The Great Democratic Illusion: Democracy Without a Cognitively Sovereign Demos

Perhaps the greatest political illusion of the twenty-first century is that elections alone create democracy.

Most democratic theory asks how democracy should function. This essay asks a prior question: what makes democracy possible at all?

We have never talked more about democracy. And perhaps we have never understood it less. Almost every political system claims to be democratic. Governments invoke it to justify authority. Opposition movements invoke it to challenge power. International organisations promote it as a universal ideal. Yet beneath this apparent consensus lies a troubling silence on a far more fundamental question: **what actually is democracy?**

Democracy is not valuable 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. Democracy is therefore not an end in itself, but humanity's best-known method of governing power without permanently concentrating it.

For more than two centuries, political theory has answered this question primarily through institutions. Elections, constitutions, representative assemblies, political parties, separation of powers and civil liberties have become the accepted indicators of democratic governance. They are indispensable achievements. But are they democracy itself, or merely the institutional architecture through which democracy may be expressed?

Every theory of democracy is ultimately a theory about the distribution, exercise and control of political power.

Here is where modern democratic theory made its profound mistake. We have gradually come to treat institutions as if their existence were sufficient to create democracy. The relationship is more demanding. **Institutions can embody, protect and cultivate democratic sovereignty, but they cannot substitute for a sovereign demos.** A demos creates and legitimises democratic institutions, while those institutions in turn help shape the civic capacities through which the demos can remain sovereign.

When the demos loses its sovereignty, institutions may continue to function for decades while democracy slowly becomes little more than a constitutional ritual.

This immediately raises a question rarely asked with sufficient precision. Who—or what—is the demos? Is it simply the population? The electorate? Everyone entitled to vote? None of these definitions is satisfactory. A society does not become democratic merely because ballots are counted honestly. A population becomes a demos only when citizens choose to assume responsibility for their common future. **Democracy is not a catalogue of political rights. It is a form of collective self-government.** And self-government requires citizens capable of governing themselves. **Rights belong to persons. A demos emerges when citizens assume responsibility for their common political future. Participation is therefore not merely a democratic right; it is also a democratic responsibility.**

This is where this approach departs from much contemporary democratic theory. From Schumpeter's competitive model to Dahl's polyarchy, an influential twentieth-century tradition placed institutions, participation and political competition at the centre of democratic analysis.

These matter enormously. But a prior question remains: under what conditions can citizens exercise sufficiently independent judgment to make those institutions meaningfully democratic? Every election begins before citizens enter a polling station, when they form an opinion. If the practical capacity for independent judgment is increasingly shaped by concentrated economic interests, information monopolies, algorithmic filtering, psychological manipulation or political propaganda, elections lose part of their democratic legitimacy: the formal choice remains, while more of the conditions under which it is formed lie outside effective democratic control.

The first institution of democracy is not Parliament. It is the independent human mind.

Institutions cannot think. Citizens can. Therefore democracy begins in the human mind. Everything else follows. This is why cognitive sovereignty is not simply another political objective competing with prosperity, security or justice. It is a precondition for democracy itself. Without the capacity for independent judgment there can be no meaningful political choice. Without meaningful political choice there can be no sovereign demos. Without a sovereign demos there can be no democracy—only democratic procedures.

Here it is worth acknowledging intellectual debts. Aristotle taught that democracy concerns the participation of citizens in public life. Rousseau argued that sovereignty belongs to the people and cannot be alienated. John Stuart Mill emphasised that democracy is a process of cultivating citizens capable of self-government, not merely a mechanism for aggregating preferences. Tocqueville recognised the indispensable role of civic participation. Robert Dahl expanded democracy through polyarchy. Jürgen Habermas demonstrated the importance of the public sphere and rational discourse. Each contributed something essential. **But the twenty-first century confronts us with challenges they could scarcely have imagined:** algorithmic persuasion, artificial intelligence, information warfare, cognitive engineering and unprecedented concentrations of informational power. Democracy therefore requires one additional foundation that earlier generations did not need to formulate explicitly: cognitive sovereignty.

Yet independent judgment alone is still not enough. **Who holds power? Who shapes decisions? Who controls legitimacy?** These are the questions democracy must answer. Democracy cannot survive if it becomes the dictatorship of individual interests, nor can it survive if public authority suppresses individual freedom in the name of collective goals. **The defining characteristic of democracy is therefore not majority rule but the continuous search for equilibrium** between individual liberty, social responsibility and shared civic responsibility. Individual liberty without responsibility can erode the common conditions on which freedom depends; social responsibility without liberty can become paternalism or coercion; shared civic responsibility without freedom can become obedience. **Democracy itself is the equilibrium.** It is neither individualism nor collectivism, but the permanent effort to balance all three. Whenever this equilibrium collapses, democracy begins to disappear—even if every constitutional procedure formally survives.

When democratic institutions continue to function after the demos has lost meaningful sovereignty, democracy risks becoming institutional hypocrisy

rather than popular self-government.

This perspective leads to a different understanding of elites. Complex societies need exceptional competence, integrity and leadership. Democracy does not reject excellence; it rejects entitlement. A society that stops distinguishing knowledge from opinion or achievement from assertion does not become more democratic—it becomes less capable. Scientific, technical, entrepreneurial, administrative, judicial, cultural and political elites are therefore necessary to social progress.

A genuine elite earns recognition through demonstrated competence, achievement, integrity and contribution. But competence is not sovereignty: political authority has a separate source of legitimacy and must remain accountable to the demos. **A quasi-elite emerges when wealth, inherited position, institutional access or closed self-reproducing networks are converted into a presumed entitlement to rule.** Expertise may be durable, but political authority cannot be inherited, purchased or self-proclaimed. What the demos grants, it must remain free to withdraw through democratic and constitutional means. Different civilizations may develop different attitudes toward authority and hierarchy, but none turns expertise or privileged access into political sovereignty.

The same principle applies to representative democracy. One of the classic justifications for the independence of elected representatives is that it protects independent judgment rather than freeing representatives from democratic accountability. Representation is a delegation of legitimacy, not its transfer. If democratic legitimacy originates in the demos, the demos 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 rather than participants in their creation.

This tension is visible in contemporary survey evidence. The OECD's 2026 Trust Survey found that trust in national government had broadly steadied after earlier declines, yet only 31 per cent of respondents across participating OECD countries believed that the political system allowed people like them to have a say in what government does. By contrast, 68 per cent believed that voting influences government action. **The gap is revealing:** citizens may recognise the value of elections while still feeling that their effective political agency between and beyond elections is limited.

Integrated democracy is never achieved. It is continuously sustained—or gradually lost.

Rights are indispensable, but rights alone do not sustain democracy. Democracy also depends on citizens accepting responsibility for the political community they govern. The purpose of democracy is not merely to aggregate preferences but to cultivate citizens capable of governing themselves.

If this diagnosis is correct, then democracy should no longer be measured primarily by the existence of elections, political parties or constitutional procedures. It should also be measured by a more demanding criterion: **the degree to which citizens exercise continuous, meaningful and responsible influence over public decisions.** Institutions remain indispensable instruments and safeguards of democratic sovereignty, but they cannot constitute an independent source of democratic legitimacy.

The Libertas Europa Definition of Democracy

Democracy is not a political condition but a continuous process of maintaining equilibrium in which a cognitively sovereign demos exercises meaningful influence over public decisions while balancing individual liberty, social responsibility and shared civic responsibility. Democratic legitimacy originates in the demos and is exercised through institutions that can protect, cultivate and organise that sovereignty—but not replace its source.

This is not merely another definition. It is a different way of thinking about democracy, with implications for cognitive sovereignty, representation, recall, public interest, democratic elites, information integrity and the institutions required to make democratic sovereignty effective.

Democracy does not begin with institutions.

It begins when citizens decide to become the demos.