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Global Democracy Discussion

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Why think about global democracy? Why (if at all) does global governance need democratising?

Two approaches to this question framed the discussion. First, the view that because authority is seeping up above the level of the state we need to start thinking about democracy at these levels – in other words, global democracy as a way to manage globalization and make global governance more effective. An alternative rationale is that we need to think about global democracy because there is an unequal diffusion of power and authority and an unequal loss of agency by different actors in the system i.e. for reasons of justice, legitimacy, and human development.

Put another way, concerns about democracy at the global and domestic levels spring from reasons which are *instrumental* (democracy as a means to political stability), as well as *normative* - democracy is *intrinsically* valuable (because of a commitment to political equality, the need for accountability, etc.).

How useful are global/domestic democracy analogies?

Participants reflected at length on the usefulness of drawing analogies between global and domestic democracy. Many were sceptical of drawing such analogies or critical of existing attempts to do this. Six particular problems were discussed:

1. the absence of functional analogues to such familiar features of the domestic level as nationalism and public spheres;
2. the difficulty of extrapolating devices of representation that work relatively well at one level, onto other levels;
3. global authority is structured very differently from its domestic counterpart – specifically, its jurisdiction (in terms of impact) is far more uneven, it is often fragmented on functional lines, and displays a less clear hierarchical structure than state authority;
4. the seepage of power and authority makes it difficult to even identify the locus of global power with any clarity;
5. those seeking to draw global/domestic analogies tend to adopt a very narrow, impoverished, Schumpeterian view of democracy as ‘competition for votes’. Whereas a normatively appealing conception of democracy is rather more complex and makes provision for, among other things, (i) devolution and delegation of decision-making to non-elected officials; (ii) horizontal accountability; (iii) non-electoral areas of contestation (free press, civil society); (iv) relatively widely accepted and diffused norms concerning key roles, such as those of the ‘citizen’, ‘public official’, etc.
6. there is a tendency to use a purely instrumental view of democracy with too little attention paid to the educative and protective functions of democracy, which require different sorts of thinking.

Finally, it was suggested that there is an ongoing two-way relationship between global and domestic democracy – perhaps, global democracy should be about making national democracy work better.

What are the tradeoffs between democracy and other values?

The debate then focused on tensions and conflicts between democracy and other values. These included

- (i) democracy vs efficiency (with arguments from efficiency often being used to make the case for insulating institutions of global governance from special-interest lobbying, thereby keeping them undemocratic, e.g. central banks);
- (ii) democracy vs accountability (with arguments from accountability preferring stable governments not subject to the frequent turnovers mandated by the democratic process). Here the example of the democratic oversight of central banks e.g. Federal Reserve was discussed;
- (iii) democracy vs human rights (e.g. minority rights) – where democracy is used to trump concerns about human rights;
- (iv) means vs ends of democracy. Here the discussion became a debate between two positions. On the one hand, that the idea of democracy is ethically appealing because certain kinds of results (presumably much of what is in the ‘good governance’ box) were more likely to obtain through democratic process. On the other hand, that democracy is but one component of a broader notion of ‘good governance’ – if the desirable end in Iraq is ‘good governance’, then democracy is not the most urgent priority even if it is a necessary condition for good governance.

In weighing up the ends and means of democracy the issue arose as to whether democratic process should be revoked in specific instances where the negative possible ends outweigh respect for the democratic process. The obvious problem is ‘who decides?’ – and this is precisely the question that democratic process answers. The values with which democracy competes – it was observed - can be ordered only through deliberative discussion.

It became evident as the discussion progressed, that differences in perspective seemed to emerge from fundamentally differing definitions of democracy. Participants made several attempts to capture the conceptual core of democracy, noting that the term ‘democracy’ tends to be a proxy for many different things. Consensus breaks down because when people refer to ‘democracy’ or seek to transpose it to another level, they are often speaking about or seeking to transpose different elements of the concept.

Distinguishing different conceptions of democracy

Three conceptions were put forward:

1. democracy as a spectrum of gradually increasing democratic oversight;
2. a relatively ‘thin’ procedural notion of democracy, which thereby avoids smuggling substantive values into the concept and thereby obscuring the difficult tradeoffs alluded to earlier;
3. a deeper vision of democracy as highlighted in the recent democratisation literature which demonstrates that an emphasis on promotion of elections without ‘consolidation’ does not facilitate successful transitions from authoritarianism to what can meaningfully be called ‘democracy’.

The rapporteur (Rahul Rao) noted that there may be much less divergence here than we think –the relatively thinner notion of democracy permits it to be pushed much further down the list of good governance than thicker democrats might, at first glance, be comfortable with. Nevertheless it may be the case that the good governance ‘shopping list’ prioritises the very same ends that thicker democrats value, except that they tend to import these into the concept of ‘democracy’ itself.

(Summary by Rahul Rao and Ngaire Woods)