Minimalist Conception of Democracy: 
A Normative Analysis

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Introduction

Classical conceptions of democracy were able to ascribe various virtues and goals to democracy, largely because they were presented at a time when democracy was a noble, yet narrow experiment. In modern times, democratic governance is accepted and practiced nearly worldwide, and as a result, we are able to base theories of democracy not on what it should or could be, but on what we observe. At the present, due to the complications of modernity, there exists a question of whether to reduce the definition of democracy back to its simple etymology: rule by the people.

Modernity both wreaks havoc and heaps potential onto our politics. Education levels are steadily on the rise, information moves faster than it ever has, diversity is held as a strength rather than a hindrance, and persons themselves are increasingly mobile in their professions, locations, and political identity.

In such a situation, the elaborate, idyllic pictures of democracy that have been presented (but not always presented) since its inception now seem tenuous. Modern populations lack the stability in location or opinion to build towards the consensual pursuit of ideals that is often associated with democratic government. However, at the same time, these populations seem much more able. They are more educated, less provincial, more tolerant, and capable of pursuing almost unlimited information.

Therefore, a modern population is fragmented yet capable. It is into these circumstances that a minimalist conception of democracy intercedes. All of its contributors to be mentioned here wrote during World War II at the earliest, which is indicative of the theory’s place in the modern world. It allows for both the peaceful
competition of ideas in a less stable population and provides an adequate outlet for an informed electorate that can be considerably trusted to make its own decisions, without placing encumbrances in the path of this expression.

However, a minimalist conception of democracy suffers from something of a connotation problem. Its reduction of democracy’s stated goals, not to mention the very term “minimalist,” give the first impression that it is a theory that is purposefully scaling back what it is that democracy can accomplish. But the purpose of this paper is to show that lowered expectations do not necessarily follow from lessened conditions, and that the elaborateness of a democracy’s conception of itself does not necessarily speak to whether its people have a better government.

**Question**

A minimalist conception of democracy is a somewhat reduced notion of democracy that abandons the pre-determined goals of classical democratic doctrines, the nineteenth century models based on community consensus on a common good. Currently, this conception is considered mostly as descriptive definitions that separate minimalist conceptions from more exacting theories of democracy or democracies themselves from non-democracies. As a result of this approach, the value judgments attached to minimalist conceptions are little more than functional conveniences. However, minimalism has potential to exist as a normative theory in its own right, since it provides democratic government the ability to accommodate a wider range of traditions and ideals as it expands over the globe, as well as the ability to accommodate fluid priorities within domestic borders and even promote certain traits held to be “democratic,” such as increased participation and the protection of rights. The question,
Therefore, is: What are the benefits of a minimalist conception of democracy when it comes to promoting normative outcomes within a given democracy and across potential democracies?

**Minimalist Democratic Theory**

It is necessary to begin with an explanation of the conceptual approach to minimalist democratic theory to be used here. I say “conceptual approach” rather than “definition” because a definition would characterize the perspective of the topic too narrowly.

The body of minimalist democratic theory is drawn from several thinkers, to be discussed later, who do not share any definition of the theory. The authors to be cited are Adam Przeworski, Joseph Schumpeter, Karl Popper, William Riker, and Russel Hardin. While their ideas give shape to what I call a minimalist conception of democracy, it is important to note that this is not an established theory. These authors, save Przeworski, do not utilize a minimalist conception in explicit terms, nor does their work draw on each others’: the grouping is mine. They do not share a definition of a minimalist conception, and in fact, most do not offer a definition at all. Instead, they share a viewpoint wherein democracy does not set conditions for its outcomes or characterize itself as anything other than an electoral system. This is the approach to the concept that will be utilized: not one author’s definition or view, but rather a shared vision of a system that does not assign conditions or outcomes to democracy, and leaves only elections as the driver of policy.

This approach is more fitting than a straight definition because a definite, defined “minimalist democracy” has never existed, and neither could one. Any society’s
government is bound to be infused with their values to the point where it has goals, explicit or implicit, other than running elections. Therefore, minimalist democracy is not an entity, but a direction. Every democracy is somewhere between minimalism and a thicker conception. It cannot become a minimalist democracy, but it can move closer to that approach.

The democratic systems opposed to minimalist democratic theory are referred to as “thick” or “demanding” theories of democracy. Like a “minimalist conception,” this is not an established school of thought. Instead, these terms imply that these conceptions, rather than assigning democracy no conditions as a minimalist conception does, instead state that democracy is to have certain outcomes.

**Literature Review**

The purpose of my question is based on the premise that the normative potential of minimalist democratic conceptions is only partially explored by the authors who propose them. My overall comment on the existing minimalist literature is that it utilizes minimalist theory mostly as a definition, which is to say it is not assigned its share of benefits or drawbacks in itself as a theory. Instead, it is treated as a definition that is acceded to in order to draw a functional division between democracies and non-democracies. Often when this division is made, a theorist will proceed to make a claim of democracy’s fundamental benefit, clarified through its reduction to an essential conception. In doing this, there is no analysis of the normative benefit of a minimalist conception in itself.

What I would like to do is explore the possibilities of what may be generated by a minimalist conception of democracy in order to argue that a minimalist conception of
democracy is not only a way to define democracy, but also a means to enhance its quality as well by allowing different electorates to further their varied, changing interests and to allow democracy to adapt to international consequences.

The first author to be considered is Adam Przeworski, who put forth his minimalist conception in *Democracy and the Market* (1991) and “Minimalist Conception of Democracy: A Defense” (1999). In these works, Przeworski simply defines minimalist democracy as “a system in which parties lose elections.”¹ He compares this approach to consensus-based theories of democracy and states the infeasibility of the latter, whether they are based on *a priori* rationality or deliberation, with the weak point of both means to consensus being the simple presence of irreconcilable differences in society.²

This point relates to what Przeworski regards as the value of democracy itself, that value being the peaceful transfer of power enacted through regular elections. Przeworski determines this as the essential value of democracy by taking a minimalist view of the concept, refusing to assign conditions other than holding elections in which parties can lose. Przeworski comes to this conclusion by asserting that a minimalist conception allows for the illustration of compliance in a social choice scenario.³ In cases where a party loses an election, it gains higher utility by accepting the results than it would by subverting the system. Also, a victorious party is better off holding the next scheduled election rather than canceling or postponing it. Therefore, in the minimalist view, we can explain compliance with the verdict of elections within rational choice models.
Przeworski’s argument that fallible elected officials must be subject to turnover does hold normative value, yet a number of his conclusions are reached only by utilizing a minimalist conception relatively to thicker conceptions of democracy, and therefore his minimalist conception does not entirely stand alone. While Przeworski clearly differentiates his theory from consensus-based approaches, he mostly stops at the point of definition. When he does assign values to democracy when approaching it from a minimalist understanding, they do not relate to the quality of a particular democracy operating on the premises of a minimalist approach, but instead they pertain to minimalism’s feasibility as a definition or its ability to sustain democratic government, relative to the risk of collapse posed by other systems. While these are important arguments, they do not make the argument that a minimalist conception of democracy yields a democracy of higher quality.

While much less explicit, Joseph Schumpeter’s analysis in Capitalism, Socialism, and Democracy (1942) makes points similar to Przeworski’s. Schumpeter first assesses classical consensus-based democratic doctrine. He does not cite specific theorists, but instead identifies it as the “eighteenth-century philosophy of democracy” wherein, “It is held, then, that there exists a Common Good, the obvious beacon light of policy, which is always simple to define and which every normal person can be made to see by means of rational argument.” He then goes on to argue that this conception lacks both rational unity and rational sanction; the former meaning it cannot happen and the latter stating its results are not necessarily valid in themselves. Also, Schumpeter states that acceptance of classical doctrine has survived as long as it has only through external political factors,
such as social homogeneity, unifying religious beliefs, and politicians’ desire to flatter their constituencies.\(^7\)

In opposition to classical doctrine, Schumpeter puts forth his own theory of democracy, which consists of an institutional arrangement wherein individuals acquire power to make decisions by competing for the people’s vote.\(^8\) However, Schumpeter neglects normative arguments in favor of a criterion of observability. His arguments on behalf of a minimalist approach’s merit are based not on its value or even its value relative to classical doctrine, but only on its ability to be observed empirically. Schumpeter states, “The principle of democracy then merely means that the reins of government should be handed to those who command more support than do any of the competing individuals or team.”\(^9\) With this conception, Schumpeter does not even go so far as to say democracy itself has a value outside of empirical observability.

While observability is a worthwhile expectation, it lacks normative value. If observability is one’s criterion for success, there is a tendency to scale back expectations and goals, rather than extend them. This is revealed in the fact that on the whole, Schumpeter is very defensive in tone, wishing only to secure his characterization of democracy without stating potential benefits to democracy. He promotes a minimalist view as absolving discrepancies found within classical doctrine, but he does little to embark on a discussion of minimalism’s benefits in itself.

While operating within a philosophical and historical analysis rather than a political one, Karl Popper sets forth concepts of minimalism as well, though as mentioned previously, that is not his own term. In *The Open Society and Its Enemies* (1963), Popper preaches a break from the intellectual heritage left by the “great men” of
the past, whom he criticizes as being anti-freedom because of their support of sovereignty. He rejects the concept of sovereignty in favor of elections, stating that the imperfections and uncertainties of elections are preferable to the prospect of tyranny found within sovereignty.

Like Przeworski, Popper sets a major division between democracies and other systems, but while Przeworski states that democracies are made by periodically evicting officials, Popper asserts that democracies are a system wherein one administration can be replaced by another without bloodshed, which to him, indicates elections: “The first type [of government] consists of governments of which we can get rid without bloodshed--for example, by way of general elections; that is to say, the social institutions provide means by which the rulers may be dismissed by the ruled.”

Since it makes no explicit mention of popular contribution to government, Popper’s dichotomy between bloody and bloodless means of government transition is a tenuous means of identifying democracy, but his intention is the same as Przeworski’s in that he is claiming that authority is to be derived from periodic rejections or approval of the ruling by the ruled. But also like Przeworski’s definition, Popper’s attributes normative value to democracy itself, while leaving his own minimalist view largely explored in its own right. Similar to the previous authors mentioned, Popper’s minimalism is mostly presented only in a comparative sense. Rather than advancing minimalist theory into its implications for a particular democracy, he only argues that it is preferable to more demanding theories and will allow democracies to last.

Another comparative work, one that is explicitly so, is William Riker’s Liberalism Against Populism (1982). Within a social choice framework, Riker assesses
the viability of liberalism and populism. Riker’s “liberalism” is a relatively minimalist conception, based on the Madisonian view of a system wherein officials are controlled by being subjected to periodic elections.\(^\text{13}\) While Riker’s is a highly simplified version of Madison’s perspective, it is functional for his purposes. Riker’s conception of populism is based on Rousseauian democracy, a system based on citizens’ direct participation in policy decisions and the “will of the people.”\(^\text{14}\) This view is indicative of the classical doctrines rejected by minimalist authors, and Riker’s analysis disproves populism’s compatibility with social choice theory.

While Riker states that liberalism (minimalism, using Riker’s definition) can co-exist with social choice theory, he has no evaluations of it beyond that. Similarly to the previous authors, Riker’s study is devoid of normative considerations. Instead, his argument only pertains to the feasibility of a minimalist conception. This can be considered a first step in the argument for a minimalist approach, since there is no point in pursuing it further if it cannot square with the established parameters of social choice. Also, it is noteworthy that Riker’s determination that thicker conceptions are not achievable in a social choice scenario. However, the lack of normative concerns in a work such as this, which is a form of direct comparison between the two conceptions, underscores the necessity for a normative analysis to be done.

In Russell Hardin’s *Liberalism, Constitutionalism, and Democracy* (1999), the author does not lay out a minimalist conception as such, but his comments on democracy as co-ordination theory certainly hint towards it. Hardin refutes consensus-based theory such as that of Rousseau and Kant, commenting, “We think different individuals may have different rights and goods that are all valid. Then why would we expect we would
agree? Experience suggests that we would not. Theory so far has had nothing of interest to say on this question.”

He goes on to describe democracy as co-ordination theory, wherein stability is produced through political and economic group competition. Here, Hardin appears to be suggesting minimalism through acquiescence, stating that thicker conceptions of democracy are not achievable, so a minimalist conception suffices. In the subsequent analysis of the problems faced by this co-ordination theory, the criterion is workability rather than anything normative. Therefore, like other authors mentioned, a minimalist conception is outlined as something that merely exists as an option turned to when rational consensus cannot be reached, not as a theory that entails normative values and traits.

**The Nature of the Problem**

The difficulty approached is not so much a problem to be solved as it is a perspective to be added. The problem is that little attention is paid to minimalist theory’s normative potential, so therefore a predominantly negative existing connotation of minimalist conceptions of democracy diminishes these approaches’ potential role. These conceptions often originate under the auspices of a demand for observability and an idea of the least that can be expected from democracy. This approach has prevented minimalist theories from being considered as something thought of as not only adequate, but possibly beneficial as well.

This problem is normative in that I will seek to establish the desirable qualities for which minimalist theories provide. Yet at the same time the progression of the argument bridges the gap between theoretical and practical, due largely to minimalist conceptions’
origins as accommodating observability. Throughout, the argument concerns how the application of a minimalist conception would improve tangible politics, rather than serve more abstract ends.

Although this suggests some interplay between normative and empirical approaches, the argument does not contain empirical analysis, since the overall nature of the argument is hypothetical. It is not a measured record of theory’s impact, since, as previously discussed, a minimalist conception is not quantifiable: minimalism is more of an approach to democracy than a type of government to be instated. As such, attempting to definitively categorize democracies as minimalist and thick would be a division that is subjective to the point of being arbitrary. There is more of a gradient between them than there are qualifications for each. Therefore, the argument suggests the benefits to be derived from moving towards the fulfillment of the minimalist approach as opposed to the alternative, and as a result of this perspective, the outlook of the paper is normative.

As in Adam Przeworski et al’s Democracy and Development (2000), attempts have been made to quantitatively classify democracy along minimalist criteria. However, the problem with these classifications is that they are a much better example of a minimalist definition than a minimalist theoretical approach. Although in other works Przeworski himself spoke of the value of democracy within a minimalist view, Democracy and Development is indicative of a different type of attitude: rather than speak of minimalism as an approach or a direction, studies such as these use a minimalist definition of democracy, wherein a base set of conditions is used to separate democracies from other systems.
In the case of *Democracy and Development*, a base set of operational rules are set out to qualify a regime as democratic, including the election of the chief executive and legislature and the existence of more than one party.\textsuperscript{16} Under this approach, the nation with the most minimalist approach is simply lumped together with the thickest democratic conceptions, for the purpose of being separated from dictatorships. This simplicity is emphasized by the statement, “Throughout this discussion, we have focused on democracy. We treat dictatorship simply as a residual category, perhaps better denominated as ‘not democracy.’ Our procedure is to establish rules that will disqualify a particular regime as democratic, without worrying about the nature of the regimes eliminated in this manner.”\textsuperscript{17}

As a result of such procedures, a minimalist conception of democracy is used for little more than to identify countries which satisfy a set of minimal criteria supplied for democracy. Through these means, democracies are distinguished from dictatorships, but little is revealed concerning how a minimalist conception compares to a thick conception within a given democracy. Therefore, the overarching nature of my argument stems from the belief that minimalism can be considered as something more than descriptive. Przeworski’s statement, “But my point is not that democracy can be, needs to be, improved, but that it would be worth defending even if it could not be”\textsuperscript{18} is valid, but quality is no doubt important as well. A minimalist approach is a concept that, when its possibilities and priorities are explored, can contain values as strong as that of any thick conception, albeit achieved through the powers of process rather than those of abstraction.
The significance that comes from addressing the problem is found both within and across countries. Within a country, a minimalist approach is a means to finding ideal policy in a way that is determined through authentic popular sentiment, and is also changeable through time. This is so because a minimalist view does not define democracy by its policy outcomes. Instead, outcomes are determined throughout electoral competition. Across countries, minimalist conceptions of democracy allow democracy in itself to be accessible to countries abandoning dictatorships. Of course, these are related in that these nascent democracies partake in the significance afforded within a country. The benefits of a minimalist approach do not cease when a country simply reaches a democratic status.

**Exclusions**

As it is based on hypothetical models and arrangements, any workable research in political theory requires complications to be set aside in the construction of the argument. This section addresses the omissions and simplifications which are necessary for the purposes of this paper.

First, it is worth repeating that what is referred to as “a minimalist conception of democracy”, or any similar term, is not a single defined theory so much as it is an approach to democratic theory, such as those espoused by the authors in the literature review. The authors cited as having minimalist conceptions contain nuances among them which are worth mentioning, but are not significant enough to prevent them all from being considered as part of the minimalist approach that focuses solely on elections as the criterion for democracy. While the details of each author’s particular arguments do receive attention, the theoretical lynchpin of elections as democracy’s sole criterion is
ample enough to unite the conception of minimalist theory used in the argument, so it is acceptable to set aside minimalist theorists’ nuanced differences for the most part.

The question of whether democracy is desirable, as opposed to other systems, is not addressed. It is admittedly so that the argument proceeds from a viewpoint that holds democracy to be preferable. Many of the premises are based on the assumption that democracy’s spread attests not only to its popularity, but to its validity as being an advanced point in the evolution of government. If at any point the premises state that an aspect of minimalist enhances democracy, as opposed to another system, it is to be presumed that this is a benefit.

It may also seem as though the particulars of the more demanding theories of democracy are not particularly well represented, but there is a reason for this. The main impetus for my argument comes from the minimalist literature’s shortage of arguments which extol a minimalist approach independently of comparison to thicker theories of democracy. Therefore, it may appear as though the thick democratic conception is not well-detailed here, but this is a part of the effort to focus the argument on a minimalist conception’s appeal in itself. References to thicker theories are present, but it should be kept in mind that any reference to exacting democratic theories is meant only to be a reference point for minimalist conceptions; a point-for-point comparison is not the intention.

For all the attention given to elections, one may notice that no heed is given to the collective action problems that are endemic to voting. While this is a worthwhile concern, questions of information, coordination, and costs are too large to be tackled within a paper that is addressing different matters. For the purposes of the argument, it is
assumed that the costs of voting are zero, so elections are expressions of public opinion that are not marred by other factors.

Similarly to the issue of collective action, there is the question of wealthier parties having a disproportionate effect on electoral outcomes, through such means as campaign contributions or organized lobbying. These influences will be excluded since a certain degree of popular organization can overcome the power of wealth in the electoral arena, making elections and not finances the ultimate arbiter within a democracy.

Neither collective action problems nor the influence of wealth can be considered detriments to the arguments made. The problems they pose are not part of the central conclusions made when the focus of democracy is elections. Rather, they are faults that are encountered when elections are implemented. Therefore, they are flaws in the world, not flaws in the theory. In fact, a few of the premises of the argument, namely fairness and participation, suggest that the total fulfillment of the theory could actually overcome these flaws in the electoral arena.

The Argument

My characterization of minimalist theories of democracy is based largely on the work of Adam Przeworski, who, as previously noted, characterizes democracy as “a system in which parties lose elections.” However, Przeworski does little to explore a minimalist conception’s effects on the quality of democracy, rather than its ability to sustain democratic government. Other minimalist theorists, namely Karl Popper and Joseph Schumpeter, draw a division between minimalist theory and early classical doctrine, but they do little more than state minimalism as a way to differentiate democracy from dictatorship. Furthermore, while the viewpoints of William Riker and
Russell Hardin do not contain normative evaluation of this particular subject, they do assign a measure of value to minimalist theory in that they acknowledge its feasibility.

In short, minimalist democratic theory has much more potential than this. The existing literature on the topic of minimalist conceptions of democracy treats it as only a definition to be substantiated or unsubstantiated, but minimalist theories have normative repercussions that are desirable, considering a number of arguments. These arguments are based on the premise that a single conception of the ideal, which is required by exacting theories of democracy, is unattainable since a given democracy’s goals at any time are temporary, not to mention that they vary significantly across democracies. Hence, notions of democracy that define it by its goals are likely to exclude many democracies.

On the other hand, minimalist conceptions further the quality of a democracy by making it more effective at measuring and implementing the varying objectives of given societies, namely through valid elections that are fully expressive of popular opinion. It will be seen that these benefits are not encouraged by any sort of statement on behalf of a minimalist conception, but are instead encouraged by the practice of minimalism, with its strong emphasis on political process.

The benefits of minimalist theory can be divided into two main premises: that it is desirable under theoretical considerations of democracy’s role by virtue of being a capacious notion of democracy, and that minimalist theory itself leads to desirable outcomes when accepted by a population, achieved through an effective expression of a society’s ideal at a given time through elections and the support of the institutions that make this possible.
A capacious rule of democracy is necessary to accommodate democracy’s spread. The explosion of democracy in the postwar world, both in practice and appreciation, is a development that holds importance not only to researchers of international politics, but to theorists as well. Several works have made explicit attempts to address the theoretical implications of an increasingly democratic world.

In *Western Political Theory in the Face of the Future*, John Dunn opens with the declaration, “We are all democrats today.” Dunn’s book partially addresses the implications of democracy’s spread, but this 1979 book is certainly a product of its time, as Dunn spends most of the book deriding democratic theory for degenerating into a state of oscillation between Cold War rhetoric and arguments for egalitarian democracy that hold little promise for implementation.

In a more contemporary work, *The State of Democratic Theory* (2003), Ian Shapiro begins in a similar fashion to Dunn: “The democratic idea is close to nonnegotiable in today’s world.” But while Shapiro claims his book is a reassessment of theory in light of political practice, his analysis makes little mention of practical application. Instead, Shapiro is searching for theoretical middle ground between such concepts as aggregate and deliberative democracy and pinning down a definition of domination, all so that democracy can cast as wide a net as possible, but only in theoretical terms.

While these books are worthwhile in their own right, Dunn’s is dated and both are lacking a practical bent. Increased acceptance of democracy certainly has theoretical implications that ought to be discussed, but if this discussion does not include consideration of the practice of politics, the theoretical discussion is not taking place.
concurrent to the progress of democracy on the ground but instead completely above it. What is needed is a discussion of the religious and cultural traditions that democracy is encountering in its new terrain, and whether or not the implementation of democracy makes not only the concept of democracy but the governing of these countries better or worse off.

As democracy gains wider implementation throughout the world, it is influenced by various political traditions, so therefore increased acceptance of democracy is subjected to many interpretations. Norberto Bobbio touches on this point while discussing the differences between what he calls “formal” (minimalist) and “substantive” (thick) conceptions. He states, “Every regime is democratic according to the meaning of democracy presumed by its defendants, and undemocratic in the sense upheld by its detractors.”

One could argue that this cheapens democracy or weakens its coherence, since there is less discrimination amongst democratic regimes. There is a political component to this challenge in that it can be argued that the inclusion of practices considered “undemocratic” undermine democracy’s values, turning it instead into a nominal tool, wherein every regime that wishes to be characterized as democratic may do so. Also, there is a conceptual component reflecting concern for democracy’s definitional integrity. The question here is: since a capacious conception would allow numerous ideals and goals to exist under the banner of “democracy,” what exactly could democracy really mean? Could there be such a thing as a democratic regime at all?

On the contrary to these challenges, subjectivity actually operates in democracy’s favor. Democracy has a special quality derived from its contingency upon popular input.
People themselves are varied, and live in constantly changing times, so democracy will therefore always lead to various outcomes and take different forms. However, this variety is all in accordance with the decisions of the people who live under democracy, meaning that democracy is, by nature, subjective. It cannot be conceptually watered down by the inclusion of various practices and ideals. Conceptions of democracy that determine its outcomes objectively and not subjectively are inherently less democratic, since they are not determined by the shifting priorities inherent to popular rule. The basic purpose of democracy is not only resistant to the risks posed by inclusiveness; it is in fact strengthened by capaciousness.

Democracy should be a system open to interpretation; this makes it both truer to its purpose as popular rule and increases its acceptance, as it becomes palatable to nations of varying traditions. Democracy, as rule by the people, should conform to the people’s view of what their democracy is perceived to be. Therefore, allowing democracy to be capacious is allowing it to fulfill its intention as popular rule.

Still, the variety of outcomes which could arise from such an approach to democracy brings the use of the concept itself into question. It is to be supposed that an action such as the exclusion of a body of persons from the electorate would cause some to wish that the nation in question cannot be considered a democracy. This is so because there are value judgments that are attached externally to democracy but are not part of its minimal conception. Democracy’s nature is popular rule, so if “undemocratic” actions such as disenfranchisement are taken as a result of popular rule, it does not make the nation less democratic by definition. On the other hand, if the people of a nation were
not in charge of setting goals and policy, and they were instead determined objectively by anything other than the electorate itself, how would that be democratic?

It sounds paradoxical for a democracy to take undemocratic actions through democratic means, but paradox is nothing new to democracy. Any democracy must deal with the fact that it has the power to destroy itself through democratic exercise: at any time, even the healthiest of democracies can vote to abolish its own government. It is a great and terrible power, but it would not be a democracy without it.

Of course the quality of a democracy is important, but it is only reasonable to ask that a nation simply come under the banner of democracy itself before it can improve to the point where it can be held to the standards of being a successful democracy. This does not mean that any nation can place the word “Democratic” in its name and be considered such, but the only criterion should be “a system in which parties can lose elections.” This may allow for undesirable regimes in the short run, but it does put a nation on terms that allow for a deep and self-determined democratic tradition.

In the transition to democracy, an authoritarian state cannot be expected to become a thriving democracy overnight. It is much more plausible to make the transition to democracy mostly in name, then progress towards a more democratic state over a period of time which can be very long, but leads to a genuine change for the better. In the meantime, it may not be a strong democracy or even a democracy at all, but a gradual transition provides for a deeper democratic tradition to form.

Democracy of any kind puts a society on the terms which allow for a better version of democracy. Democracy has a vocabulary and an essence of rights, equality, fairness, and transparency that is completely unknown in a dictatorship. In such a system
where it is unknown, it does not have any place in that society’s lexicon, so it is not perceived to be lacking. But those living in a weak democracy are familiar with these terms, and know what they are missing. Nominal democracies are often held to be worse than dictatorship, since they can “pass off” as democracies, but the truth is no one’s buying it: being a democracy puts the pressure on, it does not take it off. In fact, a country is better off being on democratic terms, even if they are not in practice for the moment.

It is easier to agitate for democratic reform within a democracy, however weak, than from within a different type of government. It is simple to argue that an established democracy should be fair and inclusive, since this is nearly a given in political discourse. In this way, quality of democracy is better achieved by reaffirming the democratic aspects of an existing democracy, rather than trying to create a thick democracy from no democracy at all. Reform is much more likely from within since the costs are lower in an established system, not to mention that change is more likely to be peaceful. Allowing a country to be called a democracy is the first step towards making it a strong democracy, but setting a thick criterion for democracy itself is discouraging, as it pushes goals farther away. How can a nation be expected to progress towards a successful democracy, if it is hampered from becoming a democracy at all?

Therefore, nominal democracy is not something to be dismissed. Such nominal democracies hold potential for grassroots demand for democratic reform which are able to deepen democracy to an extent even further than that which can be imposed through a thick system of democracy. This is so because weak democracies call for more
democracy, not less, and the people of the nation itself respond by forging democracy’s strength.

Furthermore, pressure for reform of nominal democracies comes from the outside. Entering the democratic community leads to pressure to meet the criterion of democracy’s civic creed of inclusiveness, openness, and fairness. Ill favor from other democracies is worse than disfavor from an external democratic community, since one does not have the alternative of playing victim or acting defiant towards one’s peers, as can be done to one’s ideological enemies.

Also, democracy is best to be constructed as loosely as possible in order to accommodate the pre-existing traditions of nations throughout the world. The idea that democracy is fit only for particular religions or cultures is prevalent and dangerous. Somewhere along the way of intellectual history, the ancient Greek practice of democracy was given a “Western” label, in spite of a lack of indication that Greek experience had much immediate impact on Greece’s “Western” neighbors in Europe. Still, democracy’s applicability is largely defined through cultural, racial, or religious characteristics, which is hardly an edifying criterion for mapping the history of thought.

A minimalist approach enforces the idea that democracy is not a set of conditions, but instead a decision-making process. It is neither Western nor Christian, but rather human for people to come together and decide how they are to be governed. One can argue the difficulties that varying cultures and traditional institutions can pose to democracy’s spread, but there is no denying that there is something fundamental about the people of a country, through some means or another, influencing their government’s decisions. Even if this is not considered natural, it can at the very least be considered
desirable. And to label democracy as being exclusive to the West is to discount a deep and varied global history of government through consent of the governed.

Alexis de Tocqueville, taking a broad perspective in *Democracy in America*, called “the democratic revolution […] the most continuous, ancient, and permanent tendency known in history.” This sentiment of democratization as being neither recent nor externally driven, but rather a tendency of human thought, is affirmed by numerous examples of cultural traditions of public reasoning that are only a breath away from balloting itself.

Meyer Forte and Edward E. Evans-Pritchard, in *African Political Systems*, include studies of various African tribes, but are able to make general comments on African political structure as a balance between the need for central authority and the need for rule by consent, wherein rulers are obliged to their subjects, at risk of removal. They state:

> It would be a mistake to regard the scheme of constitutional checks and balances and the delegation of power and authority to regional chiefs as nothing more than an administrative device. A general principle of great importance is contained in these arrangements, which has the effect of giving every section and every major interest of society direct or indirect representation in the conduct of government.\(^{23}\)

This book, published in 1940, predates the various strongmen supported by each side during the Cold War, and its place before this interlude indicates an underlying relevance of participation and accountability in African political heritage.

Other non-Western cultures also harbor a tradition of discussion and tolerance of varying viewpoints. In the wake of India’s 1947 independence, the deliberations that led to a fully democratic constitution did include references to Western democratic models, but a particular emphasis was placed on the tolerance of heterodoxy, pluralism, and
public discussion by Indian emperors such as Ashoka and Akbar. Furthermore, Buddhist scholars, in the holding of councils, attached importance to public deliberation as a means of settling disputes as early as the seventh century C.E.

The Muslim world, so commonly referred to as inhospitable to democracy, harbors its own traditions of tolerance and an open marketplace of ideas. While the current environment holds many examples of friction between Muslims and Jews, Arab rulers of the days of the Islamic empire had an arrangement with Jews and Christians, known as the dhimma (protected ones), wherein they were citizens endowed with liberties and even leadership positions in the community. Also, the Islamic world was extremely porous to outside thought, as evidenced by the prominence of Greek classical philosophy and Indian mathematics. Therefore, from this example and those preceding it, we can see that the idea of non-Western societies as incompatible with democracy and closed off to external intellectual influence may seem satisfactory in current climates, but neglects much deeper traditions of an intellectual history that points to democracy’s adaptability to different cultures.

A fear raised by a capacious conception is that a country’s pre-existing traditions could contain values which would be considered undemocratic, such as exclusion of women or minorities from the electorate. These issues raise the question of whether a minimalist conception is still normatively desirable in cases wherein it could include such aspects. As stated earlier, it is best at first for democracy to simply be installed without a number of qualifications before it can advance and truly thrive. If a nation’s people hold democratic values, it is their responsibility to work towards them, and the resultant democracy will be that much deeper for having been ensured by its own people. True
rights are not won by government dictates, they are won through the passage of time and the power of interpersonal contact. For how long after the Thirteenth Amendment did it take for African-Americans to be truly free?

Therefore, on the whole, the process of resolving such rights issues and the form of government are largely separate. The process of the granting of rights is done no favors nor is it strained by a nation’s movement towards a minimalist conception. Since this process will operate at its own pace, in the meantime no country should be excluded from consideration as a democracy simply because of such transgressions. Nations held to be unquestionably democratic contain restrictions on certain segments of their populations, but they are considered democratic nonetheless.

Within a minimalist system, a nation can progress to more authentic states of success through the progression of its people, rather than having rights artificially imposed from the beginning, which leaves the possibility that these external impositions could be rejected by the society, possibly violently. Instead, as John Stuart Mill argues in “A Few Words on Non-Intervention” (1859), the people of a political community must seek their own freedom in the same way that only an individual can develop his own virtue, since virtue of either kind cannot be imposed. Instead, virtue has a better chance of being attained through struggle to enhance freedom through their own efforts. He states, “But the evil is, that if they have not sufficient love of liberty to be able to wrest it from merely domestic oppressors, the liberty which is bestowed on them by other hands than their own, will have nothing real, nothing permanent.26

A thicker conception may include such rights within its very conception of democracy. While “undemocratic” aspects of these nascent democracies may be
distasteful, they are a short-term sacrifice within a long-term process, and this process
cannot begin if the country in question is rejected as a democratic state at the outset.
Bobbio acknowledges this claim on logical grounds, stating, “It is known that the greater
the number of connotations attached to a concept, the narrower is the range which it
denotes.”

The classic example of evolution presents us with the image of a creature born
with a crude eye. Critics will say that the crude eye is an undesirable since it is less than
complete, and will do little good to its possessor. However, we know that this creature,
slightly better off than his peers, will pass the trait on. Further improvements to the eye
will also be promulgated and over the long-term, all of its ilk will see perfectly.
Therefore, just as we can see that a crude eye is better than none, we see how a flawed
democracy is better than none, and can come to function fully in time.

As a capacious conception, minimalist theory is therefore desirable because it
allows for different forms of democracy to co-exist. The more demanding theories that
would wish to define democracy in a specific fashion should be wary of the power of
definition itself. If we were so bold as to say that democracy is one particular system, we
must be willing to say that no other system can be considered democratic. Instead of
taking this attitude, we must be willing to include poorly functioning democracies among
the best of them.

Democracy is an approach to government that should be encouraged; it is not a
selective club with set criteria, as it is in Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s famed assertion that a
true democracy has never existed, stating that it would require a small state, simplicity in
public business, equality among citizens, and an absence of luxury. Rousseau drearily
remarks, “If there was a nation of gods it would be governed democratically. Such a
government is not suitable for men.” It is in the interest of all democracies and potential
democracies to disagree with this sentiment. Przeworski acknowledges the impossibility
of demanding democracy to conform to a complete roster of values: “Almost all
normatively desirable aspects of social and economic life, are credited as definitional
features of democracy […] Indeed, according to many definitions, the set of true
democracies is an empty set.”

The argument that a minimalist approach is desirable for its outcomes consists of
both broad premises and enumerated premises, and for each, the benefits are derived
from a minimalist conception’s emphasis on procedures over outcomes, therefore
opening possibilities for popular input and change over time. The broad premises are
synchronicity, flexibility, and realism. These are the qualities of a minimalist conception
that are theoretically satisfying, which is to say it is a form of democracy that is pleasing
in a broad, conceptual sense.

The first of the broad premises is that in a minimalist conception, a synchronicity
exists between the electorate and political outcomes. The desires of a given democratic
society are best reflected in outcomes when elections define the government, as they do
in a minimalist democratic approach. This is so because elections are a direct means of
influence on government. As opposed to thicker theories that rely on a mode of
rationality, a set of outcomes, or standardized values that are superimposed on society
before rule is exercised, minimalist democracy provides for the constantly changing
needs and desires of society to find a place in government through elections. Therefore,
minimalist democracy possesses a cohesiveness attained through the closeness of the
voters and the government, which makes the classical theories seem particularly artificial in comparison.

Another broad premise is flexibility, a quality of democracy that will show itself to be increasingly valuable in democracies that are modernizing and progressively diversified. In Principles of Representative Government (1997), Bernard Manin touches on this principle when discussing his theory of “audience democracy.” Manin argues that the social cleavages that determine candidates’ message are not the steady, unchanging divisions that led to strong party democracy in the past. Instead, they are constantly shifting and often overlapping, and this is a condition with which democracy is forced to cope, and with which it has coped so far.32

When a government is restricted by nothing but election results, it is free to adjust along with changes in society and opinion over time. Plus, this places no restrictions on what it can accomplish in general. Though it can be argued that this potential applies also to a government’s ability for shortcoming, this basically comes down to a matter of confidence in the electorate.

The final broad argument is that democracy is best defined as realistically as possible. Democratic theory begins from the vantage point of democracy as being preferable, as evidenced by the effort to discover and refine the normative benefits it maximizes. Therefore, one could say that democratic theory’s purpose is largely to emphasize its favorable traits and illustrate what it can accomplish. This is why placing theory in the service of abstract principles, as the exacting doctrines do, weakens democratic theory. Theory is better serving ends that are actually within the scope of accomplishment, while still hypothetical. Democratic theory wanes if it is contained
within an unrealistic realm, where theory is unable to encourage democracy by stating the outcomes it can maximize. Minimalist theory can meet the demands of being both realistic and aimed towards advancing normative goals, as will be seen in the rest of the arguments.

The enumerated premises are fair elections, political rights, participation, and accountability. These are aspects of the particular institutions that a minimalist conception would spawn, due to an electorate that holds a minimalist view of democracy, therefore creating institutions defined by popular input, rather than determined outcomes.

The first of the enumerated premises is fairness in elections, which is a benefit that is implied, since minimalist authors make no explicit provision for it. This omission is forgivable, seeing as how a government’s pursuit of fairness in elections is separate from its establishment of them. However, fairness is provided for by minimalist theory’s very basis in elections. When the people of a democratic nation realize that elections are the sole guiding force of their democracy, the greatest effort will be undertaken to make sure those elections are as fair as possible. Since they are the only criterion of democracy immediately provided, elections are of paramount importance, and when this is made clear to the electorate, it will assign elections a high level of value and seek to enforce their validity.

Of course, the recognition of elections as the primary means to policy creates incentives among the few to manipulate said elections, but the overwhelming approval of fair elections in the populace will be reflected in the rule of law. As previously mentioned, a minimalist approach’s focus on elections assigns them value from the perspective of the electorate, so it would be unreasonable to suggest that those who
support fair elections could possibly be anything other than an overwhelming majority. Therefore, there will also be a large incentive to conceal electoral cheating, but countering this is simply a matter of a society recognizing the problem and enforcing its own electoral regulations, not a matter for theory to decide.

On the flip side, it follows that a more demanding conception of democracy would de-emphasize fair elections. Elections may be held for the sake of calling the system democratic, but in a democracy with pre-determined goals, what room is there for competition? In a thick conception, elections are therefore prone to manipulation towards stated ends.

The upholding of fair electoral proceedings is also suggested by Przeworski’s evaluation of rational choice compliance within a minimalist democracy. He argues that in all but the most extreme cases of continued deprivation, groups would prefer to fairly lose elections in a democracy than to undermine democracy itself, since a debasement of its democratic institutions can lead to repression and arbitrary violence.\(^{33}\) This is something we see in the practice of successful democracies, wherein the peaceful transfer of power is a proud tradition.

In keeping with fairness is the provision of political rights. Of the premises given here, this is explicitly mentioned by Przeworski and Popper, who state that minimalism’s focus on institutions leads to provision of rights. On the other hand, exacting theories of democracy provide for people, outcomes, or policy goals, which are the very things for which rights tend to be sacrificed. The most obvious example of a possible provision of a demanding theory is equality, which Bobbio notes can be at odds with liberal freedoms.\(^{34}\) Political rights are not a form of policy but rather aspects of political institutions. The
strength of these institutions are directly proportional to the sincerity and thoroughness with which political rights are granted. Minimalist theory is focused on these institutions, namely elections. As Przeworski comments, “[…] while the distinction is not unambiguous, constitutions protect at most rights, not interests.”

A minimalist constitution, therefore, provides for processes that effectively translate popular sentiments into policy through elections, and if this process is to be valid, political rights will be emphasized. This is so because political rights are essential to holding effective elections, and as previously stated, elections are highly valued by those taking a minimalist approach because they need to be effective as popular statements of opinion. Therefore, political rights are provided for in a minimalist conception as a means to effective elections.

Even with this resolved, the question of non-political rights is still open. The concern raised by the status of non-political rights is resolved by a minimalist conception’s ability to allow a society to reach its ideal over time. If a country’s ideal includes those non-political rights, they will be secured through electoral input.

If a country’s ideal does not include non-political rights, that is a matter of the society’s discretion and values, which is separate from the political process and may only be truly changed through broader avenues, such as broadcasting, public education and simple interpersonal experience over time, as discussed previously in the section pertaining to a minimalist conception’s status as capacious rule.

Also as discussed previously, it is undesirable to exclude countries holding such views on rights from consideration as a democracy. If within a democratic framework, they could actually be better placed on the path to securing these rights, and though this
may take time, it is more likely to create genuine support for freedoms. And even if they do not progress in this manner, there is no real reason to exclude them from democratic government for these reasons, due to the demands that would be faced both internally and externally to live up to proclaimed democratic standards. Abandoning them from the democratic community is not likely to make their lot any better. Though it may be argued that offering status as a democracy is an incentive, a democratic status laden with conditions is difficult to reach coming from a status of dictatorship, and would only serve to discourage nations from adopting the concept of democracy at all. This illustrates the error in assigning too many values and conditions to democracy: it invariably narrows democracy’s breadth.

Popper’s take on minimalism and rights is found in *Conjectures and Refutations* (1963), wherein he argues that revolutions destroy the institutional and traditional framework of society. This may sound unrelated, but it should be kept in mind that Popper is here speaking of Marxist revolutions, an overt, though extreme, example of the type of stated goals a demanding conception of democracy would entail. Yet his point is valid, considering that even non-communistic demanding conceptions consist of “revolutions” of their own, wherein society is rearranged according to abstract principles and geared towards set outcomes, rather than finding its own way. Such an arrangement runs counter to rights. Therefore, the upshot is that minimalist theory provides for rights since it provides for electoral institutions rather than ideologies, and strong electoral institutions are vital to genuine and prolonged provision of rights.

The most common concern when it comes to minimalism’s ability to protect rights is the prospect of a tyrannical majority: a situation wherein an electoral majority
oppresses a minority. While this apprehension is not restricted to minimalist democracy, it is readily associated with it since it is an electoral fault, and minimalism explicitly provides for nothing except for elections. However, a tyrannical majority should not necessarily be associated with minimalist democracy.

Simply because a democracy is minimalist in its conception, this does not mean it is so in its electoral rules and a simple majority reigns in all situations. “A system in which parties can lose elections” is not precluded from enacting safeguards such as judicial institutions or legislative filibuster, so a democracy may therefore provide for minority protections and still be considered minimalist. Refusing to attach outcomes to democracy does not mean institutions can only be as simple as a reigning majority. The key is whether or not those institutions are geared towards particular outcomes. Checks and balances, as such, do not create particularized outcomes, so can exist within a government holding a minimalist view of democracy itself. Therefore, the tyranny of the majority is no larger a problem for a minimalist democracy than it is for any other, and though it remains a valid concern, minimalist democracies may prevent it without betraying their conceptual integrity.

While it is true that a minimalist approach is compatible with minority protections, it does not necessarily provide for it in the same way in which a thick conception of democracy would be able. However, the important point to remember here is that a thick approach to democracy does not necessarily provide for these protections, either. It follows logically that an exacting democracy could exclude them just as easily as include them. Also, in cases wherein rights are threatened in spite of popular support for them, a nation under the minimalist conception can prevent that remission of rights
through the strength of elections, while thicker democracies do not have this check. Support for rights under a minimalist democracy is determined through the genuine support of a country’s people, not through the whim of planners.

Another benefit to be derived is increased participation. This is not participation in the Rousseauian sense, but rather a more modern definition of the term which includes activity such as voter turnout, communication with elected officials, etc. In the absence of widespread participation, there stands a situation in which the few choose for the many. This voting minority is easily skewed towards the affluent and educated, leaving the neediest persons effectively disenfranchising themselves, due to the costs of information and voting, and allowing an unrepresentative government.

Minimalist democracy provides an impetus for citizenry to feel concern towards government and seek influence as an individual or within a group. Thicker conceptions, wherein outcomes are determined, are a discouragement to participation, since there are no prospects for change in, or addition of, priorities. On the other hand, when elections are seen as the only provider of outcomes, there is no reason for people to feel that they cannot pursue an agenda within government and have some effect. Like the argument concerning fairness, this depends upon a belief in the efficacy of government, which minimalism cannot achieve in itself. Democratic governments need to take extra efforts to make it known that elections are the means through which people achieve outcomes in government, but once this is done, fairness and participation follow within a minimalist approach.

Accountability is also provided for as a result of minimalist democracy’s focus on elections, but not in the traditional sense. Normally, accountability is considered a
responsibility of the officeholder only, but minimalist democracy allows for a shift in this burden that makes accountability an issue for the electorate as well. Accountability, when applied only to the officeholder, is a judgment that can be applied to dictators and popular officeholders alike, since any type of leader is to be held accountable to his subjects. Therefore, a view of accountability as being solely the responsibility of officeholders has nothing to do with the strength of a democracy. However, when people themselves are made to feel accountable for government’s actions, this is the essence of democracy.

Elections are both the primary focus of minimalist democracy and the primary means in which people direct government. People direct government through the choices that they make, and any choice comes with responsibility for it. Accountability, therefore, is a matter among the people in a minimalist democracy. It is their government and through elections they determine its actions. The power is ultimately in their hands, so therefore the citizen must be accountable to himself and to others in the exercise of this power.

This form of accountability is a necessary quality to be held by the electorate in order to better influence elections, and therefore government. As much as elected officials can be at fault by not representing or misrepresenting constituents’ interests, there is no denying the fact that those constituents put them in office in the first place and retain the power to remove them. No factor other than the choices of the electorate will ultimately be accountable for the actions of government. This signifies that minimalist democracy prods the electorate to maximize the information contained in their choices.
and responsibly assess electoral decisions in both the short and long-term, since they are aware of elections’ centrality.

However, in a system following a thicker conception, priorities are determined, and therefore unsusceptible to popular input. The result is a public that has no incentive to bother itself with policy and government, since something other than elections is the determining factor.

**Conclusion**

On its face, the minimalist conception of democracy can seem a bit gloomy. It can be interpreted as lowering the bar, saying that democracy can achieve nothing more than uncertain outcomes. However, it is the simplicity of the definition that makes it both strong and flexible. In spite of being short on words, it can be seen that the minimalist conception is broad in its effects, encompassing many different views of democracy and aspects of policy by including only the basic element of what makes a government democratic.

Conceptions that assign democracy any other aspect within its definition simultaneously go too far in their description and narrow the reach of democracy. Their descriptions go too far by including classifications that cannot be achieved through basic democracy, and they narrow the reach of democracy by limiting its application to certain outcomes or conditions. Any purposes or qualities other than electoral competition assigned to democracy are subjective and artificial, since they depend on building upon the basic system of democracy in spite of these additions not being inherent in the concept itself.
Rather than setting conditions or outcomes, the minimalist definition sets only rules, allowing the will of the electorate to be sovereign. When the only commitment is to the people, the democratic forum becomes an avenue of possibility. Due to constant competition and uncertainty, any idea, party, or policy can gain the favor of the people and become enacted through election. Therefore, minimalist democracy is an opportunity for innovative ideas, popular participation, and an infinite capacity for new thoughts and contributors.

With a fair playing field, the minimalist conception requires parties to expand and include as many people as possible within their policy. Most importantly, minimalist democracy enshrines fairness. Every party needs to compete for the public favor in order to achieve election, and when a party loses, it accedes because it knows it will receive another chance. One of the proudest traditions of any healthy democracy is that a defeated incumbent always steps down. Not because he is forced to or because he agrees that his opponent is better off serving than he is, but simply because the people have spoken.
Notes

5. Schumpeter, Capitalism, Socialism, and Democracy, 250.
8. Ibid, 269.
12. Ibid, 124. also Popper, Conjectures and Refutations, 344.
15. Hardin, Liberalism, Constitutionalism, and Democracy, 152.
17. Ibid, 18.
19. Dunn, Western Political Theory in the Face of the Future, 1.
22. Bobbio, Democracy and Dictatorship, 158.
27. Bobbio, Democracy and Dictatorship, 61.
29. Ibid, 102.
34. Bobbio, Liberalism and Democracy, 33.
36. Popper, Conjectures and Refutations, 343-344.

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