2  Can international organizations be democratic? A skeptic’s view

Robert A. Dahl

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. 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. 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. In usage, then, the meaning of the term is

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1 I am indebted to Martin Gilens for polling data on American opinion and to Bent Hagtvet and Rune Premers for providing me with articles, published and unpublished, on the referenda on membership in the European Union in the Nordic countries and Austria.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 Christopheren (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
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.9

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; Held 1995). An opposing view is offered by skeptics such as Philippe Schmitter (1996), who argues that even within “the emerging Euro-polity” (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 countries9 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 version10 foreign

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9 To prevent definitional overload I omit a discussion of 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.
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 stable 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 Gunman and Thompson 1986 and Fishkin 1991.

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

Can international organizations be democratic? 27

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 marked 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
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 formidable 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 dealing 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 as informed and interested in 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. 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

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20 Although his conclusions are somewhat more hopeful than mine, Ramón Vargas-Machuca 1994 addresses some of the problems.
In order to foster a culture of open communication and continuous improvement, it is essential to establish clear channels for feedback and reporting. By creating a safe space where employees feel empowered to express their thoughts and concerns, organizations can enhance productivity and innovation. It is important to foster a mindset that embraces constructive criticism as a means of growth and development.

One effective method is through regular team meetings where team members can share ideas and challenges. These sessions should encourage active participation and open dialogue to ensure that everyone feels heard. Additionally, implementing a transparent performance evaluation system can help identify areas for improvement and recognize outstanding efforts.

Moreover, promoting a culture of accountability can lead to increased motivation and accountability among team members. By setting clear expectations and goals, individuals are more likely to take ownership of their work and strive for excellence.

In conclusion, fostering an open communications environment is crucial for organizational success. By encouraging feedback, promoting constructive criticism, and creating an accountability culture, organizations can strengthen their teams and drive progress.

Corrections:

Although the answer to the question is correct, it might be more engaging to start with a question that leads the reader into the response. For example:

"How can organizations foster an open communications environment that encourages feedback and accountability?"

By asking this question, the reader is more likely to engage with the response and consider the solutions presented.

In summary, fostering an open communications environment is essential for organizational success. By encouraging feedback, promoting constructive criticism, and creating an accountability culture, organizations can strengthen their teams and drive progress.
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 bureaucratic 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 inevitability, 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, insofar 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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of course, it can be perceived correctly, and accordingly, personal preferences might affect the outcome. However, the core of this decision is not about the superficial aspects of the decision-making process. What matters is the underlying reason or purpose of the decision. It's important to consider the deeper implications and long-term effects of decisions, rather than focusing solely on the short-term convenience or immediate outcome. This approach helps in making more informed choices and aligning personal preferences with broader goals and objectives.
Regretfully I have never shared Dahl's enthusiasm for democracy of employees, or of employees, customers, and share-owners, as a principle of governance of business enterprises. Nor would I—or I think he—favor analogous democratic governance of universities by majorities of all members of the community.

If "exit" does not work, the answer within a single jurisdiction has to be anti-trust policy or other regulations and protections imposed by a democratic policy. In many cases, especially in the international context Dahl is discussing here, neither competition among parallel institutions nor democratic governance is feasible, and we are left with what Dahl calls bureaucratic bargaining systems to exert the supervision of the broader policy.

Unions and federations, and constitutions

Unrestricted majority rule could be disastrous for minorities, for equality of citizens before the law, and for the continuation of democracy itself. That is why constitutions are essential. And that is why devolutions of decisions on local issues to democratic governments of diverse smaller entities could ideally protect minorities against majoritarian tyranny without giving any of them extra weight in national decisions. The ideal is elusive. Nation states are typically federations; their constitutions are the contracts of union or federation and constituent governments, as well as the rights of citizens. The United States Senate is an undemocratic aberration in our constitution, but without such a compromise the union might not have been formed and might not survive demographic and economic shifts.

As Dahl suggests, we must expect similar compromises in the governance of the European Union. The European Parliament represents head-counts irrespective of boundaries between members, but that is probably a reason why it will never have sovereign power.

Which populations are entitled to be sovereign democratic states?

This seems to me a thorny problem in democratic theory. Majority rule and self-determination, yes, but for whom? Does geography identify a sovereign nation? Ethnicity? Religion? History? Are the British Isles inclusive of Ireland, Scotland, and Wales a legitimate unit, the pre-1914 United Kingdom a feasible federation? Irish nationalists, with the support of a majority of residents of the island, claimed the whole of Ireland. The aggregate Protestant majority of six northern counties wanted to stay in the UK and succeeded. But Catholic majorities in two of those counties preferred the Free State. Democratic theory does not tell us how the area should be divided among separate sovereign democracies, whether or not they can be federally joined.

The modern world is full of similar conflicts—Yugoslavia, Chechnya, Somalia, Sudan, Rwanda and Burundi, the Congo, Liberia, Armenia and Azerbaijan, Kurdistan, etc.—and unfortunately they generally become bloody. Actually it is hard to think of nations whose boundaries were not determined by force and invasion, as natural and sacred as they seem to current residents.

Commitment and credibility

Dahl wonders whether a sovereign democratic government can credibly commit the state beyond its own term in agreements with other countries. Of course dictators can change their minds too, as Hitler and Stalin did. Actually, nations do generally respect treaty obligations, even though the agreements were made by governments of opposing parties. (However, the United States Congress has made our government an exception by its unwillingness to pay UN dues.)

The problem of inconstancy in policy as a result of political swings extends beyond foreign policy. In electoral competition, parties and candidates are judged term by term, election by election, on their promises and achievements. Yet governments do many things and pass many laws of longer lives and still longer effects. Zigzags and stop-goes between ideologically and programmatically extreme parties are a potential threat. Socialize after one election, privatize after the next? Business and finance—the Bond Market!—communities insist on the need for credibility, which is strongly emphasized in economic theory these days. Powerful interests say, in effect, "We must have credible monetary, fiscal, financial, tax policies, or else we won't play."

The result is a strong movement to remove important economic policies from democratic politics. In the US the Federal Reserve becomes more and more independent. Congress is chronically on the brink of proposing to the states a constitutional amendment requiring balance of the federal budget. In the UK, the 1997 Labor government has for the first time given the Bank of England operating independence in monetary policy. In Europe, the Treaty of Maastricht will deprive members of the EU of independent monetary, exchange rate, and fiscal policies. These trends endanger democracy by narrowing the scope of democratic choice.
Introduction: the dynamics of democratic order

Joel Migdal

1. Democracy on the eve of material and formal globalization and ecological restrictions
2. The democratic order: economic