


# Democracy's Instrumental Value



Introduction to Political Theory  
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King's College London

I. Thinking about Democracy

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# Thinking about Democracy

“Democracy is the theory that the common people know what they want, and deserve to get it good and hard.”

H. L. Mencken

# Thinking about Democracy

*Democracy*

A political system where power is regulated through some sort of collective procedure that gives each individual one vote over decisions or to elect decision-makers

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# Thinking about Democracy

What, if anything, is valuable about democracy?

Is electoral representation compatible with democracy? If so, what principles should guide representation?

What is the role of leadership in a democracy?

# Democracy as Power

Question

*Are democratic decisions legitimate because they were made through a democratic procedure?*

*Or should we judge those decisions according to substantive standards that are external to the procedure?*

## *Obergefell vs Hodges (2015)*

*“The dynamic of our constitutional system is that individuals need not await legislative action before asserting a fundamental right....Their hope is not to be condemned to live in loneliness, excluded from one of civilization’s oldest institutions. They ask for equal dignity in the eyes of the law. The Constitution grants them that right.”*

# Democracy as Power

Judicial Review

There are *basic rights* or *standards of justice* on the basis of which judges may override democratic decisions

Species of Democratic Instrumentalism

More broadly, democracy is only justified if it tends to produce *good outcomes over time*



# Democracy as Power

What is a democratic procedure?

All vote on a law, winning side gets enforced

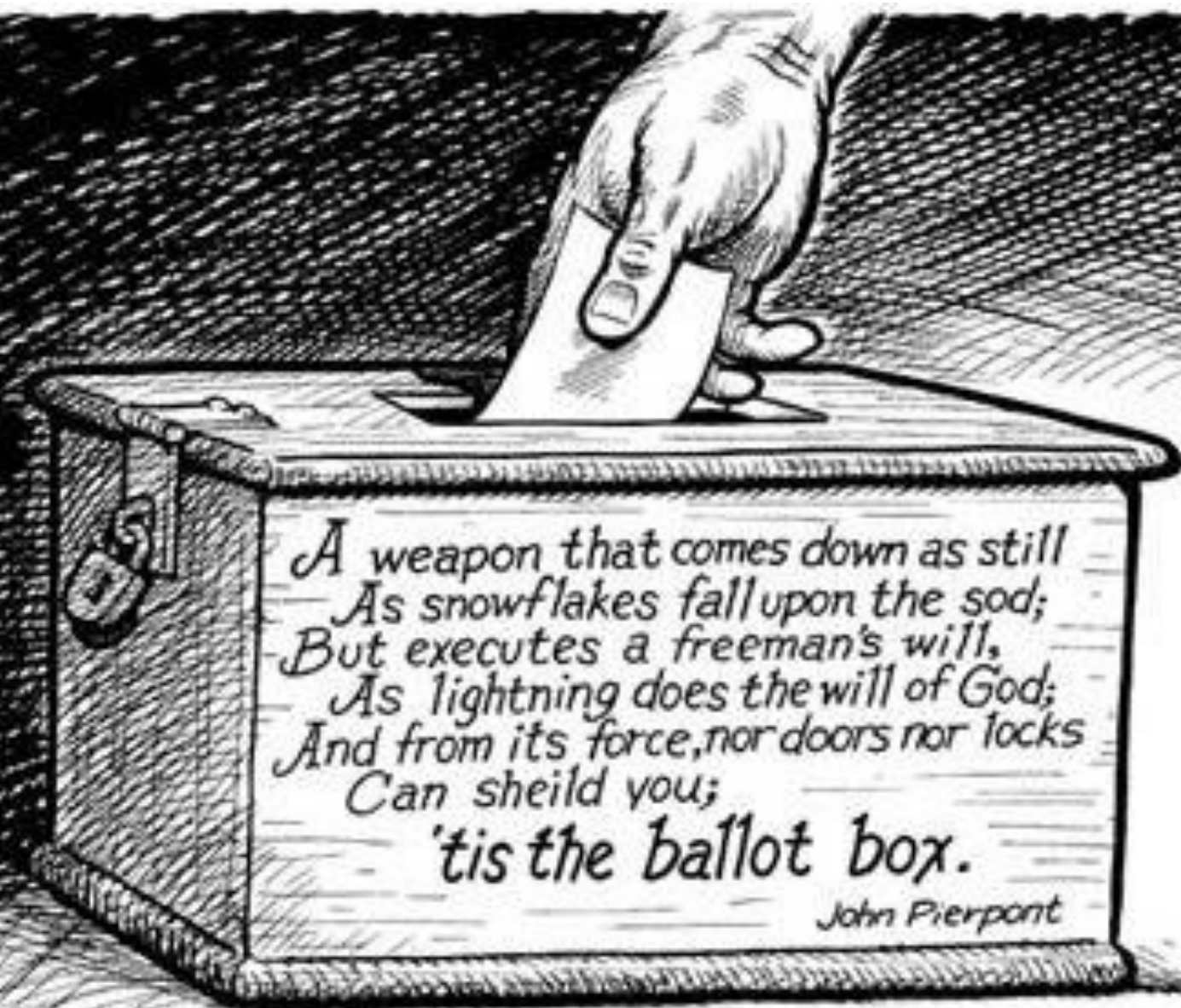
Winners are thus *imposing their desires/interests/beliefs on the losers*

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# Democracy as Power

Democracy implies *power over other people*

Power over other people *stands in need of special justification because it contradicts our basic self-governance and autonomy*



*A weapon that comes down as still  
As snowflakes fall upon the sod;  
But executes a freeman's will,  
As lightning does the will of God;  
And from its force, nor doors nor locks  
Can shield you;  
'tis the ballot box.*

*John Pierpont*

GO  
VOTE!



# Instrumentalism Defended

“The right to a democratic say...is a right to political power—a right to set coercive rules that significantly limit how other people will live their lives...My position is that there is no such *basic moral right*, because one does not have a basic moral right to exercise significant power over the lives of other people.” Arneson, 46

# Instrumentalism Defended

Defenses of Right to a Democratic Say

All rights imply coercion of others,  
democracy is no different

Response: Morally significant matters of degree, coercion of others is inherent to exercise of democratic rights

# Instrumentalism Defended

Defenses of Right to a Democratic Say

We can't agree about who is the most competent, so elevating one individual or group will always be disrespectful

Response: Respect should be judged objectively, not subjectively



# **Instrumentalism Defended**

Defenses of Right to a Democratic Say

Given reasonable disagreement about what constitutes a good outcome/justice, only fair procedures can resolve disagreements

Response: Collapses into “radical” skepticism about justice as such

# Instrumentalism Defended

Defenses of Right to a Democratic Say

Democracy realizes a principle of *public recognition of equality*

Response: Any system that is seen to equally further moral interests bestows public recognition of equality



# Instrumentalism Defended

## Conclusion

Exercising power over others can *only be justified by the results it brings about, however defined*

For Arneson, the only justification is that it helps realize an ideal of *justice*

# Instrumentalism Defended

## Some Assumptions

“The instrumentalist as I conceive her is a realist about morality but can and should be a fallibilist about our present moral knowledge. There is moral truth, but our current epistemic access to it is uncertain, shaky.”

# Instrumentalism Defended

Some Assumptions

Reasonable pluralism about the good is  
compatible with moral realism about  
justice

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# Instrumentalism Defended

## Some Assumptions

“the appropriate respect for an agent’s rational agency capacity is shown by recognizing it for what it is.”

Arneson, 52

# Instrumentalism Defended

## Some Assumptions

We should always try to move from the unjust “real world” towards the just “ideal world” through whatever means are best, as people will eventually feel respected in the ideal world



# Minimalism Defended

Instrumentalism: Democracy is good if it  
“works”

Minimalism: What “works” about  
democracy is the selection of political  
leaders through electoral competition



# Minimalism Defended

Dominant definition within empirical political science

Democracy means the competitive struggle for leadership and power between political parties

# Minimalism Defended

Instrumentalism and minimalism are often conflated, but *they are distinct*

First: Claim about the justification of democracy

Second: Claim about the preferable institutional arrangements of democracy



# Minimalism Defended

But they are also *complementary*

Most minimalist arguments are *instrumental* arguments. They are arguments about the conditions under which democratic institutions *produce good outcomes*.

# Minimalism Defended

## “Schumpeterian” Democracy

“The democratic method is that institutional arrangement for arriving at political decisions in which individuals acquire the power to decide by means of a competitive struggle for the people’s vote.”

pg. 269



# Minimalism Defended

## Rational Ignorance

“Normally, the great political questions take their place in the psychic economy of the typical citizen with those leisure-hour interests that have not attained the rank of hobbies, and with the subjects of irresponsible conversation. These things seem so far off; they are not at all like a business proposition; dangers may not materialize at all and if they should they may not prove so very serious; one feels oneself to be moving in a fictitious world.” pg. 261

# Minimalism Defended

Rational Ignorance: You will only gain knowledge if you have an *immediate interest* in that knowledge, and especially if you have something to lose by not having it



# Minimalism Defended

All political systems require *expertise* and *responsible action* to produce *good outcomes*

Democracy contributes to good outcomes by introducing *competition* into the selection of leaders

*Competition* provides incentives for individuals and groups to gain requisite knowledge and ability

# Minimalism Defended

## Some Problems

*How do we determine the bar for citizen competence?*

*Where we set the bar depends a great deal on how we understand the role of citizens in a democracy*



# Minimalism Defended

## Some Problems

*What is the voters' role?*

Policy details or *deciding on the values that select among competing options* –  
i.e., more *general* steering of the political  
process

# Minimalism Defended

## Some Problems

*Is instrumentalism true?*

If we *reject* instrumentalism, then we either need to defend minimalism on *other grounds* or *reject minimalism*