

both kinds of judgments. This is nearly always the case with judgments about public policy. For example, someone who says, "The government should establish a program of universal health insurance" is asserting in effect that (1) health is a good end, (2) the government should strive to achieve that end, and (3) universal health insurance is the best means of attaining that end. Moreover, we make an enormous number of empirical judgments like (3) that represent the best judgment we can make in the face of great uncertainties. These are not "scientific" conclusions in a strict sense. They are often based on a mixture of hard evidence, soft evidence, no evidence, and uncertainty. Judgments like these are sometimes called "practical" or "prudential." Finally, one important kind of practical judgment is to balance gains to one value, person, or group against costs to another value, person, or group. To describe situations of this kind I'll sometimes borrow an expression often used by economists and say that we have to choose among various possible "trade-offs" among our ends. As we move along we'll encounter all these variants of value judgments and empirical judgments.

---

#### DEMOCRATIC GOALS AND ACTUALITIES

Although it is helpful to distinguish between ideals and actualities, we also need to understand how democratic ideals or goals and democratic actualities are connected. I am going to spell out these connections more fully in later chapters. Meanwhile, let me use the chart as a rough guide to what lies ahead.

Each of the four items under Ideal and Actual is a fundamental question:

*What is democracy? What does democracy mean? Put another way, what standards should we use to determine whether, and to what extent, a government is democratic?*

FIGURE 3. *The main elements*

IDEAL		ACTUAL	
Goals and Ideals		Actual Democratic Governments	
What is democracy?	Why democracy?	What political institutions does democracy require?	What conditions favor democracy?
Chapter 4	Chapters 5–7	Part III	Part IV

I believe that such a system would have to meet five criteria and that a system meeting these criteria would be fully democratic. In Chapter 4, I describe four of these criteria, and in Chapters 6 and 7, I show why we need a fifth. Remember, however, that the criteria describe an ideal or perfect democratic system. None of us, I imagine, believes that we could actually attain a perfectly democratic system, given the many limits imposed on us in the real world. The criteria do provide us, though, with standards against which we can compare the achievements and the remaining imperfections of actual political systems and their institutions, and they can guide us toward solutions that would bring us closer to the ideal.

*Why democracy? What reasons can we give for believing that democracy is the best political system? What values are best served by democracy?*

In answering these questions it is essential to keep in mind that we are *not* just asking why people now support democracy, or why they have supported it in the past, or how democratic systems have come about. People may favor democracy for many reasons. Some, for example, may favor democracy without thinking much about why they do; in their time and place, giving lip service to democracy may just be the conventional or traditional thing to do. Some might endorse democracy because they believe that with a democratic

government they will stand a better chance of getting rich, or because they think democratic politics would open up a promising political career for them, or because someone they admire tells them to, and so on.

Are there reasons for supporting democracy of more general and perhaps even universal relevance? I believe there are. These will be discussed in Chapters 5 through 7.

*In order to meet the ideal standards as best we can, given the limits and possibilities in the real world, what political institutions are necessary?*

As we shall see in the next chapter, in varying times and places political systems with significantly different political institutions have been called democracies or republics. In the last chapter we encountered one reason why democratic institutions differ: they have been adapted to huge differences in the size or scale of political units—in population, territory, or both. Some political units, such as an English village, are tiny in area and population; others, like China, Brazil, or the United States, are gigantic in both. A small city or town might meet democratic criteria reasonably well without some of the institutions that would be required in, say, a large country.

Since the eighteenth century, however, the idea of democracy has been applied to entire countries: the United States, France, Great Britain, Norway, Japan, India . . . . Political institutions that seemed necessary or desirable for democracy on the small scale of a town or city proved to be wholly inadequate on the far larger scale of a modern country. The political institutions suitable for a town would be wholly inadequate even for countries that would be small on a global scale, such as Denmark or the Netherlands. As a result, in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries a new set of institutions developed that in part resemble political institutions in earlier democracies and republics but, viewed in their entirety, constitute a wholly new political system.

Chapter 2 provided a brief sketch of this historical development. In Part III, I describe more fully the political institutions of actual democracies and how they vary in important ways.

A word of caution: to say that certain institutions are necessary is not to say that they are enough to achieve perfect democracy. In every democratic country a substantial gap exists between actual and ideal democracy. That gap offers us a challenge: can we find ways to make “democratic” countries more democratic?

If even “democratic” countries are not fully democratic, what can we say about countries that lack some or all of the major political institutions of modern democracy—the nondemocratic countries? How if at all can they be made more democratic? Indeed, just why is it that some countries have become relatively more democratic than others? These questions lead us to still others. What conditions in a country (or any other political unit) favor the development and stability of democratic institutions? And, conversely, what conditions are likely to prevent or impede their development and stability?

In today’s world these questions are of extraordinary importance. Fortunately, at the end of the twentieth century we have much better answers than could be obtained only a few generations ago and far better answers than at any earlier time in recorded history. In Part IV, I indicate what we know about answers to these crucial question as the twentieth century draws to a close.

To be sure, the answers we have are by no means free from uncertainty. Yet they do provide a firmer starting point for seeking solutions than we have ever had before.

#### FROM VALUE JUDGMENTS TO EMPIRICAL JUDGMENTS

Before leaving the chart I want to call attention to an important shift as we move from left to right. In answering “What is

democracy?” we make judgments that depend almost exclusively on our values, or what we believe is good, right, or a desirable goal. When we move on to the question “Why democracy?” our judgments still strongly depend on ideal values, but they also depend on our beliefs about causal connections, limits, and possibilities in the actual world around us—that is, on empirical judgments. Here we begin to rely more heavily on interpretations of evidence, facts, and purported facts. When we try to decide what political institutions democracy actually requires, we rely even more on evidence and empirical judgments. Yet here, too, what matters to us depends in part on our previous judgments about the meaning and value of democracy. Indeed, the reason we may be concerned with the shape of political institutions in the actual world is that the values of democracy and its criteria are important to us.

When we reach the right side of the chart and undertake to determine what conditions favor the development and stability of democratic institutions, our judgments are straightforwardly empirical; they depend entirely on how we interpret the evidence available to us. For example, do or do not democratic beliefs contribute significantly to the survival of democratic political institutions? Yet here again the reason these empirical judgments are important and relevant to us is that we care about democracy and its values.

Our path, then, will take us from the exploration of ideals, goals, and values in Part II to the much more empirical descriptions of democratic political institutions in Part III. We’ll then be in a position to move on in Part IV to a description of the conditions that are favorable or unfavorable for democratic political institutions, where our judgments will be almost exclusively empirical in nature. Finally, in the last chapter I’ll describe some of the challenges that democracies face in the years ahead.

PART II *Ideal Democracy*



## *What Is Democracy?*

All of us have goals that we cannot attain by ourselves. Yet we might attain some of these by cooperating with others who share similar aims.

Let us suppose, then, that in order to achieve certain common ends, you and several hundred other persons agree to form an association. What the specific goals of the association are, we can put aside so as to focus strictly on the question that forms the title of this chapter: What is democracy?

At the first meeting, let us further assume, several members suggest that your association will need a constitution. Their view is favorably received. Because you are thought to possess some skills on matters like these, a member proposes that you be invited to draft a constitution, which you would then bring to a later meeting for consideration by the members. This proposal is adopted by acclamation.

In accepting this task you say something like the following:

“I believe I understand the goals we share, but I’m not sure how we should go about making our decisions. For example, do we want a constitution that entrusts to several of the ablest and best informed among us the authority to make all our important decisions? That arrangement might not only insure wiser decisions but spare the rest of us a lot of time and effort.”

The members overwhelmingly reject a solution along these lines. One member, whom I am going to call the Main Speaker, argues:



“On the most important matters that this association will deal with, no one among us is so much wiser than the rest that his or her views should automatically prevail. Even if some members may know more about an issue at any given moment, we’re all capable of learning what we need to know. Of course, we’ll need to discuss matters and deliberate among ourselves before reaching our decisions. To deliberate and discuss and then decide on policies is one reason why we’re forming this association. But we’re all equally qualified to participate in discussing the issues and then deciding on the policies our association should follow. Consequently, our constitution should be based on that assumption. It should guarantee all of us the right to participate in the decisions of the association. To put it plainly, because we are all equally qualified we should govern ourselves democratically.”

Further discussion reveals that the views set forth by the Main Speaker accord with the prevailing view. You then agree to draft a constitution in conformity with these assumptions.

As you begin your task you quickly discover, however, that various associations and organization calling themselves “democratic” have adopted many different constitutions. Even among “democratic” countries, you find, constitutions differ in important ways. As one example, the Constitution of the United States provides for a powerful chief executive in the presidency and at the same time for a powerful legislature in the Congress; and each of these is rather independent of the other. By contrast, most European countries have preferred a parliamentary system in which the chief executive, a prime minister, is chosen by the parliament. One could easily point to many other important differences. There is, it appears, no single “democratic” constitution (a matter I shall return to in Chapter 10).

You now begin to wonder whether these different constitutions have something in common that justifies their claim to being “dem-