

Session I

What Is Democracy and Where Did It Come From?

European Democracy and Other Democracies

It is now recognized that forms of democracy arose in regions of the world besides Europe, but the existence of non-European democracies was not widely known in the West until relatively recently. Consequently, the historical development of democracy in Continental Europe, Great Britain, and the British North American colonies was not influenced by these varieties of early democracy. Western philosophers, political leaders and, more particularly, the founders of the American Republic overwhelmingly focused on ancient Greek democracy and the Roman Republic.

Gender Exclusive Democracies

The early European democracies of Greece and the Roman Republic were patriarchal and did not allow women to vote or hold office. In contrast, Sparta, although a monarchy, was more egalitarian and there women could own and inherit land, participate in sports, and receive an education. Despite this level of gender equality, the Spartan government was strictly patriarchal with voting and office holding, including the kingship, restricted to men.

Two millennia would pass before women were allowed formal participation in the Western democratic process. The enfranchisement of women on a national level did not begin until the late 19th Century when in 1893 New Zealand, a self-governing colony of Great Britain, granted women the vote (but not the right to hold office). France did not grant women the right to vote until 1945.

Racially Exclusive Democracies

The citizens of ancient Greek democracies were white. Yet most Greek city-states were involved in commerce and had relations with different civilizations in Africa, so Black people were far from unknown to the Greeks. In fact, there are numerous representations of Black men and women in Greek art and the *Iliad's* King Priam is described as being descended from Ethiopian royalty. Since citizenship was normally inherited, however, the chances of Black men participating in the Athenian government, or the governments of the other ancient Greek democracies would appear to be slight. On the other hand, Greeks did not associate skin color with social status, so such participation, if it existed, may have gone unremarked.

The Romans distinguished between two types of African people: "Aethiopes" or people from south of the Sahara - - who were mostly Black; and "Africanus" or people from

North Africa (the Mediterranean littoral) - - who had various skin colors. As in ancient Greece, a physiognomic feature such as skin color was not associated with social status (e.g., the vast majority of Roman slaves were white) and the Roman Republic had no laws that distinguished between people on the basis of physical appearance. Although the citizens of Rome were overwhelmingly white and citizenship in the Republic was largely inherited, it could also be granted to those who benefitted the Rome. Accordingly, there may well have been Black citizens who participated in the governance of the Republic - - there was no law to stop them.

Centuries later in the early democracies of Western European, the right to vote was very gradually extended to increasing numbers of men and, although male suffrage remained subject to many restrictions, race was not one of them. In England, the first black person known to have voted in a British election cast his ballot in Westminster in 1774. In post-revolutionary France, universal suffrage for male citizens prevailed with no racial exclusions. However, there were few Black people living in France who were not slaves and slaves, as non-citizens, could not vote.

In the colonies of Britain and in France's colonial empire the right to vote was restricted on the basis of race. In Australia, aboriginal men and women were not granted full voting rights until 1967. In New Zealand, although their colonial constitution did not restrict the right to vote to white New Zealanders, the requirement that a voter own or lease land effectively disenfranchised the Maori who held their land communally. Canada abolished slavery in 1834 and Black Canadian men, now transformed into British subjects, gained the right to vote, provided they owned taxable property or had a taxable net worth. Although they were not prohibited by national or provincial law from voting, the existence of property qualifications, local traditions, and racial prejudice, prevented many Black Canadians from voting until well into the 20th Century. In the French Colonial Empire, indigenous people were not recognized as full French citizens and therefore did not have the right to vote until post-World War II decolonization.

[Democracy and race in the United States will be discussed in Session II. The suggested colloquy reading, John Dunn's "Setting the People Free", focuses solely on the development of democracy in Europe, but does not deal with the Roman Republic, so a brief addendum describing Rome's form of self-government is attached.]

Athenian Democracy

The spirit of Athenian democracy was epitomized by Pericles in his funeral oration for the Athenian war dead, delivered during the Peloponnesian War:

For we alone [unlike other Greek city states] regard the man who takes no part in public affairs, not as one who minds his own business, but as good for nothing; and we Athenians decide public questions for ourselves or at least endeavor to arrive at a sound understanding of them, in the believe that it is not debate which

is a hindrance to action, but rather not to be instructed by debate before the time comes for action. Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*

“Democratia” in ancient Greek meant “power in the hands of the people”, but Pericles makes it clear that in ancient Athens, “the people” meant only men. Further, “men” meant only “citizens”. Nevertheless, within that double limitation, every male citizen was expected to actively participate in government, Athenian democracy was direct, not representative.

Citizenship in Athens Was Restricted

The population of Athens 431 BC was roughly 300,000 of whom 30,000 adult males were full citizens. There were about 40,000 resident aliens, counting men, women, and children as well as 150,000 slaves, again, counting men women and children. The remaining segment of the population were women who were neither aliens nor slaves.

Structure of Direct Democracy in Athens

Assembly: Most of the citizens did not spend a lot of time participating in democratic governing in the Assembly - - they worked their farms - - but they all had the right to not only vote on proposals but to speak on them as well. The Assembly: a) Declared war and concluded peace; b) Deployed armies and navies; And c) Adopted or rejected all proposed laws.

Council (“Boule”): Comprised of 500 citizens drawn by lot from 139 Athenian districts (demes). The Boule met daily and: a) Drew up agenda for the Assembly; b) Coordinated with other public bodies; and c) Conducted foreign relations.

Executive Body of Boule: 50 members drawn by lot

Juries - - annual jury pool = 6,000 citizens drawn by lot with 200 to 6,000 citizens on an individual jury. There was no judge, and the parties represented themselves, although parties who could afford to often hired speech writers to prepare their addresses to the jury.

Ostracism

On a set day in winter citizens could vote to ostracize fellow citizens. If 6,000 citizens voted to exile a person, he had to leave Athens within 10 days and stay away for 10 years. No specific charges against the person had to be made.

The Demise of Athenian Democracy

Athens engaged in a number of wars to obtain allies, create colonies, and expand its economic and political power. And it used its membership in a coalition of Greek city states called the Amphitryonic League to advance its foreign policy. In 356 BC, the Macedonians were admitted to the League, and they used it to gain eventual mastery over all of Greece. Athenian democracy came to an end in 338 BC with the defeat of Athens by Macedonia.

The Bad Reputation of Athenian Democracy

For 2,000 years after the demise of Athenian democracy, Western thinkers, even those who opposed autocracy and aristocracy, considered it a failed experiment, due largely to three immensely influential Greek authors.

1. Thucydides: His portrayal of Athenian democracy is ambivalent. While he highlighted its positive aspects (e.g., Pericles funeral oration), he also traced the origins of the disastrous Peloponnesian War to the imperialism of Athens' democratically elected leaders. His description of democracy's downfall left a lasting negative impression.

2. Plato: In his *Republic*, *Apology*, and *Crito*, Plato rejected democracy as detrimental to virtue, decency, and good judgement, characterizing it as the rule of the foolish, vicious, and brutal, and a frontal assault on the possibility of the good life. He wrote that the "rage for liberty", which he believed arose from democracy's commitment to equality, would inevitably undermine a democratic government.

3. Aristotle: In his *Politics*, Aristotle characterized democracy as government in the interest of the poor rather than in the interest of the community as a whole. He saw it as a regime of naked group interest, unapologetically devoted to serving the many at the expense of the wealthier, the better, the more elevated, the more fastidious, and the more virtuous.

The actual Greek title of what we know as Plato's *Republic* is "*politeia*" and Aristotle favorably described it as a form of government different from Greek democracy. *Politeia* allowed for rule by the many as long as it was controlled by an elaborate political structure that distributed power and responsibility as widely as possible in accordance with individual capacities. Accordingly, *politeia* would draw on a wide range of energies and skills to serve the common good and, in that way, elicit a wide range of sympathy and loyalty. *Politeia* can be translated as "constitutional government" and Aristotle thought it was superior to both monarchy and aristocracy and very much superior to democracy.

For millennia, the negative light which these ancient Greek authors cast on direct democracy had a strong and prejudicial influence on western political thought. For example, James Madison, addressing the question of how many members the proposed House of Representatives should have, clearly reflected this negative legacy:

The number ought at most to be kept within a certain limit, in order to avoid the confusion and intemperance of a multitude. *In all very numerous assemblies, of whatever characters composed, passion never fails to wrest the sceptre from reason. Had every Athenian citizen been a Socrates; every Athenian assembly would still have been a mob.* (Emphasis added.) *Federalist Paper No. 55*

Non-European Democracies

In *The Decline and Rise of Democracy* (2020), David Stasavage advances the hypothesis that “Early Democracy” arose in many regions of the globe and was just as widespread in human societies as autocracy, both of which existed for millennia, Stasavage concludes that, even if it is not inevitable, democracy comes naturally to human beings. His definition of Early Democracy is minimalist: he found it to exist where the “ruler” encounters some check on his actions by elements of the “ruled” and must at least consult with them. Stasavage does not explore when and how human societies came to be “ruled” in the first place but does outline the conditions he considers necessary for the existence of early democracy.

Early Democracy arose where:

1. Rulers did not simply inherit their position, there was a mechanism for their being chosen by others.
2. Rulers needed to obtain consent for their decisions from a council or assembly.

Certain conditions were conducive to the development of Early Democracy:

1. Small scale setting, which allowed broad participation by the people;
2. Extensive rather than intensive farming. With farming spread out, rulers had to cooperate with the people in order to find out how much they were producing so that they could levy taxes on the people’s output.
3. Existence of exit options - - if the people could easily leave the area governed by a ruler, the ruler had to earn the people’s consent and cooperation in order to maintain a population of subjects from which he could collect taxes and form an army.
4. Absence of a state bureaucracy, without which the ruler could not:
 - a. Coerce
 - b. Monitor economic production
 - c. Monitor population movements

Stasavage argues that Early Democracy was practiced in a number of non-European societies, including the following:

I. Kingdom of Mari (Mesopotamia - - 3,000 BC)

The geography of Mari furnished conditions conducive to Early Democracy:

1. Isolation: it was far from the highly populated and autocratic areas of southern Mesopotamia
2. Poor soil: precluded intensive farming

Early Democratic features:

1. Rulers (kings) had to negotiate with individual towns to raise revenue
2. Town councils were responsible for tax collection
3. In certain instances, the whole population of a town assembled to determine how much they would contribute to the king’s government

- II. Songye People of Kasai (now southern Democratic Republic of the Congo - - 15th Century) established an aristocratic republic.

Early Democratic features:

Population divided into two classes:

1. Upper Class elected a president for a period of three to five years
2. President paid valuable gifts to those who elected him
3. President could not be reelected

Lower Class, however, had no vote.

- III. Huron Nation (Southern Ontario - - 17th-18th Century)

Conditions favorable for Early Democracy

1. Small scale (20 villages located no more than 3-days walking distance from each other)
2. Their exhaustive agriculture required moving to a different location every 20 years
3. Clan or family could ignore tribe decisions that it disagreed with or simply leave the village

Structure of Huron Society

1. Society divided into four separate tribes and eight separate clans
2. Each village belonged to a single tribe, but had multiple clans
3. Society was matrilinear and matrilocal

Early Democratic features: Collective governance at three levels:

A. Villages

1. Villages had multiple chiefs - - one for each clan in the village
2. Chiefs came from lineages, but the "clan mother" picked the individual within that lineage would who become the next chief subject to the clan members' confirmation
3. Chiefs could be deposed by clan members if their performance was unsatisfactory
4. Villages were governed by a council of the chiefs and a group of male elders
5. The council was responsible for:
 - i. Organizing public goods, e.g., maintaining the palisade around the village
 - ii. Distributing food when it was scarce
 - iii. Deciding disputes between different clans.

B. Tribal Council

Each tribe had a council composed one tribal chief and a chief from each clan. Tribal chiefs were “first among equals” having no power to make unilateral decisions or to control the highly independent clan chiefs

C. Confederacy Council

Each tribe sent their tribal chief and clan chiefs to the confederacy council. Decision-making was consensual and each tribe had the right to abide by a confederacy decision or to ignore it.

We know much more about the Hurons than we do about the members of the older Early Democracies not only because the Hurons are much closer to us in time, but also because among the first Europeans who encountered them were Jesuit missionaries who meticulously recorded the details of Huron society.

A further distinction is that Huron democracy was much more a direct democracy than many of the ancient Early Democracies, which tended to be representative rather than participatory and, in this respect, Huron democracy was closer to Athenian democracy. Also, like citizens of Athens, the Hurons owned slaves, usually members of enemy tribes like the Iroquois who had been captured in war. But in sharp contrast to ancient Athens, every Huron was a “citizen”, and every adult man and woman had a voice in tribal decision making.

Early Democracy in England

Early Democracy in England differed from the rest of Western Europe in that:

Representatives were more distanced from people.

Representatives were not restricted by mandates from the voters and not required to report back to voters before taking action.

The direct participation of the public was limited

Due to these factors, the representatives of the Majority found it easier to do what they wanted.

Early kings of England had no standing army or police, and so depended on the support of powerful subjects. Under the feudal system that evolved after the Norman Conquest of 1066, the laws of the Crown could not have been upheld without the support of the nobility and the clergy. The former had economic and military power based on their ownership of land and the feudal obligations of their tenants. The Church was virtually a law unto itself in this period as it operated its own system of religious law courts. Consequently, English monarchs, when confronted with major decisions, had to consult with and gain the consent and cooperation of the nobility and the senior clergy.

To do so, they called Great Councils, which typically would consist of archbishops, bishops, abbots, barons and earls - - the pillars of the feudal system.

Magna Carta

A Great Council that took place in 1215 resulted in the Magna Carta in which King John agreed not to levy taxes without the consent of the barons. Although frequently hailed by pro-democratic leaders in Great Britain and North America as a unique expression of Anglo-Saxon democratic development, it did not serve as an immediate check on monarchical power: it was never signed or sealed by King John and he, as well as subsequent kings, ignored its prohibition against levying taxes without the barons' consent. But despite the Great Charter's limited effectiveness in the short term, over time it came to be regarded as a watershed in the development of English democracy primarily because it was consistently characterized as such by pro-democratic leaders.

Gradually, the Great Council of the early Middle Ages evolved into the Parliament of England. Initially, most parliaments were summoned when the king needed to raise money through taxes. They grew more inclusive over time and in the so-called "Model Parliament" of 1295, knights and "burgesses" (citizens of a borough, town, or university) were permitted to attend for the first time. This class of gentry became known as "the Commons" and in 1341 the Commons met separately from the nobility and clergy for the first time, resulting in what was effectively an Upper Chamber and a Lower Chamber. The Upper Chamber became known as the House of Lords and the Lower Chamber became known as the House of Commons. In 1430, the number of people who could vote in elections for the House of Commons was limited to those who owned freehold property worth forty shillings or more.

Although the power of the English Parliament gradually increased under the Tudors, the Early Democratic period in England did not come to a definitive close until the Parliamentary revolt against the second Stuart monarch, Charles I.

The English Civil War

The rejection of the traditional order during the 17th Century Civil War, which led to the beheading of Charles I and the creation of a Commonwealth, caused many to hope for the permanent establishment of a republic, the dismantling of hereditary privilege, and the spread of political equality. During the Revolution of the 1640s, the anti-monarchist forces included a faction called the Levellers who advocated for something close to universal manhood suffrage, as well as yearly Parliamentary elections. They coined the egalitarian slogan "No human being comes into the world with a saddle on their back and none comes into the world booted and spurred to ride them." But the New Model Army, which defeated the king's forces, was headed by members of England's landed gentry, including Oliver Cromwell, who utilized the Army to ensure that the existing hierarchies remained in place. Failing to spark an egalitarian revolution, the Leveller leaders ended up in the Tower of London. This history was not lost on the American

colonists who strongly favored frequent elections and strongly opposed standing armies and powerful executives.

The Commonwealth and Cromwell's subsequent rule as Lord Protector did not survive his death and the monarchy was restored under Charles II in 1660. But the end of monarchical dominance, foreshadowed by the execution of Charles I, came to pass in 1688 when Parliamentary forces deposed James II, installed William of Orange as king, and made Parliament the dominant political institution in Great Britain.

Absolute monarchy had been defeated, but Parliament, which was now supreme, was aristocratic, not democratic. Membership in the House of Lords was limited to Lords Temporal (the hereditary nobility) and Lords Spiritual (the archbishops and bishops of the Church of England). The House of Lords was more powerful than the House of Commons and could reject any law passed by the lower house. Moreover, the House of Commons, membership in which was ostensibly less restricted, consisted entirely of men, usually of great wealth, and all of them Anglicans (except in Scotland). Women could neither vote nor stand for election. Members were not paid, so in practice, only men of wealth could afford to represent their counties or boroughs. Candidates had to be electors, which meant that in most places they had to own land, mills, or businesses. Virtually all members representing county seats were relatives or dependents of peers.

Beginning with the reign of King William, Parliament played an increasingly intensive role in raising revenue and managing a new system of public borrowing. At the same time, the Crown's influence steadily diminished with 1710 marking the last year the king vetoed parliamentary legislation. As Parliament secured its supremacy over the Crown, it continued to be composed of an aristocratic elite that was insulated from both local interests and popular influence. While this made governing easier, it left the people with little political say.

Also, during this period, two parliamentary factions, the Whigs and the Tories, that had originated in 1679, rapidly evolved into clearly defined political parties. The Whigs opposed absolute rule and favored a monarchy constrained by the English constitution and the power of Parliament while the Tories were conservative and sympathetic to the traditional powers of the English monarchs. Religion was another point of significant antagonism: Whigs tended to be low Church Anglicans or Presbyterians who were hostile to Catholicism; Tories were traditional Church of England members and often sympathetic to Catholicism. Contention between the parties was often bitter and the names of both parties originated as terms of abuse: "Tory" derived from the Irish word meaning "outlaw" and "Whig" signified "horse thief" in Scots Gaelic.

From 1688 to 1715, the Whigs and Tories were highly competitive and the Triennial Act of 1694, which required elections to the House of Commons to take place at least once every three years, only served to increase political competition. But in 1707, the Act of Union joined Scotland to England and greatly altered the political landscape, since Scottish MPs were overwhelmingly Whigs. By 1715, the Whig party had become

dominant and remained in control of Parliament until 1760. Under the leadership of Robert Walpole, considered to be the first British Prime Minister, the Whigs, a party that had been created to oppose absolute monarchical rule, began to restrict political participation in the following ways: a) the Parliamentary term was lengthened to 7 years - - a longer term gave the majority Whigs the ability to "time" elections better; b) the Whigs threw out the norm that MPs could not hold offices that were remunerated by the state. Instead, Robert Walpole encouraged such "placemen" and compelled them to vote with his Ministry on all bills; c) Walpole used bribery to win elections and pro-Whig publications defended this corruption as "the natural condition of human affairs"; and d) Walpole sought to crush popular protests against his corrupt Ministry by passing the Riot Act of 1714, which allowed local authorities to declare unlawful any gathering of 12 or more people and by suspending habeas corpus in 1715 and several subsequent years.

England's Arrested Development

By the time of the American Revolution, Great Britain had moved farther toward modern democracy than any European country except Switzerland. Yet both the House of Lords and the House of Commons remained dominated by the upper levels of society - - the nobility and landed gentry. Despite mass demonstrations in support of universal manhood suffrage, such as the Chartist Movement in the 1830s and 1840s, the vote remained highly restricted. And although British kings had seen their power reduced, as late as 1834 they could still dismiss a Prime Minister, even if he had majority support in Parliament. With a governing elite that was very much attached to class privilege, England was reluctant to grant political power to the lower orders. Consequently, it delayed the establishment of universal suffrage for centuries and in doing so delayed its transition to modern democracy.

But if democracy's development was agonizingly slow in Great Britain, it was explosive in Britain's North American colonies.