2 Can international organizations be democratic? A skeptic's view[1]

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Can international organizations, institutions, or processes be democratic? I argue that they cannot be. Any argument along these lines raises the question, "What is democracy?" or, better, "What do I mean by democracy?" If I can say what democracy is, presumably I can also say what democracy is not, or to put it another way, what is not a democracy.[2] In brief: an international organization is not and probably cannot be a democracy.

Democracy

Yet to say what democracy is and is not is far more difficult than we would like. This is so for many reasons, of which I will offer three.

First, as we all know, the term democracy has been and continues to be used indiscriminately.[3] Although the word may be applied most frequently to a form of government, it is not restricted to forms of government. What is more, government itself is a protean term. Not only do states have governments; so also do economic enterprises, trade unions, universities, churches, voluntary associations, and other human organizations of infinite variety, from families and tribes to international organizations, economic, military, legal, criminal, and the rest. Even when the word democracy is applied to governments, and further restricted to the government of a state, the concept unfolds into several complex dimensions.[4] In usage, then, the meaning of the term is

[1] I am indebted to Martin Gilens for polling data on American opinion and to Bernt Hagtvet and Rune Premfors for providing me with articles, published and unpublished, on the referenda on membership in the European Union in the Nordic countries and Austria.

[2] For another reflection on this question, see Schmitter and Karl 1991.

[3] In his neglected but excellent analysis of the meaning of democracy, Jens Christophersen (1966) provides us with several dozen different usages, many by illustrious writers, and many of them mutually inconsistent.

[4] In my own work, for example, a minimally coherent and adequate assessment seems to me to require descriptions of ideal criteria, their moral justifications, different forms of actual political institutions that we call democratic (which is to say, more or less

virtually unbounded – indeed so unrestricted that it has even been used to signify dictatorship.[5]

To explain why international institutions and processes will be non-democratic, I intend to consider just two of the innumerable aspects of democracy. These are democracy as a system of popular control over governmental policies and decisions, and democracy as a system of fundamental rights.

When we consider democracy from the first and probably the most familiar point of view, we interpret it as consisting of rule by the people, or rather the demos, with a government of the state that is responsive and accountable to the demos, a sovereign authority that decides important political matters either directly in popular assemblies or indirectly through its representatives, chosen by lot or, in modern democracies, by means of elections. Viewing democracy from the second point of view, we interpret it as providing an extensive body of rights. These are of at least two kinds. One consists of rights, freedoms, and opportunities that are essential to popular control and the functioning of the democratic institutions themselves, such as freedom of speech and assembly. The other consists of a broad array of rights, freedoms, and opportunities that, though arguably not strictly essential to the functioning of democratic institutions, tend to develop among a people who govern themselves democratically, such as rights to privacy, property, a minimum wage, non-discrimination in employment, and the like.

One may value democracy from either point of view, or, more likely, from both, and of course for other reasons as well. However that may be, I am going to focus mainly on the first perspective, democracy as a system of popular control over governmental policies and decisions,[6] and I will offer several reasons for believing that whatever kind of government may prevail in international organizations it will not be recognizably democratic in that sense. The famous democratic deficit that has been so much discussed with respect to the European Union is not likely to be greatly reduced in the EU; elsewhere the deficit is likely to be far greater.

democratic by ideal standards), chiefly democratic polyarchy, and some conditions favorable or unfavorable for the emergence and stability of actual democratic political systems.

[5] "The most explicit occurrence," according to Christophersen, "is Babeuf's statement that the terms 'democracy' and 'Robespierrism' were identical, and the latter term signified a revolutionary dictatorship, or a strict and merciless emergency rule, which was to crush anything that barred the victory of revolution" (Christopherson 1996: 304). Lenin and his followers also equated dictatorship of the proletariat with democracy, or proletarian democracy.

[6] Though a more detailed analysis might benefit from sharper distinctions, I will use the terms policies, decisions, and policy decisions indiscriminately.

The second problem in saying what democracy is and is not is to determine how and where to locate the threshold or cut-off. It is not very useful to treat democracy as if we could specify a sharp, clear line between democracy and non-democracy. Imagine that we had two scales for democracy rather like scales for measuring temperatures. One would run from a theoretical system that is perfectly or ideally democratic to a theoretical system that is completely non-democratic; the other would run from actual or real-world systems that sufficiently meet ideal democratic criteria to be called democracies to the most extreme non-democratic systems that we actually observe in human experience. An analogy might be a thermometer used for weather and one going from absolute zero to the boiling point of water. If we were to place the two democracy scales alongside one another, systems at the top of the scale for measuring actual democracy would surely fall considerably short of the top of the scale on which we would locate an ideal democracy – and so too, no doubt, at the bottom. At what point on the scale of actual political systems are we justified in designating a political system as democratic or non-democratic? Unfortunately the transition from democracy to non-democracy is not like the freezing point of water. None the less, even if the threshold is pretty hazy, I want to argue that international systems will lie below any reasonable threshold of democracy.

A third difficulty in defining democracy arises because, in practice, all democratic systems, with the exception perhaps of a few tiny committees, allow for, indeed depend on, delegation of power and authority; the citizen body delegates some decisions to others. Size and complexity make delegation essential. Despite all their concern for maintaining the authority of the assembly, even Athenians could not avoid delegation. In modern representative democracies, or what I sometimes call polyarchies, the extent of delegation is enormous, in theory running from the demos to its elected representatives to higher executives to top administrators and on down the lengthy bureaucratic hierarchy. To what extent the demos effectively controls important final decisions has been, of course, a much disputed empirical question, not to say a crucial ideological issue. But we would agree, I think, that, in practice, delegation might be so extensive as to move a political system beyond the democratic threshold.[7]

I believe this is very likely to be true with international organizations and institutions, including the European Union (hereafter, the EU).

[7] Guillermo O'Donnell (1994) distinguishes "democratic" systems, in which office-holders are held accountable to voters through competitive elections, and "delegative democracy" in which they are held accountable by one another.

The problem

If that judgment were shown to be justified, a democrat might say, we cannot in good conscience support such delegation of power and authority by democratic countries to international organizations and institutions. Yet this answer will not do. In both democratic theory and practice a fundamental dilemma lurks half hidden, ordinarily just out of view. Other things being more or less equal, a smaller democratic unit provides an ordinary citizen with greater opportunities to participate in governing than a larger unit. But the smaller the unit the more likely that some matters of importance to the citizen are beyond the capacity of the government to deal with effectively. To handle these broader matters, the democratic unit might be enlarged; but in doing so the capacity of the citizen to participate effectively in governing would be diminished. To put it loosely, one might say that although your government gains more control over the problem, your capacity to influence that government is diminished.

At the extreme limit, a democratic unit of, say, twenty people, could provide every member with unlimited opportunities to participate in its decisions and little or no delegation would be necessary. Yet the government would have no capacity to deal effectively with most matters that were important to the members. At the other extreme, a world government might be created in order to deal with problems of universal scope, such as poverty, hunger, health, education, and the environment. But the opportunities available to the ordinary citizen to participate effectively in the decisions of a world government would diminish to the vanishing point. To speak in this case of "delegating authority" would simply be a misleading fiction useful only to the rulers.[8]

Optimists and skeptics

In the latter half of the twentieth century this dilemma has reappeared because of the increasing use of international organizations, institutions, and processes to deal with matters that are beyond the effective capacities of the government of a single country. So the question arises: to what extent can the ideas and practices of democratic government be applied to international organizations, institutions, and processes? Those who believe that democracy can be extended to the international realm offer an optimistic answer. International institutions not only should be democratized but actually can be (Archibugi and Held 1995;

[8] For my earlier explorations of this dilemma, see Dahl 1967: 953–70, 1989: 317ff and 1994, and Dahl and Tufte 1973: 13ff.

Held 1995). An opposing view is offered by skeptics such as Philippe Schmitter (1996), who argues that even within "the emerging Europolity" (which is surely the most promising international site for democratization) a recognizably democratic political system is unlikely to develop. For reasons I am going to present here, I share Schmitter's skepticism, although I take a somewhat different path to reach a similar conclusion.

My skepticism applies not just to the European Union but even more to international organizations in general. I do not mean to say that we should reject the benefits of international organizations and institutions. The benefits may sometimes even include assistance in fostering democratization in non-democratic countries. But I believe we should openly recognize that international decision-making will not be democratic. Whether the costs as measured in democratic values are outweighed by gains as measured in other values, and perhaps even by gains in the democratization of non-democratic countries, obviously depends, among other things, on how much one values democracy. Overarching judgments are likely to be either vacuous or highly controversial. The only point I wish to press here, however, is that international policy decisions will not ordinarily be made democratically.

My argument is simple and straightforward. In democratic countries[9] where democratic institutions and practices have been long and well established and where, as best we can tell, a fairly strong democratic political culture exists, it is notoriously difficult for citizens to exercise effective control over many key decisions on foreign affairs. What grounds have we for thinking, then, that citizens in different countries engaged in international systems can ever attain the degree of influence and control over decisions that they now exercise within their own countries?

Foreign affairs and popular control: the standard version

Scholars and other commentators have observed for many years that exercising popular control over foreign policy decisions is a formidable problem. Consider the United States. In the standard version[10] foreign

[9] To prevent definitional overload I omit a discursus on what I mean by a "democratic country." Different scholars using similar but not identical criteria tend to converge on about the same list of countries. I simply use the term to refer to the twenty or so countries in which the political institutions of polyarchy, as I have described them elsewhere, have existed since 1950 or earlier, and other countries in which they now exist at about the same level as in these "old" democracies.

[10] The classic and still highly relevant study is Almond 1950.

affairs are remote from the lives, experiences, and familiar knowledge of ordinary citizens. Although a small "attentive public" may exist "before whom elite discussion and controversy takes place" (Almond 1950: 139), a great many citizens lack knowledge of foreign affairs, certainly in depth.[11] Concrete experience, personal familiarity, social and professional ties, knowledge of relevant histories, data, and trends are weak or entirely lacking and are replaced, if at all, by flickering images drawn from radio, television, or newspaper accounts. In addition, the sheer complexity of many international matters often puts them beyond the immediate capacities of many, probably most, citizens to appraise. The upshot is that crucial foreign policy decisions are generally made by policy elites without much input from or accountability to the majority of citizens.[12]

The US decision in late 1993 to adopt NAFTA closely fits the pattern. A week before the vote on NAFTA in the House of Representatives, 79 percent of those surveyed in a CBS/New York Times poll were unsure or did not know whether their Congressional representative favored or opposed NAFTA. "Some Americans felt strongly about NAFTA. But the vast majority neither understood it nor cared enough about it to become well informed. As a result, public opinion was effectively neutralized on the issue and had little effect on the final outcome" (Newhouse and Mathews 1994: 31–2; see also Molyneux 1994: 28–30).

Americans are not unique.[13] Is it realistic, for example, to expect

[11] In surveys in the US from the 1930s to 1994, 553 questions concerned foreign affairs. Of these, "14 percent were answered correctly by at least three-quarters of survey respondents ... An additional 28 percent of the items were correctly answered by between half and three-quarters of those asked ... [M]ore than half could be answered by less than half the general public. 36 percent of the questions were known by only one-quarter to one-half of those asked. In the 1940s, this included knowledge about the forms of government of Sweden and Yugoslavia ... and that the United States was sending military aid to Greece. Finally, nearly a quarter of the items could be answered by fewer than one-fourth of those asked. These little known facts included knowing that the United States was sharing information about the atomic bomb with England and Canada in the 1940s ... knowing about how many soldiers had been killed in Vietnam in the 1960s, knowing how much of the federal budget goes to defense of foreign aid in the 1970s ..." (Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996: 82–6).

[12] I am going to use terms like political elites, policy elites, and political leaders and activists despite their lack of precision. Almond (1950: 139ff) distinguished four types of foreign policy elites: political, administrative and bureaucratic, interest, and communication elites. The more inclusive term "political class" widely used in Italy (*la classe politica*), which might also be useful, is too rarely used in English to be helpful here.

[13] Whether Americans are less well informed on foreign affairs than citizens in some European countries is hard to say, since differences in the knowledge of citizens in different countries seems to vary so much with the particular item. See table 2.8 and table 2.9 in Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996: 90–1.

citizens in European countries to develop informed judgments about European Monetary Union and its desirability? The editors of *The Economist* recently observed that "public debate on the subject has been dismally poor right across Europe ... Far from engaging in argument, the pro and anti tribes ignore each other resolutely" (*The Economist* 1996: 17).

One response to the standard account might be: So what? If the average citizen is uninterested in foreign affairs and not fully competent to make informed judgments, is it not better to leave the matter to the political leaders and activists?

We can take it as axiomatic that virtually all decisions by any government, including a democratic government, are disadvantageous to some people. If they produce gains, they also result in costs. If the trade-offs in advantages and disadvantages were identical for everyone, judgments involved in making collective decisions would be roughly equivalent to those involved in making individual decisions; but the trade-offs are not the same for everyone. Typically costs and benefits are distributed unevenly among those subject to a decision. So the perennial questions arise: What is the best decision? Who can best decide? How?

A part of the perennial answer is that the proper criterion for government decisions is the public good, the general interest, the collective good, and other similar, though perhaps not strictly equivalent, formulations. But as we all know, how to define the public good and how to achieve it are formidable problems.

Proposed solutions to the problem of the public good seem to fall into two rough categories: substantive and procedural. Substantive solutions offer a criterion, such as happiness, welfare, well-being, utility, or whatever; a metric or measure that can be summed or aggregated over the persons concerned; and a distributive principle for determining what constitutes a just or justifiable allocation of the good among persons. Procedural solutions offer a process for determining and validating decisions, such as majority rule, or a full-blown democratic process, or guardianship, or judicial determination, and so on. On closer examination, however, neither substantive nor procedural solutions are sufficient; each requires the other. Because substantive solutions are not self-enacting, they require procedures for determining the substantively best outcomes; and because procedures, including democratic procedures, are means to ends, not ends in themselves, their justification depends on more than purely procedural values.

In practice all substantive solutions are contested, indeed highly contested; none commands general acceptability, except perhaps in a purely formulaic way, such as Pareto optimality or the greatest good of

the greatest number. In the absence of full agreement on substantive criteria, many people in democratic countries tend to accept procedural solutions as sufficient, at least most of the time. When we disagree, they might say, then let the majority decide, if not directly then through our representatives; though to be acceptable, the majority decision must not only follow proper procedures but must also lie within some generally agreed on boundaries as to rights, liberties, minimal standards of justice, and so on.[14]

As a practical matter, the problem of determining the general good would be easier to solve in a political unit containing a highly homogeneous population. At the limit of complete homogeneity, differences in the impact of collective decisions would vanish, but of course that limit is rarely if ever reached, even in a unit as small as a family. In any case, an increase in the size of a political unit is usually accompanied by an increase in the diversity of interests, goals, and values among the people in the unit. Thus when a democratic unit is enlarged to include new territory and people, the demos is likely to become more heterogeneous. Diversity in turn tends to increase the number of possible political interests and cleavages based on differences in economic position, language, religion, region, ethnic or racial identity, culture, national affiliation, historical memories, organizational attachments, and others.

As the number of persons and the diversity of interests increase, the idea of a common good or general interest becomes ever more problematic. Earlier I mentioned some of the cognitive and emotional obstacles to popular control over foreign policy decisions. These make it harder for citizens to perceive and understand the situations, conditions, needs, wants, aims, and ends of other citizens who are distant and different from themselves in crucial respects. Even if they acquire some grasp on these matters, their incentives to act for the benefit of the distant others when it may be to their own cost or disadvantage are weak or nonexistent. Beyond the boundaries of one's own intimate attachments, altruism is uncommon, and as a steady state among many people it is too feeble to be counted on. In sum, among a large group of persons with varied and conflicting ends, goals, interests, and purposes, unanimity is unattainable, disagreement on the best policy is to be expected, and civic virtue is too weak a force to override individual and group interests.[15]

[14] The process of deliberation in democratic decision-making, to which democratic theorists have been giving increased attention, can be seen as a crucial procedural stage necessary if democratic decisions are to be substantively justifiable. See Guttman and Thompson 1996 and Fishkin 1991.

[15] I have elaborated on this question in Dahl 1987 and 1995.

If the public good on foreign affairs were rationally demonstrable, if in fine Platonic fashion the elites possessed the necessary rationality and sufficient virtue to act on their knowledge of the public good, and if ordinary citizens had no opinions or held views that demonstrably contradicted their own best interests, then a defensible argument might be made that the political leaders and activists should be entrusted with decisions on foreign affairs. But on international issues the public good is as rationally contestable as it is on domestic questions and we have no reason to believe that the views of elites are in some demonstrable sense objectively correct. Yet the weight of elite consensus and the weakness of other citizens' views means that the interests and perspectives of some, possibly a majority, are inadequately represented in decisions. Views that might be strengthened among ordinary citizens if these views were more effectively brought to their attention in political discussion and debate remain dormant. The alternatives are poorly explored among ordinary citizens, if not among the policy elites. Yet if citizens had gained a better understanding of their interests and if their views had then been more fully developed, expressed, and mobilized, the decisions might have gone another way.

These conditions probably exist more often on foreign affairs than on domestic issues. Sometimes elites predominantly favor one of the major alternatives; many citizens are confused, hold weak opinions, or have no opinions at all; and those who do have opinions may favor an alternative that the political leaders and activists oppose. So public debate is one-sided and incomplete, and in the end the views and interests of the political leaders and activists prevail.

To provide a satisfactory account of the empirical evidence bearing on this conjecture would be a large undertaking, all the more so if one attempted to compare the experiences of several democratic countries. The best I can offer are several scattered pieces of evidence:

- As I have already indicated, the US decision about NAFTA appears to fit the pattern pretty well.
- Support for European unification was markedly higher among "opinion leaders" than among non-leaders in twelve European countries from 1973–91 (Wessels 1995: 143–4, tables 7.2 and 7.3). From evidence for changes in support over time, one author concludes that:

> a system of internationalized governance such as the EC could not expect support if there were no political leaders and activists, political parties, and attentive publics who care about it. That does not turn the European integration process into a process independent of mass opinion. Quite the contrary: because support and legitimacy are

necessary, élites and political actors have to work to secure them. (Wessels 1995: 162)

The revised standard version: occasional activation

In the standard version, the views of elites tend to prevail, particularly when they pretty much agree. But suppose that the policy on which they agree is seen to cause or threatens to cause great harm to the interests, goals, and well-being of a large number of citizens. We need only recall the Vietnam War, in which US policy was initially made almost exclusively by "the best and the brightest," the elite of the elites, until the human waste and futility of the war became so evident as to create intense public opposition *and* a broadening split among the political leaders and activists. On such occasions, political leaders and activists are sharply divided, ordinary citizens are activated, mass publics develop strong views about foreign affairs, and public opinion becomes highly influential in key foreign policy decisions (Aldrich, Sullivan, and Bordiga 1989).

It is misleading to say, for example, that Americans never become involved in foreign affairs. Answering the standard Gallup question, "What do you think is the most important problem facing this country today?" in about one-third of the 150 surveys from 1935 to 1985 Americans ranked foreign affairs highest. At least once in each of eighteen years during that fifty-year interval Americans put foreign affairs highest. Not surprisingly, the importance of foreign affairs soared during wars: World War II, Korea, Vietnam. In short, their responses were appropriate to the circumstances.[16] While support for the war effort during World War II was widespread among elites and the general public, during the wars in Korea and Vietnam elite opinion, at least in some highly influential quarters, lagged behind general public opinion.

In Europe, questions about a country's relations with the EU and its predecessor, the European Community, have led to the political

[16] Thus, in 1939, the public concerns of Americans began to shift from domestic to foreign affairs, moved to first place after Hitler invaded Poland, were replaced at the end of World War II by domestic matters, which in turn were replaced by Cold War worries in the late 1940s. "From that point until the early 1960s, foreign affairs dominated public concern, ranking first in 48 of 56 surveys and often commanding over 50 percent of the public ... In 1963 the hegemony of foreign affairs was interrupted by the emergence of the civil rights movement ... until foreign affairs, boosted by the Vietnam War, regained the top position in 1965. From 1960 to 1970 Vietnam and other international issues dominated public concern. The only exception occurred in August 1967, when race riots pushed social control to the forefront...With minor exceptions, economics has completely dominated public concerns for the last 10 years [1974–84], often capturing 60 percent of the public" (Smith 1985).

activitation of a large part of the electorate,[17] aroused intense passions, and produced sharp divisions within the general population, sometimes in opposition to the predominant views of the political leaders and activists. Political activation and sharp divisions were particularly visible in the referendum in Norway in 1972 on membership in the EC, in France in 1992 on ratifying the Maastricht Treaty, and in Norway and Sweden in 1994 on membership in the EU. In all four referenda, citizens disagreed as sharply in their views of what would be best for themselves and their country as they would on divisive domestic issues. Voters in the French referendum on Maastricht split almost evenly (51 percent yes to 49 percent no) along class and occupational lines.[18] By small majorities Norwegians rejected membership in the EC in a referendum in 1972 and again in the EU in 1994. In public argument, advocates of the economic, security, and cultural advantages of the EU were in conflict with opponents who tended to stress such values as democracy, absence of red-tape Brussels bureaucracy, environmental protection, welfare state values and policies, counter-culture as well as gender equality. Analysis of the vote reveals significant differences among Norwegians. "No" votes were concentrated more heavily in the northern and western periphery; in fishing and farming communities; among church members, women, and those working in primary industries or in the public sector, particularly in social and public health services. "Yes" votes were concentrated more in urbanized areas, particularly in the area around Oslo, and among voters with university education or higher incomes. Voters who identified themselves as supporters of the Christian, Agrarian, or Left Socialist parties preponderantly opposed EU membership, while both Labor and Conservative voters strongly supported it.[19] The referendum in Sweden appears to have divided voters in a somewhat similar fashion. It is worth noting, by the way, that Swedish surveys revealed that within a year the majority in favor had declined to a minority, though by then the die was cast.

[17] The turnout on the EU referendum in Austria was 82 percent, which exceeded the general election of 1994; in Finland, 74 percent, about the same as in the election of 1991; in Sweden, 83.3 percent, about 3.5 percent lower than in the immediately preceding general election; in Norway, 89 percent, which exceeded turnout in all previous elections (Jahn and Storsved 1995).

[18] The "no" vote was 70 percent among farm laborers, 62 percent among farmers, and 60 percent among urban manual workers. Lower white collar workers and persons in crafts and small business split almost evenly. People in big business, management, professions, academics, scientists, teachers, and health and social workers voted in favor by substantial majorities (Brulé 1992).

[19] Cf. Petterson, Jenssen, and Listhaug 1996; Hansen 1996; Bjorklund (n.d.). Although the various factors tend to overlap, multiple regression analysis indicates that those listed had significant independent effects.

The revised standard version of the influence of public opinion on foreign policy, then, would read something like this: although citizens in democratic countries are usually less interested in foreign affairs than in domestic issues, in some circumstances they can become activated and play an influential or even decisive role in key foreign policy decisions. A policy is likely to activate citizens if it causes or threatens to cause such severe harm to the interests, goals, and well-being of a large minority, or even a majority, of citizens that they become aroused in opposition, political activists arise to champion their cause, and political leaders are themselves split. The question then begins to look very much like a hard-fought domestic issue. If the threatened costs of the policy are fairly obvious, concrete, and immediate, while the promised gains are abstract, theoretical, and distant, leaders in favor of the policy may ultimately lose.

Yet even in the revised standard version, such issues are rare: in Vietnam, casualties brought the costs home while the promised gains, like preventing the dominoes of South and Southeast Asia from falling, were to most Americans remote, uncertain, and highly theoretical. So, too, joining the EU pits assurances of long-run and somewhat abstract gains for some Europeans against more specific and understandable losses perceived by others.

But foreign policy decisions like these are uncommon. Even NAFTA did not activate many voters, despite the efforts of its opponents to generate fears of its consequences. As a result, most Americans gave it scant attention. In effect, the decision was made by political leaders and activists without much influence by ordinary citizens.

International organizations and processes

If popular control is formidably difficult within democratic countries, surely the problem will be even harder to solve in international institutions. If Norway had joined the EU, would its citizens be able to exercise anything like the degree of influence and control over the decisions in Brussels and Strasbourg that they have over the decisions of their own parliament and cabinet? Swedish citizens may now have more influence on the policy decisions of the EU than Norwegians, but would anyone contend that they exercise as much influence in the European Parliament as they do in their own? Or Danes? That these are small and relatively homogeneous countries only reinforces the point. Scale and heterogeneity matter. But the same question might be asked about a larger country such as Britain.

To achieve a level of popular control that is anywhere near the level

already existing within democratic countries, international organizations would have to solve several problems about as well as they are now dealt with in democratic countries. Political leaders would have to create political institutions that would provide citizens with opportunities for political participation, influence, and control roughly equivalent in effectiveness to those already existing in democratic countries. To take advantage of these opportunities, citizens would need to be about as concerned and informed about the policy decisions of international organizations as they now are about government decisions in their own countries. In order for citizens to be informed, political and communication elites would need to engage in public debate and discussion of the alternatives in ways that would engage the attention and emotions of the public. To insure public debate, it would be necessary to create an international equivalent to national political competition by parties and individuals seeking office.[20] Elected representatives, or functional equivalents to them (whatever they might be), would need to exercise control over important international bureaucracies about as well as legislatures and executives now do in democratic countries.

How the representatives of a hypothetical international demos would be distributed among the people of different countries poses an additional problem. Given huge differences in the magnitude of the populations of different countries, no system of representation could give equal weight to the vote of each citizen and yet prevent small countries from being steadily outvoted by large countries; thus all solutions acceptable to the smaller democracies will deny political equality among the members of the larger demos. As with the United States and other federal systems, acceptable solutions may be cobbled together as one has been for the EU. But whatever compromise is reached, it could easily be a source of internal strain, particularly in the absence of a strong common identity.

Strain is all the more likely because, as I have already said, just as in national democracies most decisions are bound to be seen as harming the interests of some people, so too in international organizations. The heaviest burden of some decisions might be borne by particular groups, regions, or countries. To survive these strains, a political culture supportive of the specific institutions would help – might indeed be necessary. But developing a political culture takes time, perhaps many generations. In addition, if policy decisions are to be widely acceptable and enforceable among the losers, then it is probable that some common identity, equivalent to that in existing democratic countries, would have to

[20] Although his conclusions are somewhat more hopeful than mine, Ramón Vargas-Machuca 1994 addresses some of the problems.

develop. On present evidence, even Europeans do not now possess a common identity.[21] How then can we reasonably expect one to grow elsewhere?

In sum: if it is difficult enough for ordinary citizens to exercise much influence over decisions about foreign affairs in their own countries, should we not conclude that the obstacles will be far greater in international organizations? Just as many important policy decisions in democratic countries are in effect delegated by citizens to the political elites, will not the citizens of countries engaged in an international association delegate effective control to the international policy elites? And will not the extent of delegation in international organizations go well beyond any acceptable threshold of democracy?

Conclusions

To say that international organizations are not and are not likely to be democratic is not to say that they are undesirable. It seems evident that they are necessary to many of the same human needs and goals that advocates of democracy contend are best served by democratic governments, and, as I said at the beginning, they can sometimes assist a non-democratic country to make the difficult transition from a highly undemocratic to a more democratic government. In addition, international organizations can help to expand human rights and the rule of law, the other important aspect of democracy that I emphasized earlier. Even measured against some loss in democratic control, these are important potential gains.

Despite these possible advantages I see no reason to clothe international organizations in the mantle of democracy simply in order to provide them with greater legitimacy.

But if their governments cannot be justified as democratic, how can they be justified? In the current world there are not many alternatives to democracy as a source of legitimacy. Autonomous hierarchies are hard to justify, though justifications do exist. The hierarchies of business enterprises acquire legitimacy because they are believed to be useful to the operation of predominantly privately owned market economies, which nowadays are almost universally regarded as preferable to any

[21] "As an economic, political, and administrative construction, Europe evidently elicits evaluative attitudes, but not a real community of belonging of the kind experienced in nation states. If the European Union is able, in the future, to generate a new system of belonging, it is difficult to imagine, from what we know, what it will be like. . . . For the present, a European identity is a vanguard phenomenon" (Duchesne and Frognier 1995: 223).

feasible alternative.[22] Other hierarchies in the private or non-profit sectors in democratic countries – including universities, research centers, hospitals, some religious organizations, and many others – justify the non-democratic aspects of their governments as necessary on the ground that their governors are greatly superior in knowledge and expertise to those they govern, and adequately concerned for the well-being of those subject to their decisions.

As long as, and in fact longer than, the idea of democracy and the practise of popular government have existed, so too has an alternative view, according to which rule by an elite of guardians possessed of greatly superior knowledge and virtue is definitely superior to democracy. Although we who advocate democracy reject this view as invalid when it is applied to the government of a state, including the government of a nation state or a country, is the argument for guardianship valid in governing international organizations? If not, and if as I have argued here democracy is unattainable in international organizations, what alternative would be left? Or, should I say, what alternative would be right?

Although the answer to that question is unclear to me, I would like to suggest some parts of an answer.

1. We should be wary of ceding the legitimacy of democracy to non-democratic systems. In the course of this century we have already witnessed many attempts to cloak non-democratic systems in the mantle of democracy. We have had "authentic" democracy, "true" democracy, "proletarian" democracy, "people's" democracy, "stockholder" democracy, and many others. All of these were in fact non-democratic forms of bureaucratic, hierarchic, or authoritarian rule. If international organizations are not democratic, then are we not obliged to speak the truth about them?
2. Yet if the governments of international organizations are not democracies, what are they? I suggest that we treat them as *bureaucratic bargaining systems*. Just as rulers in most authoritarian governments are to some extent and in some ways responsive to the opinions and desires of those over whom they govern – even corporate managers cannot indefinitely ignore the desires of their subordinates – so leaders in bureaucratic bargaining systems cannot indefinitely ignore

[22] I agree that in a democracy there are no feasible alternatives to a predominantly (not completely!) market-oriented economy. I also believe that the existing hierarchies in business enterprises are not necessary or legitimate, and the arguments in their defense seem to me unsatisfactory. See, e.g., Dahl 1985. At present, views along these and similar lines are clearly those of a fairly small minority. Should they become widely shared in the future, then of course the governments of most existing business would be in deep trouble.

the limits set by the opinions and desires of the governed. But if such a highly attenuated kind of responsiveness were sufficient to render a political system "democratic" then I do not see how any political system could ever be non-democratic.

3. In weighing the desirability of bureaucratic bargaining systems in international organizations, the *costs to democracy* should be clearly indicated and taken into account. Even if we conclude that the gains, or expected gains, outweigh these costs, that is no reason to ignore them entirely. The "democratic deficit" described by critics of the bureacratic bargaining system for governing the European Union should be seen as a likely cost of all international governments.
4. Supporters of democracy should resist the argument that a great decline in the capacity of national and subnational units to govern themselves is inevitable because globalization is inevitable. To be sure, the forces leading to greater internationalization of the economic, political, military, social, and cultural spheres of human life appear to be extremely powerful. However, I do not see how we can know with confidence the extent to which globalization is inevitable or contingent. The last three centuries are a graveyard packed with the corpses of "inevitable" developments. Instead of yielding to triumphal claims of inevitablity, we should evaluate each situation on its own merits.
5. If we judge that important human needs require an international organization, despite its costs to democracy, we should not only subject its undemocratic aspects to scrutiny and criticism but also try to create proposals for greater democratization and insist that they be adopted.[23]
6. Finally, in so far as the government of an international organization continues indefinitely as an undemocratic bureaucratic bargaining system, are we not obliged to develop criteria against which to judge it? We do have some useful criteria for judging how well a government measures up to democratic standards, even if we may disagree on details. But what standards should we use to appraise an international organization after we have concluded that it is desirable despite the costs to democracy imposed by its bureaucratic bargaining system of government? And on what grounds are we to justify any alternative standards that we may propose? These may be difficult, and even embarrassing, questions, but I do not believe we should evade them by describing undemocratic systems as democratic.

[23] Such proposals have in fact been advanced by scholars who are more optimistic than I about democratizing international organization. See, for example, Held 1995: chap. 12.

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