



Democracy Part II

Representative Democracy

Types

Representative democracy is not one-size-fits-all. It can be organized in **two types—territorial and functional**.

Territorial Representation

Here, the society is divided into **constituencies of equal population**.

- **Advantage?** It's simple, convenient, and people feel connected—they know their representative personally.
- **Disadvantage?** Local issues can take **undue prominence**, overshadowing broader national concerns.

Functional Representation

Instead of geography, society is divided on the basis of **occupations and functions**.

- For instance, **industrial workers** would elect someone to represent their industrial policy interests.
- This idea has its roots in **Guild Socialism** of **G.D.H. Cole**, who believed different groups should directly represent their professional or economic functions.
- However, a darker variant of this emerged in **corporatism under fascist regimes**, where class conflict was suppressed and **democratic elections were bypassed**.

Theories

Reactionary Theory – Hobbes

Hobbes believed in **unlimited representation** and **absolute sovereignty**. Why? Because he thought politicians had **superior knowledge and wisdom**, making them the best custodians of public interest.

In short: Trust the rulers completely, don't question them.

Conservative Theory – Edmund Burke

Burke wanted **public control** but **without direct public participation**.

- He argued: ordinary people are often swayed by passions.
- Solution? Let **elites govern**, but if they fail, they can be **replaced by another elite**.
- Parliament, for Burke, was not to serve narrow local demands, but to act as an **assembly of the nation**.
- A balance between accountability and elite wisdom.

Enlightened Model – J.S. Mill

Mill wanted representatives with both **understanding and experience**.

- He gave them **freedom and flexibility** to act, instead of being tied down to voters' wishes.
- Representatives should lead, not just follow.



Liberal Theory – John Locke

Locke believed in the **wisdom of the masses**.

- For him, representatives were nothing but **agents or messengers** of the people.
- Their legitimacy came from carrying forward the **consent of the governed**.
- Here, the people are the masters, not the rulers.

Radical Theory – Rousseau

Rousseau took it further: he didn't like representatives at all!

- For him, sovereignty belongs to the **people directly**.
- His model was **direct democracy**—citizens themselves making laws, embodying the **general will**.
- “No one can represent my will better than me.”

So, you see, theories of representation are like a spectrum:

- **Hobbes → Absolute rulers**
- **Burke → Elite guardians**
- **Mill → Enlightened leaders**
- **Locke → Agents of the people**
- **Rousseau → Direct rule by the people themselves**

Contemporary Theories

Traditional Theories of Democracy

Traditionally, when philosophers spoke of democracy, they were mostly concerned with two things:

1. **Form of government** – Who rules? How are rulers chosen?
2. **Ethical justification** – Is democracy morally superior? Does it promote liberty, equality, justice?

In other words, they gave us the **ideal blueprints** and **normative arguments** about why democracy is good.

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Contemporary Theories of Democracy

Now, move to the **modern world**. Here, democracy is not studied only in theory, but in practice.

- **Nature of democracy** becomes central:
→ How does democracy *actually* work?
→ What is the role of power, class, gender, culture, media?
- Instead of abstract ideals, contemporary thinkers bring in **sociological findings**.
→ For example: voting patterns, elite dominance, participation of marginalized groups, technology's influence.
- Alongside, they bring in **ethical critiques**.
→ Does democracy live up to its promise of equality?
→ Does it empower or manipulate citizens?
→ Is it just a façade for elite control?

So, the shift is this:

- **Traditional theories** = “What should democracy be?”
- **Contemporary theories** = “What is democracy in reality, given society, economy, and power structures?”

This is why theories like **elitist theory, pluralist theory, participatory democracy, deliberative democracy, radical democracy** emerged — they dig into the **real functioning** and the **hidden challenges** of democracy.

Elitist Theory

The Core Idea

At its heart, the **Elitist Theory** says: *democracy is not really about the people ruling themselves*. Instead, it's about a **minority of elites** — those with superior influence in religion, the state, economy, or society — who actually make the decisions.

Why? Because, according to this view, the **masses** (the majority) lack the qualities of leadership. They feel safer following than taking responsibility themselves.

Key Dimensions

1. **Decisions are taken by leadership.**
→ It's not the masses but the elite leaders who make real decisions.
2. **Free competition among leaders.**
→ Democracy survives when elites compete with each other for power.
3. **People choose from competing elites.**
→ Citizens don't shape policies directly; they just *select* which elite group will lead them.

Major Thinkers



- **Vilfredo Pareto → Circulation of Elites**

He said society is never free from elites. Old elites decline, and new ones replace them — but it's always the rule of few. The masses *fear responsibility* and prefer to follow.

- **Robert Michels → Iron Law of Oligarchy**

In any large organization — political party, union, government — leadership inevitably concentrates in the hands of a few. Democracy cannot escape this “rule of the few.”

- **Joseph A. Schumpeter**

He reframed democracy: it is not about the people *making* laws, but about the people's ability to **appoint and dismiss lawmakers**. A practical, minimalist definition.

- **Raymond Aron**

He drew a sharp contrast:

- In **liberal democracy**, elites are divided, they compete, and thus create checks and balances.
- In **Soviet democracy**, elites are unified, so power is concentrated and unchecked.

- **Giovanni Sartori**

He issued a warning: *Self-government is a delusion*. The real danger is not elite leadership itself, but when **leadership disappears** — because then, the masses can be manipulated by an **anti-democratic counter-elite**.

The Essence

Elitist theory forces us to rethink democracy. Instead of the romantic idea of “rule of the people,” it shows us democracy as **rule of elites, checked by competition, accountability, and circulation**.

So the people do matter — but mainly as a **force to select, reject, and balance elites**, not as day-to-day rulers.

Pluralist Theory

Now, imagine democracy not as a single ruler, not even as a handful of elites — but as a **game of groups**. That's exactly how the **pluralist theory** looks at it.

Society, according to this view, is **differentiated**. Which means, no single centre of power dominates. Instead, you have a variety of **groups** — cultural, economic, occupational — each holding some degree of **influence**, each with its own **values, sources, and methods** of pushing for their interests.

The American political scientist **A.F. Bentley** beautifully described democracy as nothing but a **political game played by groups**. Politics, in this sense, is not the story of great men, or elites at the top, but the constant **push and pull among groups**.

Later, **Robert Dahl** sharpened this into his famous concept of **polyarchy** — literally, “rule by many.” Here, democracy is not pure majority rule, but a system with **several centres of power**, where no one group can completely dominate the others.

Think of the **policy-making process** in such a society. It is **highly decentralised**, almost like a marketplace. Policies emerge not from some sacred will of the people, nor from elites sitting in an ivory tower, but from **bargaining, negotiation, and compromise among relatively autonomous groups**.

But here comes the catch — who usually wins in this bargaining game? Often, it's the **more organised and vocal groups**. For instance, **producers** — business lobbies, industry associations — tend to outweigh **consumers**, who are scattered and less vocal.



So the pluralist picture tells us: democracy is **not about elites** alone, it's not about a monolithic state, it's about the **balance of groups**, each checking, bargaining, and competing with others.

In short, **pluralism** makes democracy look like a **chorus of voices** — sometimes harmonious, often noisy, but never the monopoly of one.

PYQ

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3. Explicate the features of Representative Democracy.
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