

DEMOCRACY



Democracy means rule by the people. In contrast to monarchies (rule by a king), oligarchies (rule by a small elite), or dictatorships, democracies are supposed to be societies where the people rule themselves. But it's not like everyone in a country could all meet up to decide on, enact, and enforce laws. The politicians, bureaucrats, and cops who make up the state are never the entirety of "the people." So how could we tell whether a political system that calls itself democratic is truly one in which the people rule?

Confusingly, almost every country tells their subjects that their particular form of governance is what democracy really looks like. In the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, they're taught that real democracy means the leadership of a party ruling in the interests of Korean workers, peasants, and intellectuals . . . the precise way the North Korean government describes itself. In Western capitalist countries, we're told that real democracy means multi-party elections alongside "free markets": that is, the political system of Western capitalist nations. How could these countries not be democratic when everyone has the right to vote for politicians every four years?

A system where everyone has the right to vote certainly seems more democratic than one in which entire groups cannot. Though social movements have forced the United States government to expand voting rights to the majority of the population, originally, only property-owning, Anglo-American Protestant men could vote. During the Revolutionary War, the white men for whom the "birthplace

of democracy” was created held hundreds of thousands of people as captives enslaved for forced labor. One of the complaints the authors of the Declaration of Independence lodged against the British crown was that the empire wasn’t supportive enough of ethnic cleansing against Indigenous peoples they described as “merciless Indian Savages.”¹ The only way to describe the early United States as a system in which “the people” ruled is to discount the humanity of millions.

American democracy remained explicitly antidemocratic for centuries. The Civil War was followed by a brief period called Radical Reconstruction when formerly-enslaved Black workers had some political and economic power. But from the 1870s, Jim Crow laws created an enduring system of white supremacy and Black disenfranchisement in the former Confederacy. The Second Reconstruction of the 1950s and 1960s involved struggles to break this white minority rule.

¹“Declaration of Independence: A Transcription.” America’s Founding Documents, U.S. National Archives and Records Administration, last modified August 27, 2024, <https://www.archives.gov/founding-docs/declaration-transcript>.

Removing racist restrictions on voting rights is reasonably seen as another advance for democracy. But though the contemporary United States might be more democratic, that doesn't answer the question of whether it is democratic. So long as you're a US citizen who isn't a felon, you can probably vote in local, state, and federal elections. The problem is proving that voting rights and democratic popular rule are the same thing. It's not like civil rights activists fought and died for voting rights because they thought pulling ballot box levers looked especially fun or because they had any illusions about the historic rottenness of the American political system. People fought for voting rights as an instrumental goal, a stepping stone to being able to effect necessary changes.

But did oppressed communities actually win that power when the electoral franchise was expanded? A widely-cited 2014 study found that "economic elites and organized groups representing business interests have substantial independent impacts on U.S. government policy, while

mass-based interest groups and average citizens have little or no independent influence.”² In the half century since the passage of the Voting Rights Act, communities of color have seen escalating assaults from state violence, mass incarceration, and gentrification. Since nobody would vote to be attacked by the police or forced from their home, this raises a troubling question: did electoral enfranchisement really lead to popular rule?

We’re told that the most important thing you can do as a citizen is vote for president. This is despite the fact that any politically aware person knows that, thanks to the Electoral College, each presidential race is decided by only a handful of swing states. Your individual vote only “matters” insofar as it substantially affects the outcome of the election. For that to happen, you’d have to be the one swing vote to decide the swing state that decides the winner of the Electoral College.

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² Gilens, Martin, and Benjamin I. Page. “Testing Theories of American Politics: Elites, Interest Groups, and Average Citizens.” *Perspectives on Politics* 12, no. 3 (2014): 265. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1537592714001595>.

Barring this monumentally unlikely occurrence, your vote is inconsequential, since the result is no different than it would be if you had just stayed home. In fact, given the average distance to a polling place and average rate of road fatalities, you're more likely to die driving to vote than you are to cast a meaningful ballot.

Using voting rights to identify the United States as an authentic democracy implies that the people are ruling by doing an action that's literally, on the individual scale, meaningless. There's no rational reason to believe that your vote is going to be the deciding vote in a presidential contest. So why are we told that exercising our right to vote is the essence of democracy?

Elections don't just produce information about voters' political preferences. They also produce legitimacy. They help convince voters that their political system is legitimate, since they've been granted the opportunity to decide who will rule for the next few years.

Voters understand that in a presidential race, they will collectively be the ones to choose who will be the next legitimate commander-in-chief of the world's largest nuclear arsenal, head honcho of the Department of Homeland Security and the Federal Bureau of Prisons, CEO of international CIA torture sites and a militarized border and foreign military bases in a numerical majority of countries. I mean hey—that's the job description!

It should go without saying that any of those institutions are pretty profoundly, in their essence, anti-popular rule. Even the adult, non-felon citizens who get to vote in the United States were never really consulted as to whether they wanted them or not. Billions of people exploited by US neocolonialism in peripheral nations don't get a say in US policies at all. This creates a paradox: "democratic" elections never offer us the chance to reject the most violent, authoritarian, anti-democratic aspects of our "democratic" system. That's why many of the anarchists, abolitionists, and revolutionaries fighting for a non-hierarchical, non-exploitative society have refused to participate in elections at all—not because the outcome of elections doesn't matter, but because no result a racist, capitalist system might offer us deserves our support.

Those raised in capitalist representative democracies are trained to think of democracy as certain rules, regulations, or parliamentary procedures. We have long debates as to whether specific processes like gerrymandering, filibusters, supermajorities, or party caucuses are more or less democratic. Whatever your position, this discourse ignores the wide range of everyday institutions in which normal people have virtually no say regardless, from workplaces to schools to patriarchal households paying rent to absentee landlords. It ignores the fact that, no matter how a law gets passed, it will be an armed agent of the state called a police officer or soldier who will enforce it at gunpoint. And it ignores the profound authoritarianism of US imperialism around the world.

Ironically, organizing to fight back against the violence of the “democratic” state often involves practicing direct democracy: collective decision-making without elected representatives as intermediaries. After all, we aren’t likely to spend countless unpaid hours on a grassroots campaign or risk injury and arrest at a rebellious demonstration if we don’t feel like we have a say in how things go. Occupy Wall Street encampments were city-wide experiments in direct democracy.

Authoritarian party rule was replaced by the “democratization of democracy” in self-governed Indigenous Zapatista communities. David Graeber wrote that the alter-globalization movement they inspired was “about creating new forms of democracy” as well.³

Actively deciding on what you and your neighbors or comrades should do is a form of self-rule far more profound than anything offered by “democratic” capitalist states. “Anarchists believe in direct democracy by the people as the only form of freedom and self-rule,” writes Lorenzo Kom’boa Ervin.⁴ Many envision a federation of directly-democratic councils with recallable delegates as a model for coordinating across a non-oppressive, post-capitalist society. That’s not to say everything labeled “direct democracy” produces effective, participatory decision-making. Maybe you’ve had to sit through a meeting that scrupulously followed “democratic” procedures but proved monumentally unproductive. J. Sakai pointed out that the trappings of democratic decision-making can hobble actual revolutionary organizing, especially since we base our conceptions of democratic procedure on capitalist and reactionary institutions.

³ David Graeber, *Direct Action: An Ethnography* (AK Press, 2009), 11.

⁴ Lorenzo Kom’boa Ervin, *Anarchism and the Black Revolution* (Pluto Press, 2021), 37.

“Sometimes doing away with ‘democracy,’” he points out, “can be even more democratic in real terms.”⁵

To make sense of that “democracy in real terms,” we might reflect on the word democracy itself. Words like monarchy, oligarchy, patriarchy, and hierarchy all descend from the Greek word archon, meaning legitimate ruler. In a monarchy, a single person rules; under patriarchy, men rule. Demos meant The People, the poor masses who were excluded from the political system and who therefore couldn’t be legitimate rulers. We speak of democracy, not demoarchy, because though the dispossessed may not be able to wield authoritative power, we can organize to exercise kratos—force.

Democracy, in this sense, is resistance: not the Speaker’s gavel but the arms of the poor. This suggests that the youth expropriating goods at a militant protest or the activists scheming up a city-stopping disruption are more authentically democratic than the politicians engineering new legislation to jail them.

When we as oppressed, exploited, or excluded people decide to walk out of an abusive job alongside our coworkers, to join in shouting down a duplicitous politician, to rush the police line together, we are enacting the democratic tradition in its oldest sense. The “democracy in real terms” that voting procedures and constitutional amendments try to approximate is nothing more than enacting our agency as antagonists of the forces that would oppress and destroy us.

Real democracy might mean repeating the words of the Argentinian unemployed workers’ movement of the early 2000s: “Our dreams don’t fit in their ballot boxes.”



The Lexicon series aims to convert words into politically helpful tools—for those already engaged in a politics from below as well as the newly approaching—by offering definitional understandings of commonly used keywords.

Whatever we hear from all quarters we are very apt to believe, whether it requires some effort to believe, whether it is true or not, especially if it requires some effort to examine it. Of all the modern delusions, the ballot has certainly been the greatest. Yet most of the people believe in it.

**—Lucy Parsons, *The Ballot Humbug*,
1905**

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