

Democracy and Common Valuations

Philip Pettit

Three views of the ideal of democracy dominate contemporary thinking. The first conceptualizes democracy as a system for empowering public will, the second as a system for empowering public judgement, and the third as a system for empowering public valuation. I see the third view as the most attractive and I associate it with the long tradition that derives from the time of the Roman republic.

The first view is that democracy is a system designed to empower the public will. It suggests that we can think about a democratic people as we might think about an individual, as a corporate body with a mind of its own. The assumption is that the people, considered in this collective sense, forms a will about who should be in government; what policies government should pursue; and what constitutional and other constraints government should operate under. And the point of democracy, according to this first approach, is to ensure so far as possible that that public will rules. Democracy should be designed so that private influences and foreign influences are minimized and the public will of the constituent people rules over all.

This theory depicts democracy as a system that enables the people to enjoy a collective autonomy akin to the personal autonomy that individuals rightly cherish. But while that certainly makes democracy sound attractive, I believe that the theory is a failure. The idea of the people as a collective agent, and the idea that the people has a mind and will of its own, is a myth. There are collective agents in the social world – we need only think about churches, corporations, clubs and the like to see what they involve – and collective agents do have minds and wills. But the people in a large-scale electorate are not an example of a collective agent. They are an unorganised multitude of individual agents, not a body with a claim to being an agent in its own right.

The problems for this first theory have led many people to conceptualize democracy in a second manner as a system for empowering, not the people's will, understood as a set of preferences, but rather the

judgments of the people on relevant issues. This is often described as a deliberative ideal of democracy, though the third approach that I will be looking at – the approach I favour – can also be described as deliberative in character. In order to avoid ambiguity we do best to think of this second approach as the public-judgment view of democracy as distinct from the public-will theory just mentioned.

The public-judgment theory, however, falls to the same sort of problem as the public-will theory. In order to think of a group as making judgments over a range of issues, we have to be able to picture it as sufficiently organized and reflective to be able to monitor where individual votes would lead the group and whether in particular they would lead it to support a coherent package of principles and policies. Even the judgments of three people, A, B and C, can lead to an incoherent collective outcome. A and C might vote for the group endorsing some proposition, say that *p*; B and C might vote for the group endorsing a second proposition, say that *q*; and yet the group as a whole would be disposed to vote against endorsing the joint proposition ‘*p* and *q*’. A would reject it because of rejecting ‘*q*’, B because of rejecting ‘*p*’, and the two of them would outvote C. Thus the group would be stuck with endorsing ‘*p*’, endorsing ‘*q*’, but rejecting ‘*p* and *q*’. In order for a group to be truly a centre of judgments, the members would have to be able to monitor and adjust what their individual votes are taken to support. And no large-scale electorate, of course, could possibly be in a position to do this.

Have I been unfair to the two theories mentioned? Someone may say that while it may not make sense to posit a public preference or judgment on some matter – the preference or judgment of the collective people – there is certainly sense in the idea of people having private preferences and judgments on that question. Can’t we think of democracy, then, as a system that ensures that government is responsive to such private preferences and judgments? We can, but it is essential to realize how limited an ideal this would be. We can think of democracy as empowering private preferences and judgments only in the sense of empowering the preferences and judgments of a majority or plurality of citizens; and it might do this while neglecting and perhaps flouting the corresponding attitudes in a minority. The point is familiar.

This is not to say that the limited ideal should be discounted as having little importance. Even if electorally expressed preferences and opinions fail to answer to a public will or a public judgment, they still represent a very good basis on which to determine who shall govern. No matter how democracy is articulated as an ideal, I would say, it should never forsake

the recourse to electoral competition as the principal means of appointment to government. But with that point emphasized, we should turn to a third view of democracy under which the ideal involves more than the belief in a particular system of appointment to public office.

The third view I have in mind connects with the traditional republican ideal that good government is government which is constrained to track the common good; the idea is that government should go where the common good leads, and only where the common good leads. That traditional ideal is often criticized on the grounds that people differ in their views of the common good. But the approach can be understood in a revised, republican manner that avoids that problem.

As a result of regular elections, and the relative openness of the way government is exercised in democracies, people get to debate questions of what government should do, and under what constraints it should operate, not just questions of who should be in government; that is what regular political conversations are about. On such questions, as we are all well aware, people routinely differ and differ quite strongly. But despite those differences the striking thing about most discussion is that it does not run into the ground straight away; it does not go to stalemate immediately. On the contrary, as people discuss and identify their differences, they almost always identify in the process the considerations that they recognize in common as relevant to the debate. You and I may differ on whether there should be a public medical system, or on whether our country should be involved in a certain war. But in debating about such questions, we will almost always agree in common on the relevance of certain valuations, even if they do not lead us in the same direction. I may argue that a public health system is necessary to guard against severe deprivation among the poor, or that it should help to reinforce our sense of a common citizenship. And even while you disagree on the conclusion that I draw, you may well admit that those are indeed relevant considerations. You may admit their relevance, even if you think that they do not have the weight I attach to them or that they are outweighed by considerations on the other side.

If this pattern is common, as I think it is, then whenever there is public debate about what our government should do, the differences of opinion that appear among us will generally be balanced by the emergence of a repository of considerations that we each recognize as relevant in the debate we conduct. I think of the considerations that we endorse in this way – and recognize that we endorse in common – as our shared political valuations. They are not matters that we think about very often or

explicitly try to set down but they crystallize as the byproduct of public discussion, even discussion that generally tends to difference. They accumulate over the years, they come to constitute a form of shared, discursive capital. Those of us who know the folkways of our society are put in a position to recognize that if we want to persuade our fellows about what we or our government should do, then we must look to those valuations for the resources we are to employ in the course of the argument.

The third theory of democracy – the modern-day version of the republican theory that democracy enforces the common good – is best articulated with reference to this picture of shared valuations offering us common discursive capital – a common stock of argumentative resources. For what we can now plausibly say is that, ideally, democracy ought to ensure that government is constituted and pursued in a way that is tied to what common valuations support. Those valuations will always vary a little between different societies, and may vary a good deal across wider cultural divides. In any society they will tend to support certain general arrangements and constraints of the kind often registered in a constitution. While they provide the currency in which debate on other, more concrete matters is conducted, they will not often unambiguously support a particular alternative in that domain. But still, they will certainly serve to reduce the number of alternatives that are found defensible and thinkable there. And they will usually provide a base for determining acceptable ways for government to make a decision on the alternative to be adopted. They may license the rule of a parliamentary majority, for example, or argue for referring the matter to a more or less impartial body – say, a court or tribunal or commission – that operates at arm's length from parliament.

To sum up, then, I believe that the point of democracy is not to empower anything so mythical as the will or the judgment of the public but rather to empower what I think of as common or public valuation. Such valuation offers a genuine target for government to have to track and any system that forced government to track it would surely deserve to be described as democratic.

What institutions should be put in place to ensure that government does indeed track common valuation, and only common valuation? This question takes us to other matters but my own view, for the record, is that the required institutions are of two kinds. On the one hand, electoral institutions that would force those aspiring to positions in government to provide a justification on the basis of common valuation for the policies they propose, and to defend those justifications against opponents. And

on the other, contestatory institutions that would enable individuals and groups of individuals to challenge government policies – whether in the courts or on the streets – for how well they answer to the terms of common valuation. Democracy should be two-dimensional, with the electoral dimension constraining government at the time when people are selected for office, and the contestatory dimension constraining government through the long periods when those elected to office hold and exercise power. As the price of liberty is eternal vigilance, so too is the price of enjoying government for the common good. Two-dimensional democracy takes that lesson seriously, imposing vigilance on the practice of government as well as on the process in which government is formed.

References

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