

## Democracy at the Core: Recalling Participation's Raison d'Être

Michael Briand

The IAP2 has adopted a set of 'Core Values for Public Participation' that, taken together, are intended to serve as the warrant and the touchstone for our principles, priorities, and practices, both as individual professionals and as a professional community:

1. The public should have a say in decisions about actions that could affect their lives.
2. Public participation includes the promise that the public's contribution will influence the decision.
3. Public participation promotes sustainable decisions by recognizing and communicating the needs and interests of all participants, including decision-makers.
4. Public participation seeks out and facilitates the involvement of those potentially affected by or interested in a decision.
5. Public participation seeks input from participants in designing how they participate.
6. Public participation provides participants with the information they need to participate in a meaningful way.
7. Public participation communicates to participants how their input affected the decision.

These 'Core Values' are statements of fundamental values that public participation efforts should embody and reflect. They are also assertions of universal values—values that are valid irrespective of variation in the public setting, be it national, cultural, religious, ideological, or political. As such, they are intended to be invoked and applied throughout the world as the normative basis for constructing, implementing, and evaluating public participation processes.

In the list above, you might have noticed that Core Value 1 differs from the other six in that it takes a *prescriptive* form, rather than a *descriptive* form. Is this significant? Probably not; most likely, the difference is merely semantic and incidental. For the sake of

consistency, as a statement of what the IAP2 in fact values and is committed to, it ought to read, ‘the public *has* a say in decisions about actions that could affect their lives.’

It might be instructive, though, to treat the grammatical contrast between Core Value 1 and the others as signifying something more substantial. Perhaps, if only to stimulate our thinking, we should read it as implying that the public should have a say in decisions about actions that could affect their lives because currently they *don't* have a say—or, more precisely, they don't have *enough* of a say, or the *right kind* of say.

Is this true? And if it is true that people do not have enough of a say, or the right kind of say, in decisions about actions that could affect their lives, does it matter? Would it change—*should* it change—the way we think about public participation? The way we feel about it? The way we practice it?

### **Democracy Reconsidered**

We value public participation because we value democracy. In ‘Democracy as a Universal Value’,<sup>1</sup> the Nobel Prize-winning economist, Amartya Sen, argues that democracy is a value having universal validity for human beings. Democracy enriches the lives of all people, he writes, and in three ways. First, democracy affords us political freedom. Political freedom is an aspect of human freedom in general. Having the ability and opportunity to participate in the civic and political life of one's community and society is an important element of a fulfilling human life. Democracy thus has intrinsic value for our well-being.

Second, democracy is instrumentally valuable. Democracy enables us to express our beliefs about how social life should be organised and to gain a hearing for those beliefs with our fellow citizens and with our representatives in government who have the authority to make official decisions that will affect us.

Third, democracy has a ‘constructive’ value in that it enables us, both individually and collectively, to form our values, principles, purposes, and priorities through interaction with others. Democracy encourages us to question, to think, to reflect, and to learn. It teaches us skills, develops our judgment, shapes our character, facilitates our growth as moral agents.

If Professor Sen is correct, then it's clear we should think of democracy, not just as an institution or a system of government, but first and foremost as a way of life. Specifically, we should understand democracy as a way of living in ‘right relationship’ to others. Even in

its minimalist form, in which our duty to others extends only as far as respecting their rights, democracy embodies a moral principle for living together with the other members of our communities and society.

If democracy is a way of life built on a moral foundation, what, then, are its essential, indispensable features? What does it require of us?

All conceptions of democracy assume political equality and mutual respect. The minimalist conception, for example, holds that all persons have the same legal, civil, and political rights, and that

Any meaningful notion of democracy posits that people should be equal not just in having the same rights, but in having a measure of real influence on the official decision-making process.

people show one another equal respect by not violating those rights. Some conceptions of democracy, however, go beyond the minimal requirement of basic rights. On these views, it is not enough to protect the liberties that people's rights afford them. It matters whether people have certain 'powers', or capabilities, as well as opportunities to act. Among these 'powers' is the ability to contribute actively to shaping the values, priorities, practices, policies, and institutions that give substance to their community's or society's quality of life. Equal 'authorship' of collective life, captured in the aphorism, 'When all will be affected, all must decide', is the essence of democracy.\* By itself, simply being free from interference in exercising my rights does not ensure that I can participate effectively in the making of public decisions.†

If authorship, or influence, is the key test of a polity's 'democraticness', then people must have more of a 'say' in the politics of their communities and society than they can obtain through basic guarantees such as the right to assemble, to speak freely, and to vote in fair elections. For example, in *Democracy and Disagreement*, Amy Gutmann and Dennis Thompson argue that democracy requires acceptance of 'reciprocity'.<sup>2</sup> Specifically, people must accept that they owe one another an effort to provide *reciprocally acceptable reasons* for their political prescriptions.<sup>3</sup> Such reasons are 'public' in the sense that anyone can recognize their relevance and prima facie validity, even if ultimately one discounts their force or even rejects them completely.□ The duty to give each other reciprocally acceptable

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\* See Core Value 4.

† See Core Value 2.

□ 'Acceptable' reasons are not reasons that *will* be accepted, but that *can* be accepted. That 'anyone *can*' accept them does not mean 'everyone will'. 'Prima facie validity' means that anyone who makes an effort to

reasons does not mean citizens have to agree on which reasons are the most important considerations, or on how much weight different reasons should be assigned. It does mean people are bound to explain to their fellow citizens, in terms their fellows can understand,

Democracy requires that we provide reciprocally acceptable reasons for our political prescriptions.

why a position they support (or oppose) should be supported (or opposed) by others as well.<sup>4</sup>

A requirement to provide and consider reciprocally acceptable reasons in an effort to influence the decision-making process presents a challenge for minimalist approaches to democracy. It entails that people must enjoy substantial access to the process and gain a hearing in which both their fellow citizens and official decision-makers are prepared to be influenced by the reasons they offer.

Advocates of a minimalist understanding of democracy tend to emphasise the superiority of a representative form of government, in which persons selected by citizens (through voting in elections) are given the authority to make legally binding policy decisions.\* In contrast, a

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consider a reason for a perspective or position not his or her own can see that it carries some force, at least on first hearing. A reason with prima facie validity makes sense ‘on its face’. Thus, when presented with such a reason, I might respond, ‘yes, there might be something to that’ or ‘that’s not an unreasonable point’, or ‘now the ball is in my court and I need to respond’.

\* Representative democracy is also called (inaccurately) the ‘republican’ form of democratic governance. According to Cornell University’s Legal Information Institute, the clause of the U.S. Constitution guaranteeing each state a ‘republican form of government’ originated in ‘the Virginia Plan introduced in the [Constitutional] Convention and was obviously attributable to [James] Madison. ... In a letter in April, 1787 to [Edmund] Randolph, who formally presented the Virginia Plan to the Convention, Madison had suggested that “an article ought to be inserted expressly guaranteeing the tranquility of the states against internal as well as external danger... Unless the Union be organized efficiently on republican principles, innovations of a much more objectionable form may be obtruded”.’ In other words, at the time the U.S. Constitution was drafted, the term ‘republican’ was used simply to distinguish a form of government founded on the authority of the governed rather than on that of a king (or queen). Roger Scruton supports this interpretation with his observation that ‘the distinction between republic and monarchy has, historically, corresponded to two rival theories of political obligation, one based in an idea of consent, the other in an idea of obedience’. [*A Dictionary of Political Thought* (London and Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1982): 402]

The Legal Information Institute goes on to remark that, ‘in *Luther v. Borden* [7 How. (48 U.S.) 1 (1849)], the Supreme Court established the doctrine that questions arising [under the section guaranteeing to the states a republican form of government] are *political, not judicial*...and that “it rests with Congress to decide what government is the established one in a State . . . as well as its republican character. ... On the ground that [such] issues were not justiciable, the Court in the early part of this century refused to pass on a number of challenges to state governmental reforms and thus made the clause in effect non-cognizable by the courts in any matter, a status from which the Court’s opinion in *Baker v. Carr*, despite its substantial curbing of the political question doctrine, did not release it’. (emphasis added)

In short, the Court in effect has ruled that the clause guaranteeing each state a republican form of government *does not determine* what form of non-monarchical (i.e., democratic, consent-based) government the states may have. By implication, therefore, the U.S. Constitution does not (except in the provisions that address these matters explicitly—specify the form of [non-monarchical] the government the United States as a whole (i.e., the federal government) must have. [http://www.law.cornell.edu/anncon/html/art4frag16\\_user.html#art4\\_hd70](http://www.law.cornell.edu/anncon/html/art4frag16_user.html#art4_hd70)

‘direct’ (or participatory) democratic government is one in which citizens themselves make decisions about policies.

In an indirect, or representative, democracy, elected representatives are accountable to the electorate—i.e., to those citizens who vote. Representation, it is argued, is not only necessary—because the electorate is too numerous to allow citizens to make public decisions through voting on them directly—but also desirable—because people may be unable or unwilling to obtain and analyze enough reliable information about complex problems and issues and to evaluate competently the bearing of that information on their interests. In the representative form of democracy, political equality (embodied in the principle of ‘one person, one vote’) does not extend beyond the equal right of each eligible member of the electorate to have his or her electoral vote counted as equal to the vote of every other member. Because each citizen does not vote directly on propositions (other than occasional referenda and initiatives) that, if passed, would become official, legally enforceable policies, but votes only to elect a representative, the representative, once elected, necessarily possesses political authority in far greater measure than that possessed by the individual citizen.<sup>+</sup>

Like other forms of democratic government, representative government is linked with ‘majoritarianism’, the doctrine that a majority of elected representatives are entitled to make policy decisions, and that a majority of voters suffices to elect those representatives. ‘Majority rule’ is the principle that more than one-half of the voting citizenry or its representatives must agree in order for a proposal to become official policy. Majoritarianism holds that any restriction that prevents a simple majority (50 percent plus 1) from making decisions is undemocratic. Thus, as Michael Walzer has written, winning ‘more people than the other side has’ is what makes a political outcome legitimate.<sup>5</sup>

Democracy's basic premise is that ultimate decision-making authority belongs to *all* members of a community or society *in equal measure*.

But majoritarianism and majority rule are not as easily justified as one might think. They do not follow directly from democracy's basic premise: that ultimate decision-making

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<sup>+</sup> This holds true whether the conception of representation is the ‘trustee’, ‘mandate’, or ‘instructed delegate’ form. In the ‘trustee’ version, the elected representative is authorised to use his or her best judgement in determining whether a proposed policy is in the best interests of his or her constituents. In the ‘mandate’ version, the representative is *given permission* (a mandate) to support (or oppose) policy proposals of a certain type or that meet certain criteria. In the ‘instructed delegate’ version, the representative is *required* to support (or oppose) policy proposals of a certain type or that meet certain criteria.

authority belongs to *all* members of a community or society *in equal measure*. By vesting decision-making authority in the majority and denying it to the minority, majoritarianism and majority rule curtail the equal democratic authority of every citizen who happens to find himself or herself in the numerical minority. Except in relatively rare systems that feature proportional representation, the votes of persons who support the candidate who fails to garner a majority or plurality of the total effectively count for nothing; it is as if those persons did not vote at all. Why? Because the elected official is bound (in a practical political sense, if not in principle) to reflect the views, interests, and priorities of those who elected her. Even if in theory the candidate-turned-elected official could be said to represent all citizens, in practice she almost never gives substantial consideration to the views, interests, and priorities of those who did not vote for her.

It is important to understand that, even when citizens agree to establish decision-making arenas and degrees of decision-making authority that depart from the principle of one person, one vote, the *original* decisions to do so must be made by all, with each counting as one and not more than one. Nothing in democratic political theory provides for any departure from the basic principle of the political equality of persons, *unless* the departure is authorised by all through a process that embodies precisely that principle.

Moreover, the political authority possessed by each citizen in a democracy is ‘unalienable’—it may not be taken or given away. Even if the citizen assigns her decision-making authority to a person acting as her representative, that assignment is—at least in principle—always circumscribed, provisional, and revocable. She may at any time restrict or rescind it. Because the authority assigned is provisional, it constrains the person who is elected to represent her in government. The elected representative who receives a citizen’s assignment of decision-making authority does not thereby acquire *carte blanche* to make decisions as she sees fit. In principle, the citizen may at any time and in any situation withdraw and reclaim the authority she has delegated. <sup>□</sup>

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<sup>□</sup> The reason for this, paradoxically, is that the ultimate source of authority in a democracy is not individual in nature. For reasons we cannot go into here (they stem from Wittgenstein’s argument against the intelligibility of the idea of a private language), democratic political authority cannot be *created* by the individual person alone *or* in concert with other individuals (contractarian theories of democratic authority to the contrary notwithstanding). It must be created by a supra-individual entity (of which the individual may be a constituent member). This is so irrespective of what that entity might be: society, God, natural law, tradition, etc. As a citizen in a democracy, the individual *draws upon* that source; in a sense, she borrows from the common fund of authority that has been established in the name of all citizens. But because she did not create it, she does not

In practice, of course, we cannot and do not permit citizens to take back their assignment of decision-making authority whenever they like. To do so would be unworkable. But it is imperative to understand that this limitation on the citizen's right to rescind assignment of his or her decision-making authority is a practical concession to reality—it does not constitute a weakening or abandoning of the fundamental moral and political principles upon which democracy is founded.

This fact has a crucial implication: An elected government representative possesses no democratic political authority to disregard or discount the views of *any* of the citizens she represents. She is bound to take full account of each citizen's views, because not to do so would risk failure to represent the citizen's interests effectively. We could not say an elected representative genuinely *represents* the citizen's interests if she disregards or discounts what the citizen believes, feels, or says (or would say) about them.

Elected representatives have a *duty to hear and heed* to the fullest extent feasible the concerns, needs, interests, experiences, values, and priorities of all members of the public. They have an obligation to engage their fellow citizens in conversation.

This does not mean elected representatives must attempt to do the impossible—slavishly follow the inescapably conflicting (and often ill-informed, poorly thought-through,

selfish, or unreasonable) opinions and wishes of their constituents. Nor does it mean they must consult personally (face-to-face or otherwise) every one of their constituents. But it does mean that, whether they are members of local, regional, or national legislative bodies, elected representatives have a *duty to hear and heed* to the fullest extent feasible the concerns, needs, interests, beliefs, experiences, and priorities of all members of the public.

Moreover, they have this duty not simply because the political equality inherent in democracy requires it, but for two additional reasons. First, citizens can best ascertain their (collective and individual) needs, interests, priorities, etc. by engaging each other and their elected representatives in democratic discussion. Second, discussion enables both citizens and their elected representatives to develop the soundest, most effective policies possible in response to public problems and issues. As far as practicable, therefore, elected

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'own' it. Hence she cannot give it away. Invoking her authority as a citizen carries with it both the freedom subsequently to rescind assignments of that authority and the duty to honor the principle that it is not hers to alienate.

representatives have an obligation to engage their fellow citizens in conversation oriented to the making of official decisions.

Taking democracy seriously requires that we honor the principle that ‘the people’ are the ultimate political authority. If the people (the public, the community) are the ultimate political authority, they must be able, collectively, to control the making of decisions concerning fundamental issues of public policy. Individually, every citizen is entitled to share equally in the exercise of ultimate political authority by *participating as fully as practicable* in the making of decisions.

### **The Trouble with Representative Government**

Participation and discourse are essential for democracy because without them citizens cannot influence the making of decisions that affect the character and quality of the social, economic, political, and cultural life of their communities and society. It is not simply, however, that government must be responsive to individuals; rather, it is that individuals, in accordance with the ideal of ultimate authorship of the laws that apply to them, must have some *actual impact* on the form and content of the laws they are bound to obey.

If conditions are such that citizens come to believe they cannot influence the process by which policies and laws are made, then

The most basic question of all has not been asked: Does representative government work *even for the majority?*

democracy begins to erode. Thus, for example, when decisions are ‘made’ through the mechanical device of voting unaccompanied by reasoned political discourse, sheer numerical superiority may be viewed as an expression of brute political power. The results of voting may appear to lack authority in the eyes of those who believe the majority has not honestly, open-mindedly, and fairly considered the merits of the losing side’s perspective. Similarly, when electoral and legislative processes are manipulated by those who can bring money or other resources to bear in an effort to promote their own interests to the detriment of the mass of ordinary people, democratic institutions begin to lose legitimacy.

Is democracy weakening? *In Hope Unraveled: The People's Retreat and Our Way Back*, Richard C. Harwood reports on personal conversations he has had in dozens of communities

across the United States during the past 15 years.<sup>6\*</sup> He describes a citizenry whose views about politics in the U.S. have deteriorated slowly but steadily, leading them from anger to frustration and, finally, to a retreat from public life. Similarly, Philip Green and Druscilla Cornell have argued that, in the U.S. at least, democracy has ‘unraveled to the point where it must be called into question whether the United States can be considered to have a democratic form of government in precisely [the] traditional sense [of people being the] ultimate author[s] of the laws that apply to them [and of having] some actual impact on the form and content of [those laws]’.<sup>7</sup>

Green and Cornell suggest that ‘the appropriate term for the American political system, in which the lawmakers, though elected, have a source of power distinctly separate from those to whom the laws are addressed, is not democracy or representative government, but rather “representative oligarchy”.’ In the U.S., ‘the de facto rulers are [rulers in virtue of riches], because no one can become a ruler without their support and approval’.

The authors raise the question of whether representative government in the U.S. is democratic in any but a formal, minimalist sense. They contend that, although longstanding efforts to make representative government work better for minorities have highlighted the fact of exclusion of certain groups from participation in public affairs, the most basic question of all has not been asked: Does representative government work *even for the majority?*

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\* Does it matter to the rest of the world whether democracy in the United States is in good health? Consider just one of several ways in which it matters immensely: In a recent review of the work of James Lovelock and others, Bill McKibben writes that Lovelock believes worldwide consumption of fossil fuels (now rising rapidly in India and China) is on the verge of disabling the earth’s temperature-management system and throwing the planet into an uncontrollable, irreversible, and catastrophic hyper-heated state. In this condition, Lovelock predicts, only about one-thirtieth of the world population—about 200 million people—will survive. Billions will die. And what is the chief source of fossil fuel consumption? The internal combustion engines of the vehicles driven in the U.S. Yet there is very little indication that Americans are prepared to take steps even to begin reducing fuel consumption, let alone do so to the degree and at the rate Lovelock and others believe is urgently required. Still less is there any evidence that U.S. political leaders are responding to such alarms as are being raised. This indifference owes at least in part to the influence of corporate interests on U.S. policymaking. But Americans lack not only the will to change their behavior, they lack the *means*. As McKibben concludes, ‘*the technology we need most badly is...the knowledge about how to cooperate to get things done.* [But] our sense of community is in disrepair at least in part because the prosperity that flowed from cheap fossil fuel has allowed us to become extremely individualized [to the point where] local solidarity...has disappeared. Our problem now is that *there is no way forward, at least if we’re serious about preventing the worst ecological nightmares, that doesn’t involve working together politically to make changes deep enough and rapid enough to matter*’. (emphasis added) Bill McKibben, ‘How Close to Catastrophe?’, *The New York Review of Books*, November 16, 2006: 23-25.

The fact is, Green and Cornell assert, ‘the American electoral system is broken’. And if the electoral system is broken, representative government itself is at peril, because ‘a “free election” is [its] basic operational unit. ...In the standard version of representative government, after all, “elections are trumps”. [But] it is not at all obvious what constitutes a “free” election, when was the last time (in the U.S.) there was one, and when if ever there might be one again’.

Such radical questions are in order, the authors believe, because of the pernicious role money plays in U.S. politics. The ‘American electoral system as a whole is dominated by capital, making it almost impossible for anyone who is not a millionaire, or at least able to fund-raise as if they were a millionaire, to even seriously consider running for any major office’. This is not an unfortunate byproduct of an otherwise well-designed system—it *is* the system. ‘...The abysmal failure of all efforts at meaningful electoral reform not only profoundly undercuts mass participation in the electoral process but undermines the idea that available structures of representation are compatible with even a limited representative form of democracy’.\*

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— Bill McKibben

The link between the interests of capital and aggressive cheerleading for ‘representative government’ is not coincidental. As Green and Cornell observe, since *The*

*Slaughterhouse Cases* were decided by the courts in 1876, corporations in the U.S. have been legally defined as persons before the law. Yet trade unions and other groups that have a stake in public policy lack this legal recognition. In fact, the authors point out, ‘for many decades after the passage of the 14<sup>th</sup> Amendment it was easier to get the Federal courts to apply its protections to corporations than to the actual human individuals for whose protection that Amendment was designed’. This development reached its peak with the Supreme Court’s assertion in *Buckley v. Valeo*<sup>8</sup> that the political activities of corporations,

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\* Significantly, Harwood’s conversations indicate that Americans distinguish between ‘government’ and ‘the system’ within which government operates, and they are deeply troubled by the access and influence that ‘moneyed interests’ enjoy in contrast to the relatively meager ability of ordinary citizens to ensure that public policy promotes the public interest.

including the spending of vast sums of money on political campaigns, constitute a political activity protected by the First Amendment. Thus the Constitution offers guarantees only for individuals operating as solitary persons, or for entities that are in no way real individuals (i.e., corporations)—not for collectives of persons (such as trade unions) that make up the core of democratic participation.

Green and Cornell echo the claim made above, that ‘democracy’ is not simply a type of government. To characterise it as such ‘is a reification that conceals more reality than it uncovers’. Rather, democracy should be conceived of as a practice (or, more generally, a ‘way of life’, as I have suggested) that manifests itself in a variety of ways. As a practice, it is no better (or worse) than those manifestations. In the U.S., the authors observe, the Senate is a ‘millionaire’s club’ and the House of Representatives is a ‘collection of fiefdoms only a handful of which are contested electorally most of the time’.<sup>+</sup> In effect, there is no party of ‘democracy’—no party of the public as a whole, or of the people in general. And that, Green and Cornell write, is why

the supposedly democratic character of representation is in fact only notional.

There is formal accountability of titular rulers, to be sure, in that they must run for reelection. And the ability to deliver votes...still counts for something. Just the same, on issues of importance to capital, oligarchy almost always rules... True accountability on any other than purely symbolic issues is delivered only to those who in turn deliver the goods that nominate and elect.

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<sup>+</sup> House incumbents seeking re-election now have a 98 percent chance of winning, up from the 91.3 percent of all incumbents who ran in 1994. According to Stephen C. Erickson, the ability of professional staff to run what are essentially full-time re-election campaigns, free mailing to constituents, and the promotion of constituent-oriented legislation are key advantages that are unavailable to challengers. Although money has always been important in U.S. politics, Erickson writes, it has never been more so than in the period from 1960 to the present. By 1960, the year of the first televised presidential debate, between John F. Kennedy and Richard M. Nixon, television was clearly having a powerful political effect. Television both decreased the unit cost of reaching voters and maximised the impact of campaign funds by making possible, like never before, a personal appeal to voters. Through the year-round fundraising made possible by large staffs, incumbents have expanded dramatically their ability to raise campaign resources, while challengers have clearly not been able to keep pace. In fact, the average amount of money spent on free mail to constituents during a single House term is about as much as the average challenger spends on an entire campaign. See Stephen C. Erickson, ‘The Entrenching of Incumbency: ‘Re-elections in the U.S. House of Representatives, 1970-1994’, *The Cato Journal*, vol. 14 no. 3, <http://www.cato.org/pubs/journal/cj14n3-2.html>

As Green and Cornell note, the question, ‘what does it mean to be represented?’, is rarely asked. The same is true of the questions, ‘representative of what?’ and ‘representative of whom?’ Such questions usually are posed only by advocates of fairer or more meaningful representation for marginalised or excluded minorities. But *most* people *most* of the time are effectively marginalised or excluded (though not in the same degree or in the same way). The fact is, ‘democracy’ in the U.S. (and perhaps elsewhere in putative democracies) amounts to little more than government officials enjoying the freedom to do as they like, constrained only by what other ‘players’ in the system are able to impose on them, until they are truly threatened with removal from office—and often not even then, given the devices, stratagems, and resources available for the work of remaining in power.

Many people, of course, are represented more than adequately: those who are intent on protecting the substantial stakes they have in the fortunes of any profit-making or income-generating corporation. Even organised groups of individual citizens, such as the National Rifle Association, the Sierra Club, and the American Association of Retired Persons, typically can do little more than impede uncongenial legislation. They lack the resources required for sustained, effective influence, especially the sort required to move new legislation through Congress. For the rest of us, the most we can hope for, ordinarily, is a ‘canned’ response (signed by a mechanical pen or its contemporary equivalent) to a phone call we make or a letter we write. We might get some help with a problem we’re having with a government agency. But our ability genuinely to influence public policy is for all practical purposes non-existent.

The obsession with democracy understood as equal individual liberty both fosters and betokens a predisposition to accumulate as much power as possible, the better to render ourselves independent of the goodwill of others.

Democratic representative government, Green and Cornell insist, requires equal representation of (non-corporate) persons. Many mechanisms for such representation are conceivable, from proportional representation in a multi-party legislature to institutionalised use of deliberative polls. But proposals for new means by which to make government more democratic will gain no traction in public discussion unless they are accompanied by a shift in the national consciousness away from the idea that we have no

democratic duty beyond respecting the widely accepted rights of our fellow citizens toward a democratic ethic that takes moral and existential equality seriously. The obsession with democracy understood as equal individual liberty both fosters and betokens a predisposition to accumulate as much power as possible, the better to render ourselves independent of the goodwill of others. In the name of power thinly disguised as the lofty principle of freedom, democratic governance in the U.S. has been reduced to a near-Hobbesian way of life in which 'every person for himself or herself' is the highest expression of our potential as social creatures.

As proposed above, democracy is a way of life supported by a moral principle which says both that '*I* am as important and valuable as the other members of our communities and society' and that '*they* are as important and valuable as I am'. But democracy in the U.S. today weighs far more heavily in favour of the former sentiment than the latter. Green and Cornell rightly point out that in this regard the ongoing political battle in the U.S. over social security is instructive. Advocates of privatisation argue that (in the near future, if not already) most people will be too well-off in retirement to incur more than a negligible benefit from social security payments. The moral assumption implicit in this contention is that, because it is not in a well-off person's narrow self-interest to subsidise the well-being of his or her less-well-off fellows, he or she has no moral duty to do so. Our duty to others stops with the requirement that we respect their 'right' to struggle to provide adequately for themselves—the assumption being that, if they fail, it is their own fault.

For democratic theorists from Kant and Mill to Rawls and Gutmann and Thompson, the aspiration to democracy is the aspiration to a moral community based on recognition of the equal moral standing of one's fellows and a commitment to showing all persons equal concern and respect. As Daniel Kemmis argues so eloquently in *Community and the Politics of Place*,<sup>9</sup> without the practice of reciprocity, people cannot see each other as connected to one another, and hence cannot see that they have shared interests. Social and communal life becomes atomised, and as it does, people's moral horizons shrink to the realm of family and friends. And as this occurs, people retreat into fortresses they erect to keep at bay the alien and hostile world of their own communities and society.

The life force of democracy, Green and Cornell write, is rooted in the idea that human beings should be *able*—not just be free—to express themselves in public and to *be heard*.

Hence democracy is rooted, as Gutmann and Thompson have shown, in support for continuous moral-political dialogue. As Green and Cornell remind us, however, as public space narrows, what can be said narrows, and after a while the narrowing of what can be said narrows what can be thought. This happens, they emphasise, *within the logic of the system*. The achievement of national group-think—so painfully evident in the shameful behaviour of Washington insiders and the national news media in the wake of 9/11—‘requires no

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straightforward manipulation of people, nor any assumption that they don't know their own interests or are not being allowed to express their own thoughts. Just the same, the result is a perversion of discussion without anyone having been in charge of perverting it'. In

oligarchic America (with the possible, yet-to-be-demonstrated exception of the Internet), the growing media oligopoly excludes the vast majority of its people from the electronic commons, from the public space upon which democracy depends. As H.L. Mencken observed, freedom of the press is limited to those who own one.

What is at stake in the continuing contest between oligarchy and democracy, Green and Cornell conclude, is not just the responsiveness and fairness of democratic institutions and practices, but the moral psychology of the American people. Unless we acquire a greater appreciation of the relationship between our character as individual human beings and the values served by the institutions and practices we build and sustain, we will lose any sense of the connection between our political life and our moral life. And when that occurs, democracy will be lost.

### **Participation and Democracy**

At the outset of this essay I asked whether it would be instructive to read Core Value 1 as implying that the public *should* have a say in decisions about actions that could affect their lives because currently they *don't* have a say—or *enough* of a say, or the *right* kind of say. I then asked whether, if the answer is ‘yes’, does it matter—would it, or should it, change the way we think about and practice public participation?

I believe members of the public currently lack an effective say in the making of public policy. This matters tremendously, because their continuing absence from the political process renders democracy hollow, in both theory and practice. Without participation by ordinary citizens that enables the vast majority of people to reclaim collective control over their lives, democracy no longer serves as the means by which people become the rightful authors of their own lives. It ceases to be a practice founded on the moral principle that all persons are owed a duty of equal concern and respect. It stops being a way of life in which people live in 'right relationship' with others.

Public participation is much, much more than a means by which public policy can be made more effective and by which citizens can feel more connected with government. Public participation is the *sine qua non* of democracy, which in turn is an indispensable constituent of human well-being. Hence the form, extent, and quality of public participation are of the most fundamental importance. In our conversations and discussions of when, where, and how to bring citizens into the public decision-making process, let us bear in mind that the stakes are of the highest order. Democracy—and probably much more—hangs in the balance.

Michael Briand is President of the Institute for Democratic Dialogue & Deliberation in Denver, Colorado. He is the editor of the International Journal of Public Participation.

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<sup>1</sup> Sen, Amartya, 'Democracy as a Universal Value', *Journal of Democracy* (1999) 10 (3): 3-17.

<sup>2</sup> Stephen Macedo, 'Introduction', *Deliberative Politics: Essays on Democracy and Disagreement*, ed. Stephen Macedo, New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999: 7.

<sup>3</sup> Amy Gutmann and Dennis Thompson, 'Democratic Disagreement', in Macedo, 259.

<sup>4</sup> Amy Gutmann and Dennis Thompson, 'Democratic Disagreement', in Macedo, 272.

<sup>5</sup> Amy Gutmann and Dennis Thompson, 'Democratic Disagreement', in Macedo, 256.

<sup>6</sup> *Hope Unraveled: The People's Retreat and Our Way Back*, Richard C. Harwood (Dayton, OH: Kettering Foundation Press), 2006.

<sup>7</sup> Green, Philip and Druscilla Cornell 'Rethinking Democratic Theory: The American Case', [http://www.iefd.org/articles/rethinking\\_democratic\\_theory.php](http://www.iefd.org/articles/rethinking_democratic_theory.php)

<sup>8</sup> 424 US 1 (1976)

<sup>9</sup> Kemmis, Daniel, *Community and the Politics of Place* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press), 1990.