



CHAPTER 3

Democracy and Our Relationship to the State

There are two major aims in this chapter. First, the chapter will introduce the most important aspects of democratic theory. Second it will examine the argument that democracy is the main grounding for political obligation, that is, morality behind why people should obey the laws of their state, or should be obliged to follow what the state wants people to do. Whether we see the laws, institutions, and electoral systems of our country as legitimate has a great deal to do with our relationship to the state. This chapter begins by exploring the historical evolution of the term “democracy” and the debate between advocates of the protective and participatory theories of democracy, as well as the cases for deliberative and cosmopolitan democracy. The chapter then outlines why democracy is seen as the major grounding for political obligation and considers the implications for the rights of minorities when adhering to the majoritarian principal—that is, the idea that the majority should decide who gets what and how.

Chapter Outline

- **What Is Democracy?**
- **Historical Background**
 - The French and American Revolutions
 - The Nineteenth-Century Move toward Democracy
- **Competing Theories of Democracy**
- **Deliberative Democracy**
- **Why Is Democracy Thought to be Special?**
- **Is Democracy Special? The Problem of Majority Rule**
- **Cosmopolitan Democracy**
- **Conclusion**

Key Terms

Consociational democracy
Cosmopolitan democracy
Deliberative democracy
Democracy

Democratic elitism
Direct democracy
Illiberal democracy
Liberal democracy

Political obligation
Political system
Polyarchy
Representative democracy

Discussion Questions

1. Athenian democracy is often presented as the hallmark of a democratic practice. Yet, many in Athens could not participate. How do we grapple with the reality of a small minority participating in direct democracy? Is this democratic? Are there any similarities to democracy today?
2. For many centuries, democracy was not held in high esteem, and yet today almost every country wants to call itself democratic. What changed? Is this a change for the better? Does this represent the dilution of democratic ideals and practices?
3. Since the nineteenth century, there has been a close connection between democracy and capitalism. Does one require the other? How they are compatible or not?
4. It has been argued that the behaviour of political parties in a democratic system can be understood using an economic model with the state in the role of producer and the voter in the role of consumer. What is gained by adopting this approach? What is ignored? Does this “package” the politician as an item or good?
5. The concept of deliberative democracy, advocated by Habermas, suggests that public debate increases both the rationality and legitimacy of decisions. Do you agree? If so, why? If not, why not?
6. How does democracy speak to the issue of political obligation? Is the minority equally obliged by the preferences of the majority?
7. Many would argue that representative democracy is the strongest type of democracy. Do you agree? Why or why not?

Further Resources

- <http://www.democracynow.org/>
Democracy Now home page—Media outlet concerned with issues of democracy
- <http://www.dwatch.ca/>
Democracy Watch home page—Watchdog group based in Ottawa

- <http://www.opendemocracy.net/>
Open Democracy home page—News and commentary on political issues
- <http://www.iroquoisdemocracy.pdx.edu/html/greatlaw.html>
Full text of “The Great Law of Peace” that formed the basis for the Six Nations model
- Hirschmann, N. (1992). *Rethinking Political Obligation: A Feminist Method for Political Theory*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- Pateman, C. and C. W. Mills (2007). *Contract and Domination*. Cambridge: Polity Press.