



DEMOCRATIC SOVEREIGNTY

From the Independent Human Mind to the International Order

A Libertas Europa Foundational Paper

1. The Great Democratic Illusion

Perhaps the greatest political illusion of the twenty-first century is that elections alone create democracy. We have never talked more about democracy, and perhaps we have never understood it less. Almost every political system invokes democracy to justify authority or challenge power. Yet beneath this apparent consensus lies a prior question: what makes democracy possible at all?

Democracy is not valuable merely because it gives everyone a vote. It is valuable because no other political order has yet found a better way to combine freedom, legitimacy and peaceful self-government while preventing the permanent concentration of political power. Elections, constitutions, representative assemblies, political parties, separation of powers and civil liberties are indispensable achievements. But they are the architecture through which democracy may be expressed; they are not the source of democratic legitimacy.

Institutions do not create democracy. A sovereign demos creates democratic institutions.

When the demos loses effective sovereignty, institutions may continue to function for decades while democracy gradually becomes a constitutional ritual. When democratic institutions continue to function after the demos has lost meaningful sovereignty, democracy risks becoming institutional hypocrisy rather than popular self-government. The central democratic question is therefore not whether institutions exist, but where political sovereignty actually resides.

Who, then, is the demos? It is not simply the population, nor merely everyone entitled to vote. A citizenry becomes politically effective as a demos when its members possess the capacity and institutional possibility to assume responsibility for their common future through collective self-government. Citizens are born with rights; democratic self-government additionally requires participation, judgment and responsibility. Participation is therefore not only a democratic right. It is also a democratic responsibility. Democracy is not sustained by rights alone; it is sustained when citizens also accept responsibility for the political community they govern together.

Every theory of democracy is ultimately a theory about the distribution, exercise and control of political power. If citizens can periodically choose office-holders but cannot meaningfully influence fundamental decisions, determine what authority they retain, or reclaim power delegated in their name, democratic form may remain while democratic sovereignty weakens.

This distinction may help explain a recurring tension in contemporary representative systems. Citizens can possess extensive democratic rights while exercising only limited influence over major strategic decisions. They may be invited to choose governments yet remain largely spectators of decisions made in their name. Formal sovereignty can therefore coexist with diminishing practical control over the forces that shape collective life.

The demos is a sui generis collective political subject constituted by an enduring community of people connected through a shared political space, common political affairs, and a sufficiently sustained will to decide collectively on those affairs and on their common political future. In relation to the political matters that legitimately belong to that community, the demos is the original and ultimate holder of political sovereignty. Its existence and sovereignty do not derive from the state, constitution, institutions, elections or external recognition, but precede them as the source of political legitimacy.

The demos may delegate authority and specific competences, but sovereignty itself cannot be transferred. Every delegation must therefore remain definable, limited, subject to democratic control and revocable. Cognitive sovereignty, political participation and democratic institutions do not create the demos; they determine its capacity to exercise its sovereignty freely and effectively. A restriction or loss of that capacity does not extinguish sovereignty itself. Any appropriation of sovereign competences without the legitimate and revocable delegation of the demos constitutes a usurpation of authority.

The demos is not defined by numbers, citizenship, territory, ethnicity, language, religion or culture alone. Self-identification is necessary but not sufficient for its existence. The decisive elements are the durability of the community, substantive political interconnectedness, the existence of common political affairs, and a sustained will to decide collectively on those affairs and on a common political future. Demoi may overlap and exist at different political levels; an individual may simultaneously belong to a local, national and wider composite demos. The existence of a demos therefore establishes a right to political self-determination, but does not by itself establish an automatic right to any predetermined institutional or territorial outcome.

In such conditions elections can no longer, by themselves, establish democratic legitimacy. The legitimacy they generate becomes progressively weaker because political choice is increasingly formed within an environment whose boundaries are controlled elsewhere.

The first institution of democracy is the independent human mind.

Institutions cannot think. Citizens can. Without sufficient capacity for independent judgment there can be no meaningful political choice; without meaningful choice there can be no sovereign demos; without a sovereign demos there can be no fully effective democracy, only democratic procedures whose substance may vary greatly.

This argument builds on a long democratic tradition rather than rejecting it. Aristotle connected political life with citizen participation. Rousseau insisted that sovereignty belongs to the people and cannot be alienated. John Stuart Mill understood self-government as a process that develops citizens, not merely aggregates preferences. Tocqueville emphasized civic participation. Dahl widened the democratic lens through polyarchy and conditions such as alternative information. Habermas showed the importance of the public sphere and reasoned discourse. The twenty-first century adds a new scale of challenge: algorithmic persuasion, artificial intelligence, information warfare, cognitive engineering and unprecedented concentrations of informational power. These conditions make cognitive sovereignty an explicit democratic requirement.

The answer cannot be censorship or an official truth, because that merely transfers cognitive power from one actor to another. A democratic information environment should instead protect pluralism, transparency of influence, access to competing interpretations, disclosure of relevant interests and



protection against covert manipulation, while strengthening citizens' capacity to question narratives rather than passively absorb them.

3. Democratic Sovereignty

Cognitive sovereignty is necessary, but it is not sufficient. Democracy must also answer who ultimately possesses political authority, who determines the distribution of competence and who can correct or reverse its exercise.

A sovereign demos must remain capable of initiating political questions; determining which matters it reserves for direct decision; deciding which powers it delegates and to whom; defining the scope and purpose of that delegation; and modifying, withdrawing or reclaiming delegated authority. Parliament, government, bureaucracy, courts, parties, experts and other institutions may exercise authority, but they cannot become the original source of the legitimacy from which their powers derive. The demos is therefore not merely the final supervisor of political power. It is the original holder of political competence.

Authority may be delegated. Sovereignty cannot be transferred.

This distinction matters because the appearance of concentrated power does not by itself determine whether sovereignty has been surrendered. A demos may choose to delegate extensive authority, potentially even to a single leader, without necessarily losing sovereignty, provided the other conditions of Democratic Sovereignty remain intact: citizens retain meaningful political choice, cognitive sovereignty, reserved competences, the capacity to redefine delegation, political equality and an effective ability to revoke entrusted power. Concentration of delegated authority is therefore not the same as irreversible concentration of sovereignty. The demos may delegate as much or as little authority as it chooses, but it cannot cease to possess the sovereign right to determine what is delegated, what remains reserved, how far delegation extends and when it ends.

The same logic applies to representation. The independence of elected representatives should protect judgment, not free representatives from democratic accountability. Representation is a delegation of authority, not a transfer of sovereignty. If legitimacy originates in the demos, citizens must retain meaningful influence throughout the political cycle rather than only on election day. Otherwise representation can gradually evolve into political autonomy while citizens become spectators of decisions made in their name.

This perspective also clarifies the legitimate role of elites. Every complex society needs exceptional knowledge, competence, integrity and leadership. Democracy does not reject elites; it rejects entitlement to sovereignty. Neither birth, wealth, office, professional status nor academic distinction creates democratic legitimacy. A democratic elite exists only because free citizens recognize competence and entrust particular people with authority in the public interest. That recognition is never permanent. It cannot be inherited, purchased or proclaimed. What the demos grants must remain subject to democratic review and withdrawal. Democratic elites are therefore not a privileged class but a temporary relationship of public trust. Different civilizations may develop different attitudes toward authority, leadership and social hierarchy, but the same democratic principle applies: legitimacy exists only while it is freely recognized by the demos.

Elites may possess considerable influence and authority, but they may not become sovereign. The democratic problem begins when political, bureaucratic, financial, media, intellectual, administrative or technological elites acquire the ability collectively to define the boundaries of acceptable political choice independently of the demos. Formal democratic institutions may then remain intact while effective sovereignty gradually shifts away from the citizens they ostensibly represent. Elites are necessary. Elite sovereignty is not democracy.

Democratic sovereignty also requires an equilibrium of values. Democracy cannot survive as the dictatorship of individual preference, nor as the suppression of individual freedom in the name of collective goals. It continuously reconsiders the balance between individual liberty, individual and



social responsibility, legitimate public interest and long-term continuity. Rights without responsibility can dissolve the common good; public interest without liberty can become authoritarian; responsibility without freedom becomes obedience. Democracy is therefore neither individualism nor collectivism. Democracy itself is the continuous search for a legitimate equilibrium among these principles.

Definition of Democratic Sovereignty

Democracy is a continuous process of collective self-government in which a cognitively sovereign demos remains the original and ultimate holder of political authority; exercises meaningful influence over public decisions; determines which matters it retains for direct decision and which powers it delegates, to whom and to what extent; and retains the effective ability to redefine or withdraw every delegation. Democratic legitimacy flows from the demos to institutions, never from institutions to the demos, while democratic society continuously reconsiders the equilibrium between individual liberty, responsibility, the public interest and its long-term continuity.

Democratic Sovereignty is not a condition permanently achieved once institutions are established. It must be continuously sustained and can gradually be lost. The fullest practical realization of this principle may be described as Integrated Democracy: a benchmark in which cognitive sovereignty, demos competence, continuous influence and revocable delegated power operate together. It is an analytical ideal, not a claim that any contemporary political system fully realizes it.

4. One Principle, Many Democratic Forms

Democratic Sovereignty is deliberately non-monistic. Democracy is not identified with one ideology, one institutional model or one historically specific political arrangement. Elections, parliaments, parties, constitutions, separation of powers, direct democracy and representative institutions may all serve democracy, but none constitutes democracy by itself. The universal principle is not institutional uniformity but sovereignty of the demos.

Different societies and civilizations may therefore develop different constitutional structures, relationships between leadership and participation, combinations of representative and direct decision-making, and distributions of institutional authority. A political system should not be classified as democratic merely because it resembles a particular Western model, nor automatically classified as undemocratic because its institutions differ from that model. The relevant questions are whether citizens can form sufficiently independent judgments; whether the demos can determine what it reserves and what it delegates; whether it can exercise meaningful influence over fundamental choices; and whether delegated authority remains genuinely reversible.

Under this standard, Russian, Chinese, American, European or any other political system must be evaluated according to the same principles. Russia or China could exhibit a higher degree of Democratic Sovereignty if their respective demoi genuinely retained these capacities; conversely, a formally electoral Western system can exhibit a low degree of Democratic Sovereignty if citizens possess political rights and regular elections but have lost effective control over fundamental decisions. This theory does not determine which political system is better as a whole. It asks one narrower question: how much effective political sovereignty remains with the demos?

This pluralism also applies to substantive values. No universal formula can permanently determine the correct balance between liberty, responsibility, public interest and continuity for every society. Different communities may legitimately arrive at different equilibria according to their history, culture, social structure and democratic preferences. What makes those arrangements democratic is not conformity to one predetermined ideology, but their emergence from a sovereign demos that remains capable of reconsidering and changing them.



The fundamental chain of democratic legitimacy can therefore be expressed simply: independent human mind -> cognitively sovereign citizen -> sovereign demos -> reserved and delegated authority -> continuous democratic control -> revocable power. Different societies may institutionalize this chain differently, but the democratic test remains the same.

Power may be delegated, but sovereignty must remain with the demos.

5. Layered Democratic Sovereignty

Once sovereignty is located in the demos rather than in the state or its institutions, another question becomes unavoidable: who constitutes the demos? Individuals belong simultaneously to local communities, social and cultural communities, nations, states and, in some cases, wider political communities. Democratic sovereignty must therefore be understood as layered. The plural of demos used here is demoï.

The individual is the starting point. A person is not a demos, but no sovereign demos can exist without individuals capable of sufficiently independent judgment. Cognitive sovereignty therefore precedes political sovereignty. Individuals become members of a politically effective demos when they participate in a community capable of collective self-government and accept responsibility for a common future.

The first collective level is often the local or social demos: communities whose members directly share the consequences of common decisions. Here subsidiarity becomes a democratic principle rather than merely an administrative one. Decisions should normally remain with the smallest demos capable of resolving them effectively, provided its decisions do not disproportionately determine the rights and fundamental interests of other communities.

The national demos represents a broader political community capable of collective self-determination. In this understanding the state is not the original source of sovereignty but an institutional expression of a political community. The logical relationship is people -> demos -> political authority -> state, not state -> sovereignty -> citizens.

The same logic applies above the national level. Several national demoï may voluntarily form a wider political community without dissolving themselves. A European demos, for example, need not replace national demoï. It can exist as a composite demos in which different communities jointly exercise only those dimensions of sovereignty they have chosen to exercise together. A higher political level cannot legitimately transform delegated competence into inherent sovereignty merely because institutions have accumulated power over time. The demos at each relevant level must retain the authority to determine what it reserves, what it delegates, to whom and to what extent.

6. Self-Determination and the International Order

Layered sovereignty becomes most difficult when questions of territory and political status arise. Territory is essential for stability, security, economic viability and the practical exercise of authority, but territory has no political will. People do. Existing borders should therefore create a strong presumption in favor of stability, not an unlimited claim to political ownership over a community regardless of its sustained democratic will.

The primary democratic criterion for fundamental questions of political status should be the freely expressed and sustained qualified will of the relevant demos. Ordinary political decisions may legitimately be made by ordinary majorities. Decisions that may permanently alter borders, citizenship, constitutional status or membership in a political community require a stronger and more persistent mandate. The appropriate threshold should be defined ex ante and should rise with the irreversibility and external consequences of the decision.

A very high qualified majority, freely expressed and sustained over time, should create a strong presumption in favor of self-determination. Where such a clear majority does not exist, democratic



will remains central, but additional criteria become increasingly important: the durability of the community, territorial concentration, capacity for self-government, economic and institutional viability, prospects for future development, security consequences, historical continuity and, above all, the equal rights and legitimate interests of other affected demoï.

This prevents two opposite errors. Territorial integrity cannot become an absolute principle allowing an existing state permanently to govern a political community against overwhelming and sustained democratic will. But self-determination cannot mean that a narrow or temporary majority may fundamentally alter the status of a deeply divided population. A qualified majority does not define democracy; it measures the strength of consent where the consequences of collective choice are fundamental or difficult to reverse.

The sovereignty of one demos also cannot extinguish the equal rights of another. A region seeking independence may itself contain a community with a legitimate claim to remain within the existing state or to obtain autonomy. Demoï may be nested, overlapping and politically interdependent. Self-determination should therefore not be equated automatically with secession. It should mean the right of a legitimate demos to determine its political status through a regulated democratic process. Depending on the mandate and competing rights involved, outcomes may range from local or cultural autonomy through regional autonomy, federation, shared sovereignty, association or confederation to full independence. This plurality creates political space for compromise.

At the global level humanity does not yet constitute a single demos in the same political sense. The international order is therefore better understood as a community of sovereign demoï, usually represented through states and other legitimate political structures. The same democratic principle should apply between them: no political community possesses democratic legitimacy to determine the fundamental political future of another merely because it is stronger.

International law should therefore provide structured procedures for reconciling competing democratic claims rather than treating conflicts over sovereignty primarily as contests between territorial claims backed by power. A sustained and highly qualified democratic mandate should strengthen the legal position of a demos seeking a change in political status. The weaker or more divided the mandate, the greater the importance of additional criteria and negotiated solutions.

That balance matters because both sides need incentives to compromise. Where one side possesses the state, military power, territory and international recognition while the other possesses only a political claim, the stronger party may have little reason to negotiate. Conversely, an automatic right to secession could remove incentives for compromise from the weaker party. International law should structure the conflict so that both sides have something to gain from negotiation and something to lose from refusing it.

The purpose of international law should not be to eliminate political conflict. It should make compromise more rational than force.

Disputes over political status should consequently be subject to common procedures: identification of the relevant demos; verification of democratic legitimacy and freedom from coercion; expression of a qualified mandate; negotiation of alternative political arrangements; protection of all affected communities; agreement on practical consequences; and democratic ratification of the actual settlement. International recognition should increasingly become a consequence of legitimate procedure rather than an instrument of geopolitical discretion.

This would reduce the present inconsistency in which territorial integrity, self-determination, autonomy or independence are often defended or rejected according to the geopolitical identity of the parties involved. Democratic Sovereignty instead applies one principle across all levels: the individual must retain cognitive autonomy; the local community legitimate self-government; the national demos political self-determination; composite political communities genuinely delegated authority; and relations between demoï sovereign equality under common law.



The boundaries of democracy cannot themselves be placed beyond democratic legitimacy. Political communities may evolve, integrate, decentralize, federate or separate, but changes of fundamental political status should occur through qualified democratic consent, protection of the equal rights of others and negotiated legal procedures rather than through force.

No institution may permanently exercise authority over a sovereign demos against its legitimate democratic will. But no demos may exercise its sovereignty by extinguishing the equal sovereignty and rights of others. Between these principles lies the basis for both a pluralistic democratic order and a more stable international system.



Conclusion

Democracy is therefore not a fixed institutional condition but a continuous relationship between citizens, political judgment and power. Its health cannot be inferred from elections alone. It depends on whether citizens can form sufficiently independent judgments, become an effective demos, retain original political competence, determine what they decide directly and what they delegate, influence public decisions continuously, and reclaim authority that ceases to serve them.

This approach does not abolish representative institutions, political leadership, expertise or constitutional order. It gives them a clearer democratic foundation. Institutions remain indispensable, but their legitimacy flows from the demos. Elites remain necessary, but their authority remains conditional. Political communities may organize themselves in different ways, but none can convert delegated power into permanent sovereignty over the people from whom its legitimacy originates.

The same principle extends from the individual human mind to local communities, nations, composite political orders and relations between demoi. It offers no universal institutional blueprint and no automatic answer to every political conflict. It offers instead a common democratic test: where does sovereignty actually reside, how was authority delegated, and can the demos meaningfully redefine or reclaim it?

Subsequent Libertas Europa papers can examine the individual dimensions, measurement and institutional implications of this doctrine. The foundational proposition, however, is simple.

**Democracy does not begin with institutions.
It begins when citizens decide to become the demos.**

Gorazd Hladnik