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What is Democracy, and is it the One?

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Introduction

A press release from the White House dated December 12, 2005 contained the following summary:¹

Today, the President Addressed Iraq's Incredible Political Transformation. Two and a half years ago, Iraq was in the grip of a cruel dictator. Since then, Iraqis have assumed sovereignty of their country, held free elections, drafted a democratic constitution, and approved that constitution in a nationwide referendum. In three days, they will go to the polls for the third time this year and choose a new government under their new constitution. Difficult work remains, but 2005 will be recorded as a turning point in the history of Iraq, the Middle East, and freedom.

Today, the White House still maintains that a key strategic goal in the War in Iraq is the establishment and preservation of democracy in Iraq. In *National Strategy for Victory in Iraq*, published by the National Security Council and available on the White House website, we find that “[a]n emerging democracy in Iraq will change the regional status quo that for decades has bred alienation and spawned the transnational terrorism that targets us today.” While it is not my purpose to engage in the ongoing debate concerning our presence in Iraq or the inherent problems of introducing democracy specifically into the Middle East, let us be clear about one fact: it is in the best interest of the *United States* that Iraq become fully democratic and emerge as “an ally in the War on Terrorism.” Whether it is in the best interest of Iraq is another question altogether and perhaps remains to be seen. But for the purposes of this paper, the Iraq situation raises two fundamental questions: Why do we naturally assume that democracy is the best form of government for everyone (including ourselves), and what exactly do we mean by “democracy” anyway?

¹ <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2005/12/20051212-1.html>.

What is Democracy?

Let us take the second question first, since it is, on the surface at least, less complicated. The term “democracy” was invented by the ancient Greeks from the roots *dēmos* (people) and *kratos* (power) to describe a form of government in which political power rested primarily with the *dēmos*—a word variously interpreted as “the people,” “the majority,” and “the riff-raff.” Although democracies emerged in many Greek city-states (*poleis*) over the course of the sixth century B.C.,² we know almost nothing about the details of these constitutions.³ Only in the case of Athens do we have abundant evidence from a number of sources that inform us in detail concerning the specific form of her democracy. Though democracy was primarily a sixth-century phenomenon, scholars have identified important trends that reach back as far as eighth-century B.C. that suggest conditions in Greece were ripe for democratic development.⁴ Democracy, therefore, is not only a Greek word; it is also a uniquely Greek phenomenon.

The Athenian form of democracy, with which we are most familiar, is strikingly different than our own. Most substantially, the Athenians practiced a *direct* form of democracy whereas ours is an *indirect* or *representative*. All Athenian citizens (male, non-slave, that is) would

² Aristotle at *Politics* 1291b4 and following outlines the different types of Greek democracy based on the compilation of over 150 constitutions taken from Greek city-states.

³ The term *polis* (city-state, plural *poleis*), from which the English word “politics” derives, implies a small but autonomous area of land inhabited by members of the same clan. The term *politeia*, translated here as “constitution,” means not only the governmental structure but also the *customs* of a city-state.

⁴ Here are three: first, in the late 8th and 7th centuries B.C., a particular kind of warfare developed called “hoplite” warfare after the Greek word for shield. Hoplite warfare was based on tightly-packed formations with overlapping shields and relied on strict discipline in the face of the enemy. Most importantly, hoplite warfare was a cooperative and egalitarian affair: both wealthy and poor fought side-by-side as *equals*, relying upon each other for success in war, which was always a threat. Second, a seventh-century B.C. law in Crete imposing term limits on public office enacted by the *polis* and the *dēmioi* (= *dēmos*) suggests that the people participated in political affairs. Last, we may add the fact that “the Greek moral and political vocabulary was always thin on words for ‘obedience’ or ‘subordination.’” Homeric heroes in assembly must, just as citizens in Athens would later, *persuade* one another rather than *command*, *order*, or *decree*.

meet in the *ekklēsia* (assembly) and would vote directly on agenda items set by the Council. We might compare the modern referendum, where a motion or bill is submitted to the whole citizen body of a town or state. Additionally, in Athens all citizens had the opportunity to speak and to persuade the assembly to vote one way or the other, though our evidence suggests that the assembly was dominated by a handful of skilled speakers. Numerous other institutions placed power in the hands of citizens. To mention but one more, juries (sometimes as large as 2,501 members!) were selected by lot to judge all sorts of cases.

We have thus far been discussing democracy as a political institution—where the power lies, how the government is structured, how decisions are made—but the word democracy evokes, as much for the Athenians as for us, a set of political *ideals* centered around freedom and equality. One of the most forceful ancient expressions of this comes from Pericles' funeral oration, so vividly told in Thucydides' *History of the Peloponnesian War* (book 2, chapters 34–46). After articulating how all citizens, rich and poor, were treated equally before the law, he goes on, “and, just as our political life is free and open, so is our day-to-day life in our relations with each other. We do not get into a state with our next-door neighbor if he enjoys himself in his own way, nor do we give him the kind of black looks which, though they do no real harm, still do hurt other people's feelings. We are free and tolerant in our public lives; but in public affairs we keep to the law. This is because it commands our deep respect” (trans. Rex Warner).

As a sort of experiment, ask ten of your friends, acquaintances, and family members to define democracy; then, ask them what it means to them. Note how different the answers are.

The Best Form of Government?

I would like to relate to you a story—an absolutely true one—of what happened to me recently. In a local McDonalds I was waiting for my order (salad, I promise) when in comes a group of young adults laughing and chatting. Catching sight of a man with a Niagara Falls t-shirt on, one of them asks him where it was. When he mentions that it was on the U.S.-Canada border, another youth pipes up, “Really? I thought it was somewhere, like, in Arizona.” As if this was not bad enough, yet another chimes in, “I really never cared nothing about learning about America.” Are these people, citizens all, empowered and enfranchised, really the kind of people we want to decide the course of our community, not to mention our nation?

This is reminiscent of another story from the fourth-century B.C., one about an Athenian general and statesman named Phokion who lived in the middle of the fourth-century B.C., a time that might justifiably be called the “height” of Athenian democracy. Remember that in their particular form of democratic government the whole citizen body would assemble together, would listen to proposals, and would vote on them—and the majority vote would carry the day. Phokion was dismissive and contemptuous of the political judgment of the *dēmos*, so one day, when he himself put forward a particular proposal, and when it was met with spontaneous applause and approval by the assembly, he nervously turned to the man sitting next to him and asked “Did I say something foolish?”⁵

Debate around democracy usually was predicated on just this question: who is fit to rule? The political tension in the sixth and fifth centuries was mainly between oligarchic (“rule of a few”) and democratic factions, and so the choice was often between these two forms. An author known as the Old Oligarch,⁶ who wrote an important but highly critical book on the Athenian constitution, wrote, “in all of Greece the best elements of society opposes democracy” (1.5). Why is this? He continues: “This is natural, of course, since the least amount of overindulgence and injustice but the highest amount of scrupulousness in the pursuit of excellence are found in the ranks of the better class, while within the ranks of the *dēmos* will occur the greatest ignorance, disorderliness, rascality—poverty acting as a stronger incentive to base conduct, not to speak of lack of education and ignorance, traceable to the lack of means which afflicts the average of mankind.” Plato,⁷ too, argues strongly against putting power in the people's hands for two reasons. First, the common person lacks the knowledge and expertise to run a government; he equates the process of democracy with allowing the passengers on a ship to steer the course of the ship in place of the captain; this is the so-called “ship of state” metaphor.⁸ Secondly, the common people are less capable of controlling their desires and thus think less rationally

⁵ Plutarch *Life of Phokion* 8.5.

⁶ Although the name “Xenophon” (an important historian) is attached to the work on the Athenian constitution referred to here, it is certainly not by him, and so we call him “Pseudo-Xenophon.” Since the work is anti-democratic and pro-oligarchy, we often refer to the author as “The Old Oligarch.”

⁷ Plato (428/427–348/347 B.C.), student of Socrates, is arguably the most important philosopher within the western tradition. Aristotle, for different reasons, was also critical of democracy.

⁸ *Republic*, book 6 (488a–e). The ancients were fond of equating government with ship sailing, and the English word “governor” (as does “government”) is derived from the Latin *gubernator*, which itself is derived from the Greek word *kybernetes* (“ship-captain”).

about policy and the common good. Just as the mind overrides the stomach's ravenous appetite, he might argue, the best men of the state must curb the people's desires. We might note that Federalist Paper 63, published as all the others under the name Publius but perhaps written by James Madison, argued that the creation of the Senate was motivated, in part, by a desire to defend the people "against their own temporary errors and delusions."⁹

It seems to me that the main difference between the ancient philosophers' arguments against democracy and our own (tacit and usually unexamined) assumption that democracy is the "self-evident" mode of governance is one of perspective. We (as Thucydides) regard democracy from the eyes of an individual: democracy allows us to do whatever we want and pursue our own goals, and it is this right to privacy and freedom from governmental interference that we regard as sacred. The Greek thinkers approached the problem from a different angle; they asked what was best for the city-state, not the individual. And when it came to placing the power in the hands of either the *dēmos* or the (presumably enlightened) elite, they chose the latter.

Let me conclude by stating for the record that I do not wish to take up arms and foment a revolution. After all, it is our democratic life that allows me to spend my days and evenings reading Greek and Latin authors and writing about fundamental questions about the human condition, such as freedom, equality, and the best form of government. Yet Socrates' famous dictum "the unexamined life is not worth living" can and perhaps should be extended into the realm of political thought. We should repeatedly question our preconceived assumptions about the way we govern ourselves (not to mention others), if not to refashion our ways of doing things, at least to remain conscious and aware of the reasons we do things the way we do. A final thought: one would be hard pressed to argue that Iraqis are better off today under their fledgling democracy than they were under

the "brutal" dictator Saddam Hussein. Democracy, in other words, is not the only ingredient for prosperity, nor is it the only form of government that can lead to equality and freedom—those values we treasure so much in our own country.

Further Reading

The best study of Athenian democracy is Mogens Herman Hansen, *The Athenian Democracy in the Age of Demosthenes*, translated by J. A. Crook (Norman, OK 1999). A broader study of democracy's rise in Greece may be found in the excellent collection of papers in Kurt A. Raaflaub, Josiah Ober, and Robert W. Wallace, *Origins of Democracy in Ancient Greece* (Berkeley/Los Angeles/London 2007). Another fine collection of papers concerning the contemporary relevance of classical Greek democracy, written by both classicists and modern political theorists, is worth consulting: Josiah Ober and Charles Hedrick, ed., *Dēmokratia: A Conversation on Democracies, Ancient and Modern* (Princeton 1996).

⁹ Publius continues: "As the cool and deliberate sense of the community ought, in all governments, and actually will, in all free governments, ultimately prevail over the views of its rulers; so there are particular moments in public affairs when the people, stimulated by some irregular passion, or some illicit advantage, or misled by the artful misrepresentations of interested men, may call for measures which they themselves will afterwards be the most ready to lament and condemn. In these critical moments, how salutary will be the interference of some temperate and respectable body of citizens in order to check the misguided career, and to suspend the blow meditated by the people against themselves, until reason, justice, and truth can regain their authority over the public mind? What bitter anguish would not the people of Athens have often escaped if their government had contained so provident a safeguard against the tyranny of their own passions? Popular liberty might then have escaped the indelible reproach of decreeing to the same citizens the hemlock on one day and statues on the next."