

CHAPTER

1

The Rise of Democratic Ideas

Are there any ideas that you would fight for? Go to jail for? Give up your life for? Ideas this powerful are the driving force behind much of human history. Religion is one. Defending home and family is another. So is loyalty to a group, a country, or a beloved leader. Would it surprise you to discover that **democracy** is an idea that people—perhaps your own ancestors—have fought and even died for? Americans today tend to take democracy for granted, but this was not always so.

The idea of democracy is more than two thousand years old; yet it is still the most “modern” form of government. Before the ancient Greek city-states turned government in this new direction, people everywhere lived under authoritarian rulers such as chieftains, kings, or pharaohs. The Greeks, however, had the radical notion of ruling themselves and turned the idea into reality.

Though the form that democracy takes has varied in different times and places, the idea has always held the same promise: freedom of political choice. Today people in some countries are still willing to fight—and die—to gain or defend that freedom. This chapter looks first at the main characteristics of modern democracy and then goes back to trace the development of democratic ideas through history.

SECTION 1/Essential Features of Modern Democracy

Focus Questions

- How do the people of a democracy take part in government? (pages 3–4)
- How are law and individual rights important in a democracy? (pages 4–5)
- Why is the use of reason highly valued in a democracy? (pages 5–6)

Terms to Know

representative democracy	civil rights
rule by law	civil liberties

Modern democracies are not all alike. Many have developed over time in response to their own unique history. The form of government may vary. Some, for example, may have parliamentary governments; others may have congresses and presidents. All democracies, however, have certain features in common. These features are based on principles that are at the heart of Western civilization. Individuals and their right to be individuals are the focus of these principles.

Representative Government

In modern democracies, the government gets its power from the people, and the people are the



In nations that lack a long tradition of democracy, governments may be unstable. The Philippines, an independent nation since 1946, has been troubled with corrupt officials and armed uprisings through most of that period. In 1986 a president who had ruled by martial law fled the country, and Corazon "Cory" Aquino took office. Her government had to deal with continuing demonstrations supporting the former president, opponents within her own administration, and guerrilla rebellions. Here, demonstrators march to protest one of Aquino's actions.

ultimate decision-makers. However, modern democracies are not pure democracies. People do not vote directly on each law or issue. Instead, they elect officials to do the work of government. This system is known as **representative democracy**, because the elected officials represent the people who elected them. If the people do not like the way their representatives perform their jobs, they can vote them out of office in the next election.

In stable democracies, where the idea of rule by the people is firmly established, there are orderly transfers of power after elections. In democracies without stable traditions, the period after an elec-

tion is often dangerous. A leader who has lost the support of the people may refuse to give up control of the government and may even use armed force to keep the winner from taking office, thereby putting an end to democracy. In stable democratic societies, all groups agree to accept the results of elections. This is possible because they recognize that the people are the highest authority and because they know that elections—which are used to determine the will of the people—are free and fair.

Rule by Law

A second essential feature of democracy is **rule by law**. In a democracy, no person is above the law. Everyone, from the most powerful government official to the poorest citizen, must obey the law. The personal opinions, wishes, or prejudices of officials cannot take precedence over legal and constitutional procedures. For this reason, it is important that citizens know what the laws are. Most democratic nations have written constitutions. A written constitution serves to establish the basic laws by which the people are to be governed.

Written laws are an important protection against abuses of power by government officials. Today most people in the West take this principle for granted. Historically, however, the law has often been nothing but the wishes of a dictator or an absolute monarch. Since these wishes might change from day to day, citizens in such countries had no legal way of opposing unreasonable government actions.

In a democracy, the laws give people both power and protection. That is not to say that all laws are good. Nor does it suggest that laws must exist forever. A person who thinks a law is unjust can work to persuade a majority that it should be changed. There are legally acceptable ways to do this.

At times, however, people have felt the need to challenge a law in order to force people to confront an issue. This was the case with Martin Luther King, Jr., whose stand in defense of African Americans' rights (page 805) sometimes led to his arrest. In 1963 he wrote a letter from the city jail in Birmingham, Alabama, to eight prominent religious leaders who had criticized his activities. In the letter King explained his nonviolent "direct action" against segregation:

¶ One may well ask, "How can you advocate breaking some laws and obeying others?" The answer lies in the fact that there are two types of laws: just and unjust. I would be the first to advocate obeying just laws. One has not only a legal but a moral responsibility to obey just laws. Conversely, one has a moral responsibility to disobey unjust laws.¶

Martin Luther King, Jr., based his actions on strong moral convictions. Neither he nor his followers denied responsibility for breaking the law. Nor did they question the right of society to enforce the law. They knew what they were doing, and they were prepared for the consequences. Their willingness to endure time in jail was later rewarded when many of the unjust laws they opposed were changed.

Individual Rights

A third essential feature of democracy is the belief that each person has basic human rights and freedoms. This belief stems from the traditional Western emphasis on individual worth. Because every individual is important, each one has the right to make his or her own personal choices and decisions, even if some are bad. The alternative—having the government make all the decisions—is considered far worse.

In a democracy the government is obliged to protect the **civil rights** of its citizens. Civil rights are the rights of citizens to be treated equally under the law and to have equality of opportunity. For example, in the United States, each citizen has an equal right to vote, and each citizen's vote has equal weight. The government cannot discriminate against certain people or groups, in the electoral process or otherwise. Indeed, the government must defend its citizens against discrimination.

Throughout history many countries have had different laws for different classes of people. In Europe, until about 200 years ago, aristocrats were tried by different laws and in different courts than common people. Taxes, too, varied among the classes. Often the aristocracy paid no taxes, while the common people were heavily taxed. Important positions in the government, the army and navy, and the Church were open only to aristocrats. Commoners, no matter how intelligent, hard-

working, or well-educated, had no chance of gaining these positions.

The modern democracies that grew up during the nineteenth century gradually rejected these forms of discrimination. They held that all citizens were equal before the law. In 1896 Supreme Court Justice John Marshall Harlan stated the principle, as it applies in the United States, this way:

¶ . . . In view of the Constitution, in the eye of the law, there is in this country no superior, dominant, ruling class of citizens. There is no caste here. Our Constitution is color-blind, and neither knows nor tolerates classes among citizens. In respect of civil rights, all citizens are equal before the law. The humblest is the peer of the most powerful.¶

Though Justice Harlan spoke for many when he made this statement, in reality there were still many years of struggle ahead before the principle was widely applied. Women and minorities, including African American citizens, would not achieve equality under the law until much later. Nevertheless, the principle served as a guiding light for legislators promoting civil rights, and it eventually prevailed.

Democratic governments are bound not only to protect citizens' civil rights but to respect their **civil liberties** as well. Civil liberties are the protections that the law gives to people's freedom of thought and action. Civil liberties include the right to freedom of speech, freedom of the press, and freedom of religion.

In a democracy the majority rules, but the minority still has the right to express its opinions. The English philosopher John Stuart Mill wrote in 1859:

¶ If all mankind minus one were of one opinion, and only one person were of the contrary opinion, mankind would be no more justified in silencing that one person than he, if he had the power, would be justified in silencing mankind.¶

Mill also made clear, however, that individuals cannot be totally free to do as they please. Each person's liberties, Mill believed, were limited by the rights of others. As he put it, "Your freedom to move your arm ends where my nose begins."

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Reason

Underlying all of these features of democracy is the great value placed on reason. Democratic governments base their decisions not on traditions that defy logic but on reasoned argument. The debates in our legislatures are aimed at resolving disagreements and finding the best solutions to problems through the exchange of information and opinions. The foundation of democracy is the idea that the average citizen can participate intelligently and responsibly in these debates.

In other societies and in other times, this has not been the case. It was commonly thought that the majority of people were neither intelligent nor disciplined enough to have a voice in government and that experiments in democracy would soon end in tyranny. The Italian political thinker Niccolò Machiavelli (mak-ee-uh-VEL-ee) agreed. He wrote the following statement in 1517, and his sentiments were echoed even into the twentieth century:

☞ The people may be compared to a wild beast, which (although by nature ferocious and savage) has been subdued by having been always kept imprisoned and in servitude, and having by accident got its liberty, not knowing how to provide food and shelter for itself, becomes an easy prey to the first one who attempts to chain it up again.☞

The democracy that flourished in the United States made it clear to the world that the people were not a "wild beast." The American people created and supported a constitution that is still a model for newly emerging democracies.

—John Stuart Mill, 1859

Not all countries have followed the same path to democracy. As a result, not all democratic governments are alike.

Yet all successful democracies establish representative governments. They all insist on rule by law. They all protect individual rights. And they all rely on reasoned debate. These democratic principles were not created from thin air. They represent basic Western values that have come down to us through history. The roots of democracy run deep. In the rest of this chapter, you will trace those roots, from ancient Greece through Renaissance Europe to the beginnings of the United States in the late 1700's.

Section 1 Review

1. **Define:** representative democracy, rule by law, civil rights, civil liberties.
2. What is the difference between a pure democracy and a representative democracy?
3. What does it mean to say that modern democracies are governed by the rule of law?
4. What part does reasoned debate play in a democracy?
5. **Critical thinking:** Why do democratic governments protect the rights of individuals even when the exercise of those rights may be troublesome to the majority?