairness, Legitimacy, and Accountability in Self-Government

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No system of government is flawless. Every political arrangement that has been tried has failed some of its citizens at some point, and none has proven immune to corruption. The realistic question, then, is not which system is perfect but which one deserves the allegiance of its people because it treats them fairly, serves their interests, and resists abuse better than the alternatives. This paper argues that democracy is that system. Democracy is a fair and reliable form of self-government that protects a broad sphere of personal freedom, delivers real benefits to the governed, and builds in the accountability needed to keep corruption in check. The argument proceeds by answering three challenges: that political expertise should earn political authority, that legitimate authority requires a level of agreement no society can reach, and that fairness alone would be satisfied just as well by flipping a coin.

The Problem of Expertise

The most intuitive challenge to democracy begins with an honest observation: people differ in skill and knowledge, and politics is no exception. We readily hand medical decisions to doctors because they know more about health than we do, so it seems natural to hand political decisions to those who know the most about governing. Plato (ca. 375 BCE/2004) built an entire political theory on this idea, and Brennan (2016) has recently revived it, arguing that widespread voter ignorance and bias justify giving more political power to the better informed.

The analogy is weaker than it looks. Estlund (2008) points out that a doctor's authority over us does not rest on expertise alone; it rests largely on our consent. A physician who knows far more than we do still may not operate on us against our will. Politics lacks this foundation, because few of us have ever consented to the authority of the government that rules over us. Authority therefore needs some other basis, and expertise is a tempting candidate. But the fact

that one person knows better than another does not by itself give the first person the right to rule the second, a mistake Estlund calls the expert/boss fallacy. Even if some citizens really were wiser rulers, there would remain the question of who has the standing to identify them, and citizens who disagree about who the experts are would have reasonable grounds to object. Expertise, however real, cannot settle who ought to hold power.

Legitimacy and Reasonable Disagreement

If neither consent nor expertise can ground political authority, what can? A plausible answer is that political power is legitimate only when it can be justified to the people who live under it. Rawls (1993) develops this idea in his liberal principle of legitimacy, which holds that coercive power is properly exercised when it accords with principles that all reasonable citizens could be expected to endorse. Estlund (2008) builds on a similar thought in what he calls the qualified acceptability requirement: a justification for political authority must be acceptable to every point of view that is qualified, meaning reasonable, rather than to every point of view whatsoever.

An obvious objection is that almost nothing is believed by everyone, so demanding universal acceptance would leave us with very little legitimate authority. The word *qualified* answers this worry. The requirement gives a veto only to reasonable objections, not to every opinion held by anyone. A second objection says that a viewpoint should be able to defeat a proposed justification only if that viewpoint is true, which sounds like the proper position for any lover of the truth. Yet this standard is too demanding for politics. If only the truth could ground legitimacy, we would first need an authority to decide what the truth is, and reasonable people would disagree about that authority, rebuilding the very problem we set out to solve. Waldron (1999) makes a related point: because thoughtful people disagree deeply about justice and the

common good, a society needs a way of settling those disagreements that each of them can accept as fair. Democracy, which gives every citizen a voice in the outcome, is the procedure best positioned to play that role.

Fairness and the Coin-Flip Objection

Even so, a skeptic may press the point about fairness. We have not said exactly what makes a procedure fair, but so far it appears that democracy is one fair procedure and choosing between two proposals by flipping a coin is another. If fairness is the main basis of democracy's importance, why not simply flip a coin? A coin flip is perfectly fair, at least if fairness means giving each person an equal chance of changing the outcome.

The answer is that fairness is not the only thing that gives democracy its value, and that even as a matter of fairness, a coin flip falls short. A coin flip treats the citizens' views as irrelevant. It gives everyone the same chance, but it gives no one a voice. Christiano (2008) argues that democracy is distinctive because it publicly treats citizens as equals whose judgments about their shared life count. Moreover, we expect people's views to be intelligent. Citizens reason, gather information, and learn from one another, and a procedure that responds to those views will tend to reach better decisions than one that responds to chance. Estlund (2008) ties democracy's authority to exactly this combination of fairness and a tendency to do better than random, and Landemore (2013) shows how diverse groups that pool their knowledge can outperform smaller groups of experts. Democracy is therefore fair in a way a coin flip is not, and wiser in a way a coin flip cannot be.

Accountability, Freedom, and Corruption

Fairness and wisdom would mean little if democratic systems could not also deliver good government in practice. Here the record is encouraging. Popper (1945) argued that the great

virtue of democracy is that it allows citizens to remove their rulers without bloodshed, which gives leaders a standing reason to answer to the public. Sen (1999) goes further, observing that no substantial famine has occurred in a functioning democracy, since regular elections, a free press, and an organized opposition give governments strong incentives to respond to suffering. Przeworski et al. (2000) found no evidence that democratic institutions hinder economic growth, which undercuts the claim that freedom must be bought at the price of effectiveness.

Democracy also supports freedom in a more direct way. Dahl (1989) argues that democratic government protects the basic rights that citizens need to take part in political life, such as speech, association, and the vote, while also making it more likely that people live under laws they have had a hand in making. This is the kind of self-determination a government of experts could not offer. Nor is democracy immune to corruption or error. Majorities can be misled, officials can be bought, and minorities can be neglected. But these are the failures that democratic institutions are best equipped to expose and correct, because the press can investigate, the opposition can object, courts can enforce rights, and voters can replace those who fail them. A system that makes its own mistakes visible and removable is more resilient than one that must trust its rulers to be good.

Conclusion

No form of government will ever be perfect, and democracy does not need to be in order to be defended. Expertise cannot justify authority without the consent of the governed, legitimacy depends on justifications that reasonable citizens can accept, and a fair procedure that also responds to the intelligence of its participants has advantages that mere chance does not. Add to this the accountability, freedom, and resilience that democratic institutions provide, and the case is strong that democracy is the best available way for free people to govern themselves.

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