

# **What's the Best Form of Government?**

## **Part I: For and Against Democracy**

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# 0 What Is Democracy?

**Democracy**  $\approx$  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**.

**Some notable alternatives:** Dictatorship (autocracy, absolute monarchy), aristocracy, timocracy, oligarchy, anarchy.

# I Against Democracy: Plato

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.

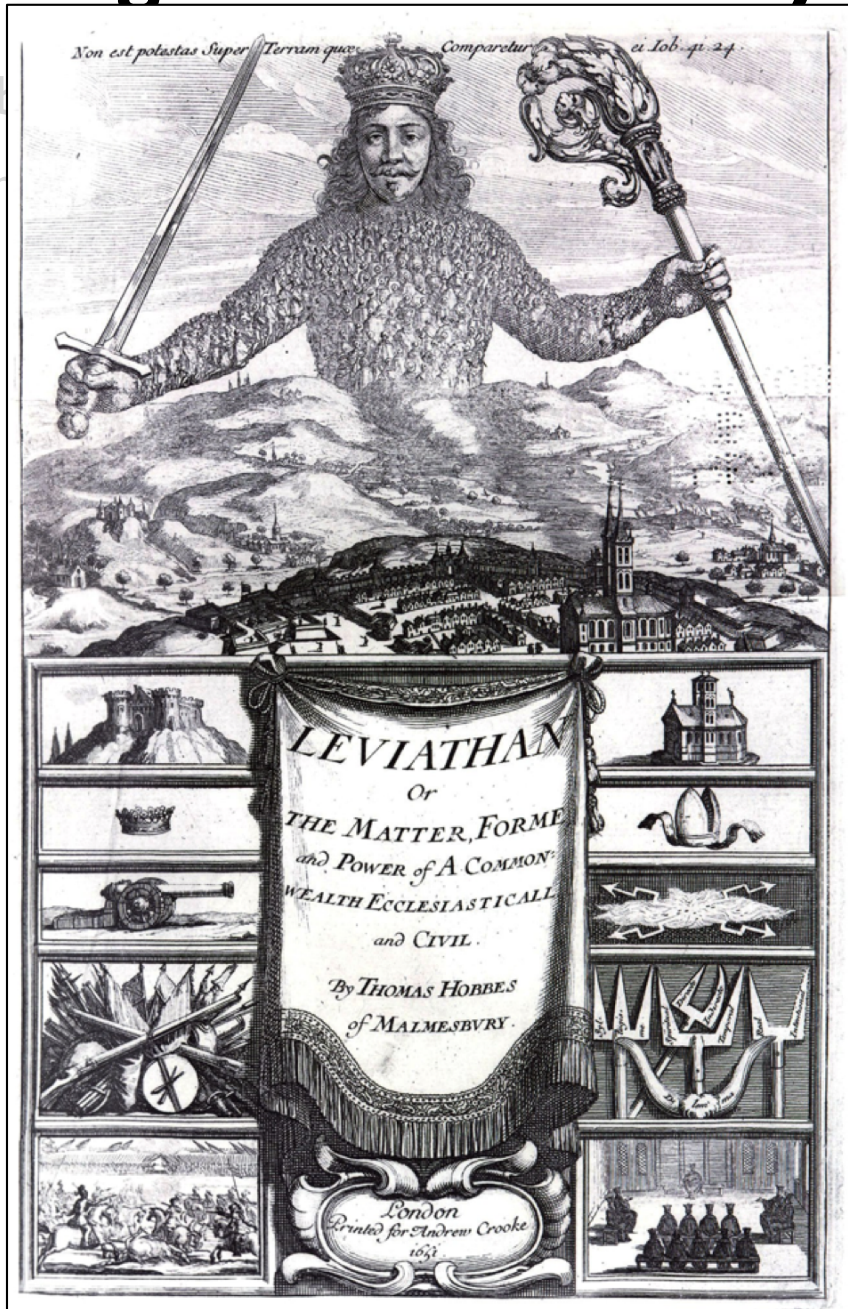
“So these are democracy's features—these and others like them”, I said. “It looks as though it's an enjoyable, lax, and variegated kind of political system, which treats everyone as equal, whether or not they are.”

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

## 2 Against Democracy: Hobbes

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monarchy to rule by 'sovereign



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## 2 Against Democracy: Hobbes

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

- Alignment of interests
- Informed decisions
- Consistency
- Stability
- Benevolent favouritism
- The childlike nature of assemblies

### 3 For Democracy: De Tocqueville

De Tocqueville highlights four key advantages of democracy:

- Alignment of interests (cf. Hobbes)
- Reflective patriotism
- Respect for rights and the law
- **Indirect benefits**

## 4 For Democracy: Mill

**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”.
- 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..”
- 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.”

## 4 For Democracy: Mill

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

### **Main considerations in favour of democracy:**

- **Robust protection of rights and interests**  
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**  
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).



## 4 For Democracy: Mill

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

Two main considerations in favour of democracy:

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

- **Indirect benefits (again)**

Only democracy, Mill argues, promotes active engagement in the general prosperity.