

Arenilla, M. (2010): “Concepts in Democratic Theory”, en S. French, S. y D. Ríos (Ed.) *E-Democracy: A Group Decision and Negotiation Perspective*. Dordrecht: Springer, p. 15-30.

David Rios Insua
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Editors

Advances in Group Decision and Negotiation 5

e-Democracy

*A Group Decision and Negotiation
Perspective*

 Springer

Concepts in Democratic Theory

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Abstract This chapter reviews key concepts in democratic theory and participation from a classical liberal perspective, so as to set up the stage for the rest of the book. After revising various definitions about democracy, we review the main ideas about direct democracy, representative democracy and participatory democracy. We then address some of the current challenges for democracy, outlining how information and communication technologies may aid in addressing such issues.

1. Introduction

Few words exist in the social sciences that have so many different, even opposed, meanings and that have mobilized more passion and people throughout history than that of democracy. This word evokes hope, but also apathy; it represents the future although also a profound past; it symbolizes change as well as resistance to change; it excites passions, but produces conformity. As if it were a sun, around this concept others revolve structuring the political and social essence of contemporary life: liberty, equality, power, sovereignty, representation, participation, legitimacy, choice and the common good.

The concept of democracy just reflects the evolution that has taken place over the last two and a half millennia of a system for the organization of the exercise of political power in society, which includes diverse and contradictory meanings. It is a creation of Western thought, with innumerable theoretical and ideological contributions and political forms exercised over this time. The fact that it is a historical and cultural product as well as a social model would explain current problems related with attempts to extend it to certain societies, as their context is too different from those in which the concept of democracy was forged.

What we know as democracy today is grounded in the theoretical premises of democratic liberalism, which has little or nothing to do with the Athenian democracy. Its construction owes much both to its detractors and to its defenders. It represents a specific type of society that can be contrasted with all other political systems and with what in each historical moment, since Athens, has been understood as democracy. In addition, democracy today has become a “brand” or a “certificate of quality” for states in international relations.

The evolution of democracy is in debt with the development of the concepts of liberty and equality. Democracy has been constructed on these two principles and they constitute the explanatory core of the ideas developed in this chapter, which are based on the classics of political theory. Constructing the evolution of the concept of democracy based on participation or its limitations is a tempting offer, particularly in a book of these characteristics. Contrasting the exercise of direct power with the exercise of power through representation restricted by an institutional structure has great

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explanatory power, but such a focus could divert the discussion of the essence of democracy towards a quantitative question, government by the many or by the few, present today in the debates around e-democracy. Thus, the central theme of democracy has to be found in the meaning of political power, in the nature of the citizen and his/her role in society and in political institutions. It is the opposition between the individual/citizen and the exercise of power which gave rise to the evolution of the concept of democracy.

This chapter deals with what is understood by democracy. From the focus just mentioned, we will begin with the principles of liberty and equality and look at the concepts of direct democracy, representative democracy and participatory democracy. Lastly, we will look at some of the principal elements of the crisis in democracy and the challenges that it currently faces.