

David Held's Models of Democracy
A review of Chapter 5:
Competitive Elitism and the Technocratic Vision

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Weber and Schumpeter's model of *competitive elitism* (aka. leadership democracy or oligarchism), essentially sets out the role of citizens in a modern democracy as those whose duty begins and ends with selecting - via the ballot box - the individual or party that will lead their polity into the foreseeable future.

The model, if it ever was relevant to any time, most certainly does not appear to be relevant to the present day (except, perhaps, to the most pessimistic among us, as Weber and Schumpeter appear to have been in their day). Indeed, Held criticizes Schumpeter (and, thus Weber) when he noted: "What he [Schumpeter] did was to define democracy and the range of 'real' political possibilities in terms of a set of procedures, practices and goals that were prevalent in the West at the time of writing. In so doing, he failed to provide an adequate assessment of theories which are critiques of reality – visions of human nature and of social arrangements which explicitly reject the status quo and seek to defend a range of alternative possibilities." (Held: 153).

What's more, it is highly questionable as to whether competitive elitism can be classed as a form of democracy at all. The writer believes it cannot and should not be classified as such.

Most of David Held's key arguments, in which he largely criticizes the two thinkers' view of democracy, are saved for his conclusion. As such, the writer has taken the liberty to present the strengths and weaknesses of the model before noting the main arguments outlined by Held, contrary to the order noted on the grading sheet.

On the surface, there are what some may consider to be a number of strengths or positives in the competitive elitist model, not the least of which is its apparent role in seeking a balance between what Held called "...might and right, power and law, expert government and popular sovereignty." (Held: 126).

Other strengths include the model's belief in the appointment of government officials on the basis of their specialist training, and not on the basis of patronage (Held: 131) and on the requirement for a "strong parliament which would create a competitive training ground for strong leadership and serve as a balance to public and private bureaucracy." (Held: 133).

Additionally, the model advocates keeping those in charge in check (Held: 143) and providing a mechanism through which inadequate governments can be de-installed,

though neither Weber or Schumpeter explain how both mechanisms would work empirically (or, at the very least, Held did not cover them in his synopsis).

All-in-all, however, it is clear that the number of weaknesses or negatives in the competitive elitist model by far outnumber the strengths or positives, with the root possibly lying in the fact that both Weber and Schumpeter's theories do not take into account societal developments and civic evolution that has taken place since the death of Schumpeter in 1950. Held describes Weber and Schumpeter's theory of democracy as modern, however the writer begs to differ, as much has changed in the nearly 60 years since the Austro-American's death.

Held notes that "Max Weber and Joseph Schumpeter...shared a conception of political life in which there was little scope for democratic participation and individual or collective development, and where whatever scope existed was subject to the threat of constant erosion by powerful social forces." (Held: 125). It is clear, both men lived in a different age, and as one wise person once noted: "The past is a another country".

While some may see Weber and Schumpeter as soothsayers in their 'uncanny' foretelling that ever larger corporations and organizations will erode individuality and social difference (what many today call 'globalization'), their overall view of the world is dated and, thus, their view of democracy is dated as well.

Weaknesses or negatives in the model are many. However, the majority appear to revolve around the lack of respect and/or confidence that both Weber and Schumpeter had towards the common voting citizen. The two place political leaders on pedestals, and the 'great unwashed' prostrate at their feet, without explaining why leaders should be exalted and why they should be considered as 'better' than those they are leading or seeking to lead. (Interestingly, both thinkers speak of the expertise of parliamentarians. However, in parliamentary democracies, unlike Republics, Government Ministers are most often not experts in their fields and often are shuffled among portfolios. They, therefore, are not necessarily more qualified to lead than non-parliamentarians.)

Though noted many times in many ways throughout chapter 5 of Held, it is Schumpeter's view that best encapsulates the opinion held by both thinkers that the

voter's role in a democracy should be "...confined to accepting or refusing one 'boss' over another." (Held: 150).

Though somewhat redundant, it is useful to outline the many ways the two thinkers disparage the role of the voter in a competitive elitist system; useful because, as noted by Held himself: "In Schumpeter's [and, by default, Weber's] democratic system, the only full participants are the members of political elites in parties and in public offices. The role of ordinary citizens is not only highly delimited, but it is frequently portrayed as an unwanted infringement on the smooth functioning of 'public' decision-making. All this places considerable strain on the claim of 'competitive elitism' to be democratic." (Held: 156).

According to Held "Weber...tended to include in his explanation a low estimation of the bulk of the electorate...He appears to have thought of the electorate as unable generally to discriminate among policies and as capable only of making some kind of choice among possible leaders." (Held: 136). Weber, says Held, "[S]tood squarely in the classic liberal democratic tradition which has consistently sought to defend *and* limit [his emphasis] the political rights of citizens. However, there is an important sense in which he altered it. For he articulated a new, highly restrictive model of democracy. It is restrictive because he envisaged democracy as little more than providing a way of establishing qualified political leaders. It is restrictive because the role of the electorate and possible avenues of extending political participation are treated highly skeptically." (Held: 137).

Similarly, Schumpeter believed that "Far from democracy being a form of life marked by the promise of equality and the best conditions for human development in a rich context of participation, the democratic citizen's lot was, quite straightforwardly, the right periodically to choose and authorize governments to act on their behalf." (Held: 142).

However, perhaps most staggering, is Schumpeter's view that "The voters outside of parliament must respect the division of labor between themselves and the politicians they elect. They must not withdraw confidence too easily between elections and they must understand that, once they have elected an individual, political action is his business...Not only should electors refrain from trying to instruct their

representatives about what they should do but they should also refrain from any attempt to influence their judgement: 'the practice of bombarding them with letters and telegrams for instance...ought to come under the same ban'...The only means of political participation open to citizens in Schumpeter's theory are discussion and the occasional vote. In his opinion, democracy is most likely to be effective when leaders are able to set the terms of public policy unimpeded by back-seat driving." (Held: 150).

Hence, to Weber and Schumpeter, democracy was merely a mechanism of selection, and nothing more. However, among other things, it greatly disregards the idea of agency, i.e. the notion that ordinary citizens, either as individuals or as members of groups, can make choices and gain political power and with it the ability to affect and even make decisions. This is particularly underscored in today's world of client politics where grassroots organizations, special interest groups (including diasporas and NGOs) and others have power and influence never before experienced.

Held takes great pains to critique Schumpeter more so than Weber, possibly for two reasons. First, Held notes early on that Weber wrote "relatively little" about competitive elitism, but that "much of his work...bears on the possibility of democracy." (Held: 125). Second, Schumpeter's work is marginally more recent than Weber's, and is more blatant in its disregard for the common citizen.

He criticizes Schumpeter for two "highly questionable claims". The first is that there is 'a classical theory of democracy.' Held calls this "fundamentally unfounded because it is unrealistic." Second is that a single classical theory of democracy can only be replaced by a competitive elitist model (Held: 152). Held attempts to shoot this down by stating that first, there is no single classical theory of democracy; second, there is no evidence that competitive elitism is a comprehensive, empirically based model and; third, that competitive elitism exhausts all other options within democratic theory, which it doesn't.

However, this criticism was not enough for Held, as he noted that Schumpeter's "whole attack on 'classical democracy' rests on a 'category mistake' – a fairly serious accusation.

Held goes on to address a key shortcoming of both Schumpeter and Weber: the two thinkers' "problematic account" of the nature of agency and their underestimation of

the capability and value provided by the common citizen voter. Held rightly asks: "If the electorate is regarded as unable to form reasonable judgements about pressing political questions, why should it be regarded as capable of discriminating between alternative sets of leaders? On what basis could an electoral verdict be thought adequate? If the electorate is capable of assessing competing leaderships, it surely is able to understand key issues and discriminate between rival platforms." (Held: 154).

Held goes on to boil down Schumpeter's view that democracy entails "a state in which everyone is, in principle, free to compete for political leadership." Held criticizes this view, noting that not everyone has the resources to run for office. Held fails to note that along with the lack of resources, not everyone *wishes* to run for office. It appears that, in Schumpeter's view, if one has no resources or interest in running for office, the level of participation in their "democracy" is reduced further to only exercising his or her franchise.

Given this, Held concludes: "Little remains of the case for democracy except the sheer 'protection against tyranny' argument...this is far from unimportant consideration; it if were merely a choice between tyranny and competitive elitism...the latter would of course be desirable. But the rich tradition of democratic thought indicates that these are far from the only avenues open." (Held: 157).

All-in-all, the model under review has little if any basis in reality and, thus, no relevance to Canada as a modern, mature, liberal democracy.

Schumpeter, according to Held, believed that the notion of competitive elitism holds several advantages, one of which is that it allows one to easily distinguish between democratic governments from others. It is probably safe to say that no one need fear that Canada will become non-democratic in the near future, or that such a model is needed because it is not clear on which side of the fence Canada currently sits.

That being said, Held notes that Weber "referred to modern representative democracy as 'plebiscitary leadership democracy': 'plebiscitary' because routine elections in Western countries (Britain, Germany, the United States) were progressively becoming indistinguishable from occasional direct votes of confidence (or lack of confidence) in government; 'leadership because what was at stake in such elections

was the popularity and credibility of particular groups of leaders, i.e. political elites.”
(Held: 137).

With four federal elections in Canada since 1997 and another possibly in the works, the remark is an interesting one, and there may be some grain of truth to it vis-à-vis Canada. It might be interesting to do further analysis on Weber’s remark as it pertains to this country.

Sources

Held, David; *Models of Democracy Third Edition*; Stanford University Press (2006).