
UNIT 2 DEMOCRACY

Structure

- 2.1 Introduction: The Origins of the Democratic Ideal
- 2.2 Historical Background
- 2.3 The Conceptual Family of Democracy: Autonomy, Equality, and Liberty
- 2.4 Justifications for Democracy: Intrinsic and Instrumental
- 2.5 Democracy: Procedural and Substantive
- 2.6 Types of Democracy: Representative Democracy and its Critics, Participatory Democracy, Deliberative Democracy, Social Democracy and Cosmopolitan Democracy
- 2.7 Summary
- 2.8 Exercises

2.1 INTRODUCTION: THE ORIGINS OF THE DEMOCRATIC IDEAL

In 1992, 2500 years of democracy were enthusiastically celebrated all over the world. This was an unusual celebration because, while anniversaries of statesmen, revolutions and the founding of nations are quite commonly celebrated, no other political ideal has ever been celebrated in this way. Also, democracy in the modern world is quite different from democracy as it was practised in ancient Greece 2500 years ago. The democratic ideas and practices with which we are here concerned belong to the modern world, but it would be useful to briefly note the chief features of democracy in the city-state of Athens - widely considered to be the most stable, enduring and model form of democracy in Greece - in ancient times.

The word democracy itself is of Greek origin. The Greek word *demokratia* is a combination of the words *demos* (meaning the people) and *kratos* (meaning rule). This gives democracy its meaning as a form of government in which the people rule, whether directly - through personal participation - or indirectly, through elected representatives. The main difference between ancient and modern democracies, of course, is in the way in which 'the people' were defined. In the ancient Greek polity, the 'demos' was rather restrictively defined, and notably excluded three main categories of persons: the slaves, women, and *metics* (the foreigners who lived and worked in the city-state). This meant that barely a quarter of the total population were members of the citizen body. Nevertheless, the direct participation of a 40,000 strong citizen body was no mean achievement.

The actual career of Athenian democracy was fairly troubled, as aristocrats, generals and demagogues made periodic attempts to control power. Their contempt for the poor - described as 'the mob' or 'the rabble' - finds echoes in the modern world, where democracy was achieved through struggle, and against considerable odds. Indeed, the struggle for democracy everywhere and throughout history, has been simultaneously a struggle against political inequality based on, and justified by, inequalities of birth and wealth.

At its best, however, Athenian democracy conveys an impressive picture of direct participation

by citizens in the assembly which deliberated and took decisions on all policy matters, and met on as many as 300 days in the year. Citizens also participated directly in the government, as they were chosen by lot to serve in official administrative and judicial positions.

2.2 HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Democracy has been described as one of the “characteristic institutions of modernity”, and as such it was the result of a complex and intertwined processes of ideological, social and economic change. In Britain, this change was signalled by the Industrial Revolution that began in the middle of the eighteenth century, while in France and America it was launched by the political revolutions in the last quarter of the same century.

Britain is regarded as the first modern democracy because, in the aftermath of the Civil War in the seventeenth century, royal absolutism was brought to an end, and powers were transferred from the crown to the two houses of parliament, of which one, the House of Commons, was an elected chamber. Though the franchise continued to be highly restricted - based on ownership of property - control of the executive had effectively passed to a loose coalition of the aristocracy and the bourgeoisie, such that political conflict was, henceforth, peacefully conducted between the competing elites. It was only in the nineteenth century that the expansion of suffrage took place, beginning with the enfranchisement of the upper middle classes in the Reform Act of 1832. This was followed by the gradual extension of the franchise to the working classes, largely as a response to the pressure of political struggles by the working-class and radical movements like Chartism. By the last quarter of the nineteenth century, and three Reform Acts later, about two-thirds of the male population stood enfranchised. It was, however, not until 1929 that women secured the right to vote, and universal adult suffrage was fully achieved only in 1948, when plural voting was abolished in favour of the principle of one-person one-vote.

In France, the more radical tradition of democracy was inaugurated by the Revolution of 1789, with its stirring call of Liberty-Equality-Fraternity, and its emphasis on the principle of popular sovereignty. The Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen proclaimed the rights of personal liberty, freedom of thought and religion, security of property and political equality as the natural and imprescriptible entitlements not merely of French citizens, but of ‘mankind’ at large. Initially, the revolutionary constitution of 1791 established something akin to universal male suffrage, and even the property requirement for the right to vote was low enough to exclude only domestic servants, vagrants and beggars. Thus, four million male citizens won the right to vote in 1791, but four years later, more restrictive property requirements were introduced, bringing down the number of voters to just 100,000 prosperous taxpayers. Universal male suffrage was reintroduced only after the revolution of 1848, and universal adult franchise only a century later in 1946, when women won the right to vote.

In the United States of America too, the advance of democracy in the aftermath of the Civil War was restricted to white men, and the enfranchisement of women, as also of indigenous and black people was not achieved until the twentieth century. Nevertheless, the Declaration of Independence (1776) was the document that simultaneously effected the legal creation of the United States of America, and that of democracy in that country. Though slavery continued to be practised until the mid-nineteenth century, the American Revolution did give the modern world its first democratic government and society. Hereditary power - of monarchy and aristocracy alike - were overthrown as a republican government, in which all citizens were at least notionally equal, was put in place. An important institutional mechanism of the separation of powers between the three branches of government - the executive, the legislature and the

judiciary - was also effected, making it difficult for any one branch to exercise arbitrary or untrammelled power.

The political ideas of the Levellers, John Locke and Tom Paine, and documents like the 'French Declaration of the Rights of Man (1789)', and the 'American Declaration of Independence (1776)', expressed the important ideas and principles that have underpinned democracy in the modern world. These writings and documents are also often seen as charters of liberalism, and liberalism was indeed an important handmaiden of democracy at this time. This is why it is not surprising that the beginnings of democratic theory are distinguished by a strong emphasis on the concept of liberty, rather than the concept of equality with which it later came to be identified. As their name indicates, the Levellers in seventeenth century England advanced a radical conception of popular sovereignty and civil liberties. Interrogating property ownership as the basis for political rights, they advocated a nearly universal male suffrage, though - echoing ancient Athens - servants and criminals, apart from women, were to be excluded.

John Locke's *Second Treatise on Government* (1681) is an important source book of classical liberal ideas. In this work, Locke presents an account of a hypothetical state of nature, governed by a Law of Nature, which mandates that no individual ought to harm another in life, health, liberty or possessions. The natural equality of men - stemming not from any equality of endowment in terms of virtue or excellence, but from the fact that they are all equally creatures of God - gives them the equal right to freedom. Though this state of nature is governed by a Law of Nature that endorses these rights, there is no agency to administer and enforce this law. Therefore, to prevent others from invading their rights or to exact retribution for such invasions, men will enforce the law as *they* interpret it. In a state of nature that is largely characterised by peace and mutual assistance, the absence of such an agency contains endless possibilities for conflict, and these are the chief inconveniences of the state of nature, which is therefore transcended through a social contract. This social contract, founded in the consent of every individual, is the basis of legitimate government. Civil law must now conform to the eternal rule that is natural law, and thus, the purpose of political society and of government is the preservation of the life, liberty and property of individuals (and Locke accordingly supplements this account with a defense of private property). If the government fails to discharge the purposes for which it was created, the people have the right to resist and replace it. It is this statement of the core principles of classical liberalism - individualism, popular sovereignty and limited government - that provided the foundation for liberal democracy.

These principles were also celebrated in the American Declaration of Independence (1776), which followed Locke in describing as natural and inalienable the rights to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness (the last widely interpreted as an euphemism for property). The continued exclusion of slaves and women from the category of those who possessed such rights is only one example of the contradiction between the universalism of liberal principles and the selectivity of liberal practices.

The French Declaration of the Rights of Man (1789) reflected the republican spirit of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, in idealising citizenship by presenting individuals as public-spirited members of a community. For Rousseau, however, representative government simply was not good enough, and the only form of free government was direct democracy in which citizens would participate directly. Of course, Rousseau was aware that gross inequalities of wealth as well as large political communities were obstacles to popular sovereignty, while liberty, welfare and public education in the context of a small city-state provided the ideal conditions for democracy.

However, it has now come to be recognised that the link between liberalism and democracy is

not a necessary one. Liberal-democracy may be seen as a historically specific form of democracy, based on a culturally specific theory of individuation. It combines liberalism as a theory of the state with democracy as a form of government. As such, for societies that attach greater significance to the community than to the individual, the democratic part of liberal-democracy (such as free elections and freedom of speech) may be adopted without the liberal component. It has, thus, become possible today to speak not only of different paths to democracy, but also of different ways of being democratic, or even being “differently democratic”.

The twentieth century saw an unparalleled extension of democracy in terms of both its *inclusiveness* as well as its *spatial expansion*. Beginning with the extension of the suffrage to women in the older western democracies, and ending with the dismantling of apartheid in South Africa, democracy in the twentieth century became more inclusive. This phenomenon has been described in terms of “waves of democratisation”. The democratisation of many countries in Europe in the nineteenth century is viewed as the first wave of democratisation. The second wave is dated to the period following World War I, when many countries of Europe – including those of Scandinavia – became democratic. The third wave of democracy came after the Second World War, when new democracies were established in countries like Germany and Italy after the collapse of Nazism and Fascism; and following decolonisation in the 1950s and 1960s, democracy was eagerly adopted by most of the new nations of Asia and Africa. The fourth wave of democratisation saw a return to democracy in post-Communist Eastern Europe, as well as in many countries of Latin America that had turned their backs on democracy.

2.3 THE CONCEPTUAL FAMILY OF DEMOCRACY: AUTONOMY, RIGHTS, LIBERTY AND EQUALITY

The concept of democracy may be seen as a part of a conceptual cluster or a family of concepts, in which the concepts of rights, freedom and equality are most central. Underpinning these is the principle of individualism and individual autonomy as developed in the early liberal tradition, especially in the writings of Thomas Hobbes and John Locke. The principle of *autonomy* expresses the value that we attach to possessing control over our own individual persons, decisions and life-choices. Individuals are autonomous beings, capable of rational thought and, therefore, of determining what is good for them. However, while we are individuals acting for ourselves, we are also members of collectives or associations, and decisions taken in these affect our lives. Hence, we assert the right to participate in the making of those decisions, and this constitutes an act of self-determination as much as the decisions we make in our private lives about our career and other personal matters.

In classical liberal political theory, autonomy, freedom and equality form the cornerstone of the liberal theory of democracy. The principle of autonomy, along with the concept of *freedom*, suggests the importance of popular government. As in the writings of John Locke, government must guarantee the rights and personal liberty of the individual, and it is the job of the government to protect the individual’s life, liberty and property from being undermined by other individuals and the state alike. It asserts that all individuals, by virtue of being human beings, equally possess these rights.

But how is equality to be achieved in the making of political decisions? Democratic theorists make a distinction between *prospective equality*, and *retrospective equality*. Prospective equality obtains when, in a decision that is to be made, every citizen starts off with an equal chance of influencing the outcome of the democratic process, and no persons or groups suffer particular

disabilities that prevent them from determining that decision. Retrospective equality is achieved if, in a decision that has already been taken, we can say that everyone equally determined that decision. Now, it is clear that in most situations it is hard to say this, unless the decision was unanimous. But since unanimous decisions are rather rare, decision by majority is the only procedure which satisfies the test of democracy. It does so because it fulfils the condition of prospective equality – viz., that everyone started off with an equal chance of determining the decision – and is also the best in terms of retrospective equality, because it may be said that more people favoured the winning alternative over all others.

Though freedom and equality form the cornerstone of the liberal theory of democracy, a greater emphasis on one or the other takes democracy in very different directions. Thus, if our starting-point is the principle of freedom, we would give the greatest importance to the rights and personal freedoms of the individual, and this might even lead us to argue that the state should play a limited and minimal role in society, and it should not impose on us any particular view of the good life or the perfect society. Freedom-centered views have led theorists to argue that it is illegitimate and wrong for the state to tax its wealthy citizens to provide free or subsidised public services for poorer citizens.

If, however, equality is the starting-point of our theory, we will argue that formal political equality is of little use, unless individuals really possess the capacities by which they can determine their life-plans. So, if we wish to extend the control people have over their own lives, we have to first remove the disadvantages that they suffer from on account of social and economic inequalities of caste or class.

2.4 JUSTIFICATIONS FOR DEMOCRACY: INTRINSIC AND INSTRUMENTAL

Democracy may be justified as having intrinsic or instrumental value. When we value democracy as a good in itself and for itself, we assert the intrinsic value of democracy. That is, we argue that democracy is valuable for its own sake, because it is the fairest way of giving expression to equality among citizens. On the other hand, democracy may also be valued instrumentally, or as a means to some other end. Thus, it may be argued that democracy is good because it fosters competition among political leaders and so gives us a better choice of leadership. Or it could be said that democracy is good because it makes everyone feel that they were a part of the decision-making process. Democracy may also be justified as a way of minimising the abuse of political power, by distributing it equally among citizens. Another instrumental justification for democracy is its role in human development, to the extent that it encourages people to take responsibility for their political lives.

Democracy may have instrumental value, but its intrinsic value derives from its moral superiority as a way of giving effect to political equality. If we view it as a way of arriving at decisions among a group of persons – whether citizens of a polity or members of a neighbourhood association or sports club – democracy is morally superior to any other way of arriving at decisions. This is so because the human race has not been able to devise any other way of arriving at decisions which are binding on all, and which takes everybody's interests into account. This implies, of course, that people are the best judges of their own interests, and that equal citizenship rights are necessary to protect those interests. However, even if individuals agree on the general purposes of their collective endeavour, they will almost certainly disagree about how to achieve it. Even if they shared the same view of what constitutes the common

good, individuals would surely hold different opinions of how to actually achieve that good. In such situations, democracy represents a fair moral compromise among people who live within the territory of the same state, but do not share a single conception of the good life.

It is precisely because unanimity is impossible that the best and the most practical procedure for arriving at a decision is the principle of majority rule. This is probably why Winston Churchill described democracy as "the worst form of government except for all the rest". Though many people tend to equate the principle of democracy with the principle of majority rule, it is important to keep in mind that majority rule is only the most practicable and acceptable procedure for arriving at decisions in situations where people disagree. The moral value of democracy lies, not in the principle of majority rule, but in the principle of equality that underpins it.

2.5 DEMOCRACY: PROCEDURAL AND SUBSTANTIVE

In large and complex societies, it is not always possible for people to gather together to make decisions on each and every issue, as they did in the direct democracy of ancient Athens. This is why modern democracy works through representative institutions. People elect their representatives to a legislature or assembly, and these representatives are authorised to take decisions on behalf of those who elected them. Ultimate sovereignty, however, remains with the people, who can hold their representatives accountable, and refuse to re-elect them when the next election comes round. Representative government is almost synonymous with the idea of democracy today.

However, democracy should not be seen merely as a set of institutions – e.g., free and fair elections, legislative assemblies, and constitutional governments arising out of these. This view of democracy is described as *procedural* democracy, because it emphasises only the procedures and institutions of democracy. It fails to see that notwithstanding formal political equality, some citizens may be more equal than others, and may enjoy a greater voice than others in the determining of decisions. More often than not, it would be the poorer, less educated, and the socially disadvantaged citizens who would be unable to fully practice their democratic rights. Social and economic inequalities make it difficult for a formal participation to be effective. This is why theorists emphasise the importance of *substantive* democracy. This ideal suggests a society of truly equal citizens, who are politically engaged, tolerant of different opinions and ways of life, and have an equal voice in choosing their rulers and holding them accountable. The outcomes and decisions of the democratic process would then be mindful of the interests of all, rather than the interests of a few powerful groups and individuals in society. This also means that democracy is and should be the principle of organisation not only of government, but also the organising principle of all collective life in society.

We could argue, however, that this is not possible unless and until the background conditions for equality are met, because social inequality makes formal political equality relatively meaningless. Even the free exercise of the franchise, for example, may require freedom from caste superiors, from dominant landlords, or, in the case of women, from the male head of the household. This freedom may be curtailed when people do not have the power of independent decision-making or adequate access to relevant information; and, above all, when despite their exercise of the franchise, they are unable to get a responsive administration. In societies where there are minorities based on religion, language and ethnicity, the majority principle tends to work to the disadvantage of minorities, for they may be systematically outvoted, and may never have a real or equal opportunity to influence the outcome of the decision-making process.

2.6 TYPES OF DEMOCRACY

Representative Democracy and its Critics

Since direct democracy is not possible in large and complex societies, the mechanism through which people take part indirectly in government is through electing representatives to carry out their will. For early social contract theorists, such as Hobbes and Locke, representative government was a form of government authorised by the people to act on its behalf. For Rousseau, however, sovereign power over the state should rest in the hands of the citizenry and its “general will”, because the opinions and interests of representatives could never be identical to those of the electorate.

Be that as it may, today representative government – based on the majority principle – is considered the best way of giving effect to the democratic impulse. It has, however, two types of critics, those who consider it unrealistic (Schumpeter and the elite theorists) and those who consider it inadequate (participatory democrats, discussed in the next section). The Schumpeterian view of democracy projects this statement of the classical eighteenth century theory of democracy as an inaccurate account of what democracy is *really* about. To Joseph Schumpeter, the classical theory of democracy assumes – mistakenly – that sovereignty lies in the hands of the people who elect individuals to an assembly where their will can be carried out. Democracy is projected as an institutional arrangement for arriving at political decisions which realises the common good in this way. In reality, however, Schumpeter argues, democracy is not about popular sovereignty. It is not really the case that the primary task of democracy is to vest political power in the hands of a sovereign electorate, and its secondary task to elect leaders. On the contrary, the main purpose of democracy seems to be to elect leaders from among a given set of candidates, who compete with each other for the people’s vote. Leadership is the driving-force, the people merely give their endorsement to one or the other leader. This has been called the “realist” theory of democracy.

Participatory Democracy

The classical theory of participatory democracy is found in the writings of Rousseau and John Stuart Mill. Rousseau’s theory depends upon the participation of every individual citizen in political decision-making. The relationship between citizens is one of interdependence, such that each individual is equally dependent upon all the others viewed collectively as sovereign. Participation is important not only in decision-making, but also as a way of protecting private interests and ensuring good government. For Mill, as for Rousseau, participation has an educative function for citizens. Popular democratic government is Mill’s ideal polity, in which participatory institutions foster active citizenship and a public-spirited character. This is the mechanism through which the individual is made to take public interest into account and to make decisions guided by the idea of the common good, rather than by his own selfish interests. Thus, democratic institutions – especially local ones – are “a school of political capacity”.

In large and complex societies, direct participatory democracy is clearly impossible. Nevertheless, contemporary democratic theorists – such as Carole Pateman and Benjamin Barber – have argued in favour of participatory or “strong” democracy, in which the ordinary citizen is more fully involved in decision-making processes than is possible within the limits of representative democracy. This could take the form of strengthening local democracy, so that citizens are involved in community affairs and social movements. Advocates of participatory democracy generally follow Mill in attaching importance to civic education as a way of creating a more

active and politically engaged citizenry. Above all, they believe that political participation is central to the good life for human beings and that it helps to restrain the abuse of power by public officials.

Deliberative Democracy

Deliberative democracy values open and public deliberation on issues of common concern. It starts from the assumption of individuals as autonomous persons, but does not view the social relationships between these autonomous persons as relationships of conflict or interest. Rather, it sees people as relating to each other and seeking to influence each other through reasoned argument and persuasion. For advocates of deliberative democracy, persuasion is the best basis for political power, because it alone respects the autonomy of individuals and values their capacity for self-government. It also gives individuals control over an important aspect of their lives, and makes for greater and continuous accountability of political power. Unlike participatory democracy, which requires individuals to be constantly engaged in making decisions, deliberative democracy allows for a political division of labour between citizens and professional politicians, though citizens are involved in deliberation about public issues.

Social Democracy

Social democracy is a form of democracy that is based on a strong commitment to equality. Social democrats, therefore, support the idea of the welfare state based on redistribution. They believe in the liberal institutions of representative democracy, but wish to combine these with the ideal of social justice. To the extent that liberalism frequently takes the form of right-wing libertarianism – a belief in the unfettered freedom of the individual and the free market – social democracy is more egalitarian than liberalism. However, it is less radical than Marxian socialism and may be said to stand at the intersection of these two ideologies. Indeed, it has been said that social-democracy is more than democracy and less than socialism!

Social democrats argue that all individuals should get an equitable share of society's resources in order to realise their own plans of life. If poverty or disability or belonging to a minority are obstacles in this respect, then it is the duty of the state to remove such obstacles. Social democracy is thus particularly concerned with providing the conditions for the well-being of workers, women, the disabled, the elderly, members of cultural minorities, and so forth. It is basically interested in creating the conditions for equality, so that all citizens can enjoy their democratic rights to the same extent. It sees democracy as not only a form of government, but also a principle that should inform collective life in society as a whole.

Cosmopolitan Democracy

Cosmopolitan democracy is an idea advanced by political theorists in the context of globalisation. With the coming into being of forms of supranational organisation – such as the European Union – and with the advance of economic and cultural globalisation, it is believed that democracy must also respond to these challenges beyond the borders of the nation-state. The idea of cosmopolitan democracy is a response to this challenge. Though there is no single institution of global governance that has replaced the national state, this theory points to the global civil society being created by the phenomenon of “globalisation from below”. The new solidarities being forged across national borders give rise to the notion of cosmopolitan citizenship. The environmental movement and the women's movement are two notable examples of this. As the world is getting more rapidly and closely connected through the communications and internet revolutions, the implications of these developments for democracy are uncertain. Do these

technological innovations make governments more or less accountable? Is it really possible for citizens to participate in them? For instance, though the majority of members of the World Trade Organisation (WTO) are developing countries, who represent a majority of the world's citizens, the WTO continues to be responsive to the more prosperous nations and their interests. How can this and other institutions of global governance be democratised? How can the proper conditions of cosmopolitan citizenship be realised?

2.7 SUMMARY

In this unit, we examined the historical evolution of democracy from ancient Athens to the modern world. We then proceeded to study democracy in relation to the family of concepts in which it is embedded, viz. autonomy, rights, liberty and equality. We examined two broad types of justification for democracy: intrinsic and instrumental. Drawing a distinction between procedural and substantive democracy, we also examined various types of democracy, including representative democracy (and its "realist" Schumpeterian critics), participatory democracy, deliberative democracy, social democracy, and, of vital concern for the future, cosmopolitan democracy.

2.8 EXERCISES

1. Discuss the meaning and nature of democracy.
2. Explain the evolution and growth of democracy in the 20th century.
3. Discuss various conceptions and types of democracy.
4. Explain various types of democracy.