
**The Future of Representative
Democracy**

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Democracy, a short history©

By John Keane

Origins

Democracy commonly refers to a type of political system in which the people or their representatives lawfully govern themselves, rather than being governed, say, by a military dictatorship, totalitarian party or monarch. In recent decades, democracy in this sense has enjoyed unprecedented popularity. Democracy has become one of those English words - along with computer and OK - familiar to many millions of people around the world. Some observers speak of a global victory for democracy or claim that democracy is now a universal good. Yet what the word means and whether and why democracy is to be preferred over its rivals continues to be disputed. Opinions remain divided about whether actually existing democracies like the United States or Britain or India or Argentina live up to their democratic ideals. These ideals are also controversial. The most common disagreement is between the advocates of 'participatory' or 'direct' democracy, understood as the participation of all citizens in decisions that affect their lives, for

instance by voting and accepting a majority verdict; and those who favour 'indirect' or 'representative' democracy, a method of governing in which people choose (through voting and the public expression of their opinions) representatives who decide things on their behalf.

The beginning of wisdom in such disputes is to see that democracy, like all other human inventions, has a history. Democratic values and institutions are never set in stone; even the meaning of democracy changes through time. During its first historical phase, which began in ancient Mesopotamia (c. 2,500 BCE) and stretched through classical Greece and Rome to the rise and maturation of Islamic civilization around 950 CE, democracy was associated with the creation and diffusion of public assemblies. During these centuries, nobody knows who invented the term or exactly where and when the word 'democracy' was first used. It is commonly thought that it is of classical Greek origin, but new research shows that the feminine noun *dēmokratia* (meaning the rule of the people: from *dēmos*, 'the people', and *kratein*, 'to rule') has much older roots. It is traceable to the Linear B script of the Mycenaean period, seven to ten centuries earlier, to the late Bronze Age civilization (c. 1500-1200 BCE) that was centred on Mycenae and other urban settlements of the Peloponnese. Exactly how and when the Mycenaeans invented terms like *damos* (a group of people who hold land in common) and *damokoi* (an official linked to the *damos*) is unclear, but it is probable that the family of terms we use today when speaking of democracy have Eastern origins, for instance in the ancient Sumerian references to the *dumu*, the 'inhabitants' or 'sons' or 'children' of a geographic place.

The uncertainty surrounding the origins of the language of democracy is tempered by the discovery by contemporary archaeologists that the practice of self-governing assemblies is not a Greek invention. The custom of popular self-government was born of the 'East', of peoples and lands that geographically correspond to contemporary Iraq and Iran. Assemblies were later transplanted eastwards, towards the Indian sub-continent; they travelled westwards as well, first to city states like Byblos and Sidon, then to Athens, where during the fifth century BCE they were claimed as something unique to the West, as a sign of its superiority over the 'barbarism' of the East. By the 5th century BCE, in Athens and scores of other Greek city states, democracy meant self-government through an assembly of equal male citizens who gathered in a marketplace or town district for the purpose of discussing some matter, putting different opinions to the vote and deciding, often by a majority of raised hands, what course of action was to be taken. According to the Greek philosopher Aristotle (384-322 BCE), democracy was self-government among equals, who rule and are ruled in turn. Democracy was the lawful rule of an assembly of male citizens - women, slaves and foreigners

were normally excluded - whose sovereign power to decide things was no longer to be given over to imaginary gods, or an aristocracy, or to bloodthirsty tyrants.

So understood, democracy implied that within the political order questions concerning who gets what, when and how should remain permanently open. That in turn required certain political customs and institutions. These included written laws, the payment of elected officials, the freedom to speak in public, voting machines, voting by lot, and trial before elected or selected juries. It also required efforts to stop bossy leaders in their tracks by using such peaceful methods as limited terms of office and - in an age yet without political parties, or recall and impeachment procedures - the ostracism of demagogues from the assembly by majority vote. The first phase of democracy also saw the earliest experiments in creating second chambers (called *damiorgoi* in some Greek city states) and confederations of democratic governments co-ordinated through a joint assembly called a *myrioi*, as proposed by the Arcadians during the 360s BCE. Towards the close of its first phase, the democratic tradition was enriched by contributions from the Islamic world. It was responsible for the spread of a culture of printing and efforts to cultivate self-governing associations, such as endowment societies (the *waqf*) and the mosque and, in the field of economic life, partnerships that were legally independent of rulers. Islam also cultivated the defence of shared virtues like toleration, mutual respect among sceptics and believers in the sacred, and the duty of rulers to respect others' interpretations of life.

Representative Democracy

From around the tenth century CE, democracy entered a second historical phase whose centre of gravity was Europe. Shaped by forces as varied as the rebirth of towns, the rise (in northern Spain) of the first parliaments, and the conflicts unleashed by self-governing councils and religious dissent within the Christian Church, democracy came to be understood as *representative democracy*. This at least was the term that began to be used in France and England and the new American republic during the eighteenth century, for instance by constitution makers and influential political writers when referring to a new type of government with its roots in popular consent. Again, nobody knows who first spoke of 'representative democracy', though one political writer and thinker who broke new ground was the French nobleman who had been foreign minister under Louis XV, the Marquis d'Argenson (1694-1757). He was perhaps the first to tease out the new meaning of democracy as representation. 'False democracy', he noted in his *Considérations sur le gouvernement ancien et present de la France* (1765), 'soon

collapses into anarchy. It is government of the multitude; such is a people in revolt, insolently scorning law and reason. Its tyrannical despotism is obvious from the violence of its movements and the uncertainty of its deliberations. In *true democracy*, one acts through deputies, who are authorised by election; the mission of those elected by the people and the authority that such officials carry constitute the public power.’

This was a brand new way of thinking about democracy, by which was meant a type of government in which people, understood as voters faced with a genuine choice between at least two alternatives, are free to elect others who then act in defence of their interests, that is, *represent* them by deciding matters on their behalf. Much ink and blood was to be spilled in defining what exactly representation meant, who was entitled to represent whom and what had to be done when representatives disregarded those whom they were supposed to represent. But common to the second historical phase of democracy was the belief that good government was government by representatives. Often contrasted with monarchy, representative democracy was praised as a way of governing better by openly airing differences of opinion – not only among the represented themselves, but also between representatives and those whom they are supposed to represent. Representative government was also hailed for encouraging the rotation of leadership guided by merit. It was said to introduce competition for power that in turn enabled elected representatives to test out their political competence before others. The earliest champions of representative democracy also offered a more pragmatic justification of representation. It was seen as the practical expression of a simple reality : that it wasn’t feasible for all of the people to be involved all of the time, even if they were so inclined, in the business of government. Given that reality, the people must delegate the task of government to representatives who are chosen at regular elections. The job of these representatives is to monitor the spending of public money. Representatives make representations on behalf of their constituents to the government and its bureaucracy. Representatives debate issues and make laws. They decide who will govern and how – on behalf of the people.

As a way of naming and handling power, representative democracy was an unusual type of political system. It rested upon written constitutions, independent judiciaries and laws that guaranteed procedures that still play vital roles in the democracies of today : inventions like *habeas corpus* (prohibitions upon torture and imprisonment), periodic election of candidates to legislatures, limited-term holding of political offices, voting by secret ballot, referendum and recall, electoral colleges, competitive political parties, ombudsmen, civil society and civil liberties such as the right to assemble in public, and liberty of the press. Compared with the previous, assembly-based form, representative democracy greatly extended the

geographic scale of institutions of self-government. As time passed, and despite its localised origins in towns, rural districts and large-scale imperial settings, representative democracy came to be housed mainly within territorial states protected by standing armies and equipped with powers to make and enforce laws and to extract taxes from their subject populations. These states were typically much bigger and more populous than the political units of ancient democracy. Most states of the Greek world of assembly democracy, Mantinea and Argos for instance, were no bigger than a few score square kilometres. Many modern representative democracies - including Canada (9.98 million square kilometres), the United States (9.63 million square kilometres), and the largest electoral constituency in the world, the vast rural division of Kalgoorlie in the federal state of Western Australia that comprises 82,000 voters scattered across an area of 2.3 million square kilometres - were incomparably larger.

The changes leading to the formation of representative democracy were neither inevitable nor politically uncontested. Representative democracy was in fact born of many and different power conflicts, many of them bitterly fought in opposition to ruling groups, whether they were church hierarchies, landowners or imperial monarchies, often in the name of 'the people'. Exactly who were 'the people' proved to be a deep source of controversy throughout the era of representative democracy. The second age of democracy witnessed the birth of neologisms, like 'aristocratic democracy' (that first happened in the Low Countries at the end of the sixteenth century) and new references (beginning in the United States) to 'republican democracy'. Later came 'social democracy' and 'liberal democracy' and 'Christian democracy', even 'bourgeois democracy', 'workers' democracy' and 'socialist democracy'. These new terms corresponded to the many kinds of struggles by groups for equal access to governmental power that resulted, sometimes by design and sometimes by simple accident or unintended consequence, in institutions and ideals and ways of life that had no precedent. Written constitutions based on a formal separation of powers, periodic elections and parties and different electoral systems were new. So too was the invention of 'civil societies' founded on new social habits and customs – experiences as varied as dining in a public restaurant, or controlling one's temper by using polite language - and new associations that citizens used to keep an arm's length from government by using non-violent weapons like liberty of the printing press, publicly circulated petitions, and covenants and constitutional conventions called to draw up new constitutions.

This period unleashed what the French writer and politician Alexis de Tocqueville (1805-1859) famously called a 'great democratic revolution' in favour of political and social equality. Spreading from the Atlantic region, this revolution often

suffered setbacks and reversals, especially in Europe, where it was mainly to collapse in the early decades of the twentieth century. The democratic revolution was fuelled by rowdy struggles and breathtaking acts, like the public execution in England of King Charles I. Such events called into question the anti-democratic prejudices of those – the rich and powerful - who supposed that inequalities among people were ‘natural’. New groups, like slaves, women and workers, won the franchise. At least on paper, representation was eventually democratised, stretched to include all of the population. But such stretching happened with great difficulty and against great odds. Even then it was permanently on trial; in more than a few cases, the United States in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries included, the definition of representation was actually narrowed by withdrawing the right to vote from certain groups, particularly black and poor people.

Not until the very end of this second phase - during the early decades of the twentieth century - did the right to vote for representatives come to be seen as a *universal* entitlement. That happened first for adult men and later – usually much later – for all adult women. But even then, as the experiences of totalitarianism and military dictatorship show, the opponents of democratic representation fought hard and with considerable success against its perceived inefficiencies, its fatal flaws and supposed evils. They demonstrated that democracy in any form was not inevitable – that it had no built-in historical guarantees.

Complex Democracy

What is happening to actually existing representative democracies? Do they have a secure future? Are they suffering decline, or transformation into something that resembles ‘post-democracy’? Does democracy remain a viable ideal?

Such questions today command widespread interest because representative democracies are subject to new trends and contradictory pressures. In the emerging era of ‘complex democracy’, which dates roughly from the mid-twentieth century, democracy has become a global force. The case of India, where in 1950 the world’s first-ever large-scale democracy was created among materially impoverished peoples of multiple faiths, many different languages and low rates of literacy, is a key symbol of this change. Data shows that in the year 1900, when monarchies and empires predominated, there were no states that could be judged as representative democracies by the standard of universal suffrage for competitive multi-party elections. By 1950, with the military defeat of Nazism and the

beginnings of de-colonization and the post-war reconstruction of Europe and Japan, there were 22 democracies accounting for 31 per cent of the world's population. By the end of the twentieth century, waves of democracy had lapped the shores of Latin America, post-communist Europe and parts of Africa and Asia. At least on paper, out of 192 countries, 119 resembled representative democracies (58.2% of the globe's population), with 85 of these countries (38% of the world's inhabitants) enjoying forms of political democracy respectful of basic human rights, freedom of the press and the rule of law.

In the era of complex democracy, not only are the language and ideals and institutions of democracy, for the first time in history, becoming familiar to people living within most regions of the earth, regardless of their nationality, religion or civilisation. Not only is there new talk of 'global democracy' and democracy as a 'universal value' (Amartya Sen). For the first time, racial prejudice has also begun to be extracted from the ideals of democracy, such that many democrats now find themselves embarrassed or angered by talk of 'backward' or 'uncivilised' or 'naturally inferior' peoples. There are signs as well that the theory and practice of democracy are mutating, that its significance is changing because its institutions are being stretched into areas of life in which democracy in any form was previously excluded, or played little or no role. Once seen as given by the grace of a deity, democracy is viewed pragmatically as a handy weapon for use against concentrations of unaccountable power. It comes to have a new meaning : the public accountability and public control of decision makers, whether they operate in the field of state or interstate institutions or within so-called non-governmental or civil society organisations, such as businesses, trade unions, sports associations and charities.

In the age of complex democracy, assembly-based and representative mechanisms are mixed and combined with new ways of publicly monitoring and controlling the exercise of power. Representative forms of government do not simply wither, or disappear. Representative democracy within the framework of territorial states often survives, and in some countries it even thrives, sometimes (as in Mongolia, Taiwan and South Africa) for the first time ever. Representative government has also sometimes been enriched, as in the civic involvement and clean-up schemes (*machizukuri*) in Japanese cities such as Yokohama and Kawasaki during the past two decades. But for a variety of reasons related to public pressure and the need to reduce corruption and the abuse of power, representative democracy is coming to be supplemented (and hence complicated) by a variety of democratic procedures that are applied to organisations other than states. New combinations of assembly-based and representative and other democratic procedures begin to spread

underneath and beyond these states. Forums, summits, parliaments for minorities, judicial review and citizens' juries are some examples. Others include public enquiries, congresses, blogging and other new forms of media scrutiny, as well as open methods of co-ordination, of the kind practised in the European Union.

Experiments with extending democracy within the institutions of civil society, into areas of life 'beneath' the institutions of territorial states, are much in evidence, so that organisations like the International Olympic Committee, whose membership is otherwise self-selecting, are governed by executive bodies that are subject to election by secret ballot, by a majority of votes cast, for limited terms of office. With the help of new communication media, including satellite television and the internet ('e-democracy'), the public monitoring of international organisations of government is also growing. Bodies such as the World Trade Organisation, the United Nations, and the European Commission find themselves under permanent or intermittent scrutiny by outside bodies, their own legal procedures, and by public protests.

These trends towards complex democracy are to a varying degree subject everywhere to counter-trends. The third age of democracy is plagued by growing social inequality and troubled by the visible decline of political party membership and, especially among young people and the poor, fluctuating turnout at elections and growing disrespect for 'politicians' and official 'politics', even boycotts and satirical campaigns against all parties and candidates. Whether and how democracies can adjust to the new world of campaign mega-advertising, political 'spin' and corporate global media is proving equally challenging. Just as perplexing is the issue – felt strongly in countries as different as India and Taiwan and Canada – of whether and how democracies can come to terms with their 'multi-cultural' societies. The coming of an age of 'silver democracy', in which growing numbers of citizens live to ripe old ages in conditions of growing material and emotional insecurity, is likely to be just as daunting. Then there are the deep-seated trends for which there is no historical precedent, and no easy solutions, like the rise of the United States as the world's first democratic empire; the spread of uncivil wars; rising fears about the biosphere; and the proliferation of new forms of violence and new weapons systems with killing power many times greater than that of all democracies combined.

Pressured by such trends, does democracy have a future? The nineteenth-century American poet and writer, Walt Whitman (1819-1892), famously noted that the history of democracy could not be written because democracy as he and others knew it was not yet properly built. From the standpoint of the early twenty-first century, and the possible emergence of a more complex understanding and practice

of democracy, the same point can be put differently: we do not know what will become of democracy because its fate has not yet been determined.

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