

|CURIEUX|

ACADEMIC JOURNAL

March Issue

Part 3 Issue 48

Editing Staff

Chief-In-Editor

Caroline Xue

George Hasnah

Chief of Operations

Anshal Vyas

Assisting Editors

Olivia Li

Luzia Thomas

Madalyn Ramirez

Shefali Awasthi

Soumya Rai

Sarah Strick

Is There Such a Thing as Too Much Democracy? By Ashley Wei

Abstract

This essay will explore the concerns emerging in democratic countries, such as the majority's lack of expertise and flawed electoral systems, demonstrating that we are nowhere near having too much democracy. It will then show through an example of a positive application of democratic values that we can never have too much democracy if it is applied appropriately to its people without the interruption of self-serving representatives. While the idea of democracy was created to facilitate peaceful transitions of power rather than violent uprisings, it has become apparent that democracy has taken a different turn altogether.

What is Democracy?

According to the Cambridge Dictionary, democracy is “the belief in freedom and equality between people, or a system of government based on this belief, in which power is either held by elected representatives or directly by the people themselves.” After generations of adaptation, modern society takes for granted how democracy is meant to function. We have also forgotten what the original Greek thinkers and architects warned us about democratic processes.

“Those people without the skill...to vote could lead to the equivalent of societal shipwreck,” claims Socrates, a Greek philosopher who is widely recognized to be the “Father of Western Philosophy” (Britannica). In his cautionary quote, he is concerned about whether the voter has the appropriate level of expertise to make important, governing decisions. Socrates reflects the tensions that have been present throughout the history of democracy, a fear of this flaw disrupting the effectiveness of the system.

Democracy originates from the Greek word “demos,” representing “people,” and “kratos” signifying “power.” It is a form of government where the power is granted to the people; the version of democracy that underpinned the Athenian government was a direct democracy where the whole population rules directly. Eventually, other forms of democracy would develop - such as when rule is established through elected representatives. This is called a representative democracy, which is the type of democracy most applied in modern society. While Athenian democracy is imperfect, it laid the foundation for what would later influence the development of modern democracies.

Democracy in Today's World

Today, more than 70 out of 167 countries surveyed in the Economist Intelligence Unit's (EIU) 2023 Democracy Index, equivalent to 4.4 billion people, live under some form of democratic governmental system. As argued by the United Nations, democracy can play a significant role in maintaining peace and security, while at the same time allowing individuals the freedom of expression and association. In the disordered world that we live in today, the effectiveness of democracy is categorized by an index (a scale of up to 10) which considers the following factors: “electoral process and pluralism, functioning of government, political

participation, political culture, and civil liberties” (EIU). According to the EIU Index, only 7.8% of the world’s population has an index score of 8 or above on the scale. This small percentage of people live under what is referred to as “full democracies,” with fair elections, civil engagement, and individual rights. In contrast, 37.6% of the world’s population live in “flawed democracies,” which possess problems with the rule of law, political participation, and more.

Due to the increase of misinformation, political divides, and increases in bribery, citizens in many democratic countries have found it difficult to trust their governments, suggesting that democracy has been corrupted by modern humanity. Many countries have also displayed either a sudden or gradual decrease in their democracy index score, revealing a rise in social and political conflict together with a decline of democratic quality (EIU). When we understand the degradation of democratic values as seen in the last several decades, we can start to see that there can never be too much democracy if there is a balance between high-quality citizen involvement and the protection of individual rights. If decisions are ultimately made with care and not based on self interest, external influences, and bias, democracy would not descend into the world of chaos and corruption that seems to characterize it now.

A Lack of Expertise Leads to Manipulation

The majority’s lack of political knowledge has made manipulation and negative influence by corrupted, self-driven political candidates effortless and concerning. With widespread, targeted advertisement and misinformation on social media, citizens are more easily manipulated prior to elections and lean to public opinion rather than voicing their personal, well-informed judgments. Additionally, the increase of falsehood, conspiracy theories, and personal attacks can also lead to decision-making based on flawed information, skewing electoral outcomes. This disrupts the original fundamental principles of democracy. Instead of advocating for the freedom of expression and respect of human rights, which is democracy in its purest form, the manipulation seems like a different form of government claiming itself to be democracy through deception.

In 2024, for instance, the United States, one of the world’s leading political powers, is held up as a paragon of democracy. In the The US, citizens depend on representatives to make political decisions rather than voting on laws directly themselves. Yet, its dysfunctional government and the nation’s divided beliefs and values no longer allow the country to showcase political harmony and peace. With its existing tensions, the country’s political candidates can quickly ignite further problems and create divides among unacquainted citizens who are vulnerable in believing misinformation. This, in fact, was what characterized Donald Trump’s political campaign in the 2016 election, which ultimately swung in his favor. On the other hand, US citizens do not always educate themselves in preparation for making political decisions. According to CNBC, polls have revealed how 34% of Republican and 32.5% of Democratic registered voters mentioned that “they did not know the names of their party’s congressional candidates in their districts” This shows the public’s deep disinterest and disengagement from democratic processes. According to the National Democratic Institute, if citizens do not have a

strong understanding of the political process and key policy issues, they are less equipped to make informed choices which benefit the country. The issues we face today were predicted by Socrates thousands of years ago - clearly where he questions whether crucial decisions might not be best handed to citizens without relevant knowledge or active engagement.

Besides the citizens, those running for office who lack wisdom have the possibility of using “their elected position for personal gain rather than for common good.” (Socrates). Again, as Socrates warned, the risk of electing an unsuitable leader becomes increasingly high when the citizens themselves are not politically literate. A recent situation in America comes to mind - George Santos, the former US representative for New York was expelled from congress not long after misleading the electorate. By embellishing his resumé and basing his entire candidacy on lies, Santos misled New Yorkers to vote him into the House of Representatives. This demonstrates how the perfect marriage of candidate corruption and voter illiteracy can lead to corrupted leadership. But again, none of this should be indicative of democracy, and absolutely not too much of it.

Flawed Electoral Systems Become Problematic

Electoral systems worldwide are becoming increasingly flawed, threatening the foundations of democracy. One of the most alarming trends is the rise in candidate bribery, a practice that brutally ignores the principle of free and fair elections. According to the Public Choice journal’s article “When is Buying Votes Wrong?”, bribery has become more sophisticated and widespread, with candidates offering monetary incentives, promises of jobs, contracts, or other forms of dishonest treatment in exchange for votes. Such practices distort the will of the electorate, allowing wealthy individuals to gain political power rather than earning it through the genuine support of citizens. Rather than those with the best leadership qualities who propose the more ethical ideas, voting comes down to who has the bigger wallet. While the initial democratic electoral system was designed for voters to have a chance to voice their opinion, humanity has slowly allowed elections to focus on the temptation of personal gains rather than benefits for the entire nation. The uneven “playing field” often leads to unstable, unrepresented governments and crushed democratic norms - not too much democracy at all but rather anti-democracy.

According to the official voting results posted by the New York Times, the United States’ 2016 presidential election showcased Hilary Clinton winning the popular vote, (combination of all voters in all states of America) but Donald Trump winning the electoral college (a group of presidential electors formed every four years who vote on the president and vice president) thus giving him the White House. If the fundamental and radical principles of democracy ensures the election to skew towards the “vote of the people,” why did the presidential position eventually go to Trump? This system was created by the original forefathers of America who were creating standards for a much smaller United States (the 13 original colonies). We find here the question of too much democracy shifting to now ask: is America’s system of democracy outdated?

Does an Effective Democracy Exist?

Democracy was created to govern a fair, free, and equal nation, yet its modern interpretation utilizes it for a different purpose. If democracy doesn't exist in its purest and intended form, there will never be such a thing as too much of it. This form of government, unadulterated by greed and self interest, is still needed for equality, freedom, and justice in the modern world (United Nations). In its purest form, democracy remains essential for protecting human rights and ensuring economic prosperity. According to MIT Economics, economists have revealed that democratization causes a 20-25 percent increase in GDP per capita. Moreover, during an International Social Survey Program (ISSP) survey, it was also found that more exposure to democracy results in healthier emotional well-being as individuals find more opportunities to participate politically. In the survey, a sample of citizens of different countries were asked to rate their mental state on a scale "very happy" to "not at all happy". Ireland, which was ranked 7th on the Democracy Index is now ranked 1st out of all the countries surveyed with 44% of its citizens claiming that they were "very happy" while Russia, ranked 144 on the Democracy index had less than 5% saying they were "very happy". Clearly, democracy can and does work in some parts of the world - and is not being applied too much in these areas. But nations like America should learn from them because their democracy is not working.

Conclusion

Ultimately, there is no such thing as too much democracy, especially when it enables civic participation without flaws and corruption by human nature that violate basic integrity and human rights. While it is rare for a country to have a "perfect" democracy, its core principles should attempt to preserve the notion of the will of the people. In its purest form, it depicts a direct democracy where the power is exercised directly by the people. In today's world, Switzerland is the only country which governs through a direct democracy. All residents in the country over the age of 18 are able to vote in an election to determine how the country is run (World Economic Forum). Citizens can also launch their own popular initiative when demanding a change in the constitution, but this requires the prior agreement of 100,000 individuals with their valid signatures. This places Switzerland on the 2023 Democracy Index with an overall score of 9.14 out 10, also categorizing it as a full democracy. If all democracies came in their purest form, there might never be too much of it. Citizens can voice their opinion in the nation's politics and have the freedom and right to vote independently, without the interruption of misleading representatives who abuse their power. Though democracy will always have flaws by virtue of being human run, enhancing transparency and access to information will make it harder for flawed information to exist, ultimately feeding the public with valid and accurate knowledge. Educating and awareness-raising through public campaigns is also crucial to cultivate a culture that rejects corruption and fraud. With these available solutions to access, democratic institutions can be strengthened and empowered, allowing democracy to deliver its promise of equal rights, opportunities, and representation at last.

Works Cited

- Amico, Laura. "Do Democracy and Capitalism Really Need Each Other?" *Harvard Business Review*, 11 Mar. 2020, hbr.org/2020/03/do-democracy-and-capitalism-really-need-each-other. Accessed 28 June 2024.
- Annan, Kofi. "Democracy." *Council of Europe*, www.coe.int/en/web/compass/democracy.
- Australian Electoral Commission. "Compulsory Voting in Australia." *Australian Electoral Commission*, 20 Nov. 2023, www.aec.gov.au/About_AEC/Publications/voting/. Accessed 28 June 2024.
- B. Talisse, Robert. "Why More Democracy Isn't Better Democracy." *OUPblog*, 23 Sept. 2019, blog.oup.com/2019/09/why-more-democracy-isnt-better-democracy/. Accessed 17 May 2024.
- Cartledge, Paul. "History & Policy." *History & Policy*, 20 July 2006, www.historyandpolicy.org/policy-papers/papers/ostracism-selection-and-de-selection-in-ancient-greece. Accessed 28 June 2024.
- Economist Intelligence Unit. "Democracy Index 2023." *Economist Intelligence Unit*, 2023, www.eiu.com/n/campaigns/democracy-index-2023/. Accessed 28 June 2024.
- Federal Election Commission. "Political Action Committees (PACs)." *FEC.gov*, 2023, www.fec.gov/press/resources-journalists/political-action-committees-pacs/. Accessed 28 June 2024.
- Ghosh, Saurav. "PACs, Super PACs and More: Your Guide to Key Election Spending Vehicles." *Campaign Legal Center*, 15 Sept. 2022, campaignlegal.org/update/pacs-super-pacs-and-more-your-guide-key-election-spending-vehicles. Accessed 28 June 2024.
- Helms, Ludger. "When Leaders Are Not Good": *Oxford University Press EBooks*, vol. 4, 17 July 2014, pp. 51–69, <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199683840.003.0004>. Accessed 11 Sept. 2023.
- Lucchi, Micol. "This Is How Switzerland's Direct Democracy Works." *World Economic Forum*, 31 July 2017, www.weforum.org/agenda/2017/07/switzerland-direct-democracy-explained/. Accessed 28 June 2024.
- Merkel, Wolfgang. "Is Capitalism Compatible with Democracy?" *Zeitschrift Für Vergleichende Politikwissenschaft*, vol. 8, no. 2, 26 July 2014, pp. 109–128, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12286-014-0199-4>. Accessed 24 May 2024.
- National Geographic Society. "Democracy (Ancient Greece) | National Geographic Society." *Education.nationalgeographic.org*, National Geographic, 19 Oct. 2023, education.nationalgeographic.org/resource/democracy-ancient-greece/.
- Noland, Natalie. "How Did Socrates View Democracy?" *TheCollector*, 30 Jan. 2024, www.thecollector.com/how-did-socrates-view-democracy/.
- Norris, Pippa. "Why American Elections Are Flawed (and How to Fix Them)."

- Wwww.hks.harvard.edu*, 2017,
<https://www.hks.harvard.edu/publications/why-american-elections-are-flawed-and-how-fix-the-m>. Accessed 28 June 2024.
- Plato. "The Republic." *Gutenberg.org*, 11 Sept. 2021, www.gutenberg.org/files/1497/1497-h/1497-h.htm. Accessed 28 June 2024.
- Raja, Story by Jonathan Rauch and Ray La. "Too Much Democracy Is Bad for Democracy." *The Atlantic*, Dec. 2019,
www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2019/12/too-much-democracy-is-bad-for-democracy/600766/.
- Roser, Max, et al. "Democracy." *Our World in Data*, 2022, ourworldindata.org/democracy. Accessed 17 May 2024.
- Shamim, Sarah , and Areesha Lodhi. "The Year of Elections – Is 2024 Democracy’s Biggest Test Ever?" *Al Jazeera*, 4 Jan. 2024,
www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/1/4/the-year-of-elections-is-2024-democracys-biggest-test-ever. Accessed 28 June 2024.
- Stieb, Matt , and Margaret Hartmann. "Here’s Every Single Lie Told by George Santos." *Intelligencer*, 8 Mar. 2024,
nymag.com/intelligencer/article/guide-george-santos-lies.html. Accessed 28 June 2024.
- Stuenkel, Oliver. "Brazil’s Polarization and Democratic Risks - Divisive Politics and Democratic Dangers in Latin America." *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, 17 Feb. 2021,
carnegieendowment.org/2021/02/17/brazil-s-polarization-and-democratic-risks-pub-8378
- The New York Times. "Presidential Election Results: Donald J. Trump Wins." *The New York Times*, 9 Aug. 2017, www.nytimes.com/elections/2016/results/president. Accessed 28 June 2024.
- The Print. "Fallacy of Too Much Democracy: No Economic Freedoms Can Thrive without Political Freedoms." *YouTube*, 12 Dec. 2020,
www.youtube.com/watch?v=H7om35BjQQM. Accessed 17 May 2024.
- United Nations. "Democracy." *United Nations*, United Nations, 2021, www.un.org/en/global-issues/democracy. Accessed 17 May 2024.
- "What’s in a Name? One-Third of US Voters Don’t Know Candidates." *CNBC*, 3 Oct. 2018,
www.cnbc.com/2018/10/03/one-third-of-us-voters-dont-know-candidates-reutersipsos-poll.html. Accessed 28 June 2024.
- World Population Review. "Democracy Countries 2024." *Worldpopulationreview.com*, World Population Review, 17 May 2024,
worldpopulationreview.com/country-rankings/democracy-countries. Accessed 23 May 2024.