

Rule by Multiple Majorities: A New Theory of Popular Control

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Abstract

The book develops a theory of popular control: an account of what popular control is, when it is valuable, and how elections and other democratic institutions might facilitate it. The theory is developed in order to answer a particular question: how can we understand the idea of popular control without assuming that all citizens share a ‘collective will’?

The traditional answer is that popular control consists in the rule of the majority and presupposes merely that a majority have a shared will. ‘The majority rules in the name of the people’, as Tocqueville puts the standard view. What many political theorists fail to appreciate is that typically there is no majority of the population whose members share a common will. There are instead multiple, overlapping majorities—multiple subsets of the citizen body constituting numerical majorities of the whole—none of which is likely to possess anything resembling a collective will per se. This insight, which rarely informs work in normative democratic theory, is the point of departure for the theory of popular control developed in the book. It leads us to ask whether, and in what sense, a democracy might empower *each* of these overlapping majorities to control government, at the same time.

A formidable obstacle to answering this question is that, as social choice theory has taught us, the preferences of different majorities may be impossible to satisfy simultaneously. Citizens’ preferences may be such that every feasible alternative frustrates the shared preferences of some majority, as when majorities’ preferences form ‘cycles’ over all alternatives. Some scholars argue such situations rarely occur in practice; others conclude the ideal of popular rule is incoherent.

The theory developed in the book shows how multiple majorities can have control, at the same time, even if their preferences exhibit cycles and collective decisions are always bound to frustrate some majority. On my account, popular control implies neither that the people have a collective will nor that any majority has a shared will. A majority has some control over a variable, I argue, if its members are able to make the variable conform to their preferences whenever they attach sufficient importance to the variable. As I show, the conditions for control can hold for every majority subset of the population, at the same time, even if majorities’ preferences exhibit cycles.

After setting out this account of what popular control consists in, I explain the reasons why popular control is desirable, whether existing democracies establish popular control, and what institutional reforms might improve the value of popular control. In these portions of the book, I engage with the work of political scientists on retrospective voting; republican critics of majoritarian democracy who believe majority control must be circumscribed to prevent domination of minorities; empirically minded skeptics who doubt that popular control is a realistic or attractive ideal for ill-informed and disengaged citizens; and scholars who see in deliberative citizens’ assemblies a promising means of strengthening popular control in mass democracies.