

tion of a 'Green revolution' after seizing power in Libya in 1969. Examples of the latter include the emphasis on Marxism-Leninism in communist states and the use of Wahhabism to support monarchical rule in Saudi Arabia. However, when such strategies fail, all semblance of legitimation evaporates and non-democratic regimes are forced either to resort to progressively more draconian means of survival, or else they collapse in the face of popular uprisings. This can be seen in the case of the so-called 'Arab Spring' of 2011 (see p. 88).

## DEMOCRACY

### Understanding democracy

Debates about democracy extend well beyond its relationship to legitimacy. These stem, most basically, from confusion over the nature of democracy. The origins of the term 'democracy' can be traced back to Ancient Greece. Like other words ending in 'cracy' (for example, autocracy, aristocracy and bureaucracy), democracy is derived from the Greek word *kratos*, meaning power, or rule. Democracy thus means 'rule by the *demos*' (the *demos* referring to 'the people', although the Greeks originally used this to mean 'the poor' or 'the many'). However, the simple notion of 'rule by the people' does not get us very far. The problem with democracy has been its very popularity, a popularity that has threatened the term's undoing as a meaningful political concept. In being almost universally regarded as a 'good thing', democracy has come to be used as little more than a 'hurrah! word', implying approval of a particular set of ideas or system of rule. In Bernard Crick's (1993) words, 'democracy is perhaps the most promiscuous word in the world of public affairs'. A term that can mean anything to anyone is in danger of meaning nothing at all. Amongst the meanings that have been attached to the word 'democracy' are the following:

- a system of rule by the poor and disadvantaged
- a form of government in which the people rule themselves directly and continuously, without the need for professional politicians or public officials
- a society based on equal opportunity and individual merit, rather than hierarchy and privilege
- a system of welfare and redistribution aimed at narrowing social inequalities
- a system of decision-making based on the principle of majority rule
- a system of rule that secures the rights and interests of minorities by placing checks upon the power of the majority
- a means of filling public offices through a competitive struggle for the popular vote
- a system of government that serves the interests of the people regardless of their participation in political life.

Perhaps a more helpful starting point from which to consider the nature of democracy is Abraham Lincoln's Gettysburg Address (1863). Lincoln extolled the virtues of what he called 'government of the people, by the people, and for

## CONCEPT

**Political equality**

Political equality means, broadly, an equal distribution of political power and influence. Political equality can thus be thought of as the core principle of democracy, in that it ensures that, however 'the people' is defined, each individual member carries the same weight: all voices are equally loud. This can be understood in two ways. In liberal-democratic theory, political equality implies an equal distribution of political rights: the right to vote, the right to stand for election and so on. In contrast, socialists, amongst others, link political influence to factors such as the control of economic resources and access to the means of mass communication.

● **Majority rule:** The rule that the will of the majority, or numerically strongest, overrides the will of the minority, implying that the latter should accept the views of the former.

● **Cosmopolitan democracy:** A form of democracy that operates at supranational levels of governance and is based on the idea of transnational or global citizenship.

the people'. What this makes clear is that democracy links government to the people, but that this link can be forged in a number of ways: government *of*, *by* and *for* the people. This section explores the implications of these links by considering three questions. Who are the people? In what sense should the people rule? And how far should popular rule extend?

**Who are the people?**

One of the core features of democracy is the principle of political equality, the notion that political power should be distributed as widely and as evenly as possible. However, within what body or group should this power be distributed? In short, who constitutes 'the people'? On the face of it, the answer is simple: 'the *demos*', or 'the people', surely refers to *all* the people; that is, the entire population of the country. In practice, however, every democratic system has restricted political participation, sometimes severely.

As noted, early Greek writers usually used *demos* to refer to 'the many': that is, the disadvantaged and usually propertyless masses. Democracy therefore implied not political equality, but a bias towards the poor. In Greek city-states, political participation was restricted to a tiny proportion of the population, male citizens over the age of 20, thereby excluding all women, slaves and foreigners. Strict restrictions on voting also existed in most western states until well into the twentieth century, usually in the form of a property qualification or the exclusion of women. Universal suffrage was not established in the UK until 1928, when women gained full voting rights. In the USA, it was not achieved until the early 1960s, when African-American people in many Southern states were able to vote for the first time, and in Switzerland universal suffrage was established in 1971 when women were eventually enfranchised. Nevertheless, an important restriction continues to be practised in all democratic systems in the form of the exclusion of children from political participation, although the age of majority ranges from 21 down to as low as 15 (as in Iranian presidential elections up to 2007). Technical restrictions are also often placed on, for example, the certifiably insane and imprisoned criminals.

Although 'the people' is now accepted as meaning virtually all adult citizens, the term can be construed in a number of different ways. The people, for instance, can be viewed as a single, cohesive body, bound together by a common or collective interest: in this sense, the people are one and indivisible. Such a view tends to generate a model of democracy that, like Rousseau's (see p. 97) theory, examined in the next main section, focuses upon the 'general will' or collective will, rather than the 'private will' of each individual. Alternatively, as division and disagreement exist within all communities, 'the people' may in practice be taken to mean 'the majority'. In this case, democracy comes to mean the strict application of the principle of **majority rule**. This can, nevertheless, mean that democracy degenerates into the 'tyranny of the majority'. Finally, there is the issue of the body of people within which democratic politics should operate. Where should be the location or 'site' of democracy? Although, thanks to the potency of political nationalism, the definition 'the people' is usually understood in national terms, the ideas of local democracy and, in the light of globalization (see p. 142), **cosmopolitan democracy** (discussed in the final section of the chapter) have also been advanced.

## How should the people rule?

Most conceptions of democracy are based on the principle of ‘government *by* the people’. This implies that, in effect, people govern themselves – that they participate in making the crucial decisions that structure their lives and determine the fate of their society. This participation can take a number of forms, however. In the case of direct democracy, popular participation entails direct and continuous involvement in decision-making, through devices such as referendums (see p. 201), mass meetings, or even interactive television. The alternative and more common form of democratic participation is the act of voting, which is the central feature of what is usually called ‘representative democracy’. When citizens vote, they do not so much make the decisions that structure their own lives as choose who will make those decisions on their behalf. What gives voting its democratic character, however, is that, provided that the election is competitive, it empowers the public to ‘kick the rascals out’, and it thus makes politicians publicly accountable.

There are also models of democracy that are built on the principle of ‘government *for* the people’, and that allow little scope for public participation of any kind, direct or indirect. The most grotesque example of this was found in the so-called ‘**totalitarian democracies**’ that developed under fascist dictators such as Mussolini and Hitler. The democratic credentials of such regimes were based on the claim that the ‘leader’, and the leader alone, articulated the genuine interests of the people, thus implying that a ‘true’ democracy can be equated with an absolute dictatorship. In such cases, popular rule meant nothing more than ritualized submission to the will of an all-powerful leader, orchestrated through rallies, marches and demonstrations. This was sometimes portrayed as plebiscitary democracy. Although totalitarian democracies have proved to be a travesty of the conventional notion of democratic rule, they demonstrate the tension that can exist between ‘government *by* the people’ (or popular participation), and ‘government *for* the people’ (rule in the public interest). Advocates of representative democracy, for example, have wished to confine popular participation in politics to the act of voting, precisely because they fear that the general public lack the wisdom, education and experience to rule wisely on their own behalf.

## How far should popular rule extend?

Now that we have decided who ‘the people’ are, and how they should rule, it is necessary to consider how far their rule should extend. What is the proper realm of democracy? What issues is it right for the people to decide, and what should be left to individual citizens? In many respects, such questions reopen the debate about the proper relationship between the public realm and the private realm that was discussed in Chapter 1. Models of democracy that have been constructed on the basis of liberal individualism have usually proposed that democracy be restricted to political life, with politics being narrowly defined. From this perspective, the purpose of democracy is to establish, through some process of popular participation, a framework of laws within which individuals can conduct their own affairs and pursue their private interests. Democratic solutions, then, are appropriate only for matters that specifically relate to the

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### ● **Totalitarian democracy:**

An absolute dictatorship that masquerades as a democracy, typically based on the leader’s claim to a monopoly of ideological wisdom.

## Focus on . . .

# Direct democracy or representative democracy?

Direct democracy (sometimes 'classical', 'participatory', or 'radical' democracy) is based on the direct, unmediated and continuous participation of citizens in the tasks of government. Direct democracy thus obliterates the distinction between government and the governed, and between the state and civil society; it is a system of popular self-government. It was achieved in ancient Athens through a form of government by mass meeting; its most common modern manifestation is the use of the referendum (see p. 201). The merits of direct democracy include the following:

- It heightens the control that citizens can exercise over their own destinies, as it is the only pure form of democracy.
- It creates a better-informed and more politically sophisticated citizenry, and thus it has educational benefits.
- It enables the public to express their own views and interests without having to rely on self-serving politicians.
- It ensures that rule is legitimate, in the sense that people are more likely to accept decisions that they have made themselves.

Representative democracy is a limited and indirect form of democracy. It is limited in that popular participation in government is infrequent and brief, being restricted to the act of voting every few years. It is indirect in that the public do not exercise power themselves; they merely select those who will rule on their behalf. This form of rule is democratic only insofar as representation (see p. 197) establishes a reliable and effective link between the government and the governed. This is sometimes expressed in the notion of an electoral mandate (see p. 200). The strengths of representative democracy include the following:

- It offers a practicable form of democracy (direct popular participation is achievable only in small communities).
- It relieves ordinary citizens of the burden of decision-making, thus making possible a division of labour in politics.
- It allows government to be placed in the hands of those with better education, expert knowledge and greater experience.
- It maintains stability by distancing ordinary citizens from politics, thereby encouraging them to accept compromise.

● **Radical democracy:** A form of democracy that favours decentralization and participation, the widest possible dispersal of political power.

● **Economic democracy:** A broad term that covers attempts to apply democratic principles to the workplace, ranging from profit-sharing and the use of workers' councils to full workers' self-management.

community; used in other circumstances, democracy amounts to an infringement of liberty. Not uncommonly, this fear of democracy is most acute in the case of direct or participatory democracy.

However, an alternative view of democracy is often developed by, for example, socialists and radical democrats. In **radical democracy**, democracy is seen not as a means of laying down a framework within which individuals can go about their own business but, rather, as a general principle that is applicable to all areas of social existence. People are seen as having a basic right to participate in the making of *any* decisions that affect their lives, with democracy simply being the collective process through which this is done. This position is evident in socialist demands for the collectivization of wealth and the introduction of workers' self-management, both of which are seen as ways of democratizing economic life. Instead of endorsing mere political democracy, socialists have therefore called for 'social democracy' or '**economic democracy**'. Feminists, similarly, have demanded the democratization of family life, understood as the right of all to

**CONCEPT****Plebiscitary democracy**

Plebiscitary democracy is a form of democratic rule that operates through an unmediated link between the rulers and the ruled, established by plebiscites (or referendums). These allow the public to express their views on political issues directly. However, this type of democracy is often criticized because of the scope it offers for demagoguery (rule by political leaders who manipulate the masses through oratory, and appeal to their prejudices and passions). This type of democracy may amount to little more than a system of mass acclamation that gives dictatorship a populist (see p. 307) gloss.

participate in the making of decisions in the domestic or private sphere. From this perspective, democracy is regarded as a friend of liberty, not as its enemy. Only when such principles are ignored can oppression and exploitation flourish.

**Models of democracy**

All too frequently, democracy is treated as a single, unambiguous phenomenon. It is often assumed that what passes for democracy in most western societies (a system of regular and competitive elections based on a universal franchise) is the only, or the only legitimate, form of democracy. Sometimes this notion of democracy is qualified by the addition of the term 'liberal', turning it into liberal democracy. In reality, however, there are a number of rival theories or models of democracy, each offering its own version of popular rule. This highlights not merely the variety of democratic forms and mechanisms, but also, more fundamentally, the very different grounds on which democratic rule can be justified. Even liberal democracy is a misleading term, as competing liberal views of democratic organization can be identified. Four contrasting models of democracy can be identified as follows:

- classical democracy
- protective democracy
- developmental democracy
- people's democracy.

**Classical democracy**

The classical model of democracy is based on the *polis*, or city-state, of Ancient Greece, and particularly on the system of rule that developed in the largest and most powerful Greek city-state, Athens. The form of direct democracy that operated in Athens during the fourth and fifth centuries BCE is often portrayed as the only pure or ideal system of popular participation. Nevertheless, although the model had considerable impact on later thinkers such as Rousseau and Marx (see p. 41), Athenian democracy (see p. 95) developed a very particular kind of direct popular rule, one that has only a very limited application in the modern world. Athenian democracy amounted to a form of government by mass meeting.

What made Athenian democracy so remarkable was the level of political activity of its citizens. Not only did they participate in regular meetings of the Assembly, but they were also, in large numbers, prepared to shoulder the responsibility of public office and decision-making. The most influential contemporaneous critic of this form of democracy was the philosopher Plato (see p. 13). Plato attacked the principle of political equality on the grounds that the mass of the people possess neither the wisdom nor the experience to rule wisely on their own behalf. His solution, advanced in *The Republic*, was that government be placed in the hands of a class of philosopher kings, Guardians, whose rule would amount to a kind of enlightened dictatorship. On a practical level, however, the principal drawback of Athenian democracy was that it could operate only by excluding the mass of the population from political activity. Participation was restricted to Athenian-born males who were over 20 years of age. Slaves (the majority of the population), women and foreigners had no political rights

## Debating . . .

# Is democracy always the best form of government?

In modern politics, democracy has come to be so widely accepted that it appears to be almost politically incorrect to question it. The 'right' solution to a political problem is thus the democratic solution; that is, one made either by the people themselves or, more commonly, by politicians who are accountable to the people. But why is democracy so widely revered? And are there circumstances in which democratic rule is inappropriate or undesirable?

### YES

***The highest form of politics.*** The unique strength of democracy is that it is able to address the central challenge of politics – the existence of rival views and interests within the same society – while containing the tendency towards bloodshed and violence. In short, democratic societies are stable and peaceful. This occurs because democracy relies on open debate, persuasion and compromise. People with rival views or competing interests are encouraged to find a way of living together in relative harmony because each has a political voice. Democracy is therefore a kind of political safety valve, democratic participation preventing the build up of anger and frustration and, thereby, containing political extremism.

***Democracy as a universal value.*** It is now widely argued that democracy is a human right: a fundamental and absolute right that belongs to all people, regardless of nationality, religion, gender and other differences. Rights of political participation and access to power, especially the right to vote, are universally applicable because they stem from the basic entitlement to shape the decisions that affect one's own life – the right to self-rule. Indeed, an equal access to power and the right to political participation could be viewed not simply as virtues in their own right, but as preconditions for the maintenance of all other rights and freedoms.

***Keeping tyranny at bay.*** All systems of rule are apt to become tyrannies against the people, reflecting the fact that those in power (and, for that matter, all people) are inclined to place self-interest before the interests of others. Governments and leaders therefore need to be checked or constrained, and there is no more effective constraint on power than democracy. This is because democratic rule operates through a mechanism of accountability, which ultimately allows the public to 'kick the rascals out'. Democratic societies are therefore not only the most stable societies in the world, but also the societies in which citizens enjoy the widest realm of freedom.

### NO

***The disharmony of democracy.*** Far from being a guarantee of stability, democracy is biased in favour of conflict and disharmony. This is because democracy sets up an ongoing electoral battle between opponents who are encouraged to condemn one another, exaggerating their faults and denying their achievements. Democratic politics is often, as a result, noisy and unedifying. While the disharmony of democracy is unlikely to threaten structural breakdown in mature and relatively prosperous societies, democracy in the developing world may make things worse rather than better (Hawksley, 2009). 'Democratization' may therefore deepen tribal, regional or ethnic tensions, and strengthen the tendency towards charismatic leadership, thereby breeding authoritarianism.

***Democracy as westernization.*** Rather than being universally applicable, democracy is based on values and assumptions that betray the cultural biases of its western heartland. Democracy is rooted in ideas such as individualism, notably through the principle of equal citizenship and 'one person, one vote', and notions of pluralism and competition that are intrinsically liberal in character. The dominant form of democracy is therefore western-style democracy, and its spread, sometimes imposed and always encouraged, to the non-western world can therefore be viewed as a form of cultural imperialism.

***Good government not popular government.*** Democratic solutions to problems are often neither wise nor sensible. The problem with democracy is that the dictates of wisdom and experience tend to be ignored because the views of the well-educated minority are swamped by those of the less well-educated majority. Being committed to the principle of political equality, democracy cannot cope with the fact that the majority is not always right. This is a particular concern for economic policy, where options, such as raising taxes or cutting government spending, which may best promote long-term economic development, may be ruled out simply because they are unpopular.



## CONCEPT

**Athenian democracy**

Athenian democracy is characterized by the high level of citizen involvement in the affairs of the city-state. Major decisions were made by the Assembly, or *Ecclesia*, to which all citizens belonged. When full-time public officials were needed, they were chosen on a basis of lot or rota to ensure that they constituted a microcosm of the larger citizenry. A Council, consisting of 500 citizens, acted as the executive or steering committee of the Assembly, and a 50-strong Committee, in turn, made proposals to the Council. The President of the Committee held office for only a single day, and no Athenian could hold this honour more than once in his lifetime.

whatsoever. Indeed, Athenian citizens were able to devote so much of their lives to politics only because slavery relieved them of the need to engage in arduous labour, and the confinement of women to the private realm freed men from domestic responsibilities. Nevertheless, the classical model of direct and continuous popular participation in political life has been kept alive in, for instance, the township meetings of New England in the USA, the communal assemblies that operate in the smaller Swiss cantons and in the wider use of referendums.

**Protective democracy**

When democratic ideas were revived in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, they appeared in a form that was very different from the classical democracy of Ancient Greece. In particular, democracy was seen less as a mechanism through which the public could participate in political life, and more as a device through which citizens could protect themselves from the encroachments of government, hence 'protective democracy'. This view appealed particularly to early liberal thinkers whose concern was, above all, to create the widest realm of individual liberty. The desire to protect the individual from over-mighty government was expressed in perhaps the earliest of all democratic sentiments, Aristotle's response to Plato: 'who will guard the Guardians?'

This same concern with unchecked power was taken up in the seventeenth century by John Locke (see p. 31), who argued that the right to vote was based on the existence of **natural rights** and, in particular, on the right to property. If government, through taxation, possessed the power to expropriate property, citizens were entitled to protect themselves by controlling the composition of the tax-setting body: the legislature. In other words, democracy came to mean a system of 'government by consent' operating through a representative assembly. However, Locke himself was not a democrat by modern standards, as he believed that only property owners should vote, on the basis that only they had natural rights that could be infringed by government. The more radical notion of universal suffrage was advanced from the late eighteenth century onwards by utilitarian theorists such as Jeremy Bentham and James Mill (1773–1836). The utilitarian (see p. 353) case for democracy is also based on the need to protect or advance individual interests. Bentham came to believe that, since all individuals seek pleasure and the avoidance of pain, a universal franchise (conceived in his day as manhood suffrage) was the only way of promoting 'the greatest happiness for the greatest number'.

However, to justify democracy on protective grounds is to provide only a qualified endorsement of democratic rule. In short, protective democracy is but a limited and indirect form of democracy. In practice, the consent of the governed is exercised through voting in regular and competitive elections. This thereby ensures the accountability of those who govern. Political equality is thus understood in strictly technical terms to mean equal voting rights. Moreover, this is, above all, a system of constitutional democracy that operates within a set of formal or informal rules that check the exercise of government power. If the right to vote is a means of defending individual liberty, liberty must also be guaranteed by a strictly enforced separation of powers via the creation of a separate executive, legislature and judiciary, and by the maintenance of basic rights and freedoms, such as freedom of expression, freedom of movement, and freedom

● **Natural rights:** God-given rights that are fundamental to human beings and are therefore inalienable (they cannot be taken away).



## Jeremy Bentham (1748–1832)

UK philosopher, legal reformer and founder of utilitarianism. Bentham developed a moral and philosophical system that was based on the idea that human beings are rationally self-interested creatures or utility maximizers, which he believed provided a scientific basis for legal and political reforms. Using the 'greatest happiness' principle, his followers, the Philosophic Radicals, were responsible for many of the reforms in social administration, law, government and economics in the UK in the nineteenth century. A supporter of *laissez-faire* economics, in later life Bentham also became a firm advocate of political democracy. His utilitarian creed was developed in *Fragments on Government* ([1776] 1948), and more fully in *Principles of Morals and Legislation* (1789).

from arbitrary arrest. Ultimately, protective democracy aims to give citizens the widest possible scope to live their lives as they choose. It is therefore compatible with *laissez-faire* capitalism (see p. 132) and the belief that individuals should be entirely responsible for their economic and social circumstances. Protective democracy has therefore particularly appealed to classical liberals and, in modern politics, to supporters of the New Right.

### Developmental democracy

Although early democratic theory focused on the need to protect individual rights and interests, it soon developed an alternative focus: a concern with the development of the human individual and the community. This gave rise to quite new models of democratic rule that can broadly be referred to as systems of developmental democracy. The most novel, and radical, such model was developed by Jean-Jacques Rousseau. In many respects, Rousseau's ideas mark a departure from the dominant, liberal conception of democracy, and they came to have an impact on the Marxist and anarchist traditions as well as, later, on the New Left. For Rousseau, democracy was ultimately a means through which human beings could achieve freedom (see p. 339) or autonomy, in the sense of 'obedience to a law one prescribes to oneself'. In other words, citizens are 'free' only when they participate directly and continuously in shaping the life of their community. This is an idea that moves well beyond the conventional notion of electoral democracy and offers support for the more radical ideal of direct democracy. Indeed, Rousseau was a strenuous critic of the practice of elections used in England, arguing in *The Social Contract* ([1762] 1913) as follows:

The English people believes itself to be free, it is gravely mistaken; it is only free when it elects its member of parliament; as soon as they are elected, the people are enslaved; it is nothing. In the brief moment of its freedom, the English people makes such use of its freedom that it deserves to lose it.

● **General will:** The genuine interests of a collective body, equivalent to the common good; the will of all, provided each person acts selflessly.

However, what gives Rousseau's model its novel character is his insistence that freedom ultimately means obedience to the **general will**. Rousseau believed the





## Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712–78)

Geneva-born French moral and political philosopher, perhaps the principal intellectual influence upon the French Revolution. Rousseau was entirely self-taught. He moved to Paris in 1742, and became an intimate of leading members of the French Enlightenment, especially Diderot. His writings, ranging over education, the arts, science, literature and philosophy, reflect a deep belief in the goodness of 'natural man' and the corruption of 'social man'. Rousseau's political teaching, summarized in *Émile* (1762) and developed in *The Social Contract* ([1762] 1913), advocates a radical form of democracy that has influenced liberal, socialist, anarchist and, some would argue, fascist thought. His autobiography, *Confessions* (1770), examines his life with remarkable candour and demonstrates a willingness to expose weaknesses.

general will to be the 'true' will of each citizen, in contrast to his or her 'private' or selfish will. By obeying the general will, citizens are therefore doing nothing more than obeying their own 'true' natures, the general will being what individuals would will if they were to act selflessly. In Rousseau's view, such a system of radical developmental democracy required not merely political equality, but a relatively high level of economic equality. Although not a supporter of common ownership, Rousseau nevertheless proposed that 'no citizen shall be rich enough to buy another and none so poor as to be forced to sell himself' ([1762] 1913).

Rousseau's theories have helped to shape the modern idea of participatory democracy taken up by New Left thinkers in the 1960s and 1970s. This extols the virtues of a 'participatory society', a society in which each and every citizen is able to achieve self-development by participating in the decisions that shape his or her life. This goal can be achieved only through the promotion of openness, **accountability** and decentralization within all the key institutions of society: within the family, the workplace and the local community just as much as within 'political' institutions such as parties, interest groups and legislative bodies. At the heart of this model is the notion of 'grass-roots democracy'; that is, the belief that political power should be exercised at the lowest possible level. Nevertheless, Rousseau's own theories have been criticized for distinguishing between citizens' 'true' wills and their 'felt' or subjective wills. The danger of this is that, if the general will cannot be established by simply asking citizens what they want (because they may be blinded by selfishness), there is scope for the general will to be defined from above, perhaps by a dictator claiming to act in the 'true' interests of society. Rousseau is therefore sometimes seen as the architect of so-called 'totalitarian democracy' (Talmon, 1952).

However, a more modest form of developmental democracy has also been advanced that is compatible with the liberal model of representative government. This view of developmental democracy is rooted in the writings of John Stuart Mill (see p. 198). For Mill, the central virtue of democracy was that it promotes the 'highest and harmonious' development of individual capacities. By participating in political life, citizens enhance their understanding, strengthen their sensibilities and achieve a higher level of personal development. In short, democracy is essentially an educational experience. As a result, Mill proposed the

### ● **Accountability:**

Answerability; a duty to explain one's conduct and be open to criticism by others.

**CONCEPT****Parliamentary democracy**

Parliamentary democracy is a form of democratic rule that operates through a popularly elected deliberative assembly, which mediates between government and the people. Democracy, in this sense, means responsible and representative government.

Parliamentary democracy thus balances popular participation against elite rule: government is accountable not directly to the public but to the public's elected representatives. The alleged strength of such a system is that representatives are, by virtue of their education and experience, better able than citizens themselves to define their best interests.

broadening of popular participation, arguing that the franchise should be extended to all but those who are illiterate. In the process, he suggested (radically, for his time) that suffrage should also be extended to women. In addition, he advocated strong and independent local authorities in the belief that this would broaden the opportunities available for holding public office.

On the other hand, Mill, in common with all liberals, was also aware of the dangers of democracy. Indeed, Mill's views are out of step with mainstream liberal thought in that he rejected the idea of formal political equality. Following Plato, Mill did not believe that all political opinions are of equal value. Consequently, he proposed a system of plural voting: unskilled workers would have a single vote, skilled workers two votes, and graduates and members of the learned professions five or six votes. However, his principal reservation about democracy was derived from the more typical liberal fear of what Alexis de Tocqueville (see p. 245) famously described as 'the tyranny of the majority'. In other words, democracy always contains the threat that individual liberty and minority rights may be crushed in the name of the people. Mill's particular concern was that democracy would undermine debate, criticism and intellectual life in general by encouraging people to accept the will of the majority, thereby promoting uniformity and dull conformism. Quite simply, the majority is not always right; wisdom cannot be determined by the simple device of a show of hands. Mill's ideas therefore support the idea of **deliberative democracy** or parliamentary democracy.

**People's democracy**

The term 'people's democracy' is derived from the orthodox communist regimes that sprang up on the Soviet model in the aftermath of World War II. It is here used, however, to refer broadly to the various democratic models that the Marxist tradition has generated. Although they differ, these models offer a clear contrast to the more familiar liberal democratic ones. Marxists have tended to be dismissive of liberal or parliamentary democracy, seeing it as a form of 'bourgeois' or 'capitalist' democracy. Nevertheless, Marxists were drawn to the concept or ideal of democracy because of its clear egalitarian implications. The term was used, in particular, to designate the goal of social equality brought about through the common ownership of wealth ('social democracy' in its original sense), in contrast to 'political' democracy, which establishes only a facade of equality.

Marx believed that the overthrow of capitalism would be a trigger that would allow genuine democracy to flourish. In his view, a fully communist society would come into existence only after a transitional period characterized by 'the revolutionary dictatorship of the proletariat'. In effect, a system of 'bourgeois' democracy would be replaced by a very different system of 'proletarian' democracy. Although Marx refused to describe in detail how this transitional society would be organized, its broad shape can be discerned from his admiration for the Paris Commune of 1871, which was a short-lived experiment in what approximated to direct democracy.

The form of democracy that was developed in twentieth-century communist states, however, owed more to the ideas of V. I. Lenin (see p. 99) than it did to those of Marx. Although Lenin's 1917 slogan 'All power to the Soviets' (the workers' and soldiers' and sailors' councils) had kept alive the notion of

● **Deliberative democracy:** A form of democracy that emphasizes the need for discourse and debate to help to define the public interest.



## Vladimir Ilyich Lenin (1870–1924)

Russian Marxist theorist and active revolutionary. As leader of the Bolsheviks, Lenin masterminded the 1917 Russian Bolshevik Revolution, and became the first leader of the USSR. His contributions to Marxism were his theory of the revolutionary (or vanguard) party, outlined in *What is to be Done?* ([1902] 1968); his analysis of colonialism as an economic phenomenon, described in *Imperialism, the Highest Stage of Capitalism* ([1916] 1970); and his firm commitment to the 'insurrectionary road to socialism', developed in *State and Revolution* (1917). Lenin's reputation is inevitably tied up with the subsequent course of Soviet history; he is seen by some as the father of Stalinist oppression, but by others as a critic of bureaucracy and a defender of debate and argument.

commune democracy, in reality power in Soviet Russia quickly fell into the hands of the Bolshevik party (soon renamed the 'Communist Party'). In Lenin's view, this party was nothing less than 'the vanguard of the working class'. Armed with Marxism, the party claimed that it was able to perceive the genuine interests of the proletariat and thus guide it to the realization of its revolutionary potential. This theory became the cornerstone of '**Leninist democracy**', and it was accepted by all other orthodox communist regimes as one of the core features of Marxism–Leninism. However, the weakness of this model is that Lenin failed to build into it any mechanism for checking the power of the Communist Party (and, particularly, its leaders), and for ensuring that it remained sensitive and accountable to the proletarian class. To rephrase Aristotle, 'who will guard the Communist Party?'

## Democracy in practice: rival views

Although there continues to be controversy about which is the most desirable form of democracy, much of contemporary debate revolves around how democracy works in practice and what 'democratization' (see p. 272) implies. This reflects the fact that there is broad, even worldwide, acceptance of a particular model of democracy, generally termed liberal democracy. Despite the existence of competing tendencies within this broad category, certain central features are clear:

- Liberal democracy is an indirect and representative form of democracy, in that political office is gained through success in regular elections that are conducted on the basis of formal political equality.
- It is based on competition and electoral choice. These are achieved through political pluralism, tolerance of a wide range of contending beliefs, and the existence of conflicting social philosophies and rival political movements and parties.
- It is characterized by a clear distinction between the state and civil society. This is maintained through the existence of autonomous groups and interests, and the market or capitalist organization of economic life.

● **Leninist democracy:** A form of democracy in which the communist party, organized on the basis of 'democratic centralism', articulates the interest of the proletariat.

## CONCEPT

**Pluralism**

In its broad sense, pluralism is a belief in, or a commitment to, diversity or multiplicity (the existence of many things). As a descriptive term, pluralism may be used to denote the existence of party competition (political pluralism), a multiplicity of moral values (ethical pluralism), or a variety of cultural norms (cultural pluralism). As a normative term, it suggests that diversity is healthy and desirable, usually because it safeguards individual liberty and promotes debate, argument and understanding. More narrowly, pluralism is a theory of the distribution of political power. It holds that power is widely and evenly dispersed in society.

- It provides protection for minorities and individuals, particularly through the allocation of basic rights that safeguard them from the will of the majority.

Nevertheless, there is a considerable amount of disagreement about the meaning and significance of liberal democracy. Does it, for instance, ensure a genuine and healthy dispersal of political power? Do democratic processes genuinely promote long-term benefits, or are they self-defeating? Can political equality coexist with economic inequality? In short, this form of democracy is interpreted in different ways by different theorists. The most important of these interpretations are advanced by:

- pluralism
- elitism
- corporatism
- the New Right
- Marxism.

**Pluralist view**

Pluralist ideas can be traced back to early liberal political philosophy, and notably to the ideas of Locke and Montesquieu (see p. 312). Their first systematic development, however, is found in the contributions of James Madison (see p. 319) to *The Federalist Papers* (Hamilton *et al.*, [1787–89] 1961). In considering the transformation of America from a loose confederation of states into the federal USA, Madison's particular fear was the 'problem of factions'. In common with most liberals, Madison argued that unchecked democratic rule might simply lead to majoritarianism, to the crushing of individual rights and to the expropriation of property in the name of the people. What made Madison's work notable, however, was his stress upon the multiplicity of interests and groups in society, and his insistence that, unless each such group possessed a political voice, stability and order would be impossible. He therefore proposed a system of divided government based on the separation of powers (see p. 313), bicameralism and federalism (see p. 382), that offered a variety of access points to competing groups and interests. The resulting system of rule by multiple minorities is often referred to as '**Madisonian democracy**'. Insofar as it recognizes both the existence of diversity or multiplicity in society, and the fact that such multiplicity is desirable, Madison's model is the first developed statement of pluralist principles.

The most influential modern exponent of pluralist theory is Robert Dahl (see p. 250). As described in *Who Governs? Democracy and Power in an American City* (1961), Dahl carried out an empirical study of the distribution of power in New Haven, Connecticut, USA. He concluded that, although the politically privileged and economically powerful exerted greater power than ordinary citizens, no ruling or permanent elite was able to dominate the political process. His conclusion was that 'New Haven is an example of a democratic system, warts and all'. Dahl recognized that modern democratic systems differ markedly from the classical democracies of Ancient Greece. With Charles Lindblom, he coined the term 'polyarchy' (see p. 273) to mean rule by the many, as distinct from rule by all citizens. The key feature of such a system of pluralist democracy (see p. 101) is that

● **Madisonian democracy:** A form of democracy that incorporates constitutional protections for minorities that enable them to resist majority rule.

**CONCEPT****Pluralist democracy**

The term pluralist democracy is sometimes used interchangeably with liberal democracy. More specifically, it refers to a form of democracy that operates through the capacity of organized groups and interests to articulate popular demands and ensure responsive government. The conditions for a healthy pluralist democracy include: (1) a wide dispersal of political power amongst competing groups, specifically the absence of elite groups; (2) a high degree of internal responsiveness, group leaders being accountable to members; and (3) a neutral governmental machine that is sufficiently fragmented to offer groups a number of points of access.

competition between parties at election time, and the ability of interest or pressure groups to articulate their views freely, establishes a reliable link between the government and the governed, and creates a channel of communication between the two. While this may fall a long way short of the ideal of popular self-government, its supporters nevertheless argue that it ensures a sufficient level of accountability and popular responsiveness for it to be regarded as democratic.

However, the relationship between pluralism and democracy may not be a secure one. For instance, one of the purposes of the Madisonian system was, arguably, to constrain democracy in the hope of safeguarding property. In other words, the system of rule by multiple minorities may simply have been a device to prevent the majority (the propertyless masses) from exercising political power. A further problem is the danger of what has been called 'pluralist stagnation'. This occurs as organized groups and economic interests become so powerful that they create a log jam, resulting in the problem of government 'overload'. In such circumstances, a pluralist system may simply become ungovernable. Finally, there is the problem identified by Dahl in later works, such as *A Preface to Economic Democracy* (1985); notably, that the unequal ownership of economic resources tends to concentrate political power in the hands of the few, and deprive the many of it. This line of argument runs parallel to the conventional Marxist critique of pluralist democracy, and has given rise to neopluralism (see p. 63).

**Elitist view**

Elitism (see p. 102) developed as a critique of egalitarian ideas such as democracy and socialism. It draws attention to the fact of elite rule, either as an inevitable and desirable feature of social existence, or as a remediable and regrettable one. Classical elitists, such as Vilfredo Pareto (1848–1923), Gaetano Mosca (1857–1941) and Robert Michels (1876–1936), tended to take the former position. For them, democracy was no more than a foolish delusion, because political power is always exercised by a privileged minority: an elite. For example, 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 conforms 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 achieved through coercion and violence). Michels developed an alternative line of argument based on the tendency within all organizations, however democratic they might appear, for power to be concentrated in the hands of a small group of dominant figures who can organize and make decisions. He termed this 'the iron law of oligarchy' (see p. 232).

Whereas classical elitists strove to prove that democracy was always a myth, modern elitist theorists have tended to highlight how far particular political systems fall short of the democratic ideal. An example of this can be found in C. Wright Mills' influential account of the power structure in the USA. In contrast to the pluralist notion of a wide and broadly democratic dispersal of power, Mills, in *The Power Elite* (1956), offered a portrait of a USA dominated by a nexus of leading groups. In his view, this 'power elite' comprised a triumvirate of



**CONCEPT****Elitism**

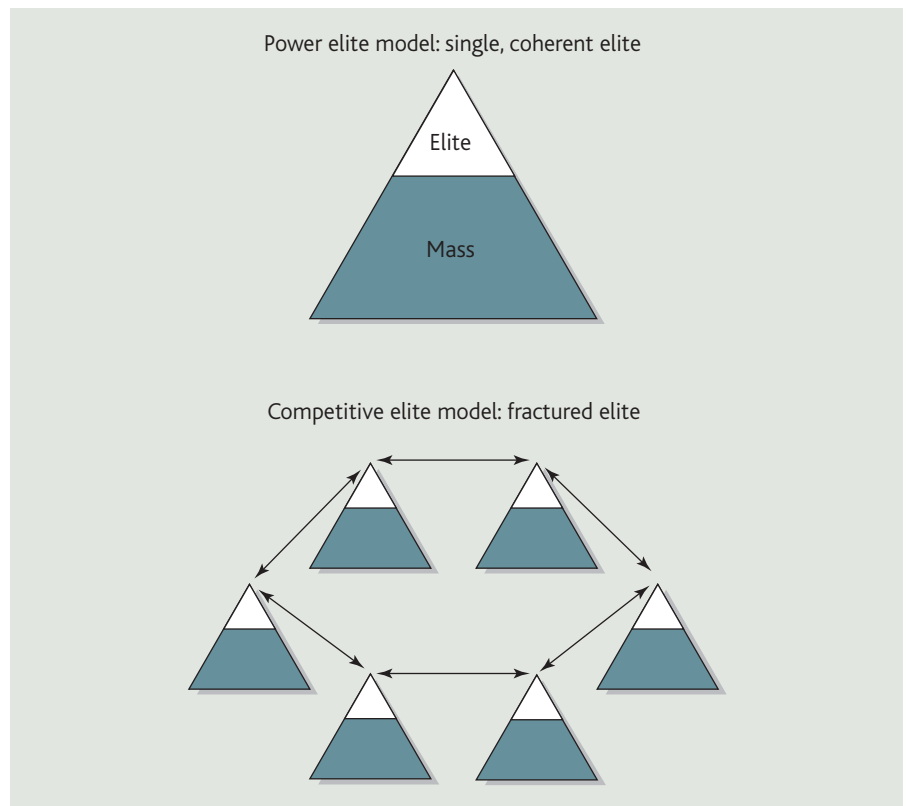
Elite originally meant, and can still mean, 'the highest', 'the best', or 'the excellent'. Used in an empirical sense, it refers to a minority in whose hands power, wealth or privilege is concentrated. Elitism is a belief in, or practice of, rule by an elite or minority.

*Normative* elitism suggests that political power should be vested in the hands of a wise or enlightened minority. *Classical* elitism claimed to be empirical (although normative beliefs often intruded), and saw elite rule as an unchangeable fact of social existence. *Modern* elitism is also empirical, but it is more critical and discriminating about the causes of elite rule.

big business (particularly defence-related industries), the US military and political cliques surrounding the President. Drawing on a combination of economic power, bureaucratic control and access to the highest levels of the executive branch of government, the power elite is able to shape key 'history-making' decisions, especially in the fields of defence and foreign policy, as well as strategic economic policy. The power-elite model suggests that liberal democracy in the USA is largely a sham. Elitists have, moreover, argued that empirical studies have supported pluralist conclusions only because Dahl and others have ignored the importance of non-decision-making as a manifestation of power (see p. 9).

Certain elite theorists have nevertheless argued that a measure of democratic accountability is consistent with elite rule. Whereas the power-elite model portrays the elite as a cohesive body, bound together by common or overlapping interests, competitive elitism (sometimes called 'democratic elitism') highlights the significance of elite rivalry (see Figure 4.1). In other words, the elite, consisting of the leading figures from a number of competing groups and interests, is fractured. This view is often associated with Joseph Schumpeter's (see p. 141) 'realistic' model of democracy outlined in *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy* (1942):

The democratic method is 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.



**Figure 4.1** Elite models

The electorate can decide which elite rules, but cannot change the fact that power is always exercised by an elite. This model of competitive elitism was developed by Anthony Downs (1957) into the 'economic theory of democracy'. In effect, electoral competition creates a political market in which politicians act as entrepreneurs bent upon achieving government power, and individual voters behave like consumers, voting for the party with the policies that most closely reflect their own preferences. Downs argued that a system of open and competitive elections guarantees democratic rule because it places government in the hands of the party whose philosophy, values and policies correspond most closely to the preferences of the largest group of voters. As Schumpeter put it, 'democracy is the rule of the politician'. As a model of democratic politics, competitive elitism at least has the virtue that it corresponds closely to the workings of the liberal-democratic political system. Indeed, it emerged more as an attempt to *describe* how the democratic process works than through a desire to *prescribe* certain values and principles – political equality, popular participation, freedom or whatever.

### Corporatist view

The origins of corporatism (see p. 251) date back to the attempt in Fascist Italy to construct a so-called 'corporate state' by integrating both managers and workers into the processes of government. Corporatist theorists, however, have drawn attention to parallel developments in the world's major industrialized states. In the form of **neocorporatism**, or liberal corporatism, this gave rise to the spectre of 'tripartite government', in which government is conducted through organizations that allow state officials, employers' groups and unions to deal directly with one another. To a large extent, this tendency to integrate economic interests into government (which was common in the post-1945 period, and particularly prominent in, for example, Sweden, Norway, the Netherlands and Austria) was a consequence of the drift towards economic management and intervention. As government sought to manage economic life and deliver an increasingly broad range of public services, it recognized the need for institutional arrangements designed to secure the cooperation and support of major economic interests. Where attempts have been made to shift economic policy away from state intervention and towards the free market (as in the UK since 1979), the impact of corporatism has markedly diminished.

The significance of corporatism in terms of democratic processes is clearly considerable. There are those who, like the British guild socialists, argue that corporatism makes possible a form of functional representation, in that individuals' views and interests are articulated more by the groups to which they belong than through the mechanism of competitive elections. What is called 'corporate pluralism' thus portrays tripartism as a mechanism through which the major groups and interests in society compete to shape government policy. Some commentators, however, see corporatism as a threat to democracy. In the first place, corporatism only advantages groups that are accorded privileged access to government. 'Insider' groups therefore possess a political voice, while 'outsider' groups are denied one. Second, corporatism can work to the benefit of the state, rather than major economic interests, in that the **peak associations** that the government chooses to deal with can be used to exert discipline over their

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● **Neocorporatism:** A tendency found in western polyarchies for organized interests to be granted privileged and institutionalized access to policy formulation.

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● **Peak association:** A group recognized by government as representing the general or collective interests of businesses or workers.

members and to filter out radical demands. Finally, corporatism threatens to subvert the processes of electoral or parliamentary democracy. Policy is made through negotiations between government officials and leaders of powerful economic interests, rather than through the deliberations of a representative assembly. Interest-group leaders may thus exert considerable political power, even though they are in no way publicly accountable and their influence is not subject to public scrutiny.

### New Right view

The emergence of the New Right from the 1970s onwards has generated a very particular critique of democratic politics. This has focused on the danger of what has been called 'democratic overload': the paralysis of a political system that is subject to unrestrained group and electoral pressures. One aspect of this critique has highlighted the unsavoury face of corporatism. New Right theorists are keen advocates of the free market, believing that economies work best when left alone by government. The danger of corporatism from this perspective is that it empowers sectional groups and economic interests, enabling them to make demands on government for increased pay, public investment, subsidies, state protection and so on. In effect, corporatism allows well-placed interest groups to dominate and dictate to government. The result of this, according to the New Right, is an irresistible drift towards state intervention and economic stagnation (Olson, 1982).

Government 'overload' can also be seen to be a consequence of the electoral process. This was what Brittan (1977) referred to as 'the economic consequences of democracy'. In this view, electoral politics amounts to a self-defeating process in which politicians are encouraged to compete for power by offering increasingly unrealistic promises to the electorate. Both voters and politicians are held to blame here. Voters are attracted by promises of higher public spending because they calculate that the cost (an increased tax burden) will be spread over the entire population. Politicians, consumed by the desire to win power, attempt to outbid one another by making ever more generous spending pledges to the electorate. According to Brittan, the economic consequences of unrestrained democracy are high levels of inflation fuelled by public borrowing, and a tax burden that destroys enterprise and undermines growth. As characterized by Marquand (1988), the New Right view is that 'democracy is to adults what chocolate is to children: endlessly tempting; harmless in small doses; sickening in excess'. New Right theorists therefore tend to see democracy in strictly protective terms, regarding it essentially as a defence against arbitrary government, rather than a means of bringing about social transformation.

### Marxist view

As pointed out in relation to people's democracy, the Marxist view of democratic politics is rooted in class analysis. In this view, political power cannot be understood narrowly in terms of electoral rights, or in terms of the ability of groups to articulate their interests by lobbying and campaigning. Rather, at a deeper level, political power reflects the distribution of economic power and, in particular, the unequal ownership of productive wealth. The Marxist critique of liberal democ-

racy thus focuses upon the inherent tension between democracy and capitalism; that is, between the political equality that liberal democracy proclaims and the social inequality that a capitalist economy inevitably generates. Liberal democracies are thus seen as ‘capitalist’ or ‘bourgeois’ democracies that are manipulated and controlled by the entrenched power of a **ruling class**.

Marxism thus offers a distinctive critique of pluralist democracy. Power cannot be widely and evenly dispersed in society as long as class power is unequally distributed. Indeed, in many respects, the Marxist view parallels the elitist critique of pluralism. Both views suggest that power is ultimately concentrated in the hands of the few, the main difference being whether the few is conceived of as a ‘power elite’ or as a ‘ruling class’. However, significant differences can also be identified. For instance, whereas elitists suggest that power derive from a variety of sources (education, social status, bureaucratic position, political connections, wealth and so on), Marxists emphasize the decisive importance of economic factors; notably, the ownership and control of the means of production. Modern Marxists, however, have been less willing to dismiss electoral democracy as nothing more than a sham. **Eurocommunists**, for example, abandoned the idea of revolution, embracing instead the notion of a peaceful, legal and democratic ‘road to socialism’.

### Towards cosmopolitan democracy?

The idea of cosmopolitan democracy has received growing attention due to the advance of globalization and the evident ‘hollowing out’ of domestic democratic processes focused on the nation-state. If global interconnectedness means that policy-making authority has shifted from national governments to international organizations, surely democracy should be recast in line with this? However, what would cosmopolitan democracy look like, and how would it operate? Two basic models have been advanced. The first would involve the construction of a world parliament, a body whose role would be to introduce greater scrutiny and openness to the process of global decision-making by calling to account established international organizations, such as the United Nations, the World Trade Organization, the International Monetary Fund and so forth. Very few advocates of such an idea contemplate the creation of a fully-fledged world government or global state; most, instead, favour a multilevel system of post-sovereign governance in which no body or level is able to exercise final authority. Held (1995) proposed a package of measures, including the establishment of a ‘global parliament’, reformed and more accountable international organizations, and the ‘permanent shift of a growing proportion of a nation state’s coercive capacity to regional and global institutions’. Monbiot (2004), for his part, backed the creation of a popularly elected world parliament, composed of 600 representatives, each with a constituency of about 10 million people, many of which would straddle national borders.

The alternative model of cosmopolitan democracy is less ambitious and formalized, relying less on the construction of new bodies and more on the reform of existing international organizations, often linked to the strengthening of global civil society (see p. 106). This model places its faith in non-governmental organizations (NGOs) (see p. 248) to reconfigure global power by offering an alternative to top-down corporate globalization. This idea of ‘globalization from

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● **Ruling class:** A Marxist term, denoting a class that dominates other classes and society at large by virtue of its ownership of productive wealth.

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● **Eurocommunism:** A form of deradicalized communism that attempted to blend Marxism with liberal-democratic principles.

**CONCEPT****Global civil society**

Global civil society refers to a realm in which transnational non-governmental groups and associations interact. These groups are typically voluntary and non-profitmaking, setting them apart from TNCs (see p. 149). However, the term 'global civil society' is complex and contested. In its 'activist' version, transnational social movements are the key agents of global civil society, giving it an 'outsider' orientation, and a strong focus on cosmopolitan ideals. In its 'policy' version, NGOs are the key agents of global civil society, giving it an 'insider' orientation and meaning that it overlaps with global governance (see p. 432).

below' amounts to a bottom-up democratic vision of a civilizing world order. Such an approach would be effective to the extent that NGOs and transnational social movements could introduce an element of public scrutiny and accountability to the working of international bodies, conferences, summits and the like, meaning that global civil society functions as a channel of communications between the individual and global institutions.

However, the prospects for cosmopolitan democracy are far from rosy. In the first place, states, and especially major states, are likely to block any trend towards global democracy, or ensure that any 'alternative' bodies that may be created will lack credibility and remain peripheral to global decision-making. In a wider sense, the egalitarian thrust implicit in the idea of cosmopolitan democracy is simply out of step with the deep economic, political and military disparities of the existing global system. Aside from the obstacles confronting the transition to cosmopolitan democracy, critics have argued that the project itself may be profoundly misconceived. In the first place, however structured and composed, any global institution that is tasked with ensuring public accountability is doomed to failure. The inevitable 'gap' between popularly-elected global political institutions and ordinary citizens around the world would mean that any claim that these institutions are democratic would be mere pretence. Democracy, in this light, is perhaps only meaningful if it is local or national, and all international organizations, whether these are regional or global, are destined to suffer from a debilitating 'democratic deficit'. Second, the democratic credentials of NGOs and, for that matter, social movements may be entirely bogus. Large memberships, committed activists and the ability to mobilize popular protests and demonstrations undoubtedly give social movements and NGOs political influence, but they do not invest them with democratic authority. Quite simply, there is no way of testing the weight of their views against those of the population at large.