Chapter 8

Democracy, Representation and the Public Interest

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Introduction

Since the dawn of political thought the question 'Who should rule?' has been a recurrent issue of argument and debate. Since the twentieth century, however, the question has tended to elicit a single, almost universally accepted, response: the people should govern. Perhaps no other political ideal is accorded the unquestioning approval, even reverence, currently enjoyed by democracy. Whether they are liberals, conservatives, socialists, communists or even fascists, politicians everywhere are eager to proclaim their democratic credentials and to commit themselves to the democratic ideal. And yet it is its very popularity that makes democracy a difficult concept to understand. When a term means anything to anyone it is in danger of becoming entirely meaningless. Democracy may now be nothing more than a 'hurrah word', endlessly repeated by politicians, but denoting little of substance.

In reality, a number of competing models of democracy have developed in different historical periods and in various parts of the world. These have included direct and indirect democracy, political and social democracy, pluralist and totalitarian democracy and so on. What forms of government can reasonably be described as 'democratic', and why? Moreover, why is democracy so widely valued, and can it be regarded as an unqualified good? Modern ideas of democracy are, however, rarely based upon the classical idea of popular self-government. Rather, they are founded on the belief that politicians in some sense 'represent' the people and act on their behalf. This raises questions about what representation means and how it is accomplished. What, for instance, is being represented: the views of the people, their best interests, or the various groups which make up the people? Is representation a necessary feature of democracy, or is it merely a substitute for it? Finally, democratic governments claim to rule in the national or public interest. However, what is meant by the 'public interest'? And can the people ever be said to have a single, collective interest? Even if such a collective interest exists, how can it in practice be defined?

Democracy

The term democracy and the classical conception of democratic rule are firmly rooted in Ancient Greece. Like other words that end in 'cracy' – such as autocracy, aristocracy and bureaucracy – democracy is derived from the ancient Greek word *kratos*, meaning 'power' or 'rule'. Democracy therefore means 'rule by the demos', demos standing for 'the many' or 'the people'. In contrast to its modern usage, democracy was originally a negative or pejorative term, denoting not so much rule by all, as rule by the propertyless and uneducated masses. Democracy was therefore thought to be the enemy of liberty and wisdom. While writers such as Aristotle (see p. 69) were prepared to recognize the virtues of popular participation, they nevertheless feared that unrestrained democracy would degenerate into a form of 'mob rule'. Indeed, such pejorative implications continued to be attached to democracy until well into the twentieth century.

Democratic government has, however, varied considerably over the centuries. Perhaps the most fundamental distinction is between democratic systems, like those in Ancient Greece, that are based upon direct popular participation in government, and those that operate through some kind of representative mechanism. This highlights two contrasting models of democracy: direct democracy and representative democracy. Moreover, the modern understanding of democracy is dominated by the form of electoral democracy that has developed in the industrialized West, often called liberal democracy. Despite its undoubted success, liberal democracy is only one of a number of possible models of democracy, and one whose democratic credentials have sometimes been called into question. Finally, the near universal approval which democracy currently elicits should not obscure the fact that the merits of democracy have been fiercely debated over the centuries and that, in certain respects, this debate has intensified in the late twentieth century. In other words, democracy may have its vices as well as its virtues.

Direct and indirect democracy

In the Gettysburg Address, delivered at the time of the American Civil War, Abraham Lincoln extolled the virtues of what he called 'government of the people, by the people, and for the people'. In so doing, he defined between two contrasting notions of democracy. The first, 'government *by* the people', is based upon the idea that the public participates in government and indeed governs itself: popular self-government. The second, 'government *for* the people', is linked to the notion of the public interest and the idea that government benefits the people, whether or not

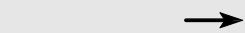
Democracy

Although the democratic political tradition can be traced back to Ancient Greece, the cause of democracy was not widely taken up by political thinkers until the nineteenth century. Until then, democracy was generally dismissed as rule by the ignorant and unenlightened masses. Now, however, it seems that we are all democratic. Liberals, conservatives, socialists, communists, anarchists and even fascists have been eager to proclaim the virtues of democracy and to demonstrate their democratic credentials.

This emphasizes the fact that the democratic tradition does not advance a single and agreed ideal of popular rule, but is rather an arena of debate in which the notion of popular rule, and ways in which it can be achieved, is discussed. In that sense, democratic political thought addresses three central questions. First, who are the people? As no one would extend political participation to *all* the people, the question is: on what basis should it be limited – in relation to age, education, gender, social background and so on? Second, how should the people rule? This relates not only to the choice between direct and indirect democratic forms, but also to debates about forms of representation and different electoral systems. Third, how far should popular rule extend? Should democracy be confined to political life, or should democracy also apply, say, to the family, the workplace, or throughout the economy?

Democracy, then, is not a single, unambiguous phenomenon. In reality, there is a number of theories or models of democracy, each offering its own version of popular rule. There are not merely a number of democratic forms and mechanisms but also, more fundamentally, quite different grounds on which democratic rule can be justified. Classical democracy, based upon the Athenian model, is characterized by the direct and continuous participation of citizens in the processes of government. Protective democracy is a limited and indirect form of democratic rule designed to provide individuals with a means of defence against government. As such, it is linked to natural rights theory and utilitarianism (see p. 358). Developmental democracy is associated with attempts to broaden popular participation on the basis that it advances freedom and individual flourishing. Such ideas were taken up by New Left thinkers in the 1960s and 1970s in the form of radical or participatory democracy. Finally, deliberative democracy highlights the importance of public debate and discussion in shaping citizens' identities and interests, and in strengthening their sense of the common good.

Critics of democracy have adopted various positions. They have warned, variously, that democracy fails to recognize that some people's views are more worthwhile than others'; that democracy upholds majority views at the expense of minority views and interests; that democratic rule tends to threaten individual rights by fuelling the growth of government; and that democracy is based upon the bogus notion of a public interest or common good, ideas that have been further weakened by the pluralistic nature of modern society.



→ Key figures

Jean-Jacques Rousseau (see p. 242) Rousseau viewed democracy as the most important means through which humans can achieve freedom or autonomy, in the sense of 'obedience to a law one prescribes to oneself'. He was a strenuous critic of the practice of elections and insisted that citizens are only 'free' when they participate directly and continuously in shaping the life of their community. For Rousseau, this ultimately meant obedience to the general will, although he was less clear about the precise mechanisms through which the general will would emerge.

Joseph Schumpeter (1883–1950) A Moravian-born US economist and sociologist, Schumpeter developed an analysis of capitalism that emphasized its bureaucratic tendencies and its growing resemblance to socialism. His theory of democracy offered an alternative to the 'classical doctrine', which was based upon the idea of a shared notion of the common good; it portrayed the democratic process as an arena of struggle between power-seeking politicians intent upon winning the people's vote. His view that political democracy is analogous to an economic market had considerable influence upon later rational-choice theories. Schumpeter's most important political work is *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy* ([1942] 1976).

Crawford Brough Macpherson (1911–87) A Canadian political theorist, Macpherson developed a leftist form of liberalism that reflects the influence of Marxism. He portrayed early liberalism as a form of possessive individualism, intrinsically linked to market society. His critique of liberal democracy stressed liberalism's pre-democratic features and acknowledged its bias in favour of capitalism. Nevertheless, he argued that the basic liberal democratic principle of equal liberty could ultimately be realised, but only within conditions of participatory democracy and in a non-market social environment. Macpherson's major works include *The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism* (1962), *Democratic Theory* (1973) and *The Life and Times of Liberal Democracy* (1977).

Robert Dahl (1915–) A US political scientist, Dahl is a leading exponent of pluralist theory. He contrasts modern democratic systems with the classical democracy of Ancient Greece, using the term 'polyarchy' to refer to rule by the many, as distinct from rule by all citizens. His empirical studies led him to conclude that the system of competitive elections prevents any permanent elite from emerging and ensures wide, if imperfect, access to the political process. His later writings reflect a growing awareness of the tension between democracy and the power of major capitalist corporations. Dahl's major works include *A Preface to Democratic Theory* (1956), *Who Governs?* (1963), *Dilemmas of Pluralist Democracy* (1982) and *A Preface to Economic Democracy* (1985).

Further reading

Dahl, R. *Democracy and Its Critics*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1989.
Harrison, R. *Democracy*. London: Routledge, 1993.
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they themselves rule. The classical conception of democracy, which endured well into the nineteenth century, was firmly rooted in the ideal of popular participation and drew heavily upon the example of Athenian democracy. The cornerstone of Athenian democracy was the direct and continuous participation of all citizens in the life of their *polis* or city-state. As described in Chapter 3, this amounted to a form of government by mass meeting, and each citizen was qualified to hold public office if selected to do so by lot or rota. Athenian democracy was therefore a system of 'direct democracy' or what is sometimes referred to as 'participatory democracy'. By removing the need for a separate class of professional politicians, the citizens themselves were able to rule directly, obliterating the distinction between government and the governed and between the state and civil society. Similar systems of 'town-meeting democracy' continue to be practised at a local level in some parts of the USA, notably in New England, and in the communal assemblies employed in Switzerland.

The town meeting is, however, not the only means through which direct democracy can operate. The most obvious of these is the plebiscite or referendum, a popular vote on a specific issue which enables electors to make decisions directly, instead of selecting politicians to do so on their behalf. Referendums are widely used at every level in Switzerland, and are employed in countries such as Ireland to ratify constitutional amendments. The UK held a referendum in 1975 on continued membership of the then European Community, in 1979 on establishing devolved assemblies in Scotland and Wales, and since the election of the Blair government in 1997 referendums have been held on Scottish and Welsh devolution, the Northern Ireland peace deal and the introduction of a London mayor. In the USA, referendums have increasingly been used in local politics in the form of 'propositions' or popular initiatives. A form of direct democracy has also survived in modern societies in the practice of selecting juries on the basis of lot or rota, as public offices were filled in Athenian times. Advocates of direct democracy further point out that the development of modern technology has opened up broader possibilities for popular participation in government. In particular, the use of so-called interactive television could enable citizens to both watch public debates and engage in voting without ever leaving their homes. Experiments with such technology are already under way in some local communities in the United States.

Needless to say, modern government bears little resemblance to the Athenian model of direct democracy. Government is left in the hands of professional politicians who are invested with the responsibility for making decisions on behalf of the people. Representative democracy is, at best, a limited and indirect form of democracy. It is limited in the sense that popular participation is both infrequent and brief, being reduced to the act of voting every few years, depending on the length of the political

term. It is indirect in the sense that the public is kept at arm's length from government: the public participates only through the choice of who should govern it, and never, or only rarely, exercises power itself. Representative democracy may nevertheless qualify as a form of democracy on the grounds that, however limited and ritualized it may appear, the act of voting remains a vital source of popular power. Quite simply, the public has the ability to 'kick the rascals out', a fact that ensures public accountability. Although representative democracy may not fully realize the classical goal of 'government *by* the people', it may nevertheless make possible a form of 'government *for* the people'.

Some advocates of representative democracy acknowledge its limitations, but argue that it is the only practicable form of democracy in modern conditions. A high level of popular participation is possible within relatively small communities, such as Greek city-states or small towns, because face-to-face communication can take place between and amongst citizens. However, the idea of government by mass meeting being conducted in modern nation-states containing tens, and possibly hundreds of millions of citizens is frankly absurd. Moreover, to consult the general public on each and every issue, and permit wide-ranging debate and discussion, threatens to paralyse the decision-making process and make a country virtually ungovernable. The most fundamental objection to direct democracy is, however, that ordinary people lack the time, maturity and specialist knowledge to rule wisely on their own behalf. In this sense, representative democracy merely applies the advantages of the division of labour to politics: specialist politicians, able to devote all their time and energy to the activity of government, can clearly do a better job than would the general public. Nevertheless, since the 1960s there has been a revival of interest in classical democracy and, in particular, in the idea of participation. This reflects growing disenchantment with the bureaucratic and unresponsive nature of modern government, as well as declining respect for professional politicians, who have increasingly been viewed as self-serving careerists. In addition, the act of voting is often seen as a meaningless ritual that has little impact upon the policy process, making a mockery of the democratic ideal. Civic disengagement and declining electoral turnout in many parts of the world are thus sometimes viewed as symptoms of the malaise of representative democracy.

Liberal democracy

Bernard Crick (2000) has pointed out that democracy is the most promiscuous of political terms. In the sense that the word means different things to different people, democracy is an example of an 'essentially contested' concept. No settled model of democracy exists, only a number

of competing models. Nevertheless, a particular model or form of democracy has come to dominate thinking on the matter, to the extent that many in the West treat it as the only feasible or meaningful form of democracy. This is liberal democracy. It is found in almost all advanced capitalist societies and now extends, in one form or another, into parts of the former communist world and the developing world. Indeed, in the light of the collapse of communism, the US New Right theorist, Francis Fukuyama (1992), proclaimed the worldwide triumph of liberal democracy, describing it as the 'end of history', by which he meant the struggle between political ideas. Such triumphalism, however, should not obscure the fact that, despite its attractions, liberal democracy is not the only model of democratic government, and, like all concepts of democracy, it has its critics and detractors.

The 'liberal' element in liberal democracy emerged historically some time before such states could genuinely be described as democratic. Many Western states, for instance, developed forms of constitutional government in the nineteenth century, at a time when the franchise was still restricted to propertied males. In fact, women in Switzerland did not get the vote until 1971. A liberal state is based upon the principle of limited government, the idea that the individual should enjoy some measure of protection from the state. From the liberal perspective, government is a necessary evil, always liable to become a tyranny against the individual if government power is not checked. This leads to support for devices designed to constrain government, such as a constitution, a Bill of Rights, an independent judiciary and a network of checks and balances among the institutions of government. Liberal democracies, moreover, respect the existence of a vigorous and healthy civil society, based upon respect for civil liberties and property rights. Liberal-democratic rule therefore typically coexists with a capitalist economic order.

However, although these features may be a necessary precondition for democracy, they should not be mistaken for democracy itself. The 'democratic' element in liberal democracy is the idea of popular consent, expressed in practice through the act of voting. Liberal democracy is thus a form of electoral democracy, in that popular election is seen as the only legitimate source of political authority. Such elections must, however, respect the principle of political equality; they must be based upon universal suffrage and the idea of 'one person one vote'. For this reason, any system that restricts voting rights on grounds of gender, race, religion, economic status or whatever, fails the democratic test. Finally, in order to be fully democratic, elections must be regular, open and, above all, competitive. The core of the democratic process is the capacity of the people to call politicians to account. Political pluralism, open competition

between political philosophies, movements, parties and so on, is thus thought to be the essence of democracy.

The attraction of liberal democracy is its capacity to blend elite rule with a significant measure of popular participation. Government is entrusted to professional politicians, but these politicians are forced to respond to popular pressures by the simple fact that the public put them there in the first place, and can later remove them. Joseph Schumpeter summed this up in *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy* ([1942] 1976) by describing the democratic method as 'that institutional arrangement for arriving at political decisions in which individuals acquire the power to decide by means of a competitive struggle for the people's vote'. Thus the virtues of elite rule – government by experts, the educated or well-informed – are balanced against the need for public accountability. Indeed, such a view implies that in liberal democracies political power is ultimately wielded by voters at election time. The voter exercises the same power in the political market as the consumer does in economic markets. This process of accountability is strengthened by the capacity of citizens to exert direct influence upon government through the formation of cause groups and interest groups. Liberal democracies are therefore described as pluralist democracies: within them political power is widely dispersed among a number of competing groups and interests, each of which has access to government.

Nevertheless, liberal democracy does not command universal approval or respect. Its principal critics have been elitists, Marxists (see p. 82) and radical democrats. Elitists are distinguished by their belief that political power is concentrated in the hands of the few, the elite. Whereas classical elitists believed this to be a necessary and, in many cases, desirable feature of political life, modern elitists have developed an essentially empirical analysis and usually regretted the concentration of political power. In a sense, Schumpeter advanced a form of democratic elitism in suggesting that, though power is always exercised by an elite, competition among a number of elites ensures that the popular voice is heard. In the view of C. Wright Mills (1956), however, industrialized societies like the USA are dominated by a 'power elite', a small cohesive group that commands 'the major hierarchies and organizations of modern society'. Such a theory suggests that power is institutional in character and largely vested in the non-elected bodies of the state system, including the military, the bureaucracy, the judiciary and the police. Mills argued, in fact, that the means for exercising power are more narrowly concentrated in a few hands in such societies than at any earlier time in history. From this perspective, the principle of political equality and the process of electoral competition upon which liberal democracy is founded are nothing more than a sham.

The traditional Marxist critique of liberal democracy has focused upon the inherent tension between democracy and capitalism. For liberals and conservatives, the right to own property is almost the cornerstone of democratic rule since it provides an essential guarantee of individual liberty. Democracy can exist only when citizens are able to stand on their own two feet and make up their own minds; in other words, capitalism is a necessary precondition for democracy. Orthodox Marxists have fiercely disagreed, arguing that there is inherent tension between the political equality which liberal democracy proclaims and the social inequality which a capitalist economy inevitably generates. Liberal democracies are thus 'capitalist' or 'bourgeois' democracies, manipulated and controlled by the entrenched power of private property. Such an analysis inclined revolutionary Marxists such as Lenin (see p. 83) and Rosa Luxemburg (1871–1919) to reject the idea that there can be a 'democratic road' to socialism. An alternative tradition nevertheless recognizes that electoral democracy gives the working masses a voice and may even be a vehicle for far-reaching social change. The German socialist leader Karl Kautsky (1854–1938) was an exponent of this view, as have been modern Euro-communists. However, even when socialists have embraced the ballot box, they have been critical of the narrow conception of political equality as nothing more than equal voting rights. If political power reflects the distribution of wealth, genuine democracy can only be brought about through the achievement of social equality or what early Marxists termed 'social democracy'.

Finally, radical democrats have attacked liberal democracy as a form of facade democracy. They have returned to the classical conception of democracy as popular self-government, and emphasized the need for popular political participation. The ideal of direct or participatory democracy has attracted support from Karl Marx (see p. 371) most anarchist thinkers, and from elite theorists such as Tom Bottomore (1993) and Peter Bachrach (1967). The essence of the radical democracy critique is that liberal democracy has reduced participation to a meaningless ritual: casting a vote every few years for politicians who can only be replaced by electing another set of self-serving politicians. In short, the people never rule, and the growing gulf between government and the people is reflected in the spread of inertia, apathy and the breakdown of community. Radical democrats therefore underline the benefits that political participation brings, often by reference to the writings of Rousseau (see p. 242) and J.S. Mill (see p. 256). While they suggest no single alternative to liberal democracy they have usually been prepared to endorse any reforms through which grass-roots democracy can be brought about. These include not only the use of referendums and information technology, already discussed, but also the radical decentralization of

power and the wider use of activist and campaigning pressure groups rather than bureaucratic and hierarchic political parties.

Virtues and vices of democracy

In modern politics there is a strange and perhaps unhealthy silence on the issue of democracy. So broad is respect for democracy that it has come to be taken for granted; its virtues are seldom questioned and its vices rarely exposed. This is very different from the period of the English, American and French revolutions, which witnessed fierce and continual debate about the merits of democracy. Indeed, in the nineteenth century, when democracy was regarded as a radical, egalitarian and even revolutionary creed, no issue polarized political opinion so dramatically. The present unanimity about democracy should not, however, disguise the fact that democrats have defended their views in very different ways at different times.

Until the nineteenth century, democracy, or at least the right to vote, was usually regarded as a means of protecting the individual against overmighty government. Perhaps the most basic of democratic sentiments was expressed in the Roman poet, Juvenal's question, '*Quis custodiet ipsos custodes?* [Who will guard the Guardians?]' Seventeenth-century social contract theorists also saw democracy as a way in which individuals could check government power. In the eyes of John Locke (see p. 268), for instance, the right to vote was based upon natural rights and, in particular, the right to property. If government, through taxation, possessed the power to expropriate property, citizens were entitled to protect themselves, which they did by controlling the composition of the tax-making body. In other words, there should be 'no taxation without representation'. To limit the franchise to property owners would not, however, qualify as democracy by twentieth-century standards. The more radical notion of universal suffrage was advanced by utilitarian theorists like Jeremy Bentham (see p. 359). In his early writings Bentham advocated an enlightened despotism, believing that this would be able to promote 'the greatest happiness'. However, he subsequently came to support universal suffrage in the belief that each individual's interests were of equal value and that only they could be trusted to pursue their own interests.

A more radical case for democracy is, however, suggested by theorists who regard political participation as a good in itself. As noted earlier, Jean-Jacques Rousseau and John Stuart Mill have usually been seen as the principal exponents of this position. For Rousseau, democracy was a means through which human beings achieved freedom or autonomy. Individuals are, according to this view, free only when they obey laws which they themselves have made. Rousseau therefore extolled the merits

of active and continuous participation in the life of their community. Such an idea, however, moves well beyond the conventional notion of electoral democracy and offers support for the more radical ideal of direct democracy. Rousseau, for example, derided the practice of elections employed in England, arguing that 'the people of England are only free when they elect their Member of Parliament; as soon as they are elected, the people are slaves, they are nothing'. Although Mill did not go so far, remaining an advocate of electoral democracy, he nevertheless believed that political participation was beneficial to both the individual and society. Mill proposed votes for women and the extension of the franchise to include all except illiterates, on educational grounds, suggesting that it would foster among individuals intellectual development, moral virtue and practical understanding. This, in turn, would create a more balanced and harmonious society and promote 'the general mental advancement of the community'.

Other arguments in favour of democracy are more clearly based upon its advantages for the community rather than for the individual. Democracy can, for instance, create a sense of social solidarity by giving all members a stake in the community by virtue of having a voice in the decision-making process. Rousseau expressed this very idea in his belief that government should be based upon the 'general will', or common good, rather than upon the private or selfish will of each citizen. Political participation therefore increases the feeling amongst individual citizens that they 'belong' to their community. Very similar considerations have inclined socialists and Marxists to support democracy, albeit in the form of 'social democracy' and not merely political democracy. From this perspective, democracy can be seen as an egalitarian force standing in opposition to any form of privilege or hierarchy. Democracy represents the community rather than the individual, the collective interest rather than the particular.

Even as the battle for democracy was being waged, however, strident voices were raised against it. The most fundamental argument against democracy is that ordinary members of the public are simply not competent to rule wisely in their own interests. The earliest version of this argument was put by Plato (see p. 21) who advanced the idea of rule by the virtuous, government being carried out by a class of philosopher-kings, the Guardians. In sharp contrast to democratic theorists, Plato believed in a radical form of natural inequality: human beings were born with souls of gold, silver or bronze, and were therefore disposed towards very different stations in life. Whereas Plato suggested that democracy would deliver bad government, classical elitists, such as Pareto (1848–1923), Mosca (1857–1941) and Michels (1876–1936), argued that it was simply impossible. Democracy is no more than a foolish delusion because political power is always exercised by a privileged minority, an elite. In

The Ruling Class ([1896] 1939), Mosca proclaimed that in all societies 'two classes of people appear – a class that rules and a class that is ruled'. In his view, the resources or attributes that are necessary for rule are always unequally distributed and, further, a cohesive minority will always be able to manipulate and control the masses, even in a parliamentary democracy. Pareto suggested that the qualities needed to rule conform to one of two psychological types: 'foxes', who rule by cunning and are able to manipulate the consent of the masses; and 'lions', whose domination is typically based upon coercion and violence. Michels proposed that elite rule followed from what he called 'the iron law of oligarchy'. This states that it is in the nature of all organizations, however democratic they may appear, for power to concentrate in the hands of a small group of dominant figures, who can organize and make decisions, rather than in the hands of the apathetic rank and file.

A further argument against democracy sees it as the enemy of individual liberty. This fear arises out of the fact that 'the people' is not a single entity but rather a collection of individuals and groups, possessed of differing opinions and opposing interests. The 'democratic solution' to conflict is a recourse to numbers and the application of majority rule – the rule of the majority, or greatest number, should prevail over the minority. Democracy, in other words, comes down to the rule of the 51 per cent, a prospect which Alexis de Tocqueville (see p. 138) famously described as 'the tyranny of the majority'. Individual liberty and minority rights can thus both be crushed in the name of the people. A similar analysis was advanced by J.S. Mill. Mill believed not only that democratic election was no way of determining the truth – wisdom cannot be determined by a show of hands – but also that majoritarianism would also damage intellectual life by promoting uniformity and dull conformism. A similar view was also expressed by James Madison (see p. 232) at the US Constitutional Convention at Philadelphia in 1787. Madison argued that the best defence against such tyranny was a network of checks and balances, creating a highly fragmented system of government, often referred to as the 'Madisonian system'.

In other cases, a fear of democracy has sprung not so much from the danger of majority rule as from the nature of the majority in most, if not all, societies. Echoing ancient reservations about popular rule, such theories suggest that democracy places power in the hands of those least qualified to govern: the uneducated masses, those likely to be ruled by passion and instinct rather than wisdom. In *The Revolt of the Masses* ([1930] 1961), for instance, Ortega y Gasset (1885–1955) warned that the arrival of mass democracy had led to the overthrow of civilized society and the moral order, paving the way for authoritarian rulers to come to power by appealing to the basest instincts of the masses. Whereas democrats

James Madison (1751–1836)

US statesman and political theorist. Madison was a Virginian who was a keen advocate of American nationalism at the Continental Congress, 1774 and 1775. He helped to set up the Constitutional Convention in 1787, and played a major role in writing the Constitution. Madison served as Jefferson's secretary of state, 1801–9, and was the fourth president of the United States, 1809–17.

Madison's best known political writings are his contributions to *The Federalist* (1787–8), which campaigned for constitutional ratification. He was a leading proponent of pluralism and divided government, believing that 'ambition must be made to counteract ambition'. He therefore urged the adoption of federalism, bicameralism and the separation of powers. Madisonianism thus implies a strong emphasis upon checks and balances as the principal means of preventing tyranny. Nevertheless, when in office, Madison was prepared to strengthen the powers of national government. His views on democracy, often referred to as 'Madisonian democracy', stressed the need to resist majoritarianism by recognising the existence of diversity or multiplicity in society, and highlighted the need for a disinterested and informed elite independent from competing individual and sectional interests. Madison's ideas have influenced liberal, republican and pluralist thought.

subscribe to egalitarian principles, critics such as Ortega tend to embrace the more conservative notion of natural hierarchy. For many, this critique is particularly directed at participatory forms of democracy, which place little or no check upon the appetites of the masses. J.L. Talmon (1952), for example, argued that in the French Revolution the radically democratic theories of Rousseau made possible the unrestrained brutality of the Terror, a phenomenon Talmon termed 'totalitarian democracy'. Many have seen similar lessons in the plebiscitary forms of democracy which developed in twentieth-century fascist states, which sought to establish a direct and immediate relationship between the leader and the people through rallies, marches, demonstrations and other forms of political agitation.

Representation

Modern democratic theories are closely bound to the idea of representation. As stressed earlier, when citizens no longer rule directly, democracy is based upon the claim that politicians serve as the people's representatives. However, what does it mean to say that one person 'represents' another?

In ordinary language, to represent means to portray or make present, as when a picture is said to represent a scene or person. In politics, representation suggests that an individual or group somehow stands for, or on behalf of, a larger collection of people. Political representation therefore acknowledges a link between two otherwise separate entities – government and the governed – and implies that through this link the people's views are articulated or their interests are secured. The precise nature of this link is, nevertheless, a matter of deep disagreement, as is the capacity of representation ever to ensure democratic government.

In practice, there is no single, agreed model of representation but rather a number of competing theories, each based upon particular ideological and political assumptions. Representatives have sometimes been seen as people who 'know better' than others, and can therefore act wisely in their interests. This implies that politicians should not be tied like delegates to the views of their constituents, but should have the capacity to think for themselves and use personal judgement. For many, however, elections are the basis of the representative mechanism, elected politicians being able to call themselves representatives on the grounds that they have been mandated by the people. What this mandate means and how it authorizes politicians to act, is however a highly contentious matter. Finally, there is the altogether different idea that a representative is not a person acting on behalf of another, but one who is typical or characteristic of a group or society. Politicians are representatives, then, if they resemble their society in terms of age, gender, social class, ethnic background and so forth. To insist that politicians are a microcosm of society is to call for radical changes in the personnel of government in every country of the world.

Representatives or delegates?

In his famous speech to the electors of Bristol in 1774 Edmund Burke (see p. 348) informed his would-be constituents that 'your representative owes you, not his industry only, but his judgement; and he betrays, instead of serving you, if he sacrifices it to your opinion'. For Burke, the essence of representation was to serve one's constituents by the exercise of 'mature judgement' and 'enlightened conscience'. In short, representation is a moral duty: those with the good fortune to possess education and understanding should act in the interests of those who are less fortunate. In Burke's view, this position was justified by the fear that if MPs acted as ambassadors who took instructions directly from their constituents, Parliament would become a battleground for contending local interests, leaving no one to speak on behalf of the nation. 'Parliament', Burke emphasised, 'is a deliberative assembly of one nation, with one interest, that of the whole'.

A similar position was adopted in the nineteenth century by J.S. Mill, whose ideas constitute the basis of the liberal theory of representation. Though a firm believer in extending the franchise to working-class men, and an early advocate of female suffrage, Mill nevertheless rejected the idea that all political opinions are of equal value. In particular, he believed that the opinions of the educated are worth more than those of the uneducated or illiterate. This encouraged him, for instance, to propose a system of plural voting, allocating four or five votes to holders of learned diplomas or degrees, two or three to skilled or managerial workers, a single vote to ordinary workers and none at all to those who are illiterate. In addition, like Burke, he insisted that, once elected, representatives should think for themselves and not sacrifice their judgement to their constituents. Indeed, he argued that rational voters would wish for candidates with greater understanding than they possess themselves, ones who have had specialist knowledge, extensive education and broad experience. They will want politicians who can act wisely on their behalf, not ones who merely reflect their own views.

This theory of representation portrays professional politicians as representatives in so far as they are an educated elite. It is based upon the belief that knowledge and understanding are unequally distributed in society, in the sense that not all citizens are capable of perceiving their own best interests. If politicians therefore act as delegates, who, like ambassadors, receive instructions from a higher authority without having the capacity to question them, they may succumb to the irrational prejudices and ill-formed judgements of the masses. On the other hand, to advocate representation in preference to delegation is also to invite serious criticism. In the first place, the basic principles of this theory have anti-democratic implications: if politicians should think for themselves rather than reflect the views of the represented because the public is ignorant, poorly educated or deluded, surely it is a mistake to allow them to choose their representatives in the first place. Indeed, if education is the basis of representation, it could be argued that government should be entrusted to non-elected experts, selected, like the Mandarins of Imperial China, on the basis of examination success. Mill, in fact, did accept the need for a non-elected executive on such grounds. Furthermore, the link between representation and education is questionable. Whereas education may certainly be necessary to aid an understanding of intricate political and economic issues, it is far less clear that it helps politicians to make moral judgements about the interests of others. There is little evidence, for example, to support the belief which underpinned J.S. Mill's theory, and by implication those of Burke, that education gives people a broader sense of social responsibility and a greater willingness to act altruistically.

The most serious criticism of this theory of representation is, however, that it grants representatives considerable latitude in controlling the lives of others. In particular, there is a danger that to the degree to which politicians are encouraged to think for themselves they may become insulated from popular pressures and end up acting in their own selfish interests. In this way, representation could become a substitute for democracy. This fear had traditionally been expressed by radical democrats such as Tom Paine (see p. 206). As a keen advocate of the democratic doctrine of popular sovereignty, Paine actively involved himself in both the American and French revolutions. Unlike Rousseau, however, he recognized the need for some form of representation. Nevertheless, the theory of representation he advocated in *Common Sense* ([1776] 1987) came close to the ideal of delegation. Paine proposed 'frequent interchange' between representatives and their constituents in the form of regular elections designed to ensure that 'the elected might never form to themselves an interest separate from the electors'. In addition to frequent elections, radical democrats have also supported the idea of popular initiatives, a system through which the general public can make legislative proposals, and the right of recall, which entitles the electorate to call unsatisfactory elected officials to account and ultimately to remove them. From this point of view, the democratic ideal is realized only if representatives are bound as closely as possible to the views of the represented.

Elections and mandates

For most people, representation is intimately tied up with elections, to such an extent that politicians are commonly referred to as representatives simply because they have been elected. This does not, however, explain how elections serve as a representative mechanism, or how they link the elected to the views of the electors. An election is a device for filling public offices by reference to popular preferences. That being said, electoral systems are widely divergent, some being seen as more democratic or representative than others. It is difficult, for instance, to argue that non-competitive elections, in which only a single candidate is placed before the electorate, can be regarded as democratic, since there is no electoral choice and no opportunity to remove office-holders. However, there are also differences among competitive electoral systems. In countries such as the UK, the USA, New Zealand and India, plurality systems exist, based upon the 'first-past-the-post' rule – the victorious candidate needs only acquire more votes than any single rival. Such systems do not seek to equate the overall number of seats won by each party with the number of votes it gains in the election. Typically, plurality systems 'over-represent' large

parties and 'under-represent' smaller ones. In the 1983 British general election, for example, the SDP–Liberal Alliance gained 26 per cent of the vote but won only 3.4 per cent of the seats of the House of Commons. By contrast, proportional electoral systems, used throughout continental Europe and, since 1997, for devolved and EU elections in the UK, employ various devices to ensure a direct, or at least closer, relationship between the votes cast for each party and the seats eventually won.

Regardless of the system employed, there are problems in seeing any form of election as the basis of representation. An election is only representative if its results can be interpreted as granting popular authority for particular forms of government action. In other words, an election must have a meaning. The most common way of imposing meaning upon an election result is to interpret it as providing a 'mandate' for the winning candidate or party, an idea that has been developed into a theory of representation, the so-called doctrine of the mandate. A mandate is an authoritative instruction or command. The doctrine of the mandate is based, first of all, upon the willingness of parties or candidates to set out their policy proposals through speeches or by the publication of manifestos. These proposals are, in effect, electoral promises, indicating what the party or candidate is committed to doing if elected. The act of voting can thus be understood as the expression of a preference from amongst the various policy programmes on offer. Victory in the election is therefore a reflection of the popularity of one set of proposals over its rivals. In this light, it can be argued that the winning party or candidate not only enjoys a popular mandate to carry out its manifesto pledges but has a duty to do so. The act of representation thus involves politicians remaining faithful to the policies upon which they were elected, which, in turn, provides an obvious justification for strict party discipline.

The great merit of the mandate doctrine is that it seems to impose some kind of meaning upon an election, and so offers popular guidance to those who exercise government power. However, the doctrine also has its drawbacks. For example, the doctrine acts as a straightjacket, limiting government policies to those positions and proposals the party took up during the election, and leaves politicians with no capacity to adjust policies in the light of ever-changing circumstances. The doctrine is therefore of no value in relation to events like international and economic crises which crop up unexpectedly. As a result, the more flexible notion of a 'mandate to rule' has sometimes been advanced in place of the conventional 'policy mandate'. The idea of a mandate to rule is, however, hopelessly vague and comes close to investing politicians with unrestricted authority simply because they have won an election.

It has, furthermore, been suggested that the doctrine of the mandate is based upon a highly questionable model of electoral behaviour. Specifi-

cally, it portrays voters as rational creatures, whose political preferences are determined by issues and policy proposals. In reality, there is abundant evidence to suggest that many voters are poorly informed about political issues and possess little knowledge of the content of manifestos. To some extent, voters are influenced by 'irrational' factors, such as the personality of party leaders, the image of parties, or habitual allegiances formed through social conditioning. Indeed, modern electoral campaigns fought largely on television have strengthened such tendencies by focusing upon personalities rather than policies, and upon images rather than issues. In no way, therefore, can a vote for a party be interpreted as an endorsement of its manifesto's contents or any other set of policies. Moreover, even if voters are influenced by policies, it is likely that they will be attracted by certain manifesto commitments, but may be less interested in or even opposed to others. A vote for a party cannot therefore be taken as an endorsement of its entire manifesto. Apart from those rare occasions when an election campaign is dominated by a single, overriding issue, elections are inherently vague and provide no reliable guide about which policies led one party to victory and others to defeat.

Finally, countries with plurality electoral systems have the further problem that governments can be formed on the basis of a plurality of votes rather than an overall majority. For instance, Bill Clinton was elected US president in 1992 on the basis of 43 per cent of the popular vote, and in 2001 the Blair government in the UK gained an overall majority in the House of Commons of 167 seats with only 41 per cent of the vote. When more voters oppose the elected government or administration than support it, it seems frankly absurd to claim that it enjoys a mandate from the people. On the other hand, proportional systems, which tend to lead to the formation of coalition governments, also get in the way of mandate democracy. In such cases, government policies are often hammered out through post-election deals negotiated by coalition partners. In the process, the policies which may have attracted support in the first place may be amended or traded-off as a compromise package of policies is constructed. It is not therefore possible to assume that all those who voted for one of the coalition parties will be satisfied by the eventual government programme. Indeed, it can be argued that such a package enjoys no mandate whatsoever because no set of voters has been asked to endorse it.

Characteristic representation

A final theory of representation is based less upon the manner in which representatives are selected than on whether or not they typify or resemble the group they claim to represent. This notion of representation is

embodied in the idea of a 'representative cross-section', employed by market researchers and opinion pollsters. To be 'representative' in this sense it is necessary to be drawn from a particular group and to share its characteristics. A representative government would therefore be a microcosm of the larger society, containing members drawn from all groups and sections in society, in terms of social class, gender, religion, ethnicity, age and so forth, and in numbers that are proportional to their strength in society at large.

This theory of representation has enjoyed support amongst a broad range of theorists and political activists. It has, for instance, been accepted by many socialists, who believe that an individual's beliefs, attitudes and values tend to be shaped by their social background. Thus people's views can, in most cases, be traced back to their class origins, family circumstances, education, occupation and so on. This is why socialists have long believed that an obstacle to democracy exists in the fact that the political elite – ministers, civil servants, judges, police and military chiefs – are drawn disproportionately from the ranks of the privileged and prosperous. Because the working classes, the poor and the disadvantaged are 'under-represented' in the corridors of power, their interests tend to be marginalized or ignored altogether. Feminist theorists (see p. 62) also show sympathy for this notion of representation, suggesting that patriarchy, dominance by the male sex, operates in part through the exclusion of women from the ranks of the powerful and influential in all sectors of life. Groups such as the National Organization of Women (NOW) in the United States have therefore campaigned to increase the number of women in political and professional life. Anti-racist campaigners argue similarly that prejudice and bigotry is maintained by the 'under-representation' of racial minorities in government and elsewhere. Civil rights groups, particularly in the USA, have made an increase in minority representation in public life a major objective.

This theory of representation is based upon the belief that only people who are drawn from a particular group can genuinely articulate its interests. To represent means to speak for, or on behalf of, others, something that is impossible if representatives do not have intimate and personal knowledge of the people they represent. In its crudest form, this argument suggests that people are merely conditioned by their backgrounds and are incapable of or unwilling to understand the views of people different from themselves. In its more sophisticated form, however, it draws a distinction between the capacity to empathize or 'put oneself in the shoes of another' through an act of imagination, and, on the other hand, direct and personal experience of what other people go through, something which engages a deeper level of emotional response. This implies, for example, that although the so-called 'New Man' or

'pro-feminist' male, may sympathize with women's interests and support the principle of sexual equality, he will never be able to take women's problems as seriously as women do themselves. Men will therefore not regard the crime of rape as seriously as do women, since they are far less likely to be a victim of rape. In the same way, white liberals may show a laudable concern for the plight of ethnic minorities but, never having experienced racism, their attitude towards it is unlikely to match the passion and commitment that many members of minority communities feel. Similarly, those who come from affluent and secure backgrounds may never fully appreciate what it means to be poor or disadvantaged.

Nevertheless, the belief that representatives should resemble the represented, and that government should be a microcosm of the people, is by no means universally accepted. Many, in fact, regard it as a positive threat to democracy rather than as a necessary precondition. It could be argued, first, that people simply do not want to be ruled by politicians like themselves. Nowhere in the world can government be described as a representative cross-section of the governed and, ironically, the countries that have come closest to this ideal, orthodox communist regimes, were one-party states. Moreover, if politicians are selected on the basis that they are typical or characteristic of the larger society, government itself may simply reflect the limitations of that society. What is the advantage, for instance, of government resembling society when the majority of the population is apathetic, ill-informed and little educated? Critics of this idea of representation point out, as J.S. Mill emphasized, that good government requires politicians to be drawn from the ranks of the educated, the able and the successful.

A further danger is that this theory sees representation in exclusive or narrow terms. Only a woman can represent women; only a black can represent other blacks; only a member of the working class can represent the working classes, and so forth. If all representatives are concerned to advance the interests of the sectional groups from which they come, who is prepared to defend the common good or advance the national interest? Indeed, this form of representation may simply be a recipe for social division and conflict. In addition to this, characteristic representation must confront the problem of how its objective is to be achieved. If the goal is to make government a microcosm of the governed, the only way of achieving this is to impose powerful constraints upon electoral choice and individual freedom. For instance, political parties may have to be forced to select a quota of female and minority candidates; or certain constituencies may be set aside for candidates from particular backgrounds; or, more dramatically, the electorate may have to be divided on the basis of class, gender, race and so on, and only allowed to vote for candidates from their own group.

The public interest

When the opportunity for direct popular participation is limited, as it is in any representative system, the claim to rule democratically is based upon the idea that, in some way, government serves the people or acts in their interests. Politicians in almost every political system are eager to claim that they work for the 'common good', or in the 'public interest'. Indeed, the constant repetition of such phrases has devalued them, rendering them almost meaningless. Too often the notion of the public interest serves merely to give a politician's views or actions a cloak of moral respectability. Yet the notion of a collective or public interest has played a vital role in political theory, and constitutes a major plank of the democratic ideal, in the form of 'government *for* the people'. The idea of a public interest has, however, been subjected to stern and often hostile scrutiny, especially in the late twentieth century. It has been pointed out, for example, that it is difficult, and perhaps impossible, to distinguish between the private interests of each citizen and what can be thought of as their collective or public interests. In the view of some commentators, the concept itself is misleading or simply incoherent. Moreover, attention has been given to how the public interest can in practice be defined. This has precipitated debate about what has been called the 'dilemma of democracy', and led to the suggestion that, though democratic rule may be desirable, no constitutional and electoral mechanism may exist through which it can be brought about.

Private and public interests

Political argument often turns on whether a particular action or policy is thought to be in somebody's interest, with little or no attention being paid to what that interest might be, or why it should be regarded as important. In its broadest sense, an 'interest' denotes some kind of benefit or advantage; the public interest is, then, what is 'good' for the people. However, what does this 'good' consist of, and who can define it? Interests may be nothing more than wishes or desires, defined subjectively by each individual for himself or herself. If so, interests have to be consciously acknowledged or manifest in some form of behaviour. Sociologists, for example, identify interests as the '*revealed* preferences' of individuals. On the other hand, an interest can be thought of as a need, requirement or even necessity, of which the individual may personally be entirely unconscious. This suggests the distinction, discussed in Chapter 5, between 'felt' or subjective interests and genuine or 'real' interests which have some objective basis.

The problem of defining interests runs through any discussion of the public interest, shrouding the issue in ideological debate and disagreement. Those who insist that all interests are 'felt' interests, or revealed preferences, hold that individuals are the only, or best, judges of what is good for them. By contrast, theorists who employ the notion of 'real' interests may argue that the public is incapable of identifying its own best interests because it is ignorant, deluded or has in some way been manipulated. In *Political Argument* (1990), however, Brian Barry attempted to bridge the gap between these two concepts by defining a person's interests as 'that which increases his or her opportunities to get what he or she wants'. This accepts that interests are 'wants' that can only be defined subjectively by the individual, but suggests that those individuals who fail to select rational or appropriate means of achieving their ends cannot be said to recognize their own best interests.

What are called 'private' interests are normally thought to be the selfish, and usually materialistic, interests of particular individuals or groups. This idea is based upon long-established liberal beliefs about human nature: individuals are separate and independent agents, each bent upon advancing his or her perceived interests. In short, individuals are egoistical and self-interested. Such a notion of private interests is inevitably linked to conflict, or at least competition. If private individuals act rationally, they can be assumed to prefer their own interests to those of others, to strive above all for their own 'good'. Socialists, however, have tended to reject such a notion. Rather than being narrowly self-interested, socialists believe human beings to be sociable and gregarious, bound to one another by the existence of a common humanity. The belief that human nature is essentially social has profound implications for any notion of private interests. To the extent that individuals are concerned about the 'good' of their fellow human beings, their private interests become indistinguishable from the collective interests of all. In other words, socialists challenge the very distinction between private and public interests, a position that inclines them towards a belief in natural social harmony, rather than conflict and competition.

Most political theorists, however, have accepted that a distinction can be drawn between private interests and the public interest. Any concept of the public interest must, in the first place, be based upon a clear understanding of what 'public' means. 'The public' stands for *all* members of a community, not merely the largest number or even overall majority. Whereas private interests are multiple and competing, the public interest is indivisible; it is that which benefits each and every member of the public. However, there are two, rather different, conceptions of what might constitute the public interest, the first of which is based upon the idea of shared or common interests. From this viewpoint, individuals can be said

Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712–78)

Geneva-born French moral and political philosopher, perhaps the principal intellectual influence upon the French Revolution. Rousseau was entirely self-taught. He moved to Paris in 1742, and became an intimate of leading members of the French Enlightenment, especially Diderot. His autobiography, *Confessions* (1770), examines his life with remarkable candour and demonstrates a willingness to expose his faults and weaknesses.

Rousseau's writings, ranging over education, the arts, science, literature and philosophy, reflect a deep belief in the goodness of 'natural man' and corruption of 'social man'. His political teaching, summarised in *Émile* ([1762] 1978) and developed in *Social Contract* ([1762] 1969), advocates a radical form of democracy which has influenced liberal, socialist, anarchist and, some would argue, fascist thought. Rousseau departed from earlier social contract theories in being unwilling to separate free individuals from the process of government. He aimed to devise a form of authority to which the people can be subject without losing their freedom. He proposed that government be based upon the 'general will', reflecting the collective good of the community as opposed to the 'particular', and selfish, will of each citizen. Rousseau believed that freedom consists in political participation, obedience to the general will, meaning that he was prepared to argue that individuals can be 'forced to be free'. Rousseau envisaged such a political system operating in small, relatively egalitarian communities united by a shared civil religion.

to share an interest if they perceive that the same action or policy will benefit each of them, in the sense that their interests overlap. The public interest therefore constitutes those private interests which all members of the community hold in common. An obvious example of this would be defence against external aggression, a goal which all citizens could reasonably be expected to recognize as being of benefit to them.

The alternative and more radical notion of the public interest is based not so much upon shared private interests as upon the interests of the public as a collective body. Instead of seeing the public as a collection of individuals, whose interests may or may not overlap, this view portrays the public as a collective entity possessed of distinct common interests. The classical proponent of this idea was Rousseau, who advanced it in the form of the 'general will'. In *The Social Contract* ([1762] 1969), Rousseau defined the general will as that 'which tends always to the preservation and welfare of the whole'. The general will therefore represents the collective interests of society; it will benefit all citizens, rather than merely

private individuals. Rousseau thus drew a clear distinction between the general will and the selfish, private will of each citizen. The general will is, in effect, what the people would wish if they were to act selflessly. The problem with such a notion of the public interest is that, so long as they persist in being selfish, it cannot be constructed on the basis of the revealed preferences of individual citizens. It is possible, in other words, that citizens may not recognize the general will as their own, even though Rousseau clearly believed that it reflected the 'higher' interests of each and every member of society.

Is there a public interest?

Despite the continued popularity of terms such as the 'common good' and the 'national interest', the idea of a public interest has been subject to growing criticism. Critics have suggested not only that politicians are prone to using such terms cynically but also that the concept itself may simply not stand up: the public may not have a collective interest. The principal advocates of such a view have subscribed to individualist or classical liberal creeds. Jeremy Bentham (see p. 359), for example, developed a moral and political philosophy on the basis that individuals sought to maximize what he called 'utility', calculated in terms of the quantity of pleasure over pain experienced by each individual. In other words, only individuals have interests, and each individual alone is able to define what that interest is. From this perspective, any notion of a public interest is bogus; the interests of the community are at best what Bentham called 'the sum of the interests of the several members who compose it'. The notion of a public interest as shared private interests therefore makes little sense simply because each member of the community will strive for something different: a collection of private interests does not add up to a coherent 'public interest'.

Individualists suggest that the issues over which all, or even most, citizens would agree, such as the need for public order or for defence against external aggression, are few and far between. Even when there is general agreement about a broad goal, such as maintaining domestic order, there will be profound differences about how that goal can best be achieved. For instance, is order more likely to be promoted by social equality and respect for civil liberty, or by stiff penalties and strict policing? Bentham's views contrast even more starkly with Rousseau's alternative notion of the public interest as the collective interests of the community. The idea of the general will is meaningless quite simply because collective entities like 'society', the 'community' and the 'public'

do not exist. The nearest Bentham came to acknowledging the public interest was in his notion of general utility, defined as 'the greatest happiness for the greatest number'. However, this formula merely accepts that public policy should be designed to satisfy the 'greatest number' of private interests, not that it can ever serve the interests of all members of the public.

Similar ideas have been developed by modern pluralist theorists, who view politics in terms of competition between various groups and interests. The emergence of organized groups is explained by 'rational choice' (see p. 246) or 'public choice' theorists in terms of rational, self-interested behaviour. Individuals who may be powerless when they act separately can nevertheless exert influence by acting collectively with others who share a similar interest. Such an analysis, for example, can explain the emergence of trade unionism: the threat of strike action by a single worker can be disregarded by an employer, but an all-out strike by the entire workforce cannot be. This interpretation acknowledges the existence of shared interests and the importance of collective action. However, it challenges the conventional idea of a public interest. Interest groups are 'sectional' pressure groups, representing a section or part of society, ethnic or religious groups, trade unions, professional associations, employer's groups and so on. Each sectional group has a distinctive interest, which it seeks to advance through a process of campaigning and lobbying. This leaves no room, however, for a public interest: each group places its interest before those of the whole society. Indeed, the pluralist view of society as a collection of competing interests does not allow for society itself to have any collective interests.

Despite growing criticism, the concept of a public interest has not been abandoned by all theorists. Its defence takes one of two forms. The first rejects the philosophical assumptions upon which the individualist attack is based. In particular, this questions the image of human beings as being resolutely self-interested. It is clear, for example, that Rousseau regarded selfishness not as a natural impulse but as evidence of social corruption; human beings are, in Rousseau's view, essentially moral, even noble, creatures, whose genuine character is revealed only when they act as members of the community. Socialists uphold the idea of the public interest on the same grounds. The concept of the public interest, from a socialist perspective, gives expression to the fact that individuals are not separate and isolated creatures vying against one another, but social animals who share a genuine concern about fellow human beings and are bound together by common human needs. Nevertheless, it is also possible to defend the concept of the public interest from the perspective of rational choice theory, without relying upon socialist assumptions about human nature.

The notion of a public interest can only be dispensed with altogether if there is reason to believe that the pursuit of self-interest genuinely works to the benefit of at least the 'greatest number' in society. In reality, there are persuasive reasons for believing that the unrestrained pursuit of self-interest tends ultimately to be self-defeating and that a society guided by private interests alone is doomed to frustration and unhappiness. This can be explained through reference to what economists call 'public goods', goods or services from which all individuals derive benefit but which none has an incentive to produce. Environmental concerns such as energy conservation and pollution demonstrate very clearly the existence of a public interest. The avoidance of pollution and the conservation of finite energy resources are undoubtedly public goods in that they are vital for both human health and, possibly, the long-term survival of the human species. Nevertheless, self-interested human beings may rationally choose to despoil the environment or waste vital resources. Private firms, for example, may pump poisonous waste into rivers and the sea on the grounds that it would clearly be more expensive to dispose of it in an environmentally friendly way, and also because each firm calculates that its waste alone is unlikely to cause serious damage. Obviously, if all firms act in the same way and for the same reasons, the result will be environmental devastation: the seas and rivers will die, disease will spread and everyone will suffer.

The idea of public goods thus highlights the existence of public or collective interests that are distinct from the private interests of either individuals or groups. It could be argued that these constitute the 'real' interest of the individuals concerned rather than their 'felt' interests. However, following Barry, this can perhaps be seen as a case of individuals and groups demonstrating that they do not recognise their own best interests. All people acknowledge the need for a clean and healthy environment, but, left to their own devices, they do not act to secure one. In such circumstances, the public interest can only be safeguarded by government intervention, designed to curb the pursuit of private interests for the collective benefit of the whole society.

Dilemmas of democracy

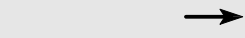
The drawback of any concept of the public interest derived from an abstract notion like the general will is that by distancing government from the revealed preferences of its citizens it allows politicians to define the public interest in almost whatever way they please. This danger was most grotesquely illustrated by the 'totalitarian democracies' which developed under fascist dictators such as Mussolini and Hitler, in which the

Rational choice theory

Rational choice theory, with its various subdivisions including public choice theory, social choice theory and game theory, emerged as a tool of political analysis in the 1950s and gained greater prominence from the 1970s onwards. Sometimes called formal political theory, it draws heavily upon the example of economic theory in building up models based upon procedural rules, usually about the rationally self-interested behaviour of individuals. Most firmly established in the United States, and associated in particular with the so-called Virginia School, rational choice theory has been used to provide insights into the actions of voters, lobbyists, bureaucrats and politicians. It has had its broadest impact upon political analysis in the form of what is called institutional public choice theory.

Using a method that dates back to Hobbes (see p. 123) and is employed in utilitarian theorising (see p. 358), rational choice theorists assume that political actors consistently choose the most efficient means to achieve their various ends. In the form of public choice theory, it is concerned with the provision of so-called public goods, goods that are delivered by government rather than the market, because, as with clean air, their benefit cannot be withheld from individuals who choose not to contribute to their provision. In the form of game theory, it has developed more from the field of mathematics than from the assumptions of neo-classical economics, and entails the use of first principles to analyse puzzles about individual behaviour. The best-known example of game theory is the 'prisoner's dilemma', which demonstrates that rationally self-interested behaviour can be generally less beneficial than cooperation.

Supporters of rational choice theory argue that it has introduced greater rigour into the discussion of political phenomena, by allowing political analysts to develop explanatory models in the manner of economic theory. By no means, however, has the rational choice approach to political analysis been universally accepted. It has been criticized for overestimating human rationality in that it ignores the fact that people seldom possess clear sets of preferred goals and rarely make decisions in the light of full and accurate knowledge. Furthermore, in proceeding from an abstract model of the individual, rational choice theory pays insufficient attention to social and historical factors, failing to recognize, among other things, that human self-interestedness may be socially conditioned, and not innate. Finally, rational choice theory is sometimes seen to have a conservative value bias, stemming from its initial assumptions about human behaviour.



→ Key figures

James Buchanan (1919–) A US economist, Buchanan used public choice theory to defend the free market and argue in favour of a minimal state. He developed the idea of constitutional economics to explain how different constitutional arrangements can affect a nation's social and economic development. This led to an analysis of the defects and economic distortions of democracy which emphasizes, for instance, the ability of interest groups to make gains at the expense of the larger community. He supports tough constitutional limitations to keep the political market under control and prevent the expansion of state powers. Buchanan's main works include *Fiscal Theory and Political Economy* (1960), *The Calculus of Consent* (with Tulloch, G) (1962) and *Liberty, Market and the State* (1985).

Anthony Downs (1930–) A US economist and political analyst, Downs developed a theory of democracy based upon the assumptions of economic theory. His 'spatial model' of political behaviour, a sub-set of rational choice theory, presupposes a 'policy space' in which political actors, candidates and voters can measure where they stand in relation to other political actors. Influenced by Schumpeter (see p. 223), Downs portrayed parties as vote-maximizing machines, anxious to develop whatever policies offer the best prospect of winning power. On this basis, he explained both the behaviour of political parties and the features of particular party systems. Downs's key political work is *An Economic Theory of Democracy* (1957).

Mancur Olson (1932–98) A US political scientist, Olson used public choice theory to analyse groups' behaviour. He argued that people join interest groups only to secure 'public goods'. As individuals can become 'free riders' by reaping the benefits of group action without incurring the cost of membership, there is no guarantee that the existence of a common interest will lead to the formation of an organisation to advance or defend that interest. Olson questioned pluralist assumptions about the distribution of group power, and suggested that strong networks of interest groups can threaten a nation's economic performance. His best-known works include *The Logic of Collective Action* (1968) and *The Rise and Decline of Nations* (1982).

Further reading

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democratic credentials of the regime were based upon the claim that 'the Leader', and the leader alone, articulated the genuine interests of the people. In this way, fascist leaders identified a 'true' democracy as an absolute dictatorship. In reality, however, no viable form of democratic rule can be based exclusively upon a claim to articulate the public interest – that claim must be subject to some form of public accountability. In short, no definition of the public interest is meaningful unless it corresponds at some point and in some way to the revealed preferences of the general public. This correspondence can only be ensured through the mechanism of popular elections.

One of the most influential attempts to explain how the electoral process ensures government in the public interest was undertaken by Anthony Downs in *An Economic Theory of Democracy* (1957). Downs explained the democratic process by drawing upon ideas from economic theory. He believed that electoral competition creates, in effect, a political market, in which politicians act as entrepreneurs bent upon achieving government power, and individual voters behave rather like consumers, voting for the party whose policies most closely reflect their preferences. Downs believed that a system of open and competitive elections serves to guarantee democratic rule because it places government in the hands of the party whose philosophy, values and policies most closely correspond to the preferences of the largest group of voters. Moreover, democratic competition creates a powerful incentive for the emergence of a policy consensus, in that parties will be encouraged to shift their policies towards the 'centre ground', in the hope of appealing to the largest possible number of electors. Although the 'economic theory of democracy' does not contain an explicit concept of the public interest, it is, nevertheless, an attempt to explain how electoral competition ensures that government pays regular attention to the preferences of at least a majority of the enfranchised population. This, indeed, may serve as at least a rough approximation of the public interest.

Downs's model of democratic politics was not meant to be an exact description of the real world, but rather, like economic theories, a sufficiently close approximation to help us understand how such a system works. Nevertheless, it has its limits. In the first place, it assumes a relatively homogeneous society, forcing parties to develop moderate or centrist policies that will have broad electoral appeal. Clearly, in societies deeply divided on racial or religious lines, or by social inequality, party competition may simply ensure government in the interests of the largest sectional group. Furthermore, as a general tendency, it could be argued that party competition shifts politics away from any notion of the public interest since it encourages parties to frame policies which appeal to the immediate private and sectional interests of voters rather than to their

more abstract, shared interests. For example, parties are noticeably reluctant to propose tax increases that will discourage the use of finite fossil fuels, or to tackle problems like global warming and ozone depletion, because such policies, though in the long-term public interest, will not win votes at the next election.

Downs's model may also be based upon questionable assumptions about the rationality of the electorate and the pragmatic nature of electoral politics. As discussed in the previous section, voters may be poorly informed about political issues and their electoral preferences may be shaped by a range of 'irrational' factors like habit, social conditioning, the image of the party and the personality of its leader. Similarly, parties are not always prepared to construct policies simply on the basis of their electoral appeal; to some extent, they attempt to shape the political agenda and influence the values and preferences of ordinary voters. The workings of the political market can, for instance, be distorted as effectively by party propaganda as the economic market is by the use of advertising. Finally, the responsiveness of the political market to voters' preferences may also be affected by the level of party competition, or lack of it. In countries such as Japan and Britain where single parties have enjoyed long periods of uninterrupted power, the political market is distorted by strong monopolistic tendencies. Two-party systems, as exist in the USA, Canada, New Zealand and Australia, can be described as duopolistic. Even the multi-party systems of continental Europe can be seen, at best, as oligopolistic, since coalition partners operate rather like cartels in that they try to restrict competition and block entry into the market.

A further, and some would argue more intractable, problem is that no constitutional or elective mechanism may be able reliably to give expression to the collective or public interest. Downs's 'economic' version of democratic politics operates on the assumption that voters only have a single preference because traditional electoral systems offer them a single vote. However, in the complex area of government policy, where a wide range of policy options are usually available, it is reasonable to assume that voters will have a scale of favoured options which could be indicated through a preferential voting system. The significance of such preferences was first highlighted in the field of welfare economics by Kenneth Arrow, whose *Social Choice and Individual Values* (1963) discussed the problem of 'transitivity'. This suggests that when voters are able to express a number of preferences it may be impossible to establish which option genuinely enjoys public support. Take, for instance, the example of an election in which candidate A gains 40 per cent of the vote, candidate B receives 34 per cent, and candidate C gets 26 per cent. In such a situation it is clearly possible to argue that no party represents the public interest because none receives an overall majority of votes – though candidate A could obviously

make the strongest claim to do so on the grounds of achieving a plurality, more votes than any other single candidate. Nevertheless, the situation may become still more confused when second preferences are taken into account.

Let us assume that the second preferences of all candidate A supporters go to candidate C, the second preferences of candidate B favour candidate A, and the second preferences of candidate C go to candidate B. This creates a situation in which each candidate could claim to be preferred by a majority of voters. The combined first and second preferences for candidate A add up to 74 per cent (40 per cent plus B's 34 per cent); candidate B could claim 60 per cent support from the electorate (34 per cent plus C's 26 per cent); and candidate C could claim 66 per cent support (26 per cent plus A's 40 per cent). In other words, an examination of the second or subsequent preferences of individual voters can lead to the problem of 'cyclical majorities' in which it is difficult, and perhaps impossible, to arrive at a collective choice which could reasonably be described as being in the public interest. Although A's claim to office may still be the strongest, it is severely compromised by the majorities that B and C also enjoy. Arrow described this as the 'impossibility theorem'. It suggests that even if the concept of a public interest is meaningful and coherent, it may be impossible to define that interest in practice through any existing constitutional or electoral arrangements.

The implications of Arrow's work for democratic theory are profound and depressing. If no reliable link can be made between individual preferences and collective choices, two possibilities are available. The first option, proposed by James Buchanan and Gordon Tulloch in *The Calculus of Consent* (1962), is that the range of issues decided by collective choice should be extremely limited, leaving as many as possible in the hands of free individuals. Buchanan and Tulloch propose that collective decisions are appropriate only where policies elicit unanimous agreement, at least among elected representatives, a position which would be consistent with only the most minimal state. The alternative is to accept that, since election results cannot speak for themselves, politicians who use the term 'public interest' always impose their own meaning upon it. All references to the public interest are therefore, to some extent, arbitrary. Nevertheless, this latitude is not unlimited because there is the possibility of calling politicians to account at the next election. For this point of view, the democratic process may simply be a means of reducing this arbitrary element by ensuring that politicians who claim to speak *for* the public must ultimately be judged *by* the public.

Summary

1. A number of models of democracy can be identified. The principal distinction is between the classical ideal of direct democracy, in which people literally govern themselves – government *by* the people – and more modern forms of representative democracy, in which professional politicians govern on behalf of the people – government *for* the people.
2. The most successful form of democracy has been liberal democracy, founded upon the twin principles of limited government and popular consent expressed at election time. The strength of liberal democracy is that by upholding individual liberty and making possible a high degree of popular responsiveness it is able to maintain political stability.
3. Representation means, broadly, acting on behalf of others, but opinions differ about how this is best achieved. Some argue that representatives should think for themselves, exercising their own wisdom or judgement; others believe that representatives have a mandate from the voters to fulfil their election pledges; still others think that representatives must resemble or be drawn from the group they aim to represent.
4. All notions of democracy are based, to some degree, upon the idea that government can and does act in the public interest, the common or collective interests of society. But individualists and pluralists have questioned whether there is any such thing as public interest separate from the private interests of citizens. Others have doubted if there exists an electoral or constitutional mechanism through which the public interest can in practice be defined.

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