



INTRODUCTION

Rhonda has taught sixth grade at Eucalyptus Elementary School for ten years. She almost quit teaching when discipline problems became intolerable, but when she allowed the kids to create some of their own class activities, they became more involved and attentive. Now Rhonda holds weekly planning meetings in each of her classes. Assembled as small groups, the students make collective decisions about class projects, playtime, and which books Rhonda reads to them.

Tony wanted to get more involved in his community, so he worked as a volunteer with the Jefferson Neighborhood Council. After a year, he joined the planning board that oversaw all of the council's activities. The board met monthly and used a streamlined adaptation of Robert's Rules of Order to move briskly through numerous minor and major decisions. Tony found the meetings fast paced and rigidly moderated. Like other volunteers, he began to see the board members as distant and unreachable. After three months on the board, he quit and stopped working with the council.

Lisa and Alejandro were determined to raise their children differently from the way they had been raised. They tried to create an open, egalitarian family atmosphere for their three adopted daughters. The family jointly decided upon chore assignments and family outings, using consensus during spontaneous family meetings. The daughters became adept at arguing and, to a lesser extent, listening. When the children demanded influence over decisions about allowances, Lisa and Alejandro refused to negotiate. The children tried a short-lived strike, but the issue was eventually forgotten and tensions diffused.

THESE SCENARIOS OFFER a glimpse of the promise and problems of small group democracy. When a decision is made that involves more than one person, the decision can often be made through a democratic procedure. Whether the setting is a classroom, a community group, a family, or a senate chamber, group decision making can proceed according to democratic or undemocratic principles.

This book is written for those who want a better understanding of what makes a small group democratic. People usually use the word *democratic* when critiquing or praising large-scale political systems, and scholars and activists have discussed at length the meaning of large-scale democracy. Unfortunately the meaning of democracy in small groups has not been explored. Since it is difficult to bake a pie without a list of ingredients, let alone a recipe, the absence of a definition of small group democracy may partly explain why apple pie emerges from the family oven more often than democracy.

This book is also for those who want to know how to start a small democratic group or make their current groups more democratic. There will never be a cookbook for democracy, because humans and their social appetites are ever changing. Nonetheless, I think I can provide a few cooking tips. Almost everyone has encountered some of the most common group problems. Exceedingly long meetings, for example, are a ubiquitous phenomenon, and they can obstruct the democratic process in many ways. Groups that wish to proceed democratically must also find ways to adapt their procedures to compensate for large memberships, time pressures, and external power constraints.

But there is more to cooking than reading a recipe. Like anything else, democracy takes practice. By drawing on the experiences of existing groups, this book provides ideas and suggestions for those who wish to apply the principles of democracy to their social and political groups, their personal lives, and their world.

The Meaning of Democracy

In "On Participation," Hanna Pitkin and Sara Shumer explain the importance of reexamining the meaning of democracy:

At first glance, democracy may seem a battle long won, but that is only because we pay lip service to the term without thinking about its meaning, let alone trying to live by its implications. The idea of democracy is the cutting edge of radical criticism, the best inspiration for change toward a more humane world, the revolutionary idea of our time.¹

As people demand more power over their lives in the name of democracy, they radicalize the definition of democracy. In this way, democracy's meaning has evolved over the centuries, and the term has become applicable to what were once considered apolitical spheres of our lives. People now speak of democratic business meetings, democratic schools, democratic clubs and organizations, democratic families, and even democratic personal relationships.

Every time the definition of democracy evolves, the questions posed by Pitkin and Shumer return. What does democracy mean? How can we live

by its implications? These questions are crucial. As Gregory Calvert, former national secretary of Students for a Democratic Society, argues, democratic movements are greatly constrained if they lack a clear definition of democracy.²

To understand the full meaning of democracy, one must seek a broader and richer definition than can be found in a dictionary or in existing governments. Democracy embodies powerful philosophical principles that have never been fully realized on large social scales. As Charles Lummis writes, democracy "describes an ideal, not a method of achieving it. It is not an ... historically existing institution, but a historical project."³

Democracy connotes wide-ranging liberty, including the freedom to decide one's own course in life and the right to play an equal role in forging a common destiny. Democracy means social and civil equality and a rejection of discrimination and prejudice. Democracy embraces the notion of pluralism and cultural diversity. It welcomes a wide range of perspectives and lifestyles, moving different social groups toward peaceful coexistence or respectful integration. Democracy represents the ideal of a cohesive community of people living and working together and finding fair, nonviolent ways to reconcile conflicts. In sum, democracy embodies all three elements of the famous French Revolutionary slogan, "*Liberté, égalité, fraternité.*"⁴

Working from these principles, we can envision the contours of large-scale democratic utopias. But what would a small democratic group look like? How would pluralism and freedom of speech manifest themselves in smaller social groups? Should all groups strive to be democratic? These are the questions with which this book begins.

Democracy in Small Groups

All of us have taken part in small group discussions. Our small group experiences might range from joining friendly gatherings to attending meetings in business, civic, and recreational groups and organizations. We may not be experts, but we all know something about the pitfalls and potential of small group decision making.

We also have our own ideas about the democratic process. Through formal and informal education, we have learned something about both democratic ideals and the behavior of governments that call themselves democratic. For many of us democracy has come to mean elections, parliamentary debates, voting, lobbying, and the like. For others, democracy may mean open discussion, the search for common ground, and egalitarian decision making.

Despite this general knowledge, not all of us have participated in highly democratic groups. Finding information about such groups is difficult,

because writings on small groups rarely discuss democracy, per se, at length. The phrase *small group democracy* is not in common use, so it is necessary to begin with a brief definition of this central term.

A *small group* consists of more than two people who have a perception of common goals, a network of communication, some interdependence, some shared norms, and a sense of wholeness.⁵ The smallness of a group depends upon both absolute numbers and the intimacy of the membership. Imagine a group as a cluster of people in two-dimensional space: the more people the group has, the larger it becomes; however, the closer the members are to one another, the smaller the group becomes. For convenience's sake, we can think of small groups as having some cohesiveness and fewer than, say, thirty members.⁶

A small group is democratic if it has equally distributed decision-making power, an inclusive membership committed to democracy, healthy relationships among its members, and a democratic method of deliberation. Group deliberation is democratic if group members have equal and adequate opportunities to speak, neither withhold information nor verbally manipulate one another, and are able and willing to listen.

The Time and Place for Democracy

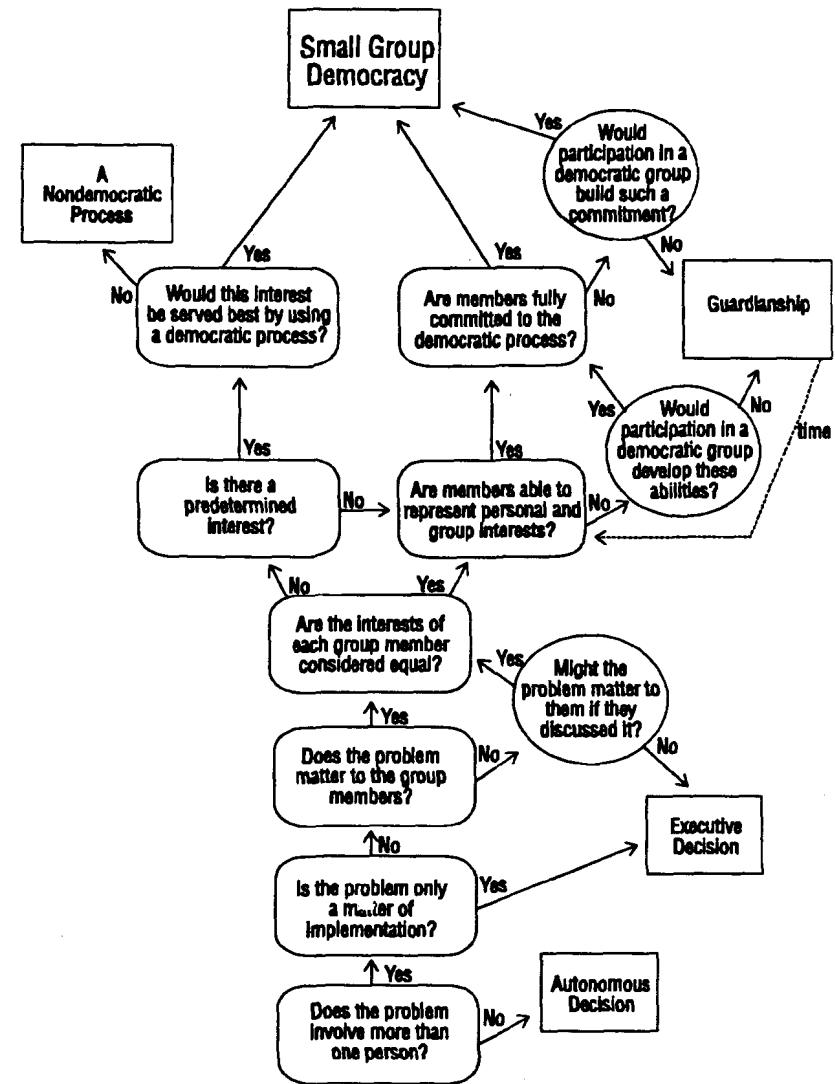
Given this basic definition, should all groups strive to be democratic? If not, when and where can groups use a democratic process? In answering these questions, previous authors have identified a number of key considerations.⁷ In Figure 1.1 these are represented as the branches of a decision tree. This tree shows the questions that one asks when deciding whether to solve a problem democratically.

Starting at the trunk of the decision tree, one first assesses the problem. If it involves only one person, an autonomous decision can be reached. While one might wish to consult others, a group decision-making process is unnecessary.

If the problem involves merely implementing or working out the details of a previous decision, an executive (or judicial) decision-making process is in order. When a group decides to buy a computer, the membership would not ordinarily reach a fully detailed agreement and then solemnly march out the door to buy the computer. Instead, the group is more likely to authorize the finance committee to select the computer model and accessories (a matter of detail) and give the treasurer responsibility for handling any problems that arise in making the purchase (a matter of implementation).

If the problem is of no concern to group members, an executive or delegated decision might be in order. Thus a member of a worker-owned

Figure 1.1 Decision Tree for Small Group Democracy



supplier, because the members have expressed no interest in who sells them wood, so long as it is inexpensive.

But note the question in the first oval: might the problem matter to group members if they discussed it? This question raises the possibility that the members would care about a problem if they had the information

