

**Voting on the basis of self-interest and a democratic government oriented towards the common good
- the paradox and its resolution.**

Shekhar Pratap Singh,

New Delhi- 110067

Abstract

It has been argued that the modern democratic practice suffers from a paradox. While the democratic governments are expected to work in everyone's interests, the voters who elect these governments can vote according to their self-interests. That is, while voters can elect representatives for any reason of their own, the government so elected is expected to work only in everyone's favour. The resolution of this paradox has been sought in different ways. The pluralists have argued that this paradox is generated because of a mistaken definition of democracy; for them, democracy is nothing but a fair mechanism to resolve power-conflicts within a society. Others have suggested that it is the responsibility of the elected representatives to represent only the common interests, even if they have been elected by the voters on the basis of parochial reasoning. Others have argued that through constitutional checks and balances we could make sure that elected representatives work only in favour of the common good. After delineating all these alternatives, this paper will explore the resolution suggested by the deliberative democrats. Deliberative democracy theorists argue that through institutional tweaks we could make voters reflect on the common good itself. They believe that through public deliberation we could change voter preferences and bring them in line with the common interests. We will pursue the details of this particular alternative.

Keywords: Democracy, Deliberative Democracy, Pluralism, Pluralism.

Subject: Political Science, Political Theory, Political Philosophy.

Voting on the basis of self-interest and a democratic government oriented towards the common good – the paradox and its resolution

The Paradox

Democracy has been understood as a political system where people rule over themselves. This understanding of democracy has now been immortalized in Abraham Lincoln's words: "Government of the people, by the people, and for the people." Government, here, is not of the few, but everyone. In other words, the democratic governments are expected to follow the interests of all its citizenry ('the people'), and not favour a particular few.

But according to Bruce Ackerman and James Fishkin, there exists a paradox at the heart of the modern democratic project. While all of us somehow agree that the democratic government needs to work for the common good, and not serve the interests of majority or a particular section of society, the voting system, the basis on which governments are elected, allows voters to cast their vote according to their self-interests. We all accept that a voter does nothing wrong if she casts her vote according to her self-interests.

The question which then comes up is that how can a system based on 'self-interest based voting' lead to the establishment of a government which works for the common good? Should it not be clear that 'self-interest based voting' can only lead to a government which works in the interests of a particular group, and not the common good? And unless the government is not working for the common good, or the good of the larger community, can that government be democratic? (Ackerman and Fishkin, 2002:131).

This paper will explore solutions to this paradox of modern democratic practice. We will mainly be exploring the resolution that emerges through the works of theorists of deliberative democracy. But first, let us look at some of the other options

Pluralist alternative and its limitations

While for many the above mentioned paradox is obvious, for others this is just a problem generated by our maximalist conception of democracy. For pluralists, like democratic theorist Robert Dahl, democracy is nothing but a fair procedure to aggregate those self-interest reflecting votes. Here democracy is just viewed as a procedural mechanism to aggregate and compromise between various preferences of isolated individuals. Here common good is nothing but the aggregated outcome of the individuals pursuing their private interests in isolation from each other. Democracy here is just a mechanism to reduce conflict between various competing interests and power holders, and elections just a way to manage it. Here, elections and other democratic practices are not viewed as a means to refract a common good - a common agenda which the democratic government could reflect. (Dahl, 1956)

There are serious problems with the pluralist view of democracy. Democratic government, in this case, ends up just as a site of power politics between groups. Instead of the common good, the government here reflects the section which has emerged as the winner. Many writers have argued that state, in this pluralist conception, reflects only this power politics and not the common good. And because state reflects only the interests of particular sections of society, while neglecting others, it can hardly command the legitimacy of the whole society. Hence, it is not a democratic state.

Moreover, citizens of this kind of democracy can hardly call themselves politically autonomous, because instead of being based on common good - an agenda to which all of them could have consented- the laws and policies here just reflect this power politics. A pluralist democracy “at its best reflects fair bargaining among competing interests, not an ideal of self government.” And if we take “Political autonomy” of citizens as an important criterion of democratic rule, then this system of government fails to clear our test of democracy (Cohen and Fung, 2004:26).

There are serious concerns about ‘political equality’ also. Many will argue that while after the extension of universal suffrage, in terms of votes, everyone is formally equal, political life is still dominated by the groups which held power earlier. If our system of democracy is just about the aggregation of private interests, then formal political equality, provided by universal suffrage, may simply reinforce the hierarchies already present in the society. Aggregation of unreformed private interests might just represent the unequal social and economic structure of a given society. Even after the equal vote, some groups might find their voice missing from the ‘aggregated’ common good. (Ibid: 25)

But the question which then comes up is that can we ever have a democratic government geared towards the common good, on the basis of a voting system which reflects the private preferences of individuals and not the common good?

Other Solutions

Ackerman and Fishkin tell us that many have blamed secret ballot for leading to this kind of voting system. This debate between secret and public ballot is not new; James and John Stuart mill debated on this. Voting at that time was public in nature. Franchise was then limited to propertied male members, who had the necessary resources to withstand economic and social pressures brought on by public voting. But with the enfranchisement of women, blacks and slaves, the hitherto oppressed sections were also included in the electoral process. It was now felt that the secret ballot can help these groups to avoid the economic and social pressures which public voting could have lead to (Ackerman and Fishkin, 2002:129).

While James Mill favoured secret ballot, John Stuart Mill was against it. According to Ackerman, Mill predicted that secret ballot would “encourage voters to look upon the ballot as if it were just another commodity for private gratification.” “Rather than standing up in public to declare which candidate was best for the country, the secret balloter would merely choose the politician who most pandered to his private interests.” Mill emphasized the importance of public discussion and argued that the very process of public discussion will encourage sensitivity towards the public interest (Ibid: 129).

But, as Bruce ackerman suggests, Mill’s fears about secret ballot have proved to be prescient. “Secret balloting has led to a sort of Civic Privatism.”“privatism has eroded the central ideas of democratic citizenship.”(Ibid: 130)

Even then, the benefits of secret ballot are too many to forego. Many solutions have been suggested which while keeping the secret voting intact, make sure that the government works according to the common good and not according to the petty interests of the majority or other powerful groups

Some writers, taking cue from Edmund burke, have suggested that it is the role of the representatives to make sure that they filter out the petty, self-interested, demands of their constituents and themselves work only for the common good. But instead of solving the paradox between the ‘self- interest based voting’ and a government dedicated to the common good, this view simply shifts the responsibility on to

the representatives. Here, representatives are supposed to insulate the government from the petty self-interests of the voters (Ibid: 131).

One other solution is to put in place constitutional checks and balances, to make sure that the government works only for the common good, and not in the interest of one particular section of society. Here, again, instead of resolving the paradox, an effort is made to constrain the electoral mandate and guide it towards the common good through constitutional checks.

Both these views suffer from a deficit of legitimacy. Both solutions try to insulate the government from the effects of voting. One can easily ask whether these solutions are at all democratic. Moreover, these solutions do not resolve the paradox, but simply manage it through various kinds of undemocratic institutions and practices.

Resolution through deliberation

The third solution is offered by people who talk about deliberative democracy. These theorists do not talk about insulating the government from the petty preferences of the voters; they think that these preferences can themselves be changed (Cohen, 2003). They tend to look back at the Mill's ideal of public deliberation, and argue that an infusion of deliberation, between the private act of voting and the government selection, can solve the paradox that we have been concerned about.

Deliberation, they hope, will orient individual preferences towards the common good. In fact, they talk about a kind of conversation between the common good and the individual preferences. In this conversation, our notions of common good are continuously revised in line with the individual interests, and, in turn, individual interests get revised in light of the common good. Deliberative democrats hope to arrive at this reflective equilibrium between the common good and individual self-interest.

The common good which has been arrived at through public deliberation is not merely an aggregate of isolated individual preferences, but reflects the consensus which has been achieved by changes in the preferences of individuals through public deliberation.

Deliberative democrats believe that the very idea of public deliberation forces individuals to think about reasons which can convince others. They are hopeful that this kind of other-regarding-reasoning, that public deliberation engenders, will lead to establishment of some sort of an overlapping consensus.

Now, the job of the government would be to work according to the consensus which has been arrived through a fair procedure of deliberation. A government which reflects this consensus is the legitimate government. There would be no need for devices like constitutional checks and balances or representatives oriented towards common good, required earlier to insulate the government from unreasonable individual preferences of their constituents.

No doubt, there will be need for constitutional checks and balances, but not to insulate the government from the narrow interests of the majority or other powerful groups, but to establish a framework for fair deliberation, and for this consensus to be revised continuously.

Deliberative democracy theorists "do not expect self-interest and group interest to disappear as political forces." Instead, they want to make sure that the appeal to "self interest is made through the common interest" - if someone wants to promote his/her interests then he/she has to convince others that it is in their interests also (Cohen and Fung, 2004:26).

Moreover, everyone agrees that public deliberation wouldn't always lead to consensus and there will be situations when deliberation would fail to achieve a consensus. In such a situation, decisions will be taken by voting. So, voting is not completely ruled out in the theories of deliberative democrats, but it is only used in case of failure of efforts to reach a consensus.

But in a society with plurality of opinions about the common good, the chances of reaching a consensus are very bleak. Here, Jeremy Waldron argues that "we need a theory of democracy that makes voting the natural culmination of deliberation, rather than an indication that deliberation has been in some sense inadequate." He writes, "we need a theory of deliberation that dovetails with voting, not a theory of deliberation that is embarrassed by it." (Waldron, 1999: 212)

One thing is clear that the deliberative democrats are not assuming that consensus will be achieved on every issue, and that there would be no need for decisions to be arrived at through voting. Voting system is intact in their theories. They want to bring in deliberation prior to voting. They suggest lots of complex institutional mechanisms to deal with this situation.

Joshua Cohen talks about two kinds of deliberative participation- *Direct Participatory Deliberation* and *Mediated (indirect) Society wide deliberation*. While *Direct Participatory Deliberation* is more focused and leads to firm decisions on particular issues, *Mediated Society wide deliberation* is more open ended; it does not result in voting on particular issues, e.g. Political parties and other civil society organizations like, media, fall in this category. Moreover, *society wide deliberations* are open to everyone, and in that sense they are more inclusive. At the same time, *Direct participatory deliberation* includes only those who are directly involved with that particular issue – as the users of a particular service or the people who get affected by a particular decision (Cohen and Fung, 2004: 30)

While *Direct participatory deliberation* is directly linked with the decision-making process, *society wide indirect deliberation* can only build up public opinion. Deliberative democrats, like Cohen, think that a kind of equilibrium will get established between this formal participatory deliberation and informal society wide deliberation. They hope that the values around which consensus has been built in the informal *society wide deliberation* will affect the decisions being taken in the formal institutions of *direct participatory deliberation*, and, in turn, the practicality of these formal institutions will shape the values which are agreed to in the society wide informal public sphere (Ibid :31).

This is how deliberative democrats hope to solve this paradox between self- interested voting and a democratic government working towards the common good. By bringing in a dose of deliberation, before voting, they hope to change our preferences itself.

But deliberation may not proceed on the expected lines in deeply hierarchical societies. While Joshua Cohen argues that distributive justice will need to be put in place before fair deliberation can take place, others, like Iris Marion young, find this view problematic. Young argues that if issues of justice have already been decided before deliberation, very less will be left for the deliberators to take decisions on. (Young, 1999)

Here in India, Gurpreet Mahajan has argued that in a deeply hierarchical society, like India, deliberative activity can lead towards more democracy only after the state has secured the conditions of equality for everyone. (Mahajan, 2003)

Conclusion

So, while a dose of deliberation can help us not only in resolving the above mentioned paradox, but also in deepening democratic legitimacy, political equality and political autonomy, the relation between deliberation and democracy is not so direct in deeply hierarchical societies. Inequalities in hierarchical societies, like India, may frustrate all the efforts to engender democracy through deliberation. Even then, the idea of deliberative democracy has definitely provided us with an ideal with which we can criticise and reform our institutions. In that sense it is an important development in the critical theory of society.

References:

Ackerman, Bruce and James Fishkin (2002), 'Deliberation Day', *The Journal of Political Philosophy*, 10(2), 129-152.

Cohen, Joshua (2003), 'Deliberation and Democratic Legitimacy' in Derek Matravers and Jon Pike (eds.), *Debates in Contemporary Political Philosophy: An anthology*, London and New York: Routledge.

Cohen, Joshua and Archon Fung (2004), 'Radical Democracy', *Swiss Journal of Political Science*, 10(4), 23-34.

Dahl, Robert (2006), *A preface to Democratic Theory, Expanded Edition*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

Fung, Archon (2003), 'Survey Article: Recipes for Public Spheres: Eight Institutional Design Choices and Their consequences', *The Journal of Political Philosophy*, 11(3), 338-367

Mahajan, Gurpreet (2003), 'Civil Society and its Avatars' in Carolyn M. Elliot (eds.), *Civil Society and Democracy: A Reader*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press.

Waldron, Jeremy (1999), 'Deliberation, Disagreement and Voting' in Harold Hongju Koh and Ronald C. Slye (eds.), *Deliberative Democracy and Human Rights*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press.

Young, Iris Marion (1999), 'Justice, Inclusion, and Deliberative Democracy' in Stephen Macedo (eds.), *Deliberative Politics: Essays on Democracy and Disagreement*, New York: Oxford University Press.