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**The Democratic Process,  
or the Bureaucrat's Nightmare**

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## The Democratic Process, or the Bureaucrat's Nightmare

Bonn, 8 June 2009. When it comes to supplying their citizens with public goods and services, democracies are superior to authoritarian regimes, at least in the long run. Yet despite this dividend of democracy, to some people the democratic process still seems at times too complex, cumbersome, inefficient, vociferous: here we need think only of the process leading up to important decisions in the context of the ongoing economic crisis. Politicians have a way of changing their positions from one day to the next, and what only yesterday was a party's hard line, may today be an entirely different matter. Even in cases involving long-term reform projects on which the parties concerned have reached basic consensus, democracies often seem relatively unreliable when it comes to long-term planning and strategies. To cite an example from Germany, there has been for decades now a consensus that German federalism is in need of reform. However the process of translating this basic insight into political practice has been a very gradual one; indeed it has worn out one reform commission after the other and been accompanied by seemingly endless disputes among the actors involved. Other major pieces of unfinished business, like reform of the country's healthcare and pensions systems, have been typified less by a rapid implementation of long-term plans and strategies than by a number of iterative processes that may seem to many more closely to resemble the cacophony of wrangling interest groups in replay mode.

So why is it that in representative democracies political processes of this kind ultimately lead to better results than in the political systems in place in autocratic regimes? The first important point is that democracy is not simply an orchestrated consensus show in which the actors involved reach agreement, across party lines, on a set of policy concepts, which they then proceed to implement across the board and for the longer term. Democracy is, instead, an inclusive form of conflict management, one that sets the stage for substantive conflicts to be played out by non-violent means and on the basis of a set of democratic procedures. That is to say, the consensus among the actors involved extends "only" to the fundamental elements of democracy, to fair and free elections, to freedom of the press and the right of assembly, to respect for human rights, etc. Another thing we inevitably find in democracies is consensus on the need to submit disputes to an independent judiciary for resolution. However, when it comes to concrete substantive issues, like e.g. environmental, health, or education policy, there is seldom reason to expect consensus to be reached, in particular over the longer term. And there is nothing wrong with that.

For the functions of democratic competition resemble, in certain ways, the process of economic competition, with parties, vying for votes, forced to seek their orientation in preferences of social interests groups that may differ quite substantially. If they are to hold their own in this competition, parties need constantly to seek to gear their activities to the preferences articulated by, say, civil society actors or representatives of social interests. This "customer orientation" forces parties to constantly adapt their political positions, while political competition induces them to define strict party profiles and to search for new solutions of their own. And just as in the case of economic competition, "customer orientation," innovation, and imitation (the preferred means of disseminating policy concepts that have proven their mettle) represent the key advantages of democracy. The fact that these processes are virtually immune to long-term planning, incremental in nature, and constantly accompanied by blatant lobbying and the



boisterousness of the political market is part and parcel of a process that is rooted, at the same time, in inclusiveness and competition. In ways analogous to economic competition, once described by Friedrich Hayek as an open discovery process, democratic competition compensates for the knowledge and ability that individuals may lack when it comes to developing and implementing sustainable plans in complex and highly dynamic societies.

Dangers may arise only if a gulf is allowed to open up between citizens and their elected representatives and executive authorities, with a growingly insulated ministerial bureaucracy and lobbyist groups coming to dominate the scene. Such tendencies towards insulation are, in some measure, a “natural” reaction on the part of the government machinery. Indeed, the democratic process may well turn out to be the bureaucrat’s nightmare. For he or she, in charge of planning and implementation, is constantly faced with the volatility of political processes that may, time and again, derail planning and implementation strategies that have just been adopted. This is the reason why both powerful interest groups and government decision-makers have major incentives to turn a blind eye to the preferences of the citizenry. When the processes concerned are more clear-cut in structure, this may mean that policy is made behind the closed doors of ministerial bureaucracy, even though this approach is bound, in the longer term, to undermine the openness of democratic competition. Rigorous demands for more transparency for political decision-making processes may prove helpful in dealing with exclusionary tendencies of this kind. But more civic participation based on participatory procedures, e.g. at the municipal level, or efforts to strengthen the elements of direct democracy can also serve to counteract any creeping erosion of the inclusiveness of the process of democratic competition.



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