

Rethinking Democracy: A Historical and Theoretical Exploration of its True Essence

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ABSTRACT

This research paper is an attempt to assess expanding role and essence of democracy with reference to historical developments, ideological principles and conceptual variations. Main purpose of this study is to assess whether democracy is just a political ideology and a form of government or its role is expanding in other aspects of human life. For this purpose, the researchers revisit democratic history and ideals to dig out the aim of study. It is revealed how a liberal, vigilant and educated society is the backbone of democracy. Study also provides a brief account of historical progress and philosophical foundations of democratic governance, particularly focusing on the role of popular sovereignty, equality, and liberty. Study highlights the expanding scope of democracy as moulder of individual behaviour, knitting of new social fabric and an agent of cultural change. This paper briefly assesses the theoretical debates among key philosophers such as Hobbes, Locke, Rousseau and their impact on democratic development through major revolutions and constitutional changes. The paper aim is to present a consolidated view of democracy by combining classical political theory with contemporary democratic practices. This study was conducted with the help of qualitative method and textual content analysis technique. Historical and philosophical approaches are applied as basic frame work to assess core issues.

Keywords: *Democracy, Popular Sovereignty, Equality, Liberty, Direct Democracy, Representative Democracy, Rule of Law, Political Theory, Secularism, Community, Social Fabric*

INTRODUCTION

The people of Athens were called demo and their rule was known as cracy, simply unlike modern representative democracy Greek democracy was direct democracy which was applicable in a town or a small city of few thousand people. It was just a beginning; however, democracy has a long journey to achieve success and its present shape, it is a story of hardships, difficulties and sacrifices. It combined theoretical work and wisdom of statesmen with practical experiences of human societies. Today democracy is acknowledged and appreciated as effective and successful

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working system of government but it is not a static theory, its journey is still continued with human wisdom and consciousness.

Relevancy of time and availability of required conditions are very important for the working of any political system, therefore, there was a time when democracy and prevailing conditions had no match and it was abandoned by Greeks due to an attack of sages of the ages and lacking of relevant requirements. And now those who reject democracy with same arguments are also ready to pick it by suggesting few amendments as per their need and requirement. Democracy is based on sovereign right of people to legislate, liberty, equality, fraternity, accountability, rule of law and human rights. Generally democracy is debated and discussed as a political ideology and system of governance, all traditional and democratic theorist from Rousseau to Robert. A. Dahl focus on the democracy as political participation and state affairs.

However, there is need to know that democracy is a system of state and form of government or something more beyond this. If besides political ideology it has some more important aspects then what is the real essence of democracy? This whole study revolves around this said question. For this purpose it is necessary to reach at a conclusion with the help of brief analytical view of democratic history and its principles which may couple it with the help of some modern theorists. This study is very important for readers and researchers, it will help to realise students and researchers to go for democratic ideals with different aspects. Study may help one to think how democracy can be adjustable in country like Pakistan with Islamic context of state because this study reveals democracy is adjustable with new modifications and concepts in any state. Lastly study may help to others for more work because research and creativity has no end. Organization of this study contains a brief abstract, an introduction, targeted literature review, research methodology, data analysis, findings and conclusion. In the end a list of references or end notes is added following the APA style. Whole study revolves around these two questions. Is democracy a more than form of government and political ideology? What is the real essence of democracy?

LITERATURE REVIEW

The development of democratic theory has been the subject of extensive academic discourse across centuries. Foundational works such as Dahl (1989) emphasized participation, inclusivity, and equality as the cornerstones of democratic systems. Heywood (2002) highlighted the diversity of democratic structures, distinguishing between liberal, direct, and representative models in comparative political contexts. Sartori (1965) laid the groundwork for evaluating democratic typologies by identifying criteria for classifying democratic regimes. In addition, John Stuart Mill (1961) advocated for liberty and education as essential prerequisites for democracy's success, warning against the tyranny of the majority. Robert A. Dahl (1998) further argued that democracy must be measured not only by institutions but also by the degree to which citizens can participate meaningfully in governance. His theory of polyarchy provided a framework for understanding modern democracies as pluralistic systems.

Contemporary scholars such as Larry Diamond (2008) and David Held (2006) have contributed significantly to understanding democratic consolidation in transitional societies,

emphasizing the role of civil society, political accountability, and institutional trust. Francis Fukuyama (2011) added to the debate by linking democracy with state capacity and rule of law, suggesting that procedural democracy alone is insufficient without effective governance. Moreover, historical critiques from Alexis de Tocqueville continue to influence democratic discourse, especially in highlighting the dangers of majoritarianism and the erosion of individual liberty. More recent works by Pippa Norris (2017) have explored the crisis of democracy in the 21st century, focusing on populism, electoral distrust, and global democratic backsliding. This literature collectively confirms that democracy is not a fixed formula but a dynamic and evolving process—deeply embedded in philosophical roots, socio-political contexts, and institutional innovations

In addition, historical analyses from thinkers such as Tocqueville and contemporary critiques of majoritarianism and representation have informed the complexities surrounding democratic implementation. This literature collectively affirms that democracy is both an evolving idea and a contested practice, influenced by philosophical, cultural, and structural dynamics. A lot of literature is available on democracy but research and study is endless process, generally democracy is debated as political system, form of government and share of people. Author of this study also couldn't ignore these basic realities, however, tried to highlight essence of democracy on focusing its basic ideology and expanding role. There is need to do more and more work on its essence in the light of globalization and expanding activism.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study is based on non-experimental design, qualitative method and textual contents analysis technique. Historical and philosophical approaches are also used for better understanding of conceptual developments. The main text synthesizes classical and modern democratic thought, grounded in primary political philosophy, texts and academic references. For the literature review and theoretical framework, scholarly sources are analysed through content analysis to highlight recurring themes and critical perspectives on democracy.

Historical and Philosophical Evolution of Democracy

The concept of democracy is not a modern invention but dates back over twenty-five centuries to ancient Greece. Although the Greeks initially embraced democracy, philosophical opposition—most notably from influential thinkers—led to its eventual decline (Bradat, 1988, p. 46). Following this decline, democracy disappeared from Western discourse for many centuries, during which time it was often criticized as an impractical or flawed form of governance (Corcoran, 1983; Rodee et al., 2000, p. 44; Sartori, 1965, p. 373).

The new episode of democracy in Europe began gradually over the last two and a half centuries. The idea of supreme and absolute rule of people challenged shared authority and rule of kings and popes and the making its adoption slow and contested (Corcoran, 1983; Sartori, 1965, p. 91). Yet today, democracy has become a global aspiration, replacing autocratic regimes and expanding across diverse political systems (Kesselman, Krieger, & Joseph, n.d.; Agarwal, 2009, p. 266).

Ancient democratic models, such as those in Greek city-states, were direct and exclusive. These systems excluded large portions of the population and lacked institutional complexity (Sartori, 1965, pp. 250–251). In contrast, modern democracy rests on the concept of the social contract, developed by Hobbes, Locke, and Rousseau, emphasizing rights of individuals and collective governance. The political turbulence in 17th-century England paved the way for democratic ideas, particularly through the conflict between the monarchy and Parliament (Bradat, 1988, p. 47). The English Civil War, Puritan movements and the Glorious Revolution of 1688 culminated in the Bill of Rights (1689), establishing parliamentary supremacy and influencing liberal democracy (Bradat, 1988, p. 50).

Hobbes viewed the state as most powerful agency to avoid chaos and establish peace, supporting absolute monarchy yet recognizing the governed as the source of authority. Locke's version promoted legislative supremacy and public consent, emphasizing cooperation and human rationality. Rousseau contributed the idea of collective will and sovereignty of people, which provided foundations of the American and French revolutions (Bradat, 1988, pp. 47–48). The American Declaration of Independence (1776) and the U.S. Constitution (1787) reflect these ideas. The French Revolution (1789), laid foundations for democratic values and secular governance (Kesselman et al., n.d., p. 97).

Later thinkers such as Bentham, Mill, and Dewey advanced liberal democracy, emphasizing personal liberty, protection of minority rights and resistance to tyranny of majority. (Baradat, 1988). Democracy as share of power appears direct or pure and indirect or representative government. As structure democracy works as parliamentary, presidential and hybrid forms. Parliamentary democracy is based on fusion between legislature and executive like UK, presidential system is based on fission between said branches like USA, while hybrid structure is the mixture of both like China and France. (Baradat, 1988) Majoritarian systems, such as first-past-the-post, often lead to a concentration of power in a few dominant parties, while proportional representation systems allow for a more diverse political landscape by allocating seats based on vote share. Each system presents advantages and limitations regarding fairness, stability, and minority representation (Norris, 2017).

Despite their structural differences, successful democracies share common institutional features: free and fair elections, an independent judiciary, protection of civil liberties and checks and balances on power. These institutions ensure that representatives remain accountable to the public and that political competition occurs within a framework of legal and ethical norms (Diamond, 2008). As democracies continue to evolve, emerging forms such as participatory and deliberative democracy aim to increase citizen engagement beyond periodic elections. These models encourage broader involvement through public consultations, citizen assemblies, and grass roots movements, reflecting the dynamic and adaptive nature of democratic governance (Held, 2006).

Essence of Democracy with its Theoretical and Expanding Role

Democracy functions effectively as both an ideology and a system of governance in the modern era. However, John Stuart Mill cautioned against two threats to democracy: widespread

ignorance and the tyranny of the majority, driven by the self-interest of both rulers and citizens (Harmon, n.d.). A democratic framework necessitates political awareness and comprehension among leaders and citizens, achievable through robust education and training systems. A liberal government is inherently supported by a liberal society which itself emerges from educational foundations (Mill, 1861). A government "of the people" implies active citizen engagement in governance. Such participation requires an alert and proactive populace. The essence of democracy lies in its people; thus, apathetic or indifferent individuals undermine its principles. Vigilant citizens ensure continuous oversight of governmental actions. Education and awareness foster tolerance and liberalism, creating an environment conducive to power-sharing and constructive opposition (Haq, 2005, pp. 296–297).

Democracy thrives on robust public opinion, which depends on freedoms of thought and expression. A thriving democracy is ultimately shaped by informed public discourse (Sartori, 1965, p. 74). Opinions must be permitted to develop freely. Time serves as the ultimate judge of an opinion's validity. Societies that suppress dissenting views risk becoming tyrannical, as stifling debate obstructs the evaluation of ideas (Mill, 1961, p. 255). For an opinion to hold weight, it must translate into actionable influence. In democracies, this is achieved through free and fair elections, which act as the driving force for democratic progress (Heywood, 2002, p. 229). Successful elections depend on peace, equity, equal opportunities, high participation, effective campaigning, and universal acceptance of outcomes (Weiner, 2006, p. (Machan, 2014)).

Representative democracy relies on political parties to uphold civilian supremacy. Parties educate, train, motivate, and represent the populace, functioning as dual pillars: one governing and the other opposing. Modern democracies, such as those in the U.K., U.S.A., India, Pakistan, and France, adhere to this framework. While the U.S. Constitution initially overlooked parties, they emerged swiftly post-ratification. Multi-party systems, as in France, Germany, Pakistan, and India, further exemplify this dynamic (Agarwal, 2009, pp. 270–271). A democratic state risks descending into mobocracy without a constitution and independent judiciary. Constitutions establish principles and rules for governance, while an impartial judiciary safeguards constitutional and individual rights (Agarwal, 2009, p. 271). Democracy's core principle—rule by the people—positions popular will as the ultimate authority (Agarwal, 2009, p. 267). However, ambiguity arises in defining "the people," as minors, those with mental incapacities, and certain adults (e.g., criminals, tax evaders) are excluded. Phrases like "organic whole" risk overshadowing individual agency.

Realistically, democracy entails majority rule while protecting minority rights, ensuring no oppression of one group by another (Sartori, 1965, pp. 18–19). Majoritarian systems in democracies like the U.K., U.S.A., and India pose representation challenges for minorities. Proportional representation, as in Canada and New Zealand, mitigates these issues by ensuring broader power-sharing (Heywood, 2002, p. 232). Democratic power rests on absolute or simple majorities, with popular sovereignty enabling legislation and veto rights. Without public consent, democracy falters (Lutz, 1980, p. (Holyoake, 1896, p. 51)). Equality—a rallying cry in the American (1776) and French (1789) revolutions—sustains popular sovereignty. It entails equal legal standing and opportunities, not uniform treatment. Political equality guarantees universal suffrage and non-discriminatory access to office. Legal equality ensures uniform justice,

dismantling privilege and absolutism. Economic equality fosters fair competition and security, while social equality rejects discrimination based on identity or status (Haq, 2005, p. 251; Sorgent, 1981, pp. (Feldman, 2005, p. 14)–41). Democracy intertwines freedom, liberty, and rights. Freedom denotes absence of coercion, whereas liberty refers to socially and politically recognized freedoms. Rights, legally protected liberties, prevent anarchy by balancing individual autonomy with societal order (Sorgent, 1981, pp. (Feldman, 2005, p. 14)–41).

Democracies safeguard life, liberty, property, and happiness through laws and constitutions (Machan, 2014). Human rights, enshrined in documents like the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, reflect democratic commitments to liberty and equality. The U.S. Constitution's Bill of Rights exemplifies immutable protections. The U.K., despite its monarchical structure, upholds rule of law and democratic rights (Ghiorgis, 2014). Western democracies prioritize accountable governance, equality, and rights but often neglect secularism—a separation of religion and state rooted in Enlightenment-era revolts against ecclesiastical dominance. Secularism, coined by Holyoake (1896, p. 51), confines religion to private life, barring its political influence (Feldman, 2005, p. 14). A modern theorist observes that soul of democracy is mass participation and freedom of people, to achieve the purpose of participation there is need to establish and protect public institution and safeguarding themselves individual rights. (Mounk, 2018).

Another well-known contemporary theorist outlines five pillars of representative democracy: active political participation, equitable elections, public influence in policy making, an informed citizenry, and governance serving all citizens equally (Dahl, 1989, pp. 85–86)

Democracy is not mere a political ideology, there are modern writers who viewed democracy with different angels and convinced that it is equally an important pattern of individual and social life of the people. According to a modern theorist it is wrong to conclude democracy mere as a system of political participation and a form of governance, it has behavioural, social and cultural aspects. Democracy is now a life pattern which effect individual and social values of life. (Almond & Verbs, 1963). Democracy has contributed in reorganizing modern complex society and it also promote a valuable process of socialization (Held, 2005).

Democracy evolved economic values with social effects, it reflects how communities interact with each other for power sharing and economic gains within larger scale of society. (Macpherson, 1977) According to Smith (2020), democracy is commonly known for public participation in state affairs and a political aspect of people's life. But it is not a whole story now democracy is a versatile and universal practice, it is an individual attitude, social fabric and cultural beauty. (Smith, 2020). A latest approach in the perspective of democracy is very appealing. Real essence of democracy is its contribution in creating a sense of one community among people regardless of cast, colour and class. Democracy connected societies through shared values and common good. Its result is a flexibility in social structure and progression in culture. This modern approach of new theorist makes democracy adaptable for all societies on the basis of sharing of common human values. (Johnson, 2019).

FINDINGS

Study reveals some very important findings, firstly, it highlights that democracy has never been remained a best form of government for all times, it could not work during golden days of Greeks and remained obsolete system for many centuries. But now it is successful working system in contemporary age. So it may be said democracy is not the best but most suitable and working form of government in prevailing conditions. Secondly, form of government is meaningless without required reforms and welfare for people, so democratic attraction lies in its reforms and provision of rights for people. Thirdly, it is revealed democracy believes in picking and choosing all those human values which are the requirements of a good citizenship and a peaceful human society.

Theorists are always ready to pick any good from everywhere to strengthen democratic stability and socio-economic life. Fourthly, democracy was a form of government and political system in the past but now concept and practice has widened its scope and impact. Democracy is now a political affair, individual attitude, communal sense of share and social fabric with new cultural values. Lastly, the main focus of this study is essence of democracy, it is found that real essence of democracy is not the matter of its principles, this study reveals democracy is more than a political ideology and its essence is welfare for all with human dignity, good citizenship and sense of communal share through fabric of human values in society. So democracy is an agent of change in political culture and social life of the people. Democratic norms are the part of individual character, family life, social bonds and economic uplift.

This study has some recommendations for learners and scholars. There is need to conduct studies on democracy with reference to differences of societies. Scholars should do more work to make democracy adjustable in under developed and conservative societies. As a well-known writer of modern times. Feldman in his book, *Fall and Rise of Islamic State* claims there are two surviving political ideologies in 21st century, one is democracy and other is Islamic state. Therefore it is recommended that Muslims scholars, researcher and academia should conduct comparative studies to develop workable relation between both ideologies considering basic principles and structural issues.

CONCLUSION

In the end it is concluded that democracy has gone through different phases of the history, it is not a matter of haste and hurry to achieve desired political stability, political consciousness and well-being for people. It is a journey of passion, tolerance and struggle, price of democracy is sacrifice, vigilance and a liberal society. Its success became possible with combination of great men's wisdom and practical participation of people. Common people have no interest in theoretical slogans and forms of government, they always look for practical gains and reforms, therefore, the secret of democratic success is its gains and reforms and it is real essence of democracy. Democracy is now a political order, individual character and a social pattern of life. Democracy is very flexible ideology to include any valuable idea and utilitarian practice as a part of democracy so democracy is in progress for more theoretical ideas and practice.

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