

DEMOCRACIES

Within our historical period, democracy has become the predominant benchmark that determines how legitimate governments are. Rulers, the world over, regardless of how truly democratic they may be, claim democratic credentials to bolster and vindicate their right to wield power. Democracy as a term has several meanings. First and foremost, democracy describes a government that has been fairly installed by – and can be removed by – its citizens through meaningful periodic elections. Secondly, it is often invoked as an ideal to aspire towards in which peoples' rights are protected, equality striven for, and justice achieved. Thirdly, the term relates to existing democratic polities and their common processes, which go beyond simple elections. Derived from the Greek words demos – people – and kratos – power, democracy also relates historically to the form of rule exercised by Athenians in ancient Greece.

Defining Attributes of Modern Democracy

Free and Fair Elections

Elections determine the composition of governments (who run the country) and legislatures (who make the laws). In democracies, elections that lead to new governments are periodic, free and fair. That is to say electoral processes are regular; they are contested by candidates and participated in by voters who do so willingly and without coercion; and they are free from fraud and government interference that may afford any party an unfair advantage.

Universal Participation

Democracies ensure that the adult population is able to exercise their right to vote and contest for office without fear of rejection due to their economic background, education status, gender, ethnic identification or religious affiliation. In some democracies, some exclusions to voting and running for office still exist with regard to place of birth or criminal record, while all democracies exclude minors from participating. Since the early 20th Century, when for instance women were not permitted to vote, democracies have made significant strides in expanding the franchise ('vote').

Human Rights

In democracies, governments are required to ensure the human rights of all citizens. They do not perpetrate flagrant, organised acts of violence upon the population; they afford freedom of the press; they do not suppress the rights of people to assemble and organise, or ban political parties or interest groups from political participation. Constitutions often codify and enshrine these citizens' rights which are preserved and defended by an independent judiciary and other institutions that safeguard citizens against government overreach and ensure accountability.

Responsible Government

Elected authorities can approve and enact policies uninhibited by unelected authorities such as a monarch, the armed forces, the international community, and religious leaders. To ensure human rights are not trampled on, there may be oversight by courts which can overturn certain decisions. Despite the intervention of interest groups in formulating policy, any decision made by the executive and elected representatives is their own and they bear responsibility to their voters for their policies. States which may be democratic or have democratic aspirations may fulfil the above four conditions in various degrees. As such, democracy is seen within a continuum in which full democracy and overt dictatorship are on either end. Nonetheless, there is a certain minimum standard that must be achieved in each area before a country can properly be called a 'democracy'.

Types of Democracies

Parliamentary

In parliamentary democracies, the executive (the 'government') depends upon the support of the legislature (the 'parliament'). Parliament is seen as the most democratically legitimate body of representatives and if it withdraws its support from the government, then a new government must be formed or fresh elections held. Voters elect their parliamentary representatives and these representatives appoint the prime minister. Of course, in practice voters also consider the future prime minister that they would prefer. Parliamentary democracies have a prime minister, who leads the government and a ceremonial president (or other 'head of state') who has mainly ceremonial duties. Other features include limits to the separation of powers between legislators, the executive and the cabinet – as they are all members of parliament – and non-fixed terms of office.

Presidential

In a presidential system, the head of government (here known as the 'president') is elected directly by the people. There are also separate elections for the legislature (normally known as 'parliament' or 'congress'). This means that, even if the legislature and president are from different parties or the legislature no longer supports the president, nonetheless the president can normally remain in power. The president and members of the cabinet are not members of the legislature creating a strict separation of powers between the two elected branches of government. In America, this is based on the idea that there should be tension between the executive and the legislature to prevent either one from becoming too powerful, however in other countries this has not always worked. The president serves as both the head of government and state (as opposed to the parliamentary division between prime minister and ceremonial president). Presidential democracy dates back to 1787 with the US effort to form a republican government.

Semi-presidential

These systems combine elements of both parliamentary and presidential regimes with an elected president and an appointed prime minister who answers to parliament. Some give lots of power and discretion to the president while others are more parliamentary in character.

Parliamentary or Presidential?

While people disagree about which form of democracy is better, it is argued that presidentialism makes the political process quite rigid. Furthermore, presidentialism tends to focus power in one individual rather than balancing power within the executive. In presidentialism, voters have a greater say in directly electing a president but the contest itself is a winner-takes-all situation which can create greater polarisation. Voters have a better sense of who is in control but the president can overwhelm other branches of government, the opposition and state apparatuses. Furthermore, even as legislators may have greater scope for independence, disagreement with the president can lead to paralysing stalemates. As such, democracy of either kind is an evolving reality as much as an aspirational project that works best to serve people.

Adapted from Aníbal Pérez-Liñán, 'Democracies' in Daniele Caramani (ed), *Comparative Politics* (OUP 2020)

Further Reading

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