Democratic Expeditions

Flawed Democracy, Achievements and the Value of Difficult Compromises

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Takeaways

→ Many powerful people oppose democracy. As a result, democracy needs to be defended.

→ Sustaining democracy often requires difficult compromises and these compromises result in democracies that are flawed. It is easy to criticise or oppose these compromises.

→ Despite their flaws, stable democracies are often valuable, they are achievements.

→ Activists should not shy away from compromises that contribute to these achievements—i.e. flawed democracy. Under any circumstances, it is difficult to tell which compromises are worth making. But democrats should embrace compromises that they believe will allow them to pursue further reforms through democratic processes.

→ Activists should avoid compromises that threaten these achievements, compromises that undermine the creation or maintenance of flawed democracies.

Introduction

Venezuela, Turkey, Tunisia, Thailand and Hungary. Efforts to undermine democracy are not hard to find. Arguably, the competitive nature of American elections has been threatened by Donald Trump's refusal to acknowledge his defeat in 2020.

Activists face many challenges in responding to antidemocratic efforts. One of their central dilemmas is the following: they want citizens to take costly action to defend democratic institutions, but these efforts often require difficult **compromises**, that leave democratic institutions very far from our political ideals.

Why should individuals undertake costly action to defend compromised and flawed institutions? The idea of **achievement** offers a useful way of thinking about this question. By achievement, I mean a valuable end, such as the preservation of a political system, attained via a difficult process.

Democratic Achievements

What is useful about the idea of achievement? It makes clear why citizens should bear the costs, sometimes quite substantial, of defending flawed democratic institutions. Determining whether a political institution is an achievement requires us to understand the conditions under which that goal is achieved. And this process provides crucial information about the source of our institutional shortcomings. Moreover, considering whether institutions are an achievement leads us to assess whether alternatives would be free of flaws. If those alternatives would suffer from the same kinds of flaws, then we have good reason to defend (and try to improve!) the valuable institutions we have.

How might we apply these ideas to democracy?

Take the United States. American democracy is far from perfect: people who vote in some states have more power than people who vote in others; it uses arcane and unjustifiable procedures to determine who holds critical positions like the presidency; state and local politicians routinely change voting rules to maintain their power, ensuring that single parties dominate in areas where the opposition would otherwise have more influence; and the wealthy are able to easily convert their money into outrageous amounts of political influence.

Do flawed institutions, like those of the United States, merit vigorous defence? Are they worth compromising for? Answering these questions, we might ask whether their maintenance is an achievement.

Compromises, Achievements and Threats to Democracy

Let's stay with the United States. Although it is renowned as a long-standing democracy, its political system has been repeatedly attacked. Opponents of democracy have tried, and continue to try, to overturn election results, to prevent the opposition from organising, to strip power from officials with whom they disagree, to undermine the courts and election officials, to make it harder for certain people in certain places to vote, and to rig electoral rules to favour certain parties and candidates. Overcoming these threats has been a long, difficult and ongoing process, the work of generations of people.

Historic and contemporary challenges to the stability of American democracy have come from the same sources as threats to democracy in regimes such as Hungary and Poland. There have been many Americans who have opposed sharing power in general, or sharing power with large segments of the citizenry. Opposition to democracy has also arisen from the basic fact that the interests of many would be advanced by an alternative system, one that promised them more power or in which those in office did not face regular and rule-based challenges to their influence.

The efforts of these individuals to subvert America's democracy have required sustained, multifaceted counterefforts to defend democracy—in the form of electoral mobilisation, protest, public debate, institutional innovation, legal resistance, and sustained government intervention in state and local politics.

The same factors that make democratic systems difficult to sustain ensure that American institutions are flawed. It is important to understand why. It is not because institutional designers fail to see these flaws. Rather, it is because many people are not committed to equal or fair systems, and many have sufficient power to ensure that institutions do not reflect these values. **As a result, political stability tends to come at a price: democratic systems reflect the raw power of different groups.**

This reality is clear in the United States Its Constitution is a record of some of the most important compromises that have been made to achieve political peace in the face of deeply entrenched disagreement. The American electoral system is the result of these compromises. For example, in order to win the support of small states for the Constitution, the document grants outsized weight to small states. And each state has enormous power over its own electoral system, allowing local officials to write rules that benefit themselves and their parties.

This reality is not unique to the United States. **Every long-standing democracy bears the marks of such compromises; otherwise, it would not last. Political stability comes at a price.** By implication, if we want democracy, we have to put up with the flaws that these choices create and work to eradicate them over time. The idea that democracy is an achievement, that it is the result of a difficult process brings this reality to the fore.

To be an achievement, something must be difficult to achieve and valuable. Even flawed democratic institutions can be valuable. They facilitate the peaceful transfer of power. They provide some mechanism for voters to seek policies designed to advance their welfare. And they provide opportunities for citizens to jointly exercise influence over their political lives. In this important respect, democracies treat their citizens as rulers, not just as ruled. Indeed, rival systems to democracy, such as electoral autocracies, do not express the same kind of respect for their citizens. They manipulate their citizens by getting them to vote for fake opposition parties or in extraordinarily unfair elections.

Flawed democracies are difficult to sustain. But they are valuable. They are an achievement.

Democratic Compromises

How might these conclusions inform the activities of those defending, establishing, or re-establishing democratic systems? Successful efforts require at least two kinds of compromise. They require different groups to forge alliances across ideological lines—activists must work with members of movements whose goals they oppose, politicians are forced to make deals with rivals, citizens will vote for candidates they would never support in the normal course of affairs. Even when these movements are successful, broad alliances produce outcomes that no group finds fully satisfactory. Second, attaining a stable, competitive system requires activists to appease political forces that might otherwise be implacably opposed to democracy.

Both kinds of compromise are regular sources of tension—they are familiar to any student of efforts to defend democracy. Managing these tensions, both practically and intellectually, is a central task for leaders of these movements.

My arguments suggest why these compromises, though difficult to accept, should be embraced and why democrats have good reason to embrace the flawed institutions that results from concessions. These compromises are not the product of moral failures on the part of proponents of democracy. They are artefacts of the difficult processes by which democracy is achieved and is sustained and, more fundamentally, of the fact that many powerful actors are opposed to democracy.

The conclusion that these compromises should be accepted and understood as necessary to the achievement of democracy does not imply that groups should not seek to improve these systems. But part of what makes democratic institutions valuable is that they provide a rule-based, regularised way for groups to pursue such improvements without having to fear legal or violent reprisals.

Of course, not all compromises are acceptable. Compromises that undermine democracy itself should be avoided. Again, American history is instructive. In 1877, a compromise was reached to end the debate over a contested presidential election (the Hayes-Tilden Compromise). While the compromise resolved the disagreement over the election, it also allowed for the effective exclusion of black voters in the South, fundamentally hobbling democracy. It was not until 1965 (90 years later!) that the effects of this rotten compromise were addressed. This compromise is sometimes called the "corrupt bargain." **And compromises of this sort ought to be avoided. They are self-defeating and undermine a democracy's claim to be an achievement.**

Further Readings

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About the Author

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About "Democratic Expeditions"

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