# POLYARCHY

## Participation and Opposition

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# 1. DEMOCRATIZATION AND PUBLIC OPPOSITION

Given a regime in which the opponents of the government cannot openly and legally organize into political parties in order to oppose the government in free and fair elections, what conditions favor or impede a transformation into a regime in which they can? That is the question with which this book is concerned.

## Concepts

Since the development of a political system that allows for opposition, rivalry, or competition between a government and its opponents is an important aspect of democratization, this book is necessarily about one aspect of democratization. But the two processes—democratization and the development of public opposition—are not, in my view, identical. A full description of the differences could lead us into a tedious exploration of a semantic bog. To avoid this detour, I hope I may be allowed to indicate rather summarily some of my assumptions without much in the way of defense or elaboration.

I assume that a key characteristic of a democracy is the continuing responsiveness of the government to the preferences of its citizens, considered as political equals. What

other characteristics might be required for a system to be strictly democratic, I do not intend to consider here. In this book I should like to reserve the term "democracy" for a political system one of the characteristics of which is the quality of being completely or almost completely responsive to all its citizens. Whether such a system actually exists, has existed, or can exist need not concern us for the moment. Surely one can conceive a hypothetical system of this kind; such a conception has served as an ideal, or part of an ideal, for many people. As a hypothetical system, one end of a scale, or a limiting state of affairs, it can (like a perfect vacuum) serve as a basis for estimating the degree to which various systems approach this theoretical limit.

I assume further that in order for a government to continue over a period of time to be responsive to the preferences of its citizens, considered as political equals, all full citizens must have unimpaired opportunities:

1. To formulate their preferences
2. To signify their preferences to their fellow citizens and the government by individual and collective action
3. To have their preferences weighed equally in the conduct of the government, that is, weighted with no discrimination because of the content or source of the preference

These, then, appear to me to be three necessary conditions for a democracy, though they are probably not sufficient. Next, I assume that for these three opportunities to exist among a large number of people, such as the number of people who comprise most nation-states at the present time, the institutions of the society must provide at least eight guarantees. These are indicated in table 1.1.

I am going to make the further assumption that the connections between the guarantees and the three fundamental



opportunities are sufficiently evident to need no further elaboration here.[1]

Table 1.1. Some Requirements for a Democracy among a Large Number of People

| For the opportunity to: | The following institutional guarantees are required: |
|---|---|
| I. Formulate preferences | 1. Freedom to form and join organizations |
| | 2. Freedom of expression |
| | 3. Right to vote |
| | 4. Right of political leaders to compete for support |
| | 5. Alternative sources of information |
| II. Signify preferences | 1. Freedom to form and join organizations |
| | 2. Freedom of expression |
| | 3. Right to vote |
| | 4. Eligibility for public office |
| | 5. Right of political leaders to compete for support |
| | 6. Alternative sources of information |
| | 7. Free and fair elections |
| III. Have preferences weighted equally in conduct of government | 1. Freedom to form and join organizations |
| | 2. Freedom of expression |
| | 3. Right to vote |
| | 4. Eligibility for public office |
| | 5. Right of political leaders to compete for support |
| | 5a. Right of political leaders to compete for votes |
| | 6. Alternative sources of information |
| | 7. Free and fair elections |
| | 8. Institutions for making government policies depend on votes and other expressions of preference |

Now from examination of the list of eight institutional guarantees, it appears that they might provide us with a theoretical scale along which it would be possible to order

1. Some of the relationships are discussed in my *A Preface to Democratic Theory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1956), pp. 63–81, and in Robert A. Dahl and Charles E. Lindblom, *Politics, Economics and Welfare* (New York: Harper, 1953), chaps. 10 and 11.

different political systems. Upon closer examination, however, it appears that the eight guarantees might be fruitfully interpreted as constituting two somewhat different theoretical dimensions of democratization.

1. Both historically and at the present time, regimes vary enormously in the extent to which the eight institutional conditions are openly available, publicly employed, and fully guaranteed to at least some members of the political system who wish to contest the conduct of the government. Thus a scale reflecting these eight conditions would enable us to compare different regimes according to the extent of permissible opposition, public contestation, or political competition.[2] However, since a regime might permit opposition to a very small or a very large proportion of the population, clearly we need a second dimension.

2. Both historically and contemporaneously, regimes also vary in the proportion of the population entitled to participate on a more or less equal plane in controlling and contesting the conduct of the government: to participate, so to speak, in the system of public contestation. A scale reflecting the breadth of the right to participate in public contestation would enable us to compare different regimes according to their inclusiveness.

The right to vote in free and fair elections, for example, partakes of both dimensions. When a regime grants this right to some of its citizens, it moves toward greater public contestation. But the larger the proportion of citizens who enjoy the right, the more inclusive the regime.

Public contestation and inclusiveness vary somewhat independently. Britain had a highly developed system of public contestation by the end of the eighteenth century, but only a miniscule fraction of the population was fully included in

2. Throughout this book the terms liberalization, political competition, competitive politics, public contestation, and public opposition are used interchangeably to refer to this dimension, and regimes relatively high on this dimension are frequently referred to as competitive regimes.



it until after the expansion of the suffrage in 1867 and 1884. Switzerland has one of the most fully developed systems of public contestation in the world. Probably few people would challenge the view that the Swiss regime is highly "democratic." Yet the feminine half of the Swiss population is still excluded from national elections. By contrast, the USSR still has almost no system of public contestation, though it does have universal suffrage. In fact one of the most striking changes during this century has been the virtual disappearance of an outright denial of the legitimacy of popular participation in government. Only a handful of countries have failed to grant at least a ritualistic vote to their citizens and to hold at least nominal elections; even the most repressive dictators usually pay some lip service today to the legitimate right of the people to participate in the government, that is, to participate in "governing" though not in public contestation.

Needless to say, in the absence of the right to oppose the right to "participate" is stripped of a very large part of the significance it has in a country where public contestation exists. A country with universal suffrage and a completely repressive government would provide fewer opportunities for oppositions, surely, than a country with a narrow suffrage but a highly tolerant government. Consequently, when countries are ranked solely according to their inclusiveness, not taking into account the surrounding circumstances, the results are anomalous. Nonetheless, as long as we keep clearly in mind the fact that the extent of the "suffrage" or, more generally, the right to participate indicates only *one* characteristic of systems, a characteristic that cannot be interpreted except in the context of other characteristics, it is useful to distinguish between regimes according to their inclusiveness.

Suppose, then, that we think of democratization as made up of at least two dimensions: public contestation and the right to participate. (Figure 1.1) Doubtless most readers believe that democratization involves more than these two di-

- right to oppose
- right to participate

mensions; in a moment I shall discuss a third dimension. But I propose to limit the discussion here to these two. For the point has already emerged, I think: developing a system of public contestation is not necessarily equivalent to full democratization.

To display the relationship between public contestation and democratization more clearly, let us now lay out the

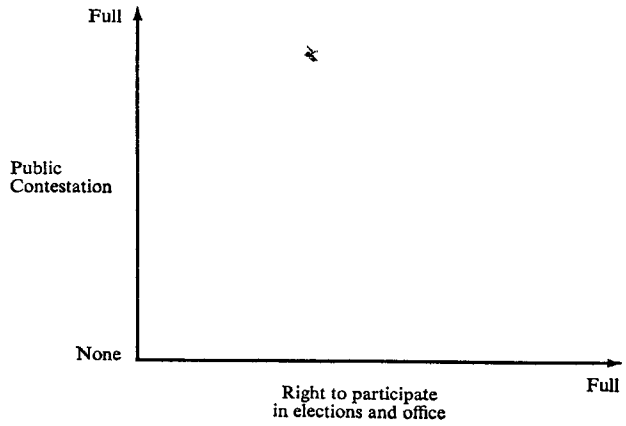



FIGURE 1.1 Two Theoretical Dimensions of Democratization

two dimensions as in figure 1.2.[3] Since a regime may be located, theoretically, anywhere in the space bounded by the two dimensions, it is at once obvious that our terminology for regimes is almost hopelessly inadequate, for it is a terminology invariably based upon classifying rather than ranking. The space enclosed by our two dimensions could of course be cut up into any number of cells, each of which might be given a name. But the purposes of this book make an elaborate typology redundant. Let me instead provide a small vocabulary—a reasonable one, I hope—that will enable me to speak precisely enough about the kinds of changes in regimes that I want to discuss.

3. An array of 114 countries along these two dimensions will be found in appendix A, table A-1.



Let me call a regime near the lower left corner of figure 1.2 a closed hegemony. If a hegemonic regime shifts upward, as along path I, then it is moving toward greater public contestation. Without stretching language too far, one could say that a change in this direction involves the liberalization

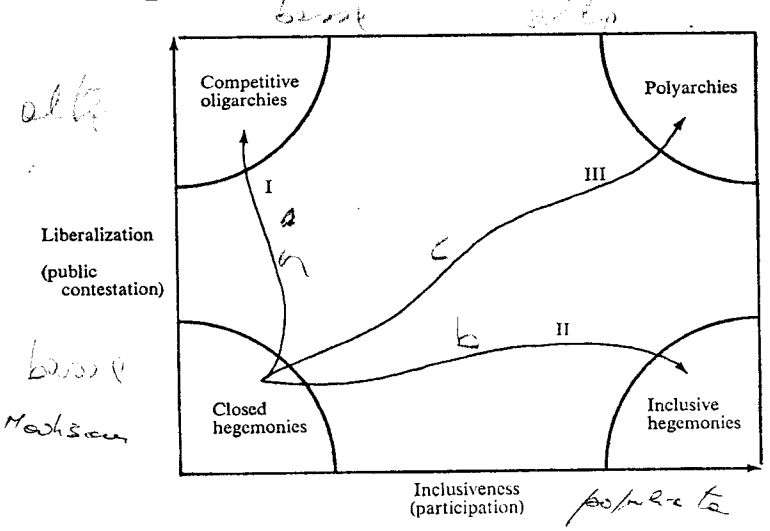



FIGURE 1.2 Liberalization, Inclusiveness, and Democratization

of a regime; alternatively one might say that the regime becomes more competitive. If a regime changes to provide greater participation, as along path II, it might be said to change toward greater popularization, or that it is becoming inclusive. A regime might change along one dimension and not the other. If we call a regime near the upper left corner a competitive oligarchy, then path I represents a change from a closed hegemony to a competitive oligarchy. But a closed hegemony might also become more inclusive without

liberalizing, i.e., without increasing the opportunities for public contestation, as along path II. In this case the regime changes from a closed to an inclusive hegemony.

Democracy might be conceived of as lying at the upper right corner. But since democracy may involve more dimensions than the two in figure 1.2, and since (in my view) no large system in the real world is fully democratized, I prefer to call real world systems that are closest to the upper right corner polyarchies. Any change in a regime that moves it upward and to the right, for example along path III, may be said to represent some degree of democratization. Polyarchies, then, may be thought of as relatively (but incompletely) democratized regimes, or, to put it in another way, polyarchies are regimes that have been substantially popularized and liberalized, that is, highly inclusive and extensively open to public contestation.

You will notice that although I have given names to regimes lying near the four corners, the large space in the middle of the figure is not named, nor is it subdivided. The absence of names partly reflects the historic tendency to classify regimes in terms of extreme types; it also reflects my own desire to avoid redundant terminology. The lack of nomenclature does not mean a lack of regimes; in fact, perhaps the preponderant number of national regimes in the world today would fall into the mid-area. Many significant changes in regimes, then, involve shifts within, into, or out of this important central area, as these regimes become more (or less) inclusive and increase (or reduce) opportunities for public contestation. In order to refer to regimes in this large middle area, I shall sometimes resort to the terms near or nearly: a nearly hegemonic regime has somewhat more opportunities for public contestation than a hegemonic regime; a near-polyarchy could be quite inclusive but would have more severe restrictions on public contestation than a full polyarchy, or it might provide opportunities for public



contestation comparable to those of a full polyarchy and yet be somewhat less inclusive.[4]

The need to use terms like these later on in this book testifies to the utility of classification; the arbitrariness of the boundaries between "full" and "near" testifies to the inadequacy of any classification. So long as we keep firmly in mind that the terms are useful but rather arbitrary ways of dividing up the space in figure 1.2, the concepts will serve their purpose.

4. The problem of terminology is formidable, since it seems impossible to find terms already in use that do not carry with them a large freight of ambiguity and surplus meaning. The reader should remind himself that the terms used here are employed throughout the book, to the best of my ability, only with the meanings indicated in the preceding paragraphs. Some readers will doubtless resist the term polyarchy as an alternative to the word democracy, but it is important to maintain the distinction between democracy as an ideal system and the institutional arrangements that have come to be regarded as a kind of imperfect approximation of an ideal, and experience shows, I believe, that when the same term is used for both, needless confusion and essentially irrelevant semantic arguments get in the way of the analysis. At the opposite corner, hegemony is not altogether satisfactory; yet given the meaning I have indicated, the term hegemonic seems to me more appropriate than hierarchical, monocratic, absolutist, autocratic, despotic, authoritarian, totalitarian, etc. My use of the term "contestation" in "public contestation" is well within normal (if infrequent) English usage; in English contestation means (to contest) which means to make something the subject of dispute, contention, or litigation, and its most immediate synonyms are to dispute, challenge, or vie. The utility of the term was, however, first suggested to me by Bertrand de Jouvenel's "The Means of Contestation," *Government and Opposition* 1 (January 1966): 155–74. Jouvenel's usage is similar to my own, as is the identical French term he used in the original, meaning: *débat, objection, conflit, opposition*. In the same issue of this journal, however, Ghita Ionescu ("Control and Contestation in Some One-Party States" pp. 240–50) uses the term in its narrower but currently quite common meaning as "the anti-system, basic and permanent postulates of any opposition on the grounds of fundamental, dichotomic differences of opinion and ideologies" (p. 241). Clearly this is a more restricted definition of the concept than the one I use here and that, I believe, Jouvenel uses in his essay.

## The Question Restated

The question with which this chapter opens can now be restated as follows:

1. What conditions increase or decrease the chances of democratizing a hegemonic or nearly hegemonic regime?
2. More specifically, what factors increase or decrease the chances of public contestation?
3. Even more specifically, what factors increase or decrease the chances of public contestation in a highly inclusive regime, that is, a polyarchy?

## Qualifications

This book, then, is about the conditions under which systems of public contestation are likely to develop and exist. Because public contestation is an aspect of democratization, this book is necessarily to some extent about democratization, as I noted at the beginning of this chapter. But it is important to keep in mind that the focus here excludes a number of important matters that would be considered in an analysis of democratization.

It is convenient to think of democratization as consisting of several broad historical transformations. One is the transformation of hegemonies and competitive oligarchies into near-polyarchies. This was, in essence, the process at work in the Western world during the nineteenth century. A second is the transformation of near-polyarchies into full polyarchies. This was what occurred in Europe in the three decades or so that spanned the end of the last century and the First World War. A third is the further democratization of full polyarchies. This historical process can perhaps be dated to the rapid development of the democratic welfare state after the onset of the Great Depression; interrupted by the Second World War, the process seems to have renewed itself



in the late 1960s in the form of rapidly rising demands, notably among young people, for the democratization of a variety of social institutions.

This book is concerned with the first and second of these transformations but not the third.[5] Whether it prospers or fails, the third wave of democratization will surely prove as important as the others. Since it will take place only in the most "advanced" countries and will help to shape the character of life in the "advanced" countries in the twenty-first century, to many people in these countries the third wave may well seem more important than the others. Yet most of the world still lies beyond the possibility of this particular transformation. Of the 140 nominally independent countries existing in 1969, about two dozen were highly inclusive and had highly developed systems of public contestation: they were, in short, inclusive polyarchies. Perhaps another dozen or fewer were near-polyarchies within reasonable reach of full polyarchy. It is in these three dozen countries that the third wave must occur. Whether some nonpolyarchies can overleap the institutions of polyarchy and arrive somehow at a fuller democratization than now exists in the polyarchies, as ideologues sometimes promise, seems remote, in the light of the analysis that follows. For most countries, then, the first and second stages of democratization—not the third—will be the most relevant.

The focus of this book is, in fact, even narrower than an analysis of the first two stages of democratization. I have referred to "regimes" and "systems of public contestation." But so far I have not specified the level of the polity at which regimes and public contestation may be effective. Let me then emphasize at once that the analysis here deals with national regimes, that is, regimes taken at the level of the

5. I have dealt with some aspects of the third in *After the Revolution? Authority in a Good Society* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1970).

country, or, if you will, the legally independent state, or, to use less appropriate terms, the nation or the nation-state. Doubtless some of the analysis could be applied to subordinate levels of political and social organization, such as municipalities, provinces, trade unions, firms, churches, and the like; perhaps some of it might even be relevant to the polities that are emerging at more inclusive levels—international organizations of various kinds. But the argument is specifically developed only with respect to national regimes.

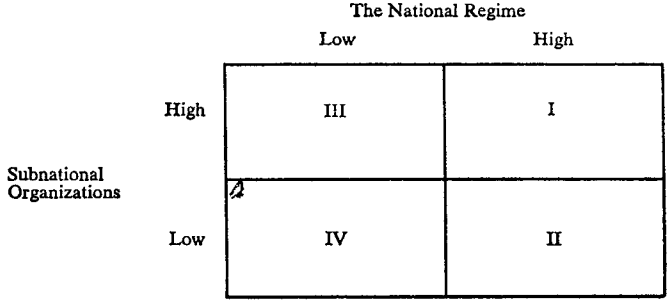
Again, this would be a grave omission in a book about democratization. Even from the perspective of public contestation, the omission is important. For casual observation suggests that countries differ in the extent to which they furnish opportunities for contestation and participation in the processes not only of the national government but of various subordinate governmental and social organizations as well. Now to the extent that gross differences in the general characteristics of subnational units appear to be associated with differences in the nature of the national regime (for example, whether it is a polyarchy or not), I shall try to take these into account in the analysis.

Yet it might seem reasonable to insist that the analysis ought to go a good deal further. A full description of the opportunities available for participation and contestation within a country surely requires one to say something about the opportunities available within subnational units. The extraordinary attempt in Yugoslavia to grant a large measure of self-government in subnational units means that the opportunities for participation and contestation are greater in that country, despite the one-party regime, than, let us say, in Argentina or Brazil. An inclusive view of the matter, then, would require one to pay attention to all the possibilities suggested in figure 1.3. Indeed a number of recent critics of incomplete democratization in polyarchies contend that while polyarchies may be competitive at the national level a great



many of the subnational organizations, particularly private associations, are hegemonic or oligarchic.[6]

Important as the task is of moving beyond the description of the national regime to the subnational units, at present the attempt to examine a fairly large number of countries would I think require an analysis so complex and would encounter problems of data so overwhelming as to make the




I. Fully "liberalized" or "competitive" regimes
II. Competitive at the national level, hegemonic within subnational organizations
III. Competitive within subnational organizations, hegemonic at the national level
IV. Fully hegemonic polities

FIGURE 1.3 A Hypothetical Ordering of Countries According to the Opportunities Available for Contestation

enterprise highly unsatisfactory. In principle, to be sure, subnational orgnizations could be located along the two dimensions illustrated in figures 1.1 and 1.2. Yet the problem is not simply to locate countries in the hypothetical space suggested by figure 1.3. For one thing, that space has to do with only one of the two main dimensions: contestation. Ob-

6. Cf. in particular Grant McConnell, *Private Power and American Democracy* (New York: Knopf, 1966); Henry S. Kariel, *The Decline of American Pluralism* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1961); and to some extent also Robert Paul Wolff, *The Poverty of Liberalism* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1968).

viously a similar procedure would be required for the other main dimension, participation. What is more, even within a country, subnational units often vary in the opportunities they provide for contestation and participation. For example, in many modern countries these opportunities are much greater in municipal governments than in trade unions, and greater in trade unions than in business firms. Consequently, one would have to break subnational units into a number of categories: business firms, trade unions, municipal governments, churches, educational institutions, etc.[7] At this stage, these requirements are, unfortunately, little short of utopian, and it is for this reason—pragmatic rather than theoretical—that I have decided to restrict my attention to the national level.

## Assumptions

When hegemonic regimes and competitive oligarchies move toward polyarchy they increase the opportunities for effective participation and contestation and hence the number of individuals, groups, and interests whose preferences have to be considered in policy making.

From the perspective of the incumbents who currently govern, such a transformation carries with it new possibilities of conflict as a result of which their goals (and they themselves) may be displaced by spokesmen for the newly incorporated individuals, groups, or interests.

The problem of their opponents is the mirror image of the problem of the incumbents. Any transformation that provides opponents of the government with greater opportunities to translate their goals into policies enforced by the

7. The already classic study by Seymour Martin Lipset, Martin A. Trow, and James S. Coleman, *Union Democracy* (Glencoe: The Free Press, 1956), concentrates on the deviant case of a trade union in which contestation and participation are high. To describe and explain that deviant case within the context of a single country was a very sizable undertaking.



state carries with it the possibility of conflict with spokesmen for the individuals, groups, or interests they displace in the government.

Thus the greater the conflict between government and opposition, the more likely that each will seek to deny opportunities to the other to participate effectively in policy making. To put it another way, the greater the conflict between a government and its opponents, the more costly it is for each to tolerate the other. Since the opposition must gain control of the state in order to suppress the incumbents (at which point opposition and government have changed roles), we can formulate the general proposition as an axiom about governments tolerating their opponents:

AXIOM 1. *The likelihood that a government will tolerate an opposition increases as the expected costs of toleration decrease.*

However, a government must also consider how costly it would be to suppress an opposition; for even if toleration is costly, suppression might be very much more costly and hence obviously foolish. Therefore:

AXIOM 2. *The likelihood that a government will tolerate an opposition increases as the expected costs of suppression increase.*

Thus the chances that a more competitive political system will emerge, or endure, may be thought of as depending on these two sets of costs:

AXIOM 3. *The more the costs of suppression exceed the costs of toleration, the greater the chance for a competitive regime.*

Axiom 3 can be illustrated graphically as in figure 1.4.

The lower the costs of toleration, the greater the security of the government. The greater the costs of suppression, the

greater the security of the opposition. Hence conditions that provide a high degree of mutual security for government and oppositions would tend to generate and to preserve wider opportunities for oppositions to contest the conduct of the government.

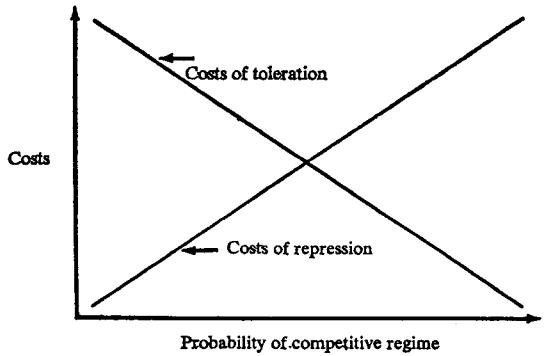



FIGURE 1.4

The question posed a moment ago can therefore be restated:

What circumstances significantly increase the mutual security of government and oppositions and thereby increase the chances of public contestation and polyarchy?

But before I try to answer that question, let me first consider a prior one: does polyarchy matter?