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# Democracy

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Democracy has emerged in the twentieth century as a valued but vague concept. Nearly all states now claim to be democratic, even though their respective political institutions vary greatly, but many are anything but democratic. The primary pragmatic requirement for any claim to be a 'democracy' is that the state confers a sense of legitimacy upon the political system. In a democracy the people as a whole, rather than any sub-group, hold the power to create a government of their choosing, which they then have an obligation to obey.

## Definitions of democracy

In practice, definitions of democracy vary according to the political inclinations of the commentator. Communist theorist and activist, Rosa Luxemburg, contended that democracy is ruling the people in the interests of the people. In this tradition, Fidel Castro has maintained extensive health and social care for all Cubans since his seizure of power in 1959, despite the absence of democratic elections. Yet both political theory and history show us that the essence of democracy commands little consensus and that it can take various forms.

## Representative democracy

Under representative democracy, a state is typically divided into geographical constituencies, in which the citizens elect a representative to the legislative assembly. The election of representatives in *free and fair elections* is the fundamental requirement of a 'flourishing democracy' (Kennedy 1993, p. 251). The electorate can be represented by officials in two ways. The first consists of constituents, interest groups and pressure groups lobbying the elected candidate on how to vote on each issue. The second gives representatives a mandate to cast their votes as they see fit, since they were elected for their ideas and electoral platforms.

In practice, most representatives are motivated by both of these models, but, most importantly, by the governing ideology of their particular political party. Considerations that constituents would wish to see reflected are often overridden by those of the party since candidates usually need the backing of a political party to stand a chance of being elected at all. Rousseau attacked representative democracy as inad-

equated, stating that English citizens are 'free only during the elections of Members of Parliament; as soon as the members are elected, the people is enslaved' (1968, p. 141).

## Liberal democracy

Liberal democracy is a 'representative' system, the 'liberal' aspect reflecting the importance of property and individual rights. As liberals since John Stuart Mill have stressed, there exists the possibility that a majority may support an authoritarian party. Under this '*tyranny of the majority*' individual rights may be violated by the state, as happened after 43.9% of the German electorate voted for National Socialism in March 1933.

The reluctance of liberals to allow the state such extensive powers produced the compromise of 'liberal democracy'. The electorate is allowed to elect representatives for the legislature, whilst such mechanisms as the separation of powers and a Bill of Rights limit the legislature's authoritarian potential.

One critic claims (Phillips 1991, p. 15) that this makes a mockery of democracy; that 'politics becomes less a matter of active citizenship and more just a question of following rules'. Furthermore, liberal democracy is seen as being inherently patriarchal: first, because it represents political institutions consisting mainly of men; and, second, Phillips argues, because liberal democracy, concentrating on individual rights, is too restrictive in what it considers to be of public concern and leaves many arbitrary power relations in society unchallenged. Issues of public concern, she contends, need to be broadened for a properly democratic society to tackle social inequalities and give more protection to women in the workplace and in marriage.

## Social democracy

Social democrats, unlike their liberal counterparts, support mechanisms operated by the state to enhance *social and economic equality*, such as a more comprehensive welfare state and protection of workers' rights. The German constitution, for example, indicates that its citizens have the right to be protected by a welfare state.

Social democrats emphasise that an unrestrained





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free-market economy produces inequalities which enable the wealthy to articulate their political interests at the expense of those of the poor. Hoover and Plant (1989, p. 259) contend that 'democracy has been undermined by the libertarian reliance on the market'. The debate revolves around the conflicting values of the rights of individuals to amass property and those of the community to redistribute wealth as it sees fit.

### Direct democracy

Libertarian democrats contend that direct democracy is the only genuine form of democracy since it enables all concerned citizens to participate equally in a council empowered to form and implement all political decisions and laws. Representative democracy is criticised for transferring power from citizens to officials representing vested economic and political interests. Highlighting the need for direct democracy, Chomsky contends that 'as long as some specialised class is in a position of authority, it is going to set policy in the special interest that it serves' (Achbar/National Film Board of Canada 1992).

However, direct democracy is often dismissed as 'utopian' by its critics. For direct democracy to work, the political community must be small enough to enable all its citizens to meet together to discuss issues and sufficiently isolated to enable its members to have complete control over all aspects of communal life.

### Participatory democracy

Participatory democracy is a hybrid model which combines the pragmatic advantages of representative democracy with the theoretical attractions of direct democracy. It allows all citizens a greater say in policy issues through such mechanisms as public enquiries, advisory referenda and consultative bodies. Macpherson (1977, p.94) states that 'a more equitable and humane society requires a more participatory political system'. He goes on to suggest the use of modern telecommunications to give citizens the

collective opportunity to influence political decisions through electronic referenda.

### Conclusion

The liberal claim that every community has the right to choose its own form of government is now an accepted norm of the international community, with rogue states sometimes facing sanctions — as in Nigeria's suspension from the Commonwealth in 1995. Heated debate continues on the specific form that democracy should take.

The application of multi-party representative democracies to ethnically divided states is fiercely criticised by those favouring a more participatory system, where a consensus would help to reconcile, rather than reinforce, deep-seated disputes. It is likely that these debates will continue and intensify as we approach the next century.

### References and further reading

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