
UNIT 8 THE IDEA OF DEMOCRACY*

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8.0 OBJECTIVES

In this unit, you will explore the idea of democracy at national and international levels. After studying this unit, you should be able to:

- Explain the meaning of democracy;
- Distinguish between its minimalist and maximalist forms;
- Understand its various types; and
- Explain democracy promotion at the international level.

8.1 INTRODUCTION: MEANING OF DEMOCRACY

The concept of democracy is more than 2500 years old having first appeared in Athens in the 5th century BC. Likewise, the word democracy is of Greek origin derived from the word '*demokratia*'. It is a combination of two Greek words, '*demos*' meaning people and '*kratos*' meaning power. Hence, democracy stands for rule by the people which gives true legitimacy to the government. It is one of the most debated issues in the field of Political Science as it is a 'contested concept'. This means although there is a general agreement on the meaning of democracy, yet there are differences on how to implement it. That is why; there are different types of democracy, direct, representative, deliberative etc. There

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is a consensus on the idea that democracy means popular rule and sovereignty, but how that will be achieved varies. There are, however, some inherent contradictions in the way democracy is practiced. How to achieve people's participation, balance between liberty and equality, protection of minority rights and to avoid tyranny of majority etc are some of the questions which democracies have to grapple with. One of the central problems faced by democracies all over the world is how to balance between liberty and equality. The English liberal tradition gives more importance to liberty while the French tradition treats equality as superior to liberty. Negative liberty places more emphasis on the individual and his rights while positive liberty talks of limiting these rights to attain equality. This means that negative liberty favors a limited role for the state, while positive liberty wants state intervention to create conditions where equality could exist. The state is asked by positive liberals to rectify social and economic imbalances through legislation.

That notwithstanding, there are a number of advantages that a democracy has over other forms of governments. It prevents rule of the oppressors, fosters human development, facilitates protection of individual rights and freedoms and could even prevent wars at the international level as democracies normally do not fight against each other. In his 1861 book, *Considerations on Representative Government*, J S Mill has given three advantages of democratic decision making over non-democratic ones. First, strategically, democracy compels decision makers to take into account interests, opinions and rights of most of the people which would not be the case in an authoritarian or aristocratic form of government. Second, epistemologically, democracy brings in a number of varied views in the process which allows decision makers to pick up the best ideas. Third, democracy also helps in character building of citizens as it inculcates qualities like rationality, autonomy and independent thinking. This creates pressure of public opinion on political leaders who cannot ignore people's views in order to remain in power. In this context, Nobel laureate Amartya Sen has touched upon the relationship between democracy and famines, arguing that there have been no famines in a functioning democracy as the leaders are accountable to the people and cannot ignore their basic welfare.

Former Prime Minister of United Kingdom, Winston Churchill had reservations about democracy but he still said that it was the worst form of government *except* all those other forms that have been tried from time to time. Understood in a broader sense, democracy is not only a form of government and state, but it is also a condition of society or a way of life. A democratic society is one in which there is socio-economic equality while a democratic state is one where citizens get a chance to participate in open and fair political process. Radical democrats in the 1960s and the 1970s believed that socio-economic equality was a precondition for success of political democracy. Some frequent meanings attributed to the term democracy are as follows:

- Rule by the poor and disadvantaged
- Society based on equal opportunity and individual merit instead of hierarchy and privilege
- Welfare and redistribution to reduce social inequality
- Decision making based on majority rule

- Protection of minority rights by placing checks on majority rule
- Fulfilling public offices through competition for popular vote.

In a broader sense, a number of features can be attributed to a democracy. A written constitution, rule of law, human rights, independent media and judiciary, separation of powers between the executive, the judiciary and the legislature could be described as some of the basic features of democracy. The idea of democracy has come a long way from its initial form in Greece which was not inclusive in nature. The Greek model of democracy excluded women, slaves and immigrants making it ‘undemocratic’ in spirit. This spirit continued even in modern democracies like France, Britain and the US where some sections were not allowed to vote while the voting rights were given to wealthy men. The French Revolution of 1789 talked about liberty, equality and fraternity apart from popular sovereignty for mankind. However, women did not get the right to vote and it was only in 1944 that France started universal adult suffrage. In Britain, women got the right to vote in 1928 while in the US, they got this right in 1920. However, discrimination on the basis of color remained in the US and it was only in 1965 that the African American women and males were given the right to vote. India has been progressive in this regard compared to Western democracies as it adopted universal adult franchise from 1950 when its constitution came into force and became the world’s first democratic state to have universal adult franchise since inception. Saudi Arabia has recently allowed women to vote and in 2015, women for the first time exercised their right to vote in municipal elections.

The geographical expanse of democracies world over has been well demonstrated by Samuel P Huntington, in his 1991 book *The Third Wave: Democratization in the Late Twentieth Century*. Expressing his views on three waves of democratization, he stated that democratization can be described as the process leading to establishment of democracy. The first wave lasted between 1828 and 1926 with 33 countries having democratic governments due to the impact of French and American Revolutions. This wave was accompanied by a reverse wave between 1922 and 1942 when there were only 11 democracies in the world due to the Great Depression and rise of Communism, Fascism and Nazism. The second wave lasted between 1943 and 1962 which saw a maximum of 52 democracies all over the world following decolonization. The second reverse wave lasted between 1958 and 1975 due to disillusionment with modernization, problems in development and military coups in Latin America. The number of democracies came down to 30 countries in this period. The third wave of democratization started in 1974 with 65 democratic countries as of 1989 due to decolonization and the end of the Cold War. Huntington also mentioned that the third reverse wave had started in 1980s as Haiti, Nigeria, Suriname and Sudan fell to undemocratic forces. Political scientists have termed the fall of authoritarian governments during the ‘Arab Spring’ in 2011 in West Asia as the fourth wave of democratization.

Check Your Progress 1

Note: i) Use the space given below for your answer.

ii) See the end of the unit for tips for your answer.

- 1) What do you understand by democracy? What are the advantages of democracy over other forms of government?

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8.2 PROCEDURAL/MINIMALIST AND SUBSTANTIVE/MAXIMALIST DIMENSION

Democracy could be well understood by two different views – procedural (minimalist) and substantive (maximalist). The procedural dimension merely focuses on procedures or means in place to attain democracy. It argues that regular competitive elections on the basis of universal adult franchise and plural political participation would produce a democratically elected government. In his 1942 book, *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy*, Joseph Schumpeter has said that democracy is “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”. Huntington has also echoed similar views saying, “The central procedure of democracy is the selection of leaders through competitive elections by the people they govern.” However, people are perceived as passive beyond electoral participation in minimalist view and thus are governed by their representatives. This view does not focus on liberty and freedom as it emphasizes how to elect a democratic government. In the absence of checks and balances in the system, the elected leaders could manipulate procedures and power for their own benefit leading to concealed authoritarianism. The government could work for the elites who hold power instead of the people who should hold ultimate authority in a democratic set up. Such instances have existed in Argentina and Brazil between 1980s and 1990s. The governments in Central Asian countries too could be described as procedural democracies as the power has been concentrated in hands of a single individual although periodic elections are held from time to time. Terry Karl has pointed that minimalist view could also lead to a ‘fallacy of electoralism’, a situation where electoral process is given priority over other dimensions of democracy. Fareed Zakaria calls it ‘illiberal democracy’, a case where governments are democratically elected but ignore constitutional limits on their power and deprive their citizens of basic rights and freedoms.

Substantive democracy tries to overcome the shortcomings of procedural view arguing that social and economic differences could hamper people’s participation in the democratic process. It focuses on outcomes like social equality instead of ends in order to truly work for the governed. In a sense, it talks about ‘common good’ rather than benefit of limited individuals. The rights of marginalized sections like women and the poor are protected through redistributive justice so that conditions can be created through state intervention for their participation in political process. Various political scientists like John Locke, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Immanuel Kant and John Stuart Mill have contributed to the emergence of this view. Unlike Schumpeter who believed that conception of democracy

which aim for ambitious forms of equality are dangerous, Rousseau argued that a formal variety of democracy is equivalent to slavery and its only egalitarian democracies which have political legitimacy.

Check Your Progress 2

Note: i) Use the space given below for your answer.

ii) See the end of the unit for tips for your answer.

1) Distinguish between procedural and substantive democracy.

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8.3 TYPES OF DEMOCRACY

Broadly speaking, democracy can be classified as direct and representative depending on how the people rule. Direct democracy is based on direct and unmediated citizen participation in government rule. All adult citizens take part in decision making to ensure that all the viewpoints are discussed and best possible decisions are taken. Direct democracy wipes out the distinction between the government and the governed and the state and civil society. The ancient Greek city state model was an example of direct democracy. In contemporary times, direct democracy can be found in Swiss cantons. In the Greek model, there was physical presence of citizens in the assembly to ensure their participation. However, the Swiss model is slightly different as it depends on methods like initiative, recall and plebiscite to ensure popular participation in policy making. Initiative gives people power to propose a legislation which should be discussed by the legislature. Recall is the power in hands of people through which they can remove their policy makers if their performance is not up to the mark. In a plebiscite, an important question is put in front of citizens for their approval or disapproval. Direct democracy ensures greater legitimacy as people are more likely to follow decisions which are taken by them only. It also creates a highly informed citizenry which participates in decision making. However, there is vast difference in size (geography, population) between a city-state and a nation-state. That is why practicing direct democracy is difficult in big modern nation states. This issue was solved with the development of representative democracy, which first appeared in northern Europe in the 18th century. Representative democracy is limited and an indirect form of democracy. It is limited because popular participation in policy making is very less pertaining to voting in a few years while it is indirect as people do not exercise power directly but through their elected representatives. Presidential and parliamentary democracies are two main types of representative democracies around the world. There are more parliamentary democracies around the world than presidential democracies. Parliamentary democracies are more representative than presidential, but at the same time, they are relatively less stable.

Check Your Progress 3

Note: i) Use the space given below for your answer.

ii) See the end of the unit for tips for your answer.

1) What do you understand by representative democracy?

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8.4 THEORIES OF DEMOCRACY

8.4.1 Classical Democracy

Classical democracy is based on the polis or the city state of Ancient Greece with a particular system of rule that developed in the largest and the most powerful Greek city-state based on mass meetings. The remarkable feature of this model was that citizens were politically very active. Apart from participating in Assembly meetings, citizens also contributed to decision-making and public offices. However, it excluded women, slaves and foreigners from citizenship. It is pertinent to mention that it was only because of slaves and women that male Athenian citizens could get free time to devote to political affairs. Hence, their exclusion from citizenship was unfortunate and undemocratic. *Plato* in his book, *The Republic* criticized Athenian democracy saying that people were incapable to rule themselves wisely and they required rule by philosopher kings and guardians who are suited to rule.

8.4.2 Elitist Theory

This theory was propounded by *Vilfredo Pareto*, *G Mosca*, *Robert Michels* and *Joseph Schumpeter*. The theory was developed in the discipline of sociology but has major implications for political science as well. Michels gave his ‘iron law of oligarchy’, arguing that despite its original aim, every organization is ultimately reduced to oligarchy amounting to the rule of few. Mosca said that people can be categorized as rulers and the ruled. Most of the power, prestige and wealth are in the hands of the ruling class irrespective of the form of government. The ruled follow the elite as they do not have leadership qualities. This theory poses serious questions to democracy and suggests that in practice, democracy is not achievable as the elites would control the power, wealth and hence, decision making.

8.4.3 Pluralist Theory

Contrary to the elitist theory, pluralists believe that policy making is a decentralized process where different groups bargain for their views to be accepted. It is result of interaction between different groups unlike few elites.

Public policy is formulated by more organized and vocal groups. The main proponents of this theory include *Karl Mannheim*, *Raymond Aron*, *Robert Dahl* and *Charles Lindblom*. Dahl and Lindblom gave the concept of ‘polyarchy’ meaning rule by many instead of rule by all citizens. They concluded that although the politically privileged and economically powerful exert more influence than ordinary citizens, no elite is permanently able to dominate the political process.

8.4.4 Participatory Democracy

All democracies are participatory in the sense that they are based on popular consent which ensures their participatory nature. However, there are chances that the role of citizens could be limited to just voting in a democracy. The gap between elected representatives and the people widens in complex democracies which have variety of people divided by caste, class, religion, region etc. In contrast to elitist and pluralist theories, participatory democracy advocates active citizen participation in policy making to ensure common good is promoted while it also makes the government more accountable towards the citizens. *Jean J. Rousseau*, *J S Mill* and *C B Macpherson* supported the idea of participatory democracy. Rousseau argued for popular sovereignty as the supreme power is vested in hands of the people which is their inalienable right and the citizens should involve themselves in state affairs. Mill said that a government which promotes moral, intellectual and active qualities in its citizens is the best government.

8.4.5 Deliberative Democracy

Deliberative democracy argues that political decisions should be based on fair and reasonable deliberations among citizens. This is required to produce best decisions to achieve public good. It emphasizes on the quality of process for best outcomes. *John Rawls* and *Jurgen Habermas* have argued for a deliberative democracy. Rawls believed that reason can overcome self interest to attain a just political society. Habermas believed that fair procedures and clear communication would lead to legitimate and mutually agreed upon decisions.

8.4.6 People’s Democracy

People’s democracy refers to democratic models generated by the *Marxist* tradition. Marxists have been interested in social equality and hence, have their own idea of democracy against the Western model which they say only generates political equality. People’s democracy is established after the proletarian revolution when the proletariat starts making political decisions. This will eventually give way to Communism marked by self-regulation. While Karl Marx talked about the rule of the proletariat, Lenin changed the concept and introduced the role of the party as the vanguard of the proletariat. However, Lenin did not establish mechanisms to check the power of the party and its powerful leaders to ensure that they remained accountable to the proletariat.

8.4.7 Social Democracy

Social democracy stands for a basic change in Marxist thought, although it shares same goals with Communism. It aims to establish a socialist society, but not through revolution but through state regulation of means of production. Social

democrats do not believe in the Marxist critique of democracy, which seen as a “bourgeois” facade for class rule. Instead, social democrats see democracy as essential for achieving socialist ideals. That is why they stand for state regulation of business and industry in order to ensure welfare of citizens. This movement started with the efforts of *August Bebel* and *Wilhelm Liebknecht* who cofounded the Social Democratic Workers’ Party in 1869 in Germany.

8.4.8 Cosmopolitan Democracy

Cosmopolitan democracy is a response to economic and cultural globalization arguing that democracy should respond to challenges beyond borders since states are interdependent on each other. *Immanuel Kant* and *David Held* the one of the main proponents of cosmopolitan democracy. They argue that democracy should extend to global sphere and there should be democratization of international organizations like the UN which are dominated by the West. Voices of marginalized countries should be heard as well and less developed and rising powers should have representations in global governance. The idea of cosmopolitan citizenship goes beyond traditional citizenship of a state arguing for global citizenship and that is why, there is a rise of movements which are global in nature due to similarity of interests among states. Women’s movement and environmental movements are the prime examples as their repercussions are being felt all over the world.

8.4.9 E-Democracy

This is a relatively new concept but is based on the works done by earlier theorists. E-democracy or electronic democracy is the use of information and technology to enhance or even replace representative democracy. Common problems in all democracies – issues of scale, lack of time, decline of community values, and lack of opportunities for policy deliberation could be dealt with digital communication. Supporters of e-democracy have built on the ideas of participatory democracy to enhance active citizen participation in policy making.

Check Your Progress 4

Note: i) Use the space given below for your answer.

ii) See the end of the unit for tips for your answer.

1) What are the drawbacks of people’s democracy?

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2) What do you understand by cosmopolitan citizenship?

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8.5 FOREIGN POLICY DIMENSION: DEMOCRACY PROMOTION

Various countries and international organizations assist other countries in promotion of democracy and human rights since it is believed that democracies are less likely to fight wars among themselves and economic and social indicators are better in a democracy compared to other forms of government. This is in sync with the democratic peace theory propounded by *Immanuel Kant* and *Thomas Paine* who believed constitutional republics are less likely to wage wars against each other. Democracy has been vigorously promoted as a foreign policy tool by the US and many European countries, apart from the European Union. Former US President, Woodrow Wilson had once said that the world must be made safe for democracy and made efforts to promote democracy through bilateral relations and multilateral forums like Pan-American Liberty Pact. The ideological fight between Communism and Democracy was witnessed during the Cold War, when the US and its allies tried to check the spread of Communism and promote democratic values. The Ronald Reagan administration inserted the democracy agenda in American foreign policy saying democracy was necessary for promoting human rights. The National Endowment for Democracy was established in the 1980s while the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) was used as a tool for democracy promotion by the US post-Soviet countries and Latin America. The trend continued in the 1990s and democracy promotion was one of the three pillars of President Bill Clinton's foreign policy. President George W Bush continued this trend; however, he used military means to achieve his objective of democracy promotion, for instance in Iraq and Afghanistan. European countries also started to assist democracy promotion in the 1970s. The European Union started European Initiative for Democracy and Human Rights in the 1990s. Some other countries like Japan, India, Argentina and Brazil also promote democracy, but the degree of promotion varies vastly. International and regional organizations like the UN and African Union also promote democracy and human rights. The UN charter talks about protection of human rights while in 2006, the UN established the UN Democracy Fund to assist civil society organizations to strengthen democracy.

After the end of the Cold War, *Francis Fukuyama* in his 1992 book *The End of History and the Last Man* argued that democracy has proved a better system than the other forms of government and liberal democracy is the final form of government for all nations. However, this is easier said than done and a number of problems can be witnessed in the democracy promotion process. A number of external interventions have been justified on the grounds of democracy and

human rights promotion. The failure of democracy promotion in Iraq and Afghanistan has raised doubts whether such external interventions is justified or not. External intervention may ensure procedural democracy, but achieving substantive democracy remains difficult due to lack of real reform. That is why; external interventions mainly lead to what has been called ‘imposed democracy’ as the internal reform and modernization remains elusive in the target country. It also goes against the very spirit of democracy i.e. the right to self-determination, as it is not the citizens of the country but outsiders who decide the type of government in the target country. In the post 9/11 world, there is too much emphasis on counter-terrorism efforts which acts as an impediment to human rights of minorities and the concept of multiculturalism. There are other models of development like China which appeal to different countries wanting to contain democracy. China, despite being largest authoritarian state in the world, is set to become world’s largest economy in coming years. These shortcomings raise questions over the practice of democracy promotion in international affairs. The international community itself needs democratization as the international bodies are dominated by P-5 countries (the US, Russia, Britain, France and China) while the emerging powers like India, Japan, Germany, Brazil and South Africa do not have adequate representation in international governance.

Check Your Progress 5

Note: i) Use the space given below for your answer.

ii) See the end of the unit for tips for your answer.

1) What are the challenges before democracy promotion in international affairs?

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8.6 LET US SUM UP

Democracy has evolved as a concept over the years and has become more inclusive. It is one of the most debated themes in political science as people agree on its meaning, but do not agree on how to achieve democracy. That is why; there are several types of democracies from direct to representative ones. With changing times, there are new dimensions of democracy, like e-democracy which are coming up. The idea of democracy is challenged by the issues of immigration, terrorism and anarchic nature of international system, however, as Robert Dahl in his 1989 book, *Democracy and its Critics* has argued, democracy is superior to other systems in at least three ways. It promotes freedom, human development and it is the surest way for people to safeguard and promote goods and interests they share with others.

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8.8 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS EXERCISES

Check Your Progress 1

- 1) Your answer should include the following:
 - Greek origins of the word.
 - Difference between direct and indirect democracy.
 - Rule by the people.
 - J S Mill's views on advantages of democracy.

Check Your Progress 2

- 1) Your answer should highlight the difference between the mechanism and actual practice of democracy.

Check Your Progress 3

- 1) Your answer should highlight the rule by elected representatives.

Check Your Progress 4

- 1) Your answer should elaborate the influence of the Marxist tradition on democracy.
- 2) Your answer should highlight the influence of globalization on democracy.

Check Your Progress 5

- 1) Your answer should include the following:
 - Democratic peace theory.
 - Promotion of democracy as a foreign policy tool.
 - Mention of Francis Fukuyama's book.

