

HISTORY OF DEMOCRACY

Origins of Democracy

The word "democracy," as well as the concept it represents, can be traced back to the area surrounding the Mediterranean Sea. The beginnings of democracy can be credited to the Greeks of the sixth century BC. The word comes from two Greek words: *demos*, meaning "the people," and *kratein*, meaning "to rule." These two words are joined together to form democracy, literally meaning "rule by the people" (Pious). The Greek system of government was perhaps closer to a true democracy or rule by the people than any other in history. The Greeks viewed dictatorship as the worst possible form of government, so their government evolved as the exact opposite. Their civilization was broken down into small city-states (never more than 10,000 citizens), and all the men voted on all issues of government. There were no representatives in the Greek system of government. Instead, they ruled themselves directly; each man was a life long member of the decision making body. This was almost a total democracy except for the fact that women and slaves (over 50% of the population) were not considered citizens and were not allowed to vote. Despite this, no other civilization has come as close to democracy as its creators, the Greeks, and many later civilizations have incorporated this Greek idea as part of the foundation for their government (Lee; Lefebvre).

Ideas of democracy similar to that of the Greeks were used by the Romans, though not to the same extent. The Roman Empire (509-27 BC) took some of their governmental ideals from the Greeks. Their government was a representative democracy, which had representatives from the nobility in the Senate and representatives from the commoners in the Assembly. Governmental power was divided between these two branches and they voted on various issues. Many Roman political thinkers were fond of democracy. The Roman Statesman, Cicero was one. Cicero suggested that all people have certain rights that should be preserved. He and other political philosophers of the time taught that governmental and political power should come from the people (Lefebvre; Lee). After the trend of democracy was started by the Greeks and carried on by the Romans, it has been seen in many later governmental systems throughout history.

Democracy in the Middle Ages

Though democracy was not directly instituted in the Middle Ages, many democratic ideas were prevalent throughout the period. Because Christianity, which taught that men were created equal in the eyes of God, was deeply ingrained into the society of the Middle Ages, the democratic idea of equality was understood by many of the people. The Middle Ages, however, utilized another form of government, which was developed

during this period called feudalism. Feudalism stressed that all people have certain rights and developed a system of courts to defend these rights. From these courts came the modern day judicial branch of the American government along with many of the ideas such as kings councils, assemblies and eventually parliamentary systems (Sanford 20-27).

Democracy in England

In 1215 AD, the Magna Carta opened the door to a more democratic system in England. Nobles forced King John to sign this "Great Charter" that created the English "Parliament", or law-making body, and stated that the written laws held a higher power than the king, thereby limiting the power of the Royal family and giving some of that power to the people. Later, the Petition of Right (1628) stipulated that the King could no longer tax without parliament's permission and the Bill of Rights (1689) provided freedom of speech and banned cruel or unusual punishment. These strengthened Parliament further and gave the people more right to express themselves. Though these reforms did not make England a true democracy in any sense, they did incorporate democratic ideals, which would later be used to form the government of the United States (Lefebvre; Pious).

John Locke



The concept of democracy continued to be prevalent in Europe with the philosophies of an English philosopher by the name of John Locke and a French philosopher named Jean Jacques Rousseau. Locke's book, *Two Treatises* (published in 1690), stated that under the "social contract," the government's job was to protect "natural rights", which included "the right to life, liberty, and the ownership of property." Rousseau expanded on this idea with his book, *The Social Contract*, in 1762. In essence, these two philosophers said that

the people should have input on how their government is run. This school of thought paved the way for modern day American Democracy (Lefebvre).



Jean Jacques Rousseau ->

The Path to Modern Democracy

The American Revolution is another important event in the history of democracy. The first step, of course, in America's pursuit of democracy was the Declaration of Independence in 1776. In this great document, written by Thomas Jefferson, many ideas are taken from the aforementioned philosophers, Locke and Rousseau. From Locke, Jefferson borrowed the idea that all men are created equal, and he altered the right to life, liberty and property to "the right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness." Jefferson borrowed a little from Rousseau as well when he said that all men should have the right to take up arms against the government if it did not respect these rights (Jefferson).

In the French Revolution, a similar cause was espoused. Political thinkers and philosophers such as Montesquieu, Voltaire, and Rousseau inspired the people by building off of American ideas and insisting that freedom comes only after the legislative, judicial and executive branches of the government are separated. The people of France overthrew the king, then set forth the "Declaration of the Rights of Man," which changed Locke's right to life, liberty and property to the right to "liberty, property, security, and resistance to oppression." (The resistance of oppression probably came from Rousseau.) These ideas, like the ones in the American Declaration of Independence, lent themselves to a partially democratic system where the powers of the king are limited and the people have some say in their government (Pious; Lefebvre).

All over the world, revolutions began to spring up against monarchies, and democratic governments began to develop. Before the end of the 19th century, almost all of the Western European monarchies had adopted a constitution limiting the power of the Royal Family and giving some power to the people. Parliamentary type representative legislatures were also developed in many of these countries, giving the people more power to rule (Pious).

With the growing success of democracy in the United States and in other countries throughout the world, democracy became more and more popular. By the 1950's, almost every independent country on the planet had a government that embodied some of the principals and ideals put forth by democracy. The model nation for these principals became the United States (Pious; Sanford 20-27).

Democracy in America

Modern American democracy is in the form of a democratic republic or a representative democracy. A representative democracy came about in the United States because the colonists were tired of taxation without representation and wanted a more fair system where the people had more say in the rule of the country. They did not desire the Athenian form of democracy however; as they feared it would give the people too much power and would lend control of the government to the uneducated masses. What they came up with was a representative democracy wherein elected representatives rather

than direct rule by the people rule the government. These representatives are elected with the idea that they will accurately represent their constituents, but in case some don't, the U.S. government is divided into three branches to keep corruption in check. These three branches are the Executive, Legislative, and Judicial branches. No one branch contains absolute power, rather, each branch is balanced off of the others creating a system of checks and balances to protect the principals of democracy. This system is in no way perfect, and this is why we must pursue a more perfect form of democracy and a more perfect union between our citizens, states and country (Pious; Sanford 20-27).