

Fundamental Principles of Democratic Governance and Contemporary Approaches

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ABSTRACT

This article conceptualizes democracy as popular sovereignty and provides a comprehensive examination of its theoretical and philosophical foundations, as well as its significance for the development of contemporary society. Democracy is substantiated as a system of governance that advances the public interest through citizens' active participation in political processes, elections, public oversight, and social deliberation. The article analyzes the views of such scholars as Robert A. Dahl, Laura Valentini, S.V.R. de A. Samarasinghe, Plato, Aristotle, Benjamin Barber, Larry Diamond, Samuel Huntington, Seymour Martin Lipset, Tiago Peixoto, and Francis Fukuyama, and compares their conceptual approaches to democracy. Through these perspectives, key democratic criteria effective participation, equality, political rights, public control, accountability, and inclusiveness are elucidated. In addition, the article offers a detailed discussion of internationally recognized democratic principles, including the primacy of human rights, the rule of law, citizens' active engagement in social and state affairs, transparency, free and fair elections, economic freedom, anti-corruption efforts, and a multi-party system. In conclusion, the article synthesizes the democratic reforms being implemented in Uzbekistan, highlighting the "people-centered state" principle and the notion of the primacy of human interests as crucial factors in national democratic development.

Keywords: Democracy; Sovereignty; Citizen; Legitimacy; Political Equality; Human Rights and Freedoms; Rule of Law; Accountability; Transparency; Free and Fair Elections; Civil Society Institutions; Anti-Corruption; Political Pluralism.

1. Introduction

Today, democracy is understood as a form of governance exercised by the people, in which the people constitute its primary source and through whose active participation power is implemented in the interests of society. This process is realized through mechanisms such as the election or removal of public officials and the submission of pressing social issues to public vote. Democracy also represents a fundamental force in shaping moral and civic values. Contemporary perspectives on the form, content, and role of democracy in human development continue to be enriched and refined as advanced practices of state governance expand worldwide and as societies deepen their understanding of their identity and future. Interpretations of these general democratic principles can be observed in the works of the following scholars.

1.1. Study Objectives

The present study pursues the following main objectives:

- to conceptualize democracy as a system of popular sovereignty grounded in citizens' active and equal participation in governance.
- to examine the theoretical and philosophical foundations of democratic governance from classical to contemporary perspectives.
- to comparatively analyze major scholarly approaches to democracy and identify their common and distinctive criteria.
- to systematize the fundamental principles and internationally recognized standards of democratic governance.

➤ to explore the institutional, legal, and participatory mechanisms that ensure legitimacy, accountability, and inclusiveness in democratic systems.

➤ to assess the relevance of these democratic principles within the context of contemporary reforms and people-centered governance models.

2. Methodology

This article applies a comprehensive socio-humanitarian research methodology. First, the historical method is employed to analyze the evolution of democratic ideas from antiquity to the present, ranging from Plato and Aristotle to contemporary theorists. Using the philosophical-analytical method, the essence of democracy, its values, and its normative foundations are elucidated. The comparative (comparativist) method is applied to examine and contrast different scholars' approaches to democracy, allowing for the identification of both common and distinctive features. In addition, a systemic approach enables democracy to be examined as an interconnected system encompassing political institutions, legal norms, and civil society. On the basis of logical generalization and deductive reasoning, theoretical conclusions are subsequently formulated.

3. Discussion and Results

The American political theorist and professor of political science at Yale University, Robert Alan Dahl, conducted a philosophical analysis of popular sovereignty and identified the following key characteristics: (1) effective participation; (2) equality in voting; (3) enlightened understanding; (4) public control (or public oversight); and (5) the inclusion of all adult members of society [1]. Robert Alan Dahl's philosophical analysis of state power identifies the essential features required for a democratic system to be genuinely just and functional. Effective participation, equality in voting, enlightened understanding, public control, and the inclusive participation of adults underscore that democracy is not merely a set of formal rules, but rather a dynamic practice that requires meaningful participation, equal influence, informed deliberation, responsible governance, and broad inclusion. These elements serve as a foundational basis for ensuring that democratic authority is legitimate, just, and truly reflective of the collective will and interests of the people.

Laura Valentini, Professor of Philosophy and Political Theory at Ludwig Maximilian University of Munich, has for many years conducted research on global justice, democracy, freedom, human rights, political obligation, the methodology of political theory, and the relationship between moral philosophy and social ontology. In this context, she characterizes popular sovereignty as follows: "By democracy, I understand a set of collective decision-making processes in which those who belong to a given group (in this case, society) are equally entitled to participate in determining the rules by which they are to be governed" [2]. Laura Valentini's definition of democracy emphasizes its essence as a collective process in which every member of society possesses equal rights in shaping the rules that govern them. From a philosophical perspective, this underscores the fundamental democratic principle of political equality, whereby the legitimacy of governance derives from the equal participation of all individuals in the process of lawmaking. This perspective further highlights that genuine democracy is not merely a matter of institutional arrangements, but also of ensuring that all voices carry equal weight in the formulation of societal norms and decisions.

Researcher S. V. R. de A. Samarasinghe, in his book *Democracy and Democratization in Developing Countries*, defines popular sovereignty as follows: “It is a method of decision-making regarding collectively binding rules and policies that is controlled by the people, and the most democratic order is one in which all members of the community possess effective and equal rights to participate directly in such decision-making namely, a system of popular governance that realizes the principles of popular control and equality to the highest possible degree in practice” [3]. From a philosophical perspective, this emphasizes the ideal of participatory democracy, in which the legitimacy of governance is grounded in the active and equal participation of all citizens. It highlights the principles of direct participation and equality, whereby the retention of power in the hands of the people reflects the highest standards of democratic oversight and justice.

Concerns about the tendency of democracy to devolve into mob rule were partly associated with its understanding as a form of social governance. Within this conception, the demos did not encompass the entire political community but rather a specific group the poor masses. In the influential works of Plato and Aristotle, democracy is defined as a form of government in which the impoverished majority exercises power over a privileged minority. Plato maintains that democracy arises when the poor defeat their rivals, expel some of them, and subsequently grant the remaining individuals equal shares of freedom and political authority [4]. From a philosophical perspective, this reflects the notion that democratic systems often emerge as a result of struggles for equality and justice, wherein previously marginalized groups seek to redress inequalities by establishing a system in which power is more broadly distributed. Plato’s view highlights a tension inherent in democracy between the pursuit of equality and the complexity of achieving just and effective governance.

When addressing popular sovereignty, Aristotle, in contrast to Plato, states: “Democracy is a form of state in which the free and the poor constitute the majority and are vested with state power” [5]. By defining democracy as a system in which political power is held by a majority composed of free and poor citizens, Aristotle departs from Plato’s perspective. From a philosophical standpoint, this conception emphasizes democracy as a mechanism through which those with fewer economic privileges can influence and exercise control over governance, thereby reflecting a broader and more inclusive understanding of political authority that underscores the role of the majority in shaping the state. Aristotle’s view stresses that democracy is grounded not merely in the redistribution of power, but in the collective will of a wider segment of society.

Benjamin R. Barber, an American political theorist, wrote in his renowned book *Strong Democracy* that “in a strong democracy, people—citizens—govern themselves to the greatest extent possible, rather than transferring their powers and responsibilities to representatives who act on their behalf” [6]. This approach highlights the ideal of participatory democracy, which places the direct and active involvement of all citizens at the center of political decision-making. It emphasizes self-governance and direct action as the highest expressions of democratic participation and accountability, thereby challenging the traditional model of representative democracy.

Larry Jay Diamond is an American political sociologist and a leading contemporary scholar in the field of democracy studies. According to Diamond, for emerging democracies to be stable and secure, they must become more deeply democratic more liberal, accountable, and responsive to their citizens. This requires the establishment

of stronger and more effective political institutions, particularly political parties, the judiciary, and legislative bodies, as well as the decentralization of power at regional and local levels, effective control of corruption, and the strengthening of civil society [7]. In essence, the stability and security of emerging democratic states depend on their commitment to deepening democratic principles. To achieve this, they must not only enhance the effectiveness of political institutions and decentralize power, but also combat corruption and expand the capacities of civil society. By supporting a liberal, accountable, and responsive system of governance, such democracies can create a solid foundation for maintaining stability and resilience.

Samuel F. Huntington, an American political scientist, adviser, and academic, defined the democratic wave in his 1991 book *The Third Wave* as “a group of transitions from nondemocratic to democratic regimes that occur within a specified period of time and that significantly outnumber transitions in the opposite direction during that same period” [8]. Huntington’s concept of the democratic wave reflects a period in which the pace of democratic governance surpasses the rise of authoritarianism, thereby illustrating a collective shift toward broader political freedoms. This wave signifies not only a series of individual transitions, but also more extensive and profound transformations in the global political landscape, demonstrating the enduring appeal and resilience of democratic ideas across diverse contexts.

Seymour Martin Lipset was an American sociologist and political scientist whose major scholarly contributions were in the fields of political sociology, trade union organization, social stratification, public opinion, and the sociology of intellectual life. Lipset was among the early proponents of modernization theory, which posits that democracy is a direct consequence of economic growth and that “the more prosperous a country is, the greater its capacity to sustain democracy” [9]. Lipset’s “modernization theory” emphasizes that economic development fosters the advancement of democracy, suggesting that as a state becomes wealthier, the likelihood of democratic governance increases. This perspective highlights the interrelationship between economic prosperity and political systems, implying that sustained wealth over time can support and reinforce democratic ideas.

➤ Tiago Carneiro Peixoto is a Brazilian political scientist and a senior governance specialist at the World Bank, who promotes participatory democracy and digital government worldwide. A well-known researcher and commentator on open government and civic technologies, he has conducted pioneering research on the impact of technology on democratic processes. This research includes the following areas:

- identifying the factors that facilitate the successful implementation of e-democracy and digital government practices;
- examining the role of open data in the public sector;
- assessing the impact of participatory practices on tax revenues;
- analyzing the effects of technology on political participation and gender representation [10].

Francis Yoshihiro Fukuyama, an American political scientist, political economist, international relations scholar, and writer, argues that history should be understood as an evolutionary process and that the “end of history,” in this sense, signifies liberal democracy as the ultimate form of governance for all societies. According to Fukuyama,

since the French Revolution, liberal democracy has repeatedly demonstrated itself to be fundamentally superior morally, politically, and economically to any alternative system, and therefore cannot be supplanted by another form of governance [11]. This view indicates that the historical trajectory and distinctive strengths of liberal democracy render a transition to a fundamentally different system one capable of surpassing its achievements and advantages virtually impossible. Accordingly, Fukuyama underscores that liberal democracy represents not only a political system but also the culmination of societal development toward a stable and enduring ideal.

Democracy is distinguished by its specific characteristics, forms of existence, and particular as well as universal features within the process of social development, reflecting its dimensions of individuality, specificity, and universality. The universal aspects of democracy are grounded in its generally recognized principles and ideas. Today, these universal aspects are acknowledged as fundamental principles of social progress. They are expressed in ensuring and strengthening the independence of peoples and states, fostering interaction among states, and promoting the transition from a strong state to a strong civil society, while continuously developing this process in accordance with the demands of the times.

It should be emphasized that there exist internationally recognized principles for building a democratic society universally accepted and acknowledged guidelines that are common to all. Today, any democracy in the world can be assessed on the basis of these shared principles. They include the following:

First, the primacy of human rights and freedoms. These rights encompass an individual's personal, political, economic, social, cultural, and environmental rights and freedoms. The enhancement of human rights and interests, as well as human dignity, the establishment of the foundations of a truly people-centered system of governance, the further improvement of public welfare, and the liberalization of all spheres of life are identified as key priorities. In this regard, the principle that "ensuring human rights and freedoms is the supreme objective of the state" has been enshrined in the Constitution, where the number of articles has increased from 128 to 155, the number of legal norms from 275 to 434, and the text has been renewed by 65 percent [12]. To achieve this objective, it has been established that human honor and dignity are inviolable, and that legal measures applied by state authorities must be based on the principle of proportionality and be sufficient to attain the objectives prescribed by law.

Second, the rule of law. The laws of the Republic of Uzbekistan and other normative legal acts are adopted on the basis of the Constitution of the Republic of Uzbekistan and for the purpose of its implementation. No law or other normative legal act may contradict the principles and provisions of the Constitution. The rule of law implies that the acts issued by state authorities and administrative bodies, as well as the actions of public officials, must strictly conform to the Constitution and the law. Therefore, it is essential that officials at all levels—whether ministers, governors, or ordinary citizens possess a thorough knowledge of the Constitution and the laws and ensure their proper implementation, and, above all, that an environment is created in which all members of society strictly adhere to these rules. The effective enforcement of laws, the anticipation of systemic problems, and efforts not only to counteract the negative consequences of legal violations but also to prevent such violations through preventive measures are of critical importance. The Constitution and the laws, vested with supreme and binding legal authority, constitute key attributes of statehood. Accordingly, in Uzbekistan, reforms have begun with the

establishment of the legal foundations of legality that define the state's accountability to the people and mechanisms to ensure respect for the primacy of human and civil rights.

Third, the active participation of citizens in the life of society and the state. This principle has become one of the decisive factors in the dynamics of transformation, closely associated with the increasing role and influence of public oversight and civil society institutions. This is because the introduction of public control mechanisms in public administration, along with the freedom of civil society institutions and the mass media, has become a central component of democratic reforms. In accordance with universally recognized democratic principles, the strengthening of public oversight has led to greater citizen participation in state and social governance, the expansion of local self-government capacities, and an enhanced role of the media. As a result, state authorities have increasingly oriented their activities toward taking into account the will of the people, their aspirations, and their interests. This, in turn, demonstrates the emergence of a new model of democratic development in the country based on dialogue with the people and the prioritization of public interests. A vivid example of this is the introduction into the governance system of the new principle that “documents move, not citizens,” which places the people at the center and has led to the formation of a new approach to public service delivery aimed at facilitating state–citizen relations and ensuring transparency. If the scope and efficiency of services in this area are further expanded and the use of information technologies is enhanced, a more innovative, modern, and transparent system of public service delivery can be achieved. As President Shavkat Mirziyoyev has emphasized, “The New Uzbekistan Strategy means expanding citizens’ participation in the country’s socio-political life, realizing their aspirations, implementing advanced initiatives, addressing pressing life challenges, improving living standards, and creating sufficient and necessary conditions for individuals to independently enhance their material well-being” [13].

To this end, the Law “On the Civil Service” was adopted in Uzbekistan with the aim of implementing in practice the principle, widely applied in advanced countries, that “the state must serve the people,” thereby ensuring the primacy of the “people-centered state” principle in public administration [14]. The recognition of the state’s responsibility for the fate and future of the people, as well as its obligation to create the necessary conditions for their material and spiritual well-being, has fostered a sense of public satisfaction and gratitude among the population. Accordingly, the state programs, strategies, and normative legal acts adopted in the country are aimed at mobilizing the creative and constructive potential of the people, realizing their aspirations and goals, supporting the nation’s path of development, and inspiring society toward active engagement in national progress. In this context, the Development Strategy for 2017–2021 has pursued a course aimed at orienting public administration toward the interests of the people by establishing a system of governance grounded in transparent and honest relations between the state and society, as well as ensuring an effective system of social protection. In order to build a people-centered state, it is necessary to achieve efficiency in the interaction between the state and the public, accelerate decentralization, increase the accountability of public officials, enhance the philosophy and culture of governance, and shift the provision of public services from a focus on quantitative indicators to an emphasis on quality. On this basis, it is appropriate for the country to position itself among states with a high level of people-oriented governance.

Fourth, equality. The political, legal, and moral equality of every citizen constitutes a fundamental value of democracy. Equality is the key to ensuring respect for the rights of all individuals worldwide and preventing the dominance of any group or individual over others. “Equality of citizenship implies the protection of all persons from discrimination on any grounds, including race, color, sex, language, religion, political or other opinions, national or social origin, property, birth, or any other status” [15]. As a general concept, equality encompasses five distinct types: political equality, equality before the law, equality of opportunity, economic equality, and equality of respect, or social equality.

Fifth, accountability. The essence of this principle lies in the fact that governmental accountability means that both elected and appointed public officials are obliged to explain and justify their decisions and actions to citizens. Government accountability is ensured through the application of various political, legal, and administrative mechanisms designed to prevent corruption and to guarantee that public officials remain responsible and transparent toward the people they serve. In the absence of such mechanisms, corruption may flourish.

Sixth, transparency. Transparency means that public officials, while performing their duties in public office, allow their actions to be subject to public scrutiny. Citizens are able to participate in public meetings and freely obtain information about what is taking place within state institutions, as well as who makes decisions and for what reasons. Openness thus constitutes a step toward accountability [16]. The principle of openness is one of the fundamental principles of public administration and is aimed at building a legal and democratic state governed by the rule of law. By its very nature, this principle presupposes state institutions that are open to society in order to inform citizens about their activities. To ensure the right of political parties and citizens to be informed about the stages and progress of administrative procedures, to access relevant documents and files, and to be aware of the appropriate protective remedies available, state bodies must operate in a transparent manner [17].

Seventh, the conduct of regular, free, and fair elections. A free election is one in which all citizens have the opportunity to vote for the candidate of their choice, while a fair election is one in which all votes carry equal weight and are accurately counted [18]. Article 21 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights states that “the will of the people shall be the basis of the authority of government; this will shall be expressed in periodic and genuine elections, conducted by universal and equal suffrage and held by secret vote or by equivalent procedures that ensure the freedom of voting” [19].

Eighth, economic freedom. In democratic states, economic pluralism is closely interconnected with political and social pluralism and constitutes the foundation of a society’s socio-economic, cultural, and educational advancement. Economic freedom refers to individuals’ authority to make economic decisions. One approach to economic freedom derives from liberal traditions that emphasize free markets, free trade, and private property [20].

Ninth, the control of the abuse of power. The abuse of power, or misuse of official authority, refers to unlawful actions committed by public officials in their official capacity that affect the proper performance of their duties. The most widespread form of abuse of office is corruption among government officials. Corruption hinders not only the economic and political development of the state and society, but also their cultural and social advancement.

Tenth, the multi-party system. A multi-party system is a system in which more than two political parties compete for power. Multi-partyism embodies democratic principles such as free competition, pluralism, and equality, and promotes active participation among members of political parties.

- The presence of multiple political parties in a democratic state is explained by the following reasons:
- expanding opportunities to select the most qualified candidates for political office;
- providing alternative viewpoints to the incumbent government through the existence of an opposition;
- enabling the opposition to perform an oversight function over holders of political power [21].

Single-party systems result in the absence of political alternatives for citizens and the concentration of power, often leading to authoritarian rule. In Uzbekistan, within the framework of ongoing democratization reforms, strengthening the functioning of the multiparty system is of particular importance for the effective implementation of the principle of separation of powers.

4. Conclusion

This article conceptualizes democracy as popular sovereignty and argues that its essence is realized through citizens' effective, informed, and equal participation in political processes. The perspectives of Dahl, Valentini, and Samarasinghe demonstrate that democratic legitimacy is determined by the people's genuine involvement in decision-making processes, their equal capacity to influence outcomes, and the existence of public oversight; meanwhile, the analysis of classical thinkers (Plato and Aristotle) reveals democracy as a historically complex socio-political process intrinsically linked to demands for equality and justice. The approaches of Barber, Diamond, Huntington, Lipset, Peixoto, and Fukuyama further confirm that the sustainability of modern democracy is reinforced by institutional effectiveness, accountability, free elections, anti-corruption efforts, economic development, digital participation, and adherence to universal human values.

At the same time, the article synthesizes widely recognized international criteria for building a democratic society namely, the primacy of human rights, the rule of law, active citizen participation, equality, accountability, transparency, free and fair elections, economic freedom, constraints on the abuse of power, and a multiparty system as key indicators of democratic quality. In the concluding assessment, it is emphasized that the reforms being implemented in Uzbekistan, grounded in the principles that "the state must serve the people," a "people-centered state," and the "primacy of human interests," contribute to strengthening civil society and enhancing openness and responsibility, thereby consolidating a consistent and sustainable trajectory of national democratic development.

5. Future Directions and Practical Suggestions

Future research should further develop interdisciplinary approaches to democratic governance by integrating political theory, digital governance, and socio-economic analysis.

Greater attention should be devoted to studying the impact of emerging technologies and artificial intelligence on democratic participation, transparency, and public oversight.

Policy efforts should prioritize deepening civic education and democratic culture in order to ensure informed, responsible, and sustained citizen participation.

Additional institutional reforms should focus on strengthening anti-corruption mechanisms, judicial independence, and open-government practices.

Future reform strategies should continue to advance people-centered governance models by enhancing public service quality, digital access, and inclusive decision-making processes.

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