

Participatory democracy in social movements

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Participatory democracy refers to an organizational form in which decision making is decentralized, nonhierarchical, and consensus oriented. It can be contrasted with bureaucracy, in which decision making is centralized, hierarchical, and based on a formal division of labor, as well as with majority vote. Participatory democratic organizations have been a prominent feature of many progressive movements, including radical pacifism, the civil rights movement, the New Left, feminism, environmentalism, antinuclear activism, gay and lesbian movements, and the global justice movement.

Participatory democratic organizations today claim a diverse lineage, with precursors in ancient Athenian democracy, the New England town hall, Quaker meetings, and Spanish civil war affinity groups. The term itself was popularized in 1962 by the New Left group, Students for a Democratic Society (SDS). SDS activists took the term from philosopher Arnold Kaufman to refer to a polity in which citizens were regularly involved in public policymaking. They intended the term to describe a political system, not a mode of organizational decision making. However, at the time, decision making within SDS itself was collectivist and consensus oriented, this despite the group's formal reliance on parliamentary procedure. The same was true of the militant civil rights group, the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). For thousands of activists in the New Left, antiwar, and radical feminist movements, participatory democracy soon became an organizational ethos (Ferree & Martin 1995; Polletta 2002). By the end of the decade, many young activists perceived the political system

as intransigent, and they turned to building alternative schools, health centers, food coops, and publishing guilds, thus contributing to an enduring cooperative movement (Rothschild & Whitt 1986).

For sociologists writing about the surge of collectivist organizations during this period, the participatory democratic impulse reflected a youthful repudiation of authority that was at odds with the demands of effective political reform. Participatory democratic organizations were conceptualized as “expressive” or “redemptive” in contrast to their “instrumental” and “adversary” bureaucratic counterparts (see discussions in Breines 1989 and Polletta 2002). Since then, many scholars have instead adopted Breines's (1989) view of participatory democracy as animated by a *prefigurative* impulse. By enacting within the movement itself values of radical equality, freedom, and community, activists have sought to bring into being a society marked by those values. Far from being antipolitical, participatory democracy has been an attempt to transform what counts as politics.

Still, most scholars have seen participatory democracies as fragile. And indeed, some of the most famous participatory democratic movement groups, such as SDS, numerous feminist collectives, and the antinuclear Clamshell Alliance, collapsed after explosive internal battles about organizational structure. One common explanation for participatory democracy's fragility is its inefficiency (see discussions in Breines 1989; Polletta 2002). Consensus decision making takes time, decentralized administration creates problems of coordination, and a minimal division of labor sacrifices the benefits of expertise. These inefficiencies are manageable in an organization that is small or has little opportunity for political impact. But when participatory democratic groups grow in size or political stature and face new demands for coordination and funding, such inefficiencies become intolerable. The result is often a battle

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between political pragmatists, who are willing to adopt a more centralized and hierarchical organizational structure, and purists who refuse such reforms. Ultimately, either groups bureaucratize or they collapse.

Yet the battles that have wracked participatory democratic groups have usually centered not on the inefficiency of the form but on the group's failure to live up to its professed egalitarianism. In line with this insight, some scholars have argued that participatory democracy's vulnerability is its inequity rather than its inefficiency. Michels (1958) maintained that democratic organizations inevitably developed oligarchical structures as those occupying positions based on their expertise developed a stake in retaining their positions. Participatory democrats refuse those imperatives and privilege democracy over expertise. That only means that the hierarchies are informal, scholars in this vein argue. The result is what Freeman (1973) calls the "tyranny of structurelessness" in which the elimination of formal structures of authority only makes it easier for informal cliques to rule freely. When members shut out of decision making protest their marginalization, an organizational crisis is likely, since participatory democracy provides no mechanisms for holding leaders formally accountable.

A third perspective holds that as long as members' interests are fundamentally congruent, they are unlikely to object to disparities in informal influence (Mansbridge 1982). But when members' interests conflict, which is likely to occur in all but the most homogeneous of groups, the consensus-based decision making characteristic of participatory democratic organizations offers no way of adjudicating those conflicts. If minorities are not coerced to agree with the majority, then a stalemate is likely. After a series of such stalemates, an organizational crisis may ensue.

Although these explanations have been advanced separately, case studies have shown that two or even three of these dynamics have often operated at the same time. Moreover, the fact that groups have found strategic benefit in participatory democratic organization and that

they have done so in groups that are striking in their diversity casts doubt on the inevitability of participatory democracy's failure. It invites more attention to the conditions in which the form's potential inefficiency, inequity, and inability to reconcile competing interests become insuperable problems. Perhaps even more important, though, several trends have transformed the ways in which contemporary activists practice participatory democracy, as well as the challenges they face. One trend, especially evident in the women's movement, is the growth of hybrid organizational forms. In the 1970s and 1980s, activists running rape crisis centers and battered women's clinics found themselves pressed to adopt more conventional organizational structures by federal funding agencies. Activists discovered, however, that they could combine organizational forms: capitalizing on participatory democracy's capacity to foster tactical innovation and solidarity and bureaucracy's capacity to maximize expertise (Matthews 1994). For example, groups combined a hierarchy of offices with informal consultation across levels, divided decisions into those requiring consensus and those not requiring it, and so on (Ferree and Martin 1995). Indeed, scholars say that hybrid organizations have become the norm, in the women's movement and more broadly (Chen 2009).

That said, many activists remain committed to participatory democracy as a true alternative to bureaucracy. Indeed, the rise of the global justice movement has been accompanied by a resurgence of interest in radically "horizontal" forms. Here, though, a second trend is striking: the formalization of participatory democratic practices. If the creation of hybrid organizational forms responded to the tendency of participatory democracy to produce inefficiencies, the formalization of participatory democratic practices is intended to counter the inequalities that it has often generated. In meetings, roles of facilitator, timekeeper, and "vibes watcher" are intended to minimize unacknowledged exercises of influence. Networks and coalitions are favored over organizations

as a way to preserve groups' autonomy. The World Social Forum and associated regional forums encourage participants to share experiences, analyses, and strategies for opposing neoliberalism, and to undertake collaborative projects. However, participants are formally barred from adopting unified positions. Given the diversity of agendas and groups involved in the Forum, and the disparities of power among them, Forum organizers say, any joint positions would require a coercive, and inevitably false, unity.

A third trend is also evident in the global justice movement. The Internet has provided not only a new means of communication, but also new models of action and interaction (Juris 2008). Building on the possibility for collaborative problem solving associated with the Internet, along with its capacity to foster ties of diverse kinds, activists have sought to create movements in which autonomous spheres or publics are linked in multiple ways along the lines of a virtual network. At the same time, contention around corporate access to personal online information and open source software, as well as campaigns for do-it-yourself online copyright agreements, are intended not only to prefigure a more participatory society within the movement but to gain for people outside the movement control of the decisions that affect them. In this sense, the Internet has helped to make central once again the more macropolitical dimensions of participatory democracy that were central to the New Leftists who introduced the term.

Whether and how new digital technologies are transforming the practice of participatory democracy are questions that merit further research. Another important question concerns the impacts of participatory democratic organizational forms. During historical periods or institutional arenas in which participatory democratic organizations are prominent, do they make inroads into the repertoire of institutionalized organizational forms? For example, Rothschild (2000) argues that widespread public support for workplace democracy reflects the popular valorization of

terms such as "voice" and "empowerment" by the social justice movements of the 1960s and 1970s. What are the conditions in which particular versions of participatory democracy diffuse across movements? Some evidence suggests that a popular perception of participatory democracy as white and middle class may make it less appealing to activists of color and working-class activists (Polletta 2005). Finally, we know little about whether participatory democratic organizations exist in conservative movements. If they do exist, and are animated by prefigurative goals, then that suggests that radical democracy is a more politically capacious concept than we usually think. If such groups are not animated by prefigurative goals, then we may learn about additional rationales for movement groups to operate as participatory democracies.

SEE ALSO: Anarchism; Bureaucratization and social movements; Democracy inside social movements; "Iron law of oligarchy"; Prefigurative politics; Social Forum, World.

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