

**A Note on
Politics, Institutions, Democracy and Equality**

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1. The Main Questions

What is the *relation*, if any, between democracy, equality, and fundamental rights?

What *conditions* in a country are favorable (or unfavorable) for the development, consolidation, and stability of democracy, equality, and rights?

How, if at all, can democracy, equality, and rights be *promoted* in a country where the favorable conditions are weak or lacking?

2. Theory and Findings: Democracy and its Institutions

Democracy may be thought of, and we generally do, in two different but related ways. Sometimes we conceive of democracy as an *ideal*, goal, aim, or standard, one that is perhaps unachievable but nonetheless highly relevant, not only for classifying and judging political systems (e.g., as democratic or nondemocratic, more democratic or less democratic, moving toward greater democracy or toward a decline in democracy), but also for fashioning strategies of democratization, designing appropriate political institutions, and so on. Often, however, we judge *actual* systems to be democratic, even though they fall short, probably far short, of the ideal.

2.1.. Democracy as an ideal.

Although no model of democracy can claim universal acceptability, it is useful to consider ideal democracy as a political system designed for members of an association who are willing to treat one another, for political purposes, as *political equals*. Although the members of the association may view one

another as unequal in other respects, all are assumed to possess equal rights to participate fully in making the policies, rules, laws, or other decisions that they are then expected (or required) to obey.

The most important type of democratic association is undoubtedly the *state*, since the state is, by definition, an association uniquely entitled to enforce its rules, if need be, by extreme coercion: imprisonment, physical punishment, and sometimes even by death. The way that control over the state is exercised is, therefore, a matter of supreme importance to the people within its domain. For several millenia, democracy has been viewed as a means by which the people within the domain of a state can themselves exercise control over the state, directly in an assembly or indirectly by means of representatives chosen by lot or through elections. Since the Athenians and other Greeks introduced democracy in their city-states around 500 BCE, at about the time the Romans also inaugurated their republic, the main focus of democratic ideas, practices, and institutions, then, has been the governments of states.

An association of political equals formed to govern a state would, ideally, satisfy the following criteria:

Effective participation: Before a policy is adopted by the association, all the members should have equal and effective opportunities for making their views known to other members as to what the policy should be.

Voting equality: When the moment arrives at which a decision about policy will finally be made, every member should have an equal and effective opportunity to vote, and all votes must be counted as equal.

Enlightened understanding: Within reasonable limits as to time, each member should have equal and effective opportunities for learning about the relevant alternative policies and their likely

consequences.

Control of the agenda: The members must have the exclusive opportunity to decide how and, if they choose, what matters are to be placed on the agenda. Thus the democratic process prescribed by the three preceding criteria is never closed; policies are always open to change by the members, if they so choose.

Finally, *inclusion of adults:* All, or at any rate most, adult permanent residents under the jurisdiction of a state should have the full rights of citizens that are implied by the first four criteria. Although this criterion was unacceptable to most advocates of democracy before the twentieth century, most democrats today would consider it a necessary requirement if a state is to be governed democratically.

2.2. Actual democracy.

In order to achieve democratic goals in governing an actual state under the imperfect conditions of the real world, what political institutions would be necessary? In answering, we need always to keep in mind that certain political institutions might be *necessary* for approximating ideal democracy to an important extent; but they might not be *sufficient* for fully closing gap between ideal democracy and real democracy. Indeed, as is almost always the case with highly demanding ideals, we have every reason to suppose that even under the most favorable circumstances the gap will remain quite large. In short, judged against the exacting standards set by democratic ideals, real democracy as we know it may be quite far from fully democratic.

In order for a large political unit, such as a country, to be governed democratically, what actual and feasible political institutions would be required? Briefly, the minimal set of political institutions necessary for modern representative democratic government to exist in a country are:

Elected officials. Control over government decisions about policy is constitutionally vested in officials elected by citizens. Thus modern, large-scale democratic governments are *representative*.

Free, fair, and frequent elections. Elected officials are chosen in frequent and fairly conducted elections in which coercion is comparatively uncommon.

Freedom of expression. Citizens have a right to express themselves without danger of severe punishment on political matters broadly defined, including criticism of officials, the government, its policies, the regime, the socioeconomic order, and the prevailing ideology.

Access to alternative and independent sources of information. Citizens have a right to seek out alternative and independent sources of information from other citizens, experts, newspapers, magazines, books, telecommunications, and the like. Moreover, alternative sources of information actually exist that are not under the control of the government or any other single group attempting to influence public political beliefs and attitudes, and these alternative sources are effectively protected by law.

Associational autonomy. To achieve their various rights, including those required for the effective operation of democratic political institutions, citizens also have a right to form relatively independent associations or organizations, including independent political parties and interest groups.

Inclusive citizenship. No adult permanently residing in the country and subject to its laws can be denied the rights that are available to others and are necessary to the five political institutions just listed. These include the rights to vote in the election of officials in free and fair elections; to run for elective office; to free expression; to form and participate in independent political organizations; to have access to independent sources of information; and rights to other freedoms and opportunities that may be necessary to the effective operation of the political institutions of large-scale democracy.

2.3. Democracy and equality

Whether as an ideal or an actuality, democracy assumes the desirability of political equality among adults, even though they may be considered unequal in many other respects. Although I cannot, within the limits of this paper, adequately justify the view that it is reasonable and proper to regard other adults as our *political* equals, that conclusion follows if we accept two assumptions. First, we assume that the good or interests of each person are entitled to equal consideration. No human beings, in this view, are *intrinsically* entitled to have their good or interests treated as superior to the good or interests of others. This fundamental moral judgment might be called the *principle of intrinsic equality*. Second, we assume that except on a very strong showing to the contrary, protected by law, every adult subject to the laws of the state should be considered sufficiently well qualified to participate in the democratic process of governing a state. We might call this practical or prudential judgment the assumption of *civic competence*. Obviously these two assumptions are contestable; but if we were to follow out the implications of the alternatives to each of them, most of us would, I believe, find every feasible alternative highly objectionable. Conversely, if we accept these two judgments, one moral, the other prudential, then logically, I believe, we must also accept the desirability of treating people as our political equals, at least in governing a state. ¹

2.4. *Democracy and Rights*

It is a common mistake to interpret democracy as simply a matter of political participation. For fundamental political rights are an intrinsic element of democracy, whether viewed as an ideal or an actuality. Each of the criteria of ideal democracy stated above implies a *right* held by

¹ A more extended justification may be found in my *On Democracy* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), Ch. 6, "Why Political Equality? I. Intrinsic Equality," and Ch. 7, "Why Political Equality? II. Civic Competence," pp. 62-80.

citizens: a right, for example, to have one's vote counted equally. And each of the political institutions of actual democracy implies one or more rights--indeed, a complex body of enforceable rights: rights to participate in electing representatives, for example; rights to freedom of expression, inquiry, discussion, and deliberation in the widest sense; rights to form associations with others for inquiry and political action; rights to citizenship; and more. These rights are not only morally obligations. In order for the basic democratic institutions to exist, the necessary rights must also exist, not simply on paper but as effective rights, legally and practically enforceable. A country without these necessary rights would, as a consequence, also lack the political institutions required for democracy.

3. *Conditions favorable and unfavorable*

The twentieth century has witnessed a phenomenal increase in the number of countries in which the basic political institutions of modern representative democracy effectively exist.

Why has this global expansion occurred? Although the answer must be somewhat conjectural, changes in a half dozen *conditions favorable to democracy* appear to account for much of the expansion.

3.1. *Foreign intervention* hostile to democratic institutions greatly declined with the collapse of the Soviet Union. The less overt U.S. support for military regimes in Latin America was reversed in the 1980s. Finally, other democratic countries and international organizations began to support democratization.

3.2. *Military coups declined.* The most frequent source of democratic

breakdowns in the twentieth century was greatly reduced in importance when military dictatorships, notably in Latin America, were badly discredited by their failures--political, economic, even (Argentina) military. In most of Latin America today the military no longer represents a serious threat to democracy.

3.3. *Anti-democratic ideologies declined* in strength throughout much of the world. The decline began during and after the First World War with the ebbing legitimacy of monarchy, hereditary aristocracy, and open oligarchy. It continued during and after the Second World War with the collapse of the main twentieth century antidemocratic ideologies, Fascism, Nazism, and Soviet Communism, together with the governments that actively promoted them. Although ideological challenges remain--extreme nationalism and Islamic fundamentalism, for example--viewed from a world perspective these are essentially local.

3.4. Along with the declining strength of antidemocratic ideologies and the absence of a superior ideological alternative, in many countries *democratic beliefs gained strength*. In some newly democratized countries elements of a *democratic culture* began to emerge as widely held democratic beliefs, practices, habits, attitudes were transmitted from one generation to the next and thus became the cultural norm rather than the exceptional view.

3.5. Although severe ethnic, religious, and cultural conflicts continued to limit the chances for democracy--notably in Africa--in some countries *carefully designed electoral arrangements* that encouraged political inclusion and compromise rather than conflict helped democratic

institutions to survive.

3.6. The *spread of market capitalism* and, in some countries, its displacement of centrally directed economic systems helped to create a large middle class with needs and desires for education, communication, and expression and other social and cultural elements supportive of liberal democratic ideas. Indeed, in some countries where dictatorships had spurred economic development, as in South Korea and Taiwan, authoritarian rule lost its legitimacy and the authoritarian governments yielded to demands for democratization.

As a result of these more favorable conditions, and perhaps others, by the mid-1990s more than 80 countries possessed the basic political institutions of democracy at a level sufficiently adequate that we can reasonably consider them to be actual, if far from ideal, democracies. Although one or another of the basic institutions meet a somewhat lower standard in some countries than in others, nearly half the countries in the world, containing more than half the world's population, are substantially democratic. (Tables 1, 2, and 3).

4. Policy Recommendations

4.1. *Every country is in some sense unique.* Consequently no general strategy of democratization and liberalization is appropriate for all. A basic requirement for outsiders (or insiders, for that matter) who are involved in democratization should be: *Know the country!*

4.2. Because countries vary so greatly, *it is absurd to divided the political systems of the world into two types: democratic and nondemocratic.*

If we imagine a continuum from extreme authoritarianism, where all the political institutions of

democracy are absent, to democratic countries, where all the institutions are present to a significant degree, then many countries are located somewhere between the extreme ends. They are complex mixtures of freedom and despotism, democracy and authoritarianism, defacto rights and defacto repression. The appropriate steps for democratization in one country may be entirely inappropriate in another.

4.3 *Democracy cannot be imposed from the outside against the will of the people.* Dictatorships can. (E.g., the USSR in Czechoslovakia.) For democracy to endure in a country, a predominant part of its leaders and ordinary people must believe that democracy is more desirable than all available anti-democratic alternatives.

4.4. Except under highly unusual circumstances, *democratization requires time.* Democratic forms can be introduced in a country almost overnight, but if the underlying conditions are unfavorable they will rapidly wither. To put it in another way, without substantial time, democratic forms would never become institutionalized and deeply rooted in the political and general culture of a country.

Remember: it took about six centuries from the time that the British parliament first emerged until the full democratization of British political institutions; three quarters of a century from the French Revolution to the Third Republic; more than a century and a half from the creation of legislatures in the American colonies to the Constitutional Convention; another 140 years from the Constitutional Convention to the extension of full rights of citizenship to women; and still another sixty years for the effective protection of the voting rights of African-Americans.

To be sure, because democratic ideas and institutions do not have to be invented or re-invented, liberalization and democratization no longer require centuries; but they may require generations.

In my view, then, it is absurd to think, for example, that China--a country with a civilization and

culture at least a millenium older than that of Europe, during which it has never governed itself through democratic institutions-- can make itself into a democracy overnight. It was folly to suppose that after one more brief American occupation, Haiti would somehow emerge as a stable democracy. It is highly unrealistic to believe that stable democracy can be established in Kosovo unless NATO and UN forces are prepared to remain there for a decade, and perhaps more, in order to help Kosovans build the civil society that will be needed to sustain democratic institutions.

4.5. In a country at the extreme authoritarian end of the continuum, an optimal strategy of democratization may be to begin by fostering *access to alternative sources of information*. In the contemporary world, to suppress all alternative sources of information imposes enormous costs on a regime, and for all practical purposes may even be impossible (consider *samizdat* in the USSR, and the Internet in China.) If alternative source of information are already available, the next step in democratization would be to gain substantial *freedom of discussion*. Preventing freedom of discussion also imposes high costs on a regime, particularly if its undergoing economic development with a market economy. In a country where many or most people already have access to alternative sources of information and enjoy considerable freedom of discussion, the third move in the strategy of democratization might be to engage in *the formation of independent associations*, from trade unions to political groupings, even (ultimately) political parties. Although a nondemocratic regime is likely to resist this step, suppression may prove to be costly to economic growth and international support. For any nondemocratic regime, the most dangerous step of all is to permit *free and fair elections*. Yet a country may reach a point (witness South Korea in 1989) where it can no longer resist demands for free and fair elections without generating such unrest that the country will be ungovernable.

If a country successfully navigates this final stage, it would then possess all the basic democratic

institutions. They are, however, likely to be fragile.

4.6. New democratic institutions will be particularly fragile in a country with sharp ethnic and cultural cleavages. In cultural divided countries, and there are many, liberalization and elections may so greatly intensify cleavages and conflicts as to bring about a breakdown in democracy and reversion to an authoritarian regime. Consequently, in countries with culturally divided societies, the *design of the electoral system* can be of critical importance. Though the task is not simple, electoral systems can sometimes be designed so that they tend to result in inclusion and cooperation rather than exclusion and conflict. ²

4.7. Transition from authoritarianism to democracy can be helped by *economic modernization*, which tends to produce a civil society, beliefs, and culture supportive of democratic ideas and institutions.

4.8. However, from a democratic perspective, *market capitalism is a double-edged sword*. Simply introducing market capitalism into a country is not enough to create and sustain democratic institutions. Indeed, if introduced too abruptly, it may actually be harmful. Although market capitalism definitely does help to create *some* conditions favorable to liberalization and democratization, unfortunately it also tends to generate inequalities that are usually seriously damaging to political equality. Moreover, in a country without a strong, legitimate, competent, and effective government to regulate both the economic transition and the subsequent operation of business enterprises, the rapid introduction of

²In recent years the design and analysis of such systems has become a significant concern of political scientists and other scholars. The relevant literature is extensive. An excellent brief summary is Ben Reilly and Andrew Reynolds, *Electoral Systems and Conflict in Divided Societies* (Washington: National

market capitalism can be disastrous for the living standards, security, and ways of life of ordinary people. The attempt to convert Russia swiftly to a market economy has been an (almost) unmitigated disaster for the Russian people, who now, some surveys suggest, tend to believe that "democracy" and capitalism are by no means desirable.

We too easily forget that in no democratic country is the market permitted to rule economic life without extensive regulation and intervention by the government. Because markets inevitably harm some persons, because in a democracy those who are harmed can vote, and because votes do count (sometimes, not always), democratic governments have always been interventionist. Their idealized portrayal of a nineteenth century economy free of government regulation and intervention is more myth than fact.

Let me now conclude by returning to my previous admonition. Because every country is to some extent unique, a feasible strategy of liberalization and democratization must be crafted to fit the unique features of the country.