



As the US example shows, we have come a long way from the eighteenth-century British version of constitutional monarchy (which was effectively the system the American revolutionaries rejected, though the influence of Montesquieu shows they were pretty conflicted about it). In different places and at different times, countries have democratised their constitutions without relapsing into crude and fearful politics. Elected heads of state have replaced kings and queens (except in places like Britain and its former dependencies, or the Scandinavian countries, where kings and queens have simply been deprived of all their powers). The franchise

has gradually been extended to include those categories of adults who were previously excluded (in Montesquieu's time the British electorate constituted just 2 per cent of the total population, all of them propertied, Anglican men). British Catholics, Jews and working men were enfranchised during the course of the nineteenth century. Women did not get the vote until the second decade of the twentieth century, and not on the same terms as men until 1928. The voting age was lowered from twenty-one to eighteen in 1969. Now there is talk of lowering it to sixteen. The European Court of Human Rights has recently ruled to extend the franchise to serving prisoners, though the current British government is resisting.

Other countries have followed a similar pattern of slow and choppy progress towards greater democracy, some considerably slower and choppier than others. (French women did not get the vote until 1945, more than 150 years after the men; in Switzerland women did not get the vote until 1971; the country that moved to universal suffrage for men and women earliest was New Zealand, in 1893.) Elsewhere the change has often been quicker. Many countries have democratised rapidly, some, such as Japan, in the aftermath of the Second World War and others, such as Poland, following the end of the Cold War. Modern democratic citizens have now acquired an extensive portfolio of rights backed up by increasingly elaborate systems of law. Discrimination on the grounds of gender, sexual orientation, race or religion, though it has hardly been abolished, has been greatly curtailed. The direction of change is not all one way. In the United States the Supreme Court recently ruled invalid key parts