

What's the Best Form of Government? Part I: For and Against Democracy

This week: Some of the most famous arguments for and against democracy
Next week: What are the serious alternatives today? Are there any?

Democracy ≈ a form of government in which decisions are made “by the people”, either through the direct participation of all eligible citizens in decision-making (as in a referendum) or through the election of representatives in free and fair elections in which the votes of all eligible citizens carry equal weight.

I. Against Democracy: Plato's *Republic* (c. 370 BC)

A persistent criticism of democracy is that it systematically leads to *bad decisions* and lets the *wrong people* into power—people who lack the skill to govern well and don't have the public interest at heart. In Plato's *Republic*, Socrates tells Adeimantus:

“[...] We said that no one could be good (short of having been born with really exceptional talents), unless even his childhood games had taken place within a good environment and his way of life had been the same. This political system, however, arrogantly spurns all of that, and doesn't care what kinds of provenance people had before coming to government; as long as someone claims to be sympathetic to the general populace, he is honoured within this political system.”

“A very vulgar way of going about things,” he commented.

“So these are democracy's features—these and others like them”, I said. “It looks as though it's an enjoyable, lax, and variegated kind of political system, which treats everyone as equal, whether or not they are.”

(*Republic*, 555b-c, trans. Robin Waterfield)

2. Against Democracy: Hobbes' *Leviathan* (1651)

Hobbes offers six main reasons to prefer monarchy to rule by ‘sovereign assemblies’:

- i. **Alignment of interests:** only monarchy unites the public interest with the private interest of the ruler.
- ii. **Informed decisions:** a monarch is able to receive higher quality advice, in secret if necessary.
- iii. **Consistency:** assemblies tend to be inconsistent over time, whereas a monarch can maintain greater consistency.
- iv. **Stability:** assemblies can be internally unstable, leading to civil war—this is less likely in monarchies.
- v. **Benevolent favouritism:** Although monarchies are prone to favouritism (this is admitted to be a serious ‘inconvenience’ of monarchy), assemblies are no better in this respect. Moreover, whereas monarchs tend to confer undeserved benefits on their favourites, democracies tend to confer undeserved harms on vilified minorities or individuals.
- vi. **The childlike nature of assemblies:** although it's another ‘inconvenience’ of monarchy that the monarch may sometimes be a child, the problems are due not to monarchy itself, but to a child's vulnerability to manipulation by ambitious, self-interested individuals. Assemblies have no advantage in this respect, because they too are vulnerable to manipulation by ambitious, self-interested individuals. Moreover, an assembly, like a child, has to hand over to a temporary dictator in emergencies.

3. For Democracy: De Tocqueville's *Democracy in America* (1831)

De Tocqueville highlights four key advantages of democracy:

- i. **Alignment of interests (cf. Hobbes):** “In the American democracy public officers have no permanent interests distinct from those of the majority.”
- ii. **Reflective patriotism:** “I maintain that the most powerful, and perhaps the only, means of interesting men in the welfare of their country which we still possess is to make them partakers in the

Government.”

- iii. **Respect for rights and the law:** “However irksome an enactment may be, the citizen of the United States complies with it, not only because it is the work of the majority, but because it originates in his own authority, and he regards it as a contract to which he is himself a party.”
- iv. **Indirect benefits:** “Democracy does not confer the most skilful kind of government upon the people, but it produces that which the most skilful governments are frequently unable to awaken, namely, an all-pervading and restless activity, a superabundant force, and an energy which is inseparable from it, and which may, under favorable circumstances, beget the most amazing benefits.”

4. For Democracy: Mill's *Considerations on Representative Government* (1861)

Mill's critical target: Enlightened dictatorship.

In the background: Mill's *utilitarianism* about questions of value (see Week 15).

Q: If you're a utilitarian, how could you possibly object to government by a perfectly rational, fully informed, happiness-maximizing dictator?

Problems of enlightened dictatorship:

- Because they have no way of influencing important decisions (and know it), the intellectual and moral capacities of the people are “stunted”. (p. 34)
- Moreover, subjection leads to a loss of patriotism: “Let a person have nothing to do for his country, and he will not care for it” (p. 34).
- And the likely results are bad for the general happiness: “And that state [...] often means being overrun, conquered, and reduced to domestic slavery, either by a stronger despot, or by the nearest barbarous people who retain along with their savage rudeness the energies of freedom” (p. 35).

Main considerations in favour of democracy:

- **Robust protection of rights and interests:** “The first is, that the rights and interests of every or any person are only secure from being disregarded when the person interested is himself able, and habitually disposed, to stand up for them” (p. 38). Only democracy, Mill argues, leaves all citizens “able and habitually disposed” to demand appropriate consideration of their rights and interests.
- **Effects on the general prosperity:** “The second is, that the general prosperity attains a greater height, and is more widely diffused, in proportion to the amount and variety of the personal energies enlisted in promoting it” (p. 38). Only democracy, Mill argues, promotes active engagement in the general prosperity.
- **Effects on character:** Mill argues that democracy promotes the cultivation of “mental excellence, intellectual, practical and moral” (p. 41) and a “striving, go-ahead character” (p. 44).

However, Mill doesn't think the best form of representative government is one in which all votes have *equal weight*...

Primary reading:

Mill, John Stuart (1861). *Considerations on Representative Government*, Chapter 3 (Further reading: Chapter 8).

Further reading:

De Tocqueville, Alexis (1831). *Democracy in America*, Chapter 14.

Hobbes, Thomas (1651). *Leviathan*. Chapter 19, Section on “Comparison of Monarchy, with Sovereign Assemblies”.

Plato (c. 370BC). *Republic*, 555b-562b [see the page margins of any edition for these reference numbers]

For more on political philosophy, take **PH214: Philosophy, Morals and Politics**.