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Degrees of democraticity

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Abstract

People have tended to load their different conceptions of democracy with their own political ideals; in this paper it is argued that normative and definitional questions should rather be separated, so that political philosophers and political scientists may adopt the same concept of democracy, even if they disagree normatively or politically. Moreover, it is argued that we should replace an absolute notion of democracy by a relativized notion, which allows for different degrees of democraticity. This facilitates the separation of normative and conceptual issues and it is convenient in contexts in which “democratic deficits” are discussed – as e.g. when democracy is to be implemented on a supranational level. Moreover, it has the consequence that democratic deficits are not necessarily bad.

Keywords

Alf Ross; Changes of Power; Corruption; Democracy; Discrimination; Ideal Type; Individual Rights; Representation; Subsidiarity.

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Introduction

There are competing conceptions of democracy. In particular, political philosophers and political scientists have defined the terms “democracy” and “democratic” in many different ways.¹ Which one is right? How should one choose among the proposed definitions?

A democracy is perhaps always a State, but the adjective “democratic” is often applied to other entities as well; for example, organizations, collective decisions, decision methods, personalities, families, and so on. However, in what follows, I shall concentrate upon States and certain similar political organizations or societies, such as unions and confederations of States.

The problem of how to choose among different conceptions of democracy might be held to be, at least partly, a normative question. Presumably, different philosophers propose different concepts of democracy because they evaluate types of political organizations differently; each favours the definition that picks out his or her favourite type of society. However, I recommend that we separate the normative and the definitional questions. In this way, different thinkers may adopt *the same* concept of democracy, even if they disagree normatively. This would facilitate theorizing concerning democracy.

But is this possible? Would not everyone still want to reserve the term “democracy” for his particular version of a good society? Do we not all think of ourselves as democrats? Yes, I believe this is true of all or nearly all of those who take part in academic discussions of democracy. So how could we agree on one specific concept?

1. Relativization

I suggest that this might be possible if we think of democracy in relative terms, i.e. as a matter of degree. Primarily, we should not regard democraticity as a *property* of certain societies. Rather, we should opt for a two-place *relation* of democraticity (“society A is more democratic than society B”). Moreover, we may assume that this relation is asymmetric and transitive, but not connected. In other words, no society is more democratic than itself; if A is more democratic than B and B is more democratic than C, then A is more democratic than C; but we should not assume that for every pair of societies A and B, either A is more democratic than B, or B is more democratic than A, or A and B are equally democratic.

This should be helpful, for once democracy is taken to be a matter of degrees, it is possible to define it in such a way that everyone could agree that a higher degree of democracy is not automatically better.

Moreover, we can allow that two societies, A and B, are both democratic, but that A is nevertheless more democratic than B. When we use the term “democratic” as a one-place relation in such contexts, we might just take it to refer to societies where there is “government by the people” in at least *some* fairly reasonable sense and to *some* fairly substantial extent. This is vague, of course, but here vagueness is tolerable.

However, it would perhaps still not be so easy to establish a scientific consensus regarding the precise definition of a two-place relation like the one indicated here. Therefore, it would probably be expedient as well as clarifying to adopt a *three-place* relation of democraticity in terms of which we may say of two societies A and B, e.g., that both are democratic, but that A is more democratic than B in a certain

¹ See e.g. Frank Cunningham, *Theories of Democracy*, London and New York: Routledge, 2002.

respect R_1 , while B is more democratic than A in respect R_2 .² I suspect that it would be comparatively easy to reach a consensus concerning such matters. And if so, it would presumably not be necessary or even desirable to have a conception which allows us to determine which one of A or B is more democratic than the other – or that they are equally democratic.

This method of substituting a one-place property by one or more many-place relations – in terms of which one may subsequently define various one-place properties as needed – is a scientifically progressive and fairly well known way of handling contested and problematic notions in many areas.

2. Starting-point and method

My purpose in this paper is not to construct an explicit and precise definition of democraticity. Rather, I shall indicate a number of features and distinctions that might be taken into account if one wants to adopt a relativized concept of democraticity. We should start from something rather uncontroversial, namely that democracy is “government by the people”. This is what you will often find in a dictionary. But it is of course very unspecific. The problem is that “the people” can “govern” in many different ways – e.g. more or less indirectly.

Presumably, the people can govern, even if it does not consider and decide every single issue. It is just the same in a dictatorship. A dictator need not himself (or herself) decide every single issue concerning the government; some decisions may be delegated to others, and it is still a dictatorship even if some of the decisions made by others happen not to be in accordance with the actual will of the dictator. Similarly, *mutatis mutandis*, with a democracy.

One may ask who are referred to by the phrase “the people”. Take the people of Sweden, for example. Does this include every citizen? Even children? Are immigrants who have not yet been awarded citizenship included? In Abraham Lincoln’s phrase, democracy is “government of the people, by the people, for the people”, but in Sweden those who are governed are not the same as those who govern (in the sense that they have the right to vote). Hence, I think we can say that Sweden is not fully democratic, since some of those who are governed are not allowed to participate in government. It would be more democratic – but not necessarily better – if *everyone* in Sweden were allowed to participate in government.

This example also illustrates my earlier point about the importance of distinguishing definitional from normative questions. Clearly, it is quite reasonable to restrict the right to vote to citizens who have reached a certain age; small children cannot be expected to be sufficiently informed about political questions and they are probably not able to vote in a responsible way. Therefore, the whole people should not be allowed to “govern”. So a lesser degree of democracy, in *this* respect, is to be preferred.

3. Formal and material aspects

As far as I know, the Danish philosopher and legal scientist Alf Ross is one of the few who has attempted a definition of “democracy” which explicitly allows for degrees of democraticity.³ He says he wants to identify an “ideal type” of

² Different examples of such “respects” or dimensions will be mentioned in sections 2 – 14 below.

³ See Alf Ross, *Varför demokrati?* (“Why democracy?”), Stockholm: Tidens förlag, 1968. However, in many contexts Ross nevertheless uses the term “democracy” in an absolute sense, e.g. when he says that “democracy is the form of government which gives a maximum of political freedom, in the sense of autonomy, to the citizens” (p. 108, my translation). And in certain places he seems to identify

democracy, with three dimensions of variation: intensity, efficiency, and extensity. These dimensions correspond to what I called three-place relations of democraticity in section 1 above. However, Ross seems to make somewhat stronger assumptions about his dimensions than I do – he seems to think of them as measurable on interval scales with fixed maxima and minima – and, more importantly, he regards his three dimensions as exhaustive, whereas I assume that there are many others in addition.

This last point is connected with the fact that his notion of democracy is more formal or legalistic than mine. For him democracy is a *form* of government, presumably specified in a constitution, whereas I want to suggest that actual behaviour and attitudes are also important. For example, it seems to me that there is more “government by the people” in a nation where there is a high degree of political *participation* among citizens than there is if political apathy is the dominant attitude (other things being equal). For Ross, on the other hand, participation is conceptually irrelevant. Of course, like most democrats he believes that participation is a good thing, but increased participation does not bring us closer to his ideal type of democracy. His ideal type is insensitive to material aspects, such as the degree of participation.

As a matter of fact, it seems that democracy in a formal sense is compatible with dictatorship in material terms. For example, it is often said that the *constitution* of the Soviet Union was democratic even though *in reality* it was a dictatorship, at least during the last decades of Stalin’s reign. Again, I would say that Sweden would not be very democratic – perhaps not even a democracy – if only a tiny fraction of the people in Sweden voted in general elections and if most Swedes had no political preferences and were only interested in sex, sport and soap operas. Under such conditions there would be no “government by the people”, even if the constitution would remain just as it is today.

Ross’s three dimensions can be explained as follows.⁴ *Intensity* is the percentage of “the people” who have the right to vote. For example, democraticity was increased when women were enfranchised.⁵ *Efficiency* is the degree to which the people can really decide issues. For example, efficiency is at a maximum where there is direct democracy, in the sense that the people decide all issues by direct voting. There is less efficiency in a representative democracy, especially if the government can to some extent act independently of Parliament, or if there is a House of Lords or some independently appointed legislative body that shares the power with elected members of Parliament. So parliamentarism increases the degree of democraticity. Similarly, if general elections occur more often, democraticity is increased. *Extensity* is the extent to which popular influence and control applies to different areas or branches of public decision-making. Maximum extensity is reached when the people control not only the legislative power in parliament, but also the executive power of the Government and the judicial power of the courts. I suppose Ross would say that extensity, and thereby democraticity, is also increased if chiefs of police – and perhaps also ordinary policemen – are directly appointed by popular vote.

Ross is quite explicit that his “ideal type” of democracy is not necessarily a moral or political ideal; more democracy, in his sense, is not necessarily better. But he does not always stick to this distinction. For example, he says that maximum intensity

democracy with the majority principle (see e.g. pp. 111-114). Again, he also says that compromise is the essence of democracy (p. 120).

4 See Ross (1968), pp. 92-95.

5 Ross is not quite consistent on this point. On p. 94 percentage seems to be the main factor, but on p. 91 he claims that some exclusions are worse than others, independently of numbers. Thus, he says that “it is more undemocratic to exclude people with an income under a certain level than to exclude women, even if the latter are more numerous” (my translation). His reason for this rather surprising view is that exclusion of the former kind is more “politically important” (see p. 92).

requires only that all *adult* members of the people have the right to vote,⁶ but he also admits that the “logical limit” is that *every* human individual has this right.⁷ I think he should have said that, while the former is better, the latter is more democratic. The reason why those who are 18 years old should be allowed to vote, but not those who are only 17, is surely normative rather than purely practical or somehow dependent upon the very concept of democracy.

However, as mentioned above, it seems to me that democracy is not merely a matter of formal or legal aspects. Intensity in Ross’s sense is purely formal but the actual turnout in elections is also important for democrats. For example, those who think that there is a “democratic deficit” in the EU or in the USA sometimes emphasize precisely the low turnout in general elections. So it is plausible to let democraticity depend upon turnout as well. This is not the same as participation, for participation may include a great many activities besides voting.

It should be noticed that material intensity could presumably be increased by legal means. For example, a more or less heavy fine could be imposed on those who fail to cast their vote. If the fine is sufficiently heavy, turnout might very well approach a hundred percent. I have the impression, however, that this is not relevant for Ross’s formal notion of intensity.

4. Direct democracy

If the people should govern to a maximal degree, it seems that intensity, extensity, and efficiency in Ross’s sense – as well as in a more material sense – should be maximal.

Let us consider extensity. Maximal democracy seems to imply that the people as a whole should do everything that is ordinarily done within the legislative, executive and judicial branches of government. For example, the people should not only vote on certain legislative proposals; they should also *make* such proposals. And they should discuss among themselves how they should act in given situations and how they should solve political problems. Obviously, this is impossible in practice. It may work in small groups, but not on the level of national politics. In real life, democracy must be far from direct.

Moreover, it is not clear that government by the people ought to be as extensive as is practically possible. For example, it might be possible to increase the extent to which the people of Sweden directly decide legal issues ordinarily handled by the courts and economic decisions ordinarily made by the Central Bank of Sweden, but this would hardly be desirable.⁸ Apart from the practical difficulties, it would probably decrease the quality of the decisions. Judges and members of the Central Bank of Sweden have a training that is presumably of some importance for their ability to make good decisions.⁹

For similar reasons, direct democracy it is not even desirable in legislation – except perhaps in some very special cases. In other words, efficiency in Ross’s sense ought to be rather limited. This is congenial to the views of those of us who prefer some kind of representative democracy. The main reason for preferring representative democracy is, of course, that efficiency in Ross’s sense can be expected to be incompatible with efficiency in a more utilitarian sense. The common good can be

6 Ibid. p. 94.

7 Ibid. p. 91.

8 Even so, someone may of course hold that, other things being equal, extensivity ought to be as high as possible. But other things are often not equal.

9 In view of recent events in Europe and the U. S., I should perhaps add that I do not believe that the members of central banks always make the right decisions. For all I know, they may be wrong more often than not.

more effectively served by politicians than by people in general, since the former have a special training in these matters and also more time and opportunities to find the best solutions. It is also very important that they have to argue for their decisions in public and they can be held responsible for them in retrospect.

It might be argued that these advantages of representative democracy could be somehow imitated within the framework of direct democracy. If every citizen were to play the part of a politician – as in direct democracy – he or she should perhaps be forced to argue in public for his or her view on every issue in advance and to accept responsibility in retrospect. In practice, however, this would be too time-consuming, and it is not easy to see how responsibility for bad decisions could be exacted in retrospect. Citizens can hardly be voted out of “office”. In any case, the disadvantages of direct democracy illustrate the (rather obvious) point that more democracy can be worse than less democracy.¹⁰

5. Economic democracy

It is sometimes argued that democracy should be extended to the economic activities in society. This can be interpreted in several ways; what I have in mind here is the idea that decisions concerning the use of capital and the production of goods and services should be made or ultimately controlled by the State, i.e. by the Government or by parliament. Socialism, in other words, or more precisely State socialism in conjunction with democracy.¹¹

Ross does not claim that economic democracy would increase democratic extensity. I suppose this is because his notion of democracy is purely formal. For him, extensity is a matter of the traditional branches of government. However, extensity might be taken in a broader and more material sense. We may take the executive branch of government to include production of goods and services as well as investment and management of capital – or we may take these activities to form a fourth branch of government over and above the traditional three. In any case, many people would presumably agree that the degree of democraticity would be increased by the introduction of economic democracy, i.e. if government of the people were not restricted to legislation, executive decisions concerning public services, foreign policy, infrastructure and so on, but rather extended to include also decisions within commercial and industrial life. And even people who are opposed to socialism might agree that, other things being equal, socialism would be more *democratic* than capitalism – as long as it is clearly understood that “more democratic” does not entail “better”. Whether or not socialism is better than capitalism is a separate issue. It should not be confused with the question of which is more democratic.

However, there is a completely different sense of “economic democracy”, in which the term signifies a system where all enterprises and firms are owned by their workers or “employees”, who make their decisions by democratic methods (free discussion, majority rule, and so on).¹² In itself, such a system seems to be compatible with political dictatorship, but we might add that it should be combined with a democratic State. Furthermore, we may demand that the Government controls all banks and investment funds. Individual firms may invest their profits, but they may also borrow money for productive investments from the Government. Finally, to distinguish the system from ordinary capitalism, we may add that no

¹⁰ In order to avoid misunderstanding, I should perhaps add that I do not have the silly view that less democracy is always better than more democracy.

¹¹ Ross regards the phrase “economic democracy” as unclear and ambiguous, and he suggests that a better term would be “socialism”, see Ross (1968), p. 138-9.

¹² For example, David Schweickart uses the phrase “economic democracy” in this way in his book *After Capitalism* (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, 2002).

individual capitalists are allowed, but that the Government and associations of workers may act like capitalists in a market economy, provided that they operate within the limits of the State. Firms may be governed by direct or representative democracy.

So far as I can see, democracy in the workplace would not increase political democracy. This is so because individual firms would not be controlled by the people, but by the employees. However, if the executive power of the State were to control all investment funds – apart from the capital assets of the individual firms – it seems that democraticity would indeed be increased. But even so, economic democracy in the first sense seems to be *more democratic* than economic democracy in the second sense, other things being equal. Again, however, it does not follow that the former is better than the latter. This is a separate and rather interesting question. My own feeling, for what it is worth, is that, *in this respect*, less democracy is much better than more democracy.

6. Deliberative democracy

Some people seem to regard the essence of democracy as collective decisions according to the majority principle. By contrast, those who favour deliberative democracy stress the public reasoning of free and equal citizens in order to establish “the will of the people”, preferably in the form of a consensus. Some voting rule like the majority principle is probably indispensable in a democratic State, but it is tempting to say that the State’s degree of democraticity is also proportional to the degree to which deliberative democracy is realized in it. In order to govern, the people must make up its mind.

On the other hand, there is a limit to the amount of discussion that can be spent on political problems and if consensus is required we might be stuck forever on a lot of issues. This is not only bad; it is also not a plausible requirement on democracy. Democracy is a way of handling incompatible beliefs and preferences in a collectivity, and these cannot, and should not, always be discussed away. This may be desirable when a compromise, or a consensus on either one of the competing positions, would be an improvement over a simple majority decision, but this is certainly not always the case.

Nevertheless, such cases exist, and a democratic process of decision-making should therefore try to identify them. Other things being equal, a country in which the ideals of deliberative democracy influence decision-making is more democratic than countries in which those ideals play no role in practice.

7. The common good

If democracy is “government of the people, by the people, for the people”, one may consider the idea that there is more democracy, the more government is “for the people”. We may assume that government is “for the people” to the extent that it realizes “the common good”.

An obvious problem with this suggestion is that “the common good” can be understood in many different ways. For example, the time horizon is important; are we referring to the common good in the short or the long run? In so far as there exists a common good at all, it seems reasonable to define it in terms of the preferences of all concerned. The common good may be identified with the greatest possible aggregate satisfaction of these preferences. But people’s preferences may be over means or ends. Democracy seems to have something to do with the former, but not necessarily with the latter. On the other hand, the latter may be more important than the former from an evaluative point of view or, in other

words, from the point of view of the “common good”. Consequently, I suggest that the degree of democraticity is completely independent of the degree to which the common good is realized by political decision-making.

Another interpretation of “for the people” is that the people should only have its own interests in mind when it governs. For example, on this interpretation Swedish voters should only be concerned with Swedish interests when they vote, not with the interests of the whole European Union and even less with the interests of people in the rest of the world. Sweden would be less democratic, on this understanding, if Swedes also tried to improve the situation of people in other countries. This is a strange view of democracy and I do not recommend it.

8. Changes of power

If several parties in a country compete for political power, there seems to be more “government by the people” if the parties take turns at governing than if one party governs all the time. In the short run, it may be unavoidable that a certain party or coalition of parties – or a certain section of the population – has the power to decide what the State should do, but if there are changes of power now and then, there is nevertheless a sense in which, over time, the *whole* people governs. By contrast, if one party governs nearly all the time, there is rather government by a certain *part* of the people – and this part may not even constitute a majority, much less a significant majority. Consequently, changes of power may be said to increase the degree of democraticity in a country.

But, once again, we cannot infer from this that changes of power are always or ever valuable. It is sometimes said that changes of power are valuable for their own sake. This is not plausible. Whether or not they are good depends upon the consequences in particular cases.

Personally, I believe that changes of power can often have a certain instrumental value. For example, certain political decisions may be desirable from the point of view of the common good, but because of close ties to special interests or of party prestige a given party may be unable to make them, while another party might make them quite easily. Therefore, if the parties alternate in power, they may together make more desirable decisions over a period of time than if only one party had been in power over the whole period. Moreover, if there is real competition among parties because no party can take a certain majority of the votes for granted, and if different parties or coalitions of parties can shoulder the responsibilities of government and thereby educate themselves, the results of political decision making can be expected to be better than if one party is more or less automatically re-elected over and over again.

On the other hand, if changes of power occur too frequently, government would probably be focused too much on results in the short run. Perhaps something like eight to ten years would be a suitable period for a party to be in office.

9. Democratic parties

If parties nominate members of Parliament and other officials, it makes a difference whether or not the parties make these decisions in a democratic way. For example, do they choose their leaders by direct democratic methods or is it a matter of more or less secret manipulation within a small elite?

Thus, I suggest that a democratic country with a party system is more or less democratic depending upon the democraticity of the political parties. The democraticity of the country is partly determined by the democraticity of the parties.

It might be suggested that political parties ought to be democratic in just the same way as countries ought to be democratic. But this is by no means obvious. For example, direct democracy as well as democratic centralism may be more acceptable for parties than for countries.

10. Corruption

If special interests (big business, labour unions, farmers, very rich individuals, etc.) have the power to enforce or influence governmental or party decisions, there is correspondingly less government by the people. Normally, such power is not legitimized in the constitution, but it may nevertheless be quite real.

All cases of this kind may not be ordinarily called "corruption". This term may be used in more or less inclusive senses. In the strictest sense, it only covers cases where officials use their administrative or governmental powers for illegitimate *private* enrichment. Even in this strict sense, there are degrees of corruption. According to the World Bank, countries like Finland, New Zealand, Singapore, Sweden, Denmark and Austria have the least corruption, while Bangladesh, Nigeria, Myanmar and Angola have the most.¹³ It is often said that corruption undermines democracy.

In a more inclusive sense, there is also corruption when officials favour some individual or some group of people for the good of their party, for example in the form of financial contributions or campaign support. But it is clearly difficult to draw a sharp line between corruption in this sense and morally and politically legitimate attempts to improve the situation of certain citizens (for example, the worst off or the entrepreneurs). Such attempts and corresponding political promises may inspire citizens to support certain politicians financially or otherwise.

But even if certain mild kinds of "corruption" are sometimes morally legitimate, they may nevertheless decrease democraticity – at least if they are not balanced off by similar corruption or support for other political agents. However, this is quite acceptable and nothing to worry about, if democraticity is conceptually independent of desirability. As I suggest it should be.

11. Minority and individual rights

Democracy as such – i.e. government by the people – does not presuppose or involve minority or individual rights over and above the general right of citizens to participate in government. But so-called liberal democracy is often taken to involve certain further rights. Such rights are, for example, "the right to life, liberty and security of person", the right to "equal protection of the law", the right "to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers", the right to freedom of peaceful assembly and association, the right "to work, to free choice of employment, to just and favourable conditions of work and to protection against unemployment".¹⁴

Now, it can be held that political rights of this kind tend to decrease democracy, since they constitute a constraint upon the power of the people. Since the people are not allowed to violate individual rights, democratic efficiency is to that extent reduced.

Another question is whether, in a democracy, the minority should have any right to be respected or catered for by the majority. Should the majority only provide for its

¹³ See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Political_corruption.

¹⁴ The rights mentioned here are taken from the Universal Declaration of Human Rights adopted by the United Nations in 1948.

own interests or should it also to some obligatory degree satisfy the demands of the minority?

More precisely, there are *two* questions involved here. First, is it morally desirable that the majority respects the minority? Second, is it part of democracy that the majority respects the minority?¹⁵ The first question may be answered differently in different cases. But the answer to the second question seems to me to be affirmative. In order for *the people* to govern, it seems that the people as a whole should have some influence on government. If this influence cannot be wholly realized by voting power, it may also be a matter of minority rights.

Some theorists may of course disagree. In particular, those who take the essence of democracy to be decision-making in accordance with the majority rule can be expected to claim that the democraticity of a country is quite independent of whether or not the majority recognizes an obligation to take minority interests into account – and a corresponding minority right. But those who are against minority rights should argue this on moral grounds. That the people govern is one thing, that it votes is another.

12. Proportional representation

Do small minorities have a right to seats in Parliament or should there be an election threshold against small parties, parties with, say, less than four percent of the votes? It is sometimes said that such a threshold is undemocratic. On the other hand, the absence of a threshold would allow small parties to have more influence than is motivated by their support among the citizens.¹⁶

However, it seems quite unwarranted to say that democracy requires strict proportionality. "Government by the people" may be a vague idea, but it seems incompatible with a situation in which a very small party – especially if it is generally and correctly regarded as "extremist" by most citizens – has disproportionate power in that it can dictate policy and force the acceptance of decisions that most citizens dislike.

13. Discrimination

Almost everyone would agree, nowadays, that without women's suffrage, there would be a serious democratic deficit. However, we may go one step further. If women have *in fact* less opportunity to participate in politics on an equal basis – even if there are no legal constraints – there is also less democracy. Therefore, patriarchy undermines democracy. Government by the male part of the people is not the same as government by the people.

Similarly with other kinds of discrimination or oppression, such as those related to age, sexual orientation, physical disability, ethnicity, race, class, and so on. Thus, "pro-liberal democrats see such things as racial or sexist discrimination that excludes people from forming potentially effective political organizations as not just wrong but as undemocratic".¹⁷ I would add that even if such discrimination is not legitimized by the constitution or other legislation in the country or political organization under discussion – and even if it is, on the contrary, expressly

15 Of course, there is also the more pragmatic question of whether it would be a rational strategy for the majority to respect the minority in a certain situation. This is not (part of) the question I have in mind here.

16 In the 2006 general election in Sweden, the Swedish Democrats (Sverigedemokraterna) did not get enough votes to get into parliament. However, without the 4% election threshold they would have received ten seats, and consequently the winning alliance of four non-socialist parties would not have had a majority in the parliament. The winning alliance was not supported by a majority of the voters.

17 Cunningham (2002), p. 68.

declared illegal – the country is less democratic to the extent that there is *actual* discrimination in it.

14. Subsidiarity

The so-called subsidiarity principle requires that political decisions be made on the lowest possible level. Is subsidiarity entailed by democraticity? In other words, is a political association more democratic the more it realizes the ideal of subsidiarity?

The thought that democraticity increases with subsidiarity might be involved when eurosceptics claim that there is a democratic deficit in the EU. At least, they would probably say that the EU would be more democratic if more decisions were made separately by the member States rather than by the European Parliament or by the Council. But why would this be more democratic? Perhaps the idea is that there is more democracy when decisions are “closer to the citizens” or “closer to those who are primarily affected”. But decisions made by a member State are only “closer” to the citizens of that particular State; it is further away from the other citizens of the EU – and thereby from the majority of the citizens. Moreover, in many cases the other citizens of the EU are significantly affected by the decisions of a member State; many of the former may be *more* affected than some of the latter.

It must be admitted, of course, that the phrase “government by the people” is not sufficiently precise to settle the question of whether democracy increases or decreases with subsidiarity. But that is quite all right. The question of what is the most suitable degree of subsidiarity – for a given kind of decision or branch of politics – is a substantial political and normative question that should not be confused with questions of terminology. Consequently, I propose that democracy should *not* be taken to increase with subsidiarity; rather, democraticity increases when political power is shared equally by all citizens of the relevant political association.¹⁸ In other words, the more subsidiarity, the less democracy – other things being equal. But, as before, more democracy is not automatically better.

15. Conclusion

If, as I have argued, normative questions should be clearly separated from questions of democraticity, there is an important and to my mind welcome conclusion to be drawn: the fact that X is more democratic than Y is *not automatically* a decisive reason for preferring X to Y. The reasons for preferring X to Y have to be more substantial. The fact that X is more democratic than Y may very well be one such reason, but this should then be recognized as a potentially controversial normative or political proposition that needs further support; it should not be taken as a conceptual triviality. Ideally, the concept of democracy or “government by the people” should be defined in a way that could be accepted by all political parties. Political disputes can then be clearly recognized as such and they should not be mixed up with mere questions of correct vocabulary. For example, it may be agreed that a higher degree of direct democracy or of economic democracy entails a higher degree of *democraticity* (other things being equal). Everyone should be able to accept that, but the question of whether more direct

¹⁸ A further question is what political associations would in this sense be “relevant”. This is what is sometimes also called “the boundary problem”. See e.g. my paper “Democracy and political boundaries”, in Folke Tersman (ed.), *The Viability and desirability of global democracy*, Stockholm Studies in Democratic Theory, Vol. III, Stockholm University 2007, pp. 14-32, and several other papers within the same research project.

democracy or economic democracy is also *better* is a separate question that needs to be handled as a substantial *political* issue.¹⁹

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