



Democracy

Meaning

When Abraham Lincoln gave us that famous definition—

“Government of the people, for the people, and by the people”—

it sounded simple, but each phrase carries layers.

- **Government of the people** – That’s true for all governments. Whether it’s the Junta in Myanmar or the Republic of France, every government *claims* to be made of people. So by itself, it doesn’t say much.
- **Government for the people** – This could be benevolent despotism. Think of regimes in **China** or **North Korea**. The rulers *claim* they work for people’s welfare, but without the people’s consent, it’s incomplete.
- **Government by the people** – This is the crux. It’s where democracy comes alive. Literally, it means **direct democracy**—like Switzerland, where citizens vote on referendums. But in practice, most countries rely on **representative democracy**—India, the U.S.—where leaders are chosen through elections.

Now, what makes modern democracy **essential**?

- **Universal Adult Franchise (UAF)** – the dignity of “one person, one vote.”
- **Free flow of information** – media, open debates, free speech.
- **Elections & majority approval** – periodic accountability.
- **Minority accommodation** – because democracy is not just about 51% dominating 49%.

The **faith in democracy** is based on a deep conviction:

There are extraordinary possibilities in ordinary people.

But here’s the irony—ordinary people are also fallible. They can be swayed by emotions, misled by a **demagogue**, or carried away by populism.

This creates a tension: sometimes, **rule of the mediocre** dominates. How do societies deal with this?

By pushing towards **meritocracy**—where **occupational hierarchy** is based on **qualification, competence, and character**, not age, caste, gender, or race.

That’s why people like **Raghuram Rajan** (economist) or **Manmohan Singh** (technocrat-turned-PM) symbolize democracy blending with meritocracy.

And yet, the grand conclusion still stands tall:

All ills of democracy can only be cured by more democracy.

Not less. Not authoritarian shortcuts. But **deeper democracy**—more participation, more accountability, more transparency.

That’s the living spirit of democracy: messy at times, fragile at times, but still the best system humanity has invented to respect both equality and dignity.



Expansion of Democracy

When we talk about the **Expansion of Democracy**, we can't escape **Samuel P. Huntington**. He gave us the famous idea of **waves of democracy**—just like waves in the ocean, democracy has advanced, then sometimes receded.

First Wave – It began way back in the **17th century** in the **West**. Think of the **U.S., France, and Britain**. They pioneered democratic practices. But it didn't last forever. In the **interwar period**, countries like **Germany and Portugal** fell back into authoritarianism—this was the **reverse wave**.

Second Wave – After the **Second World War**, democracy spread again in the **West** and in many **former colonies**. But once more, there was a setback. In much of the **Third World**, democracy collapsed—except in **India**, which proudly remained the exception.

Third Wave – The big moment came in the **late 1980s** with the **collapse of the USSR**. Suddenly, democracy swept across **Eastern Europe**, becoming “almost universal.” But there was one major puzzle—**Arab exceptionalism**, meaning democracy did not take root in much of the Arab world.

Fourth Wave – That puzzle seemed to be solved with the **Arab Spring in 2010**, starting in **Tunisia**. People rose against dictators with hope for freedom. But what followed was the **Arab Summer**—a harsh reality check, with **foreign states and non-state actors** meddling. Instead of flourishing democracies, many countries sank into civil wars or authoritarian comebacks.

And here comes the **criticism**—many argue that the so-called “waves” are not just about people's aspirations, but often a **Western discourse**. Democratisation, they say, is sometimes just a cover for controlling **resources** through **clientelist regimes**—leaders loyal not to their people, but to foreign powers.

So what's the big takeaway? Democracy has indeed expanded in **waves**, but it's never been a smooth journey. Each advance meets a **reverse wave**, shaped by history, geopolitics, and culture. The story of democracy is not finished—it's still being written.

Classical Notion

When we trace democracy back to its **ancient roots**, we begin in **Greece**. There, democracy meant the **equal participation of all “free men”** in the affairs of the polis. Decisions were made through **free discussion**, always under the umbrella of **respect for law and established procedures**.

But the Greeks themselves were divided about it. **Plato** warned that people lacked the **education** and wisdom needed to govern, which could easily lead to chaos. **Aristotle** went further—he said democracy is nothing but the **rule of the mediocre**, guided by **self-interest**. Instead, he suggested a better balance: the **mixed constitution**, which combined the wisdom of aristocracy with the inclusiveness of democracy, giving us what he called **polity**.

This idea of **mixed constitutions** carried forward—**Cicero** in Rome and later **Saint Augustine** in Christian thought both argued that rulers must be **subordinate to virtue or law**.

Fast forward to the **modern period**, thinkers like **Machiavelli** and **Montesquieu** debated **pure forms of government**, but it was **Hobbes** and **Locke** who gave democracy its real push through **social contract theory**. They argued: political legitimacy doesn't come from **dictators** or the **divine right of kings**, but from the **consent of the people**. The state, they said, is nothing mystical—it's an **artificial mechanical creation of men**, and its **authority rests in the individual**.

Then comes **Rousseau**, who takes it a step further. He insists on **popular sovereignty**—that true democracy must reflect the **general will**, making the state a product of the people's collective choice.



Later, **A.V. Dicey** distilled democracy into a simple definition: it is **government where majority opinion determines legislation**. **James Bryce** added another dimension—democracy is not just about governance, it's about **self-education** of the people through active participation.

And so, from **ancient Athens to modern times**, democracy evolved into what we now know as **liberal democracy**, built on the foundation of **representative democracy**.

The journey shows us that democracy was never static—it has been a constant negotiation between **freedom and order, participation and competence, majority and minority**.

Liberal Democracy

Evolution

In the beginning, **property** was the ticket to political participation — only landowners or the wealthy had a voice. But with **industrialisation**, workers who powered the economy demanded the **vote**. The ruling elites realized that if they didn't include the workers, their very **system would collapse**. This struggle eventually opened the door to what we now call **Universal Adult Franchise (UAF)**.

So today, **liberal democracy** stands as a blend of **free market economy + UAF** — linking political participation with economic freedom.

Principles

At its core, liberal democracy runs on **government by consent** — and this operates at **two levels**:

1. **Representatives** agreeing on behalf of the people.
2. The **public**, informed through **mass media**, keeping a constant watch.

The heart of the system is **public accountability**.

- **John Locke** pictured the government as a **trustee** — a *night watchman*, whose job was to safeguard **natural rights** (life, liberty, property).
- **Rousseau**, in contrast, pushed for **general will** and even **direct democracy**, emphasizing that sovereignty rests with the people.

Other principles grew out of this:

- **Majority rule** — with faith in the **wisdom of majority**.
- **Minority rights** — so that the majority doesn't crush the minority.
- **Constitutional government** — ensuring not rule of men, but **rule of law**.

Mechanism

How does all this work in practice?

- **Multi-party competition** → giving citizens real **alternatives**.
- **Political offices open to all** → no monopoly by a race, class, or gender.
- **Periodic elections under UAF** → every adult's vote counts equally.
- **Civil liberties protected** → freedom of speech, press, association, etc.



- **Independent judiciary** → guardian of the constitution.
- **Separation of powers** → executive, legislature, and judiciary keep each other in check.
- **Merit-based appointments** → dismantling privilege and nepotism.

So, when you put it all together — **Liberal Democracy** is not just voting every few years. It is a **living system** that balances **freedom with accountability**, **majority with minority**, and **law with justice**. It evolved out of struggle, adapts with time, and survives only as long as **people remain vigilant**.

PYQ

1. Comment on the proposition that liberal constitutionalism precedes liberal democracy. 2009, 20



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