

Chapter 55

Interactions between the Governed and Their Governments: The Democratic Paradigm

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ABSTRACT

The relationship between citizens and their states is omnipresent: even in the most authoritarian or totalitarian regimes there is always some interaction between the government and its society. The advent and widespread use of modern digital communications has added new instruments through which all sectors of society, especially the least represented, can make their voices heard. The purpose of this chapter is to provide a theoretical base for analyzing how citizens and government interact in the age of digital communications. Dictatorships rely on performance and resort to violence to obtain support. Leaders in democracies can usually rely on the principles of the regime itself and governmental procedures or popular elections. The legitimacy brought by policy efficiency can support despotic governments over time. Lack of controls over the actions of a ruler exposes the whole polity to the risk of abuse of power and deterioration of the people's liberty. Digital communication tools arise as new channels for governments to promote their views to the people, convincing them of their policies' usefulness and value; monitor the population's activities in support or against the government; and block information contrary to the interests of the government, the dictator, or the ruling elite. The population too can use the new digital interfaces to obtain information, share approval or discontent with others, organize protests or support. The traditional mechanisms of democracy to provide legitimacy to the regimes are deeply impacted by the new communication technologies.

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INTRODUCTION

The relationship between citizens and their states is omnipresent: even in the most authoritarian or totalitarian regimes, there is always some interaction between the government and its society. Indeed, in democracies such interactions are more evident, yet they occur in every polity, even the most authoritarian ones—what makes them more difficult to notice is the rejection, by the regime, to grant a voice to the governed at least one with legitimacy or acceptability. Still, different sectors of any society will try to influence governmental decisions when they significantly affect their lives both in democracies and dictatorships (Sharp, 2010:27).

The advent and widespread use of modern digital communications has added new instruments through which all sectors of society, especially the least represented, can make their voices heard, as the latter chapters in this book will demonstrate. For this reason, understanding the relationship between the state and citizens requires revising the meaning of democracy and other concepts related to it. The purpose of this chapter is to provide a theoretical foundation for analyzing how citizens and government interact in the age of social media and digital communications, in democracies and dictatorships alike.

WHAT IS DEMOCRACY?

Democracy is the most widely and universally accepted form of government. As regimes can rarely resist for long by using force alone (Rousseau, 1913:8), it is necessary that all exercise of power be justified by one means or another so that the governed minimally accept and support such rule. A discussion of what is meant by political legitimacy is provided below in this chapter. For now, it suffices to establish that in the contemporary political debate democracy is the only source of

political legitimacy that enjoys virtually absolute and complete support. This stems from the voluntarist approaches of Grotius and Locke in the 17th century, which replaced the divine right of kings with natural law as the foundation of authority's legitimacy. Since then, the consent of the ruled is deemed as the fundamental basis for legitimate authority, as well as limitations on the power of the rulers whose authority rests in the consent of the ruled. These powers can be revoked by practical institutional mechanisms to enforce such limitations and keep the powerful in check.

This is why concepts such as democracy, checks and balances, representation and legitimacy do not have only an epistemic significance, but also a fundamental impact on what, in our age, is considered to be a democratic polity, and building a political framework to reflect such an ideal model to the best possible extent. Furthermore, as stated above, even the most authoritarian of regime leaders needs, at least to a minimal extent, the consent or recognition of her authority by the ruled. If not for legitimacy at least to aid in enforcing her authority and avoiding the need to use brute force in every social interaction, which is obviously cumbersome and ultimately impossible.

Therefore, even the most authoritarian regime must obtain a minimum legitimacy, which is demonstrated by the frequent recourse to “elections” and “referenda” in which the dictator extracts from the governed their formal consent. In the age of social media, as we will see in the latter chapters of this book, democracies and dictatorships alike use the new and widespread tools of digital communications to preach their views to their populations, share information of interest to the government, and monitor the opinions and behavior of the common people. On the other hand, populations have also used such tools to obtain relevant information to inform themselves of their decisions (when their consent is asked or can be given), share misdeeds by the government and organize resistance and/or protests. Democratic

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