What is Democracy?

Robert Hanna

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The Fall 2024 US Presidential Election is rapidly approaching, not like Carl Sandburg's fog, on little cat's feet, but in big clomping army boots. This raises many important moral and political issues, one of which is the nature of democracy.

Very confusingly for most people, especially including political scientists, who can't even come to an agreement on the definition of "democracy" (Cummings, 2017), there are at least *three* substantively different concepts of democracy at play in contemporary politics, not only in the USA but also worldwide: (i) democracy as the rule of the majority of all the people qualified to vote, who then hand over the control of coercive power to an elected or appointed minority, aka *majoritarian-representative democracy*, (ii) democracy as the open process of critical discussion and critical examination of opinions and social institutions, and, simultaneously, the unfettered expression of different opinions and lifestyles, aka *libertarian democracy*, and (iii) democracy as the unwavering commitments to universal respect for human dignity and autonomy, and universal resistance to human oppression, aka *ethical-emancipatory democracy*. Notoriously, however, the three concepts of democracy are *mutually logically independent*, in that they do not necessarily lead to or follow from one another.

First, it is really possible that what is decreed by the majority of all the people qualified to vote is in fact morally evil and wrong, aka *the problem of the tyranny of the majority*—and that is exactly what happened when the Nazis were elected by a majority of German voters in 1932–1933 (Wikipedia, 2024).

Second, it is also really possible that what is decreed by the majority of the people qualified to vote is a system in which an elected or appointed powerful minority of those people can actually override the majority, aka *the problem of the tyranny of the minority*—and that is exactly what happens whenever the US Electoral College votes to elect someone, like Trump in 2016, who did not actually win the popular vote, and also whenever the Supreme Court votes either to sustain or strike down laws in decisions that don't reflect what the majority of Americans actually believe or want.

Third and finally, it is also really possible that there could be an open process of critical discussion and critical examination of opinions and social institutions, and simultaneously the unfettered expression of different lifestyles and opinions, which nevertheless leads to a situation in which universal respect for human dignity and autonomy, and universal resistance against human oppression, are in fact undermined and weakened, aka *the problem of an unconstrained, value-neutral process*—and that is exactly what happened in the case of Trump's election in 2016, via the multiple-Party system, the Primaries, and psychologically-manipulative uses of social media and the internet (see, e.g., Schreckinger, 2016; Benkler et al., 2017).

In my opinion, the only independently morally and politically acceptable concept of democracy is the *third* concept, *ethical-emancipatory democracy*: democracy as the unwavering commitments to universal respect for human dignity and autonomy, and universal resistance to human oppression. Nevertheless, *if we conjoined the second and third concepts*, i.e., an open process of critical discussion and critical examination of opinions and social institutions, and the unfettered expression of different opinions and lifestyles, all guided by and for the sake of the unwavering commitments to universal respect for human dignity and autonomy, and universal resistance to human oppression, then we could also derive a compound morally and politically acceptable concept of democracy that is driven by the demands of the third concept.

Now,the USA claims that it's a democracy. Nevertheless, the existence and Constitutional entrenchment of the social institutions of the Electoral College and the Supreme Court entail that it actually *isn't*. So, given the fundamental flaws in American so-called "democracy," what should be done? Here's a four-part proposal.

First, everyone needs to recognize that there are three logically distinct concepts of democracy and that only either the third concept of democracy alone, or the conjunction of the second and third concepts, is morally and politically acceptable.

Second, we need to get rid of the Electoral College and Supreme Court, *altogether*.

Third, we need to get rid of the de facto two Party system, the Primaries, and psychologically-manipulative uses of social media and the internet, *altogether*, by starting with a list of self-declared candidates, *all* of them independents, who meet the basic eligibility requirements (USAGov, 2024), and then elect presidents directly and exclusively on the basis of (i) each candidate's life-history up to the election, as presented in a publicly-accessible and independently fact-checked and confirmed *Curriculum Vitae (CV) document*, with only one small, passport-style, head-shot picture of the candidate allowed, of no more than 10 pages (of single space 12 pt text) in length, of which that candidate is, certifiably, the sole author, and (ii) each candidate's ethical commitments and proposed policies, and her/his reasons for holding them, as presented in a publicly-accessible and independently fact-checked and confirmed *commitments-and-policies document*, of no more than 20 pages (of single-spaced 12 pt text) in length, of which that candidate is, certifiably, the sole author, and (iii) an election run-up period lasting exactly one month from the time the candidates' *CV* and commitments-and-policies documents have been independently fact-checked, confirmed, and certified, and then made generally available to all the eligible voters via official hard-copy mailing and also on a single, official *US Presidential Election Website*, to the election day itself, in order to give all the eligible voters just enough time to read, think about, and discuss the candidates' *CV*s and commitments-and-policies documents, but little or no time for psychological manipulation via social media and the internet.

Fourth, finally, and most radically, we need to get rid of the coercive majoritarian representative rule of all the people qualified to vote, *altogether*, and replace it by *truly democratic decision procedures*, by which I mean *participatory decision-making*, aka *collective principled negotiation* (see, e.g., Fisher, Ury, and Patton, 2010; Hanna, 2018: esp. sections 2.8–2.9). These decision procedures would indeed be "truly democratic"—that is, they would operate *according to the principles of ethical-emancipatory democracy*—in that they would systematically rule out *both* the tyranny of the majority and *also* the tyranny of the minority.

What would such a system look like?

Let's first consider the classical majoritarian representative democratic two-valued voting system:

Yes (or Yea)

No (or Nay)

and also the classical *Robert's Rules of Order*-style (Robert's Rules Online, 2024) three-valued voting system:

Yes

Abstain

No

In most versions of the classical majoritarian representative democratic two-valued voting system, full participation of all eligible voters is not required. So deciding not to vote, for any reason whatsoever, is functionally equivalent to abstention in that system. In *Robert's Rules-of-Order*-style three-valued systems—with numerical ranking of candidates or candidate-options, and iterated rounds of re-shuffled rankings in which the least favored candidate or candidate-option is dropped in each round, until a victor is determined—the "abstain" vote is used for any one of three reasons: (i) genuine neutrality or unconcern about a proposal, either way (relatively rare), (ii) as a polite way of saying "a plague on both their houses," or (iii) as a way of *quasi-nay-voting*, without incurring any social consequences or repercussions (or social stigmata, in voting without secret ballot) that might be attached to actual disagreement.

But by sharp contrast to all of the above, consider now the following scheme: (i) that group decision-making should not be *a discrete, individual act* (like a vote) that is carried out at a particular moment by a group of people, but instead should be *a temporally extended social-dynamic process containing a medley or symphony of mutually-coordinated individual acts*, that is engaged in and performed by a group of people, (ii) that every such process of group decision-making should be a dialogue with people collectively discussing various proposals for institutional group action guided by principles of ethical-emancipatory democracy, (iii) that every process of group decision-making should feature a five-valued array of options for taking a position on any given proposal, including two degrees of agreement, one neutral or as-yet-uncommitted value, and two degrees of disagreement, namely—

Strongly Agree

Mildly Agree

Abstain

Mildly Disagree

Block or Walk

—any of which is registered by each member of a group at any point in a given dialogue about a given proposal being considered by that group, (iv) that every registration of a position carries with it the option to change or update your position at any time in the dialogue, (v) that every registration of a position is aimed at a principled, negotiated decision collectively made by that group as whole, and (vi) that therefore every process of group decision-making ideally involves full participation by all members of the relevant group. Following the facilitation and principled negotiation traditions in non-mainstream social and political theory since the 1980s, let us call this system *participatory decision-making*. It could also be called *direct democracy*, although this label is somewhat problematic in view of the fact that the term "democracy" is systematically ambiguous and widely misused, especially in falsely self-labeled "democratic" States like the USA. So to avoid confusion, I will stick to the term "participatory decision-making."

But I must also add eight crucial further points by way of unpacking the specifically ethical-emancipatory democratic *interpretation* of participatory decision-making.

First, there is a *basic principle* governing the system of participatory decision-making:

No one is ever coerced in any particular sub-cycle or overall process of participatory decision-making, either with respect to their own position or with respect to their other contributions to the dialogue-towards-deciding, and more specifically, no one is ever forced to walk, or punished for blocking or walking.

Second, *blocking* means not merely a strong disagreement with a given proposal, but also that *one block is enough to defeat a given proposal in any given sub-cycle of a particular process of participatory decision-making*.

Third, every blocker must also offer, or support, or at least refrain from blocking, *an alternative proposal* in the next sub-cycle of the same decision-making process.

Fourth, every participant is permitted *only a limited number of blocks* (say, three or four, or whatever) in a particular decision-making process, but if s/he uses up *all* his or

her blocks, s/he must then also *walk away from* that decision-making process and thereby *exit it*.

Fifth, walking away from/exiting a particular decision-making process can be done at any point in the process, not only after the permitted maximum number of blocks; and it will always carry some natural consequences, whether good or bad; but these consequences are always freely chosen by the walker/exiter, not coerced, since (i) according to the basic principle, no one is ever coerced for walking/exiting, hence no one is ever forced to do so or punished for doing so, and (ii) everyone involved in a particular decision-making process always has the option of staying in that process under one or another of the five positions—except after using up all his or her permitted blocks, which entails walking away from/exiting the process, *but this is part of the rules*, hence agreed-to from the start, and not coerced.

Sixth, *mild disagreement* always entails going forward with the current proposal if there is sufficiently strong support for it.

Seventh, *sufficiently strong support* means that there is close to or more than 50% strong or mild agreement with the proposal, and no blocks.

Eighth and finally, *not participating* in the process—yet, or perhaps ever—for any reason whatsoever, is functionally and normatively equivalent to abstention or walking/exiting, hence it is never coerced, and more specifically, no one is ever forced to participate, punished for not participating, or prevented from participating.

The dynamic registration of positions in participatory decision-making according to the scheme I just laid out essentially tells us how a person is *rationally feeling* about any proposal put forward for group decision-making. Therefore the dynamic registration of positions in participatory decision-making in this sense is *not* majoritarian representative democratic voting. On the contrary, it is dynamically tracking the levels of what Brazilians call *concordar*—literally, "shared heart," that is, solidarity, onboardness, or team-spirit—about any given proposal for ethical-emancipatory social action, for the sake of which those people are having a dialogue-towards-deciding. Otherwise put, the dynamic registration of positions in participatory decision-making is tracking the level of people's rationally-guided but also inherently affective (i.e., felt, desiderative, or emotional) *onboardness* about any given proposal for ethical-emancipatory social action, in a way that is relevantly similar to *monitoring the dynamics of team-spirit* in team-sports or to *monitoring the dynamics of mutual cohesion and harmonization* in dancing or musical performances.

Let's call the classical majoritarian representative democratic two-valued voting system (yes/no, with or without full participation, and with or without a secret ballot), together with *Robert's Rules of Order-style* three-valued systems (yes/abstain/no, with full participation, with or without a secret ballot, and numerical rankings of candidates or candidate-options), *voting*. By contrast, let us call participatory decision-making *deciding*. The fundamental difference between *voting* and *deciding* is essentially analogous and parallel to the fundamental difference between *debate* and *dialogue*. Here are some important conceptual contrasts between dialogue and debate.

- Dialogue requires temporarily suspending one's own beliefs, encourages critical reflection on them, listens in order to understand and find meaning, and opens the possibility of reaching a better solution than any of the original solutions. *Dialogue discovers new common aims and thoughts.* Debate dogmatically asserts one's own beliefs, negatively criticizes by denying the validity of others' beliefs, listens only in order to be able to refute, and presupposes that one's own position is the only acceptable or possible solution to any problem. Debate digs in its heels and suppresses or even kills shared creative thinking.

- Dialogue allows the expression of real feelings (in ourselves and others) for understanding and catharsis. Debate expresses feelings to manipulate others and denies others' emotions and feelings as legitimate.

- Dialogue respects the human dignity of all participants and seeks neither to alienate nor oppress. Debate rebuts contrary positions and typically belittles and depreciates all participants who disagree.

- Dialogue is collaborative and all about exploring common ground towards a new understanding and a new synoptic vision of the conceptual and ideological landscape. Debate is combative and all about conversational conquest, closure, and closed minds.

Or to summarize all of this in a single statement:

Dialogue aims to elucidate ideas and enlighten—in the broadly Kantian, heavy-duty sense of what I call *radical enlightenment* (Hanna, 2018: part 2)—all of its participants, but a debater aims only to defeat and silence his conversational opponents.

Classically, in the Platonic tradition, debaters were labelled *Sophists*; in the context of modern majoritarian representative democratic states, they're *demagogues*. By sharp

contrast, but also in the Platonic tradition, people engaging in dialogue were labelled *Socratic philosophers.* And well within that tradition of Socratic dialogue, but more specifically according to the theory of post-majoritarian-representative democratic social dynamics that I'm briefly describing and defending here, people engaging in participatory decision-making in the sense I just spelled out, are *ethical-emancipatory democrats*.

Now debate is inherently aimed at voting. In standard debating competitions, people in the audience vote at the end to determine who "won." And this perfectly parallels political campaigns in modern majoritarian representative democratic states, of which the 2024 US Presidential election is a paradigmatic example. On the one hand, there are the debaters (namely, Sophists or demagogues), *the politicians*, and on the other hand there, is the passive audience, *We the People*, that pretends it is authentically participating by voting at the end of all the debates, in order to determine *who wins* and *who loses*. Voting, by its very nature and central role in the social and political mechanisms of modern majoritarian representative democratic states, institutionally polarizes and segregates people into *with-me* or *against-me* camps, and also into *winners* and *losers* camps; and ultimately it also coercively demands toe-the-line conformity and inauthentic consensus at the conclusion of the voting process, *since the majority rules*–except, of course, when they appoint a minority that actually rules. Moreover, this inherently adversarial and contradictory situation is true whether people vote Yes or No, even if they antecedently possessed much more nuanced, subtle, non-bivalent views before they entered into the voting system. So it is Yea or Nay, *no matter what* We the People say; and *when they come out of voting*, the system has institutionally polarized and segregated them, and yet also coercively demands their lock-step conformity and their phony consensus.

Three-valued *Robert's Rules of Order*-style voting systems may *seem* to be an improvement on modern majoritarian representative democratic voting polarization; but actually they're not. Numerical rankings of candidates or candidate-options only promotes *systematic strategic partisan, polarized voting*, and the systematic strategic partisan, polarized destruction of unwanted candidates or candidate-options. And "abstain" in a *Robert's Rules of Order*-style system merely means, in effect:

> "for whatever reason, I am not saying which polarized group I belong to, and I also accept the coercive demand for obedient conformity and artificial consensus that voting imposes in modern majoritarian representative democratic states."

By sharp contrast, participatory decision-making according to the ethical-emancipatory democratic interpretation does *not* institutionally polarize people, thereby segregating them into partisan factions, *nor* does it coercively demand conformity and consensus.

This is because participatory decision-making in the sense I spelled out is essentially dialogical; because it dynamically registers people's levels of *concordar* about proposals for institutional action; because the process of creating *concordar* is a mutual coordination and harmonization of basic affects and moral-political values; and because people take individual and mutual responsibility for the institutional actions they perform at the end of the process.

In modern majoritarian representative democratic voting with the secret ballot, it's true that people are, by virtue of secrecy, protected from the social consequences, repercussions, or stigmata attached to publicly being in this polarized, segregated partisan camp or that one. But this in turn means that people take no mutual responsibility for their votes. Moreover, in modern majoritarian representative democratic political debating, no one but the debaters actually gets to contribute to the formation of proposals or the discussion itself. How people vote at a debate is wholly determined by how *the debaters*, that is, the politicians, whether Sophists or demagogues, verbally convince each atomic, isolated individual to belong to one polarized, segregated partisan camp or the other, always appealing to their rational self-interest only, hence inherently guided by ethical egoism. And, in an essentially coercive authoritarian way, demands, and imposes, consensus and conformity at the end of the voting-mechanism's functioning, by majority rule. Therefore, to summarize, the modern majoritarian representative democratic voting-debating system (i) is inherently polarizing, and it segregates people into partisan factions, (ii) in secret ballot versions, it's without mutual responsibility, (iii) it's atomistic/solipsistic and driven by rational self-interest only, and (iv) it's inherently coercive and authoritarian.

But by sharp contrast, participatory decision-making according to the ethical-emancipatory democratic interpretation is inherently an open, face-to-face group activity, everyone is responsible to everyone else, everyone is also individually responsible for their own contributions, and no one is ever coerced into anything: whether by *the tyranny of the majority* or by *the tyranny of the minority*. On the contrary, when a group decides on institutional action by means of a process of participatory decision-making according to the ethical-emancipatory interpretation of democracy, via dialogue, it is because they have mutually coordinated and harmonized their rational affects, and created *concordar* or solidarity, according to shared non-egoistic and non-consequentialist moral and political principles, and have freely taken both individual and shared responsibility for their collective decision.

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