

FIGURE 5. *Why democracy?*

Democracy produces desirable consequences:

1. Avoiding tyranny
2. Essential rights
3. General freedom
4. Self determination
5. Moral autonomy
6. Human development
7. Protecting essential personal interests
8. Political equality

In addition, modern democracies produce:

9. Peace-seeking
10. Prosperity

heads of nondemocratic regimes have usually tried to justify their rule by invoking the ancient and persistent claim that most people are just not competent to participate in governing a state. Most people would be better off, this argument goes, if they would only leave the complicated business of governing to those wiser than they—a minority at most, perhaps only one person. In practice, these rationalizations were never quite enough, so where argument left off coercion took over. Most people never explicitly consented to be ruled by their self-assigned superiors; they were forced to do so. This older view—and practice—is by no means dead even today. In one form or another the contest over government by “the one, the few, or the many” is still with us.

In the face of so much history, why should we believe that democracy is a better way of governing the state than any nondemocratic alternative? Let me count the reasons.

In comparison with any feasible alternative to it, democracy has at least ten advantages (fig. 5).

1. *Democracy helps to prevent government by cruel and vicious autocrats.*

Perhaps the most fundamental and persistent problem in politics is to avoid autocratic rule. Throughout all recorded history, including our own times, leaders driven by megalomania, paranoia, self-interest, ideology, nationalism, religious belief, convictions of innate superiority, or sheer emotion and impulse have exploited the state's exceptional capacities for coercion and violence to serve their own ends. The human costs of despotic rule rival those of disease, famine, and war.

Consider a few examples from the twentieth century. Under Joseph Stalin's rule in the Soviet Union (1929–1953), many millions of persons were jailed for political reasons, often because of Stalin's paranoid fear of conspiracies against him. An estimated twenty million people died in labor camps, were executed for political reasons, or died from the famine (1932–33) that resulted when Stalin compelled peasants to join state-run farms. Though another twenty million victims of Stalin's rule may have managed to survive, they suffered cruelly.<sup>1</sup> Or consider Adolph Hitler, the autocratic ruler of Nazi Germany (1933–1945). Not counting tens of millions of military and civilian casualties resulting from World War II, Hitler was directly responsible for the death of six million Jews in concentration camps as well as innumerable opponents, Poles, gypsies, homosexuals, and members of other groups he wished to exterminate. Under the despotic leadership of Pol Pot in Cambodia (1975–1979), the Khmer Rouge killed a quarter of the Cambodian population: an instance, one might say, of self-inflicted genocide. So great was Pol Pot's fear of the educated classes that they were almost exterminated: wearing spectacles or having uncalled hands was quite literally a death warrant.

To be sure, the history of popular rule is not without its own serious blemishes. Like all governments, popular governments have

sometimes acted unjustly or cruelly toward people outside their borders, people living in other states—foreigners, colonials, and so on. In this respect popular governments have behaved no worse toward outsiders than nondemocratic governments, and often they have behaved better. In some cases, as in India, the colonial power has contributed inadvertently or intentionally to the creation of democratic beliefs and institutions. Yet we should not condone the injustices often shown by democratic countries toward outsiders, for in so acting they contradict a fundamental moral principle that, as we shall see in the next chapter, helps to justify political equality among the citizens of a democracy. The only solution to this contradiction may be a universal code of human rights that is effectively enforced throughout the world. Important as this problem and its solution are, however, they are beyond scope of this small book.

More directly challenging to democratic ideas and practices is the harm inflicted by popular governments on persons who live within their jurisdiction and are compelled to obey its laws but who are deprived of rights to participate in governing. Although these people are governed, they do not govern. Fortunately, the solution to this problem is obvious, if not always easy to carry out: democratic rights should be extended to members of the excluded groups. This solution was in fact widely adopted in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries when previous limits on the suffrage were abolished and universal adult suffrage became a standard aspect of democratic government.<sup>2</sup>

But wait! you might say. Can't democratic governments also inflict harm on a minority of citizens who do possess voting rights but are outvoted by majorities? Isn't this what we mean by "the tyranny of the majority"?

I wish the answer were simple. Alas! it is much more complicated than you might suppose. The complications arise because virtually every law or public policy, whether adopted by a democratic

majority, an oligarchic minority, or a benign dictator, is bound to inflict some harm on some persons. Simply put, the issue is not whether a government can design all its laws so that none ever injures the interests of any citizen. No government, not even a democratic government, could uphold such a claim. The issue is whether in the long run a democratic process is likely to do less harm to the fundamental rights and interests of its citizens than any nondemocratic alternative. If only because democratic governments prevent abusive autocracies from ruling, they meet this requirement better than nondemocratic governments.

Yet just because democracies are far less tyrannical than non-democratic regimes, democratic citizens can hardly afford to be complacent. We cannot reasonably justify the commission of a lesser crime because others commit larger crimes. Even when a democratic country, following democratic procedures, inflicts an injustice the result is still . . . an injustice. Majority might does not make majority right.<sup>3</sup>

However, there are other reasons for believing that democracies are likely to be more just and more respectful of basic human interests than nondemocracies.

2. *Democracy guarantees its citizens a number of fundamental rights that nondemocratic systems do not, and cannot, grant.*

Democracy is not only a process of governing. Because rights are necessary elements in democratic political institutions, democracy is inherently also a system of rights. Rights are among the essential building blocks of a democratic process of government.

Consider, for a moment, the democratic standards described in the last chapter. Is it not self-evident that in order to satisfy these standards a political system would necessarily have to insure its citizens certain rights? Take effective participation: to meet that standard, would not its citizens necessarily possess a *right* to participate and a *right* to express their views on political matters, to hear

what other citizens have to say, to discuss political matters with other citizens? Or consider what the criterion of voting equality requires: citizens must have a *right* to vote and to have their votes counted fairly. So with the other democratic standards: clearly citizens must have a *right* to investigate alternatives, a *right* to participate in deciding how and what should go on the agenda, and so on.

By definition, no nondemocratic system allows its citizens (or subjects) this broad array of political rights. If any political system were to do so, it would, by definition, become a democracy!

Yet the difference is not just a trivial matter of definitions. To satisfy the requirements of democracy, the rights inherent in it must actually be available to citizens. To promise democratic rights in writing, in law, or even in a constitutional document is not enough. The rights must be effectively enforced and effectively available to citizens in practice. If they are not, then to that extent the political system is not democratic, despite what its rulers claim, and the trappings of “democracy” are merely a façade for nondemocratic rule.

Because of the appeal of democratic ideas, in the twentieth century despotic rulers have often cloaked their rule with a show of “democracy” and “elections.” Imagine, however, that in such a country all the rights necessary to democracy somehow become, realistically speaking, available to citizens. Then the country has made a transition to democracy—as happened with great frequency during the last half of the twentieth century.

At this point you might want to object that freedom of speech, let us say, won't exist just because it is a part of the very definition of democracy. Who cares about definitions? Surely, you will say, the connection must be something more than definitional. And you are, of course, correct. Institutions that provide for and protect basic democratic rights and opportunities are necessary to democracy: not simply as a logically necessary condition but as an empirically necessary condition in order for democracy to exist.

Even so, you might ask, isn't this just theory, abstractions, the game of theorists, philosophers, and other intellectuals? Surely, you may add, it would be foolish to think that the support of a few philosophers is enough to create and maintain democracy. And you would, of course, be right. In Part IV we'll examine some of the conditions that increase the chances that democracy will be maintained. Among these is the existence of fairly widespread democratic beliefs among citizens and leaders, including beliefs in the rights and opportunities necessary to democracy.

Fortunately, the need for these rights and opportunities is not so obscure that it lies beyond the comprehension of ordinary citizens and their political leaders. To quite ordinary Americans in the late eighteenth century, for example, it was fairly obvious that they could not have a democratic republic without freedom of expression. One of the first actions of Thomas Jefferson after he was elected to the presidency in 1800 was to bring an end to the infamous Alien and Sedition Acts enacted under his predecessor, John Adams, which would have stifled political expression. In doing so Jefferson responded not only to his own convictions but, it appears, to views widely held among ordinary American citizens in his time. If and when many citizens fail to understand that democracy requires certain fundamental rights, or fail to support the political, administrative, and judicial institutions that protect those rights, then their democracy is in danger.

Fortunately, this danger is somewhat reduced by a third benefit of democratic systems.

3. *Democracy insures its citizens a broader range of personal freedom than any feasible alternative to it.*

In addition to all the rights, freedoms, and opportunities that are strictly necessary in order for a government to be democratic, citizens in a democracy are certain to enjoy an even more extensive array of freedoms. A belief in the desirability of democracy does not

exist in isolation from other beliefs. For most people it is a part of a cluster of beliefs. Included in this cluster is the belief that freedom of expression, for example, is desirable in itself. In the universe of values or goods, democracy has a crucial place. But it is not the only good. Like the other rights essential to a democratic process, free expression has its own value because it is instrumental to moral autonomy, moral judgment, and a good life.

What is more, democracy could not long exist unless its citizens manage to create and maintain a supportive political culture, indeed a general culture supportive of these ideals and practices. The relation between a democratic system of government and the democratic culture that supports it is complex and we'll come back to it in Chapter 12. Suffice it to say here that a democratic culture is almost certain to emphasize the value of personal freedom and thus to provide support for additional rights and liberties. What the Greek statesman Pericles said of Athenian democracy in 431 B.C.E. applies equally to modern democracy: "The freedom we enjoy in our government extends also to our ordinary life."<sup>4</sup>

To be sure, the assertion that a democratic state provides a broader range of freedom than any feasible alternative would be challenged by one who believed that we would all gain greater freedom if the state were abolished entirely: the audacious claim of anarchists.<sup>5</sup> But if you try to imagine a world with no state at all, where every person respects the fundamental rights of every other and all matters requiring collective decisions are settled peacefully by unanimous agreement, you will surely conclude, as most people do, that it is impossible. Coercion of some persons by other persons, groups, or organizations would be all too likely: for example, by persons, groups, or organizations intending to rob others of the fruits of their labor, to enslave or dominate those weaker than themselves, to impose their own rule on others, or, indeed, to re-create a coercive state in order to secure their own domination. But if the

abolition of the state would produce unbearable violence and disorder—“anarchy” in its popular meaning—then a good state would be superior to the bad state that is likely to follow upon the heels of anarchy.

If we reject anarchism and assume the need for a state, then a state with a democratic government will provide a broader range of freedom than any other.

4. *Democracy helps people to protect their own fundamental interests.*

Everyone, or nearly everyone, wants certain things: survival, food, shelter, health, love, respect, security, family, friends, satisfying work, leisure, and others. The specific pattern of your wants will probably differ from the specific pattern of another's. Like most people, you will surely want to exercise some control over the factors that determine whether and to what extent you can satisfy your wants—some freedom of choice, an opportunity to shape your life in accordance with your own goals, preferences, tastes, values, commitments, beliefs. Democracy protects this freedom and opportunity better than any alternative political system that has ever been devised. No one has put the argument more forcefully than John Stuart Mill.

A principle “of as universal truth and applicability as any general propositions which can be laid down respecting human affairs,” he wrote, “. . . is that the rights and interests of every or any person are secure from being disregarded when the person is himself able, and habitually disposed, to stand up for them. . . . Human beings are only secure from evil at the hands of others in proportion as they have the power of being, and are, *self-protecting*.” You can protect your rights and interests from abuse by government, and by those who influence or control government, he went on to say, only if you can participate fully in determining the conduct of the government. Therefore, he concluded, “nothing less can be ultimately desirable



than the admission of all to a share in the sovereign power of the state," that is, a democratic government.<sup>6</sup>

Mill was surely right. To be sure, even if you are included in the electorate of a democratic state you cannot be certain that all your interests will be adequately protected; but if you are excluded you can be pretty sure that your interests will be seriously injured by neglect or outright damage. Better inclusion than exclusion!

Democracy is uniquely related to freedom in still another way.

5. *Only a democratic government can provide a maximum opportunity for persons to exercise the freedom of self-determination—that is, to live under laws of their own choosing.*

No normal human being can enjoy a satisfactory life except by living in association with other persons. But living in association with others has a price: you cannot always do just what you like. As you left your childhood behind, you learned a basic fact of life: what you would like to do sometimes conflicts with what others would like to do. You have also learned that the group or groups to which you want to belong follow certain rules or practices that as a member you, too, will have to obey. Consequently, if you cannot simply impose your wishes by force, then you must find a way to resolve your differences peacefully, perhaps by agreement.

Thus a question arises that has proved deeply perplexing in both theory and practice. How can you choose the rules that you are obliged by your group to obey? Because of the state's exceptional capacity to enforce its laws by coercion, the question is particularly relevant to your position as a citizen (or subject) of a state. How can you both be free to choose the laws that are to be enforced by the state and yet, having chosen them, not be free to disobey them?

If you and your fellow citizens always agreed, the solution would be easy: you would all simply agree unanimously on the laws. Indeed, in these circumstances you might have no need for laws, except perhaps to serve as a reminder; in obeying the rules you

would be obeying yourself. In effect the problem would vanish, and the complete harmony between you and your fellows would make the dream of anarchism come true. Alas! Experience shows that genuine, unforced, lasting unanimity is rare in human affairs; enduring and perfect consensus is an unattainable goal. So our difficult question remains.

If we can't reasonably expect to live in perfect harmony with all our fellow human beings, we might try instead to create a process for arriving at decisions about rules and laws that would satisfy certain reasonable criteria.

- The process would insure that before a law is enacted you and all other citizens will have an opportunity to make your views known.
- You will be guaranteed opportunities for discussion, deliberation, negotiation, and compromise that in the best circumstances might lead to a law that everyone will find satisfactory.
- In the more likely event that unanimity cannot be achieved, the proposed law that has the greatest number of supporters will be enacted.

These criteria, you will notice, are parts of the ideal democratic process described in the previous chapter. Although that process cannot guarantee that all the members will literally live under laws of their own choosing, it expands self-determination to its maximum feasible limits. Even when you are among the outvoted members whose preferred option is rejected by the majority of your fellow citizens, you may nonetheless decide that the process is fairer than any other that you can reasonably hope to achieve. To that extent you are exercising your freedom of self-determination by freely choosing to live under a democratic constitution rather than a nondemocratic alternative.