

Democratic political theory

[Politics](#), [Democracy](#)



If one were to discuss democracy, it would take a lifetime or so to discuss it. Democracy is a topic that is too profound to discuss concisely and the answers are not definite or absolute and can be subject to debate. Nonetheless, this paper shall endeavor to explain the issue based on the question stated above. When one thinks of democracy, what would immediately come into mind are freedoms or liberties and rights of the individual. This is what makes democracy, as a form of government or society different from others which exercise or practice some form or another of state or authoritarian rule.

According to Thucydides in his work, *On Justice, Power and Human Nature*:

“ We are more of an example to others... it is called a democracy, because it is managed not for a few people, but for the majority... We are free and generous not only in our public activities as citizens, but also in our daily lives: there is no suspicion in our dealings with one another, and we are not offended by our neighbor for following his own pleasure... We live together without taking offense on private matters; and as for public affairs, we respect the law greatly and fear to violate it, since we are obedient to those in office at any time, and also to the laws... that bring shame on their transgressors by the agreement of all (40-41).”

Upon careful analysis of Thucydides' remarks, he gave one a look on what it was like in the city-state of Athens which he regarded as unique in terms of its government since it practiced democracy. Based on what he said, this system appeared to preserve individual liberty. This could be made possible by electing its leaders rather than have leaders whose transfer or power would be hereditary and not ratified by the citizens.

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Even though the term “ social contract” was non-existent at the time, it would appear as though such an arrangement already existed long before Thomas Hobbes, John Locke and Jean Jacques Rousseau would come up with that concept. It would appear that ancient (Athens) Greek society was already living on the basis of mutual respect and trust of one another. The liberties and freedoms of the citizens were not threatened so as long as the leaders ruled wisely and justly and for as long as the latter do so, the former willingly abided by the laws.

In another literature that deals with the topic, the next one would be a satirical play from the Greek comic dramatist Aristophanes titled The Knights of Aristophanes. The plot centers on the conflict between the slaves Nicias and Demosthenes against a fellow slave named Cleon whom the two charged of conspiring to take control of the state through secret machinations and abuse of his status and tried to perpetuate himself in power. In light of this, the knights are called in to bring Cleon to justice. The two sought a champion in a sausage vendor named Agoracritus who outdid Cleon in every way and was persuaded to take his place as leader.

After a vigorous debate Cleon lost and yields to the will of the people. In relation to the topic, one can infer that even though it is not a perfect political system, democracy has safeguards that ensure no tyrant will be able to seize power. Critics of democracy argue that too much liberties would bring about chaos and in the midst of this chaos, someone is apt to take advantage and seize power, becoming a tyrant.

In this case, one might think that democracy might be a self-destructive political ideology with these many liberties and freedoms it allows but in a

democratic society, it also gives room for vigilance (Aristophanes 14-15). Democracy can be a double-edged sword and invite tyranny only if the rest of the citizenry would be apathetic or negligent, preferring to leave the matters of the state to politicians alone while they preoccupy themselves with their personal liberties.

John Locke was one of the three thinkers who came up with the idea of the social contract besides Hobbes and Rousseau. In his *Second Treatise on Government*, he stated that all men are created equal in the state of nature by God. Locke stated:

“ The state of nature has a law of nature to govern it, which obliges every one: and reason, which is that law, teaches all mankind, who will but consult it, that being all equal and independent, no one ought to harm another in his life, health, liberty, or possessions: for men being all the workmanship of one omnipotent... there cannot be supposed any such subordination among us, that may authorize us to destroy one another, as if we were made of for one another's uses... Every one, as he is bound to preserve himself... ought he, as much as he can, to preserve the rest of mankind, and may not, unless it be to do justice on an offender, take away, or impair the life, or what tends to be the preservation of the life, liberty, health, limb, or goods of another (9).”

What this means is that although individuals may be physically unequal, they are equal in the sense that they are all endowed, if not entitled, to the same freedoms and liberties. Since this is the case, no one else has the right to deprive another of these same freedoms. Democracy, the way Locke understood it, is a society where there exists an atmosphere of mutual

respect an toleration of one another. What this means is that while democracy does recognize individual freedoms and liberties, it encourages a mature society where there is mutual respect for one another and tolerance of other people's differences and not trying to assert or impose one's will over the other whether it would be one's preferences or tastes or even religious beliefs (Locke, " A Letter Concerning Toleration").

The Federalist Papers, probably next to the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution in terms of importance, are a series of articles written to help boost the campaign to ratify the newly-drafted Constitution of the United States. The principal authors of these papers were Alexander Hamilton, James Madison and John Jay. To give the impression these articles were written by a single person, they all wrote under a common pen name, Publius alluding to the famed Roman consul Publius Valerius Publicola. There were a total of 85 articles written between October of 1789 and May of 1788. It is interesting to note that these papers were written particularly to sell the idea of accepting the Constitution.

There were some opposed to the ratification of the Constitution because they saw that the provisions here, particularly the one calling for a strong central government, would upset the " balance of power" of the state by compromising its autonomy guaranteed by the Articles of Confederation making the state far more prosperous through the taxes and other duties it imposed on its neighbors. They perceive this as an incipient form of tyranny in depriving states their rights, and in effect, the rights of the individual under this so-called " tyranny" of a central government though the word "

totalitarianism” was not yet in vogue and it was something close to despotism.

In the the 8th article, written by Hamilton, he further emphasized the need for this collective security to prevent any conflict from happening between the states as well as from any foreign invasion. This collective security under the Union is sure to bring about peace and order making the United States conducive and ripe for economic stability. Hamilton stated:

“ If we are wise enough to preserve the Union we may for ages enjoy an advantage similar to that of an insulated situation... Extensive military establishments cannot, in this position, be necessary to our security. But if we should be disunited, and the integral parts should either remain separated, or, which is most probable, should be thrown together into two or three confederacies, we should be, in a short course of time, in the predicament of the continental powers of Europe --our liberties would be a prey to the means of defending ourselves against the ambition and jealousy of each other (Hamilton).“

It can be inferred here that although the United States tolerates and exercises democracy, it cannot be absolute. There needs to be a form of regulating institution to ensure that the rights of the individuals would not encroach one another. Looking at it from a slightly bigger picture, this was applied among the states who were jealously guarding their autonomy. Further articles of the Federalist Papers had taken other concerns into consideration by selling the idea of separation of powers in the central government as a “ safety valve” of checks and balances to prevent the usurpation or monopolization of political power in one branch.

What the three Founding Fathers wanted to emphasize is that it is possible to have a strong central government in a democratic society. They were able to allay the fears that such an institution would be an anathema to a democratic society and threaten the rights and liberties of its citizens. As an epilogue, one should also note that prior to the Constitution's approval, a Bill of Rights was added to allay these fears and thereby preserve the democratic legacies enjoyed by Americans up to this very day.

Alexis de Tocqueville, a French nobleman and one of the earliest political analysts of the United States, had a lot to say about liberty in the United States after comparing it to that of his native country France. In one of his travels, Tocqueville noticed that small communities serve as the "breeding ground" for individual liberty. He remarked:

"Town-meetings are to liberty what primary schools are to science; they bring it within people's reach, they teach men how to use and how to enjoy it. A nation may establish a free government, but without municipal institutions, it cannot have the spirit of liberty (76)."

What Tocqueville was driving at was that democracy cannot emanate from the top and work its way to the bottom. Democracy starts at the grassroots level lest one should remember that democracy literally means "rule by the people" with "the people" meaning the citizenry or constituency of a community, in this case the town. In a democratic society, such towns allow freedoms and liberties and it is here that liberties are accessible to the people. They do not have to be wholly dependent on a central government to give them their freedom. It can be given or practice already at the grassroots level. This is where liberty thrives and it works its way to the top

rather than from the other way around. It is here that liberties are preserved and nurtured and as such no central government can completely deprive or take it away from the citizens.

In his book, *Republic*, Cass Sunstein gives his views of freedoms and liberties:

“ When there is a democratic system with free speech and a free press, the government faces a great deal of pressure to ensure (that people generally have access to food). And where officials are pressured, they respond. But a system without a democratic press or free elections is likely to enable government to escape public retribution... Free speech and free press are not mere luxuries or tastes of the most educated classes; they increase the likelihood that government will actually be serving people's interests (98).”

This would underscore that politics or the business of government is too good to be left in the hands of the politicians. Sovereignty in democratic societies rest with the people and those who are in government are supposed to serve the citizens rather than enslave them with laws that seek to take away their rights. Their role is mainly to serve the citizens by representing their interests. Though this is true ideally, realistically, it is very difficult to do.

In conclusion, democratic societies are supposed to preserve individual liberties. However, one would notice that this is not absolutely the case as governments and laws exist. Their role is primarily to ensure harmony. It recognizes and respects the rights of the individual and ensures they would not encroach the liberties of others. The role of the state then is to serve as

an arbiter or regulator and it is supposed to serve the citizens, not bend them to its will. It is not perfect but neither are the other forms and it is a constant challenge of the citizens to make it work for their benefit for the moment they become complacent with it, democracy would die a natural death and invite tyranny.