The Importance of Size for Democracy

Author(s): Kirkpatrick Sale

Source: *The Good Society*, FALL 1996, Vol. 6, No. 3 (FALL 1996), pp. 6-10

Published by: Penn State University Press

Stable URL: https://www.jstor.org/stable/20710760

The Importance of Size for Democracy

by Kirkpatrick Sale

Many disparate types of theorists have analyzed the nature of democratic government, but virtually all are agreed on one point: a true democracy requires a small society. The human mind is limited, the human voice finite; the number of people who can be gathered together in one place is restricted, the time and attention they are capable of giving is bounded. From simply a human regard, there is a limit to the number of people who can be expected to know all of the civic issues, all of the contending opinions, all of the candidates for office.

The Athenian assembly at its best periods seems to have numbered around 5,000—one record suggests a quorum may have been 6,000, and Plato speaks of the ideal number of citizens as 5,040—and though that seems to us a large number for debate and decision, it seems to have worked.

The Greeks in general, whether partisans of democracy or not, agreed with Aristotle that the well-run *polis* had to be small: "If citizens of a state are to judge and to distribute offices according to merit, then they must know each other's characters; where they do not possess this knowledge, both the election to offices and the decisions of lawsuits will go wrong." European thinkers, likewise, though not all of them democrats, assumed with Rousseau and Montesquieu that populations and territories had to be kept circumscribed. "A fundamental rule for every well-constituted and legitimately governed society," as Rousseau said, "would be that all the members could be easily assembled every time this would be necessary," and therefore "it follows that the State ought to be limited to one town at the most"; and though he is never specific as to the size of its population—indeed, he argues sensibly that it depends on the geography and fertility of a region—he refers at one point to maximum freedom in a state of 10,000.

All subsequent democratic theory has proceeded from like assumptions. The triumph of the American and French revolutions recast much of this theory into national molds, and there were some who tried to argue that large-scale representative or republican systems retained "the essence" of democracy, but even a man like Madison acknowledged that a "pure democracy" was "a society consisting of a small number of citizens, who assemble and administer the government in person." Even John Stuart Mill, who was dealing with an England of millions, agreed that "the only government which can fully satisfy all the exigencies of the social state is one in which the whole people participate," and that, he said, cannot take place "in a community exceeding a single small town."

The twentieth century—and with undoubted good reason—has had occasion to reiterate that view in the face of mass parties, mass politics, and mass governments claiming to be democratic. John Dewey may have spoken for his generation—"Democracy must begin at home, and its home is the neighborly community"—as Lewis Mumford for his—"Democracy, in any active sense, begins and ends in communities small enough for their members to meet face to face." More recently, the eminent Robert Dahl: "Any argument that no political system is legitimate unless all the basic laws and decisions are made by the assembled people leads inexorably to the conclusion that the citizen body must be quite small in number." And Leopold Kohr puts it in this delightful perspective:

> A citizen of the Principality of Liechtenstein, whose population numbers less than fourteen thousand, desirous to see His Serene Highness the Prince and Sovereign, Bearer of many exalted orders and Defender of many exalted things, can do so by ringing the bell at his castle gate. However serene His Highness may be, he is never an inaccessible stranger. A citizen of the massive American republic, on the other hand, encounters untold obstacles in a similar enterprise. Trying to see his fellow citizen President, whose function is to be his servant, not his master, he may be sent to an insane asylum for observation or, if found sane, to a court on charges of disorderly conduct. Both happened in 1950. [And times subsequently.] . . . You will say that in a large power such as the United States informal relationships such as exist between government and citizen in small countries are technically unfeasible. This is quite true. But this is exactly it. Democracy in its full meaning is impossible in a large state which, as Aristotle already observed, is "almost incapable of constitutional government."[1]

This *is* exactly it.

The actual experience of direct democracy over the ages seems to have confirmed these theoretical insights—was no doubt the source of many of them—and suggests the possible population sizes at which it may operate. The results will not surprise you.

The cradle of direct democracy, of course, was Greece, from about the seventh to the fourth centuries B.C., and the hand that rocked the cradle was quite small indeed: the *Encyclopedia Britannica* may even be a little generous in asserting that Hellenic democracy operated in areas that were "generally confined to a city and its rural surroundings, and seldom had more than 10,000 citizens." Athens itself may have outgrown those limits at several points in its career, and possibly a few other cities as well, but the Greek experience overall indicates that about 5,000 people would be the upper limit for regular and sustained participation in daily or weekly matters. The Athenian assembly at its best periods seems to have numbered around 5,000—one record suggests a quorum may

have been 6,000, and Plato speaks of the ideal number of citizens as 5,040—and though that seems to us a large number for debate and decision, it seems to have worked. Obviously certain constraints have to apply at that number. Not everyone can speak on every issue, for example, because if they met for ten hours a day and each one talked for as little as ten minutes apiece it would take them eighty-four days to debate a single issue.[2] Not all issues can be brought to the group for discussion, because the maximum number of decisions that could be taken, even assuming a fairly rapid rate of one a day, would be no more than about three hundred a year. That in turn means that some degree of cohesion and agreement has to exist beforehand in the community at large; it needs the refinement of many issues to a limited number of viewpoints (this, of course, is what the *agora* and *gymnasia* were all about) and the acceptance of a limited number of spokespeople to put forth a particular cause; and it requires a willingness to let minor decisions be taken by functionaries (chosen by lot or election) operating outside the assembly. But given these restraints, and they seem to have come perfectly naturally to Greece, the Hellenic system was beyond question, despite its occasional flaws and lapses, one of the finest that humankind seems ever to have crafted.

Interestingly enough the other extraordinarily successful experience of direct democracy took place in another mountainous country, and the record there is even longer. The Swiss mountain cantons, whether as completely independent entities in the earlier centuries, or as parts of various loose alliances and federations later on, used a system of regular popular assemblies, referendums, and initiatives from the thirteenth well into the nineteenth century. Even now, according to Cambridge University historian Jonathan Steinberg, "underlying the provisions of a Swiss constitution is the assumption that ultimately the ideal state is the direct democracy or the *Landsgemeinde,* the assembly of all free citizens in the historic ring," and he notes: "This, the pure form, not the clauses of a constitution or its preamble, is the truly venerable element in Swiss political life." The ancient "fundamental law" of Canton Schwyz gives some notion of what the *Landsgemeinde* must have meant:

> The May *Landsgemeinde* is the greatest power and prince [in the old sense of that word, meaning principal body] of the land and may without condition do and undo, and whoever denies this and asserts that the *Landsgemeinde* be not the greatest power nor the prince of the land and that it may not do and undo without condition is proscribed. Let a price of one hundred ducats be set on his head.[3]

Even the punishment is typically Swiss.

Because each canton was a federation of districts, and each district was divided into communes, each commune was made up of sovereign villages, it is not possible to describe the "typical" democratic system in Switzerland. But in the main the *Landsgemeinde* covered a population averaging 2,000 to 3,000 people, of whom only the adult men were allowed to debate and vote (hence an assembly of around 500), and would meet roughly once a month or in some places once a year. The meetings were wide-open affairs, with plenty of horse-trading and even some vote-buying going on beforehand, and any number of factions would appear in the course of debate; but somehow after the decisions were taken, the divisions healed—they could hardly be allowed to fester in such small populations—and implementation was normally accepted and shared by all. In between meetings, for any particular matter of even the remotest seriousness, the *Landsgemeinde* officials would submit referendums to the citizens and accept as a matter of course the direction of the vote; at the same time the citizens whenever they wanted could force an initiative with a small number of signatures on a petition, and if the initiative passed it had the force of law. So well-entrenched are both the referendum and initiative that they are active parts of the politics of a number of modern-day Swiss cantons, and of the federal system as well.

Modern Switzerland has found, though, that increasing populations—and increasing pressures from the outside (especially corporate) world—have forced changes in their traditional democracies. There are still five cantons (out of twenty-five) that run their affairs through annual cantonal meetings of all the citizens, but the turnout tends to drop as the size increases, and the cantons average about 30,000 people now, ranging from 13,000 to 50,000. Town meetings show similar effects: the city of Grenchen, with 20,000 people and 12,000 voters, has found that only about 400 people show up for town meetings these days, whereas in nearby Wagen, with 4,300 people, 90 percent of the citizens may turn out for votes and assemblies. If there is a "tipping point" for Swiss democracy to work effectively, it would seem by my calculations to come at around 10,000, perhaps slightly earlier.

The last historical example of direct democracy in action is one we have already touched on: the New England town meeting. As a rule the towns in which they took place traditionally held no more than about 1,000 people, meaning that the assembly itself would attract upwards of about 200 people (only property-owning males were theoretically eligible), depending on the issues to be discussed or officials to be elected. At first, in the seventeenth century, the meetings would be monthly affairs, sometimes even weekly, but gradually by the eighteenth century the practice was to have them quarterly or annually and to let the elected officers of the town—typically there would be more than forty of them, from selectman to meeting-hall-sweeper—and the various designated committees—usually a dozen, from finance to roads—carry on the town business in the interim. These meetings, however infrequent, left little enough initiative to the town officers, though—they would declare on everything from whether the town should have a new bridge to which bushes marked the town boundaries, and the officials were entrusted merely with carrying out their wishes. And even when a town official made bold enough to propose a new course, he would not act on it until authorized by the town meeting, no matter how urgent, because he knew full well that it would never be carried out unless it had the meeting's sanction.

Town meetings still exist today in many parts of New England, though they are a dying institution as states intrude to take over more local functions and the Federal purse looms behind practically any project of size. But they still decide the laws that are to govern

. . . in smaller units, people are more politically active, can understand the issues and personalities far more clearly, participate more in all aspects of government, and regard themselves as having some effective control over the decisions of their lives.

the town, the budget to be followed, the local taxes to be paid, the policies to guide the town officers, and who those officers are to be, much as they did 300 years ago. It is no longer local control in any real sense, what with the press of outside polities, but it is still direct democracy and, as political scientist Jane Mansbridge has determined, there are "citizens still directly controlling important decisions that affected their lives." Her reaction, in one town of 500:

> I left the town meeting grinning . . . These people had debated energetically the practical and ideological sides of issues vital to their town. They had taken responsibility for the decisions that they would have to live with. Votes had been close. Farmers and workers had spoken out often and strong. The town had no obvious "power elite."[4]

Most such towns that still have annual meetings are small, averaging perhaps 4,000 or so, though they include many places of 500 and quite a number with 7,000 and 8,000. Joseph Zimmerman, a professor of political science at the New York State University at Albany and one of the leading academic experts on the town meeting, believes that there are definite limits on how well they can operate before things get so large that only special-interest groups bother to turn out:

> A lot of studies claim that the New England town meeting is undemocratic, because only special interest groups show up and only a small percentage of the voters come out, which is certainly true once a town gets up to 8,000 or 10,000 residents. But below that level it is a sort of informal representative government, where the people who don't go in effect elect the people who do go to act for them. If they don't like the results, they turn out in force next time.[5]

Again, the upper limits of the community.

The most enterprising modern examination of the connection between population sizes and democratic government that I know of is a slim volume called *Size and Democracy,* by Robert Dahl of Yale and Edward R. Tufte of Princeton University. As befits a scholarly study, it is barely able to offer itself of any firm conclusion, and it is evident that the authors are quite bewildered by their own evidence, which in the end they choose mostly to disregard. But the evidence is clear enough, and hardly surprising: in smaller units, people are more politically active, can understand the issues and personalities far more clearly, participate more in all aspects of government, and regard themselves as having some effective control over the decisions of their lives.

There have been any number of surveys of citizen behavior both in this country and around the world, and Dahl and Tufte have surveyed most of them. Their summary: "Citizens tend to believe that their local government is a more human-sized institution, that what it does is more understandable, that it handles questions they can more readily grasp, and thus is more rewarding, less costly, to deal with." As to power:

> Citizens saw local units as more accessible, more subject to their control, more manageable. In the United States, only one citizen in ten thought he would stand much chance of success in changing a proposed national law he considered unjust; but more than one out of four thought they could succeed in changing a proposed local regulation they considered unjust.[6]

As to participation:

> In a number of countries, including the United States, levels of political participation other than voting are higher at local than at national levels . . . Two to four times as many people said they had tried to influence their local government as said they had tried to influence their national government.[7]

As to equality:

> Only in smaller-scale politics can differences in power, knowledge, and directness of communication between citizens and top leaders be reduced to a minimum . . . larger-scale politics necessarily limits democracy in one respect: the larger the scale of politics, the less able is the average citizen to deal directly with his top political leaders.[8]

In short:

> The relative immediacy, accessibility, and comprehensibility of local politics may provide many citizens with a greater sense of competence and effectiveness than they feel in the remoter reaches of national politics. What defenders of local government have contended throughout an epoch of growing centralization and nationalization of political life may prove to be more, not less, valid for the future: the virtues of democratic citizenship are, at least for the ordinary citizen, best cultivated in the smaller, more familiar habitat of local governments.[9]

It is easy enough to prove that small size is a *necessary* condition for the proper functioning of a direct democracy—even more for a consensus one—but could it also be a *sufficient* condition?

In truth, I do not think it would really be obligatory in a harmonious world that every community is a democracy, if only it remained of human-scale proportions. I could imagine each community going for its own singular form of governance—some might choose a republic, others an elected triumvirate, some may prefer a socialist dictatorship, others a cooperative federation, and only a few of the finest and most harmonious opt for a consensual democracy—and as long as none of them tried to impose upon the others, the conditions for a stable, ecological world would be met; and as long as the citizens of each has a free right in the choice of government, and

the free right to leave the community if that government palled, then the conditions of justice and freedom would be met. The essential underpinning of a sound and stable society, I am convinced, is the community that is built to the human scale in all its proportions and cleaves to the human scale in all its institutions, not necessarily one that is democratic.

And yet, to my reading, history and logic both argue that a small community will tend toward the democratic, whether or not it expresses it formally, simply by virtue of the fact that individuals are known to each other, interaction is common and regular, opinions are freely exchanged, and every ruler is also a neighbor. In a small society even the prince will probably be accessible—as in Liechtenstein—and every parliament familiar; where the government is inherently limited in scope and accumulation, it is extremely difficult for any individual or set of individuals to dominate and overpower the populace at large, and extremely unlikely that the citizens will permit them. As Leopold Kohr has put it:

> In a small state democracy will, as a rule, assert itself irrespective of whether it is organized as a monarchy or republic . . . Even where government rests in the hands of an absolute prince, the citizen will have no difficulty in asserting his will, if the state is small. The gap between him and the government is so narrow, and the political forces are in so fluctuating and mobile a balance, that he is always able either to span the gap with a determined leap, or to move through the governmental orbit himself.[10]

Moreover, any small society that sought stability and permanence, efficiency and rational governance, would most likely tend toward democracy almost automatically, as it were. Governing by diktat may look easy, but it does not permit reliable information coming in from below in conception, it does not allow diverging opinions to be heard in deliberation, and it does not encourage smooth and willing cooperation in execution. A community that wanted to be sure it knew what all its people were thinking, what the gripes and problems were, that wanted to hammer out the best solutions to the difficulties as they arose and wanted to be sure its suggestions were carried out and its regulations obeyed, would inevitably work toward some form of direct democracy. Likewise a community that wanted to create the maximum participation in the political process so as to give outlet for grumbling and dissension, that wanted to develop feelings of self-worth and effectiveness for the citizens' own psychic health, that wanted to insure loyalty and cooperation through common understanding of the political machinery rather than through coercion, would instinctively move toward some kind of participatory democracy. Healthy not only for the individuals in it but for the community itself, democracy would be likely to come to the fore in any rational community kept at a manageable size, no matter what its trappings may look like.

The great English biologist J.B.S. Haldane was once asked, in a group of distinguished theologians, what he could conclude about the nature of the Supreme Being out of his immense store of knowledge of the nature of the universe. The old man thought for just a moment, bent forward and replied, "An inordinate fondness for beetles."

And indeed the scientist's perception was accurate: of the somewhat less than a million animal species that have been identified and named, almost 75 percent of them are insects, and of these insects about 60 percent are beetles.

Whether or not the secret to God's plan is in fact the beetle, as I must confess myself reluctant to believe, two indisputable truths seem to be revealed in the natural world. The first has to do with diversity, an incredible diversity that generates so many hundreds

Healthy not only for the individuals in it but for the community itself, democracy would be likely to come to the fore in any rational community kept at a manageable size, no matter what its trappings may look like.

of thousands of insects, and something like 400,000 kinds of beetles, more different kinds than any other known species—spotted and striped, checkered and solid, green, yellow, purple, and rose, some living in sand and garbage, some in trees and roses, some quite minuscule and almost invisible to the unaided eye and some at least a foot long, some unisexed and some multi-sexed, some in the tropics, some in the Arctic, some indeed everywhere in the world. The second has to do with size, for the great preponderance of the many billions of insects are smaller than the human finger, and yet there are many times more species of small animals than of larger ones, by a ratio of at least ten to one.

Does nature by any chance have a political message for us?

This essay is excerpted from Human Scale *(New York: Coward, McCann & Geoghegan, 1980) and is reprinted by permission.*

Kirkpatrick Sale is author of several books including Human Scale *and most recently* Rebels Against the Future.

References

Aristotle, *The Politics* (Baltimore: Penguin, 1962).

Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Social Contract* (New York: Hafner, 1947).

James Madison, Federalist 10., *The Federalist Papers* (Garden City, NY: Anchor, 1966).

J.S. Mill, "The Ideal Best Form," *Representative Government* (London: Parker, Son, & Bourn, 1881).

Robert Dahl, *After the Revolution?* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1970).

Leopold Kohr, *The Breakdown of Nations* (New York: Rinehart, 1957).

Kathleen Freeman, *Greek City-States* (New York: Norton, 1963).

M.I. Finley, *Democracy: Ancient and Modern* (New Brunswisk, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1973).

Jonathan Steinberg, *Why Switzerland?* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1976).

Endnotes

1. *The Breakdown of Nations* (New York: Reinhart, 1957), pp. 99–100.

2. This is what Bertrand de Jouvenal has called "the Chairman's Problem", and pertains in a group of any size. See the *American Political Science Review,* June 1961.

3. Jonathan Steinberg, *Why Switzerland* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976), p. 73.

4. *Massachusetts Review,* Winter 1976.

5. *New York Times,* March 15, 1979.

6. Robert Dahl and Edward R. Tufte, *Size and Democracy,* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1973), p. 57.

7. Ibid. The reason that participation in local voting is usually lower than in national is that it is seen as a weak method of influence in the immediate setting where there are other more potent means of getting one's views across, but it is all there is when it comes to the remote world of national politics. The desire of a town for stability, the reluctance to create serious fissures, the built-up intimacy with an incumbent, and the lack of media hype also tend to reinforce this.

8. Ibid. p. 87–8.

9. Ibid.

10. *Breakdown,* pp. 98–9.