

Introduction to Democracy and the Need for a Definition

This chapter aims to establish a clear understanding of democracy, starting with a simple definition and progressively elaborating on its terms to identify the bare minimum features of a democratic government. The ultimate goal is to distinguish democratic forms of government from non-democratic ones and explore why democracy is considered superior to other systems.

The Necessity of Defining Democracy

The discussion begins with an important point raised by Merry, questioning why one would discuss democracy before defining it. Lyngdoh Madam explains that in everyday life, people use words like 'pen,' 'rain,' or 'love' without first having a precise definition. Definitions become necessary only when there is ambiguity or a need to distinguish a word from similar concepts. For instance, a definition of 'rain' is needed to differentiate it from 'drizzle' or 'cloudburst.' Similarly, a clear definition of democracy is crucial because various governments, even those that are not truly democratic, often claim to be so, leading to confusion.

Etymology vs. Evolving Meaning

Yolanda suggests that the definition of democracy can be found in its Greek origin, 'Demokratia,' where 'demos' means people and 'kratia' means rule, thus 'rule by the people.' However, Lyngdoh Madam clarifies that a word's meaning does not always remain tied to its origin. She uses the example of 'computers,' which originally were powerful calculators but now are used for a wide range of tasks like writing, designing, and entertainment. This illustrates that meanings can evolve over time, making it less useful to rely solely on etymology. Therefore, as Merry concludes, there is no shortcut; one must actively think about the meaning and evolve a definition.

Critiquing Simple Definitions

Ribiang brings up Abraham Lincoln's famous definition: "Democracy is government of the people, by the people and for the people." While acknowledging its beauty, Lyngdoh Madam implies that even such a revered definition might not be sufficient for a comprehensive understanding, especially when many different kinds of governments claim the democratic label. The text also presents various thought-provoking quotations about democracy,

highlighting its complexities and potential pitfalls, suggesting that a simple, universally accepted definition is elusive and requires deeper thought.

A Simple Starting Definition and Its Limitations

To begin, the text proposes a simple definition: **democracy is a form of government in which the rulers are elected by the people**. This definition serves as a useful starting point, allowing for the immediate distinction between democratic and clearly non-democratic governments. For example, the army rulers of Myanmar were not elected by the people, nor were dictators like Pinochet, or the kings of Saudi Arabia who rule by birthright. In these cases, the people have no say in choosing their rulers.

However, this simple definition is quickly identified as inadequate. If applied without careful consideration, it could lead to almost every government that holds elections being labeled a democracy, which would be highly misleading. As the text notes, many contemporary governments, even those that are not genuinely democratic, strive to be called democracies. This necessitates a more careful examination of each word in the definition and a detailed spelling out of the true features of a democratic government to distinguish genuine democracies from those that merely pretend to be one.

Essential Features of a Democratic Government

A democracy, at its core, is a form of government where rulers are elected by the people. However, as the provided text elaborates, this simple definition raises several critical questions regarding who the rulers are, what constitutes a democratic election, who can participate, and the extent of power held by elected officials. To address these complexities, four essential features of a democratic government have been identified.

1. Major Decisions by Elected Leaders

In a true democracy, the final decision-making authority must reside with those representatives who have been elected by the people. This principle ensures that the will of the populace is directly translated into governmental action. The text highlights the situation in Pakistan under General Pervez Musharraf, who seized power through a military coup in October 1999. Despite later holding elections for national and provincial assemblies, the ultimate power remained with General Musharraf and military officers, none of whom were elected by the people. He amended the Constitution through a 'Legal Framework Order' in 2002, granting himself the power to dismiss assemblies and placing civilian cabinet work under a military-dominated

National Security Council. This example clearly demonstrates a violation of this first feature, as elected representatives lacked the real power to make final decisions, rendering the system undemocratic.

2. Free and Fair Electoral Competition

Elections are a cornerstone of democracy, but merely holding them is insufficient. For an election to be considered democratic, it must offer a genuine choice among political alternatives and provide a fair opportunity for the current rulers to be removed if the people so wish. The text provides two contrasting examples:

- **China:** Elections are held every five years for the National People's Congress, which appoints the President. However, candidates require approval from the Chinese Communist Party, and only members of the Communist Party or its allied smaller parties are permitted to contest. This system effectively denies the people any serious choice, as the government is always formed by the Communist Party, making it impossible for the ruling party to lose.
- **Mexico:** For 70 years until 2000, Mexico held regular elections, but every single one was won by the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI). While opposition parties existed, the PRI employed numerous 'dirty tricks' to secure victory. These included forcing government employees and teachers to attend party meetings and influence votes, largely ignoring opposition in the media (except for criticism), last-minute shifting of polling booths, and excessive spending on campaigns. In practice, despite the appearance of choice, the ruling party could not be defeated, thus failing the test of a free and fair election where those in power have a fair chance of losing.

3. One Person, One Vote, One Value

Democracy is founded on the fundamental principle of political equality. This means that in a democracy, every adult citizen must have one vote, and each vote must carry equal value. While universal adult franchise is widely accepted globally, the text points out instances where this principle is violated:

- **Saudi Arabia:** Until 2015, women were denied the right to vote.
- **Estonia:** Citizenship rules were designed in a way that made it difficult for people belonging to the Russian minority to acquire voting rights.
- **Fiji:** The electoral system was structured such that the vote of an indigenous Fijian held more value than that of an Indian-Fijian.

These examples illustrate how the denial of equal voting rights or unequal weighting of votes undermines the core democratic principle of political equality.

4. Rule of Law and Respect for Rights

A democratic government, even after winning elections, cannot operate arbitrarily. It must function within limits defined by constitutional law and respect citizens' rights. The example of Zimbabwe under Robert Mugabe, who ruled since its independence in 1980, highlights the importance of this feature. Although Mugabe was popular and his ZANU-PF party consistently won elections, his government systematically undermined democratic norms:

- The constitution was repeatedly amended to increase presidential powers and reduce accountability.
- Opposition party workers faced harassment, and their meetings were disrupted.
- Public protests and demonstrations were declared illegal.
- Laws were enacted to limit criticism of the President.
- State-controlled media (television and radio) only presented the ruling party's views, and independent journalists who reported critically were harassed.
- The government ignored court judgments that went against it and pressured judges.

This case demonstrates that popular approval alone is insufficient for a democracy; popular leaders can become autocratic. A robust democracy requires sufficient space for normal political activity, including opposition, before elections. This necessitates that the state respects basic rights such as freedom of thought, expression, association, and protest, and ensures everyone is equal before the law. These rights must be protected by an independent judiciary whose orders are obeyed. Furthermore, after elections, a democratic government must adhere to basic rules, respect guarantees for minorities, and ensure that every office bearer is accountable to both the people and independent officials. These constitutional limits and protections for citizens' rights are crucial for preventing elected governments from becoming autocratic.

Arguments For and Against Democracy

The discussion in Madam Lyngdoh's class highlights the common debates surrounding democracy, prompting students to consider whether it is truly the best form of government. This exploration reveals both the criticisms leveled against democratic systems and the strong

justifications for their adoption.### Arguments Against Democracy

Several criticisms are routinely voiced against democratic governance, often stemming from observations of real-world democracies:

- Instability due to Changing Leadership:** A frequent argument is that leaders in a democracy are constantly changing, which can lead to instability. This constant flux can hinder long-term planning and consistent policy implementation.
- Political Competition and Lack of Morality:** Critics argue that democracy is primarily driven by political competition and a struggle for power, leaving little room for morality or ethical considerations in governance.
- Delays in Decision-Making:** The necessity of consulting many people, engaging in discussions, and holding meetings in a democracy often leads to significant delays in decision-making processes.
- Potential for Bad Decisions:** It is argued that elected leaders may not always understand or act in the best interests of the people they represent, potentially leading to poor or misguided decisions.
- Corruption due to Electoral Competition:** The nature of electoral competition, where parties and candidates vie for votes, is often cited as a breeding ground for corruption.
- Disregard for Ordinary People's Capacity:** Some believe that ordinary citizens lack the knowledge or understanding to make informed decisions about governance and therefore should not be involved in such processes.
- Ineffectiveness in Solving Problems:** As noted in the text, democracy is not a "magical solution" to all problems. For instance, it has not eradicated poverty in many democratic countries, including India. While it ensures people make their own decisions, it doesn't guarantee those decisions will be good, and mistakes can be made.
- Impact on Efficiency:** The frequent changes in leadership and the time-consuming decision-making processes can sometimes set back major decisions and negatively impact the government's overall efficiency.

These arguments suggest that while democracy may not be an ideal form of government in practice, the critical question remains whether it is superior to other available alternatives.

Arguments For Democracy

Despite its drawbacks, democracy is often considered the best form of government due to several compelling advantages:

- Accountability and Responsiveness:** Democracy is inherently more accountable to the needs of its people. Unlike non-democratic governments, where rulers may choose whether or not to respond to public needs, a democratic government must attend to the needs of its citizens. The example of China's famine (1958-1961) versus India's ability to avoid a similar catastrophe highlights this. Economists suggest that India's democratic structure, with multi-party elections, an opposition, and a free press, compelled its government to respond effectively to food scarcity, preventing a large-scale famine that China, under a non-democratic regime, experienced.
- Improved Quality of Decision-Making:** Democratic decisions involve extensive consultation and discussion among many individuals. This collective deliberation allows for the identification of potential mistakes and reduces the chances of rash or irresponsible decisions,

thereby improving the overall quality of governance. **Mechanism for Dealing with Differences and Conflicts:** In diverse societies, where people have varied opinions, interests, languages, religions, and castes, conflicts are inevitable. Democracy provides a peaceful framework to resolve these differences. It ensures that no single group is a permanent winner or loser, allowing different groups to coexist peacefully. This ability to keep diverse countries, like India, united is a powerful argument for democracy. **Enhancement of Citizen Dignity:** A fundamental strength of democracy lies in its principle of political equality. It recognizes that every citizen, regardless of wealth or education, holds the same status. Citizens are not mere subjects but are, in essence, the rulers themselves. This empowerment and recognition of individual worth significantly enhance the dignity of citizens. **Capacity for Self-Correction:** Democracy offers a unique advantage in its ability to correct its own mistakes. While no government form is immune to errors, in a democracy, mistakes cannot be hidden indefinitely. Public discussion provides a platform to address these errors, and there is a mechanism for correction: either rulers adjust their decisions, or they can be replaced through elections. This self-correcting mechanism is absent in non-democratic systems. In conclusion, while democracy does not offer a perfect solution to all societal problems and can be slow or inefficient at times, it stands out as clearly better than other known alternatives. It provides better chances for sound decisions, respects people's wishes, facilitates peaceful coexistence among diverse groups, and crucially, allows for the correction of its own errors while upholding the dignity of its citizens.

Broader Meanings and Practice of Democracy

The initial understanding of democracy is often limited to a descriptive sense, viewing it primarily as a form of government. As explained in the text, this approach helps identify the minimal features a democracy must possess. The most common form in modern times is representative democracy, where a majority takes decisions on behalf of all people, often through elected representatives. This system is necessary because modern democracies involve such a large number of people that direct collective decision-making is physically impossible. Furthermore, citizens may lack the time, desire, or skills to participate in every decision. However, this minimal understanding, while useful for distinguishing democracies from non-democracies, falls short. It doesn't allow for a distinction between a "democracy" and a "good democracy," nor does it enable us to see the operation of democracy beyond the governmental sphere. To grasp the broader meanings of democracy, we must consider its application to organizations other than the government. The text provides examples such as a

democratic family where everyone's opinion matters equally in decision-making, or a teacher with a "democratic temperament" who allows students to speak and ask questions. Conversely, a political party where one leader and their family decide everything is highlighted as undemocratic. These examples illustrate that the word "democracy" often refers to a basic method of decision-making. A democratic decision, as described, involves consultation with and consent of all those affected, ensuring that those who are not powerful have the same say as those who are. This principle can be applied to a government, a family, or any other organization, making democracy a principle applicable to any sphere of life. Beyond existing governments and organizational decision-making, democracy is also used to set an ideal standard that all democracies should strive for. The text mentions ideals such as "true democracy" where no one goes hungry, and where every citizen can play an equal role in decision-making, requiring not just an equal right to vote but also equal information, basic education, equal resources, and commitment. While no country in the world perfectly embodies these ideals, understanding democracy as an ideal is crucial. It reminds us why democracy is valued, helps us judge existing democracies, identify their weaknesses, and distinguish between a minimal democracy and a good democracy. The text emphasizes that no country is a perfect democracy, and the features discussed provide only the minimum conditions. Achieving an ideal democracy requires a constant effort to realize and strengthen democratic decision-making. The fate of a country, in a democracy, depends not just on the rulers but significantly on the active political participation of its citizens. This distinguishes democracy from other forms of government like monarchy or dictatorship, which often prefer citizens not to participate. Democracy, conversely, thrives on active citizen engagement. While rule through elected representatives is the most common form, small communities can practice direct democracy, such as a Gram Sabha where all people sit together to make decisions. This highlights that democracy can apply to many spheres of life and take various forms, as long as the basic principle of consultation on an equal basis is accepted.