



## Participatory Democracy: A Conceptual Engagement

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### Abstract

*The paper is a conceptual engagement with different perspectives on participatory democracy in contemporary scenario. By analyzing various conflicting conceptions of participation, it deals with the problems and prospects of participatory democracy in contemporary pluralist societies. The compatibility between participation and representation is also explored. Finally, the paper delves into the new avenues of democratic participation that have come up and how can we aid and deepen participation more effectively.*

**Keywords:** Democracy, participation, representation, civil society, globalization.

### Introduction

At a conceptual level, the idea of participatory democracy is a critique of the liberal representative model in which participation is restricted to free and fair elections. Participatory democracy presents a case for a more robust democracy in which citizens involve themselves in making and shaping policies to the widest extent possible. The term “participatory democracy” emerged as a slogan within the New Left student movement of the 1960s in United States and spread among the working class in late 60s and 70s.

The “Students for a Democratic Society”, a North American student activist movement came up with the “Port Huron Statement” in 1962 giving a call for participatory democracy wherein citizens at the individual level were encouraged to play a more pro-active role in shaping the decisions that affected their lives.

While the importance of liberal democracies cannot be underrated, there have been certain developments in modern times which have brought participatory democracy to focus. With the expansion of democracy there has been a simultaneous dissatisfaction with liberal democracies which are increasingly seen as legitimizing capitalism rather than bringing creativity or initiative of individual to fore. Increasingly societies are becoming culturally and normatively plural due to factors like migration. Most of the democracies have fairly articulate minorities which have begun to assert themselves.

A Schumpeter kind of elitist democracy that marginalizes minorities is increasingly considered to be irrelevant for modern times. There has also been a heightened sense of citizenship among people. Significant sections of citizens see politics as an expression or embodiment of ‘good’ life that they seek and therefore, want a polity in which they are stakeholders. They would like to actively involve themselves in politics.

### Methodology

The paper employs the methodology of critical analysis of secondary data on participatory democracy. The secondary sources include journal articles and books on the issue. The idea is to evaluate and review the existing perspectives on participation so as to arrive at an understanding of participatory democracy that is feasible and effective for contemporary times. The paper deals with issues of compatibility between participation and representation and explores ways in which participatory democracy can be strengthened and expanded in present times.

### Results and Discussion

**Participatory Democracy- A Contested Terrain:** The advocates of participation argue that rather than seeing participation as beneficial for the numerous benefits it entails, political participation needs to be looked at as in itself constituting an important ‘part’ of good life for human beings that should be aimed at and it also has the potential to act as bulwark against abuse of power by public officials. Participation as such is also a necessary ‘means’ to a good society. Participation in a way is also instrumental to human development in so far as it encourages people to take responsibility for their political lives. Participatory democracy claims that giving people opportunities for participation in political decision making will not only enable them to grasp the working of the political process but will also help in inculcating their interest in politics. It is argued that given a choice, more and more people would be interested in politics rather than leading a private life detached from political scene. In fact, participatory democrats attribute the many problems that representative democracies today face like corruption to the non-participatory nature of democracies.

Rousseau in his classic work ‘Social Contract’ pioneered participatory democracy by enunciating popular sovereignty and

asserting that sovereignty not only originates in the people, it is also retained by the people even when they transit from state of nature to civil society. His 'General Will' reflected the true interests of each individual as well as the common interests of the whole community. Government was only an instrument to carry out the instructions of General Will. Carole Pateman has observed that the inconsistency between universal formal rights and class, sex inequality in participation can be resolved only through institutions that encourage self-management<sup>1</sup>.

Jane Mansbridge in 'Beyond Adversary Democracy' argues that there is a primary conflict within democratic theory between "unitary" and "adversary" democracy. The former is characterized by face-to-face relationships among equals in which a consensus on common interests is worked out. This classical notion contrasts sharply with "adversary" democracy in which large-scale political institutions encompassing conflicting interests require equal protection of individuals through formal guarantees of rights and formal decision procedures such as majority rule<sup>2</sup>. Similarly, Benjamin Barber in 'Strong Democracy' also brings out a critique of liberal democracy or what he calls as "thin" democracy- "thin" because of the marginal role that citizens play in their own governance. Barber bitterly attacks liberal democracy on the grounds that it lacks a definitive moral content and for its reductionist tendencies to see the individual as nothing more than a bundle of appetites<sup>3</sup>.

However, arguments for participatory democracy are not easily acceptable. Joseph Schumpeter in his major work 'Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy' directs attention to a major paradox of modern times that is, as modern democracies have grown, consolidated and become universalized, they are confronted with the dilemma of limited citizen participation. Schumpeter attempts to resolve this paradox by restricting democracy to periodic competitive elections either to endorse existing elites or select new ones. He argues that given the conditions that we are in, we can have democracy only to the level of elitism. The elitists also point out that ordinary people are not endowed with adequate patience and insight that would enable them to make a correct assessment of the situation<sup>4</sup>.

In similar vein, Norberto Bobbio in 'Future of Democracy' argues that modern democracies do not provide space for citizen participation. Bobbio attributes this to three trends namely, technological development has meant that policy issues are becoming more and more technical in nature and therefore require expertise which the citizens might not possess. Secondly, bureaucratic machinery that is so indispensable in democracies also curtails the room for citizen participation. Thirdly, strengthening of democracy suggests that more and more demands would come up but when obstructed with inefficient democratic procedures might result in unmanageable situations<sup>5</sup>.

However, recent literature on participatory democracy argues that the argument about diminishing prospects for participation

fails to acknowledge the new avenues of participation that have come up. They suggest that the issue needs to be posed in a very different way. We need to see how politics is getting transformed in our times. Traditional mapping of politics seen in terms of three layers or structures-formal bodies (legislature, executive, judiciary, and public service), political parties and related bodies and citizen collective acting in terms of pressure groups and social movements has to undergo a tremendous change.

**New Sites of Participation:** Participatory Democrats argue new sites of politics have come up especially at the local level formulated by citizen initiative and therefore a different kind of politics is in the offing. Democracy today expresses itself not through formal channels, but it may express in different ways and channels which are truly political and where citizens feel they are effective like clubs, family and other civic bodies. They further argue that low voter turn-out in developed democracies does not signal that citizens are not interested in politics, rather it suggests that people have become estranged from their political institutions. This estrangement does not signal indifference but the fact that citizens are developing a critical eye towards political institutions. Increasingly, people have begun to realize that the way participation has been formalized does not provide enough scope for effective participation and therefore there is a need to make the mechanisms of representative democracy more robust<sup>6</sup>. Ron Inglehart argues that while "elite-directed" participation such as voting is dormant or declining, "elite-challenging" forms of participation are gaining salience<sup>7</sup>.

Javeed Alam in his book 'Who wants democracy' argues on the basis of empirical information that from 1970 onwards proportion of SCs, STs and women turning up for General Elections in India is far more than the national average and therefore participation may not apply uniformly to all sections but depends upon the varying stakes that different sections have in the state. Participation as such is to be seen in discreet way rather than generalised<sup>8</sup>.

Participatory Democrats draw attention to certain socio-political developments that provide increasing opportunities for democratic participation. Globalisation has thrown up new challenges at global and domestic level which cannot be regulated by formal mechanisms of democracies. Scholars like John Kean and David Held have argued that global civil society is shaping up made up of international NGOs; various movements related to trade, environment; farmers and other activist groups. In the new context, a great deal of differentiation is taking place making co-ordination difficult. State is required to offload its various activities to new bodies involving huge citizen participation. As Ulrich Beck has argued that even the most rationally planned decisions cannot ensure the predictability of results and this in contemporary times has the propensity of politicizing the environment. According to Beck, contemporary times are marked by 'politics of risk

avoidance' wherein the best way for policymakers to shield themselves from getting implicated in taking any hasty decision is to allow more and more citizen participation. This ensures that policymakers cannot be solely blamed for any policy which might have adverse consequences as they can always claim that citizens were also involved in decision-making. There are other trends like formation of more diverse and new groups in the nature of NGOs and other voluntary organizations that have intensified the struggle for more robust citizen participation<sup>9</sup>.

When we look at the contemporary scenario, one can discern conflicting trends. While the conventional channels of participation have been declining, newer modes and sites of participation have come up. The problem arises due to a fundamental conflict as to how we define democracy and participation and more importantly how participation is to be properly institutionalised in order to achieve effectiveness. Strengthening democracy in terms of participation is not one thing which we can deepen from the state down into civil society or vice versa. Instead democracy has to be seen differently with distinct characteristics depending on the location where it is being talked of<sup>10</sup>.

**Participation and Representation:** Advocates of participatory democracy recognize that self-management or institutions of direct democracy cannot replace the state. Poulantzas recommends 'socialist pluralism' by which he means democratizing the state, that is, making parliament, bureaucracy accountable and incorporating new forms of struggle at local level-women's groups, ecological groups and so on.

C. B. Macpherson in 'Life and Times of Liberal Democracy' criticises liberal democracies for limiting citizen participation and argues for participatory democracy which he contrasts with what he terms 'protective democracy'. He argues greater equality requires greater political participation. But since direct democracy is not feasible in contemporary societies, what is possible and required is a pyramidal Councils System wherein there would be direct democracy at the lowest level and delegates at each higher level would be elected by elected members of the lower level<sup>11</sup>.

Iris Marion Young in 'Inclusion and Democracy' talks about the compatibility between active participation and political representation and suggests that by encouraging plural associational activities, representative democracy can be participatory. In fact, she argues in large-scale modern societies, both representation and participation are needed for policies to be truly democratic. Young argues representation is necessary because amidst complexity of modern social life, no person can be present at all decisions or in all decision-making bodies whose actions affect his life<sup>12</sup>.

The claim that a robust democracy cannot co-exist with representation imagines an ideal democratic decision-making situation as one in all which citizens are present. Young instead

recommends conceptualising representation in terms of Derridian's concept of 'difference' wherein the representative will inevitably be separate from constituents but should be 'connected' to them in determinate ways.

Young takes up the same logic of commitment to equality that participatory democrats claim to uphold, to recommend representation and argues that special representation for disadvantage groups is essential to enable them to come at par with those having money, power and influence. Against participatory theorists who suggest civil society as preferred alternative to state for promoting democracy, Young argues that associations of civil society cannot mobilise the amount of resources necessary to support conditions for self-development of everyone. Only state institutions have unique capacities for regulating and co-ordinating the administration on a large-scale that can in turn prevent large private enterprises from monopolizing power. State commands the resources and capacity to ensure that the private sector does not solely function with the profit motive but also takes into consideration imperatives of collective well being.

Robert Dahl gives a compelling set of arguments that even decentralized direct democracy cannot avoid representation. According to Dahl, even in a small assembly of people, most people will be more or less passive participants who listen to the more active ones and this will in effect bring in representation. Dahl therefore argues that representative institutions do ensure political equality as it is rule governed and there are in place some norms of accountability. Also, it is inevitable that the size of small decentralised political units will grow with time<sup>13</sup>.

To cap it all, participatory democracy of Greek Athenian times is neither feasible nor desirable in modern times. When scholars argue for a more participatory idea of democracy, there is clearly no attempt to resurrect Athenian model. Even in Mansbridge's account, adversary and unitary democracies are clearly "ideal" types and no democracy, however large and impersonal or small and intimate, will be purely one or the other. What is argued for is that citizens are well aware about their interests and have some say in the policy process.

**Strengthening Participatory Democracy:** Mark E. Warren outlines certain measures for participatory democracy to be strengthened in modern times. According to him, democracy should follow politics and not state centred political institutions. Democratic participation is needed only on relevant political issues involving conflict of interests that is, issue-based participation. While there is less scope of participation in formal institutions but given the shift of power of significant decision-making from portals of state to portals of economy, there are ample opportunities for citizen participation in sectors of economy and society. Devolution is to be studied not in territorial sense but issue-based devolution provides scope for participation. The Public-Private Partnerships (PPPs) in key areas provide new opportunities for people to more effectively

participate in public domain. Also civil society associations strengthen participatory democracy by generating awareness, giving training to citizens in claiming their entitlements and voicing their concerns.

According to Warren, a new division of labour has come up related to complexity of day-to-day life. A new kind of “trust” based on competence and expertise is coming up and therefore people participate in specific arenas most salient to them and rely on others to participate in other arenas. Democracies thus do not offer equality of opportunity, participation in all arenas but in specified ones. Democratic equality is to be seen as what Michael Walzer calls ‘complex equality’. It is important to recognize that individuals are capable enough and have opportunities to influence those decisions in which they prefer to participate. There are diverse range of voluntary organizations whose membership people can avail and they also have the option of leaving the association. This exit option that people have according to Warren ensures that such organizations cater to the needs of the members. In other associations of non-voluntary nature, equality can be ensured through mechanisms such as public hearings (as *Jan Sunwais* in India), inclusion of those affected, freedom of information (Right to Information Act of India is a case in point) and so on. Thus participatory equality in modern times according to Warren does not mean that people have say in all decisions at all levels but at least that people are equal in registering their dissent through protests, boycotts and other such mechanisms<sup>14</sup>.

## Conclusion

To cap it all, a participatory democracy must be such that it limits what Warren calls ‘convertibility of resources’ that is, advantage in one domain must not automatically be converted into advantage in other domains. Thus, participatory democracy for contemporary times has to be different in the sense that suggests citizen participation in significant decisions and not all. The conventional understanding and channels of participation have given way to new settings and locations where people are participating. It asks different kind of questions, looking not so much at formal institutions but asks what processes facilitate and what impede democracy.

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