

How Much Democracy for the University?

By Carl Cohen

DOES EVERY PERSON have a right to a voice in the decisions that affect his life? The answer is no; the frequent claim to that right, however well-intentioned, is confused and mistaken. When decision-making processes, especially in universities, are altered so as to guarantee that alleged right to students, custodians, and vice-presidents, we may expect the consequences to be bad. They often are. There is no such right.

In support of the claim to that right the argument (when any is given) comes generally to this: "Giving to every person a voice, direct or indirect, in decisions that affect his life is simply the operational meaning of democracy. Since most of us are committed to the democratic process, we cannot consistently deny the right in question." This is a classical illustration of the question begged. Is that what we mean by democracy? Surely not.

Democracy means different things to different people, of course—but there is a common core of meaning, abused by those who seek to advance partisan objectives by attaching to them the name of democracy. The philosophical kernel to which all may readily assent is this: Democratic government is self-government, government in which the authority to make and enforce the rules rests in the membership of the community over which the rules have force. Democracy is a system of community government in which decisions facing that community as a whole are reached through the participation of its equal members. The modes of participation vary enormously, of course, as do the kinds and sizes of communities that may so govern themselves. But it is certain that where there is to be democracy there must be some self-conscious community of equals seeking to govern themselves.

Thus conceived, democracy is a deeply worthy ideal, a form of government solidly defensible on grounds both moral and empirical. I can't take up that defense here, but I do want to show that from this honorable ideal, widely and rightly shared, seriously mistaken inferences have commonly been drawn.

THERE ARE, to be sure, many decisions affecting my life in which I do have a right to a voice. In a community of equals, regarding matters of common concern, to deprive some of their voice is to treat equals unequally without justification. If I am a citizen of a genuinely democratic community, I do indeed have a right to participate in making the decisions properly to be made by that community.

On the other hand, to see that there are some decisions affecting me in which I do not have the right to a voice is to see some of the appropriate limits of democracy, to see that there are contexts in which democracy does not apply and communities in which it is not a justifiable ideal. To recognize this is not to denigrate democracy but to understand it for what it is. It is a procedural system greatly to be respected, the best and most just mode of governing communities of certain kinds. But it is not universally ideal where decisions are to be made, nor is it in every context indisputably the supreme value. In universities above all we must take care not to muddy and cheapen our own ideals with careless rhetoric.

Now to be explicit. There are three classes of cases in which I may not be entitled to a voice in decisions that affect my life.

Category 1: Communities of Unequals. A community in which members are clearly not equals is one in which democracy is out of order with respect to the matters on which the inequality is recognized. The equality (or inequality) to be weighed may be either of *concern* (stake in the outcome) or of *standing* (nature of the membership in the community).

In political communities, at least, we are right to think of everyone as having an equally serious stake in the outcomes of decision-making, and in such communities (cities, townships, states) all who are citizens are citizens equally, with fully equal standing. But in non-political communities inequality of standing is common, and critical. In the secondary-school classroom (for example), teacher and pupils are certainly members of one community, but are so clearly of unequal standing in that community that an equal voice in its government for pupil and teacher is absurd. In some matters—on which it will be agreed the pupil has a concern as great or

greater than that of the teacher—the former may rightly have no voice at all. Both are members, but their membership is of different kind, requiring utterly different qualifications, imposing utterly different obligations, and entitling them to make utterly different claims.

The point is not that the teacher is more intelligent than his pupils, or stronger; he may not be. It is that in view of the nature of that community, and its purpose, the 10th grade is not run as a democracy, and ought not be. Those who believe that it ought to be have rarely tested this belief in practice.

By way of contrast, a chess club will normally consist of players of unequal playing strength who are yet members equally, and all are entitled (as the constitution of the club normally provides) to an equal voice in the general government of the club. It is worth reflecting whether, in this crucial respect (i.e., equality of the nature of the membership of the members), an undergraduate course in a university is more like the 10th grade or the chess club. A graduate seminar in philosophy may call for government of yet another kind. In this light, demands by some university students for the right to participate equally in decisions, for example, concerning course content, because these decisions "affect their lives," are naïve. The concern of the student is as great as that of the professor in the progress of the term's study, but his membership in the classroom community is of a different order.

In our political communities, professed but grossly imperfect democracies, some citizens are unjustly deprived of their rightful voice. This plight of the economically and politically oppressed is likened, by well-meaning university reformers, to that of the student facing an assigned exercise in French or physics that he had no voice in choosing. The analogy is grossly mistaken; I am astounded by the numbers—some among my colleagues—who accept it. The university is not a political community, although decisions within it occasionally have political impact.

Citizens of the polity are rightly equals in political government. Members of the university, although equal citizens (if of age) in their city or state, are not equals with respect to many of the decisions properly made within that university, whoever may be affected by them.

It will sometimes be argued by those without a governing voice that the inequality alleged to justify the discrimination is fraudulent; or they may allow that it is real, but contend that it does not bear on the matters upon which they claim a voice in such fashion as to invalidate their claim. The soundness of such arguments may be determined only by examining their specific content. Inequalities between patricians and plebeians, between nobles and burghers, between men of property and men without, all have been held—wrongly, we now think—to justify depriving alleged "inferiors" of decision-making power in the political community.

Some university students now argue that theirs is a condition like that of Roman plebs, and that, in justice, there is no inequality between themselves and their professors entitling the latter to a greater voice in determining what is to be studied, what is "relevant," or on what standard work is to be evaluated. If they are right, and we share a commitment to democracy, their demand for an equal voice is justified. I think them wrong. But my controversy with them is not over the desirability of democracy. It concerns the nature of the university community and the kinds of membership therein. Recognizing that both parties are honest democrats, the issue is whether a given group is or ought to be a member of the self-governing community having authority on the matters in question. The claim that real inequalities are present is an arguable one, clearly, and has in many contexts been found faulty.

Category 2: Separate Communities. I am sometimes genuinely affected by decisions reached by members of a community of which I am clearly not a member at all. Suppose that the purest democracy is operative, both in that other community and in my own. A decision in a nearby city, taken with the full participation of its members, may have serious economic consequences (for good or ill) for me, but the decision may yet be one on which I, living and working elsewhere, have no legitimate claim to a voice. A decision made (we will suppose) democratically, in another branch of my university, not to retain on the staff one who is a dear friend of mine, affects me gravely. My being affected, however, surely

does not in itself make me a member of the professional community rightly charged with reaching such decisions. I am concerned, perhaps more deeply than any of those in the decision-making body, but my concern does not give me a right to a voice in the matter. And so on. Democracy is community self-government. Any claim of mine to a voice in the democratic decision-making of a given community must be grounded upon my membership, or right to membership, in that community of equals. If I am not a member, and ought not to be, I have—on democratic principles, at least—no claim to a voice simply because I have a real stake in the matter.

Category 3: Overlapping Communities. Some kinds of concern (it may be argued), if I really have them, make me a member of an important community of concern. And it is that community of concern within which, properly, democratic process should be operative. Democracy has its locus in the community, true enough, but the community properly charged with decision-making on any given affair (this argument concludes) is the community of those with a stake in it.

This argument is appealing and provocative, but human communities are in most cases too intricately related to permit its application flatly. We are often members of two communities, larger and smaller, both genuinely concerned with a given matter, where the one community is a sub-class of the other. And it may be that the members of the smaller, contained community have a concern with the matter at hand either (a) more intense, in some clearly measurable way, or (b) more appropriate, in some clearly specifiable way, than others with whom they are equals in the larger, containing community.

Here again the controversy is not over the rightness or desirability of democracy. Suppose all agree on that. The issue is: Within which of the two (or more) competing communities should democracy operate with respect to issues of the kind in question? The larger community is not invariably the more appropriate one—for it is almost always possible to specify a yet larger community with some degree of concern that we would all agree ought not to be vested with authority on matters of that kind. We want to choose the largest class that is appropriately connected to the matter at hand. But what are the appropriate connections? With respect to what features does equality render one a member of the community within whose democratic purview the issues in question rightly fall? That question has no universal answer, as far as I can see; wise decisions in any specific context must employ both general principles and the facts of that case, or that kind of case.

IN A UNIVERSITY many matters of importance are of direct concern to more than one community within it—say the college of arts and sciences and the department of philosophy—and might arguably be decided by either. Some serious matters are of concern to the faculty community in a college, as well as the community of faculty members and students in that college. Some of these matters—say, what standards will be set for the award of degrees—are properly vested in the contained community, not because of the greater concern of its members, but because of their special competence and special responsibilities for such certification.

Whenever, in these controversies, we vest authority in the smaller, contained community, we conclude in effect that the larger, containing community is not a community of equals with respect to the question at hand. We may then expect to hear from some the complaint that proper voice has been denied. Similarly, when we vest authority in the larger, containing community, we may expect to hear the complaint, from others, that the voices with rightful authority have been unfairly diluted. Complaints of both sorts can be rationally reviewed. In the university setting most such issues, although sensitive, are not objectively difficult to resolve.

Is there, then, a universal right to a voice in decisions that affect one's life? Surely not. The claim should be rejected not *against* the democrat, but by the democrat who seeks to defend democracy carefully and honestly, and to make it work.

Carl Cohen is professor of philosophy at the University of Michigan. Among his books is "Democracy," published in 1973 by the Free Press.