

In Defense of Participatory Democracy

Midge Quandt

Participatory democracy is a system of direct popular rule in all areas of public life. It does not mean that citizens must be consulted on every issue. But it does require mechanisms by which the vast majority, including the underprivileged and the marginalized, has regular, continuous input into decision-making. Under this system, powerful economic interests (if they still existed) would have a diminished influence on government policies. In this way, participatory democracy transcends procedural matters and confronts the issues of class and social justice head-on.

In the North, our attitude toward participatory democracy in Latin America and elsewhere tends toward outright condemnation or at least, suspicion. Distrust of direct participatory democracy with its connotation of unwieldiness is one aspect. More importantly, the specter of direct popular rule is unsettling if not frightening to the U. S. establishment. Political and economic elites feel threatened and rightly so. Add to this the fact that the procedural, electoral democracy with which we are familiar is uniformly regarded as the only legitimate kind by those invested in the process. And it is not surprising that participatory democracy has almost no place in our discourse.

The suspicion of direct democracy must be put in the context of repeated attacks on today's leftist governments in Latin America — Bolivia, Ecuador, and especially Venezuela are favorite targets. Political writers and the media raise questions about the legitimacy of these governments. As a result, even some in the progressive community regard them with a jaundiced eye. This is particularly true of Venezuela. Most writers on Hugo Chavez, for example, focus on his personality and political style to the

exclusion of everything else. Ignoring advances in social justice, political analysts make much of his supposedly single-minded pursuit of power. (Aversion to his rhetorical excesses is often a reflex of the middle class and the rich. Likewise, the practice of the Venezuelan opposition which vilifies the “*chavista* rabble.”) Then there is the U. S. media. Abetted by the relentless demonizing of the left by public figures, the mainstream media accuses Chavez of demagoguery and worse. In Venezuela, the opposition engages in diatribes against “totalitarianism” and “Castro-communism.” (Some even compare him to Hitler.) Likewise, opponents of Daniel Ortega in Nicaragua call him a dictator and liken him to Somoza. Not unexpectedly, some in the solidarity movement are ambivalent about both Chavez and Ortega.

Extreme claims like those above can be advanced only because they contain a modicum of truth, however small. “The cult of personality” surrounding Chavez and Ortega, as even friendly observers admit, increases executive power while discouraging debate. Whether this adds up to true authoritarian rule is another question.

Procedural Democracy vs. Participatory Democracy

What is the relevance of all this for participatory democracy? It turns out that those who condemn leaders like Chavez also reject the kind of popular participation embodied in direct democracy. This is no coincidence. According to the conventional wisdom, the only acceptable form of democracy is the procedural kind — regular elections, representative bodies based solely on geography, free speech. There is no place here for the popular will. Indeed, the term itself is suspect. The will of the people,

unmediated by elected (and “reliable”) representatives, is potentially destabilizing and — though this is rarely said today — hostile to property rights. Hence the wishes of the majority are honored only occasionally, typically at election time. Between elections, they are filtered and refined through “responsible” representatives. (The U. S. constitution, reflecting the fear of what the 18th century called the mob, is a case in point. The bicameral system of representation which it created was meant to curb the excesses of the populace, most particularly, the people with limited property).

Advocates of procedural, formal democracy tend to equate participatory democracy with a tropism toward autocratic government — often of the populist variety. The logic goes like this: even with elections and other constitutional safeguards, countries which, in addition, encourage direct democracy, like Venezuela, court one-man rule. The link between participatory democracy and authoritarianism, according to this interpretation, lies in the direct pipeline between a charismatic leader and the populace. (The term “masses” is avoided not only because it is dated but also because of its elitist connotations.) As the leader takes on the mantle of the people’s savior — shades of Juan Peron and Fidel Castro — checks on his power, if they exist at all, are weakened. One who embodies the will of the people, so the argument goes, cannot legitimately be challenged. Hence there exists a constant threat of authoritarianism under the guise of a democratic system of government.

In contrast, the left has historically had grave doubts about electoral democracy. Behind the system of representative institutions, it argues, lies the power of political and economic elites (in monitoring the electoral process, influencing political parties by financing political campaigns, and vetting the experts who now play a large role in government). Conversely,

the left embraces participatory democracy precisely because it undercuts the domination of those elites. Unfettered by remote legislatures and courts, the voice of the grassroots can make itself heard. Vehicles for that voice include local assemblies, municipal and workplace councils and referenda. In Latin America today, experiments in participatory democracy which provide institutional channels for participation are most evident in Venezuela and, to a lesser extent, in Nicaragua.

Before 1999, electoral (and neo-liberal) democracy in Venezuela gave power to the elite and consigned the poor majority to the sidelines. With the election of Chavez, avenues for popular participation were opened. His “socialism for the 21st century” is redistributive in the economic sphere and participatory in political terms. On various occasions Chavez has said that the organs of direct democracy constitute the political arm of the new socialism. The institutions of representative democracy remain in place but are supplemented by referenda, cooperatives, planning councils and since 2006, communal councils. Although many progressives are suspicious of the populist, “strong-man” tendencies within *chavismo*, it can be argued that real democracy has been extended by the (still incomplete) implementation of direct democracy. The grass roots organs are no doubt more responsive to the wishes and needs of ordinary Venezuelans than traditional government mechanisms have been. The communal councils, in particular, have given the poor a greater stake in their government. These local councils decide on and administer projects in such areas as health, housing and water and, importantly, these decisions are binding. In a few municipalities such as Corora, mayors have turned the entire municipal budget over to the communal councils to good effect.

While Chavez capitalized on popular mobilization to create the institutions of direct democracy, the story of participatory democracy took a different turn in Nicaragua. In recent years, grass roots militancy has declined. As a result, Daniel Ortega's creation of the Councils of Citizens' Power was clearly not a response to popular momentum. Instead, in some accounts, it was an effort to *create* that momentum: to energize the base and to gather widespread support for the so-called "second phase" of the Sandinista revolution. Not surprisingly, that effort, though laudable in theory, has been less impressive in practice.

The communal councils in Venezuela have worked reasonably well. They exist on a small scale — 200 members on average — and are both manageable and democratic. On the minus side, government funding of the councils brings with it the danger of top-down control. Currently, some of these councils are more autonomous than others.

The same can be said of Nicaragua. Some of the local councils are dominated by loyalists of the Sandinista Party. Others have broader membership. Also problematical is the sidelining of the Municipal Development Committees, which grassroots groups have fought to develop and which to many constituted grass roots democracy. Activists in these Committees now feel marginalized and often do not support the Ortega Government. However, Nicaragua's councils of citizen power do have specific local powers assigned to them. For example, they decide who among the poor families in rural communities will be beneficiaries of the Zero Hunger anti-poverty program.

In both Venezuela and Nicaragua, experiments in participatory democracy are offset by the concentration of decision making in the executive branch. Another drawback to participatory democracy in both

countries is its limited reach: it has not yet operated beyond the local level in either country. In Nicaragua, Daniel Ortega has talked about changing the constitution to establish a chamber where the councils' representatives would sit, but those changes are unlikely to happen anytime soon.

While the actual mechanisms of participatory democracy are still in the developmental stage in Latin America, the failure of procedural democracy to limit the power of elites provides impetus for further experimentation and expansion of our definition of what constitutes “democracy for the 21st century.”