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# **True Democracy without Powerful Parties**

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## **Abstract:**

**This paper argues that a government for the people and by the people requires an effective constitution more than electoral politics. While the author agrees to the need for democratic processes, it is pointed out that party politics and uninformed voting diminish the democratic nature of an election. Powerful parties suppress the free expression of opinions and judgments and harm the cause of democracy. True democracy requires that candidates be accountable to the constituents and not to the party, and that voters “do their homework” about the candidates before they vote.**

**July, 2005**

"...that we here highly resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain; that this nation shall have a new birth of freedom; and that this government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth."

Lincoln's Gettysburg Address, November 19, 1863.

## **1. Introduction**

We are used to the idea that democracy means multi-party, electoral politics. In this paper I will argue that a strong, respected constitution that is enforced through the separation of powers is truly basic to democracy, while party politics is only tangential to or even harmful to true democracy. In principle, a system with powerful political parties is less democratic than a system without such parties, and *universal suffrage* is not fundamental to true democracy. It will generally be more democratic if people running for political office do so as individuals rather than as party members, and if they are accountable to their constituents and not to their political parties. I will further argue that "substantive democracy" is more important than "formal democracy." By *substantive democracy* I mean a government that is responsive to the demands and needs of the people, rather than one that dictates its wishes onto its people. On the other hand *formal democracy* refers to a government that is formed by electoral politics.

It is submitted that under the freedom to organize, political parties or groups are inevitable. While I argue that powerful political parties may jeopardize the effective implementation of democratic principles, suppressing the formation of political parties will be equally detrimental to democratic principles. The thesis of this paper is not that political parties harm democracy and should be outlawed, but that *powerful* political parties may impinge the rights of individuals to function as individuals in the political arena and thus may harm democracy. Thus political parties may do whatever they want yet should never form governments. Governments should be formed from individuals elected as individuals and not as party members.

By my definition, a government that is responsive to the demands and needs of the people is democratic. Indeed, Abraham Lincoln's ideal of a government is that it is "of the people, by the people, for the people." "For the people" is the ends; "by the people" is the means. "Of the people" is a descriptive phrase that portrays a government so ideal that the people have a strong sense of *ownership* for the government. Of course, a dictator could say that his policies are "for the people", this would not be meaningful unless he is genuinely responsive to the needs of the people and his policies indeed serve the interests of the

people. So democracy would not allow those in power dictating the policy directions against the wishes and interests of the people. If those in power humbly follow the demands and needs of the people in exercising such power, they are by my definition substantively democratic. Thus “benevolent dictators” is a contradiction in terms.<sup>1</sup>

Section 2 explores the importance of an effective constitution in safeguarding the social interest and “substantive democracy.” Section 3 demonstrates that party politics is intrinsically undemocratic in the sense of distorting or failing to represent true personal preferences. Section 4 argues that there is a better alternative than universal suffrage to further the interest of society. Section 5 will compare “substantive democracy” with “formal democracy” arguing that the latter is neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition for the former. Concluding the paper, Section 6 argues that an effective constitution is a far more reliable instrument to bring about substantive democracy than electoral multi-party politics.

## **2. The Importance of an Effective Constitution and Separation of Powers**

It is often said that power corrupts, and that absolute power corrupts absolutely. In order to prevent the abuse of power, it is important that power not be totally vested with one body, particularly with the ruling government. This is why it is important that judiciary powers be separated from the executive. The importance of the constitution and an independent judiciary that enforces the constitution is underscored by Meiklejohn (1965), who pointed out that a robust democracy requires broad channels of discussion and debate on all of society’s issues and concerns. It is in this spirit that the forefathers of the United States brought in the First Amendment to the Constitution, which says:

***Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances.***

— *The First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution*

While this separation of powers is fundamental to democracy, party politics is not. It is sometimes said that the existence of an opposition can provide “checks and balances” against the ruling party, but the best checks and balances is through the judiciary and an understanding, educated public who are fully aware of their constitutional rights.

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<sup>1</sup> A benevolent dictator is often interpreted as someone who acts in the interest of the people against the choice of the people. This implies that people cannot act rationally either by nature (such as when their vintage points prevent them from seeing the overall picture) or by the dynamics of socio-political interactions. This is plausible but calling such a statesman a dictator does not appear to do him justice.

The *US Constitution On Line* says:

*The Constitution is deliberately inefficient. The Separation of Powers devised by the framers of the Constitution was designed to do one primary thing: to prevent the majority from ruling with an iron fist. Based on their experience, the framers shied away from giving any branch of the new government too much power. The separation of powers provides a system of shared power known as [Checks and Balances](#).*

I disagree that the Constitution is inherently *inefficient*, though it is indeed not *expedient* for those in power. Efficiency must be defined in terms of “output: input” ratio, and output in this context is the ultimate positive outcome or increase in welfare that people get from the government. Input is the resources we put in.. In so far as the Constitution is really the best way to ensure that the common interest of the public is safeguarded it enhances welfare and is efficient. The Constitution enhances our sense of security and gives us peace of mind. With this sense of security and peace of mind we are at ease to pursue our individual dreams with the devotion and dedication that make the realization of such dreams possible.

With an effective Constitution we can be sure that none among ourselves need to be victimized by the “tyranny of the majority” or the tyranny of a dictatorial regime. We can hold the government accountable to its people. The Constitution is so important and is the foundation of democracy because only the Constitution can safeguard the rights of the individual as a free person, and that is vitally important.

### **3. Party Politics is Undemocratic**

On the other hand, party politics is inherently distortionary of the freedom of expression. When individuals run for office through the sponsorship of a political party that represents special interest groups they can no longer speak their minds freely as individuals. They tend to become accountable to the parties they belong more than accountable to the people who elect them to office. Thus true democracy must effectively allow and ensure that individuals speak their own minds and represent themselves. In the political market, so to speak, there should be *atomistic competition* just as in the market of commerce free and open competition requires the same and the absence of “tying” or “bundling” arrangements among suppliers. In the U.S. and some other countries, fair trade practices require that suppliers compete atomistically among themselves, and that they must not collude, must not enter into price fixing agreements, and must not tie one product with another in a way that precludes or reduces choice when selling to consumers. If these rules are breached,

then the Federal Trade Commission can take up the matter and sue the offenders. Microsoft was sued, for example, for getting computer manufacturers pre-install Microsoft Window into computers sold to consumers, thus depriving the latter of a choice. Party politics is often like this kind of “tying.” Anyone who wants to run for office today will be marginalized unless they join one of the predominant parties. To join a party, however, one must accept certain party stands(though not necessarily all) and often(though not always) must vote with the party to which one belongs. There is no law that prevents a party from imposing such requirements on party members. Those who run for office and are forced to join political parties are like suppliers who link up with the dominant player in the market to preempt individual political players who want to represent only themselves truthfully.

Thus, while people should be allowed to organize associations or political parties freely, when anyone wants to run for office they should relinquish their party memberships. Should they be elected, they should represent themselves and should be held responsible to the people rather than to the party to which they formerly belonged. This way they can vote freely according to their own conscience, without being encompassed by party lines.

Under the proposed arrangement, because there will no longer be a ruling party as such, there will also not be an opposition party. But this does not imply the loss of “checks and balances.” Because there is a free press and freedom of speech is a constitutional right, anyone has the right and liberty to criticize any politician. In the parliament or legislature, moreover, since debates are open to the public and any member may state his/her dissenting views at will, checks and balances will continue to be effective even without a formal “opposition.” Unlike in the case of party politics, however, there will not be an opposition that “plays politics” and opposes for the sake of opposing. This will save resources, particularly the time of all members, who can then devote more time to understanding the crux of issues and working out better policy responses.

In party politics, it is well known that politicians engage in all kinds of political engineering, including trading votes or pork barreling. Such practices should be declared illegal and even criminalized. Only in this way may we have genuine, atomistic competition, and truly open debates and unfettered exchange of views. Only in this way will the parliament or legislature come to decisions without the decisions being distorted by political engineering.

Party politics as we know it compromises the freedom of individuals to speak their minds and is therefore counter to basic constitutional rights, such as enshrined in the American

constitution. To be specific, the first Amendment to the American constitution states: “Congress shall make no laws respecting the establishment of a religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press, or the right of the people freely to assemble, and to petition to the government for a redress of grievances.” In the Declaration of Independence, it is stated: “We hold these Truths to be self-evident: that all Men are created equal, that they are endowed by the Creator with certain inalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness—that to secure these Rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just Powers from the Consent of the Governed, that whenever any Form of Government becomes destructive of these Ends, it is the Right of the People to alter or to abolish it, and to institute new Government, laying its Foundations on such Principles, and organizing its Powers on such Forms, as to them shall seem most likely to effect their Safety and Happiness.” These basic statements effectively hold that individuals should be free, and that the rights of anyone should not be encompassed, in speaking his mind and pursuing his economic, social, and political ideals. Party politics obviously encompasses such basic rights.

This is not to say that we should ban the organization of political parties or interest groups. People should be allowed to freely organize among themselves to further their common interest.

In an email to the author, Professor James Hsiung of the New York University wrote:

*Parties do serve certain necessary functions, like recruiting political activists/leaders, aggregating articulated interests of constituents, and arousing the political consciousness of voters, helping conduct the electoral campaigns, getting voters out on election day to vote, etc. These are necessary functions in a democracy. In the absence of political parties, who else is going to perform these functions? Or, put another, who else can better perform them without parties? Saying this does not mean that party politics is necessarily democratic. It is, I agree with you. However, party politics is a necessary evil for a democracy to function.*

While people should be allowed to organize political parties as they like, it should be illegal for political parties not to respect the rights of the politicians whom they promote to act as individuals in the political arena. And it should be illegal for political parties to attempt such practices as trading votes, colluding, or otherwise controlling the political behavior of any individuals. So while parties are unavoidable, but parties that abuse their powers and influences should be sanctioned.

#### **4. The Suboptimality of Universal Suffrage and the Alternative**

Modern society assumes that universal suffrage is a basic democratic right. Assuming that people should be equal, which is a fundamental assumption for all democratic theories, universal suffrage appears logical. However, exercising the right to vote does not mean much if the voter is not informed. Without questioning the ability to make judgments voters should at least be informed about the candidates running for an election. To force people to vote, or to lure people to vote, will raise the voting rate but that does not carry any normative implications, unless the voters are informed and know what they are doing.

The fact is: we know that politicians during times of an election campaign often engage in socially costly propaganda which really does not inform the voters. We also know that such propaganda works, and people get emotional when they go to the ballot box. But we need emotionally cool voters, voters who can tell the difference between the policy positions of the candidates running for office, people who have an idea about the track record of the candidates. A thoughtless vote is damaging to the democratic process. One might say that the effects of many thoughtless votes might cancel one another out. The problem is, however, that these thoughtless votes are often not random. They are swayed by propaganda and by mass psychology.

Accordingly, it makes sense to require all voters to meet certain requirements before they can vote. If we have to pass a test to drive on the road, surely we must pass some test in order to exercise the right to choose our social decision makers. At least they have to attend a necessary number of public forums where the candidates present their policy ideas. If they fail the test, indicating that they do not know even the basics about the candidates, *or* if they do not even participate in the public forums where the candidates present their ideas and engage in a debate, then they should not vote. To the extent that voters are better informed, better candidates stand better chances to be elected, because their policy platforms will be better studied and better understood.

To reiterate, I argue that every grown up person is potentially eligible to vote but they are not automatically entitled to vote. In order to be entitled to vote, a person must do his homework!

There is reason to believe that the chosen candidate will be very much different under a system that requires voters to do their homework from one that does not impose such a requirement. There is also reason to believe that socially wasteful propaganda will be much reduced under a system that requires voters to do their homework. We will save a

lot of resources, and we will elect better candidates to office. We will also reduce the advantage that candidates with a party background have over candidates without a party background.

## **5. Substantive Democracy vs Formal Democracy<sup>2</sup>**

In economics, we have the concept of consumers' sovereignty, which means that suppliers of market goods should be responsive to the demands of consumers. Similarly, governments, as suppliers of government goods, should be responsive to the demands of their peoples. This responsiveness is defined as substantive democracy. Such governments are effective in serving their peoples. According to the American Constitution, the powers of governments are derived from the people and governments are instituted so as to maximize the chances for their peoples to enjoy "Safety and Happiness."

If the government fails to deliver such needed government services as to enhance the "Safety and Happiness" of its people, then it is the right of the people to abolish it and to change the government.

Formal democracy, in the sense of electoral politics generating a government, does not guarantee that the government will do its job well, but it does provide a means for the people to change the government in the event it does not, hopefully without bloodshed or violence.

In practice, however, there is no evidence that social and economic policies are noticeably different between democracies ("formal democracies") on the one hand, and nondemocracies on the other hand (Mulligan, *et.al.* 2004). Historically, many formal democracies have even failed to deliver the basic needs of the people, and elections are often rigged as parties try to grab power, using both legal and illegal means, including violent and fraudulent practices. Because parties are powerful, their activities are that much more likely to hurt democracy in the sense of encompassing the rights of citizens than individuals.

As a matter of fact, in an open democracy, parties are no longer necessary and indeed are potentially destructive of democratic values and practices. Parties have historically been born out of necessity, particularly when one class of people had to fight for its interests while another tried to cling to its power. Today, however, parties of all stripes purportedly serve the interest of all people, the "social interest" or the "public interest" as it is called.

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<sup>2</sup> Much of the argument in the section follows Ho(2001), Chapter 1.

For example, the so called “three representatives” were written into the Chinese Constitution in 2004, declaring that the Chinese Communist Party, which is the ruling party in China, “represents the interests of all people in China,” and is no longer a means to carry out the “dictatorship of the proletariat” over the bourgeoisie. The American Declaration of Independence as well as the American Constitution, likewise, aims at serving the common interests of the people rather than sectarian interests. If this is the case, why do we still need political parties? If the ends is the same, and differences pertain to means only, is it not far better for everybody to open up their minds and accept free, unencumbered communication?

Thus, in the case of China, if the Chinese Communist Party were to open up and adopt democratic practices within the party, and would tolerate and even encourage dissenting views to be voiced, it would certainly stand a better chance to find the best means to serve the interests of the people. This would be substantive democracy. Such a party would be just like there being no party, because anyone would ultimately represent himself and would not be bound by party stands.

Many scholars have conducted studies on the subject of whether democracy is conducive to economic development. The results seem mixed, but there are glaring examples where effective and rapid economic development goes hand in hand with the lack of formal democracy. In today’s China, in Singapore, and in Korea under Park Chung Hee’s rule<sup>3</sup>, there is/was not much electoral democracy, and certainly little democracy in the sense of full-fledged multi-party politics. But in a substantive sense, these governments are or were providing the needed environment for economic development, namely a relatively free market, upholding or improving the rule of law, social stability, and effectively protecting private property. There are of course still shortcomings in these regimes, and the merit or demerit of the set-up must be assessed by the people living under the rule of the Chinese Communist Party, the People’s Action Party, and President Park, and not by others who live elsewhere, and mechanisms must exist for them to change it if deemed desirable. That would be democratic, and that would probably require major changes in the institutions of these countries. But we must admit that these countries are/were not at the extreme end of the absolute authoritarianism – absolute democracy spectrum.

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<sup>3</sup> Time Magazine rated President Park as Asia’s 100 most influential Asians in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. His rule enjoyed much acclaim. Despite having proclaimed martial law and been criticized for being dictatorial, he is credited with having converted “an economic basket case into an industrial powerhouse” See: <http://www.time.com/time/asia/asia/magazine/1999/990823/park1.html>

## **6. Conclusions: Constitutional Democracy versus Electoral Multi-party Democracy**

A 2004 18-country survey by Chilean research organization, Latinobarometro, found 29% of respondents satisfied with the way their democracies are working. The fact is: two decades after much of the region has adopted democratic elections, problems like poverty, corruption, and crime continued to plague the region. According to a Businessweek commentary (May 9, 2005) “Latins blame bickering political parties for lining their own pockets and those of the business elite instead of instituting reforms that benefit the majority.” Indeed, 55% of those polled said they would back a non-democratic government if it could resolve economic problems. More interestingly, Geri Smith, who wrote this commentary, observed: “That helps explain why Venezuelans voted in former paratrooper and onetime coup leader Hugo Chavez in 1998 and confirmed him in his post in a 2004 referendum. Casting himself as a latter day Robin Hood, Chavez has vowed to redistribute the country’s oil riches, pumping \$3.5 billion a year into social programs. Seven years into his ‘peaceful revolution,’ he has managed to stamp out the vestiges of multiparty democracy, tightened his control over the oil sector, and sent old-style oligarchs packing to Miami. He has done it by harnessing people power through street marches, plebiscites, and a civilian militia.”

Of all the Latin American countries, Smith found Chile a rare example of success of democratic institutions, effecting stability and poverty reduction. His conclusion is that “solid government institutions and political parties’ willingness to reach consensus” are the key to such success. If political parties are powerful and if they represent vested interests, such consensus is highly unlikely. Disillusioned with formal democracy at the ballot box, Latin Americans took to the streets. “The military coup may be a thing of the past, but the popular coup is in vogue.” Lucio Gutierrez was the third Ecuadorean President in eight years to be ousted by popular demonstrations. The experience of Latin American countries over the last two decades provides support for the thesis that multiparty politics endangers rather than helps the cause of democracy, while electoral democracy without a strong and effective constitution to contain the power of the ruling government does not mean much to the people whom it is supposed to serve.

In conclusion, constitutional democracy appears more important than electoral multi-party democracy. Democracy can be said to be more or less achieved if we have a constitution that is well formulated and well respected, and if it succeeds in protecting the rights of each citizen while maximizing the degree of autonomy enjoyed by each. We therefore do need a constitution that *defines clearly and limits* the role and the power of the government, so that whoever is in power will be required by the constitution to do what is in the best

interest of the community.

Once this is in place who leads the government becomes not really that important, because anyone in power would need to do the best for the community. While electoral democracy is still highly desirable because it allows the peaceful transfer of power, multi-party politics, particularly when the individual opinions and values of politicians are overshadowed by the power of such parties, can undermine the cause of democracy.

To reiterate, electoral politics is still highly desirable, though party politics is not. What I have argued so far is only against political parties “remote controlling” their party members even after they have been elected into office. Individuals should be answerable to the constituents who elect them to office, and not to any political party. No party, no group, no coalition, should impinge upon an individual’s own conscience when he votes in parliament, senate, congress, or any other political meetings or conventions. I am arguing that any attempt to influence an individual’s political behavior, except through persuasion and voters’ votes, should be ruled illegal and punishable by law.

A constitution that respects individual choices and protects individual choices and freedom of thought, one that considers the possible abuses of political power and sets out to constrain and prevent such abuses, is therefore truly democratic. On the other hand, in the absence of a constitution that can protect the rights of each citizen while maximizing the degree of autonomy enjoyed by each, even if we have electoral democracy it is likely that the elected politicians will only serve partisan or sectarian interests. And this is particularly true when parties play a big role in electoral politics. Some people say that politics is dirty. Perhaps this should be amended to read: party politics is dirty. When politics becomes just a scramble for power to further the interests of different selfish groups, such as often represented by political parties, it becomes dirty.

Chua(2003), who presented extensive evidence demonstrating that the introduction of formal democracy with electoral politics has caused instability against the interests of the local people in many developing countries worldwide, provides yet another support to the thesis of this paper that electoral politics combined with powerful partisan interests is often counter-productive. It should be pointed out that Chua’s work does not undermine the importance of democratic principles at all. After all, we have to consider whether people who live in democracies are happier or less happy than those living in non-democracies. I have argued that it is part of human nature to value autonomy. The sense of being one’s own master may be an important “mental good” that may be worth as much as owning a car. We cannot downplay the economic or social value of such mental goods. What I have

argued in this paper is that having a democracy in the sense of government serving and following its people's needs is fundamentally important, and that making sure that people have equal rights to participate in political affairs is quite important. This being the case, we need to limit the power of political parties to ensure that they do not suppress individual freedoms and expressions.

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