

Chapter 8



A Theory of the Democratic Process

“In democratic states,” Aristotle wrote in *The Politics*, “the people [or *demos*] is sovereign; in oligarchies, on the other hand, the few [or *oligoi*] have the position” (1952, 110). Democracy means, literally, rule by the people.¹ But what does it mean to say that the people rule, the people is sovereign, a people governs itself? In order to rule, the people must have some way of ruling, a *process* for ruling. What are the distinctive characteristics of a democratic process of government? For example, how does it differ from rule by the few, or oligarchy?

To answer these questions it is useful to proceed in three stages. First, since democracy is a *political order* it is useful to set out the assumptions that justify the existence of a political order. Second, we need to specify the assumptions that justify a *democratic* political order. Although I shall describe these two sets of assumptions rather abstractly, they are not meant to be ahistorical, and they definitely do not presume the fiction, common in democratic theory since Locke, of a prior “state of nature” out of which a political society emerges by a social contract. Third, we need to describe the essential *criteria* of a democratic political order and indicate how these follow from the assumptions.

ASSUMPTIONS OF A POLITICAL ORDER

To begin with, let us suppose that (say, in a concrete historical situation) some persons have in mind the idea of forming an association to achieve certain ends; or what is more likely, they want to adapt an already existing association to undertake these tasks. I use the term association loosely; as we shall see in moment, it need not be a state.

To achieve these ends, the association needs to adopt policies, with which members will be obliged to act consistently.² Ordinarily, their obligation to act consistently with the policies of the association is expressed in a rule or a law that includes penalties for noncompliance. Because members are obliged to obey the rules or laws, the decisions may be said to be *binding*. Taken collectively,

the decisionmakers who make binding decisions constitute the *government* of the association. These binding decisions might therefore also be called *governmental* or binding *collective* decisions.

That decisions are binding does not imply that the association is necessarily coercive, employs the threat of violent sanctions to bring about compliance, or possesses other similar characteristics that are often used to distinguish a state from other sorts of associations. Although the government of the association might create an expectation that violators will be punished by officials, in some circumstances decisions might be binding without punishments by officials or even by other members. To evoke an expectation of divine or magical sanctions might be sufficient. Or the mere process of enacting or announcing a rule might cause enough members to adopt it as a principle of conduct to produce a quite satisfactory level of compliance. In short, although the association could be a state in the usual sense of a coercive order, it might not be; likewise the government of the association need not be the government of a state. Thus we can describe a general theory of the democratic process applicable to associations whether or not they constitute a state.

The process for making binding decisions includes at least two analytically distinguishable stages: setting the agenda and deciding the outcome. *Setting the agenda* is the part of the process during which matters are selected on which decisions are to be made (including a decision not to decide the matter). *Deciding the outcome*, or the *decisive stage*, is the period during which the process culminates in an outcome, signifying that a policy has definitely been adopted or rejected. If setting the agenda is the first say, the decisive stage is the last say, the moment of sovereignty with respect to the matter at hand. Until the decisive stage is completed, the process of decisionmaking is tentative. It may lead to discussion, agreements, even outcomes of votes; but these are all preliminary, may be overruled at the decisive stage, and are not binding on the members. Decisions become binding only at the conclusion of the decisive stage. Although this analytic distinction would apply to any political order, it is essential in clarifying the nature of the democratic process, as will become clearer later on.

What constitutes the decisive stage in making collective decisions is far from self-evident. Adopting a constitution or a constitutional amendment is surely a decisive stage (or, if it is not, the constitution is a fictive or paper constitution). For most policies enacted in a constitutional order, however, the decisive stage occurs within the existing constitutional limits. In principle, a stage is decisive if all prior decisions can still be recalled or reversed. Thus, prior to the decisive stage decisions may be thought of as having been *delegated* but not *alienated* by those who participate in the decisive stage, a distinction we return to below.

ASSUMPTIONS JUSTIFYING A DEMOCRATIC POLITICAL ORDER

Binding decisions are to be made only by persons who are subject to the decisions, that is, by members of the association, not by persons outside

the association. No lawmaker is, in the familiar expression, above the law. The assumption rests on the elementary principle of fairness that laws cannot rightfully be imposed on others by persons who are not themselves obliged to obey those laws. Moreover, while this assumption is not sufficient to guarantee that freedom of self-determination will be respected, clearly it is necessary to self-determination; for laws and rules imposed by an outsider would violate the self-determination of all those subject to the laws.

The good of each member is entitled to equal consideration. This is a straightforward application to all the members of the Idea of Intrinsic Equality described in the last chapter.

No adult member of the association should ever be required to demonstrate adequate competence for protecting that member's own interests. Instead, the burden of proof would always lie with a claim to an exception, and no exception would be admissible, either morally or legally, in the absence of a very compelling showing. Thus this assumption presupposes that each member of the association is, taken all around, a better judge of his or her interests than others would be. The grounds for adopting this presumption were set out in chapter 5. Meanwhile, let us call the adult members who satisfy this presumption *citizens*; collectively the citizens constitute the *demos*, *populus*, or *citizen body*.

When binding decisions are made, the claims of each citizen as to the desirability of the policies to be adopted must be counted as valid and equally valid.³ Thus by way of the two previous assumptions we are led to the conclusion that Strong Equality exists among the citizens.

Although the preceding assumptions might appear to be sufficient to justify the democratic process, formally they need to be complemented by an elementary principle of fairness that it will do no harm to make explicit. This principle, which few would contest, is simply that, in general, scarce and valued things should be fairly allocated. Fairness need not require equality in allocations; it might, for example, require allocation according to desert. Even when fairness does require equality, as we saw in chapter 6 fair equality might not require equal lots or shares. But in certain circumstances fairness does require that each person should receive an equal share or, if that is impossible, an equal chance to gain the scarce item.

CRITERIA FOR A DEMOCRATIC PROCESS

Suppose, then, that some persons wish to constitute a political order. Suppose further that the assumptions justifying a *democratic* political order are valid with respect to this group. Because these assumptions are valid, we conclude that they ought to adopt a democratic order and therefore that the process by which the *demos* is to arrive at its decisions ought to meet certain criteria. When I say that the process ought to meet certain criteria, I mean that if one believes in the assumptions, then one must reasonably affirm the desirability of the criteria; conversely, to reject the criteria is in effect to reject one or more of the assumptions.⁴

The five criteria are standards—ideal standards, if you like—against which

Procedures proposed ought to be evaluated in any association to which the assumptions apply. Any process that met them perfectly would be a perfect democratic process, and the government of the association would be a perfect democratic government. I take for granted that a perfect democratic process and a perfect democratic government might never exist in actuality. They represent ideas of human possibilities against which actualities may be compared. Even if the criteria can never be perfectly satisfied, they are useful in appraising real world possibilities, as I shall show. Naturally they do not eliminate all elements of judgment in evaluation. For example, the criteria do not specify any particular procedures, such as majority rule, for specific procedures cannot be directly extracted from the criteria. And judgments will have to take into account the specific historical conditions under which a democratic association is to be developed. However, no one should be surprised that democratic theory, like all other normative theories, cannot furnish completely unambiguous answers for every concrete situation in which a choice has to be made between alternative proposals.

What criteria, then, will be uniquely consistent with our assumptions and thereby provide us with the distinguishing features of a democratic process?

Effective Participation

Throughout the process of making binding decisions, citizens ought to have an adequate opportunity, and an equal opportunity, for expressing their preferences as to the final outcome. They must have adequate and equal opportunities for placing questions on the agenda and for expressing reasons for endorsing one outcome rather than another.

To deny any citizen adequate opportunities for effective participation means that because their preferences are unknown or incorrectly perceived, they cannot be taken into account. But not to take their preferences as to the final outcome equally into account is to reject the principle of equal consideration of interests.

Voting Equality at the Decisive Stage

At the decisive stage of collective decisions, each citizen must be ensured an equal opportunity to express a choice that will be counted as equal in weight to the choice expressed by any other citizen. In determining outcomes at the decisive stage, these choices, and only these choices, must be taken into account.

Because the choices are, of course, what we ordinarily mean by voting, this criterion may be said to require voting equality at the decisive stage.

Obviously something like this requirement has been a mainstay of democratic theory and practice from classical Greece onward. But on what rational ground? Its justification rests, I think, on the practical judgment that voting equality at the decisive stage is necessary in order to provide adequate protection for the intrinsic equality of citizens and the Presumption of Personal Autonomy. Without it, citizens would face the prospect of an infinite regress of potential inequalities in their influence over decisions, with no final court of appeal in which, as political equals,

they could decide whether their interests, as they interpreted them, were given equal consideration. Just as inequalities in other resources could give advantages to some persons in securing special consideration for their interests, and handicap others, so too, without a requirement of equal voting at the decisive stage, inequalities in votes could work cumulatively to violate the Principle of Equal Consideration of Interests.

Notice, however, what the criterion of voting equality at the decisive stage does not specify. To begin with, it does not require voting equality at preceding stages. A demos might reasonably decide that the interests of some persons could best be given equal consideration by weighing their votes more heavily at earlier stages. On the same grounds the demos might delegate some decisions to citizen bodies in which votes were unequally weighted. Arrangements like these might be exceptional, as they have been historically in democratic countries, but they would not necessarily violate the criterion. The criterion would be violated, however, if the demos were no longer free to alter such arrangements whenever they failed to achieve their purposes or threatened to cause the demos to lose its final control over collective decisions.

Moreover, the criterion does not specify a particular method of voting or elections. To require that citizens have equal opportunities to express their choices could be satisfied if the votes or voters were selected randomly, that is, by lot. Nor does equal voting mean that each citizen should necessarily be entitled to an equal vote in districts of equal numbers of voters or residents; a system of proportional representation might serve as well or better. How citizens may best express their choices, and what specific rules and procedures should be adopted, are questions that require additional practical judgments. But procedures that meet the criterion better ought to be chosen over those that meet it worse. That the better procedure should be preferred to the worse holds even if all the procedures proposed are in some respects defective, as might often be the case.

Finally, the criterion does not explicitly require an association to adopt the principle of majority rule for its decisions. It requires only that majority rule and alternatives to it be evaluated according to this and other criteria, including the principles and assumptions that justify this criterion, such as the principle of equal consideration of interests, and that the solution that best meets the criteria should be adopted. Whether majority rule is the best solution is thus left open. As we shall see in chapter 10, the problem posed by majority rule and the alternatives to it is one of extreme difficulty for which no completely satisfactory solutions have yet been found. Judging what decision rule best meets the criterion of voting equality, whether generally or in a specific context, is a question on which persons who are committed to voting equality continue to disagree.

I think it is consistent with historic usage to say that any association whose government satisfies the criteria of effective participation and voting equality governs itself, to that limited extent, by means of a democratic process. In order to leave room for some important distinctions to come, I want to say that such an association is governed by a *democratic process in a narrow sense*. Though the

process is narrower in scope than a fully democratic process, the two criteria enable us to evaluate a large number of possible procedures. To be sure, they cannot be decisive in cases where a procedure is better according to one criterion and worse by the other. Moreover, any evaluation would ordinarily require additional judgments about the facts of the particular situation or about general tendencies and regularities of human behavior and action. Nonetheless, the criteria are far from vacuous. Although I will not introduce a rigorous argument here, it would be hard to deny that procedures providing for decisions by a randomly selected sample of citizens would satisfy the criteria better than a procedure by which one citizen makes binding decisions for all the rest; or that a voting scheme allocating one vote to each citizen at the decisive stage would be better than a scheme in which some citizens had ten votes and others none. I do not mean to imply, however, that judgments about alternatives like these would follow as unassailable conclusions from a perfectly rigorous argument.

Enlightened Understanding

As I have already suggested, judgments about the existence, composition, and boundaries of a demos are highly contestable. Thus one might simply challenge such judgments outright by asserting that some citizens are more qualified than the rest to make the decisions required. This objection of course raises the challenge to democracy posed by guardianship, which we have already considered at length. What I wish to consider now, however, is a second objection that might run like this:

I agree—the objector might say—that the citizens are equally well qualified, taken all around. I agree also that none among them, or among the other members, or among nonmembers are so definitely better qualified as to warrant their making the decisions instead of the demos. Yet for all that, I think the citizens are not as well qualified as they might be. They make mistakes about the means to the ends they want; they also choose ends they would reject if they were more enlightened. I agree then that they ought to govern themselves by procedures that are satisfactory according to the criteria of a democratic process, narrowly defined. Yet a number of different procedures will satisfy the criteria equally well; among these, however, some are more likely to lead to a more enlightened demos—and thus to better decisions—than others. Surely these are better procedures and ought to be chosen over the others.

One might object, I suppose, that enlightenment has nothing to do with democracy. But I think this would be a foolish and historically false assertion. It is foolish because democracy has usually been conceived as a system in which “rule by the people” makes it more likely that the “people” will get what it wants, or what it believes is best, than alternative systems like guardianship in which an elite determines what is best. But to know what it wants, or what is best, the people must be enlightened, at least to some degree. And because advocates of democracy have invariably recognized this and placed great stress on the means to an informed

and enlightened demos, such as education and public discussion, the objection is also historically false.

I propose therefore to amplify the meaning of the democratic process by adding a third criterion. Unfortunately, I do not know how to formulate the criterion except in words that are rich in meaning and correspondingly ambiguous. Let me, however, offer this formulation for the criterion of enlightened understanding:

Each citizen ought to have adequate and equal opportunities for discovering and validating (within the time permitted by the need for a decision) the choice on the matter to be decided that would best serve the citizen's interests.

This criterion implies, then, that alternative procedures for making decisions ought to be evaluated according to the opportunities they furnish citizens for acquiring an understanding of means and ends, of one's interests and the expected consequences of policies for interests, not only for oneself but for all other relevant persons as well. Insofar as a citizen's good or interests requires attention to a public good or general interest, then citizens ought to have the opportunity to acquire an understanding of these matters. Ambiguous as the criterion may be, it provides guidance for determining the shape that institutions should take. Thus the criterion makes it hard to justify procedures that would cut off or suppress information which, were it available, might well cause citizens to arrive at a different decision; or that would give some citizens much easier access than others to information of crucial importance; or that would present citizens with an agenda of decisions that had to be decided without discussion, though time was available; and so on. To be sure, these may look like easy cases, but a great many political systems—perhaps most—operate according to the worse not the better procedures.

Control of the Agenda

If an association were to satisfy all three criteria, it could properly be regarded as a full procedural democracy with respect to its agenda and in relation to its demos. The criteria are to be understood as aspects of the best possible political system, from a democratic point of view; while no actual system could be expected to satisfy the criteria perfectly, systems could be judged more democratic or less, and to that extent better or worse, according to how nearly they meet the criteria.

Yet to say that a system is governed by a fully democratic process "with respect to an agenda" and "in relation to a demos" suggests the possibility that the three criteria are incomplete. The two qualifying clauses imply the possibility of restrictions—of democratic decisionmaking processes limited to a narrow agenda, or responsive to a highly exclusive demos, or both. To judge whether a demos is appropriately inclusive and exercises control over an appropriate agenda requires additional standards.

In order to see more clearly why a fourth criterion is needed, let us suppose that Philip of Macedon, having defeated the Athenians at Chaeronea, deprives the Athenian assembly of the authority to make any decisions on matters of foreign and military policy. The citizens continue to assemble some forty times a year and

decide on many matters, but on some of the most important questions they must remain silent. With respect to 'local' matters, the Athenian polis is no less democratic than before, but with respect to foreign and military affairs the Athenians are now governed hierarchically by Philip or his minions. Would we want to say that Athens was now fully democratic or was as democratic as it had been before?

Although outside control makes the point more dramatically, control over the agenda may also be taken from citizens by some of its own members. Let us imagine an independent country where the three criteria we have discussed are relatively well met, and in addition there are no limitations on the matters that citizens may decide. Their agenda of collective decisions is completely open. Suppose that an antidemocratic movement somehow seizes power. In a move to placate the democratic sentiments of their fellow countrymen the new rulers leave the old constitution symbolically in place. However, they modify it in one respect. Hereafter, the people may use their old democratic political institutions for only a few matters—purely local questions, let us say, such as traffic control, street maintenance, and residential zoning. The rulers keep all the rest strictly under their own control. Even if the new system were to meet the first three criteria perfectly and thus was "fully democratic with respect to its agenda," it would be a travesty of democracy. For citizens could not democratically decide matters they felt to be important other than those the rulers had allowed to remain on the pitifully shrunken agenda of the neutered democracy. The control of nondemocratic rulers over the agenda could be much less blatant and more subtle. In some countries, for example, military leaders are under the nominal control of elected civilians who know, however, that they will be removed from office, and worse, unless they tailor their decisions to meet the wishes of the military.

These considerations suggest a fourth criterion, final control of the agenda by the demos.

The demos must have the exclusive opportunity to decide how matters are to be placed on the agenda of matters that are to be decided by means of the democratic process.

The criterion of final control is perhaps what is also meant when we say that in a democracy the people must have the final say, or must be sovereign. A system that satisfies this criterion as well as the other three could be regarded as having a fully democratic process in relation to its demos.

According to this criterion, a political system would employ a fully democratic process even if the demos decided that it would not make every decision on every matter but instead chose to have some decisions on some matters made, say, in a hierarchical fashion by judges or administrators. As long as the demos could effectively retrieve any matter for decision by itself, the criterion would be met. In this respect, then, the criteria for a democratic process presented here allows more latitude for delegation of decisionmaking than would be permissible by Rousseau's eccentric definition of democracy in the *Social Contract*. Because he defined democracy so as to make delegation impermissible, Rousseau concluded that

“if there were a people of Gods, it would govern itself democratically. Such a perfect government is not suited to men” (Rousseau 1978, bk. 3, chap. 4, p. 85).

Thus the criterion of final control does not presuppose a judgment that the demos is qualified to decide every question requiring a binding decision. It does presuppose a judgment that the demos is qualified to decide (1) which matters do or do not require binding decisions, (2) of those that do, which matters the demos is qualified to decide for itself, and (3) the terms on which the demos delegates authority. To accept the criterion as appropriate is therefore to imply that the demos is the best judge of its own competence and limits. Consequently, to say that certain matters ought to be placed beyond the final reach of the demos—in the sense that the demos ought to be prohibited from dealing with them at all—is to say that on these matters the demos is not qualified to judge its own competence and limits.

By delegation I mean a revocable grant of authority, subject to recovery by the demos. Empirically, of course, the boundaries between delegation and alienation are not always sharp, and what begins as delegation might end as alienation. Moreover, the empirical problem of judging whether the final agenda is covertly controlled by certain leaders outside the democratic process—like the military, in the example given earlier—is necessarily complicated by the covert nature of the control. But, however difficult it may be to draw the line in practice, the theoretical distinction between delegation and alienation is nonetheless crucial. In a system employing a fully democratic process, decisions about delegation would be made according to democratic procedures. But alienation of control over the final agenda (or its appropriation by leaders outside the democratic process) would clearly violate the criterion of final control and would be inconsistent with the judgment that the full condition of equal qualification exists among citizens.⁵

The criterion of final control completes the requirements for a *fully democratic process in relation to a demos*. If all the members are judged equally qualified, in the full sense, and if the other conditions set out earlier are held to exist among them, then the procedures according to which these persons, the citizens, make binding decisions ought to be evaluated according to the four criteria.

WHY EQUAL OPPORTUNITY?

The criteria specify that citizens or the demos ought to have adequate and equal *opportunities* to act in certain ways. I can readily imagine two objections to this formulation. First, it might be said that “equal opportunities” can be reduced to nothing more than formal or legal requirements that ignore important differences—in resources, for example. Suppose Citizen P is poor and Citizen R is rich. Then (the argument might go) both P and R may have “equal opportunities” to participate in collective decisions, in the sense that both are legally entitled to do so. Yet because R has far greater access to money, information, publicity, organizations, time, and other political resources than P, not only will R probably participate more than P, but R’s influence on decisions will vastly outweigh P’s.

The objection draws its force from the familiar fact that influence is a function of resources, and typically resources are unequally distributed. Nonetheless, it misses the point. For "equal opportunities" means "equal opportunities," and what the example shows is that R's and P's opportunities to participate are decidedly unequal. Though the idea of equal opportunity is often so weakly interpreted that it is rightly dismissed as too undemanding, when it is taken in its fullest sense it is extraordinarily demanding—so demanding, indeed, that the criteria for the democratic process would require a people committed to it to institute measures well beyond those that even the most democratic states have hitherto brought about. In the final chapters I shall suggest some possibilities that seem to me to fall within the range of feasibility.

A second objection might go like this: An opportunity to act to do something necessarily implies that one might choose *not* to act. If the democratic process is desirable, then should the criteria not specify *duties* as well as opportunities—duties of the citizen to participate, to vote, to become informed, and the duty of the demos to determine how the agenda is to be decided? While I believe the democratic process does imply duties like these, they are moral duties. They take their place among an array of obligations, rights, and opportunities that would confront citizens in a democratic order. I cannot say that it would always be wrong for a citizen to choose not to fulfill the political obligations implied by the criteria of the democratic process. It seems to me more consistent with the Presumption of Personal Autonomy and with freedom of self-determination and moral autonomy to ensure that citizens have the freedom to choose how they will fulfill their political obligations.

PROBLEMS IN THE THEORY

The theory of the democratic process that I have just described might seem adequate as it stands. Yet it is radically incomplete. Several of the most crucial assumptions of the theory are much too debatable to be acceptable without further examination. The implications of the theory are also far from clear, and in any case important implications are themselves likely to be contested.

In the rest of this book therefore I take up the most important problems in the theory of the democratic process. Although there is no definitive solution for most of these problems, I shall try to arrive as close to a reasonable solution as may be possible at present.

1. The argument for the Strong Principle of Equality would appear to support the conclusion that everyone subject to the laws should be included in the demos. Everyone? Not quite: not children, for example: the Presumption of Personal Autonomy applies to adults. As we saw earlier, Athenian democrats did not find it anomalous that their demos included only a minority of adults. Well into the last century most advocates of democracy assumed that women were rightly excluded from the suffrage, that is, from the demos. In most countries women gained the suffrage only in this century, and in a few only after the Second World War. In

fact, not until our own century did democratic theory and practice begin to reflect a belief that all (or virtually all) adults should be included in the demos as a matter of right. Is a judgment as to who should be included in the demos, then, purely arbitrary or so strongly conditioned by history and culture that no general judgment is possible? Although democratic theory and practice both provide substantial support for such a conclusion, I believe it is mistaken. I take up this problem in the next chapter.

2. The criteria for a democratic process, as I have described them here, do not specify a *decision rule*. Historically, of course, it has usually been contended that the only decision rule appropriate to the democratic process is majority rule. Yet even the term "majority" rule does not refer to a single, well-defined decision rule: It refers to a family of possible rules. These range from the rule that the alternative to be accepted as binding is the one that gains the greatest number of votes, even if this number is less than 50 percent, to others that require at least 50 percent plus one or a matching of every alternative against every other alternative. But all such numerical rules are subject to potential defects, such as cycles in which no majority preference can definitely be established. And even if these problems can be solved, the question remains: Why should we accept any majority principle? These issues will be considered in chapter 10.

3. Advocates of guardianship contend that any process by which ordinary citizens rule is unlikely to achieve the public good, since ordinary citizens lack both the necessary knowledge and the necessary virtue. However, even advocates of democracy sometimes argue that no *process* is sufficient to ensure that the public good (the public interest, the good of all, etc.) will be achieved. What is sometimes referred to as the idea of *substantive democracy* gives priority to the justice or rightness of the substantive outcomes of decisions rather than to the process by which the decisions are reached. In one phrasing, substantive justice should take priority over procedural justice and substantive rights priority over procedural rights. Sorting out the issues involved in this dispute over priorities is, as we shall see in chapters 11 and 12, quite tricky. But on the face of it the argument for the importance of substance as against process clearly has merit.

4. If the democratic process is a means by which some collection of persons may rightfully govern itself, what constitutes an appropriate collection of persons for employing the democratic process? Is *any* collection of persons entitled to the democratic process? In short, if democracy means government by the people, what constitutes "a people"? There may be no problem in the whole domain of democratic theory and practice more intractable than the one posed by this innocent-seeming question. To grasp it, imagine an aggregate of persons. Adapting Jonathan Swift to our purposes, let us call them the Eggfolk. While many Eggfolk contend that the Eggfolk constitute a single "people," some insist that they are really divided into two distinct peoples, the Big Eggfolk and the Little Eggfolk, with such different ways and beliefs that they should govern themselves separately, each entitled to its own fully democratic system. How are we to decide? As

we shall discover in chapter 13, democratic theory supplies little by way of an answer. In fact, while historical answers exist, there may be no satisfactory theoretical solution to this problem.

5. As the problem of a decision rule illustrates, the democratic process must somehow be actualized in the real world—in actually existing procedures, institutions, associations, states, and so on. As we saw, in the long history of democracy in the Western world democratic ideas have been applied to two radically different types of political system, the city-state and the nation-state. These were radically different in scale, and they developed radically different political institutions. Is it possible, then, to specify a unique set of institutions necessary to the democratic process? Or do the institutional requirements vary according to the scale of a society as well as other factors? We return to these questions in chapters 14 and 15.

6. Inevitably, whenever democratic ideas are applied to the real world, actual democracy falls significantly short of ideal standards. For example, the criteria for the democratic process set out earlier have never been fully met and probably cannot be. What level of approximation are we to regard as in some sense satisfactory—sufficiently satisfactory, let us say, so that we may reasonably call some actual system a “democracy.” This problem of the proper threshold of democracy is more than a mere matter of terminology. For example, if we feel an obligation to uphold democratic governments but not authoritarian governments, then the threshold becomes essential to a judgment about our obligations.

I shall argue in chapter 16 that an important threshold of democracy has been attained by a significant number of modern countries, as evidenced by a specific set of political institutions which, taken together, distinguishes the political system of these countries from all “democracies” and republics prior to the eighteenth century and from all “nondemocracies” in the contemporary world. Although these countries are ordinarily said to be “democracies,” I will refer to their systems—distinguishable as I have said by virtue of their political institutions—as *polyarchies*. What conditions favor the emergence and persistence of polyarchy in a country—and conversely, the absence of what conditions reduces the likelihood that a country will arrive at this modern threshold of democracy? I explore these questions in chapter 17.

7. Since the threshold attained by polyarchy is well short of democratic ideals, would it be possible, and if possible would it be desirable, to close some of the gap between polyarchy and democracy—to establish and surpass yet another threshold on the way to democracy? A strong current of utopianism in democratic thought encourages one to answer yes. But a countercurrent in modern thought, which will be discussed in chapter 18, contends that other powerful tendencies, such as a universal tendency to oligarchy, set insuperable limits to the possibilities of further democratization.

8. The transformation in the scale of democracy that came about as a result of the attempt to apply the democratic process to the nation-state seems to have turned political life in democratic countries into a competitive struggle among individuals

and groups with conflicting ideas, ideals, and goals. What then is the fate of that ancient ideal of political virtue and the pursuit of a common good? This question is the subject of chapters 19 and 20.

9. Finally, then, what can we reasonably conclude as to the limits and possibilities of democratization, particularly in a world that does not stand still, where the limits and possibilities may be changing as profoundly as they did when the nation-state superseded the city-state as the locus of democracy? And what about the nondemocratic governments that now prevail and may continue to prevail in a majority of countries of the world? How ought we appraise political systems in countries that are *not* democratic—that have not even reached the threshold of polyarchy? In the final chapters I want to explore some of the limits and possibilities of democracy.