

ROBERT DAHL'S CONCEPT OF POLITICAL EQUALITY: THE BEDROCK OF ENDURING DEMOCRACIES

Felix Agbo Okwa

LUISS Guido Carli University, Rome, Italy

okwafa@yahoo.com

ABSTRACT: Robert Dahl made a significant contribution to the theory of democracy in the twentieth century. His central claim is that every citizen is substantial in that each person's preference ought to carry equal weight in the processes of governance. He calls this idea political equality. This paper explores Dahl's concept of political equality as the moral and institutional foundation of enduring democracies. To this end, the paper argues that political equality is not merely a procedural norm but rather a substantive condition for the actualization of democratic legitimacy and stability. The paper achieves this by examining how political equality ensures inclusive participation, responsive leadership, and the continuous renewal of democratic trust. In furtherance of this, the paper critiques contemporary democratic systems where economic inequality, elite capture, and information divide have made the principle of equal political voice improbable. Using the analytic method of philosophical research, the study highlights that democracies endure only when they institutionalize mechanisms that protect citizens from marginalization and ensure equitable distribution of political power. Consequently, the paper concludes that the revitalization of political equality in both established and emerging democracies is indispensable for preventing democratic regression and fostering civic solidarity in plural societies. Hence, Dahl provides an enduring moral compass for reconceiving democratic practice in contemporary times.

Keywords: Political Equality, Democracy, Democratic Legitimacy, Participation, Accountability

INTRODUCTION

This paper is motivated by the growing disillusionment with contemporary exemplification of democratic practices and the widening gap between democracy's normative ideals and its contemporary exemplification. It can be argued that the principle of equality is the moral cornerstone of democratic governance. This cornerstone, however, appears to be increasingly eroded by economic disparities, elite domination, and institutional decay. As democratic institutions struggle to maintain legitimacy and responsiveness, Robert Dahl offers an urgent wake-up call in the form of a philosophical and political reminder. Dahl's theory suggests that democracy cannot endure without the principle of political equality. His insistence that every citizen's preference must be of equal value in the political process, hence, serves as both a moral imperative and a practical guide for evaluating the status of modern democracies. It is this thesis, namely, that political equality is the indispensable basis upon which democracies must rest; that inspires the inquiry of this paper.

Dahl argues that “a key characteristic of a democracy is the continuing responsiveness of the government to the preferences of its citizens, considered political equals” (1971, p. 1). To put this more clearly, democracy from Dahl’s perspective is not static. On the contrary, it is an evolving practice that is built on the institutionalization of equality in participation, competition, and representation. Dahl designs a framework he calls ‘*Polyarchy*’ to operationalize political equality in real-world political systems. Polyarchy constitutes open participation, inclusive suffrage, free expression, and competition among elites. Dahl asserts that “the democratic process presupposes political equality among citizens in making collective decisions” (1989, p. 83). This position shows that the moral legitimacy and endurance of any democratic system rests not just on conducting elections but also on ensuring that all voices have equal standing in the political arena.

It goes without saying that the twenty-first century has experienced and is experiencing a paradoxical weakening of political equality amid the global expansion of democratic institutions. “Inequalities in resources, information, and organization,” Dahl argues, “inevitably produce inequalities in political influence” (1989, p. 324). This is mostly true in our contemporary climate as economic oligarchies, digital disinformation, and voter suppression distort equal representation and participation. The erosion of political equality both delegitimizes democratic outcomes and accelerates citizens’ alienation from the political process. Revisiting Dahl’s concept of political equality, therefore, becomes a theoretical necessity as well as a practical response to the democratic crises of our age.

This paper will begin by providing an exposition of Dahl’s theory. The discussion shall, from thence, explore the institutional framework of polyarchy with the intent of exploring how Dahl translates moral equality into concrete democratic mechanisms. Upon this foundation, the following sections shall critically assess the difficulties and implications of contemporary inequalities for democratic endurance. The paper shall then conclude by reaffirming that the survival of democracy is dependent on the revitalization of Dahl’s principle of political equality, which is understood as a living and evolving commitment to the moral and participatory equality of all citizens.

Robert Dahl’s Concept of Political Equality

According to Dahl, “a key characteristic of democracy is the continuing responsiveness of the government to the preferences of its citizens” (1989, p. 1). This statement encompasses Dahl’s argument that democracy ought to be authentic and stable. However, this authenticity and stability must be attained by institutionalizing the principle that each citizen’s voice holds equal weight in influencing political outcomes. Consequently, Dahl’s notion of political equality is not just abstract or moralistic; on the contrary, it is deeply institutional and practical. It is little wonder that he identifies two fundamental dimensions of democracy, namely, public contestation and Participation (1971, p. 3).

Dahl argues that Political equality arises only at the intersection of these two dimensions of democracy. This is because it ensures that all individuals can participate freely and meaningfully in political life while also enjoying fair competition with other leaders and policies. It is the institutionalization of these dimensions that births what Dahl appropriately describes as “polyarchy”. For him, polyarchy is a system in which democratic norms are operationalized through

representative institutions, electoral competition, and civil liberties (1971, p. 7). Succinctly put, while political equality is a guiding ideal, it is also an empirical benchmark against which the health of democratic systems can be examined.

Political equality from Dahl's perspective, therefore, serves as a moral criterion that legitimizes democracy as a representation of collective self-rule. He purports that "The democratic process presupposes the moral judgment that all members of a political community are equally qualified to participate in the process of governing" (1989, p. 83). It is this very ethical assumption that separates democracy from other forms of government such as oligarchy or autocracy. It is not surprising that Dahl argues that any political system that fails to give equal consideration to citizens' preferences cannot be a democracy, no matter how procedurally sophisticated it may seem (1989, p. 99).

Additionally, Dahl observes that "the idea of political equality cannot be fully achieved as long as some citizens possess significantly greater resources [in terms of economic, informational, or organizational resources] that enable them to exert disproportionate influence" (1989, p. 324). By saying this, Dahl extends the idea of political equality to the distribution of influence and power. Consequently, political equality is not protected just through formal rights to vote and be voted for; it requires the reduction of inequalities that militate effective participation. Hence, he believes that modern democracies face the constant tension between formal equality and substantive inequality. This is a tension that can erode the legitimacy of the government if left unattended.

In furtherance of the above, Dahl brings to the fore several institutional guarantees that safeguard political equality. These institutions include effective participation, voting equality, enlightened understanding, control of the agenda, and inclusion of adults (Dahl, 1989, p. 37-40). These principles are geared towards operationalizing equality in practical governance. For example, voting equality ensures that every citizen's vote carries equal weight, while enlightened understanding results in equal access to valid and correct information and deliberative opportunities. These principles are the foundations of the democratic minimum, which is imperative for translating the moral idea of equality into institutional reality.

Dahl's theory of political equality acknowledges the empirical limits of equality in real-world democracies. It is because of this that he concedes that perfect equality is an unattainable goal, being that societies are stratified by wealth, education, and status. However, the pursuit of equality remains indispensable as a regulative ideal by being an ongoing project that guides democratic reform and critique. In this way, one can argue that Dahl's conception aligns with the tradition that holds that democracy ought to constantly evolve to approximate its own normative standards.

For Dahl's idea of political equality to endure, it must balance realism with idealism. It is for this reason that while Dahl recognizes the limitations imposed by social inequality, he insists that the legitimacy and stability of democracy are highly dependent on the citizens' enduring belief in their equal worth and influence (1956, 145). Consequently, political equality ought to become the moral centre of democratic endurance because, without it, democracy unintendedly degenerates into the rule of the powerful few over the many.

Levitsky and Ziblatt, as well as other contemporary scholars, continue to find relevance in Dahl's emphasis on equality as the lifeblood of democracy. He observes that "democracies die not only when institutions collapse, but when norms of equality and mutual tolerance erode" (2018, p. 88). It is premised on this that one can argue that Dahl's vision reminds us that democracy's survival is inseparable from the continuous reaffirmation of equality both as a right and as a lived political experience. His notion of political equality therefore encourages every democratic society to bridge the gap between its moral ideals and its political realities.

Polyarchy and the Institutionalization of Political Equality

One can acknowledge the longstanding tension in democratic theory between the ideal of political equality and the empirical reality of power inequality. It is this longstanding tension that Dahl attempts to address. Dahl observes that;

The democratic goal... consists of a condition to be attained and a principle guiding the procedure for attaining it. The condition is political equality... Control over governmental decisions is shared so that the preferences of no one citizen are weighted more heavily than the preferences of any other citizens (1971, p. 1).

Succinctly put, political equality is the normative bedrock of democracy as it ensures that citizens possess equal opportunity to express preferences, influence decisions as well as hold their rulers accountable. Dahl concedes to the fact that this is an aspirational standard. It is for this reason that he refers to democracy as an idea that may be "quite probably unattainable," however, it should still be an idea that guides our evaluation of political systems (1989, p. 83).

To reconcile and close the divide between democratic ideals and empirical governance, Dahl introduces the idea of "rule by many" as a realistic institutional approximation of democracy. He summarizes this in the concept he termed "Polyarchy". The term polyarchy "denotes the acquisition of democratic institutions within a political system that leads to the participation of a plurality of actors" (*Britannica*, 2025). In his work on polyarchy, Dahl identifies seven institutional guarantees that operationalize political equality: Inclusive suffrage, the right to run for office, free and fair elections, freedom of expression, alternative sources of information, associational autonomy (especially opposition parties), and governmental responsiveness (1971, p. 3-7). Together, these institutional mechanisms ensure that citizens' preferences can be expressed and, consequently, influence collective decisions.

Based on the above, polyarchy serves descriptively by identifying regimes that meet minimal democratic conditions and normatively by providing guidance on how institutions can safeguard political equality. Citizens are politically equal; Dahl contends, insofar as they are "participants whose views and preferences count, whose decisions bear on collective outcomes and whose opportunities to act and associate are comparable" (1989, p. 112). To institutionalize political equality, therefore, means embedding these rights and procedures into the political structure in order to allow equality to be functional rather than formal. Hence, this process would require autonomy

of civil society, plural centres of power, and safeguards against the monopolization of influence by the high-class (Coppedge et al., 2011, p. 247-267).

Nonetheless, Dahl believes that polyarchy is a practical approximation of democracy. In his words, he opines that no system can achieve perfect equality, "polyarchies promote popular sovereignty and political equality by increasing the size, number, and variety of minorities whose preferences must be taken into account by leaders" (1989, p. 221). Hence, by institutionalizing competition among elites and guaranteeing mass participation, polyarchy makes sure that rulers remain both accountable to the people and responsive to a wide array of societal interests. However, formal rights alone cannot sustain equality. It is for this reason that Dahl encourages societies to ensure that institutions function effectively in practice. Some scholars who developed Dahl's framework, such as Michael Coppedge and his colleagues, affirm that democratic stability is highly dependent on the operationalization of these guarantees: "we anchor this new index directly in Dahl's extremely influential theoretical framework" (2011, p. 252).

It is imperative that civil society remains robust, that information be accessible, and that electoral competition be genuine. This is because when these institutions erode, democracies risk what Dahl called "deformed polyarchies" (Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018, p. 87-92). Deformed polyarchies refer to systems such as where elections persist, but substantive equality and responsiveness are depleted. According to Martin Gilens and Benjamin Page, the economic elites and organized interests exert disproportionate influence on policy outcomes while average citizens have minimal impact (Gilens & Page, 2014, p. 564-581). This is a dynamic that often undermines political equality. Also, Sidney Verba, Kay Schlozman, and Henry Brady show that civic participation is heavily concentrated among the affluent and educated, thereby producing inequality within ostensibly equal institutions (1995, p. 3-6). These differences affirm Dahl's contention that "inequalities in resources, information, and organization inevitably produce inequalities in political influence" (1989, 324). Consequently, by embedding mechanisms that foster inclusion, contestation, and accountability, polyarchy transforms equality from a mere moral abstraction into a robust living institutional reality.

Challenges to Political Equality in Contemporary Democracies

The realities of contemporary governance reveal persistent and widening inequalities that threaten the endurance of democracy itself, even as Dahl's concept of political equality remains a normative cornerstone of democratic legitimacy. Dahl had cautioned that "inequalities in resources, information, and organization inevitably produce inequalities in political influence" (1989, p. 324). This prescient observation identifies the central dilemma confronting democracies in our contemporary time. Hence, though the formal institutions of polyarchy, such as elections, rights, and representation, remain unchanged, the substantive equality that motivated their design has been steadily undermined by economic concentration, elite domination, and informational asymmetries. Political equality, which was once the moral foundation of democratic theory, is now confronted with structural erosion from forces both from within and beyond the political sphere.

Economic inequality, therefore, becomes a primary challenge to political equality as it increasingly translates into disparities in political influence. Martin Gilens and Benjamin Page show this lucidly

in their empirical study: “economic elites and organized business interests have substantial independent impacts on U.S. government policy, while average citizens and mass-based interest groups have little or no independent influence” (2014, p. 564). This dynamic, in and of itself, reveals what Dahl had both anticipated and feared, namely, that wealth and power, if left unchecked, can distort the principle of equal consideration of citizens’ preferences (Dahl, 1971, p. 3). The wealthy, in these situations, gain disproportionate access to decision-makers through campaign financing, control over media narratives, and lobbying, while the voices of ordinary citizens are marginalized. Thomas Piketty underscores that growing wealth concentration not only deepens and facilitates social inequality, but it “inevitably brings with it a concentration of political power in the hands of the few” (2014, p. 264).

Another challenge is the problem of elite capture and political oligarchization. Contemporary democracies constantly witness the emergence of “oligarchic democracy” as described by Jeffrey Winters. For Winters, this is a situation in which formal electoral competition masks the persistent dominance of entrenched elites (2011, p. 4). This same phenomenon results in a hollowing out of Dahl’s ideal of polyarchy, where the forms of democracy remain, while their substance in terms of citizen equality and leadership accountability diminishes. It is premised that Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt opine that in such systems, “the erosion of democratic norms often begins not with overt coups, but with the slow decay of institutional restraint and fair competition” (2018, p. 87). The birth of populist movements across Africa, Europe, and the Americas often mirrors a popular reaction to this elite to capture as citizens perceive democratic institutions to be serving the few rather than the many.

The digital transformation of the public sphere, which has successfully redefined how political participation and communication occur, also challenges political equality in contemporary democracies. While digital technologies have the potential to democratize access to information, they have deepened inequalities by polarizing electorates, amplifying misinformation, and allowing powerful actors the avenue to manipulate discourse through data analytics and algorithmic control. According to Shoshana Zuboff, “the asymmetry of knowledge between citizens and digital corporations creates a new form of epistemic inequality” (2019, p. 378). This informational divide erodes the deliberative dimension of political equality because citizens no longer engage on a shared factual basis. The monetization of political advertising on digital platforms also allows for well-financed actors to shape electoral outcomes disproportionately. This furthered Dahl’s vision of equal participation.

Declining participation as well as civic disengagement presents a challenging threat to political equality as well. Pippa Norris observes that “citizen participation remains the lifeblood of democracy, yet across advanced industrial societies, turnout has declined, and political apathy has increased” (2011, p. 22). Hence, those who do vote or engage in the political sphere are often from more affluent, educated, or connected groups, which further reinforce existing inequalities. This participation gap undermines the inclusivity of Dahl’s model of polyarchy, which presupposes broad citizen involvement in public decision-making. In the same way, Nancy Fraser has argued that political equality is unattainable when marginalized groups lack the cultural recognition and social status necessary for their voices to carry equal weight in the political and public spheres (2005, p. 79).

Also, it goes without saying that globalization poses a serious structural impasse on the political equality of citizens within nation-states. The growing power of international corporations and the flow of capital across borders often limit national governments' capacity to respond to citizen preferences. Little wonder that Colin Crouch describes this phenomenon as “post-democracy”. For him, post-democracy refers to systems where “elections exist and can change governments, but public electoral debate is a tightly controlled spectacle managed by rival teams of professionals” (Crouch, 2004, p. 4). From this, it is safe to argue, therefore, that the globalization of economic decision-making decouples power from democratic accountability leaving ordinary citizens politically disempowered regardless of the continued existence of formal democratic institutions.

Conclusively, one can say that the task for modern democracies is to reinvigorate the idea of political equality by reforming campaign finance, expanding civic education, ensuring digital transparency, and creating new spaces for participatory governance. Consequently, Dahl calls us to consciousness that “a democratic process is sustainable only when citizens believe themselves to be political equals and when institutions make that belief credible” (1989, p. 83). Restoring this credibility is, hence, the defining challenge of democracy in our contemporary society.

Conclusion

It is worth noting that the legitimacy and endurance of democracy are inseparable from the moral and institutional revitalization of political equality. In situations where economic disparity, populist disillusionment, and technological manipulation threaten democratic norms, we must reaffirm political equality as the ethical nucleus of democratic renewal. It is imperative to revitalize this ideal by dismantling structural impediments that silence marginalized voices and distort representation, not just in the restoration of equal participation. In its truest sense, democracy demands that every citizen's preference ought to bear equal weight in the shaping of collective destiny and not just the preferences of the elites. This, hence, is a condition that cannot be achieved without conscious political reform and civic reawakening.

“The continuing responsiveness of the government to the preferences of its citizens, considered political equals,” Dahl contends, “is the fundamental characteristic of democracy” (1989, p. 1). This is a call for the rehumanisation of democracy that acknowledges that institutions derive their legitimacy from their equitable responsiveness to those they govern, not from their endurance. Political equality, in this way, becomes both a means and an end. Succinctly put, a normative principle that guides democratic conduct and a structural mechanism that ensures that power remains accountable to all.

Political equality requires a moral transformation that reflects a civic culture that prioritizes inclusion, deliberation, and empathy. Civic participation, education, and equitable access to information ought to serve as instruments for restoring the integrity of the democratic ideal. By so doing, societies will be imbued with the potential to transcend the procedural shell of democracy while reclaiming its moral core of a collective commitment to shared governance and mutual respect. True democratic renewal will, therefore, emerge only when equality ceases to be a formal aspiration and becomes the lived reality of every citizen.

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