

Six Views of Democracy

(1) “literally, **rule by the people**”; from the Greek *demokratia* (*demos*, ‘people’, and *kratos*, ‘rule’). Used in the mid-5th century BC to describe the political system in Athens and other city-states.

Advantages of this definition: Emphasizes participation and wide distribution of power; frames democracy as collective self-determination; points us to constitutions and sovereign bodies as places to look to see democracy in action.

Disadvantages: Eurocentric; begs the question of who the “people” are and how they can participate in “rule”. Even in Athens, a small city-state by the standards of today’s polities, participation was limited to a privileged minority. Modern systems are generally broader than Athenian democracy but indirect (representative): “rule” by the people is basically nonexistent everywhere we look.

(2) decision, especially election of leaders, by **voting**. Most political-science literature takes democracy as equivalent to systems of voting. The narrowest view is Schumpeter’s: democracy provides a competitive mechanism for replacement of one elite by another, thereby limiting the potential for autocracy – what the issues are, who participates, and whether participation is fair are actually not very important. But most researchers seem to place emphasis on the breadth and equality of the suffrage: the wider and more equal the vote, the more democratic the system.

Advantages of this definition: Fits modern political systems; can be measured; provides clear guidance about what to focus on, in a real-life setting, to see democracy at work; shows how democracy can produce clear and legitimate decisions.

Disadvantages: Probably also Eurocentric; glosses over questions of which things are and are not decided by voting (how public agendas are constructed); open to populist authoritarianism where top-down decisions are legitimized by voting. The fact people elect leaders and then systematically complain about them and express alienation indicates they are looking for more than just a vote.

Aside: the previous definitions, if not qualified, appear to authorize majorities democratically to exploit minorities. This possibility has bothered democratic theorists, who have often made protection of minorities a special principle of democracy that supersedes majority rule.

(3) a system of optimal **liberty**: in other words, democracy is the same as the freedom of the individual. This freedom is usually seen as being threatened by the power of the state and/or by the power of capital in modern society. Thus in this view, asserting individual autonomy against the state and capital is the key to democracy.

Advantages of this definition: Empowers antiauthoritarian stances; useful when there is a clear, powerful enemy (like a dictatorship).

Disadvantages: Not very helpful when there is no clear enemy; can lead to excessive individualism where democracy undermines other things people care about, like community; not much help in arbitrating conflicts between one person’s liberty and another’s.

(4) a system of optimal **justice** created by interaction among free and autonomous individuals. Morality is achieved within rules embedded in civil society that ensure justice and fairness, trust, integrity, and impartiality. Individual moral development is possible within the framework of these common rules. Moral deliberation will create a reflective equilibrium (a balance of different interests).

Advantages of this definition: helps explain why some kind of liberty is important while also indicating we can arbitrate conflicts among people and interests; makes clear that minority rights and interests should be taken into account.

Disadvantages: focuses on individual agents; assumes that there is an equilibrium and that everyone's voice can be heard in determining what it is; does not deal much with the fact that groups have unequal access to power and resources to represent their interests. Does society actually work this way?

(5) a system of **informed deliberation** in which broad discussion by many people produces decisions that express the common interest or general good.

Advantages of this definition: highlights the developmental and participatory aspects of democracy: how it may enlighten citizens and lead to better decisions.

Disadvantages: Like the previous view, privileges debate, but is debate what most people want? Seems to assume there is a neutral process; yet people who are skilled with words and ideas or who have more time and resources can have unequal influence.

Aside: the previous two definitions indicate why social movements might be particularly important to the development of democracy: they enable groups whose voices were previously undervalued to make their views and interests known in societal decisions.

(6) a **cognitive system** (way of understanding reality) that emphasizes the autonomy and dignity of people, and fundamental values of (a) autonomy and self-determination (liberty); (b) equality, equity, and fairness; and (c) mutualism, reciprocity, and solidarity.

Advantages of this definition: Defines democracy independently of mechanisms and in terms of things people care about (and not just rational material interests); perhaps less culturally limited than other definitions; captures a sense of democracy as something that is never complete. Probably is close to the historic roots of social democracy, if not other kinds. Builds in concern with minorities at the front end.

Disadvantages: Not easy to measure quantitatively. It needs to be demonstrated that democracy is a cognitive system.