

WHO SHOULD HAVE A VOICE IN A DEMOCRACY AND TO WHAT EXTENT?

When we find the term “democracy” defined in its Wikipedia page, we read: *Democracy (Greek: δημοκρατία dēmokratía, literally "rule by people") is a system of government where the citizens exercise power by voting. In a direct democracy, the citizens as a whole form a governing body and vote directly on each issue. In a representative democracy the citizens elect representatives from among themselves. These representatives meet to form a governing body, such as a legislature. In a liberal democracy the powers of the majority are exercised within the framework of a representative democracy, but the constitution limits the majority and protects the minority, usually through the enjoyment by all of certain individual rights, e.g. freedom of speech, or freedom of association.*

<https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Democracy>

Thus, it may seem strange to ask the question, “Who should have a voice in a democracy and what power should this voice carry?” But when we look at the history of democracy, we find that there has always been unequal participation in the process. In the American system of governance, our democratic principles evolved in that, initially, as was true with the founding of the principle of democracy in ancient Greece, only a certain element of the polis (property-owning white males) had the right to a vote. In time, we have amended our ideals to include all adult legal citizens 18 years of age and older- with the exception of certain citizens under certain legal considerations. But this leaves out a sizeable portion of the polis, to include children, non-citizens, felons, non-registered voters, and more. And it also does not address force-multipliers such as PACs, political parties, unions, big-money donations, variance of social-economic status and what this means for ability to contribute time and money to political campaigns, and more. Should we address these? Do they matter?

Thoughtful liberal thinkers may believe that each person in a democracy should have equal voice. It may, then, come as a surprise to many that Socrates himself did not stand on this principle. In Book VI of *The Republic*, Socrates points out that the flaws of democracy by comparing society to a ship (*The Republic* VI 488a–489d). Again from Wikipedia: *In the metaphor, found at 488a–489d, Plato's Socrates compares the population at large to a strong but nearsighted shipowner whose knowledge of seafaring is lacking. The quarreling sailors are demagogues and politicians, and the ship's navigator, a stargazer, is the philosopher. The sailors flatter themselves with claims to knowledge of sailing, though they know nothing of navigation, and are constantly vying with one another for the approval of the shipowner so to captain the ship, going so far as to stupefy the shipowner with drugs and wine. Meanwhile, they dismiss the navigator as a useless stargazer, though he is the only one with adequate knowledge to direct the ship's course.* https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ship_of_State

Unless we wish to be obtusely contrarian, we must invariably answer the question, as does Socrates' interlocutor Adeimantus, “Why then should just any of us, without regard to level of skill, experience, or education, be allowed to select the rulers of a country?”

Robert A Dahl in his book *Democracy and Its Critics* (c. 1989 by Yale University Press) says, very early on, “Since justice is what tends to promote the common interest, a good polis must also be just; and therefore it must aim at developing citizens who seek the common good....A good citizen is one who in public matters aims always at the common good.” (page 15).

Which brings up the question, if the point of a democratic form of governance is to achieve a common good, does it, in fact, do so? And, if so, does it require equality of voice from all of its demos?

The Sanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy offers an essay on the ethics of rationality of voting. They raise six major questions concerning this issue:

1. Is it rational for an individual citizen to vote?
2. Is there a moral duty to vote?
3. Are there moral obligations regarding how citizens vote?
4. Is it justifiable for governments to compel citizens to vote?
5. Is it permissible to buy, trade, and sell votes?
6. Who ought to have the right to vote, and should every citizen have an equal vote?

To prepare for the seminar on October 18, please read these articles and the attachment (an outline of quotes and tables).

<http://www.openculture.com/2016/11/why-socrates-hated-democracies-an-animated-case-for-why-self-government-requires-wisdom-education.html>

<https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/voting/>

<https://www.nytimes.com/2016/04/25/opinion/should-everybody-vote.html>

Attachment: excerpts from The Unheavenly Chorus, Unequal Political Voice and the Broken Promise of American Democracy by Kay Lehman Schlozman, Sidney Verba, Henry E. Brady, c. 2012 by Princeton University Press Also, the first chapter is available at: <http://assets.press.princeton.edu/chapters/s9685.pdf>

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