

GREEN DEMOCRACY

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The idea of green democracy was developed by environmental political theorists in the 1990s out of a critique of the ecological failings of liberal democracy in the wake of the exponential growth in ecological problems in the post-World War II period. Whereas the “limits-to-growth” debate of the early 1970s (see **CARRYING CAPACITY PARADIGM**) had generated calls for an eco-authoritarian state as the only means of preventing ecological overshoot and collapse, advocates of green (or ecological) democracy argue that more, rather than less, democracy is needed to tackle the ecological crisis. Green democrats also highlight the many ways in which the modern environmental movement and green political parties have enriched liberal democracy.

Green democrats join liberal democrats in arguing that civil and political rights and free elections generally lead to better environmental protection compared to centrally planned economies managed by a one-party state. However, they do not treat this as an ecological vindication of liberal democracy. Rather, they argue that meeting the sustainability challenge requires a stronger and more ecologically informed democracy across all levels of governance, but especially at the national level.

According to the green critique, liberal democracy is beset with a range of democratic deficits that favour short-term, well-organized private interests at the expense of the long-term, public good of environmental protection. These problems include the short-term horizons of election cycles, a distorted public sphere and inequalities of political participation and bargaining power in the policy making process. More fundamentally, liberal democracies are criticized for being ill-suited to an ecologically interdependent world because elected representatives do not have to answer to the constituencies affected by the transboundary and trans-temporal ecological consequences of their decisions (see **ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE**). Nor do they provide any systematic representation of the interests of the nonhuman world (see **ECOCENTRISM**).

The primary goal of green democrats has been to defend and/or develop a range of supplementary rights, norms, laws, administrative procedures, institutions and practices of political **PARTICIPATION**, deliberation, representation and accountability that would enable more systematic consideration of long-range, transboundary, ecological concerns. These include new constitutional environmental rights, new forms of proxy representation for future generations and nonhuman species, new legal principles such as the **PRECAUTIONARY**

PRINCIPLE, and new treaties that promote transboundary environmental procedural rights, such as the Aarhus Convention 1998.

Green democrats also defend deliberative or discursive democracy over strategic bargaining, cost-benefit analysis or the aggregation of unreflective preferences because the critical, public exchange of reasons that is the essence of deliberation helps to weed out uninformed and purely self-interested arguments in favour of generalizable interests such as environmental protection (see **GLOBAL DELIBERATIVE DEMOCRATIZATION** and **REFLEXIVE GOVERNANCE**). Green democrats have defended ‘mini-publics’, such as citizen juries, consensus conferences and deliberative polls, as one means of institutionalizing deliberative democracy (e.g. Smith 2003).

Critics have argued that ‘proxy representation’ for future generations and nonhuman species gives rise to new problems of accountability because the environmental representatives do not have to answer to their constituency. Others have pointed out that those who seek to represent future generations and nonhuman others would have their claims tested in the public sphere (O’Neill 2001). Meanwhile, green democrats welcome the rise of new grassroots democratic initiatives that seek to create new and more ecologically responsible material practices in collective, embodied, and prefigurative ways (Schlosberg and Craven 2019; Eckersley 2019). However, they worry about the growing climate emergency discourse given its potential to legitimate a ‘state of exception’ and the winding back of democratic rights.

References

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