

## Answering the age-old question: what does democracy mean to those who protest for it?



*There has long been a debate about democracy as a form of governance and whether it is in decline – Brexit and Trump have only exacerbated it. Drawing on research in four capital cities, **Armine Ishkanian** explains how activists view democracy. She explains why these committed and engaged citizens reject representative democracy, and the internal struggles of organisation within contemporary social movements.*

Democracy would appear to constitute one of the great paradoxes of our age. In established democracies, the recurring eruption of protest movements – from Occupy to *Nuit Debout* in France and the Democracy Spring movement in the US – come with low voter turn-out, low approval rates of political institutions, and the rise of populist parties and politicians. This paradox has caused some to proclaim a “crisis”, the “death” of democracy. Others argue that we are experiencing interrelated crises of global capitalism and representative democracy. Despite these prognoses, democracy remains an enduring idea that continues to appeal to protesters in authoritarian settings, so much so that even after the apparent failure of the Arab uprisings in most countries, they continue to take great risks to achieve it – from Hong Kong to Harare.

It has been six years since the “squares movements” emerged. While many scholars recognise that the movements which emerged in 2011 have changed political debates by drawing greater attention to issues of inequality, debt, social justice, and the shortcomings of representative democracy, it is also clear that they have fallen short of bringing about more fundamental changes in terms of policy and governance. The grievances that initially brought people to the squares and streets in protest, have not been resolved and in some instances they have been exacerbated (e.g. Cairo).

Moreover, drawing on the same sense of discontent with the status quo, populist parties have grown stronger. Six years on from the height of the Arab Spring, Occupy, and anti-austerity movements, the deeper commonalities we uncovered in the activist conceptions of democracy have lasting implications which social scientists studying democratization and democracy should take note.

In a recent [article](#), which draws on research with activists in Athens, Cairo, London, and Moscow, Marlies Glasius and I ask two questions. First, what did democracy mean for the protesters in the squares, and were there shared understandings and conceptualisations of democracy? Second, how have activists’ understandings of democracy shaped their organisational processes? While much research on the state of democracy rests on surveys or analyses of voter turn-out and party membership, our work sought to shed light on both the discontent *with* and the *appeal of* democracy through interviewing activists. The latter included those who took part in sustained street activism – either demanding democracy or contesting the defects of their democratic system. Such activists have variously been described as active, critical or insurgent citizens.

### Shared understandings

We found that regardless of the type of economy or political regime, activists in the four cities converged on the point that representative democracy alone is an unsatisfactory system; that for meaningful democracy to emerge, citizens must embrace a sense of responsibility and agency, and fight for inclusion in political decision-making. We discovered considerable commonalities in understandings and conceptualizations of democracy, despite the cultural, political, and economic



## Implications and looking ahead

The recent spate of movements have opened up debates around the meaning of democracy, inequality, and the role of the state. Yet activist conceptions of democracy bleeding outward and upward into the transformation of society and decision-making are bleaker than proponents of prefiguration would have us believe. The space for protest is declining through repressive legislation, the securitisation of public spaces, and the criminalisation of protest.

The Brexit referendum and the rise in popularity of right-wing populist politics demonstrate a growing anger with the status quo and mistrust of mainstream political parties and elites. Setting aside their anti-immigrant rhetoric, populists share demands with the movements we studied, frame those demands in the language of democracy, and argue for giving people greater control over unresponsive or unrepresentative institutions.

Brexit and Trump's victory is a reflection of that anger, discontent, and mistrust of the status quo. Today, the gap between what is on offer – formal representative democracy within the confines of the global capitalist system – and the culture of democracy activists envisage, is such that no accommodation can be reached and recurrent political mobilisation is to be expected.

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Note: the above draws on the author's co-authored article in *Democratization*.

### About the Author



**Armine Ishkanian** is Assistant Professor in the Social Policy Department at LSE.

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February 6th, 2017 | [Armine Ishkanian](#), [British and Irish Politics and Policy](#), [Featured](#), [Global Politics](#),

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