

## Democracy and democracies: between theory and facts

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*Democracia e democracias:  
entre teoria e fatos*

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**Abstract:** There have been many theories on democracy. In fact, while one speaks of “democratic theory” as if there is some kind of consensus (even if unspoken), once we start looking at different authors, we realize that there are almost as many theories of democracy as there are authors or perspectives; so, any claim of universality vis-à-vis “democratic theory” becomes compromised. In this paper I will have as my interlocutors Robert Dahl, Benjamin Barber, Robert Goodin and David Plotke. My paper has three moments: First, I will start by providing a general framework for democratic analysis based on three constitutive concepts of representation, participation and deliberation. This is the “structural moment”. Second, supported by Dahl’s five criteria of democracy and Barber’s concept of “strong democracy” I will argue that democracies tend to adopt these virtues but not with the same intensity. This is the “content moment”. In introducing these authors I will look for the implications, in terms of (active) virtues, of having the structure defined in terms of representation, participation and/or deliberation. Finally, I will look for better ways of doing democracy and redefining democracy for the future. By having “participatory budgeting” experiments as paradigm I will argue that this can be taken as an example that can be applied in very different (democratic) realities and which can, as a matter of fact, increase or transform the levels of democracy in these societies.

**Keywords:** Democracy. Representation. Participation. Deliberation. Participatory budgeting.

**Resumo:** Existem muitas teorias sobre democracia. Na verdade, enquanto se fala de “teoria democrática” como se existisse um consenso acerca do que esta

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poderia significar, a partir do momento em que nos debruçamos sobre diferentes autores, apercebemo-nos de que há tantas teorias quanto há perspectivas sobre o tema. Neste artigo tenho como interlocutores Robert Dahl, Benjamin Barber, Robert Goodin e David Plotke. O artigo tem três momentos. No primeiro, desenho o contexto geral para uma reflexão crítica sobre democracia, partindo da análise dos seus conceitos constitutivos, nomeadamente, os conceitos de representação, participação e deliberação. Este é o momento “estrutural”. De seguida, apoiando-me nos critérios ou virtudes de Dahl e no conceito de “democracia forte” de Barber, defendo que a instanciação dos vários modelos democráticos depende da importância que se confere a cada um dos critérios. Este é o momento de conteúdo. Dialogando com estes autores procuro identificar as implicações dos modelos representativo, participativo e deliberativo. Por último, procuro uma forma de redefinição da democracia mais positiva para o futuro, tendo o orçamento participativo como prática exemplar a seguir.

**Palavras-chave:** Democracia. Representação. Participação. Deliberação. Orçamento participativo.

## **I The structural moment – representation, participation and deliberation**

The language of democracy only became widely spread after World War II. Due to the transformation of political and social landscape across the world, a form of government that was traditionally seen as “exception(al)” and not necessarily good – remember that for Aristotle “democracy” was a degeneration of a good form of government – is progressively adopted and recognized as the *norm* across the globe. From Europe to South America, Asia and North America, democracy becomes the golden rule that all, or almost all, want to have part in. Of course, while “democracy” spread as general tendency and political/ social norm, it became visible that democracy assumed a variety of meanings and forms of instantiation – from authoritarian or tyrannical states, we now have “democratic” states that need to deal with their own past and history; from communist or monarchical states, we now have “democratic” states that need to assimilate and transform their origins, change or adapt their principles and adjust to a new reality. This led to very different modes of conceiving and implementing democracy, depending on the set of principles each state value the most. For instance, some states underline the importance of representative mechanisms in their form of governance, while others stress the participation factor as the most determinant and distinctive feature of their democracy. Still, others (at least theoretically speaking) claim that

democracy has and/ or should have as its core a set of deliberative practices that justify, through a rational process, the democratic way of living.

Robert Dahl, Benjamin Barber, Robert Goodin and David Plotke have different ways of treating democracy; each of them stresses a particular feature of democracy and all present sharp and valid critics to it. For the purpose of this presentation, from Dahl I want to retain the analytical distinction between five important democratic factors, namely, effective participation, equality (in voting), enlightened understanding, agenda control and inclusion (of adults). These five factors have been recently worked by David Plotke, who analyses the relationship between these democratic virtues. From Goodin, I want to retain the emphasis and recognized importance he acknowledges to deliberation. From Barber I want to retain his strong conceptualization of democracy. Contrary to Plotke who accepts that there are as many democracies as forms of instantiation *tout court*, I want to argue that there are some models that are preferable to others. It is not only a matter of acknowledging that each society/state gives priority to different values or to a different order of values; I want to make a normative claim and argue that it is worth to stress some values in detriment of others, namely, the value of participation in its particular relationship with deliberative processes within a structural set of representative mechanisms.

### 1 Dahl's five criteria and Plotke's revision

Robert Dahl in *Democracy and its Critics* starts by acknowledging three types of attitudes vis-à-vis “democracy”: first, those who reject democracy *tout court*, because they see it as a bad thing; second, those who like the idea of democracy but see it as impossible to achieve, and therefore falling within the category of “utopia”; third, those who are sympathetic to democracy and wish to fight for it, through a critical process and analysis. Dahl himself, as well as Plotke, falls under this last third attitude. Regardless of the difficulties and apparently impossible challenges to overcome that many democracies present to us, it is still worth fighting for. Either by stressing the dimension of political institutions and practices, or by stressing the dimension of rights, or still by stressing the democratic dynamic in itself as being a “process of making collective and binding decisions” (DAHL, 1971, p. 5), this democratic worth derives from a set of characteristics, ideally intrinsic to a (good or better) democracy.

Indeed, both Dahl and Plotke seem to have a common approach to democracy, namely, of treating it as a process. As such, this process requires

on the one hand, the analytical distinction between different stages; on the other hand, the translation of normative claims into practical and actual conditions. So, what are the criteria for a democratic process?

According to Dahl, these are: 1. effective participation; 2. voting equality at the decisive stage; 3. enlightenment understanding; 4. control of the agenda and 5. inclusion. We are facing a democratic process when these five criteria are met. However, just by reflecting on the meaning and implications of each criterion, it soon becomes clear that meeting these criteria is not as easy as it may initially appear. On the one hand, because there is a problem of defining each concept. When is participation *effective*? What is participation? Is it political participation or it is extended to other dimensions? What about voting equality, does each vote actually counts for one and not more than one? Regarding enlightenment understanding, it is common sense to acknowledge that the more information one has on a subject matter, the best fit s/he is to deliberate and decide upon it – at least in principle. But how much information is enough? On control of the agenda, it is not so linear to think that actually everyone who participates gives an input on the formulation of the agenda, because there are many circumstantial factors that limit and constitute that decision-making process. Finally, when we think of inclusion, and Dahl for instance solves this problem by reducing it to the inclusion of adults in their good exercise of their mental faculties, inclusion is a contested notion that deals with many uncomfortable aspects of democracies, namely, how to articulate several scales and dimensions of society and make each scale actually included and represented in the democratic processes. Plotke in “Democratic Virtues” (2010) acknowledges a very important factor that apparently escaped Dahl’s inquisition.

Plotke shows that in dealing with democracy and democratic processes one cannot think of these five criteria as relatively independent from each other; quite the contrary, the analysis of democracies require that one looks at the relations between these criteria and “virtues”, and only after looking at this can one be in a better position to understand the depth of democracy as well as the inescapable choice of having to commit oneself to one or two principles in detriment of others. There is a range of relations, and there is no single line between democratic virtues: all good things don’t go easily together. For instance, if we want to maximize participation, we can easily imagine how this will have a positive reflection on agenda control; at the same time this will probably require to compromise ourselves with the level of inclusion or equality. While Plotke underlines the vital importance

of participation in contemporary democracies, he views it as a component of the process, but one which must be in relation with other virtues. Participatory democracy is not enough in itself.

## 2 Goodin's insight on deliberation

Robert Goodin takes on the importance of deliberation for contemporary democracies, recovering many aspects from the Ancients which have been dismissed by the mainstream current of political thinkers, from Rawls onwards. Indeed, while one may acknowledge the importance and crucial role of participation for the well-being of a democratic society, it is not necessary to be (come) a ferocious advocate of deliberative democracy to recognize the importance of deliberation in itself, and the virtues that can help promoting in a democratic context. For the purpose of this paper, I want to stress out that what I am doing is sharing my reading of Goodin, although the argument is already the result of a critical reflection on it. Under this light, I want to clarify why I think deliberation matters and what contributions can it give for the growth of democratic life.

Why does deliberation matter? First of all, Goodin along other theorists see deliberation both as an internal and external process, of weighing reasons for and against a course of action, which, in Kantian terms, also corresponds to the maxim of “enlarged mentality”, or being capable to put oneself in the place of others. It is an *internal process*, because it relies in the ability to confront different positions with our own, and be sufficiently open minded to accept the possibility of changing positions along the process. It is an *external process*, because it also points to a dialogical relationship between the subject and the “others”, where different positions are compared, evaluated and discussed about, always with the goal of identifying the best position, i.e., with the best reasons. Under this light, deliberation emerges in a triptych way: as an *attitude* (of openness), as a *process* (of comparison of different rationales) and as a *result* (the position that wins the confrontation between arguments). This triptych nature of deliberation makes of it an interesting ideal to hold in democratic theory, not only because it combines the more individualistic dimension of the subject with the process of collective decision-making in larger groups, but also because it represents a pertinent tool for democratic institutions to develop and improve themselves, according to the capacity to revise and correct their own experiences, success and/or limitations. When talking of democracy/ies, generally one tends to link it to the concept of representation – crucial

concept that has been developed more pertinently since Hobbes, with direct repercussion in how we conceive western form of governments. However, when the category of participation is underlined – for instance, by constitutional design where participation seems to play a key role in the overall democratic structure of society – even then, one tends to think of participation as *mediated* by representation. This becomes clear once we acknowledge that our participation is generally framed by representative mechanisms; therefore, our participation remains to a certain extent “contained” or limited to the options offered by these mechanisms. In doing so, consciously or unconsciously, we are limiting our own conceptualization of democracy, because one tends to exclude a determinant component of politics, essential to the practice and exercise of citizenship itself, which is the component of judgment and deliberation.

So, while there are as many concepts of democracy as forms of instantiation, what makes of a democracy a better democracy? Why should a model be preferred to others?

## II Between minimal standards and maximum ones – what makes a strong(er) democracy?

Political theorists who are sympathetic of deliberative democracy tend to be advocates of it in theory, although once we move to a more practical realm, of dealing with institutional arrangements, political conflicts or others, they see their strength of argumentation compromised. This happens because when thinking of deliberation in practice, one is generally thinking of small(er) groups of people who meet to discuss certain points of the political agenda. As soon as the group starts growing, deliberation becomes harder, which derives from the limitations of its own process: *first*, from the fact that in order to deliberate one needs to know about the issues on the table (what Dahl would call “enlightened understanding”); *second*, this acquisition of knowledge implies time; *third*, time to think and debate about the *res public* implies that one is sufficiently autonomous (both mentally *and* economically speaking) to engage in these kind of activities.

Nevertheless, the principle of deliberation becomes valid and it is a foundational virtue of a democratic regime. In fact, although it is highly utopian to think that we can one day live in a deliberative democracy, democracies which incorporate deliberative processes in their structural way of functioning have a higher probability of success. Participatory budgeting is one example of a deliberative process that relies on strong

civic participation, within already existing representative mechanisms. I want to argue that, along the lines of Barber's thought, a democracy is stronger if it combines the representative, participatory and deliberative dimensions, and finds the right balance between them.

### 1 Barber's Contribution

Barber's characterization of several types of democracy is supported by a particular interest about the relationship between the individual and the community. According to his approach, liberal democracy, for instance, is "thin" democracy because its values are "prudential" and "thus provisional, optional, and conditional – means to exclusively individualistic and private ends. From this precarious foundation, no firm theory of citizenship, participation, public goods, or civic virtue can be expected to arise." (BARBER, 2003, p.4)

Given that a liberal democracy is more concerned with the individual than the community, it first defends individual rights, and only after community ones. Within the liberal model of democracy, three tendencies can be identified according to Barber: the anarchist, the realist and the minimalist. A thin democracy is "instrumental, representative, [...] in its three dispositions" (BARBER, 2003, p.117).

It is not my purpose to present an exhaustive account of these nuances, however, I wanted to acknowledge their existence and underline the common factor to all, namely, that all of these, by preferring individual rights to community ones, end by promoting conflict (between individual liberties, for instance) and express a lack of social cohesion which is ultimately necessary for the development and successful sustenance of a democratic society. Also, by emphasizing individual rights and liberties the value of participation is neglected, and citizenship emerges as an artificial category that plays a mere and limitative political role with little substance from the perspective of (moral) values. By focusing only on legalism and adopting a positivist attitude *vis-à-vis* sovereignty and power, social and political dynamics are reduced to a matter of behavior control along with identification of strategies for balance between self-interests. The "common good" as such never really emerges, and if it does it is only in a travesty way, i.e., as giving public appearance to what actually are private interests.

According to Barber's reading of "thin" democracy, a model like this can never really accomplish the democratic goals and ideals that the concept

of democracy just by itself inspires. Quite the contrary, if one is inspired and committed to the democratic ideals of equality, justice and freedom, then one must introduce the variable of community in the democratic discourse. Democracy cannot mean only *political* democracy; it must also mean *social* and *economical* democracy. Under this light, the introduction of the community in the discourse marks a shift of paradigm, insofar society can no longer be defined from a egotistic and selfish point of view; quite the contrary, society must be redefined as encounter of individuals where the well being of all, or “common good”, must be regulative (or limitative) of individual actions and liberties. The perspective is inverted, or at least complemented by the recognition of community’s importance to individuals’ flourishing, which in its turn will be reflected in the flourishing of the community as well.

Under the light brought by a reference to Barber’s work, it becomes clear that there are many ways of defining democracy, but a democracy becomes better and/or stronger (compared to others) if it doesn’t remain within a procedural level only – of reducing ‘democracies’ to the existence of elections in regular times for instance. By looking at the *relationship* between individuals and community, Barber is also showing that a strong model of democracy can only emerge when the institutional setting recognizes and is transformed in order to account for this same relationship – it is not enough to remain at the level of individual rights *tout court*, because one needs to account for the *link* between individuals.

So, what is a strong democracy? According to Barber – a reading that I share – “(strong democracy) reuses on the idea of a self-governing community of citizens who are united less by homogeneous interests than by civic education and who are made capable of common purpose and mutual action by virtue of their civic attitudes and participatory institutions rather than their altruism or their good nature.” (BARBER, 2003, p. 117). A democracy is as stronger as the level (and quality) of the participation and engagement of its citizens.

Again, I cannot fully develop at this point the implications of such emphasis on participation, as condition for a strong(er) democracy. However, I want to stress out the idea that the strength of a democracy should be measured through the levels of participation, civic engagement, but also institutional support and other measures that assure the correct implementation and practice of these rights, with the duties they entail. *Also*, a strong(er) democracy cannot remain at the political level only; it

must integrate the social, cultural, but also economical variables in order to articulate a fuller concept of community and citizenship. The participatory budgeting is a good example of this articulation of what Barber imagined as strong(er) democracy. This is the topic of our next section.

### III Democracy here and now – looking at participatory budgeting

John Stuart Mill used to say that healthy democracies need active citizens, but governments prefer passive citizens. John Dewey, on the other hand, said that the ills of democracy can only be cured with more, not less, democracy. Participatory budgeting meets the requirements, or expectations, of both philosophers, as well as the requirements defined by Barber for a “stronger” democracy. This is one of the reasons why participatory budgeting is so important to redefine the democratic paradigm. So, what is exactly participatory budgeting?

#### 1 What is participatory budgeting

Participatory budgeting is an experiment that directly addresses the concerns raised by Mill, Dewey and Barber. On the one hand, it brings a continuity between representative democracy as we know it, and the ideal of participation that is crucial to “stronger” conceptualizations of democracy. On the other hand, it creates a space where participation can happen, within a model of governance that mainly relies in representative mechanisms, and which contradicts the “apathy” that so many commentators accuse individuals of suffering from. Participatory budgeting articulates the individual *and* the community, representing an actual encounter and dialog of political, social and economic components of people’s lives.

Participatory budgeting has many layers that should be pointed out: *first*, it involves local people in the process of decision-making regarding the spending as well as the definition of priorities for a defined public budget. Here we see that Dahl’s control of the agenda is at play, along with effective participation. *Second*, this process varies from place to place according to the specificities of each locality, i.e., participatory budgeting is a process that adjusts according to local needs as well as human, social and political landscape. *Third*, participatory budgeting calls for enlightenment understanding, insofar participants are expected to get acquainted at a deeper level with the issues that they are reflecting upon. This development of knowledge is translated in two ways: first, in the process of discussion

that is reflective and deliberative (as public space for judgment); second, as developing in a result of deliberation, accepted by all as legitimate and valid. *Fourth*, participatory budgeting, after the stages of diagnosis, deliberation and process of decision-making itself, also implies a moment of accountability, making sure that decisions are correctly implemented.

## 2 Looking at participatory budgeting evolution

Porto Alegre was the first city applying the participatory budgeting experiment, in 1989/90. Resulting from a combination of factors, namely, the strong associative life in the city along with the political will of making a change embodied in the Worker's Party, Porto Alegre has now over 20 years of experience. Two decades of trial and error, correction and enhancement of participatory practices, combined with representative mechanisms of democracy. Today, out of the 5,571 municipalities in Brazil, more than 140 (about 2.5 percent) have adopted participatory budgeting. One could make the remark: proportionally speaking, it is still a low number, why didn't participatory budgeting spread even more? Before answering this question, we must account for the adjustment of participatory budgeting initiative to different cities and countries.

### *a) Different cities, different models*

There are several ways of applying the principles of participatory budgeting: different cities call for different models. However, since its inception one observed a "contamination" of participatory budgeting across the world – from Brazil, to several countries in Latin America, Europe and Africa. This expansion was and is the proof that participatory budgeting is important to democracy, not only for its innovative character, but also because it can enhance democratic practices and transform the democratic paradigm as a whole: by redefining the role of citizenship; of participation, of representation and deliberation; by giving a new perspective upon those who act, who speak, who claim, who represent and who are represented. By introducing new premises in the democratic equation, which now lives under a global spell and global watch. It is also interesting to notice that, although Benjamin Barber wrote *Strong Democracy* in 1984, i.e., 5/6 years before the participatory budgeting appeared in Porto Alegre, participatory budgeting meets Barber's criteria for participatory institutions to achieve a stronger model of democracy. For Barber these participatory institutions

had to meet the following criteria: *first*, they had to be realistic and workable; *second*, they had to be compatible with the primary representative institutions of large-scale societies; *third*, they had to address problems of society such as prejudice, uniformity, intolerance; *fourth*, they had to deal with obstacles from Modernity, which may limit participation, such as technology, scale, and parochialism; *fifth*, they had to express special claims of strong democracy as a theory of talk, judgment, and public seeing.

Although participatory budgeting meets these criteria to a large extent, it is also necessary to keep a realistic approach and not fall under the utopian spell of thinking that participatory budgeting is the cure for all of democracies evils. The success of participatory budgeting experiments across the world relies in several coordinates: first, the structural/Constitutional apparatus that supports participatory budgeting as such, i.e., the role attributed to participation and civic engagement in each country's constitution; second, the history and strength of associative life in the city; third, the political will to implement such measure; fourth, the kind of citizenship that underlines the city and the nation, among others.

Apart from these structural aspects that condition the success and/or longevity of participatory budgeting in a particular local, there is still a long way to go in order to extract all the potential benefits of this experiment and process. Some measures pass by a revision of the participatory budgeting status, i.e., in order to develop its full potential it would be important to elevate participatory budgeting to a “democratic institution”, protecting it from the volatility of political wills that are in power. Other measures pass by strengthening the link between participatory activities and education. Some others will imply a revision of the actual modes of governance, since participatory budgeting calls for a new dynamic between civil society, political class and government as such.

To conclude, participatory budgeting is a paradigmatic example that shows at play different democratic dimensions, condensing different approaches in a singular experience. Participatory budgeting can also be a good starting-point to re-conceptualize the structural concepts upon which democracy and democracies are based – representation, participation, deliberation – as well as the content concepts / virtues such as equality, freedom (of expression and association) and fairness.

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Artigo recebido em 13 de abril de 2013 e aprovado em 28 de abril de 2013.