

Michael Mason Democracy

Book section

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Democracy

A democracy is a political system in which all adult citizens have the opportunity to participate in decisions affecting their interests. The more significant and comprehensive these opportunities are, the greater the level of democracy: political theorists discuss, in these terms, the 'widening' or 'deepening' of democratic decision-making. Ultimately, this extension of the democratic principle can lead to the questioning of the 'political' category itself and its relationship to social choices determined by a market economy. However, within widely shared conceptions of *liberal democracy*, the economy is not a realm of civic self-determination, while the polity itself comprises decision-making by representatives elected by a form of majority voting among the population. Representative liberal democracy describes the overwhelming majority of political systems in the world today, in which the central institutions of government claim to provide equitable opportunities for citizens to shape the exercise of power, and where that influence is facilitated by competing political parties.

Environmentalism, for all its organizational and ideological diversity, has resented a number of core challenges to the liberal democracies. Its central charge is that these political systems fail adequately to represent ecological interests, notably those of future generations and non-human species. Ecological sustainability is viewed as a critical condition for long-term planetary (including human) survival and well-being, but democratic political procedures are seen as limited in their capacity to deliver this. In the first place, the concerns of citizens, and hence politicians, are routinely centred on short-term material gains: environmental groups must compete for agenda-setting attention with organized interests promoting economic wealth creation regardless of ecological costs. Secondly, the political and administrative institutions of liberal democracy are claimed to be ill-equipped to master ecological problem-solving: there is a clear mismatch between the hierarchical, sector-based structures of policy-making within representative democracies and the dynamic, complex pathways of much ecological harm.

In recent years there has been substantial interest by political theorists in deliberative understandings of democracy, which dwell on the processes of shared communication by which political preferences are shaped. Proponents of *deliberative democracy* find too restrictive the liberal representative view that the essence of democracy is the aggregation of votes, arguing that reasoned discussion and debate on what are publicly justifiable choices is as important. The deliberative perspective has appealed to environmental political theorists for what they judge to be its potential for greening democracy. Given their open decision-making processes, deliberative political institutions are claimed to promote the recognition of environmental protection as a public interest by exposing citizens to other-regarding arguments about ecological sustainability. This civic openness is also seen as conducive to solving complex ecological

problems inasmuch as deliberative institutions spread the cognitive burden of decision-making amongst the cooperative efforts of many individuals.

Environmental scholars have identified various institutional forms as promising vehicles for deliberative democracy. At the locus of representative power in parliamentary law-making, including its interpretation by the judiciary, the stress is on increased opportunities for articulating and defending ecological interests; for example, constitutional environmental entitlements and legal rights to public participation in project-based and strategic environmental assessment. At the level of administrative decision-making, deliberative designs can expose regulatory actions to citizen scrutiny and environmental values. Institutional designs already realized in practice include deliberative opinion polls, consensus conferences, stakeholder forums and citizen juries. The appropriateness of a particular design rests on such contextual factors as purpose, issue and scale; but the intention is always to enhance democratic participation and justification. It should be noted that the academic literature on the environmental credentials of deliberative democracy has focussed on North American and Europe: the applicability of this research to younger democratic states remains to be seen.

Proponents of deliberative democracy generally view it as a complement to existing representative institutions, although debate continues about how the two can best be integrated in pursuit of environmental protection. In contrast, advocates of *direct democracy*, such as Murray Bookchin, flatly reject liberal democratic structures in favour of political self-determination by local communities. Inspired by the classical Athenian polis, where sovereignty is exercised directly by (free) citizens, the proposal is for decision-making by face-to-face assemblies, with coordination and administration entrusted to delegated municipal councils. Ultimately, both liberal states and markets would be replaced by communal political and economic structures. While these ideas have found support within radical green activist groups and networks, they remain, not surprisingly, outside mainstream environmental policy discourse.

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