Who is the Digital Sovereign?

Rahel Süß

Abstract: The article theorizes the sovereign in recent digital democratic experiments. It demonstrates how the prevailing perspective is based on a liberal-technocratic understanding that overlooks important questions of organized collective power and identity. To address these limitations, the article contrasts the liberal-technocratic framework with a radical democratic approach. This alternative allows for reimagining the digital sovereign in two ways. First, it shifts the focus from the sovereign as a mere aggregation of networked individuals with fixed identities to one that opens up opportunities for ongoing identity construction and transformation. Second, a radical democratic approach emphasizes that the digital sovereign emerges from the individual and collective capacity to organize power.

Keywords: Democracy Machine, democratic representation, digital democratic experiments, digital sovereign, identity, radical democracy

This article is available open access under a CC BY-NC-ND 4.0 license thanks to the generous support from a global network of libraries as part of the Knowledge Unlatched Select initiative.

In the digital age, the ancient question of who should rule has gained new relevance. This article aims to explore the question of who rules in the digital age, with a focus on the concept of the sovereign as the people who self-govern. Unlike concepts of the demos that connect isolated individuals into a political unity, the notion of the sovereign invoked here emphasizes the freedom-enhancing aspects of the sovereign. However, the open question remains: Who is the sovereign in the digital age?

While some scholars have highlighted the opportunities provided by new technologies to redefine the sovereign "beyond the traditional boundaries set by geography and history" (Bernholz et al. 2021: 12), the implications have not been thoroughly explored. The task is to delve deeper into the question of how the sovereign is being redefined in recent digital democratic experiments. The analytical framework I propose to discuss this question draws on two examples: Hélène Landemore's (2020) model of "open democracy" and John Gastil's (2016) idea of the "Democracy Machine." I show how these accounts extend a minimal notion of the sovereign that authorizes laws and policies by considering additional principles such as inclusive deliberation (2021: 85) and non-electoral democratic representation (Landemore 2021: 76). While there is

Democratic Theory
doi: 10.3167/dt.2023.100206
Volume 10, Issue 2, Winter 2023: 56–66
ISSN 2332-8894 (Print), ISSN 2332-8908 (Online)

https://doi.org/10.3167/dt.2023.100206 Published online by Cambridge University Press
Democratic Theory 10-2 Winter 2023.indb 56 10/31/2023 14:00:28

much to recommend in how these approaches can contribute to redefining the digital sovereign, I argue that they risk a liberal-technocratic understanding that overlooks important questions of "organized collective power" (Klein 2022: 27) and identity.

To remedy some of these limitations, the article contrasts the liberal-technocratic understanding of the digital sovereign with a radical democratic view that draws on Steven Klein's (27) "democratic power approach." What his account adds to the question of the digital sovereign is the idea that "the people stands for the relatively less organized majority of society" (37). To explore the relationship between the sovereign's identity and the identity of those who constitute it, I propose complementing Klein's democratic power approach with Hans Asenbaum's (2021: 87) concept of "disidentification," defined as a "radical democratic practice." The primary value of this approach for reimaging the sovereign is the idea that the sovereign must be understood as a terrain of emancipation. This allows us to redefine the digital sovereign from a unitary subject with a stable identity to one that is "fugitive" (93), emerging from emancipatory processes of ongoing identity construction and transformation. In explaining the digital nature of these processes, I draw on the work of Paolo Gerbaudo (2022: 13–14), who demonstrates that "performative 'identity work' … increasingly happens online." According to Gerbaudo (8) this is evident in campaigns such as #GirlsLikeUs and Black Lives Matter.

To theorize the digital sovereign in recent digital democratic experiments, the article proceeds in three sections. I first explore Landemore's (2020) model of "open democracy" and Gastil's (2016) idea of the "Democracy Machine." Then I demonstrate why their accounts entail a liberal-technocratic understanding of the digital sovereign that cannot sufficiently explain the role of organized collective power and identity construction. Finally, I explore how a radical democratic view might help reconceptualizing the digital sovereign in a way that overcomes these limitations. The aim is to highlight some of the challenges and opportunities in thinking about the sovereign in the digital age in the context of recent digital democratic experiments.

Theorizing the Digital Sovereign

In this section, I discuss Landemore's concept of open democracy and Gastil's idea of the Democracy Machine. I show how their principles of inclusive deliberation and nonelectoral democratic representation allow for reimaging the sovereign beyond a limited understanding of voting rights and fair procedures which promise that "everyone can view themselves as equal authorities over a legal order" (Klein 2022: 39).

https://doi.org/10.3167/dt.2023.100206 Published online by Cambridge University Press
Democratic Theory 10-2 Winter 2023.indb 57 10/31/2023 14:00:28

In *Open Democracy,* Landemore (2020) draws on digital democracy experiments to develop a new framework of democratic representation. What is unique about her approach in addressing the question of the sovereign is the idea of nonelectoral democratic representation that is "specifically enabled by digital technologies" (2021: 65, 76). As she explains, "the point of rethinking democratic representation in these nonelectoral ways is that we could imagine a democracy that need not translate into elections alone or even elections at all" (76). This insight allows Landemore (71) to capture the sovereign not through the lens of "consent to power and delegation of power to elected elites" but "equality of access to power". Therefore, her idea of the sovereign is based on the ideal of democratic openness.

Landemore (72) argues that democratic institutions require a dimension of "open-endedness," which entails "adaptability and revisability". This concept of openness is ingrained in a novel institutional design she proposes. In this design, openness refers to the "accessibility of power to ordinary citizens." It allows citizens to "make their voices generally heard at any point in time and initiate laws when they are not satisfied with the agenda set by representative authorities" (2020: 11). One distinct institution Landemore (2021: 76) envisions is the establishment of a "periodically renewed" and "open minipublic". These minipublics consist of a "random sample of the entire demos" (74). The minipublics are designed to be open "to the direct input of the larger public and permanently connected to subordinated single-issue minipublics, all of which are also open and porous to the larger public's input" (76). Considering this notion of openness, how can it contribute to our understanding of the digital sovereign?

Landemore's idea of openness captures the potential value of digital technology for opening up the concept of the sovereign. By understanding the sovereign as an open sovereign, she perceives the people not merely as a political subject who authorizes laws and policies, but rather as one that engages in ongoing deliberation. The animating principle behind her democracy model is the idea that digital tools "have rendered the promise of deliberation at scale considerably more plausible by offering the possibility of replacing face-to-face, necessarily small meetings" (73). As Landemore (76) demonstrates, a digitally enabled open democracy can facilitate "constant communication flows between the temporarily represented and the temporary representatives." It allows for "much larger meetings of disembodied or reembodied (using pseudonym or avatars) individuals" (73). For instance, Landemore (81) envisions a "Citizenbook" platform that randomly matches its members in chat rooms and allows for voting online in referenda on issues of common concern. Her contribution is to show how the sovereign emerges from an ongoing process of technologically mediated "public deliberation" (83). However, a question

https://doi.org/10.3167/dt.2023.100206 Published online by Cambridge University Press
Democratic Theory 10-2 Winter 2023.indb 58 10/31/2023 14:00:28

remains as to whether the open sovereign sufficiently accounts for processes of identity construction and opportunities of self-transformation beyond ideas of personal autonomy and deliberation.

There is a second participatory account of democracy that must be explored for our question of the digital sovereign: Gastil's (2016: 2) vision of a platform that he calls "Democracy Machine." The key to viewing the digital sovereign through Gastil's framework is that it gives priority to the sovereign as a hybrid entity. Theorizing the sovereign as a hybrid sovereign is important, according to Gastil and Robert Richards (2017: 758), because civic platforms are "largely disconnected from one another".

Crucially, as explained by Gastil (2016: 2), the Democracy Machine "is a metaphor more than a machine." As a metaphor, the machine advances our understanding of the digital sovereign in a particular way. From this perspective, the sovereign emerges through a "fluid movement among diverse online (and offline) civic spaces" (Gastil and Richards 2017: 758). An important function of the machine is that it provides "citizens an overview of their civic participation and potentially aiding each citizen in integrating those experiences into … [their] developing civic consciousness or identity" (759).

Ultimately, the purpose of the machine is to engage citizens in consultation exercises by creating "long-term feedback loops" between its users and governments (758). This, in turn, is envisioned as a productive way of strengthening the influence of the hybrid sovereign on government decisions, improving responsive policymaking, and thus increasing governments' legitimacy (759; 2021: 86). Gastil's digital democratic experiment draws on various participatory practices including setting political agendas, creating and developing reform proposals, and voting in referenda and on the allocation of public budgets (Simon et al. 2017: 13–14). To ensure successful inclusive participation, Gastil highlights the importance of gamification methods and clarifies: "Machine players require credits, for instance, when they wish to sign a petition to place items on the agenda, to rank the priority of items up for discussion, and to vote on final sets of policy recommendations" (2016: 12). However, as I will explore next, his notion of a gamified and hybrid sovereign cannot adequately capture questions of organized democratic power.

Limitations of a Liberal-Technocratic Framework

I argue that from a radical democratic perspective, we can criticize Landemore's and Gastil's accounts for overlooking questions related to organized collective power and identity. The following argument focuses on

https://doi.org/10.3167/dt.2023.100206 Published online by Cambridge University Press
Democratic Theory 10-2 Winter 2023.indb 59 10/31/2023 14:00:28

what Klein (2022: 27) calls the "democratic power approach." His framework can assist in pointing out some of the limitations of a liberal-technocratic understanding of the digital sovereign, insofar as Klein (44) understands democratic power beyond "individual-level equality of opportunity for influence" by considering also aspects of "organized collective power". What new insights does this approach bring to the question of the digital sovereign?

The primary value of Klein's (37, 40) approach for redefining the digital sovereign is his argument that the people represents "the relatively less organized majority of society" and "comes into existence through the collective organization of power". A distinct benefit of this democratic power perspective is that we can question Landemore's understanding of the sovereign as being rooted in formal membership. Landemore (2021: 81) conceptualizes the sovereign as a community of "automatically electronically registered" members on a Citizenbook at birth, but she overlooks the fact that democracy requires not only equal opportunities for influencing decisions but also organized collective power. According to Klein (38), focusing "on *formal membership,* encompassing all members of a polity" fails to adequately account for the "organized collective activity of the less powerful members of that society".

To be clear, Landemore's deliberative-centric approach replaces a voting-centric perspective to the sovereign, focusing on the political mobilization of all citizens. However, considering her examples of open minipublics and the Citizenbook, it becomes evident that her democracy model primarily revolves around the idea of the people as "the aggregate members of a political community who owe each other, as individuals, treatment as free and equal citizens" (Klein 2022: 38). If we adopt Klein's (26, 31) perspective that democratic institutions serve not only as "fair procedures for resolving disagreements" but also as mechanisms for the "organization of power in society," we require a more empowered approach to the sovereign. Through this approach we can then envision the digital sovereign as an organized collective power.

To fully understand this aspect, we must engage more thoroughly with the question of identity. Doing so allows us to see how Landemore's deliberative ideal of openness risks overlooking important questions of self-transformation. On this point, Asenbaum (2021: 90) reveals that "participatory and deliberative conceptions of democracy provide notions of self-transformation," but only insofar as they "aim at strengthening personal autonomy." An alternative approach would be to build on his framework of disidentification, which understands "the self as inherently fugitive, continuously escaping hegemonic attempts at identification"

https://doi.org/10.3167/dt.2023.100206 Published online by Cambridge University Press
Democratic Theory 10-2 Winter 2023.indb 60 10/31/2023 14:00:28

(87). From this perspective, we can then show that the sovereign must be understood as "subject to change" (87).

To emphasize this point, we can draw on Gerbaudo's work on digital activism. He convincingly argues that "personal testimony campaigns [including #MeToo, #GirlsLikeUs, and Black Lives Matter] suggest that affiliation to group identity, rather than being a pre-established datum, becomes the ongoing product of performative 'identity work'" (Gerbaudo 2022: 13–14). In a similar vein, Asenbaum writes that activists in social "movements are always becoming; they always strive to be who they are currently perceived not to be." Illustrating the idea that "the subject is always a subject to change," he continues elaborating that "[s]uffragettes campaigning for the right to vote … did not make a stance as housewives but as future voters and office holders" (Asenbaum 2021: 93).

It is important to clarify that focusing on practices of self-transformation is not a recent development, as it is deeply rooted in Black feminist thought. However, as Gerbaudo (2022: 14) makes clear, identity construction "increasingly happens online." He argues "collective identity building continues to be an important practice for social movements online, and that we need to overcome the view of personal identity and collective identity as mutually opposed and appreciate instead how they can mutually reinforce" (15). What does this notion of self-transformation offer in terms of understanding the concept of the digital sovereign?

Applying Gerbaudo's insight to Gastil's idea of a hybrid sovereign, we can see that the democracy machine largely envisions the sovereign as an aggregate of networked individuals but overlooks important questions of identity construction. In other words, Gastil's account of the hybrid sovereign has indeed led to some important insights into how the digital sovereign emerges across online and in-person engagement forms. However, the problem with such a view is that it merely *connects* isolated individuals. A more empowered approach to the digital sovereign, drawing on the insights of Gerbaudo (15), would replace this "logic of connection" with a "logic of collection".

The benefit of such logic, as described by Gerbaudo (3), "is not so much 'connecting' people in a common network … but rather 'collecting' them, gathering behind a collective banner all the otherwise dispersed Internet users who are part of the same social group and are affected by common grievances." For example, personal testimony campaigns collect individual stories (8). These "contributions can come in the form of texts, images, selfies or videos, which add to those sent by other Internet users, in a 'collective story-telling' that often carries strong emotional overtones of indignation, compassion and collective pride" (2).

https://doi.org/10.3167/dt.2023.100206 Published online by Cambridge University Press
Democratic Theory 10-2 Winter 2023.indb 61 10/31/2023 14:00:28

There is another important aspect to consider for our question of who should rule. From the perspective of a democratic power approach, Gastil's hybrid sovereign and Landemore's open sovereign appear to entail a pessimistic view of citizens' capacity to collectively organize. This is partly because they envision the sovereign as emerging from a gamified process. Considering that gamification techniques are seen as an important feature for "building up civic competence" (Gastil and Richards 2017: 760), it seems that members of the sovereign are primarily understood as autonomous and rational individuals who need to be nudged to become a collective actor.

To be clear, the Democracy Machine may help strengthen "mutual trust between citizens and public officials" (Gastil 2021: 86), but only if it relies on "strong credit incentives to engage in honest and respectful deliberations" (2016: 13). For example, one element that contributes to the machine's dynamics is a reputation system. Members can earn credit "for succeeding at finding common ground" and for forging "coalitions that span diverse alliances" (Gastil and Richards 2017: 760, 761).

Similarly, Landemore (2021: 82) envisions various measures and incentives to enhance participation, such as "deliberative chat rooms" with virtual augmentation, financial compensation, and gamification methods. However, this perspective runs the risk of promoting a technocratic and top-down elitist vision. This problem becomes apparent, as explained by Asenbaum, when "deliberative forums are constructed with the purpose of producing 'better' (empathetic, public-spirited, knowledgeable) citizens." The political implication of such an approach is that "democratic subjects are not free to change; rather, they are object to particular transformations designed by others" (Asenbaum 2021: 90).

A Radical Democratic Approach to the Digital Sovereign

To sketch out a radical democratic approach to the digital sovereign, I draw on Klein's (2022) article "Democracy Requires Organized Collective Power" and Asenbaum's (2021: 87) concept of "disidentification" that he defines as a "radical democratic practice." Combining these frameworks allows us to explain certain phenomena that Landemore and Gastil overlook. First, by shedding light on the distribution of political power, a radical democratic approach theorizes the sovereign as "the relatively less organized majority of society" (Klein 2022: 37). Second, it allows us to conceptualize the sovereign as a "multiple self" that is always "free to change" (Asenbaum 2021: 93, 90). Thus, a radical democratic approach addresses the question of how the sovereign emerges by examining the

https://doi.org/10.3167/dt.2023.100206 Published online by Cambridge University Press
Democratic Theory 10-2 Winter 2023.indb 62 10/31/2023 14:00:28

interplay between organized collective power and continuous identity transformation.

As shown, Klein's democratic power approach allows us to see that Landemore and Gastil pay insufficient attention to questions of organized collective power. Insofar as Klein (37) defines the sovereign in more empowered terms, he offers an alternative approach to the sovereign. What is distinct about his idea is that the sovereign represents "political organization of the ordinary, non-elite, and less visible members of a political community – those who abjure or fail to achieve highly visible forms of economic and political power" (38). Such a view emphasizes that it is this collective power to organize from which the sovereign emerges.

The key to viewing the digital sovereign through this framework is that it enables us to better capture "the connection between political institutions and the people, insofar as the people comes into existence through the collective organization of power" (40). Klein (26) argues that it is insufficient to treat democratic institutions as "embodying fair procedures for resolving disagreements". We must also understand them as "simultaneous formal procedures and substantive mechanisms for organizing different actors, interests, and groups in society" (27). Conceptualizing democratic institutions in this way is important because it highlights their role in constituting the sovereign: "As mechanisms, democratic institutions organize and constitute collective actors that can then work through them – ranging from different groups and constituencies through to the people as a whole" (32).

Jennifer Forestal (2022) applies this insight to platform design. Her recent work on democratic design is particularly important for understanding how the people does or does not work because of its implications for building political communities and facilitating collective action. Forestal argues that "*built environments*" such as "Facebook not only operate as spaces of 'everyday talk' in the wider deliberative system, but they are also themselves institutions that shape our collective lives" (4; 2021: 35). In providing an infrastructure, "[p]latform design … works alongside laws and norms to help structure user behaviors in ways that can facilitate the formation of digital democratic communities – or else fail to do so" (2022: 4). To ensure that platform design promotes democratic politics, Forestal concludes, it must support citizens in three key aspects: recognizing "themselves as members of communities," forming "attachments to those communities," and working "collaboratively to experiment with and improve them" (4) to support what she calls "the democratic habit of experimentalism" (110).

To fully understand what a radical democratic perspective on the sovereign might add to the task of redefining the digital sovereign, we

https://doi.org/10.3167/dt.2023.100206 Published online by Cambridge University Press
Democratic Theory 10-2 Winter 2023.indb 63 10/31/2023 14:00:28

must better capture the role of disidentification, which gets overlooked by Landemore and Gastil. Asenbaum's (2021: 87) idea of "disidentification [as] a radical democratic practice" is instructive here because it allows us to address some of the limitations of the liberal-technocratic understanding of the digital sovereign. As shown, concepts of the open and hybrid sovereign focus on a stable identity that obscures important questions regarding organized collective power and identity. What is particularly valuable about Asenbaum's framework of disidentification is the rejection of a stable identity. Such a view allows us to theorize the digital sovereign as emerging from ongoing disidentificatory practices that can advance "the freedom of subjects to constitute their own identity in participatory spaces" (87).

What this idea of disidentification suggests is a perspectival shift. Rather than conceiving of the sovereign as an aggregate of networked individuals seeking to influence government decisions, it must become the terrain of emancipation. As Jacques Rancière (1992: 59, 62) explains, disidentification operates within this "logic of emancipation" because political subjectivation "is never the simple assertion of an identity; it is always, at the same time, the denial of an identity given by an other, given by the ruling order of policy." An open question remains: How can the sovereign become a terrain of emancipation?

From a radical democratic perspective, the digital sovereign requires two primary conditions. First, it should enable individuals to live "their multiple selves" and enhance their "freedom to change" (Asenbaum 2021: 89, 88). Second, for members of a political community to become a "collective actor 'the people,'" Klein (2022: 39) illustrates that "democratic institutions [must] organize the collective power of the generally disorganized majority":

> "The people is the result of political organization that coordinates the activities of these constituencies through broader social movements and over-arching institutional structures, producing a larger, cohesive, and organized movement that can lay claim to be the people. Realizing political equality will involve institutions that create a feedback loop between, first, organizing a 'latent' people, which can be identified by sociological facts about a society (that is, who is a member of this less powerful majority?), and then second, institutionally empowering that people once organized." (40)

Anonymity is an important aspect to consider for enhancing the freedom of the digital sovereign. Following Asenbaum's (2018: 468) argument, anonymity is no longer limited to "hiding one's identity when casting the ballot in elections." According to his view, "online engagement provides

https://doi.org/10.3167/dt.2023.100206 Published online by Cambridge University Press
Democratic Theory 10-2 Winter 2023.indb 64 10/31/2023 14:00:29

the means to enact identity differently, as a moment of anonymity is built into the communicative infrastructure. The body as digital object becomes a contingent reification of the self as it always needs to be reconstituted online" (2021: 100). Returning to our example of personal testimony campaigns highlights this position. As Gerbaudo (2022: 13) notes, "the identity that is constructed in these conversations is not a fixed or completely pre-ordained one. Tapping into the interactive features of social media provides the means to make identity-building a dynamic endeavor, constantly fed by the contributions issued by participants."

To conclude, conceptualizing the digital sovereign from a radical democratic perspective enables us to redefine the sovereign as an organized collective power, rather than just an aggregate of networked individuals with stable identities. By embracing this notion of the digital sovereign, we can address the limitations of recent digital democracy experiments and highlight the risks associated with a liberal-technocratic understanding of the concept. Finally, redefining the people in a more empowered sense opens up opportunities for ongoing identity construction and self-transformation. In this way, it allows us to conceptualize the sovereign as a terrain of emancipation.

Acknowledgments

This research was possible thanks to the Alexander von Humboldt Fellowship.

Rahel Süß is a postdoctoral fellow at the Humboldt-University of Berlin and The New Institute. E-mail: rahel.suess@hu-berlin.de | ORCID iD: https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6389-4898

REFERENCES

Asenbaum, Hans. 2018. "Anonymity and Democracy: Absence as Presence in the Public Sphere." *American Political Science Review* 112 (3): 459–472. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003055418000163.

Asenbaum, Hans. 2021. "The Politics of Becoming: Disidentification as Radical Democratic Practice." *European Journal of Social Theory* 24 (1): 86–104. https://doi.org/10.1177/1368431020935781.

Bernholz, Lucy, Hélène Landemore, and Rob Reich, eds. 2021. *Digital Technology and Democratic Theory.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Forestal, Jennifer. 2021. "Constructing Digital Democracies: Facebook, Arendt, and the Politics of Design." *Political Studies* 69 (1): 26-44. https://doi.org/10.1177/0032321719890807.

https://doi.org/10.3167/dt.2023.100206 Published online by Cambridge University Press
Democratic Theory 10-2 Winter 2023.indb 65 10/31/2023 14:00:29

Forestal, Jennifer. 2022. *Designing for Democracy: How to Build Community in Digital Environments.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.
Gastil, John. 2016. "Building a Democracy Machine: Toward an Integrated and Empowered Form of Online Civic Engagement." Working Paper Series at the Ash Center for Democratic Governance and Innovation, Harvard University.
Gastil, John. 2021. "A Theoretical Model of How Digital Platforms for Public Consultation Can Leverage Deliberation to Boost Democratic Legitimacy." *Journal of Deliberative Democracy* 17 (1): 78–89. https://doi.org/10.16997/10.16997/jdd.963.
Gastil, John, and Robert C. Richards. 2017. "Embracing Digital Democracy: A Call for Building an Online Civic Commons." *PS: Political Science & Politics* 50 (3): 758–763. https://doi.org/10.1017/S1049096517000555.
Gerbaudo, Paolo. 2022. "From Individual Affectedness to Collective Identity: Personal Testimony Campaigns on Social Media and the Logic of Collection." *New Media & Society:* 1–18. https://doi.org/10.1177/14614448221128523.
Klein, Steven. 2022. "Democracy Requires Organized Collective Power." *Journal of Political Philosophy* 30 (1): 26–47. https://doi.org/10.1111/jopp.12249.
Landemore, Hélène. 2020. *Open Democracy: Reinventing Popular Rule for the 21st Century.* Princeton: Princeton University Press.
Landemore, Hélène. 2021. "Open Democracy and Digital Technologies." In Bernholz et al. 2021: 62–89.
Rancière, Jaques. 1992. "Politics, Identification, and Subjectivization." *Identity in Question* 61: 58–64. https://doi.org/10.2307/778785.
Simon, Julie, Theo Bass, Victoria Boelman, and Geoff Mulgan, eds. 2017. "Digital Democracy: The Tools Transforming Political Engagement." Nesta. https://media.nesta.org.uk/documents/digital_democracy.pdf.

https://doi.org/10.3167/dt.2023.100206 Published online by Cambridge University Press
Democratic Theory 10-2 Winter 2023.indb 66 10/31/2023 14:00:29