Democracy in theory and practice

12

In recent years, the leaders of many countries have described their systems of government as democratic. The emphasis they place on certain institutions of government and their interpretations of the role of the state and individual in society may vary, but the label carries definite prestige and esteem. Britain and America are usually seen as examples of model Western representative, liberal democracies in which the people choose representatives who govern on their behalf and according to the wishes of the majority. In newer democracies, some familiar features of liberal democracies are absent or undeveloped.

In this chapter, we explore the nature of democracy and differing forms that it takes across the world. However, the main emphasis is on the way it works on either side of the Atlantic. Basic similarities and differences are highlighted, with consideration given to alleged defects in its operation.

Democracy across the world

At first sight, democracy appears to be an immensely popular political creed. Dictators such as Hitler and Mussolini sometimes proclaimed their acceptance of and support for democratic ideas, even though their governing approach was highly authoritarian and intolerant of opposition. Leaders of countries whose governing arrangements were as far apart ideologically as the old USSR and the USA called themselves democratic. This is why Crick referred to it as 'the most promiscuous word in the world of public affairs. She is everybody's mistress and yet somehow retains her magic, even when a lover sees her favours being . . . illicitly shared by another'.[1]

The so-called People's Democracies which existed under communist rule in Central and Eastern Europe offered an alternative and widely divergent model of democracy to those familiar with the Western one as practised in Britain and America. Marxists liked the egalitarian implications of democracy, and welcomed the goal of social equality brought about through the common ownership of wealth. Communists everywhere would unite in condemnation of American society, where racial integration proceeded only slowly and

private enterprise was strong, and portray it as undemocratic. Similarly, most Americans regarded the system of government in the USSR as undemocratic. As Heywood points out, democracy in the USA is more concerned with the form of government, which made it a political democracy, whereas the former USSR was more concerned with the purpose of government, and attached importance to the socialist goals on which the regime was based.[2]

The concept of democracy held by inhabitants of Britain, the USA, several European and Commonwealth countries is vastly different to the view held by communist countries. This indicates that there are widely differing conceptions about what constitutes a democratic state. For our purposes, we are concerned only with those countries that have the form of democracy, for most people would find it difficult to see any system which gives overwhelming power to the state and denies free expression in many areas of life as democratic.

The popularity of democracy

Well over half of the world's population and half of its countries live under democratic rule of some kind, even if we exclude the experiences of the People's Democracies. Democracy is no longer confined to Western countries or those connected to them as a result of past colonial ties. Former European communist states (for example, Poland), several Latin America ones (Mexico) and parts of Asia (Taiwan) – as well as South Africa – would all claim democratic credentials. Democracy has expanded far and wide. Today, the main areas unaffected by the surge of support for democratisation include significant areas of Asia (for example, China and Vietnam), much of Africa (Nigeria) and the Middle East (Saudi Arabia) and parts of Latin America (Ecuador).

The growing support for the democratic process inspired the American social analyst and political commentator Francis Fukuyama to write of *The End of History*[3]. He suggested that the conflict of ideas which had dominated political thinking for much of the era since the French Revolution was over. The causes of liberal democracy and the free market had triumphed, as 'the final form of human government'. Such a claim highlights the importance of having a clear understanding of what democracy entails.

The meaning of the term 'democracy'

The Ancient Greeks were the first people to develop democratic ideas, Athenian democracy being practised in a small city-state or *polis*. Pericles observed that: 'Our constitution is named a democracy, because it is in the hands not of the few but of the many'. This is the essence of any democracy. The word is based on two Greek terms, *demos kratos*, which literally mean 'people power', or 'rule by the people'. In the city-state, it was possible for all

citizens to come together and make decisions, a state of direct democracy. Debate was free, open and wide-ranging, each citizen having a single vote. Until the nineteenth century, democracy was generally viewed in terms of some form of **direct** government through majority rule, an idea little changed since the time of the ancient philosophers.

In more advanced and more complex industrial states, sheer numbers made the direct and continuous participation of citizens in government impossible. Face-to-face popular rule, with the mass of people coming together to make decisions, could not work. A new form of democracy replaced the Athenian variety, known as indirect or **representative democracy**. This involved freely elected representatives of the people making decisions subject to popular control. In effect, the few govern on behalf of the many, so that democracy as it now operates is actually a form of oligarchy or elitism. What is crucial is that there should be effective popular control over the rulers or decision-makers. A system is democratic to the extent that those who have power are subject to the wishes of the electorate. The majority of people are vote-casters every few years at election time, but in between have little say.

direct democracy
Government in which citizens come together in one place to make laws and select rulers. The term often nowadays refers to populistic measures such as the initiative and referendum.

representative democracy
Government in which citizens elect people to rule on their behalf.

The criteria of a Western democratic system

Key elements of a modern democracy include the following

- **Popular control of policy makers.** This involves the right of choosing the policy makers at a general election. The voter has the right to vote in periodic elections, and in the lifetime of a government the opposition parties perform the role of criticising its policy and seeing that the rights of the individual are respected. Government must be subject to control by the governed, and this control is exercised through elected representatives. The existence of opposition, by individual MPs and parties is a litmus test; without a right to oppose, there can be no democracy.
- **Political equality.** Every adult must have the right to vote, each person having only one vote. In the words of the nineteenth-century radical Jeremy Bentham, 'each to count for one, and none for more than one'.
- **Political freedoms.** There must be a free choice, without coercion of the voters, at a secret ballot. If voting is to be effective, it must be free in the sense that opposition candidates can come forward. In other words, there must be a meaningful choice of candidates. There must also be rights to free speech, assembly, organisation, etc., and the existence and extent of such liberties as free expression is a crucial test for any would-be democracy.

• **Majority rule.** The right of the majority to have their way may seem just, but it needs to be accompanied by toleration of any minority, its views being recognised and respected.

From such a listing of characteristics, we can piece together the following definition: 'A democratic political system is one in which public policies are made, on a majority basis, by representatives subject to effective popular control at periodic elections which are conducted on the principle of political equality and under conditions of political freedom'. Abraham Lincoln put it more succinctly: 'government of the people, by the people and for the people'.

Dahl argued that a political democracy must include 'processes by which ordinary citizens exert a relatively high degree of control over leaders'.[4] But our expectations of a democratic state go beyond these processes. Those who run the government must be elected via an inclusive suffrage, and there must be avenues for political association and communication, and meaningful opportunities for recording the popular will. Democratic systems must also embody a number of other ideas – that every individual matters ('each to count for one and none for more than one'), that there must be equality of

OTHER FORMS OF DEMOCRACY

Participatory democracy

Despite the general acceptance in the West of representative and liberal democracy, some writers see this view of democracy as incomplete and say it concentrates on the government of the many by the few and involves the idea of the mass of the citizenry only in a very minimal way. Writers from Rousseau to J. S. Mill, G. D. H. Cole to Peter Hain have argued that individual and group participation should be a distinguishing feature of a democracy. They stress the educational and integrative effects of political involvement. Higgins and Richardson observed that when Aristotle described man as a political animal, he meant that man realised himself fully only when participating in self-government. The goal of participationists thus becomes not merely active participation in government, but a participatory society: 'Democracy is no longer seen as a means of good government but as an end in itself'.[5]

Authoritarian or 'façade' democracy

The version of democracy outlined so far is based primarily on the experience of Western Europe and North America. In other parts of the world, newer forms of democracy have been developed which cannot be included within the orbit of liberal democracy.

Whilst many in the West would find it hard to accept the idea of People's Democracy as being truly democratic (see pp. 305–6), there are several examples of what Hague and Harrop refers to as semi-democracies,[6] blending features of a Western-style democracy

opportunity, and that people should be able to act rationally and in a spirit of compromise where necessary, and show tolerance for the views of minorities. Democracy thrives where there is moderation, a spirit of compromise and tolerance, based on respect for the rights and feelings of others. In a democracy, government must rest on the basis of consent, with the broad agreement of the voters that the government has the right to govern, even if they do not like what it is doing. Consent is essential, for without it government rests solely on power or force.

Liberal democracy

Britain and the United States, along with the democracies of Western Europe, Australia, Canada and New Zealand, are often described as **liberal democracies**. This means that they are representative systems which also embody the concepts of diversity, choice and individual rights and freedoms, as opposed to collective equality or mass participation. Liberal democracies are noted for their adherence to the ideas of:

- Pluralism – the existence of diverse centres of economic and political power;

with more authoritarian impulses. They have been developed in countries whose conditions are very different to our own and are an attempt to graft on the familiar democratic features of elections to regimes whose tone has in the past often been severely repressive. Finer) dismissed them as 'façade democracies', but sometimes they are less pejoratively labelled 'limited democracies', 'authoritarian democracies' or 'semi-democracies'.[7] Good examples are provided by some of the Asian states such as Malaysia and Singapore, in both of which effective, stable government has been provided by regimes which are 'repressive–responsive'. Hague and Harrop quote Egypt, Singapore and Tunisia as having systems in which semi-competitive elections are held (there may be some attempt to manipulate the outcome), but in which opposition can also be kept under control by intimidation. Semi-democracies are illiberal democracies in which policies are pushed through with scant concern for their impact on particular groups or communities. Institutions such as the assembly and the judiciary are cowed by the dominant force. This enables semi-democratic regimes to rough up their opponents and harass dissidents, tactics which are often wrapped in a nationalist cloak.

These democracies are far removed from the Western-style ones as exemplified by Britain and the United States. The transition to power has been achieved by peaceful means via the process of elections, whether it be in parts of Africa and Latin America, and the bulk of Eastern Europe. However, in several cases it has been hard to construct a democracy on weak foundations. Given these countries' authoritarian legacies, liberal ideas and institutions are often insecurely established and respect for basic rights can easily be ignored. In Russia, a 'new' or 'fledgling' democracy, the media has been prone to attempted manipulation by government. In other countries, be they 'new' or 'semi' democracies, it has been difficult to ensure democratic control over the military and security services.

- Limited government – checks and constraints on the power of government;
- Open government – non-secretive government which can be seen to be fair and accountable;
- Independent judiciary – a just, impartial legal system.

liberal democracy
An indirect and representative form of democracy in which political office is gained through success in regular elections, conducted on the basis of formal political equality under a universal franchise. There is pluralistic tolerance of a wide range of groups and interests, with open expression of political dissent via the mass media and voluntary groups, as well as through competing parties. People enjoy extensive political rights and civil liberties. The system is based on acceptance of the market or capitalist organisation of economic life.

Britain and the United States

Americans admire democracy and believe that it is the most appropriate type of government for the United States. Their commitment to free and fair elections, popular control and widespread tolerance of differing political viewpoints is shared by British people, the vast majority of whom would have no difficulty in describing the British system of representative government as democratic. By the criteria in the section above, Britain and the USA do both qualify as liberal democratic states. Indeed, some would go further and say that they qualify as the foremost democratic states, so that Hacker felt inspired to describe them as 'the world's two leading democracies'.[8]

republic
A constitutional form of government in which decisions are made democratically by elected or appointed officials. This was how Plato used the term; those in power obtained and retained their position as a result of winning elections in which all free adults are allowed to take part: the people had the supreme power.

Note that this is a meaning very different from the usual one familiar to British students – a constitutional form in which the head of state is an elected or nominated President, rather than a monarch.

The Founding Fathers favoured a representative democracy in which the people govern indirectly by electing key individuals such as the President, members of Congress, governors, mayors, state legislators and others, to make decisions on their behalf. As we have seen, in such a democracy, the people do not normally vote on or directly make specific policy decisions – they do so indirectly, through those they elect to represent their interests. The word 'democracy' is not used in the US Constitution and, although the opening sentence of the document refers to 'We the people', the people its framers had in mind certainly did not include the whole adult population. The Fathers preferred the term **republic** to describe the form of government they wished to create. 'Republic' lacked the connection with direct democracy, with its undesirable overtones of mass rule, demagogues and the mob.

As Hague and Harrop explain, the American Constitution 'contained the seeds of democracy, but it placed government under law before government of all the people'.[9] Because Madison and his colleagues were concerned about the

danger of an undue concentration of power in too few hands, they established a system based on the Separation of Powers, including a series of in-built checks and balances {see pp. 36–8). They favoured limited government to stop any individual or group from using its power to damage the interests of other people. They disliked the idea of excessive governmental power, which could be a threat to individual freedom. They wanted to protect not just minorities but also the population as a whole from arbitrary or unjust rule. In the Constitution, therefore, 'power checks power, to the point where it is often difficult for the government to achieve anything at all . . . American government was liberal before it was democratic. Many would argue that liberalism, not democracy, remains the guiding principle of American politics'.

The framers of the Constitution did not believe that governmental authority should rest directly in the hands of the people. They were seen as unfit to rule. In *The Federalist*, James Madison echoed the outlook of many of his co-framers of the American Constitution when he wrote:

> **Such democracies [as the Greek and Roman] have ever been found incompatible with personal security of the rights of property; and have in general been as short in their lives, as they have been violent in their deaths.**[10]

But if, at the time of writing the Constitution, the Americans were wary of the power of the mass of people, their ideas about democracy have evolved in the subsequent two hundred years. In the eighteenth century, the French philosopher Rousseau argued that the best form of government is one that reflects the general will of the people, which is the sum total of the interests that all citizens have in common. His writings were regarded as too radical by those meeting in Philadelphia, although they influenced the French revolutionaries of 1789. Today, the American idea of democracy is a belief in government where authority is based on consent and the will of the majority. If asked 'who should govern?', most Americans would respond 'the people'. The notion of 'popular sovereignty', that authority flows from the ruled to the rulers, is well established.

Many Americans have a dislike for and distrust of government, a classical republican fear of tyrannical rule. Sceptical of politicians, they have been increasingly attracted to the idea of deciding issues for themselves. A modern form of direct democracy is well established in many states, in the form of initiatives, referendums and the recall. In New England, with its surviving town meetings, it is more similar to the Athenian approach, with people meeting together to make decisions for themselves.

Along with representative government, the idea of 'limited government' is basic to the idea of liberal democracy. If the Americans give much weight to preventing the abuse of power, the British have placed greater emphasis on the representative element. In Britain, there are no such formal restraints on the

power of government – a codified constitution, a bill of rights and a separation of powers – and the winning party in an election is able to act in a way which Hailsham described as an 'elective dictatorship'.[11] For the British, the concept of democracy has traditionally been about ensuring that, following the contest of parties in free elections, a group of politicians are elected to get on with the job of governing. If they fail to act in a way the electorate likes, they can be ejected at the next election. The idea of party competition is more deeply ingrained in the British system than in the American one.

As in America, what Hague and Harrop call 'the battle of principle' for democracy was won in the nineteenth century, but 'the implementation of democratic procedures' continued well into the twentieth. Women did not get the vote in either country until after World War One, and in Britain neither did six million men . In America, not until the 1960s did African-Americans so benefit. In Britain, reform of the House of Lords to trim its powers did not get underway until 1911, and the process of democratisation of the chamber is still unresolved today. The removal of the bulk of the hereditary element has been accomplished, but election of a segment of the membership has yet to be introduced. The Americans opted for direct election of their upper house via the passage of the 17th Amendment (1913) and also took steps to involve more people in the process of choosing candidates by the adoption of primary election contests.

There been no significant British interest in direct democracy until the last three decades, although from time to time the idea of a referendum had been floated. The first national referendum took place in 1975 and there have been others since, in parts of the United Kingdom. Whenever they have been discussed, whether for the Euro, the use of proportional representation at Westminster or the re-introduction of the death penalty, the counter-argument has usually been made forcefully – that Britain has a representative democracy in which those in power, who have had a chance to research or listen to the arguments, make often-complex decisions on our behalf.

Supporters of a participatory democracy argue that much more should be done to increase public input into policy decisions through procedures such as initiatives and referendums. Others believe that too much public input through direct participation can be damaging. In America, many local school districts have faced budgetary crises in recent years because local voters have constantly turned down requests to increase revenues. In Britain too, in some local referendums the voters have rejected Council Tax increases and better or maintained services.

The health of democracy on both sides of the Atlantic

Traditional features of the democratic way of life have long existed in both countries, including:

- ample opportunities for the free expression of opinions;
- elections by secret ballot from a choice of candidates;
- government resting on consent and being accountable to the people;
- opportunities for people to influence government;
- a spirit of tolerance prevailing between the majority and the minority;
- a reluctance to coerce recalcitrant minorities, and via free elections the means by which a legitimate and peaceful minority may seek to transform itself into a majority; power may change hands peacefully.

Both countries have long been regarded as model democracies. But democracy is more than observance of a particular form of government, based on the existence of free institutions. It is an ideal, something to aspire to. In other words, although the framework may exist, it needs to be maintained in a constant state of good repair, for otherwise erosions of the democratic structure can easily creep in and undermine the whole.

Anxieties about the state of democracy have been expressed in recent years. Some commentators on either side of the Atlantic believe that today the democratic system is not working as well as it should. In 1999, Kenneth Dolbeare wrote of 'the decay of American democracy' and asked whether the condition was a terminal one.[12] He saw the problem as one compounded by the sheer scale and power of the government in Washington, for this has meant that it is 'increasingly connected only to a steadily shrinking proportion of its affluent citizens'.

Dolbeare discerned several factors which contributed to the 'decay':

1 The decline of political parties;
2 The rise of television;
3 The dominance of money as a means of access to television and electioneering in general;
4 The rise of Political Action Committees;
5 Near-permanent incumbency in Congress;
6 A general abandonment of leadership to the latest opinion poll.

More seriously than any of the above factors, however, he sees the 'thirty-year trend toward abandoning political participation' as the most alarming indication of decay. In particular, this means a continuous decline in voter participation (a point well illustrated by recent presidential elections), a particular problem concerning those in the bottom one-third of the social pyramid. He notes the paradox which has emerged:

The growing underclass has rising needs for education, jobs, training, health care etc., but these very services are being held to a minimum or even cut – and yet the voting participation of this same underclass is declining faster than that of any other population group.

Other writers have also noted that at the very time that Soviet control of Eastern Europe has broken down and given rise to the creation of 'new democracies', the American version of that same genre has shown severe signs of fatigue. Paul Taylor is an exponent of this viewpoint: 'As democracy flourishes around the globe, it is losing ground in the United States'.[13]

Similar criticisms have surfaced in Britain too. Indeed, other than points 4 and 5 above, Dolbeare's critique applies on this side of the Atlantic. There are alleged deficiencies in the workings of our democracy. Critics point to such things as the exceptional secrecy of British government, the election of strong governments which lack majority support among the electorate, the relative weakness of Parliament, the lack of opportunities for minorities and independents to gain recognition, and failings in the areas of civil liberties. In the early–mid-1990s, some commentators pointed to the poor British record in the European Court, in a series of cases concerning the failure of Britain to protect basic rights. Others noted the continuing failure to introduce an electoral system which more adequately reflected the way people voted in general elections and the lack of freedom of information legislation, among a number of other things.

The blemishes on democracy in the two countries

As in other democracies there are blemishes within the system in Britain and the USA. To take a few specific points:

Lack of knowledge, interest and belief in politicians on the part of the electorate

Many voters are ill-informed about political issues, or indeed any other issues affecting public affairs. A survey undertaken in 1988 found that 14 per cent of Americans could not even find their own country on a map of the world. Polls in the USA have shown that more Americans know their astrological sign than know the names of their representatives in Congress. The level of interest varies sharply between different groups on the community, but the findings of the 1992 *American National Election Study*, conducted by the University of Michigan, show that only 26 per cent were interested for 'most of the time', 41 per cent for 'some of the time' and 21 per cent 'only now and then'; 11 per cent were 'hardly at all' committed. In Britain, the same lack of political understanding and interest has often been highlighted, with many voters unable to name their MPs, MEPs and local councillors, and uninterested or not very

interested in what goes on at Westminster. Crewe's survey of young people in Britain and the United States (1996) found that 80 per cent of British pupils engaged in very little or no discussion of public affairs at home, including issues of importance to their own communities.[14]

In both countries, there is a significant element of the population which forms an under-class, uninformed about, uninterested in and alienated from the political system. There is widespread scepticism about politicians and what they promise and deliver, and those who are alienated feel that politics has nothing to offer them. It seems irrelevant to their lives. This group is concentrated among the least well-off. There exist dramatic contrasts in lifestyles among the American and British peoples, with a significant element at the bottom in what Will Hutton calls a '40:30:30' society.[15] Dolbeare remarks that it is among the least-educated and lower-income groups that 'feelings of discouragement, lack of efficacy, and of never getting what one wants through politics despite one's best efforts, are particularly acute'. On top of the disadvantages of being poor, the underclass has no political outlet, certainly not one which they deem to be effective. Large numbers live below the 'poverty line', and the minority populations are heavily concentrated in this category.

Trust in government has declined, with fewer people thinking that politicians can be regarded as truthful, reliable and willing to act in the public interest. Parry's study in 1992 found that in comparison with other advanced industrial countries, Britain had a median position on the 'trust in government and politicians' scale, 'less trusting and more cynical than West Germany, Austria and Switzerland, but more trusting and less cynical than the USA and Italy'.[16] In his recent work, Putnam (writing in 2000) has echoed some of these concerns. More serious than a sense of apathy and alienation, he detects a really profound change of feeling. In his view, there is a decline in civil participation and public trust which together constitute 'a worrying decline in America's social capital'.[17] A degree of scepticism about those who govern may be healthy and desirable, but democracy is based on the consent of the governed and a lack of confidence in political leaders is a sign that the system is not serving the people well.

Low levels of political participation and of turnout in elections

If democracy thrives on popular involvement and participation, the number of people who are actively involved in the political process is very small. In Britain, we have only occasional referendums, few voters join political parties and even when there is a chance to register a vote an increasing number do not bother. Some recent turnouts in local and European elections point to significant levels of apathy, perhaps linked to the point of alienation already covered. More seriously, in 2001, turnout reached an all-time low of 59 per cent.

Traditionally, the number who vote in Britain is less than in most Western countries, but it has not fallen to such a low in any of the elections of the postwar era. In the USA, turnouts are again very low by European standards, and even since 'motor voting' the 1996 and 2000 elections have revealed that many Americans are disinclined to vote.

If low turnouts reflect an increasing distrust of politicians and a feeling that 'all of them are as bad as each other', then this may seem to be a healthy scepticism. But when large numbers of people feel disenchanted with the parties they represent, and have doubts about their personal ability and integrity, there is more cause for concern.

Moreover, the rates of political participation are unequal among the population. Almost every survey on the subject has pointed to the conclusion that citizens of higher socio-economic status participate more in politics. Those who believe in democracy should be concerned about both the low numbers who participate and the inequalities in participation. Those who endure the greatest inequality are more likely to resort to unconventional, even dramatic, means of protest as their only form of participation. In the words of Edwards *et al.*, 'those who participate are easy to listen to; non-participants are easy to ignore. In a democracy, citizenship carries the promise – and the responsibility – of self-government'.[18]

The electoral system

First Past The Post may usually provide a clear winner, but some would suggest that the grossly disproportionate power given to the two major parties (Conservative and Labour, Republican and Democrat) at the expense of small ones is not only unfair but undemocratic. In both cases, government does not rest on majority support, so that in Britain the Blair government has since 2001 governed on the basis of 24.2 per cent support of the total UK electorate, and in the USA (for the fourth time in its history) a President has been elected without the backing of the majority of those who actually voted; 48.1 per cent voted for George W. Bush, as against 48.3 per cent for his rival. In the eyes of critics of FPTP, such figures cast doubt upon the legitimacy of the governing administration.

Under the FPTP system, there are no prizes for coming second. Unless a party wins, it gets no reward for the votes it receives. No matter how close the vote, only one US representative is elected from each congressional district. Third or minor parties may accumulate plenty of votes across the state, but their support is not sufficiently concentrated to enable them to gain representation. In presidential elections, there can only be one President, but in congressional, state – and many local – contests as well, third parties find it difficult to make headway, not least because the electoral system does them no favours. FPTP

encourages the belief that a vote for third or minor parties is a 'wasted' one which cannot affect the outcome. The British Liberal Party suffered from this belief for many years in the postwar era, which is why one of its election posters proclaimed: 'If you think like a Liberal, vote like a Liberal'. Even now, potential Liberal Democrat voters may vote for one of the main parties, thinking that the outcome is inevitable in their constituency. Major parties, which are often broad coalitions (especially in the United States), generally try to advance moderate middle-of-the-road positions which may appeal widely.

Electoral reformers on either side of the Atlantic would argue for a more proportional voting system via which the seats in the legislature are allocated according to each party's percentage of the vote. The cause has made little headway in the United States, but in Britain some elections (for the European Parliament and the devolved assemblies) are now contested under a 'fair voting' system, under which third and other parties have secured representation.

The media

At their best, the media expose wrong-doing and keep us informed about political matters, but often they fall well below the level that many people expect. In both countries, there is a free press, relative to that of former communist countries and present dictatorships. But the trends towards concentration of ownership means that there is insufficient diversity of viewpoint. Some groups cannot easily gain access to television either, such as those who are seen as threatening to the democratic system – students, feminists and militant trade unionists. According to Keane 'the activities of the tabloid press have been a disgrace to liberal democracy for a number of years'[19] and, at worst, television confrontations trivialise political debate, opting for the entertaining rather than in-depth discussion; issues are now less important than broad themes. The same is true of the United States. Discussion of policy often gives way to an infatuation with personalities. Marketable sound-bites are often a substitute for rational argument and elections are all about photo opportunites and pseudo-events.

Successful politicians in the media age invariably talk in entertainment-orientated themes. This can make political philosophy seem fluid. In the words of Professor Postman: 'You cannot do political philosophy on television. Its form works against the content. It is television which has enabled the propagandist to put over the candidate's case without recourse to philosophy or specifics'.[20] As Laurence Rees put it: 'For any politician who lacks conviction but has charming personal habits and appearance, there has never been a better time to seek office . . . Television as a medium is full of attractive people – often attractive people trying to sell you cars, washing machines or soap powder'.[21]

Today, Presidents are popularly remembered primarily by their looks more than by their abilities. Once, it was their utterances and the quality of their performance which mattered, but today image is all-important, and as we recall Carter or Reagan we think of how they appeared on television. Although party labels count for more in Britain, it has been increasingly the case in recent years that the public thinks in terms of the Kinnock v Thatcher or Blair v Hague/Blair v Duncan Smith duel.

Austin Mitchell MP, a British parliamentarian used to appearing on television and handling the media, has been scathing about their performance. His comments were written about British experience, but they might equally have been applied across the Atlantic. He suggested that the public is saturated with:

> **gossip . . . personalisation, all the trivia of a tabloid world, rather than being satiated on hard information or educated by explanation and analysis. The media's preoccupations are never sustained. Education is not seen as one of its responsibilities. The public neither gets, nor is helped, to understand alternative strategies . . . The media demand instant answers . . . Sensationalism sells newspapers and wins viewers. Explanation and understanding are boring. Politicians are pushed into vacuities and every action is criticised. The bland lead the blind . . . Media democracy is perpetual populism and the endless clamour for easy answers.**[22]

Rights have been neglected

Britain lacks a written constitution and a formal Bill of Rights, although the situation has now been partially corrected by the passage of the Human Rights Act, incorporating the European Convention. But citizens do not have an up-to-date, clear, tailor-made statement of the rights we might claim. There have been many anxieties about the security of long-established civil liberties in recent years, most notably in the years of Thatcherite rule in which there was perceived to be a disregard for freedom because of the alleged threat to national security. In the Blair era as well, libertarians have been dismayed by the inroads into trial by jury and by the wide-ranging nature of the anti-terrorist legislation passed between 1998 and 2001, and again after the events of 11 September 2001.

In the USA, basic freedoms are set out in the Bill of Rights. The idea of equality was proclaimed in the Declaration of Independence's resounding cry: 'We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal'; this is often seen as an American contribution to mankind. Certainly, privilege and rank count for less in America than in Western Europe, and an egalitarian fervour is in a way a part of the American dream – that each person can go out and make a fortune, by using his or her gifts and exhibiting a pioneering spirit. But the position of African-Americans until comparatively recently suggested that in practice not everyone benefited from the Jeffersonian dream. Whatever the

constitutional theory, it was a long time before African-Americans achieved their due recognition. Not until 1965 were there voting rights secured.

Furthermore, in America there has been a history of intolerance towards groups on the political left. In the 'Golden Decade' of the 1920s, those suspected of adhering to a progressive creed were denounced as 'reds' or 'subversives'. The mood of intolerance was again apparent in the late 1940s into early 1950s in the McCarthyite era and it remains the case that those who dissent from the American way of life are often regarded with suspicion. More recently, some of those who dared question the American response to the terrorist threat and the USA Patriot Act have complained of harassment or had their patriotism imputed. This mood and the treatment of terrorist suspects at Guantanamo Bay led one *Guardian* columnist to write of the 'new McCarthyism'.[23]

In both countries, very special challenges have provided the justification for a governmental clamp-down on those held to pose a threat to national security. Some people who feel little or no sympathy for the actions taken by terrorists nonetheless question whether it is right to ignore the rights of those seen as dangerous. They believe that the Blair and more particularly Bush administrations have been so understandably keen to combat terrorism effectively that they have been willing to sacrifice traditional values of justice and liberty.

Money has become too important in politics

Money has become a controversial factor in British politics in recent years, with constant press stories dogging New Labour in office. From the Ecclestone Affair onwards, a series of issues have arisen which point to a conflict of interest. Legislation on party finance has been enacted to place a ceiling on the amount any party can spend during an election campaign and to make donations more transparent, but greater openness has only highlighted the 'generosity' of wealthy backers whose motives may not be disinterested. Large gifts from multi-millionaires continue to offer problems as well as support for the parties and their images.

America has had curbs on the level of individual contributions since the 1970s, but money continues to be a cause of great unease. Money is an all-important campaign prerequisite. Without it, candidates cannot get elected to public office, because they need television to help them advance their campaign and viewing time must be purchased. Many people assume that those who provide funding want something in return and whether the money comes in the form of soft or hard money, it causes unease. Some candidates dislike having to plead for campaign contributions, but know that without it their efforts will stall.

Electoral success should not be determined on the basis of wealth. It is unfair that richer parties or candidates can use their affluence to buy a greater

chance of success. But on both sides of the Atlantic there is a feeling that an undue emphasis on money damages the fabric of democracy.

Neither British nor American democracy might seem very healthy, after reading this list. There are flaws in both countries, but several of the points made against the health of democracy could be challenged. Few countries can claim to have a perfect system. Perfection is something to which we can aspire. Meanwhile, democracy should not be taken for granted. At least British and US citizens live in countries which have evolved by peaceful change, rather than through violent upheaval. Both also have a long attachment to freedom. If the reality has fallen short of the democratic ideal in several respects, the commitment to democracy has always been apparent and to their credit many people in either country have always felt uneasy about lapses from that ideal.

Some key differences

Decentralisation: government beyond the centre

Britain has often been described as a highly centralised state, something which the Scots and the Welsh – as well as some English regions – have found hard to accept. In recent years, a measure of decentralisation of government has been introduced via devolution, thus bringing government closer to the people, a belated recognition of the Gladstonian principle set out more than a hundred years ago that 'keeping government local makes it more congenial'. But, as we have seen, devolved power is always subject to supervision by the sovereign body (Westminster) and can in theory be revoked by it.

By contrast, in a federal state power is constitutionally divided between the central government and the provincial or state government. Federalism is much less common than the unitary governments typical of most parliamentary democracies. In the United States, it was instituted to increase democracy and it does strengthen democratic government in many ways. It was designed to allay the fears of those who believed that a powerful and distant central government would tyrannise the states and limit their voice in government. It provides more levels of government and consequently more opportunities for participation in politics. It gives citizens easier access to government and therefore helps keep it responsive to the people. It enables the diversity of opinion around the country to be reflected in different public policies; among the states local democracy has long been in decline.

British local government has been regarded by many commentators as being in a parlous state in recent decades. Many have commented on the decline of the democratic element. It exercises few powers, far less than in the 1980s. Legislation has restricted the capacity of local councils to raise money and

constrained their discretion in providing local services. Many citizens are unclear what it is they are voting for. Lack of publicity may even mean that they are not sure than an election is taking place. If they are aware, they are not clear what the point is in giving up time to go to the polling booth. Interest is exceptionally low in some inner-city areas, but across the whole country there is little enthusiasm for anything to do with local government.

In America, the very existence of so many governments to handle the range of public services is an indication that decentralisation means more than handing greater power back to the states in recent years. States too have been willing to decentralise their governing arrangements, firstly through the creation of county governments and later via cities and townships. Each of the units of local government can participate in some way in the system of intergovernmental relations. They exercise considerable influence through local members of Congress who are responsive to the needs of constituents back home. They also exercise influence through membership of intergovernmental lobbying groups, which make up an increasingly important set of actors in the federal system. Today, local voters choose their own representatives to serve on city councils, school boards and some special district boards. As small legislatures elected from among the community's inhabitants, these bodies are usually the policymaking institutions closest and most accessible to all citizens. In many ways, American local government encourages popular participation and promotes the value of individualism at the local governing level.

In reality, American state and local politics are not as perfectly democratic as the comments above might seem to suggest. As in Britain, politics at the local level are poorly covered by the media and as a result much of the work done gets little attention or recognition. Many voters are ill-informed about what is going on, which makes it more difficult for them to hold those who govern accountable. Furthermore, the number who actively participate or even vote is often very low.

Britain: a quango state

Some of the lost power has been handed over to the numerous quangos which still exist, despite the fact that politicians in opposition often criticise their existence, and especially their undemocratically chosen membership. They range from NHS trusts to Training and Enterprise Councils. The Tony Benn question about those who exercise power over the rest of us is: 'Can you get rid of them?'. We cannot determine the membership of quangos, which are often stuffed with party appointees.

In the USA, there is a passion for the elective principle. In a country which has stressed the idea of limited government, holders of key positions are expected to submit themselves for periodic re-election and for some offices there are

'term limits' which determine the length of time for which people can serve. Quangocracy has never been a serious democratic issue.

Open government and freedom of information

Open government is the principle that the processes of government should be available for public scrutiny and criticism, based on a free flow of information from those who exercise power and make decisions to elected representatives, the media and the general public. In any society, there will be some information which has to be kept secret on grounds of national security. However, in an open system, the presumption is in favour of the public's 'right to know'. Ultimately, those who would withhold access and information have to defend their position in the courts. It is often alleged that information kept secret in Britain goes far beyond what is necessary to preserve public safety and often mainly covers material the publication of which would cause political embarrassment. Secrecy is then a key element of British government and it is reenforced by a range of bureaucratic, constitutional, cultural, historical and military factors. The recent British legislation on freedom of information will now only take effect from 2005. It has been widely criticised for its timidity, even though significant concessions were extracted from ministers during its passage in 1999–2000.

On the principle of openness and the right of access to information, the US performance still leaves Britain trailing. America has had a freedom of information act since 1966, as well as a series of laws and rules (the 'sunshine' acts) which opened up the vast majority of congressional meetings to public view. Whatever the doubts about the costs of its implementation or its effects on carrying out confidential investigations, most Americans and consumer groups welcome the fact that the legislation is strong and effective, giving Americans a 'right to know'.

The use of direct democracy

The use of methods of direct consultation with the people – such as the referendum, the initiative and the recall – are practical demonstrations of direct democracy in action in the United States. As we have seen on p. 00, there are deficiencies in the way referendums operate, but America has gone much further in countenancing their use not just to decide constitutional matters, but also a range of social and economic issues. More unusual and distinctly American is the use of the town meeting in small rural areas of New England. Originally, such meetings were vehicles through which the mainly Puritan religious leaders informed and led other members of the community, a means of seeking a consensus via a guided discussion. They were not opportunities for the expression of majority will on issues of the day and those who declined

to agree to the general will were likely to be driven out of the area. However, such meetings have developed into a more acceptable democratic form and in those that continue to function citizens gather together to make decisions for their community.

Future possibilities

We have examined some of the problems associated with the operation of democracy in the late twentieth century. Some fears may be over-stated, and different writers and politicians have their own particular misgivings and complaints. There is agreement among many commentators on either side of the Atlantic that all is not currently well with the body politic, and that British and American democracy are today under strain.

As to the future, new forms of democratic involvement have become a possibility with the development of media technology. The scope for the use of e-mail as a means of transmitting opinions and exerting pressure on those in office is enormous. Such technology empowers voters, and provides new means for them to be more actively involved in political dialogue. It opens up the possibility that they will be able to pass information to one another, so that the overall level of knowledge of the American citizenry will be increased. Voters might wish to use these developments to their advantage, and those elected to public office will need to be more conscious of those whose vote placed them there. This does not mean that they have to be subservient to public pressure but certainly their performances will be more effectively monitored.

In the longer term, another possible development is that the computer-literate might conduct some form of referendum on the net, giving many people a greater opportunity to participate in the political process than ever before. There may be dangers in 'electronic populism' and 'mobocracy', but for others such as Kevin Kelly 'the Internet revives Thomas Jefferson's 200-year-old dream of thinking individuals self-actualising a democracy'.[24]

In Britain, the system of interactive communications is relatively in its infancy as far as many people are concerned. But as the network of users of information technology is extended over the coming years, British voters too will have more scope to state their problems and express their views to their elected representatives. MPs and congress members will need to listen carefully to public demands, but of course they need to remember that those who use the Internet are not representative of the whole electorate. Any elected member must appreciate that it is inevitably a segment of the population, which has the facility to play an interactive role in both democracies. They are elected to their respective legislatures to represent the whole constituency, not just those who possess an electronic voice.