

# Wahlen und Demokratie



“This is not what I expected”:  
The Meaning of Democracy as Freedom in Post-Apartheid South  
Africa

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*1. Introduction*

When in April 1994 South Africans voted in the first free and fair election of the country, the Apartheid regime finally came to an end and one of the most fascinating democratic transitions of the ‘third wave’ of democratization (Huntington 1991) got underway. The long meandering lines of people queuing for hours on dusty fields to cast their vote, most of them for the first time in their life, have become one of the most iconic imageries of the hopes and aspirations people around the world attach to democratic change. However, a quarter of a century on, this spirit of optimism has given way to a more pessimistic outlook, as South Africa struggles with a plethora of social, political and economic problems: sharp inequality, poverty, corruption, recurrent violent civil unrest to name but a few (von Holdt 2013; Mkhize 2015; Project 2020). In this paper, I explore what democracy means to South Africans, what values and expectations they associate with it and how they evaluate the transformation their country has undergone over the past couple of decades. In doing so, the study aims to shed light on the everyday epistemologies of democracy, i.e., the arguments and considerations people draw upon when making sense of democratic politics and how it affects their own lives.

Even though South African democracy has achieved a notable level of stability, it shares the same problems as many other emerging democracies and can thus be seen as part of a wider trend in global democratization. Despite broad support for democracy, evidence from public opinion research casts doubts on citizens’ commitment to democracy and democratic values. In developing countries especially, democracy might be supported for more instrumental reasons that focus on the gains and benefits that are associated with democratic governance than for intrinsic reasons, as an end in its own right (Bratton/Mattes 2001). Other studies suggest that citizens support democracy merely as an abstract ideal, but when confronted with

specific issues or trade-offs tend to reject the principles and values that are constitutive of liberal democracy. Schedler and Sarsfield's study (2007) of public opinion in Mexico highlights the ambivalence of citizens' attitudes towards democracy. Drawing on the notion of 'democracy with adjectives' introduced by Collier and Levitsky (1997) to classify flawed democratic regimes, the authors suggest the notion of 'democrats with adjectives'. They find that a significant proportion of the population combines generic support for democracy with illiberal attitudes. Furthermore, many citizens in new democracies have a limited understanding of what democracy actually is and often mistakenly take aspects of authoritarian politics as democratic (Kruse et al. 2019). Meanwhile, even generic support for democracy is dwindling, as citizens lose trust that democratic institutions can bring about change (Moosa/Hofmeyr 2021). After decades of democratic transition, many citizens are disillusioned; what they got is not what they had hoped for. "The light [has] failed", as Krastev and Holmes (2019) describe the mood in post-communist Eastern Europe.

While current research on citizens' perception and support of democracy in emerging democracies highlights the problems of political culture in transition, it is marked by two principal shortcomings:

First, citizens' views are judged against abstract models of democracy, i.e. ideal-typical constellations of elements that reflect the desire for conceptual consistency of political theorists (Held 2006; Saward 2003), but rarely capture the messiness of democratic politics and its constraints. Any discrepancies between citizens' understandings and the models of democracy are usually interpreted as deficiencies that need to be corrected in order for new democracies to fully consolidate. Schedler and Sarsfield (2007) are aware of this problem and caution against negative labelling and "cheap disqualifiers" (p. 644). Doorenspleet (2015) goes a step further and calls for "people-centred concepts and measurements of democracy" that take citizens' views and rationalities seriously. Such a bottom-up approach would deepen our understanding of the interplay between popular beliefs and political processes and their possible implications, either positive or negative, for democratic consolidation in different political, cultural and historical contexts.

Second, most of the existing research is based on national and cross-national surveys, such as the World Value Survey or regional Barometers, that use standardized instruments for measuring democratic attitudes. The questions asked in these surveys are derived from theoretical models of democracy but are largely detached from everyday language and its ambi-

guities. It is therefore questionable whether the meaning respondents give to the terms and phrases used in survey questions correspond with the definitions political scientists had in mind when designing the questionnaire. Indeed, it is unlikely that concepts such as ‘democracy’, ‘freedom’ or ‘equality’ are understood in the same way across cultures. Technically speaking, while survey research achieves a high level of reliability that enables comparisons and generalization, it lacks validity and an understanding of the cognitive processes through which individuals engage with the concepts in question. Schaffer (2014) states that survey research provides only “thin descriptions” of the meaning of democracy in different contexts.

This study aims to overcome these caveats. Theoretically, it takes a constructivist approach to the conceptualization of democracy to avoid the rigidity of deductive concepts and models. Methodologically, it uses a qualitative approach that allows individuals to express their views in their own words, thus enabling a more nuanced understanding of the meaning of democracy from below. The data used in this paper was collected in semi-structured interviews with political activists in South Africa two decades after the end of apartheid. The aim is not to develop new models or theories of democracy but to unearth the grassroots epistemologies that people in an emerging democracy use to make sense of the dramatic changes they are witnessing.

## *2. A Constructivist Approach to Democracy*

The theory of constructivism stipulates that our knowledge of the social and physical world is filtered and transformed through interpretative frames that are shared by the members of a society at a particular point in time (Berger/Luckmann 1990; Searle 1995). From this perspective, knowledge and meaning emerge from a web of communicative interactions rather than from individual ‘objective’ observations (Leeds-Hurwitz 2016). Taking a constructivist approach to democracy shifts the focus from studying a fixed object of interest and its characteristics to the process of negotiating and (re)interpreting its meaning. Rather than asking ‘what is democracy?’, a constructivist approach to democracy is interested in how people within a particular historical or cultural context understand democracy and the multiple narratives that constitute their views and perceptions. These interpretative frames include elements of the ‘grand narratives’ of theoretical models of democracy (Saward 2003) but are also shaped by

actual elite discourses and the news media (Johnson-Cartee 2005) as well as by interpersonal conversations that take place in ad-hoc encounters of everyday life (Schmitt-Beck/Grill 2020).

Models of democracy tend to conceptualize democracy in an essentialist way, attempting to pin down its universal features and how it should work. What is overlooked, though, is that democracy as we know it was not ‘invented’ as a coherent system of government. Instead, since its early manifestations in ancient Greece about 2,500 years ago, democracy has changed its meaning and practice in fundamental ways (Arblaster 2002; Dunn 1993). A citizen of the ancient city-state of Athens would not recognize modern-day democracy as democratic because elections were dismissed as a means to ensure equality of participation. Conversely, modern visitors to ancient Greece would be concerned about the vulnerability of Athenian democracy to populist manipulation. A crucial turning point in the history of democracy was what Dahl (1989: 24–30) calls “the second transformation of democracy.” This occurred from the late 18<sup>th</sup> century onwards when social philosophers combined the democratic principle of popular decision-making with the medieval, non-democratic practice of representation. It was only through this ingenious innovation that democracy was possible in large-scale territorial nation-states.

Thus, democracy has to be understood as a flexible concept that has adapted to changing circumstances and needs. As a consequence, the elements that constitute democracy – institutions, processes, values – are to some extent incongruent and open to interpretation (Shapiro/Hacker-Cordón 1999). In fact, beyond the very basic idea of democracy as “rule by the people” (Encyclopedia Britannica 2023), all ‘real existing’ democracies are “democracies with adjectives” (Collier/Levitsky 1997) – liberal, delegative, participative, direct etc. – emphasizing different values and developing different practices within similar institutions to make it work. Blokker (2010: 6–10) therefore suggests the notion of “multiple democracies” to emphasize the variety of “democratic grammars” that co-exist both within and across democratic polities.

Throughout its history, democracy was, and still is, both a set of institutions and practices and an ideal. Procedural models of democracy that focus on institutions and formal processes largely ignore the power of democracy as an ideal, the utopian vision of a better world beyond the mechanics of how democracy works in the here and now. Yet democratic imagination is essential for the vitality of democracy and a driving force that mobilizes people to stand up against authoritarianism, protect demo-

cracy against its enemies and find solutions for new problems (Browne/Diehl 2019; Ezrahi 2012).

By focusing on historical trajectories, language, communicative interactions and collective meaning-making, the constructivist approach is particularly suitable for the study of third-wave democratization, when democracy took hold in a large variety of countries outside the Western world where it originates.<sup>1</sup> Different historical experiences and frameworks of evaluation are most likely to transform the meaning of democracy, resulting in a “global divergence of democracy” (Diamond/Plattner 2001) that reflects the diversity of pathways and imaginaries that shape diverse democratization processes.

A constructivist approach also emphasizes the contested nature of democracy and democratization. During transitions, democracy is not only contested between democrats and supporters of the old regime but equally between different democratic factions who struggle over the question of what democracy should look like in their country. As Whitehead (2002) points out, these conflicts are essential for democracy to become meaningful:

“If ‘democracy’ is viewed as a contested and to some extent unstable concept, anchored through the invocation of practical knowledge and a deliberative filter of collective deliberation, then democratization can only come about through a lengthy process of social construction that is bound to be relatively open-ended.” (ibid.: 30)

While deliberating democracy as an open-ended process resonates with the ideals of a rational public sphere (Habermas 1989), it can also generate a level of uncertainty and polarization that may exceed the coping capacity of a society. Indeed, many new democracies are locked in high levels of conflict between unbridgeable positions that frequently spiral into violence and in some cases even civil war (Snyder 2000). South Africa is an illuminating example of this transitional struggle. The country engaged in an extensive public debate about its past and future, most visibly manifested in the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. However, South Africa is also marred by extremely high levels of violence, indicated by high crime rates and

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1 Arguably, there have been numerous ancient examples of small-scale democracies, for example in African communities or the Indus valley civilization. However, it was Athenian democracy that left us with a rich body of philosophical discourses that still shape our ideas of democracy today (Isakhan/Stockwell 2012).

recurring attacks against immigrants from neighbouring countries (Gready 2010; Lieberman 2022).

### 3. *Investigating the Meaning of Democracy*

Despite the frequently emphasized importance of qualitative research to arrive at a more nuanced and context-sensitive understanding of how citizens perceive democracy, only a very small number of qualitative studies exist so far. For example, van Wessel (2010, 2017) conducted semi-structured interviews with citizens in the Netherlands to investigate political disaffection and citizens' notions of political responsiveness. Her material reveals a "clash of rationalities" (Wessel 2010: 513) between policies and the lifeworlds of citizens. Though citizens' complaints often remain a "poorly aggregated set of diverse demands" (ibid.: 521), people's views also suggest new avenues of problem-solving that would be a valuable resource for effective policy making.

Schaffer's (2000) study on the meaning of democracy in Senegal is the most thorough investigation into the impact of culture on the interpretation of democracy in a non-western context. Taking a language-centred approach, Schaffer shows how the translation of the word 'democracy' into the indigenous word 'demokrataasi' shifts and transforms its meaning, absorbing the existing norms and practices. Schaffer doubts whether there is a universal notion of democracy. Instead, he draws on Wittgenstein's concept of 'family resemblances' whereby cases overlap with some but not with others, although ultimately all cases are recognized as 'democracy'.

The present paper aims to contribute to this strand of qualitative research into citizens' perceptions of democracy. Focusing on South Africa, a new democracy in the Global South, the paper provides insights into democratization as a process of making sense of democracy. The analysis presented here is part of a larger comparative project on "Media, Conflict and Democratisation"<sup>2</sup> that investigates the dynamics and impact of public communication during democratization conflicts, i.e. conflicts that accompany, and are triggered by, democratic transitions (Voltmer 2019).<sup>3</sup>

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2 [www.mecodem.eu](http://www.mecodem.eu).

3 The project has received funding from the European Union's Seventh Framework Programme, grant agreement no 613370. The project run from 1 February 2014 until 31 January 2017. Fieldwork was conducted in four countries: Egypt, Kenya, Serbia and



We conducted semi-structured interviews with political activists who were selected as interview partners because of their central role in shaping public discourses in contemporary South Africa (Brooks et al. 2020). Unlike politicians, political activists are lay persons who engage in political matters voluntarily. It can therefore be assumed that their views are close to the everyday epistemologies that are shared by ordinary citizens. Semi-structured interviews are particularly suitable to encourage focused, yet unrestricted responses to a set of questions related to the respondents' political work and their views on various political issues (Arksey/Knight 1999). Fieldwork was undertaken during August and September 2015. The interviews were conducted in English<sup>4</sup> and transcribed in full<sup>5</sup>. On average, they lasted 62 minutes, ranging from ca. half an hour to ca. two hours.

All participants were actively involved in two major democratization conflicts that dominated South Africa's public agenda during the project. First, service delivery conflicts describe a variety of protests by poor, mainly urban populations demanding access to basic goods, such as water, sanitation, electricity and housing. Service delivery protests have become a permanent feature of South African politics with an estimated 13,000 protest events per year. Many of these protests involve violence ranging from burning tyres to destroying infrastructure. Protests intensified in 2014 and have seen recurrent waves ever since (Duncan 2016; Twala 2014). The second democratization conflict of the study is a single event, the State of the Nation Address (SONA) 2015. The annual speech to the South African parliament given by then President Jacob Zuma was disrupted by members of the Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF) to protest against the corruption and inefficiency of the Zuma government. Protesting MPs were removed from parliament by undercover police forces and the broadcast transmission of the speech was interrupted. This response was widely regarded as authoritarian interference by the executive and triggered a nationwide de-

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South Africa, and included interviews with three sets of actors: politicians, political activists and journalists. The present paper builds on the work package "Civil society, political activism and communications in democratisation conflicts" led by Herman Wasserman (University of Stellenbosch); fieldwork in South Africa was led by Tanya Bosch (University of Cape Town).

- 4 The decision to limit sampling to English speaking interview partners was taken for practical reasons, but it has to be kept in mind that this excludes individuals who only speak indigenous languages.
- 5 Speech features, such as pauses or 'ums' and 'ers' were omitted, but individual sentence constructions and expressions were not altered.

bate about state power and freedom of speech (Chuma et al. 2017; Sorensen et al. 2019).

The sample of interview partners was obtained in a two-step process starting from compiling civil society organizations that were involved in one or both of the democratization conflicts mentioned above. Within these organizations, we identified activists who took the lead in organizing campaigns or protests. The resulting sample consists of 26 interviews<sup>6</sup> that reflect a reasonably good balance of socio-demographic categories. Several interviewees came from a very disadvantaged background and had hardly any formal school education, while others were from middle-class backgrounds with well-paid professions, such as lawyers. There is a slight over-representation of male interview partners (15 male, 11 female). Most respondents chose not to have their race recorded, but the majority were black or coloured (for more detailed information about the sample see Appendix).

This analysis focuses on the responses to a specific question within the interview that invited participants to reflect on the meaning and quality of democracy. The question wording was: “What is your impression of the current state of democracy in South Africa? What has been achieved, and what are the shortcomings?” The wording discourages responses that reproduce learned knowledge and focuses instead on the participants’ observations and thoughts. Statements about the state of democracy that were expressed elsewhere in the interview were also included in the corpus of text. The coding was assisted by the software programme NVivo and combined deductive and inductive concepts. In the first round, the material was coded into broad categories describing the quality of democracy (Bühlmann et al. 2012; Diamond/Morlino 2005). In a second round, these categories were broken down into specific arguments.

The section that follows presents the results of the second round of analysis. After a brief overview of people’s general evaluation of democracy, the analysis focuses on one aspect that dominates the narratives about democracy across all interviews: freedom. While this restriction of the epistemic scope of democracy excludes other dimensions, it allows for the detailed, comprehensive investigation of people’s understanding of democracy that is missing in other standardized approaches, such as surveys. Where appropriate, the arguments and viewpoints of our interview part-

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6 The initial sample consists of 28 interviews. However, two interviews were excluded because of technical problems in the relevant parts of the interviews.

ners are embedded in current theoretical debates concerning the meaning of freedom. The aim is not to determine whether people's views are correct but to show how certain themes and arguments resonate in both everyday and philosophical discourses.

#### *4. Evaluation of Democracy: A Glass Half Empty*

About two decades after the end of the apartheid regime, the activists of our sample provide a rather mixed evaluation of the new democratic dispensation, as one participant summarizes it: "Democracy is 5 points out of 10" (A22). On the positive side, many respondents are aware of the remarkable journey their country has taken since the end of the apartheid regime. They acknowledge that "we have achieved a lot. We have achieved a transition, a fairly successful transition" (A15) which did not end in civil war and revenge killings as many had feared. Participants also value the construction of "the democratic architecture" (A18), encompassing the institutions of governance, elections and the rule of law.

In particular, the Constitution is referred to with reverence and pride. With its extensive protection of civil liberties, the inclusion of socio-economic rights and numerous institutional safeguards against state power, South Africa's constitution prides itself on being "one of the most progressive in the world" (South African Government 2023). The commitment to humanist values enshrined in the constitution delineates a vision of the South African society that motivates activists to fight for a better future:

"What guides us is our constitution, we always want to uphold our constitution to ensure that it does not become a useless paper ... Our constitution moves us forward. Should our constitution be fully implemented, we are going to live in a just society, we are going to live in an equal society. Let's all be respected as human beings irrespective of the colour of your skin, irrespective of your race." (A23)

However, almost all respondents point to the huge gap between the ambitions of the constitution and reality, between promises and implementation. Some respondents have only cynical words for the idea of democracy in South Africa. Their responses are marked by disappointment and bitterness. They call South Africa's democracy a "so-called democracy, ... a lie" (A28) or even deny its existence altogether: "I think the word democracy in South Africa is a joke. I think there's no democracy." (A07)

This is a shattering judgment, and although it is expressed in extreme words, it echoes the views of many other individuals we interviewed. What is the reasoning behind these judgments? What values and principles do respondents draw upon when justifying their view of democracy?

## 5. *Democracy Means Freedom*

Across all of the interviews with activists, freedom is the dominant point of reference that frames their understanding and evaluation of democracy. Other principles, such as equality, accountability and outcomes, follow with some distance and are, as will be shown below, closely linked to the idea of freedom.<sup>7</sup> Freedom was the grand narrative that mobilized decades of resistance to the apartheid regime. From the Freedom Charter of 1955 to Nelson Mandela's autobiography titled "Long Walk to Freedom" (2013), the call for freedom encapsulates both memories of past struggles and visions of the future (Brooks et al. 2020). However, like democracy, freedom is a contested concept whose meaning is 'constructed' through multiple layers of discourses that (re-)interpret an ideal with universal appeal within a domestic context.

The following analysis explores how participants of our study understand freedom and how this affects their perception of democracy. Successive coding processes as described in the previous section revealed three clusters of the meaning of freedom:

- Freedom as civil liberties
- Freedom as equality
- Freedom as a decent life

### 5.1 Freedom as Civil Liberties

In a country that excluded the majority of the population from most physical and social spaces with the sign "Whites only", the newly-won freedom is felt in a very concrete way in everyday life. Black people are now free

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7 The same pattern can be found in the interviews with politicians and journalists, which are not included in the present analysis. This uniformity across different types of actors indicates that the interpretation of democracy as freedom is the dominant narrative in South Africa.

to make choices about their own lives. They are able “to live where they want to and do what they want to” (A18). In a very fundamental way, this has restored their humanity and autonomy which was denied to them under apartheid. Freedom from racial discrimination also opens up social relationships that would have been impossible before, as a black participant points out to a white interviewer: “that now we’re able to, like now, sitting with you right now, it was something that was difficult in apartheid.” (A14)

Beyond regaining agency over one’s personal life, freedom also means being a citizen. Civil liberties such as the freedom of speech, that “give[s] people a platform to speak out” (A09), and freedom of assembly, “the freedom to join and not to join” (A22), enable people to actively take part in public life and have their voices heard. However, for many activists, these civil liberties are fragile and at risk of being undermined by an increasingly oppressive state. Activists who are involved in freedom of information campaigns saw the events surrounding the State of the Nation Address as indicative of what one participant called “state dictatorship” (A26). In their view, the removal of protesting MPs from parliament with police forces revealed the “true character of our state” (A03).

Street protests are another arena where the state becomes an oppressive force, as protesters are frequently met by “extremely aggressive and repressive responses from whoever holds power” (A08). A turning point in the public perception of the state was an event in August 2012 that became known as the Marikana massacre. After a weeks-long wild strike at a platinum mine, police opened fire at the protesting workers, killing 34 and injuring 78 (Alexander 2013). Witnessing state violence of this scale was a shock for the country. History seemed to repeat itself. For many, Marikana triggered memories of the massacres in Sharpeville in 1960 and during the Soweto uprisings in 1976 that became synonymous with the brutality of the Apartheid regime. The fact that Marikana happened in a democratic state only indicates that the old forces of oppression were still at work under the surface of democratic institutions:

“We cannot deny the ANC take-over being a democratic state ... has been a massive change. But again, the fundamental power structures have not been addressed, so those very systems that existed then take over the system without changing it. Certain things are replicating themselves. For me that is why Marikana is such a huge thing because before Marikana I saw a lot of mini Marikanas and I see them every single day.” (A21)

Facing the danger of authoritarian state power, many participants regard South Africa's civil society, of which they are an active part, as a protective force. Otherwise, "this government will take us to slavery". (A26)

These arguments that understand democratic freedom as civil liberties are aligned with the liberal conceptualisation of negative freedom (Berlin 1966). In this school of thought, freedom manifests itself in the absence of external coercion, be it by political, religious or other powers, that would interfere with the autonomy of the individual and their right to make choices about their own lives. Another central element of the liberal conception of freedom is the perception of the state as an antagonistic force that has to be held at bay. Many of our participants are deeply suspicious about the state as a continuation of the apartheid state, which, hidden under a democratic veneer continues to be a threat to freedom.

## 5.2 Freedom as Equality

The following statement takes a very different perspective on freedom:

"So how can they say there is democracy when there is no freedom? Because it's still that there is no freedom yet for our community because the rich is getting richer and the poor is getting poorer. So that is my opinion from democracy." (A02)

Here, democracy, freedom and socio-economic equality are put into one equation: just as there is no democracy without freedom, there is no freedom without equality. The expression 'the rich are getting richer and the poor are getting poorer' is used by many participants when they talk about inequality and the injustices associated with it. It expresses frustration, despair, and even resignation about the continuing socio-economic division of South Africa's society. For some, the parameters of inequality have shifted: "There is a new kind of apartheid, if you like, but it's at class level" (A07); for others, it is the same old evil: "the exploitation of black people" (A21).

The relationship between freedom and equality has long been disputed amongst democratic theorists. Following the thinking of John Locke, traditional libertarians maintain that there is an unsurmountable tension between freedom and equality. The freedom to acquire and use property inevitably results in inequality of wealth, as some individuals are more successful at making use of their resources than others. Redistributive policies are rejected as interference with individual freedom while opening

avenues for undue state power (Hayek 1944). In a similar vein, procedural approaches to democracy confine the principle of equality to a set of institutions and practices, in particular free and fair elections. The assumption is that effective equality of formal representation is sufficient to address societal inequalities regarding class, race and gender (Bühlmann et al. 2012; Munck 2016).

The participants of our study could not disagree more. For them, inequality contradicts democratic ideals and even poses a threat to democratic development for several reasons.

First, inequality negates the intrinsic value of the person whose needs and aspirations deserve equal recognition. As a relational concept, (in)equality manifests itself in the distribution of a resource that is valued amongst the members of a society, be it wealth, power, fame or something else (Anderson 2018). If a society values physical appearance, then beautiful people rank high in public esteem. Meanwhile, if it is economic wealth, then those who are poor not only have to cope with the hardships of daily life but also with societal neglect or even contempt. Consequently, as several participants point out, “the poor and the working class do not count in society” (A28), they “are made invisible and treated beneath the law” (A28), they are treated “with disregard” (A06). The interviews are full of stories about disrespectful treatment by political officials. For many activists, measures to strengthen the self-esteem of poor citizens, inform them about their rights and enable them to speak up in front of authority is therefore one of the most important aims of their work.

Further, socio-economic inequality not only affects the social standing of a person, but also their effectiveness as a citizen vis-à-vis power institutions, thus undermining the very civil liberties that are afforded to the individual under the new democratic order:

“There is a saying that says: ‘Justice is one thing and equality is something else’. So justice does not mean equality, whether you like it or not, we are not equal based on the constitution. The constitution can say ‘We are all equal in front of the law’, but even in front of the law we are not equal. Those with resources are more equal than those who do not have. That’s a matter of reality.” (A05)

This statement, which many disadvantaged people in advanced democracies would equally subscribe to, challenges the assumptions of the procedural approach to equality and democracy. The experience that cognitive capabilities and the ability to pay for professional advice can bend the

effectiveness of equal justice has eroded this participant's trust in the rule of law. For him, procedural inequality is a fact of life.

Finally, inequality does not only divide a population into rich and poor but it also results in a divided democracy where, for some people, the realization of democratic rights and opportunities is severely restricted. Meanwhile, others can employ their citizenship effectively to exercise influence on political decision-making. A participant who describes himself as a male, white, middle-class person is aware of the differences in the democratic experience between people like himself and those who are less privileged:

“The quality of democracy for people like me is very rich, very rich indeed. It becomes less rich the further down the food chain we go.”  
(A08)

Another participant in a similar position points out the flaws of unequal representation but is confident that the dynamics of party competition and electoral realignment will eventually result in a more democratic and more representative system:

“I think democracy is extremely messy and in a country as unequal as ours – and as I would argue, politically dysfunctional in the sense that the majority party doesn't represent the majority interests very well. It's going to be messy and conflictual and we have to ride that out looking at quite a long timeline of election cycles and at what point does the ANC reform, at what point do other parties secure big enough numbers of votes and enough consensus to form alternative governments. That's all good ... That's what democracy is – regime change. It's like: 'Alleluia, let's do that'.” (A03)

The optimism of this person is infectious and even more remarkable as he is an ANC supporter. For the sake of the democratic development of the country, he knows that it would be best for the ANC to split up so that other parties may form new majorities which would be more responsive to the needs and demands of their voters.

There is markedly less enthusiasm and hope among participants from disadvantaged backgrounds. In their experience, “the ANC focuses on a certain elite, so the economy is only enjoyed by a certain number of people” (A23). Being in power and having to deal with the multiple pressures of diverging interests has detached the ANC from its main electoral basis in the townships; the party has “turned its back on its own constituencies



and that's the poor and the working class." (A18) A significant number of ANC leaders have become enormously rich, often using their access to resources and networks to enrich themselves, family members and friends. As a consequence, politicians are no longer seen as representative, i.e. being like those they are representing (Dovi 2014), and therefore less able to act on behalf of their voters, as this emotional statement demonstrates:

"They don't really have a heart to help people in that way because they were never in that situation. They have always had money, there was always food put on the table, they always had a job. Unlike us, we had to struggle to have what we have today." (A24)

Because of the broken link between large sections of the electorate, especially at the lower end of the socio-economic spectrum, and their representatives, many citizens have lost trust in the effectiveness of elections. While the ANC still secures absolute majorities, though by an ever-smaller margin, street protest has become the major avenue for the poor population to express their demands. Almost all activists in our sample have been involved in organising these protests which they regard as "the only language they [politicians] understand" (A28). In these processes of public mobilization activists claim to be the true representatives of the people, their "mouths and ears and eyes" (A04), the true "voice of the people on the ground" (A12). The broad mobilization of citizens beyond elections is often regarded as an indication of the vitality of South Africa's democracy. However, the shift of the "representative claim" (Saward 2006) from electoral institutions to civil society organizations also points to the crisis of representation and the deep split of South Africa's society: While the poor blockade roads, wealthy motorists follow instructions issued by the public service broadcaster SABC to avoid delays – and the sight of angry, violent crowds.

Thus, the way in which South African activists experience and understand democracy establishes a close link between freedom and equality. For some, it is even the same; for others, the sharp socio-economic inequalities constitute a threat to democracy because it prevents large parts of the population from taking ownership of their citizen rights. These views correspond with a strand of political theory that takes a counter-position to the libertarian and procedural conceptualizations of freedom mentioned above. Beetham (2004) maintains that freedom that cannot be fully exercised because of a lack of capacities and resources loses its value. Hence, civil and political rights cannot be separated from economic and social

rights. Other authors go even further by arguing that both sets of rights reinforce each other since diminishing one would compromise the other (Dworkin 1996; Steiner 2018). There is empirical evidence that the influence of well-educated and well-off citizens on political decision-making exceeds their electoral power by far, thus translating socio-economic power into political power (Schlozman, Brady, and Verba 2020). What is more, through their ability to shape public discourse in the media, the more privileged sections of society can secure cultural hegemony whereby their norms and narratives become the dominant frame for evaluating the status quo (Rueschemeyer 2004). For example, the celebration of the emergence of a new black middle class in South Africa has promoted a narrative that attributes success to individual abilities and determination, implying that everybody has the opportunity to make the best of the new freedoms. Hence, the poor eventually bear responsibility for their situation (Southall 2016).

### 5.3 Freedom as a Decent Life

However, how equal is equal? The norm of ‘one wo/man one vote’ allocates the same electoral weight to any individual ballot. Yet there is no similarly legitimate measure to determine social and material entitlements. The question as to what is regarded as an acceptable level of inequality and what is too much thus has to be negotiated in each society: Is the emphasis on equal opportunities rather than outcomes? Is the desired equality of wealth defined by equal distribution or sufficiency of resources? What role does the state play in achieving equality?

Only a few interviewees address these questions explicitly. It appears that due to its centrality in public discourse in South Africa, the meaning of equality is largely taken for granted. The thoughts expressed in the following statement capture several fundamental issues about the relationship between freedom and equality:

“As long as we still have people living without water and electricity, then we don’t have freedom. We don’t need to all live in same conditions, we cannot obviously. We’re not saying that we live in suburb houses with nice white sheets. But what we need to have is something other people have: decent living. So if we can all have decent living then that means we’re there.” (A14)

Leaving behind the anger about the highly unequal distribution of wealth in South Africa, this participant rejects the idea of everybody having the same. Instead, he claims that the availability of basic provisions is a manifestation of freedom. He also defines the fundamental moral value on which this claim is based: a decent life. Both arguments appear in several other interviews and shed light on how people in South Africa understand freedom and its link to material resources. Many believe that the arrival of democracy is marked by the provision of basic goods, thus setting people free:

“We are not asking for much. We are asking for toilets and proper shelter, not the zinc structures that are here. We are asking for tarred roads, we are asking for lights. We also want to enjoy democracy, the freedom that everyone is enjoying.” (A23)

In the light of the conceptual fusion of democracy, freedom and redistributive justice that comes to the fore in many interviews, service delivery protests can be understood as people’s demand for a full transition to democracy; or as one participant puts it: “democracy [should] become wholesome” (A22). Freedom essentially means freedom from poverty and democracy means the end to a system that systematically excluded the majority of the population from access to basic commodities and services. During apartheid, poverty was experienced as an instrument that the regimes used to control the black majority. Overcoming poverty was therefore a major motivation for the anti-apartheid struggle.

“I grew up in Soweto ... and we thought we were fighting for the right thing. We thought we were fighting, you know, to enjoy the fruits of the struggle. And it turned out to be not as I expected. I don't know about others, but from my side it's not what I expected what I see today ... We were fighting to have a better life for all. I don't see any better life for all at all.” (A10)

This statement expresses the big disappointment of many South Africans about the post-apartheid transition, which did not fulfil their hopes for a better life. Since poverty is so closely associated with the injustices of the apartheid regime, its continuation after 1994 puts the democratic transition into question and for some “it’s apartheid in reverse ... it’s still apartheid.” (A04)

Besides the government’s failure to alleviate poverty, service delivery protests were further fuelled by the introduction of a new policy that

charged for the supply of water and electricity. The notion of freedom again provides a powerful narrative in the fight against the marketization of basic services.

“The government was promising that everything is going to be free, like water, they’d have water free, health, you know, housing and all these things you know ... But now as the years go by these things were changed. This is the struggle that we have to carry it on. And so we must claim what belongs to us.” (A12)

In the popular imagination, freedom as access to basic goods takes on the meaning of ‘for free’, undoubtedly fostered by electoral promises over the past decades. However, beyond government rhetoric, there is a strong feeling that resources like water and electricity are public goods, provided by nature, just as the air we breathe. As public goods, electricity and water belong to everybody and therefore cannot be charged. Their supply should be governed by human needs rather than market price. In some cases, people even take things into their own hands by reclaiming what they regard as their democratic rights:

“There is no democracy besides creating your own. There are hardly any services like water, sanitation and electricity in settlements ... Now, we have created our own service delivery. We will not steal water, we will go to the hardware store and get pipes and connect our own because we know where the main pipes go as we have our own plumbers ... We also connect our own electricity. We did this to liberate ourselves and to create our own democracy.” (A28)

This is quite a radical step: tapping water pipes and electricity connections as an act of liberation and democracy from below!

Theories of the quality of life have addressed similar issues revolving around the link between freedom and material goods, both in the context of advanced Western democracies and in societies of the Global South (Nussbaum/Sen 1993). Sen (1995) argues that freedom and resources have to be distinguished as two different concepts. Freedom is about the choices a person can make in their life. In other words, the freedom to choose is the ultimate end of a ‘good life’, resources are a means to achieve those choices. Sen would therefore reject the view expressed by several interview partners who equate resources such as electricity, clean water and housing with the value of freedom. Instead, Sen proposes an approach that focuses on capabilities as the opportunities of choosing to be or do something rather

than the means to support these choices. These capabilities are regarded as “real or substantive freedoms” that allow a person to flourish and realise their potential (Robeyns/Byskov 2023).

However, distinguishing between means and ends is less clear-cut when looking at concrete examples. As a major avenue for citizen participation, democratic elections are an end in their own right. However, they are also a means to select leaders who act on behalf of their voters. Similarly, Nussbaum’s list of capabilities can be interpreted as a set of interlocking ‘factors’ (means) that together constitute a good life (end). For example, health is a valuable end in itself, but also a precondition, or means, for a range of human activities.

For the poorest of South Africa’s society, a distinction between means and ends, resources and freedom does not make sense, because freedom is meaningless if one does not have the resources to make choices beyond mere survival. Throughout the interviews, the demands for basic commodities and services are rarely legitimized by the choices people would make if given the opportunity – travelling, becoming an architect, running a restaurant etc. To have these options seems to be beyond their imagination. Instead, respondents legitimize their demands with something more fundamental, namely the recognition of their dignity as human beings. Hence, the demands for resources are not to be seen as requests for hand-outs but as claiming constitutional rights: People “have a right to these things. It’s their dignity and it has to be respected.” (A23)

Indeed, it is the struggle for respect and dignity that motivates activists to get involved in service delivery campaigns: “to make sure that people even if they’re in informal settlements, live dignified lives. That’s the ultimate goal” (A06); or “the integrity of the person was the centre of what the fight [against water cut-offs and evictions] was about” (A01). Boycotts, street protests and other actions are aimed at getting the government to recognize that “this is people and not animals” (A02).

One participant describes, in a rather drastic way, how the material conditions of lacking water and sanitation affect human dignity in a day-to-day situation. What is also striking in this statement is the seamless connection between poor sanitation and democracy:

“It’s appalling to me that there are still communities that do not have access to adequate toilets, adequate sanitation. Instead, people are being given portable toilets ... This is how reality is like: I’m staying in this one room here and you are my visitor. Now, there is no toilet here, now you

want to use the toilet, how would you feel then I'll give you a portable toilet half full of my shit, you just want to pee – you must use that. Come on, where is your dignity as a person! But that's democracy, you know.” (A05)

In the course of reading through these interviews, you learn a lot about toilets: how different models protect or don't protect, privacy and how a lack of toilets affects both the safety of women and the relationship between generations living in one room. These experiences make it clear that dignity is not just an abstract concept of moral philosophy; rather, it is rooted in physical well-being and the means we have to care for and protect our bodies.

In these struggles, the state often seems to be reduced to a service provider, something like a company that has been contracted to deliver certain goods by an agreed time. There is a strong sense of entitlement that legitimizes itself through the suffering experienced during the apartheid regime. Moreover, the demand for basic goods draws much of its energy from the values and principles that underpin democracy, such as freedom and equality. The appeal of democracy is essentially the hope for a better life and a better society – a society where the value of human beings is acknowledged and protected by the provision of the material and structural conditions that would allow individuals to flourish. Thus, the persistence of inequality and poverty makes several of our interview partners doubt whether South Africa can be called a democracy.

## 6. Conclusion

This paper took a bottom-up perspective on the meaning of democracy and democratization. By asking people to explain in their own words what they think about democracy, we can better understand the reasoning behind their perceptions – something which is lost in more standardized interview techniques, such as surveys. Listening to the opinions and experiences of South African political activists reveals a conception of democracy that sounds at once familiar and strange, like a shared language spoken in a peculiar dialect. For South Africans, the meaning of democracy revolves around central concepts that can be found in any textbook about democratic theory and are part of an epistemic core of democracy that is universally shared. At the same time, these concepts are re-interpreted and 'domesticated' within the framework of the country's historic and current struggles,

resulting in a specific meaning of democracy that differs from mainstream liberal models.

In South Africa, freedom has established itself as the grand narrative that provides people with an interpretative framework to express their hopes and expectations and to evaluate the achievements of the country's transition. Freedom was the driving force that motivated the struggle against the apartheid regime, and it remains the driving force in today's political controversies. Carrying the narratives of past, present and future, freedom becomes an exceptionally broad concept that comprises liberal ideas of individual autonomy, a strong emphasis on socio-economic equality and demands for policy provisions to ensure a decent life for all. With such a broad range of meanings, freedom is the central building block of the country's vision of a better, democratic future. However, the close link between freedom, equality and outcomes also bears risks, as the failure of the government to alleviate poverty is perceived as a failure of democracy itself.

While the scope of the analysis of this paper is limited to civil society groups in post-apartheid South Africa, the findings raise broader questions about the conceptualization of democracy in an age when citizens worldwide call for democratic change but also challenge the legitimacy of existing democratic arrangements. One conclusion that can be drawn is that a procedural model that confines the meaning of democracy to institutions and formal processes does not resonate in the imagination of most citizens. The democratic promise is a promise of a better society and a better life where freedom means that individuals have the opportunity to flourish. Thus, outcomes have to be an integral part of any conceptualization of democracy. However, the arguments brought forward by the participants of this study indicate that outcomes have a deeper meaning beyond material gains, as people's living conditions are associated with demands for recognition, individual dignity and effective citizenship. Finally, divergent conceptions of the meaning of democracy highlight its contested nature and openness to different interpretations and practices. Indeed, the ability to engage in renegotiating and reimagining democratic principles and goals is essential for democracy to adapt to different contexts and new challenges.

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Appendix

Table A1: Sampled organizations

Organization	Field of activism	Number of interviews
Abahlali baseMjondolo/ Informal Settlements in Struggle <a href="https://abahlali.org/">https://abahlali.org/</a>	Housing, land reform	3
Anti Privatisation Forum <a href="https://apf.org.za/htm/03-09-09%20appeal%20solidarity.htm">https://apf.org.za/htm/03-09-09%20appeal%20solidarity.htm</a>	Housing	3
Anti-eviction campaign <a href="https://westerncapeantieviction.wordpress.com/">https://westerncapeantieviction.wordpress.com/</a>	Housing	2
Centre for Civil Society <a href="http://ccs.ukzn.ac.za/">http://ccs.ukzn.ac.za/</a>	Community, resources	1
Cities Alliance <a href="https://www.citiesalliance.org/who-we-are/about-cities-alliance/overview">https://www.citiesalliance.org/who-we-are/about-cities-alliance/overview</a>	Housing	1
Gauteng Concerned Communities <a href="https://www.facebook.com/www.gautengconcernedcommunities.org/">https://www.facebook.com/www.gautengconcernedcommunities.org/</a>	Community, resources	2
IndyMedia & Soweto Media Project	Community	1
Inner City Resource Centre <a href="https://icrc.org.za/">https://icrc.org.za/</a>	Housing, resources	1
Lawyers for Human Rights <a href="https://www.lhr.org.za/">https://www.lhr.org.za/</a>	Constitutional rights	1
Right2Know (R2K) <a href="https://www.r2k.org.za/">https://www.r2k.org.za/</a>	Civil liberties, freedom of information	6
Social Justice Coalition <a href="https://sjc.org.za/">https://sjc.org.za/</a>	Constitutional rights, housing	2
Socio Economic Rights Institute <a href="https://seri-sa.org/index.php/archive/archived-popular-education/262-2012">https://seri-sa.org/index.php/archive/archived-popular-education/262-2012</a>	Constitutional rights	2
Soweto Electricity Crisis Committee <a href="https://www.facebook.com/people/Soweto-Electricity-Crisis-Committee/100069436606839/">https://www.facebook.com/people/Soweto-Electricity-Crisis-Committee/100069436606839/</a>	Resources	1

*Table A2: Profile of interview partners*

<b>ID</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Position in organization</b>	<b>Field of activism</b>
A01	male	Mid-level functionary	Housing
A02	female	Top-level functionary	Housing
A03	male	Active member	Civil liberties, freedom of information
A04	female	Top-level functionary	Housing
A05	male	Top-level functionary	Housing
A06	male	Active member	Constitutional rights, resources (sanitation)
A07	female	Top-level functionary	Housing
A08	male	Top-level functionary	Civil liberties, freedom of information
A09	male	Mid-level functionary	Civil liberties, freedom of information, housing
A10	female	Top-level functionary	Housing, resources (water, electricity)
A11	male	Active member	Resources (water, electricity)
A12	female	Top-level functionary	Community, resources
A13	female	Mid-level functionary	Community, resources
A14	male	Mid-level functionary	Civil liberties, freedom of information, resources
A15	male	Top-level functionary	Constitutional rights
A16	female	Mid-level functionary	Constitutional rights
A17	female	Mid-level functionary	Housing
A18	male	Mid-level functionary	Housing
A20	female	Mid-level functionary	Resources
A21	female	Mid-level functionary	Housing
A22	male	Top-level functionary	Resources (electricity)
A23	male	Top-level functionary	Constitutional rights
A24	female	Top-level functionary	Housing
A26	male	Active member	Civil liberties, freedom of information
A27	male	Active member	Civil liberties, freedom of information
A28	male	Top-level functionary	Housing

