



Democracy and the Concept of Popular Sovereignty

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Abstract

Democracy is commonly understood through the principle of popular sovereignty, which asserts that political authority ultimately resides with the people. This paper examines the historical, philosophical, and institutional foundations of popular sovereignty and its relationship with democratic governance. Tracing its origins from the Athenian model of direct participation to Enlightenment debates and modern representative systems, the study highlights how the meaning of “the people” has evolved across political traditions. The paper critically engages with key tensions in democratic theory, particularly the distinction between procedural and substantive democracy, the challenges of representation and accountability, and the conflict between majority rule and minority rights. It further explores how pluralism, globalization, and supranational institutions complicate traditional notions of sovereignty in contemporary democracies. By analyzing deliberative and electoral mechanisms, the study argues that democracy should be viewed not merely as the rule of the majority, but as an ongoing process that requires civic education, institutional checks and balances, and strong adherence to the rule of law. The paper concludes that while popular sovereignty remains central to democratic legitimacy, its meaningful realization depends on inclusive participation, protection of fundamental rights, and responsiveness to social diversity. A nuanced understanding of popular sovereignty is therefore essential for sustaining democratic systems in an increasingly complex and interconnected world.

Keywords: Democracy; Popular Sovereignty; Representation; Political Participation; Deliberative Democracy; Rule of Law; Pluralism

1. Introduction

The Athenian model of democracy, although serving as a major stylistic reference in political thought, never became a recognised concept in the periodic resurgence of democratic ideas until the works of English writers in the late sixteenth century and the French Revolution expanded on the theme of popular sovereignty applied through representative agencies (Carratala Puertas & Jose Frances Garcia, 2017). The significance of such representative arrangements in discussions within the Athenian tradition was not preserved in the writings of later thinkers, who adopted Aristotle’s moral conception of democracy while renouncing the Athenian political context. As a result, the European Enlightenment had few conceptual resources to analyse the dynamics of social and anthropological change that would open the possibility of public government predicated upon popular sovereignty through representative institutions (Alexander-Davey, 2014). The strict distinction between sovereign activities of both Athenian and modern representative arrangements, together with the procedural understanding of what it means to act publicly entailed in the practice of representative democracy as Aristotle described in the Athenian tradition, had to await reflection within the Anglo-Saxon Enlightenment tradition, where the founding generation in North America was deeply etched by the

Athenian writings. The very possibility of democracy could be analysed in the Athenian horizon because the cultural focus on the Good contained a vein of anthropology besides merely ethical conjecture.

The English conception of Commonwealth influenced the Anglo-American approach to popular government, and the systematic notion of political representation arose from it. As both constitute the two featured aspects of the Athenian configuration—the investigative articulation of a format of public agency accomplished by representative institutions and the ongoing settlement of the common Good that remains unquestionable in a profound sense—specified treatments of popular government could again be properly addressed on the basis of the Athenian model three centuries later. Political representation understood as a distinctive act or function dependent as much on the existence of unchangeable values regarding the common Good as on the institution of the respective formats of human action developed through a sequence of Humanities such as History, Law, and Society, which the Anglo-American teaching borrowed once more from Athenian premises.

2. Historical Foundations of Popular Sovereignty

An important tension in democratic political thought arises from the interest of citizens in adopting the role of sovereign, a tension that can be traced back to the discussion of popular sovereignty between Jean Jacques Rousseau and Immanuel Kant concerning the relationship between self-determination, freedom, and democracy. Rousseau emphasized the essential link between freedom, self-determination and the democratic expression of sovereignty of the people (Alexander-Davey, 2014). He stressed that the people must enact legislation directly and that this process must occur in the public sphere and the need for direct legislation leads to a larger public sphere than that of most modern democracies. Kant's interpretation reduced democracy to the delegation of authority, secularizing the theology of separation of the divine and the human that shaped the modern conception of the sovereignty of the historical small factions called the people.

Democracy is not a government of the people but a governmental process whose peculiarities can easily be confused with that of the people. Popular sovereignty is a simplified form of government of the people that distorts the concept of the people, narrowing it down to votes when the people is a polythetic and inclusive concept. Most historical discussions of authority, power, and sovereignty wrongly conflate people and democracy into popular sovereignty. The anti-authoritarian and pluralistic understanding of the people lodged in democracy as governmental process, contrary to a unity and closure endowed by a peculiar form of the kantian concept of sovereignty placed at its origins, is blind to the anti-democratic foundations of popular sovereignty discussions.

2.1. Philosophical Roots in Enlightenment Thought

The Greeks invented 'demos' as a term describing not merely 'the poor', 'the rabble', or 'the masses', but as 'the people'. 'Democracy' went through an intellectual rival perpetually overcoming multiple, rich, often contradictory meanings or dimensions of 'the people'. The modern principle of 'government by the people' is therefore far richer than a 'government of the people'. The notion of the 'general interest' turned out to be central: 'the people' could not be a quantity because apportioning shares among persons was impossible. Therefore History invented recasting 'the people' as capable of being represented as a single General Interest, as The People. The modern zenith of this principle civilised many democracies and free governments still struggling with, contemporary overlap. The last such yet valid voice was to Thomas S. Kuhn still remarkable in its context, score of classics. Historical witnesses examine the ubiquitous handing, theatre of popularity. The Greek idea intellectualized the becoming of 'the people' still widely untaught; the concurrent highlights of 'Popularity' and sovereignty rank originally and perpetually important for 'government' at large, voting or election by the population remains recognised as a classic concept.

2.2. The Athenian Model and its Legacy

While the definition of democracy as popular sovereignty can be found in classic works of political theory, it is essential to understand it against the background of a more practical approach

grounded in contemporary problems and case studies. Democracy originates with the Greeks. Public participation in governance and the prioritization of public interests developed in Athens by approximately the fifth century BC and then gradually spread through the Mediterranean, ultimately spreading even further under Roman imperial rule. The legacy of Athens continues to influence citizens today—not just in nations that self-identify as democracies but also in regions currently governed by authoritarian regimes seeking legitimacy through representative institutions (Mehta, 2016).

3. Democracy as Realization of Sovereignty

The concept of democracy, derived from the ancient Greek word *dēmokratía*, literally means “the power of the people.” As such, a democracy is ultimately a regime of sovereignty, based on the formal recognition of the logic of popular sovereignty. It is the means envisaged by many for the realization of popular sovereignty and order within the limits of liberal principles, so that controversial views can contest within a free public space, and the populace ultimately can oversee governance through their legislative representatives, a system called representative democracy. Representative democracies are established between obligations, curbs, competences, checks and powers of public actors and institutions operating in public affairs for the common welfare. Beyond parliamentary elections, public actors and institutions publicly account for their decisions and actions, so that the people—seen in *Weltanschauung* terms as the solid core of diverse metropolitan communities making up a plurality—can engage expression towards ambiguous, contested avenues of tackling the common welfare (Carratalà Puertas & José Frances Garcia, 2017).

Democracy implies a two-fold notion: democracy as a procedure that safeguards the exercise of the free democratic, yet critical, expression of citizens, and democracy as the instrumental common welfare that the people can value and attest through the medium of the daily press or the modern electronic communication media. The first meeting of democracy as the expression of the popular will was the Ciudad de Anticrist. The first South American letters presented between Francisco de Miranda and Simón Bolívar approved the first popular assembly gathered from pre-colonial times (E. Pettys, 2010). Political philosophers that focused on political order prior to the advent of democracy recall and revisit academic and practical problems for a balanced practice under contemporary conditions of public discourse and popular decision-making, and try to formulate substantial common welfare (Alexander-Davey, 2014).

3.1. Procedural vs. Substantive Democracy

Democracy's recent reflections aim to complement or supersede fairness-based legitimacy with the theoretical domain known as epistemic democracy. Of particular note, Estlund's epistemic proceduralism sharply demarcates the distinction between outcome justification and outcome legitimacy, underscoring the centrality of democratic procedures. Hence, establishing a proper theory of democratic legitimacy requires a convincing justification for these procedures, since mere fairness fails to capture any distinctive aspect of democracy while failing to furnish adequate reasons for accepting decisions perceived as erroneous. The justification of the former involves normative complexity typically classified into instrumentalism and proceduralism. Both address procedures; nevertheless, the focus remains on providing reasons for adhering to democratic determinations even when certain rulings prove mistaken.

3.2. Electoral Representation and Accountability

A central tenet of contemporary democracies is that of periodic elections where citizens express their preferences regarding representatives or direct policy choices (Rosso Kern, 2014). Electoral representation is often referred to as a form of indirect or mediated democracy, which recognizes that direct forms of democracy may be impractical in large, complex societies (Lehmann, 2011). Closely linked to representation is the notion of accountability. The ability of voters to sanction representatives for their performance acts as a critical check on inter-temporal power. Only certain representatives can usually be selected, however, meaning that voters must also elect representatives with the expectation that their values will be reflected in future decisions. This multi-dimensionality

creates a lock-in effect whereby voters also subconsciously signal other attributes, and therefore representation and contestation remain contested concepts in contemporary democracies.

3.3. Deliberative Democracy and Democratic Deliberation

Deliberative governance and democratic deliberation are methods for resolving societal problems. A distinction must be drawn between deliberative governance which means that people employed in civil service must deliberate about the problems to solve for society as a whole and democratic deliberation, which can be understood as the process by which a citizen participates in national discussions about problems of common interest (Calyx, 2016). Even though they are related and, to a degree, partially overlapping, the two concepts ought to be kept apart in political discourse because both are necessary in governance but serve two different purposes. Deliberative democracy simply stresses the need for mutual understanding and a reasoned exchange of points of view, instead of immediate action or emulating the public opinion. Concerns of both concepts are thus, limited to problems that directly affects the communities involved.

4. Tensions and Critiques

Democratic notions of popular sovereignty based on general will suggest that majority decision disforms representation of the many whose interests are recorded differently. Alignment of sovereignty with a plurality of social group identities consolidated in political parties anticipates permanent political conflict and reduces democracy to a conditional arrangement. Popular sovereignty still claims legitimacy as government of the people but has impoverished conception of the people in affirming their pluralistic composition.

Instead of pluralistic aggregation of interests subservient to subjective preference formation, positive accounts of the common good demand development of a conception of the public more responsive to inequality and group subordination or domination. If popular sovereignty has exclusive right to determine the proper conception of the public, there is no recognition of the popular mandate by which group subordination is subordinated and ensured that citizens have political capability necessary to make the majoritarian decision (Noe, 2018). If group subordination precludes the aggregate vote from being equated with will of all and if electoral accountability merely lowers those for whom decisions are being made rather than elevating them into decision making positions, delimitation of who is collectively governable does not yield determinate standards. Group subordination or domination determines who the people are, popular sovereignty condones popular sovereignty to majority rule by voting on preferences.

Popular sovereignty possesses dual character formed by ideas of general will and manifestation of the will of the people, transformation through history shows little breadth. Engorgement of the permanent, exposition from the time of rebellion to hot civil war, modern century fruitless debate between the two ardent advocates dwindle constrained. Despite a literal compulsion to reverence constitutive processes, traditional democracies latch flats citizens for whom to govern towards suffrage excludes those of habit within passive citizenry Freudian penumbras carrying many whom to designate preclude claim, continual engagement of vital interest hard to upscale direct democracy much less dual channel. Different modes of democratic arrangement far from assure full display between egalitarian contestation and deterministic deceivers governing by calibration explanatory strategy quite alike climb too strenuous (Gewirtzman, 2005).

4.1. Majority Rule and Minority Rights

In popular sovereignty, the idea hinges on majority rule. Decision-making is understood, however imperfectly, as a bargain struck among equal sovereigns. However, increasingly people view the social contract through collective agreements, not individual votings, thereby introducing tensions between majority rule and minority rights, especially in rudimentary democratic measurements. Majoritarian interpretations of popular sovereignty hinge upon a simple and narrow procedural account of democracy under which political equality expresses itself as a direct aggregation of preferences. According to this view, political equality is achieved when equals vote equally in

referendums or elections, with the simple majority becoming the ideal benchmark for political decisions. Popular sovereignty seems to imply that the community is entitled to decide issues that concern it. Hence, all voting decisions based on majority rule claim a high degree of legitimacy. Democracy is thereby equated with such a majoritarian and aggregative view of political equality. Nevertheless, popular sovereignty as a theoretical and historical grounding attaches itself much broader ideas.

Moreover, majority rule alone is inadequate to secure collective decisions consistent with the widely accepted substantive values considered inherent to democracy. Majority rule fails to capture the complexities of societal preference distributions. Commonly proposed techniques to remedy the shortcomings of majority rule invariably introduce consensual elements into the voting procedures (Fuentes-Rohwer, 1996).

4.2. Sovereignty in a Pluralistic Society

The concept of popular sovereignty, despite its significance for the entire field of democratic theory, encounters some important difficulties when applied to pluralistic societies. The first such difficulty arises from the idea of majority rule in relation to the rights of cultural, ethnic, or religious minority groups. In a city-state like Athens, the population that formed the demos from which the people exercised popular sovereignty owned a clear, historical, and distinctive identity, manifesting in particular language, culture, religion, and social ties. Consequently, the imposition of majority policy greatly affected only the non-demos group of metics and slaves. The harshness of the democratic regime is therefore often overstated, particularly in relation to other Greek states like Sparta, and an admirable quality of Athenian democracy—its potential to celebrate the public, collective good over private and particular profit—has also been overlooked or forgotten.

By contrast, in contemporary democratic regimes, few decision-making rules would be regarded as legitimate for the entire polity if they did not substantially accommodate a sizeable proportion of all relevant preferences or interests. Democratic systems must therefore represent not only social divisions but also diverse and fragmented identities. Politically relevant identities may also overlap in ethnic, linguistic, or religious plurality, complicating matters further. Hence deliberative democracy can be understood as a serious attempt to respond to such difficulties, proposing specific principles and practices to guarantee the reflection of the perspectives of all reasonably engaged members of the population in collective decisions—not only majorities but also minorities (E. Pettys, 2010).

4.3. Globalization, Supranational Authority, and Sovereignty

The origins of the contemporary nation-state are rooted in the Treaty of Westphalia, signed in the mid-seventeenth century. According to a traditional understanding of sovereignty implicitly adopted by the Treaty, a sovereign state is defined as an independent political entity that possesses profound authority over its territory and the population residing within its borders. The territories of modern sovereign states must be explicitly demarcated, and the geopolitical rules established by the Treaty of Westphalia dictate that each sovereign state is entitled to full control over its domestic affairs without any encroachment by external powers. No political community, nor any supranational authority, is permitted to infringe upon the territory of a sovereign state that is satisfied with its borders. This principle underpins the contemporary understanding of sovereignty, which has been widely accepted in international relations (C. Radice, 2019) ; (Simonovic, 2002).

Generally viewed as an irreversible process, globalization is seen as a factor that severely limits states' sovereignty. It demonstrates that events or decisions occurring within one state can have considerable influence on the political, economic, social, and cultural spheres of life in another state, and that these imitations exist nowadays regardless of states' wills. Globalization's emergence is attributed to the advancement of diverse modes of transport and communication, which has accelerated the exchange of goods, services, capital flows, or information at an ever-increasing speed and facilitated cross-border interdependence among states. The vital and vital surrounding meaning of sovereignty at the international and regional levels has therefore changed;

5. Conditions for Robust Popular Sovereignty

demand certain conditions. First, a certain level of civic education and political literacy on the part of citizens is required. Two particularly important dimensions of political literacy warrant emphasis: knowledge of the rules of the political game and knowledge of specific policy choices. To vote intelligently, citizens must know how their leaders are supposed to attain their goals (i.e., the rules) and they must know what those objectives are. Knowledge of rules is usually more generalized and requires significant outputs of time and energy, but knowledge of specific policy alternatives is by no means trivial. A citizen with little knowledge of the workings of parties, elections, or the sequence of the political game may cast ballots but lacks the political literacy essential for intelligent voting. Such education is primarily the responsibility of educational institutions and other civil society organizations, and its pursuit must occur within any democracy that desires genuine popular rule. A second condition for robust popular sovereignty requires a proper institutional framework containing checks, balances, and deliberate insulation to prevent the temporary popular overflow residing within citizens—such as an excessive and hasty governmental response to a natural disaster, or a fear of terrorist bombings—to affect long-term policy choices.

A third and vital requirement is an effective guarantee of fundamental rights, as well as an adherence to the rule of law. Fundamental rights refer not only to choice with regard to self-preservation but also to the provision that one's property and material goods will not be taken—be it through the imposition of periodic land taxes, income taxes, fraud, or any mechanism outside of standard exchange and mutual consent. Such rights obligate public authority to ensure that shared funds are appropriated for the benefit of the general body of the populace, rather than individual governors, aspiring dictators, or special interest groups. Rule of law, in contrast, mandates that the officials of any given state follow the recognized and established laws—laws that ought to, and in numerous instances do, emanate from popular will (Ingham, 2016). Furthermore, even when the sovereign or governing entity is accurately identified, popular preferences consist of short-lived fads. Consequently, rulers labeled as representatives of popular intent, and commonly gifted requisite authority, enjoy the possibility of exercising ends in contrast with those of the general populace (I. Colon-Rios, 2009).

5.1. Civic Education and Political Literacy

Democracy is a social organization based on popular sovereignty, and its rise has been linked to economic growth. Its concept has evolved over time and varies according to cultural context. Values influence young Spaniards' perceptions of democracy and affect its different dimensions. Democracy is not an ideal, fixed concept but an adaptive and evolving instrument shaped by individual experiences and social values. Studying democracy is complex, as indicators often measure partial or indirect aspects, lacking clarity on what citizens truly support or value. Traditional research approaches focus on support and satisfaction but provide limited insight into the various facets of democracy that citizens value. Consequently, even when large segments of the population explicitly uphold the democratic label, possibilities for social intervention may remain limited or inadequate (Carratalà Puertas & José Frances Garcia, 2017).

5.2. Institutional Design and Checks and Balances

Sovereignty implies the right to make whatever choices one prefers, without restrictions or outside influence. This self-determination applies not only to a nation's choice to enter into international treaties but also to societies vis-à-vis the fragmented world of heterogeneous subgroups: to whom a society belongs, how values are determined, whether people remain free to leave, whether the choice is democratic or an imposition, and so on. Unlike many contemporary discussions of democracy, the French and American foundational texts cited earlier addressed sovereignty without qualification. The combination of democratic decision-making, majority principle, and respect for individual rights acted then as an institutional framework enabling the exercise of popular sovereignty. Established as the organizational core of the government, such frameworks dynamically allocate influence among contending factions or adversaries. Substantial variation across implementations of such frameworks remains possible, however.

Such concepts reinforce the importance of political institutions that encompass checks-and-balances models, longer terms of office for the different branches to encourage cooptation and dilution of respective projects that are similar in direction, establishment of national authorities that draw power from, engage with, or represent pre-existing regional forces, limitations on the duration of state and political-party monopolies, and similar provisions (Ackermann, 2017).

5.3. Fundamental Rights and Rule of Law

“To be free is not merely not to be a slave. . . . It means to have the positive power to play a part in shaping the common life of the community to which we belong” (Aleksandrovna Sydorenko, 2018). The notion of popular sovereignty, as an idea in Western political thought, became prevalent in the context of 17th-century political philosophy forged during the transition from feudalism to capitalism and the shift from monarchical absolutism to parliamentary democracy. Idea’s conception included such components as people’s sovereignty, political equality, and accountability of a state author on behalf of a nation. Rather than referring to the State, popular sovereignty indicates the content, the fundamental principle of democracy, and is considered to represent “the first and only legitimate authority”. Democracy emerges as the paramount form of political life, its increasing widespread acceptance and propagation becoming the core symbol of modern times.

While democracy in general designates the “government of the people,” it is the notion of people that demands clarification. An integral aspect of the political doctrine defining democracy, namely, the concept of popular sovereignty highlights human dignity, which implies, on the one side, the recognition of human value and importance thus places individual at the center of social and political systems and promotes safety of human rights, civil liberties, and freedoms. Accordingly, fulfillment of political obligations is viewed as an act of reverence towards each individual residing in society. Attention of political thought and hence democracy itself concentrated predominantly on the notion of people treated as a collective body of society, masses or the minority voting where a significant challenge of scope determines efficiency and effectiveness of systematics alike remains limitless. Such uncertainty or vagueness could be appreciably eliminated through application systematically adjusted perspective without losing substance of proclaimed doctrine.

6. Conclusion

The traditional conception of democracy stems from the idea of popular sovereignty and its historical theological command (E. Pettys, 2010). And yet, there remains significant disagreement about the usages and limits of the concept. The significance of popular sovereignty can hardly be overstated. Political thought before the seventeenth century treated use of the term and the thoughts accompanying it as superfluous. The advent of the concept raised acute moral, political, and other challenges contingent on competing interpreters. Its vitality has kept it center stage and at the keyboard of thinkers such as Hobbes, Locke, Lawrence, Rousseau, the Founders, Hegel, and others. Popular sovereignty has left traces wherever and whenever political structures have controlled the public and given caution to any possible departure from the state of nature. The concept has survived revolutions reassured by nursery classics written to save the thought. When political representatives conceal their identity and change the face of governance, with their hands free and their positions renewed, the challenge remains.

Popular sovereignty leaves its mark on democratic thinking as one theme among several. At the heart of division is the substance of power. To subscribe to popular sovereignty is to imply one idea of democracy. Compositions enjoyed for their complexity have survived revolutions, restoring popular sovereignty as a prominent theme, even when disguised in representative forms and reassured by writing. Simple popular-sovereignty premises are not exhaustive or always innocent. They drive one style of constitution, engaging the population on elementary definitions. Within elite unravelling democracies, popular sovereignty downplays some of the finer aspects. Political representatives, strong accumulators of governing authority, enhance the challenge by concealing the overt change in regime type. Yet, ordinary agents enjoy substantial innovation through semi- pivoting techniques of political messages.

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