

Key Values

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The International IDEA Handbook identifies the key values of democracy as popular control and political equality, and it suggests further, that individual liberty and several other values are subsumed within these two. The contested character of modern democracy suggests a more complex view, as does the fact that there are some obstacles to popular control and political equality which many democrats hold to be important. A democratic audit can make a more effective contribution to political debate if it takes account of these complexities.

For the greater part of its history, up to the period of the American and French revolutions in the late eighteenth century, democracy was seen as one of three basic forms of the government of a state, the others being monarchy and aristocracy – government by the one or by the few. Democracy meant government by the many, that is by the people (the citizens) themselves, although the term was sometimes used in a more general sense to mean any form of government in which power was distributed more broadly than in an aristocracy. Mixed constitutions were often thought to have a democratic element – an example being the House of Commons in eighteenth-century Britain, despite the fact that only a small minority at that time had the right to vote. Most of those who had anything at all to say about democracy in the narrow sense thought that it would be a remarkably unsatisfactory form of government. They took this view for two fundamental reasons.

One reason is simply that government by the people (the citizens) themselves required the citizens to gather together so that they could consider and vote upon the various issues facing the government of their state – something that was difficult to arrange even in the small city states of classical Greece. Democracy, on this view, would be possible only in a state with a small population base whose territory extended over a limited geographical area. A state of this kind, it was thought, would be simply unable to compete with, and would have difficulty defending itself against, the most powerful states of the time – England, the absolutist monarchies and the Dutch republic. Underlying this view is a belief about the state that is now almost taken for granted, namely, that an effective state requires a substantial population base. Indeed, most of the really small states in the world

today are unable to maintain an effective apparatus of government without substantial outside support and the few that do, like Iceland or Singapore, are too large to be democracies in the classical sense.

The other reason reflects the powerful distrust of the people – of the poor and, for the most part, poorly educated majority – which has always been a central feature of Western political thought. It is easy to understand why the rich and powerful, who can never be more than a small minority in the population of any state, might dislike the idea of government by the majority. While it may be tempting to see resistance to that idea by political leaders in the past as a straightforward reflection of self-interest, there is another significant component to the traditional distrust of the people which also deserves our attention. This concerns the classical view that a true form of government is one that operates according to its own proper purpose or *telos*. In the case of the state, Aristotle tells us, the only true forms of government are those ‘which have a regard to the common interest’, the others being ‘defective or perverted’ (*The Politics*, 1279a, 17-21).

Aristotle sometimes uses the term 'democracy' to refer, not to rule by the citizens as a whole but rather to what he sees as a perverted form of their rule, that is, to a government dominated by the short-term interests and prejudices of the poor and uncultivated majority, and therefore by the populist appeals of unprincipled demagogues (1279b, 4-10). Here democracy is contrasted unfavourably to other forms of rule in which the cultivated minority are able to ensure that the government of the state does indeed 'have a regard to the common interest'.

Now, this classical fear of the people also appears in the early arguments (in France and in England's colonies in North America) in favour of representative government. Consider, for example, James Madison's reflections on the dangerous vice of faction, which he defines as

a number of citizens, whether amounting to a majority or minority of the whole, who are united and actuated by some common impulse of passion, or of interest, adverse to the rights of other citizens, or to the permanent and aggregate interests of the community. (*Federalist*, #10)

For our purposes, the most interesting feature of this definition is the suggestion that the

citizens cannot be trusted to identify the 'permanent and aggregate interests of the community', that those interests might in fact be betrayed by the citizens themselves.

Madison was fundamentally opposed to democracy, which he understood in precisely the sense outlined above, but he nevertheless presented himself as a 'friend of popular government'. The system of popular rule he had in mind, which he called a republic, was to be organised on the basis of representative government. A republic was a form of constitutional state in which much of the business of government was conducted by representatives chosen by the people, but not by the people themselves. For this reason, he argued, a republic would be able to avoid the two central problems of democracy: first, representative government could be adapted to the government of large populations and territorial areas and, secondly, it ensured 'the total exclusion of the people, in their collective form, from any share' in the work of government (op. cit, #63). Tom Paine makes a similar point about the merits of representation when he celebrates the American system of rule as one in which 'representation [was] ingrafted upon Democracy' (1989, p. 170), to produce a combined and, in his view, vastly superior form of government.

This conception of representative government, as a form of popular rule in which the people nevertheless play no direct part in the work of government, seems paradoxical and it is worth reflecting on what its advocates had in mind. On the one hand, representative government can be regarded as a form of popular rule because it is clearly not a matter of government by a King or an aristocracy. If, as the Greeks had taught, a state must be governed by the one, the few or the many, then representative government does not fall readily into either of the first two categories and it can therefore be presented as a special case of the third, that is, of rule by the many. On this view, then, representative government should be expected not to exhibit the all too familiar forms of corruption that were seen as characteristic of rule by the one or the few.

On the other hand, because it placed the work of government in the hands of elected representatives and unelected public servants, representative government ensures that government is not in the hands of the people themselves. It seems, in other words, to promise the best of all governmental worlds: to avoid the specific forms of corruption associated with government by the one or the few while avoiding the dangers of arbitrary rule by the people themselves.

Two meanings of democracy

It was only in the early nineteenth century that representative government began to be described, contrary to Madison's understanding of the term, as democracy, and this novel sense of democracy (as representative government) has since come to dominate academic and political discussion. When Western states and the international agencies which they control promote democracy in other parts of the world, it is this system of government by representatives and unelected public servants that they have in mind: a form of popular rule that keeps the people at a considerable distance from the actual work of government. Thus the growing support for democracy in the West itself since the early nineteenth century and the more recent Western promotion of democratic government in other parts of the world should not be seen as indicating that the older suspicion of democracy has finally been discarded in favour of a more enlightened perspective on popular rule. On the contrary, it has now been incorporated into the meaning of democracy itself.

What is distinctive, then, about the modern understanding of democracy as representative government is that while celebrating the original democratic idea of rule by the people it also endorses the traditional hostility to democracy. Representative government reflects both of these elements: it is not a matter of an antagonistic relationship, in which a gain to one side means a loss to the other, but rather of their simultaneous realisation in the one set of institutions. Thus, the institutions of representative government that embody the principle of popular rule – elections, political parties, representative assemblies and public service bureaucracies – serve also to exclude the people from the practical work of government.

This understanding of democracy both draws upon and denies the earlier meaning of the term - and conversely, far from being entirely displaced, the latter finds itself in a position that is both supportive and critical of modern democracy. We now find ourselves, in effect, with two conflicting images of democracy. It is seen, on the one hand, as a system of representative government which combines a limited involvement of the people in their government, mainly through periodic elections, with a rigorous separation of the people from their government in most other respects and, on the other, as directly involving the people themselves in governmental decision-making. The latter's promise to domesticate political power underlies the appeal of democracy to the poor and

disadvantaged in many parts of the world while in the West it fosters a persistent democratic critique of modern democracy.

The values of modern democracy

I have suggested that, alongside the commitment to a limited form of popular rule, the classical fear of the people has also been incorporated into the dominant modern understanding of democracy. To the extent that this fear has any basis in principle – rather than simply reflecting the interests of the rich and powerful - it draws on the Aristotelian view, noted earlier, that true forms of government ‘have a regard to the common interest’, while other forms of government are ‘defective or perverted’¹. Thus, one of the values of modern democracy is to protect the common interest against the misplaced enthusiasms of the majority – and, more generally, against sectional interests of other kinds. In modern democracies, the common interest has usually understood as including the protection of individual liberty and private property and some degree of equality of opportunity, but in other respects its content is highly contentious.

Our democratic audit should acknowledge both the centrality of this value to modern democracy and the fact that it cuts across the values of popular control and political equality. The *IDEA Handbook* suggests (p. 14) that liberty is subsumed within the other two values. The record of Calvin’s Geneva or the democratic New England communities described in Tocqueville’s *Democracy in America* suggests a more complex story. Adding a third key value may complicate the audit process but it should also make the audit more interesting.

This is hardly the place to move from a statement of value to the outline of a set of empirical indicators. The Indicators for liberty and equality of opportunity are (relatively) straight forward, but in other respects the issue is probably best addressed by seeking indicators, not for the elusive – and inevitably contentious - concept of common interest itself, but rather for the influence of other interests on the work of government. The issue to be investigated, in other words, is how far the limits to popular control in fact facilitate

the intrusion of sectional interests, including those of political leaders and parties. We intend to address this issue under the general heading of corruption

IDEA's listing of political equality as a democratic value raises issues of a different kind, and it would take far too long to address them properly here. For the moment, let me just say that the modern commitment to individual liberty, understood as including associated property rights, sets severe limits to the practical achievement of political equality. When Robert Dahl laments, in *Who Governs?*, that New Haven is 'a long way from achieving the goal of political equality advocated by the philosophers of democracy [which] practically every American professes to uphold' (1961: 86), he is concerned not primarily with the inequality of voting rights but rather with the existence of significant forms of political influence that operate outside of the electoral process.

But the more important point to make here is that Dahl's lament misrepresents the views of many advocates of democracy and also, I suspect, of a very large number of Americans. As Gordon Wood observes in his review of Dahl's most recent book, the inequalities 'produced by differences of money, education, and other means of political access ... are far more important than any inequality produced by the Constitution' (NYRB, 9 May 2002). To address these inequalities would involve political changes far more radical than most Americans (or most inhabitants of other Western societies) would be willing to contemplate.

Modern democracy is clearly committed to political equality, but always within certain limits. (The same, in fact, was true of Athenian democracy – but that is another story). Electoral equality is an important part of what is involved in modern democracy but this should be seen, I suspect, less as a matter of popular control over government than of a first line of defense against oppressive government action. (This is the basis of Jeremy Bentham's and James Mill's support for representative government – except when it comes to the peoples of India and other British colonies.) This defensive argument in fact requires something more than simply one vote: one value. Members of unpopular or disadvantaged minorities might also require forms of representation that go beyond majoritarianism if they are to be able to ensure that their voices are heard in the

¹ *ibid.*, 1279a, 17-21

development of public policies which affect them.

One clue to what else might be involved in political equality can be found in Rousseau's claim that equality between citizens

should not be taken to imply that degrees of power and wealth should be absolutely the same for all, but rather that power shall stop short of violence and never be exercised except by virtue of authority and law, and, where wealth is concerned, that no citizen be rich enough to buy another, and none so poor as to be forced to sell himself. (1986, p. 96)

Citizens of modern democracies may not be able to buy other citizens, but some of them are able to purchase services from lawyers and spin doctors which set them apart from the majority of other citizens in a way that is hard to reconcile with any worthwhile sense of political equality.

Bill Connolly offers another clue when he identifies, as one of two egalitarian goals:

to establish a glass ceiling that is difficult to break through. Such a ceiling would impede economically privileged minorities from constructing costly private escapes from the general conditions of education, crime, military service and the environment ... (1995, p. 81)

The existence of such privileged minorities signals another unacceptable form of political inequality.