

# Democracy

Concept: Democracy

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Description The term "democracy," meaning the power (kratos) of the people (demos), can be traced back to ancient Greece with its small city-states. Democracy shifts the rule over the people from the king, tyrant, and the aristocracy to the people (demos) as a collective or social body. It thus opposes autocracy (the rule by one), oligarchy (the rule of the powerful), and plutocracy (the rule of the rich). Stipulating the merits of different types of government in order to determine the best government for the Greek polis (state), Aristotle advocated a form of mixed government that blended the aristocratic virtue of knowledge and experience with the democratic virtue of direct citizen involvement in the political rule of small city-states where people were intimately connected with one another. As Aristotle's *Politics* shows, ancient Greek democracy with its face-to-face interaction in the agora (an open square that was the marketplace and religious and civic center of a city-state) was limited to a small political elite of free and property-owning adult male citizens. Women, slaves, and the propertyless, which means a large part of the population in Greek city-states, were excluded from political decision-making. Hence, direct democracy was a form of rule in relatively small cities, where a small number of the population had the right to participate in political meetings, hold office, and make decisions.



(Photo: R. Vera, IDRC-CRDI)

Even though instances of direct democracy have been realized in the French and American Revolutions (for example, the movement of the Sans culottes in Paris and the town meetings in New England), in Swiss canton citizen assemblies, and in referendums, the complexity of modern societies makes direct democracy practically impossible as a form of government. With geographically and demographically large nation-states becoming the basic entities of political and social organization in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, it became logistically impossible for every citizen to directly participate in political decision-making and to directly interact with all other citizens.

Writing in the historical context of these early modern societies, which were ruled by absolutist state governments, modern political theorists such as John Stuart Mill, Alexis de Tocqueville, John Locke, and David Hume advocated the creation of representative-democratic forms of government and democratic constitutions. One of the founding fathers of classical liberalism, Locke believed that we are all born with the natural right to life, liberty, and property. He based state power on a social contract. Opposed to the divine right of kings in absolutist regimes, the social contract emphasized individual rights and a form of government restrained by law. Influenced by classical liberalism and anti-absolutism, modern democracy came to represent both the idea of the power of the people and the often contradictory idea of legally guaranteed individual rights. It came to function as both an ideal of direct popular government and the description of a concrete form of representative government that can guarantee social order as well as individual freedom. These ideas have made modern or liberal democracy a highly contested concept and political system.

The practice of political representation, which delegates the power to rule to a political class of elected representative citizens, is now common in most modern democracies. It is a practice by which the citizens of a nation-state elect politicians in free multi-party elections to represent their interests in forums such as parliament or congress. The political scientist Robert Dahl has specified the institutional characteristics of modern democracies as follows: representatives elected by citizens; free and fair elections; inclusive citizenship; the citizen's right to run for office; freedom of expression; access to alternative, non-governmental sources of information; and the citizen's right to form independent associations. As indicated above, this model of liberal democracy has not been uncontested. Whereas some have claimed that we need to enhance direct citizen participation, others have countered that ordinary people are not competent enough and do not have the time and dedication to capably participate in governance. Social democrats have argued that, historically, social and economic inequalities have been the greatest impediment to citizen equality, and that we, accordingly, need to conceptualize democracy in terms of both political and economic rights.

Liberal democracies have been theorized based on the presupposition that the nature and possibilities of political community can be developed in and through the sovereign, territorially-circumscribed nation-state; that governments of territorial states are capable of effectively responding to the demands of their citizens. Contemporary globalization undermines this ideal as states lose or give up control over many of the domestic economic, cultural, and legal factors that are key to responding to citizens' demands (for example, the erosion of national cultural programs and labour market regulations and the establishment of multinational corporations and international policy instruments such as TRIPS and NAFTA). The principle of state sovereignty and autonomy has been especially strained by the expansion of global market and financial flows linked to the liberalization of capital markets since the 1970s. The current extent and intensity of economic interconnectedness have altered the relations between economic and political power. Economic geography and political geography no longer coincide. The current overlapping of diverse national, regional, and global economic, political, cultural, and legal forces poses fundamental challenges for democratic thought and practice — challenges regarding democratic representation and accountability, state sovereignty and autonomy, and the autonomy of the individual.

Faced with these challenges, scholars in the social sciences and humanities have become engaged in an urgent and highly divergent critical debate about the future of modern democracy. Whereas some (such as Paul Hirst and Grahame Thompson) insist on the nation-state as the key site for protecting and ensuring democracy in the contemporary world, others argue for the creation of a supranational form of democracy. David Held has become a key advocate of cosmopolitan democracy and Richard Falk of global civil society, with both concepts aiming at creating liberal democracy on a global scale. Proponents of neo-liberal democracy, such as Milton Friedman, believe that the unimpeded global rule of the market is inherently democratic, and that the scope of government thus needs to be radically reduced. Rejecting both the liberal-representative and neo-liberal models, Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri have introduced their equally contested concept of "the multitude" as the new subject of global democracy. Evidently, democracy in the early twenty-first century is still a highly debated, contested, and significant concept.