

## 20. DEMOSKRATY IN THE MEGA-POLIS: HYPER-PARTICIPATION IN THE POST-INDUSTRIAL AGE

*Sam Lehman-Wilzig* Political Studies at Bar-Ilan University, Ramat-Gan, Israel.

### INTRODUCTION

If the nineteenth century was characterized by the struggle of the masses to gain access to their 'democratic' political systems (especially through extension of the suffrage), their political behaviour in the twentieth century suggests that the mere act of voting is not enough. In all manners of non-formal ways, mass participation in most democracies today goes beyond the purely institutional processes of political communication. For lack of any other all-encompassing term, I call such behaviour 'demoskraty': the collective use by citizens of non-formal means of political communication.

Demoskraty can take numerous forms. It may be passive, as in public opinion polls which enable indirect communication on discrete issues between all or part of a people, and the elected representatives. It can be active and institutional, as with voluntary organizations, interest groups, etc., who communicate with specific political leaders on specific issues, under the implicit threat (lately becoming more explicit in e.g. the US) that, if not satisfied, they will turn to more formal processes (voting) to punish the recalcitrant politician. Finally, demoskraty has increasingly (albeit not for the first time) taken on an active but non-institutional character: mass demonstrations, sit-ins, squatting, marches on capital cities, etc., with a grosser (less finely detailed) message not only for 'the government' as a whole, but for the broader, less active public as well.

Before we look at some of the underlying causes for the rise of demoskraty (an increase which shows no sign of abating in the future, and may even significantly increase), I would like to note two things from a historical perspective. First, while this movement towards a 'mega-polis' (i.e. mass hyper-participation) may seem somewhat similar to that which existed during the Athenian period, in one important philosophical sense it is quite different. For the Greeks, participation in politics was a transcendent value - they viewed political discourse as the highest *Good* in and of itself. Modern demoskraty, on the other hand, is purely instrumental in character-political communication is merely a means for the acquisition of other 'goods'. Few democratic contemporaries see politics as an ultimate end in itself (and indeed Marxist theory looks forward to the very eradication of politics altogether).

Second, demoskraty is not necessarily bad, although in the short run it can be destabilizing. But just as universal elections were

inconceivable (or considered 'evil') three hundred years ago, and yet today are the bedrock of modern democracy, so too demokraty (passive and active) may become fully legitimized - even institutionalized and routinized - forms in the future. Before normative judgement may be passed, we have to ask ourselves why demokraty has arisen, and how it may be channelled in directions that strengthen political democracy.

## DEMOSKRATY AND ITS CAUSES

The broadening of the suffrage in the nineteenth century was accompanied by an expansion in the activities of government into what we generally call the welfare state. While most democracies today have pretty much exhausted the possibilities along this particular road, there has been no let-up in the ever-increasing need for big government to make decisions that impinge upon the lives of its citizenry. The reason for this, as Daniel Bell has cogently explained, is that post-industrial society - due to the *collective* and *inter-dependent* nature of its problems - necessitates greater governmental decision making on a much wider variety of issues which directly affect the life of the private individual: ecology, pollution, transportation, energy, communication, etc. As a result of the fact that such political decisions (or lack of them) increasingly affect the quality of one's private life, in ways that are not always to the citizens' liking, demokratyic behaviour begins to make itself felt as reactive or prescriptive feedback.

Secondly, the huge expansion of higher education and the growth of mass media have acted as facilitators for demokratyic behaviour. On the one hand, a more educated population is more aware of political issues and the growing impact of political decisions on their lives. The media, in all their variegated forms, ensure that the 'educational' process continues forever. On the other hand, the latter also act as the central channel for the transferral of demokratyic messages to the political leadership - whether it be an opinion poll actively commissioned by a magazine or a street demonstration as reported in (and at times encouraged by) the local newspaper.

Thirdly, and probably of greatest importance is the problem of the system's ossification and obsolescence. In most countries, contemporary democratic institutions have not changed much (at least qualitatively) in many years. But as we have just seen, the social situation and needs of the polity have changed drastically. The result is increasing systemic dysfunctionality and (as might be expected of a still vibrant society) the development of other means to bypass the sclerotic political institutions: namely demokraty.

The exact nature of the problems can be explained briefly by recourse to a model in great vogue: cybernetics. To correctly respond to input, a system must set up gatekeepers who filter out the redundant, unusable, or unacceptable information streaming in, while transforming the other data into message units which the

system can digest and use. Among all the parts of a system (especially in the political system), it is here where most things can (and do) go wrong.

First, one finds the problem of 'interpretation'. Much data which seem unusable or unacceptable may indeed be precisely what the system needs in order to deliver the 'correct' output. Secondly, the *amount* of data can have a great effect on the system's absorptive capabilities. Obviously, the more the input, the harder the gatekeeper has to work and the greater the possibility of error. The same is true, of course, for *velocity* - the speed at which information is flowing into the system.

One can easily understand, therefore, why our formal political institutions no longer function as smoothly as perhaps they once did. The normal amount of political data input has skyrocketed. Not only must more 'objective' variables be taken into account before any viable decision can be made, but even more significantly the amount of 'subjective' (i.e. political) demands placed on the system by a more educated and organized public has increased at least as much; and at far greater velocity, thanks to the mass media. In the ensuing demokratyic cacophony it is almost impossible for any gatekeeper to know what to let through and what to filter out, let alone reinterpret the data in such a way that the system can actually use it in its decision-making.

Who are these 'gatekeepers'? They are (or at least in democratic theory, should be) elected officials. It is no fault of their own that the system which brought them to power does not provide them with tools adequate enough for the performance of their task. I am referring here to the fact that the democratic policy's central institution - the election system - is primarily designed for purely *quantitative* measurement, and a very gross measurement at that. Our election systems can determine how many voters want this party or policy, and how many prefer another. But the system's central flaw is in the very assumption that human beings think like computers in binary fashion - either this or that. For most people, far more important is how strongly 'this' is preferred to 'that'. I call this 'the problem of intensity', and it lies at the heart of the rise of demokraty.

Let us be specific. Although I am quite aware of various institutional complexities and restrictions on majority tyranny in a number of democracies, the majoritarian principle usually holds sway in the final analysis. Let us take a case where 51 per cent want policy x, while 49 per cent want y. x will usually become the policy and few would find this illegitimate. But what if we were to discover that the 51 per cent are lukewarmly supportive of x, while the 49 per cent feel y is critical for their interests? Is there any absolute moral justification (or political wisdom) in deciding in favour of x? I would think not. But our formal institutions - electoral and otherwise - do not take 'intensity' fully into account. To return to our poor gatekeeper, what formal means does s/he have of interpreting the 49 per cent as being more 'relevant' than the 51

per cent - especially since s/he is in office as a result of such a system?

Demoskraty is precisely the expression of such 'intensity'. Those that feel strongly about something join a pressure group; others take part in a street demonstration. Even many public opinion polls lately have stopped asking 'yes' versus 'no' questions and instead seek out the intensity level of personal popularity or issue agreement. In short, demoskraty is the *qualitative* counterpart to democracy's emphasis on quantity. As we turn now to the future, our task is to explore and devise institutional means for taking the qualitative element into account; that is, to pinpoint more accurately just what the public wants and how much it desires it.

## TOWARDS THE INSTITUTIONALIZATION OF QUALITATIVE HYPER-PARTICIPATION

### *The dual weighted-vote system*

Let us look at the election systems as presently constituted. Although there are numerous variations, in the final analysis the archetypes boil down to two: the proportional and the district systems, with a few countries combining them. The disadvantages of each are well known: the district system 'disenfranchises' the losing voters while the proportional system does not offer any linkage between the voter and a specific candidate.

We immediately notice, though, that both systems suffer from the fact that either all the voters (in the proportional system), or a significant minority of them (the 'losing' voters in the district system), have no specific elected official to turn to for airing grievances, a situation that explains why the level of demoskraty in various countries does not seem to be affected by the type of election systems therein.

There are other problems. District systems allow the voters to cast their ballot only within a specified locale. While this may have made sense a few centuries ago in a situation of local heterogeneity and specific local problems, it has become quite counterproductive in post-industrial society where most problems are inter-district, if not national, in scope. The proportional system (like the district) usually suffers from an additional problem - the giving of but one vote. Today, the complexity of governance demands something more refined than the casting of a single ballot for only one party or candidate; again, how is the citizen's 'intensity' to be taken into account, not to mention the fact that the voter may have different party and/or candidate preferences on different issues?

I suggest that the answer in part lies in a system of 'weighted' voting - both electorally *and* legislatively. Without getting bogged down in details (there is plenty of room for variations) we should allow each voter up to five votes, for example (the number is irrelevant). This would immediately afford a refined measurement of 'intensity' as well as differentiated issue preference. A voter

could cast two votes for a large general party (or its candidate) with which s/he is in general agreement; and one vote each for small one-issue parties on issues which the voter feels some attachment. Or, assuming that a voter feels that there is one overriding issue (e.g. nuclear disarmament), all five votes could be cast for that party/candidate.

I would add one further point with regard to the district system especially. There is no reason why we should not allow cross-district voting; that is, casting some or all of one's ballots for candidates in *other* districts. In a few moments we shall see the advantage of this.

First, however, we must deal with the other side of the 'weighted' coin - the legislative vote. Both the district and proportional systems have a problem when it comes to allocating the seats to the winning candidates. For over a century now, the sundry countries using the proportional system have been forced into performing mind-boggling statistical acrobatics in order to overcome the problem of the 'remainders'. The district system has a much greater flaw, which is rarely realized. Let us imagine district A where the winning candidate garners 51 of 100 votes, while the district B winner gains 99 of 100 votes. In parliament, A and B have equal votes even though B has support from almost double the number of voters compared to A. In other words, in a district system equal legislative powers of elected officials is unfair and unequal. When the American Supreme Court ruled 'one man, one vote' it referred to the public, and not their representatives.

The counter-argument that A and B both represent districts of 100 each is a specious one. Few politicians represent the wishes of those voters who did not support them - if they did there would not be much need for democracy.

Thus, there is little reason why those candidates who attract the most votes (whatever the system) should not have a parallel greater 'weighted' vote in the parliament (this might extend to all procedural powers in the performance of legislative duty). In our case, for example, B would have a 1.94 voting factor compared to A's 1.00. In short, *those that attract more voting support would receive greater political power*. Is this not the essence of democracy? (It should be noted that this system is no different than that which exists within a private corporation. The proxy vote is the corporation's functional equivalent of the nation's political vote. Would anyone conceive of limiting the amount of votes each proxy could cast? Then why do we so limit our political proxies?)

There are a host of advantages which would accrue from such a two-pronged 'weighted vote' system.

(1) No longer would district voters be totally disenfranchised, since their multiple vote (coupled with cross-district voting) would significantly raise the chance that some of the voter's preferred candidates would be elected. Indeed, as a result of cross-district voting it might become possible for two candidates of the same district to be elected, if they manage to attract enough votes from *outside* their district. Proportional systems would not need to worry

about remainders since every party would receive the exact legislative power due them. Of course, there would still have to be a minimum quota for election so as to weed out those parties who garner only a very few votes; otherwise the legislature would become too unwieldy.

(2) No longer would nations continuing with any form of district system (even those with a district proportional representation, e.g. Sweden) have to worry about redistricting - an expensive and politically problematic exercise. Since a representative's legislative power is directly tied to the amount of support s/he garnered, the district's size need not be kept equal to others. The representatives of larger districts would have more power than others from smaller districts - a perfectly fair arrangement. Indeed, for those who still maintain that the district system is a good one because of special local identities and problems, the 'weighted system' allows the establishment of 'true' local districting and not the artificial borders heretofore found as a result of the impossible search for district numerical equality.

(3) This dual system would strengthen 'good' candidates while keeping the politicians constantly on their toes. In the district system, as we have noted, 'good' candidates would attract cross-district support. Longtime winning candidates, who today have little incentive to perform maximally because they are in no danger of losing their seats, would have to keep doing a good job due to the everpresent threat of a reduction in legislative power after the next elections. In the proportional system, the same would hold true for those on the party list - especially if *panachage* were included: the ability of the voter to arrange the order of candidates on the list. Indeed, if this 'dual weighting' were applied to the system in West Germany, for example, the party need merely present its list; the voters for the individual candidates would determine the relative place of each in the party pecking order. This would transfer the intra-party power struggle from behind the closed doors of its convention to the broader electoral arena where the real test of intra-party strength should be determined in any case.

(4) The central advantage, for our purposes here, is that weighting the vote allows the public to express itself more accurately on the gamut of issues, parties, and personalities - and that this expression finds a greater reflection in the ongoing processes of government after the electoral balloting is over. It respects the voter's ability to discriminate between choices on a range of issues or concerns which s/he decides is salient. In other words, the voters are not faced with the absurd choice of squandering their entire capital on one political 'product', but rather are afforded the opportunity to purchase a basket of such 'products' which suits their individual needs and desires. Our democracies, which support a diversified economic system, should offer no less in the political arena.

### *Cybernetic politics*

I would like to turn now to a second broad area which can be of great help in improving political communication and alleviating *demoskraty* - the 'cybernetic polis'. While the 'dual-weighted' system promises to refine the public's electoral choices, the important post-election period is even more critical. Unless citizen groups are offered easy access to their representatives on matters about which they feel intensely, the more 'representative' election system will not reduce *demoskraty* between elections. Fortunately, the outlines for the development of such a contemporary mega-polis are already in sight.

The first step in the process is the complete computerization of elections. Every vote by every voter would be stored in a national data bank. Access would be severely restricted by law, with a fully non-partisan, independent body controlling the entire apparatus. Since the potential for abuse is high, such supervision must be as airtight as we can politically and technologically make it.

Communication from the politician to the voters would be blind. For example (and I am assuming a society where the home computer is as widespread as is today's television set), a legislative issue comes up for debate and vote, and representative Q realizes that it is a topic in which Q's supporters have a high interest. Therefore, Q puts in a request to the data bank to send a questionnaire (which Q devised) - and any other relevant information - to everyone who voted for Q. A time limit for answering - perhaps a week - could also be set. The answers flow back to the data bank and Q is presented with the results.

There are a number of points to be noted here. First, the variations of those groups to be questioned by Q are almost endless. Q could request *all* voters in the district to be polled, with a double breakdown of supporters and non-supporters outside the district could be included. The 'weight' of each voter's support would also interest Q, as would the intensity of feeling of the respondents on the specific issue polled.

Secondly, such communication need not be initiated solely by the elected representative or party. Interest groups or individuals could 'correspond' through the data bank with their elected representatives at any time - either anonymously or by name, as they saw fit. Of course, here too the official would be informed of the group's electoral 'profile'. Indeed, there is no reason why under certain prescribed circumstances the public itself could not initiate such polls, perhaps to raise public consciousness on the issue and/or to pressure the legislators. This would be akin to the present 'voter initiative' found in several countries but without the bother of an actual binding election on the issue.

Thirdly, the system could be a boon to the development and strengthening of various voluntary interest groups. For a fee, a group could request an 'electronic mailing' to be sent to any set of voters - much as mailing lists are purchased today, except that here

the specific addresses would not be known to the mailers beforehand. For example, an ecology group would have a mailing sent to all citizens who voted for 'ecology' candidates, thereby soliciting membership and support. If, as a number of political scientists have claimed, such 'intermediary' groups are a condition for the avoidance of mass (totalitarian) 'democracy', then such a procedure could only strengthen the bases of our democratic polities.

Fourthly, a periodic 'quasi-polis' situation could be developed in what can be called the 'mega-forum'. For example, every Tuesday evening at a regular hour a legislative debate would be held on a weekly topic, viewed by the entire nation (or locality). Notice of the topic would be announced well in advance, allowing each voter to obtain printed information before the debate (put out by the parties, and/or the data bank for objective facts and figures). At the close of the debate a national (or local) vote would be taken - non-binding on the representatives but with some force behind it. Again, the legislators could get a voter breakdown that is relevant to each of them. Note that it is the legislature that decides the topic and parameters of the discussion, not the public. But such a mega-forum should heighten the interest of the citizens on public issues while giving them a real sense of ongoing political participation. It should be noted that variations of such mega-forums have already been tried - e.g. New Zealand's 1981 'Televote' and the State of Washington's 'Alternatives for Washington' which ran from 1974 to 1976 - with a great amount of success.

It might be argued that the general public has no patience for such mundane concerns as 'politics'. They would soon be turned off by too much exposure. Personally, I doubt that this is true, but much depends on the manner of presentation and the quality of the debaters. There are not many things more exciting than the live electricity of a highly charged debate between skilled orators on issues about which the public feels strongly. But let us assume that after a while a significant part of the public tunes out. It is precisely those who feel intensely about certain issues who will stay, watch, and vote their advice. In other words, it is precisely our potential demoskratisers who would participate in the mega-forum. And which result offers a more accurate barometer of public feeling: a mass demonstration in the street; or a public ballot (after a reasoned debate), a vote which can be tabulated in a refined manner for accurate portrayal of at least part of the nation's opinion?

Will the politicians go for such a system? I believe so, even though it does entail a small diminution of their political freedom. However, politicians are by their very nature *political* (electoral) animals who fear more than anything else misinterpreting the public mood. The cybernetic polis removes this fear to a large extent.

A more important question, perhaps, is whether such a system will lead to better or worse policies. After all, as Burke argued, statesmanship does not entail a slavish execution of the public's will.

This is true, but a number of things must be kept in mind. First, the public today is far more knowledgeable about public issues. Secondly, the mega-forum and other processes of the cybernetic polis will allow the future statesman in a direct way to convince the public of the 'correct' path. Thirdly, and more germane, is the fact that representative - as opposed to direct - democracy, as we know it, was originally established for purely technical reasons: the impossibility of enabling thousands, if not millions, of people to actively and continually participate in the political process. As the demoskratic phenomenon shows, however, many find that too much has been taken away. If technological means for a partial reincorporation of the public into the political process becomes feasible in the future, we have not only a social obligation but a moral/philosophical duty as well to restructure our political system. A strong democracy will always be preferable to a stormy demoskraty; in order to avoid the latter, new means must be explored to reinforce the former.