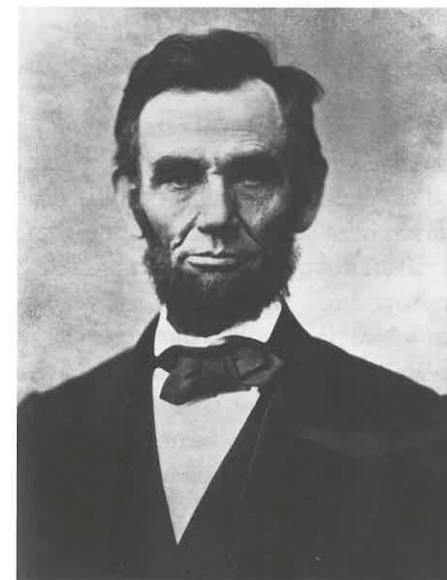




Democracy and political participation

A definition of democracy

We could spend a great deal of time attempting to develop a watertight definition of **democracy**, but this would not be of great use for a study of this kind. Instead, it is better to define the term in a more straightforward manner. The best approach is to adapt the description of democracy given by nineteenth-century American president Abraham Lincoln and to examine its meaning. This has three parts.



► Figure 1.1.1 Abraham Lincoln gave us the best-known description of modern democracy

1. Government of the people. Here we are straying furthest from Lincoln's definition. We now expect that most of the citizens are able to participate in political activity. This does not merely include standing for elected office or voting in elections, it also means being active in parties or pressure groups, being aware and letting our political views be known. Many people in modern democracies remain politically inactive, but the majority are active, and everyone certainly has the *opportunity* to participate, even if they do not take up that opportunity. We can describe this aspect as *participatory democracy*. It is often claimed that if citizens cease to be active in politics, democracy will wither and die.

2. Government by the people. This is a state of affairs where the people themselves make the important decisions that affect them. In effect we could describe this as *direct democracy*, an arrangement that would entail constant use of referendums or direct consultation processes. Government by the people could also describe a circumstance where the government is intensely sensitive to public opinion. In practice this would be virtually direct democracy. All democratic governments consult the people, so this is a useful part of our definition.

3. Government for the people. This phrase suggests that whoever governs us does so

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in the broad interests of the people. In other words, they are not governing in their *own* interests, nor do they concern themselves only with *one section* of the community. They should take into account, therefore, the interests and needs of *all* sections of society as far as is possible. Since pure direct democracy all the time is not feasible, it is inevitable that government for the people will be carried out by representatives. Thus we speak of *representative democracy* as the most common form. As long as our representatives – MPs, ministers and so on – are accountable to the people, we usually entrust government to them.

Democracy

A very general description of various political systems that are organised on the basis that government should serve the interests of the people. In liberal democracies it is also expected that citizens should influence decisions or make decisions themselves. It is also expected that government should be accountable, in various ways, to the people.

Key Word

Two and a half thousand years later, democracy has established itself as the political system preferred by all economically advanced nations. In the meantime, most peoples had been governed by hereditary monarchs, autocratic rulers, or had effectively not been properly governed at all. It is worth examining why democracy was resurrected after so many centuries in the wilderness. What is it about modern society that seems to make democracy so important? We can identify a number of theories to try to answer this question.

Democracy establishes and protects freedom.

Towards the end of the eighteenth century a number of new philosophical and political movements developed. They were largely based on the principle that mankind should be free, both as individuals and collectively as nations. The new democratic spirit was carried forward in particular by the French and the Americans. The French Revolution of 1789 was a bold attempt to free the people from the autocratic rule of the monarchy. For the revolutionaries, the monarchy ruled in the interests only of itself and the aristocracy; it was time the political system took into account the demands of the middle and working classes. If such people were to be truly free, they should also have a place in the new political system.

Similarly, the Americans, during their revolution against British rule, fought to establish freedom for all individuals from the oppressive rule of George III. The constitution that they wrote and approved in 1787 enshrined freedom of the individual in a form of government that could certainly be described as a representative democracy. By ensuring that all citizens could participate and be represented, they believed their newly found freedom would be safe.

Today, democracy continues to ensure that no government can threaten freedom unless it is with the expressed consent of the people. To illustrate this, when the Soviet Union collapsed in 1990 and its satellite states declared their

freedom, most of the new governments adopted democratic systems. This process guaranteed that the kind of domination that had occurred during the Cold War could never re-assert itself. Similarly, the so-called 'Arab Spring' of 2011 and stretching into 2012 saw the people of a number of Arab states including Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Yemen, Bahrain and Syria, rising up to try to overthrow authoritarian regimes and replace them by some form of popular democracy. All these peoples saw democracy as the way to establish their freedom from oppression.

Democracy protects minorities. If a democracy is to be effective and enduring, the system must take into account the interests and demands of minority groups. Democracy ensures that all groups have access to the political process, in which case it is often known as *pluralist democracy*. It also guarantees that minorities have a free voice and are free from discrimination. Indeed, democracy is sometimes described as a political system where minorities rule. Where democracy is, however, reduced to 'rule by the majority', minorities are not protected. The nineteenth-century English philosopher, John Stuart Mill (1806–73) called this the *tyranny of the majority*. As we shall see below, it is *pluralist* democracy that protects minorities, not just *popular* democracy

Democracy controls government power. It is a well-established belief that power tends to corrupt those who wield it. If those who govern us are left to their own devices, there is a danger that they will simply claim increasing amounts of power and begin to abuse their position. Therefore, democracy is vital in preventing this. By making governments accountable to the people, by ensuring that they must submit themselves regularly to re-election, and by guaranteeing that they are controlled by elected representatives, the people can feel safe from the corruption of power.

The alternative to democracy is a form of politics where decisions are made without reference to the people, where governments are not accountable to the people and where there are

no guarantees that individuals and minorities will be protected.

Democracy encourages popular participation.

As it is commonly believed that tyranny can be prevented by ensuring that the people are able freely to participate in politics, democracy is critical in ensuring the prevention of tyranny.

In a free democracy the people have the opportunity to become informed and be directly involved in influencing decision making. A docile and uninformed population is vulnerable to autocratic government. Democracy can prevent such a situation arising, helping to ensure that citizens remain fully involved.

Democracy disperses power more widely.

When power becomes excessively concentrated in the hands of a small number of people or organisations, it is almost inevitable that power is denied to a wider range of the population. This is a severe danger to democratic principles. For example, in many regimes power lies in the hands of a small elite – Burma, Syria or China might be appropriate examples of this – or in the hands of those who are economically powerful, such as some small Middle Eastern states or the Sultanate of Brunei. However well-meaning such governments may be, it cannot be denied that power has been removed from the vast majority of the population and so democracy will fail to flourish. It should be noted here that some of these small ruling groups do *claim* to be democratic on the grounds that they are ruling *on behalf* of the people. For the purposes of this study, however, we can treat this claim as dubious. We should say instead that when power is dispersed widely among people and non-governmental associations in what is called **civil society**, democracy is well served.

We can now summarise the benefits of democracy:

- It establishes and protects freedom.
- It can protect minorities if it is in a *pluralist* form.