



Democracy and Political Participation

Shiva Jalalpour^{1*}, Pakdel Moghadam²

¹Assistant Professor, Department of Political Science, Ahvaz Branch, Islamic Azad University, Ahvaz, Iran.

²Ph.D. Student of International Relations, Persian Gulf International Branch, Islamic Azad University, Khoramshahr, Iran.

ABSTRACT

Since the time when the first political communities took form and the initial discourses on politics was shaped, one of the most serious debates in this field has been people's role in shaping the ruling political system, codification of governing laws, and social administration. Since the publication of first written works on political philosophy, democracy has continuously been discussed as an important issue in them. Nowadays, political participation has become unavoidable as the most vital factor in the political development of nations. This shows itself in the Third World countries that are undergoing through a major transition from tradition to modernity in a more sensitive way. To have legitimacy, governments are forced to clear a room for political participation. On the other hand, the higher level of political participation of people in political decisions and policies bespeaks of the developed culture as well as the development of political culture of that society. From a religious point of view, active political participation and sensitivity over individual and social future are not only a right, but also a vital, necessary and valuable task for the general public. The more inclusive is democracy in its broad sense in a society, the more developed and current is participation including political participation. However, its depth and intensity can be reduced to the same degree.

Keywords: society, political system, democracy, political participation.

Corresponding author: Shiva Jalalpour

INTRODUCTION

Democracy as a term refers to a system of government by the whole population. This term, like many other concepts in social sciences, does not have a comprehensive and exclusive definition, and numerous alternative definitions and interpretations have been offered of it. Generally speaking, these definitions can be classified in two groups: a number of these definitions consider democracy a goal and "value". Accordingly, democracy is grounded in certain principles and values, the most striking ones of which are: relativism and popular legitimacy, in democracy the legitimacy of the state and laws is rooted in public will and satisfaction, and people endow the government with the legitimacy and power, and only the power that is conferred by people's will upon the individual is of legitimacy, and other ways of power transition are not officially recognized, and the other group covers the approaches and definitions that regard democracy as a mere "method" for distribution of political power and formal means and mechanism for decision making. As a method, democracy seeks to minimize the mistakes of social management and maximize the public participation and reducing the role of individuals in political decisions (Shaban Nia, 2011). Participation is one of the key notions in defining democracy insofar as democracy is traditionally defined as the mass participation of people in political life. Jacobson argues as to the definition of democracy that "the participation of the majority of people in political life and political decision on their

behalf is taken as democracy" (Bashirieh, 2008). The definitions that have been proposed of democracy, however, cover a wide range of forms of participation. In fact, the core feature of democracy is people's participation in taking decisions regarding the affairs on which their fate depends. Political participation indeed refers to individual engagement with different levels of activity in the political system that range from mere beholding to having an official political position (Rash, 2014). The definition that is focused on political participation insists on the role of participation in the hierarchy of power. According to Huntington, political participation consists of "the activities that are done by individual citizens in order to influence the process of political decision-making of the government" (Huntington, 2015). Whereas participation is one of the main indicators and constituents of a desirable democracy, social status is also a significant factor and criterion in the study of political participation. In most of the successful world democracies, one can find a direct and positive relationship between social status and political participation. The other issue concerns the relationship between the middle class and democracy and active political participation. In the majority of world thriving democracies, there is a direct relationship between the growth and number of the middle class and political participation (Daneshmandi, 1998). Due to the lack of coherent studies and even efforts for understanding the quality and quantity of people's political participation as the fundamental principle of democracy in different countries, it seems that the study of the process of political participation and the influence of the ruling

democratic system can provide the scientific community and Political organizations with useful information.

Concept of Political System

The concept of the political system represents a new approach to knowledge of the political phenomenon and covers not only official political institutions rather all kinds of political activity in society (Abdul Rahman, 2009). To put it otherwise, political system is comprised of the formation and construction of state power and all public institutions, including political, administrative, military, judicial, economic, cultural and religious, as well as the way in which these institutions operate, and the rules and regulations governing them "(Abdul Hamid, 2001).

David Easton defines political system as: "A system of action and reaction in any society through which obligatory or authoritative allocations are created and implemented." Easton's definition of political system has three major elements:

1) Allocation of values with the policy tools; 2) allocation and authority; and 3) paramount importance of allocation of authority (Abdul Rahman, 2009).

These very elements distinguish political system from other systems. The political system is created by the actions of people who take part in public life and are somehow related with the codification or implementation of policies in one form or another. Easton's understanding of political system is both institutional and inclusive. The political system is a social sub-system. Even in the political system there are a number of sub-systems like party system and group system. Easton christens them "a partial political system." In Easton's opinion, no political system would survive unless it can adapt itself to the circumstances in which it operates. Easton has explained the work of political systems in terms of "input" and "output". The inputs are the demands and supports that the system receives from the society. Outputs represent decisions and actions that are taken by government officials. But, as Robert Dahl also says, every political system pursues a goal that is contrary to those of other political systems; "contradiction" and agreement are two important aspects of the political system as a whole. Those who live together are never sympathetic on everything, but if they want to live together, they cannot pursue the goals which are in conflict with each other (Dahl, 1985).

Democratic Political System and Its Characteristics

"Democracy" is a variation of the Greek term "demos" that stands for people and "keratos" in the sense of government, and as an independent term δημοκρατία, *dēmokratía* literally means "rule of the people" (Jahan Bozorgi, 2009).

As a political life style of modern world, democracy is based on the principles and foundations that have evolved through the long-term process of struggle for the establishment of a democratic government. The essence of these principles can be found in egalitarianism, individualism, legalism, prioritization of people's rule and the emphasis on the natural, civil and political rights of human beings (Bashiria, 2016).

Objective and subjective criteria are used for evaluation of democracy. In the early years of the development of modern science, mental criteria were mostly used; that is to say, writers did consider a number of general characteristics (such as press freedom, the true importance of parliament, power relations, etc.) as indicators of democracy, and determined the democratic nature of regimes according to it. From the middle of the 20th century onwards, the emphasis was shifted to objective indicators such as the level of people's participation in election, the level of ideological competition, the composition of the parliamentary party, the degree to which the political rulers were elected and the accountability of sovereignty, etc. (Bashiryeh, 2008).

Generally speaking, a more precise evaluation of democracy requires the use of objective and subjective criteria. Whenever and wherever democracy is at stake, such categories as "power", "government", "society" and "law", and the like, come to one's mind; because democracy is essentially interconnected with such categories. In a democratic system, special relations exist between power structure and society, the relations which are different from the relations existing in other political systems.

"According to political sociology, power structure is of two types: one is unilateral power structure, while the other is bilateral power structure. In unilateral power structure (as a typical form), political power owes its legitimacy to sources other than society (people), and as a result, there are no institutions for the participation of social groups in political decision-making.

On the other hand, democratic states are of a bilateral power structure. In these types of regimes, the legitimacy of political power is in some way rooted in society, and as a result, there are institutions that prepare the ground for the participation of at least parts of society and social groups in politics. Naturally, we call a regime democratic in which all classes and social groups have an equal access to political power levers, though this concept can be accepted as a "typical form" of democratic regimes. Therefore, in democratic regimes, more or less social groups may participate in different degrees in political life "(*ibid.*).

In societies that are of bilateral power structure (modern societies), the sources of power are diversified and include wealth, social status, education, information, and so on.

This very diversification of power sources leads to the emergence of diverse and rival elites. Robert Dahl argues that the existence of varied and diverse social groups and interests is the basis of democracy, and democracy can be defined as sharing government among several minority groups. Views and needs of various rival groups are voiced in democratic institutions, and this in itself impedes the emergence of any tendency towards a centralized and dictatorial government. Democratic system lies between the rule of a single elite on the one hand and the ideal of the rule of the majority of the people on the other, and in this sense it is nothing but a "polyarchy" in which there is a free and open competition to attract people among elites or groups. (Bashiria, 2006).

David Truman, who has published his political ideas in a book entitled "The Governmental Process", believes that the government is the sphere of influence in the competition of diverse and varied power groups that are dispersed in society. State policies are the result of an integration of interests of diverse rivaled groups. Individual membership in different groups and the emergence of "overlapping group interests" guarantees such a process. Individuals' membership in different groups limits the power of each group, and consequently, no group can earn political power more than what it deserves. And this renders the concentration of political power impossible and prevents the emergence of authoritarian and dictatorial regimes in society and sets the scene for the growth and development of a democratic political space (*ibid.*).

Generally speaking, a number of key points are usually emphasized in explaining the general characteristics of democracy:

1. Democracy is a form of government founded upon the public opinion and it should be constantly accountable before the latter; in other words, the mere democratic origin of the sovereignty is not sufficient for democracy, but rather accountability before the people has to be continuous and the government must constantly renew its democratic origin.

2. Public opinion should be expressed in a free and open way, and there have to be appropriate ways to express it like free newspapers, elections, political parties, public opinion polls, etc.
3. As to the disputed issues by public opinion, one has to take the ideas of majority into account and, to fulfil the aspirations of majority the right to vote and political participation should be indiscriminately given to all groups and minorities.
4. Democratic state operates in a space that is brimming of independent and free and diverse institutions and associations that protect the rights and freedoms of individuals and associations against the possible authoritarian actions of the rulers.
5. Democracy requires social pluralism; that is to say, the fact that every society is consisted of various interests and values has to be taken into earnest account. Democratic system cannot serve one of these components alone.
6. Democracy needs a moral and valuational relativism, and thus no group has the right to impose any particular philosophy or ideology onto other groups as the government holder. Any slight change in public opinion, facts and morals also change accordingly. Then democracy is a form of governance in which it is always possible to change the minorities into the majority.
7. The prerequisite for acceptable performance of democratic institutions is supporting fundamental freedoms, including freedom of expression, association and pen; freedom is like the bloodstream of the organism of democracy (Bashiria, 2016).

Political Participation

Political participation consists of "an individual's engagement in various levels of activity in the political system that ranges from peaceful activity to having an official political position" (Rash, 2014).

The Encyclopedia of Social Sciences defines political participation as voluntary activity that is undertaken by the members of a society for choosing their rulers and playing direct or indirect roles in determination of the public policies. The authors of Dictionary of Sociology have defined as participation in political processes that leads to the selection of political leaders and accordingly determines or affects public policy (Aber Krasi *et al.*, 2010). Guillermo Ferro also writes: Democracy is nothing but the principle of choosing the representative via election, which takes place in society for solving governmental problems. Citizens agree to select a number of professional and informed people who are supposed to protect public interest (Ferrero, 2012).

With a cursory review of cited definitions, as well as the interpretations that have been offered by such thinkers as Maurice Duverger, Michael Rash, Anthony Giddens, Alan Debona, and other theorists of democracy, one can easily find out that in the eyes of Western thinkers, participation itself is much more important than the participators. To put it otherwise, choosing political leaders, solving governmental problems and the formation of public policies is more relevant than the people who are supposed to rule the society. Accordingly, the participants are the rabble. The uninformed masses who should inevitably accept the fences of elitism, while the criteria for elitism is not clear at all.

Jean-Paul Sartre describes election as one of the most prominent manifestations of political participation in the following way: "An electoral system – regardless of its nature – is consisted of a set of electorate who are exposed to the pressure of external factors like a formless paste. The list of elected people is the representative of a nation's will to the same extent that the list of sold music discs is a manifestation of the taste of buyers' taste (Shahnazi, 2013).

Modern democratic theory is much more direct and mature than past theories. In this theory, the influential figures are in charge of making decisions for other people, and they are responsible for controlling the uninformed masses. According to this modern theory, the rabble can only be spectators and they will have no right to interfere in politics, and that the men of influence appear in public every now and then to superficially confirm and approve their decision, which has been already finalized elsewhere, or to arrange fake elections, in which only the chosen candidates of the privileged class of society are elected. These all are merely a way for gaining legitimacy and name of government over uninformed rabble. But people participation in religiously grounded democratic system has a different story. The chief manifestation of the participation of general public, unlike political participation, is not just elections and taking part in political parties; in general participation, as its name indicates, people have effective role in general affairs of the country, and their presence should not be only limited to casting votes into the ballot box, and after election, they should not be excluded from decisions. In a religious democratic system it is people who are the true heads of the government. On the other hand, the general public has its own share in the country's issues, and it is not so that just a small part of the influential and political elite of society has the right to take part in country's planning and policy. If in democratic societies the people are known as the masses, in a religiously minded democratic system, people are described as the masters of the rulers whom should be served by the latter. In fact, in public participation, the two elements of participation, the participant, and participation as a whole, both are of their own respective particular place, and people as participants are the masters of religious government. Two elements of legitimacy and acceptance sustain the dynamics and the life of religious democracy (Javadi, 2008).

Theoretical Bases of Political Participation

There are two alternative views regarding political participation and, all types of political behavior at the more general level: rational choice and sociological school.

In the rational choice school that has Anthony Downs as its most important theorist, any political behavior is taken to be the result of an individual's decision of the actor who wisely chooses among the various options in his particular situation to choose the best option that provides his goals. Within the framework of the rational choice school, Anthony Downs has suggested a theoretical explanation of the voting behavior of the people that can be generalized as to other types of political participation.¹ Each potential voter acts upon certain rational calculation, and during electoral campaigns evaluates the services provided by the government in office and compare them with the claims and plans of the opposing parties, and takes the would-be benefits that are expected following the victory of this or that party into account, and finally casts his ballot accordingly. Voters are rational choosers who see participation in elections as a means to secure their own interests (Sayyed Emami, 2007). Olson is of the view that the

¹ The economic theory of Downs comes across a problem due to certain difficulties that are embedded in economic argument: the expected benefit of an individual vote, in view of the very role that that it plays in the general election, is so small that an individual who merely counts on personal profits and losses, may not bother to go to the ballot box. In response to this dilemma, William Ricker and Peter Ardeshak have argued that those who vote will receive additional rewards for personal economic gain, such as emotional satisfaction, showing support for the political system, declaring party or personal political preferences.

rational one's personal interest forces him to measure the cost of participation in a group or collective action in the face of its benefits. He takes rationality to be a strong factor involved in political participation. Downs and Olson both insist on the role of rationality in political participation (Rash, 2014).

According to sociological school, individual and group action has its roots in the current values and norms of society; then, the analysis of political participation is only possible in light of the study of such factors as the conditions of political socialization of individuals, political culture, group systems and other relevant conditions of social environment. One of the sociological theories is the theory of resources in which it is claimed that some social and economic resources - e.g. education, employment and income - affect the political participation of individuals. People's unequal access to such resources is effective in shaping lifestyles, social networks, and motivating individuals. Therefore, the participatory behavior of individuals should be explained in terms of their membership in career, education, etc. (Sayyed Emami, 2006).

1- Huntington's view

Huntington and Nelson regard political participation as one of the key factors involved in political development. They view political participation contingent upon two factors of attitude and priorities of political elites and the status of groups and associations and intermediary social institutions in the society itself, and are of the belief that the process of economic and social development through two channels can ultimately lead to the expansion of political and social participation:

- I) Social mobility canal represents the fact that gaining a higher social status in turn creates a sense of ability in an individual as well as the sense of having the ability to exercise impact on the decisions of public services agencies, and these subjective factors as a whole can encourage participation in politics and social activities.
- II) Organizational channel refers to active membership and active participation in various types of social groups and organizations (trade unions, groups of advocates of special interests, etc.) that increase the probability of participation in social and political activities. These factors are more important in societies in which individual mobility opportunities are more limited in them, since, as stated above, a person considers activity in social organizations or political parties as the last resort to achieve social and economic status. (Rezai, 1996).

2- Perry's View

Perry is of the belief that one needs to examine three aspects of political participation, i.e. participation, intensity and quality of participation. The mode of participation in his thought is a matter of whether this participation is made in a formal or informal way, and Perry argues that the mode of participation varies based on the opportunity, amount of interest, resources available to the individual and the common attitudes towards participation in society and particularly whether participation is encouraged or not. Intensity in this context refers to the measurement of the number of people participating in certain activities and the frequency of participation, which may still vary according to the opportunities and resources. Quality depends on the range of effectiveness of participation and evaluation of its impact on those who apply power and also on

policies. Quality varies according to the opportunities and resources from one society and to another (Rash, 2014).

3- The Views of Robert Dows and Martin Lipset

In Lipset's view, those countries that include a strong middle class along with their economic growth are more democratic than those countries which are weaker in this respect in the region. He speaks of the characteristics of the middle class as a positive factor for democratic development. In their analysis of political behavior and participation of people in the United States, Canada, Britain and Australia, Lipset and Dows insist on the factors and variables that they believe have a significant impact on political participation, but the intensity and pattern of this influence has not been the same. Among the most important of these factors one can refer to religious beliefs, gender, age, race, rural or urban identity, social class, and regional affinities. According to these authors, in the above countries save the United States, such factors as age and gender are among the most important variables affecting political participation. As it was mentioned before, influence intensity of these factors is not the same in all countries and we cannot come up with a fixed pattern in the participatory behavior of citizens. As for example, there is no stable relationship between people's social positions and their political views and their ideological and partisan tendencies, insofar as many people who do not have a favorable economic situation, vote in favor of conservative parties and the capitalists vote and vice versa (Lipsett and Dows, 1998).

4- The Views of Mibrath and Goel

Mibrath and Goel have referred to seven major factors in explaining political participation. These factors consist of: stimulus (political motivation), social status, personal characteristics, political environment, skill, resources and commitment. Political motives in this context refers to such factors as political debates, having feelings for an organization involved in political activities and having access to correct information. Personality related features comprise sociality, extroversion, and the like. People with the latter characteristics are more involved with political issues. Social status is measured by such indicators as education, location of residence, social class and ethnicity. Political environment is an environment in which people live. For example, certain political culture can encourage or restrain him from engaging in political affairs. Skills refer to one's ability of analyzing the organizing power, skills in lectures and speeches. Resources stands for non-cash financial resources that can be used in the form of contacts and relationships between individuals and statesmen and secretaries of parties. Commitment refers to one's sense of affiliation to an organization, group, party or particular person, and this attachment to the mentioned entities has a significant effect on the political participation of individuals (Rash, 2014).

5- Robert Dahl's View

Robert Dahl gives priority to political ideas particularly the opinions of political activists in society in describing the foundations of political behavior of nations. Dahl's key question is that to what extent does political opinion determine the political action of a society's people? To understand the range of influence of beliefs in regimes, Dahl argues, we need to examine the factors involved in determination of the political beliefs of activists. In Dahl's view, no one can deny the influence of his or her own ideas and practices. He continues to pose a more important question: if the ideas of general public are involved in the political system and the type of regime in that society, one should ask: "Whose beliefs is of more influence in political system of a society?"

Dahl's emphasis is more on the beliefs of a group of people that he calls them "political activists" (Firahi, 1998).

6- School of Political Socialization

Among the most striking effects of political socialization one can refer to the fact that in various political and social behaviors, including voting, supporting political parties, participating in political rallies, electoral campaigns, political propaganda, participation in negative communities, etc. (Qavam, 1995). As to socialization, there are three major perspectives: 1) anthropological perspective; 2) psychological perspective; and 3) political sociology perspective.

CONCLUSION

Nowadays political participation has turned to an unavoidable factor in the political development of nations. Political participation is a manifestation of people's presence in determining their own destinies and is one of the most fundamental forms of social relations and has been taken as one of the key notions in sociology. International encyclopedias and dictionaries have defined political participation as voluntary activity of citizens in choosing the leaders and direct and indirect participation in public policy making (Mousavi, 2009).

Participation represents a process through which people come to accept transformation in themselves and in society. The process of participation as an empowerment process underlines three basic values of sharing people in power, enabling people to supervise their fate and opening the opportunities of progress toward people.

The close relation of two notions of participation and democracy lies in the fact that democracy features collective and not individual decision-making, i.e. in collective life, we need to take decisions regarding the goals, rules, distribution of responsibilities and benefits among the members of the group and democracy depicts the ideal that such decisions should be taken by all mentioned members, and that those members have equal rights in reaching such decisions. To state the matter otherwise, democracy requires two principles of "public supervision" on collective decisions and "legal equality" in supervisory practices, and as far as these two principles are being put into effect and a society's nearness and distance to/from the ideal of equal participation in collective decision-making is democratically meaningful. Thus the following question is raised as to whether greater participation is in favor of the democratic system or against it?

In fact, one can state that people are capable of acting responsibly, and democratic states are more capable in providing public needs as compared to other types of government, and the more people speak in politics, the more likely they are to reflect their interests and aspirations. Therefore, participation is one of the key concepts in defining democracy. Insofar as in the traditional notion of democracy, democracy is the bedrock of the participation of the masses in political life. Democracy is conceived to be the participation of the majority in political life and political decision-making. However, definitions offered of democracy are taking a broad and wide range of partnerships. Actually, the chief characteristic of democracy is the participation of people in decision-making as to the affairs on which their fate depends. Consequently, without an active participation of the people, political democracy will not be a major phenomenon. Accordingly, democracy is an effective tool for peaceful resolution of issues pertaining different ideologies and the defense of individual rights and interests, as well as respecting other people's social and economic rights, and free

participation of social groups in the course of development and speeding up. Participation empowers them by weakening their own destiny because they restrain their energy and interfere with them in decision-making.

REFERENCES

1. Aber Krasi, Nicholas, Stephen Hill, Brian S. Terner, 2010, Dictionary of Sociology, trans. Hassan Pouyan, Chap Paksh Publishing.
2. Abolmad, Abdul Hameed, 2001, Principles of Politics, Eighth Edition, Tehran: Toos Publishing.
3. Alam, Abd al-Rahman, 2009, Foundations of Political Sciences, Twentieth Edition, Tehran: Nashr-e Ney.
4. Bashirieh, Hossein, 1395, Political Knowledge Training, Twelveth Edition, Tehran: Nashr-e Ney.
5. Bashirieh, Hossein, 2006, Political Sociology, Thirteenth Edition, Tehran: Nashr-e Ney.
6. Bashirieh, Hussein, 2008, Lessons from Democracy for All, Third Edition, Tehran, Negahe No.
7. Daneshmandi, Ali, 1998, The Role of Civil Institutions in Social Development, Proceedings of the First Conference on Third Planning, Planning and Budget Organization.
8. Ferrero, Guillermo, 2012, Sovereignty, Translation by Abbas Aqa, Office of Political and International Studies.
9. Feyori, Davood, 1998, Concept of Political Participation, Political Science Quarterly, No. 1.
10. Huntington, Samuel, 2015, The Third Wave of Democracy at the End of the Twentieth Century. Translation: Ahmad Shahsa, Fifth Edition, Tehran, Rozaneh.
11. Jahan Bozorgi, Ahmed, 2009, Principles of Politics and Government, Publisher: Islamic Culture and Thought Research Center.
12. Javadi, Hossein, 2008, An Investigation of Democracy and Political Participation, Political Quarterly, Faculty of Law and Political Science, Tehran, Vol. 38, No. 3.
13. Lipset, Martin and Dows, Robert, 1994, Political Sociology, Translation: Mohammad Hossein Farjad, Tehran: Toos Publishing.
14. Mousavi, Taher, 2009, Factors Affecting Political Participation, MA Thesis of Sociology, Allameh Tabataba'i University.
15. Nowroozi, Mohammad Javad, 2011, Political Philosophy, Imam Khomeini Institute of Education and Research.
16. Qavam, Abdolali, 1995, Review of Theories of Modernization and Political Development, Tehran: Shahid Beheshti University.
17. Rash, Michael, 2014, Society and Politics, An Introduction to Political Sociology, Translated by: Manouchehr Sabouri, Twelfth Edition, Tehran, SAMT.
18. Seyyed Emami, Kavooos, Eftekhari, Asghar and Abdullah, Abdulmutallab, 2006, Youth values and attitudes and political behavior, Report of the research project, National Youth Organization.
19. Shahnazi, Popular, 2013, Appreciation of Iranian Democracy, Fourth Edition, Razan Newspaper.