

# **Introduction** to Politics

**Democracy**

# Democracy

## Meaning and Interpretation

- Democracy refers to a government based on political equality, i.e. consent is required of all the individuals who form part of the political community. It is informed by the belief that all people are equally capable of, and have a stake in making, collective decisions that shape their lives.
- In a democracy, no one person's opinion or interest is of more value than the other, hence the principle of 'one person one vote'. It is based on the idea of the equal moral worth of all individuals and against the exclusion of anyone from the political process. Thus, it is against hierarchy or inherited privileges and discrimination.
- In a democracy it is assumed that there will be a diversity of opinions and interests on almost every matter of common concern. Indeed, this diversity is seen as its main strength and it calls for tolerance for all shades of opinion.
- A democratic society is also called an 'open society' where there is space for all voices, however unpopular or conventional they may be, to be heard. This requires a range of political freedoms like freedom of expression, association and movement among others, which are protected by the state. People must have access to information and be able to protest and freely criticize the government and others in order to make informed uncoerced choices and intervene in the decision-making process. Thus, the practice of democracy is unthinkable without rights.

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## Meaning and Interpretation

- 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?

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## Direct and Indirect Democracy

- In a *direct* democracy, there is a high degree of participation as citizens collectively decide, often through mass meetings, on almost all major issues. In effect, people rule themselves. This form of democracy is associated with the classical Athenian model. In India, the *gram sabha* is such an institution of direct democracy as are a number of devices like *referendum*, *initiative* and *recall* practised in contemporary societies.
- In contrast, in an *indirect* or *representative democracy*, government functions through representatives who are chosen through popular elections. These representatives provide a link between the governments and the people and elections allow the people to control the action of the representatives and prevent abuse of power.



## Direct Democracy

- It highlights 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 they have made themselves.

## Representative Democracy

- 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 the 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.

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## Liberal Democracy

- 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.

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## Liberal Democracy

- 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.



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## Objections to Democracy

- A key objection to democracy is that it produces **incompetent and inefficient governments**. In his critique of Athenian democracy, Plato argues that governance is a matter of skill and expertise and therefore should be left to experts. **Human beings are by nature fundamentally unequal**. However, democracy presumes that every-one can handle complex matters of governance and is, therefore, based on a false understanding of human nature. Thereby, it substitutes ignorance and incompetence for excellence and expertise. Because it allows non- experts to rule, democracy is an irrational form of government.
- 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 famously described as ‘the tyranny of the majority’. Individual liberty and minority rights can thus both be crushed in the name of the people.