What Is Democracy, and What Constitutes a Stable Democracy?

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Among the existing forms of government, a democratic regime is the preferred option from the citizens’ perspective because it permits elections and guarantees equality and liberties. Conversely, unlike other types of government, it requires that citizens understand its essence, appreciate its rules, and remain vigilant in the face of forces and developments aimed at restricting it. It was in this context that nineteenth-century French philosopher Alexis de Tocqueville observed the ways we use the terms “democracy” and “democratic rule” lead to chaos. Unless these terms are clearly defined, and built on a broad consensus, people can only live in the inescapable chaos of ideas benefiting demagogues and dictators.

The word “democracy” is of Greek origin: demos kratos, meaning the rule of the people. But what does this term convey and what does it imply? To answer these questions and understand the essence of democratic governance, we must first examine its principles.
The individual is the basic element of society

The idea that every member of society has natural rights and fundamental liberties is highly characteristic of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century liberal thought. This notion, which is fundamental to the concept of a stable liberal democracy, presumes that all individuals within society are human beings in their own right, and contrasts sharply with the view of a political society as a homogenous collective -- in effect an organism composed of individuals that exist only as its body parts. The doctrine of man’s natural rights complements the concept of a social contract.

This is why liberal thinkers such as John Locke (b. 1632), John Stuart Mill (b. 1806), and Alexis de Tocqueville (b. 1805) emphasized that the individual is the basic element of society, that each person’s liberty is of supreme importance, and that each and every person represents the end rather than a means in the hands of a government, nation, or state.

What are individual rights and freedoms?

What are the natural rights of every individual? First and foremost, every individual has free agency - that is, one's right to be in control of one’s body, thoughts, feelings, and actions, as long as they do not adversely affect the life, liberty, or dignity of others. Free agency also entails the right to participate, to some extent, in governance. The basic liberties that derive from a person’s natural rights include:

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✓ Religious freedom - “All men are equally entitled to the free exercise of religion, according to the dictates of conscience” (Section 16, Virginia Declaration of Rights, United States);

✓ Freedom of the press - “The freedom of the press is one of the great bulwarks of liberty, and can never be restrained but by despotic governments” (Section 12, Virginia Declaration of Rights, United States);

✓ Freedom of assembly, freedom of thought, freedom of expression, and freedom from arbitrary arrest and detention.

John Stuart Mill emphasized that man has not only the right to enjoy liberties and be free from restrictions and unjust arrest, but also the right to dignity and self-development. He regarded the right to education, for example, as one of man’s natural rights. Generally speaking, it is safe to say that liberals agree that a man who relinquishes his liberty loses part of his humanity and essence as a human being.

Is democracy equivalent to the rule of the people?

The term “rule of the people” (democracy) is subject to various interpretations, depending on one’s definitions of “rule” and “people.” The radical and participatory concepts of the rule of the people are quite simplistic, given that no modern state allows citizens to control policymaking or decision-making in the manner that was customary in ancient Greece, where citizens (who did not include women or slaves) would gather in the town square and decide on matters of policy.¹

In liberal democracies, pluralist and liberal concepts of the rule of the people are widespread. In parliamentary systems, which form the decisive majority of liberal democracies, the people elect a parliament, from which a government based on a parliamentary majority is chosen. Presidential systems offer direct elections in which the people select a president who serves as head of government (in contrast to the president in a parliamentary system, whose powers are limited and whose duties are primarily representative and symbolic). Thus, liberal democracy - whether parliamentary or presidential - may essentially be described as indirect democracy or representative democracy, given that most of its decisions are not taken directly by the people, but rather by bodies elected to represent it: a parliament, government, or elected president. At the same time, most liberal democracies also have certain elements of direct democracy, such as referenda on specific issues, direct presidential elections, or a system of primary elections. However, despite these elements, in practice the rule of the people in liberal democracies means rule by representatives of the people (in a parliamentary system) or by someone elected by the people (in a presidential system). Moreover, these elements of direct democracy do not serve to refute the claim that any direct involvement by voters in governance and policymaking - whether willingly or unwillingly - is minimal. Nonetheless, people who live in a democracy do have various means of influence, for example through civil society organizations, the media, or political parties.

¹ Radical and participatory concepts of the rule of the people include radical democratic outlooks that interpret “the rule of the people” in the literal sense. That is, it is the people - rather than a ruling elite by means of government, even if elected - that actually govern and make decisions. In such a democracy, all the people participate in governance (hence the term “participatory”), and not only by way of elections. Although these outlooks have their supporters, there are actually no governments in the modern world that operate this way.
In democracies governance is limited

In liberal democracies the government is subject to restrictions. Some stem from internal constraints, as when the government aims to uphold tolerance, liberties, and moderate control; others stem from social and political constraints. In addition, there are official apparatuses that aim to control governance: such as a constitution to guarantee basic liberties, an independent judicial system, a parliament to which the government is accountable (in a parliamentary system) or a parliament that forms part of a system of checks and balances (in a presidential system). Additional restraint mechanisms include free elections, which ensure some degree of responsiveness to public will, and regulatory bodies aimed at preventing government corruption and exploitation. Moreover, an elected local government and (in a federal system) regional government can share political power with the central government.

In democracies, government is inherently subject to restrictions because it is accountable to the people - that is, to the voting public. It is not obligated to secure the people’s approval for all its actions, but at times it must obtain the public’s general approval through elections. Furthermore, the government is also continuously accountable to parliament - both accountability based on conscience and the public good, and accountability that is bound by the legal system. However, since government and parliament are bound together in a Gordian knot stemming from the government’s dependence on a parliamentary coalition, they are fully coordinated and insufficiently separate.

The Gordian Knot

The metaphor of a Gordian knot, which originated in ancient Greece, refers to an intricate knot that is hard to unravel, a convolution of sorts. It was believed that whoever managed to unravel the Gordian knot was destined to conquer Asia. When Alexander the Great set out on his conquests, he passed through the kingdom of Phrygia and its capital, Gordium, where an oxcart had long been standing, bound to a post by a knot that no one had been able to untie. Initially Alexander tried to unravel the knot, but eventually he unsheathed his sword and sliced through it, demonstrating that he was destined to conquer Asia, as indeed he did.

At the same time, in a parliamentary system the legislature can still express a lack of confidence in the government and thereby dissolve it. No such option exists in a presidential system such as that of the United States, although the U.S. Congress can impeach a president who transgressed and became embroiled in illegal activities. Indeed, in 1974 President Nixon faced the threat of impeachment following the Watergate affair, but instead he preemptively resigned. President Clinton, too, was nearly impeached by Congress in 1998 as a result of his relations with White House intern Monica Lewinsky, when it came to light that he had lied and breached the public trust, but his presidency was saved by a very close Senate vote. In 2019 impeachment proceedings were launched against President Donald Trump because of suspected criminal ties with Ukraine and a...
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series of acts of corruption, but the Republican majority in the Senate thwarted the proceedings (impeachment requires a majority in both chambers of Congress, the House of Representatives and the Senate).²

The Watergate Affair

The Watergate Affair was a political scandal in the United States that took place in 1972-1974, during the administration of President Richard Nixon. The affair also coincided with the Vietnam War, which sparked mass demonstrations against the government - demonstrations supported by the Democratic Party and in opposition to the Republican president. The scandal itself originated with illegal activities on the part of the president, who sought to frame his political rivals. One of the measures pursued in this regard was a break-in at the Watergate Hotel, where the Democratic National Committee had its headquarters. The matter came to light by way of a leaked recording, triggering a public uproar and efforts by the Democrats to impeach the president for his involvement in the affair. The president preempted the impeachment proceedings by resigning.

Regarding the importance of corruption-free institutions, the French thinker de Tocqueville (1805–1859) observed, “The American Republic will survive until the day the Congress discovers it can bribe the people with the people’s money.”

Democracy requires a broad consensus

A democratic government governs on the basis of majority consent. However, that portion of the public that did not vote for it is also expected to uphold the rules of democracy and accept the rule of the party that won the elections fairly and, in turn, is operating in accordance with the democratic rules of the game. Presidential term limits (in a presidential system) and parliamentary term limits (in a parliamentary system) ensure that the people’s consent is periodically reassessed through elections.

Even between elections, the electoral sword of Damocles compels the government to obtain a broad consensus for certain activities. In advance of fateful decisions, such as the decision to go to war, a democratic government needs a consensus - that is, widespread agreement among more than a simple majority (this does not mean unanimity, but rather the consent of a decisive majority).

² A second impeachment trial was launched in 2021 for incitement of insurrection (overturning the 2020 election), but Trump was acquitted for the same reason, namely failure to reach a 2/3 majority in the Senate.
The Sword of Damocles

The “Sword of Damocles” refers to imminent and ever-present peril. The term traces back to the writings of the Roman statesman Cicero. Damocles was a courtier in the court of Dionysus I of Syracuse. Seeking to flatter the king, Damocles remarked that Dionysus, being a man of tremendous wealth and power who was living a life of luxury and grandeur, must surely feel fortunate and happy. In response Dionysus suggested that he and Damocles switch places for a day. Damocles immediately agreed. That evening a banquet was held, and Damocles enjoyed the full benefit of royal treatment as he sat on the king’s magnificent throne. In the midst of the grand feast he suddenly noticed a sword hanging above his head, held by a single hair of a horse’s tail, arranged by Dionysus to convey the constant sense of danger inherent in being king. The dishes before him suddenly lost their flavor, and all the beauty and grandeur no longer interested him. Ultimately he begged the king to switch back to their original roles.

Moreover, a democratic state will not continue to engage in war without widespread support and the conviction, among a considerable majority of the public, that war is indeed necessary. The Americans withdrew from Vietnam in 1974 and the Israelis from Lebanon in 1985 not because they lacked a simple majority in support of continued engagement, but because they lacked a broad consensus. Similarly, a democratic government requires a broad consensus for major legislation; indeed, formal restrictions prevent it from adopting such decisions on the basis of a simple, coincidental, and temporary majority. Generally speaking, it is safe to say that for a democratic government to exist while still embracing differences of opinion, competition, struggles, and conflicts of interest - which are the lifeblood of such a system and serve as a guarantee of liberty - it must rely on a broad consensus when deciding major issues.

A democracy is stable if there is a general consensus among its citizens regarding the foundations of government, such as restrictions, a constitutional structure, an electoral system, and civil liberties. States that enjoy such a broad consensus include the Netherlands, Switzerland, Sweden, and Norway. Until recently the same could be said for the United States and the United Kingdom, but both have begun to see an erosion in what had previously been a broad consensus. Since Trump came into power, the United States has not enjoyed a broad consensus regarding the fundamental principles of democracy, and the United Kingdom no longer has a broad consensus on union with Scotland. In less stable democracies, such as India, Chile, and Israel, there is still disagreement surrounding certain major issues such as borders, religion and state, a constitution, and type of government.

The concept of consensus has various interpretations, depending on the type of governing system. The manner in which it is interpreted differs, for example, under a majoritarian democracy. In the UK, which is a a majoritarian democracy, the government and most of the parliament have almost unlimited powers because the government enjoys a parliamentary majority, with no written constitution to limit its powers. In contrast, consensus democracies such as Switzerland, Belgium, and the United States seek more than a parliamentary majority, aspiring to achieve as
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broad a consensus as possible. Their aim is to moderate the political power of the majority, out of a belief that only a broader consensus will ensure governmental stability, protect the integrity of the state, and prevent social upheaval.

How is a broad consensus generated?

The many tools used by consensus democracies to moderate the power of the majority include the following:

• The formation of broad coalitions and rejection of the notion that a slim majority suffices to form a coalition. In Switzerland, for example, the government is composed of representatives of all the major parties. Belgium's Constitution requires that any government comprise an equal number of Flemish and Walloon ministers (representing the state's two main population groups) so as to prevent the concentration of governmental power in the hands of a single cultural-linguistic group, even if that group constitutes a majority of the population.

• The separation of powers. In the United States and Switzerland, parliaments usually cannot depose the government, and this in turn ensures a certain balance of powers between executive and legislative authorities. The American Congress thus moderates the power of the majority that voted for the president, who is directly elected by the people. Indeed, the president needs congressional authorization for decisions such as a declaration of war or ratification of international treaties. Reciprocally, the president moderates the power of the voting majority that selected the members of Congress, since Congress cannot depose the president (except by way of a complex impeachment process if the president has engaged in criminal behavior). In a majoritarian democracy such as the UK, Israel, or New Zealand, it is the parliamentary majority that forms the government, and therefore the separation of powers is primarily symbolic rather than a genuine means to achieving a balance of powers.

• Federalism. One of the aims of federal systems, in which government powers are divided between a central government and the various states, is to generate consensus. Thus, for example, each member state of the United States has its own legal system. This form of government has been adopted primarily in large countries, such as the United States, Canada, Australia, India, and Germany. In such countries, which consist of geographically distant and diverse regions, only a consensus-based system - as opposed to a majoritarian system - can prevent “disintegration” along regional lines.
Even a distinctly majoritarian democracy such as the UK must occasionally take measures to extend its powers and restrict the majority’s abundant power. In Northern Ireland, for example, an electoral system of proportional representation was instituted, with a view to moderating the power of the Protestant majority that had ruled throughout 1921–1974 and, for decades, had denied both the rights of the Catholic minority and its means of influence. The granting of autonomy to Scotland and Wales also indicates that the British leadership had come to the conclusion that it could not ensure stability without granting greater powers and more authority to national minorities.

There is no doubt that consensus is an important aspect of any democratic system, whether it be the narrow consensus of a majoritarian democracy or a broader consensus, as in the case of a consensus democracy.
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Does democracy mean majority rule?

Democracy is customarily taken to mean majority rule, but this is a simplistic and misleading definition. Even if we invoke the classical Greek concept of democracy as the rule of the people, we cannot overlook the fact that a people comprises both a majority and a minority. Whatever the circumstances, democracy entails a decision-making process based on a majority of some sort, although the process itself varies and should not be regarded as the most significant characteristic of a democratic system. Moreover, this process is not unique to the democratic system, nor is it the factor that distinguishes a democracy from a dictatorship. The twentieth century bore witness to numerous despots who drew enthusiastic support from a sizable majority of the population. Scholars concur that up to his final days, Hitler enjoyed the support of a solid majority, yet his regime certainly was not democratic. In contrast, the majority behind the British prime ministers of the 1930s was quite narrow, yet no one doubted that Britain was a democracy. Other dictators have, on occasion, also enjoyed the support of the masses: Mussolini in Italy, Perón in Argentina, Stalin in the Soviet Union, Mao Zedong in China, Nasser in Egypt, and Khomeini in Iran. As early as the nineteenth century, John Stuart Mill and Alexis de Tocqueville warned against a tyranny of the majority. Indeed, given that a majority is capable of being tyrannical or supporting tyrants, majority rule does not provide a litmus test for distinguishing between a dictatorship and democracy.

Nevertheless, a majoritarian principle of some sort is inherently a necessary, albeit not sufficient, condition for democracy. Even the elitist theory of democracy - which holds that a democracy, too, is governed by an elite of some sort - recognizes the need for a majority of all citizens to determine, through free elections, who the ruling elite will be. Those who advocate a government based on a majority of some sort do not do so because they believe that a majority is better, more just, or stronger. After all, if power and strength were the criteria for a government’s legitimacy, then even a minority government could be justified as long as power and force were concentrated in its hands. Accordingly, it is not the concept of justice or power, but rather the simple notion of a numeric ratio, that constitutes the applicable criterion.

We must bear in mind that a relevant majority is not necessarily a majority of voters in the entire country. In the UK, for example, it is the majority within each constituency (electoral district) and the majority in parliament, and not necessarily the majority of the entire voting public, that determine who will govern the country. It is possible to have an outcome in which the representatives elected by a majority of voters actually constitute a parliamentary minority, whereas representatives chosen by a minority of the voters, having secured a majority in parliament, proceed to form the government. The possibility of a parliamentary minority representing a majority of the British voters may be illustrated as follows:
8,000 votes for the Labour Party  
3,000 votes for the Conservative Party (Tories)  
15,000 votes for the Tories  
14,000 votes for Labour  
10,000 votes for the Tories  
9,000 votes for Labour

Constituency A
Labour parliamentarian elected

Constituency B
Tory parliamentarian elected

Constituency C
Tory parliamentarian elected

The Tories have a 2:1 majority in parliament
Labour has 31,000 votes
The Tories have 28,000 votes
Labour has a majority of the votes

Such an outcome is possible even if the country has more than 600 constituencies. Indeed, in 1951 Labour received a majority of the votes, but the Tories won the election and formed the government. All democratic systems depend on the stated preference of a majority of some kind, be it a majority of the entire population (in a system of proportional representation), a parliamentary majority based on victory in most of the constituencies (in a pure majoritarian system), or a parliamentary majority based on a coalition of some sort. Even in a system of proportional representation, the electoral threshold (the minimum needed to secure a seat in parliament) might prevent a majority of the voters from achieving a parliamentary majority. If, for instance, a majority of voters support left-wing parties, but some of those parties do not pass the electoral threshold, the rightist bloc may still win the elections.

Furthermore, a majority might be absolute or relative. Democracies are not typically characterized by a fixed majority, but rather by transient and fluid majorities that vary from one issue to another and over time. A permanent and stable majority would not allow for the electoral fluidity that makes a change of government possible. There are, however, countries characterized by a fundamental political tension that stems from nationality, race, or religion, and in such cases the majority is, for the most part, fixed. In Northern Ireland, for example, the fundamental political tension is between Irish Catholics and Anglo-Scottish Protestants. A change in election results would require demographic change (and indeed, the Protestant majority is gradually declining because of a higher Catholic birthrate). Mandatory Palestine had a large Arab majority, which would have prevented the Jewish minority from rising to power by democratic means. Similarly, Cyprus had a large Greek majority, which prevented the Turkish minority from achieving electoral victory. In both cases the political system collapsed, resulting in war as well as partition.
Another reason why the majority principle is not the most important aspect of a democracy is that the definition of a majority varies depending on the type of democratic system. In the French presidential elections it is indeed the voters who decide on the president, as the winning candidate must receive at least one vote in excess of 50%.

The United States employs a system known as the Electoral College, whereby each of the fifty states votes for a certain number of electors. Populous states such as California or New York have a large number of electors, whereas states with small populations, such as Iowa or Rhode Island, have a small number of electors. The Electoral College, which comprises all electors from all fifty states, selects the president of the United States. The party that achieved a majority of the votes in a particular state is awarded all the electors of that state - in other words, this is a “winner-takes-all” system. Thus a presidential candidate could win by achieving a majority of the electoral votes without having attained a majority of the citizens’ votes across the United States.

The following illustrates the possibility of such an outcome, the likes of which has indeed happened, as we shall see:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>California</th>
<th>Iowa</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Democratic votes</td>
<td>30,000,000</td>
<td>2,000,000</td>
<td>32,000,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Republican votes</td>
<td>29,900,000</td>
<td>3,000,000</td>
<td>32,900,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The state’s total number of electoral votes</td>
<td>200</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>(Winner takes all)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Electoral votes for Democrats</td>
<td>200</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>(Winner takes all)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Electoral votes for Republicans</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>(Winner takes all)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**The Voting Results:**

The Democrats achieve a majority in the Electoral College - 200 : 20.

The Republicans win a majority of the votes - 32,900,000 : 32,000,000.

A comparable outcome is also possible across the United States as a whole, taking all fifty states into account.

In the 2016 presidential elections, for example, Hillary Clinton received at least 3,000,000 votes more than Donald Trump, but she lost the election itself because she did not achieve a majority in the Electoral College. In Britain, too, the party that receives a majority of the parliamentary votes is the victor, even if this majority does not necessarily represent a majority of the voters but rather of the constituencies, each one of which is a “winner-takes-all” system. These examples illustrate that while democracy does not necessarily guarantee a government that enjoys majority support,
it does provide an opportunity to change the government every few years through elections. Coalition governments also rely, at times, on an equivocal majority. Consider, for example, an election involving three parties in which Party A receives 48% of the votes, Party B receives 35%, and Party C receives 17%; parties B and C could form a coalition government, leaving the largest party as the opposition. That is, the final decision falls to a small minority party (Party C) - an outcome that will invariably draw criticism based on the principle of majority rule. Thus we see that implementing the concept of majority rule in a real-world political situation is not a simple matter. Nonetheless, it is realized in some form through the principle of general and free elections.

One should note that a decision based on majority rule cannot be considered democratic if it defies the essence of democracy - that is, if it undermines individual liberties and the fundamental equality of citizens. While in principle the democratic ideal upholds majority-based decision-making as an expression of democracy, it also takes into account the possibility of its abuse in the event that majority rule threatens the entire democratic structure. For example, if the majority in a particular country passes a law preventing a minority group within that country from participating in politics or benefiting from the social services granted to the citizens as a whole, such legislation, albeit based on majority rule, would be patently undemocratic because it defies the basic value of equality. Thus democracy places limitations on the majority, to prevent it from becoming tyrannical and trampling minorities’ liberties or individual rights.

As noted, there are various ways of curtailing the majority. Examples include a Bill of Rights that is not subject to amendment, a rigid constitution, a requirement to secure a minority’s (or minorities’) consent for the adoption of legislation on certain issues, federalism, separation of powers, and autonomy. Indeed, the democratic system of checks and balances is intended to prevent majority rule by an omnipotent and arbitrary majority. In short, democracy’s guiding principle is that minority rights must be protected.
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Minority rights

If an explicit criterion such as majority rule cannot provide a clear definition of democracy, then we must seek other characteristics that are unique to democratic governments. One such characteristic is respect for minority rights: A threat to minorities is a threat to the essence of democracy, and at times also signals the beginning of its end. A democratic state that violates minority rights is in essence violating human and civil rights, as these are at the very heart of democracy. When a democratic state violates minority rights, it essentially ceases to be a democratic state.

As said, if a democracy does not provide for the protection of minority rights, then a majority will be able to adopt a dictatorial regime, suppress the opposition of an ideological, religious, or ethnic minority, and trample individual liberties. The liberal concept of democracy enshrines minority rights, which include a minority’s right to protection against oppression by the majority, its right to organize and seek a change of government, its freedom of action within the framework of the law, and its civil rights. Thus democracy does not necessarily mean majority rule (in 1930s Germany, a majority undoubtedly supported Hitler, while various minorities were deprived of all rights).

It is bad to be oppressed by a minority,
but it is worse to be oppressed by a majority

Lord Acton, 1834–1902

A blow to minority rights is ultimately also a blow to the majority, because if a minority is deprived of its rights, then citizens who belong to the majority cannot switch their allegiance to the minority without losing their rights as citizens. It follows that a system that restricts minority rights is effectively also restricting majority rights. Thus, because liberal democracies protect minority rights, their majorities also have more rights; conversely, in dictatorships that do not protect minority liberties, the rights of the majority are also undermined.

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How can minority rights be guaranteed?

How does a democracy guarantee minority rights? It does so, as noted, through a democratic constitution that guarantees and protects fundamental liberties; through an independent judicial authority that defends the rule of law and prevents the government from exploiting its power; through free and regular elections that grant minorities the right to become a majority and maintain fair representation; and through a constitutional structure (checks and balances, separation of powers) that prevents any majority-controlled institution or majority group from attaining absolute power. A democratic system generally works to ensure that a simple, random, and temporary majority cannot undermine the fundamental principles of the governing system without a broad consensus. This does not, however, provide absolute protection for minority rights, as the constitutional dam could collapse if the vast majority of the people are swept up in a massive antidemocratic wave, as occurred in Nazi Germany in the 1930s. Nonetheless, in the face of a more moderate antidemocratic trend, such a constitutional dam could prevent the collapse of democracy and the violation of minority rights. Moreover, it (e.g., via its judicial system) might prevent an antidemocratic trend from becoming a massive wave by nipping it in the bud.

In addition to its principles, democracy has distinct characteristics that manifest in the structure and values that serve as its pillars, and which government conduct must reflect. Its structural-administrative characteristics include primarily the following: free and regular elections; the principle of majority rule; change of government based on election results; separation of the three branches of power - executive, legislative, and judicial; a fair and independent judicial system; the rule of law; government transparency and accountability to its citizens; a low level of corruption in the state (a highly corrupt state cannot be democratic because under such circumstances the government can be bought and voters are vulnerable to bribery). Normative characteristics generally include the principle of liberty, freedom of expression and assembly, equality under the law, the preservation of human rights, civil rights and minority rights, and pluralism.
Values

Democracy focuses on individual liberties.

Liberal democracy demands respect for individual freedom, which includes freedom from arbitrary arrest or detention, freedom of thought and opinion, freedom of religion and worship, freedom from religion and from religious and antireligious oppression, freedom of speech, freedom of the press, freedom to protest and to strike, freedom of movement, and freedom of assembly and political organization. Also of note are the individual right to legal defense, to physical security, and to credible information on public affairs.

Individual liberties are often divided into two categories: those relating to freedom from government interference (freedom from...), including the freedom from arbitrary arrest or detention, the freedom of worship, and the freedom of the press, and those stemming from individual initiative and the individual’s right to influence the government (freedom to...), such as the freedom of religious assembly, the freedom to vote in elections and to run for political office, the freedom to demonstrate, and the right to receive information on government activities. This division corresponds with the concepts of positive freedom and negative freedom as defined by philosopher Isaiah Berlin.

The Principle of Equality
Cartooning for Peace 2006 – Michel Kichka
Another classification of individual liberties differentiates between human rights, fundamental rights, and civil rights. **Human rights** are natural and eternal norms that arise from the nature of man or (for religious believers) from God. These include the rights to life, freedom, happiness, and dignity, as well as freedom of conscience and freedom of (or from) belief. It is from human rights that we derive prohibitions on slavery, forced labor, trafficking in women, the use of torture in interrogations, and on cruel punishments. **Fundamental rights** are human rights that are anchored in a constitutional or legal system. The right to equality, for example, is grounded in numerous constitutions. It is from this abstract entitlement that we derive important intangible rights such as the equality of all people before the law, or universal and equal suffrage. A distinction may be drawn between **fundamental political rights** such as freedom of expression or the right to equality, and **fundamental social rights** such as the right to work, food, housing, fair working conditions, health, and a pension in one’s later years. Civil rights are fundamental rights that affect all citizens, but not necessarily non-citizens. They include the freedom of political organization, freedom of assembly, freedom to vote in elections and to run for political office, freedom to enter or leave the state, and freedom of occupation.

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**Limitations on individual liberties**

Individual liberties are critical for people whose views are not generally accepted by the majority and whose activities are anathema to the government, or to a majority of the people, or fly in the face of national consensus.

Furthermore, in raising the issue of individual liberties we do not mean to imply that individuals are free to act in whatever way they wish in a democracy. Every government unavoidably must restrict its citizens’ freedom of action. In general, it is safe to say that **limitations on a citizen’s liberty derive from the need to respect the liberties of others, and that not causing harm to others is a precondition for honouring individual rights.** It follows that in a democracy, one citizen can sue another for defamation, even though the line between freedom of expression and defamation is quite fine and not precisely definable. Likewise, military censorship is permissible in order to prevent a leak of information that might endanger the citizens (as such a leak could impinge on their rights, including their fundamental right to life). There has always been and always will be disagreement over the delineation of limits on the freedoms of the press, expression, and publication, over the nature of “pure” security information, and over the definition of a threat to security. Since there is an ever-present danger that civil liberties might be sacrificed in the name of security, Liberal democracies strive to ensure that the government not have the sole or final word in this area. When doubt arises, a court may serve as an impartial adjudicator. A number of democracies, Britain and Germany amongst them, also chose to prohibit any form of racial incitement, including anti-Semitism, even though such legislation presumably undermines freedom of speech and freedom of the press. The principle that guided decision-makers was that racial incitement constitutes a severe violation of its victims’ fundamental liberties, to the extent that it poses a threat to their lives. Comparable differences of opinion also touch on a wide
range of topics: Is the public display of pornographic posters or artistic works, which may offend the sensibilities of religious citizens, permissible? Does the prohibition on defamation restrict freedom of the press? Does the freedom of conscience legitimize conscientious objection to military conscription?

The question of limitations on religious freedom are also a matter of fierce debate: Do the principles of freedom of religion and communal religious autonomy justify discrimination between men and women (e.g., polygamy, discrimination against women in matters of divorce and property rights)? Is it permissible for parents who belong to a religious cult to reject medicine and deny their children medical treatment? Is it legitimate to prohibit members of a Native American tribe from using hallucinogenic substances that form part of their religious worship? Is it legitimate that church bells or the call of the muezzin be curtailed in the name of the right to privacy and, there are some issues over which there is no dispute among supporters of democracy. All agree, for example, that freedom of religion must be restricted when it comes to the practice of Sati (widow-burning), as practiced by certain castes and in certain regions in India, or to punishment by stoning or decapitation as decreed by fundamentalist Islam in cases of adultery, heresy, and homosexuality.

Similar deliberations in the name of democracy surround other issues as well. For example, democratic values are expected to find the golden mean between freedom of protest and the need to ensure public order, or between the freedom to strike and the need to ensure essential services.

**Equality and the rule of law**

_Eleanor Roosevelt (1884-1962)_

...without equality there can be no democracy.

—— Eleanor Roosevelt ——

One of the most important rules of the game in a democracy is equality under the law: **In a democracy, everyone is subject to the same law and all are equal under that law.** The law also applies to presidents, prime ministers, government ministers, and parliament members.
Good to Know Faculty of Social Sciences

Democracy does not guarantee equality of conditions - it only guarantees equality of opportunity
Irving Kristol (1920–2009), American journalist and author

In a democracy, the law allows all individuals to live as they wish, as long as the rights of the other are recognized and protected. **It is not the role of the law to dictate principles of morality, but rather to ensure the fair and stable coexistence of all members of the democratic society, and in this context their equality under the law.** Moreover, customarily, nearly everyone to whom the laws apply participates directly or indirectly - through representatives - in their legislation (one exception is the case of tourists who are subject to the laws of the lands they visit, even though they have not participated in any way in the legislative process). At the same time, the rule of law in its democratic sense does not mean blind adherence to the laws; still, the rule of law in this sense of blind adherence does in fact exist in communist dictatorships, military regimes, or despotic fascist states. The democratic rule of law means adherence to the rules that were democratically adopted by authorized institutions and that do not contravene the principles of democracy.

**Obedience or non-obedience to the law**

From the above follows that the rule of law does not require obedience to any law passed by a government or parliament that was not freely elected. Nor is there a duty to obey any law that is patently antidemocratic, such as a law undermining the civil rights of a minority; however, such a law can only be changed by democratic means, such as through the judiciary, and through demonstrations, petitions, or elections. Only if all efforts have failed and the law does indeed contravene democratic principles may it be disobeyed, on the condition that doing so not entail even the slightest degree of violence. Violent opposition to the law is valid only in a dictatorship, given that in this case the democratic approach is barred to citizens. In Liberal democracies the constitution serves as a “watchdog” against antidemocratic legislation. In the United States, for example, the Supreme Court is authorized, by means of judicial oversight, to overrule undemocratic legislation - that is, to ensure that any law passed by Congress be rendered null and void if the courts find that its provisions contravene constitutional principles. In 1954, specifically, the Supreme Court held that the policy of segregation, which the southern states were practicing at the time (by law!), violated the constitutional principle of equality. Opponents of segregation presented evidence that the policy of segregation - backed by the slogan “separate but equal” - did in fact create inequality and therefore fundamentally undermined the constitutional principle of equality. This ruling introduced the policy of integration throughout the US educational system, thereby generating a genuine social revolution that promoted equality, justice, and tolerance within American society.
At times the rule of law does not correlate with the will of the people, or a majority of the people, in its most radical and literal sense - along the lines of the Roman saying “Quod populo placuit legis habet vigorem” (What pleases the people has the force of law). For example, lynching by an angry mob (i.e. taking the law into one’s own hands) violates the rule of law even if a majority of the people support such spontaneous “acts of justice.” In other words, in Liberal democracies the rule of law exists in its liberal sense, whereas in dictatorships the rulers are above the law, and the law supersedes fundamental democratic liberties.

**Pluralism**

For a democratic political culture to exist, society in all its diversity must enjoy freedom of expression and representation. Liberal democracies are repeatedly described as pluralistic democracies. Indeed, they all have numerous groups, organizations, and institutions that operate quite autonomously and competitively, creating a communal, organizational, and institutional balance within society. The pluralism in Liberal democracies is constitutional-structural, social, and political. The constitutional-structural aspect manifests in the multiplicity of governing institutions, the separation of powers, and the distribution of authority among the bodies that make policy, enact laws, carry out executive functions, carry out judicial functions, provide oversight, and provide advice. The distribution of power is intended to prevent its concentration in one place by granting a measure of autonomy to local government, and at times to a federal framework that grants powers to the states that comprise the federation (for example the 50 states of the USA). The social pluralism of Liberal democracies is starkly evident. Each country has thousands of organizations, associations, groups and clubs, trade unions, employers’ organizations, chambers of commerce, higher education institutions, settlement movements, religious institutions, and professional organizations - all of which enjoy a measure of autonomy. In totalitarian regimes, in contrast, the state or the ruling party controls all such organizations.

**Political party pluralism - a product of constitutional and social pluralism**

All Liberal democracies are multiparty systems, with an organized and legitimate opposition that competes with the ruling party for voter support and public opinion. Political-party pluralism can take different forms. Simple pluralism consists of two major parties that are not very different ideologically, moderate pluralism involves four or five parties, all of which are moderate, and extreme pluralism entails more than five parties, some of which are radically right- or left-wing and some of which are moderate and centrist. Another - and undesirable - form, which often leads to the collapse of democracy, is polarized pluralism, which consists of two extremist and opposing camps that control the entire political system. The pluralism of Liberal democracies creates a measure of balance among various group interests. Pluralism does not mean unbridled competition or anarchic defiance of the state; rather, it is based on a consensus that competition must follow agreed-upon rules of the constitutional game and stay true to shared values.
Elections and change of government

Democracy may also be defined as an institutional process centred on the electoral process, as a governing system in which elections are decisive in matters of governance and policy, for it is the elections that determine the ruling party (or parties), the composition of the government, and the general direction of its policymaking.

Elections are an effective means of ensuring government accountability to the voters and a measure of responsiveness to the will of the people, as well as a general form of oversight over the actions of elected representatives. The radical participatory vision, according to which people participate directly (and not through elected representatives) in decision-making processes, cannot be realized in liberal democracies because the people’s oversight over its representatives is unspecific and indirect. Still, the responsiveness of elected representatives to pressures from and sentiments of the voting public far exceeds the expectations of adherents to the elitist theory of democracy, who dispute the notion that the general public has any influence whatsoever. Legal term limits serve as an hourglass for the government, ensuring that it cannot act on its own whims, particularly towards the end of a term, when the voter is on the verge of determining its future.

Change of government

In democratic countries the change of government occurs without violence, peacefully, and in accordance with recognized, agreed-upon the practices and rules of the game. Such change may take place frequently (as in the US and the UK), or at intervals of decades (as in Japan,
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Mexico, and Sweden). Whatever the case, a change of government must be in accordance with election results. A non-violent change of government is possible in a dictatorship (as in the Soviet Union after the ousting of Khrushchev and after the deaths of both Brezhnev and Andropov), and possibly even in accordance with guidelines established by the ruling government (as in Egypt after Nasser’s death and after Sadat’s assassination). However, a dictatorship does not have recognized and agreed-upon rules for ousting a leader who has lost the public’s support, as opposed to a leader who has lost its status among the ruling oligarchy. An “orderly” change of government is only possible following the death or assassination of a ruler.

Frequent, orderly, and non-violent changes of government are of the utmost importance in any democracy, which is why the opposition plays a decisive role in such a governing system. An opposition’s role is not only to function as a watchdog over individual liberties, but also to provide an alternative framework that is ready to take over when and if the public decides that the time has come to replace those who hold the reins of government.

**Overseeing government activity**

A democracy has various ways of ensuring government accountability to the voters. Towards this end it contains institutions such as a state comptroller and an ombudsman. Opposition parties and a free press, interest groups, and diverse forms of media also serve as means of continuous public monitoring of government activities. The extent to which their critique can influence the government depends, of course, on how independent the heads of the oversight institutions actually are, on the scale of opposition-to-government measures, and on the degree of public willingness to take political action between elections. An interest in winning the elections also has an impact on a democratic government and on its willingness to compromise with the public. However, a government that believes in a particular course of action might choose to maintain its guiding policy even at a cost to its short-term popularity, especially if it feels confident that the eventual outcome of that policy will increase the public’s support in the long term.

A **constitution** is the most important instrument for restraining the government and limiting its power. All Liberal democracies, with the exception of the UK, New Zealand, and Israel, have written constitutions. The UK and New Zealand have a deep-rooted consensus on the principles of governance, which makes the need for a written constitution less imperative. Israel lacks a written constitution primarily because there is no consensus between the religious and the secular publics regarding the status of a constitution in relation to religious law. Although it does have Basic Laws, these are more akin to regular laws (than to constitutional provisions) and can quite easily be repealed. Most constitutional democracies have what is termed a “rigid constitution,” which cannot be changed through a simple parliamentary majority and typically requires a supermajority (often two-thirds) or ratification by both houses of parliament. Such is the case, for example, in Australia, France, Austria, Belgium, Canada, Finland, Germany, Japan, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, and Norway. In the United States a constitutional amendment requires a two-thirds majority in both houses of Congress as well as ratification by three-fourths
of the state legislatures. Similarly, Switzerland requires approval by a majority of its voters and of its cantons in order to amend its constitution, as a consequence of which cantons with minority French- or Italian-speaking populations can block such an amendment.³

Official languages spoken in Switzerland
(the cantons are delineated by bright dotted lines)

Judicial oversight. Another means of restraining the government or a parliamentary majority is the practice of judicial oversight, which allows courts to overrule any law, even when adopted by a parliamentary majority, if it is contrary to the letter or the spirit of the constitution. It is generally known that judicial oversight has been practiced in the United States since 1803. Less known is the fact that numerous other Liberal democracies have adopted this practice, including Denmark, France, Iceland, Ireland, Italy, Sweden, Australia, Austria, Canada, Germany, Japan, and Norway.

Additional oversight institutions. Additional entities that limit government power in Liberal democracies include opposition parties, free trade unions, employers’ organizations, professional associations, and autonomous universities, as well as thousands of institutions, organizations, and groups that enjoy a high degree of autonomy and some measure of real or potential political power, thereby preventing the full concentration of power in the hands of the government.

Thus we see that a democratic government elected by a majority is not a government of unlimited power. All democratic approaches concur that restrictions on the government are a cornerstone of democracy, and that these take various forms: ensuring that the state does not become too “strong” and safeguarding individual liberties (the liberal approach); maintaining free elections

³ The Swiss Confederation is divided into 26 cantons, which are comparable to the states that comprise the United States. Each canton has an official language, most frequently German, less often French or Italian, with one canton in which the official languages are German, Italian, and Romansh.
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and competition among elites (the elitist approach); having a multitude of groups and ensuring balance among them (the pluralist approach); or dismantling the unwieldy bureaucratic and establishing a community-based democracy in which many powers are transferred to local government. It is not surprising, therefore, that the roots of the radical democratic approach branched out in different directions, with some of them giving rise to modern totalitarianism.

Democratic political culture

The democratic character of a government manifests not only in its institutions, laws, rules, elections, and protected liberties. Democracy is also a way of life, a system of values, and a culture. It cannot exist in the absence of a democratic way of life based on a fundamental belief in a democratic regime - at least among a considerable portion of a country's citizens. In a democracy most citizens should hence have an open-minded “democratic personality,” as opposed to the rigid, close-minded, and fanatic “authoritarian personality” that tramples over subordinates and blindly obeys superiors.

A democratic culture or way of life implies a political engagement of at least part of the population. Evaluation of the number of people involved is a matter of dispute between radicals and liberals, and between adherents to the participatory as opposed to the elitist schools of thought. It also depends on the extent to which ordinary citizens do not feel powerless and sense that they do in fact have the capacity to exert influence - for example on the election of ministers and senior administration officials and on the shaping and implementation of policy in various areas. Such a
culture is based on a fundamental trust among human beings, for without trust the citizens of a state where the representative system is effective will never be sure whether their elected representative does indeed represent them faithfully. In the absence of trust, the opposition cannot accept the election results, for fear that the government will use them to suppress it, while the government for its part cannot respect the rights of the opposition, for fear that it will not respect the rules of the game. Regionally, a number of empirical studies have shown that democratic values do not take root in societies characterized by a high degree of mutual suspicion, interpersonal hostility, and self-interest. Reciprocally, there is a demonstrated correlation between the entrenchment of democracy and the enhancement of interpersonal trust. Above all, democracy is a worldview and a moderate, tolerant system of conduct. At the base of democracy's non-violent approach is a fundamental recognition of the legitimacy of all opinions and political parties, and an emotional and intellectual willingness to “lose” and to accept the verdict when a competing outlook and rival party gain the upper hand. Tolerance is reflected in the ability to debate issues freely, out of a consensus that differences of opinion are legitimate and do not in themselves contain any element of criminality or catastrophe. Democracy is expressed through a culture and way of life that abhor violence (it is no coincidence that most if not all democracies have abolished capital punishment) and aim to uphold the social consensus that differences of opinion should be resolved peacefully. It entails a willingness to accept gradual change, without violent revolt and in accordance with the rules of the game. Decisions that are reached without violence generally require compromise. They are based neither on the absolute triumph of one approach, nor on the complete suppression of a competing view. Liberal democracy means governance based on compromise - between and within political parties, within the majority and within the minority, and between the majority and the minority. While the minority must accept its own defeat, the majority too, if it wishes to ensure that the minority comply, must consider the latter’s needs and wishes. Thus, compromise is a key and vital principle of Liberal democracy.

Empirical studies have also shown that even in democracies, significant portions of the population do not engage in politics, are not prone to trust their fellow human beings, are not inclined to compromise, and do in fact demonstrate intolerance as well as the use of violence. How, then, do these states function as democracies? Clearly a decisive factor, in terms of democratic stability, is the size of the population with a democratic political culture relative to the size of the population with an authoritarian political culture. The loyalty of the political echelon (the political-party, bureaucratic, military, intellectual, religious, and economic elites) to democratic governance and democratic culture is a necessary condition for the stability of democracy, and perhaps even for its existence. If a significant portion of this echelon no longer adheres to democratic norms - as in the cases of 1920s Germany and Italy, for example - then democracy is in grave danger.
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Democratic stability

Stable democracies are democracies that have existed continuously for an extended period of time, during which they demonstrated their ability to withstand severe crises. The British democracy is a stable one, having withstood severe crises during the twentieth century, including world wars, mass unemployment, the rise of communism and fascism during the interwar period, battles of retreat from British colonies, and the loss of an empire. France, in contrast, was unable to withstand the crises that led to the collapse of the Third and Fourth Republics. The Third Republic collapsed in 1940 with the Nazi conquest and was succeeded, during the war, by the authoritarian Vichy government, which collaborated with the occupying power. The Fourth Republic collapsed in 1958 because it was unable to handle the war in Algeria. The French army’s rebellion in Algeria and the paratroopers’ threatened seizure of Paris led to General de Gaulle’s appointment as prime minister and the formation of the Fifth Republic, a semi-presidential system of government.

The Vichy government

The Vichy government was established in France after its occupation by Nazi Germany in 1940. Following the Nazi conquest, France was divided into a northern sector, where the Germans ruled directly, and a southern sector (the “free zone” or “zone libre”), where the Vichy government ruled (with its seat in the city of Vichy). The Vichy government, headed by World War I war hero Marshall Philippe Pétain, collaborated with Nazi Germany. Pétain, though elected as head of state by the French National Assembly, acted as a dictator for all intents and purposes. Aside from the free zone, the Vichy government also controlled the French colonies in Africa, Syria and Lebanon, and the French navy. In addition, the Vichy government collaborated with the Nazis in deporting French Jews to extermination camps.

The United States, basically a stable democracy, has demonstrated its resilience in difficult situations - economic crises, the surprise attack on Pearl Harbor and World War II, the fierce wars in Japan and Germany, the Cold War, the Korean and Vietnam wars, the terrorist attacks against the World Trade Center in New York, and radical shifts in interracial relations at the domestic level. However, after the January 2020 Capitol debacle, it has become unclear whether this long-standing stability will last. Germany, Italy, Japan, Spain, Portugal, and Greece cannot be considered stable democracies along the lines of the UK and the US because their democratic systems of government collapsed at least once in the twentieth century, and because for several years during that same century they did not manage to maintain a democratic system of government. Germany as a whole did not maintain democracy during 1900–1918 and 1933–1945, nor did communist East Germany during 1945–1989, Italy during 1922–1943, and Portugal during 1929–1974. The same unquestionably holds for the new democracies in post-communist Eastern Europe, which for decades were subject to a communist regime, prior to which some had also been conservative authoritarian dictatorships.
In addition, stable democracies do not face any genuine threat from antidemocratic movements or public sentiments in the foreseeable future. There are no serious threats to democracy in Denmark or Norway. The same does not hold in young democracies such as Israel, India, Poland, Hungary, Argentina, or Peru. Accordingly, one must distinguish between stable democracies (such as the UK, Australia, New Zealand, Switzerland, and the Scandinavian countries) and less stable democracies (such as Italy, India, Poland, Hungary, Slovakia, Bulgaria, South Africa, and most of South America).

Government legitimacy

A democracy cannot remain stable unless its government enjoys legitimacy. This is a key concept in the social sciences. It refers not to legitimacy in the sense of constitutionality, but rather in the sense that a decisive majority of the population views the government as valid and basically supports its core value system. In English-speaking democracies, a decisive majority consider liberal democracy and its basic values - the rule of law, individual liberties, tolerance, moderation - to be worth supporting. In the 1920s, the German Weimer Republic faced a completely different situation. Prominent sectors of society - particularly important elites such as the top officialdom, generals, estate owners, industry tycoons, and some intellectuals - supported the imperial regime that preceded the Weimer democracy, while others on the extreme right and the extreme left aspired to see a new fascist order or a communist revolution respectively. The Weimer Republic's government never attained the legitimacy enjoyed, for example, by the UK or US governments. Likewise, in post-communist Russia there are many (perhaps even a majority of the population!) who long for a strong, non-democratic regime; among them are bureaucrats of the old communist apparatus and the new nationalists.

Government effectiveness

A stable democracy must also stand the test of effectiveness - that is, it must prove itself capable of solving problems. A democracy whose citizens view the government as weak and ineffective, incapable of making decisions and implementing policy, is a democracy whose stability is under threat. This, in turn, is likely to give rise to longings for a “strong man” who will establish order and make decisions. Such a democracy might also lose its legitimacy, for just as effectiveness reinforces legitimacy, so too ineffectiveness undermines it. An examination of the differences between the Weimer Republic and Germany today, for example, would lead one to conclude that the legitimacy ascribed to democracy in Germany increased dramatically as the citizenry came to view the government as a “success story”: it demonstrated its effectiveness, facilitated

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4 The Weimar Republic was established in 1919, in the aftermath of Imperial Germany’s defeat in World War I, following a democratic revolution in which the Kaiser was ousted. The Weimer Republic was a functional democracy that collapsed in 1933 with Hitler’s rise to power and the establishment of the Third Reich.
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Tremendous development, and, by virtue of Germany’s integration into the European Community and NATO, promoted not only its material well-being but also its security. In retrospect one might say that the democracy in West Germany vanquished the communist dictatorship in East Germany. The unification of Germany in 1990 was, in essence, an annexation of East Germany by democratic West Germany. These achievements on behalf of democracy contrast sharply with the failings of the Weimer Republic, whose leadership the people deemed responsible for failing to prevent Germany’s humiliation in the post-World War I world, failing to overcome severe inflation and unemployment, and failing to establish stable governments. In post-World War I Italy as well, there was a general sense that the Liberal-Democratic government was incapable of coping with the mass unemployment that so adversely affected discharged soldiers returning from the front, and that its foreign policy too was a disaster, as it was unable to produce the fruits of victory that would have followed had Italy been on the winning side. As a consequence, this country, too, saw the rise of fascism. The early 1990s, likewise, saw talk of a threat to Italian democracy resulting from the democratic government’s ineffectiveness in combating the mafia, corruption, and unemployment.

Legitimacy of the democracy ↑ ←-→ Effectiveness of the democracy ↑

Legitimacy of the democracy ↓ ←-→ Effectiveness of the democracy ↓

Broad consensus

Achieving democratic stability requires a broad national consensus. A democracy encompasses different opinions, conflicting interests, and competing groups and political parties. It holds elections, which in turn yield winners and losers. To keep the competition for votes from becoming violent or escalating into uncompromising extremism, everyone must accept democracy’s rules of the game. One of the most critical rules is that everyone accept the election results. The user must accept the outcome, even if this means removal from government or no possibility of entering the government of his preferred political faction. In order for the loser to accept this reality, it is imperative that the issues at the heart of the political-electoral struggle not be a matter of life and death in the eyes of the public or the political parties’ leaderships. It follows that a stable democracy requires a broad national consensus on matters of principle, a consensus that allows for political competition in other areas, so that the losing side can accept the voters’ verdict. For example, in the United States (at least until the presidency of Donald Trump), a large majority of the public agreed on the national borders, the Constitution, the presidential system of government, federalism, the sanctity of civil liberties, and the democratic system of government generally. The consensus on these issues made it possible to conduct a non-violent debate and struggle over how hawkish foreign policy should be, whether to curtail or expand welfare policy, and whether to address racial inequality through institutionalized equal opportunity or affirmative
action. These issues are important to most Americans, but they do not constitute “matters of life or death” so that the losing side in an election has always been able to accept the voters’ choice. Naturally the winning side never has trouble accepting the voting results. Nonetheless, it should be noted that the United States has seen a significant decline in this regard under the presidency of Donald Trump.

**Consensus on the fundamental values of democracy**

Some observers do not regard a general consensus among the population as a necessary condition for stable democracy; in their view, it is only essential that the political elite agree on the fundamental principles of democracy in order for such a system to exist. Empirical studies in the democratic countries have found that even the US and the UK have significant minorities whose faith in democratic norms is quite fragile. The studies attribute democratic stability to the loyalty of the political echelon to the fundamental values of democracy - namely the leaders of all the major political parties, the bureaucratic elite, prominent media and business personalities, leaders of professional associations, generals, and professors. According to this perspective, for a democracy to be stable, those who have political knowledge and those engaged in politics must believe in the democratic system of government. In such a state no important elite group will be capable or motivated to mobilize the authoritarian potential usually found among the less educated strata. Studies have indeed demonstrated that though within the political echelons in the United States, there is a firm consensus on the principles of democracy, the same does not hold for other social strata. In non-democratic regimes, such as Weimer Germany, pre-Fascist Italy, and 1930s Spain, no such consensus existed even within the political echelons. The antidemocratic forces in Weimar Germany, for example, included generals, a portion of the senior bureaucracy, estate owners, capitalists, and many intellectuals. The early hubs of social power that fell to Nazi hands were not the trade unions, but rather the university students’ associations. It was the German elites who supported the Nazis that eventually mobilized Hitler’s mass following, whereas the workers on the whole were the last to join forces with the growing wave of Nazism. Wherever elites are not united in supporting democracy, in times of crisis (such as mass unemployment or wartime defeat) an antidemocratic elite is able to mobilize the pent-up authoritarian potential of broad social strata with dizzying speed. Experience teaches us that when antidemocratic elites are strong enough, they have no trouble stirring up voters from among the popular masses.

**Cooperation between various elite groups**

In societies characterized by cultural, linguistic, or religious diversity, stable democracy is possible only if the society has developed a tradition of cooperation among the various cultural-linguistic elites. A good example is Switzerland, a heterogeneous country whose population comprises Catholics and Protestants, as well as speakers of different languages (German, French,
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The state has a strong tradition of cooperation among all its elites. It has a permanent arrangement whereby the ruling government is all-inclusive, comprising all the major parties and representatives of all its spoken languages, all its religions, and all its major cantons. This form of government is based on the concept that such a heterogeneous state must have a broad coalition to prevent it from disintegrating along cultural-linguistic lines.

Austria, too, illustrates the importance of cross-elite cooperation. During the interwar period, relations between the state’s leftist-socialist leaders and its conservative, Catholic, national-right leaders were characterized by a loathing that fostered the rise of Austrian Nazism, and Austria’s fall, like ripe, low hanging fruit, into the hands of proponents of the Anschluss - annexation to Germany in 1938. Although Austria remained divided into two camps, even after World War II, the socialist left and the conservative Catholic right, the leaders of these respective camps understood the importance of cooperation between them. From 1945 until 1966 Austria was governed by a broad coalition and cultivated a tradition of cooperation among elites in order to preserve the state’s independence and neutrality, maintain a democratic system of government, and withstand any external threat (the USSR Red Army was stationed in Vienna until 1955). Since 1966 broad coalitions have only governed intermittently, but cooperation between the elites of the right and the left has continued even without a national unity government. In this respect Austria’s relatively stable post-World War II democracy differs from its unstable democracy during the interwar period. Belgium and the Netherlands also exemplify heterogeneous states that developed a tradition of cross-elite cooperation, thus allowing them to maintain a functional democratic system of government. In Belgium, whose population includes French-speaking Walloons and Flemish-speaking Flemish, ethnic tensions and continue to unrest simmer beneath the surface, however. Belgium falls into three ideological “camps”: Catholic, liberal, and socialist. Each camp is split between Flemish and Walloon citizens. Despite this, Belgium has succeeded in maintaining a democracy thanks to cooperation among the camps’ leaders. Belgium has repeatedly managed to form a broad coalition government of Catholics and socialists, at times with the participation of the liberals, but it has never been ruled by a strictly Walloon or Flemish government. Every coalition government, whether narrow or broad, has ensured equal representation of the country’s two cultural-linguistic groups.

In the Netherlands as well, the population falls into different political-religious “families” (Calvinists, Catholics, liberals, socialists) who have formed their own political parties. Although the government does not typically take the form of a “national” coalition composed of all the ideological “families,” the Netherlands has other parliamentary and extra-parliamentary mechanisms (such as its Economic and Social Council) for ensuring cooperation among political-party elites. Because the country contains no large extremist parties and all the parties would be suitable as coalition partners - thus allowing for the formation of different coalitions - the atmosphere is one of moderation and inter-party cooperation, which ensures that democratic principles are safeguarded.

The Dutch political scientist Arend Lijphart has posited four conditions for inter-elite cooperation in a heterogeneous society: a strong commitment to cooperative frameworks, a sense of external
threat that necessitates unity, awareness of the price of non-cooperation (dissolution of the state, civil war, separatism), and willingness on the part of the various group leaders to adopt a moderate stance and to compromise. In Lebanon, Cyprus, and Northern Ireland democracy collapsed because these conditions were not met. In the absence of a commitment to cooperative frameworks - the Catholics in Northern Ireland wanted to be part of the independent Republic of Ireland, the Turks in Cyprus did not want to belong to a Greek state, and Lebanon was characterized by ethnic and religious clashes that outweighed the commitment to collective statehood - these countries could not unite internally against an external threat. This was in part because the states posing the external threat (Syria and Israel in Lebanon, Greece and Turkey in Cyprus, Ireland and the UK in Northern Ireland) had domestic allies, but primarily because the leaders of the clashing communities in Lebanon, Cyprus, and Northern Ireland were unable to practice the moderation and compromise needed to maintain a stable democracy.

Obstacles to a stable democracy

Economic weakness, social polarization, and intolerance

A stable democracy cannot exist in a state that is economically, socially, and educationally weak. Economic and social development is a precondition for a stable democracy. Even today, the lower-income world has very few stable, deep-rooted democratic systems of government.

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Particularly notable is the difficulty of establishing stable democracies in Africa and the Middle East. In many lower-income countries, where a considerable portion of the population can barely sustain itself and remains illiterate, democracy has repeatedly collapsed. Such was the case in Myanmar (Burma), Nepal, Uganda, Kenya, and the Congo, to name just a few of the dozens of examples. The democracies of low-income countries are relatively young, and until recently were under military rule (e.g. in Argentina and Brazil) or had a ruler (e.g. in India) who, albeit democratic, oppressed the opposition and imprisoned its leaders, thus undermining democracy. The twenty-first century also saw a decline in the quality and stability of Indian democracy, under the premiership of Narendra Modi, who, after coming to power in 2014, instigated the violent oppression of the country’s Muslim minority; among other measures, in 2019 he revoked the autonomy that had been granted to Jammu and Kashmir, where a majority of the population is Muslim.

Social polarization

Another source of democratic instability in lower-income countries is the intense social polarization between a poor majority and a rich minority, which characterizes most of these states. As a rule, the poorer a state is, the greater the gap between rich and poor. Among the popular masses this polarization sparks intense hatred of the ruling class, and among the rulers it generates a deep fear of the “wretched” masses and their aspirations for revenge, whether based on real or imagined wrongs. That fear in turn gives rise to oppression, which exacerbates the hatred, resulting in a vicious cycle that can transform the opposition into a force of violence. The gulf between a relatively wealthy and educated minority and the poor, illiterate masses makes it very difficult to establish or maintain a stable democracy.

Failure to cultivate a middle class

In addition, lower-income states typically do not have a sizable middle class. As far back as the fourth century BCE, Aristotle concluded that a middle class is essential for the maintenance of a moderate and stable government. Indeed, most liberal democracies have a large middle class the very existence of which neutralizes the extreme polarization that exists between a wealthy minority and the poor masses. It also fosters moderation on the part of the ruling elite, mitigating its superiority, as well as the poor classes, whose hatred it somewhat assuages. It is no coincidence that in countries such as Chile, Brazil, Argentina, India, South Korea, and Costa Rica, a democratic system of government began to emerge only after the growth of a significant middle class.
Good to Know

Intolerance

Why is democracy so fragile in most of the countries of Asia, Africa, and Latin America? One reason is a lack of tolerance. A rooted democracy requires a tolerant society, and tolerance is a value that must be taught. Human beings are not born tolerant, and there is no basis in reality for the myth of the “noble savage” - a concept born of the colonial encounter with the autochthonous populations of faraway lands and stemming from a belief in the innate virtue and innocence of so-called “primitive” societies. Another basic requisite for the establishment of democracy is a modern education system that can instill democratic values and cultivate decision-making skills. For decision-making to be genuine, the education system must imbue citizens with the ability to understand various alternatives, informedly weigh both the common good and their personal interest, and cast their vote accordingly. A population that is for the most part illiterate lacks the basic skills necessary to practice liberal democracy.

Political polarization

Political-ideological polarization - like social polarization - undermines democratic stability. It is often, mistakenly, surmised that political-party polarization is necessarily linked to the number of political parties. Two-party systems are not always moderate and the parties that comprise them are not necessarily centrist, just as multiparty systems are not necessarily polarized. One example of political-ideological polarization destabilizing democracy is the case of Italy, where for decades, beginning in the 1950s, the communists and neo-fascists controlled about 40% of the votes and prevented a democratic change of government. The main ruling party remained in power for more than forty years, which was one of the reasons that it came to be seen as loathsome and that citizens developed an aversion to the “system” as a whole. Only the dramatic and democratic change that began within the Communist Party prevented the collapse of Italian democracy in the 1990s.

An overburdened society and government

The burden carried by the government can also determine the fate of a democracy. Indeed, the stability of any political system depends on the scope of the missions it must fulfil. In the modern era all countries have had to handle various missions and crises characteristic of the modern state: the implementation of effective governance throughout the state, the establishment of national unity in the framework of the state, resolving the problem of relations between religion and the

5 The concept of a “noble savage” emerged in seventeenth-century Europe. It reflects a romantic view of humanity devoid of the burdens of modern civilization and holds that human beings are basically good, provided that education and civilization do not “ruin” them. The concept is associated with French philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau.
state, the democratic revolution and the demand for universal suffrage, and the allocation of
national resources among the social classes. In the United Kingdom these crises were resolved
gradually and over time, as a result of which the political system was never overly burdened
within any particular span of time.

Many lower-income countries must concurrently address a range of problems that the British
resolved gradually, over centuries. Countries in Africa and Asia had taken on the task of creating
a modern nation, building an effective government, and addressing popular pressure for
participation in governance and a just distribution of national wealth. Thus, it is no wonder that
most democracies in the lower-income world were unable to withstand the pressure and collapsed
during the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s. It was only in the 1990s that some of them made a second
attempt to address these problems. Lebanon, for example, had a relatively democratic system of
government for about two decades. However, when domestic problems (ethnic sectarianism, a
shift in the demographic-ethnic balance, and socioeconomic inequalities) were compounded
by “imported” problems (PLO activities and Syrian involvement), the situation deteriorated to
the extent that Lebanese democracy could no longer cope and collapsed in the 1970s. Not only
lower-income world democracies broke down under the burden of their missions. The same
happened to the Fourth Republic in France, when it found itself unable to face the challenge of
post-World War II rehabilitation while also engaging in fierce fighting in Indochina (Vietnam,
Cambodia, and Laos) and Algeria. The Fifth Republic, founded in 1958, was more fortunate since
it no longer had to address such challenges once the war in Algeria ended. Though, generally
speaking, it is safe to say that a democracy may collapse under the weight of unmanageable
problems and crises, this does not mean that a dictatorship would be better positioned to cope
with a similar set of problems.

**Failure to develop a strong civil society**

As early as the nineteenth century, French philosopher Alexis de Tocqueville posited in his
book *Democracy in America* that the stability of a state’s democracy depends on it having a
broad network of voluntary organizations such as that characteristic of American society,
including charitable organizations, debate clubs, veterans’ associations, religious congregations,
professional associations, and political parties - that is, a wide-ranging civil society. Indeed, to
this day the average American citizen is more active and engaged in voluntary organizations than
the citizens of other countries. Having a multitude of voluntary organizations serves to distribute
political power and prevents a single base of power from taking control (as the Communist Party
did in the Soviet Union, for example). Membership in such a voluntary organization allows the
private citizen, who as an individual cannot influence society or the government, to acquire
significant influence within the organization. The organization, in turn, as a body that may
unite hundreds of thousands of members, is capable of putting all its weight behind its political
struggle, thereby advancing the interests and political will of the citizens who are active within
it. Such activism also allows an individual to develop a sense of independent agency, which is
a condition for social engagement. In addition, membership in the organization helps reinforce education in democracy because the voluntary organizational structures themselves operate like small-scale democracies, with elections, representatives, administrative bodies, a president, democratic processes, changes of government, and free debate. Voluntary organizations also protect citizens from government oppression because usually only organizations, rather than individual citizens, are capable of resisting a government that is abusing its power. At the same time, voluntary organizations allow the government to resist spontaneous popular pressures that undermine its ability to function. They provide an organizational framework for the expression and moderation of the people’s will, in light of the fact that a democratic system of government does not mean majority rule. Popular pogroms and lynchings are never an expression of democracy, and organizations that mediate between the masses and the government are presumably able to “mitigate” popular will and channel it in ways that promote responsibility and moderation. Such a network of organizations constitutes a civil society, without which liberal democracy cannot function.

Only in high-income societies does one find a broad network of such voluntary organizations, which explains why democracy does not take root in low-income countries. History confirms de Tocqueville’s observation that democratic stability is linked to the presence of voluntary organizations, but one should exercise caution in applying his observation to the inner workings of higher-income countries. In countries where most of the voluntary organizations operate and exercise authority democratically, these organizations do indeed help stabilize democracy and guide its course of action. However, the mere presence of such organizations is not enough; their governance and manner of operation are also important. The Weimer Republic, for example, had a broad network of voluntary organizations, but most were authoritarian. At the time authoritarianism was also characteristic of the family unit, schools, and workplaces, as well as bureaucracies, political parties, trade unions, and professional organizations. Thus, the mere presence of voluntary organizations was insufficient to sustain Weimer democracy.
Another important question that any democracy must consider/debate is whether to allow antidemocratic parties to organize and operate freely. With regard to this question, Liberal democracies have not yet reached a consensus.

The Anglo-Saxon school of thought holds that freedom of expression, of open discourse and of assembly are not to be restricted, and that authorities should intervene only in cases involving promotion of criminality or assembly for criminal purposes — for example, incitement to political assassination or to violence against minority groups, planning an act of terror, or preparing for violent political overthrow. This is why the United States permits even organizations such as the American Nazi Party to operate openly, hold meetings, distribute propaganda, run for elections, and hold public demonstrations. Western Europe takes a different approach. The collapse of democracies in most European countries during the 1920s and 1930s led them to conclude that democracy must be protected by means of various constitutional constraints. Germany’s constitution, for example, outlaws any party that seeks to undermine the democratic system of government. In the 1950s, in the name of this principle, West Germany banned both the Nazis and the Communists, prohibiting them from organizing, assembling, speaking publicly, participating in elections, and distributing propaganda. Germany even passed legislation making it permissible to discriminate against candidates who are not loyal to the constitutional-democratic system of government, and to bar them from employment in the service of the state (teachers, lecturers, administrators, and the like). In the 1970s West Germany applied this law against declared communists in particular. Violations of the civil liberties of citizens with particular political views were also widespread in the United States in the early 1950s, during what was known as the “McCarthy era” (after Senator Joseph McCarthy). Thousands of public and private sector workers were fired after being denounced as communists, socialists, leftists, or liberals. Today it is generally acknowledged that the McCarthy-era persecutions severely contravened the principles of liberal democracy, straying far afield from the targeting of antidemocratic groups. A large majority of US citizens view this period as a dark stain on the history of American democracy.
Conclusion

This booklet is intended to make clear that democracy is neither an ideology nor a dogma. A democratic outlook is one that proposes organizing the life of a particular collective into a structure that reflects clearly defined principles and values. Democracy differs fundamentally from other systems of government because it focuses on individual liberty and equality among the state’s citizens. There are different ways of organizing the life of the collective so that it will reflect the principles and values of democracy.

Democracy’s priorities (for example, the span of social rights granted to individual people) are a subject of frequent debate, as is the basic question of the status of the individual versus the status of the collective. Generally speaking, it is safe to say that in many countries a distorted picture of democracy is set forth. Specifically, many nations seem intent on downplaying or denying the flaws in their own systems of democracy, and on extolling their government as an example of perfect democracy. Unlike other forms of government, in order to function successfully and effectively, a democracy requires its citizens to be knowledgeable about what it means and be engaged in protecting it; unceasing defense of its oversight institutions and of citizens who value the democratic form of government is thus essential. It often clashes with the needs of leaders who aspire to establish unchecked authoritarian governance. Moreover, certain democratic values seemingly contravene the primal needs of citizens. For example, the norm of equality clashes with the primal inclination to favor one’s immediate community. At times the need for a strong leader, which stems from the belief that such a leader can establish and maintain social order, contradicts the democratic order. Such factors necessitate a continuous struggle on behalf of democracy, which is essentially fragile and therefore requires protection from schemers who, for whatever reason, would opt for an authoritarian regime. In the current era and in quite a few countries, one sees numerous examples of such inclinations becoming salient, including in countries that until recently were considered strongholds of democracy, such as the United States.

“It is a strange fact that freedom and equality, the two basic ideas of democracy, are to some extent contradictory. Logically considered, freedom and equality are mutually exclusive, just as society and the individual are mutually exclusive.”

Thomas Mann (1875–1955)

6 A dogma is a belief or principle that does not require logical proof of validity and is unquestionably accepted by its adherents. The ancient Greeks differentiated between dogmatic philosophers and skeptical philosophers who questioned matters and made an effort to address their doubts.
Recommended reading


The "Good to Know" series presents a wide array of academic and topical issues, suitable for a broad readership. The purpose is to expose readers to new and challenging fields of interest. This booklet deals with the basic concept of democracy, which is only too often misunderstood or misrepresented. It endeavours to clarify central democratic principles such as individual rights, rule of law, and equality, and a broad agreement on these fundamental principles. The booklet puts special emphasis on refuting the popular, but misleading perception that majority rule is the central, and perhaps only, attribute of democracy.

The second part of the booklet asks what constitutes a stable democracy. It details legal, political, social, historical, and cultural attributes that contribute to the stability of democratic systems, using illustrations from various countries across the world.

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