

The Problem of Global Democracy
Charles Beitz
Princeton University
(preliminary summary)

An influential line of critical thought about global governance is best understood as the application to global politics of a general principle about the basis and scope of democracy. This principle is encapsulated in the medieval maxim that what touches all should be approved by all (*quod omnes tangit ab omnibus approbetur*). Applied to contemporary global politics, it produces both a diagnosis of the shortcomings of existing governance arrangements and a prescription for their reform. The diagnosis holds that various global governance processes are defective because insufficiently inclusive. The prescription calls for reforms that would extend control over these decisions to those affected by them. I call this combination of diagnosis and prescription the “democratic deficit view” (DDV), though in doing so I don’t mean to suggest that all who have argued that there is a global “democratic deficit” reach this position in the way I have described.

The general principle on which the DDV seems to depend is not usually defended; indeed, it is seldom even explicitly acknowledged. Typically the principle is simply assumed in the background and attention is focused on the respects in which contemporary mechanisms of global governance, such as they are, fall short of its requirements. On reflection, however, the general principle about the nature and basis of democracy is excessively simple. It embodies a mischaracterization of the conditions under which we regard regimes as democratic and a faulty understanding of the reasons why we admire them. These errors reinforce each other. When the view is applied to global politics, it produces a critique that is morally superficial and proposals for institutional reform that may be either unlikely to be realized in practice or, if realized, unlikely to repair the most important global economic and social injustices.

In the domestic case, the ideal of constitutional democracy is best understood as a solution to the problem of political injustice. This problem implicates both process-oriented and results-oriented moral considerations. The ideal of constitutional democracy is therefore morally complex. The problem of global political injustice also implicates an array of moral considerations and we should expect that plausible solutions would also be morally complex.

This suggests that the question whether global governance processes should be made more democratic is ill-formed. We do better to begin with a view about the respects in which global governance processes can be unjust. As in the domestic case, we need a clearer understanding of the process-oriented and results-oriented moral considerations found at the basis of the idea of political justice. With such an understanding in hand, we would be in a better position to judge proposals for institutional reform, from those that call for an extension of democratic control over global governance processes (e.g., “cosmopolitan democracy”) to those whose ambitions may appear more modest (enhanced accountability within existing institutions).