

Participatory Democracy in the USA: Reinventing American Politics

الديمقراطية التشاركية في الولايات المتحدة الأمريكية: إعادة تجديد السياسة الأمريكية

Tayeb BELOUADAH

Professor

Faculty of Law and Political Sciences, University of M'sila, Algeria

tayeb.belouadah@univ-msila.dz

Date of send: 25/03/2025

date of acceptance: 17/05/2025

date of publication: 03/06/2025

Abstract:

American democracy faces a significant crisis today, with many of its democratic institutions grappling with dwindling trust and eroding legitimacy. Observers believe that the 2020s are a moment of urgent efforts to revitalize and reinvent American democracy. Across the United States, innovative initiatives are emerging to strengthen democratic engagement. Digital tools are paving the way for enhanced civic networks and collective action, while a growing commitment to co-governance models is actively involving citizens in decision-making processes. At the heart of this movement is a new generation of visionary communities driving meaningful change. In other words, there are many calls for applying participatory democracy. This type of democracy allows every person to make a meaningful contribution and acquire the power to decide directly on policy, and politicians are responsible for implementing those policy decisions. The present research paper deals with the American new project of participatory democracy. It is also an attempt to examine this type of political system as well as its upsides.

Keywords: Democracy, politics, renewal, United States.

ملخص:

مؤخرا تمر الديمقراطية الأمريكية بحالة أزمة حيث تعاني العديد من المؤسسات الديمقراطية الأمريكية من تراجع الثقة والشرعية. ويعتقد المراقبون والمهتمون بالشأن السياسي الأمريكي أن عشرينيات القرن

الحادي والعشرين هي محطة جهود عاجلة لتنشيط الديمقراطية الأمريكية وإعادة صياغتها وتجديدها. يلاحظ انه في جميع أنحاء الولايات المتحدة الأمريكية، هناك جهود مبتكرة جارية لتمكين الديمقراطية التشاركية. إن الأدوات الرقمية الجديدة خلقت فرصًا جديدة للشبكات المدنية والعمل الجماعي. هناك إرادة قوية لإشراك المواطنين في صنع القرار من خلال نماذج الحكم المشترك؛ وجيل جديد من مجتمع التفكير الواعد. والواقع أن هناك العديد من الدعوات لتطبيق الديمقراطية التشاركية، وهذا النوع من الديمقراطية يسمح لكل شخص بتقديم مساهمة ذات مغزى، واكتساب السلطة لاتخاذ قرار مباشر بشأن السياسة، ويتحمل السياسيون مسؤولية تنفيذ تلك القرارات السياسية. تتناول هذه الورقة البحثية المشروع الأمريكي الجديد للديمقراطية التشاركية. إنها أيضًا محاولة لفحص هذا النوع من النظام السياسي.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الديمقراطية، السياسة، تجديد، الولايات المتحدة.

Introduction:

Recently, the idea of the necessity of renewing American politics and democracy constituted a considerably wide space of debate among political observers and all those interested in American politics and affairs. Seemingly, they all agree that present day American politics is in a state of a real crisis. Many studies demonstrated that a number of American democratic institutions suffer from declining trust and legitimacy. American Observers believe that the start of the 2020's is the right moment of urgent and serious efforts to revitalize and reinvent American democracy. That is the reason why we often here that there are cries across the United States of America, for more and better democratic participation. Digitization and the use of technology are help making this project a reality. People in some portion of the American society seek to get ordinary citizens involved in politics of the country and an active participant in decision-making through co-governance models.

In other words, there are many calls for applying participatory democracy as suggested by the Geneva born enlightenment thinker Jean Jack Rousseau. This type of democracy is called participatory democracy. It is a political system that allows every citizen to make a meaningful contribution, and acquire the power to decide directly on policy, and politicians are responsible for implementing those policy decisions.¹ The present research paper deals with

the American new project of participatory democracy. It is also an attempt to examine this type of political system as well as its upsides. But before delving into the core of the topic, it might be important to define democracy and discuss its types and trace its history and devolvement.

1-Definition, Types, and History of Democracy

The word "democracy" traces its origins to the idea of "rule by the people." It stems from the Greek term *dēmokratiā*, a combination of *dēmos*, meaning "people," and *kratos*, meaning "rule." Coined in the mid-5th century BCE, this term was used to describe the political structures of certain Greek city-states, particularly Athens. A central aim of this study is to analyze the concept in its most contemporary context.

It is necessary to clarify here that, generally when you think of a democracy where people run everything, you are thinking of a direct democracy². For laws and government changes, people vote directly rather than having anyone represents them. Everything from fixing the roads to raising taxes requires the people's vote. If a large group thinks something is an issue, it can be brought to the government. Democracy, A political system can be conceptualized as a form of governance wherein authority is fundamentally rooted in the populace. Power is exercised either directly by the citizens themselves or indirectly through representatives chosen by electoral processes³.

A broader and more important issue to reflect on involves the emerging model of democracy that Americans are championing. At its core, participatory democracy represents a framework where citizens hold the power to make direct policy decisions, while politicians are responsible for putting those decisions into action.⁴

Pluralist democracy refers to a political system where no single group exercises dominant control over decision-making. Instead, various organized groups actively compete to shape policies. This model ensures a distribution of

power across multiple entities, promoting a more balanced and inclusive political landscape.⁵

By definition, modern democracies are pluralist, as they uphold the principle of freedom of association. However, pluralism can exist independently of democracy⁶. A democratic model in which political power is distributed among competing interest groups, ensuring that no single group dominates decision-making.⁷

Pluralist democracy refers to a form of democracy where political power is not concentrated in the hands of any single group. Instead, various organized groups actively compete to shape and influence policy decisions.⁸ Examples of pluralist democracy are evident at both state and federal levels. Much like participatory democracy, it allows individuals to impact political decisions. However, in a pluralist democracy, this influence is exercised through involvement in groups organized around common interests.

Advocates of pluralist democracy assert that individuals choose causes they are passionate about and align with groups that champion those causes. These groups then compete to secure the backing of influential politicians who can promote their interests. A prominent example of pluralist democracy within the U.S. political system is the significant role interest groups play in shaping policy decisions. Interest groups are composed of individuals united by a shared concern or objective, working collectively to persuade policymakers to support their viewpoints.

In contrast, elite democracy represents a model where a small subset of individuals, typically those who are wealthy or highly educated, hold sway over political decision-making. This approach was supported by certain Framers of the U.S. Constitution, including Alexander Hamilton. Proponents of elite democracy argue that political participation should be restricted to a select group of well-informed individuals who are presumed capable of making sound decisions on behalf of the broader population.⁹

Elite democracy today can be observed in structures like the Electoral College. While the general population casts their votes to elect a presidential candidate, the Electoral College acts as a safeguard against the potential risks of majority rule. Historically in the United States, there have been three instances where the candidate who won the popular vote did not secure the presidency due to the outcome of the Electoral College.

The Electoral College exemplifies elite democracy because it entrusts major political decisions to a smaller, select group, even when their decisions may not align with the will of the majority. Elite democracy, as a framework, emphasizes the role of a limited number of individuals—typically wealthy or highly educated—in shaping political outcomes. In essence, it is a model where political influence is concentrated in the hands of a privileged few.

In a more practical sense, there are two schools of thought when it comes to a direct democracy. The first is a participatory democracy is one where the people use initiative and referendums to make a contribution to their government. This allows every person to make a meaningful contribution, like what you find in Switzerland. In other words, it is a form of democracy that emphasizes broad, direct participation in politics and civil society, in which most or all citizens participate in politics directly.

Scholars believe that “Strong democracy should be a form of government in which all people participate in decision-making and implementation. While recognizing that the complexity of modern society imposes limits on direct democracy, participation by all is imperative because it creates shared interests, a common will, and community action, all of which inevitably give legitimacy to politics.”¹⁰

They also affirm that fair political system is the one that should apply the value of equality, “wherein all the power and jurisdiction is reciprocal, no one having more than another: there being nothing more evident, than that creatures of the same species and rank promiscuously born to all the same advantages of

nature, and the use of the same facilities, should also be equal one amongst another without subordination and subjection, unless the Lord and master of them all, should by any manifest declaration of his will set one above another, and confer on him by an evident and clear appointment an undoubted right to dominion and sovereignty.”¹¹

It is important to clarify that Representative democracy is not generally considered participatory since it tends to assume a lack of time, knowledge or will in individual citizens to contribute to policy making. We can see participatory democracy in local and state forms of government, where citizens have multiple access points to influence policymakers¹². Town hall meetings are a way for local and national politicians to meet with constituents to hear their opinions on topics they are interested in or to discuss upcoming legislation.¹³

A popular referendum, on the other hand, allows voters to approve or repeal an act of the state legislature. Similar to initiatives, voters sign a petition to get the measure on the next ballot, but popular referendums differ in that the law in question has already passed in the state legislature. In 2016, Maine conducted a referendum vote on a measure that would outlaw hunting bears after baiting them with doughnuts. Because doughnuts are so popular for controlling Maine’s bear population, voters overwhelmingly defeated the measure.

There is a need to stress that both initiatives and referendums show how local and state governments allow for the broad participation of voters to influence policymaking. Elected representatives are then responsible for enacting the decisions of their constituents.

The second school of direct democracy theory is the deliberative theory. In this theory, citizens would deliberate government policies and reforms among themselves to generate the best policies and laws for everyone. 14

2-The Political Identity of The United States of America

During the eighteenth century, monarchies predominated across Europe; however, American Founding Fathers such as George Washington and Thomas Jefferson sought to establish an alternative political framework. One prominent advocate for change was the radical pamphleteer Thomas Paine, whose widely-read essay **Common Sense**, first published in January 1776, championed the idea of a republic form of government devoid of monarchical rule. Just six months later, Jefferson's Declaration of Independence formalized the colonies' break from England, although it refrained from prescribing a specific governmental model to replace monarchy. Nevertheless, it was evident that the Founding Fathers collectively embraced the principles of republicanism. Their vision was profoundly shaped by the revolutionary philosophical ideas of John Locke and Jean-Jacques Rousseau, along with the Enlightenment thought of Voltaire.

During the late eighteenth century, republics were rare and scattered. Notable examples of republican political systems at the time included Genoa, Venice, and the Dutch Republic, but many European Enlightenment thinkers like John Locke and Jean-Jacques Rousseau questioned the stability of a republic. Nonetheless, after getting their independence from Great Britain, Americans turned to republicanism for their new government. In this paper, there will be a focus on American democracy and what kind of democracy the Americans are now calling for.

American democracy traces its origins to the drafting of the Declaration of Independence. This pivotal document outlined the foundational principles of the American government, establishing democracy as a cornerstone of the nation's political framework. Thomas Jefferson regarded the Declaration as a reflection of the ideals embodied by the American individual. The founding fathers aimed to ensure a distinct and dignified role for the individual in the political structure of the emerging nation. Undoubtedly influenced by the radical Enlightenment, these leaders recognized the crucial reality that

individuals cannot thrive within society unless their inherent rights are safeguarded.

Jefferson and his fellow revolutionaries aimed to make the Declaration of Independence a defining expression of America's radical natural rights philosophy. It is important to emphasize that the Declaration itself stands as compelling evidence of the successful preservation and reinforcement of this legacy in the United States. Within its text, the principles are clearly articulated: all men are created equal and are endowed by their Creator with unalienable rights, including Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness ¹⁵.

The founding elite of the new nation were undoubtedly aware that the theory of natural rights was not a novel concept. This awareness likely explains their choice to describe these principles as "self-evident truths." A self-evident truth carries a greater weight than a natural right alone, suggesting a deliberate effort by the writers to infuse natural rights philosophy with an American perspective. Furthermore, the Declaration's assertion that "whenever government injures these rights, the people can alter or abolish it and institute a new government" underscores its central aim of justifying the pursuit of independence.

The Declaration of Independence and the American Constitution serve as the cornerstone documents defining the ideological framework for the democratic governance of the United States. The Declaration emphasizes the principle of popular sovereignty, asserting that the government exists to serve the people, who, in turn, elect representatives to voice their collective will. When drafting the Constitution, the Framers faced a pivotal challenge: how to establish a strong central government capable of effectively governing while preserving individual liberties. Foundational texts such as the US Constitution, Federalist No. 10, and Brutus No. 1 reflect the ongoing debate over achieving this delicate balance between authority and freedom.

The US Constitution serves as the foundational framework for the nation's government, aiming to strike a careful balance between protecting individual

freedoms and maintaining public order. The US government is based on ideas of limited government, including natural rights, popular sovereignty, republicanism, and social contract. These concepts are embodied in two of the foundational documents of the United States: the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution. Timothy Patrick McCarthy and John Campbell declare that:

The United States has always been a protest nation. From the political unrest that gave birth to the Declaration of Independence to the recent mobilization against unbridled corporate greed and war, the United States has boasted rich traditions of resistance and dissent.¹⁶

In this context, it is particularly noteworthy to observe that in recent years, the Americans started to insist that their role should be the promotion and even the protection of liberty, democracy, and human rights values and principles in all around the globe. These values though seem to be the major secular values of the American social system, originate, as pointed out earlier, from the values of the Protestant Reformation. In fact, those values have embodied the faith of the Protestant. In other words, the Americans believe that in this world, liberty, democracy and human rights are the best social values that serve God's will. Therefore, to help other people to achieve liberty and democracy is not only the mission but the obligation of God's believers. In line with this, the American scholar Ralph Gabriel said, "American democracy will liberate the world from the oppression of dictators, which is a secular expression of a religious mission, i.e. Christian is bound to liberate the world from the rule of Satan."¹⁷

3- The Participatory Democracy Project in Present Day United States

The contemporary United States is undeniably experiencing a significant crisis in its democratic framework. Numerous key democratic institutions are grappling with waning public trust and legitimacy, exacerbated by widespread perceptions of governmental inefficacy and unresponsiveness. At the same time, however, the 2020s represent a period marked by a variety of dynamic,

innovative, and critically urgent initiatives aimed at reinvigorating and reimagining democracy.

It is worth stressing that participatory democracy is not a novel concept and has existed under various political designs since the Athenian democracy. Jean-Jacques Rousseau initially developed the concept of participatory democracy, which was later championed by thinkers like J.S. Mill and G. D. H. Cole. They contended that active political participation is essential for achieving a fair and equitable society.¹⁸

Across the United States, in both urban areas and rural communities, a wide range of groups—including grassroots organizers, marginalized populations, workers, and technologists—are driving innovative efforts to strengthen democratic participation. Emerging digital tools are opening up new possibilities for civic engagement and collective action, while an increasing number of government officials at various levels are adopting co-governance models to actively involve citizens in decision-making processes¹⁹; A new wave of forward-thinking community organizers is exploring innovative approaches to building stronger, more adaptable civil institutions and organizational frameworks.

The Participatory Democracy Project at New America monitors these initiatives, highlighting the most effective innovations in democratic revitalization. Through collaboration with activists, city officials, residents, philanthropists, nonprofits, and businesses, the project seeks to identify the institutions, organizations, and policies that truly foster community empowerment²⁰.

In contemporary United States, democracy appears to be undergoing a significant crisis. Many of the nation's core democratic institutions face eroding trust and legitimacy, weakened by widespread perceptions that governmental bodies are either ineffective or unresponsive to public needs. Nonetheless, the 2020s have simultaneously emerged as a period marked by diverse, innovative,

and, above all, urgent initiatives aimed at revitalizing and reimagining democratic principles and practices. In light of these developments, a critical and unavoidable question arises one that demands thorough examination and resolution.

It is no secret that across the United States, in cities and rural communities, among grassroots organizers, marginalized communities, workers, technologists, and that many other constituencies—there are many voices calling for renewing American democracy. Practically speaking there are innovative efforts underway to empower democratic participation: New digital tools are creating new opportunities for civic networks and collective action; a growing cohort of bureaucrats at all levels of government are working to include citizens in decision-making through co-governance models; and a new generation of forward-thinking community organizers are experimenting with fresh ideas for how to form more robust and agile civil institutions and organizational structures²¹.

The Participatory Democracy Project at New America is clearly monitoring these efforts and spotlighting the most impactful innovations in democratic renewal. By collaborating with activists, city officials, residents, philanthropists, nonprofits, and businesses, the project seeks to understand which institutions, organizations, and policies effectively advance community empowerment and political engagement.

Conclusion

The American people have long been radical. In the past, they reacted against the British monarchy and could establish a republic in which democracy is the one of its major principles. The role of the American government is to serve the American citizen and to protect his natural rights .in present day American society ,one can hear voices cal for the democratization of hitherto non democraticized aspects of life and they called for the individual direct and absolute involvement and participation in the political life and decision making

.in other word there are calls for the full application of participatory democracy
.in reality this type of democracy is not a new idea it is rather appeared in the
jean jack thesis of the real democracy in which the individual can participate in
the politics of his government .

One can understand that the American politicians are now trying to find a way to apply this type of democracy and their efforts are often described as attempts to renew American politics. The Participatory Democracy Project in the United States represents a collaborative effort involving the broader community and policymakers to identify innovative approaches for revitalizing democracy. This initiative seeks to engage activists, municipal leaders, residents, philanthropists, nonprofit organizations, and businesses in exploring how various institutions, organizations, and policies can facilitate genuine community empowerment. By doing so, the project aims to contribute to the development of an improved political system that upholds and respects both individual human rights and natural rights. This kind of democracy leaves no room for the authorities to monopolize decision making in the political scene.

References

¹ <https://www.britannica.com/topic/democracy>. Retrieved on 12/01/2021.

² Clarke, P.; Foweraker, J. (2001). *Encyclopedia of Democratic Thought*. Taylor & Francis. ISBN 0-415-19396-6.

³ Diamond, L., Lecture at Hilla University for Humanistic Studies 21 January 2004: "What is Democracy"; Diamond, L. and Morlino, L., *The quality of democracy* (2016). In Diamond, L., *In Search of Democracy*. London: Routledge. ISBN 978-0-415-78128-2.

⁴ Landman, Todd (2018). "Democracy and Human Rights: Concepts, Measures, and Relationships". *Politics and Governance*. 6 (1): 48. doi:10.17645/pag.v6i1.1186

⁴ Wolfe, Joel D. (July 1985). "A Defense of Participatory Democracy". *The Review of Politics*. 47(3): 370–389.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ *The Blackwell Dictionary of Political Science* by F Bealey, 1999

⁷ "Theory of Pluralistic Democracy". *TheFreeDictionary*. 3rd Edition: *The Great Soviet Encyclopedia*. (1970-1979). Retrieved 4 June

⁸ "Theory of Pluralistic Democracy". *TheFreeDictionary*. 3rd Edition: *The Great Soviet Encyclopedia*. (1970-1979). Retrieved 4 June.

⁹ <https://www.britannica.com/topic/democracy>

¹⁰ Wolfe, Joel D. (July 1985). "A Defense of Participatory Democracy". *The Review of Politics*. 47

¹¹ John Locke *Locke, John (1988) [1689]. Laslett, Peter (ed.). Two Treatises of Government. Cambridge, NY: Cambridge University Press. Sec. 87, 123, 209, 222 "Definition of DEMOCRACY". www.merriam-webster.com. Retrieved 5 July 2021.*

¹² Wolfe, Joel *ibid.*

¹³ Barber, Benjamin R. (2003). *Strong democracy: participatory politics for a new age* (Twentieth anniversary edition with a new preface ed.). Berkeley.

¹⁴ *yourdictionary.com/examples-of-different-types. Retrieved on 12/01/2021.*

¹⁵ The Declaration of Independence.

¹⁶ McCarthy, Timothy Patrick; Campbell, John. *The Radical Reader: A Documentary History of the American Radical Tradition.* McMillian, New Press, 2003. p.8

¹⁷ <https://www.khanacademy.org/humanities/us-government-and-civics/us->

¹⁸ Wolfe, Joel D. (July 1985). "A Defense of Participatory Democracy". *The Review of Politics.* 47. Retrieved on 04/02/2021.

¹⁹ <https://www.newamerica.org/political-reform/participatory-democracy-project/about-participatory-democracy-project/>. Retrieved on 13/01/2021.

²⁰ <https://www.britannica.com/topic/democracy>. Retrieved on 02/02/2021.

²¹ <https://www.newamerica.org/political-reform/participatory-democracy-project/about-participatory-democracy-project/>. Retrieved on 12/01/2021.