

Democracy is not for everyone

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Intro

To the Western imagination, democracy is seen as a fundamental prerequisite to the creation of a modern nation-state. Its values, it is assumed, are universal and its consequences benign. Other forms of government are characterised as antiquated, barbaric, backward and repressive. But is democracy applicable to all societies - and is it even good for us in the West?

Background

The idea of democracy originated in ancient Athens where it flourished briefly before being replaced by more authoritarian forms of government. Its emergence as a "universal" value is a product of late 18th century Europe, and its adoption as a key objective of western foreign policy a product of the last 30 or so years.

There are many different forms of democracy and the term itself often implies a whole web of institutions and rights such as the rule of law, freedom of expression, minority rights and so on. The Economist Intelligence Unit has compiled an "Index of Democracy" which assesses countries' democratic credentials according to five general categories: electoral process and pluralism, civil liberties, functioning of government, political participation and political culture.

For most people the minimum criterion for democracy is a system of government in which the principal positions of power are filled through regular free and fair elections. According to Freedom House, an American organisation that tracks global trends in democracy, at the end of 2005 there were 122 "electoral democracies" (64% of the world's states, compared with 40% in the mid-1980s). On a more stringent criterion, 89 of these were rated as "politically free" - 46% of all states, compared with only 25% in 1975.

Yet there is growing concern that the spread of democracy appears to be coming to a halt and may be going into reverse. In the Middle East, the response to pressures for democratisation remains weak. In Asia, Thailand has endured sporadic political unrest since a 2006 coup, and in Burma the military junta has continually cracked down on dissent. In Iran and Afghanistan there have been allegations of fraud and vote rigging. In Latin America, there has been a coup in Honduras and the election of governments with dubious democratic credentials in Venezuela and elsewhere. Russia under Vladimir Putin has experienced a backward slide towards authoritarianism and political crises in the Balkans, the Ukraine, Moldova and the Caucasus have raised questions about the strength of the democratic transition on Europe's periphery. Perhaps more worrying still is the emergence of China, the world's most populous country, as the fastest growing economic superpower and potential rival, ideological and economic, to the United States. The so-called "Chinese model" touted as an alternative to the western liberal democracy, is based on the premise that for developing countries, authoritarianism offers a more rapid and smoother route to prosperity than the rough and tumble of electoral politics. Some analysts raise the possibility that economies driven by a fusion of autocratic politics and crony, state-guided capitalism could soon gain the upper hand.

The Issues

The debate about democracy usually revolves round the question of whether the western model of liberal democracy is appropriate for all societies. Pro-democracy campaigners argue that because democracy is based on the principle of the people's right to choose their government, it is a principle which should have a universal application. But others argue that some countries and cultures lack the institutions which can sustain democracy and that in some cases the introduction of democracy can lead to dangerous instability.

There is another debate which is just as interesting, if rarely heard, which revolves round the question of whether the liberal democratic model is sustainable over the long term even in the West.

Democracy is a western invention which is not appropriate in the developing world

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Democracy is meaningless without constitutional liberties

The reason we value democracy in the West is not that we have free and fair elections, argues Fareed Zakaria in 'The Future of Freedom', but that liberal democracies incorporate social, economic, and political underpinnings - a bundle of traditions of good governance - which have nothing intrinsically to do with democracy. "Constitutional liberalism", he argues, "is not about procedures for selecting government but, rather, government's goals. It refers to the tradition, deep in Western history, that seeks to protect an individual's autonomy and dignity against coercion, whatever the source - state, church, or society." In countries that lack such traditions, elected governments tend to go off the rails and sometimes democracy collapses altogether. As Pakistan, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka all show, corrupt, unrepresentative and flawed democracies without the strong independent institutions of a civil society can foster governments that are every bit as tyrannical as a dictatorship. Liberal institutions and practices can exist without democracy and elections, Zakaria argues. Once a country reaches a certain stage - a certain level of prosperity (he suggests a per capita income threshold of \$6,000 a year), or the acceptance by the government of legal restraints on itself, then pressure builds for democratic as well as liberal rights. The West, he feels, would be better advised to promote liberalism – e.g. persuading authoritarian regimes to release political prisoners or respect academic freedom, than democracy. The "Western model of government" is best symbolised not by the general election but the impartial judge.

Democracy often means the leadership of the majority

Alberto Fujimori, Peruvian president from 1990 to 2000, was elected in a free and moderately fair election, says John Simpson, "But as has happened so often in Latin America, Asia and Africa, an election can lead to the worst kind of elected dictatorship. Peru suffered badly from the crimes committed during Fujimori's time in office, and has never entirely recovered." Melanie Reid takes as her example the elected (albeit possibly corruptly elected) Afghan government of Hamid Karzai, who has quietly signed a version of what has become known as the "marital rape law", to retain popularity with clerics and his male followers. Among other things, this allows a man to deny his wife food if she denies him conjugal sex, grants guardianship of children to fathers and grandfathers, lets rapists pay to avoid being prosecuted, and requires women to get permission from their husbands to work. In other words, elections do not by themselves constitute democracy, and since in a democracy the majority is sovereign, there are no constitutional safeguards that cannot be overridden.

Democracies are not peaceful and are no guarantors of security

The claim that democracies promote peace seems strange in the light of the fact that Hitler was democratically elected. In Israel, controversial Prime Minister Ariel Sharon was returned to office in free elections. In the Muslim world, as William Dalrymple has pointed out, political Islam is on the march not through the bomb, but the ballot box: "Democracy is not the antidote to the Islamists the neocons once fondly believed it would be. Since the US invaded Afghanistan and Iraq, there has been a consistent response from voters wherever Muslims have had the right to vote. In Lebanon, Iran, Iraq, Palestine, Pakistan, Egypt, Turkey and Algeria they have voted en masse for religious parties in a way they have never done before. Where governments have been most closely linked to the US, political Islam's rise has been most marked."

Democracy cannot survive in high-violence societies

The basic prerequisite for democracy, argues James L. Payne, is not constitutional safeguards but the restraint in the use of violence in domestic political affairs. "Iraq is a high-violence society. There are many participants disposed to act in thuggish ways, and their violence makes a democracy virtually untenable." There's nothing surprising about this. All countries seem to begin as high-violence societies and then evolve away from this pattern. Iraq in the early 21st century is like England was in the mid-15th century. "The

Democracy is a universal right

The underlying justification for democracy, argues the campaign group Democracy for All, is the wish of the people to control their own lives. "Control over your own life is a universal value. Few people are willing to accept that their lives are controlled by others. Democratic participation and democratic political life guarantee this value and this is one of the reasons or justifications for the universal application of democracy."

There are no pre-conditions for democracy

If democracy can emerge and persist in an extremely poor, landlocked, overwhelmingly Muslim country like Mali, "which has none of the supposed preconditions for democracy, in which the majority of adults are illiterate and live in absolute poverty and in which life expectancy is 44 years", argues Larry Diamond, then there is no reason in principle why democracy cannot develop almost anywhere. In 2002 the UNDP reported that 11 of the 36 least-developed countries of the world are democracies today in terms of having regular, free, and fair elections to choose their leaders. Of the bottom third (58) of all the states classified by the UNDP, 24 are democracies. The Nobel-prize winning economist Amartya Sen observes that "People in economic need also need a political voice. Democracy is not a luxury that can await the arrival of general prosperity. Moreover, there is very little evidence that poor people, given the choice, prefer to reject democracy." Among other benefits, Sen claims, democracy prevents famines: "in the terrible history of famines in the world, no substantial famine has ever occurred in any independent and democratic country with a relatively free press. We cannot find exceptions to this rule, no matter where we look." Thus arguments that "we need economic development first, and then we will democratise" are invalid and Fareed Zakaria's suggestion that the West should only push democracy when countries reach per capita incomes of \$6,000 a year would exclude all but four of today's 87 democratisers.

Democracies bring peace; dictators bring conflict

A landmark 1993 study of international disputes between 1946 and 1986, by the US political scientist Bruce Russett, showed that there were no wars between democratic states and 32 wars when one or other parties to the dispute was non-democratic. Democracies do not wage war on each other and they also have judicial mechanisms which enable them to avoid civil strife between people and groups. Crucially, the democratic process provides a mechanism whereby an unpopular government can be jettisoned without the violent succession struggles and revolutions typical of authoritarian regimes. By contrast "there is no such thing as a peaceful dictator," says Natan Sharansky. "You cannot rely on leaders who do not rely on their own people." Even apparently benign dictatorships are a recipe for instability. Under President Suharto, Indonesian living standards more than quadrupled and health and education improved dramatically. But Suharto could not keep the lid on the pressure cooker and was eventually forced to resign in 1998 after widespread violent protests and riots. Democracy has enough fuses in it to prevent the mains blowing; tyrants do not.

There is nothing inherently "western" about democracy

Noah Feldman observes that Iraq's most senior cleric, Ayatollah Sistani, has made his reputation by pressing for democracy according to the principles of Islamic law. Increasingly, he argues, democracy is no longer seen as an alien western ideal, but as a universal one. In 2003 he issued a fatwah in which he said that as a matter of Islamic law democracy was binding as a practice and that, therefore, no one who was not an Iraqi could write the constitution of Iraq. Throughout the world opinion surveys show popular support for democracy. According to Afrobarometer opinion surveys carried out in 16 countries of sub-Saharan Africa, two-thirds of Africans say that democracy is always preferable to authoritarian rule and about the same percentage reject all possible alternatives to democracy. Even those dissatisfied with the way democracy is working in their country still believe that it's the best form of government. Similar results are

question we need to ask, then, is not what went wrong with Iraq, it is what went right with England." A tentative conclusion is that the move away from violence takes a long time and the impulse to violence is "embedded in and reinforced by a broad cultural mindset". This cannot be changed overnight and it is little affected by constitutional measures. In the 19th century, countries all over Latin America copied the American Constitution, hoping to import political stability, but failed to halt or even slow the pace of revolution. France got its first democratic regime in 1789, but its first stable democracy was achieved only in 1871, and even that was extremely uncertain for a generation. "It would not be right to say that a high-violence society like Iraq cannot become a democracy," Payne argues. "One doubts, however, that those who urged the invasion of Iraq in order to establish democracy there had any inkling that the process is likely to take the better part of a century."

Democratic government is not always legitimate government

Consent has to do with the acceptance of the authority of a government by those subject to it: democracy refers to a type of rule. Dictatorial regimes have enjoyed widespread recognition of their authority (e.g. Napoleon, Hitler), and democratically-elected governments are not always recognised as legitimate, especially if they are perceived to be "imposed" from outside. Max Weber observed that governments draw their legitimacy from three sources: traditional, religious, and legal (i.e. democracy based on popular representation). In Afghanistan, argue Thomas H. Johnson and M. Chris Mason, legitimacy is derived exclusively from Weber's first two sources: traditional (in the form of the monarchy and tribal patriarchies) and religious. The current government of Afghanistan's claim to legitimacy is based almost entirely on a legal source - winning an election. Yet in Afghanistan this does not signify what it should. Election fraud aside, the victor in Afghanistan's recent elections "will largely be seen as illegitimate because he is elected. Democracy in Afghanistan is wishful thinking."

Whether democracy is good for you depends on your priorities

If you are concerned with personal freedoms and don't want society policing everyone's behaviour, an authoritarian and intrusive government will have little appeal, argues Stanley Fish. But if, like the 17th century thinker Thomas Hobbes who witnessed the carnage of the English Civil War, you value stability and security more, you might support the idea of an absolute sovereign who is strong enough to protect you from your neighbour and foreign enemies. Democracy privileges some values - personal mobility, individual entrepreneurialism, tolerance, cosmopolitanism - and downplays others - community, ideological conformity, cultural stability. So its attractions will vary with the values a particular society embraces.

Elections in shattered societies can make life worse

Democracy often equals complexity, chaos, slowness, unpredictability, insecurity and discontinuity. The post-1989 transition to democracy in Russia and eastern Europe had catastrophic effects. In 1999, the UN Development Programme listed seven socio-economic costs of the process: several countries in the region have suffered a precipitous decline in life expectancy, particularly among young and middle aged men - Roland Scharff estimated the total excess deaths in Russia in the reform years (1992-1996) at 3.5 million; there has been a dramatic rise in levels of common and serious illnesses and the rapid spread of such diseases as tuberculosis; there has been a huge rise in poverty and wealth inequalities; women have seen themselves marginalised in public life and at a growing disadvantage economically; there have been significant deteriorations in education and health services, with a dramatic rise in unemployment. These results are clearly not indicative of a voluntary "democratic" choice for emancipation and progress. The swing back towards autocracy under Vladimir Putin has been the inevitable, and to most Russians desirable, result.

Democracy cannot flourish where there is no national unity

Democracy is impossible when there is fundamental hostility between large groups in a nation state - as in Iraq and the former Yugoslavia - and when one side fears that a political victory of another group will harm its fundamental interests. The ability to keep the lid on communal hostility is a strong argument in favour of authoritarian forms of government. RW Johnson argues that where

apparent in surveys carried out in Latin America and East Asia. Evidence gathered by Mark Tessler at the University of Michigan on several countries in the Arab world finds that support for democracy is strong there too. The universal belief in democracy is reflected in the fact that all, or almost all regimes, the worst as much as the best, feel obliged to declare themselves democratic.

"Cultural differences" are an excuse used by elites usurping power

When Prime Minister Wen Jiabao and President Putin in Russia say they have their own systems, "with Chinese characteristics" or (in Russia's case) "managed democracy", argues George Walden, "we know exactly what these characteristics and this management are about." And when we are told that democracy is not the Arab style, and that they have something called "the Arab street" instead, "not to mention the frightfully democratic system of thousands of Saudi princelings in constant touch with their feudal constituents, a smile is in order." There is no case for accepting the notion that to propagate democratic values in certain countries at all is a form of cultural arrogance.

History shows that no nation is unripe for democracy

In 1945, Truman's advisors said that there was no way Japan could be democratised and the same went for Russia and Germany. Now all three are democratic. Natan Sharansky thinks the reason is simple: "People from all over want to live in a society that permits dissent; this is a free society...to be able to say what you feel is such a relief." The ability to express dissent and rid yourself of a "huge weight on your shoulders" is a great freedom. "This in the end explains why the Germans, Russians, Japanese, and Latin Americans have embraced democracy...because they prefer not to live under tyranny."

The voters of Afghanistan deserve our respect

Many Afghan people braved rockets, bombs and intimidation and came out to vote in the recent presidential elections, showing that they prefer ballots over bullets. Although Taliban intimidation appeared to have kept many voters home and there have been reports of ballot rigging, the elections are surely a step in right direction and should be welcomed by the international community. The argument that Afghanistan is somehow inherently unsuited to democracy seems a patronising, Western fallacy.

Poor democracies do better than autocracies

China aside, there is no evidence that poor authoritarian countries grow any more rapidly than poor democracies, says Joseph Siegle. On average, between 1960 and 2005, poor democracies, excluding the East Asian economies, have grown 50% more rapidly than poor autocracies. The Baltic countries, Botswana, Costa Rica, Ghana, and Senegal have grown more rapidly than the Angolas, the Syrias, the Uzbekistans, and the Zimbabwes of this world. In terms of life expectancy, poor democracies typically enjoy life expectancies that are nine years longer than poor autocracies. Opportunities of finishing secondary school are 40% higher. Infant mortality rates are 25% lower. Agricultural yields are about 25% higher, on average, in poor democracies than in poor autocracies.

For Iraq (and Afghanistan), democracy is the only hope

Now that there is no single entity in Iraq capable of dominating the state the way that the Sunni state apparatus under the Baath Party previously did, there is now no other way forward for the Iraqis than representative democracy, argues Noah Feldman. Take Baghdad - a city of seven million people - fourteen times the size of Sarajevo. "There are Kurds, there are significant numbers of Sunni, and there are Shia. The populations are embroiled. There's no way to walk away from a civil war in the rest of the country without tremendous bloodshed in Baghdad." Democracy, he says is Iraq's "only hope" Things, he says are going badly "but if you don't try democracy I guarantee you much worse."

Democracies can learn from their mistakes

The peculiar post-war history of Britain is encouraging for democracy, argues Patrick Minford: "we tried majoritarian

countries have been cobbled together artificially, they can often only be ruled dictatorially. "The only thing to do is to break them up into smaller units that are capable of supporting democratic rule. Yugoslavia was a prime example."

expropriation after the war, it impoverished us dramatically, and under Margaret Thatcher we then set out on the route of free markets and state self-restraint." If Britain can learn, why not others?

Functioning democracy depends on Western concepts of civic nationalism

Partha Chatterjee argues that individuals exist in two dimensions: at a personal level, but also as part of a group or groups. In many countries, especially in Asia, group allegiance tends to be stronger than a commitment to the nation state or "demos". It tends to lead to cronyism and the dictatorship of the majority. Even in the most successful of the region's democracies, India, politicians are widely reviled as criminals, and many are: in the last elections in the Indian state of Bihar, several candidates fought their campaign from behind bars in jail and at least 33 of Bihar's State Assembly MPs have criminal records. It is worse still in Afghanistan. Robert Fisk doubts whether anyone voted in the recent elections because of the policies of their favourite candidate. "They voted for whoever their ethnic leaders told them to vote for. Hence Karzai asked Dostum to deliver him the Uzbek vote. Abdullah Abdullah relies on the Tajik vote, Karzai on the Pashtuns." The idea that Afghanistan might become a western style liberal democracy is absurd, he says. "Nato soldiers go on dying for the pitiful illusion that we can clean the place up. We can't. We are not going to."

For many societies enlightened despotism is the best model

William Dalrymple cites the example of Bhutan as a successful enlightened monarchy. Bhutan has been governed since 1903 by the Wangchuk kings according to the notion of Gross National Happiness, a concept that has tried to balance material prosperity and economic development with the retention of traditional values and environmental sensitivity. As a result, compared with its neighbour Nepal, where the advent of democracy brought about a looting of the state treasury and took the country to the brink of collapse, opening the way for the takeover of large swaths of the country by Maoist guerrillas, it is a "Himalayan Eden" where people enjoy gentle prosperity and there is none of the urban sprawl of cities like Kathmandu or Shimla. However the Bhutanese monarchy, for reasons best known to itself, has decided to turn itself into a democratic constitutional monarchy. On a visit to Bhutan in 2008, Dalrymple found widespread scepticism: "almost everyone I talked to was anxious that democracy could bring to Bhutan the sort of corruption and mismanagement, as well as ethnic and class divisions, that have bedevilled democratic politics in most other South Asian countries." An intelligent tyrant with an interest in his subjects' well-being may often be preferable to a stupid, grasping and short-termist "democratic" majority.

The Chinese example offers a better model for developing nations

China's Communist leadership offers an alternative to both the western and Soviet experiences: you can be rich, but not free. China's leaders have provided a legal code and the rule of law that would-be investors and entrepreneurs demand without the political freedom that democrats claim must go with it and the result has been to build the fastest growing economy in the world. The Chinese model offers two of the cardinal virtues of liberal democracy - wealth and the law - without the third, freedom. Given their history in the past 100 years, there are many reasons why this is attractive to the average Chinese. The result is a sustainable authoritarianism enabled by the efficiency of the capitalist system.

Western liberal democracy is failing

Agree

[Western democracy is becoming mob rule](#)

[Western democracy promotes inequality](#)

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Disagree

[European democracy is alive and well](#)

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No democracy is immune to authoritarian illiberalism

Democracy depends on the power of the gun

Democracies tend to ossify and protect vested interests:

The liberal democratic nation state is the least worst model

Western democracy is becoming mob rule

President Bush told tyrants not to abuse their peoples, but his government detained people without trial at Guantanamo Bay and sanctioned "extraordinary rendition". In Britain the Labour government promotes mass surveillance and legislates to extend detention without trial. Western Parliaments no longer hold their executives to account. The expenses scandal in Britain seems to signal a group of people who have lost pride in their function and instead exploit it for personal gain. Democratic assemblies are the heart of representative democracy, yet they are losing their purpose. The real key to freedom, argues Michael Munger, Chair of Political Science at Duke University, is not democracy but "freedom from democracy" or tyranny by the majority. What matters most, agrees Sam Brittan, "is what is known in Anglo Saxon jurisprudence as "due process", which means that government decisions cannot be made at the whim of the head of government and a few soul mates sitting on a sofa."

Western democracy promotes inequality

According to Marxism, democracy suffers from a contradiction between political equality on the one hand and economic equality on the other hand. The absence of the latter prevents the full realisation of the former. The wealthy have the means and power to inform themselves, to lobby, to influence, to get themselves elected, to defend themselves in court and to widen the gap between themselves and the rest. John Pilger thinks that, in Britain, democracy has been emptied of its dictionary meaning; "Instead, we have the kind of democracy that promotes grand theft as "wealth creation" and hides its poor and throws countless young people on an educational scrapheap at the age of seven." Ariel Levy agrees: "Governing by majority by definition creates minorities - whose interests are then more often than not under-served. And when you combine democracy with capitalism, the resulting governmental stew becomes an economy of haves and have nots."

Too much democracy makes responsible government impossible

California enjoys a form of participatory democracy known as the ballot proposition system, under which state laws may be proposed and the constitution amended by the public after a referendum. As this has meant votes for more spending on services and lower taxes, the result has been to drive California to a state of virtual bankruptcy which threatens to undermine America's stuttering emergence from recession. California is an extreme case, but it illustrates the danger of short-termism to which democracies are prone. Matthew Parris admits he has a problem with democracy "rooted in the possibility that through ignorance or folly, the public may simply be wrong." There are issues, he says (appeasement in the 1930s was one) "where the crowd misunderstands, grabs the wrong end of the stick or wilfully refuses to meet its responsibilities. There are matters of great complexity where decisions may have to run ahead of public understanding: for or against nuclear power, for instance, or for or against GM crops. Sometimes people refuse to accept the inevitable, such as electronic road pricing. And, despite this Government's squandering of public trust on security issues, there can be things government knows that the people cannot fully know. As Winston Churchill once remarked: "the best argument against democracy is a five-minute conversation with the average voter".

Western democracy has entrenched the power of unelected elites

Even though more countries than ever before have competitive elections, says Adam Przeworski, many "suffer from dissatisfaction and shallow political participation all around the world, in developed countries as well as in less developed". The EU, for many, is a case in point. As Francis Fukuyama has argued, the "European vision" is

European democracy is alive and well

Europe, where democracy was invented 25 centuries ago, is now a hotbed of it, says Timothy Garton Ash. "Messy, often corrupt, distorted by media ownership, sometimes disconcerting in its outcomes - but still definitely democracy, a system in which the people can change the government. Not a month goes by without an election somewhere in Europe. And you never know who's going to win." Half today's European states have enjoyed liberal democracy for less than a generation. And from Portugal to Croatia, the prospect and process of joining the EU have strengthened democracy in country after country. "This has been, and for a few candidate countries still is, Europe's transformative power," he argues "more effective in securing regime change than any army." James Kirkup agrees. "Even when liberal democracy faced its most explosive threat on the afternoon of 11 September, 2001, it came through remarkably unscathed. Undoubtedly, some rules have been broken, most repulsively by the US in Guantanamo Bay. But western-style liberal democracy is still the norm in around 100 countries around the world that adhere to the holy trinity of free votes, free markets and the rule of law."

The best thing about democracy is we can throw the rascals out

Critics of democracy often presuppose the existence of an enlightened elite- drawn, say, from the legal community - capable of doing the right thing and restraining the instincts of the mob. But, says John Sullivan, not only do elites lack accountability, they have become politicised and are often distinguishable from mobs only by their credentials at the alternative to "mob rule". Democracy generates its own authority in the voting booth, and wields its own correction in the form of throwing the rascals out

The good thing about western democracy is that it's undemocratic

What is distinctive about the American system, argues Fareed Zakaria, "is not how democratic it is but rather how undemocratic it is." In general, people are protected from the repressive aspects of mob rule by constitutional restraints on elected governments.

There is no true freedom without democracy

The relationship between democracy and freedom was stated by Joseph Schumpeter: "If everyone is free to compete for political leadership by presenting himself to the electorate, this will in most cases, though not in all, mean a considerable amount of freedom of discussion for all, in particular it will normally mean a considerable amount of freedom of the press. This relation between freedom and democracy is not absolutely stringent and can be tampered with... At the same time it is all there is..."

The liberal democratic nation state is the least worst model

The nation state has many defects, though a democratic nation state is generally better for its citizens and neighbours than an authoritarian one. The alternatives to the nation state are tribalism or anarchy, neither of which provide any sort of basis for security or prosperity. As Winston Churchill observed: "No one pretends that democracy is perfect or all-wise. Indeed it has been said that democracy is the worst form of Government - except for all those other forms that have been tried from time to time."

another way of transferring power to elites: "The very idea that this legitimacy is handed downwards from a willowy, disembodied international level rather than handed upwards from concrete, legitimate democratic publics on a nation-state level virtually invites abuse on the part of elites who are then free to interpret the will of the international community to suit their own preferences." Though coming from a pro-EU perspective, Samuel Brittan made a very similar point in 2005. The EU, he says, promotes a "corporatist mode" based on a balancing of interest groups (eg unions, business organisations) as the main actors with government in the economic game. But, he points out, "it leaves totally out of account the individual citizen who is not represented by these interest group bureaucracies: the unemployed worker who is priced out of a job; the person whose earnings are held down by compulsory retirement ages or working hour limits; the unorthodox craftsman who does not possess approved accreditation, and so on."

No democracy is immune to authoritarian illiberalism

Democrats argue that democratic governments are legitimate because they are elected. But procedure is no substitute for morality and the results of "liberal" democracy are often anything but moral. In Europe, democratically elected politicians such as Jörg Haider, Jean-Marie Le Pen, Silvio Berlusconi, Umberto Bossi, Gianfranco Fini, Pim Fortuyn and Nick Griffin are a reminder of democracy's defects. Even "respectable" European democrats often behave repressively. Between the mid-1930s and the mid-1970s, the Swedish government forcibly sterilised thousands of women, because of 'mental defects', or simply because they were of 'mixed race'. Yet Sweden was hailed as a model democracy for the entire period. No so-called constitutional safeguards can protect against such abuses. President Bush showed how easy it is to overturn fundamental constitutional protections by redefining some American citizens as 'illegal enemy combatants'. At the heart of the case for democracy is the implicit claim that a democracy which tortures, for instance, is preferable to a dictatorship which does not. That is immoral nonsense.

Democracy depends on the power of the gun

A democracy is a political regime in which political power is exercised by controlling the membership of a demos, a group within which political decisions are taken, in practice a nation state. Control of territory and migration are preconditions for democracy - as is the indivisibility of the demos. Legitimacy collapses in the face of secessionism. Yet the forces of secession are growing in nearly every country in Europe and in countries like Belgium, they are threatening to tear the demos apart and undermine the legitimacy of the state. The reality is that a democratic nation state ultimately depends on force. Most democratic regimes in Europe were enforced from outside - by invasion, occupation, or as a condition of economic aid - and in the final analysis, they depend on force to prevent the unlimited secession of minorities. It is this aspect of democracy that has wedded democrats to the forces of nationalism. Democracy reinforces nationalism as a state formation ideology. That is wrong in itself as it assumes that only certain groups are a legitimate 'demos', and it encourages nationalist violence in state formation and in resisting secessionism - look at what happened in the former Yugoslavia.

Democracies tend to ossify and protect vested interests:

The late Prof Mancur Olson of Maryland University argued that economies tend to ossify in liberal democracies. Vested interests organise and lobby for special privileges, which ordinary citizens cannot resist, being unorganised and having individually too little at stake. On the Olson view democracies may become overweight and sclerotic economically, failing to deliver what their electorates want. Their peoples have notional freedom but it is not effective in producing what they freely desire.

Conclusion

Ask people to list the benefits of democracy and they will usually cite the rule of law, freedom of the press, minority rights and so on. Yet, as Fareed Zakaria and others have observed, these institutions are not an automatic consequence of giving people the right to vote. In countries where people, in James L Payne's phrase, lack the "broad cultural mindset" which underpins liberal democratic values and institutions, the introduction of democracy

based on popular representation can bring instability, violence and repression.

Yet throughout the world people want democracy. Democratic campaigners are right to say that “control over your own life is a universal value. Few people are willing to accept that their lives are controlled by others.” Yet they are wrong to claim that the right to vote guarantees this value. Ask the Tamils incarcerated in internment camps in Sri Lanka whether they feel they have control over their own lives! Yet Sri Lanka is a democracy.

All this suggests that the whole concept of democracy is far more complex than is suggested by American neocons who urge the transformative power of the ballot box. Democracy may indeed be good for everyone, but it may take centuries to get there.