

The Consent of the Governed: Dialogue as the Foundation of Stable Democracy

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Abstract:

This study explores the tension between elite knowledge and public sentiment as mutually opposing forces within democratic government. Technocratic elites may offer expertise and efficiency, yet their remoteness from lived experience may bring alienation and lack of legitimacy. On the other hand, unruly populism fueled by sentiment and grievance may undermine institutions and run the risk of descending into instability or despotism. Citing philosophers such as Plato, Burke, and Paine, among others, and recent instances such as Brexit, the riot on Capitol Hill, and China's Zero-COVID strategy, this article contends that democracy cannot prosper by favoring either intellectual elites or emotive crowds exclusively. Instead, resilient democratic institutions would need to engage dialogue, empathy, and moral accountability such that expertise is held responsible and public feeling is channelled constructively. In positing models from Scandinavia and New Zealand, this study suggests that democracy survives less through ascendancy than through recurring dialogue that sustains credibility and reciprocal trust among rulers and ruled.

Keywords: Democracy, Populism, Elites, Dialogue, Political Legitimacy, Civic Trust

Introduction

Is society even capable of thriving and improving by simply relying upon its experts? Can society solely rely upon its people's enthusiasm and resolve? These are the worries behind legitimacy concerns of several democracies these days. Rather than some sort of "democratic crisis of the world," what is occurring is a communal problem: democratic institutions becoming illegitimate where ruling elites refuse to acquiesce to the people's dictate, and populist movements

undermine by rejecting the exercise of reason in politics. Plato argued that the common people were prone to easily being led by desire and sentiment, so that only philosopher-kings trained in rationality and truth should rule (*The Republic*). Nevertheless, Edmund Burke, the contemporary founder of conservatism, warned in *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790) that radical intellectual elites disconnected from customary values and ground-level wisdom would destabilize societies. Burke trusted people's intuitions for stability more than abstraction.

Thomas Paine trusted people's abilities for self-control through rationality and civic responsibility. These contradictory views—the elitist, populist, and conservative—the world still has immense echoes for today's polarization democracies.

Both educated intelligentsia and general citizenry bring needed strengths to democracy but are each dangerous when unchecked. It is only secure, fair democracy that is based on institutions that permit perpetual interaction between experts and laymen. Absent shared trust and collective responsibility, the tendency is for democracies either to slip toward technocratic exclusivity or to dissolve under mob rule.

The Problem with Isolated Elites

While elite rule can import talent and vision, it can quickly fail when detached from the simple sense of human feeling. Plato's philosopher-kings, as great as they were, were schooled in science and rationality but also in morals and the "Form of the Good"—a sense that knowledge alone, detached from morals, is dangerous (Plato, trans. 2007). Still, Plato's assumption is that most humans are too passionate to rule, affirming a ruler-ruled dichotomy that, if unequal, is opposite of democracy. Shakespeare's Brutus, from Julius Caesar, is an instance of this danger. He participates in the murder not out of malice, but out of the belief that Caesar's ambition would undermine the Republic. His mistake is not motives, but naivete concerning his politics. Brutus under-estimates the strength of the emotions and over-estimates the strength of reasoning. While defending his rational for becoming involved in the assassination of Caesar, he is not successful and is set upon by the mob. This story warns that even educated politicians of good motives can under-estimate the sense of morals and emotions of the crowds (Greenblatt, 2004). Today, the management of the Brexit referendum by David Cameron is illustrative of the same detachment. While presented as part of democratic gear, the referendum had been presented by the class of the elite as means of resolving party splits, as an alternative rather than for responding to the people's demands. Cameron assumed that the people would vote to remain because of economic sense. He, however, did not consider the people's anger concerning issues of national sovereignty, inequality, as well as those of identity, and hence they made an unexpected choice that he could neither stop nor anticipate (Shipman, 2017). Instead of being an outpouring of popular power emerging victorious over the leadership of the elite, Brexit illustrated the way in which elite mistakes can cultivate vengeful retribution.

More broadly, Wolfgang Streeck is critical of transnation-

al technocratic regulation, notably of economic policy, wherein unrepresented institutions like the EU or IMF command over democratic national processes (Streeck, 2016). Critics quote Streeck out of context if they assert he is opposed to expertise per se—his is a protest of elite insulation. As shown by Frenkel (2025) and Pilet et al. (2024), people trust experts but do not feel they have any influence over them. Their exclusion breeds cynicism, protest, and instability.

A democracy in which experts rule by fiat is not very democratic at all—it is managerialism under a different name. Even good management must be accountable, empathetic, and responsive to the people it serves.

The Risks of Unstructured Popular Rule

Whereas elite withdrawal is risky, so is a spontaneous emotional response by the public. Plato warned in *The Republic* that if democracy is not founded upon moral order, it is overtaken by appetite and degenerates into tyranny. It is more than theory, history attests. Where public outrage or fear overrides reason, institutions can hardly hold on.

The rise of the Nazi Party in 1930s Germany is a case in point. While Hitler did become Chancellor, he built mass support out of emotionally compelling appeals to national humiliation. He also made appeals to economic insecurity and anti-elitist bombast (Voutyras, 2024). Traditional institutions either dismissed or ignored such popular ire. When unleashed, the emotional energy behind fascism destroyed any opposition, liberal or conservative. The conditions were strange, but the lesson applies: unchannelled popular opinion, utilized as a weapon, can desecrate democratic standards. In the United States, the Capitol riot on January 6th was an expression of populist emotion instead of deliberative governance. Incited by misinformation, conspiracy theory, and rhetoric that positioned elites as traitors, the riot was not a singular occurrence but a culmination of institutional distrust over years of weakened institutions and amplified emotional grievance (Hanagan, 2025). Many political pundits have identified this event as a turning point demonstrating America's continued slide toward fascism; it illustrated how rapidly democratic values can disintegrate when uncontrolled passion is the governing force.

Cas Mudde (2004) has described populism as an oppositionist political rationality that pits "the pure people" against an "elite that is corrupt." Populists vow to put the country back into democracy but do so without allowing for deliberation or constitutional restraints. Populists such as Trump or Bolsonaro are the voice of the people, but

they conceptualize it as binary, emotive terms. It is Democratic politics, perhaps, but one that denies the checks that democracy must have to endure. These threats of unshaped emotion occur also in literature, as is the case with Kurt Vonnegut's dystopian tale, *Harrison Bergeron*. There is an authoritarian regime that imposes radical equality by blinding the gifted. What comes out of this is tyranny and farce, rather than equality. Vonnegut's satire reveals for us how ideals of emotion, pushed to their extremes by a lack of form and sense, become despotism.

Democracy needs passion, solidarity, outrage, empathy, but only coupled with critical thinking and institutional responsibility. It is otherwise volatile and untenable.

Designing Balance in Institutions and Moral Engagement

If elitist domination and untrammelled populism both fail, how do we design institutions that draw out the strengths of each? The answer is to build democratic institutions that balance expertise and mass participation, and rational policy and moral listening.

John Locke's political theory is a place to start. In *Two Treatises of Government*, he contended that political power had to be based on the consent of the governed, not simply through a vote, but through good and legitimate institutions (Locke, 1689/1988). Consent is active. It demands that leaders hear and citizens participate substantively. Michael Sandel contends that democracy is not merely a procedure—it is a common moral conversation. His text *Justice* requires public reasoning as the basis of just policy, where citizens deliberate about values, not interests (Sandel, 2010). More recent books extend this idea. Tsakalou (2023) argues that empathy is necessary for reconciling moral understanding with engaged citizenship. Empathy allows elites to hear the concerns of the public and allows citizens to trust expert judgment. Without it, even well-designed institutions are received as illegitimate.

Scandinavian democracies provide a current-day model of open deliberation, citizen panels, and participatory budgeting practices that place individuals and professionals into fruitful interaction. While this does not eradicate conflict, it avoids exclusion. Christensen and Lægreid (2021) state that these systems generate higher trust and better governance outcomes. We also need to transcend the shallow dichotomy of “emotional public” and “rational elite.” As Burke reminds us, citizens are not merely motivated by passion; they are bearers of tradition, experience, and values. Paine contends that reason and justice are not the monopoly of the elite. Genuine democracy respects

both viewpoints. Ideal institutional design then needs to inculcate humility, rather than dominance. A listening and responsive government—one that mixes expertise with moral openness—is far more effective than one that takes sides. To see how such forces play themselves out, we can examine real systems—not as blueprints, but as lessons.

China, not a democracy, teaches us the limitations of elite technocracy. Its early COVID-19 response was hailed for decisiveness, but ultimately, the Zero-COVID policy firmed into rigidity, unresponsiveness, and insulation from people's needs. The White Paper Protests of 2022, during which citizens drew blank sheets of paper to symbolize censored speech, demonstrated how technocratic policy-making independent of the public can create dissatisfaction and subvert state legitimacy (Zhang & Li, 2023). Though good in the short term, China's technocracy failed to maintain trust. Conversely, the American system allows mass engagement but is afflicted by dysfunction driven by misinformation, hyper-partisanship, and institutional gridlock. Emotional populism thrives here, where people vote, but often feel silenced or lied to. The Capitol riot, vaccine skepticism, and declining confidence in the vote are all manifestations of deeper pathologies: not too much involvement, but too little shared understanding (Gidron & Bonikowski, 2013).

Neither the U.S. nor China offers a complete solution. Both suffer from imbalance: one from elite closure, the other from emotional fragmentation. But each confirms: democracy is not merely a matter of how decisions are made, but of how communities are built among decision-makers and those they affect. Deliberative systems like those in Denmark or New Zealand offer more promising models. These governments invest in education, civic debate forums, and transparent decision-making. They do not stifle emotions or expertise, but combine them in collaborative processes.

Conclusion

Democracy should not be warfare between experts and citizens. Democracy is a union of knowledge and experience, of authority and trust. When elites decide unaccompanied by sympathy or responsibility, they create anger. When emotion prevails, untampered by order or facts, democracy fails. However, when both forces meet, when wisdom is shared and voices are heard, democracy succeeds. Plato warned against chaos unbound. Burke warned against radicalism unattached. Paine thought that justice is among the people. Sandel shows us that democracy is a conversation that all of us must participate in. It is that conversation, rather than domination, that sustains the consent of the governed.

Only by building institutions that embrace both knowledge and feeling into public life can democracy endure.

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