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John Baker

Participatory Democracy

I was asked to talk to you today about the theory of participatory democracy. It is always a delicate undertaking for a theorist to talk to practitioners, and I am acutely aware that you may find what I have to say utopian, naïve, or irrelevant. But I hope that what follows may be of some use.

I will set out the theory of participatory democracy under four main headings: what is participatory democracy?, arguments for participatory democracy, problems with participatory democracy, and some responses to the problems. I will be raising questions as much as answering them, but I hope that my talk will help to put these often familiar questions into a useful framework.

What is participatory democracy?

The idea that ordinary citizens should participate more in deciding their collective affairs is as old as democracy itself. The question has always been the same: are we as citizens collectively entitled to run our own lives, or are we supposed to let others run them for us?

In modern Irish history, the most obvious form that question took until independence was the extension of the right to vote, from something like 2½% of the adult population in 1832 to the whole population over 21 after independence.
But alongside that struggle for the extension of the franchise was a struggle over the distribution of power in democratic systems. The people who are now called 'democratic elitists' argued that regardless of the outward form of government, it was best, and perhaps even inevitable, for effective power to lie in the hands of a small elite, who might well be elected but who ought basically to be free to govern without interference from the masses.

By contrast, people who are now called 'participatory democrats' argued that power should be equally shared among all citizens, so that everyone has an equal say in collective affairs. The idea of participatory democracy represents, then, one side of a debate about power, and is therefore as much about democratic principles as about particular procedures and institutions. It is about how to achieve, to the greatest degree possible, the most equal distribution of power in society.

Participatory democrats argue that this equality of power can only be achieved by the full participation of all citizens in collective decision-making. Full participation can be usefully contrasted with other degrees of participation. At the other end of the spectrum is what might be called 'pseudo-participation', where people are consulted and given the impression of involvement, but have no real influence over decisions. Then there are various degrees of 'partial participation', in which people have some influence but not a
determining voice. In a system of full participation the citizens or members of some other organisation have full control over decision-making.

How these objectives are to be achieved is an issue on which participatory democrats differ. One recent advocate of participatory democracy recommends the following components of a participatory democracy: extensive decentralisation of decision making to neighbourhood assemblies, a civic videotext political information service, an informal lay justice system, more use of referendums, electronic balloting, election to local office by lottery, universal citizen public service and workplace democracy (Barber 1984). Others place more emphasis on what are sometimes called 'intermediate associations' or 'civil society'. These include workplaces and neighbourhood associations, but also other associations such as religious groups, voluntary bodies, single-issue campaign groups, sports clubs, trade unions and groupings like your own (Hirst 1994).

There is no agreed blueprint for participatory democracy. There is more agreement on the general case for participation, and on some of the more specific principles that participatory structures would have to try to follow. Many of these more specific principles are best understood by considering what participatory democracy is trying to achieve and the problems it faces, which explains why I have organised this talk the way I have.
Arguments for participatory democracy

A large number of arguments have been put forward for participatory democracy. We can review them under 4 headings.

**Equality.** Following on from what I've just been saying, a central argument for participatory democracy has always been based on equality. Participatory democracy is seen to promote at least three types of equality. First, as I've mentioned, the key idea of participatory democracy is to promote, as far as possible, an equal distribution of power over collective decision making. Second, participatory democrats argue that only participatory democracy is a full expression of the idea that all citizens have equal status in society. Elitist forms of democracy imply that some people are more important than others. A third egalitarian argument for participatory democracy is that only participatory democracy will ensure that there is a high degree of equality in the outcomes of decision-making. It is only common sense that decisions based on unequal power are going to reflect that inequality of power by benefiting the powerful at the expense of the powerless.

**Self-determination / autonomy.** A second set of arguments is based on the idea of self-determination or autonomy. The argument is that only participatory democracy allows people to be masters of their own lives: to be fully self-determining or autonomous. Elitist forms of democracy give control over your life to others. We can think of this self-determination at both
the individual level and the level of groups or collectives. As individual citizens, we all have an interest in trying to live our lives according to our own lights, and not to have other people's ideas of what's good for us imposed on us against our will. Participatory democracy can be seen as a way of allowing us to ensure that collective decisions respect our individual freedom. As members of groups, ranging from households and clubs through workplaces, trade unions, and neighbourhoods to states and international organisations, we also have an interest in living according to our collective will and not according to plans other people make for us. Participatory democracy enables us collectively to do this, to control our life in common for ourselves.

Community. A third set of arguments is based around the idea of community. It is argued that participatory democracy is good for a sense of community and for good social relationships in a number of ways. For example, participatory democracy is supposed to strengthen identification with the community because people feel that they are accepted and that their voice is heard; they are not excluded and alienated from society. Participatory democracy is also said to promote public spirit, because being involved in democratic decision-making forces people to listen to others and take their interests and ideas into account. Full participation can't be based simply on the idea of 'what's in it for me' -- it has to be based on a responsible attitude of mutual respect and concern, of give and
take.

**Self-development.** A fourth set of arguments for participatory democracy is based on the idea of self-development. The idea here is that by fully participating in decision-making people develop themselves as human beings and as citizens. They learn new skills, extend their knowledge of the world, develop their relationships with others, and generally expand their horizons. Participatory democracy is an area of personal growth and fulfilment.

Those, then, are at least the central arguments for participatory democracy, though I daresay there are others. Obviously there are relations between them and lots more to be said, but I hope what I've said provides a good basis for what follows.

**Problems with participatory democracy**

Let's now look at some alleged problems with participatory democracy. Here I want to concentrate on problems as they might be seen from a progressive, egalitarian point of view rather than deal with the case for democratic elitism. But in some cases the difference is simply a matter of degree, so it sometimes helps to start by expressing the problem in the stronger, more reactionary terms.

Let's concentrate on four sets of problems: practicalities, the characteristics of citizens, majority rule,
and unequal resources.

**Practicalities.** The first problem is that participatory democracy seems to be simply impractical. First, it seems simply too time-consuming. Think how long it can take for even the meetings you go to at the moment to reach decisions. Now imagine that this is multiplied by a thorough democratisation of society. Would we have time for anything but meetings?

Another problem is the problem of scale. It’s fine to think of all the members of a household or small business being involved in decision-making, but how do you run Dublin or Ireland or Europe as a participatory democracy? You can't put a million people into the same room and let them all have their say.

Even if these basic problems of time and space could be solved, critics of participatory democracy argue that the whole idea is simply inefficient. What we need is for decisions to be taken, for the work of government and industry to be proceeded with. All this endless democratic involvement simply slows things down.

**Citizens.** A second set of problems with participatory democracy concerns the characteristics of citizens. In a participatory democracy, everyone is involved. But is this really a good idea? One problem is simple ignorance. Do ordinary citizens really know enough to be trusted with making important decisions? A second problem is apathy. Do citizens
really want to be involved? Do they really care about democracy, or would they rather be at home watching videos? A third problem is self-interest. The participatory democracy ideal is of public-spirited citizens who participate on the basis of mutual respect and concern and a commitment to the common good. But is democracy of any kind really like that? Isn't it more likely that people would participate mainly on the basis of self-interest and narrow sectarian values, so that participatory democracy would simply heighten social conflict?

**Majority rule.** Another set of problems is related to the idea of majority rule. Participatory democracy is supposed to be based on equality and self-determination. But the standard way of deciding things in democracies is majority rule. That's fine for the majority, but no great shakes for minorities. Surely there is no equality of power in any meaningful sense in a system in which some groups -- perhaps Travellers, lesbians and gays or disabled people -- almost always find themselves on the losing side of the vote? Nor can those groups be said to be self-determining in any meaningful sense if they are rarely successful in determining the collective view.

**Unequal resources.** Similar issues arise when we think of the problem of inequality of resources. In a participatory democracy, everyone has the right to participate in decision-making. But in our society some people are much better resourced for participation than others, whether in terms of straight financial backing or in terms of education,
knowledge, organisational skills and free time. It is hard to see how this inequality can fail to translate into an inequality of power which in turn creates unequal outcomes.

There are more alleged problems with participatory democracy, but this is probably enough for one day.

**Responses to problems**

Let me turn, then to saying something about some responses participatory democrats have made to these problems.

**Devolution.** I suppose the central response to some of the problems I've mentioned is to look at issues of devolution, decentralisation, subsidiarity, and associative democracy. Perhaps problems of scale, as well as some problems of ignorance and apathy, have to do with the fact that decisions are currently taken at levels too remote from people's everyday lives, and that we could resolve some of these problems by devolving decisions onto smaller groups. We don't necessarily have to think of this devolution in geographical terms: neighbourhoods, districts, counties and so on. It might be based on departments in a firm, or on particular schools, or on particular social groups such as Travellers or disabled people. In a so-called 'associative democracy', power is devolved as far as possible to voluntary associations which may be based on any of these characteristics.

There is a lot to be said for devolution, but it faces a
serious problem of coordination. For example, it's a nice idea for neighbourhoods to have control over their streets: speed limits, one-way flow, traffic calming, through traffic, and so on. But it's obvious that if we devolved control of streets in this way traffic in Dublin would grind to a halt. Personally, I think this might be a good antidote to the view that everything else in life should be sacrificed to traffic flow, but I think even the greenest activist has to acknowledge that we need some kind of coordination of traffic flow across various neighbourhoods. There are countless other examples of the same problem.

**Teledemocracy.** A different approach to these problems is to look at what is sometimes called ‘teledemocracy’. The idea is that we can use either existing technologies, like the postal service and the telephone, or new technologies such as the internet and interactive television, to extend the scale of direct citizen involvement. Take something as simple as turnout at general elections. Why force people to go to polling stations when it is technically feasible to do the whole thing by post or even by telephone? Of course there are technical problems in developing such systems but in principle it should be possible. And if it is possible, and possible in a way which dramatically reduces the cost of polling, then it should be correspondingly possible to widen the number of issues which citizens decide for themselves.

**Aids to deliberation.** An objection which is
sometimes raised against this kind of extension of democracy relates to the issues about citizens I mentioned earlier. It is that the idea of people voting at home in front of their TV sets is a far cry from the model of engaged, informed citizens in face-to-face communication and deliberation over their common concerns. This and similar problems have led participatory democrats to focus more on the problem of providing aids to deliberation for active citizens, so that their democratic participation is better informed and more considered.

At the level of small-group democracy, the main thrust of this thinking is to develop better deliberative procedures, so that everyone feels that their voice has been heard, that there is a free and open discussion of the alternatives, and that decisions are based on considerations everyone can accept. On a larger scale, one aspect of the challenge is to provide better newspaper, radio and TV coverage of politics. At the moment that coverage does little to encourage real thinking and debate but this is not necessarily inevitable.

Another idea that is being tried out by some people in the US is citizens' forums. These take many forms. In the most ambitious cases, randomly chosen groups of, say, 400 citizens agree to spend six months reading material on some public issue, discussing it with their families and friends, asking for further information on questions that arise, participating in focus group discussions on the options, and finally
expressing their considered opinions. Some of the other experiments have involved people meeting for four or five days, hearing proponents of different points of view, discussing the issues in small groups, and trying to reach some consensus. Still others are limited to an evening, in which small groups watch a TV debate, phone in with questions, and discuss the issues among themselves before voting electronically.

The common idea of all these experiments is to try to combine direct participation with opportunities to expand people's knowledge and widen their horizons. Reports of the experiments confirm that ordinary citizens are indeed capable of mastering complex issues, discussing them constructively, responding to the arguments, and so on, and that the process of participation really is a transforming and enabling process. They therefore seem to refute the charges that citizens are too ignorant, apathetic or self-interested for participatory democracy to work. But quite how to translate these experiments into ways of transferring power to the mass of citizens is still a very open-ended debate.

Delegation, representation and trust. All of this can help, but it clearly does not eliminate problems of scale completely. So participatory democrats have had to think more about problems of delegation, representation and trust. If it really is impractical for everyone to be actively involved in deciding every single issue, then we have to be prepared to trust some people with some decisions, whether by delegating
responsibility to them or by allowing them to represent us in other settings. We then have to think about what kind of accountability these people should operate under: to what extent are they required to consult and seek advice, to report back, to get approval from the group? We also have to think about issues of fair representation, and in particular of how to ensure that groups which have traditionally been under-represented in more elitist forms of democracy will be properly represented in more participatory set-ups (Phillips, 1995).

An idea which was used extensively in ancient Greece and has had something of a comeback among participatory democrats is the idea of representation by lottery. Instead of electing people who become more and more entrenched and isolated, why not choose representatives by lot? That may not always be a great idea, but it seems to work for juries, so perhaps it can be extended to decision-making as well. I wonder whether local government, or the management of schools, would be any the worse for being organised by lottery than they are at the moment.

**Majority rule.** The problems I've mentioned about majority rule are complex. Some proponents of participatory democracy are rather dismissive of these concerns, except in very specific circumstances like Northern Ireland. They maintain that participatory democracy itself is a corrective to the tyranny of the majority, because it sensitises citizens to each other’s needs. Others say that the solution is to look for
alternatives to majority rule.

In the small-group contexts in which participatory democracy is most straightforwardly applicable, an obvious alternative is consensus. In other words, the aim should be to try to accommodate everyone's point of view through sufficient discussion and teasing out of issues so that in the end everyone is at least reasonably happy with the outcome. I'm sure that most people here are familiar with that process: in my own experience, small-group decision making rarely goes to a vote.

The idea of consensus can be extended to representative bodies in some contexts. For example the whole idea of the current Northern Ireland talks is to aim at an agreement which every section of the population can accept. There are some tensions in participatory democracy between the ideas of a deliberative consensus and of accountable representation, since representatives can only be free to change their views in discussion if they are not too strongly tied to instructions from their constituents. I don't think the tensions are insuperable, provided that representatives are willing to carry the discussion out to the people they represent.

If voting has to be done, for example in large-scale exercises in participation such as referendums or some of these new-technology experiments, there are alternatives to majority rule as we know it, all of which start from the idea of multi-
option ballots. In a multi-option ballot, instead of having a single proposal which you vote either for or against, you have a list of options which you place in order of preference as in an Irish PR-STV election. For technical reasons, the method used in Irish elections for counting these ballots is not very useful for counting votes in a multi-option ballot, but though no counting procedure is perfect some are reasonably defensible. Whether they are better at reconciling majority and minority interests depends to a large extent on the particular situation.

A third response to the problems of majority rule is to give special constitutional protections to minorities. Of course, these protections themselves have to be instituted by something like majority rule, but the theory is that it may be easier for the majority to commit itself to the protection of minority interests at a constitutional level than to remember to do so every time it makes a decision.

Unequal resources. Let me finish by turning to the problem of unequal resources. The obvious solution to this problem is to distribute resources more equally. A fairly cautious way of doing this is to place limits on political finance, perhaps combined with state finance for political parties, as the current government is trying to do. But this does more to establish fairer competition between political elites than to empower ordinary citizens. It still leaves plenty of inequality of power in the system. Some of the ideas I've already
mentioned try to reduce the influence of social and economic inequality by using random sampling. In my view, the only real answer is to adopt a much more radically egalitarian perspective, seeking social and economic equality throughout society. Otherwise there will always be opportunities for the privileged to exert unequal power in democracies, even participatory ones.

Conclusion

I want to conclude by returning to the contrast between elitist and participatory visions of democracy. At the level of basic values or objectives, participatory democracy is primarily interested in equality, autonomy, community and self-development, whereas elitist democracy tends to be more concerned with efficiency, stability and expertise. At the level of operating principles, participatory democracy tends to emphasise devolution, teledemocracy, deliberation, accountability, fair representation, consensus, and redistribution, while those who want to improve elitist democracy are more concerned with coordination, good management, fair competition, transparency and the equal opportunity to compete. The contrast is not particularly between participatory democracy and representative democracy, but between different models of the democratic process as a whole, with correspondingly different models of representation.

I hope I've made it clear enough that the whole area of
participatory democracy is stronger on principles than on how to institutionalise those principles. I suppose that the optimistic way of looking at this is that we are at the frontiers of democratic progress. We have to rely on our imaginations and ingenuity to push those frontiers forward.

References and further reading


James S. Fishkin, *Democracy and Deliberation* (1991)


Teledemocracy Action News Network

http://www.auburn.edu/~tann/