

How democratic should democracy seeking agents be in electoral authoritarian regimes?

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Occupying an urban park to prevent its demolition. Damaging machinery in a gold mine. Obstructing deportation officers. Democracy seeking agents contemplating such forms of direct action may find themselves facing a democratic dilemma: On the one hand, the outcome of the direct action might advance the democratic interests of society. Hence agents may have *democratizing obligations* for carrying it out. On the other hand, performing the action may go against the *democratic obligations* of the agent, as it has not been democratically legitimized through society wide processes. The dilemma emerges when a commitment to the democratic ideal creates equally weighty but opposing obligations to perform and not to perform a certain political action.

What should democracy seeking agents then do? One view is that such dilemmas do not emerge in undemocratic regimes: Laws and policies that agents resist in undemocratic regimes lack democratic legitimacy. Hence actions that counteract them do not demand the level of democratic legitimization needed in well-functioning democracies. Moreover, in the absence of democratic institutions, democracy seeking agents would not be able to legitimize their actions even if they wanted to. For both of these reasons, under undemocratic regimes, democracy seeking agents should engage in political actions that advance the democratic interests of society despite the lack of procedural democratic legitimization.

In this paper, I show that this response is too hasty. First, it wrongly assumes that democracy seeking agents already know what the democratic interests of society are prior to democratic processes. Second, it does not take into account institutional differences between regimes that are not fully democratic. In electoral authoritarian regimes, for example, most institutions of the state are shaped in a way to ensure the continuity of regime. But the ruling party still needs to win elections in order to continue its rule. Formal processes of political engagement and their efficacy are not fully undermined. Third, it overlooks non-formal processes of democratic legitimization. Even in the absence of democratic institutions, an action may be democratically more legitimate than another due to its qualities. Finally, it fails to consider the long term social implications of political actions on the democratic culture of society. A political action that might advance the democratic interests of society in the here and now might jeopardize prospects of achieving greater democracy in the future by undermining social relationships.

Alternatively, I argue that, under electoral authoritarian regimes, democracy seeking agents might face cases of genuine democratic dilemma. Yet, in other cases, the democratic ideal can be action guiding.

Drawing on the work of Pablo Gilabert and Holly Lawford-Smith on political feasibility¹, I suggest that democracy seeking agents should design courses of action based on what I call *maximal expected democratic value* (MD). The MD of a political action can be assessed by considering the feasibility, stability and democratic desirability of its outcome. Democracy seeking agents should then choose courses of direct action that have the greatest MD.

¹ Gilabert, P., & Lawford-Smith, H. (2012). Political Feasibility. *Political Studies*, 60(4), 809-825