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PAUL'S FINAL ESSAY

PPE

'Democracy is the best form of government even when it produces bad outcomes'



Democracy remains the best form of government regardless of its outcome. The intrinsic worth of Democracy outflanks any possible instrumental flaws that it can suffer from. Democracy has been argued to promote peace, diplomatic resolution to war, protection of minorities, and economic welfare (Acemoglu and Robinson 2012 *et. al*). Even if we ignore these supposed benefits that arise from Democracy, it still remains the best form of government. In this essay I will defend Democracy by putting forward the arguments originating from Robert Dahl and an argument of my own: that Democracy intrinsically promotes freedom. I then refute two classic objections associated with Plato and Thomas Hobbes. I conclude that Democracy remains the best form of government, even if it were to produce bad outcomes.

Democracy is in the crudest terms the rule of the people; a political system that has the collective of its citizens able to exercise power either directly or indirectly, and where there is an equal distribution of power across those citizens. Intrinsic worth is value that something has in its own right, without recourse to considering its effects. Instrumental worth considers the value of outcomes and their effects regardless whether they are in themselves valuable.

The benefits of Democracy have been extensively argued by Robert Dahl in his book '*Democracy and its Critics*'. One of Dahl's main arguments is that Democracy must follow from the general principle of equality. Dahl relies on the following two premises in his argument for Democracy. Firstly, he states that all citizens know best about what they want in their life and that they are better in defending their interests than anybody else. Secondly, there must be an equality of consideration in which everybody's interest is weighted equally. Dahl argues that everybody should participate in the collective decision-making because a citizen would be able to represent their interest better than somebody else, and everybody's interest should be equal (Dahl 1989).

Dahl's argument on the equal representation and consideration of people's interests concludes that Democracy is inherently better than other political systems because it follows naturally from two strong and important general principles: those of equality and the privileged position of individuals to defend their own interests.

Dahl lays out his argument in favour of Democracy with the assumption that all citizens are politically capable of knowing what their interests are and what they want. There is a deep flaw because some of them might be ignorant about political affairs and not know where they want to go in life. Even if they do know what they want, not everybody would be able to know the means by which to achieve that, and if we are to follow Dahl's reasoning that every person is the best judge of their own interests, then we are to conclude that Dahl prefers the average person not to put some trust in somebody who is more capable of understanding the present situation at hand, or better at devising some sort of plan by which to achieve that person's interest.

Dahl goes on to state that all interests should be weighted equally and given equal consideration in collective decision-making. If all people's interest are to be represented equally, it would mean that murderers, violators of the law and even those that want to abolish the current political system should be given as much attention as those that have genuinely good interests not only for themselves but for the collective good. Furthermore, Dahl ignores the possibility of selfish people who would rather abuse the political system for their own personal interest at the expense of others. There are flaws with Dahl's premises which raises a concern whether his arguments for democracy could convince us.

But Dahl's premises, and therefore his argument, can be defended. His main premise of Equality states that all citizens should be given equal consideration of their personal interests. He advocates for a political system which holds every citizen's opinion and interest equally as important regardless of their background. It has a fundamental appeal to the human ear because it tells about the equality of all people. The religious, philosophical and moral reader is struck by the good virtues that it aims to embody. The wisdom of the crowd would outnumber the possible selfishness of individual minorities.

Furthermore, Dahl's second premise that every person is the best judge of their own interests survives the criticism above because we ultimately as humans know best about what we desire most. Nobody is in our own individual privileged position to understand our deepest desires and sense our most urgent needs. We are the ones which would argue with the most fervent conviction for our general well-being; even if another individual were better than political planning than me, they would lack my appetite for my own wellbeing.

The premise of equality continues an ancient and deeply human tradition. Dahl's argument is convincing because it derives from our fundamental intuition to honour this tradition of equality.

Another factor in Democracy being good in itself is that fundamentally it embraces the notion of freedom. Regardless of the content of a law, laws where I have a say in their creation remain intrinsically less oppressive than laws where I have no such say. People would tend to prefer laws where their interests are represented. Regardless of what the laws are, a person has more freedom when they decide what laws they wish to impose upon themselves; the possibility of consent adds legitimacy to the law. Democracy can achieve this promotion of freedom by involving citizens in the process of legislation.

One of the classic criticisms of Democracy can be found in Plato's work. One of Plato's objections is laid out in the ship metaphor. He makes us imagine a ship sailing the high seas in which the captain is no longer in charge of the ship. The ship is no longer efficient as the sailors take charge. They vote and argue on where to steer the ship which leads to indecision, chaos and the loudest voice being followed. Plato tells us that this is unwise and will lead to no good as the ship will eventually collapse: "The sailors are quarrelling with one another" about the steering, the use of stores, and the control of the ship whilst they have "never learned the art of navigation" (Republic Book IV).

Plato sees the ship as analogous to Democracy, and makes us question whether we would do likewise and hand the power to the people. Plato goes on to talk about how people are incapable of making political decisions, which for him is the purpose of political rule. This will lead to general chaos, infighting, bloodshed and ultimately tyranny must emerge. Plato's alternative to Democracy is to hand the power over to the politically capable experts which he claims to be philosophers. If we are to take the ship analogy, then that would be a qualified Captain at the helm of the ship. Plato does not believe Democracy to be a wise idea and definitely not the best form of government because it inevitably leads to chaos and bad outcomes.

Plato predicates his argument on the collective of people making bad political decisions which is pessimistic and unfounded. I think that is false and that he is in the wrong to try and generalise such a massive entity as people and group them under one negative view. Many people may very well be skilful to enter the political arena and that with such views similar to Plato many hopefuls have been deprived of political success because of such bias. Plato states that the people are irresponsible and slaves to their passions, but experts are as much human as the people and are just as susceptible to such weaknesses.

Plato draws on to the conclusion too quickly and seems to only care for the instrumental value of political systems whilst disregarding their intrinsic value. Plato's argument disregards a major source of moral worth for Democracy. This is in common with many scholars who would reject the statement. To disregard the intrinsic worth is a definite fault from Plato that has to be taken into account. It is too shallow a view to regard the outcomes as the sole determining factor in whether some political system is desirable. The deeper, intrinsic virtues of a political system must be contested in moral terms.

Another sceptic of the democratic ideal was Thomas Hobbes. He favoured a strong sovereign who would personally control political power to contain violence. Hobbes viewed violence and the degeneration into the 'state of nature' as the ultimate evil which must be avoided at all cost. The 'state of nature' was a conception put forward by Hobbes which considered a primordial world prior to the building of governments and civilisations where life was "nasty, brutish and short" (Hobbes, *Leviathan* XIII.9). The sovereign would hold immense political power, particularly forceful political power, to provide a polity where violence is contained and can be forgotten. In Hobbes' view, even if the sovereign became abusive and tyrannical, they would still be better than revolution and anarchy. Although Hobbes did not promulgate any particular view on Democracy, modern scholars usually classify him as an important figure in anti-democratic thought (Duncan 2022). His major work 'Leviathan' seems to suggest that Democracy cannot furnish that necessary strong, autocratic sovereign capable of managing political stability that would act as a barrier to anarchy.

The main flaw that Hobbes' critics have touched upon is his reliance on the 'state of nature' as the main premise of his argument. Why would we base a whole justification for tyranny on some abstract concept of a world we do not even know existed? He advocates for any sort of autocratic ruler however despotic they might be so long as they are the status quo. It raises serious problems whether we are to accept any form of one-man-rule government purely on the basis that they are somehow more capable of limiting civil war, bloodshed and violence. His political philosophy relies upon fear as the decisive thought of politics and not some noble virtue. It exploits an abstract threat of reverting to 'state of nature' to justify an autocratic rule, regardless of most of its political outcomes. Hobbes' justification for anti-Democratic rule is overly pessimistic.

Those advocating for the Hobbesian view would respond that the anti-Hobbesians are overlooking a major point. The reason that the modern state is so safe and has made people so forgetful about the dangers of violence and so lax about such issues is exactly because the modern state enforces with such vigour the Hobbesian method of politics. The Hobbesians would state that we must never forget the dangers of the 'state of nature' and that ultimately any form of strong government needs to be upheld to ensure domestic tranquillity.

Yet even if we are to accept Hobbes' view of a strong sovereign to contain the violence that ensues from anarchy, that does not make Democracy inapplicable to being that sovereign exercising the power of internal peace. We can look at the case of Israel as a prime example where the sovereign is a collective democratically-elected entity and they have managed in the face of imminent threat to ensure peace and have rigorous defences against internal and external violence. Hobbes had a serious point to make that people should never forget the violence of anarchy and why we should always show deference to the regime that limits that anarchy and violence, and we must take that into account. But Hobbes did not realise that Democracy could also present a strong sovereign, albeit in a corporate entity, and tackle that threat of the 'state of nature'.

The objections to democracy presented by Plato and Hobbes lack a strong foundation. Their arguments, that are mainly criticising, remain fundamentally unconvincing. Although Plato rightly pointed out the threat of political failure if the people took charge and their voice was louder than those that are politically capable, he disregarded the people's ability to participate and contribute to the political discourse. Similarly, Hobbes fails to see the potential of Democracy and the people for assuming a politically capable, responsible and even-handed power to embody that strong sovereign he sought. Democracy holds intrinsic worth. Both these scholars failed to fully appreciate its value.

Ultimately, regardless of the outcomes, Democracy remains the best form of government. I have argued in this essay that Democracy is inherently linked to the principles of equality and liberty, which invests it with notable intrinsic worth. I have discussed the major objections presented by Plato and Hobbes, and sympathy has been shown for their worry but on the whole, they were refuted due to their pessimism and elitism. I have argued for the value of democracy and we do believe that we must give a chance to the people to have a say in collective decision-making, that we must remind ourselves of the worst forms that could take charge and reinforce the democratic ideal within countries. Democracy has led to multiple good outcomes, and it must not fall into a complacent, docile state where they forget the values they stand for. The democratic ship has survived the most troubled storms. We must constantly remind ourselves of what lurks beneath the waves and steer towards Democracy to serve a purpose that will perpetuate good within this world.

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