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Keep using “democracy” in political theory

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Abstract

This paper is a contribution to a symposium on Herman Cappelen’s 2023 book *The Concept of Democracy: An Essay on Conceptual Amelioration and Abandonment*. In that book, Cappelen develops a theory of abandonment—a theory of why and how to completely stop using particular linguistic expressions—and then uses that theory to argue for the general abandonment of the words “democracy” and “democratic”. In this paper, I critically discuss Cappelen’s arguments for the abandonment of “democracy” and “democratic” in political theory specifically.

Keywords Abandonment · Amelioration · Cappelen · Conceptual engineering · Democracy · Political

1 Prelude

This paper is a contribution to a symposium on Herman Cappelen’s, 2023 book *The Concept of Democracy: An Essay on Conceptual Amelioration and Abandonment*.¹ In this prelude, I sketch my perspective on a variety of interconnected background issues. I find this helpful because, as will subsequently become clear, my perspective diverges quite radically from Cappelen’s. The prelude thus acts as a point of contrast against which I elucidate and critically discuss Cappelen’s view in subsequent sections. In §2 I outline Cappelen’s project in the book, before critically discussing two points on which we diverge in §§3–4.

I begin by asking: What does “democracy” mean? My pretheoretic judgement is as follows:

M:P [*Mass noun: Political sense*]. “Democracy” denotes forms of government in which the leaders and/or laws are decided by the people, either directly or through freely elected representatives. E.g. “Democracy is a popular form of government”.

¹ All unaccompanied page numbers herein refer to this work.

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C:P [*Count noun: Political sense*]. “A democracy” denotes a state in which the leaders and/or laws are decided by the people, either directly or through freely elected representatives. E.g. “Norway is a democracy”.

Informal online searches and conversations suggest my pretheoretic judgement is not unusual. They also point to another—to my ears looser—sense of “democracy”:

M:N [*Mass noun: Nonpolitical sense*]. “Democracy” denotes forms of organisational or collective governance in which leaders and/or policies are decided by the governed, either directly or through freely elected representatives. E.g. “There’s no democracy in Wall Street”.

C:N [*Count noun: Nonpolitical sense*]. “A democracy” denotes an organisation or collective in which leaders and/or policies are decided by members, either directly or through freely elected representatives. “The Hong Kong University philosophy department is a democracy”.

And what about the word “democratic”? Again, my pretheoretic judgement seems not unusual:

A:D [*Adjective: Derivative sense*] Something is *democratic* insofar as it relates to or supports democracy in any of the above senses. E.g. “We had a democratic vote to decide which restaurant to go to”.

To emphasise, the above glosses are *pretheoretic* judgements. So understood, they should not be controversial: they are common-sense glosses of the everyday meaning(s) and use(s) of “democracy” and “democratic”, and I am not saying they are unique in that regard. Your pretheoretic judgements might be different.

Anyone theorising about democracy will want to do better than the above. The glosses are insufficiently careful to underpin rigorous or systematic theorising. So, at the start of a research project on the topic, many political theorists stipulate a technical definition of “democracy” to sharpen one or more of its senses. As different researchers have different interests and goals, the stipulated definitions may vary quite significantly. Here are two examples:

To fix ideas, the term “democracy”, as I will use it in this article, refers very generally to a method of group decision making characterized by a kind of equality among the participants at an essential stage of the collective decision making. [...] [T]his definition means to cover a lot of different kinds of groups that may be called democratic. There can be democracy in: families, voluntary organisations, economic firms, states, and transnational and global organisations. (Christiano, 2008, quoted in Cappelen p.159)

What I will mean by *democracy* is the actual collective authorization of laws and policies by the people subject to them. [...]

Democracy, the authorization of laws collectively by the people who are subject to them, is inseparable from voting. People are normally held to authorise

laws by voting on the laws themselves or, more commonly, by electing representative legislators.

(Estlund, 2008: 38 and 66, quoted in Cappelen p. 165)

Note that, in both the above, there is a clear connection between the technical definition and my pretheoretic glosses.

- Christiano is offering a technical definition of “democracy” as a general mass noun, explicitly combining senses M:P and M:N. Christiano’s definition goes beyond my pretheoretic glosses in demanding *equality* in the decision making.
- Estlund is offering a technical definition of “democracy” as a mass noun in sense M:P. Estlund’s definition differs from my pretheoretic gloss by stating that the people *authorise*, rather than *decide*, the laws (and policies).

Both definitions, then, are attempts to sharpen everyday senses of “democracy” as a mass noun. As such—and as I have no major objection to either definition—I am happy to accept them both as plausible starting points for theorising on the topic.

Of course, a plausible starting point may not be a plausible end point. But I cannot assess Christiano’s and Estlund’s definitions *qua* end point *now* without thereby putting the cart before the horse. A technical definition is a tool designed to be deployed for some purpose, and we must examine attempts to deploy a tool before assessing it. A proper assessment of Christiano’s and Estlund’s definitions should take into account (i) how well the definitions are embedded within their theories and explanations, and (ii) how fruitful those theories and explanations are. I cannot fairly assess either definition without looking carefully at what the theorists do with them (and I won’t be doing that herein).

Finally, it need not be an immediate problem that Christiano and Estlund offer different definitions for “democracy”. It is natural to understand philosophers and social scientists as sharpening terms to facilitate better theorising about different aspects of relevant phenomena. One theorist may want to focus on the *equality* at the heart of democracy, another may want to focus on democracy’s potential to *authorise* (and so legitimise) decisions. In such cases, the theorists retain the word “democracy” intentionally, as a signal that they take themselves to be theorising, from a particular perspective, something in the vicinity of the cluster of things we would ordinarily call “democracy”. Of course, this *does* mean that theorists need to be careful when discussing others’ work, keeping the distinct senses of “democracy” in mind.² But, at face value, there is no need for panic about the fact that different theorists offer different definitions for “democracy”—and certainly no need for existential panic.³

To my eyes, the picture I have just painted is unextraordinary and unprovocative.

² One of Cappelen’s charges against Christiano is precisely that he fails to do this (pp. 184–186). I return to this point in §4.

³ Cappelen disagrees; see 2023: 184.

2 Abandonment

In Part I of *The Concept of Democracy*, Cappelen develops a theory of abandonment—a theory of why and how to completely stop using particular linguistic expressions. As the first systematic theory of its kind, this is an important contribution to the field of conceptual engineering; it sets a new benchmark for discussions of abandoning (or eliminating) terms both in ordinary discourse and in academic theorising.

According to Cappelen, the “perfect” argument for abandoning a particular linguistic expression e combines four claims:

- *Mismatch*. The extension of e isn’t what speakers (on reflection) want to talk about when they use e .
- *Verbal disputes*. The expression e gives rise to extensive verbal disputes.
- *Bad consequences*. Using e tends to have bad (cognitive and/or emotional) consequences on people (whether the speaker, the audience, or someone else).
- *Can do better*. When a speaker uses e , there is a better way of expressing what the speaker wants to say that does not use e .

If, for some e , everyone agrees that the four claims hold, it might be quite easy to convince everyone to stop using e . But, as universal agreement is very rare, Cappelen closes his presentation of his theory by offering strategies for “abolitionists” to communicate with “preservationists”.

In Parts II–V of the book, Cappelen builds on his theory of abandonment to develop a “perfect” argument. He argues for the complete abandonment of what he calls the *D-words*: “democracy” and “democratic”. This is a linguistic proposal, not a political one. Cappelen seems generally in favour of forms of government in which the leaders and/or laws are decided by the people, either directly or through freely elected representatives. But he is against calling so-governed states “democracies”, and he is against describing them as “democratic”.

Cappelen’s argument has two strands. The first: Cappelen argues for the abandonment of the *D-words* in ordinary discourse. The second (my focus herein): Cappelen argues for the abandonment of the *D-words* in political theory. Cappelen calls the technical definitions that political theorists offer in pursuit of their own theoretical purposes and interests “ameliorations”.

In both strands, the “ordinary notion” of “democracy” looms large. This is not surprising with respect to the first strand. Regarding the second, he gives three reasons for thinking the ordinary notion of “democracy” matters for ameliorations in political theory (pp. 66–70):

- Political theorists care about the phenomenon that citizens, politicians, and others talk about when they ordinarily use “democracy”.
- Political theorists care about what non-theorists think when they ordinarily use “democracy”.

- The meaning of “democracy” helps to explain the mental states that are constitutive of a certain social object, namely democracy.

Cappelen’s case for abandoning the D-words thus begins with a description of some “basic” features of the D-words (p. 73f). I will mention three.

The first feature is that the “the usages that most commonly come to mind for many [...] occur when “democracy” is used as a count noun” (p. 73). He acknowledges only one sense in which it so used:

C:G [*Count noun: General sense*]. “Democracy” as a count noun; paradigm applications include Norway, Canada, the town of St Andrews, and the HKU philosophy department.

The second feature is that “a theory of *democracy* is incomplete unless it is accompanied by an account of what it is to be *democratic*. [And] *being democratic* is more fundamental than *being a democracy*” (p. 74, Cappelen’s italics). He later adds that “[it’s] tempting to see the semantic interaction between “democracy” and “democratic” as reflecting the metaphysical structure of a democracy” (p. 86). Thus, the sense of “democratic” Cappelen has in mind is this:

A:F [*Adjective: Fundamental sense*]. “Democratic” as an adjective whose meaning is more fundamental than that of “democracy”; paradigm applications include the decision about membership of the Norwegian parliament (decided by vote), and the decision about who will be director of graduate studies at HKU philosophy department (decided by discussion).

The third feature concerns whether the meanings of the D-words have a normative component. Cappelen argues that.

to insist that the very meaning of “democratic” has built into it a positive assessment would be to imply that those who have been arguing against democracy for the past 2,000 years have been ignorant of that aspect of the word’s meaning. (p. 89)

This kind of consideration leads Cappelen to offer the following “guiding principle”:

Principle of lexical neutrality: The meanings of the expressions “democratic” and “democracy” are normatively neutral—their meanings don’t encode a normative assessment. (p. 89)

This is not to deny that the D-words are ever used to express assessments; it is only to deny that those assessments are semantically encoded. Thus, C:G and A:F are to be interpreted as not encoding any normative assessment.

So it is in reference to those specific senses of the D-words—C:G and A:F, interpreted as normatively neutral—that Cappelen argues for the *general* abandonment of the D-words. As Cappelen doesn’t acknowledge other senses of the D-words, he makes no attempt to justify the move from the specific to the general.

Nonetheless, the strategy is *prima facie* reasonable: Cappelen explicitly argues that the case for abandonment needs to focus on the detail (see pp. 49f), and so it is appropriate for him to restrict the number of specific senses he is examining, even if it means his case is partial.

Cappelen offers a “perfect” argument for abandoning the D-words. He argues for four specific claims:

- (I) The D-words are either meaningless, or their meanings give rise to massive mismatch.
- (II) The ongoing use of the D-words would result in endless verbal disputes.
- (III) The D-words are exploited for nefarious ends.
- (IV) We can do better than using the D-words.⁴

All four play a role in the first strand of Cappelen’s argument, that the D-words be abandoned in ordinary discourse. Claims (II) and (IV) are the most important for his second strand, his case for abandoning the D-words in political theory. This case is bolstered by a subsidiary claim that Cappelen defends along the way:

(V) Extant stipulative definitions of “democracy” in political theory are not useful.

Each of (I)–(V) is surprising. I agree with Cappelen that, if compelling, they would together provide a powerful case for abandoning the D-words. However, I do not find (I)–(V) compelling. I suspect that (I) and (IV) are false, that (II) and (III) are exaggerations, and that (V) sets an unfair bar on what counts as useful. I am thus happy to continue using the D-words, and for others to do likewise.

In what follows, I focus on the second strand of Cappelen’s argument: the argument that the D-words be abandoned in political theory. Cappelen has two principal lines of argument against the practice of ameliorating “democracy” for theoretical purposes, instances of (V) and (II) respectively:

- He argues that extant ameliorations are faulty and not easily fixed.
- He argues that the practice of ameliorating “democracy” is defective as a whole as it leads to massive verbal disputes.

⁴ On pp. 138–140, he suggests we do so by talking about: sovereignty; authority; elective government; male suffrage; female suffrage; turnout; regular elections; free elections; access to media and campaign finance; executive rule of law; executive constraints; legislative power; judicial independence; judicial review; party strength; party ideology; party system size; electoral system proportionality; competitiveness; turnover; media development; civil society independence; civil society; political engagement; sub-national government elections; direct democracy; civil liberty; property rights; religious freedom; equal resources; gender equality; ethnic equality; inclusive citizenship. Cappelen does not comment on the fact that an entry in this list (“direct democracy”) contains the word “democracy”.

I consider them in turn. In both cases, as hinted above, I argue that Cappelen's considerations aren't persuasive. As things stand, it is reasonable for political theorists to keep using "democracy".

3 Cappelen on extant ameliorations

When a theorist offers an amelioration of "democracy", what is she doing? Cappelen and I agree that she is indicating to their audience how she wants to be interpreted within relevant contexts (p. 155).⁵ Consider again these words of Christiano's:

To fix ideas, the term "democracy", as I will use it in this article, refers very generally to a method of group decision making characterized by a kind of equality among the participants at an essential stage of the collective decision making. (Christiano, 2008, quoted in Cappelen p.159)

As both Cappelen and I have it, it is natural to interpret Christiano as simply indicating how he wants readers of his article to interpret his uses of "democracy" within Christiano, 2008.

Of course, a theorist should not simply pick any old definition she wants. As Cappelen and I also agree, the introduction of technical definitions is a norm-governed practice. For example, in a broadly Carnapian vein, technical definitions should perhaps generally be a precisification of an ordinary sense of the relevant term, and be fruitful for subsequent theorising. How exactly such norms are to be interpreted will depend on the case at hand.

In my view, as indicated in the prelude, you cannot properly assess an amelioration of "democracy" out of context. That is, to assess a particular technical definition for "democracy", you need to look at the particular project to which that definition is contributing. If the project is worthwhile, the definition contributes to carrying out the project, and the choice of lexical item is reasonable, then (all else being equal) it is a good technical definition.⁶

Cappelen's approach to assessing ameliorations, however, suggests he holds a different view. Cappelen treats the norms that govern technical definitions of "democracy" as being general: he states the norms in advance and applies them to a variety of technical definitions without regard to the details of the projects to which the definitions are contributing.⁷ He begins by presenting five norms, which he describes as "minimal assumptions about what would constitute a useful stipulative definition of the D-words" (p. 156):

- (1) Extensional continuity. There should be significant overlap between the extension of the ordinary term and the extension of the technical definition.
- (2) Don't ignore the adjective. Explicitly define "democratic".

⁵ For my view, see Pinder 2021.

⁶ See e.g. Pinder 2022, especially §§5–6.

⁷ See chapter 10.

- (3) Substitutional smoothness. You should be able to substitute your definition into ordinary uses of “democracy” smoothly.
- (4) Address how many of what kind of decisions a group’s members must be made democratically in order for that group to be a democracy.
- (5) Don’t build a normative assessment of “democracy” into the definition.

All five norms are connected to Cappelen’s views on the importance of the ordinary notion of “democracy” for political theory: norms (1) and (3) follow from the idea that political theorists should be talking about the very thing ordinary folk talk about; norms (2) and (4) are justified by the view that “democratic” is more fundamental than “democracy”; and norm (5) is justified by the principle of lexical neutrality.

With these five norms to hand, Cappelen examines four extant ameliorations of “democracy” and argues that they all fail. Christiano’s and Estlund’s definitions, which I mentioned in the prelude, are two of the four; the others are Schumpeter’s minimalism and Coppedge et al.’s “indices of democracy”.⁸ In three of the four cases (Christiano, Estlund, Schumpeter), Cappelen does not explain the overarching projects the theorists are engaged in. In the fourth case (Coppedge et al.), Cappelen does describe the overarching project, and raises a useful objection to the use of “democracy” in the very specific context of the project (p. 179)—before implicitly putting it aside and returning to his five norms.⁹

I have two objections to Cappelen’s line of argument. The first concerns Cappelen’s understanding of the ordinary notion of “democracy”, which underpins the five norms. The second concerns Cappelen’s methodological approach to assessing technical definitions of “democracy”—that is, without regard to the details of the projects to which the definitions are contributing.

3.1 The basic features of the D-words

As noted, Cappelen assesses four extant ameliorations using five norms, (1)–(5), that derive from his description of the basic features of the D-words. However, Cappelen’s description of those basic features deviates significantly from my pretheoretical judgements about the D-words. This is important because:

⁸ See Schumpeter 2010 and Coppedge et al., 2011. It is worth noting that, by Cappelen’s design, the authors across the four cases appear to be offering ameliorations, rather than trying to (say) characterise the ordinary meaning of “democracy”.

⁹ Coppedge et al.’s project takes the features associated with each of six conceptions of democracy, and then defines “democracy” by bundling the six lists of features together. Cappelen writes: “Their proposal is presented as a way to help those who care about democracy make practical decisions, for example about funding to various nations” (p. 179). His objection is effectively that bundling the features together doesn’t serve this goal. “Think of it like this: suppose we have six lists of components (alleged elements of democracy). Suppose each is unjustified and random. Why would combining these six defective lists be any better than sticking with one of them? The combination of six inherits the defects of all six” (p. 179). The objection is fair but unlikely to generalise.

- Cappelen’s description of the basic features leads him to make objections to extant ameliorations; but, given my judgements, those objections fail.
- Cappelen doesn’t cite or explicitly offer any linguistic data to support the basic features he describes, so I have no reason to think my judgements are idiosyncratic.

I will go through three examples.

First, Cappelen does not acknowledge “democracy” as a mass noun. That is, he is silent on uses of “democracy” such as:

- (i) Democracy is an overrated form of government.
- (ii) Democracy is more popular now than it was historically.

I don’t know why he is silent on this, or what to make of his silence. But the silence causes him problems when he tries to assess ameliorations of “democracy” as a mass noun. Recall, for example, Christiano’s technical definition of “democracy” as “a method of group decision making”. Cappelen, as a result of his silence, ends up objecting to Christiano’s definition for failing to satisfy norm (3) (substitutional smoothness):

According to Christiano, the noun ‘democracy’ denotes a method by which groups make collective decisions. However, Norway is a democracy, but Norway is a country, not a method of group decision-making. (p. 160)

But it is no surprise that you get nonsense when you substitute a stipulative definition for a term-qua-mass-noun in place of that term-qua-count-noun. It is like objecting to a definition of “chicken”-qua-mass-noun as “the edible meat of *Gallus domesticus*” by saying that Foghorn Leghorn isn’t the edible meat of *Gallus domesticus*.¹⁰ In my judgement, there is an ordinary sense of “democracy” as a mass noun—witness (i) and (ii)—and so Cappelen’s objection straightforwardly fails.

It is worth emphasising that I am not here picking up on something that Cappelen sees as a minor point. After stating the above objection, Cappelen writes that “[t]his will seem like nitpicking, but it isn’t because the fix is non-trivial” (p. 160), before raising problems for a variety of potential fixes. Cappelen, then, sees his objection as a substantive concern about Christiano’s technical definition of “democracy”. If (as I have argued) the objection fails, then that failure is significant.

Second, in my pretheoretic judgement, “democracy” as a count noun has a political and a nonpolitical sense (C:P and C:N). In contrast, Cappelen *only* acknowledges a *general* sense of “democracy” as a count noun (C:G). To bring out the difference, consider the following:

- (iii) Norway and the HKU philosophy department are democracies.

¹⁰ Foghorn Leghorn is a cartoon chicken in Looney Tunes.

To my ears, (iii) sounds arch, almost like a pun—like saying that HKU and Life are universities, or that Christianity and Jediism are religions. For Cappelen, in contrast, (iii) is straightforwardly felicitous. Conversely, consider:

- (iv) While philosophy departments can surely be *democratic*, only states can be *democracies*.

To my ears, (iv) sounds natural, with “democracy” being used as a count noun in its stricter sense C-P. But, if C-G is the only sense of “democracy”-qua-count-noun, then (iv) should sound awkward and confused.

Now, Cappelen doesn’t explicitly deny that there are narrower senses of “democracy”-qua-count-noun. But he remains completely silent on the matter, and again this seems to lead him into difficulty when assessing extant ameliorations. Recall Estlund’s amelioration of “democracy”, in the sense of M:P, as the actual collective authorization of laws and policies through voting. With reference to norm (1) (extensional continuity), Cappelen objects to Estlund’s proposal as follows:

It is targeted at political structures [...]. As a result, the suggestion is similar to the proposed definition of “fish” that applies only to fish in the North Sea. (p. 166)

The general lesson, according to Cappelen, is this:

don’t try to understand “democracy” and “democratic” as having new meanings when applied to a domain labelled “political”. Political democracy is an instance of democracy. It’s democracy applied to the political domain. If you don’t understand “democracy” in itself, you don’t understand “political democracy”. (p. 85)

That is, according to Cappelen, one objection to Estlund’s amelioration of “democracy” is that it only applies to a small subset of the ordinary extension of “democracy”. However, to my ears, the *principal* senses of “democracy” are M:P and C:P, and they *do* apply specifically to the political sphere, that is, to states. So, Cappelen’s silence on these (completely ordinary?) political senses of “democracy” results in a line of argument that, to my ears, is like objecting to a definition of “wizard” as “a man with magical abilities” by saying that the definition doesn’t apply to tech wizards.

The third difference I want to draw out between Cappelen’s features and my pre-theoretic judgement concerns the adjective “democratic”. To my ears, the adjective has quite a loose and derivative meaning, which is why we naturally describe so many more things as democratic than as democracies. For example, I easily imagine sincerely describing policies, decisions, ideas, ideals, values, approaches to leadership, approaches to parenting, methods of decision making, and so on, as democratic. And, in such cases, I would so describe them *because* they have something in common with, or are in some way related to, paradigm democracies. But, for Cappelen, this is to get things backwards. To draw this out, consider the following two sentences:

- (v) The ideal of *equality* is a democratic ideal because it is typically enshrined (to a greater or lesser extent) in democracies.

- (vi) The state of Norway is a democracy, not because it is a linguistic convention to call it “a democracy”, but because a sufficient quantity of the right kind of its state decisions are democratic.

For Cappelen, (v) is semantically confused, whereas (vi) articulates a basic semantic feature of the D-words. In contrast, to my ears, both (v) and (vi) sound like plausible, theoretical claims. I can easily imagine people arguing for and against both (v) and (vi), but I struggle to see how either side of either dispute would thereby be displaying any degree of semantic incompetence.

Once again, the difference causes Cappelen problems. Consider Cappelen’s appeal to norm (2) (don’t ignore “democratic”) to object to Estlund’s definition.

A few pages after introducing his definition of “democracy”, Estlund writes,

I hope to vindicate a **democratic** account of political authority by reconciling two fundamental ideas. (2009: 39, my emphasis).

How does Estlund think that we should go from the definition of “democracy” (“the collective authorization of laws and policies by the people subject to them”) to the use of “democratic” to modify “account”? Estlund doesn’t tell us, and there’s no obvious way to do it. Consider an expression such as “democratic law”, where “democratic” modifies “law”. I just don’t see how to go from “*the authorization of laws collectively by the people who are subject to them*” to anything that helps us understand the adjective. (p. 167)

I think Cappelen is stumped by these questions because he sees the meaning of “democratic” as prior to that of “democracy”—so he is looking for a definition of “democratic” to which Estlund’s definition of “democracy” implicitly appeals. Like Cappelen, I don’t know where to start with that. But if (like me) you see “democratic” as derivative, then there *are* obvious answers to Cappelen’s questions. Here is one set of possible definitions:

- a law or policy is “democratic” if it is authorised collectively by the people who are subject to it;
- an account of political authority is “democratic” if it implies that laws and policies are authorised by the people subject to them; and
- some *x* more generally is “democratic” if *x* relates to or supports the collective authorization of decisions by the people subject to them.

No doubt holes could be picked in those definitions. But Cappelen is wrong to claim that there is no obvious way for Estlund to define “democratic”, and his mistake can be traced back to his description of the basic features of the D-words.

The problem I am raising here is not specific to the three examples I have given. Cappelen objects to extant ameliorations of “democracy” by pointing via norms (1)–(5) to discrepancies between the ameliorations and his description of the basic features of the D-words. The problem is that the discrepancies have more to do with Cappelen’s description of the basic features than the ameliorations.

3.2 How to assess technical definitions

On Cappelen's view, *every* amelioration of "democracy" should be assessed using norms (1)–(5). However, this view is mistaken. Let me give two fictional examples to set the scene. Here's the first:

Graphs. A group of mathematically-inclined theorists decide to study forms of government using graph theory. Nodes represent individual and collective agents, and "A→B" represents A having the power to contribute to decisions made by B. The theorists define "a democracy" as "a graph in which there is a node x such that, for each other node y , there is a chain from y to x ".

On my view, in this case, the technical definition of "democracy" makes sense (at least as a starting point) within the context of the research project. The definition picks out the graphs that represent an idealised form of what we ordinarily call "democracy", a fact which is kept plain and salient by using the term "democracy". If the project yields interesting results, then all is good. However, on Cappelen's view, the technical definition is pretty awful: (1) there is no overlap with the extension of the ordinary term, as the ordinary term does not apply to graphs; (2) there is no explicit definition of "democratic"; (3) there is no substitutional smoothness (consider: "Norway is a graph in which there is node..."); and (4) although the definitions imply that *all* represented agents contribute to decisions, nothing is said about the kind or quantity of decisions. The only norm that is met is (5).

Here is the second example:

Ideals. A political philosopher decides to investigate democracy through its own ideals. She assumes a set of background values—equality, freedom, accountability, etc.—that are traditionally associated with democracy, and then defines "democracy" as "the ideal form of government". Using this definition, and given the values, she seeks to derive the possible structures of democratic government.

On my view, in this case, the technical definition of "democracy" makes sense within the context of the research project. The definition allows the theorist to derive forms of government from the background values, with the term "democracy" making it plain and salient that the derived forms of government are to be interpreted as the possible structures of what we ordinarily call "democracy". If the project yields interesting results, then all is good. However, on Cappelen's view, the technical definition is again pretty awful: (1) it may well turn out that few of the actual governments we call "democracy" will fall under the technical definition; (2) there is no explicit definition of "democratic"; (3) substitutions won't be particularly smooth (consider someone asking "Is democracy the ideal form of government?"); (4) the definition does not address how many of what kind of decisions a group's members must make in order for that group to be a democracy; and (5) the definition includes a normative assessment.

Now, I take these two cases to be counterexamples to Cappelen's norms. In both cases, given the overarching project, the technical definition makes sense and is reasonable. In neither case are Cappelen's norms appropriate. In the case of Graphs, to

demand extensional continuity or substitutional smoothness is to completely miss the point of the technical definition; in the case of Ideals, to demand normative neutrality is to completely miss the point of the technical definition. And, in general, assessments that completely miss the point of what they are assessing are unsuitable and inadequate. So Cappelen's five norms are *not* suitable for assessing technical definitions independently of the projects for which those definitions were designed. And, more generally, a good assessment of *any* technical definition will take into account the project to which that definition is contributing.

It remains open, of course, for Cappelen to argue that his five norms are particularly well-suited to assessing the four ameliorations he considers, once the specific projects to which they are contributing are taken into account. But, even if Cappelen makes a convincing case that the four ameliorations of "democracy" are deficient, examining just those four definitions would have done little to further the argument that the D-words should be completely abandoned in political theory.

4 Cappelen on verbal disputes

According to Cappelen,

the entire practice of providing ameliorative definitions of the D-words is problematic. It has led to massive amounts of verbal disputes and verbal (dis) agreement, and in general it has a tendency to undermine theoretical and public discourse. (pp. 155–156)

The verbal disputes arise because:

a lot of the theoretical literature on democracy engages with other literature on democracy. The aim is to present, compare, criticise, and develop ideas presented by others. That's problematic when there's a plethora of diverging stipulative definitions in a discipline, and more generally when a discipline is terminologically undisciplined. (p. 186)

Cappelen gives one example to illustrate: Christiano (2008) gives a definition of "democracy" and then uses that definition to describe the views of theorists (e.g. Plato and Hobbes) who meant something different by it. According to Cappelen, Christiano is either:

- "claiming that Plato had a concept of democracy that coincides with Christiano's" in which case "he would be misinterpreting Plato" (p 186); or
- in discussing Plato he is using "democracy" to mean "something other than the stipulated meaning", thereby generating "faux agreements and disagreements" (p. 186).

To further illustrate, Cappelen gives a couple of additional examples of theorists who mean different things by "democracy" but, given some of the sentences they assert, could easily be mistaken for agreeing when they in fact disagree.

How do these verbal disagreements in political theory affect public discourse? The answer is given by what Cappelen calls “interactive content flow”: “what is said in the theoretical domain influences the practical and vice versa” (p. 189). Here is Cappelen’s full discussion of interactive content follow in politics:

To see the importance of interactive content flow in politics, notice that this case contrasts with healthcare in that the decision makers are citizens and politicians: those are the people who make political decisions. In healthcare, we have a decision-making system where professionals and experts make the decisions. In politics, we let just anyone make a decision: citizens get to vote even if they are completely ignorant about politics, and representatives are not required to have any kind of expertise or particular knowledge. That makes interaction between real-world politics and political theory even more fluid. The upshot of this: don’t create lexical obstacles to interactive content flow. The use of “democracy” as a technical term with a plethora of different stipulative definitions does exactly that, and so is counterproductive. (p. 190)

I think the idea here is that, because we let more or less anyone be involved in political decision making, it is in our interests to ensure that the tools for engaging in that process are as clear and simple as we can make them. So, it is antithetical to our interests to have a field of political theory in which “democracy” is given a plethora of stipulative definitions.

4.1 Verbal disputes in political theory?

I am not persuaded on the basis of the above considerations that the practice of ameliorating D-words has led to “massive amounts of verbal disputes” in political theory. As I see it, Cappelen has provided initial evidence that the study of democracy is a field in which there is widespread disagreement about how to delineate the objects of study (and thus how to define key terms within the field). The existence of such fields of study is theoretically interesting.¹¹ But, even if Cappelen provides more evidence to establish that political theory is such a field, the appropriate *first* theoretical response (in my view) is to try to *understand* how the field operates with such widespread disagreement. Deciding that the entire field is full of verbal disputes, and that it therefore needs to reconfigure its basic understanding of the subject matter, strikes me as inappropriate as a first response.

Cappelen will disagree. His response will perhaps be: *why try to understand something deficient when there is an easy way to fix it?*¹² One rhetorical move Cappelen makes along these lines is this:

try to answer the Why-Keep-the-Lexical-Item Challenge: there are so many potential words to choose from, so why do you want to use “democracy”? It’s extremely easy to avoid the problems I have been outlining. (p. 192)

¹¹ It is noteworthy that, according to Mark Wilson, the “hard” sciences are such fields. See Wilson 2006 for extensive argument for that conclusion, and a theory that makes sense of the phenomena.

¹² See for example pp. 191–192.

However, I think that this line of response is a mistake. Across his book, regardless of how he presents it, Cappelen is arguing for a radical shift in linguistic practice within political theory. And here he is effectively challenging his opponents to say why we shouldn't make that shift. But, regardless of what Cappelen says, if he wants to argue for a radical shift in any aspect of our linguistic practice, it really is *his* burden to seriously develop and respond to reasons *not* to make that shift. The general principle I am advocating is something like this: *Don't argue for radical changes to a social practice before trying to understand why we might want to keep it as it is.*¹³ One needs to seriously try to understand how and why political theory operates without a unified definition of "democracy" *before* trying to change it.

4.2 Verbal disputes in ordinary discourse?

I am not persuaded by Cappelen's argument that the variety of ameliorative definitions in political theory has a tendency to undermine public discourse. While I am happy to accept in principle that there is some "interactive content flow", I don't understand why it would follow that a plethora of ameliorations in political theory would undermine public discourse. As Cappelen provides us with neither a theory of how interactive content flow works in practice, nor clear and generalisable examples of ameliorations of "democracy" undermining public discourse, I don't have a clear enough sense of the argument to find the view plausible. (Especially as Cappelen claims that ordinary folk are unlikely to think of political theorists as experts about democracy (p. 117), and thus are presumably unlikely to defer to their usage of "democracy".)

If anything, I imagine that it *aids* public discourse that political theorists use the word "democracy". Consider some of Cappelen's alternatives:

Christiano could have used "equality-based decision making" or "EQ decision-making". Schumpeter could have used "Competitive Vote-Based Decision [making]", or "CVB decision-making". (p. 192)

My gut feeling here is that ordinary folk would have been much less likely to grasp the relevance of Christiano's and Schumpeter's work to democracy (i.e. to forms of government in which the leaders and/or laws are decided by the people, either directly or through freely elected representatives) if those theorists had used "EQ decision-making" and "CVB decision-making". Cappelen's suggested alternatives look to me like the kind of over-precision that obscures connections and hinders understanding. By using "democracy", with a local technical definition that highlights the perspective on the topic taken within the research project, the theorist (a) clearly conveys that she is talking about the (perhaps loosely defined) form of government we care about and want to talk about, *and* (b) articulates the lens through

¹³ Extreme cases might be exceptions, but political theorists ameliorating "democracy" is not one of them.

which she is looking at that form of government. Cappelen's suggested alternatives do neither of those things.

Of course, my gut feeling might be wrong. But I am yet to be persuaded that it is.

5 Closing words

I have argued that Cappelen's case for the abandonment of the D-words in political theory is not successful. His objections to extant ameliorations of "democracy" are not compelling, and I am not persuaded that the general practice leads to massive amounts of verbal disputes.

Throughout this piece, alongside my objections, I have presented elements of what I take to be a common-sense position. As I see it, there are probably no sharp boundaries around what democracy "really is": democracy is not some definite object that can be defined and studied independently of any theoretical perspective. Instead, political theorists study democracy through different lenses, using technical definitions of "democracy" to focus their lenses and share them with readers. The result is a multitude of studies, each study defining "democracy" in its own way to highlight a particular perspective on the large cluster of phenomena in the vicinity. Collectively, the studies reflect the complexity of that cluster, illuminating the many ways of thinking about and understanding different aspects of it. If political theorists collectively decided on a single definition of "democracy", they would damage the field, making it harder to articulate and adopt new and insightful perspectives on the phenomena. If they collectively decided to abandon the D-words, the effect would be to obscure which theorists, and which theories, were contributing to our collective understanding of the cluster of phenomena.

I have not argued for this view herein. I present it as a sketch of one way to make sense of the fact that political theory operates without a unified definition of "democracy". I hope that such views are developed and assessed before political theorists decide to abandon the D-words.¹⁴

Declarations No studies involving humans or animals were conducted as part of this research.

Competing interests The author declares no competing interests.

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