



What makes democratic citizenship democratic?

James Holston 

Department of Anthropology, University of California, Berkeley, CA, USA

ABSTRACT

I contend that parliamentary representative democracy betrays what must be democratic about democratic citizenship – its directness. I examine this betrayal to consider what makes democratic citizenship democratic, what is direct about direct democracy, and how it may provide a means to (re)democratize democracy. To do so, I engage the conundrums about citizenship Aristotle posed in the *Politics*. For millennia, theorists have used Aristotle's dislike of democracy and related misrepresentations to dismiss direct democracy as impossible for large states. Moreover, the problems he raised have roiled political theory ever since because they established two issues that indicate how profoundly democracy troubles citizenship. The first concerns what it means for “the people” to remain sovereign even when most delegate the political powers of their citizenship to others. The second concerns the historical capacity of democracy to transform the political by disrupting entrenched power and legalized inequality. If so, democracy must somehow institutionalize disruption as a resource to keep it vigorous. I examine how the provocations of sovereignty, equality, and disruption democratize citizenship. These problems are unresolvable in a democracy. Their tensions are necessary to mobilize democratization, as Athenian democracy shows. Attempts to resolve them – such as republican representative democracy – destroy its energies.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 13 February 2022
Accepted 14 April 2022

KEYWORDS

Direct democracy;
representative democracy;
democratic citizenship;
Aristotle; Athenian
democracy

We live in a time when many people think that representative democracy is failing. During the last decade, I have studied this evaluation as a component of several ethnographic projects about citizenship.¹ These cases revealed that although people often felt betrayed by representative democracy and were especially attuned to its failures in their lives and communities, they remained committed to ‘democratic citizenship’. They were not clear, however, about how to define this citizenship and quite divided about how to re-democratize democracy. Many understood democratic citizenship as the bedrock of representative democracy where citizens elect their representatives. Others held notions of what we can call direct democracy as the means to re-democratize, in both authoritarian and socialist forms. These findings suggest the following conceptual problem as a condition of democracy's historical and anthropological development: if sovereign power belongs to the political community for which it is established, how to exercise that power has always been especially contentious for democracies. It is accepted that in

a democracy sovereignty belongs to citizens. But both supporters and opponents of democracy have consistently argued throughout its history over whether ‘the people’ are capable of governing themselves directly or, if not, whether they must delegate their sovereign power to supposedly competent representatives and as a result govern indirectly.

When this contestation leads to the usurpation of sovereign power by self-appointed rulers, various forms of authoritarianism emerge such as dictatorship and oligarchy. Otherwise, it typically produces various kinds of delegation to elites and experts – mostly professional politicians, career bureaucrats, and specialized knowledge producers – within some ‘scheme of representation’. This delegation is designed to save the democratic state from the ‘spectacles of turbulence’ supposedly unleashed by direct popular rule, as Madison famously pronounced in *Federalist* No. 10. Ironically, this critique of direct democracy by the democrat Madison is hardly discernible from that of the most vehement anti-democrat.² Moreover, it is certainly paradoxical that the scheme of delegation, election, and representation, which was considered by the ancients and early moderns alike to *contradict* democracy, should have become synonymous with it under regimes of ‘republican democracy’. As a result, the question of democratic self-government – of popular sovereignty with democratic citizenship – remains among the most vexing in political theory and practice.

The problem for democratic rule is therefore that if one wants to counter the anti-(direct) democratic arguments to save the notion of popular sovereignty, one must determine how the multitude of citizens is to exercise its sovereignty. Historically, the modalities of direct democracy provided a compelling answer. I do not refer to plebiscite but rather to assembly, exemplified in the Athenian polis of the fourth and fifth centuries BCE, medieval Swiss cantonal assemblies (Landsgemeinden), eighteenth-century New England town meetings, Iroquois councils (Haudenosaunee), gram sabhas and panchayats of village India, and other assemblies and associations around the world that anthropologists in particular have studied.³ But with the advent of much larger territorial polities with far greater numbers of citizens and of modern conceptions of sovereignty and rule, theorists have consistently considered these solutions inapplicable in modern societies. Hence, Madison denounces direct democracy. Instead, his proposal for political constitution is the ‘delegation of government to a small number of citizens elected by the rest’ (1961a, 76) – that is, indirect representation and mass voting – as the best means to solve the modern problems of scale and time, control ‘the tyranny of passion of majority factions’, and, one must not forget, secure property.

Yet I have found, in both the historical record and my own case studies, that this brilliant double thrust always leads to an impasse of betrayal. It has been remarkably successful as the basis for so-called liberal democracy. However, its delegation of democratic government to parliamentary systems dominated by techno-professional elites, and its subordination of active citizenship to jural, has also fueled the persistent sense that it betrays the foundational principle of democratic popular sovereignty as government of the people by the people. In recent decades, this sense of betrayal has provoked extraordinary insurrections of ‘the people’ in the forms of metropolitan rebellion and xenophobic nationalism.⁴ It fuels a rage of global intensity against liberal representative democracy that, not incongruously, again poses direct democracy as antidote across the political spectrum: Occupy storms cities with alternative conceptions of rights prefigured

in direct assemblies; populist movements embrace unmediated expressions of the people's will, often racist and sexist; municipalities enact urban citizenships based on direct participation of residents rather than delegated national belonging. As a result, rebels demanding some form of direct democracy, from assemblies to digital consultations, are as diverse as Urban Occupiers, Hong Kong resisters, Santiago cabildoists, French yellow vests, Five Star internauts, Brazilian Bolsonaroistas, American white supremacists, and partisans of political parties around the world channeling the vox populi while promoting varieties of ethno-authoritarianism.

These metropolitan and populist mobilizations constitute a people's critique of existing democracy. At its root, I suggest, is the sense that parliamentary representative democracy betrays what must be democratic about democratic citizenship – its directness – and that the antidote may be found in direct democracy. In this essay, I examine both aspects of this critique to consider what makes democratic citizenship democratic, what is direct about direct democracy, and how it may provide a means to (re)democratize democracy.

The conundrums of Aristotle

To engage these questions, I begin with the conundrums about citizenship Aristotle posed in the *Politics*. I do so not only because they are the source and still potent referent for millennial debates in political theory about democratic citizenship. It is also especially because Aristotle's own dislike of democracy and related misrepresentations have been used by theorists from Cicero on to dismiss direct democracy as impossible for large complex states. Aristotle's answers to his own conundrums are surely significant components of what vexes democracy, and it is important to clarify why. But the problems he posed have roiled political theory ever since because they established two sets of issues that indicate how profoundly democracy troubles citizenship, namely, issues of popular sovereignty and equality.

The first concerns the constitution and exercise of the supreme authority of 'the people': if democracy means 'rule by the people', what exactly does it mean for the people to rule with supreme power in a constitution for government; and, correlatively, can the multitude remain sovereign in a meaningful way even when most people delegate the political powers of their citizenship to others and never actually govern? The second set concerns the historical force of democracy to transform the political by disrupting entrenched power and legalized inequality. My argument is that democracy's critique of the constitution of political community lies in its immanent and insurgent faculty to disrupt it, to problematize citizenship and destabilize its differentiations.⁵ This problem circles back to the first: if a key attribute of democratic citizenship is its capacity to subvert inequality, then it must somehow institutionalize disruption as a political resource to keep it vigorous, to democratize democracy consistently and durably. It must attain stability but avoid becoming an entrenchment. My contention is that these sets of provocations democratize citizenship, inciting it with problems of sovereignty and government, equalization and differentiation, and disruption and institutionalization. I contend that in a democracy there is no resolution to these problems. Their tensions are necessary to mobilize democratization, and attempts to resolve them – such as 'representative democracy' – destroy its energies and betray it. In contrast, direct democracy provides the institutional and procedural framework that enables democratization.

To be sure, Athenian direct democracy had features we roundly condemn. It limited citizenship to males of Athenian parentage. Its citizens lived off the labor of slaves, foreigners, and women, all of whom were denied political rights. But the remarkable achievement that it maintained for two hundred years was of two related kinds. One advanced institutions of equality, without which democracy is impossible. For the first time in recorded history, it made all freeborn males political equals, regardless of any other differences in wealth, birth, family or individual ability. Having abolished debt-slavery among Athenians and property qualifications for citizenship, it gave all male citizens, including the poorest, equal rights to participate in the political realm of the People's Assembly and its offices, administer justice in the People's Court, debate and determine policy, and act in the collective body. Moreover, it did so at large scale, involving as many as 60,000 political citizens in the fifth century BCE. That does not mean that all performed their citizenship equally, but rather that they had an equal chance to do so through the lottery system they developed to assign most offices. The other extraordinary innovation was that Athenian democracy deliberately embraced the inherent disruptions of democracy as essential to its spirit and renewal. Its genius was to reject the temptation of resolution and rather to maintain provocation. They did so, as we shall see, through the invention of institutions, procedures of government, and a theater of politics for direct democracy.

Athens is not the source of direct democracy, and it is important to shift attention to other examples. But for 2500 years, from the constitutional reforms of Cleisthenes in 508/7 to the Macedonian conquest in 322/1 BCE, it has been its best documented and most debated case. Understanding why anti-democrats overwhelmingly use it to dismiss direct democracy for modern states is key to evaluating whether their arguments are erroneous, as I suggest. We can certainly imagine other political communities for our own needs and times. But as a result of the hegemony of republican anti-democrats, modern citizens mostly have no experience with direct democracy. What we lack in consequence is not the political imagination but the institutions and technologies of government to make direct democracy possible. The Athenian polis developed and sustained such a constitutional framework for its popular sovereignty. Once we set out its basic attributes, as I do here, we see that most remain effective and viable. The problem, then as now, is that they threaten political formations that rely on assumptions of oligarchy and that operate, as today, under the guise of 'representative democracy'. Yet precisely because they are subversive, they are necessary to sustain democracy's habit.

Aristotle (1995, 1275a1-3) opens Book 3 of the *Politics* with a conundrum: 'There is no general agreement on who is a citizen. It may be that someone who is a citizen in a democracy is not one in an oligarchy'. So what makes citizenship in a democracy democratic? My excavation of this question relies on a close reading of the *Politics* in several translations (e.g. 1995 and 1998). But, alas, given strict word limits, I have no space to elaborate that reading here. I will therefore have to leave it for another occasion and leap directly to conclusions.

Aristotle (1995, 1275a22-32) defines democratic citizenship in performative terms: citizens are those who may attend the Assembly, hold the offices it assigns, and serve in courts in the administration of justice as both prosecutors and jurors.⁶ He addresses the conundrum about popular sovereignty through two conceptual framings. Most offices of citizenship have term limits. However, the two most important – the offices of

assemblyman and juryman – are held ‘indefinitely’ (*aoristos*) by citizens in virtue of their citizenship and no other criteria. This constitutional feature means that the citizens of a democracy are sovereign (*kurios*): because they hold these two offices indefinitely, they cannot divest themselves of their power by transferring it to other magistracies. In all other cases, the power of office is granted by the Assembly only for a limited time before reverting back to it. Sovereignty is therefore the appropriate conceptual designation for this supreme, absolute, and perpetual power held by the people.⁷ Aristotle considers that this sovereign citizenry comprises the entire people (*dēmos*) of Athens and includes all classes. Like other critics, he judges it to be dominated by the interests of the poor (*plēthos*) because they are by far the most numerous.

Aristotle (1995, 1278b9-12) states that in a democracy the sovereign civic body of the people is the constitutional organization of offices (‘the *politeuma* is the *politeia*’). His word play here asserts the key point: in the case of (direct) democracy, both the people and the administration of its affairs are simultaneously sovereign. There is no conceptual separation of powers, no unitary sovereignty, no contradiction between the sovereignty of popular will and the sovereignty of government as there came to be in modern times with political theorists working in the lineage of Bodin (e.g. Hobbes, Rousseau, Condorcet, and Madison). In Athenian democracy, the Assembly structures, populates, and directs the constitution of offices and the administration of justice, and this constitution enables the civic body of the people to do so. It was a contentious relation between multiple authorities, a contestation Athenians courted. As any citizen could become a prosecutor as well as a defendant, and citizens had a great variety of legal resources at their disposal, Athens was a most litigious society. But the very abundance of legal actions made explicit the sovereignty of the multitude in its power to hold individuals, especially elites, accountable.⁸

Aristotle (1995, 1279b7-20) dislikes the simultaneous sovereignty of democracy because it ‘is directed to the interest of the poor’, being the majority, flamed by demagogues and enacted by rash decrees. He (Aristotle 1995, 1281b3) admits that collectively the people may have some ‘share of virtue and practical wisdom’. However, as most people are undistinguished, uneducated, and rude, these attributes characterize democracy. When sovereign, they erode the common good and make democracy a ‘wrong’ regime. Thus, he condemns democracy always in the measure to which popular sovereignty is simultaneous with that of law and argues that ‘law should be sovereign on every issue’ (Aristotle 1995, 1292a32). Indeed, he becomes the source in later political theory for this doctrine. Given that aristocracy is his ideal regime, it is not surprising that he would prioritize the sovereignty of law since it favors an elite regime of experts.

Practically, Aristotle (1995, 1281b23) wants to know how exactly, in terms of procedures, shares, offices, and institutions ‘freemen [the multitude] ... should properly exercise sovereignty?’ With this question, he engages the key issue of competence. On one side, he (Aristotle 1995, 1282a16-17) admits that ‘when they meet together’, the people generally exhibit collective wisdom ‘either better than experts or at any rate no worse’. On the other, he (Aristotle 1995, 1281a4 and 1281b26-34) is adamant that individually each ‘may not be of good quality’ and therefore cannot be entrusted with ‘the highest offices’. However, to let the masses have no share in government risks

producing a city ‘full of enemies’. Of great consequence for future republics, his normative answer is to take a Solonian approach: ‘let them share in deliberative and judicial functions . . . allow [them] to elect officials and to call them to account at the end of their tenure of office, but not to hold office themselves in their individual capacity’.

Which offices is he referring to? According to Hansen’s (1999, 230–236) broadly accepted analysis, there were approximately 1200 offices in fourth century Athens. Their abundance provided ample opportunity for citizens to exercise their sovereignty and receive a practical political education. About 1100 were selected by lottery from among citizens over 30 years old who presented themselves for assignment.⁹ Almost all these offices were selected once a year because tenure only lasted one year and could not be held by the same person twice. They included the nine highest *archons*, the officials who had once been elected to run the city but after reforms in the early fifth century were selected by double sortition. The rest were selected by one allotment from a pool of about 30,000 adult male citizens – down from 60,000 in the fifth century due to war, famine, and plague – in Hansen’s estimation, out of a total citizen population of 100–150,00 in Attica including women and children. All selected magistrates underwent an examination before the People’s Court before entering office. Considered especially important to the welfare of the polis, the remaining 100 magistrates were elected by show of hands at the Assembly.¹⁰ Officials were held accountable by inspection of financial records and consideration of possible abuses of power.¹¹

Given the relatively great number of both citizens and offices, Athenian direct democracy was not a small-scale, face-to-face polis, where citizens mostly knew each other, but rather large in scope and operation. Nevertheless, the widespread idea that direct democracy must be rejected in large modern states because it only works in face-to-face societies is broadly traceable to an assumption that the Athenian polis was such a small-scale democracy. It is based on a misreading of Aristotle’s *Politics*, which modern historiography corrects. In Book 7.4, Aristotle discusses the proper size of the civic body for his ideal (aristocratic) society. He argues that it should be comprised of a fraction of the population, small enough so that its citizens would know each other personally and on that basis be able to evaluate their suitability for office. His discussion of scale is normative, developed to contrast with what he judged to be the perversions of the actual large-scale direct democracy of Athens.

We can now draw conclusions about the conundrums of democratic citizenship in Athens. I glean them from Aristotle’s mixed normative and ethnographic account of political sovereignty and constitution, informed by the research of classicists into the actual historical record, in particular, Hansen (1999), Lord and O’Connor (1991), Ober (1989), and Ostwald (1986). This conjunction permits us to identify the features in effect by 400 BCE that enabled the Athenian demos to exercise its sovereignty directly, with reasonable expectations of competence and security, and at a large scale:

(1) All male citizens had the right to full political participation in the ruling Assembly and its constitution of offices, without any property qualifications or capacity restrictions. (2) There was no election of representatives to the Assembly; rather, citizens participated directly, and its office holders made binding (not consultative) decisions through direct deliberation within the framework of collegial bodies (assemblies, juries, and councils) that exercised full legal power and administered justice. (3) The Assembly met often – forty times a year in the fourth century – with a normal quorum of 6000 people, and its

agenda was set by a council of 500 citizens chosen annually by lottery. (4) The overwhelming number of offices was assigned by the chance of lottery. (5) Offices were rotated on a prescribed short-term basis, could not be held by the same person twice, and were abundant. (6) Magistrates were examined pre-tenure and held accountable post-tenure. (7) All citizens could act as both prosecutors and jurors. (8) Although a birthright of filiation, citizenship had to be performed in the political realm to be fully realized. (9) Sovereignty and government were not distinguished as spheres of power, and thus governing agencies had no authority distinct from that of the Assembly that empowered them.

These features are fundamental attributes that distinguish *democratic* citizenship. Four are also foundational for direct democracy and distinguish it from representative, namely, 1, 2, 4 and 9. I emphasize that these features structure relations between three principal agents as important in the ancient polis as the modern – the people as a collective body, officeholders, and wealth-based elites – in terms of specific conditions of political membership that make the public sphere thus constituted democratic. First, they generate the capacity of the people to act directly as a collective body of citizens without delegating authority to representatives. Second, they diminish the accumulation of power in the hands of magistrates and control their actions, especially through short-term rotation of offices and assignment by lottery. In that way, they diminish the attraction of office for the consolidation of power and impede the entrenchment of governing factions. To be sure, factional struggles remained a feature of Athenian democracy, but they were characterized by short-term victories rather than long-term entrenchments of rule. Third, they erode the privileges of wealth, especially through rotation and lottery. In conjunction with three additional features I consider next, these attributes enabled the people of Athens to remain sovereign and govern while inhibiting the formation of oligarchy (rule of the rich). They institutionalize the disruption of privilege and make it characteristic of democratic citizenship. Unlike other kinds, democratic citizenship always presents the conundrums of popular sovereignty and gnaws at their bones of contention.

A second set of fundamental problems in Aristotle's consideration of democratic citizenship concerns equality. When a constitution is constructed on 'the principle that its members are equals' (Aristotle 1995, 1279a9-20), they exercise authority in the common interest, follow procedures such as the short-term rotation of office that benefit fellow citizens, and produce 'right constitutions' in contrast to 'wrong ones' that privilege self-interest (like democracy). However, what Aristotle means by 'equality' becomes enormously complicated. He shows in Chapter 9 (Aristotle 1995, 1279b34-1280a2) that the real difference between oligarchy and democracy is wealth (riches vs poverty) and not number of rulers (few vs many). The latter is only an 'accidental attribute' because the wealthy are generally few and the poor many. Hence, the constitution of equal political rule in democracy must contend with the differences of vast social inequalities among citizens in the private realm. This is a key problem. Inequalities of wealth dominate the nonpolitical spheres of social relations, saturating its particulars with unequal distributions of resources and powers. Given such differences, how can the polis secure a fair distribution of opportunity to participate in political life? How can it prevent the expectations of wealth-based superiority supported in the private sphere from privatizing the public?

Athenians instituted three innovations to address these problems of inequality. Taking effect during the fifth century, they made full political participation possible at all levels of government for ordinary laboring citizens – not only the ‘middling’ farmers and hoplites but all citizens including subsistence farmers, wage laborers, and the indigent. This was a remarkable achievement. We have already discussed the use of lots to select most magistrates. This method made office-holding a matter of equal chance and in that radical way leveled the playing field of power. The second innovation was the recognition of the right of all citizens to speak and make proposals in the Assembly. This right to ‘stand and speak’ – *isēgoria* – of all citizens regardless of education and wealth transformed the Assembly into the primary locus of political debate and decision for the demos. On the one hand, *isēgoria* puts a premium on rhetorical skills as an attribute of political leadership and thus favors the educated. On the other, it must also be paired with the skills of active rather than passive listening to speech. Assemblymen had to be skilled listeners so that they could consider proposals and respond. Indeed, while most ordinary citizens probably did not speak in the Assembly, the expectations of democratic citizenship required all citizens to know the issues of debate, distinguish sense from nonsense, and make informed judgments.¹² The right to speak and to listen actively was the cornerstone of democratic equality, disrupting elite privilege in every institution.

The third innovation of equal political participation was the provision of pay for government service. Implemented by the middle of the fifth century, citizens received remuneration from the state for attending the Assembly and serving on juries, councils, and other offices. As Ober (1989, 81) details, this pay made it possible for laboring citizens to participate without suffering a prohibitive loss of income in the formation of state policy as well as the interpretation of law. Since offices were distributed by lottery, it is surely the case that with the introduction of state pay for service, many office holders were ordinary citizens and that the peopling of office therefore reflected the diversity of Athens’s citizenry. This distribution impeded the concentration of offices in the hands of elites or indeed of any faction, while short-term duration, rotation, and lottery circumscribed their powers.

Aristotle also puzzles, famously, over the relationship between justice and equality which equal access to the political realm does not solve: is it just to base political equality on the measure of (arithmetic) sameness or on the measure of (geometric) merit? He condemns democracy for the ‘injustice’ of treating everyone the same regardless of other differences. This condemnation leads to a rabbit hole from which he cannot escape except through idealization. It is a discussion of tremendous consequence for ‘the politics of difference’, but I have no space to engage it.¹³ I suggest that Aristotle’s theory of regime types does not allow him to conceptualize that democratic citizenship in fact uses both conceptions of justice for office holding – i.e. treating the equal equally and treating the unequal unequally according to the measure of their inequality – and entangles them in chronic struggle. If we accept that democracy precludes easy resolution, then we may see that this conundrum confronts democracy with the shortcomings of ahistorical concepts of citizenship. That is, it insists that when viewed historically, the dichotomy of so-called difference-blind and difference-specific citizenships collapses.

Historically considered, all citizenships struggle in managing the differences they distinguish among citizens and between citizens and noncitizens. The right of *isēgoria* may be legislated to ignore social differences of class and education. In that way, it may be

considered difference neutral. But the citizenship that makes it meaningful had to problematize these differences to produce it. All citizenships that aspire to egalitarian principles must engage this calculation of differences and equalities, of meritocratic worth and radical sameness (e.g. affirmative action vs habeas corpus) and generally have considerable difficulty doing so. The democratic component of democratic citizenship forces this conflict in calculations to become explicit and demands regular reassessments.

Democracy's critique of citizenship

Aristotle's conundrums about politics lead us to conclude that if we understand citizenship as membership in a political community, then it becomes democratic when provoked by the problems of sovereignty and government, equalization and differentiation, and disruption and stability we identified. What makes democratic citizenship democratic is the critique of the constitution of the political that these problems force into the open. The democratic component is the insurgent faculty of democracy to transform the political through this exposure. Anti-democrats resist this engagement, proposing conceptions of the political that indicate a resolution of these problems of sovereignty, equality, and institutionalization. But democracy's disruptions are especially forceful because they are unfinished, unresolved, insurgent incitements to erode entrenchments of power and destabilize inequality. They unsettle, provoke, probe, and transform. To those in power, they are intolerable intrusions into established ways of doing politics; to those without a share, they are revolutionary.

If democracy's aptitude is to problematize citizenship, then the popular sovereignty that establishes democracy's rule must incorporate disruption as a political resource to keep democratic citizenship vitalized, to democratize democracy persistently. Failure to do so is what Arendt (1963, 232) identifies as the 'lost treasure' of revolution: 'the failure of post-revolutionary thought to remember the revolutionary spirit and to understand it conceptually was preceded by the failure of the revolution to provide it with a lasting institution . . . for the exercise of precisely those qualities which had been instrumental in building [it]'. This impasse derives from the seemingly irreconcilable contradiction between popular sovereignty and government within the revolutionary spirit itself, namely, that at the foundation of a revolution, the concern with the durability of the new structures of government is entwined with 'the exhilarating awareness of the human capacity of beginning' (223). But without institutionalizing this entanglement of disruption and stability post-revolution, which seems so difficult, the contradiction between them hardens into opposites and 'this opposition is itself among the symptoms of our loss' (ibid).

What we have lost in the modern republican nation-state, one grounded in European and American revolutions, is the democratic component of citizenship. What we feel as a result, if we care, is betrayal and anger. The founders of republican forms of political constitution reject democratic government in its direct assembly-based form as a model for large territorial states. They target Athenian democracy as prime example, and their rejection consistently reiterates the same set criticisms, often derived from the *Politics*: the supposed incompetence of the masses to rule due to their ignorance and irrationality; their lack of time and money to devote to government; the impossibility of gathering

large populations into face-to-face assemblies; and the ‘spectacles of turbulence’ that led direct democracies to short lives and violent deaths. They advocate the republican as antidote to the democratic. While I have no space for elaboration, it is important to observe that the founders of modern republican forms (e.g. Hobbes, Rousseau and Madison) do so primarily through two conceptual innovations: they distinguish sovereignty from government – so that, for example, ‘the people’ could retain its sovereignty through plebiscites about fundamental laws but not participate in either their deliberation or administration; and, they develop schemes of representation through the delegation of authority to professional experts, based on notions of resemblance (re-presenting a likeness of the people in an elected parliament) or authorization (through ratification of charters or acceptance of protection). These republican innovations restrict popular sovereignty to occasional non-deliberative plebiscites and assign government to small parliamentary bodies of selected experts. The latter are legitimated by one theory of representation or another and allow the assembled people no institutional role.¹⁴ In such ways, republican government intends to counteract the supposed chaos, incompetence, and threat of direct democracy by the multitude.

To call this republican scheme of delegated government ‘democracy’ is a travesty. Republicans fear and reject the answers that Aristotle identified to the conundrums he posed about democratic citizenship: that democracy destabilizes entrenched power, privilege, and inequality and that democratic rule depends on figuring out how to institutionalize this disruption as a reliable political resource for government *in the interest of the masses*. Both components subvert the (oligarchic) self-interests of republicans to govern by a few (the wealthy), without the assembled people, undemocratically. They erode notions of the superiority of birth and of ‘the best’ that elites espouse. The predicament of democracy is the institutionalization of this disruptive force. Balibar (2015, 18) makes a similar point: ‘it is not that we must throw out constitutions in favor of insurrections, but rather that we must place the insurrectional power to emancipate at the core of political constitutions’. The question is how? How does the multitude exercise its sovereignty to retain the insurgent elements of democracy as a resource for government? How does it institutionalize Arendt’s spirit of revolution?

In my investigation of Aristotle’s conundrums, I identified 12 features of the Athenian polis and its democratic citizenship that achieved just that – nine to address problems of sovereignty and government and three of inequality. Assignment of office by lot addresses both. The complementarity of these features provided the institutions, procedures, and opportunities to establish direct democracy as organized norms of political constitution. They were deeply reinforced, moreover, by the Athenian development of rhetoric and theater, as Ober (1989, 205) brilliantly analyzes as ‘methods at the level of ideology’.

I focus on institutionalization to show that it counters not only the arguments anti-democrats deploy to disparage Athenian democratic citizenship. I use it also to counter their rejection on that basis of direct democracy as inappropriate for modern territorial polities. On the contrary, Athens shows that direct democracy is fully possible at large scale in a complex society. Athenian democracy was not incompetently governed or unstable. These accusations are false. It lasted two hundred years, with moments of crisis to be sure, but with remarkable longevity and consistency. By providing public pay for government service, the Athenian polis made it possible for working-class citizens to

participate in the political realm, with adequate time and devotion, and practice their citizenship at all levels of government. They did so massively. The characterization of Athenian democracy as small-scale and face-to-face is simply false, one based on Aristotle's ideal rather than fact. The problem of scale for assembly-based direct democracy does not vanish in consequence but needs to be rethought (for example, through networked convocations). Even the distinction between 'representative' and 'direct' as opposing types of democracy is fallacious from the perspective of direct democracy. Direct may include selecting representatives by lot, election, self-selection, proxy voting, and other means.

To control office, limit entrenchments of political power and undermine privileges of biography, Athenians used methods of sortition, rotation, short-term limits, and accountability for competence. Most importantly, assignment by lot established the rule of equality by chance in the distribution of office. It determined not only that everyone among citizens could govern but more outrageously for anti-democrats that *anyone* of them could govern.¹⁵ Sortition asserted the Athenian confidence that anyone could become reasonably competent in office (in any case, for a short time).

To ensure the capacity of the people to act collectively and keep the life of politics vital, Athenian democracy required that citizenship be fully activated through performance in its key institutions in both the neighborhood and the city. Democratic citizenship was most fully nourished by the equal right of all citizens to attend and speak at the People's Assembly and to participate as both prosecutor and juror in the People's Court. It was no less fortified by the right of all citizens to participate, by lottery assignment, in its numerous collegial bodies. In all cases, decisions made by members were binding and not merely recommendations to a higher authority. As Athenian political institutions met frequently and entailed an abundance of offices, they provided a robust practical education in citizenship. Although elites (such as Aristotle) thought that elections favored 'the best', democrats considered that they fostered the professionalization of politics – which they distrusted – the interests of the rich, and corruption. Hence, they insisted on using sortition to distribute political office to deter all three.

The conjunction of these features of direct democracy constitutes the institutionalization of a regular, even daily, predictable and reliable democratization of political life. They institute the spirit of disruption to unsettle the entrenched and unequal in tandem with the need to ensure the stability of constitutional rule. They answer the conundrums about democratic citizenship that Aristotle posed in the *Politics* about the exercise of popular sovereignty and the attainment of political equality in the context of vast social inequalities. They are in sum what makes democratic citizenship democratic.

That republicans reject direct democracy is not because it is too old or feeble, not because it is unscalable or favors the incompetent, not because it could not work in modern times. It is because its citizenship is outrageously inconvenient for us moderns who are always occupied with private interests. Democratic citizenship distracts from the seductions of private life. It erodes the powers of wealth and expert knowledge that yield privilege. It sabotages assumptions about superior birth and merit. It disrupts the notion that freedom means to acquire without limit and consume from a maximum of options. Setting out the democratic components of democratic citizenship in plain sight, as I have

done with the help of Aristotle, may perhaps provide an opportunity for reimagining its conditions of possibility. If nothing else, it shows just how diminished is the republican citizenship we (mis)call democratic.

Notes

1. In three projects, I combined digital and in-person assemblies: participatory budgeting in Vallejo, California; strategic master planning for the seven-campus Federal University of São Paulo, Brazil; and community-based mosquito vector control to combat dengue in Nicaragua.
2. 'Hence it is that such democracies have ever been spectacles of turbulence and contention; have ever been found incompatible with personal security or the rights of property; and have in general been as short in their lives as they have been violent in their deaths.' (Madison 1961a, 76).
3. The literature is enormous. An example for each modality is Hansen (1999), Barber (1974), Zuckerman (1970), Morgan (1962), Hansen and Stepputat (2006) and Appadurai (2002).
4. I have investigated metropolitan rebellion in (Holston 2019).
5. I have researched the force of this critique in my ethnographic and historical studies of Brazilian citizenship (e.g. Holston 2008). I showed that in the development of the poor peripheries of Brazilian cities, the historical sites of citizen differentiation – political rights, access to land, illegality, servility – fueled the irruption of an insurgent citizenship among the working classes that destabilized entrenched differentiated citizenship.
6. Athenian citizenship also had to be performed as a coming-of-age ritual to be fully activated. At eighteen, young men had to claim by oath membership in their local neighborhood assembly as a requirement for city-wide citizenship. See Hansen (1999, 96–97).
7. Whether 'sovereign' is the best English gloss of the Greek *kurios* is much debated. Some translators, such as Reeve (Aristotle 1998), use the word 'authority' instead. See Hoekstra (2016) for an interesting discussion.
8. Worth noting is the institution of ostracism which gave the Assembly the right to banish any citizen by democratic vote, with no justification required, making it a public demonstration of the absolute sovereignty of the collective body of deliberating citizens. See Kagan (1961) and Ober (1989, 73–75). For more on the 'simultaneity of popular and legal sovereignty in Athens', see Ober (1989, 300–302), as well as Hansen (1999, 150–155) on Athenian litigation.
9. Selected by lot from an annual list of 6000 citizens, a typical jury might have 200 members for a private trial and 500 for a public (Ober 1989, 142). Hansen (1999, 187) notes juries of 2000 for high-profile public trials. These astonishing numbers indicate a most complex system of allotment and procedure.
10. Hansen's list of elected magistrates includes all military generals, the most important financial officers, some high priests, the director of the city's water supply, the military trainers of young citizens, and envoys. Any citizen could be proposed and elected for these posts, even in absentia. The extent to which the election of these officeholders constituted a representative component is an interesting question. Direct democracy may include representation by election (or other methods) but, generally, not vice versa (see Manin 1997). However, the mere fact of election does not make it representative. To be so would require a theory of political representation about what is being re-presented and in what manner. To my knowledge, Athenians had no such theory. As they did not distinguish between popular sovereignty and government, a theory of political representation would be unnecessary. The elected military general and city treasurer were not selected and did not serve to re-present the people as a whole or by constituencies but rather to perform a specific job as the best qualified individual.
11. See Lane (2016) for the control of office through such procedures.

12. See Hansen (1999, 146) for discussion of relations between speakers and audience during Assembly debate and Ober (1989, 169-174) on the distrust of the rhetorical skills of politicians.
13. For Greek conceptions of equality, see (Harvey 1965) and (Vlastos 1984).
14. Space precludes citations for Hobbes and Rousseau (see Tuck 2016), but note Madison: In *Federalist* No. 10, he (1961a, 76) contrasts the ‘pure democracy’ of the ancients ‘consisting of a small number of citizens, who assemble and administer the government in person,’ with the modern republic based on ‘the scheme of representation’. In discussing the American Senate in *Federalist* No. 63, he (1961b, 385) discloses that ‘the true distinction between these [ancient democracies] and the American governments lies in the total exclusion of the people in their collective capacity, from any share in the latter’ (emphasis original).
15. Rancière (2006, 94) makes this point forcefully.

Acknowledgments

I am grateful to Engin Isin for his insightful comments that sharpened my arguments.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Notes on contributor

James Holston is a political anthropologist. He is professor of anthropology at the University of California, Berkeley, where he is also founding director of the Social Apps Lab. His research focuses on the city as a strategic site for the emergence and erosion of citizenship, popular sovereignty, and democracy. He also develops software platforms for democratic citizenship, public health, and planning. His books include *The Modernist City: An Anthropological Critique of Brasília*, *Cities and Citizenship*, and *Insurgent Citizenship: Disjunctions of Democracy and Modernity in Brazil*. His software projects include AppCivist.org and DengueChat.org which engage people in assembly-based direct democracy. They have been implemented for participatory budgeting (Vallejo, CA), master planning (São Paulo, Brazil), and citizen entomology for arbovirus vector control (Managua, Nicaragua). He has conducted extensive research in Brazil and is currently engaged in collaborative projects in Brazil, Denmark, Nicaragua, Peru, and the United States.

ORCID

James Holston  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-6712-3767>

References

- Appadurai, A. 2002. “Deep Democracy: Urban Governmentality and the Horizon of Politics.” *Public Culture* 14 (1): 21–47. doi:10.1215/08992363-14-1-21.
- Arendt, H. 1963. *On Revolution*. London: Penguin Books.
- Aristotle. 1995. *Politics*. Translated by R. F. Stalley. Revised Ernest Barker Translation. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Aristotle. 1998. *Politics*. Translated by C. D. C. Reeve. Indianapolis: BHackett.
- Balibar, É. 2015. *Citizenship*, Translated by T. Scott-Railton. Cambridge: Polity Press.

- Barber, B. R. 1974. *The Death of Communal Liberty: Freedom in a Swiss Mountain Canton*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Hansen, M. H. 1999. *The Athenian Democracy in the Age of Demosthenes: Structure, Principles, and Ideology*. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press.
- Hansen, T. B., and F. Stepputat. 2006. "Sovereignty Revisited." *Annual Review of Anthropology* 35: 295–315. doi:10.1146/annurev.anthro.35.081705.123317.
- Harvey, F. D. 1965. "Two Kinds of Equality." *Classica et Mediaevalia* 26: 101–146.
- Hoekstra, K. 2016. "Athenian Democracy and Popular Tyranny." In *Popular Sovereignty in Historical Perspective*, edited by R. Bourke and Q. Skinner, 15–51. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Holston, J. 2008. *Insurgent Citizenship: Disjunctions of Democracy and Modernity in Brazil*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Holston, J. 2019. "Metropolitan Rebellions and the Politics of Commoning the City." *Anthropological Theory* 19 (1): 120–142. doi:10.1177/1463499618812324.
- Kagan, D. 1961. "The Origin and Purposes of Ostracism." *Hesperia* 30: 393–401. doi:10.2307/147043.
- Lane, M. 2016. "Popular Sovereignty as Control of Office-Holders: Aristotle on Greek Democracy." In *Popular Sovereignty in Historical Perspective*, edited by R. Bourke and Q. Skinner, 52–72. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Lord, C. , and O'Connor D. K., eds. 1991. *Essays on the Foundations of Aristotelian Political Science*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Madison, J. 1961a. "No. 10." In *The Federalist Papers*, edited by C. Rossiter, 71–79. New York: Signet Classics.
- Madison, J. 1961b. "No. 63." In *The Federalist Papers*, edited by C. Rossiter, 380–388. New York: Signet Classics.
- Manin, B. 1997. *The Principles of Representative Government*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Morgan, L. H. 1962. *League of the Iroquois*. Secaucus, NJ: Citadel Press.
- Ober, J. 1989. *Mass and Elite in Democratic Athens: Rhetoric, Ideology, and the Power of the People*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Ostwald, M. 1986. *From Popular Sovereignty to the Sovereignty of Law: Law, Society, and Politics in Fifth-Century Athens*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Rancière, J. 2006. *Hatred of Democracy*, Translated by S. Corcoran. London: Verso.
- Tuck, R. 2016. "Democratic Sovereignty and Democratic Government: The Sleeping Sovereign." In *Popular Sovereignty in Historical Perspective*, edited by R. Bourke and Q. Skinner, 115–141. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Vlastos, G. 1984. "Justice and Equality." In *Theories of Rights*, edited by J. Waldron, 41–76. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Zuckerman, M. 1970. *Peaceable Kingdoms: New England Towns in the Eighteenth Century*. New York: Norton.