



Prensa Participativa

DEMOCRACY? WHAT DEMOCRACY?

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Today, what we call “government” has been a part of practically every human being for the past 65 centuries. It is basically that which through a slow metamorphosis has become the rules of behavior for practically every aspect of human life in society.

Approximately in 4,500 BC Mesopotamia’s Sumerians -present day Iraq- were the first in organizing politically, this as a confessional (religious) state. Some 1,000 years later this civilization had developed its government into a democratic monarchy, with Sumer’s several city-states having individual governors who elected a general king. They had also developed a code of laws.

Varieties developed from this system still predominate worldwide, starting with Ancient Greece with its “pure democracy”, where the governing power was exercised directly by the people as established there in about 600 BC(1). Thus, all citizens could approve, amend or repeal laws, elect public officials, etc.

Only Switzerland, with its population of 8.5 million, remains practicing this democratic system. Conversely, today most countries are governed through the so called “representative democracy”, where supposedly “**sovereignty resides on the people**, who exercises the power directly or through representatives who arise from free and periodical elections”(2).

From this system have also sprung varieties like “semi-direct” or “participative” democracy, where the people participate on decisions regarding legislative measures through plebiscites (final approval), referendums (voting in favor or against) and citizens’ initiatives (proposed by the people). There is an uncommon variation that bestows on the people the power to recall elected officials.

Now, considering the preceding introduction, we should consider our present circumstances and ask ourselves: Do we truly live in a democracy in Puerto Rico as a United States colony? And further more: Is the U.S. government itself a true democracy?

On both levels we can see how the people’s supposed “representatives” govern

unrestricted. In Puerto Rico, for example, ¿when was the last time that we, the governed, were consulted to approve or reject a legislative measure that would affect us? Of course, consulting the people about everything would be impossible due to the necessary complicated logistics to do it. But let's consider the most important matters, like privatizing the government's most important assets, such as health care, water, and electric power services, etc.

An example is enough to illustrate it, such as the Comptroller's Office Audit Report CP-21-01 dated last September 30. It highlights "*irregularities*" in "*the non-profitable investment of \$192 million for the purchase of land or projects development that were neither built nor completed*", and adds that "*the AAE (Electric Power Authority) invested \$62,205,965 on the cancellation of the Gasoducto del Sur (a pipeline) project, paid \$31,911,596 for the Vía Verde (natural gas) project that never began, and paid for purchases and services of \$85,533,332 for the conversion project (of four plants) that it later cancelled*".

On this case the fact that the project was to be developed by the Swiss company Skanka should have alerted as a reference to corruption. In May 2007 The New York Times reported that "*the Swedish construction company Skanska has become the focal point of a growing scandal in Argentina, which threatens to engulf the government of President Néstor Kirchner*". In March 2011 it added that Skanka had to pay fines amounting to \$19.6 million for defrauding the U.S. government.

This point was explained by Daniel Wasterfors, a Swiss sociologist: "*A common defense is that bribes (to pay them) are a necessity in foreign soil, that that it simply is the way in which business are made*".

If the Puerto Rican people would've been consulted on the local project, subject experts would've being able to detect Skanka's background, advise the people and investigate the projects's financial details before making the gift of more than \$375 million to the combined corrupt businessmen and politicians involved. It's a matter of general knowledge that government corruption is today the worst enemy Puerto Rico faces - although the U.S. in not exempt.

In that country's case, the situation could be considered worse due to its electoral system, in which only 538 people elect the president and each state elects its congressional representatives. It's the so called "Electoral College" that has been used since 1964 based on a formula that even many citizens do not understand. According to the Federal Constitution's Article 2, "*each state shall appoint, in such manner as the legislature thereof may direct, a Number of Electors, equal to the whole number of senators and representatives to which the state may be entitled in the Congress*". That means that the largest states - with a higher number of congressional districts - have a right to more presidential votes.

Is the presidential election really democratic? In Spanish, one of the main definitions of "democracy" says: "*Political system that defends the people's sovereignty and the people's right to elect and control those who govern*".(2) The English one says: "*A political system that allows the citizens to participate in political decision-making, or to elect representatives to government bodies*". However, every common vote casted on election day only serves to elect each district's Electoral College voter. But most outrageous is that the college's vo-

ters are not required to follow the regular voters' intentions and preference regarding candidates and party.

I join my words to those of Spanish columnist David Castillo Villalobos, who in 2018 wrote: *"It's curious how we think we live in a democratic system when the citizens' power of decision is only limited to "selecting" the president, deputies and mayors, and after that, ¿in which other decisions can the citizens of a country participate? ... ¿Why is it called democracy if the people don't have the power to decide?"*

Every time we hear political references to "our democracy" we should ask ourselves: "Democracy? What democracy?".

(1)Budge, Ian (2001). "Direct democracy". In Clarke, Paul A.B.; Foweraker, Joe (eds.). *Encyclopedia of Political Thought*. Taylor & Francis.

(2)Spanish Real Academy Dictionary

(3)Oxford Dictionary