

**What are the strengths and the weaknesses of liberal minimalism, civic republicanism, and developmental democracy?**

Despite often enormous differences in their key elements, liberal minimalism, civic republicanism and developmental democracy share several strengths and weaknesses.

Held (1996) identifies several key elements of liberal minimalism which differentiate it from other models of democracy. These include the notions of sovereignty lying in the hands of citizens, but being enacted through selected (or elected) representatives, and perhaps more significantly – in terms of comparison with models of government used prior to the development of liberal minimalism – the regular election, by secret ballot, of government representatives in order to hold the government to account without fear or retribution or reprisal. Held also identifies the establishment of a constitution ensuring equality under the law and freedom from arbitrary persecution as well as a separation of political and civil society (ie, lack of interference by government in private matters).

The idea of sovereign power belonging to citizens can be considered a strength. Locke (1943) was strongly opposed to the concept of sovereign power being in the hands of an individual or an elite class. That said, Locke also contended that it is the right of the individual to identify transgressions and appropriate punishment, which conflicts with liberal minimalism's necessary constitutional framework. Locke, at least, would see the representative form of the liberal minimalist model to be weak in that while the representatives are chosen to act on behalf of citizens, the very fact that *they* are the ones acting takes sovereignty away from the citizenry – a powerful weakness. Additionally, Maddox (1991) identifies a perceived weakness in liberal minimalism: the notion that the citizenry may lack the education or motivation to live up to their

responsibilities.

Stokes (2002) identifies a key element of civic republicanism which can be seen as a strength – an expectation of political participation (in local forms such as serving in local government or jury duty, at least). Stokes also identifies a focus on the good of *all* citizens, rather than the good of the majority. This combination can potentially counter the 'weaknesses' of liberal minimalism – a focus on what is best for *everyone* and an expectation of involvement by all citizens would warrant a focus on education and motivation, to ensure everyone can effectively promote the interests of the political community. Barber (1992) contends that these ideas of citizenship are crucial to democracy, as effective participation by all citizens is essential to determine what is truly good for the community of which they form a part.

This same 'strength' can also be perceived as a weakness. Stokes contends that any model focussed on the good of a particular political community – even a broad one, as encouraged by civil republicanism – must be exclusive: broadly, this could mean excluding other political communities (for example, one nation-state putting its goals over those of another); but it can also be a problem internally. It is unlikely that in the expansive communities promoted by civic republicanism that everyone would agree on everything – there are likely to be irreconcilable goals. In a system that is necessarily exclusive, there is great potential for those within a community whose views are seen as detrimental to the universal good to be excluded - or, as Stokes puts it, subjected to 'ultimate discrimination' (2002, p. 34). Locke's criticism is also still relevant – the shift in power has gone from the individual to an 'elite group' – the community as a whole.

Held identifies the developmental democratic model as similar to liberal minimalism, but with a focus on *popular* sovereignty as opposed to *representative*

*democracy* – ie, the views of the raw majority are adopted, rather than ensuring an equal share of power to all facets of the citizenry. Held's (1996, p. 116) description of developmental democracy does, however, also describe a trend towards social justice in developmental democracies – an assurance that those 'left out' of the raw majority are ensured basic social rights (such as a right to work, 'real' income, education and healthcare). This is a strength of the model, which ensures a very basic equality across the community, and ensures a basic level of education and sense of community belonging which encourages informed, motivated involvement in the political process. Held also describes, as a strength, the requirement of developmental democracy for the 'doing' power of government – the actual implementation of the government's/citizens' decisions – to be distributed across multiple bodies with different spheres of influence to prevent a single person or small group passing and implementing self-interested decisions and outcomes.

That said, Macpherson (1977) contends that the trend and social outcomes identified by Held is not guaranteed. Developmental democracy leaves room open for exploitation (*basic rights* don't necessarily guarantee *equal power*) and a focus on popular sovereignty does nothing to encourage a pursuit of the community good, leaving a lot of room for pursuit of 'immediate self-interest' (Macpherson 1977, p. 74).

All three models share several strengths: an effort to provide basic rights and power to all citizens; also, a shift in focus from individual or small elite group sovereignty to, if not everyone in the community, sovereign power at least being distributed across a greater number and variety of people.

Yet while they each have their own unique weaknesses, none fully address the issue of total equality, and without that equality – equality of education, motivation and

individual interest – none of the models can claim to be the best for *all* of the citizens that form the political community over which the government governs.

## References

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