

Democracy and Its Challenges

Democracy is a set of institutions and practices that are designed to move the political process toward equal rights and influence for all citizens. The institution that most directly corresponds to this goal is the selection of policymakers by almost all adult citizens, voting as equals in elections. But as the late democratic theorist Robert Dahl taught, full-suffrage elections matter only when other conditions are present: the freedom to form and join political associations, the freedom to formulate and express political preferences, and widespread access to sources of information that are not controlled by the government. Taken together, these features define a basic version of democracy called “polyarchy.” Polyarchy is by no means an idealistic standard for a perfect democracy, but it captures the essential features shared by political systems that have been conventionally considered democracies in the West since the Second World War.

Some of the greatest threats to polyarchy today – civil war, terrorism, state failure, and economic collapse – are too obvious to discuss: polyarchy is only a distant dream where such conditions exist. More deserving of our attention are the insidious challenges to already existing polyarchies. These include the concentration of power in the executive, social and economic inequalities, polarization, and apathy. All of these challenges are products of gaps between the ideals of democracy and the minimal requirements of polyarchy. Addressing these challenges means filling those gaps.

Consider the concentration of power. Dahl’s definition of polyarchy calls for leaders to be elected and to be held accountable at the next election. These practices encourage, but do not ensure, that the government will be responsive to the public between elections and responsive to electoral minorities. It is possible, therefore, that an elected leader could act like a dictator between elections or ignore the rights of the opposition, giving rise to Tocqueville’s tyranny of the majority. For this reason, many countries supplement polyarchy with liberal institutions: legislative and judicial checks on the executive, and constitutional guarantees for the civil and political rights of majorities and minorities alike.

Social and economic inequalities challenge democracy in both policymaking and policy implementation. To the degree that the wealthy and well-connected have disproportionate power over the media, the executive, the legislature, and the courts, citizens do not have equal influence over policy. To the degree that the privileged receive preferential treatment and the marginalized suffer from discrimination by the police, the courts, and bureaucrats, citizens do not have equal rights. This is the justification for the egalitarian principle of using the state to provide all citizens with enough security, health, and education to be able to participate as full and equal citizens.

Polarization and apathy are unhealthy extremes on the same dimension. In a healthy democracy, most citizens care enough about politics to participate but not so much that they demonize those who disagree with them. They see the stakes as low enough that they can afford to lose today and hope to win in the future. Too often, however, politicians simplify and exaggerate what is at stake, making compromise difficult. And sometimes corruption encourages apathy: if all politicians are corrupt, voting makes no difference. Clearly political leaders must lead responsibly, not oversimplifying, not demonizing, and behaving honestly. It also helps if there are channels for participation other than elections, especially at the local level, where concrete policies are less vulnerable to ideological distortion.

The remedy for these challenges to democracy is more democracy: more liberal, more egalitarian, more deliberative, and more participatory.