Democracy and democratisation
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Introduction

Aims

In our study of democracy and democratisation we have three main aims. These are to consider:

• how democracy is defined and understood, and how far actual systems conform to democratic principles
• the main explanations of why political systems have moved from non-democracy to democracy
• whether or not democracy is a stable political system, and whether democratic systems run any serious risk of breakdown.

Learning outcomes

By the end of this course, you should be able to discuss critically a range of issues relating to democratisation. You should be able to:

• explain how democracy actually works in real world conditions
• explain how democracy relates to the non-elective institutions of the state
• discuss different ways in which democracy can work badly
• outline the essential arguments of comparative historical sociologists of democratisation, such as Moore and Rueschemeyer
• explain how some forms of non-democracy can make the transition to democracy
• assess theories of democratic breakdown in relatively poor countries and arguments for developmental dictatorship
• discuss why democracy has survived in wealthy countries.

Syllabus

If taken as part of a BSc degree, 114 Democratic politics and the State or 130 Introduction to modern political thought must be passed before this course may be attempted.

In this course we will consider various aspects of the conditions of democracy, the processes of democratisation, and the breakdown of democratic regimes.

Conceptualising democracy. General criteria for democracy and particular forms of semi-democracy. Delegative democracy, illiberal democracy and biased states. Democratic consolidation.


Conditions of democracy and its maintenance. The concept of democratic legitimacy and the functioning of liberal democracy in advanced capitalist societies.

Transitions to democracy. Forms of non-democracy and transitional paths towards democratisation.

A range of countries will be examined in relation to these themes from Europe, Asia and Latin America.

Reading and preparation

The reading required for this course is quite wide and extensive. It goes well beyond this subject guide. The history of democratisation, democratic breakdown and democratic reconstruction extends across virtually the whole world and backwards through centuries. It may be better for you to take a limited part of the syllabus, and study that very thoroughly, than to range widely but superficially across a very broad area. The fact that you have an hour in which to answer each examination question indicates that the Examiners will be looking for a certain amount of depth from each candidate rather than a wide range of knowledge.

In your examination, you will have to answer three questions from a choice of 12. You will need to prepare more than three topics, but if you are careful to cover Chapter 1 of this subject guide - which really is essential - together with its associated reading, along with the material covered in one other chapter, that should be enough.

You also will want to consider the Sample examination paper, which is given in the Appendix to this subject guide, in order to get a sense of what is likely to come up. It may be a good idea to test yourself before the examination by writing a one-hour answer to one or more of the sample questions. It should be reasonably clear to you whether you have written a good answer or not.

Reading advice

A very large number of works cover different aspects of democracy and democratisation, and you cannot hope to read them all. Moreover, some of the works that you do need to read are long and complex. The main thing is to get a sense of the arguments presented rather than trying to follow every detail. Remind yourself when reading complex works that this subject is mainly designed to explain concepts. The amount of potentially relevant factual material is virtually infinite, but you do not need to master it all - you only need to know enough facts to be able to illustrate and understand general ideas.

Listed below are works described as Essential reading. These relate mainly to authors whose arguments are specifically discussed in the text. Other works are listed as Further reading. These should supplement the essential texts and give a fuller basis for those topics that you choose to concentrate on in detail. If you are keen to read more on your selected topics than the works listed here, use the bibliographies of the listed works to find additional material.

Essential reading

Books

Introduction


Journals


Huntington, S.P. ‘The Clash of Civilizations?’, Foreign Affairs, 593, 72(3) 1993, pp.22–49.


Detailed reading references in this subject guide refer to the editions of the set textbooks listed above. New editions of one or more of these textbooks may have been published by the time you study this course. You can use a more recent edition of any of the books; use the detailed chapter and section headings and the index to identify relevant readings. Also check the virtual learning environment (VLE) regularly for updated guidance on readings.

Further reading

Please note that as long as you read the Essential reading you are then free to read around the subject area in any text, paper or online resource. You will need to support your learning by reading as widely as possible and by thinking about how these principles apply in the real world. To help you read extensively, you have free access to the VLE and University of London Online Library (see below).

Other useful texts for this course include:

Books


Gill, G. The Dynamics of Democratisation. (Basingstoke: Macmillan Press, 2000) [ISBN 0333801970]. This is available via the publisher’s website.


Journals

Online study resources
In addition to the subject guide and the Essential reading, it is crucial that you take advantage of the study resources that are available online for this course, including the VLE and the Online Library.

You can access the VLE, the Online Library and your University of London email account via the Student Portal at: http://my.londoninternational.ac.uk
You should have received your login details for the Student Portal with your official offer, which was emailed to the address that you gave on your application form. You have probably already logged in to the Student Portal in order to register! As soon as you registered, you will automatically have been granted access to the VLE, Online Library and your fully functional University of London email account.
If you forget your login details at any point, please email uolia.support@london.ac.uk quoting your student number.

The VLE
The VLE, which complements this subject guide, has been designed to enhance your learning experience, providing additional support and a sense of community. It forms an important part of your study experience with the University of London and you should access it regularly.

The VLE provides a range of resources for EMFSS courses:
• Self-testing activities: Doing these allows you to test your own understanding of subject material.
• Electronic study materials: The printed materials that you receive from the University of London are available to download, including updated reading lists and references.
• Past examination papers and Examiners’ commentaries: These provide advice on how each examination question might best be answered.
• A student discussion forum: This is an open space for you to discuss interests and experiences, seek support from your peers, work collaboratively to solve problems and discuss subject material.
• Videos: There are recorded academic introductions to the subject, interviews and debates and, for some courses, audio-visual tutorials and conclusions.
• Recorded lectures: For some courses, where appropriate, the sessions from previous years’ Study Weekends have been recorded and made available.
• Study skills: Expert advice on preparing for examinations and developing your digital literacy skills.
• Feedback forms.
Some of these resources are available for certain courses only, but we are expanding our provision all the time and you should check the VLE regularly for updates.
Making use of the Online Library

The Online Library contains a huge array of journal articles and other resources to help you read widely and extensively.

To access the majority of resources via the Online Library you will either need to use your University of London Student Portal login details, or you will be required to register and use an Athens login: http://tinyurl.com/ollathens

The easiest way to locate relevant content and journal articles in the Online Library is to use the Summon search engine.

If you are having trouble finding an article listed in a reading list, try removing any punctuation from the title, such as single quotation marks, question marks and colons.

For further advice, please see the online help pages: www.external.shl.lon.ac.uk/summon/about.php

Structure of the subject guide

The first chapter in this subject guide seeks to explain how democracy can be defined and understood. It takes three different approaches to defining, understanding and theorising democracy and considers each in turn.

Chapter 2 looks at systems that have some of the characteristics of a democracy but which contain significant shortcomings from the viewpoint of democratic purists. These include systems defined by O’Donnell (1994) as ‘delegative democracies’ and Philip’s work on biased states (1999). It also includes systems defined by Zakaria’s (1997) work as ‘illiberal democracies’, which is mostly considered to relate to some Asian countries. Finally, the work of Linz and Stepan (1996) is discussed and, in particular, their study of democratic consolidation. The notion of consolidation allows us to evaluate the working of democracy according to different criteria.

Chapter 3 deals with non-democratic systems and transitions to democracy. It does not deal in very great detail with the internal characteristics of non-democratic systems. However, it does discuss how far the different internal characteristics of different kinds of non-democracies either facilitate or impede democratic transition.

Chapter 4 looks at general attempts to theorise the development of democracy. In doing so, it discusses the works of six major authors. The first part deals with Lipset (1983), who is a classic modernisation theorist, and Vanhanen (1997), who has written about democratisation from a similar standpoint. The second part deals with historical sociologists who look at class-based theories of political change, particularly Moore (1967) and Rueschemeyer (1992). The third part deals with a clash between Fukuyama (1992), who believes that democracy reflects a universal human aspiration, and Huntington (1996), who is much more of a cultural relativist.

Chapter 5 has to do with threats and alternatives to democracy. It considers one case of democratic breakdown (Chile in 1973) and one case in which democracy might have broken down but did not (Venezuela in the 1990s) and tries to relate these outcomes to theories. It also considers economic theories that appear to argue in favour of the greater developmental efficiency of authoritarian government. Finally, it discusses the possibility that democracy in wealthy countries may face different prospects and problems than democracy in poor countries.
At the end of each chapter, you will find a list of Learning outcomes and some Sample examination questions to help you with your revision. In the Appendix, you will find a Sample examination paper for further practice.

The subject guide offers a summary of quite a lot of reading matter, and deals with quite a number of different topics. It is an introduction to the literature and not a substitute for it. It is intended to raise questions rather than close off discussion by offering answers too readily. It also deals largely with comparative and theoretical issues, even though there are some case studies mentioned in particular chapters. If you are familiar with your own political system, or have read about the political systems and recent history of other countries, then you should consider this familiarity with particular cases to be an advantage. However, no matter how much you may know about detailed political arrangements, there is no substitute for engaging with concepts.

### Reading time

If you can find the readings without too many problems, and have no difficulty reading English, then in roughly 25 full days, you should be able to cover enough of the subject to be able to answer three examination questions. Another way of expressing this is that we normally recommend that if you study one course over an academic year, you need to do a minimum of seven hours of study per week. It will take longer if you read more slowly or with difficulty. Please note that this is the absolute minimum and we would never recommend that you only prepare for the minimum number of questions required on the examination paper! If you have already taken **82 Comparative politics** (although this is not a prerequisite), then you may need to do a little less reading.

### The examination

**Important**: the information and advice given here are based on the examination structure used at the time this guide was written. Please note that subject guides may be used for several years. Because of this we strongly advise you to always check both the current Regulations for relevant information about the examination, and the VLE where you should be advised of any forthcoming changes. You should also carefully check the rubric/instructions on the paper you actually sit and follow those instructions.

There will be a **three-hour** examination. You will be expected to answer **three** questions out of 12, allowing one hour per question, which should enable you to explore a selected set of topics with some degree of depth.

It is a good idea, when the examination actually begins, to spend a reasonable period of time making absolutely sure that you understand the questions and preparing your answers in outline. You can probably afford to spend at least one quarter of the examination period preparing. It is important not to embark on an answer until you are sure that you know what you are going to say. Since all answers are all given equal marks, it is important to spend virtually equal amounts of time on each question. You should therefore not begin an answer until you know how you intend to conclude it.

Remember, it is important to check the VLE for:

- up-to-date information on examination and assessment arrangements for this course
- where available, past examination papers and Examiners’ commentaries for the course which give advice on how each question might best be answered.
Chapter 1: Defining and conceptualising democracy

Aims of the chapter

This chapter considers three different ways of explaining how democracy works and how it differs from other forms of government:

• the first of these is that democracy has to do with voting and popular participation
• the second is that democracy has to do with free, fair and competitive elections
• the third is that democracy is essentially a system of checks and balances.

Each of these approaches is set out and then criticised. At the end of the chapter you should be able to explain, at least in outline, the advantages and disadvantages of all three approaches to democracy.

Learning outcomes

By the end of this chapter, and having completed the Essential reading and activities, you should be able to:

• list, describe and compare the main theoretical approaches to understanding democracy
• describe the main criticisms of each of these approaches
• outline and discuss the main ethical principles that lie behind democracy as a system of government
• outline the ways in which the relationship between majoritarian government and individual rights has been understood
• analyse the role of activists in democratic politics
• explain why the notion of contestation is crucial to our understanding of how democracy works
• explain why liberal democracy is inherently a rather complex system of government.

Essential reading

Further reading


Introduction

The post-1945 period has seen a very great extension of democratic government. Virtually every wealthy, industrialised country is now a democracy. A high proportion of poorer countries in Asia, Eastern Europe, Africa and Latin America are also democracies, although some clearly are not. While the downfall of Soviet Communism has not democratised the entire world, it has led to a significant increase in the number of democratic systems. By the same token, cases of democratic breakdown, though certainly not unknown, have been proportionately fewer since 1945 than they were during the 1920s and 1930s. No First World country has suffered from democratic breakdown since 1945, although democracies have been overthrown in quite sophisticated political societies, such as Greece in 1967, Chile in 1973 and Pakistan in 1999. In the first two cases, however, the military governments that replaced democracy did not prove infinitely durable, lasting for seven and 16 years, respectively. Both of these countries are now democracies once again.

This transformation has given some encouragement to those who believe that democracy is the best form of government and would like to see it extended further. It does, however, raise a number of questions. Many of these questions are discussed in subsequent chapters of this subject guide. In this chapter, we consider in general terms some of the questions that we need to ask about particular situations. These are essentially questions about democracy itself:

- On the basis of ideas about individual freedom and human rights – does democracy have to be liberal?
- How can we understand and theorise liberal democracy?
- How democratic is liberal democracy?
- How liberal is it?
- How stable is it?

How far political systems can usefully be compared just because they are democracies is also a valid question. For example:

- Do the political systems of Bolivia, the United Kingdom and Bulgaria really have much in common just because they are democracies?
- Or are they still divided by more than unites them?
There are many approaches to and theories of democracy, but the ruling ideas that lie behind them can be summarised under three headings:

1. democracy as participation
2. democracy as competition
3. democracy as balance.

**Democracy as participation**

The first major theorist of democracy in the modern world was the eighteenth-century French philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau. Rousseau is still a controversial figure in the history of political thought. How far his views were understood and how far they were misrepresented by later authors presents a complex question. However, even if his views were actually rather complex and somewhat misrepresented on some occasions, Rousseau is forever associated with the idea that a good political system allows its citizens the freedom to participate in political life. We need to consider such a viewpoint because the notion of participation must be central to our understanding of what democracy is, can be and should be. The most influential present-day exponent of the ‘participationist’ view of democracy is Robert Dahl. In his work, Dahl (1989) specifically outlines and defends participatory democracy against a number of competing arguments. Participationists seek to replicate in the modern world the virtues of the political system invented in Athens in classical times. It may be difficult to describe as a democracy a system in which slavery existed and in which women did not vote, as was the case in Athens. What many people saw as valuable about the Athenian system, however, was the assembly where all full citizens were encouraged to attend, participate and vote. Rousseau believed that people were free only when they were actually voting to choose their leaders or actively discussing proposed legislative changes.

Central to this approach is the argument in favour of participatory democracy. The essential argument is psychological. Political participation is good for us, both as individuals and as a society. It is an important dimension of human experience that we should seek to participate in choosing the rules and the people that govern us. It is also important for our society that we should exert some important influence on the decision-making process in our capacity as independent-minded individuals with personal viewpoints. Ultimately, from this standpoint, political participation is a good thing, because it is an expression of human desire and social need for civic equality.

The notion of democracy as being about participation plus equality reached its clearest and most extreme expression during the French Revolution. Fukuyama (1992), following the German philosopher Hegel, recently put forward the view that the radical democratic ideas of the French Revolution moved the argument for political equality from the religious to the secular dimension. Secular democratic ideas are more universal in their appeal than ideas about human equality in the sight of God, and their relationship to politics is direct and explicit. Although the French Revolution did not put an end to despotism, even in France it helped to create modern democratic ideology – along with the War of American Independence (the principles of which are discussed later in this chapter). Since the French Revolution, the idea of civic equality has lain at the heart of all significant demands for political change – even if some movements, like Communism, have been mistaken and subject to perversion when in power.
Civic equality means the notion that we are all capable of understanding and debating issues that concern the general good. We are not all equal at our place of work, or in what we have in the bank. However, so the argument goes, what unites us is (or should be) a common concern for the general good. This common concern needs to be given institutional expression if it is to remain vibrant. Voting and (in some countries) jury service are very important here. Unless we keep activating some formal concept of equality, society is in danger of dividing more and more into the rich and powerful on one side and everybody else on the other.

**Legitimacy and governability**

A related and more recently elaborated argument in favour of the view that the key to democratic politics is participation has to do with legitimacy and governability (Beetham, 1991). People will accept authority more easily if they see it as rightful, and this is more likely if they have an opportunity to make the rules themselves. This is necessary because, in any successful society, people have to do things that they do not much like doing, such as paying taxes, obeying the speed limit for driving cars, and so on. The state is obviously able to use force to make people comply with the law, but it is much better for all concerned if there is a general culture of agreement. This is much more likely when people are able to challenge and possibly change the law through appropriate participatory channels.

It is important to distinguish here between the conservative argument that democracy is mainly about legitimation – in other words, about giving the appearance of self-government to people so that they obey authority more willingly – and the radical argument that democracy allows popular notions of morality to discipline the rulers. Both viewpoints conclude that participation is a kind of public good.

**Critics of the participationist theory of democracy**

Participationist arguments for democracy have been criticised on three main grounds:

- apathy
- intolerance
- logistics.

**Apathy**

This reason for criticising participationist theories relates to differential knowledge. We live in a complex and sophisticated world. Decision-makers need to have a reasonable amount of knowledge so they can make good decisions. We might ask ourselves whether we want to live in a world in which a porter or a gardener has as much influence on political outcomes as a diplomat or a scientist. We would not go to a gardener to be operated on if a doctor of medicine was available instead. The objection is not really about narrowly defined expertise – because all political systems need to rely on experts to some extent – it is rather that the democratic need to express political arguments in ways that will influence ordinary people lowers the level of public debate. The current phrase used in the UK to express this is ‘dumbing down’.

It could be argued that the effect of too much popular participation is that democratic political systems pay too much attention to presidential adultery and not enough to foreign policy. This is mainly because most people can understand adultery, but only a few understand foreign policy.
If the world is indeed a dangerous place, then misplaced emphasis of this kind can make it very dangerous. In Europe in the 1930s, for example, the democracies made a very poor job of standing up to Hitler, largely because they were not sufficiently focused on the main threat.

A supporter of participation could try to counter this argument by saying that a lot of general knowledge – albeit not the most detailed and specialist knowledge – could be acquired by interested voters. This is not true of very specialised knowledge, but monarchies and aristocracies do not have this either. All kinds of government have to rely on specialist advisers, and there need be no problem with democratic states having professional bodies of experts to give detailed expression to the democratic will. General legislative bodies do not need to set interest rates or draft precise legislation. All that might be needed for effective popular participation is a willingness to understand the main issues and relate them to general principles, just as members of legislative assemblies are expected to.

However, this observation does not get rid of the problem. In order to acquire knowledge, people need to have not only the ability but also the inclination to learn. Some may find it interesting and enjoyable to do this, but ordinary people may not want to learn the details of every public policy. The only realistic incentive that a democracy can give to people to learn about policy is a chance to change it. The problem here, though, is that the nature of the democratic process ensures that non-expert individuals can have only the most minimal impact on the choice of government. If 20 million people vote at the next election, then it is statistically inconceivable that the way in which you or I might vote will make any difference to the outcome. So why bother to vote at all?

In many present-day democracies, most people do vote at major national elections when given the chance; although turnout in local elections is at very low levels and non-voting has increased alarmingly in the USA and the UK. Voting in general elections, and perhaps even at local elections, however, can be seen as a kind of civic ritual. Most people vote because they want to make some kind of statement of principle or to participate in what is seen as a social process of some significance. Media coverage of election campaigns is very high and also helps to bring out the vote. Party machines sometimes play an active part in persuading people to go to polling stations. None of this, however, explains why people should learn about policy issues in detail.

In fact the ‘why bother?’ argument becomes much stronger in the context of active or informed participation on policy issues. A voter may be a family man with a job or a working mother with a young family who does not want to spend time mastering the complex details of, for example, economic policy in order to decide how to cast a vote. A voter’s time is not free. The theoretical idea that voters may not want to involve themselves in mastering the details of complex issues is reinforced by empirical findings. Majority participation in most democracies is limited to voting in national elections; just about every other form of active participation is limited to minorities.

Critics, such as Schumpeter, say that, overall, most people either do not participate much in politics and do not know much about policy issues (by the standards of a professional politician at least) or else they do participate in politics, but still do not know much about policy issues (Schumpeter, 1978). Neither is necessarily a good idea.
Intolerance

A second argument against democracy as participation is that it gives too much attention to what majorities think and not enough to individual or minority rights. Majority opinion does not necessarily reflect respect for personal freedom or a respect for individual rights, and critics do not necessarily accept that one will lead to the other. Most of us accept that people have individual rights that should not be violated by pure majoritarianism. Minority rights can be violated by an excessive emphasis on majority rights. Majorities have discriminated against minorities on the grounds of religion or ethnic background. The rights of neighbours and foreigners should be considered – most of us understand why it would be undesirable for the popular majority of a large and powerful country to vote to go out and conquer a smaller and less powerful neighbour.

Popular participation is not the same as mob rule, but some authors have expressed the fear that one might lead to the other. There is a memorable scene in Shakespeare’s play *Julius Caesar* when the mob kills a poet called Cinna because he has the same name as a conspirator, even though he is a completely different person. In historical fact, there has been less mob rule in reality than may have appeared in theory. Usually, when crowds or popular masses have put on a show of intolerance, they were encouraged by antidemocratic or politically manipulative elites. As Rousseau would have put it, they have been misled rather than corrupted. Even so, an alliance of irresponsible or antidemocratic elites and manipulable masses can be very damaging. For this reason, most democratic systems in the First World try to protect minority and individual rights through some kind of constitutional provision. Such provisions are generally accepted to be, on the whole, beneficial for democracy. They do not prevent or limit the amount of popular participation, but they do put limits on what can be expressed or decided democratically.

Logistics

A third problem with participation, often argued reluctantly by people who generally sympathise with the idea of greater participation, is practicality. The problem here is that participation involves more than deciding and voting. It should also involve listening, deliberating and debating. It is impossibly difficult in a large community, however, for people to be able to present arguments to other people in the hope of making them listen. The media – even the correspondence columns of newspapers – have space for only a tiny amount of possible communications.

Dahl (1989) makes the point very clearly. Suppose that every adult citizen had the right to address his or her fellow citizens for two minutes only, once a year, on any subject. All citizens would have to have the corresponding duty to listen to all others: if this were too drastic a rule, then there could be at least one television channel given over purely to individual speech-making. At that rate, 30 citizens could speak every hour and 720 every day, allowing no breaks for eating, sleeping or anything else. If this went on for an entire year, then 262,800 citizens would get to speak. However, most people in the democratic world live in countries whose electorates are well over 20 million. So even if this drastic experiment in participation were possible, then only around one per cent of the population would be able to enjoy their two-minute speech, and it is reasonable to suppose that this one per cent would soon cease to command the full attention of the other 99 per cent.
Referendums as expression of the need to participate

Realistically, the existence of societies with very large numbers of people makes full-scale participatory democracy impossible, although universal suffrage is, of course, feasible. In fact, computer technology means that popular voting has never been easier to organise from a purely technical point of view and there have been arguments that referendums should be used more often to take advantage of this fact. Participatory democracy, however, was originally intended to mean more than voting. Participants - like jurors in a courtroom - should listen and perhaps ask questions: they should inform themselves of the main issues and then make a decision. To vote in semi-ignorance, with one's mind made up by a slogan or a reflex, is a much poorer form of participation.

A genuine difference in emphasis as to how much weight to give to referendums as instruments of policy exists between different democratic political systems. Switzerland uses them frequently, some states of the USA occasionally and the UK hardly at all. Since different countries have adopted different attitudes to referendums, it is evident that strong arguments are in favour of (and against) each type of system. It has been widely observed that public opinion tends to be rather conservative (in the sense of disliking change) and systems for referendums have been more effective in blocking change than promoting it. For example, the Irish people once voted by referendum to prevent any change in their divorce laws and only narrowly reversed this decision in 1995. The Swiss have remained outside the European Union and have played little part in foreign affairs: they also gave women the vote much later than most other countries. In the USA, the California electorate has at times voted to restrict public spending according to a formula (proposition 13) and to make life far tougher for undocumented migrants from abroad (proposition 187). Broadly speaking, these are 'right-wing' decisions.

Supporters of referendums see them as an important antidote to the inevitable elitism of professional politicians and organised interests. Opponents see them as giving too much power to possibly ignorant people. Opponents of referendums also fear that too much direct voting can make it easy for opponents of change to block desirable innovations. There have often been cases where legislative majorities have introduced change, even when this has been unpopular; later on, public opinion has accepted such changes. For example, when abortion was legalised in the UK in the 1960s, it was clear that Parliament was voting for a change that was not supported by most people. Today, however, only a minority want the state to prevent abortion by law. Much the same was true in the USA, although the actual decision was made by the Supreme Court rather than the legislature. In the late 1960s, conservative Americans (who opposed abortion) hoped that the issue would prove seriously damaging to liberal Americans (who supported the legalisation allowing abortion). A generation later, the opposite had become true. The abortion issue is very delicate for conservative Americans, because many women will refuse to vote for a candidate who openly opposes abortion.

Overall, although the historical importance of participationist ideas and arguments should not be ignored, there are many reasons why an uninhibited form of direct democracy would not be feasible and might not be desirable. In practice, the direct effect of democratic participation is mediated by the fact that there are legal and representative aspects to democracy as well.
Activity

List the different ways in which Robert Dahl (1989) defends his theory of democracy against its critics.

Democracy as competition

Another important theoretical approach to democracy defines it by the existence of free and fair elections and electoral competition. The most famous exponent of this argument was the Austrian political philosopher and economist Joseph Schumpeter (1978).

Schumpeter believed that it was wrong to idealise either democracy or the folk wisdom of the people. His view of the characteristics of ordinary people is much more pessimistic than that of Rousseau or Dahl. Schumpeter was writing a few years after the German electorate had voted in sufficient numbers to allow Adolf Hitler to take power. Schumpeter also argued that, although democracy was important, it was not the only public good. Under extreme political circumstances, people would be more likely to be guided by an innate sense of right and wrong than by any doctrine of the democratic mandate. For example, people either supported or opposed Hitler on moral grounds: a few people who opposed him nevertheless believed that he should be supported because he was democratically elected. However, many people during the past century – including intellectuals – have at times supported antidemocratic parties or movements such as fascism and communism. At the opposite extreme, many people who today prefer democracy do so because of a belief in freedom and the rights of the individual. They are pro-democracy, because they believe that democracy is the best means of securing freedom and rights. If they were persuaded otherwise, they might change their minds about democracy itself.

Schumpeter believed, therefore, that democracy should not be theorised in too idealistic a way. Whether a political system is democratic is not at all the same question of whether we like it. Nor, argued Schumpeter, should democracy be based on an overly optimistic view of people's wisdom. People devote their main care, attention and skill to areas of their life where it would make a real difference, such as their livelihoods and their families. Because few people believe that their vote does make a real difference, they mainly participate in politics by expressing attitudes rather than reflecting quietly on issues. Even quite intelligent people are capable of casting their votes without much thought to the consequences.

Such arguments are pessimistic, of course. What is interesting, though, is that Schumpeter could find a strong defence of democracy even though he started from so negative a position. His main argument is that elections discipline elites. Anybody who wants to be head of government must first win an election. For many ambitious elite figures, argued Schumpeter, the pursuit of power is actually a bit of a game. In order to win the game, however, a democratic leader must appeal to ordinary people. Furthermore, a party leader cannot afford to be too arrogant because he or she might well lose the next election. Power is less likely to corrupt people who have only a limited tenure on it.

Criticisms of Schumpeter

Schumpeter’s arguments have been criticised as being too negative and restrictive on a number of grounds:

• the role of activists
• democracy and law
• democracy and collective interest.
The role of activists

It may be true that not everybody who participates in politics does so intelligently, but intelligent participation is the hallmark of a democracy. If we only have elites competing for the vote and voters acting in semi-ignorance, we lose an important aspect of democracy – the ability of people who do not want to be professional politicians to take some active interest in how they are governed and to bring issues to the attention of the public as a whole.

Furthermore, democratic politics is much more than party politics. Pluralism was an important strand in post-1945 US political science, to some extent reacting against the view that democracy is essentially an auction for votes. Pluralists such as Dahl (1989) have generally been less interested in political parties than in organised groups, including voluntary organisations that people join in order to express a view (e.g. Amnesty International) and those that represent them at their place of work (e.g. trade unions). Early pluralist scholars argued that anybody could be an activist and that organised group politics were a way of extending the effectiveness of democracy. It was not the case that citizen participation was restricted to one vote every four or five years. The politics of organised groups, it was argued, could bring ordinary people into contact with governmental decision-making on a day-to-day basis.

Activists are people – not generally personally ambitious – who wish to use democratic action to bring about (or sometimes prevent) change. In today’s wealthy democracies, they are often supporters of environmental causes and sometimes of the rights of minorities, children or even animals. There can be no doubt that such people have succeeded in changing the political agenda in a variety of ways. Conservative critics see activists as misguided and, not infrequently, as a nuisance. At times, that is true – they are motivated by impractical ideas and support experimental changes that do not work well. Activism, however, often initiates the slow process of changing the way in which non-activists think about particular issues. In general, plural groups create an additional dimension to political life that is valuable and positive. One only has to compare the state of the physical environments in the former Soviet Union – where this kind of activism was ruthlessly suppressed – with that of Western Europe – where environmentalist groups have been very active for years – for the point to be very clear.

Unfortunately, though, subsequent scholarship has shown some of these pluralist arguments to be somewhat optimistic. Activists involved in interest group activity are not usually the very poor. They tend to be from a relatively well-educated minority of the population and are often quite unrepresentative of the population as a whole. Furthermore, some interest group activity has more to do with helping a selected group make extra money than with seeking a better world. Business and labour interest groups are entirely legitimate, but one cannot really see them as deepening democracy. In fact, business interests often operate even under authoritarian governments.

An additional problem is the way in which activist politics tends to turn itself into just another form of political organisation. Interest groups, like parties, may quickly acquire a salaried bureaucracy, which may come to see itself as simply doing an ordinary job. For some (though by no means all) salaried officials, interest group politics are just another means of earning a living.
Some scholars, identified more with a conservative than pluralist viewpoint, tend to see activists as forming a counter-elite rather than a representative body of the citizenry. It is their activism itself that makes them atypical. Nevertheless, the number of genuine activists – although relatively small in terms of society as a whole – is much greater than the number of professional politicians or people in public office. The existence of intermediate groups prevents society from polarising between the leaders and the led.

**Democracy and law**

Liberals would be critical of Schumpeter on another point – that it may be possible to restrict the effect of any excesses and injustices caused by mistaken popular decisions by putting some constitutional and judicial restrictions on democratic politics. It is surprising that Schumpeter, who was a very strong supporter of capitalism and the US way of life, did not give this point more attention. Of course, no legal system is necessarily proof against a really determined despot, because such a despot can simply refuse to enforce the law; however, in political cultures in which the legal process is generally respected, the rule of law can discipline some of the excesses of political competition.

**Democracy and collective interest**

Like many free-market economists, Schumpeter starts from the notion that people participate in the political process as individuals. Yet in the real world, many people define their participation in public life in terms of a collectively formed identity – such as social class, religious belief or regional origin. Some people do change their preferences between parties on the basis of promises made to themselves as individuals or as a result of dissatisfaction with the performance of incumbents. However, there are ‘loyalist’ voters who have always voted Labour, Christian Democrat, Republican, or Ulster Unionist, for example.

Of course, it may be objected that loyalist votes do not determine electoral outcomes, but swing votes do, because they are determined by the political alternation necessary for democracy to work. Nevertheless, democratic leaders have to appeal to people who think of themselves as members of collectives. For example, in Northern Ireland, the Ulster Unionist Party has, for many years, been mainly Protestant, and the Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP) and Sinn Fein have been mainly Catholic. Little competition for votes exists across religious boundaries, although there is some. Democratic systems somehow still have to be made to work in societies where competition is blocked by strongly held collective identities.

Overall, Schumpeter is right to point to electoral competition as an essential and valuable part of the democratic process. Some of his scepticism about the intelligence commonly shown by the general public is, at least, valuable as a corrective. However, his theory of democracy as competition oversimplifies and limits too much.

**Activity**

List the criticisms that Schumpeter makes of what he calls the classical theory of democracy.
Chapter 1: Defining and conceptualising democracy

Democracy as balance

I would hazard the view that most political scientists today would define democracy mainly as a system of balances. They would give some weight to participation, some to competition, and some to the expression of collective aspirations within an overall context where individual rights are protected via the legal process. The task of a successful democracy is to make these coherent or, if this is not possible, to manage difficulties effectively as may arise.

Theories of constitutional balance were developed, in different ways, in eighteenth-century France, Britain and the USA. Two particular ideas are of interest here:

- The first is the notion of the English eighteenth-century philosopher Edmund Burke that a system of government based on elections should be representative.
- The other is the US notion, normally ascribed to James Madison, that different aspects of a democratic political system should provide checks and balances. Madison is regarded as the key intellectual force behind the doctrines expressed in the US Constitution, whereas Burke, originally a supporter of the American Revolution, eventually emerged as the foremost English critic of the French Revolution.

Burke's argument attempts to reconcile representative government with the autonomy of the political class. His point is that elected representatives do not exist to do exactly what the voters want them to do. They exist to provide knowledge and good judgment as well as to reflect any popular preference. It is not the job of a representative political system to give people what they want, but to make decisions based on striking a reasonable balance between what is popular, what is morally desirable and what works in practice. Although Burke was by no means a democrat, his thinking has influenced the way in which one school of thought looks at democracy. The essential point is that democracy is generally a rather complex system that seeks to strike a set of balances between different sets of principles.

The US Constitution was based on a rather similar idea. However, the important difference between British and US thinking at that time is that, in the case of the USA, much more emphasis was put on limiting the power of the state. Government was seen as a necessary evil. Popular participation was desirable in so far as it made it harder for the state to exercise despotic power, although popular dictatorship was itself a threatening but possible form of government. Political institutions should therefore be devised both to express and to limit the popular will. To avoid any overpowering effect, voting should be channelled through a complex set of institutions:

- strong local government
- separate legislative assemblies
- separate elections for a president
- a written constitution
- powerful courts.
For a system of checks and balances to work, it is necessary for the institutional system to be popularly supported – in other words, legitimate. As part of the normal political process, those who control one branch of government (or one part of the state) may be tempted to exceed their authority. Although those in control of other parts of the state may be capable of preventing this, the task of maintaining the system becomes much easier if public opinion remains steadfastly in favour of the constitutional process. Where this does not reliably happen, we may find ourselves dealing with imperfect forms of democracy, which are discussed in the next chapter.

Prerequisites for balance: the defeat of absolutism

It is important to note that much eighteenth-century thinking in the English-speaking world (following the example of John Locke a century earlier) was based on the notion that government needed to be limited and, where necessary, opposed. This view can be seen as expressing an antithesis between economic and political power. It was almost universally accepted in the eighteenth century that property conferred rights. Moreover, property owners – whether merchants or nobility – wanted to protect what they had from the Crown. The monarchs themselves tended to engage in wars and inevitably found this to be an expensive pursuit. Finding themselves short of money, they sought to impose taxation. This desire met resistance in a number of ways. In England in medieval times, these conflicts led to deliberate efforts to contain royal power through the signing of Magna Carta in 1215 and the effort of Simon de Montfort, an English politician and military leader, to organise a parliament in the later thirteenth century.

It is not easy to trace a clear line from medieval institutions such as Magna Carta in England and the early development of Parliament to the dramatic constitutional changes that took place in England, the USA and France between 1642 and 1815. However, the sources of tension between property and political power were rather similar:

- The crown asserted its right to power, but it needed money.
- Civil society was unwilling to pay taxes.
- Parliament offered some scope for bargaining between civil society and the crown.
- Eventually bargaining broke down and armed conflict resulted.

The monarchical state was defeated in England in the 1640s, in the USA in the 1780s and in France at the beginning of the 1790s. In England and France, the monarchy was eventually restored (although in France it was subsequently re-abolished), but the absolutist state was not. The USA went further in the direction of democracy by abolishing the monarchy altogether and replacing it with a presidency.

This subject guide does not have the space to give a detailed discussion of constitutional change in these countries since then. However, it is clear that the defeat of the principle of absolutism in the most economically advanced and most powerful countries of the world represented a victory for propertied interests. This is not to say that the propertied interests that played a vital part in this transformation were wholly and unambiguously in favour of democracy (they were not), but rather that independently held property provided a base of social power. This could, on rare but decisive occasions, challenge the authority of the state and initiate
far-reaching political change. The point still relevant today is that the issue of property versus taxation led to some very sophisticated thinking about political organisation and to the development of what are still some dominant intellectual ideas about how a political system should work.

Checks and balances versus the doctrine of the democratic mandate

Fashions change in political science, as they do everywhere else, and the idea of democracy as a system of checks and balances was rather superseded in the mid-twentieth century, in Europe if not elsewhere, by the doctrine of the democratic mandate. According to this, democracy was essentially a means of empowering government to change society in accordance with the wishes of the majority. This majority, so the argument went, would use their vote to support the political party (or parties) of their choice. These would represent their supporters in parliament and would legislate according to the desires of their supporters. Class interests or political ideas would establish a natural affinity between certain kinds of voter, certain kinds of political ideology and one or more political parties. Political parties would play the role of encouraging activists and attracting ordinary people into politics. (There is a significant overlap between this idea and the pluralist idea of activist participation.)

The doctrine of the democratic mandate never came close to describing the conduct of politics in the USA, but it did come closer to describing how democracy worked in the mid-twentieth century in some European countries. Labour or Social Democratic parties tended to compete with Conservative or religious parties. If the left-wing parties won, they would increase taxes on high incomes and property; if the right-wing parties won, income and property taxes would be reduced. A range of other issues always complicated the actual process, but the essential model, according to which parties reflected defined social interests, largely seemed to operate.

The absence of a role for checks and balances in this kind of political game, however, left collectivist doctrines of democracy vulnerable to the accusation that they had no good way of limiting the possible abuse of power by elected governments. Surveys show that voters in industrialised countries have become more suspicious of government in the past 50 years and that people are less collectively minded and more interested in personal freedom. The end of the Cold War and the damage done to the credibility of socialist doctrines by the collapse of the of Soviet Union also led people to doubt that the best form of politics involved a clash between the advocates of rival ‘big ideas’ about politics. Furthermore, the past 50 years has seen a decline in religious observance in most industrialised countries and also a significant class dealignment. There are therefore, for example, fewer politically motivated Catholics, irrespective of what they do, who are likely to vote for religious parties, and fewer manual labourers with an obvious affinity for working-class politics.

For these reasons, theories that premise democratic politics on the role of the individual rather than the collective, and on problem-solving rather than general political doctrines, have come back into fashion. From this viewpoint, the point of democracy is as much to limit state power and protect citizens against the abuse of government as it is to express the view of majorities or transform society. What makes a political society healthy or otherwise is whether individual citizens are content with the working of their public institutions. The influence of this kind of thinking can be seen in major recent works by political scientists, such as Przeworski (1991, 26).
Przeworski argues that democracy is in equilibrium when ‘all the relevant political forces find it best to continue to submit their interests and values’ to the uncertainties inherent in the democratic system. The people are subject to both law and the ultimate authors of the law-making power. Because of popular attachment to the system, participants in politics face lower costs or greater benefits by complying with the procedures of democratic process than by breaking them. For this to be possible, democratic institutions need real popular backing, otherwise those in charge of such institutions may gain from behaving undemocratically and may be tempted to do so.

Some of the ideas of the eighteenth-century Enlightenment have been abandoned. People today do not generally believe (as the authors of the US Constitution did) that we have inalienable ‘natural rights’ given to us by God. We believe instead that we have to work at creating and protecting our rights and that if this is not done then our political system will fail. The protection of rights, however, is still considered to be essential for a good political system.

One reason for the current ascendancy of ideas about democracy as balance has to do with the longevity of the US system and the considerable contemporary prestige of the USA. The US political system is still recognisably the same that existed in 1800. This is not really true in the UK, where parliamentarianism did not severely limit the role of the monarchy until after the 1832 Great Reform Act. It is not at all true of most other countries that are now democracies. A good question is how far the US model can usefully be adapted to other democratic systems. Although many political scientists are wary of the US idea that the executive and legislative bodies should be elected separately, however, there is now almost universal agreement that democracy needs a strong constitutional system with powerful courts. In many wealthy countries today, an aggrieved individual is at least as likely to visit a lawyer as a parliamentary representative.

The complexity of democracy

In the mid-1980s, when democratic transition was more or less complete in southern Europe, just underway in Latin America and possibly just beginning in eastern Europe, more emphasis was put on holding free and fair elections. For many observers, the important thing was to get elections held and then a country could be considered a democracy. Now there is a general view that free-and-fair elections are not enough. Democratically elected leaders are capable of acting very undemocratically at times. Democracy is now seen as the embodiment of a set of principles including:

- individual freedom
- human rights
- non-discrimination on the ground of religion, ethnicity or gender
- opportunities for participation
- an element of electoral competition.

We need all of these things, because the absence of any one of them makes us vulnerable to some form of bad government.

Although the theory of democracy as involving a complex balance of different aspects is probably accepted by the majority of political scientists, it also has weaknesses. These include, for example:

- The fact that democracy is unavoidably complex. This may not matter to a well-educated and sophisticated elector. Many people, however, will not see much relationship between how they vote and what they get. There is, inevitably, too much else going on. Less sophisticated
people may be ‘turned off’ politics altogether by the complex nature of the democratic process. Electoral turnout has tended to fall in recent years in both the USA and the UK. The result may be to create a more apathetic, or fatalistic, culture among the population at large. This, in turn, might create opportunities for populist politicians. It is too early to be sure that this is happening, but concerns have been expressed. As a result, some politicians have tried to find ways of reinvigorating the political process, possibly by strengthening local government.

- Multiple criteria can make definitions of democracy very demanding. This may not be a bad thing in wealthy, First World countries, where constant thought needs to be given to how to upgrade the quality of the political process. It may not be so helpful, however, in evaluating emerging democracies, where the holding of free-and-fair elections on a consistent basis may seem to be an achievement in itself. The best may become an enemy to the good.

- The US version of democracy tends to be biased against strong government and (at least by implication) sympathetic to the role of markets. This certainly fits the spirit of the times. We live in an age that is rather sceptical about the role of government. In most First World countries the press is constantly full of details about government policy failures in transport, agriculture, education and so on. The idea – very widespread in the 1940s – that government could be used as an active instrument to achieve valuable social purposes has lost a lot of credibility. Certainly the idea of democracy as balance is very congruent with the idea of limited government, and with the notion that state power is generally part of the problem rather than part of the solution. It is understood that people will seek their main satisfactions in private life and that the economy works best if it is run essentially privately. This approach is not problematic, as long as its underlying bias is recognised and the assumptions on which it is based continue to be accepted.

**Democracy and capitalism**

It may be, however, that the relationship between capitalism and democracy will turn out to be more problematic than eighteenth-century Enlightenment thinkers originally supposed. As we saw earlier, democracy was originally intended to give expression to notions of civic equality. What happens, however, if private ownership of property and capitalist relations of production have the effect of maintaining and even increasing inequality? Most eighteenth-century thinkers did not care very much about the genuine poor, but today's democrats do. It follows that the relationship between democracy and equality – like that between democracy and property – has become complex and problematic.

It is widely accepted (perhaps more in Europe than in the USA) that very great disparities of wealth are potentially threatening to democracy as well as being socially undesirable and perhaps morally wrong. For these reasons, generations of socialist or social democratic politicians have sought to use democracy to turn the state into a materially equalising institution. In other words, the idea was that the less-privileged majority in any society would use the powers of universal suffrage to elect redistributionist parties. For much of the twentieth century, left-wingers hoped, and conservatives feared, that democracy would foment equality and reduce differentials based upon unequal incomes and ownership of property.
It did not turn out like this. This is at least partly because a very balanced and sophisticated democratic system, although good at preventing undesirable things from happening, is nothing like as good at getting anything done. This is not a problem for people who believe that they can mostly organise their lives satisfactorily with only minimal help from the state. However, the abandonment of the idea that a strong, central government can resolve pressing social problems ensures that democracy offers at best only limited opportunities for redressing the inequalities of the marketplace. Moreover, if genuine economic or political crises developed, we would have to think again about what we wanted from our democratic system.

Overall, the definition of democracy as embodying a balance of principles reflects the way in which most of us think of democracy. Whether this will be the case in the future remains to be seen.

**Conclusion**

Democracy is a complex system that is understood in ways that are increasingly demanding. Democracy is a word that has to be understood by ordinary people and also by practising politicians, so that political scientists are not able to define it purely as they please. What they can do is to try to make our understanding coherent, or at least to point out inconsistencies when they occur. The general international trend in the past generation has been to emphasise individual rights in our understanding of democracy and de-emphasise (to some extent) participation. Countries, however, have to satisfy a whole series of conditions before they can truly be regarded as democracies.

**A reminder of your learning outcomes**

By the end of this chapter and the relevant reading, you should be able to:

- list, describe and compare the main theoretical approaches to understanding democracy
- describe the main criticisms of each of these approaches
- outline and discuss the main ethical principles that lie behind democracy as a system of government
- outline the ways in which the relationship between majoritarian government and individual rights has been understood
- analyse the role of activists in democratic politics
- explain why the notion of contestation is crucial to our understanding of how democracy works
- explain why liberal democracy is inherently a rather complex system of government.

**Sample examination questions**

1. ‘A system is more democratic if people can vote more often on issues which concern them. That is why democracy should make frequent use of referendums.’ Discuss.
2. ‘A democracy is a country that chooses its leaders through election.’ Discuss.
3. ‘The notion of liberal democracy is inherently contradictory.’ Discuss.
4. To what extent, if any, does contemporary, First World democracy allow ordinary voters to exert control over what their government does?
Chapter 2: Democracy and the state

Aims of the chapter

This chapter looks at systems that are democratic in some ways and not democratic in others. It considers several variants of systems that do not fit easily into either category. These include façade democracy, state bias, illiberal democracy and delegative democracy. It then discusses the notion of democratic consolidation as a way of distinguishing semi-democracies from countries that are fully democratic.

Learning outcomes

By the end of the chapter and the associated reading, you should have a good understanding of how political scientists have tried to conceptualise these different forms of semi-democracy and what their main characteristics are. You should be able to:

- identify and discuss when it is most difficult for elected political leaders to control the military
- explain when democracy is most at risk from within the state itself
- outline what illiberal democracy is
- outline what delegative democracy is
- explain what happens when a democratic state is biased in favour of incumbents
- analyse the advantages and disadvantages of using a demanding standard of democratic consolidation.

Essential reading

Books


Journals


Further reading

Books

Introduction

The previous chapter established that democracy, as we understand it, is a fairly complex form of government. Some early political philosophers would not have recognised it as democracy at all. This chapter looks at some cases in which the minimum conditions of democracy have probably been met, but in which there are still serious problems in achieving all of the things we generally want from democracy. This issue is especially relevant when we look at new democracies, or democracies that are imperfect in some ways but effective in others. Is there a dividing line that enables us to say that 'A' is a democracy but 'B' is not? More importantly still, is there a good way to understand and conceptualise a system that has some of the characteristics of democracy but not others?

These are open-ended questions to which no definitive answer can be given. They are, however, questions that can usefully be explored further. Linz and Stepan (1996) and other authors such as Przeworski (1991) have introduced into the literature a broad notion of 'democratic consolidation'. This can be used to separate systems in which elections are held but in which the democratic process is flawed from those that are democratic in the fullest sense. We will look at the issue of democratic consolidation later in the chapter. Non-consolidated democracy can refer to a wide range of situations, which need to be narrowed down somewhat. In this chapter, we look at four specific but different kinds of situation.

1. **Limited democracies**, in which elections are held freely but the government does not fully control the state. The state – by which is meant principally the army, the police and the judiciary – does fairly much as it sees fit. This is normally known as limited democracy, but at the extreme its critics could regard it as 'façade democracy.'

2. **Biased states**, in which votes are honestly counted and individual freedoms mainly respected, but where the elected government tends to use the state for partisan advantage (Philip, 1999). The courts, police, etc. are subject to the will of powerful politicians. These, in turn, act as though they are above the law and may resort to illegal methods of media manipulation or campaign financing at election time.

3. **Illiberal democracies**, in which the government and state control each other and where effective government is possible, but where there is little respect for individual rights (Zakaria, 1997). We have already noted that the notion of human rights seems essential to our understanding of democracy today. In addition to this, a problem exists with the internal logic of illiberal democracy, in that illiberal systems can deny essential rights to opposition politicians and thereby limit democratic participation and competition.

4. **Delegative democracies**, in which the government responds only to public opinion and neglects pluralist arrangements and institutions (O'Donnell, 1994). Some overlap exists between illiberal and delegative democracy, in that both are likely to involve the abuse of rights by the forces of the state. There is a difference of degree, however: delegative democracy is more likely to be a response to crisis and something that is inherently transitional. Moreover, the
abuse of rights under delegative systems is more likely to be the result of personalist arbitrariness than systematic state policy. One might consider the outcome as being the ‘personalisation’ of the state.

The distinctions drawn in the literature between different forms of semi-democracy are possibly a little bit neater than real-life situations, and the literature sometimes overlaps categories. It is, however, a good idea to keep them apart for the purposes of clear discussion.

We will now look at each of category in turn.

### Limited and façade democracy

Some political systems may appear superficially to be democratic without being democratic at all. In such cases, democracy is no more than a façade, and the real power is in the hands of a dominant party or the military or an individual dictator. It may be better to regard such systems as non-democracies and to analyse them as authoritarian systems.

We do, however, need to be concerned with systems in which there is a genuine democratic element, but in which this is not strong enough for a country to be considered fully democratic.

#### Example: South America

Between 1945 and 1976 (or thereabouts), South America had many elected civilian governments. Could South America be regarded as fully democratic? The answer is ‘not exactly’, because most countries had military interventions and long periods of military dictatorship as well.

For example, the Ecuadorian politician, Velasco Ibarra, was famous as an orator. His personal motto was ‘give me a balcony and I will govern’. He found, to his cost, however, that winning elections was one thing and governing quite another. He won five presidential elections and was unable to complete a single term: the military always stepped in and overthrew him before the end.

Could we say that these countries were democratic at some points and authoritarian at others? This may be true as far as it goes, but it does not go very far. It is quite reasonable to treat authoritarian rule as non-democratic, but it is not clear that we can regard a country as democratic merely because it is not currently run in an authoritarian way. There are several reasons why this is so:

1. A democratically elected government will not do certain things, because it cannot expect to survive the consequences of opposition from non-democrats. We call this an ‘anticipated reactions’ problem.
2. So-called democracies with powerless democratic leaders will have a problem of legitimisation. Democracy can only take hold in a society if it is taken seriously as a means of deciding who governs. If anybody dissatisfied with an election result or government can just call in the military, people will be likely to see democracy as a meaningless game.
3. Non-democratic forces, possibly including the military and the police, will control ‘enclaves’ of society and will not be accountable for their actions via democratic means.
4. In policy terms, this creates a situation in which measures that might help with long-term democratic stabilisation are inhibited by the short-term needs of political survival. For example, it was sometimes politically impossible for elected governments to use the legal process against their authoritarian predecessors for corruption or the abuse
of power. The realisation that senior ranks of the military were often above the law made it even harder for civilians to govern in the long run.

**Democracy and the state**

Moving from specific examples to consideration of more general points, we can see that limited democracy exists when the elected government does not control the state. It is of course true that the word ‘control’ is problematic. There are ways in which the elected government should not control the state (for example, it should not be able to win exemption from prosecution for corruption). Democratic systems require a balanced relation between the democratic and non-democratic parts of the state. (We saw in Chapter 1 that democracy involved a complex set of balances.) Democratic systems vary according to which positions are subject to election and which are not, but there is always a non-elected aspect to the state. Some democracies elect their judges. Very few elect their generals. The relation between the elected and non-elected part of the state needs to be constructive if democracy is to be successful. It is evident that the elected government must be able to govern; however, elected government still needs to be subject to the constraints of the law. The elected government must not have absolute power over the state, or else it may be able to place itself above the law. The problem of securing a good relationship between the government and the state cannot just be a matter of command and control. It needs to involve elements of command, but also agreement and cooperation.

Situations do sometimes arise in which what we might call the permanent state – officials, judges and security forces – is out of favour with the elected government. Such a situation will always generate a certain amount of tension, but normally this is likely to be manageable. The problems that arise can also be more serious, however. One of the reasons why the parliamentary republic in Weimar Germany failed to prevent the rise of Hitler in 1933 had to do with the lack of sympathy with democratic values on the part of the German state elite – judges, the police, the military and so on. Nazi street fighters enjoyed over-tolerant policing and leniency from the courts, and Hitler served only a few months in prison in 1923, despite having been involved in an attempt to overthrow the democratic state by force. Obviously, this enormously strengthened the Nazi party.

Similar problems occurred in the case of Allende's Socialist government in Chile (1970–73). It is quite possible that this government would have encountered severe problems whatever the circumstances, but it did not help that the courts, police and military were completely out of sympathy with the elected government. A lack of trust in the existing state induced some militant supporters of the government to bypass the constitution and to engage directly in property seizures and harassment of opponents. This, in turn, led conservatives to claim that the government was failing to uphold the law and to invite the military to step in. In the end, the military accepted this invitation.

Tensions within the state are especially likely to arise under conditions of war, serious insurgency or terrorism, because such conditions are likely to create a security dilemma. Either the state fights its enemies in an indiscriminate way, or else it accepts certain restraints on its conduct of conflict. Restrained warfare can be a tenable option if the aim is to bring the adversary into a negotiating situation. It is often the case, however,
that military officers, senior policemen and others will resent the restraints that democracy puts on what they are allowed to do, and they may be tempted to break the rules. The liberal democratic solution to such occurrences is for those responsible for lawlessness to be arrested and brought to justice. When even genuine liberal democracies are involved in some kind of armed conflict, though, such an outcome does not occur as often as it possibly should. When the security forces are in a position to make a credible threat to overthrow the state, it may in fact be impossible for an elected government to intervene too much in what the forces of the state do. It may have to ignore past or present-day abuses. In the worst case, the military becomes the effective arbiter of power.

Democracy in biased states

Moving further along the democratic spectrum, in some political systems, elections are routinely held and contested, but the state is biased toward incumbents. This situation is not uncommon and requires some further discussion.

Most social scientists accept Douglass North’s way of defining institutions and organisations (1992). Institutions are enforced rules – some people would say valued and enforced rules. Organisations are collectives that seek to gain some advantage by playing according to the rules. There is a clear analogy here with sporting occasions – for example, a football match. The referee and ultimately the governing council of football (the institution) interpret and enforce the rules. The team players (the organisation) seek to win the game. In football, as in life, rules are occasionally broken and enforcement is occasionally mistaken. The key point, however, is that different people have different roles.

In liberal democratic systems, the state is the rule-enforcing body. Those who run the state may have interests of their own, but they still have to operate through laws and formal procedures. State bodies operate the political process by enforcing the rules rather than by trying to determine the outcome. They intervene only when the rules are in dispute or where they have been broken. Political parties and interest groups are organisations. Organisations may not want to observe the rules, but they have to do so or else they will fail to achieve their objectives. As a result of winning power (when they do so), organisations can change the rules in ways that are of benefit to their members and supporters; however, they still have to operate through the formal rules of impartial institutions rather than directly as they please.

In biased states, the state behaves ‘organisationally’ as well as institutionally. The people who run the top echelons of the state – elected politicians, the military, the police, sometimes the economic technocracy and sometimes the judiciary – do not necessarily have to respect formal procedures operated by impartial officials. They can act more or less as they wish. They may prefer one political party or one political outcome above others.

Example: Mexico

By way of example, Mexico was governed in the 1980s and 1990s by an economic technocracy. The technocracy was introduced into the political system by the power of the presidency, and it was kept there by a system that allowed the outgoing president to select his successor. For most of this period, there were contested elections.

If one takes competitive elections with the vote honestly counted as the minimum definition of democracy, then Mexico was a democracy during the 1990s at any rate.
However, the ruling party that contested the elections – the Institutional Revolutionary Party (the PRI) – was very much dominated by the state itself. It would be impossible to argue seriously that the state was indifferent as to whether the PRI was elected or not, or that the state simply enforced impersonal rules within which different organisations competed. Instead, the situation was that the referee was also a player. The state and the PRI were so closely connected that it was hard to say where the PRI ended and the state began.

Example: Peru

A further example can be taken from Peru under Fujimori in the 1990s. Fujimori was elected to the presidency as an independent candidate. He faced serious problems on a number of fronts:

- Peru was suffering from economic decline and hyperinflation.
- Peru had a problem with terrorism.
- Fujimori did not enjoy a congressional majority.

It seems that some Peruvian military officers who wanted to fight against terrorism without constitutional restraint approached Fujimori and suggested that they get together and overthrow the congress and existing judiciary. Fujimori agreed to this and, in April 1992, closed congress by force. Public opinion generally approved of this – Fujimori’s popularity actually rose following the closure.

In policy terms, the closure of congress was quite successful:

- inflation fell
- economic growth resumed
- the main terrorist organisation – Sendero Luminoso – was largely defeated.

Fujimori took advantage of the resulting increase in presidential popularity in order to run for re-election. He was able to do this in 1995, but things become more complicated afterwards. Fujimori wanted to run again in 2000, despite the fact that the constitution approved by plebiscite in 1993 forbade him to do so. However, Fujimori’s supporters in congress voted in a law that would allow him to run again. The Peruvian Supreme Court declared this unconstitutional. Fujimori’s supporters in congress counteracted by voting to impeach Supreme Court judges opposed to Fujimori’s re-election. These were replaced with tame judges, who ruled that Fujimori’s candidacy for re-election did not break the constitution. In the end, Fujimori appeared to win the 2000 elections, but further allegations of bribery led the Peruvian Congress – which was also elected in 2000 – to vote Fujimori from office at the end of that year.

Activity

Using the relevant reading, present some explanations as to why democracy in biased states does not break down altogether.

Illiberal democracy

The term ‘illiberal democracy’ was developed in an article by Zakaria (1997), in which he made the point that democracy, as we generally know it, involves a mixture of majoritarianism and respect for individual rights. He argued also that many independently established consolidated democracies enforced systems of individual rights before they introduced universal suffrage. Britain, for example, was a liberal state (according to some definitions of the term) after 1689, but only became fully democratic after 1918. Zakaria questioned whether the introduction of universal suffrage before systems of individual rights were firmly established would lead to liberal democracy or whether majoritarian systems would actually stand in the way of the development of rights.
Zakaria’s argument has led to a considerable debate in academic literature, and Plattner’s critique is directly relevant (1998). Plattner argues that liberal values can be institutionalised via the democratic process in cases where liberalism did not precede democracy. It is, though, not entirely clear that this is the case. In Latin America, most countries are democracies, but it is not at all clear that they have institutionalised systems of state impartiality. Nor are countries that have been democratic for longer – such as Colombia and Venezuela – more successful at building liberal institutions than others.

Zakaria can be criticised for using the concept of liberalism (or ‘illiberalism’) too widely. Some people think of liberalism as having to do with impartiality, others think of it as having to do with freedom. Some political systems can be broadly fair and impartial but quite intolerant as well. It might be best to call such systems illiberal, while using a concept such as bias to describe state partiality (as seen in the previous sub-section).

Although Zakaria’s concept of illiberal democracy may need some reformulation, it does work reasonably well in at least one important real-world context. This context is the system in which cultural values are rather authoritarian and not particularly responsive to the individualistic principles of equality before the law and competition for the popular vote. Many such systems are to be found in Southeast Asia.

It is certainly the case that a country can be governed according to a set of political values that are not individualist or liberal but indeed formally democratic. Whether such systems are democratic in a deeper sense is disputable.

**Activity**
Consider illiberal democracy alongside Schumpeter’s definition of democracy, which was described in the last chapter. Would illiberal democracy fit Schumpeter’s definition?

### Delegative democracy

The term ‘delegative democracy’ was developed by Guillermo O’Donnell to cover some countries in Latin America (1994). Although O’Donnell principally had in mind the presidencies of Collor in Brazil and Menem in Argentina, some people would say that other examples in the region could also be found, notably those of Fujimori in Peru and Chavez in Venezuela.

The basic idea is that the system is run on the basis of extreme personalism. People vote for the president – delegative democracy is far more likely in presidential than in parliamentary systems – on the basis that they are voting for a pure leader figure who will solve all of the country’s pressing problems. A relation exists between this idea and the Weberian notion of charismatic authority. Weber’s notion is based on earlier religious leaders who successfully appealed to large numbers of people. A relation also exists between this idea and ‘cults of personality’, which are common enough in non-democracies. O’Donnell’s notion, however, refers to countries that are indeed democratic and to elections that have been freely held and actively contested.

Empirically, personalist politicians do not usually win presidential elections in Latin America, and where they have done so, they have often faced overthrow by congress. However, the phenomenon of extreme personalist rule, although not common even in Latin America, is not unknown and is worth discussing further. Certainly, one important reason why extreme
personalists sometimes do win elections is the fact that democratic systems can fail in policy terms and this failure can produce political crisis. In Latin America at the beginning of the 1990s, for example, there was a clear relationship between hyperinflation and extreme personalism.

Delegative democracy may well prove to have been an inherently transitional form of government. An individual cannot solve all of a society's problems and will soon lose his (or her) authority if he (or she) tries to do so. Very personalistically minded presidents in the region have often been removed from power by congress. An individual leader, however, can sometimes reorganise the state so that, although the moment of extreme personalism is transitory, its political significance may be long-term. The significance may be that a personalist leader will make use of the military to help him govern, which is what happened in Peru under Fujimori and, to some extent, in Venezuela under Chavez, or else he can make common cause with business leaders, as happened in Argentina under Menem. The end result may be that the system changes into some other form of semi-democracy.

Activity

List O'Donnell's main criteria for characterising delegative democracy.

The notion of democratic consolidation

We saw in the introductory chapter that liberal democracy is a complex form of government. It is entirely likely that we will find systems that are democratic in some aspects and not in others. We have already discussed some of these situations in this chapter. We should also ask whether there is a dynamic of democracy. In other words, does the experience and practice of democracy make it more likely that democracy will be strengthened? If it does, then limited, biased, illiberal and delegative democracies are likely to be transitional phenomena pending the deepening of democratic institutionalisation.

Although some countries have indeed seen a strengthening of their democratic institutions after they democratised, this has not been so in all cases. There does not seem to be much evidence of a general trend according to which non-consolidated democracies are likely to become consolidated according to a set pattern.

Linz and Stepan discussed this point in their work on democratic consolidation (1996). Their work is rich and complex, and the methodology is reasonably clear. They start by defining democracy in a very demanding way. Essentially they define five arenas of democratic consolidation.

1. In civil society, there has to be freedom of association and communication.
2. In political society, there has to be free and inclusive electoral contestation.
3. There must be a rule of law and a spirit of constitutionalism.
4. The state apparatus has to be fun, according to legal–rational (Weberian) bureaucratic principles.
5. Economic society has to be organised around respect for property rights, and conditions must be in place to permit economic growth.

These conditions are rather demanding, and contrast with a simpler definition proposed by Przeworski, which is that:

‘democracy is consolidated when under given political and economic conditions a particular set of institutions becomes the only game in town’ (1991, 26).
The problem with any very demanding definition is that only a few political systems can meet it. For example, most people would regard the UK and Spain as democracies, but armed groups wanting some form of secession have attacked each country from within:

- the Irish Republican Army (IRA) wants Northern Ireland to become part of a united Ireland
- the Basque Separatist Movement (ETA) wants an independent Basque country.

For years, the southern states of the USA were racially segregated and black Americans did not enjoy the full protection of the law. It would be an extreme view, however, to say that the USA was not a democracy during this period, although it is a view that has been advanced. Some European democracies have also been run in very corrupt ways. Can we seriously say, however, that the rule of law did not operate in these cases?

There are some advantages in having a demanding definition of democracy:

- We saw in the last chapter that democracy is inherently a complex form of government.
- We do need to break down the concept into some of its component parts in order to see how they fit together in different ways and at different times.
- We need to be able to analyse systems in which there are elections but where there also exists a threat to democracy from armed minorities.
- We also need to be able to analyse systems in which elections are routinely held and contested but in which there is not much confidence in the judicial system and in which it would be optimistic to speak of a rule of law.

In practice, Linz and Stepan give considerable weight to voter attitudes towards democracy. Their work uses extensive survey data and seeks to evaluate answers to questions such as:

- Are people convinced that democracy is the best form of government?
- Do they have confidence in their own democratic institutions?

Other authors, such as Diamond (1999) also believe that we have a lot to learn about democracy by asking questions of ordinary people, particularly in places where democracy is a relatively new form of government.

In principle, this does seem to be a useful way of proceeding. We can learn more about how democracy works in practice, by learning about people's attitudes towards it. It is likely that these attitudes will be rationally explicable in terms of the objective conditions facing the country. For example, if voters perceive their government as being economically unsuccessful, then it is entirely likely that the economic indicators will show this to be so. If that is the case, then we can specify what objective conditions are likely to orient public opinion in a given way. There is, however, always some irrationality in politics, and it may well be that there is some lack of fit between what people believe to be the case and that is actually the case. If such a lack of fit exists, then we will not be able to explain democratic legitimation purely in terms of objective conditions. We may need to look for more complex kinds of explanation.

It is also important that the notion of non-consolidated democracy does not become a theory of stages. We really cannot know whether democratic systems that today seem non-consolidated will in the future:

- become consolidated
- break down altogether
• remain non-consolidated
• consolidate in some ways and de-consolidate in others.

Not only is democracy a complex category in itself, but the dynamics of democratisation or non-democratisation in some respects remain obscure. There are limits to our possible knowledge of these things.

Activity

Explain how each of the Linz and Stepan arenas of democratic consolidation interconnect to form an overall picture of a consolidated democracy.

Conclusion

This chapter has considered some of the ways in which scholars have tried to conceptualise and categorise political systems that were at least minimally democratic (having free and contested elections) but not completely so, according to the rather demanding criteria set out at the end of Chapter 1. The authors considered here do not have a monopoly on these characterisations. There are other possible ways of discussing imperfectly democratic systems – an enormous amount of literature exists on the subject, and fresh ideas will no doubt be put forward in the future. Those authors considered here do, however, have the merit of putting forward characterisations that work both at a conceptual level and as descriptions of one or more real-world political systems.

A reminder of your learning outcomes

By the end of the chapter and the associated reading, you should have a good understanding of how political scientists have tried to conceptualise these different forms of semi-democracy and what their main characteristics are. You should be able to:

• identify and discuss when it is most difficult for elected political leaders to control the military
• explain when democracy is most at risk from within the state itself
• outline what illiberal democracy is
• outline what delegative democracy is
• explain what happens when a democratic state is biased in favour of incumbents
• analyse the advantages and disadvantages of using a demanding standard of democratic consolidation.

Sample examination questions

1. What is ‘illiberal democracy’? What are the reasons for supposing it to be a potentially durable form of government?

2. “Delegative democracy” is just a sophisticated name for presidentialist personalism.’ Discuss.

3. What good reasons, if any, are there for supposing that non-consolidated democracies are likely to become more consolidated over time?

4. What is state bias? What impact does it have on democracy?
Chapter 3: Non-democratic systems and the transition to democracy

Aims of the chapter

This chapter looks at the relation between different kinds of non-democracy and different kinds of transition to democracy. The types of non-democracy discussed in the chapter are:
• imperial and colonial rule
• monarchy
• military government
• dominant party government.

We will give an account of some of the ways in which each of these systems has been transformed into democracy.

Learning outcomes

By the end of this chapter, and having completed the Essential reading and activities, you should be able to:
• explain the main problems and difficulties that are likely to be associated with democratising each system of government discussed in this chapter (empire, monarchy, military government and dominant party rule)
• explain how transition could happen in different kinds of non-democratic political system.

Essential reading


Further reading


Gill, G. The Dynamics of Democratisation. (Basingstoke: Macmillan Press, 2000) [ISBN 0333801970]. This is available via the publisher’s website.


Introduction

During the past 20 years, many countries that were formally non-democracies have become democracies. Essentially this chapter is an empirical discussion of how democratisation took place in the recent and more distant past. It suggests that the way in which societies became democratic (or not) depended significantly on the way in which they were organised prior to democratisation. This chapter should be read in conjunction with the next chapter, which examines some theories of why democratisation occurred.

Huntington’s (1991) notion that there have been three waves of democratisation has generally been accepted as empirically useful. The first wave of countries essentially adopted democratic principles in the nineteenth century. They included:
• the USA
• Switzerland
• France
• Britain.

The second wave consisted of countries that democratised after the defeat of fascism in 1945. The list includes:
• (the then) West Germany
• Italy
• Japan
• Austria.

The third wave began in 1974 with the overthrow of the authoritarian government of Portugal. The military government in Greece also fell in 1974, and the following year the Spanish dictator Francisco Franco died. By 1980, these three southern European countries had all become democracies. During the next decade, the majority of Latin American countries changed from non-democracies to democracies. Many African countries also adopted democracy in the 1980s or early 1990s. From the late 1980s, the countries of eastern Europe also rejected communism and adopted democracy. The process culminated in mid-1991, when a failed coup attempt brought about the destruction of the Soviet Union as a unit. Many, though not all, of its component parts became democracies.

It is, however, important to qualify the notion of ‘waves’ in one respect. In the past, in some regions of the world there were almost as many cases of democratic breakdown as of democratisation. To adapt Huntington’s phraseology, waves sometimes pulled away from the shore as well as moving towards it. Latin America has suffered several waves of democratic breakdown, the most important of which took place in the 1930s, 1960s and early 1970s. In continental Europe, many parliamentary systems were set up at the end of the First World War and the majority of these broke down in the 1920s or early 1930s. In the 1930s, many observers believed that fascism or communism, and not democracy, would be the wave of the future.

What is significant for this discussion is that there has been much less democratic breakdown since 1980 than there was following earlier ‘waves’ of democratisation. By the middle of the 1990s, well over 50 countries that
were not democracies at the beginning of 1974 had become democracies. Most of these were in the Third World, and so far the vast majority of these democratic transitions have not been reversed. Some countries nevertheless did suffer from democratic breakdown. A military coup took place in Pakistan in 1999, and serious problems were seen with the electoral process in Zimbabwe in 2002. It is also clear that some important parts of the world – China and much of the Middle East – did not participate in the most recent democratising wave. Nonetheless, we cannot really speak of any major reversal of the most recent wave of democratisation.

However, progress towards democracy has slowed down since the mid-1990s. Even so, the extent of democratisation has surprised scholars. As we shall see in more detail in the next chapter, some modernisation theories did not expect the spread of democracy across Africa and Latin America to be sustained. It is true that some new democracies do not seem to be particularly secure and that only some of the countries that have democratised since 1974 can be regarded as democratically consolidated. Nevertheless, as we saw in the last chapter, the criterion of democratic consolidation is demanding. The mere fact that democracy has proved as durable as it has over quite long periods of time is significant.

One way of trying to understand the magnitude of this transformation is to consider how different forms of non-democracies have evolved into democracies or, on occasion, have failed to do so. This approach will be considered in the rest of this chapter.

**Colonial rule and the collapse of empires**

An important force behind political change has been the decline, or in some cases, collapse of empires. This process has sometimes created entirely new countries - new countries that need new political systems. Ex-colonial countries have not invariably adopted democratic systems of government. Former British colonies have often done so - the USA, India and Ireland are positive examples - but there are negative examples as well, such as Pakistan. Former Spanish colonies did not immediately develop democratic institutions, even in countries, such as Argentina, that were settled principally from Europe. Nevertheless, the history of decolonisation has seen major changes in the way in which very large numbers of people have been governed.

The defeat of the British Empire in the War of American Independence had particularly important consequences for the history of democracy worldwide. The USA pioneered the presidential system of government, which today is the main alternative to parliamentarianism. A generation later, the success of many former Latin American colonies of Spain and Portugal in securing independence also brought into existence new states and new constitutional systems - although constitutional development was much less successful in Latin America than in the USA. Most Latin American countries adopted hybrid systems that include:

- presidentialism
- continental European systems of administrative law
- a tradition of rule by decree.

Unfortunately, very few systems of this kind have truly consolidated institutionally in the long run.

In 1918, the collapse of the Austro-Hungarian Empire also brought a number of new states into existence. Attempts were made to set up democratic parliamentary systems in most of these new states, but virtually
all of them failed, falling victim to authoritarian forms of politics by the
1930s. Many were then occupied or controlled by the Nazis during 1941–
45. In some cases re-democratisation followed the defeat of Nazi Germany
in 1945 and in others it followed the collapse of Communism in the 1980s.

After the Second World War, the European empires pursued a consistent,
if not always voluntary, policy of decolonisation. The political results
of independence were mixed, but at least some countries adopted and
retained democratic systems. India famously adopted a democratic
parliamentary system in the late 1940s, while some other countries,
notably in Africa, only became democracies in the 1980s ‘wave’, and
sometimes not even then.

**Political consequences of imperial control and
decolonisation prior to 1990**

The effect of imperial collapse upon democratisation was therefore
rather mixed. In some very important cases, the end of empire led to
democratisation, but this was by no means the only outcome. It is clear
that democratisation did spread after the collapse of the former Soviet
Union, but much less clear that the collapse of previous empires had so
general an effect. The consequences of earlier forms of imperial control
and decolonisation in various parts of the world depended upon (among
other things):

- the character of the imperial society
- the extent to which there was settlement from the metropolitan country
- the historical epoch in which the colonising and decolonising took
  place.

In some cases, the impact of colonial rule was utterly destructive.
Indigenous populations in much of the Americas were either totally wiped
out or greatly reduced in number.

In other cases, the colonial power sought to reduce the cost of direct
administration, either by allowing some precolonial patterns of authority
to survive or by developing and transmitting new institutions. This was
done with varying degrees of success in different parts of the world. In
some cases, European colonial powers were able to legitimate their rule,
in the sense that subjects of the empire wished to remain so, at times on
the basis of full-scale integration into the imperial country, but such cases
are extremely few. Sometimes, willing ex-colonies have proved to be more
a source of embarrassment than satisfaction to the colonial power, which
wanted to find an acceptable means of getting rid of a colony eager to
stay in the empire – the Falkland Islands are one example and Gibraltar
another. Of course, the Falklands are populated by British settlers rather
than indigenous people. On the other hand, though, indigenous peoples in
Martinique and French Guyana are content to remain part of France. This
kind of government is not inevitably non-democratic, in the sense that the
French Guyanese vote in French elections and the Falkland Islanders elect
a council of their own.

Far more often, however, the imperial power was unable to persuade
former colonies to remain as colonies. When the opportunity for
independence presented itself, it was generally accepted and sometimes
seized. We can identify four possible ways in which decolonisation
interacted with democratisation:

- continuity and democratisation
Chapter 3: Non-democratic systems and the transition to democracy

- continuity and non-democratisation
- discontinuity and democratisation
- discontinuity and non-democratisation.

Continuity and democratisation

In some cases, independent countries adopted democratic institutions from their former colonial powers (which were themselves democracies). It sometimes mattered that independence was granted and accepted on relatively good terms, though this was not necessarily decisive. Britain retained good relations with India after independence in 1947, and India adopted and maintained a parliamentary system based on the British model. The same was also true of British Honduras, which became known as Belize upon independence in 1981. Nevertheless, the bitterly fought independence movement in Ireland did not preclude Ireland from adopting parliamentary institutions after 1922.

Continuity and non-democratisation

In some cases, the independent country threw off the control of a non-democracy, but did not democratise when it did so. A form of colonial rule that was doubly non-democratic (both because colonialism is not inherently democratic and because the colonial power was not a democracy) then gave way to a non-democratic but local form of post-colonial rule. When Brazil became independent from Portugal in the 1820s, it retained a monarchical system of government. The monarchy was not overthrown until 1889, and Brazil did not really establish a democratic form of government until the 1980s.

Discontinuity and democratisation

The category most relevant to the issue of democratic transition occurred where the collapse of a non-democratic empire led to the adoption of democracy in the newly independent countries. When Soviet rule collapsed in Eastern Europe after 1989, most of the countries of eastern Europe adopted democratic systems of government. They did so partly in reaction to the unpopular Communist system imposed upon them earlier, partly out of a genuine preference for democracy and partly because the new states enjoyed the support of the USA and the European Union. Such cases are illustrations of transition to democracy via imperial collapse.

Discontinuity and non-democratisation

In some cases, newly independent countries seemed likely to adopt democratic parliamentary systems similar to those existing in their former colonial powers, but in the end did not do so. This pattern of abortive democracy is common in Africa, although the past decade has seen significant amounts of re-democratisation in the region. Vietnam and Algeria became independent from France when France was a democracy, but they did not democratise themselves.

Negative legacies of colonialism

Sometimes the impact of colonialism created problems that made it hard for post-colonial countries to become stable democracies. One of the legacies of colonialism was that centralised states and national borders were organised over territories that had not previously known them or that had experienced quite different boundaries at earlier times. Borders that once seemed artificial often remained intact after the ending of colonial rule and tensions often resulted from a poor ‘fit’ between the externally imposed national
borders and the original allegiances of indigenous peoples. Because empires were coercive, they sometimes imposed a single form of rule on ethnically or religiously divided territories. The downfall of such empires has led, at times, to an upsurge in conflict between different ethnic or religious groups as each tried to consolidate its own territorial claims.

Sometimes a clear-cut secession is possible and may appear to resolve the issue (for example, the Czech Republic and Slovakia agreed to separate in 1991). At other times, clear-cut solutions are less easy to find and serious armed conflict may develop. These conflicts did not absolutely prevent subsequent democratisation but they did make it more difficult. Examples include:

- the former republics of Yugoslavia in the 1990s
- Ireland after 1922
- India/Pakistan after 1947.

One might conclude this discussion, therefore, by saying that empires, although they do not often make any successful claim to legitimacy in their own terms, do at times develop institutions that can be transmitted successfully to colonies and kept on after independence. It is often a matter of contingency whether or not this happens, however, and there have been many failures as well as successes. For this reason, the decline of empires - although an opportunity for democratic transition - can also be a time of very great disorder and conflict.

Whether the influence exerted today by the USA over Latin America and by some European countries over parts of Africa can be considered imperial is controversial. What is clear, though, is that attempts by the USA and to some extent Europe to export democracy to various parts of the world have been influential. In southern and eastern Europe, countries that could sustain democratic institutions over the long term could enjoy the prospect of membership of the European Union. Such membership is advantageous on many grounds. In the African case, quite significant amounts of aid have been made conditional on democratisation. The relative importance of this linkage for democracy has varied from case to case and is never preponderant. International bodies do have to work through local agents if they are to succeed and most Africans do prefer democracy. At the very least, however, the international community is much less supportive of non-democracy in the Third World than was once the case. In Latin America, too, international influence has played a part in discouraging dictatorship, although abundant survey evidence shows that most people within the region prefer democracy, and this fact needs to be taken into account as well.

Consequences of the breaking-up of the former Soviet Union in 1991

The central event in the third wave of democratisation was the fall of the former Soviet Union. Although Soviet rule over eastern Europe loosened considerably after 1986, the seminal event here was the breaking up of the former Soviet Union after a failed military coup attempt in 1991. This had three important consequences.

1. Several countries in eastern Europe that would probably have adopted democracy if left to themselves could then do so. The Soviet Union had supported communist rule in eastern Europe and invaded Hungary in 1956 and Czechoslovakia in 1968 in order to preserve communism in the region, but from the late 1980s, the former Soviet Union no longer tried to do so.
2. The decline and eventual disintegration of the former Soviet Union changed the nature of politics in other parts of the world. Communist parties in non-communist countries needed to rethink their ideologies and strategies. This was also true of anti-communists. Some of those who had supported military rule in Latin America because they believed that this was the only way of suppressing communism had to re-evaluate their positions. Similarly, the USA and some European governments, which had previously backed non-democratic rulers in parts of the Third World because they were anti-communist and likely to suppress communism, no longer needed to do so. The USA, in particular, became a global advocate of democratisation and this is also true of the European Union.

3. A number of newly independent republics that had formerly been part of the Soviet Union (though not all of them) subsequently adopted democratic systems of government.

Activity
List the most important European Empires, including the former Soviet Union. Trace out which of their ex-colonies became democracies immediately after independence and which did not.

Other forms of non-democratic organisation
We now turn to countries that have made the transition to democracy without major changes in their basic identity or international relations. There are three fairly common forms of non-democratic rule in the world today:

- monarchy
- military government
- rule via a dominant party system.

We might want to make a further distinction between totalitarian and authoritarian rule, but this will not be discussed in great detail here, because it is not directly relevant to democratisation.

Monarchy
A number of countries are monarchies today, but for many it is in name only, in the sense that the monarch is a figurehead for what is, in practice, parliamentary government. Nepal, Saudi Arabia and the Emirates of the Persian Gulf are still run on monarchical principles, and the King of Thailand exerts real, though not absolute, power in his country.

At first sight, the concept of monarchy might fit perfectly into Weber’s belief that some political systems can be run on the basis of ‘traditional’ legitimation. There can be little doubt that the maintenance of a figurehead monarchy in parliamentary democracies relates to the aim of legitimating political authority among certain sections of the population. Soldiers in the UK are asked to risk their lives for ‘Queen and country’. The appeal of ‘Prime Minister and country’ may be somewhat less. Monarchists in the UK would almost certainly win a referendum on the question of whether the UK should become a republic. It would be far too much to claim that the monarchy in the UK legitimates the political system as a whole, but it probably plays a modest part in the overall process of legitimating state power.
In countries where the monarch actually does rule, it would, by the same token, be too simple to adopt an uncritical definition of traditionalism. Traditionalism usually is, to some degree, contrived and deliberately designed to maintain stability. Another Middle Eastern monarchy – that of Reza Shah II in Iran – could scarcely be seen as traditional at all, although this partially explains its undoing. In 1979, the Shah was overthrown by religious fundamentalists, who did not believe that he was traditional enough.

Most observers have attributed the survival of the Saudi and Gulf monarchies less to the legitimation produced by traditional values than to the neo-patrimonial allocation of resources in oil-rich countries (see Crystal, 1990). In other words, oil money is recycled through these societies as a result of essentially personalist decisions made by the ruling families. The money clearly alleviates social discontent. The deliberate arbitrariness and unpredictability of a system that depends upon individual decision-making creates some degree of insecurity within civil society. As a result, people who need access to public money are less likely to try to organise themselves in order to demand their rights or oppose the government. The objective of all of this from the viewpoint of the rulers is not so much to build political institutions as to avoid the need for them, although family networks remain.

Monarchical systems can, however, undertake the transition to democracy. Sometimes this may occur because of the will of the monarch. A notable example of this occurred in Spain after 1975 when King Juan Carlos made a determined attempt to ensure that his country adopted democratic principles. Although there were some anxious moments, in the end the transition to democracy was a clear success. When this happens, it is likely that the country will retain a constitutional monarchy. Such a system can remain a surprisingly popular form of government as long as the monarch does not seek to undermine the principles of the constitution. At other times, though, monarchs have been opposed to democratisation and have either prevented it from happening or else have fallen from power under pressure from forces demanding change. The most spectacular recent case was the fall of the Shah of Iran in 1979. Since it is hard to think of a smooth and sustained transition to democracy that has also involved the overthrow of a monarchy, it is likely that democratic prospects are enhanced when the monarch supports democratic transition rather than opposes it.

**Military government**

Military rule, like monarchy, is a more complex form of government than it may at first seem. It may indeed appear coercive and repressive. After all it might be said that the whole point of military rule is to introduce policies and forms of governance different from those the people would choose if they could. Often, it is true that the whole purpose of military rule is to block democratic government. Some significant exceptions to this rule do exist, however, and the question of how military rule can give way to democratic government is complex.

Sometimes the military itself initiates democratisation. This may happen because military rulers have got into difficulties and seek some form of extrication. Commonly, a military withdrawal from power occurs on the implicit basis that it could be cancelled or reversed later on. Military officers may be more willing to hand over power to civilians if they think that the new arrangement may only be temporary. Of course, if democracy is to survive, any expectation that the military is handing back power temporarily will have to be changed at a later date. This is, to a degree, what happened in Latin America in the early 1980s. Many officers who
were involved in handing back power to elected civilians did so in the belief that this was just another phase in a cycle of military and civilian rule. Only in retrospect did the transfer appear definite. What needs to be explained, therefore, is less the original decision to hand power back than the inability or unwillingness of the military to organise fresh intervention. The changed international environment may be an important part of the explanation for this.

Another possible pattern of transition occurs when the military seeks to move from a position of outright dictatorship to a position in which they still rule, but in which they do so in a more indirect and therefore theoretically more constitutional way. Sometimes, a move from open dictatorship to semi-dictatorship has appeared to work. General Pinochet in Chile twice won plebiscites – in 1978 and 1980. In the longer run, however, semi-dictatorship is an unstable form of government. By attempting to sustain it, military rulers have often put themselves in positions where they had to give up power altogether. When General Pinochet lost the 1988 plebiscite (his third), he was forced to give up power altogether. By the same token, military officers sometimes prefer one civilian political party to another and they may try to organise democratic transition in such a way as to help their friends. If the military government is unpopular, however, people may vote for a candidate who is seen as the most anti-military of all of those available.

Another reason for the military allowing a transition to democracy is that it sometimes sees no further point in continuing to govern. Military officers are not necessarily anti-democrats in principle – they may have genuine institutional concerns. One reason the military sometimes distrusts democracy has to do with the concept of hierarchy, which is central to the military itself. The military organisation is based on hierarchy, discipline and obedience, not on participation or activism. To that extent, it can be threatened by civil commotion and political militancy. After a period of time, however, it may come to feel that society has changed and the danger has passed. After 1975 the Spanish military was mostly prepared to believe that the circumstances prevailing at the time of the 1936–39 Civil War no longer existed. The decline of communism in the 1980s also persuaded some military officers in South America that they had less to fear from democracy.

A less stable way by which military governments have sometimes tried to adapt to democracy was for officers to make the transition into civilian politics. It is not impossible for officers who have already taken power to organise some kind of political party, provided that they are willing to accept a transition from military to civilian life. Colonel Peron played an important part in the Argentine military coup of 1943, but thereafter behaved much as any civilian politician. Although Peron himself was eventually overthrown by the military in 1955, Peronism was (and is) a successful political movement. Similarly, the Mexican Revolutionary Party was created by successful revolutionary generals willing to operate through a party organisation. Today, the party is wholly civilian. In ex-military or semi-military governments in the Middle East, the instrument of government is a ruling party rather than the military. However, these transitions, real though they were, did not for the most part lead quickly to stable democracy.

Finally, the military may simply be defeated and become unable to maintain itself in power. In this situation, however, political change will not necessarily lead to democracy. In Cuba, the military dictator Batista was overthrown by Fidel Castro in 1959, and in Nicaragua, the military dictator Somoza was overthrown by the Sandinistas in 1979. Neither of these dictatorships was typical of the region – they were much more
personalistic than the majority. However, this does not alter the fact that they were overthrown by force. Nicaragua, after a flirtation with communism, eventually evolved in the direction of democracy; Cuba remains authoritarian. In other cases, political change has been precipitated by defeat by an external force. The Argentine military government fell in 1982–83 following a military defeat by the UK, and democracy returned to Panama after the USA invaded and deposed General Noriega in 1989.

Activity

List the main real-world cases that involved democratisation of monarchical systems and the democratisation of military governments.

Dominant party government

The idea of government by an all-controlling party largely stems from Lenin’s organisation of the Russian Bolsheviks. Lenin set up a Revolutionary party, not in order to compete for power in a democratic system, but rather to seize power from an autocracy. His idea was to create a strongly disciplined elite party composed of professional revolutionaries – a so-called vanguard party. This would, in turn, control a range of other organisations either openly or through clandestinity.

Lenin did not bring about the overthrow of the Tsarist monarchy. He did not expect this to happen, and played little part in it. What he did do was take advantage of the power vacuum that followed the defeat of the Tsar in order to organise the seizure of power. The Bolsheviks were then able to take control of the whole of the Soviet Union and govern until the entire system collapsed at the end of the 1980s.

The idea of a vanguard party was hugely influential in other parts of the world. However, the communist parties in China, Cuba and Yugoslavia differed from the Bolsheviks in that they were originally, in large part, military organisations as well as political ones. Mao, Tito and Castro actually took power by force from pre-existing dictatorships. The military aspect of government in these countries was correspondingly greater than that in the former Soviet Union.

We have already noted that the Communist Party of the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991. Essentially, it was torn apart by internal conflicts between would-be modernisers and traditionalists who wanted to retain the Soviet Empire at all costs. Meanwhile, some of the modernisers had become alienated from the Communist Party and wanted a new kind of political system altogether. Most dominant party systems, however, are run in a very disciplined way by people who understand that internal disunity is likely to have very serious consequences, which is what happened in the former Soviet Union. Of the world’s remaining non-democracies, the most important are based on dominant party systems run by autocratic leaders.

Can Leninist vanguard systems adapt to democratic circumstances? Evidence shows that they can, even though they may not particularly want democracy. The Mexican PRI had many of the characteristics of a dominant party system, although it was able to adapt to democratisation. The same was also true for the former ruling party in Taiwan. Both of these parties were able to retain an essential degree of unity, while moving from being authoritarian parties to parties willing to engage in democratic contestation. Both eventually lost power via the popular vote, but neither disintegrated completely. Both parties continue to play an active part in democratic politics.
Transitions to democracy

It is difficult to theorise about democratic transition on the basis of logical deduction about the strengths and weaknesses of non-democratic forms of rule – so many different possibilities exist. Moreover, subjective factors – such as whether particular individuals prefer democracy or distrust it – may matter as much as objective conditions.

Attempts have been made to discuss democratic transition in more general terms, however.

• A first influential approach is based on ideas about class power and state power.

• A second approach is based on ideas of economic change and assumes that democratisation is associated with economic progress. This kind of approach – known as modernisation theory – is also discussed in the next chapter. It is important to note, however, that a number of quite poor countries have democratised since 1985, and that this is something that modernisation theory on its own would have failed to predict.

• A third approach refuses to consider general ideas and puts a lot of emphasis on the detail of individual cases (see di Palma, 1990). If 50 countries have democratised in the past 15 years, there are likely to be 50 different combinations of factors responsible. This approach is valuable as a corrective, and it reminds us that democratisation is something that has to be brought about by political practitioners: it does not just happen by itself. Yet, if there were no general influences, one would expect democratisation to be something of a random process.

In point of fact, democratisation has generally occurred in waves rather than as a set of random events. We do need, therefore, to consider changes in international politics. These are not the only relevant factors, but they clearly matter and they are capable of being analysed in reasonably general terms.

A reminder of your learning outcomes

Having completed this chapter, and the Essential reading and activities, you should be able to:

• explain the main problems and difficulties that are likely to be associated with democratising each system of government discussed in this chapter (empire, monarchy, military government and dominant party rule)

• explain how transition could happen in different kinds of non-democratic political system.

Sample examination questions

1. Under what circumstances are empires most likely to be able to transmit effective political institutions?

2. ‘Whether or not monarchies can democratise rather depends on the monarch.’ Discuss.

3. What are the main problems that arise when military regimes try to control the handing over of power to their preferred democratic candidates?

4. ‘Dominant party systems are authentic political institutions, but they do not always survive democratisation.’ Discuss.