Think • Vol 24 • No 69 • Spring 2025, 51–55

DOI: https://doi.org/10.1017/S147717562500003X

Does Democracy Exist?

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Keywords: democracy; political philosophy; aspirational concepts; conceptual engineering; equality

Abstract

Democracies may be defined as civic arrangements wherein all citizens have equal political standing. The problem is that no real-world democracy has successfully achieved this arrangement. Are they really democracies, then? For that matter, *are there any democracies at all?* Aikin and Talisse propose that 'democracy' is an aspirational concept, one that holds those who strive to achieve particular ends to exceedingly high standards. This makes democracies intelligible as democracies in their collective aspirations, but it also makes their failures instructive parts of what they are as democracies.

We tend to think of democracy as a set of governmental institutions. We see it as a political order characterized by open elections, constitutional constraints, the rule of law, freedom of speech, a free press, an independent judiciary, and so on. This makes good sense. These institutions indeed loom large in our political lives.

However, political institutions differ considerably from one purportedly democratic society to the next. Voting procedures, representation schemes, conceptions of free speech, and judicial arrangements are not uniform across societies that are widely regarded as democratic. In some of these countries, voting is required by law and military service is mandatory. In others, these acts are voluntary. Some democratic countries have distinct speech restrictions, others have different and blurrier boundaries. And the ancient Athenians appointed their representatives by lot, instead of by vote. Given these variations, how can these societies all be democracies? If it's the institutions that make democracies, it's not clear what institutions are necessary.

This leads to the thought that although a certain range of institutional forms are characteristic of democracies, democracy itself should be identified with the *kind of society* those institutions realize. Democracy is *multiply realizable*, as philosophers say. We consequently can see how two societies with distinct constitutions nevertheless can be democratic.

But this prompts the obvious question: What kind of society is a democracy? Abraham Lincoln's depiction of the democratic project in his Gettysburg Address may seem a good place to start. He identified democracy as *government of the people, by the people, and for the people*. Yet this goes only so far. For one thing, it retains the idea that democracy is centrally a mode of government. More importantly, it doesn't specify what it means for government to be *by* or *for* the people. As Lincoln's remark stands, a society might count as democratic even though benevolent oligarchs, or some other subset of the

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citizenry, run it for their benefit. Consider this against the fact that there are many democracies with appallingly low voter turnout numbers, or that in many democracies in the (not so distant) past only a select few citizens could vote at all.

One appealing further thought is that's missing from Lincoln's account is the idea that a democracy is a social order *accountable to all the people*. In fact, that thought was what was behind the look in askance at democracies that restrict voting to a very small class or participation to one gender. In a democracy, the people not only rule themselves; they rule themselves as equal partners. No citizen is another's political subordinate, master or overlord. We can say that a democracy is a society in which people collectively govern themselves as political equals. And consequently, in governing ourselves, there aren't any members of the state to whom we don't owe concern, reasons and standing when they have complaints to air. So, it's not just that we all have a say, but that nobody is treated as though their concerns don't matter.

It is worth emphasizing that political equality does not mean that every citizen is identical or is equally admirable. Rather, our political equality means that we participate in the activities of collective self-government *as equals*. We each get to make up our own minds about political affairs. We don't merely *get* an equal say in political decision-making; we're *entitled* to one. Underlying that entitlement is the idea that each citizen's perspective must be accounted for. Having an uncommon point of view or unpopular opinion does not disqualify one from citizenship.

This definition helps to make sense of why institutions can vary across democratic societies. There are different ways to structure a society of self-governing equals. Thus, democracy can take various institutional forms. Societies embodying significantly different institutions can be democratic.

However, this conception of democracy raises a new and particularly vexing difficulty. Arguably, *no existing society fits the definition*. Material, social and historical blocks to equal standing among citizens are pervasive in all societies claiming to be democratic. There is no self-governing society of political equals to be found. Every existing society falls short of that mark.

It is tempting to conclude from this line of reasoning that democracy doesn't exist, that no society is democratic. We think this conclusion is unwarranted. To see why, we need to take a step back to consider some features about what we might call *aspirational concepts*.

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Let's begin by asking a very different question: was Aristotle a scientist? He wrote multiple treatises on scientific subjects, from marine biology and botany to astronomy and physics. However, he never looked through a microscope and had no conception of DNA. He had never heard of the theory of evolution or of Newton's laws of motion. Moreover, he held views of natural phenomena that could hardly be called scientific by today's standards. For example, he thought that species were eternal, that men and women had different numbers of teeth, that the Earth is the centre of the universe, that the universe's motion had to be sustained by a purpose, and that formal and material explanations must be distinct. Not only were these views incorrect, but they arguably stood in the way of the progress of the sciences.

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Nonetheless, Aristotle sought to explain the world around him by means of a particular style of inquiry, a mode of investigation that directed him to observe, tinker, take notes, track how things change, theorize in light of the available data and revise as new evidence emerged.

For this reason, Aristotle was indeed a scientist. His status as such is due to the *aspiration* his empirical studies embody, and the way that this aspiration guided his work. We'd say the same of Ptolemy and Newton, even though their theories are no longer supported fully by the evidence. In fact, one of the best ways to say that their theories failed is that they were scientific theories, posed by scientists, trying to live up to the goal of a good scientific theory. Moreover, we contend that contemporary scientists are *bone fide* scientists, even though we also expect that in the next 100 years new discoveries will render obsolete much of what they believe.

Or consider another notion, that of being a *soccer player*. On the one hand, the six-year-old next door with the muddy cleats is a soccer player. She gets out there, knocks the ball around, and gets an orange slice at the end of the match. That's playing soccer, and it'd be silly to say she's not a soccer player. But there's another sense in which all that is hardly playing soccer, since were the very actions or skills the six-year-old displayed on the field to be manifested by grown-ups in a competitive match, we'd say it was playing soccer in name only. (A few years back, a poll of fans of the English Premier League resulted in Arsenal's famously wrong-footed centre back, Shkodran Mustafi, being ranked as 'can't play football'.) But, again, it's not in the manifest instances that we see the aspirations that make them both our adult and child soccer players, but in the fact that they are striving to play the game well and further to be better at the game. That both take themselves to be bound by the rules (like not using your hands), but in also being better players (so, working on one's trapping or defending or movement off the ball). If they take no interest in those things, then they are no longer soccer players in that relevant sense. They are soccer players because they see themselves, their performances and their plans for their improvement through the lens of those multiform goals.

The point of those cases was an analogy. So, something similar should be said in the case of democracy. It's the name of a social *aspiration*. Accordingly, a society counts as democratic in

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virtue of the extent to which the aim of realizing a self-governing society of political equals guides its institutions and practices. This means that a society that falls short of being a self-governing society of political equals might nonetheless qualify as an authentic democracy.

However, it remains the case that a society's being a democracy comes to more than its *claim* to be one. We regard Aristotle as a scientist not simply because he *says* he's being scientific. Rather, his status as a scientist has to do with how he conducted his investigations; he counts as a scientist in virtue of how the aspiration to understand the world informed his efforts. We might call it a broad empiricism and a commitment to systematic and natural explanations. The same goes for the soccer players; they strive to improve and so adjust their practices in light of feedback from coaches and other players within the rules of the game. That is, in order to count as a soccer player, one needs to play the game regularly, but that's not all. One must also bring to the play a particular ambition of chasing improvement.

Similarly, there are certain necessary institutional and practical conditions that a society must meet if it is to qualify as pursuing the democratic aspiration. Here we return to the familiar governmental and institutional forms that typically spring to mind when we think about democracy: open and fair elections, the rule of law, freedom of speech, and so on. A society that does not satisfy certain baseline institutional requirements cannot count as a democracy. This is because those institutional forms supply the necessary background for pursuing the democratic aspiration.

Consequently, identifiably democratic institutions are not sufficient for democracy. The democratic aspiration also involves the creation of a culture in which the aim of achieving a self-governing society of equals is operative in the minds and practices of citizens and political officials. This means that for a society to qualify as democratic, certain kinds of considerations, reasons and arguments must *count* when deciding political policy.

To use a simplistic example, a cogent argument to the effect that a particular policy diminishes the capacity of some citizens to participate as equals in self-government *must count as a formidable criticism* of that policy. What's more, in the absence of similar considerations that favour the policy, the equality-based critique must be regarded as *decisive*. Now putting the point in a different way, a society in which arguments about equal access to political participation *simply have no purchase* in discussion and decision-making is at best a democracy in decline, and arguably not a democracy at all. Similarly, politicians and political coalitions that disregard considerations about equality, or that openly seek to limit any citizen's equal access to the activities of self-government, have effectively divested from democracy.

Thus, even though no society lives up to the definition of democracy, democracies nevertheless exist. To summarize, real-world societies are democracies in virtue of satisfying two related conditions. First, the society must feature certain characteristic political institutions. Second, the people – politicians, officials and citizens alike – must regard those institutions as manifesting the aspiration to realize the idea of self-government among equals. Crucially, this means that a democratic people must treat certain kinds of considerations regarding equality as politically *salient* – always weighty, sometimes decisive – in their own political thinking.

Seeing democracy as an aspiration enables us to identify existing societies as democratic, despite their manifest flaws. That is a significant advantage. However, to conclude this essay, we raise a troubling downside of this account.

Consider that once we understand democracy as an aspiration, we also must hold that the task of a democratic society is that of cultivating more authentic forms of collective self-government among equals. In other words, our view says that taking up the democratic aspiration involves *expanding* citizens' access to effective political participation beyond the familiar institutional actions, such as voting and petitioning representatives. This plausibly calls for the creation of new sites where citizens can be democratically engaged. Unsurprisingly, there has arisen a range of novel proposals for extending our inventory of democratic activity,

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from citizen juries and mini-publics to facilitated cross-partisan deliberative conversation and other civic initiatives.

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While these efforts generally are to be applauded, they also raise a difficulty. As we expand the sites of democratic participation, we also create new opportunities for democracy to fall short. When we add to our civic responsibilities political activities that go beyond voting, we introduce new ways in which citizens can be shut out. To see this, note that robust forms of democratic engagement call for the expenditure of various resources, such as time, attention, energy and money. These are not evenly distributed across the citizenry. And disparities in these things tend to favour those who already enjoy other forms of social advantage. Calls for political participation, given background resource inequalities, will have unequal participatory output – even if the objective was to redress it.

Thus, the downside to our account. In order to count as democratic, our society must actively pursue the goal of self-government among equals. Yet our efforts to make society more authentically democratic in the required ways can reinforce existing patterns of democratic advantage and exclusion. What's more, these unwelcome by-products of our democratic enhancements are often unavoidable, tragically, even despite efforts to undo them. One could say that a hazard lies within the democratic aspiration. Whereas that's true, we prefer to think that, like most things worth striving for, democracy involves risk.

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Cite this article: Aikin S and Talisse R (2025) Does Democracy Exist? *Think* **24**, 51–55. https://doi.org/10.1017/S147717562500003X

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