REPRESENTATION IS DEMOCRACY*

David Plotke

Complaints about the quality of representation appear widely in contemporary politics. Angry citizens assail representatives for acting in elitist and narrowly self-interested ways. Some critiques target the inefficiency of legislative procedures. Others blame elected officials and interest groups for creating dense, corrupt networks of influence that prevent action on crucial matters. Participatory democrats and postmodern radicals often reject representation altogether in favor of immediacy and direct control.

My argument takes a different direction. I will first discuss how debates about representation took shape during the Cold War, and how the end of that conflict changes the terms of debate. Then I propose a view of representation which differs in crucial ways from the main views advocated during the Cold War.

I argue that the opposite of representation is not participation. The opposite of representation is exclusion. And the opposite of participation is abstention. Rather than opposing participation to representation, we should try to improve representative practices and forms to make them more open, effective, and fair. Representation is not an unfortunate compromise between an ideal of direct democracy and messy modern realities. Representation is crucial in constituting democratic practices. "Direct" democracy is not precluded by the scale of modern politics. It is unfeasible because of core features of politics and democracy as such.

I. After the Cold War

In the late 1980s and early 1990s most Communist regimes fell apart. The shape of their replacements was not clear. An economic debate ensued – how fast should the transition to a market economy occur, and what sort of market economy should be built? Parts of the Western left made a useful contribution by arguing that the most rapid and thorough shift to a market economy was not always optimal for growth, political stability or equity.

In politics, the idea was that Communist states should be replaced by liberal parliamentary regimes. Here the Western left had little of interest to say about this process or its aims. Why?

At a recent meeting of political scientists, a prominent political theorist spoke on a panel whose members had been asked to respond to the events of the last

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decade in Eastern Europe. He said that those events are not very compelling, because dismantling old-fashioned tyrannies is not our problem ("our" meant democrats in the ex-West). To focus on the demise of the Communist regimes might even misdirect our attention, turning us away from the intricate forms of unfreedom that confine politics in the ex-West.

There is a connection between these two episodes – one large and one small. Democrats who are mainly skeptical of representative institutions tend not to have much of interest to say about how such institutions should be built and developed in countries which previously lacked them. To explain why this is so requires looking once again at the Cold War.

The Cold War was partly a political argument, and the defeat of the Soviet Union and its allies was a political defeat. Well before the end of the Cold War, the political failure of the Communist side appeared in the *demoralization* of Communist elites – in their lack of commitment to the Communist order and eventually in their notable unwillingness to fight for it.

A repeated logic of political argument helped to shape the outcome of the Cold War. First, Communist regimes and theorists rejected Western democracy as hollow and false. They claimed to be establishing a fuller and higher form of democracy.

Second, defenders of Western regimes responded with an account of what can fairly be called minimal democracy. This view was formulated sharply by Joseph Schumpeter in the 1940s. He argued that democracy means choosing political leaders through elections – period:

> . . . the democratic method is that institutional arrangement for arriving at political decisions in which individuals acquire the power to decide by means of a competitive struggle for the people's vote.[1]

Proponents of minimal democracy did not simply restate Schumpeter's claim. They often stressed the intrinsic value of political liberties (which Schumpeter derived from the notion of a free electoral competition). Some advocates of minimal democracy also claimed that political socialization could bolster democracy. Yet most theorists of minimal democracy put electoral competition for leadership at the center of democratic practices.

This view was highly effective in political and theoretical battles during the Cold War, when all parties claimed to uphold democracy. Politically, it allowed critics of Communism to ask blunt and effective questions: How are leaders chosen in these higher democracies? Who decides if they should be replaced? These questions were powerful weapons among Western publics and, it would appear, in weakening support for Communist regimes among their political and social elites. (They remain effective today, as in the political competition between the regimes in China and Taiwan.)

Theoretically, Schumpeter's formulation was compelling in a now familiar way. He explained an important result (democracy) as the unintended result of self-interested action in a particular institutional setting (seeking power via elections). Here is Schumpeter again:

> . . . [T]he social meaning or function of parliamentary activity is no doubt to turn out legislation and, in part, administrative measures. But in order to understand how democratic politics serve this social end, we must start from the competitive struggle for power and office and realize that the social function is fulfilled, as it were, incidentally – in the same sense as production is incidental to the making of profits.[2]

In the third part of the Cold War dynamic, critics of minimal democracy in the West rejected it as pseudodemocratic. Proponents of a participatory left saw themselves as caught between corrupt critiques of minimal democracy made by apologists for Communist regimes and restrictive notions of democracy proposed as quasi-official doctrine in the West.

In the Cold War, nonCommunist left critics of minimal democracy tended to define their positions by reversing the latter's claims. For example, Communist regimes extolled high levels of participation in their countries. Proponents of minimal democracy responded by insisting that this participation was coerced. They argued that the right to participate entails the right to refrain from politics. When some went on to suggest that, given basic freedoms, low levels of political participation show satisfaction with the overall course of politics, they took a complacent and even apologetic view of participation in the West.

Given this unappetizing menu, critics of minimal democracy advocated a sharp and sustained increase in political participation. They did not propose that coercion be used. Yet they paid little attention to the limits to participation that exist in a democratic regime, notably time constraints and varied preferences for political activity.

Critics of minimal democracy claimed they were sincerely democratic, not pro-Communist. This rationale for participatory and neorepublican positions has largely disappeared, as there are no more Communists against which radical proposals look reasonable because they are not manifestly authoritarian. The end of the Cold War undermines the implicit basis of such proposals, which went something like this: Given the political and ideological rigidity of the Cold War, there is no prospect of our proposals being implemented. Consider them as provocations about what might be done in a very different political climate. Now a different political context has appeared, and participatory democrats have had little to say beyond warning democrats in the ex-Communist countries not to get too excited about their new parliamentary institutions.

The political dynamic I have outlined recurred in the four decades of the Cold War. Figure 1 summarizes some of the main arguments in which the participatory left rejected and often tended to invert the positions taken by minimal democrats. On most fronts, proponents of minimal democracy won these arguments about politics. They dominated crucial debates, such as those about how to connect and distinguish political and social life (by affirming separation); about the forms and extent of agreement required for political stability (agreement on political procedures and procedural norms); and about the appropriate form of the state (regulation rather than planning). Over time, advocates of Communism appeared sinister or stupid while participatory democrats seemed naive or disruptive.

Today all three Cold War positions have unraveled. Communism has disappeared as a political and theoretical force. The views of the participatory left have not recently yielded major new political or theoretical initiatives. The fragmentation of minimal democracy is well advanced, as libertarians, cultural conservatives, social liberals, and social democrats clash and redefine their positions.

II Arguments about Representation

I want to explore this dynamic of Cold War argument through the important case of representation. During the Cold War, leaders and theorists of Communist regimes vigorously criticized "Western" representative politics while claiming:

> Communist leaders function as wise trustees for the nation, making decisions in everyone's long-run interests.
> All legitimate social interests are represented politically within the leading party.

Figure 1. Cold War Conflicts

	Minimal Democracy	*Communism*	*Participatory Left*
Forms of representation	Elite competition, linked to parties and interest groups	Pure trustee (Leninism)	Replace with participation
Links between social and political life	Social pluralism and separation between politics and society	Integrate society into politics (vertical and horizontal)	Integrate politics into society
Agreement needed for political stability	Agreement on procedures and procedural norms	Political and moral agreement on the direction and meaning of history	Republican unity in a political and social community
Appropriate form of the state	Decentralized within a political system; aimed at regulation	Ultracentralist; aimed at controlling social and economic outcomes	Welfarist; aimed at redistribution

> The party and quasipolitical organizations (trade unions, neighborhood associations, women's groups) overcome the Western separation between citizens and politics and allow people to influence governance directly.

The first claim linked quasi-Burkean notions of representation to left-authoritarian practices. It turned on judgments of long-run interests about which there was no agreement. Critics of Communism showed that the second and third claims were not true. Advocates of the Communist regimes were thus vulnerable to the charge that citizens had no way to make their own decisions about the degree of their leaders' wisdom.

Proponents of minimal democracy, stressing regular and open elections, did not have to claim much to win the day. For this view, representation appears as what elites must have been doing to keep themselves in power. If elections occur regularly, representatives who refuse to pay attention to constituents will be pushed out of office. The fear of electoral defeat constrains the choices of officials and stirs their interest in the opinions and welfare of their constituents.

The Communist account of representation in state socialist regimes was so weak that it could be defeated by almost any account of representation in the West, all of which compared favorably with a Communist reality in which trustees told constituents what to do with little fear of sanctions. Minimal democracy faced a stronger critique from parts of the nonCommunist left. The claim was that conventional representative procedures, based on a fragmented and disinterested electorate, replaced or blocked political participation and left most people powerless. In the 1960s and 1970s, this participatory argument intersected a neorepublican critique of representation that extolled the virtues of political action and public life. While the participatory critique underlined the *lack of power* of those who were only represented, the republican argument stressed the *deprivation* suffered by those who did not spend their time exercising public freedom.

These critiques of representation made strong points against proponents of a scheme in which citizens had little role between elections and did little more than assent to choices prepared and defined by elites. But critics offered no compelling alternative. Participatory democrats advocated that everyone participate actively in deciding everything important for their lives. Neorepublicans depicted public life as not only a good thing, but as the primary source of real accomplishment and happiness. Such proposals were vulnerable to rejoinders by minimal democrats: Everyone cannot always participate everywhere, and not everyone should value public life above other goods. Proponents of minimal democracy dominated this field of argument so easily that their thin notions of representation became political common sense.

After the Cold War, complaints about the quality of representation have become louder. The critique of representation has been taken up vigorously by a renovated right in the United States and elsewhere. Doubtful that representatives can be made to act more responsibly, conservative critics of political representation try to constrain representative bodies by limiting the number of terms that elected officials can serve, decentralizing control of important matters (block grants), limiting spending (a balanced budget amendment), and narrowing government intervention through deregulation. The conservative critique contrasts political representation with communal networks and markets, where individuals can have real power and live virtuously. This critique regards political decisionmaking as inferior to markets and communal associations, which are held to be simpler, more efficient, and more respectful of individuals' autonomy.

At a time when populist criticism of legislatures and representation is angry and insistent, we should recognize that urgent calls for direct and simple political relations have often been made by democratic movements. Yet successful democratic movements most often make politics more complex and less direct. This may not be the immediate experience of those involved. Women who gain the vote can speak more directly on public matters. Workers who build independent unions and blacks who dismantle segregation become more directly involved in making political decisions.

When democratic movements win, however, politics as a whole tends to become more complex. Direct personal domination is replaced by procedures that rely on more general and abstract relations among political agents. Democratic successes expand the number of voices in conversations about what to do and thereby make decisions more complicated.

If democratic movements tend to increase political complexity, we should not identify democracy with simplicity or directness per se – even if those same movements rightly say that democratic reform will make politics more directly accessible for them. Obviously to claim that increased complexity causes democratization is not plausible. But complexity and democracy can often be compatible and even interdependent, as they are in many forms of representation. Thus while a particular representative scheme may be unnecessarily complicated and deserve criticism, there is nothing democratic in principle about criticizing representation for being complex or abstract.

In fact, representation has a central positive role in democratic politics. To develop this view, I next assess a proposal for democracy without representation. Then I discuss key elements of the concept of representation. I emphasize the relational and active dimensions of representation, as opposed to conceptions that begin by identifying representation with the absence or passive role of the one represented.[3]

I should underline that I do not intend to reject participation. My point, again, is that the opposite of representation is not participation: the opposite of representation is exclusion. And the opposite of participation is abstention. Rather than opposing participation to representation, we should try to improve and expand representative practices. On that basis, a number of the most valuable aspects of participation should be considered as part of a reformed scheme of representation.

III The Critique of Representation

Calls for participatory democracy played a positive and provocative role during the Cold War by underlining the narrowness of prevalent conceptions of minimal democracy. After the Cold War this role no longer exists. To say one's critique of conventional democratic forms is not authoritarian is not a resonant claim when there are no Communists to play the role of undemocratic radicals. Advocates of participatory democracy now face a setting where their ideas might be taken seriously as practical choices – no wartime unity precludes it.

Benjamin Barber's influential critique of representation illustrates the limits of those ideas. Barber advocates "strong" democracy, meaning:

> politics in the participatory mode where conflict is resolved in the absence of an independent ground through a participatory process of ongoing, proximate self-legislation and the creation of a political community capable of transforming dependent, private individuals into free citizens and partial and private interests into public goods.[4]

He adamantly rejects representation:

> Representation is incompatible with freedom. . . . Representation is incompatible with equality . . . Representation, finally, is incompatible with social justice. . . .[5]

When Barber outlines a "strong" democracy he proposes:

> 1. A national system of NEIGHBORHOOD ASSEMBLIES of from one to five thousand citizens; these would initially have only deliberative functions but would eventually have local legislative competence as well.[6]

The assembly presumably includes all adults in the neighborhood. If not, there is no point in further discussion, as we are already in a representative situation.

To give life to this assembly, imagine that it is charged with deliberating and then choosing policies about local primary and secondary education. Two problems immediately arise, probably with enough force to stop the project as direct democracy. One is the problem of attendance. In the deliberative stage, consider that most people prefer to attend. But circumstances make a number of people unable to do so: illness, work schedules, responsibility for children. Others are ambivalent – students who prefer to study, artists who want to complete their day's work in the evening, and so forth. In direct democracy, everyone needs to attend. Could this be done without coercion for a sequence of meetings?

The second problem arises if time scarcity were somehow managed and sufficient resources were expended to allow everyone to attend. At this meeting of (say) one thousand people, who gets to talk first? And last? Imagine an open floor at one of the first meetings, when an agenda for deliberation is shaped. Presume a long evening meeting of 2.5 hours. Interventions average three minutes, including applause and pauses between speakers. Fifty speakers get the floor. (The meeting has conversational elements, so there are forty separate speakers and ten people speak twice.)

Are the other 960 members of the assembly participants or highly interested spectators at a political event? If “direct” means more than being physically present, in what sense would this 96% of the assembly be engaged in strong or direct democracy? Barber’s critique of representation would surely apply to the relation between the 4% of the room with a voice and the 96% with eyes and ears only.

Somehow these problems are surmounted and we continue to regard the assembly as engaged in direct democracy. Consider a sequence of such meetings on education policies. Imagine an enthusiastic assembly willing to deliberate weekly for between six months and a year before moving toward choices on policies. Then the meeting arrives when the assembly becomes a legislative body.

Prior deliberations give everyone a good knowledge of models of education and their community’s needs. For legislative purposes people now have two choices. They can discuss overall models one at a time. Or they can consider component policies individually. Presume that time constraints encourage a choice to address the main issues in order: hiring school directors; selecting the teaching staff; defining the curriculum; choosing sites for schools and deciding how to build them; organizing transportation; and funding all the above. This list marks a decision point: coercion, collapse, or representation.

Why? The assembly would have two main options for its new legislative meetings. It could meet as a whole in a sequence of meetings to take up each issue in turn. This sequence would probably have to be much longer than the first set of deliberative meetings in order to make the required decisions. It is unimaginable that unanimous attendance would persist, due to time constraints, exhausted resources, and varied preferences. Sustaining attendance would probably require coercion as the meetings went to a second year. If the assembly rejected coercion, and a diminishing part of the neighborhood attended, it would head toward collapse due to a lack of legitimacy (and collective action problems).

A committee system, based on policy areas, would most likely be the preferred alternative to another series of general meetings. These committee meetings would make a clear transition to a representative model. Someone very interested in choosing school directors would sacrifice their lesser interest in curricular issues. One might reasonably hope to have a vote in the final integration of policies decided by the subcommittees. But by then the whole process would have a frankly representative character, if it survived.

Barber or an advocate of similar views might object that I am taking his proposal too literally. Yet it is not persuasive to say that Barber’s proposal would be workable with less stringent criteria – say 60 percent of the adult members of the neighborhood attend half the meetings, while others attend occasionally. Such meetings would be a *de facto* representative assembly with no legitimate basis for selecting members or making decisions.[7]

It takes only a small number of citizens and a routine issue (education) to rule out a nonrepresentative democracy. Direct democracy is implausible – not a desirable but difficult goal, nor an attractive horizon that may be out of reach. Little is gained by proposals to integrate two types of democracy, representative and direct. The intent of such proposals may be to shake up minimal democratic forms, to expand participation and address new issues. Yet proposing to combine representative and direct democracy offers to mix a flawed reality with an implausible construct. We should instead try to improve representative practices and develop new ones.

"Direct" democracy is not precluded by the scale of modern politics, but because of core features of democracy as such. This is true because democratic premises include sufficient autonomy for individuals to develop and sustain different preferences, including different preferences for political involvement, and because democratic forms include a commitment to reaching decisions.[8]

The image of a direct and simple democracy relies on a misconceived effort to substitute participation for representation. But representation is not an unfortunate compromise between an ideal of direct democracy and messy realities. It is crucial in constituting democratic practices.

IV Elements of Representation

What does representation mean, especially in politics? Hannah Pitkin's start, in her valuable and influential book on the subject, is misleading: ". . . [R]epresentation, taken generally, means the making present *in some sense* of something which is nevertheless not present literally or in fact."[9]

Formulations like Pitkin's are often used to get discussions of representation off the ground. Thus Ernesto Laclau recently writes that representation is "[e]ssentially the *fictio iuris* that somebody is present in a place from which he or she is materially absent."[10] From Pitkin to Laclau there is a loss of nuance (the notion that representation makes something "present in some sense" is gone). But Laclau's formulation is basically equivalent to Pitkin's because she focuses on literal, physical presence.

For Pitkin *presence* and *representation* seem mainly to be opposites. This downplays the *relational* and *abstract* elements of political representation. In a typical dictionary listing the first meaning of representation is "to stand for" – not replace or omit.[11] That is a reasonable starting point. Yet when we refer to social relations, if we say to *represent is to stand for* we need to add *in a relation of mutual interest*.

To understand political representation we can first look at other forms of that relation. With representation among objects, the first meaning is signification – to represent something is to stand for it, without replacing it.

To say *x* represents *y* entails several claims. First, there is a claim of nonidentity. We do not say that my chair represents my chair, though we might say that a particular chair represents chairs in general.

Second, there is a claim of a meaningful rather than a natural connection, so that a symbol is *recognized*. Let this piece of chalk represent a division of an army as I portray a famous battle, let this wine represent the blood of Christ. When *x* and *y* share a property and are thus similar – oranges and lemons, or lions and tigers – we do not say they represent each other.

Third, claims of representation are contextual. A red sign at a streetcorner represents an instruction to comply with a law against going through the intersection without stopping.

These elements remain when we ask about representation in a market setting. If we say that person *a* represents person *b* in an exchange, we mean *a* is not identical to *b*; their relationship is a function of social understandings (about how contracts can be made); and this relationship is contextual (one's real estate agent is not entitled to announce one's conversion to a new religion).

New features appear. My representative in the market is *authorized* to make certain agreements. He or she is presumed to make *truthful depictions* of my aims and capacities (e.g., I can buy the building in question). In turn I am *obligated* by his or her actions. I communicate with my representative, and I can replace him or her.

These new elements indicate the presence of *agency* in market representation. For the participatory view, to say *x* represents *y* is to say that *x* does something to *y*. But a market relation contains agency on both sides. The active side of the agent's behavior is sometimes noted – and criticized as a form of domination or alienation – in participatory accounts. What is not taken seriously in such accounts, and usually not even noted, is the agency of the principal, i.e., the person being represented. If *x* represents *y*, *y* is guiding and constraining *x*, enabling and authorizing her or him.

In political representation all these elements persist. Nonidentity, relations of meaning, and contextuality are all features of political representation. Nonidentity is a very important dimension of any democratic notion of representation. Concepts of representation that claim a merging and full identity between a representative and those who seek representation are often deployed in authoritarian populist regimes: Peron, or Castro, or even Mussolini represents you because he is like you, understands you, is even identical to you as a part of the people. You are, in effect, represented by the presence of a superior version of yourself in government.

As in a market context, my representative is *authorized* to vote on legislation. He or she is presumed to be intending to be truthful, e.g., if he or she claims that a majority in their district supports a measure, they have good reason to think so. I accept the outcomes of the voting process in the relevant legislative setting as *binding*, unless they are changed by authorized procedures. I express my preferences, minimally through voting, and could act (along with others) to replace my representative.

A major new emphasis appears in political representation. Imagine that I instruct my economic agent to buy space for a factory to produce an item whose manufacture is highly profitable but whose production is very destructive of the environment. She returns from her business to say that because of that prospect she decided to make a different purchase (or donate the money to a worthy charity). I would be entitled to dismiss her as my representative, subject to the terms of our contract. It is presumed that my expressed preferences should define the course of her actions. A market agent can adjust his or her actions to take account of unanticipated events, but sweeping reinterpretations of preferences are not permitted, certainly not without consultation between principal and agent.

A political representative looks toward the preferences of those they represent, toward others' preferences, and toward their own view of overall welfare. Political representatives recognize the existence of competing and general interests alongside those of their constituents. And they consider whether their constituents' choices are the best way to get what those constituents want. In political representation dialogic elements between principal and agent expand, as does the latter's room for maneuver.

Political representation, like market forms of representation, authorizes agents to act, presumes a reliable report of aims, entails communication, produces decisions that are binding for the person represented, and is revocable. Political representation includes a substantial role for the judgment of the representative in choosing how to act as a responsible agent. The preferences of the person being represented are subject to interpretation – making them clear requires dialogue. And preferences other than those of the person represented need recognition, if only for strategic reasons.

For participatory critics of representation, and many others who rely on Pitkin's analysis, representation is linked with absence. In a more recent essay, Pitkin follows this logic and depicts participation as the preferred alternative to representation:

> As long as politics is equated with government, and government regarded as a means for achieving private purposes and reconciling conflicting claims in a generally acceptable manner, rightly designed representative institutions may serve its purposes very well. But if its real function is to direct our shared, public life, and its real value lies in the opportunity to share in power over and responsibility for what we, jointly, as a society, are doing, then no one else can do my politics 'for' me, and representation can mean only the exclusion of most people from its benefits most of the time.[12]

The key phrase, "do my politics," signals the convergence of libertarian and participatory critiques of politics in an image of self-expression and self-realization. What disappears is any sense that representation is a *relation*, one in which both parties are active. To gain representation, I communicate preferences about how social relations should be ordered to someone else. My aim is to achieve those preferences, with the proviso that they might change in the course of communication about how to do so.

Thinking of representation as absence is apt to lead to rejecting the concept and the practice. If *X* represents *Y* in politics, is *Y* present? We could simply say yes, because we are already in a political realm where everyone is in principle present as citizens. But that answer seems almost glib, given what we know about rates of voting and other forms of political participation in many democratic countries. It would be better to change the meaning of the question a bit: Physical persons and relations of political representation exist at different analytical levels. Even though these levels are intertwined in actual situations they are not the same. Thus it is plausible to say that in a given context, someone is present politically but not physically.

The distinction between physical presence and political presence can be clarified by a nondemocratic example. Think of a slaveowners' polity, when citizens assemble to decide on common matters. The citizen slaveowners bring their slaves to the assembly, where they serve their owners and wait near them for instructions. We would hesitate to say that the slaves were present in a political sense, because we do not really think that physical and political presence are the same thing.

I gain political representation when my authorized representative tries to achieve my political aims, subject to dialogue about those aims and to the use of mutually acceptable procedures for gaining them. I may or may not be physically present when my representative engages in various activities, but in a political sense I am forcefully present throughout the representative process. This conception underlines the agency of both participants in the relationship, the strategic elements of their interaction, and the need for communication between them.[13]

V Democracy as Representation

Representation helps constitute democratic capacities and practices. In principal-agent relations in a market context, we do not assume an opposition between acting and being represented. Instead we presume that the principal is both active and represented. Both market and political notions of representation presume the agency of the principal, so to speak. "I represent *X*" most often means that I act as a representative for *X*. But "I represent" also means that I claim to have certain capacities and interests. Thus I represent myself politically, to and through a representative. These uses of representation signal its active side for the person who often appears as a predicate [*B* represents me in Congress] or a passive subject [I am represented by *B*].

Here I will return to the dimensions of representation outlined earlier in order to indicate their positive elements with regard to democratic practices. First, to say that I am represented makes a claim of nonidentity. To assert that one is represented by *B* is a claim not of dependence but of mutuality, which presumes real autonomy from *B*.[14]

Second, my representation is a relation that requires others' recognition. Part of the basis for recognition is the act of political choice that I have made in selecting a representative. Thus I am recognized as being able to participate in a relationship of representation.

Third, representation is contextual: *B* is my political representative. My understanding of this shows I can distinguish among practices.

These elements of representation help constitute a political person with a significant degree of autonomy; the capacity to choose a representative; and the capacity to make and sustain distinctions between political and other practices.

What I have identified as the market dimension of representation helps to constitute competent agents. When I take on an agent who can make agreements – when I represent myself through an agent – I expand my ability to make such agreements. The idea that I am obligated by my agent's acts attests to my capacity to meet such obligations (if I were not capable, he or she might not have agreed to represent me). These forms of power to set and attain objectives have a *potentially* democratic meaning insofar as I represent my interests and abilities truthfully and accurately through my agent, and I communicate effectively with him or her during our relationship.

Crucial democratic features of representation emerge with its most specifically political elements. A political representative (by convention and often by law) cannot be subject to binding mandates, however strong their commitment may be to the preferences of constituents. That lack of closure creates a permanent need for representatives and those who are representing themselves to negotiate their relationship. Both parties know that while the person who wants representation has preferences, those are not the only relevant factors. Other constituents may have different preferences, and the representative has his or her own aims.

These features of representation encourage a person who wants good representation to take account of others' preferences and to recognize complexity (and scarcity) of many types. In reporting a preference to a representative with any prospect of success, I have to be able to step back from my experience far enough to describe a problem in terms that someone who does not share that experience can understand. I have to be able to define the relations in which that problem is located and evaluate its causes in ways that are plausibly connected to remedies I might propose. I also have to make a decision about what to propose that my representative do, in a context where I know that other projects are underway: I have to persuade my representative how to act.

Democratic politics is *constituted* partly through representation. Representation is constructive, producing knowledge, the capacity to share insights, and the ability to reach difficult agreements. It entails a capacity for recognizing social relations in order to consider changing them. Representation also helps to constitute democratic institutions. It requires procedures for taking decisions, and there have to be ways of sustaining those decisions over time.

As with forms of representation, democratic politics in general is a process of more or less artful construction. The “unnatural” qualities of democracy make it vulnerable to critiques as thin, formal, and abstract. Such criticism is partly true and basically misleading. Democracy is abstract when it treats citizens as equal. It is abstract in sustaining decision procedures that are part of the process through which majorities are built. It is formal in insisting on the nonnegotiable character of rights and procedures (e.g., freedom of expression and voting). And democracy means compromises of principle because it is a way to make decisions where resources are limited and preferences are strong. The misleading core of participatory and populist criticism is the idea that we could get rid of the formality and the complexity and still have democracy, much less a purer form of it.

VI Choices about Representation

My aim here is not to endorse any particular set of representative forms, but to insist that a democratic politics has to be a politics of and about representation. I will close by proposing positions in difficult debates about appropriate forms of representation.

A system of representation should not be a pure expression of any single mode of trustee, interest, identity or any other form of representation.[15] In a complex polity with functional and territorial divisions, several modes of representation have a legitimate role to play. Choices are usually about weighing gains and losses from giving one or another mode of representation a primary role in a particular setting.

Yet the starting point in a democratic view of representation should be interest representation. Interest representation gives greater weight to the activities of citizens in seeking to understand, clarify, and achieve their preferences than do alternative models of representation. Thus it emphasizes the active and reflective elements of seeking representation. A system based exclusively on interest representation would have notable defects, which critics have often pointed out (too much bargaining, too little deliberation, too little room for actions aimed at the general or public interest). Despite these problems, any overall system of representation without a large element of interest representation would probably not be feasible for long as a democratic process.

What do citizens do in interest representation? Their first aim is to clarify their own preferences. Then they seek to select representatives who will try to produce suitable results. When their electoral efforts succeed, constituents seek to press their representatives to take positive steps. Constituents need to be diligent because of the strong presence of competing interests within and outside their district. What do representatives do? They seek to win results that match the expressed preferences of their constituents. In relations with other representatives there is much bargaining (along with at least some deliberation – it is hard to strike a good bargain on an important matter without deliberation about what that bargain means). Representatives remain close to their initial positions, changing them mainly as a result of trades that can be justified to constituents (a highway in our district next year rather than two bridges this year).

In interest representation, representatives seek primarily to pursue their constituents' interests as defined by their expressed preferences. As binding interest representation (fully mandated representation) is illegitimate in democratic polities, we are considering forms of representation that contain general elements. A representative cannot say only: I support *Y* because I am bound to do so by an agreement with my constituents. He or she must say: *Y*, which is a matter of great concern to my constituents, is crucial to the public good. Political debate contests that claim.

Starting with interest representation rules out a view of democratic reform as primarily a matter of expanding the autonomy of representatives from their constituents, to improve parliamentary deliberation or for some other purpose. The aim should be to improve these links, for example by increasing deliberative elements within them. Taking interest representation as a starting point also means little sympathy for populist or libertarian assaults on interest group politics, as though the political terrain would be better swept clean in favor of "the people" or the market.

Starting with interest representation opens up promising areas of practical inquiry: expanding participation in representative forms; enhancing communication between representatives and constituents; increasing effective participation by previously excluded or underrepresented groups; and increasing sites and modes of representation. Such efforts will meet strong resistance, from people who believe politics is already too complex and from people who regard such reforms as an undesirable expansion of politics *per se*.

What about the episodes with which I began? Most of the Western left has had little to say about political choices in East and Central Europe because political forces in those countries have aimed mainly to establish stable forms of minimal democracy, not to criticize or overcome them. This has put the left in general and the participatory left in particular in an uncomfortable position. Often nothing at all is said about some of the most important political changes of the last few decades. Alternatively, what is said appears to diminish the accomplishment of getting rid of the communist regimes and starting to build democratic political orders. An effort to rethink and reconstruct representative practices is a better place for democrats to start, though it promises much conflict at a time when the main political positions of the Cold War have come apart.

NOTES

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1. Joseph Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism, and Democracy* (New York: Harper, 1950), 269.

2. Ibid., 282.

3. Like everyone who writes about representation, I have benefited from Hannah Fenichel Pitkin's *The Concept of Representation* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1972).

4. Benjamin Barber, *Strong Democracy: Participatory Politics for a New Age* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1984), 132.

5. Ibid., 135, 145–46.

6. This proposal is the first and crucial element in a program of 12 points that Barber claims "does not illustrate strong democracy; it is strong democracy." Ibid., 307.

7. His proposal has further problems – for example, it pays little attention to the possibility that those deliberating about education would develop strong differences through the process of considering the issues, extending deliberations and making policy decisions much harder to reach.

8. Here my argument intersects that of Jane Mansbridge in *Beyond Adversary Democracy* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1983). She contrasts a unitary conception of democracy based on shared or common interests to an adversary conception based on conflicting interests. To use her terms, I would say that any feasible democracy contains decisive elements of the adversarial model, less because of the size of the units involved than because differing preferences and pressures to reach decisions exist in virtually all political settings.

9. Pitkin, *The Concept of Representation,* 9.

10. Ernesto Laclau, "Power and Representation," *Emancipation*(*s*) (London and New York: Verso, 1996), 97.

11. *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language – New College Edition* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1980).

12. Hannah Fenichel Pitkin, "Representation," in Terence Ball et. al. eds., *Political Innovation and Conceptual Change* (Cambridge: New York, 1989), 150.

13. This conception might be called abstract. Yet democratic politics is by its nature abstract with regard to people's direct social experience: it entails selective description, critical reflection, and making decisions under constraints. Any account of direct experience entails considerable abstraction from the vast amount of data that could be described. A second abstraction occurs because politics entails reflection on how to organize social life, not a thick redescription of what people experience. Individuals and groups choose what to discuss and how to evaluate it, and then compare and argue for their evaluations. A third abstraction results from the need for decisions among political actors, who are never political actors alone (time scarcity), disagree deeply, and are in principle equal. To make a decision in these circumstances means considering alternatives. This in turn means abstracting key features of complex settings in order to compare prospective outcomes.

14. This autonomy precludes any closure in which principal and agent become one – either one. Nondemocratic concepts of representation allow a reversal of terms so that representatives incorporate their principals. Two important versions of representation as incorporation in American political and legal history were coverture in marriage law and Southern accounts of slavery as part of republican politics.

15. In trustee representation, the representative aims to achieve what he or she imagines to be the best outcome for an individual, without necessarily acting in accord with that person's expressed preferences. A good trustee is a wise judge of his or her constituents' needs and how to meet them. What do trustee representatives do among themselves? In the best case they jointly pursue the public good while seeking to sustain the conditions of political freedom that make such inquiry possible. They are colleagues in a deliberative enterprise. For deliberation to matter, representatives must be open to changing their initial positions in response to persuasive arguments. And they must be prepared to defend those changes to constituents who are willing to accept them when they disagree. Burke is an obvious referent for one type of trustee representation; Lenin for another. These referents suggest the difficult relationship between a pure trustee model and democratic norms. Identity representation has recently been defended strongly in Anne Phillips, *The Politics of Presence* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1995). Her aim is to show that the adequate representation of certain kinds of minorities or previously excluded groups requires a large presence of members of those groups in decision making bodies.