
UNIT 9 DEMOCRACY, REPRESENTATION AND ACCOUNTABILITY*

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9.0 OBJECTIVES

In this unit, you will be reading about democracy, representation and accountability and also the relationship between these three concepts. After going through this unit, you should be able to:

- Explain the meaning of democracy;
- Discuss the concepts on representation and accountability; and
- Examine the relationship between these three concepts.

9.1 INTRODUCTION

The term democracy has been in use in the tradition of western political thought since ancient times. Democracy is a Greek word which means a state in which leaders are chosen from among the general population. It could thus be distinguished from ‘aristocracy’ which means the rule of the wise; from ‘oligarchy’ which means rule by strong groups like certain family and from ‘monarchy’ which means rule by an individual. Democracy signifies the rule of the people. Several exponents of democracy have treated democracy chiefly as

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a form of government like Austin, James Bryce, A.V. Dicey, A.L. Lowell and John Seeley. Democracy is not primarily a form of government, but a democratic government implies a democratic state. All that a democratic state means is that the community as a whole possesses sovereign authority and maintains ultimate control over affairs. In addition to being a form of government and a type of state, democracy is also an order of society. A democratic society is one in which the spirit of equality and fraternity prevails. Democracy has become increasingly appealing in the modern world, especially in the second half of the 20th century because of the nature and functioning of the contemporary state.

Ideally, government is representative and accountable, representative in the sense that its policies align with citizen's interests, and accountable in the sense that it is answerable to citizens for its conduct and responsive to their demands. The *electoral* system plays an important role in determining how representative and accountable a government is in practice. In a representative democracy, decisions are made by elected representatives and implemented by appointed officials to whom the representatives delegate some of the tasks of governing. The representatives decide what citizens must and cannot do and they coerce citizens to comply with their decisions. The question of representation is why rulers would, equipped with powers, act in the best interest of others, of citizens or at least some majority thereof. This is what is meant by representation: acting in the best interest of the public. Accountability is a popular aspect of democratic theory. Too often, accountability is identified with elections or with catching out those who are charged with public responsibilities, without any sense of its *exact* contribution to our understanding of democracy. Governments are accountable if voters can discern whether governments are acting in their interests and sanction them appropriately, so that those incumbents who act in the best interest of citizens win re-election and those who do not lose them.

A direct democracy or pure democracy is a type of democracy where the people govern directly. It requires wide participation of citizens in politics. Athenian democracy or classical democracy refers to a direct democracy developed in ancient times in the Greek city-state of Athens. In direct democracy, citizens, without the intermediary of elected or appointed officials, can participate in making public decisions. Direct democracy, thus, reduces the distinction between government and the governed and between the state and civil society; it is a system of popular self-government. The second major type of democracy is referred to as representative democracy. This political arrangement establishes an intermediary political actor between the individual and the policy outputs of the state. Through the electoral process, one person or a group of people are elected and assigned with the task of making decisions on behalf of the group of citizens that they represent.

9.2 REPRESENTATION IN DEMOCRACY

The claim connecting democracy and representation is that under democracy governments are representative because they are elected: if elections are freely contested, if participation is widespread, and if citizens enjoy political liberties, then governments will act in the best interest of the people. Owing to the main challenge presented by direct democracy, i.e. the difficulty of each one of us representing ourselves at various forums, indirect or representative democracy was introduced. Representation is defined as the process by which political power

and influence which the entire citizenry or a part of it might have upon governmental action, with their express or implied approval, is exercised on its behalf by a small number among them, with a binding effect upon the whole community thus represented. Similarly, a representative government is understood to stand for 'the whole people', or some numerous portion of it. It exercises the ultimate controlling power through deputies periodically elected by the people themselves. J.S. Mill argued that 'the people must possess this ultimate power in all its completeness. They must be masters, whenever they please, of all the operations of government'. From this conceptualisation, five essential principles of representation in a liberal democracy stand out, namely:

- The ultimate power lies with the people (the popular sovereignty principle);
- This popular power is exercised by a select few on behalf of the many (the deputation principle);
- The deputies (or representatives) are mandated by the people through periodical elections (the popular consent principle);
- Decisions made and actions carried out by these deputies have a binding effect on the community (the governance principle); and
- As ultimate masters, the people remain the final judge of performance of the government and their deputies (the accountability principle).

Edmund Burke, an English philosopher and politician, argued that a representative should be guided by four things, namely constituency opinions, rational judgement, consideration of the national interest and personal convictions or conscience. In the modern world, most people tend to view a representative in Burke's explanation: a person with discretion and inclined or expected to act in response to local, national and personal exigencies. Since the establishment of representative institutions, their basic structure has been the same everywhere:

- Rulers, those who govern, are selected through elections
- While citizens are free to discuss, criticize, and demand at all times, they are not able to give legally binding instructions to the government
- Rulers are subject to periodic elections

Constitutions and subsidiary legislations in various countries, both at local and national levels, spell out the functions of representatives. There are common known functions such as the making of laws/ordinances/by-laws, revenue-raising, and authorisation of budgets. However, representatives (for example members of parliament and councillors) do a lot of other things sanctioned by convention, the expectations of voters, personal convictions and the fact that they are 'leaders'. Since representation is about the best interest of the 'people' or 'citizens', yet interests are in conflict. In this situation, government represents varying interests:

- A government is representative if it acts on the best available knowledge; and if individuals are sufficiently well informed so that each of them or the average one is more likely than not to reach the correct decision, this knowledge is revealed by the verdict of the majority of voters. In such situations, the government can represent individual interests, since the common interest is nothing but their sum.

- The government can represent an interest that is *collective* in the sense that everyone is better off under the centralized decision than they would have been had they all pursued individual interests. People have to be coerced for their own good; the government is representative in such situations when it pursues the collective interest.
- When the structure of interests is such that any course of action puts individuals in conflict situation, a government that pursues the best interest of a majority, at a cost to the minority, is representative. This is, after all, what majority rule is about.

Check Your Progress 1

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

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

1) What are the essential principles of representation in a liberal democracy?

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9.3 TYPES OF REPRESENTATION

In a representative democracy elections are usually held on the basis of universal adult franchise without any discrimination on the grounds of gender, caste or religion. All voters of a community are collectively described as the electorate who choose their representatives on two alternative systems of representation:

9.3.1 Territorial Representation

Under territorial representation the country is divided into geographical areas called constituencies. Voters of each constituency elect their representatives. This system is based on the assumption that each constituency has a uniform interest. But since the population are divided into varying groups and interests it becomes imperative for introducing functional representation.

9.3.2 Functional Representation

It implies that the people belonging to different occupations or functions should be allowed to elect their representatives on a similar basis. For instance, those in industrial sector vote on industrial policy, in the agriculture sector should vote on the agriculture policy and therefore need not be consulted on other policies. The champions of functional representation argue that the representatives of a

particular territory cannot take care of all the sections of people in the territory. So people should choose representatives to decision making bodies on the basis of professional and specific economic interests. This type has largely been tried under totalitarian systems.

9.4 THEORIES OF REPRESENTATION

The different theories of representation give a conceptual clarity on the role of representatives of the people in the process of policy-making, the limits of their authority and functions.

9.4.1 Reactionary Theory

The reactionary theory is based on superior knowledge and wisdom of the politicians who are regarded as the best custodians of public interest. However, the representatives here have a limited role to convey the popular feelings for considerations and decisions. It is, in fact, an elitist theory with no provision of public control. Its chief exponent, *Thomas Hobbes* and *Hamilton* regarded order and authority as best maintained by the executive and the parliament. This theory is democratic only so long as it accepts the primacy of public interest in policy making.

9.4.2 Conservative Theory

The chief exponents of conservative theory, *Edmund Burke* and *James Madison* grant a measure of public control without encouraging popular participation in the process of government. It also allows people to choose representatives from an elite group and also depend on their good sense for instructions. However, the representatives can be replaced in case of failure of performance.

9.4.3 Liberal Theory

John Locke and *Thomas Jefferson* exemplified the true spirit of democracy. It upholds equality of all people who are endowed with equal capability to rule. The theory relies on the wisdom of the masses and treats their representatives only as their agents to translate their judgements into concrete policy.

9.4.4 Radical Theory

Its chief exponents are *Rousseau* and the *New Left*, who hold the wisdom of the people in highest esteem and go to the extent of deprecating representative government itself. It holds that wisdom of the people is bound to be diluted through the process of representation. It regards direct democracy as the *only* true democratic form of government.

In a nutshell, the radical theory of representation relegates representation to marginal importance; the conservative theory erodes the spirit of democracy by overemphasizing the gap between elites and the masses. The radical theory claims to be the most progressive as it pays highest importance to the people, but it tends to rule out representation itself. Hence the liberal theory of representation may be treated as the most suited to the requirements of representative democracy.

Check Your Progress 2

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

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

1) Briefly explain various theories of representation.

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9.5 ELECTION SYSTEM IN REPRESENTATIVE DEMOCRACY

The ideal electoral system in a representative democracy is one allowing all eligible citizens to cast an equally weighted vote, and for united groups of voters, except very small ones, to elect one or more of their candidates to a governing body. Approximate proportional representation on governing bodies would be a happenstance and not deliberate. Elections are instruments of democracy; they are instrumental in linking the preferences of citizens to the behaviour of policymakers. What exactly ‘linking the preferences of citizens to the behaviour of policy makers’ is supposed to mean, is the subject of normative theories of political representation and representative democracy. Political representation, as much as democracy, is an essentially contested concept and its meaning and implications differ from one normative view on political representation to the other.

Representative democracies are based upon several interrelated principles:

- The existence of regular, free, fair elections based upon universal suffrage and secret ballots.
- The existence of competing political parties offering electoral choice.
- The existence of electoral laws supervised by an independent judiciary.
- Freedom of speech and association.
- Freedom to stand as an election candidate.
- “Reasonable” relationships between votes cast and representatives elected.
- Availability of accurate unbiased political information.

The provision of election in a democracy is intended to ensure that the government will exercise its power with the consent of the governed. This means, elections lend legitimacy to the authority of the government. The real test of a genuine election is whether the voters have real alternatives before them for exercising their choice. Secret ballot is particularly important in democratic elections. An electoral system denotes the method by which:

- A voter is required to indicate his or her choice of a candidate or political party out of those contesting in the election.

- The votes obtained by a candidate or political party are translated into allocation of seats or offices.

Broadly speaking, three types of electoral systems may be identified under democratic systems.

9.5.1 Plurality System

Under Plurality system, the principle of “first past the post” is applied which means that any candidate obtaining the largest number of votes will be declared elected. It is not necessary to secure absolute majority i.e more than 50% of the total valid votes. This system is practised in British House of Commons, American House of Representatives, Indian House of People and Legislative Assemblies. However, this system of simple majority does not seem fair to the minorities as their candidates may lose by very small margins and also the votes secured by different political parties might not correspond to the number of seats won by them. The supporters of this system contend that it promotes a two party system which results in a balance between the ruling and opposition parties. It makes the majority sensitive towards the minority, prevents separatist tendencies and motivates the minorities to join the national mainstream.

9.5.2 Majoritarian System

Under this system, which requires an absolute majority, two methods are adopted to decide the winner.

- **Alternative Vote:** Under this system a voter is required to indicate his order of preference for candidates. If no one gets an absolute majority of first-preference votes, the candidate who gets the *least* number of first-preference is eliminated and the next preferences of votes are added to the first preference of those candidates. This process is repeated till some candidate gets absolute majority. This system is prevalent in India, America and Australia.
- **Second Ballot System:** Under this system a voter is required to vote for one candidate only. If no candidate is able to obtain absolute majority, second ballot is held to decide the winner.

9.5.3 Proportional Representation

This system is particularly adopted in multi-member constituencies in order to secure a fair representation for the minorities as well as the majority. It is a complex system which is implemented by several methods such as:

- **List System:** Under this system, the ballot contains separate lists of candidates of different political parties and the voter marks one list of his or her choice. Various methods of calculation of seats per list are used. The List System is employed in voting for national elections in Germany, the Italian Chamber of Deputies, the Knesset of Israel, the Swiss National Council, and Legislature of Finland.
- **Single Transferable Vote:** For each constituency, a quota is set which is usually equal to the total number of valid votes, divided by one more than the number of seats available, plus one vote. A candidate, who obtains first

preferences equal to the electoral quota, or more, is declared elected. The surplus votes are redistributed among those candidates whom these voters had given their next preference, in proportion to the number of second preferences obtained by each of such candidates. The candidate obtaining the least number of first preferences is eliminated and the next preferences of his or her voters are added to the first preferences of those candidates. This process of redistribution from both sides is repeated till the number of candidates securing the electoral quota equals the number of seats available, who are then declared elected. The *Irish Republic* and *Malta* adhere to this system of representation. Under this system, all types of ethnic groups, women, differing interests and ideologies are represented but at the same time due to diversities, the system falls short of obtaining a clear majority, thereby leading to unstable and ineffective coalitions. The system is not regarded as conducive to national integration.

Check Your Progress 3

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

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

1) What do you understand by ‘first past the post’ system of election?

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9.6 ACCOUNTABILITY: FUNDAMENTAL TO DEMOCRACY

One of the elements that distinguish liberal representative democracies from other type of regimes is their combination of an institutional framework of authorization of political power with one oriented to ensure the responsiveness and accountability of those authorized agents. The representative is someone who has been authorized to act with relative independence of the electorate. In so far as representative democracy implies the existence of a fundamental gap between political representatives and citizens, it requires the existence of institutional mechanisms to ensure that such separation does not result in unresponsive or illegal governments. The central question addressed by the concept of accountability is precisely how to regulate and reduce the gap between representatives and the represented, while simultaneously preserving the distance between political authorities and citizenry that characterizes the relations of representation. In any democratic state there are two key accountability relationships: those that regulate the exchange between citizens and politicians, and those that regulate the interactions among public holders. The concept of accountability refers to the ability to ensure that public officials are answerable for their behaviour, in the sense of being forced to inform and justify about their decisions, and of being eventually sanctioned for those decisions.

Democratic accountability refers to the many ways in which citizens, political parties, parliaments and other democratic actors can provide feedback to, reward or sanction officials in charge of setting and enacting public policy. Democracy has many definitions, implications and consequences, but accountability is one of its most important components. Citizen participation, political equality, civic consciousness, self realization, decent treatment by authorities, sense of individual political efficacy, respect for constitutional norms, protection of human rights, responsiveness to public opinion, social and economic levelling and, of course, “freedom” have all been associated with this form of political domination – either as a defining feature or a likely product of it – but they are all contingent and vulnerable if citizens cannot reliably hold their rulers accountable for the actions that they take in the public realm. Traditional sovereigns, benevolent despots or elected autocrats might momentarily tolerate any or all of the above, but if they cannot be held accountable they can dismiss these ‘political concessions’ as irrelevant or retract from them at will. In searching for a definition of accountability, these explanations serve meaning to the concept:

- Accountability involves a mutual exchange of responsibilities and potential sanctions between citizens and rulers, made all the more complicated by the fact that in between the two are usually a varied and competitive set of representatives.
- Second, the subject matter of accountability can be quite varied: ethical behaviour, financial probity, social esteem, sexual relations, functional interdependence, familial obligation, patriotic duty, etc., but the distinctive type that interests us is political accountability, i.e. that which may accompany the exercise of asymmetric power.
- Third, all stable political regimes probably have some predictable form of accountability to some type of constituency. Sultanistic autocracies have their coteries and cadres. Military dictatorships have their juntas and complex arrangements for resolving the conflicts between the different armed services. Even absolute monarchies were supposed to be accountable to God – not to mention more earthly dynastic and marital concerns. In terms of political accountability, each citizen has the same rights and obligations, i.e. to be informed about prospective actions, to hear the justification for them and to make a judgment about how they were performed. What makes their role increasingly complex is that they have had to rely more and more upon specialized representatives, i.e. on agents who in turn act as principals when it comes to ensuring accountability of elected or appointed rulers.
- Political accountability has to be institutionalized if it is to work effectively, i.e. it has to be embedded in a stable, mutually understood and pre-established set of rules. Some of these may be formalized in a constitution, in basic legal codes or in sworn oaths, but political accountability is *not* the same as legal, financial or ethical accountability. Political accountability is not only negative. Rulers have a considerable array of mechanisms to defend themselves against such an eventuality. The rulers have so internalized the expectations of those they are ruling that they have nothing to fear from accountability; indeed, it gives them greater legitimacy when they have to act against immediate popular opinion.

Government accountability requires that public officials, elected or unelected, have an obligation to explain their decisions and actions to the citizens. Government accountability can be achieved through a number of mechanisms. These can be political, legal or administrative mechanisms designed to fight corruption and to ensure that public officials remain answerable and accessible to the people they serve. Government accountability can be achieved through the following ways:

- Conducting free and fair elections.
- Political accountability of public officials is determined by whether the officials occupy an elected versus appointed position, how often they are subjected to re-election and the number of terms they can serve in a political office.
- The legal accountability mechanisms include instruments like the constitution, legal acts, decrees, rules and regulations that prescribe actions that such public officials can and cannot take and how citizens may take action against those officials whose conduct is considered unsatisfactory. An independent judiciary is a necessity for the success of the legal accountability mechanisms, serving as the only avenue through which aggrieved citizens can bring their claims against the government.
- Administrative accountability mechanisms include offices within agencies or ministries and practices within administrative processes designed to ensure that the decisions and actions of public officials conform to the interests of the citizens.
- Electoral Accountability exists when: i) there is clarity of responsibility for political outcomes, and ii) voters can effectively sanction those responsible for those outcomes.

Check Your Progress 4

- Note:** i) Use the space given below for your answer.
 ii) See the end of the unit for tips for your answer.

1) What do you understand by accountability in a democracy?

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9.7 LET US SUM UP

One of the elements that distinguish liberal representative democracies from other types of regimes is their combination of an institutional framework of authorization of political power with one oriented to ensure the responsiveness and accountability of those authorized agents. The representative is someone

who has been authorized to act with relative independence of the electorate. In so far as representative democracy implies the existence of a fundamental gap between political representatives and citizens, it requires the existence of institutional mechanisms to ensure that such separation does not result in unresponsive or illegal governments. The central question addressed by the concept of accountability is precisely how to regulate and reduce the *gap* between representatives and represented while simultaneously preserving the distance between political authorities and citizenry that characterizes the relations of representation.

Political accountability is intimately intertwined with the concept of democratic representation. It refers to a particular type of relationship that results in the act of delegating authority to a representative body, where the represented holds a claim to superior authority over those to whom it has temporarily delegated its power. A government is politically accountable if citizens have the means for punishing unresponsive or irresponsible administrations. It is usually assumed that political parties represent the essential institution of political representation and that elections are the main mechanism of political accountability that the citizenry has at its disposal to reward or punish politicians. Elections provide a regular mechanism for citizens to hold governments responsible for their actions, forcing out of office those incumbents who did not act in the best interest of voters or re-electing those who did.

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9.9 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS EXERCISES

Check Your Progress 1

- 1) Your answer should include five principles, popular sovereignty, deputation, popular consent, governance and accountability.

Check Your Progress 2

- 1) Highlight reactionary, conservative, liberal and radical theories of representation.

Check Your Progress 3

- 1) Highlight that any candidate securing largest number of votes will be elected.

Check Your Progress 4

- 1) Your answer should highlight following points:
 - Mutual exchange of responsibilities and potential sanctions between citizens and rulers.
 - All stable political regimes have some accountability to some form of constituency.
 - Political accountability has to be institutionalised for effective work.