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## Article

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### BEYOND ELECTORALISM: A CRITIQUE OF SCHUMPETER'S DEMOCRATIC THEORY AND THE CASE FOR OHACRACY

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## Abstract

The aim of this paper is to critique Schumpeter's theory of democracy in order to explore an alternative to his theory of democracy. Schumpeter conceptualizes democracy as the institutional arrangement for arriving at political decisions in which individuals acquire the power to decide by means of a competitive struggle for the people's vote. This description of classical democracy by Schumpeter is hinged on his argument that classical construal of democracy as a democratic institutional arrangement for arriving at political decisions which realizes the common good is fraught with numerous assumptions that are indefensible. Schumpeter insists that there do not exist a common good that all can be brought to see via rational argument, as even those with good intentions can disagree on what is best for society. Employing the combined methods of exposition and thematic content analysis (TCA), this paper finds out that Schumpeter's theory, on further analysis has some weaknesses. This work is necessary because Schumpeter's model has been influential but has not been adequately challenged from non western framework. Thus, this paper holds that an alternative to both Schumpeter's modern form of democracy and classical form of democracy is the Igbo participatory form of government referred to as *Ohacracy*. It remains a better option, as a form of government, to ensuring human flourishing.

**Keywords:** Ohacracy, Participatory, Democracy, Will, Common Good.

## Introduction

Democratic theory and practice have been at the forefront of political philosophy and political science for many years. Democracy has continued to be idealized as a regime of popular rule,

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based on the ideals of political equality, public deliberation, and popular sovereignty, from the direct democracy models of ancient Athens to contemporary liberal representative systems. But in his work *Capitalism, Socialism, and Democracy* (1942), Joseph Schumpeter retorts against such universal belief by offering a straightforward and systematic definition. According to him, democracy can be defined as an institutional process of arriving at political decisions under which the people gain the right to make such decisions by obtaining a free competition for their votes, and not the actual governance of the people.

Schumpeter's model, also known as elite democracy or minimalist democracy, has had a significant influence on post-war democratic theory and molded much modern political science theory. "Democracy" cannot and does not imply that the people actually rule in any sense of the words "people" and "rule," he asserts. In the words of Schumpeter (1942), it "means only that the people have the opportunity of accepting or refusing the men who are to rule them." It was Schumpeter's belief that the institutional device of competitive elections, rather than popular control, separated democracies from nondemocracies. No meaningful or substantive manifestation of popular sovereignty is found in the US, UK, and other liberal democracies. Therefore, in his view, the essence of democracy is not leadership but the process by which leaders come to power. While providing a viable and organizational concept of contemporary democracy, Schumpeter's redescription has come under intense attack both from the practitioners of democracy and from normative philosophers. Democracy loses its promise of participation, deliberation, and emancipation as much as critics are concerned when it is nothing more than an occasional electoral contest. Besides, it ignores democratic values increasingly espoused by deliberative and participatory democratic models, such as accountability, inclusivity, civic engagement, and collective self-determination (Pateman, 1970; Habermas, 1996; Dryzek, 2000).

In this paper, Schumpeter's original thesis is reexamined with the aim of questioning whether it is still a valid model for democratic administration in today's world, especially in plural and postcolonial societies such as Nigeria. Even as it is added to the tradition, it contends that Schumpeter's procedural definition remains insufficient to capture the multifaceted cultural, communal, and participatory aspects of democracy in practice in indigenous African societies. This paper presents *Ohacracy*, a theoretical framework patterned after the Igbo system of participatory government, based on communal consensus, dialogic reason, and rotating leadership. It draws lessons from the traditional Igbo polity of southeast Nigeria. *Ohacracy* is an alternative notion of democracy that prioritizes collective sovereignty, neighborhood responsibility, and lateral participation in contrast to Schumpeter's elitist conception. Therefore, the paper introduces two goals: it first critically evaluates Schumpeter's democratic minimalism both philosophically and practically; second, it develops the institutional and normative potential of *Ohacracy* as an intellectually justified and culture-reflective model of participatory democracy. To state this, the research contributes to the now increasingly variegated debate on indigenous governance, intercultural theory of democracy, and political legitimacy seeking models beyond Western liberal paradigms.

### **Schumpeter on the Non-Existence of Common Good and Common Will**

Democracy for Schumpeter is a method of the achievement of "common good" by the articulation of a single, unified popular will. He questions whether there is a widely accepted common good that can be discovered by all the citizens through reason. According to him, the notion that one can label policies as being either "good" or "bad" misses the diversity of human interests and values (Schumpeter, 1942). According to Schumpeter, there is no consensus on

what the common good is since it is different among different people and societies. To add to Schumpeter's skepticism, Gerry Mackie contends that liberal-democratic societies do share some degree of agreement on such fundamental principles as the rule of law, emancipation from slavery, and government by constitution, though no single common good can be capable of universal rational assent (Mackie, 2004). Furthermore, Coleman and Ferejohn (1986) refer that a conception may be useful even though it is indeterminate and contestable.

Arguments concerning particular topics would never be settled even when society concur regarding a general understanding of what constitutes the common good, as for instance with the utilitarian maxim of greatest happiness. Political disagreements would still exist, usually with passion. He also denies the hypothesis that the sum of individual tastes will yield a common will. For him, the democratic process is so incoherent and fragmented as to produce a unified, rational popular will (Schumpeter, 1942). Rousseau's distinction between the "general will" and the "will of all," the former an idealized conception of public reason and the latter the actual, often mistaken choices of the public, is echoed here in this line of reasoning (Rousseau, 1987). Competing visions of the common good are present in consolidated democracies, though they are circumscribed by intersecting values and principles (Mackie, 2004). Sean Ingham refutes Schumpeter by contending that individuals can still shape the result of policies despite having their desires manipulated or imposed. He concludes control remains with the decision-maker regardless of the source of their will by establishing a counterfactual between an autocrat and his advisor (Ingham, 2016). This implies popular will is manipulable but needn't be empty.

### **Schumpeter on the Non-Existence of Individual Will**

Irrationality of the typical voter is the target of Schumpeter's most controversial assertion. He contends that in politics compared to their personal or professional life, people behave with much less level of intellectual involvement. Their intelligence becomes emotional, associative, and primitive once they become part of the political system (Schumpeter, 1942). He compares democratic crowds to unreasonable mobs that can easily be manipulated and driven by mania, making allusions to Pareto and LeBon. Whereas Schumpeter exaggerates irrationality's strength in group action, there are other scholars like Ober (2008) who demonstrate that group conclusions tend to be more correct than individual judgments based on Aristotle and the Condorcet jury theorem. Postmes and Spears (2003) also contend that group action is driven by standards and expectations of group members and not by being irrational. Democratic institutions thus formed are therefore capable of facilitating rational group decision-making. Schumpeter admits that the citizens may be rational about some, mundane issues, such as home politics or problems that directly concern their life, even though he is pessimistic. But if the problems concerned are national or theoretical, reality gets less and perceptions get shaped more by ideological biases and hazy perceptions than by sound judgment (Schumpeter, 1942). The vulnerability of the citizens to propaganda is the threat. Political elites can formulate a public will through expertly shaping issues. The public will is thus built and not spontaneous (Schumpeter, 1942). Nevertheless, following Bernard Manin (1987), democracy should work towards influencing preferences within the framework of public representation and argumentation, rather than identifying a pre-existing popular will. A vibrant representative democracy requires ongoing elections and competitive parties, following Schumpeter. They serve as a brake on the will that has been established and permit replacing of incompetent representatives. Likewise, Hamilton et al. (1787) considered democracy as a vehicle for public opinion expansion and sophistication through informed leadership.

### **Critiques of Schumpeter's Theory of Democracy**

Democratic theorists, political theorists, and comparative politics scholars alike have all highly criticized Schumpeter's minimalist definition of democracy, which is that democracy is a system of competitive leader selection through elections. Although his model is systematic and useful to grasp government, it has several theoretical and empirical inadequacies. Exclusion of involvement, elitist prejudice, and disregard for contextual democratic demands in postcolonial and plural societies are the three broad criticisms one can invoke to classify these shortfalls en masse. The strongest of all criticisms of Schumpeter's model is that it confines democracy to being a method of choice of leaders, barring public discussion and participatory citizenship—two things most central to democratic legitimacy. Schumpeter categorically states that "the people have no will other than a manufactured one" and elites voted to rule must rule, rejecting the classical view of democracy as rule by the people (Schumpeter, 1942). Classical democratic theorists like John Stuart Mill and Jean-Jacques Rousseau are discredited by this limited understanding with their participatory ideals. In her book *Participation and Democratic Theory*, Carole Pateman (1970) firmly resists this exclusion, contending that democratic participation promotes civic virtue, political skill, and personal development - all of which are required for a functioning democracy. Similarly, Barber (1984) holds in *Strong Democracy* that restricting democracy to election competition "turns citizens into consumers" and neglects the transformative power of democratic participation. Because it takes away from the people a significant role other than voting, Schumpeter's theory is seen to be anti-democratic in character. Schumpeterian democracy's elite and bureaucratic foundations are the target of a second wave of criticism. Schumpeter quietly justifies oligarchic control of democratic institutions by promoting elite political competition and reducing the status of common people. A few interconnected elites dominate contemporary democracies under such regimes, as described by C. Wright Mills (1956) in *The Power Elite*, so that elections become a ceremonial affair with minimal scope for genuine change.

Finally, Schumpeter's theory is criticized by Dahl (1989) as well on grounds that it espouses a "democracy of spectators" as opposed to a participatory democracy. Dahl stresses contention and inclusion in his theory of polyarchy, two virtues that are either ignored or compromised in Schumpeter's theory. Therefore, even in the context of elections, institutional structures and power disparities that restrict public agency are not recognized by the Schumpeterian theory. This elitist predisposition could only strengthen neocolonial alienation and government structures in postcolonial society. Lastly, Schumpeter's theory has been faulted as being inadequately contextualized, especially in multicultural or postcolonial nations. His approach disregards the diversity of identity, ethnicity, and rule of the society that is prevalent in the majority of African, Asian, and Latin American republics because it was premised on stable, comparatively homogeneous Western democracies. The Schumpeterian emphasis upon vertical accountability and competitive elections seems not only to be reductionist but also very likely to be destabilizing in those cultures where traditional forms of consultation, communal reflection, and consensus play a fundamental role in the governance process, such as the Igbo, Ashanti, or Zulu. Merging liberal democratic principles with postcolonial politics without reference to local practices creates a democratic deficit and eliminates local legitimacy, Chatterjee (2004) argues in *The Politics of the Governed*. Likewise, Ekeh (1975) distinguishes the civic public sphere from postcolonial Africa's primordial public realm, illustrating that indigenous institutions tend to possess oftentimes the moral legitimacy that imported liberal institutions do not. Schumpeter's model is not possible to use as a foundation for solid or sustainable democratic leadership in such environments since it ignores these realities.

Furthermore, Schumpeter's democratic model has been faulted for the relative deficiency of emphasis placed on elections, barring more sophisticated elements like public discourse, civil society, and participatory government. His model raises the suspicion of majoritarianism as it does not incorporate protection of minority interests and leaves little room for lawmakers to be made accountable in the intervals between elections. Schumpeter risks ignoring social justice and environmental sustainability in the interests of economic efficiency by tightly equating democracy with capitalism and the theory of "creative destruction." Partly true, his premises regarding irrational voters underestimate the influence of civic institutions, the media, and education in the making of well-educated citizens. More critically, however, Schumpeter's approach appears to promote elite domination by prioritizing skill and leadership at the expense of direct engagement. He compares democratic leadership with a patient going to see a doctor or a merchant retaining a manager - not for the autonomy of decision-making, but for outcomes. The inherent dignity of citizen involvement in the formation of public life is beyond the ken of this administrative ideal. But critics contend that public deliberation, institutional design, and education can all lead to enlightened participation. The citizens can be encouraged towards rational discussion and ethical reasoning by adequate democratic procedures. Popular control over policy needs a specific causal relationship between policy and citizens' policy opinions, but this relationship may stand even when citizens have no policy opinions and even when the opinions they do have is an outcome of elite manipulation. This control may not sum up to popular rule if elites have not simply influence but also dominating control over public opinion. For him, there is no reason to expect elites to have dominating control over public opinion if the political environment is indisputably competitive (Ingham, 2016). Having looked at the limitations inherent in both classical and modern forms of democracies in Schumpeter this paper tries to demonstrate that Igbo participatory form of government referred to as *ohacracy* is the way forward.

### **Igbo Participatory Political Model of Government: *Ohacracy***

*Ohacracy* is Igbo social political system of government which is firmly founded on their culture, maintained by their customs, norms, values and language. It is a people oriented government. In *ohacracy* power belongs to the people and the people are the sovereign. For Iroegbu, *ohacracy* is the practical conception of societal order and governance in which the communities determine the praxis of the socio-political life of the people while taking into account basic individual and group peculiarities (Iroegbu, 1997). By implication, *Ohacracy* is an active participation of all responsible Igbo persons in the polity which encourages the common good and the common aim in their existential life so that they can delineate and create themselves and stand out as humans in the society. *Ohacracy* is conveyed as a process by which the collective will of the people decides their existence in the community. This form of government has the trait of the spirit of belongingness which is based on African communalism; accordingly, there is need for a brief depiction of belongingness in order to deepen the meaning of *Ohacracy* as an Igbo political system of government.

In order to understand the idea African communalism there is need to understand the concept of belongingness. Belongingness is a theory of justice that promotes the active role of the community and the individual in the society. For Ejenam, belongingness is a principle of membership applied to a given political community. It is what forms a community's cultural, historical, and traditional values (Ejenam, 2007). Iroegbu avers that it is both a *terminus ad quo* and a *terminus ad quem*. It implies "that it is very fundamental such that we cannot speak of social justice in Africa without it. Belongingness makes all members real and participating



members of the community. It gives all a sense of belonging”(Onebunne & Alike, 2017). Actually, there is nothing that exists that is not part of reality, which by extrapolation belongs to something or a particular reality. Hence, we are part of a group in order to be able to offer our own quota to the common good of all. Without this act of belonging particularly in a political community there will be no participation. Belongingness, however, outshines these existential facts of every communal function. This idea of belongingness is obvious in John Donne’s poem: No man is an Island, entire of itself; every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main.... any man’s death diminishes me, because I am involved in mankind, and therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls, it tolls for thee (Onebunne & Alike, 2017).

Onebunne and Alike hold that “Belongingness is, therefore, a fundamental quality in understanding whatever is. Nothing can be construed as regards its completeness but in its political relation to other realities, defining itself through other beings. Everything is delineated by a relation, that is, a thing or being is in relation to something, or with an attribute of engaging in something (Onebunne & Alike, 2017). As a result, our identity lies in belonging to a group. Belongingness identifies realities as such. Our nature is in belonging. Its role is in belonging. Its mode and operations are in belonging. Belongingness, as such, is the ontological value of living. By belongingness, being is related to other beings by relationship of what it is or does (Onebunne & Alike, 2017).

### **The Political Significance of *Ohacracy***

*Ohacracy* is characterized by belongingness and belongingness is founded in African communalism. Consequently, in African communalism individuals take into consideration the interest of other people in whatever actions that they carry out. It is on the basis of this that the leadership model of *Ohacracy* is conceptualized. Interestingly, *Ohacracy* works based on the customs, culture and values of the Igbo people. Igbo culture like any other African culture is full of symbols and symbolism. For example, *Ofo* in Igbo culture is the symbol of authority, and it plays major roles in *Ohacracy* (Eze et al, 2023). *Ofo* does not only symbolize authority, it does symbolize truthfulness as well. Hence, anyone who upholds *Ofo* should as a matter of necessity and duty promote justice at all times. Alike avers that:

Symbolism derives its power from the fact that it speaks not only of reflective intelligence but to the entire human psyche. It arouses deep emotional experience, releases hidden energies in the soul, gives meaning and stability to the personality, establishes strong loyalties and disposes a man for consistent and committed actions. Symbols in Igbo land can be seen in *Igba-afa* (divination), morning kola ritual, *Ichiozo* (title taking), bride price ceremony, masquerade ceremonies, etc (Alike, 2016).

It is on the basis of this importance of *Ofo* symbol that Njoku holds that *Ofo* is an authoritative emblem symbolizing justice, righteousness, and truth (Njoku, 2009). Still, *Ohacracy* is a form of government of the people that is known for consensus for the good of everybody, which is embedded in unity, love and progress therefore “*Igwe-bu-ike*,” meaning unity is strength (Onebunne & Alike, 2017). This can also be seen in the work “*Njiko ka mma*” meaning staying together is better than being alone which is the theory of communalism as well (Onebunne & Alike, 2017). Moreover, *Ohacracy* is also known for promoting integrity and as such people who participate in it are those with established integrity. *Ohacracy* involves representatives from every family, kindred or even village as far as the person is a man of honour, of good reputation, peace loving, fluent and intelligent. These unique traits make representatives in *Ohacracy* to be trustworthy to function optimally. It is evident from this, what

obtains in *Ohacracy* is completely different from what is commonplace in the western form of democracy practiced in Nigeria whereby representatives do not have the moral will to serve. Most of them lack the probity and competence to function proficiently.

Besides, *Ohacracy* promotes servant leadership style. By extrapolation, it is a bottom to the top leadership approach that makes everyone to consider themselves as servants and not leaders who are representative of others in government in order to serve the general populace which they represent. In *Ohacracy*, the Igbo people are of the view that spirit beings such as *Chi-Ukwu* (Supreme God), *Alusi* (Deity), Earth goddess -*Ala* play exceptional roles as well. They play their roles in order of hierarchy so as to assist human beings or men in the community to achieve their goals independently and cooperatively chiefly in bringing about peace when there are challenges and disagreements in the society (Onebunne & Alike, 2017). Moreover, *Ohacracy* advances equal rights, respect of views of other people and promotes active participation of the people. This implies that it permits for collective participation whereby everyone out of their own volition participates in the decision making process and work as a team so as to achieve a common goal for themselves and the larger community. As regards to transparency, sustainability and accountability, *Ohacracy* is sustainable on the grounds of norms, morals, and laws of the land. All the representatives as a matter of obligation and duty are supposed to obey the laws of the land and this establishes who can be part of the *Ohacracy* government. *Ohacracy* is an Igbo social political form of government and leadership model which is an integral part of the Igbo culture and as such it is sustained using the Igbo language. The Igbo language is the fundamental means of communication and expressing themselves, and as such they define their culture through their language. Onebunne and Alike support this view when they assert that language is culture specific and culture dependent that has social relevance. It facilitates inter-personal relationship in the community, it is spoken and that is why it is part of man, culture and the community in which he finds himself (Onebunne & Alike, 2017).

Moreover, *Ohacracy* is based on justice for everyone in the community or society. The term for justice in Igbo is *Nkedirionye* which is *giving one his or her due*. The Igbo concept of justice holds that in *Egbe bere Ugo bere, nke si ibeya ebena, nku kwaa ya*. This means let the Kite perch, and eagle perch, any that says let the other not perch, let its wing go into pieces (Onebunne & Alike, 2017). Based on the characteristics of unity, brotherhood, consensus and communal life of belongingness possessed by *Ohacracy* as a system of government it is rated high above inefficient and unproductive Nigeria's brand of democracy. Additionally, it is the most sincere and incorrupt form of participatory government (Onebunne & Alike, 2017). Additionally, since it promotes transparency and accountability. The selection processes of representatives in the government is based on character, competence and capacity of the individual and at any point the individual deviates from these ethics of good conducts that were considered before his selection, the person will without delay be withdrawn from the representative position and role. Consequently, members are committed, hardworking, honourable and hands-on in playing their roles well in order to steer clear of disgrace and eviction. This is in contrast to the Nigerian Democratic Party primary processes of electing members that will represent the party. The later is transactional and after the contestants buy their way into becoming candidates of their parties they disarm the members from holding them accountable (Adelekan & Ashibi, 2020). Hence, as an alternative to both Schumpeter's form of democracy and classical form of democracy is the Igbo participatory form of government referred to as *Ohacracy*. It is not only the best form of government Nigeria needs to make efforts to adopt at this critical time in Nigeria's history of failure of governance it can also

be universalized and adopted by other countries since democratic governance all over the world is going through serious crisis.

There is need to fill in a major lacuna in *Ohacracy* which could impact negatively on its efficiency and practicability. This lacuna is that *Ohacracy* was mainly practiced in an epoch in traditional Igbo culture when population size was much less and the society was not as complex as it is now, therefore, it will be tough to practice it utterly as it was practiced then. Hence, there is the necessity for *Ohacracy* to adopt the current Igbo town union governance structures that are efficiently working in dealing with social and economic inequalities and infrastructural deficits in Igbo towns and communities. In other words, notwithstanding the great qualities of *Ohacracy*, its biggest challenge in this modern society is population growth and size. The society is now bigger than what it was in the traditional Igbo society and has become more complex due to cross-cultural, political, religious, urbanization, migration, trade, and technological influences. It will be challenging to practice *Ohacracy* the way the Igbo people practiced it in traditional Igbo society. Accordingly, there is need for it to be based on the modern town union governance structure in Igbo land.

### **The Governance Configuration of Igbo Town Union Organization**

The Igbo town union government is a major element in community and rural development. It serves as a self-help tool means to community development in the post-colonial era. The way to gain membership is by birth, marriage, parental origin or adoption (Obiakor et al., 2021). Furthermore, people who have resided in a specific town for 10 years or more and have acknowledged and accepted the norms and rules guiding the function of the union and the town are entitled to become members of the union. This permits for accommodation, inclusivity, impartiality, participation, variety, novelty, and equity. Interestingly, the union is an association of rational individuals who notwithstanding their class dissimilarity take themselves as equals. Besides, the town union governance system is based on the principles of the rule of law and not blinded by religious and ethnic emotions. The interest of the group is both communal and expansive in nature. Members of the union render aids to their fellow members and at the same time they pay attention to the serious questions regarding how to bridge the fissure between the government and the people by spotting areas of failures in governance, by solving social and economic problems of the community and town (Obiakor and Okoreaffia, 2021). They also assist in rallying the people of the town for meaningful development of the town as regards infrastructures. The governance structure of town unions in Igbo land permits for transparency, accountability, serious punitive measures to put members who go wrong in order (Obiakor and Okoreaffia, 2021). All these qualities which the Igbo town union possesses that make them efficient rural and community development organization in this present-day epoch can aid to fill in the gap of the laps of *Ohacracy* as an effective participatory governance system.

### **Conclusion**

According to Schumpeter, the classical definition of democracy alleges that: The democratic method is that institutional arrangement for arriving at political decisions which realizes the common good by making the people itself decide issues through the election of individuals who are to assemble in order to carry out its will (Eze et al., 2023). From Schumpeter's critique of the classical doctrine of democracy, one can see that the above idea is somewhat fraught with assumptions. It assumes that there is such a thing as "common good," that the people are quality enough to decide on issues, especially of the election of representatives, and that the elected representatives saddled with the task of securing the purported common good take the task seriously. Recent political upheavals have led to the revisit of such critiques of democracy



as that of Schumpeter, who alleges that democracy is indeed *rule of the politician* - and not of the people. Consequently, the paper after much critical analysis and evaluation of modern and classical theories of democracies in Schumpeter came to the conclusion that both the classical delineation of democracy and Schumpeterian construal of democracy are open to serious weaknesses. In order to fill in this gap in knowledge *ohacracy* which is the Igbo participatory form of government is proposed as the alternative form of government that can be adopted in most African countries like Nigeria where democratic practice is still a huge challenge. *Ohacracy* can also be universalized and adopted by other countries since democratic governance all over the world is going through serious crisis.

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