

About the Liquid Democracy Phenomenon

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It is generally accepted that two forms of democracy have historically been formed: direct and representative. However, modern democracy cannot be recognized as direct due to quantitative restrictions, and the functioning of representative democracy in practice requires compliance with a large number of conditions that are not always met. Such ideas fuel discussions about the crisis-state of democracy and the search for alternative solutions to overcome the crisis.

One of these concepts, which would include the positive features of these forms of democracy, is liquid democracy. Liquid democracy is a system for more flexible political participation by citizens in the democratic process through the use of both online and offline networks. Citizens' voting is based on trust between one another, and depending on the level of trust, various options for delegating voting rights are possible. Thus, several types of delegation can be created, from forms of traditional representative democracy to direct democracy. The term "liquid democracy" first appeared in the political sphere in the program of the Pirate Party of Germany. The party's Chairman, Erfurt Falco Windisch gave the following quote concerning the concept:

... in times of political uncertainty and issues of great complexity, we urgently need new forms of democratic decision-making. Thanks to liquid democracy, we can give citizens more opportunities to participate directly in political decision-making processes. To do this, we must use the means of modern communication.¹

Thus, the concept includes elements of both direct and representative democracy, based on the principles of a networked society and e-democracy. The emergence of liquid democracy is primarily associated with the development of modern information and communication technologies. For the first time since the ancient era of city-states, it is possible to technically implement direct-voting by citizens, creating a working participatory democracy, and strengthen "legitimacy through more constant communication with citizens".²

When speaking about the positive and negative aspects of the concept, it should be noted that some researchers believe that liquid democracy can be called an improved version of the previously-functioning forms of democracy. In this regard, this issue is considered in conjunction with the study of historical forms of the political system. First of all, this applies to direct parliamentarism, which combines both elements of direct and representative democracy. In such a system, "democracy as such is considered not only as

a form of government, but also as an idea applicable to all areas of social and political life, where citizens want and can participate on an equal basis in decision-making through discussion, in accordance with democratic standards"³. Thus, a citizen who has the right to vote in the system of direct parliamentarism decides for himself which political issue requires his active, direct participation, which can be resolved by remote voting, and which requires the delegation of the right to vote. Thus, B. Ford summarizes the principles of self-organized, liquid democracy of direct parliamentarism as follows: a citizen can choose a passive (individual) or active (delegate) role depending on their own preferences; a low level of barrier for an active role of participation; delegation of authority, which makes it possible to use different levels of decision-making; privacy of both delegates and individuals; direct accountability of delegates; specialization through two-stage delegation (delegation from a delegate).⁴

Opponents of liquid democracy claim that the concept of e-democracy is not fully developed. Electronic voting can make democracy more legitimate or, on the contrary, it can delegitimize it. As stated in the report of the Speaker's Commission on Digital Democracy at the British House of Commons in 2015, the digital aspect is only part of the solution to problems: "It can help to make democratic processes easier for people to understand and take part in, but other barriers must also be addressed for digital to have a truly transformative effect."⁵ In other words, digital technologies can become not only a stimulating factor in the formation of a liquid democracy, but also a factor leading to regression, if the process was implemented properly.

In practice, many programs are aimed at creating e-democracy. The recommendations adhere to the main idea that information and communication technologies (ICTs) gradually facilitate the dissemination of information and the discussion of policy issues. Therefore, it is necessary to recognize the following:

... that information and communication technology (ICT) is progressively facilitating the dissemination of information about, and discussion of, political issues, wider democratic participation by individuals and groups and greater transparency and accountability in democratic institutions and processes, and is serving citizens in ways that benefit democracy and society.⁶

The Council of Europe, for example, created an ad hoc committee on artificial intelligence in 2021 to "examine the feasibility and potential elements on the basis of broad

multi-stakeholder consultations, of a legal framework for the development, design and application of artificial intelligence, based on Council of Europe's standards on human rights, democracy and the rule of law."⁷ The new program "Digital Europe 2021-2027" has also been launched.⁸ Based on the strategy of the digital single market adopted in May 2015, and its achievements, the main goal of the program is to ensure the digital transformation of Europe. The program will allocate 7.5 billion euros for financing for 2021-2027; 1.3 billion euros are allocated specifically for ensuring the digital transformation of public administration and public services.

The research of the theorists of the electronic democracy phenomenon is also very extensive. V. I. Fedorov, based on the experience of practical application of e-voting in twelve countries, notes several general problematic trends: high financial costs for experimental projects with electronic voting systems; the lack of international legal standards for electronic voting; a low level of trust among citizens, primarily due to the lack of a clear verification mechanism; and the lack of a single standard of equipment for electronic voting.⁹ Expert of the European program for digital democracy K. Giant notes the following:

... none of the existing experimental systems, however, do not allow for scalability to tens, maybe even hundreds of thousands of participants — an opportunity that may be claimed at the first attempt to apply it in the context of an open discussion of topical issues, when participants know that the discussion will either be taken into account by the current regime, or be included in the program a broad opposition coalition.¹⁰

Researcher of the concept of liquid democracy T. L. Rovinskaya claims that there are weak points in the concept; those weak points include technology, public discussion of proposals, the threat of "virtual" abuse and "expertocracy," the decline of political activity in the majority of the public, and stability and security of electronic systems. Based on the above, the problematic points in the liquid democracy concept are the lack of development of voting technologies, the threat of violations of ethical standards by experts, and the risks associated with possible cyber-attacks. As the researcher suggests, "Only a well-defined system of control over the voting process and security control, as well as dynamic control over the process of transferring votes and using each vote once on one issue, can prevent such abuses."¹¹

Despite the existing shortcomings, the concept of liquid democracy in general, with its supporters and opponents, strives to make democratic decision-making more flexible, dynamic, and transparent in practice. One example of the practical application of the principles of the liquid democracy concept is the activity of a non-partisan, non-profit organization in Germany with the same name — Liquid Democracy. The organization currently has twenty-five completed projects that aim to increase civic engagement through online-participation and promote a democratic culture of participation. Since the organization was established in 2009,

its work has focused on developing innovative methods to promote participation. Thus, the implementation of online participation may be relevant for non-profit civil associations and organizations, commercial companies, mass media, political parties, and, of course, public administration in the field of civil participation and urban planning. In 2012, one of the founders of Liquid Democracy, D. Reichert, said that the Pirate Party of Germany has entered numerous national parliaments for the following reason:

We are used to saying that we live in a democracy, although we spend most of our time in autocratic systems — whether at school, at University, in the profession, and even clubs often have a steep hierarchy and undemocratic processes. The term 'liquid democracy' — refers not only to smooth transitions between direct and representative democracy, but also in general to how we can incorporate relevant areas of life into politics.¹²

Liquid Democracy's principles are the following: innovation, as developing opportunities for democratic participation is impossible without social and technical innovation; participation, which has implications for the development of society as a whole and individuals; independence from state and economic structures, which also gives greater transparency and the ability to better focus on the goals and objectives of the organization; software of an open and accessible source code that creates absolute transparency and the value of information; and non-profit status of the organization. The project team itself states that "The core of our work revolves around the development of Adhocracy, a free and open-source software and digital participation tool providing users with various civic participation tools."¹³

Adhocracy, based on the above principles, is open-source software that reflects the diversity of e-participation processes and allows many participants to make decisions together at any given time, even if they are not in the same place. These projects often face very different requirements, so Adhocracy was conceived as a library that one can use by downloading the software in the public domain. The program's license allows you to view, use, and modify the source code for free, so that users benefit from innovation and further development in other projects and applications. It is thanks to the popularity of Adhocracy that Liquid Democracy has become a non-profit organization in a few years, which now employs twenty people full-time in various projects. Work is underway on the third version of Adhocracy and a multi-purpose participation portal for Berlin, which makes decisions about zoning, environmental initiatives, and allocation of funds in its area. These are just a few of the twenty-five projects which have been successfully implemented by the organization, which are open and posted on their official website.¹⁴

The introduction of digital technologies into the political life of society has an impact on democratic processes. The positive consequences of digitalization as a new stage of informatization of society include the expansion of the right

to information, access to information about the activities of public bodies, and the development of a networked society. Currently, “liquid democracy” successfully combines the ideas of a networked society, as well as direct, representative, and electronic democracy. It is becoming a concept that is relevant to modern society, but to strengthen its influence and expand its scope, a large study of both theoretical provisions and various practices is required. Taking into account all of the positive factors, we can talk about the prospects of the concept of liquid democracy. However, as long as it does not convince the majority of the members of society in practice of its effectiveness and does not demonstrate success in overcoming the crisis-states of democracy, it will be considered only as one of the possible options for the democracy of the future.

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ENDNOTES

- 1 “Pirate Party Germany”, accessed February 2, 2021, <https://www.piratenpartei.de/tag/edemocracy/>
- 2 Coleman Stephen, *Can the Internet strengthen democracy?* trans. Yuri Misnik (Saint Petersburg: Alethea, 2018), 81.
- 3 Tatyana Rovinskaya, “Mobile democracy: pros and cons”, *World economy and international relations*, no. 12 (2014): 63.
- 4 Ford Brayan, *Delegative Democracy*, Personal website of Bryan Ford, accessed February 2 2021, <https://bford.info/deleg/deleg.pdf>.
- 5 Report of the Speaker's Commission on Digital Democracy, accessed May 6 2020, <http://www.digitaldemocracy.parliament.uk/documents/Open-Up-Digital-Democracy-Report.pdf>.
- 6 Recommendations of the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe CM, Rec (2009) to the member States of the Council of Europe on e-democracy, February 18 2009, accessed May 6 2020, https://www.coe.int/t/dgap/goodgovernance/Activities/Key-Texts/Recommendations/Recommendation_CM_Rec2009_1_en_PDF.pdf.
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- 8 Europe investing in digital: the Digital Europe Programme, accessed February 3 2021, <https://ec.europa.eu/digital-single-market/en/europe-investing-digital-digital-europe-programme/>
- 9 Fedorov Vladislav, Electronic voting: the idea of fix or the basis of future democracy? *Citizen. Election. Power*. no. 1-2 (2017): 179–182.

- 10 Velikanov Kirill. “Electronic democracy: myth, project or reality?” *A daily online publication D-russia.ru*, accessed May 15 2020, <http://d-russia.ru/elektronnaya-demokratiya-mif-proekt-ili-realnost.html>.
- 11 Rovinskaya, “Mobile democracy: pros and cons”, 63.
- 12 Detlef Gürtler, Start in die digitale Demokratie, *Online magazine Enorm*, accessed May 15 2020, <https://enorm-magazin.de/gesellschaft/politik/demokratie/liquid-democracy-start-die-digitale-demokratie>.
- 13 “Liquid Democracy”, accessed May 15 2020, <https://liqd.net>.
- 14 Ibid.