

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-04387-9 - The People's Government: An Introduction to Democracy

Del Dickson

Excerpt

[More information](#)

I

Liberty and Freedom

Americans do not need to be convinced that democracy is a good thing. There has been a national consensus about the virtues of self-government since 1620, when the Mayflower Compact became the Plymouth Colony's founding social contract. The birth of American democracy goes even farther back, to the Iroquois, who established a sophisticated democratic confederacy a hundred years before the Europeans arrived.

If America's long-standing attachment to democracy has a downside, it is that too many people take it for granted. Most Americans never give democracy a thought, beyond dragging themselves to the polls every few years and trying to get out of jury duty.

Over the last century, democracy has become a global phenomenon. It is now fashionable for politicians everywhere to promote democracy in glowing, even messianic terms. Almost every country in the world claims to be democratic, although most must be thankful that their claims are not subject to truth-in-advertising laws.¹

These are heady times for political leaders who claim to love democracy, but perilous for ordinary people who actually believe in it. In many countries, those who take democracy seriously run the risk of official harassment, persecution, prison, and worse.

¹ Saudi Arabia, an autocratic monarchy controlled by the Al-Saud dynasty, is the major exception. A few other smaller states, such as Brunei, remain unapologetically undemocratic. In 2005, Saudi Arabia took its first tentative steps toward democratization when the regime held unprecedented nonpartisan municipal elections. The elections were largely for show. Suffrage and contestation were strictly limited to Muslim men, elected officials had no real power, and no political parties were allowed to organize or contest elections. A second round of municipal elections, originally scheduled for 2009, was repeatedly postponed until September 2011. The third round of municipal elections is currently scheduled for 2015, and the Saudi government has hinted that women might be allowed to vote this time.

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-04387-9 - The People's Government: An Introduction to Democracy

Del Dickson

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Even in developed democracies, public officials routinely disregard basic democratic principles in the name of security, order, efficiency, and expediency. Politicians praise democracy to the skies in public while working quietly in private to subvert it. Like termites, the damage that they do is largely unseen, but if left unchecked, all that eventually remains is a hollow democracy, with a thin veneer of formal public accountability that barely conceals the rot underneath.

Despite these challenges, American identity and ego are inseparably wrapped up in democracy. This has led to two fundamental misperceptions about republican government: that Americans invented it, and that American democracy is the only model worthy of serious consideration.

Most Americans would agree with Pericles that “[o]ur system of government does not copy the systems of our neighbors; we are a model to them, not they to us.”² Such pride is understandable but counterproductive.

We need to think critically about democracy and consider alternative approaches to popular government. By understanding how democracy works, and seeing the different forms that it takes, we can reexamine our own system to strengthen what works, fix what is broken, and improve what we can. The American tree of liberty might not need to be regularly refreshed with the blood of tyrants and patriots, but it still requires care if it is to continue to shelter future generations.

KEY TERMS

Liberty and Freedom

Ask any American to define liberty, and chances are they will give you a pretty good definition of liberty. Ask any American to define freedom, and chances are they will give you a pretty good definition of liberty. Like most people who live in a liberal democracy, Americans tend to conflate these two distinct rights.

Liberty is the right to think and speak one's mind, to follow one's conscience, and to make independent decisions about one's own life without undue external interference. It is the right to be an autonomous individual, whose thoughts and beliefs are unrestricted, and whose actions are limited by reason, conscience, consent, and the rule of law.

Freedom is the right to participate in politics. It is the right to deliberate, decide, and act with others as part of a political community.

Liberty is a natural right, in that it exists apart from state and society. States can recognize, respect, limit, or destroy liberty, but they do not grant it in the

² Thucydides, *Pericles' Funeral Oration*.

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-04387-9 - The People's Government: An Introduction to Democracy

Del Dickson

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Liberty and Freedom*

3

first instance. All one needs to do to secure liberty is to move away from other people and beyond the reach of government.

Hermits and wild animals have liberty, but only people who live in a well-ordered political community can have freedom. Freedom is a human invention that cannot exist apart from society and government. Freedom is a right people grant to each other when they join together to form a political commonwealth.

Liberty and freedom are the two great pillars of democracy. They are the metarights from which other political rights are derived. They are discrete concepts, yet complement and complete each other. Liberty is the right to be left alone; freedom is the right to be included. Liberty is an individual right; freedom is about community. Liberty finds its purest form in the realm of thought; freedom belongs to the realm of action. It is common to have liberty without freedom, and possible to have freedom without liberty, but the official democracy owner's manual does not recommend either option.

Power, Politics, and State

Power is the ability to get people to do something they would not have done otherwise. Most forms of power are at least implicitly coercive: obedience is based on fear of the perceived consequences of noncompliance.

There are some exceptions to the rule of coercive power.³ The most important form of noncoercive power is *authority*, which is legitimate power.⁴ People comply with an authoritative order because they have internalized the source and content of the order and subjectively accept that it *should* be obeyed. They yield voluntarily, though not necessarily happily.

In the motion picture *The Wizard of Oz*, the Gale family surrenders Toto to the malevolent Miss Gulch, not out of fear, but because she has signed a legal document authorizing her to take the plucky terrier. The Gales obey the law because they believe that it is the right thing to do, even though it goes against their interests – and Toto's, too.

³ In his essay, "Of The First Principles of Government," Scottish Enlightenment theorist David Hume identified five forms of political power and obedience: (1) interest, (2) opinion of utility and necessity (that is, the apparent interests and necessities of human society), (3) habitual sense of obligation (i.e., authority), (4) force, and (5) influence (e.g., the state offers rewards for obedience). Hume, David, *Essays, Moral, Political, and Literary*. Machiavelli might have added a sixth category: trick or deception.

⁴ Max Weber, *Economy and Society* (2 vols., University of California Press 1978). Weber identified three distinct types of political authority: *traditional* (voluntary compliance based on customary power relationships among individuals, such as the mutual sense of duty between a feudal lord and vassal), *charismatic* (voluntary obedience based on a leader's personality), and *legal-rational* (voluntary obedience based on the internalization and subjective acceptance of established norms and principles).

Sidebar 1: The Politics of Oz

Some scholars see L. Frank Baum's *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* as an allegory of American democracy.⁵ Baum himself insisted that his book was just a fairy tale, but his protests did not stop speculation about possible hidden meanings in his classic story. Here are some of the more interesting theories:

DOROTHY GALE: An ordinary American, "simple, sweet, and true," and a stranger in a strange land. In Dorothy, Baum – the son-in-law of early feminist Matilda Joselyn Gage – created a new archetype of all-American heroine and the direct precursor of modern icons like Ellen Ripley and Buffy Summers.

YELLOW BRICK ROAD: The Gold Standard, presidential candidate William McKinley's monetary policy.

SILVER SHOES: The Silver Standard, favored by Populist Party presidential candidate William Jennings Bryan. The silver shoes can take Dorothy anywhere she wants to go, once she learns how to use them. The 1939 movie substituted ruby slippers, to show off MGM's new Technicolor film process.

THE COWARDLY LION: Presidential candidate and populist William Jennings Bryan.

THE TIN MAN: American labor – once fully human, turned piece by piece into a machine.

THE SCARECROW: American farmers.

THE WIZARD OF OZ AND GLENDA THE GOOD WITCH OF THE NORTH: charismatic and manipulative rulers who seek to use Dorothy for their own purposes.

THE EMERALD CITY: The golden road leads to the illusory paradise of paper money, or greenbacks.

FLYING MONKEYS: American Indians – primitive spirits, once free, but now captive and exploited. Baum's mother-in-law was an activist on Indian issues and an adopted member of the Mohawk Wolf Clan.

THE WICKED WITCHES OF THE EAST AND WEST: Eastern bankers and Western railroad companies.

TOTO: No one has come up with a plausible theory about the dog's political significance – feel free to make up your own.

⁵ Henry Littlefield, "The Wizard of Oz: Parable on Populism," 16 *American Quarterly* 47 (1964); Gretchen Ritter, "Silver Slippers and a Golden Cap: L. Frank Baum's *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* and Historical Memory in American Politics," 31 *Journal of American Studies* 171 (1997); Bradley A. Hansen, "The Fable of the Allegory: The Wizard of Oz in Economics," 33 *Journal of Economic Education* 254 (2002).

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-04387-9 - The People's Government: An Introduction to Democracy

Del Dickson

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Liberty and Freedom*

5

Authority is the Holy Grail, the Maltese Falcon, the melange, and the Precious of politics, all wrapped into one. It is so highly prized because governing is much easier when people comply voluntarily, rather than being compelled to submit through force or fear.⁶

Politics is the theory and practice of power. One standard definition is who gets what, when, how, and why. But this is only half of the equation. Politics also has a behavioral dimension: who *does* what, when, how, and why. Combining these approaches, one material and one behavioral, politics is how power is organized and used to allocate resources and regulate human activity.

The ultimate form of organized political power is the *state*. A state consists of an ordered hierarchical society, with a clear geographical border that separates it from all other societies, where leaders are distinguished from ordinary people or citizens, and with a government that has a monopoly on the authoritative use of violence.⁷ States are not the only source of political power, but they are the strongest and most pervasive form of institutionalized power.

WHO SHOULD RULE?

The Tyranny of Scarce Resources

For the foreseeable future, our lives will remain subject to the power of states. Accordingly, one of the most important questions to consider is, who should be in charge of the state – who should rule? The best answer to this question depends on many variables, but the most important single factor involves a basic assumption about resources – the essential goods that makes life possible.

Conventional political wisdom assumes that these resources are scarce; that there are not enough essential goods and services to go around. Politics is how societies determine who wins and who loses in the competition for scarce resources, knowing that some people *have* to lose.

This conception of politics is closely related to economics, but the two are not synonymous. Both begin with the assumption of scarce resources, but differ in how the competition for resources plays out.

Economists look to market forces to allocate scarce resources. They use cost-benefit analysis to understand how the process works, and either assume or advocate rational and efficient resource allocation through markets. An efficient system allocates scarce goods according to their “highest use,” meaning that resources go (and *should* go) to those who are willing to pay the highest price in a free market exchange. You might notice a subtle bias there.

⁶ Another example of noncoercive power is money. One of the most effective ways to get people to do something they would not otherwise do is to pay them.

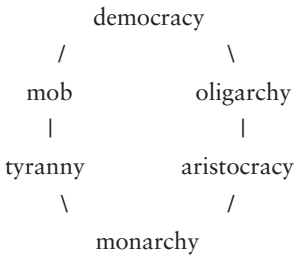
⁷ Max Weber, *Economy and Society*.

Political scientists study resource allocation through the prism of power. They look first to elite decision making, rather than to market forces, to understand how this works. Who gets what, when, and how is based primarily on power differentials among competing individuals and groups. Political scientists expect this to be a messy process. Reason and rationality have their place, but so do will, desire, passion, greed, hypocrisy, and corruption. Most political scientists assume that the authoritative allocation of resources is, and always will be, at least somewhat irrational, contradictory, volatile, inefficient, unfair, exploitative, corrupt, and brutal.

The Merry-Go-Round of Politics

If we accept for now the assumption that politics is about how communities organize the struggle for scarce resources, then there are three broad answers to the question of who rules: the one, the few, or the many. Each of these has two iterations: a moderate form and a corrupt form. The one can rule as a monarch or a tyrant, the few can rule as an aristocracy or an oligarchy, and the many can rule either as a democracy or a mob.

Aristotle’s Ring Cycle⁸



More than two millennia ago, the ancient Greeks understood politics to be a no-holds-barred competition for scarce resources, where the stakes are literally life or death. This makes political power inherently unstable, as different groups struggle for control and survival. States, governments, and rulers come and go as power flows from one group to another. Yet while instability and change are inevitable, the options concerning who is in charge remain perpetually limited to the six choices listed here.

Governments, states, and civilizations come and go, yet nothing truly new can happen. All societies are trapped in the same repeating loop of power, privilege, and privation, where the winners rule and enjoy the spoils while the losers suffer in poverty and want. When the one or the few are in charge, the

⁸ Borrowed from composer Richard Wagner’s epic “Ring Cycle,” *The Ring of the Nibelung*. Both ring cycles seem endless, their plots do not always make sense, and lots of people die for no good reason.

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-04387-9 - The People's Government: An Introduction to Democracy

Del Dickson

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Liberty and Freedom*

7

many are inevitably oppressed. When the many rule, the few must suffer. It is the world's worst merry-go-round.

Democracies are not exempt from the tyranny of scarce resources or the resulting competition, oppression, and instability. In a world with too little for everyone to share, the many must exploit the few in order to secure enough resources for themselves. Ancient Attica purchased its male citizens' unprecedented liberty and freedom with slavery and the exclusion of women from public life.

Two thousand years later, America's Founders likewise assumed that in order to enjoy their rights, someone else had to pay the price. Thomas Jefferson knew perfectly well that slavery was morally reprehensible and fundamentally irreconcilable with the spirit of his Declaration of Independence. Yet like the Athenians he so deeply admired, Jefferson believed that in order to have the time and resources he needed to be free, others, regrettably but inevitably, had to be kept in chains.

Getting off the Merry-Go-Round

As it turns out, the universal assumption that scarcity is the limiting constant of politics was wrong, or at least exaggerated. With the discovery of the New World and its vast store of natural resources, a new conception of politics developed that revolutionized modern politics, just as the leap from Aristotelian to Newtonian physics transformed the natural sciences. It gradually became apparent that essential goods might not be in critically short supply after all, and that long-standing assumptions about resource scarcity need not define or limit politics. This marked the liberation of politics from economics.

First in the New World, then in Europe, a new view of politics slowly emerged. If old assumptions about material scarcity can be overcome, or at least dealt with creatively, then poverty, deprivation, and endless class warfare are not inevitable. Politics can become an inclusive, civilized, and even cooperative enterprise – an administrative puzzle to solve, rather than an existential struggle with no exit. In a world with enough essential resources to go around, politics can be a game that everyone can play, and if not everyone can win equally, at least no one has to lose everything.

With this revolutionary redefinition of politics, two new possibilities emerged to answer the question of who should rule: *everyone* should rule, or *no one* should rule. The former led to modern democratic theory, whereas the latter inspired social anarchism⁹ and communism.¹⁰ All of these theories were premised on the radical new idea that there are enough essential resources for everyone, if politics can just be made to work properly.

⁹ Most notably Mikhail Bakunin, Peter Kropotkin, and P. J. Proudhon.

¹⁰ Including Karl Marx, Friedrich Engels, V. I. Lenin, Rosa Luxemburg, Eduard Bernstein, and Karl Kautsky.

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-04387-9 - The People's Government: An Introduction to Democracy

Del Dickson

Excerpt

[More information](#)**Equal Rights as a Birthright**

The catalyst for this radical reconception of politics was the Enlightenment and the systematic, semi-scientific study of history. The brightest light of the Scottish Enlightenment, David Hume, concluded that human experience had at last provided enough examples of different political systems to understand empirically the political life cycle – how governments worked, and more importantly, how they failed. In the United States, Alexander Hamilton called this the science of politics.¹¹

Rather than naively dreaming of utopia or glumly assuming that class warfare is inevitable, Americans sought to use the new science of politics to distill objective principles of good government, in order to establish the world's first stable federal republic – a *novus ordo seclorum*.¹² America was the first democratic state founded on the promise that equal political and legal rights are a birthright, and American history has been the story of trying to live up to that promise.

Beautiful Choices

The liberation of politics from economics means that, at least in relatively prosperous countries, politics can transcend the grim task of sorting out society's winners and losers. Political decisions are no longer strictly limited by scarcity and necessity, but can include what Aristotle called “beautiful” or “free” choices.

Beautiful choices are the options that people have once their survival needs are met. By definition, beautiful choices are not necessary to sustain life; they make life more pleasant, enjoyable, and rewarding.

New horizons open when communities can make beautiful choices. Once everyone's basic needs are secure, what should we do with our spare time and treasure? Establish new parks and wilderness lands? Build public schools? Promote the arts? Add bike lanes to local streets? Provide health and child care for working families? Build rockets to explore the universe? Cut taxes and give money back to taxpayers? These are all beautiful choices.

¹¹ Alexander Hamilton, *The Federalist Papers*, No. 9. Hamilton closely followed Hume's essay, “That Politics May Be Reduced to a Science.” Both favored the quasi-empirical, “scientific” study of history as the best way to discover why previous regimes failed, and the best way to establish rigorous principles of good government. This was a novel approach at the time, and they claimed that their approach yielded wisdom unavailable to the ancients. Hume and Hamilton believed that the science of politics would allow governments to be designed like an engineering or architectural project, and that these new, scientific principles would provide long-term stability and avoid the “perpetual vibration” between tyranny and anarchy that had long plagued previous governments, especially democracies.

¹² “A new order of the ages.” The quote, often attributed to Virgil, was first included on the reverse of the Great Seal of the United States in 1782. More than a century later, in 1935, Franklin D. Roosevelt resurrected the motto and placed it on the back of the dollar bill as a symbol of the New Deal.

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-04387-9 - The People's Government: An Introduction to Democracy

Del Dickson

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Liberty and Freedom*

9

All of this allows for a new, post-materialist dimension of politics that extends, and perhaps transcends, Harold Lasswell's conventional definition. Post-materialist politics deals with how communities deliberate, decide, and act once the necessities of life are assured and people have spare time and resources to do as they please. Economics will always be the dismal science, but politics can be beautiful.

Democracy

Democracy means rule by the people. Political power originates with individuals, and is either exercised directly by them or is held in trust by their representatives in a responsive and accountable government. At a minimum, democracy means government by consent, where government officials must seek public approval at regular intervals to remain in power. There must be regular opportunities for public political participation, including the right to take part in the periodic, free, fair, and transparent selection of most important government officials.

In a democracy there are no permanent classes of rulers and subjects. Citizens take turns ruling and being ruled.¹³ This is what Abraham Lincoln meant when he wrote, "As I would not be a slave, so I would not be a master. This expresses my idea of democracy. Whatever differs from this, to the extent of the difference, is no democracy."¹⁴

Lincoln later articulated a more elegant definition of democracy as *government of the people, by the people, and for the people*. This is hardly the last word on what democracy is, but it is a good place to begin.

This book proposes different ways to think about democracy. Ideas vary widely, but can include any combination of the following characteristics: direct popular decision making, representative government, random selection of major public officials, direct or indirect elections, limited or near-universal adult suffrage, limited or open contestation rights for offices, powerful or limited government, unitary or federal government, accountable government, government by consent, transparent government, responsive government, a government responsible for safeguarding popular rights and liberties, government based on the rule of law, and government premised on the routine peaceful transfer of power among competing factions according to popular will.

¹³ Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution*.

¹⁴ Abraham Lincoln, "On Slavery and Democracy." Lincoln scribbled these words on a scrap of paper in August 1858, apparently in response to the Kansas-Nebraska Act, which he had opposed. Mary Todd Lincoln saved the fragment and later gave it to the pioneering lawyer Myra Bradwell, after Bradwell helped secure Mrs. Lincoln's discharge from a sanatorium in 1875.

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-04387-9 - The People's Government: An Introduction to Democracy

Del Dickson

Excerpt

[More information](#)

2

Freedom or Liberty?

Like beer, ice cream, and people, democracy comes in two basic types but an infinite variety of flavors. Which type one prefers depends on the answer to a deceptively simple question: which right is more important, freedom or liberty? Are people better off being an active part of a community, or making individual decisions on the basis of enlightened self-interest? *Free democracy* emphasizes freedom and community; *liberal democracy* stresses liberty and individualism. Free democrats long to belong; liberal democrats mostly just want to be left alone.

FREE DEMOCRACY

Free democracy begins with Aristotle's view that people are political animals. Our social nature leads us to seek the company of others, and to organize ourselves into communities on the basis of shared political, social, and economic interests. It is the same impulse that leads people to enjoy going to movie theaters, ball games, shopping malls, and using social media. If Aristotle was right, then freedom is not only essential to democracy; it is a central aspect of human nature.

In a free democracy, government is not merely accountable to the people; it *is* the people. Every eligible citizen is a legislator engaged in, and responsible for, collective decision making. With habitual popular participation in government, the gap between ruler and citizen virtually disappears.

Free democracy is catholic in spirit, centered on community and public life. Free democrats believe that it is only as an integral part of a good and just society that people can realize their individual and collective potential. Whereas some communities take pleasure in being together, a free community takes pleasure in doing things together. Politics in this context is a cooperative enterprise, a team sport where ultimately everyone is on the same team. Accordingly, free democracies sometimes go to great lengths to try to avoid factional infighting and partisanship, in favor of unity and communal harmony (Figure 2.1).