

# Understanding democracy as a product of citizen performances reduces the need for a defined ‘people’

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By Democratic Audit UK

2015-10-8

*In a paper recently presented at the 2015 APSA Annual Meeting, **Liron Lavi** addresses the conflict between the understanding of democracy as ‘the rule of the people’ and the fact that ‘the people’ will always be a heterogeneous, open, and dynamic concept. She writes that if democracy is understood as an effect produced by repetitive performative acts, ‘the people’ is produced as the source of democratic sovereignty and does not need to be a single, coherent entity.*



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Dēmokratía, literally ‘the rule of the people’, is the basis for democracy as a political regime. However, ‘the people’ is a heterogeneous, open, and dynamic entity. So, how can we think about democracy without the people as a coherent entity, yet as the source of democracy? I employ a performative theorisation of democracy in order to answer this question. Democracy, I suggest, is an effect produced by repetitive performative acts and ‘the people’ is produced as the source of democratic sovereignty.

A quick search on ‘democratic performance’ will usually yield results (and concerns) regarding voter competence, government accountability, liberal values, and legitimacy. However, from the perspective of performative theory, the term gains a rather different meaning (as has been discussed at length by [Judith Butler](#)). It suggests that democracy is not a pre-given structure but rather needs to be constructed repeatedly. Thus, for a democracy to be recognised and maintained as such it needs to be *performed* by citizens, institutions, office-holders, the media, etc. Acts made by these players – voting, demonstrating, decision- and- law-making, etc. – give form to the abstract concept of democracy, thus producing it as their (imagined) source. There is, therefore, no finite set of actions that can determine once and for all that a social structure is indeed a democracy, for the regime is not a stable and pre-given structure, but rather produced and imagined through a multitude of acts and procedures.

Elections, for example, are a democratic performance insofar as they are perceived as an effective tool for expressing the public’s preferences and choosing its representatives and desired policies. Polling stations are

therefore the site in which democracy is constituted insofar as all eligible members (can) participate in the act of voting, and therefore are constructed as the source of sovereignty. By this, elections produce democracy as their effect, as their source, and hold together the political imagination of democracy. And they do this periodically, thus open options for new variations (and failures) in the democratic effect they produce. Elections are therefore, not only an opportunity to replace representatives and incumbents, but also an opportunity to perform democracy, shape it, alter it, and load it with various meanings.

The 2008 presidential election in the United States is one example for such a case, as shown in [Thomas Friedman's words](#) in the day after the elections:

*And so it came to pass that on Nov. 4, 2008, shortly after 11 p.m. Eastern time, the American Civil War ended, as a black man — Barack Hussein Obama — won enough electoral votes to become president of the United States.*

*A civil war that, in many ways, began at Bull Run, Virginia, on July 21, 1861, ended 147 years later via a ballot box in the very same state.*

*The Civil War could never truly be said to have ended until America's white majority actually elected an African-American as president.*

In other cases, however, the elections might not be so successful in creating such an effect. When they are perceived as a dysfunctional tool that does not translate citizens' preferences into political outcomes, a flawed democracy is produced (we can think about the 2000 US presidential elections, for example, as a case of such a challenge to the creation of an American democratic effect). In extreme cases the performance of democracy fails completely – the 2005 Iraqi elections may be considered as such a case.

If we are to say that democracy is a product of repetitive performative acts, then who performs it? Butler has stressed that “there is no doer behind the deeds” (see, for example, [here](#) and [here](#)); rather, the subject comes into being through the performance. When we think about democracy from a performative perspective, it is therefore unnecessary to commit to one, concrete ‘people’ that precedes the constitution of democracy. Although democracy is performed, and indeed produced, through acts associated with it, there is no single, ideal, coherent people doing the acts.

The degree of performative success is determined by the successful citation practices associated with democracy. Hence, it is not so much the ‘who’ of democracy, but the ‘what and the ‘how’. ‘The people’ is, from this perspective, a fictive category, a performative agency that facilitates the democratic performance.

This by no means lessens its importance because the people remains a *necessary* fiction for democracy to sustain its appearance as the political regime it is. It becomes a category associated with democracy, much like elections and other practices and institutions required to perform democracy successfully, and it is thus constructed *vis-a-vis* the democratic idea and its performances. There is, therefore, no *a priori* people that precedes the democratic performance insofar as for an act to be considered democratic it needs to produce a people as its source. It also does not mean that democracy and the people are completely open or contingent, changing freely with every performance. Rather, they are constrained by regulatory frames that determine what *is* democracy and what *is* a people that can be said to rule itself. Nonetheless, they are *doings* and not beings. As such, they are flexible, alternating with every performance, facing an option of failure in each and every performative repetition.

To conclude, to claim that democracy is a “deed without a doer” is to suggest that no pre-given people is required in order to rule itself. Alternatively, the people is (potentially) produced by the democratic performative acts as a requirement for a regime to be democratic. From a performative perspective, the absence of a definite people is not

a challenge for democracy, but rather inseparable part of its production as a performative effect. In a performative theory, democracy is repeatedly performed through collective acts that produce it as a stable, knowable, and pre-given regime. From this perspective it is therefore possible to think about 'the rule of the people' without ever committing to one, definite and coherent people.

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*Note: this post represents the views of the authors, and not those of Democratic Audit UK or the LSE. Please read our comments policy before posting.*

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