

How and why has the view on democratic government changed during the history of Western political thought?

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Introduction

The World Values survey from 2000 portrayed a consensus among 79 countries across the globe that democracy is the preferred form of government despite its challenges (Ferdinand et al., 2018). However, when looking at the history of Western political thought it becomes evident that the view on democratic government has not always been this way. By analyzing and discussing the question

of how and why the view on democratic government has changed during the history of Western political thought, we can develop a better understanding of the underlying structures, principles, and challenges of current democracies. Hence, this assignment aims to portray how the view on democratic government has changed during the history of Western political thought from a perception of democracy as an easily corruptible and unstable form of government to a perception of democracy as a provider of political legitimacy, liberty, stability, and societal progress. Furthermore, this assignment aims to examine possible factors that can explain why the view on democracy has changed, and how it is continuously changing.

This assignment will progress chronologically starting with Plato, moving on to Thomas Hobbes, then to Montesquieu, and lastly to John Stuart Mill. Each thinker will be presented in two paragraphs, where the first paragraph aims to analyze and compare the thinkers' views on democracy, and the second aims to identify reasons behind their view, focusing on historical context, methods, and influences from other thinkers. The choice of the above-mentioned political thinkers is made with the intention of including a large part of history with reasonable gaps between time periods while considering this assignment's restrictions of length and maximum number of thinkers. At the same time, the views of these thinkers differ from each other in one way or another, thus enabling a substantial analysis of how the view on democratic government has changed. After the analysis and comparison of each thinker, a broad summary of how the view on democratic government has changed will be presented, followed by a discussion on why this change has occurred. Lastly, the findings of this assignment will be put into a modern context and some challenges of today's democratic governments are portrayed.

Ancient Greece: Plato (429 BC – 347/8 BC)

The ancient Greek philosopher Plato was born around the end of the heyday of Athenian democracy. The democratic system in the city-state Athens was a direct democracy where all adult male citizens could participate in the popular assembly and thus perform political influence (Nippel, 2016). In the

Socratic dialogue in *Republic*, Plato criticized the direct democracy of his time while laying down a blueprint for his ideal city-state (Boucher & Kelly, 2002; Korab-Karpowicz, n.d.). Plato's critique of democracy builds upon the notion that it is inherently easily corruptible. He argued that the characteristics of democracy – notably excessive equality and freedom – make democracies unstable and prone to breed tyranny (Coumoundouros, n.d.; Sorensen, 2016). Plato described equality in a democracy as equality among unequals which entails a mistaken belief that anyone has the right and ability to rule. People can assume political power without having the necessary knowledge, ability, and virtue. This will eventually lead them to act according to their own undisciplined appetitive desires instead of in the entire community's interest. Additionally, Plato pointed out that the democratic goal of individual freedom to do whatever one wants is a corrupting feature. It creates an anarchical environment that acts as a catalyst for tyranny to arise (Coumoundouros, n.d.).

Plato's criticism of democracy reflects his ideas about his ideal city-state, Kallipolis. In the utopian Kallipolis, specialization is central to realizing the "good" society. Education plays an essential role in making the citizens' appetites responsive to reason, but not all are equally responsive (Boucher & Kelly, 2002). Plato's three dimensions of the human soul naturally assigns people different roles in society: The appetitive citizens should be producers, the spirited citizens should be guardians, and the rational "philosopher kings" should rule (Lund, 2021, PET Lecture 1a, slide 11). Here Plato sets forth the argument that political authority should be granted to the few knowledgeable and virtuous, thereby promoting an aristocracy that, unlike democracy, preserves the community's interests and resists

corruption. Plato grew up during the Peloponnesian War (431 – 404 BC) that ended with Sparta defeating Athens, which temporarily ended Athenian democracy (Lund, 2021, PET Lecture 1a, slide 11). He sympathized with the idea that the democracy itself was responsible for Athens' defeat. Furthermore, the decision of the restored Athenian democracy in 399 BC to execute Plato's teacher,

Socrates, might have influenced Plato's thoughts on democratic decisions being a result of desires, emotion, and opinion rather than reason and knowledge (Rubin, n.d.).

Early Modern Europe: Thomas Hobbes (1588 – 1679)

Thomas Hobbes wrote some of his most influential work during the English Civil War (1642-1651). His work considered how to establish a civil society and thus a government that would not collapse from within as he had experienced in the civil war (Lloyd & Sreedhar, 2018). In *Leviathan* (1651), Hobbes' main argument is that to escape the State of Nature – an anarchical condition of intense competition for survival between all men –, men must engage in a social contract by choosing an absolute sovereign (McClelland, 1996). In opposition to Plato, Hobbes did not acknowledge the importance of having a government that acts in the entire community's interest instead of in its own. According to Hobbes, the most important feature of the sovereign is its absolute political power as law-giver, law-enforcer, and the ultimate judge, as this is the only way to prevent the outbreak of civil war (McClelland, 1996). This absolutist logic shows why Hobbes had doubts about democracy as a sustainable form of government. In his work *Philosophical Rudiments* (1651), Hobbes highlighted that democracies tend to encourage State of Nature-like competition where men, as “rational egotists”, seek only their own interests. Although Plato identified a similar tendency, Hobbes was not concerned with the possibility of democracy transforming into tyranny because of this. Instead, he saw the tendencies of democracy as a provoker of internal conflict that could ultimately lead to civil war and thus launch society back into the State of Nature. (Lloyd & Sreedhar, 2018).

Hobbes' works can be seen as a response to the contemporary political environment of mid 17th century England. In the late, 1630s conflict began to escalate between the Parliament and King Charles 1st over the extent of the king's power, which ultimately lead to the beginning of the English Civil War. It can be argued that Hobbes' view of an absolute, undivided, and unlimited government as essential to preserving peace occurred in part through his method of drawing theoretical lessons from contemporary politics (McClelland, 1996). Furthermore, Hobbes followed the renaissance tradition of studying the ancient Greeks. He published a translation of Thucydides' *History of the*

Peloponnesian War (1629), and, like Plato, he drew from it some of his conclusions about the disadvantages of democratic government. Hobbes' focus was, however, the democratic government's dangerous and conflict-creating dilution of sovereign authority (Schlatter, 1945).

The Age of Enlightenment: Montesquieu (1689 – 1755)

The French Enlightenment thinker Montesquieu was among the first political thinkers to cohesively develop the doctrine of separation of powers in government. In his work, *The Spirit of Laws* (1748), Montesquieu explored the separation of political power in the legislative, executive, and judicial branches of government to avoid corruption and secure political liberty. Although Montesquieu did not promote democracy, the separation of powers with checks and balances on government power was a democratic element that echoed in the formation of the American constitution in 1789 (McClelland, 1996). Montesquieu thus strongly opposed the absolute government advocated by Hobbes. He argued that a despotic government based on the guiding principle of fear, much like the Hobbesian absolute state, is illegitimate and unstable as it disregards the rule of law and the importance of political liberty (McClelland, 1996). Instead, Montesquieu emphasized two forms of legitimate government that could secure stability, moderation, peace, and political liberty at once: (1) the republic – a mix of aristocracy and democracy – built on the principle of virtue and (2) the constitutional monarchy built on the principle of honor (Lund, 2021, PET Lecture 3, slide 13). He did, however, identify weaknesses and limitations of a republic with democratic features. Like Plato, Montesquieu pointed to the fact that too much equality will eventually lead to despotism, but also that extreme inequality will lead to aristocracy or monarchy. Meanwhile, he argued that a republic is only applicable to small societies, and therefore France should adopt a constitutional monarchy instead (Baron de Montesquieu, 1748). Montesquieu thus generally acknowledged democracy's favorable checks on the privileged classes, but he deemed a democratic republic unlikely to sustain its moderation and guiding principles in a modern context.

The Age of Enlightenment and its regimes of thought are detectable in the work of Montesquieu. The period attached great importance to reason, progress, and knowledge acquisition through science.

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Political and philosophical thinkers of the time were particularly interested in the question of how to establish reason and moderation in government that could provide security without violating the people's liberty to live life peacefully and fearlessly (Harvey, 2006; Lund, 2021, PET Lecture 3, slide 13). Montesquieu's contemporary ideas about the rule of law, separation of powers, and the preservation of political liberty, therefore stood in stark contrast to the absolute government advocated by Hobbes just a hundred years earlier. Furthermore, Montesquieu was inspired by Locke's empiricism. He found empirical arguments in history by studying the structure of the Roman empire, its separation of powers, and the reasons for its downfall (McClelland, 1996). Additionally, Montesquieu was inspired by the constitutional monarchy of England, where the monarch's power was limited by law and the status of Parliament was prominent, thus creating a separation of powers (Krause, 2000).

The Industrial Revolution: John Stuart Mill (1806 – 1873)

John Stuart Mill was an English philosopher, a reformist social liberal, and an advocate for the legal and social equality of the sexes. Contrary to his predecessors, Mill believed that the tendencies of democracy to transform into despotism or tyranny are avoidable in a representative democracy given the right social conditions (Lund, 2021, PET Lecture 4, slides 10 & 28). In his work *Considerations on Representative Government* (1861), Mill argued that the best form of government is representative and democratic as it most effectively represents the people's interests, assures their happiness and liberty, promoting stability (Lederman, 2021; Mill, 1861). Mill attached great emphasis to education as a means of realizing a well-functioning representative democracy in practice. He believed, much like Plato, that it should be the most educated people who should have the most political power and hold office in government (Lederman, 2021). Likewise, Mill stressed the importance of an educated public as a condition for suffrage for both men and women. Basic education would enable people to identify who shares their interests, who are fit for governing, and thus make rational choices. At the same time, he argued that political liberty and the right to vote

have an educational effect, encouraging improvement and progress in society (McClelland, 1996). Mill had a positive view of human nature, and believed that humans, in addition to being self-interested, also feel sympathy and justice on behalf

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of others (Heydt, n.d.). Thus, Mill had a significantly more positive view on democracy as he had confidence in its success given the right conditions and people's general will to do good.

Mill wrote in a time of mass industrialization and urbanization in Britain, which led to significant economic growth but also notable social cleavages. The upper class who had the capital to invest in factories acquired wealth, while the workers in these factories endured harsh living and working conditions. This establishment of highly visible unequal social classes in a time of prosperity gave way for the so-called "social question" with debates on political, economic, and social (in)equality (Lund, 2021, PET Lecture 4, slide 15 & 17). This historical context acted as a fertilizer for Mill's thoughts on political equality through representative democracy and the extension of universal suffrage to both men and women. His thoughts could have been further influenced by the increasing democratization of his time. Mill was, for instance, inspired by Alexis de Tocqueville's account of the successful American democracy, and thus he drew and built upon Tocqueville's inductive method of drawing general conclusions from the case of America (Qualter, 1960).

Discussion: Why did it end up this way?

As depicted in the ideas presented above, it is evident that the view on democratic government has changed significantly from the time of the Ancient Greeks to the middle of the 19th century. Plato saw democracy as easily corruptible and prone to breed tyranny. Hobbes shared Plato's negative view on democracy, as he argued it to be a gateway for State of Nature-like competition among men, leading

to anarchy and war. Montesquieu portrayed a moderately more positive view on democratic government, as he argued that a democratic republic with a separation of powers, in theory, could secure peace and political liberty. However, he was doubtful of its ability to preserve its guiding

principles in a modern context. Lastly, Mill challenged his predecessors' doubts about democracy. He portrayed representative democracy as the best form of government due to its ability to reflect the interests of the people and preserve their liberty. Furthermore, he argued it to be an achievable and sustainable form of government given the right social conditions. The question following from these findings is how come the view on democratic government has changed so significantly?

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It can be argued that the differences in historical context and the general progression of Western civilization have had a large impact on each thinker's view on democracy and its attributes. Plato and Hobbes both wrote in times of war and major political turmoil, which influenced their views on direct democracy. Both thinkers had a negative view on human nature, seeing humans as selfish and driven by their appetites. Furthermore, they interpreted the concept of freedom – which is promoted in a democracy – as the ability to do whatever one wants and therefore as anarchy. Given these perceptions of human nature and freedom, it is not surprising that these thinkers perceived democracy as an anarchical and self-seeking arena and thus a form of government that should be avoided. Montesquieu wrote in a time of more political stability, giving way for the knowledge and progress-seeking trends of the Enlightenment. The concept of freedom was no longer associated with anarchy but rather with liberty – the right to live life peacefully without fear of the state –, which was seen as necessary for society's stability and prosperity. Montesquieu thus formed principles about the moderate government that could accommodate this contemporary call for political liberty. His ideas about separation of powers influenced the emerging thoughts of democratization in America and Europe that, along with the Industrial Revolution's social question, set the scene for Mill's support of representative democracy. During this time of economic prosperity, political liberty and participation were not only seen as a condition for the stability of society but also a driver of the improvement of humanity. Under the influence of these contemporary beliefs in human progress and emerging democratization trends, Mill developed his arguments for why indirect representative democracy can succeed. Thus, the historical and political context of each thinker, the development of ideas about how to structure democratic government,

and the changing perceptions of human nature and freedom have influenced these thinkers' view on democratic government.

The Successes and Crises of Today's Liberal Democracies

Since the middle of the 19th century, the democratic form of government has dispersed. After the end of the Second World War, democracy gained momentum, and given the third "wave" of democratization and the collapse of the Soviet Union (1991), democracy has become the predominant

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legitimate form of government in the world (Ferdinand et al., 2018). Francis Fukuyama even went so far as to state that the prevalence of liberal democracy marked an "end of history" in the sense that we have reached "*...the end point of mankind's ideological evolution and the universalization of Western liberal democracy as the final form of human government.*" (Fukuyama, 1989).

The ideas of political thinkers throughout the history of Western political thought, including those mentioned in this assignment, have in one way or another contributed to drafting the structures and ideals of today's Western liberal democratic form of government. Constitutional governments based on separation of powers and the rule of law, as conveyed by Montesquieu, make up the basic structure for most legitimate liberal democracies today. Plato's concern with the transformation of democracy to tyranny is thus sought to be resolved through constitutional systems of checks and balances between the branches of government. Secondly, the critique of direct democracy throughout political thought, especially voiced by Plato, and the arguments for indirect democracy presented by Mill seem to have impacted today's democratic governments, as the number of states that practice direct democracy is extremely limited. Furthermore, Plato and Mill's emphasis on the importance of education as a condition for society – and in the case of Mill democracy – to succeed continues to be a guiding principle for many Western democracies. This is evident in the provision of free basic education and the consideration of this as a civil right.

The democratic governments of today are, however, not without challenges. Since Fukuyama declared liberal democracy as the final form of government, there has been a rise in autocratic leaders trying to consolidate their power through so-called autocratic legalism. In countries like Hungary, Poland, and Turkey, aspiring autocrats use the legitimacy of their democratic electoral mandates to undo constitutional systems of checks and balances. The gradual hollowing out of constitutions and erosion of the people's democratic right to hold their leaders accountable and elect new leaders thus counteract the separation of powers and open doors to despotism (Scheppele, 2018). Perhaps this marks a rise of so-called "Hobbesian democracies" that enjoy absolute constitutional authority "*only restrained by formalities and the lingering memory of something called the rule of law*" (van Dun,

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2005). Furthermore, the decline in democracy can even be detected in highly consolidated Western democracies. Democratic decline as a consequence of the rise of populism and its authoritarian tendencies is reasonably exemplified by the US presidency of Donald Trump. Throughout his presidency, Trump has turned his back on the basic democratic principle of accepting a legitimate opposition by continuously attempting to delegitimize it (Müller, 2016). Moreover, his unwillingness to accept the legitimacy of President Joe Biden's electoral victory in the 2020 election exhibits a disregard of fundamental democratic institutions (Howell & Moe, 2021).

Conclusion

Conclusively, this assignment has shown how the view on democratic government has changed significantly during the history of Western political thought by analyzing and comparing political thinkers in a period extending from ancient Greece to the middle of the 19th century. Democratic government has developed from being perceived as inherently corruptible and unstable and thus a form of government that should be avoided, to being perceived as the most favorable form of government due to its ability to provide political legitimacy, liberty, stability, and societal progress given the support of the right institutions. Moreover, this assignment has discussed possible reasons

why the view on democratic government has changed. From this discussion, it is concluded that factors such as the historical and political context of each thinker, their study of historical events and thoughts of previous thinkers, and the development of ideas concerning how to structure a democratic government have influenced the thinkers' perception of human nature, the concept of freedom, and thus their assessment of the sustainability and success of the democratic form of government. Lastly, the ideas of political thinkers mentioned in this assignment have contributed to the drafting of the Western liberal democracies of today, and although this form of government is widely dispersed and accepted, it cannot be seen as a static entity. As such, the historical change in the view of democratic government and the challenges of today's democracies suggests that the view on democratic governments, and thereby the interpretation of its underlying principles, is ever-changing.

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