A Democratic Society

MMC 6612
New Media and a Democratic Society

Historic Perspective

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

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
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

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

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”
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”
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”

“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)?

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
Democracy in America (2)

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

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 …”

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

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

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
Conditions of a democratic society

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

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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