

Here we examine the expression 'democracy', and try to disentangle its value as an objective term of analysis and its misuse as a tool of propaganda. The focus is on 'liberal democracy'. First the various dimensions of democracy and the notion of democracy are considered, and the idea of democracy as 'the sovereign people' governed by consent is closely examined. Then the issue of whether there are particular conditions for the development of democracy is investigated. Arguments for and against democracy are explored and finally there are some reflections on the future of democracy in the twenty-first century.

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## POINTS TO CONSIDER

- Why is democracy a great 'hurrah' word?
- Have forms of democracy other than liberal democracy (such as the communist 'people's democracy') any validity?
- To what extent does modern Britain fit Aristotle's categories of types of government?
- What are the differences between 'defensive' and 'citizen' democracy, and is one preferable to the other?
- To what extent are claims that in a democracy 'the sovereign people are governed by consent' merely rhetorical flourishes?
- Are claims of the universal applicability of democracy valid?
- What would you identify as the main threats to democracy in the modern world?

Democracy substitutes election by the incompetent many for appointment by the corrupt few. (George Bernard Shaw, *Man and Superman*, 1903)

It has been said that Democracy is the worst form of government except all those other forms that have been tried from time to time. (Sir Winston Churchill, *Speech*, House of Commons, November 1947)

The difference between a Democracy and a Dictatorship is that in a Democracy you vote first and take orders later; in a Dictatorship you don't have to waste your time voting. (Charles Bukowski, *Erections, Ejaculations, Exhibitions and Tales of Ordinary Madness*, 1972)

Democracy is a great 'hurrah' word of modern times. From being associated with mob rule at the beginning of the nineteenth century, democracy had become the objective of every 'civilised' nation by its end. A century later, there is hardly a state or regime, no matter how despotic, that does not proclaim its devotion to 'democracy'. Along with 'God, Queen and country' (in Britain), or 'mom and apple pie' (in the USA), 'democracy' is now associated with something good and wholesome, something worth defending and, if necessary, dying (and killing) for.

One can see that there is a problem with the term 'democracy'. If every political system is a 'democracy' then what value can be attached to the word as an analytical tool? One must question, however, Bernard Crick's assertion, in his *In Defence of Politics* (1962), that politics primarily takes place only in democratic systems of government. Politics can take place under any form of governmental system, as it involves a struggle for power. Democratic political systems involve power struggles of a kind very different from those of other political systems, such as dictatorships and one-party states.

We identify here the main features of a democratic form of government. Indeed, as will become apparent, underlying our discussion is an identification of democracy with 'liberal-democratic' forms of government. Liberal democracies are closely associated with particular forms of intellectual, cultural, social and economic development identified and discussed below.

Liberal democracies are among the great creations of the human mind. They establish the conditions for individual freedom and participation in government, for freedom of speech and thought, and, within the **rule of law**, the stability and order required for that freedom to flourish. In the great struggles and fearful wars of the twentieth century liberal democracy met the challenges from authoritarianism and totalitarianism and ultimately triumphed.

#### rule of law

The principle that everyone, even the ruler, is under the authority of the law (and those who administer the law in the courts).

Liberal democracies are relatively new, only appearing from the late nineteenth century onwards. They are still in a minority among nations, albeit the wealthiest and most powerful ones. Democratic ideas are worth studying in some detail since they claim universal applicability.

## Defining democracy

'Democracy' comes from Ancient Greek: *demos* means 'the people' and *kratein* means 'to rule'. Hence, *demokratia*, 'democracy', means 'rule by the people', as defined in, for example, *The Concise Oxford Dictionary*:

**democracy** 1a. a system of government by the whole population, usually through elected representatives. b. a state so governed. c. any organisation governed on democratic principles.

Democracy can refer to popular government, or **representative government**, or participation in government, or republican government, or some overlap between some or all of these. Defining democracy may appear to be easy, but is in fact full of problems.

Many forms of government are described as 'democratic'. For example, Adolf Hitler called the Third Reich 'The German democracy, which is the true democracy'. Benito Mussolini described Italian Fascism as 'the purest form of democracy'. Communist regimes call themselves 'people's democracies'. Most dictatorships in the developing world claim to be 'democratic'. Finally, our own political system is called a 'liberal democracy', combining two political 'hurrah' words. The difference between liberal democracies, established in Western Europe, North America and elsewhere, and other so-called 'democracies' might appear so obvious as not to need defining. Yet define it we must, if we are to have a tool with which to analyse this particular form of government. So, then, what is 'democracy'?

### representative government

A political system in which the government is chosen by the people (for example, by elections), governs on their behalf, is accountable to them and owes its legitimacy to the fact that it is representative of the people in some manner.

One might start by contrasting democracies with other types of government. Democracies have a number of elements by which they might be distinguished from non-democratic systems and 'pseudo-democracies' – systems that claim to be democratic and, indeed, which apparently have some democratic features, but lack certain fundamental elements of 'genuine' democracies.

## Elements of democracy

A number of features of democracy can be identified:

- Democracy as a system of government. Here we can discern two forms of democracy: 'defensive democracy' and 'citizen democracy'/'republican democracy';

- democracy and legitimising government;
- majority rule and democracy;
- equality of citizenship rights;
- public opinion in democracies;
- the rule of law and democracy.

### Democracy as a system of government

Ancient Greeks, such as Aristotle in *The Politics*, identified three kinds of government, each with a corresponding 'corrupt' form.

- **Monarchy:** rule by one man, usually as the consequence of birth: the corrupt form being *tyranny*.
- **Aristocracy:** rule by a few men, based on education, property ownership, merit or some other quality that distinguished them from most other people: the corrupt form being oligarchy.
- **Democracy:** rule by the whole people – or at least a majority: the corrupt form being mob rule, although 'democracy' and 'mob rule' were seen as the same thing by most thinkers.

All these political systems make decisions accepted as binding on the whole community. Every one has a mixture of decision-making by one person, a few or many people. Monarchs, for example, consult widely about government. Even dictators have to take into account how far they can control the people. Hitler's oratorical powers facilitated his seizure of power in Germany, but also helped him as leader to persuade, cajole and inspire the German people. Ancient Athenian democracy involved the direct participation of all citizens in government and is often seen as the inspiration for modern democracies. Citizenship itself, though, was very restricted. No women, slaves or foreigners could take part, or ever hope to become citizens, in the democracy. In all political systems, ancient and modern, there is a tendency for an 'oligarchy' of professional administrators and politicians to arise. There are also always groups – defending economic interests or advancing particular causes – that influence government without a popular **mandate** to do so.

#### mandate

This can mean either a general authority to govern conferred on a government by an election or a specific authority (and duty) to implement a policy put before the electorate in a manifesto.

Britain's political system, for example, has elements of: monarchy in the power of the prime minister; aristocracy, or its modern non-corrupt meaning of the form oligarchy, in the domination of the political system by a few political parties and relatively small groups of political leaders; and democracy, in its widespread political debate and regular elections.

Consideration of the term ‘democracy’ involves identifying the degree to which these three elements exist in a political system. A state may be called ‘democratic’ because features associated with democracy predominate, while in ‘undemocratic’ systems they are at a minimum and anti-democratic values predominate. However, this takes us back to the central issue: what is meant by ‘democracy’?

One might see a political system defined as democratic by the degree to which people can exercise *effective* influence on government policy. Democracy is not just about voting and voting rights. Most modern political systems have some form of election and legislative assembly. Even in countries that one would never consider democratic – certainly not liberal democratic – we need to consider other factors than **suffrage** and elections as the basis for a democracy.

#### **suffrage**

The right to vote in public elections. It is now usually defined in terms of citizenship and age. In the nineteenth century suffrage was restricted to people on the grounds of gender, education and property ownership

Crucially, popular opinion can influence government decisions in democracies without votes being taken. Governments, political parties and politicians want to win future elections and so will take notice of public opinion.

Oligarchy and monarchy still exist in ‘democratic’ states, but it is the democratic element that is of greatest value and should be a prominent influence in government. Thus democracy can be interpreted as a *positive* description of the democratic element in government.

In ‘non-democratic’ states the democratic element may exist but popular influence on government decision-making is kept to a minimum. Here, democracy is interpreted *negatively*.

Support for or against the democratic element among a population depends on many factors. These include emotional, personal, family or class interests, loyalties and traditions; the national historical experience; and cultural support for democratic principles of government. Combinations of these and other factors may lead to a movement in favour of democracy (as in Spain after the death of General Franco in 1975) or against democracy (as in the German Weimar Republic during the 1920s).

Most important are economic conditions. Poor, unemployed, desperate people are, to say the least, likely to be unenthusiastic supporters of a democratic government presiding over their misery. (Alternatively, wealthy societies, too, may be in danger from citizen apathy. Democracy may be viewed as no more than a means by which to remain rich. Plump and prosperous people resent even the time it takes to vote to ensure the survival of their democracy.)

Factors favouring or undermining democracy vary from country to country and from time to time. There is no automatic presumption in favour of democracy or its effortless, inevitable, spread across the globe.

Another way of identifying or classifying democratic systems of government is outlined below.

### *Defensive democracy*

Democracy is the means by which citizens are protected from an oppressive state. It defends the rights of citizens and promotes liberty. Defensive democracy sees a tension between citizens and the state, and a distinction between public and private spheres of life. It has strong roots in liberalism.

Citizens participate in defensive democracies when they fear their rights and freedoms are threatened by the state or a foreign power. Once the threat is removed most citizens will not participate in democracy. In the twentieth century democratic theory extended citizen rights to include full participation in society. State activities expanded into areas of what had once been considered private life, establishing health, education and welfare systems. One might still relate this to defensive democracy. The rights to be defended have expanded to include those of the welfare state. They still have to be advanced and defended by democratic action and most people will only participate when they see threats to these rights. This can be done by either 'direct' or 'representative' democracy. We will concentrate on representative democracy here.

Modern representative democracy includes most of the things that one associates with liberal democracy. It consists of:

A cluster of rules and obligations permitting the broadest participation by the majority of the citizens in the selection of representatives who alone can make political decisions (that is decisions affecting the whole of the community).

This cluster includes elected government; free and fair elections in which every citizen's vote has an equal weight; a suffrage which embraces all citizens irrespective of distinctions of race, religion, class, sex, and so on; freedom of conscience, information and expression of all public matters broadly defined; the right of all adults to oppose their government and stand for office; and associational autonomy – the right to form independent associations including social movements, interest groups and political parties.<sup>1</sup>

Representative democracies are closely associated with constitutional arrangements designed to legitimise the state and ensure that citizenship rights are protected. They still assume greater judgement, more political intelligence, among political leaders than among the electorate. Such democracies function as a means of containing the dangers of a direct democracy.

Consent to govern is expressed by regular elections, which also legitimise the actions of the government during the period between elections. Once elected, the government has a mandate from the people to carry out policies outlined in its manifesto. It can take whatever steps it deems necessary, within the bounds of political accountability, to ensure the survival and success of that society and the defence of its citizens.

The vast majority of citizens confine participation in politics to voting. Only a tiny number are likely to join a political party. Even fewer will become party activists, of which a tiny proportion will become a member of the local and national political class. Apathy, or at least non-involvement, is *the* characteristic of modern representative democracies. They are run by **elites**.

#### elite

Those regarded (by themselves and those they govern) as superior in some manner to others. In a political sense, those with special access to power.

Robert Michels, in *Political Parties* (1900), formulated an ‘iron law of oligarchy’ at play in democracies. Small elite groups have a disproportionate role in the running of democratic organisations. Michels and other ‘elite theorists’, such as Max Weber in his many writings, Gaetano Mosca in *The Ruling Class* (1896), and Mosei Ostrogorski in *Democracy and the Organisation of Political Parties* (1902), stressed the deceptiveness of democracy. They recognised that it was the few at the top of power structures, rather than the many (as in democratic theory), who shaped ‘democratic’ government. Joseph Schumpeter, in *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy* (1942), claimed that modern democracy is little more than a power struggle between elites. Voters choose between ‘auctions’ of public services by oligarchic party elites. Indeed, as others have identified, modern democracy has become so money orientated that it corrupts the democratic process. Politicians and political parties raise vast sums of money to fund campaigns, especially in the USA. All social democracies have large public sectors and elections have become little more than attempts to ‘bribe the people with their own money’, with scant mature public debate over policies.

The complexity of modern political issues means that political representatives must use their judgement on the basis of the evidence available to decide on the most appropriate policies. It is simply impossible for the majority of voters to understand policy details and reach a rational decision. Ordinary voters have to rely on the experienced judgement of politicians. Edmund Burke, in a speech to the electors of Bristol (1774), drew a significant distinction between a ‘delegate’ and a ‘representative’. Delegates merely reflect the views of their constituents in parliament, while a representative is elected to use his own judgement. Burke clearly states that MPs should be representatives and, indeed, could not be delegates even for the tiny electorates of an eighteenth-century constituency.

This raises the issue of whom the elected politician 'represents'. Modern parliamentary constituencies have tens of thousands of voters, large numbers of whom did not vote for the elected representative. Members of the local party expect their views to be listened to by the person they worked to elect. Local businesses, trade unions, councils and other social organisations all have a right to be represented in the House of Commons by their MP. National pressure groups, trade unions, businesses and the national party all claim and seek representation in the democratic forum of the nation.

Clearly, it is impossible for a politician to represent all these interests equally. Indeed, party discipline, party loyalty and ideological compatibility will reduce the potential for 'representative conflict and stalemate'. The reduction is so great, in the view of many modern democrats and elite theorists, that representation on important issues in modern parliamentary democracies has been replaced by party control and party instructions on how to vote and what to think on issues. Compared with the British system, the US Congress has a weak party system. On the one hand, this offers greater scope for politicians' judgement; but on the other, as critics point out, they are more subject to powerful private interests, especially when these are exacerbated by the demands of almost constant electioneering and fundraising.

#### *Citizen democracy/republican democracy*

According to this type of democracy citizens should be active in order to advance their rights. Very importantly, the education and character development of the citizen is encouraged by participation in the political system. It improves the whole of society. Citizen democracy assumes, therefore, greater involvement than merely voting, with citizens taking an active part in the political system. 'Direct democracy' is the means by which this can come about.

Direct democracy describes the citizen's personal involvement in government. It developed in Ancient Athens during the fifth and fourth centuries BC. It worked quite well in a small society, consisting of no more than fifty thousand citizens at most (and probably nearer thirty thousand). Modern states are too large, in terms of both population and geography, for Athenian-style direct democracy to be a feasible means of national government. Direct democracy is limited to school governor boards, trade-union branches, town meetings in New England, some pressure-group activity, and so on. In Switzerland, however, there is a form of direct democracy in central government, its twenty-six cantons and three thousand communities. Referenda can be called for on any national law. In fact, over 450 have been held during the last 150 years and the number is rising to around ten referenda a year.

A society could still have a strong democratic culture in a citizen democracy with representative democratic institutions. Representative democracies often



have elements of direct democracy in them. Radicals on the left want more active participation of citizens in decision-making. Some, on both the left and the right, believe citizens should have military training as a means of being integrated into society and learning what their democracy means.

Many democracies allow for referenda on important issues as a form of direct democracy. They can come from the government or be demanded by the populace. The result may or may not be binding on government; it depends on the constitutional rules. Just over half the US states have some form of direct democracy. Referenda are used in Italy, Denmark, France and New Zealand. Australia has had over fifty referenda. The UK has held referenda on political and constitutional issues in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, but only one throughout the UK (concerning continued membership of the European Union, in 1975).

The time for greater direct democracy may have come. People are better educated, have greater access to information, and have more wealth and leisure time than ever before. Representative systems of democracy belong to a less democratic, less educated and less affluent age. Their constitutional systems are increasingly viewed as museum pieces by their electorates, who become frustrated by the lack of effective accountability of the government to the people. Their elected representatives, to put it politely, do not seem to demonstrate a greater level of political judgement than the people they represent.

### **Democracy and legitimising government**

All democracies claim ‘popular sovereignty’ as providing government legitimacy – ‘legitimacy’ meaning ‘the moral and political right to govern and expect to be obeyed’. Democratic government acts on behalf of the ‘people’, who are politically ‘sovereign’. Democratic governments govern by ‘consent’. We need at this stage to define the ‘people’, ‘sovereignty’ and ‘consent’.

#### *The people*

This may describe the whole adult citizen body of the democracy, as it now tends to be the case, or it may merely define a group with special political privileges derived from wealth, class or education. There are many variations on this theme, for example:

- The British consider that the people have shared traditions, shared customs, shared history, and a sense of being part of the nation. The British people exist independently of their state. The state is their servant, carrying out their will as expressed through parliament. Democracy recognises the rights and freedoms of the people and the need to keep government under some form of control and accountability to the elected representatives of the people.

- The French believe the state reflects the ‘general will’ of the people. The state is closely linked to the identity of the people and reflects their interests. It is part of the people and contributes to national identity. It must not oppress the rights of the people.
- German political tradition maintains that the state reflects the people as the nation. German national identity pre-dates the existence of the state. The state is the machine for the expression of the will of the people. Democracy is one of the means by which the sovereignty of the people in their state is expressed.

### *Sovereignty*

This concept claims that the people have the right to create the government of their choice and to replace it when they see fit. Legitimacy derives from the democratic will of the people, not from the sovereign or a ruling class defined by birth (or some other restrictive attribute). All are subject to government. All should have a say in how it is constructed and, within what is practicable, should be allowed to participate. All democratic governments derive their legitimacy from this concept, a vital element of which is ‘consent’.

### *Consent*

In direct democracies citizens give consent to a course of action. In representative democracies consent is the consequence of ‘mandates’ given to governments by election victories or referenda. Consent is reaffirmed by free and regular elections, with competing political parties putting a programme before the people. Parties that win elections are said to have a ‘specific mandate’ to govern – a right to carry out those policies they included in their manifesto. A ‘general mandate’ to govern is also provided by an election victory. A government can take whatever measures are necessary to meet unforeseen problems. Consent for these actions will come from the elected body that seeks, on behalf of the people, to make the government accountable for its actions. Mandates acquired by national governments have superiority over mandates acquired by winners of local government elections.

### **Majority rule and democracy**

Democracy is not the same thing as ‘majority rule’. Indeed, many democrats have seen great dangers to individual and minority group freedoms from simple ‘majority rule’ principles.

One problem is defining ‘majority’. No political party in Britain, for example, has won a majority of the turnout in a general election since 1935, although the governing party usually has a majority of the seats in the House of Commons. Many MPs are elected on a minority of the vote in their

constituency. Votes are cast for a party and, as a consequence, entail automatically voting for specific policies that one may oppose. Turnouts in local government and European parliamentary elections are low in Britain (averaging 20–40 per cent), and falling in general elections (down to 59 per cent in 2001). To what extent should the views of those who have not voted be considered? One might declare that if one doesn't vote one has forfeited one's say. However, studies in 'voter apathy' in the 2001 general election seem to show not 'apathy' but irritation and disgust at the political class. One might consider the 'democratic' element of public opinion polling as a better reflection of popular opinion than elections. Indeed, we are all in minorities on many issues, and we should be very concerned about the rights of expression of 'minorities'.

In many ways the best criterion for judging a democracy is how it treats its minorities. Minority views of today often become the majority opinion of tomorrow. It is vital, therefore, that there should be a 'free market' of ideas in democracies. Nevertheless, at the end of the day, there has to be some appeal to majority interests and views as the basis of democratic rule after debate and argument has been undertaken. In the last analysis, minority opinion cannot over-rule the views of the majority.

### **Equality of citizenship rights**

Democratic theory argues that all citizens have equal political rights. Citizens (unless disqualified on legal grounds, such as imprisonment or bankruptcy) all have one vote, of equal value, in constituencies of roughly equal size. All citizens have an equal right to run for office. None of these rights can be legally circumscribed by property or by educational or social status.

Such equality is a recent achievement. In the UK, for example, multiple voting rights, based on property and educational attainment, were not abolished until 1948. Fear of the poor and of mass democracy by those with wealth and power has since Plato and Aristotle been the basis of resistance to equal citizenship rights and democracy. Constitutional and other political restraints have ensured that the excesses of mass democracy have been largely contained (although there are those who see a corrupting effect of 'dumbing-down' of political debate in a mass democracy).

In recent decades there has been a challenge to the individual basis of citizenship rights in a democracy by the advocates of group rights, who demand the recognition of social equality by political and institutional means. It is argued that women, the disabled, ethnic minorities, gays and others are disadvantaged by the emphasis on individual rights.

## Public opinion in democracies

Democratic systems of government are supposed in some way to reflect 'public opinion'. As we have observed, some form of 'majority rule' is one basic premise of democracy. We have also seen that many democratic theorists have feared mass democracy and the dangers of 'rule by the mob'. One problem arises from differing definitions of 'public opinion'.

Although the term is often used as if it were a single concept, public opinion is rather more complex than one would initially think. There are few issues, if any, on which the public will all have any opinion, let alone the same opinion. In pluralistic democracies there are many groups and individuals with highly diverse views on issues. One can identify three types of public opinion. First, there is 'expert opinion'. Politicians and civil servants will often consult specialists and professionals on policy. Second, one might identify 'informed general opinion' of interested, well-read people, who, without being professional experts, might write to newspapers or MPs, or support particular pressure groups. Finally, we have 'mass uninformed public opinion', with views on the issues of the day, shaped by the mass media and by what appears of immediate concern. Interest is temporary and will pass quickly on to other 'new' issues. Depending on the issue, most of us will belong to one or other of these blocks of public opinion.

Public opinion is cited by politicians as *the* major factor influencing policy formation. There are a number of problems for democracy in this idea. Appeals to 'public opinion' are often used to silence minority or dissenting opinions. The 'will of the people' is a fine phrase, but one which is usually used to over-rule objections from some parts of the public. Powerful groups will often claim that they express 'public opinion' when they are, in fact, advancing their own sectional interests. Some groups, especially business and other economic interests groups, are sufficiently powerful to have many channels of manipulating and shaping public opinion along lines that essentially benefit themselves. If this were the situation one might regard 'public opinion' as without value as a tool for analysing democratic societies. Public opinion arises from the political culture of a society and is only partly influenced by elites manipulating it by using 'spin doctors'.

Public opinion supporting the essentials of democratic values and norms is a vital element in underpinning democratic culture. When it is essentially 'conservative' in its attitudes it might be considered as a useful check on some of the radical and ill-thought out programmes that sometimes appear from reformist groups. Public opinion on important issues can be influenced and changed by democratic action. It is, therefore, of great value in democracies.

## The rule of law and democracy

The rule of law is the basis of modern government. There is a logical series of stages in the rule of law for understanding the basis of liberal democracy. Humans have natural rights, based on natural law, which can be discerned by reason. These provide the foundations for the law. Laws are based on universal moral principles, like universal scientific laws. Hence, government could be seen as the rational discovery and application of legal principles to a society with the consent of the governed, accepting the rule of law as the foundation for stable and rational government. Different societies have different legal traditions, but all are shaped by their legal systems. Democratic government, based on the principle of the rule of law, is, therefore, fundamentally different from political systems that claim that the authority to govern, the making of law itself, derives from God, the laws of economics or racial struggle, or some other source.

The above constitutes a 'democratic culture', one that has taken centuries to develop and become established in liberal democracies, a culture that is still some way from being fully developed in most modern societies.

## Conditions for the development of democracy

Democracy arises from a peculiar set of historical, social and economic circumstances. One might speculate about the nature of modern society if scientific and humanistic thought had not appeared and if intellectual enquiry had not developed in the form that it did. We can observe this through a resumé of the history of the development of democratic thinking and how modern democracies were founded.

The development of democracies and scientific modes of thought coincided in the Greek world of the sixth and fifth centuries BC. Science sought to understand the structure of the universe, explore its laws, develop intellectual discipline and establish knowledge. Democratic thought entailed similar applications of logic, in this case to the problems facing society. Debate, argument, the testing of theories and experimentation were applied to society to improve the lot of human beings. Greek city-states or *poleis* (singular *polis*) were riven by class conflict. Greek democratic thinkers hoped that argument and debate might reduce such struggle and identify the common causes of the people. Athenian democracy involved the direct participation of all citizens in government. It may or may not have done much to reduce tensions but it did stimulate political thought. Plato, in *Republic*, used reason to identify the principles of the 'best' political system. Aristotle, in *Politics*, classified political systems: democracy, aristocracy, monarchy, tyranny, and so on. However, the decline of Athenian democracy in the fourth century paralleled Greek

economic and population decline. Greece eventually became subject, first to Macedon and later to Rome. Its experiment in democracy ended.

The Roman Republican constitution was composed of balanced parts, representing the various social classes of Roman society: patrician, equestrian and plebeian. The Republic built the empire. The Republic destroyed itself in decades of civil wars, giving birth to the imperial system under Augustus (emperor 27BC–AD14). Indeed, it was the Republic that provided many modern constitution-makers, such as the founding fathers of America, with a model to copy. The imperial system claimed to have restored the Republic, but crushed genuine democratic activity beyond the election of low-level officials.

The decline of democracy in the ancient world paralleled the decline of scientific thought. Rome's political and scientific development stagnated. This stagnation continued throughout the Middle Ages, reinforced by the domination and authority of the church. Power struggles between the church and the secular rulers of Europe occurred without reference to the people's views. Intellectual enquiry was overwhelmingly about theological issues which were untestable by scientific method.

Nevertheless, change, though very slow and halting, was underway. It would eventually flower into the **Renaissance** – among whose many achievements, the gradual recovery of scientific and rational forms of thought paved the way for the development of democracy.

#### Renaissance

A cultural and intellectual movement in Europe during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. In part it involved a revival of classical learning. It brought an understanding of man and the universe which owed little to religious teaching and much to the development and application of scientific methods of thought.

The Renaissance involved new forms of thinking that, although they need not necessarily have led to democratic society, helped develop scientific thought, enquiry and a constant challenge to dictatorship and totalitarianism. Thought would progress by observation, experiment, the application of reason and the challenging of scientific orthodoxy. It was but a step to apply the same principles to society. Like nature, society was subject to enquiry, understanding and the possibility of change and improvement through the application of scientific principles. Established governments and political ideas were also, like the scientific ideas of Aristotle now being challenged by the new science, subject to challenge, reform and, potentially, overthrow.

Machiavelli, in *The Discourses* (1513–17), argued for a mixed constitution, along the lines of Republican Rome, as the most efficient and free system of government. He was highly suspicious of unrestrained government whether democratic, aristocratic or monarchic.

Particularly important was the Renaissance principle of society as the ‘stage’ on which man shaped his destiny – the basis of modern forms of democratic political thought. Humans were God’s perfect creation, fully capable of understanding the world. As part of this understanding, human beings discerned the existence of natural law and natural rights. They also perceived that in a ‘state of nature’ human beings were essentially equal. Given these assumptions authority was not derived by rulers directly from God, but from the consent of the governed.

By the late seventeenth century new scientific and philosophical ideas, tempered by the horrific religious wars of the first half of the century, had led to the development of new social and political ideas. Men such as Hobbes, Descartes, Pufendorf, Locke, and a host of lesser figures, constructed systems of thought that influenced politics. They placed the individual at the centre of society, along with concepts of citizenship, the state and the law, and, although the term would not be used at this time, ‘democracy’. Consent to be governed was not a ‘one-off’ event. It had to be regularly reaffirmed by some form of consultation – elections, for example. Indeed, some thinkers, later identified as ‘liberals’, provided the basis for resistance to, and even revolutionary overthrow of, a government that abused the natural rights of its citizens and ruled without consent.

Modern politics, from the mid-eighteenth century, arose from struggles between democrats and anti-democrats. Democrats were associated with modernity and progress, optimism and hope, and the development of balanced constitutions. Anti-democrats were regarded as supporters of out-dated and reactionary institutions and views and the defenders of undeserved privileges of wealth and political power. Rousseau, in *The Social Contract* (1762), was the most influential of many writers who attacked the concept of **absolutist monarchy**. He wanted a new society based on reason, free individuals, and a social contract between government and people. The American and French revolutions (1776 and 1789, respectively) derived their ideological underpinning from English liberals such as Locke, and French rationalists such as Montesquieu and Rousseau. They sought to implement democracy, although it took longer than they imagined.

Modern democratic constitutional systems involve universal suffrage, the existence of competing political parties, debate, free media and a highly educated citizenry. Even pro-democrats worried about giving the uneducated and unpropertied too much power before they were ready for democracy’s responsibilities. Democratic political systems, to be secure, required a strong democratic political culture.

#### **absolutist monarchy**

A monarchy where the king is above the law and the law is valid only in so far as it is the will of the king. The term is often applied to the monarchs of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries (for example, Louis XIV of France).

This culture involves the application of reason to political issues, a belief in reasoned argument, a rejection of violence, an acceptance of the 'rules of the political game' by all parties, and a willingness to compromise in the face of valid evidence. One might argue that democracy requires an underlying political 'myth' of shared political beliefs, not subject to rational and scientific enquiry, to bind people together.

Politics is not just an activity for an elite. The population should feel they can involve themselves in politics. In practical terms this means elite support for democratic systems of government, the existence of a liberal middle class of some size, and working-class identification with, and participation in, democratic culture. All must be willing to make sacrifices to ensure its survival. There should be a high degree of social mobility. People should be able to rise – and fall – in the social structure, depending on ability; and the elite political class should be open to all on the basis of competition and ability and be subject to regular infusions of new people and new ideas.

Such conditions are very hard to acquire and maintain. Democracy demands constant effort and support; it entails the commitment of individuals and groups who might find democracy working against their particular interests and of others who might not want the responsibility of self-government. There are always those who argue that the burdens of democracy are too much for a people to bear.

Let us now look at some of the major arguments *against* and *for* the principle of democracy.

## Arguments against and in support of democracy

Democracy has never lost its capacity to stimulate arguments about its desirability. Much recent criticism has been directed at its ineffectiveness in delivering the wishes of the electorate. We shall discuss some fundamental objections to and arguments in support of democracy.

### Arguments against democracy

Democracy has always had its critics. The origins of the major arguments against democracy can be traced back, like its origins, to Ancient Greece and the ideas of Socrates, Plato and Aristotle. It should be remembered that the opinions of anti-democrats – usually the rich, the literate, the educated, the aristocratic – have tended to be preserved in the written record.

The anti-democratic argument includes a number of elements

- Government requires a specialised elite. This might be described as a 'conservative' view.



- The majority of the population is incapable of effective self-government. This is an element of 'liberal' concerns about democracy.
- Political democracy tends to ignore the fundamental lack of democracy in economic relations. This is a strong element of the 'Marxist' criticism of democracy.
- Democratic systems reflect gender divisions in society. This is a strong element of the 'feminist' critique.

*Government requires a specialised elite: the conservative view*

Plato, in *Republic*, put forward one of the most effective attacks on democracy. He argued that any kind of work involves the principle of the 'division of labour'. Thus, specialisation in society – experts in each field refining their art or craft – has led to an overall increase in the wealth and level of civilisation. People choose their work and contribution to society in accordance with their wishes and their abilities. Each function requires the acquisition of specialist knowledge.

The argument runs thus: this principle of specialisation should be applied to government. Why should all people have a say in government, either by voting or in public opinion polls? The work of government is difficult and important, requiring training and specialised knowledge. Most people (however much they flatter themselves) know little of politics, the major issues and how to make important decisions. government should be left to the specialists and those who know best. So, in Plato's *Republic*, the 'Guardians' trained for government on the basis of intelligence and ability. They were committed to government and the administration of society on behalf of the people.

Such an anti-democratic view is rarely stated in such clear terms, outside the ranks of the fascistic right and some on the Marxist left. Yet often reformers and administrators, politicians of both the left and the right, may profess their support for democracy while at the same time expressing the wish to avoid its constraints and frustrations and often evincing a fundamental distrust of the people. For example, an East European Communist official in 1946 stated, 'We could not allow our plans for the betterment of the people of our country to be jeopardised by the votes of a load of ignorant peasants in an election',<sup>2</sup> while Henry Kissinger opined, 'I don't see why we need to stand by and watch a country go Communist due to the irresponsibility of its own people'.<sup>3</sup>

The criteria for membership of Plato's Guardians were ability, training and a commitment to seeking the benefit of the whole community. Later anti-democratic thinkers defended elites based on wealth, race, religion or birth. One would not, modern anti-democrats say, sail a ship with reference to the opinion of its crew, nor, for that matter, choose the captain on the basis of birth

or wealth. Captains should be appointed on merit, and *only* merit. So should the ship of state.

In Britain, the upper reaches of the permanent civil service have been likened to Plato's Guardians. They are chosen on merit. One might observe permanent secretaries wielding more expert power and influence than ministers. Yet ministers are specialists in wielding political power. Both in government and parliament leadership groups are chosen by competition and merit, with a very limited role for the populace. Democracy may be a political and ideological tool of government, but one with a very limited reality in modern Western democracies (a fact welcomed by anti-democrats).

*The majority of the population are incapable of effective self-government: liberal concerns*

Plato associated democracy with passion dominating over reason. Most people lack the intellectual abilities for balanced and sensible participation in government. Hence his argument for government by the philosophically trained. Aristotle declared that democracy polarised the rich against the poor, contributing to political instability. Indeed, most Greek and Roman writers stressed the importance in political systems of having elements of monarchy, aristocracy and democracy in 'mixed', or 'balanced', constitutions; the best features of each would act to counter and restrain their worst.

Nineteenth-century liberals were deeply concerned about the dangers of majority rule by an ill-educated mass of voters. There was a need to restrict democratic rights to those capable of reasoned thought. They also argued for a balanced constitution to contain democracy. Twentieth-century political theorists have been concerned with the complexity of modern societies, which makes issues difficult to understand, about the declining interest in politics, and about the 'dumbing-down' of political debate on complex issues. Supporters of democracy believe that this fear is exaggerated. There is plenty of evidence that voters understand complex issues. Indeed, those who participate in democracy show considerable knowledge and capacity. Western democracies have high levels of education and information.

*Political democracy ignores the lack of democracy in economic relations: the Marxist criticism*

Democratic systems do little to mitigate the fundamentally exploitative nature of capitalist economies. Deep social and economic inequalities continue to exist and undermine the democratic system by restricting the real power and influence available to working-class people. Without fundamental reforms of economic inequalities in society the equality of political rights becomes meaningless, democracy is a sham, merely the ideological means by which the

many are governed – and exploited – by the few. Only with the transformation of modern society into a socialist, classless one would real democracy occur.

*Democratic systems reflect gender divisions in society:  
the feminist critique*

Women are placed at a disadvantage in democracies through the burdens imposed upon them by domestic duties and by their secondary social and economic role in a male-dominated society and political system. Liberal-democratic political systems are dependent on gender divisions and, in that sense, are no different from non-democratic systems. In suppressing the potential contribution of women no society can be truly democratic. This view is not so much against democracy as convinced that there can be *no* democratic society until women are truly free and equal.

### **Arguments in support of democracy**

A democrat might recognise much truth in the foregoing criticisms. All too often supporters of democracy have lacked powerful intellectual champions to publicise its value. The views of ordinary Athenians on democracy, for example, are inferred from their willingness to make great sacrifices to ensure its survival. The relative silence of the poor and their views on democracy – or anything else for that matter – was the norm until the last century and a half or so. Support for democracy has been rare among the wealthy, educated, powerful and literate. Equally rare were cogent arguments on its behalf until the late nineteenth century.

The pro-democratic argument includes a number of elements:

- the democratic view of elites and democracy;
- democracy contributes to social cohesion;
- democracy encourages citizen development;
- a moral claim for participation;
- democracy as an engine of social change.

*The democratic view of elites and democracy*

The democrat does not believe that the expert element in government should be abolished, but argues that this element should not be trusted with absolute and unchecked power. At the same time, the democrat argues that democracy is of positive value. A strong democratic element in government is important for good government. There are a number of reasons for this.

It is unlikely that an ideal aristocracy or oligarchy, however attractive it may be in anti-democratic theory, could ever be attained in practice. Most kinds of oligarchy would, in practice, be far from ideal. Democracy, for all its

weaknesses, would be safer. Any body of people, however carefully chosen, if they were freed from all democratic control and accountability, would become a special class with interests of their own. Elites tend to become self-serving and pursue their interests at the expense of the community. They seek to amass wealth and power for themselves (rather than for the benefit of the community). This corruption would occur no matter how high-minded or how well trained they were. As Lord Acton stated: 'Power tends to corrupt and absolute power corrupts absolutely. Great men are almost invariably bad men.'<sup>4</sup>

Undemocratic elites would become increasingly remote from the people, steadily less capable of understanding popular desires and feelings, and less concerned with the welfare of the people. Eventually, to make the people obey the elite, coercion and repression would be introduced. At the very least, democratic societies tend to reduce corruption, violence and oppression.

A healthy society requires its citizens to think for themselves and to form their own opinions. If citizens are repressed, or discouraged from taking part in government or influencing government decisions, then much useful information becomes unavailable to the government. Ill-informed and wrong decisions are made, damaging society.

As society is made up of a great number of individuals and groups, no elite can know what is best for all. Strong democratic elements in the political system help government make its decisions taking into account the complex nature of society. Dissenting groups should be tolerated as some truth may exist in their arguments and the discussion of many opinions aids the formation of sound policy. Democratic societies are simply better governed than monarchic or oligarchic ones.

#### *Democracy contributes to social cohesion*

Governments prefer to govern by consent rather than by force. Creating a sense of membership of a political system, democracy provides the basis for governmental legitimacy and social and political stability. It creates commitment to one's society and, contrary to the views of anti-democrats, it has not led to mob rule, but to a stronger and more balanced society with greater freedom for the vast majority of people.

Democracies are closely associated with liberal capitalism and social welfare. Some democratic theorists believe democracy is possible only in market capitalist societies that allow individual competition to flourish. Others assert that democracy requires social welfare systems to ensure individual freedoms and education for the population. It isn't absolutely proven that these are essential requirements for 'democracy'. There may be other means of establishing it. But there is a close correlation between liberal democracies and

capitalist-welfare societies. Such societies do appear to be well governed, prosperous and highly cohesive.

### *Democracy encourages citizen development*

A democratic political system requires that its citizens have knowledge of the major issues of the day. An informed populace is a responsible one, one that takes its role in the political system seriously. Governments and political parties also benefit from a citizen body growing and maturing in its democratic roles and responsibilities, as new people with different experiences and knowledge take part in politics and government at all levels. The dangers of stagnation and of a self-serving elite are reduced.

### *A moral claim for participation*

All citizens have a stake in their society. Whether people will be rich or poor, well or ill educated, free, healthy, even happy and contented, depends largely on politics. Their government affects them all. All have lives to lead, children to raise, friends and family to care for, and taxes to pay. Democrats argue that morality demands the right to participate in one's political system. Indeed, most democrats would argue that there is not only a moral *right* but also a moral *duty* to take an interest in politics, vote and get involved. Not to do so puts existing democracies at risk, perpetuates tyrannical and brutal regimes, and is a moral betrayal of those who fought and died in the past for the right to participate and of those putting their lives at risk for democracy today.

### *Democracy as an engine of social change*

Rational political action – short of violence – has been a vital engine of social change and reform in democracies. Demonstrations, strikes, protests, are often needed to bring issues onto a political agenda. The constitutional system itself may support an unjust society by ensuring the maintenance of a status quo. Britain in the nineteenth century may have been relatively democratic, compared to other European societies, but political and social reform required political agitation. Even in the twentieth century, mass democratic Britain retained a need for extra-parliamentary action to 'improve' society and seek an end to social injustices, such as racial and sexual discrimination.

There is always a danger that deeply committed, ideologically motivated groups that have a grievance, a sense of the 'fraudulent' and 'unjust' nature of the system, will use violence to try to change policy or even overthrow a regime. One might even agree, without supporting violence, that in Northern Ireland political and social reforms have come about as a consequence of Republican and Loyalist violence – the 'bullet and the ballot box'. But in a democracy the legitimacy of violence to secure social and political change

is always dubious, except in the minds of its supporters. It lays itself open to such questions as 'Who voted for you?' and 'Who gave you the right to kill in my name?'

## The future of democracy

Democracy appeared to be on the march by the end of the twentieth century. It was attractive, successful, adaptable and able to combine freedom with order. The end of the Cold War saw democracies established in Eastern Europe and the former states of the USSR. Elsewhere, too, concepts of citizenship and popular sovereignty appeared to be on the rise. The future of democracy appeared to be rosy. But all is not as well as one might have hoped. There are a number of challenges to democracy that have to be overcome.

### Globalisation

The effectiveness of democracy is challenged by 'globalisation'. Capitalism and democracy have often been closely associated, especially in liberal-democratic political theory. However, the power of big businesses, international financial institutions and international money markets challenges both state sovereignty and the ability of democracy to respond to both the demands of the people *and* pressures from the global economy.

Welfare systems have been challenged by global businesses. Demands for lower corporation taxes and reduced health and welfare provision are linked to demands to improve economic competition. There are also pressures for a greater role for 'market solutions' to social problems. Businesses have easy access to government. They have a dominant influence within the media. Indeed, the media are often part of global business empires.

'Rolling back the state', a rallying cry of many on the libertarian right, involves a curtailment of the ability of the state to control corporations and produces a capitulation to the self-interested demands of businesses. It also involves the decline of the people's influence on their political system, a decline reflected by a dwindling interest in politics in most democracies.

### Apathy

The greatest danger to democracy is not violence, but apathy. Growing lack of interest in democratic politics can be perceived in several important areas.

Voting is the minimal degree of involvement in a democracy. Turnout in general elections, local elections and referenda is in decline. In the USA, for example, presidential election voter turnout is only around 50 per cent of those eligible and only 39 per cent turnout was achieved in the November

2002 Congressional elections. In Britain's 2001 general election only 59 per cent of those registered voted, and Swiss referenda stimulate around 40 per cent voter participation. This may, of course, not be apathy, but could be taken as evidence of contentment with one's society. However, opinion polls show widespread disillusionment with politics and politicians, and – by implication – democracy. A belief exists in most democracies that voting never changes much, and that participation can have very little influence on events, a view that bolsters cynicism about the democratic process. This can be observed in the declining membership of political parties. Membership has always been a minority interest, but is a shrinking one. Fewer people join political parties than ever before. In the UK, for example, the three main political parties have a combined membership of less than 800,000.

Declining interest and participation in democracy allow political and ideological extremists to have a greater impact on politics than would otherwise be the case.

### **Anti-democratic and irrational forces**

Democracies are not immortal. They have shown considerable resilience to the threats from fascism and communism during the twentieth century and triumphed, but anti-democratic and irrational forces could reappear to challenge them and, perhaps, win. There is evidence of the growth of such forces in Europe: fascism, nationalism, terrorism, religious fundamentalism, and extremism in the cause of animal rights and environmentalism. At present they are on the fringes of politics. However, levels of intolerance of minorities – such as migrants and asylum seekers – have grown among democratic leaderships and among voters.

Nevertheless, despite all these reservations, democratic forms of government continue to show considerable degrees of vigour and reform. The great challenge for democracy in the twenty-first century will be to spread and deepen its roots in those countries from which it has been absent, while finding new democratic systems, reinvigorated democratic cultures, to ensure that it does not wither in its heartlands.

### **Summary**

Democracy claims, and at least in theory is granted, universal applicability. It is such a 'feel-good' word that almost every regime, however tyrannical, describes itself as 'democratic'. In reality, the degree to which a government is democratic can be measured by the extent to which 'the people' influence government. From other perspectives, we need to consider how far the people are protected from an oppressive state ('defensive democracy') or the extent

to which they are encouraged to participate in decision-making ('citizen democracy'). Democratic government can be described as governing with the consent of the people. Majority rule, equality of rights and the rule of law are also important dimensions to democracy. Moreover, democracy requires the social underpinning of a democratic culture. Democracy has often been attacked. A conservative view is that governance is best left to a highly-skilled elite; a liberal view is the idea that the masses cannot be entrusted with power. Others, such as Marxists and feminists, argue that 'democracy' is but a façade to hide unjust class rule. Defenders of democracy argue that elites are not to be trusted with power. Besides, democracy promotes social cohesion, encourages citizenship development and enables social change to occur without violence. There is also a claim that, as all have a stake in society, all have a right to participate in its decisions. Democracy's future is bright. It has confronted its fascist and communist enemies during the twentieth century and defeated them. It is quite capable of defeating the threats to it that are apparent in the twenty-first century.

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### SAMPLE QUESTIONS

- 1 What are the essential characteristics of a 'liberal democracy'?
- 2 How valid are historical and recent critiques of democracy?
- 3 'Although democracy has successfully withstood the challenges of the twentieth century, it would be unwise to think it will be equally successful in the twenty-first century.' Discuss this statement.
- 4 Are there any valid forms of democracy other than 'liberal democracy'?
- 5 What difficulties are encountered in modern democracies in answering the question 'who governs'?
- 6 Are there any preconditions for a successful democracy?

