

UNIT IV

Democracy: Meaning and Types

Introduction

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 property-less and uneducated masses. Democracy was therefore thought to be the enemy of liberty and wisdom. While writers such as Aristotle 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.

Meaning

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. 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: 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]).

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: 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).

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 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. 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 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] 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 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 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 Eurocommunists. 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 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 and J.S. Mill. 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 over-mighty 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, 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. 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, 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 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 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], 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 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.