

# A Democratic Society

MMC 6612  
New Media and a  
Democratic Society

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## Historic Perspective

- ◆ Greeks: Plato (Socrates) and Aristotle
- ◆ The Roman Republic
- ◆ The French Revolution
- ◆ The United States Constitution

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## Ancient Greeks

- ◆ Aristotle: The **few** should rule with the *consent* of the **many**
- ◆ Questions about voting: Who may vote, and why?
  - Education
  - Property
- ◆ If property, then leisure
- ◆ If leisure, then education is possible

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## Ancient Greeks

- ◆ What is democratic government for?
  - To enact, interpret and enforce laws
- ◆ What are laws for?
  - To ensure people's freedom
- ◆ What is freedom?
  - Subjects of a ruler are no better off than slaves
  - Slaves are property

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## Roman Republic

- ◆ Citizens who *have a say* in lawmaking will **trust** the government
- ◆ An army of **citizens** is better than an army of **mercenaries**
- ◆ "Mixed government" – a *balance* between:
  - The Senators and the People
  - The officers and the soldiers
  - The individual and the collective

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## Roman Republic (2)

- ◆ **Schools, literature and history** supported, perpetuated the Roman system of government
- ◆ Political rule: Two sides of the coin
  - **Power:** A ruler (or ruling body) sometimes must wield power without asking permission
  - **Consent:** Ruling group normally cannot hold on to power *unless* it has "the consent of the governed"

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## French Revolution

- ◆ Forget the idea that a person *must own property* or be *educated* –
- ◆ “The public good” includes **everyone**
- ◆ **Public good** and **individual liberties** are not the same thing

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## French Revolution (2)

- ◆ **Liberty** = freedom from absolute rulers
- ◆ **Equality** = citizenship (rights), *not* financial or economic equality
- ◆ Reaction to feudalism, monarchy, aristocracy, under which a person is almost always *unable* to rise above the conditions of his or her birth

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## French Revolution (3)

- ◆ What Rousseau thought:
  - Humans are meant to be free
  - Every human is capable of expressing what he called *volonté générale* (“the general will”); what is best for the society, *not merely what a majority desires*
- ◆ Rousseau provides the first “moral justification for democracy”

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## Emergence of United States

- ◆ Property and money: “No taxation without representation”
- ◆ Locke (1680–90): “Life, liberty and estate”
- ◆ Jefferson (1776): “Life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness”

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## “Estate” vs. “Property”

- ◆ “Estate” may or may not mean **property** (land and possessions)
- ◆ What are the things that guarantee our autonomy as individuals – our independence?
- ◆ Do they include *privacy*?
- ◆ Do they include the right “to think as you will and to speak as you think” (Justice Louis Brandeis, 1927)?

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## Democracy in America

- ◆ “Independency” in America was tied to property rights
- ◆ This *united* the small farmers, small businessmen, shopkeepers and traders
- ◆ *More people could own land* in North America than in Europe
- ◆ Those who could **vote** would be those who owned *some* property –
  - Only men (no women)
  - Neither slaves nor American Indians

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## Democracy in America (2)

- ◆ The meaning of “democracy” now *expanded* to include:
  - Liberty
  - Rights (**individual** rights *and* **majority** rights = two different things)

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## Alexis de Tocqueville

- ◆ Tocqueville wrote *Democracy in America* (1835, 1840)
- ◆ “Tyranny of the majority”
- ◆ His ideas influenced John Stuart Mill
- ◆ Mill (*On Liberty*, 1859): “... there needs protection also against the tyranny of the prevailing opinion and feeling, against the tendency of society to impose, by other means than civil penalties, its own ideas and practices as rules of conduct on those who **dissent** from them ...”

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## Tocqueville (2)

- ◆ Tocqueville constructed “a new theory of politics” based on what would later be called **pluralism**
- ◆ In America, he saw three *contributors* to this:
  - Effective **local** self-government
  - Independent Protestant **churches**
  - **Voluntary associations** and mutual-aid societies: In a three-way “conversation” with the state (federal government) and individual rights

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## Deliberation + Participation

- ◆ “Others” are *not only* individuals but also *groups* (e.g., minorities)
- ◆ Decisions always must be *negotiated* with others
- ◆ “Tyranny of the majority”: As bad as having a king
- ◆ Determining *what is* the public good, or “common good,” requires deliberation

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## Modern Liberal Democracies

- ◆ What is an elected government for?
  - To enact, interpret and enforce laws
- ◆ What are laws for?
  - To protect people’s rights
- ◆ What rights do people have?
  - For the most part, the law will determine this

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## Minimum Requirements for a Democratic *Government*

- ◆ Periodic elections are held
  - ◆ Leaders and officials abide by the results of elections
  - ◆ Decisions are made public
  - ◆ Process of decision-making may also be public (transparent)
  - ◆ Public criticism of government is permitted in mass media
- These do not *guarantee* a democratic society

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## Conditions of a democratic society

- ◆ Individual liberties
- ◆ Human rights
- ◆ Economic progress
- ◆ Social justice

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## Finally: Communication!

- ◆ How do the people know what constitutes a public good?
  - Marketplace of ideas
  - Many voices; ability for all sides to be heard
- ◆ Tyranny of the majority: The *opposite* of pluralism

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## A Democratic Society

Presentation by Mindy McAdams

Source for much of this presentation:  
Crick, B. (2002). *Democracy: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford University Press.

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