

Chapter 8

Democracy, Representation and the Public Interest

Introduction

Democracy

Representation

The public interest

Summary

Further reading

Introduction

Since the dawn of political thought the question 'Who should rule?' has been a recurrent issue of argument and debate. Since the twentieth century, however, the question has tended to elicit a single, almost universally accepted, response: the people should govern. Perhaps no other political ideal is accorded the unquestioning approval, even reverence, currently enjoyed by democracy. Whether they are liberals, conservatives, socialists, communists or even fascists, politicians everywhere are eager to proclaim their democratic credentials and to commit themselves to the democratic ideal. And yet it is its very popularity that makes democracy a difficult concept to understand. When a term means anything to anyone it is in danger of becoming entirely meaningless. Democracy may now be nothing more than a 'hurrah word', endlessly repeated by politicians, but denoting little of substance.

In reality, a number of competing models of democracy have developed in different historical periods and in various parts of the world. These have included direct and indirect democracy, political and social democracy, pluralist and totalitarian democracy and so on. What forms of government can reasonably be described as 'democratic', and why? Moreover, why is democracy so widely valued, and can it be regarded as an unqualified good? Modern ideas of democracy are, however, rarely based upon the classical idea of popular self-government. Rather, they are founded on the belief that politicians in some sense 'represent' the people and act on their behalf. This raises questions about what representation means and how it is accomplished. What, for instance, is being represented: the views of the people, their best interests, or the various groups which make up the people? Is representation a necessary feature of democracy, or is it merely a substitute for it? Finally, democratic governments claim to rule in the national or public interest. However, what is meant by the 'public interest'? And can the people ever be said to have a single, collective interest? Even if such a collective interest exists, how can it in practice be defined?

Democracy

The term democracy and the classical conception of democratic rule are firmly rooted in Ancient Greece. Like other words that end in 'cracy' – such as autocracy, aristocracy and bureaucracy – democracy is derived from the ancient Greek word *kratos*, meaning 'power' or 'rule'. Democracy therefore means 'rule by the demos', demos standing for 'the many' or 'the people'. In contrast to its modern usage, democracy was originally a negative or pejorative term, denoting not so much rule by all, as rule by the propertyless and uneducated masses. Democracy was therefore thought to be the enemy of liberty and wisdom. While writers such as Aristotle (see p. 69) were prepared to recognize the virtues of popular participation, they nevertheless feared that unrestrained democracy would degenerate into a form of 'mob rule'. Indeed, such pejorative implications continued to be attached to democracy until well into the twentieth century.

Democratic government has, however, varied considerably over the centuries. Perhaps the most fundamental distinction is between democratic systems, like those in Ancient Greece, that are based upon direct popular participation in government, and those that operate through some kind of representative mechanism. This highlights two contrasting models of democracy, direct democracy and representative democracy. Moreover, the modern understanding of democracy is dominated by the form of electoral democracy that has developed in the industrialized West, often called liberal democracy. Despite its undoubted success, liberal democracy is only one of a number of possible models of democracy, and one whose democratic credentials have sometimes been called into question. Finally, the near universal approval which democracy currently elicits should not obscure the fact that the merits of democracy have been fiercely debated over the centuries and that, in certain respects, this debate has intensified in the late twentieth century. In other words, democracy may have its vices as well as its virtues.

Direct and indirect democracy

In the Gettysburg Address, delivered at the time of the American Civil War, Abraham Lincoln extolled the virtues of what he called 'government of the people, by the people, and for the people'. In so doing, he defined between two contrasting notions of democracy. The first, 'government by the people', is based upon the idea that the public participates in government and indeed governs itself: popular self-government. The second, 'government for the people', is linked to the notion of the public interest and the idea that government benefits the people, whether or not

Democracy

Although the democratic political tradition can be traced back to Ancient Greece, the cause of democracy was not widely taken up by political thinkers until the nineteenth century. Until then, democracy was generally dismissed as rule by the ignorant and unenlightened masses. Now, however, it seems that we are all democratic. Liberals, conservatives, socialists, communists, anarchists and even fascists have been eager to proclaim the virtues of democracy and to demonstrate their democratic credentials.

This emphasizes the fact that the democratic tradition does not advance a single and agreed ideal of popular rule, but is rather an arena of debate in which the notion of popular rule, and ways in which it can be achieved, is discussed. In that sense, democratic political thought addresses three central questions. First, who are the people? As no one would extend political participation to *all* the people, the question is: on what basis should it be limited – in relation to age, education, gender, social background and so on? Second, how should the people rule? This relates not only to the choice between direct and indirect democratic forms, but also to debates about forms of representation and different electoral systems. Third, how far should popular rule extend? Should democracy be confined to political life, or should democracy also apply, say, to the family, the workplace, or throughout the economy?

Democracy, then, is not a single, unambiguous phenomenon. In reality, there is a number of theories or models of democracy, each offering its own version of popular rule. There are not merely a number of democratic forms and mechanisms but also, more fundamentally, quite different grounds on which democratic rule can be justified. Classical democracy, based upon the Athenian model, is characterized by the direct and continuous participation of citizens in the processes of government. Protective democracy is a limited and indirect form of democratic rule designed to provide individuals with a means of defence against government. As such, it is linked to natural rights theory and utilitarianism (see p. 358). Developmental democracy is associated with attempts to broaden popular participation on the basis that it advances freedom and individual flourishing. Such ideas were taken up by New Left thinkers in the 1960s and 1970s in the form of radical or participatory democracy. Finally, deliberative democracy highlights the importance of public debate and discussion in shaping citizens' identities and interests, and in strengthening their sense of the common good.

Critics of democracy have adopted various positions. They have warned, variously, that democracy fails to recognize that some people's views are more worthwhile than others'; that democracy upholds majority views at the expense of minority views and interests; that democratic rule tends to threaten individual rights by fuelling the growth of government; and that democracy is based upon the bogus notion of a public interest or common good, ideas that have been further weakened by the pluralistic nature of modern society.



→ Key figures

Jean-Jacques Rousseau (see p. 242) Rousseau viewed democracy as the most important means through which humans can achieve freedom or autonomy, in the sense of 'obedience to a law one prescribes to oneself'. He was a strenuous critic of the practice of elections and insisted that citizens are only 'free' when they participate directly and continuously in shaping the life of their community. For Rousseau, this ultimately meant obedience to the general will, although he was less clear about the precise mechanisms through which the general will would emerge.

Joseph Schumpeter (1883–1950) A Moravian-born US economist and sociologist, Schumpeter developed an analysis of capitalism that emphasized its bureaucratic tendencies and its growing resemblance to socialism. His theory of democracy offered an alternative to the 'classical doctrine', which was based upon the idea of a shared notion of the common good; it portrayed the democratic process as an arena of struggle between power-seeking politicians intent upon winning the people's vote. His view that political democracy is analogous to an economic market had considerable influence upon later rational-choice theories. Schumpeter's most important political work is *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy* ([1942] 1976).

Crawford Brough Macpherson (1911–87) A Canadian political theorist, Macpherson developed a leftist form of liberalism that reflects the influence of Marxism. He portrayed early liberalism as a form of possessive individualism, intrinsically linked to market society. His critique of liberal democracy stressed liberalism's pre-democratic features and acknowledged its bias in favour of capitalism. Nevertheless, he argued that the basic liberal democratic principle of equal liberty could ultimately be realised, but only within conditions of participatory democracy and in a non-market social environment. Macpherson's major works include *The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism* (1962), *Democratic Theory* (1973) and *The Life and Times of Liberal Democracy* (1977).

Robert Dahl (1915–) A US political scientist, Dahl is a leading exponent of pluralist theory. He contrasts modern democratic systems with the classical democracy of Ancient Greece, using the term 'polyarchy' to refer to rule by the many, as distinct from rule by all citizens. His empirical studies led him to conclude that the system of competitive elections prevents any permanent elite from emerging and ensures wide, if imperfect, access to the political process. His later writings reflect a growing awareness of the tension between democracy and the power of major capitalist corporations. Dahl's major works include *A Preface to Democratic Theory* (1956), *Who Governs?* (1963), *Dilemmas of Pluralist Democracy* (1982) and *A Preface to Economic Democracy* (1985).

Further reading

- Dahl, R. *Democracy and Its Critics*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1989.
 Harrison, R. *Democracy*. London: Routledge, 1993.
 Weale, A. *Democracy*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 1999.

they themselves rule. The classical conception of democracy, which endured well into the nineteenth century, was firmly rooted in the ideal of popular participation and drew heavily upon the example of Athenian democracy. The cornerstone of Athenian democracy was the direct and continuous participation of all citizens in the life of their *polis* or city-state. As described in Chapter 3, this amounted to a form of government by mass meeting, and each citizen was qualified to hold public office if selected to do so by lot or rota. Athenian democracy was therefore a system of 'direct democracy' or what is sometimes referred to as 'participatory democracy'. By removing the need for a separate class of professional politicians, the citizens themselves were able to rule directly, obliterating the distinction between government and the governed and between the state and civil society. Similar systems of 'town-meeting democracy' continue to be practised at a local level in some parts of the USA, notably in New England, and in the communal assemblies employed in Switzerland.

The town meeting is, however, not the only means through which direct democracy can operate. The most obvious of these is the plebiscite or referendum, a popular vote on a specific issue which enables electors to make decisions directly, instead of selecting politicians to do so on their behalf. Referendums are widely used at every level in Switzerland, and are employed in countries such as Ireland to ratify constitutional amendments. The UK held a referendum in 1975 on continued membership of the then European Community, in 1979 on establishing devolved assemblies in Scotland and Wales, and since the election of the Blair government in 1997 referendums have been held on Scottish and Welsh devolution, the Northern Ireland peace deal and the introduction of a London mayor. In the USA, referendums have increasingly been used in local politics in the form of 'propositions' or popular initiatives. A form of direct democracy has also survived in modern societies in the practice of selecting juries on the basis of lot or rota, as public offices were filled in Athenian times. Advocates of direct democracy further point out that the development of modern technology has opened up broader possibilities for popular participation in government. In particular, the use of so-called interactive television could enable citizens to both watch public debates and engage in voting without ever leaving their homes. Experiments with such technology are already under way in some local communities in the United States.

Needless to say, modern government bears little resemblance to the Athenian model of direct democracy. Government is left in the hands of professional politicians who are invested with the responsibility for making decisions on behalf of the people. Representative democracy is, at best, a limited and indirect form of democracy. It is limited in the sense that popular participation is both infrequent and brief, being reduced to the act of voting every few years, depending on the length of the political

term. It is indirect in the sense that the public is kept at arm's length from government: the public participates only through the choice of who should govern it, and never, or only rarely, exercises power itself. Representative democracy may nevertheless qualify as a form of democracy on the grounds that, however limited and ritualized it may appear, the act of voting remains a vital source of popular power. Quite simply, the public has the ability to 'kick the rascals out', a fact that ensures public accountability. Although representative democracy may not fully realize the classical goal of 'government by the people', it may nevertheless make possible a form of 'government for the people'.

Some advocates of representative democracy acknowledge its limitations, but argue that it is the only practicable form of democracy in modern conditions. A high level of popular participation is possible within relatively small communities, such as Greek city-states or small towns, because face-to-face communication can take place between and amongst citizens. However, the idea of government by mass meeting being conducted in modern nation-states containing tens, and possibly hundreds of millions of citizens is frankly absurd. Moreover, to consult the general public on each and every issue, and permit wide-ranging debate and discussion, threatens to paralyse the decision-making process and make a country virtually ungovernable. The most fundamental objection to direct democracy is, however, that ordinary people lack the time, maturity and specialist knowledge to rule wisely on their own behalf. In this sense, representative democracy merely applies the advantages of the division of labour to politics: specialist politicians, able to devote all their time and energy to the activity of government, can clearly do a better job than would the general public. Nevertheless, since the 1960s there has been a revival of interest in classical democracy and, in particular, in the idea of participation. This reflects growing disenchantment with the bureaucratic and unresponsive nature of modern government, as well as declining respect for professional politicians, who have increasingly been viewed as self-serving careerists. In addition, the act of voting is often seen as a meaningless ritual that has little impact upon the policy process, making a mockery of the democratic ideal. Civic disengagement and declining electoral turnout in many parts of the world are thus sometimes viewed as symptoms of the malaise of representative democracy.

Liberal democracy

Bernard Crick (2000) has pointed out that democracy is the most promiscuous of political terms. In the sense that the word means different things to different people, democracy is an example of an 'essentially contested' concept. No settled model of democracy exists, only a number

of competing models. Nevertheless, a particular model or form of democracy has come to dominate thinking on the matter, to the extent that many in the West treat it as the only feasible or meaningful form of democracy. This is liberal democracy. It is found in almost all advanced capitalist societies and now extends, in one form or another, into parts of the former communist world and the developing world. Indeed, in the light of the collapse of communism, the US New Right theorist, Francis Fukuyama (1992), proclaimed the worldwide triumph of liberal democracy, describing it as the 'end of history', by which he meant the struggle between political ideas. Such triumphalism, however, should not obscure the fact that, despite its attractions, liberal democracy is not the only model of democratic government, and, like all concepts of democracy, it has its critics and detractors.

The 'liberal' element in liberal democracy emerged historically some time before such states could genuinely be described as democratic. Many Western states, for instance, developed forms of constitutional government in the nineteenth century, at a time when the franchise was still restricted to propertied males. In fact, women in Switzerland did not get the vote until 1971. A liberal state is based upon the principle of limited government, the idea that the individual should enjoy some measure of protection from the state. From the liberal perspective, government is a necessary evil, always liable to become a tyranny against the individual if government power is not checked. This leads to support for devices designed to constrain government, such as a constitution, a Bill of Rights, an independent judiciary and a network of checks and balances among the institutions of government. Liberal democracies, moreover, respect the existence of a vigorous and healthy civil society, based upon respect for civil liberties and property rights. Liberal-democratic rule therefore typically coexists with a capitalist economic order.

However, although these features may be a necessary precondition for democracy, they should not be mistaken for democracy itself. The 'democratic' element in liberal democracy is the idea of popular consent, expressed in practice through the act of voting. Liberal democracy is thus a form of electoral democracy, in that popular election is seen as the only legitimate source of political authority. Such elections must, however, respect the principle of political equality; they must be based upon universal suffrage and the idea of 'one person one vote'. For this reason, any system that restricts voting rights on grounds of gender, race, religion, economic status or whatever, fails the democratic test. Finally, in order to be fully democratic, elections must be regular, open and, above all, competitive. The core of the democratic process is the capacity of the people to call politicians to account. Political pluralism, open competition

between political philosophies, movements, parties and so on, is thus thought to be the essence of democracy.

The attraction of liberal democracy is its capacity to blend elite rule with a significant measure of popular participation. Government is entrusted to professional politicians, but these politicians are forced to respond to popular pressures by the simple fact that the public put them there in the first place, and can later remove them. Joseph Schumpeter summed this up in *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy* ([1942] 1976) by describing the democratic method as 'that institutional arrangement for arriving at political decisions in which individuals acquire the power to decide by means of a competitive struggle for the people's vote'. Thus the virtues of elite rule – government by experts, the educated or well-informed – are balanced against the need for public accountability. Indeed, such a view implies that in liberal democracies political power is ultimately wielded by voters at election time. The voter exercises the same power in the political market as the consumer does in economic markets. This process of accountability is strengthened by the capacity of citizens to exert direct influence upon government through the formation of cause groups and interest groups. Liberal democracies are therefore described as pluralist democracies: within them political power is widely dispersed among a number of competing groups and interests, each of which has access to government.

Nevertheless, liberal democracy does not command universal approval or respect. Its principal critics have been elitists, Marxists (see p. 82) and radical democrats. Elitists are distinguished by their belief that political power is concentrated in the hands of the few, the elite. Whereas classical elitists believed this to be a necessary and, in many cases, desirable feature of political life, modern elitists have developed an essentially empirical analysis and usually regretted the concentration of political power. In a sense, Schumpeter advanced a form of democratic elitism in suggesting that, though power is always exercised by an elite, competition among a number of elites ensures that the popular voice is heard. In the view of C. Wright Mills (1956), however, industrialized societies like the USA are dominated by a 'power elite', a small cohesive group that commands 'the major hierarchies and organizations of modern society'. Such a theory suggests that power is institutional in character and largely vested in the non-elected bodies of the state system, including the military, the bureaucracy, the judiciary and the police. Mills argued, in fact, that the means for exercising power are more narrowly concentrated in a few hands in such societies than at any earlier time in history. From this perspective, the principle of political equality and the process of electoral competition upon which liberal democracy is founded are nothing more than a sham.

The traditional Marxist critique of liberal democracy has focused upon the inherent tension between democracy and capitalism. For liberals and conservatives, the right to own property is almost the cornerstone of democratic rule since it provides an essential guarantee of individual liberty. Democracy can exist only when citizens are able to stand on their own two feet and make up their own minds; in other words, capitalism is a necessary precondition for democracy. Orthodox Marxists have fiercely disagreed, arguing that there is inherent tension between the political equality which liberal democracy proclaims and the social inequality which a capitalist economy inevitably generates. Liberal democracies are thus 'capitalist' or 'bourgeois' democracies, manipulated and controlled by the entrenched power of private property. Such an analysis inclined revolutionary Marxists such as Lenin (see p. 83) and Rosa Luxemburg (1871–1919) to reject the idea that there can be a 'democratic road' to socialism. An alternative tradition nevertheless recognizes that electoral democracy gives the working masses a voice and may even be a vehicle for far-reaching social change. The German socialist leader Karl Kautsky (1854–1938) was an exponent of this view, as have been modern Euro-communists. However, even when socialists have embraced the ballot box, they have been critical of the narrow conception of political equality as nothing more than equal voting rights. If political power reflects the distribution of wealth, genuine democracy can only be brought about through the achievement of social equality or what early Marxists termed 'social democracy'.

Finally, radical democrats have attacked liberal democracy as a form of facade democracy. They have returned to the classical conception of democracy as popular self-government, and emphasized the need for popular political participation. The ideal of direct or participatory democracy has attracted support from Karl Marx (see p. 371) most anarchist thinkers, and from elite theorists such as Tom Bottomore (1993) and Peter Bachrach (1967). The essence of the radical democracy critique is that liberal democracy has reduced participation to a meaningless ritual: casting a vote every few years for politicians who can only be replaced by electing another set of self-serving politicians. In short, the people never rule, and the growing gulf between government and the people is reflected in the spread of inertia, apathy and the breakdown of community. Radical democrats therefore underline the benefits that political participation brings, often by reference to the writings of Rousseau (see p. 242) and J.S. Mill (see p. 256). While they suggest no single alternative to liberal democracy they have usually been prepared to endorse any reforms through which grass-roots democracy can be brought about. These include not only the use of referendums and information technology, already discussed, but also the radical decentralization of

power and the wider use of activist and campaigning pressure groups rather than bureaucratic and hierarchic political parties.

Virtues and vices of democracy

In modern politics there is a strange and perhaps unhealthy silence on the issue of democracy. So broad is respect for democracy that it has come to be taken for granted; its virtues are seldom questioned and its vices rarely exposed. This is very different from the period of the English, American and French revolutions, which witnessed fierce and continual debate about the merits of democracy. Indeed, in the nineteenth century, when democracy was regarded as a radical, egalitarian and even revolutionary creed, no issue polarized political opinion so dramatically. The present unanimity about democracy should not, however, disguise the fact that democrats have defended their views in very different ways at different times.

Until the nineteenth century, democracy, or at least the right to vote, was usually regarded as a means of protecting the individual against overmighty government. Perhaps the most basic of democratic sentiments was expressed in the Roman poet, Juvenal's question, '*Quis custodiet ipsos custodes?* [Who will guard the Guardians?]' Seventeenth-century social contract theorists also saw democracy as a way in which individuals could check government power. In the eyes of John Locke (see p. 268), for instance, the right to vote was based upon natural rights and, in particular, the right to property. If government, through taxation, possessed the power to expropriate property, citizens were entitled to protect themselves, which they did by controlling the composition of the tax-making body. In other words, there should be 'no taxation without representation'. To limit the franchise to property owners would not, however, qualify as democracy by twentieth-century standards. The more radical notion of universal suffrage was advanced by utilitarian theorists like Jeremy Bentham (see p. 359). In his early writings Bentham advocated an enlightened despotism, believing that this would be able to promote 'the greatest happiness'. However, he subsequently came to support universal suffrage in the belief that each individual's interests were of equal value and that only they could be trusted to pursue their own interests.

A more radical case for democracy is, however, suggested by theorists who regard political participation as a good in itself. As noted earlier, Jean-Jacques Rousseau and John Stuart Mill have usually been seen as the principal exponents of this position. For Rousseau, democracy was a means through which human beings achieved freedom or autonomy. Individuals are, according to this view, free only when they obey laws which they themselves have made. Rousseau therefore extolled the merits

of active and continuous participation in the life of their community. Such an idea, however, moves well beyond the conventional notion of electoral democracy and offers support for the more radical ideal of direct democracy. Rousseau, for example, derided the practice of elections employed in England, arguing that 'the people of England are only free when they elect their Member of Parliament; as soon as they are elected, the people are slaves, they are nothing'. Although Mill did not go so far, remaining an advocate of electoral democracy, he nevertheless believed that political participation was beneficial to both the individual and society. Mill proposed votes for women and the extension of the franchise to include all except illiterates, on educational grounds, suggesting that it would foster among individuals intellectual development, moral virtue and practical understanding. This, in turn, would create a more balanced and harmonious society and promote 'the general mental advancement of the community'.

Other arguments in favour of democracy are more clearly based upon its advantages for the community rather than for the individual. Democracy can, for instance, create a sense of social solidarity by giving all members a stake in the community by virtue of having a voice in the decision-making process. Rousseau expressed this very idea in his belief that government should be based upon the 'general will', or common good, rather than upon the private or selfish will of each citizen. Political participation therefore increases the feeling amongst individual citizens that they 'belong' to their community. Very similar considerations have inclined socialists and Marxists to support democracy, albeit in the form of 'social democracy' and not merely political democracy. From this perspective, democracy can be seen as an egalitarian force standing in opposition to any form of privilege or hierarchy. Democracy represents the community rather than the individual, the collective interest rather than the particular.

Even as the battle for democracy was being waged, however, strident voices were raised against it. The most fundamental argument against democracy is that ordinary members of the public are simply not competent to rule wisely in their own interests. The earliest version of this argument was put by Plato (see p. 21) who advanced the idea of rule by the virtuous, government being carried out by a class of philosopher-kings, the Guardians. In sharp contrast to democratic theorists, Plato believed in a radical form of natural inequality: human beings were born with souls of gold, silver or bronze, and were therefore disposed towards very different stations in life. Whereas Plato suggested that democracy would deliver bad government, classical elitists, such as Pareto (1848–1923), Mosca (1857–1941) and Michels (1876–1936), argued that it was simply impossible. Democracy is no more than a foolish delusion because political power is always exercised by a privileged minority, an elite. In

The Ruling Class ([1896] 1939), Mosca proclaimed that in all societies 'two classes of people appear – a class that rules and a class that is ruled'. In his view, the resources or attributes that are necessary for rule are always unequally distributed and, further, a cohesive minority will always be able to manipulate and control the masses, even in a parliamentary democracy. Pareto suggested that the qualities needed to rule conform to one of two psychological types: 'foxes', who rule by cunning and are able to manipulate the consent of the masses; and 'lions', whose domination is typically based upon coercion and violence. Michels proposed that elite rule followed from what he called 'the iron law of oligarchy'. This states that it is in the nature of all organizations, however democratic they may appear, for power to concentrate in the hands of a small group of dominant figures, who can organize and make decisions, rather than in the hands of the apathetic rank and file.

A further argument against democracy sees it as the enemy of individual liberty. This fear arises out of the fact that 'the people' is not a single entity but rather a collection of individuals and groups, possessed of differing opinions and opposing interests. The 'democratic solution' to conflict is a recourse to numbers and the application of majority rule – the rule of the majority, or greatest number, should prevail over the minority. Democracy, in other words, comes down to the rule of the 51 per cent, a prospect which Alexis de Tocqueville (see p. 138) famously described as 'the tyranny of the majority'. Individual liberty and minority rights can thus both be crushed in the name of the people. A similar analysis was advanced by J.S. Mill. Mill believed not only that democratic election was no way of determining the truth – wisdom cannot be determined by a show of hands – but also that majoritarianism would also damage intellectual life by promoting uniformity and dull conformism. A similar view was also expressed by James Madison (see p. 232) at the US Constitutional Convention at Philadelphia in 1787. Madison argued that the best defence against such tyranny was a network of checks and balances, creating a highly fragmented system of government, often referred to as the 'Madisonian system'.

In other cases, a fear of democracy has sprung not so much from the danger of majority rule as from the nature of the majority in most, if not all, societies. Echoing ancient reservations about popular rule, such theories suggest that democracy places power in the hands of those least qualified to govern: the uneducated masses, those likely to be ruled by passion and instinct rather than wisdom. In *The Revolt of the Masses* ([1930] 1961), for instance, Ortega y Gasset (1885–1955) warned that the arrival of mass democracy had led to the overthrow of civilized society and the moral order, paving the way for authoritarian rulers to come to power by appealing to the basest instincts of the masses. Whereas democrats

James Madison (1751–1836)

US statesman and political theorist. Madison was a Virginian who was a keen advocate of American nationalism at the Continental Congress, 1774 and 1775. He helped to set up the Constitutional Convention in 1787, and played a major role in writing the Constitution. Madison served as Jefferson's secretary of state, 1801–9, and was the fourth president of the United States, 1809–17.

Madison's best known political writings are his contributions to *The Federalist* (1787–8), which campaigned for constitutional ratification. He was a leading proponent of pluralism and divided government, believing that 'ambition must be made to counteract ambition'. He therefore urged the adoption of federalism, bicameralism and the separation of powers. Madisonianism thus implies a strong emphasis upon checks and balances as the principal means of preventing tyranny. Nevertheless, when in office, Madison was prepared to strengthen the powers of national government. His views on democracy, often referred to as 'Madisonian democracy', stressed the need to resist majoritarianism by recognising the existence of diversity or multiplicity in society, and highlighted the need for a disinterested and informed elite independent from competing individual and sectional interests. Madison's ideas have influenced liberal, republican and pluralist thought.

subscribe to egalitarian principles, critics such as Ortega tend to embrace the more conservative notion of natural hierarchy. For many, this critique is particularly directed at participatory forms of democracy, which place little or no check upon the appetites of the masses. J.L. Talmon (1952), for example, argued that in the French Revolution the radically democratic theories of Rousseau made possible the unrestrained brutality of the Terror, a phenomenon Talmon termed 'totalitarian democracy'. Many have seen similar lessons in the plebiscitary forms of democracy which developed in twentieth-century fascist states, which sought to establish a direct and immediate relationship between the leader and the people through rallies, marches, demonstrations and other forms of political agitation.

Representation

Modern democratic theories are closely bound to the idea of representation. As stressed earlier, when citizens no longer rule directly, democracy is based upon the claim that politicians serve as the people's representatives. However, what does it mean to say that one person 'represents' another?

In ordinary language, to represent means to portray or make present, as when a picture is said to represent a scene or person. In politics, representation suggests that an individual or group somehow stands for, or on behalf of, a larger collection of people. Political representation therefore acknowledges a link between two otherwise separate entities – government and the governed – and implies that through this link the people's views are articulated or their interests are secured. The precise nature of this link is, nevertheless, a matter of deep disagreement, as is the capacity of representation ever to ensure democratic government.

In practice, there is no single, agreed model of representation but rather a number of competing theories, each based upon particular ideological and political assumptions. Representatives have sometimes been seen as people who 'know better' than others, and can therefore act wisely in their interests. This implies that politicians should not be tied like delegates to the views of their constituents, but should have the capacity to think for themselves and use personal judgement. For many, however, elections are the basis of the representative mechanism, elected politicians being able to call themselves representatives on the grounds that they have been mandated by the people. What this mandate means and how it authorizes politicians to act, is however a highly contentious matter. Finally, there is the altogether different idea that a representative is not a person acting on behalf of another, but one who is typical or characteristic of a group or society. Politicians are representatives, then, if they resemble their society in terms of age, gender, social class, ethnic background and so forth. To insist that politicians are a microcosm of society is to call for radical changes in the personnel of government in every country of the world.

Representatives or delegates?

In his famous speech to the electors of Bristol in 1774 Edmund Burke (see p. 348) informed his would-be constituents that 'your representative owes you, not his industry only, but his judgement; and he betrays, instead of serving you, if he sacrifices it to your opinion'. For Burke, the essence of representation was to serve one's constituents by the exercise of 'mature judgement' and 'enlightened conscience'. In short, representation is a moral duty: those with the good fortune to possess education and understanding should act in the interests of those who are less fortunate. In Burke's view, this position was justified by the fear that if MPs acted as ambassadors who took instructions directly from their constituents, Parliament would become a battleground for contending local interests, leaving no one to speak on behalf of the nation. 'Parliament', Burke emphasised, 'is a deliberative assembly of one nation, with one interest, that of the whole'.

A similar position was adopted in the nineteenth century by J.S. Mill, whose ideas constitute the basis of the liberal theory of representation. Though a firm believer in extending the franchise to working-class men, and an early advocate of female suffrage, Mill nevertheless rejected the idea that all political opinions are of equal value. In particular, he believed that the opinions of the educated are worth more than those of the uneducated or illiterate. This encouraged him, for instance, to propose a system of plural voting, allocating four or five votes to holders of learned diplomas or degrees, two or three to skilled or managerial workers, a single vote to ordinary workers and none at all to those who are illiterate. In addition, like Burke, he insisted that, once elected, representatives should think for themselves and not sacrifice their judgement to their constituents. Indeed, he argued that rational voters would wish for candidates with greater understanding than they possess themselves, ones who have had specialist knowledge, extensive education and broad experience. They will want politicians who can act wisely on their behalf, not ones who merely reflect their own views.

This theory of representation portrays professional politicians as representatives in so far as they are an educated elite. It is based upon the belief that knowledge and understanding are unequally distributed in society, in the sense that not all citizens are capable of perceiving their own best interests. If politicians therefore act as delegates, who, like ambassadors, receive instructions from a higher authority without having the capacity to question them, they may succumb to the irrational prejudices and ill-formed judgements of the masses. On the other hand, to advocate representation in preference to delegation is also to invite serious criticism. In the first place, the basic principles of this theory have anti-democratic implications: if politicians should think for themselves rather than reflect the views of the represented because the public is ignorant, poorly educated or deluded, surely it is a mistake to allow them to choose their representatives in the first place. Indeed, if education is the basis of representation, it could be argued that government should be entrusted to non-elected experts, selected, like the Mandarins of Imperial China, on the basis of examination success. Mill, in fact, did accept the need for a non-elected executive on such grounds. Furthermore, the link between representation and education is questionable. Whereas education may certainly be necessary to aid an understanding of intricate political and economic issues, it is far less clear that it helps politicians to make moral judgements about the interests of others. There is little evidence, for example, to support the belief which underpinned J.S. Mill's theory, and by implication those of Burke, that education gives people a broader sense of social responsibility and a greater willingness to act altruistically.

The most serious criticism of this theory of representation is, however, that it grants representatives considerable latitude in controlling the lives of others. In particular, there is a danger that to the degree to which politicians are encouraged to think for themselves they may become insulated from popular pressures and end up acting in their own selfish interests. In this way, representation could become a substitute for democracy. This fear had traditionally been expressed by radical democrats such as Tom Paine (see p. 206). As a keen advocate of the democratic doctrine of popular sovereignty, Paine actively involved himself in both the American and French revolutions. Unlike Rousseau, however, he recognized the need for some form of representation. Nevertheless, the theory of representation he advocated in *Common Sense* ([1776] 1987) came close to the ideal of delegation. Paine proposed 'frequent interchange' between representatives and their constituents in the form of regular elections designed to ensure that 'the elected might never form to themselves an interest separate from the electors'. In addition to frequent elections, radical democrats have also supported the idea of popular initiatives, a system through which the general public can make legislative proposals, and the right of recall, which entitles the electorate to call unsatisfactory elected officials to account and ultimately to remove them. From this point of view, the democratic ideal is realized only if representatives are bound as closely as possible to the views of the represented.

Elections and mandates

For most people, representation is intimately tied up with elections, to such an extent that politicians are commonly referred to as representatives simply because they have been elected. This does not, however, explain how elections serve as a representative mechanism, or how they link the elected to the views of the electors. An election is a device for filling public offices by reference to popular preferences. That being said, electoral systems are widely divergent, some being seen as more democratic or representative than others. It is difficult, for instance, to argue that non-competitive elections, in which only a single candidate is placed before the electorate, can be regarded as democratic, since there is no electoral choice and no opportunity to remove office-holders. However, there are also differences among competitive electoral systems. In countries such as the UK, the USA, New Zealand and India, plurality systems exist, based upon the 'first-past-the-post' rule – the victorious candidate needs only acquire more votes than any single rival. Such systems do not seek to equate the overall number of seats won by each party with the number of votes it gains in the election. Typically, plurality systems 'over-represent' large

HISTORY OF DEMOCRACY

Origins of Democracy

The word "democracy," as well as the concept it represents, can be traced back to the area surrounding the Mediterranean Sea. The beginnings of democracy can be credited to the Greeks of the sixth century BC. The word comes from two Greek words: demos, meaning "the people," and kratein, meaning "to rule." These two words are joined together to form democracy, literally meaning "rule by the people" (Pious). The Greek system of government was perhaps closer to a true democracy or rule by the people than any other in history. The Greeks viewed dictatorship as the worst possible form of government, so their government evolved as the exact opposite. Their civilization was broken down into small city-states (never more than 10,000 citizens), and all the men voted on all issues of government. There were no representatives in the Greek system of government. Instead, they ruled themselves directly; each man was a life long member of the decision making body. This was almost a total democracy except for the fact that women and slaves (over 50% of the population) were not considered citizens and were not allowed to vote. Despite this, no other civilization has come as close to democracy as its creators, the Greeks, and many later civilizations have incorporated this Greek idea as part of the foundation for their government (Lee; Lefebvre).

Ideas of democracy similar to that of the Greeks were used by the Romans, though not to the same extent. The Roman Empire (509-27 BC) took some of their governmental ideals from the Greeks. Their government was a representative democracy, which had representatives from the nobility in the Senate and representatives from the commoners in the Assembly. Governmental power was divided between these two branches and they voted on various issues. Many Roman political thinkers were fond of democracy. The Roman Statesman, Cicero was one. Cicero suggested that all people have certain rights that should be preserved. He and other political philosophers of the time taught that governmental and political power should come from the people (Lefebvre; Lee). After the trend of democracy was started by the Greeks and carried on by the Romans, it has been seen in many later governmental systems throughout history.

Democracy in England

In 1215 AD, the Magna Carta opened the door to a more democratic system in England. Nobles forced King John to sign this "Great Charter" that created the English "Parliament", or law-making body, and stated that the written laws held a higher power than the king, thereby limiting the power of the Royal family and giving some of that power to the people. Later, the Petition of Right (1628) stipulated that the King could no longer tax without parliament's permission and the Bill of Rights (1689) provided freedom of speech and banned cruel or unusual punishment. These strengthened Parliament further and gave the people more right to express themselves. Though these reforms did not make England a true democracy in any sense, they did incorporate democratic ideals, which would later be used to form the government of the United States (Lefebvre; Pious).



The concept of democracy continued to be prevalent in Europe with the philosophies of an English philosopher by the name of John Locke and a French philosopher named Jean Jacques Rousseau. Locke's book, *Two Treatises* (published in 1690), stated that under the "social contract," the government's job was to protect "natural rights", which included "the right to life, liberty, and the ownership of property." Rousseau expanded on this idea with his book, *The Social Contract*, in 1762. In essence, these two philosophers said that the people should have input on how their government is run. This school of thought paved the way for modern day American Democracy (Lefebvre).



The Path to Modern Democracy

The American Revolution is another important event in the history of democracy. The first step, of course, in America's pursuit of democracy was the Declaration of Independence in 1776. In this great document, written by Thomas Jefferson, many ideas are taken from the aforementioned philosophers, Locke and Rousseau. From Locke, Jefferson borrowed the idea that all men are created equal, and he altered the right to life, liberty and property to "the right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness." Jefferson borrowed a little from Rousseau as well when he said that all men should have the right to take up arms against the government if it did not respect these rights (Jefferson).

In the French Revolution, a similar cause was espoused. Political thinkers and philosophers such as Montesquieu, Voltaire, and Rousseau inspired the people by building off of American ideas and insisting that freedom comes only after the legislative, judicial and executive branches of the government are separated. The people of France overthrew the king, then set forth the "Declaration of the Rights of Man," which changed Locke's right to life, liberty and property to the right to "liberty, property, security, and resistance to oppression." (The resistance of oppression probably came from Rousseau.) These ideas, like the ones in the American Declaration of Independence, lended themselves to a partially democratic system where the powers of the king are limited and the people have some say in their government (Pious; Lefebvre).

All over the world, revolutions began to spring up against monarchies, and democratic governments began to develop. Before the end of the 19th century, almost all of the Western European monarchies had adopted a constitution limiting the power of the Royal Family and giving some power to the people. Parliamentary type representative legislatures were also developed in many of these countries, giving the people more power to rule (Pious).

With the growing success of democracy in the United States and in other countries throughout the world, democracy became more and more popular. By the 1950's, almost every independent country on the planet had a government that embodied some of the principals and ideals put forth by democracy. The model nation for these principals became the United States (Pious; Sanford 20-27).

Democracy in America

Modern American democracy is in the form of a democratic republic or a representative democracy. A representative democracy came about in the United States because the colonists were tired of taxation without representation and wanted a more fair system where the people had more say in the rule of the country. They did not desire the Athenian form of democracy however; as they feared it would give the people too much power and would lend control of the government to the uneducated masses. What they came up with was a representative democracy wherein elected representatives rather

than direct rule by the people rule the government. These representatives are elected with the idea that they will accurately represent their constituents, but in case some don't, the U.S. government is divided into three branches to keep corruption in check. These three branches are the Executive, Legislative, and Judicial branches. No one branch contains absolute power, rather, each branch is balanced off of the others creating a system of checks and balances to protect the principals of democracy. This system is in no way perfect, and this is why we must pursue a more perfect form of democracy and a more perfect union between our citizens, states and country (Pious; Sanford 20-27).

