



# Democracy and Common Interests

Jane Mansbridge

**Back in the 1960's I was a member of several small collectives that eventually collapsed, in part because of their problems with internal democracy. After two subsequent detailed studies of collectives that made decisions in face-to-face assembly, I concluded that the problems with democracy in both these collectives and in the nation state stemmed in part from an intellectual confusion.**

We have in our minds two ideas of democracy, not one. Moreover, these two ideas are based on contradictory premises, from which different consequences flow. We usually argue about democracy past one another, without making our premises — and therefore our real disagreements — clear.

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One form of democracy, which I have called "adversary" democracy, assumes that the interests of the citizens conflict. It settles disagreements procedurally, by — in theory — giving each individual one vote and letting the more numerous side win. This procedure has both a positive and a negative philosophical legitimation. Positively it is legitimated by a tradition of the equal worth of each individual. Negatively, it is legitimated by the conclusion that in the absence of agreed-upon standards each individual's desires must count as much as those of any other individual. Both justifications require equal power among the citizens in order to legitimate the outcome.<sup>1</sup>

Adversary democracy can take majority rule or consociational ("power-sharing") forms. In practice, majority rule becomes acceptable when the polity has sufficient cross-cutting cleavages so that most individuals can have the experience of being the majority and winning on some important issues. When many individuals find themselves consistently in a minority, as happens in countries where the important cleavages coincide, some agreement that shares power in proportion to the number of adherents for each set of policies meets the legitimation requirements of adversary democracy. It is easiest to think of power-sharing through the example of two people living together, who have on some issues conflicting interests that they cannot resolve through deliberation. They cannot vote, because they have no one to break the tie. So they take turns winning when their interests conflict. Nations with coinciding cleavages can act the same way. If the political cleavages promoted by geography, economics, religion, and language all coincide — if, say, the North of a country is also its industrial section, its Protestant section, and its Germanic language section, while the South is its agricultural,

Catholic, and Romance language section — pure majority rule lets the most populated of the two sections win on all important matters of conflict. Few permanent minorities would agree to such a situation. The nation could handle the problem by splitting in two, thus losing the advantage of unity, or by requiring consensus, which would privilege the status quo by allowing either region to block a projected change. A consociational solution, however, would give the Southern, Catholic, agricultural section of the country its percentage of the ministries and even its percentage of the heads of state over time, as well as its percentage of the budget, the schools, the state television time, and all other goods that the state provides.

Adversary solutions like majority rule and consociationalism assume conflicting interests among the citizens. They require, in theory, equal power among citizens to legitimate the decisions made in the name of a "whole" that is no more than the sum of divergent parts.

A second and older form of democracy, which can be called "unitary," "communal," or "deliberative" democracy, assumes common interests among the citizens. This form of democracy derives its legitimation

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from reasoning. Its procedure is deliberation. In a deliberative democracy, citizens reason together until they come up with a good policy that meets their needs. They may also delegate some of their number, with whom they have common interests, to deliberate for them. They expect to make their decisions by consensus.

### **Adversary solutions like majority rule and consociationalism assume conflicting interests among the citizens.**

Deliberative democracy was probably the only form of democracy before the first strands of adversary democratic thought and practice emerged in England in the mid-seventeenth century. In the mid-seventeenth century, the English Parliament started making more decisions by majority rule than by its traditional procedure of consensus. Representatives to Parliament stopped being simply selected in various ways from their district and started facing an opposition; this made elections necessary. In the mid-seventeenth century Thomas Hobbes made his famous suggestion that individuals were naturally, in their pre-governmental state, engaged in a war of all against all. Churchmen began to argue against "just prices" for goods and wages, and for prices generated by each individual's pursuing his or her own conflicting interests. Intellectuals began to urge on states a policy of tolerance toward dissenting religions. The stage was set for a growing acceptance of ongoing, fundamental conflict in all the important spheres of life.



*"He stands there all day, saying nothing, promising everything. He calls it politics."*

Before the mid-seventeenth century, however, the assumption in most decision-making bodies — whether within the church, in parishes, or in Parliament — was that the members of the community had fundamentally common interests in the matters up for decision. This assumption made possible a deliberative democracy, in which politics was fundamentally a matter of discovering or creating a common good. Those not familiar with the modern-day Quaker practice of consensus may find it strange to read in the 1647 Putney Debates frequent suggestions that the two opposing groups retire from the heated discussions for a day or so to "submit to that light that God shall cast in among us, (to) unite us, and make us of one heart and one mind."<sup>2</sup> In this era even Parliament would postpone issues for further reflection or create a small committee to come up with a policy when the assembly could not come to consensus on an issue. The assumption was that people of good will, reasoning together on matters that pertained to all, could arrive at policies that when explained would be persuasive to all.

Even majority rule, before the mid-seventeenth century, was usually conceived as a shorthand form of consensus, an approximation resorted to when time was short. The rationale was that, all things being equal, the larger number had a greater chance of being right than the smaller number. The goal was getting the right policy. For this reason, the procedure did not focus on the numbers of voters per se, but often followed the formula of the "melior et sanior pars," or the larger and wiser part. The voters with more experience or wisdom counted for more than one.<sup>3</sup>

The gradual replacement of deliberative democracy by adversary democracy from the seventeenth century to the present has made possible democracy on the level of the nation state. Transforming majority rule from a measure of the good of the whole to a procedure that distinguishes between competing individual preferences made it possible to generate democratically, rather than through monarchy or elite consensus, a single will that could speak for the nation as a whole. Early Greek understandings of democracy had assumed a single substantive common good, applicable to

the whole nation. When nations increased in size and the interests of their citizens diverged, the goal of a unanimous citizenry became untenable, and the common good had to be vested in a single person, the monarch. The modern conception of majority rule, which did not require the majority to be right but only to understand and promote its own interests, allowed the large modern nation state to achieve unity through legitimate political decisions without a monarch and without substantively resolving underlying conflicts.

Although the procedures of adversary democracy have the great advantage of making decisions possible under conflict, the theory has major weaknesses. Because adversary democracy takes preferences as given, and because it assumes both self-interest and irreconcilable conflict, it does not meet the deliberative, integrative and transformative needs of citizens who must not only aggregate self-interests but choose among policies in the name of a common good. Moreover, as modern politics rely more and more on the assumptions of conflict implicit in adversary democracy, both citizens and representatives may forget the need for more deliberative procedures.

Adversary democracy is built on the assumption of self-interest. But from the mid-seventeenth century to the mid-twentieth century, this assumption was balanced in a theory of "dual motivation" with the assumption that human beings were also motivated by benevolence. In 1942 Joseph Schumpeter took the first step in building a democratic theory on the foundations of self-interest alone. In Schumpeter's system, there is no common good or public interest. Voters pursue their individual interests by making demands on the political system in proportion to the intensity of their feelings. Politicians, also pursuing their own interests, adopt policies that buy them votes, thus ensuring accountability. In order to stay in office, politicians act like entrepreneurs and brokers, looking for formulae that satisfy as many and alienate as few interests as possible. From the interchange between self-interested voters and self-interested brokers emerge decisions that come as close as possible to a balanced aggregation of individual interests.

Schumpeter did not explore the normative side of adversary democracy, which legitimates the aggregation of interests only when each individual's interests are weighted equally, and legitimates the equal weighting both by the equal moral worth of each individual's interests and by the absence of accepted standards for arguing that some interests deserve greater consideration than others. This part of the theory became explicit only in the late 1970's when radical democrats began to explore what it might mean to give each individual equal power.

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Because adversary theory, in spite of its strong egalitarian implications, has critical deliberative weaknesses, framers of actual democratic institutions have always built in arenas for the discovery and creation of a public good — at least among the representatives and occasionally even among the citizens themselves. These arenas sometimes change. In the United States, congressional staffs may now deliberate on the issues much more than the members of Congress themselves. Foundations, academic research centres and journalists now often set the issues and play a critical role in deliberation. These new players and new arenas have discoverable strengths, along with weaknesses, that institutional innovations might try to counteract.<sup>4</sup>

The weaknesses in adversary institutions make more dangerous the tendency in modern liberal democracies to reduce the number of arenas available for deliberation. As Claus Offe and Helmut Wessenthal point out, modern "democratic" reforms that substitute institutions that require only representation or counting heads for institutions that require dialogue reduce the incentive for individuals to make the good of others their own. Unions may not be able to survive if members cannot meet together face to face to build the kind of bond between them that makes sacrifice for the others possible. Replacing talking by counting weakens workers, who need to forge class solidarity, even more dramatically than it weakens capitalists, whose long-term and short-

term interests may be more congruent and who may thus not need mutual interchange to understand their interests or create new common interests with other members of their group.<sup>5</sup>

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The assumption that common interests can be uncovered or created is not just an idealist's fantasy. Common interests, and the procedures of deliberation frequently associated with common interests, prevail today on many issues, in many contexts. In some contexts, the assumption of common interests is false, and the consensus generated is a pseudo-consensus. But in many cases — in academic departments, in other workplaces, in voluntary associations and church groups, in unions, and even in local, state and national government — the individuals involved in a decision can on some issues either find or create common interests among them that will have priority over their conflicts.

Many in the liberal tradition have an understandable fear of group processes that lead individuals to put a group good above individual goods. Many on the left have an understandable fear of the hegemony exercised by the more powerful on both the agenda and the process of deliberation. Distinguishing between pseudo-consensus and genuine consensus, an act impossible to perform with certainty, thus requires some attempt to understand what individual interests on a given issue either are or can be. Whether one thinks of people's interests as what they would choose with perfect information or what a group they were in would choose if it could deliberate in non-oppressive conditions,<sup>6</sup> trying to distinguish between genuine and false interests, and between political conditions that promote the one rather than the other, becomes a critical democratic act.

Size makes a great difference, although not all the difference. It goes without saying that increasing the number of people affected by a decision increases the likelihood that one

of these, or a significant minority, will be affected adversely. But in any size group, including the nation state and the community of nations, it can be useful to ask individuals with different perspectives to work out a common answer to a common problem. The arenas in which they deliberate can be traditional representative assemblies, superior courts, corporatist gatherings of affected interest groups, or policy juries selected by lot. The legitimacy of the solutions they develop will rest on the reasons they advance on behalf of those solutions and the underlying structure of interests as the individuals affected perceive those interests.

At every level of government — the neighborhood, the city, the province, the nation, and the community of nations — democracies should integrate many kinds of deliberative arenas into the ways decisions are made. When interests conflict, as I presume they will increasingly with increasing scale, either the majoritarian or the consociational forms of adversary democracy must eventually be pressed into service. But at no point should adversary institutions be allowed to crowd out the deliberative ones. Experienced political actors, whether representatives to a national assembly or members of an academic department, know how to move between adversary and deliberative procedures as the issues warrant. At the moment, however, the knowledge of how to move from one set of procedures to another is in apprenticeship form. It has to be learned by doing. Mostly unconscious, it cannot easily be passed on. Identifying the need for both adversary and deliberative procedures, and the need for subtle transitions between the two depending on the potential for commonality in different issues, allows us to begin to understand more explicitly how to integrate deliberation and concern for the common good with counting heads and the protection of individual interests.

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Understanding the different forms of both adversary and deliberative democracy should have particular

interest in Asia, Latin America, Africa, and other parts of the world less infiltrated than the western democracies by the doctrines of adversary democracy. Citizens of many non-capitalist nations correctly apply to adversary democracy the same moral critique that they apply to capitalism. Recognising the reliance of both capitalism and adversary democracy on self-interest, and recognising the assumption of conflict at the base of both systems, they see both as undermining the group unity that is a major force in their moral and political lives. One-party states, while often undoubtedly tools for the personal aggrandisement of members of the party, also have the strong moral claim of uniting a country. As experiments with "liberalisation" become more popular, and previously one-party systems experiment with opposition, these settings too will become crucial experiments in designing institutions that preserve deliberation and a concern for common interests while recognising and accommodating genuine conflict.

Similarly, countries not permeated with the tradition of adversary democracy can use in practical ways the analysis of power that derives from a comparison of adversary with deliberative democracy. In adversary democracy, decisions are in theory legitimated by the equal power of each individual in the decision. The theory is fundamentally and irretrievably individualist. In deliberative democracy, equality of power per se is less necessary. Individuals can be represented by those more powerful than they whenever the more and less powerful have the same interests. Indeed, the only democratic legitimation for unequal power is that the more powerful will promote, for one reason or another, the interests of the less powerful. This is the fundamental rationale behind any "strong man" or "vanguard" regime. In a democracy based on genuinely common interests, it can be assumed that the commonality of interests prevails among both the less and the more powerful. When those interests diverge, retrospective voting and other procedural features of adversary democracy must attempt to guarantee accountability. Non-western nations have the opportunity to examine the structures their

cultures have historically developed to promote common interests and acting on behalf of the whole. What signs tell people that common interests can be generated, or that an irreconcilable conflict has emerged? What words and symbols attach to the common interest? What loyalties can be touched upon or created to lead individuals to make the good of the whole their own?

In the western tradition, and in some non-western situations as well, nationalist movements in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries enlarged from the region to the nation the definition of the whole that commanded loyalty. An analysis of how this transformation took place, with what losses and what gains, might give us clues to the possibilities of political transformation in a yet more universal direction. While the quickest way of creating world-wide common interests would undoubtedly be a Martian invasion, small examples of working interdependence can also serve as the collateral for larger cooperative enterprises.<sup>7</sup> As adversary democracy, which in theory counts each individual for one and none for more than one, is unlikely to command assent within our lifetimes as a formula for world-wide governance, the potential in deliberative democracy must be exploited.

The growing dominance of adversary democracy in western nation states does not mean that the human race has lost its ability to deliberate. The assumption of common interests, and the procedures of deliberation and consensus frequently associated with that assumption, still apply today in many issues, in many contexts. Feminist political theorists, scholars of the Frankfurt school, and practitioners of alternative dispute resolution, among others, have prompted political philosophers and practitioners to give greater attention now than at any time since World War II to the potential in deliberative democracy.<sup>8</sup> New institutions that incorporate deliberation have a chance of being tried.

Many proposed institutions — like versions of demarchy, policy juries, or election by lot, neighborhood meetings on national issues, or quasi-corporatist meetings of opposing

interest groups — envisage a mix of adversary and deliberative elements. Robert Dahl's citizen advisory bodies, selected by lot to deliberate on outstanding policy issues, would present their findings to elected representatives to decide according to traditional adversary procedures. John Burnheim's functional councils, chosen by lot from a self-selected cadre to negotiate matters of conflicting interest, might need to move from reflecting existing social and economic power to incorporating more equal individual power.<sup>9</sup> The critical problem is finding ways to handle differently issues on which common interests can be generated and issues on which interests fundamentally conflict, trying to insure that in matters of genuine and irreconcilable conflict the interests of each affected individual count for one and none for more than one. When theorists and constitutionalists envision a politics of pure persuasion rather than power<sup>10</sup>, they must keep in mind that this politics works best in a context of common interests. When conflicting interests arise, a democratic critic will want to ask whether, in the procedures used to settle the dispute, factors like self-selection or unequal economic power do not give more than equal weight to one set of interests rather than another.

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The maxim, "practice-thought-practice", is nowhere more applicable than in democratic practice and theory. The participatory innovations of the 1960's sparked a renaissance of democratic theory. Now is the time to put into practice some ideas — like negotiations among functionally based groups chosen by lot, experiments with teledemocracy, or techniques for moving back and forth from adversary to deliberative procedures — that contemporary theorists have urged. Practice will undoubtedly prove these ideas wanting in part, and a new round of theorising can begin.

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10. E.g. theorists as diverse as John Rawls, in **A Theory of Justice** (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1971); Jurgen Habermas, in **Legitimation Crisis** (1973) trans. Thomas McCarthy (Boston: Beacon Press, 1975); and Michael Walzer, in **Spheres of Justice** (New York: Basic Books, 1983).

## TILL TOMORROW

Another slow train to an early grave  
as the workplace whistle blows loudly in tonight's grey air,  
the lines of cars returning  
passengerless to lifeless suburban tombs.  
Revolution in Mexico, yeah, far away from here  
the undead rising in the night to haunt  
the dead of the day with a waking, no wake,  
no engines gearing for the crushing of the day.

How glamorous the hand of the industrial accident  
pickled in formaldehyde, a stark symbol of progress  
it reaches up, its stretched fingers showing the scar.  
Like honey the rebel flows from the glass walled prison  
of open plan and teak veneer and the rebel flows  
to machine with luddite intent and the rebels flow  
from the sewers and gutters;  
sweetening the city with their insurrection.

Stuart Dawson

*"When you sneer at love,  
you don't have much left in  
life".*

*Edith Piaf*

Unexpected as wildflowers you  
appeared  
Subversive of my ordered world.  
Surprised by your delight  
I carry you like a passport, aromatic  
in the night.

Panicky, unanchored, restless, numb  
I long to come back fast and take  
you.  
Then, among the raiding bats and  
resting stars,  
When the contours of my heavy  
heart remember  
You lift the stone and let in light.

Ross Fitzgerald