

KETTERING REVIEW



A journal of ideas and activities dedicated to improving
the quality of public life in the American democracy

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Democracy for Us, Citizens

by Cristina Lafont

*There are no shortcuts
to make a political
community better
than its members,
nor can a community
achieve faster progress
by leaving their
citizens behind.*

The underlying fear, shared by citizens and academics alike, seems to be that the standard package of rights and opportunities for political decision-making that citizens enjoy in democratic societies are losing their political significance. These rights and opportunities no longer seem sufficient to secure citizens' effective capacity to both shape the policies to which they are subject and endorse them as their own. In light of the political system's lack of responsiveness to the citizenry, citizens can no longer see themselves as equal partners in a democratic project of self-government. Even if they still enjoy all their legal rights of democratic participation, these rights are losing their "fair value"—to use Rawls's expression. From this perspective, it seems clear that reducing democratic deficits would require increasing the fair value of citizens' current rights and their opportunities to effectively shape the policies to which they are subject. And, from this perspective, institutional reforms should seek to increase rather than decrease citizens' ability to participate in forms of decision-making that can effectively influence the political process such that it once again becomes *responsive* to their interests, opinions, and policy objectives.

While this may seem like the intuitive meaning behind the "democratic deficit"-based complaints of citizens, political organizations, and even academics, such concerns are not properly reflected within the main debates of democratic theory. Indeed, when one turns to normative democratic theory for guidance as to how to strengthen democratic institutions or reduce democratic deficits, one encounters sharp disagreement over what the ideal of democracy

even requires in the first place, as well as attendant disagreements over the institutional reforms that would be most helpful for bringing current societies closer to that ideal.

Proposals to reform current democratic institutions are often put forth as helpful shortcuts

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to solve difficult problems of democratic governance. But, taking shortcuts that bypass public deliberation about political decisions would further erode the fundamental commitment of the democratic ideal of self-government, namely, to ensure that all citizens can equally own and *identify with* the institutions, laws, and policies to which they are subject. In pluralist societies this is a fragile and quite burdensome commitment. Thus, there is a strong temptation to simply skip it, to take shortcuts that remove political decisions from debates in the public sphere in order to avoid problems such as overcoming disagreements, citizens' political ignorance, or poor-quality deliberation within the public sphere. However, the exclusionary and alienating effects of these proposed shortcuts would erode mutual empathy and civic solidarity among citizens, and these are resources

that democracy cannot flourish without. The democratic ideal of treating each other as free and equal depends upon being committed to convincing one another of the reasonableness of political decisions to which we are all subject, and that ideal withers if we simply coerce one another into sheer obedience. Only if citizens are in fact committed to convincing one another can they continue to identify with the institutions, laws, and policies to which they are subject and *endorse them as their own* instead of feeling alienated from them. As the current rise in populism indicates, democracies ignore this concern at their peril. In addition, the proposed "shortcuts" naïvely assume that a political community can reach better outcomes by bypassing the actual beliefs and attitudes of its own citizens. Unfortunately, there are no shortcuts to make a political community better than its members, nor can a community achieve faster progress by leaving their citizens behind. The *only road* to better political outcomes is the long, participatory road that is taken when citizens forge a collective political will by changing one another's hearts and minds. Commitment to democracy simply is the realization that there are no shortcuts. However arduous, fragile, and risky the process of mutual justification of political decisions through public deliberation may be, simply skipping it cannot get us any closer to the democratic ideal. In fact, it will move us further away.

As a citizen who grew up under a dictatorship and made it through a hard-won transition to democracy, I do not take democracy for granted. I know that democratic rights are rarely given. They must be taken. They must be fought for, they must be claimed, and they must be

reclaimed whenever their effectiveness is undermined by the powers that be. Only citizens can do that. But this requires clarity as to what is worth defending and reclaiming, the proposals that may help us, citizens, regain democratic control and those that may seem promising but that would further alienate us from the political process. Clarity about the precise features of democracy that are worth fighting for could hardly be timelier, as both optimists and skeptics agree, the fate of democracy is hanging in the balance. We, citizens, must claim and own our political institutions if democracy is to survive at all.

My central aim is to articulate and defend a participatory conception of deliberative democracy. There is a lot being written on deliberative democracy, and my project is a contribution to this literature. But what seems to be missing from the literature is an emphasis on the participatory aspect of democracy as an ideal of self-government. In my view, this is partly due

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to the lack of an appropriate conception of democratic participation—in particular, a conception that is both sensitive to deliberative concerns and suitable for mass democracies. Trying to articulate such a conception in direct conversation with alternative conceptions of democracy requires, first of all, some clarity as



to what the democratic ideal generally involves. It cannot be reduced or equated to the ideal of political equality. Political equality is necessary but not sufficient for democracy. Some form of democratic control over political decision-making by the citizenry is essential to the democratic ideal. This may seem obvious. Strangely enough, the different conceptions of democracy that I analyze all tend to focus on the ideal of political equality to the detriment of the ideal of democratic control—the ability of citizens to shape the policies they are subject to as well as to endorse them as their own.

Granted, it is not always easy to pin down the difference between political equality and democratic control in practice. However, a helpful way to evaluate the impact of conceptions of democracy and their proposals for reform upon democratic control is to assess the extent to which they require or expect citizens to *blindly defer* to the decisions of others. Note that the question here is not whether citizens are required to *defer* to the political decisions of others. All representative democracies require citizens to do that. The question is whether they are expected



to do so *blindly*. In representative democracies citizens are expected to delegate political decisions to their representatives, officials, and so on. However, to the extent that citizens maintain some capacity for control over these actors, they are not doing so *blindly*. By contrast, deference is blind if there is no such capacity for control. The difference between the two can be explained as follows. In the first case, one has *some* (defeasible) *reason* to assume that the political decisions endorsed by the agent to whom one is deferring are those that one would have endorsed if one had thought through the issue with access to the relevant information. By contrast, in the second case, one has no reason to make this assumption. This is not to deny that we may have good reasons to blindly defer to the decisions of others. It is simply to point out that whenever we do so, we are no longer engaging in a democratic project of self-government regarding those decisions. To the contrary, what we have determined is that these decisions should track *their* considered judgments instead of *ours* and that we will blindly follow them, whatever they happen to be. An expectation of *blind*

deference is quintessentially incompatible with the democratic ideal of self-government. Thus, it provides a helpful yardstick for evaluating the democratic promise of different conceptions of democracy and their proposals for institutional reform. The more such conceptions expect citizens to blindly defer to the decisions of others and thus accept the possibility of a *permanent misalignment* between the beliefs and attitudes of the citizenry and the laws and policies to which they are subject, then the less attuned these conceptions and proposals are to the democratic ideal of self-government. Taking this yardstick as a guide is helpful for identifying democratic shortcomings among conceptions of democracy that, for all their differences, nonetheless endorse various shortcuts that would bypass citizens' public deliberation of political decisions. Such a yardstick is also helpful for articulating and defending a conception of democracy without shortcuts.

The ideal that one should not be subject to the laws that one cannot see oneself as an author of is motivated by a concern to avoid being coerced into *blind obedience*. Differently put, the ideal seeks to avoid being coerced into obeying laws that one cannot endorse as at least reasonable upon reflection. Avoiding sheer coercion does not require that one literally be an author of the laws, but it does require that one can obey them based upon insights into their reasonableness. One has to be able to identify with the laws or to reflectively endorse them.

According to this idea, citizens can see themselves as participants in a democratic project of collective self-government to the extent that

they can identify with the laws and policies to which they are subject and endorse them as their own.

A permanent *disconnect* between the interests, reasons, and ideas of citizens and the actual laws and policies that they are bound to obey would alienate them from the political community. It is this notion of political *alienation* or *estrangement* that we need to explore in order to articulate an interpretation of the democratic ideal of self-government that can be action-guiding for complex societies like ours.

No matter how interconnected they may be in practice, domination and alienation are different phenomena. The concern with political domination is a concern with the distribution of political power. I am politically dominated by others to the extent that they can (arbitrarily) impose their decisions on me, whereas I am not dominated by them (at least not politically) if I have as much power to decide as they do. Undoubtedly, the concern with political equality or non-domination is essential to the democratic ideal of self-government. However, political equality does not rule out political alienation. This is because the worry about being alienated from laws that one is bound to obey but cannot reflectively endorse is a concern with the *substance* of the laws and not just with the distribution of power among decision-makers. A substantive concern with the proper *content* of the laws and policies that I am bound to obey is different from, and interpersonal concern with, the proper *relationship to others* who also participate in the decision-making process. Political equality is necessary but not sufficient for democratic self-government. Whether or not I have equal decision-making power, I can be alienated

from laws and policies that I am bound to obey but cannot identify with or endorse upon reflection. Being required to *blindly defer* to political decisions that one cannot reflectively endorse is quintessentially opposed to the ideal of self-government. Indeed, being part of a collective political project that is not responsive to my interests and ideas, my ways of thinking, and my ways of caring is likely to lead to estrangement.

In *The Constitution of Equality* Thomas Christiano provides a detailed account of the importance of avoiding political alienation or estrangement in terms of citizens' fundamental interest in "being at home in society."

This rich description of the idea of "being at home in society" indicates various senses in which citizens have an interest in avoiding alienation or estrangement from the social world that they live in. As he points out, there are two significant sources for citizens' fundamental interest to live in a social world that conforms to their judgments: citizens' sense of justice and their



capacity to experience the value of things around them. To put it in Rawlsian terms, we can say that the fundamental interest in avoiding political alienation is anchored in the two moral powers of citizens, i.e., their capacity for a sense of justice and for a conception of the good. Let's call the latter the *identitarian* and the former the *justice* aspect of political alienation.

With respect to the identitarian aspect, the importance of citizens being able to live in a world that conforms to their judgments partly has to do with their ability to develop a sense of fit and connection by seeing their values affirmed in the society they live in, their ideas recognized and reflected in their shared culture, and so on. It is important for citizens' identity and self-esteem to be able to shape the social world they live in so that they can find both meaning in what they do and value in their forms of life. However, there are limits to the possibility of shaping the social world in ways that conform to literally everyone's values and conceptions of the good. No society can affirm all values and ways of life simultaneously. Certainly, there can be no democracy without



loss in this particular sense because, in order to maintain democratic commitments to political equality, inclusion, equal standing, and so on, not all values that happen to be important to citizens or even all valuable aspects of differing forms of life can be reflected in the laws and policies to which citizens are subject. In addition, for many citizens, their social, cultural, or religious identities may be more important sources of meaning and value than their political identity. Some citizens may not be interested in forming a political identity at all.

However, it is a different situation when the laws and policies to which citizens are subject fail to conform to their judgments about *justice*. When citizens cannot endorse the laws and policies they are bound to obey as just or at least as reasonable, then they may see themselves as forced into acquiescing with injustice or directly acting against their conscience. Avoiding *this* kind of alienation is a fundamental interest of citizens independent of any relative importance that politics may have for their identity. Citizens cannot develop and maintain a sense of justice if they are being forced to blindly obey laws and policies that violate their own fundamental rights and freedoms or those of others. Thus, from the point of view of citizens, an alignment of their interests, reasons, and ideas with the laws and policies to which they are subject is an ineliminable part of *also* avoiding being forced into either wronging themselves or others. Whether or not citizens value politics or are politically passive, they have a fundamental interest in not being forced to *blindly defer* to political decisions made by others that they cannot reflectively endorse as reasonable but are nonetheless bound to obey. Undoubtedly, their

interest in avoiding political alienation is likely to be at its highest whenever the laws and policies they are bound to obey touch upon issues of basic justice or constitutional essentials—to use Rawls’s expression.

It is this *substantive* concern with the content of the laws and policies that citizens are bound to obey for which any plausible interpretation of the democratic ideal of self-government must be able to account. However, as noted, an account of the ideal of self-government that is articulated simply in terms of an ideal of political equality cannot capture the significance of democratic participation for ensuring that citizens can endorse political decisions as their own. Citizens are not simply concerned with their status as political equals. They are also equally concerned with the reasonableness of the laws and policies that they must obey. No amount of equalization of political power can compensate or substitute for citizens’ fundamental interest in preserving their sense of justice—their interest in avoiding being forced into wronging themselves or others by having to blindly obey laws that, by their own lights, violate their fundamental rights and freedoms or those of others.

Focusing on citizens’ substantive concern with ensuring that the laws and policies that they must follow do not violate their fundamental rights or those of others helps to illuminate why the democratic ideal of self-government is not just an ideal of political equality, but also an ideal of political participation in decision-making, for only a democratic political system in which citizens can *participate in shaping* the laws and policies to which they are subject can ensure that these

laws and policies conform to their judgments about justice. Only in this way can citizens develop and maintain their sense of justice instead of being forced to blindly obey laws and policies that wrong themselves or others. Democratic participation in decision-making

Democracy must be participatory, but not in the sense of requiring citizens to be involved in all political decisions.

is essential to preventing an *alienating disconnect* between the political decisions to which citizens are subject and their political *opinions* and will. A political system that requires citizens to blindly defer to political decisions made by others is quintessentially incompatible with the democratic ideal of self-government.

If this brief analysis of the democratic ideal of self-government is plausible, then we can identify a sense in which citizens’ participation in political decision-making is essential to democracy but which also does not rule out representative government. Democracy must be participatory, but *not* in the sense of requiring citizens to be involved in all political decisions. Instead, a democracy must be participatory in the sense that it has institutions in place that facilitate an ongoing alignment between the policies to which citizens are subject and the processes of political opinion- and will-formation in which they (actively or passively) participate. Citizens can *defer* a lot of political decision-making to

their representatives so long as they are not required to do so *blindly*. So long as there are effective and ongoing possibilities for citizens to shape the political process as well as to prevent and contest significant misalignments between the policies they are bound to obey and their interests, ideas, and policy objectives, then they can continue to see themselves as participants in a democratic project of self-government. Understood in this way, the democratic ideal

remains both feasible and action-guiding for representative democracies.

Cristina Lafont is Harold H. and Virginia Anderson Professor of Philosophy and Chair at Northwestern University. This essay is drawn from her recent book, Democracy Without Shortcuts: A Participatory Conception of Deliberative Democracy. It is used here with the permission of Oxford Publishing Limited through PLSclear.

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