In the Matter of Democracy in Moderation

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The question of whether or not we need less or more democracy is often framed as a battle between skepticism and optimism, but neither extreme captures how contemporary democracies actually function. I argue instead for democracy in moderation. This is a system that preserves equal citizenship while recognizing that large scale democratic participation can produce poor outcomes when citizens are overwhelmed, uninformed, or motivated by partisan identity rather than public reason. My view draws on Jason Brennan and Helene Landemore, but it is ultimately grounded in a wider lineage from Mill to Madison, Rousseau, Stasavage, Burke Dahl, Pitkin and Schumpeter. Their insights recognize that democracy succeeds not when it maximizes participation, but when it structures and constraints it intelligently. Democracy is legitimate because it treats citizens as equals, yet it remains effective only when it does not demand from citizens more than they can reasonably provide.

A moderated view begins from a realistic understanding of citizens. They are neither political saints or political experts. Like Madison, who insisted that representative systems "refine and enlarge the public views", I believe democracy should channel, and not merely be an echo of public opinion (Madison 82). Brennan's empirical evidence about political ignorance confirms what classical theorists always suspected; voters lack the time, incentives, and background knowledge to evaluate complex policy. Mill feared the "tyranny of the majority" driven by unreflective public opinion; Schumpeter argued that voters form preferences reactively and irrationally; Dahl acknowledges that polyarchies work because institutions distribute power in ways that prevent domination (Dahl 3).

This is why I agree with Brennan that voter ignorance undermines democratic quality, though not with his epistocratic solution (Brennan 45). Brennan rightfully points out that structural incentives reward misinformation and ideological identity. Expanding participation cannot, by itself eliminate these pressures. In fact, real world deliberation often intensifies them. People enter discussions with strong prior beliefs, motivated reasoning, and identity driven commitments; the goal becomes defending a worldview rather than seeking truth. When citizens deliberate, they frequently double down, drift toward extremes, and interpret evidence selectively, reinforcing group polarization rather than dissolving it.

Moreover, deliberation cannot be epistemically productive if participants lack foundational political knowledge. Those with weaker understanding are easily overshadowed by louder, more assertive voices, even when those voices rely more on conviction than expertise. Instead of producing collective intelligence, deliberation often amplifies the confident rather than the informed. Rousseau warned that "the people, being subject to delusions, cannot always do what is best for them," capturing the risk of untempered popular judgement (Rousseau 71). These problems do not justify abandoning democracy, but they show why participation alone cannot guarantee good outcomes and why institutions must account for predictable cognitive limitations.

My view is that democracy succeeds when it limits itself to what it does well and delegates the rest. Certain decisions such as public health, monetary policy, or crisis management should be handled by expert institutions with democratic oversight rather than democratic micromanagement. This is not elitism, but institutional humility. People often think of elites as selfish or self-serving, but that is not what I defend here. The point is not to empower elites as a class, but to empower competence under democratic oversight. Furthermore, it is ultimately the

citizens' responsibility to choose the right leaders who will appoint competent experts to specialized roles. Hence, this reflects what Dahl describes as a polyarchic balance, where democratic authority sets citizens toward broad directions but does not micromanage technical implementation. Citizens should choose leaders and general priorities, but they should not directly vote on specialized issues they cannot reasonably evaluate. Burke captured this centuries ago when he wrote, "Your representative owes you, not his industry only, but his judgement" (Burke 93).

The COVID 19 pandemic illustrated this necessity. If we had voted directly on lockdowns or vaccines during all the misinformation, the results could have been dangerous. However, if experts had made all the decisions without democratic input, people would have lost trust. Therefore, both the institutional and citizen aspects should be working together and collectively. This hybrid approach consisting of democratic governments setting values and experts handling execution, is precisely the moderated democracy I defend. It empowers, and constraints citizens at the correct level, as does it support decision making with institutions capable of counteracting predictable human limitations.

Such moderation resolves the tension between competent governance and democratic legitimacy. Democracy must treat citizens as equals, however, it must also protect their welfare. Mill's worry about uninformed majorities, Schumpeter's doubts about voter rationality, and Brennan's empirical evidence all highlight the need for competence safeguards. Meanwhile Dahl's emphasis on participation and Landemore's emphasis on inclusion show that legitimacy comes from belonging (Landemore 72). Too little democracy erodes equality; too much erodes effectiveness. As Stasavage writes, "Democracy has never been a single model but a shifting balance between popular control and elite competence" (Stasavage 11). A moderated democracy

embraces this balance. In an era marked by polarization and complexity, the future of democratic governance depends not on maximizing or minimizing democracy, but on practicing it wisely, through moderation, humility, and institutional intelligence.

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