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# A Democratic Dilemma: System Effectiveness versus Citizen Participation

ROBERT A. DAHL

The unexpected rise in opposition to the Maastricht Treaty in 1992 reflected in part an abrupt heightening of awareness about possible trade-offs that the designers and supporters of the treaty had largely ignored. The treaty was intended to create in due time a common currency among the twelve members of the European Union (EU), common policies on defense and foreign affairs, and greater authority for the EU over many of the policies—social, economic, and environmental—of the member states. (Before Maastricht the EU had been called the European Community.) Increasing references to the democratic deficit in the political arrangements of the EU revealed a concern that whatever other benefits might result from the treaty, they could come at the cost of submerging a national democratic government into a larger and less democratic transnational system.

Maastricht presented citizens and leaders (in a country like Denmark, for example) with a fundamental democratic dilemma: They could choose to preserve the authority of a smaller democratic political unit (Denmark) within which they could act more effectively to influence the conduct of their government, even though some important matters

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might remain beyond the capacity of that government to deal with effectively. Or they could choose to increase the capacity of a large political unit to deal more effectively with these matters, even if their ability to influence the government in a democratic fashion were significantly less in the larger unit (the EU) than in the smaller unit (Denmark).

The dilemma transcends Maastricht and the EU. It exists wherever and whenever the societies and economies within democratic states are subject to significant external influences beyond their control. It has, therefore, existed ever since the idea and practice of democracy evolved in ancient Greece 2,500 years ago.

External actions beyond the capacity of a particular state to control can, of course, result from deliberate decisions like Maastricht, but they can also result from developments that are not necessarily intended to limit that state's autonomy. Whenever economic life extends beyond a state's boundaries, for example, internal choices are limited by actions taken outside the country. Military and strategic choices have always been constrained by decisions, or expectations about decisions, made by external actors. Although economic and strategic limits are ancient, only recently have many people realized that actions having decisive consequences for a country's environment cannot be controlled exclusively by people within that country. Even the capacity to control immigration has begun to slip away from the sovereign control of nation-states.

Transnational actions affect all democratic countries in varying degrees. In general, decisions in small democracies like Denmark are more constrained by external forces than in large countries, if only because their economies (in advanced countries like Denmark, at any rate) are more dependent on international trade; and ordinarily, too, they are strategically more vulnerable (Switzerland being an exception only in part). Yet it is obvious that external actors and actions impose crucial limits on the choices available even to the people of a large and powerful country like the United States. Indeed, these limits may be particularly painful for Americans because of the rather swift change in the country's international economic position from relatively high autonomy earlier in this century to much greater interdependence as the century comes to a close. Only thirty years ago, for example, officials in charge of fiscal and monetary policy, and their official and unofficial advisers, could reflect on the possibility of employing orthodox Keynesian remedies for a recession, such as reducing interest rates and increasing federal spending, without giving a great deal of weight to the responses of foreign investors. It is hard to imagine them doing so today.

## HISTORICAL TRANSFORMATIONS IN DEMOCRACY

Because historical changes in the nature of democratic institutions have a poignant bearing on the dilemma I just suggested, a word about them may be helpful. The history of democracy can be viewed as consisting of three great transformations. The first occurred during the first half of the fifth century B.C. in Greece: the transformation of nondemocratic city-states—typically aristocracies, oligarchies, monarchies, or mixtures of all three—into democracies. For the next two thousand years, the idea and practice of democracy were associated almost exclusively with small scale city-states, reappearing in the late middle ages in some of the city-states of Italy.<sup>1</sup> In the small compass of the city-state, the central institution was the assembly in which all citizens were entitled to participate.

But the city-state was made obsolete by the emergence of the large scale nation-state, or more accurately the national state.<sup>2</sup> At this point our story begins to suggest an analogy with the present. For in a second democratic transformation the idea of democracy was transferred from the city-state to the much larger scale of the national state. While some city-state republics lingered on, increasingly the autonomy that cities might once have possessed was curtailed as they became subordinate units of national states. What made the second transformation possible was an idea and set of practice we now tend to regard as essential to democracy—representation. Democracy came to be understood not as assembly democracy in the city-state but as representative democracy in the national-state. As a consequence of that transformation in scale and form, a set of political institutions and practices, which taken as a whole were unknown to the theory and practice of democracy up to that time, came into existence.

By the late twentieth century, this set of political institutions, which are generally seen as necessary to democracy (though not sufficient) on the large scale of a country, have become very familiar: control over government decisions about policy is constitutionally vested in elected officials; elected officials are chosen in frequent and fairly conducted elections in which coercion is comparatively uncommon;

<sup>1</sup> Rome might also be cited as part of this trend. Throughout the period of the Republic, the Roman institutions for citizen participation in government largely remained those of the city-state. Despite the vastly enlarged scale of Rome, Romans never adopted a system of representative government in the modern sense.

<sup>2</sup> It would be even more accurate, perhaps, to speak of country-states but the term is unfamiliar and national state will probably do better.

practically all adults have the right to vote in the election of officials and have the right to run for elective offices in the government; citizens have an effectively enforceable right to express themselves on political matters broadly defined, without danger of severe punishment; they also have effective rights to seek out alternative sources of information and to form relatively independent associations or organizations, including independent political parties and interest groups.<sup>3</sup>

Although an Athenian in classical Greece would hardly have accepted this constellation of institutions as a democracy—and modern day advocates of assembly democracy often do not—we need not be detained by these linguistic, philosophical, and ideological disputes. For our concern here is with the effects of transnational economic, social, and political systems on modern democracy as we, if not the Greeks of classical times, conceive it.

### THE PRESENT TRANSFORMATION

The third transformation, then, is the one now taking place. Just as earlier city-states lost much of their political, economic, social, and cultural autonomy when they were absorbed into larger national states, so in our time the development of transnational systems reduces the political, economic, social, and cultural autonomy of national states.<sup>4</sup>

The boundaries of a country, even one as large as the United States, have become much smaller than the boundaries of the decisions that significantly affect the fundamental interests of its citizens. A country's economic life, physical environment, national security, and survival are highly and probably increasingly dependent on actors and actions that are outside the country's boundaries and not directly subject to its government. Thus the citizens of a country cannot employ their national government, and much less their local governments, to exercise direct control over external actors whose decisions bear critically on their lives—for example, foreign investors who choose to invest their money elsewhere. The result is something like the second transfor-

<sup>3</sup> I have used the term *polyarchy* to differentiate the institutional complex of modern democracy, not only from assembly democracy and other possible institutional arrangements but also from democracy in the ideal sense. Instead, I usually rely here on the reader to grasp from the context which of the multiple meanings of democracy I have in mind.

<sup>4</sup> David Held examines some of the consequences of internationalization for democracy and provides an extensive account of the limits on the sovereignty of nation-states resulting from the world economy, international organizations, international law, and hegemonic powers and power blocs. See "Democracy, the Nation-State, and the Global System" in Held, ed., *Political Theory Today* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1991), 197-235.

mation writ large on a world scale. Just as the rise of the national state reduced the capacity of local residents to exercise control over matters of vital importance to them by means of their local governments, so the proliferation of transnational activities and decisions reduces the capacity of the citizens of a country to exercise control over matters vitally important to them by means of their national government. To that extent, the governments of countries are becoming local governments.

Is democracy in the national state, then, destined to meet the fate of democracy in the city-state? Will it grow more and more attenuated until finally it lingers on as little more than a ghostly reminder of its earlier vigorous existence? In the same way that the idea and practice of democracy were shifted away from the city-state to the larger scale of the national state, will democracy as an idea and a set of practices now shift to the grander scale of transnational governments? If so, just as democracy on the scale of the national state required a new and unique historical pattern of political institutions radically different from the ancient practices of assembly democracy that the small scale of the city-state made possible, desirable, and even self-evident, will democracy on a transnational scale require a new set of institutions that are different in some respects, perhaps radically different from the familiar political institutions of modern representative democracy?

### CONSEQUENCES FOR DEMOCRACY

I do not propose to say much here about what those new supranational political institutions might be.<sup>5</sup> We can be reasonably certain, however, about two things. First, they will be of enormous variety, from associations like the United Nations and the European Union to military arrangements like NATO or its successors, economic associations like the emergent North American economic area, and innumerable ad hoc but enduring arrangements for economic, military, environmental, and other matters. To be sure, the constitutional and political systems of democratic countries also vary greatly; but all, by definition and in empirical reality, are similar in having the basic set of political institutions I mentioned earlier. Second, they will require considerable delegation of power to make consequential decisions—*de facto* if not always *de jure*—to officials who are not themselves directly subject to elections, though at least nominally they may be subject to officials who are.

<sup>5</sup> Held offers some brief speculations in *ibid.*, 231–234.

Like the second transformation, then, the third is associated with a great increase in the scale of the political system. And as with the second, this third change in scale will have important consequences for certain values. As I have already suggested, the two that compose the dilemma under discussion here are the ability of the citizens to exercise democratic control over the decisions of the polity versus the capacity of the system to respond satisfactorily to the collective preferences of its citizens.

A persuasive argument to classical Greeks as well as to many modern democrats is that smaller systems at least hold out the theoretical potential for greater citizen effectiveness than larger systems, even if in practice that potentiality is not always realized. Judged from this perspective, as a site for democracy the city-state was clearly superior to the national state, at any rate in its potentials. Judged from the perspective of system capacity, however, the city-state had some obvious disadvantages, notably in defense but conspicuously also in economic capacities. The parochial and even passionate attachment of Greeks to their city-states meant that they could unite against aggressors, if at all, only when the aggressor was on their doorstep. Heroic though they were, they could not prevent subjugation by the Macedonians and Romans and destruction of the precious autonomy of their cities. Nor could the Italian republics adequately defend themselves against the superior forces of national states like France and Spain. For one example, take Venice. When Napoleon reached Italy in 1797, his forces overwhelmingly outnumbered those of Venice, which surrendered without resistance. Napoleon then further dramatized the obsolescence of the city-state by unceremoniously handing over the ancient republic to Austria.

That larger political systems often possess relatively greater capacity to accomplish tasks beyond the capacity of smaller systems leads sometimes to a paradox. In very small political systems a citizen may be able to participate extensively in decisions that do not matter much but cannot participate much in decisions that really matter a great deal; whereas very large systems may be able to cope with problems that matter more to a citizen, the opportunities for the citizen to participate in and greatly influence decisions are vastly reduced. Taken to an extreme but perhaps not wholly fanciful limit, the paradox would pose a choice between a tiny unit in which citizens could exercise perfect democratic control over, say, the location and upkeep of footpaths; or a world government necessary for preserving life on the planet by preventing acute environmental degradation, but over which citizens had only symbolic democratic control.

Judgments about trade-offs are no easy matter. On balance, few people today would regret that our predecessors gave up the potentialities of democracy in smaller city-states for the enhanced system capacity of the national state. Our successors may one day conclude that on balance it was worthwhile to trade off the potentials for democracy in countries and national states for the enhanced capacity of supranational associations. I do not need to make these judgments here. I need only observe that just as the inclusion of a village, town, or city in the economy, society, and polity of a country reduces the relative importance of strictly local decisions and increases the relative importance of decisions made outside the smaller unit, so too as a country becomes more and more a part of a vaster social, economic, cultural, and political world, the ability of citizens to make their own decisions autonomously is diminished.

We can examine the matter more concretely by considering the effects of internationalization on the potentialities of a country for approximating several of the criteria we might use to assess democratic performance. I have already stressed the extent to which internationalization means that many crucial decisions are made by persons outside a country, without the political participation of citizens within the country, or at most perhaps only a tiny minority. This exclusion from participation, it might be objected, comes about because of the absence (or weakness) of transnational political institutions. If these were created along democratic lines then citizens could participate in transnational decisions just as they now can in national decisions. I shall ignore the fact that such institutions do not now exist and seem exceedingly remote in most of the world; even if they were to come about the opportunities and importance of participation would still be greatly diminished.

While Jean Jacques Rousseau was wrong, I think, about some important issues, he was on target in emphasizing that the opportunities for (and importance of) citizen participation decrease with the number of citizens. To oversimplify, if citizens were truly equal in influence, then the influence of an average citizen would necessarily shrink as the number of citizens increased from a hundred to a thousand; from a thousand to a hundred thousand; and so on. Or if we take theoretical opportunities to participate at any stage in a decision process—for example, by engaging in discussion with all other citizens or for that matter with one's representative in the parliament—then clearly these shrink linearly with numbers. A simple arithmetical exercise would demonstrate how the amount of time for each citizen to engage in



discussion rapidly approaches insignificance as the number of persons who participate increases. Thus even if transnational democratic institutions are created, they cannot overcome the limitations imposed by scale and time.

Turn now to the matter of equality in voting at the decisive stage of collective decisions, as for example in elections. In the absence of supranational political institutions constructed more or less according to democratic principles, the criterion is essentially irrelevant. But even if nominally democratic political institutions are created (as in the European Union), they are likely to violate the principle even more extensively than decision making at the national level in democratic countries. For example, federal systems typically, perhaps invariably, violate the criterion of voting equality, because representation in parliament (or in one house) is not proportional to population or citizens, but on the contrary gives disproportionate weight to states, provinces, or regions with smaller populations. (Nevada and California both have two senators, for example.) I presume that international political institutions, formal and informal, would tend to follow the same principle, though perhaps not to the extreme of one country-one vote, as in the UN General Assembly.

If we take political realities into account, as we must, then just as the realities imposed by political life and institutions profoundly limit the extent to which the criterion of voting equality is actually met even in democratic countries, so too these realities will attenuate the principle in international life, but, I believe, to an even greater extent. As one illustration among many, in a democratic country the mere fact of representation means in practice that the personal preferences of a representative will almost inevitably carry far more weight than those of an average citizen; and we know how greatly all the additional influences brought to bear on a representative tend to violate the criterion of voting equality even further. But if this is true in democratic countries, does not, and will not, internationalization cause even more massive violations?

Consider enlightened understanding. In introducing this rather ambiguous criterion I simply want to recognize that democracy cannot be justified merely as a system for translating the raw, uninformed will of a popular majority into public policy. It is foolish and historically false to suppose that enlightenment has nothing to do with democracy. It is foolish because democracy has usually been conceived as a system in which "rule by the people" makes it more likely that the

“people” will get what they want, or what they believe is best, rather than alternative systems in which an elite determines what is best. But to know what they want or what is best the people must be enlightened, at least to some degree. Because advocates of democracy have invariably recognized this, they have also placed great stress on the means to an informed and enlightened citizenry, such as education, discussion, and public deliberation.

What the criterion is intended to require, then, is that alternative procedures for making decisions ought to be evaluated according to the opportunities they furnish citizens for acquiring an understanding of means and ends, of one’s interests and the expected consequences of policies for interests, not only for oneself but for all other relevant persons as well. Thus the criterion makes it hard to justify procedures that would cut off or suppress information which, were it available, might well cause citizens to arrive at a different decision; or that would give some citizens much easier access than others to information of crucial importance; or that would present citizens with an agenda of decisions that had to be decided without discussion; and so on.

Here again, the absence of transnational political systems constructed on democratic principles makes the criterion virtually irrelevant to the international decisions and actions that nowadays, and probably increasingly, bear heavily on the lives of citizens in democratic countries. Even if attempts were made to create transnational “democratic” systems, the burdens of information, knowledge, and understanding they would place on their citizens would, I believe, far exceed those of national democratic systems—which, heaven knows, impose burdens that may already be excessive.

Likewise, if the weakness of citizens in exercising final control of the agenda of collective decision making is already a problem of the utmost seriousness in all democratic countries, then surely internationalization virtually nullifies the possibility. In the absence of democratic transnational institutions, at best only a tiny minority of citizens in any country can exercise direct control, and often not much indirect control either, over the agenda of the transnational decisions, actions, choices, and influences that so profoundly affect their opportunities and life chances. But even if democratic transnational institutions are created, all the difficulties of exercising final control that already exist in democratic countries will be compounded.

Finally, there is the question of inclusion. Once again, the criterion is largely irrelevant in the present world, since except for the European

Union no transnational structures exist with even the semblance of a democratic process. At best, decisions are made by unelected delegates appointed by national governments, many of which, and in some cases most of which, are not themselves dependent on elections. But often crucial decisions are not made even by official international organizations but by official and unofficial actors largely or wholly outside the purview of the official international organizations — banks, multinational firms, investors, government agencies, and so on. To propose that all persons significantly affected by these decisions should be included in the process would be seen as fanciful; that they should be included as political equals, democratic citizens if you like, seems an even more utopian claim.

### CAN DEMOCRACY ADAPT?

These reflections suggest several ways by which the democratic idea might be adapted to the new change in scale.<sup>6</sup> The most obvious is to duplicate the second transformation on a larger scale: from democracy in the national state to democracy in the transnational state. However, the historical analogy is too imperfect to allow that facile conclusion. For in the countries where modern democratic institutions developed, the structures and consciousness of nationhood were already rather fully developed, but transnational political structures and consciousness are likely to remain weak in the foreseeable future. Only the European Union shows much sign of harboring a supranational growth gene. There the incipient institutions of a “democratic” transnational political community are faintly visible in the form of the European Parliament. A sort of transnational polyarchy might gradually come into existence. Though its citizen body would be massively larger than that of the United States, democratic ideas and practices applied to the Union as a whole might gradually take hold. Yet even in this case it seems fanciful to expect that the European Parliament in Strasbourg would ever become as responsive to the citizens of the European Union (whatever the membership of the EU may ultimately turn out to be) as the existing national parliaments of the present members of the EU.

Except for the European Union, the prospects for even moderately “democratic” governments of transnational political associations are

<sup>6</sup> This section is adapted from my *Democracy and Its Critics* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), 320–321.

poor. Even if transnational political systems are greatly strengthened, for a long time to come decisions are likely to be made by delegates appointed by national governments. Thus the link between the delegates and the citizens will remain weak; and the democratic process will be even more attenuated than in existing polyarchies. With respect to decisions on crucial international affairs, the danger is that the third transformation will not lead to an extension of the democratic idea beyond the national state but to the victory in that domain of *de facto* guardianship.

This emerging possibility means that in order to maintain the vitality of the democratic process, democratic institutions within countries would need to be improved. Stronger democratic institutions would provide whatever democratic control may be possible over the authority delegated to transnational decision makers and thus help to prevent delegation from becoming in effect a total and permanent alienation of control. What form these might take is hard to say, but they might well include new and more effective institutions for enhancing citizen understanding, deliberation, and informed participation.<sup>7</sup> Stronger democratic institutions would also help to provide a healthy democratic political life within the large sphere of relative autonomy that democratic countries will still possess. Here the experience of the smaller European democracies is encouraging. Just as they maintained a vigorous and self-confident political life in the very process of adapting to their international vulnerability and dependence, so in the future all democratic countries will be challenged to discover ways of maintaining and strengthening the democratic process as they adapt to transnational forces. In this way, while freedom and control might be lost on one front, they could yet be gained on others.

In addition, democratic life in smaller communities below the level of the national state could be enhanced. The larger scale of decisions need not lead inevitably to a widening sense of powerlessness, provided citizens can exercise significant control over decisions on the smaller scale of matters important in their daily lives: education, public health, town and city planning, the supply and quality of the local public sector from streets and lighting to parks and playgrounds, and the like.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>7</sup> For some suggestions along these lines see James Fishkin, *Democracy and Deliberation* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991); Benjamin Barber, *Strong Democracy* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 261ff; and my "The Problem of Civic Competence," *Journal of Democracy* 3 (October 1992): 45-59.

<sup>8</sup> A useful analogy is furnished by attempts to democratize the workplace. A substantial body of research shows that in economic enterprises, arrangements by which workers are entitled to

What is more, citizens in democratic countries should insist that extensive information be provided and wide-ranging public deliberation, discussion, and debate take place before they yield significant autonomy to transnational institutions. Because the problem of trade-offs in democratic values resulting from changes in scale has been largely ignored, the opponents of drastic increases in the size of a democratic unit have little to fall back on except sentiment, attachments, loyalties. Over the long span of history, they have won some rear-guard skirmishes and lost the deciding battles—a fate that may well await them in the coming century.

The burden of proof should be placed squarely on the advocates to show that the trade-offs definitely support the values of a majority of citizens. Fearful that discussion may easily arouse adverse reactions among citizens who may insufficiently understand the advantages claimed for transnational arrangements (advantages that will often be long-run, uncertain, and supported only by counterfactual theoretical arguments) when faced with a choice between wider public discussion or less, leaders favoring such moves may be tempted to avoid the pitfalls of widespread public deliberation. Yet because of the education of citizens that public deliberation helps to promote and the possibility of forming a more secure long-run consensus for or against a proposed change, to avoid extensive public deliberation would be, I believe, both morally and politically wrong.

For these reasons, by initially rejecting Maastricht in their 1992 referendum, engaging in further public discussion and debate, bringing about a reconsideration and renegotiation of some parts of the treaty to preserve greater Danish autonomy on certain matters, and then adopting the revised treaty through democratic procedures that insured greater consensus for this historic move, I believe that the Danish people made a positive contribution both to democratic values and the European community. The people of a democratic nation are not only fully entitled to explore the trade-offs between system effectiveness and citizen effectiveness, but I believe that commitment to democratic values obliges them to do so.

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participate in decisions are more highly valued at the level of the shop floor than at higher levels in the firm.