

What Is Democracy? Power, Participation, and the Fragile Art of Self-Government

Explore the origins, principles, and modern challenges of democracy — from ancient Athens to digital disinformation, and...

B2 Reading · 35 min · Politics

1 Before You Read — Reflect & Discuss

Consider the following questions and discuss with a partner or your teacher:

1. What does the word "democracy" mean to you? Can you define it in one sentence?
2. Do you think your country is fully democratic? What works well, and what could be improved?
3. Is democracy always the best system of government, or are there situations where other systems might work better?

2 Reading

The Idea That Changed the World: Democracy Past, Present, and Under Threat

In 2024, more than half the world's population lived in countries that held national elections — the largest such number in history. Yet at the same time, independent watchdog organisations reported that global democracy was in decline for the eighteenth consecutive year. More elections, it seems, do not necessarily mean more democracy. Understanding why requires us to look beyond the ballot box and examine what democracy truly means, where it came from, how it works — and why it is more **fragile** than most people realise.

The Origins of an Idea

The word "democracy" comes from the Greek *δημοκρατία* — literally "rule of the people." Its earliest known practice emerged in Athens around 508 BCE, where male citizens (excluding women, enslaved people, and foreigners) gathered in open **assemblies** to debate laws, vote on policies, and hold officials **accountable**. Athenian democracy was direct: citizens did not elect

representatives but participated personally in decision-making. It was also deeply imperfect — limited to a fraction of the population — yet the **principle** it established, that political authority should derive from the governed, would prove to be one of the most powerful ideas in human history.

For most of the following two thousand years, democracy was rare. Monarchies, empires, and **authoritarian** regimes dominated global politics. It was not until the Enlightenment — the intellectual movement of the 17th and 18th centuries that championed reason, individual rights, and **liberty** — that democratic ideas regained serious momentum. The American Revolution (1776) and the French Revolution (1789) translated Enlightenment philosophy into political reality, establishing republics founded on the **sovereignty** of the people.

What Makes a Democracy?

Modern democracy is far more than simply holding elections. Political scientists identify several essential components. **Free and fair elections** are necessary but not sufficient: voters must have genuine choices, and results must be respected. **Rule of law** means that everyone — including those in power — is subject to the same legal framework. **Separation of powers** divides government authority among independent branches (typically executive, legislative, and **judicial**) to prevent any single institution from becoming too powerful. Freedom of speech, freedom of the press, and the right to peaceful **assembly** ensure that citizens can participate in public life, criticise the government, and organise **opposition**.

Perhaps most importantly, a functioning democracy requires a culture of **tolerance** and compromise. In a democracy, political opponents are rivals, not enemies. The losing side in an election accepts the result and continues to participate in the democratic process, trusting that they will have the opportunity to win next time. When this trust breaks down — when political competition becomes existential conflict — democracy is in serious danger.

Democracy Under Pressure

In recent years, democratic institutions around the world have come under increasing pressure. **Populist** leaders have risen to power by exploiting public frustration with economic inequality, immigration, and perceived elite corruption — often by attacking the very institutions (independent courts, free press, electoral commissions) that sustain democracy. In several countries, democratically elected leaders have gradually **eroded** democratic norms from within: weakening judicial independence, restricting press freedom, and changing electoral rules to entrench their own power. Political scientists call this process "democratic **backsliding**."

The spread of **disinformation** through social media has added a new dimension to the challenge. When citizens cannot agree on basic facts — when conspiracy theories and fabricated news compete with credible journalism for attention — the informed public debate on which democracy depends becomes nearly impossible. The manipulation of online information by both domestic and

foreign actors has been documented in elections worldwide, raising fundamental questions about the **integrity** of the democratic process in the digital age.

Why Democracy Still Matters

Despite its imperfections, democracy remains the system of government most closely aligned with human **dignity** and freedom. Democracies are statistically less likely to go to war with each other, less likely to experience famine, and more likely to protect individual rights and **minorities**. Democratic governments, because they are accountable to their citizens, tend to be more responsive to public needs and more capable of self-correction than authoritarian alternatives.

Democracy is not a destination but a process — one that requires constant **vigilance**, active participation, and a willingness to defend its institutions even when they are inconvenient. As the philosopher Karl Popper observed, the question is not "Who should rule?" but rather "How can we organise our political institutions so that bad or incompetent rulers can be prevented from doing too much damage?" The answer, imperfect as it is, remains democracy.

3 Key Vocabulary

Word / Phrase	Definition	Example Sentence
fragile	easily broken, damaged, or destroyed; delicate	Democracy is more fragile than most people realise.
assemblies	gatherings of people for a common purpose, especially for formal discussion	Athenian citizens gathered in open assemblies to debate laws.
accountable	required to explain and take responsibility for one's actions	Democracy holds officials accountable to the people.
principle	a fundamental truth or belief that serves as the foundation for reasoning or action	The principle that authority derives from the governed changed history.
authoritarian	favouring or enforcing strict obedience to authority at the expense of personal freedom	Authoritarian regimes dominated world politics for centuries.
liberty	the state of being free within society from oppressive restrictions	The Enlightenment championed reason, individual rights, and liberty.
sovereignty	supreme power or authority, especially of a state to govern itself	Republics were founded on the sovereignty of the people.
free and fair elections	elections in which all eligible citizens can vote without intimidation and results are honestly counted	Free and fair elections are necessary but not sufficient for democracy.

Word / Phrase	Definition	Example Sentence
rule of law	the principle that everyone is subject to the same legal framework	Rule of law means even the powerful must obey the law.
separation of powers	the division of government into independent branches to prevent concentration of authority	Separation of powers prevents any single institution from dominating.
judicial	relating to courts of law or the administration of justice	An independent judicial system is essential for democracy.
opposition	organised political resistance to the party or government in power	The right to organise opposition is fundamental to democracy.
tolerance	willingness to accept behaviour, opinions, or beliefs different from one's own	A functioning democracy requires a culture of tolerance and compromise.
populist	relating to politicians who claim to represent the interests of ordinary people against elites	Populist leaders have risen by exploiting public frustration.
eroded	gradually worn away or weakened over time	Elected leaders have eroded democratic norms from within.
backsliding	a gradual return to a worse condition; in politics, the weakening of democratic institutions	Democratic backsliding occurs when leaders weaken courts and press freedom.
disinformation	deliberately false or misleading information spread to deceive people	The spread of disinformation threatens informed public debate.
integrity	the quality of being honest and morally upright; the state of being whole and undamaged	Disinformation raises questions about the integrity of elections.
dignity	the state of being worthy of respect and honour	Democracy is the system most closely aligned with human dignity.
minorities	groups that are smaller in number or less dominant within a larger group or society	Democracies are more likely to protect individual rights and minorities.
vigilance	the action or state of keeping careful watch for possible danger or difficulties	Democracy requires constant vigilance and active participation.

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Useful Collocations

democratic institutions · political authority · human rights · free press · electoral system · rule of law · civil liberties · public debate · political opposition · separation of powers · voter turnout · constitutional reform · peaceful protest · democratic values · government accountability · informed citizenry

5 Reading Comprehension

1. What was distinctive about Athenian democracy?

- a) It was based on hereditary monarchy
- b) Citizens participated directly in decision-making rather than electing representatives ✓**
- c) Only wealthy citizens could participate
- d) It was identical to modern democracy

2. According to the text, why are free and fair elections 'necessary but not sufficient' for democracy?

- a) Because elections are too expensive to organise
- b) Because democracy also requires rule of law, separation of powers, and civil freedoms ✓**
- c) Because not all countries have the technology to hold elections
- d) Because elections always produce the wrong results

3. What does the text identify as essential for democratic culture beyond institutions?

- a) A strong military
- b) Tolerance, compromise, and acceptance of electoral defeat ✓**
- c) A single dominant political party
- d) Mandatory voting for all citizens

4. What is 'democratic backsliding'?

- a) When a country transitions from dictatorship to democracy
- b) When elected leaders gradually weaken democratic norms and institutions from within ✓**
- c) When voter turnout decreases
- d) When opposition parties refuse to participate in elections

5. How does disinformation threaten democracy?

- a) It makes elections more expensive
- b) It undermines informed public debate by making it difficult to agree on basic facts ✓**
- c) It increases voter turnout artificially
- d) It only affects social media companies

6. What statistical advantages do democracies have over authoritarian systems?

- a) They have larger economies in all cases
- b) They are less likely to experience war with each other, famine, and rights violations ✓**
- c) They always have higher GDP per capita
- d) They never experience corruption

7. What does Karl Popper's question suggest about the purpose of democracy?

- a) That democracy should produce perfect leaders
- b) That the key question is how to prevent bad rulers from causing too much damage ✓**
- c) That philosophers should govern instead of politicians
- d) That democracy is no longer relevant

6**Vocabulary Exercise — Fill in the Blanks**

**fragile · accountable · sovereignty · judicial · tolerance · populist · eroded · backsliding ·
disinformation · vigilance**

1. Democracy is more _____ than most people realise — it can be damaged gradually.
2. Democratic systems hold political leaders _____ to the people who elected them.
3. Modern republics are founded on the _____ of the people — the idea that authority comes from citizens.
4. An independent _____ system is essential to ensure that laws apply equally to everyone.
5. A functioning democracy requires a culture of _____ and willingness to compromise.
6. _____ leaders often gain support by attacking elite institutions and claiming to speak for ordinary people.
7. In several countries, democratic norms have been gradually _____ by the very leaders who were elected to uphold them.
8. Democratic _____ occurs when institutions like courts and the press are systematically weakened.
9. The spread of _____ through social media makes informed public debate increasingly difficult.
10. Protecting democracy requires constant _____ and active citizen participation.

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Answer Key

Vocabulary Exercise Answers

1. fragile
2. accountable
3. sovereignty
4. judicial
5. tolerance
6. Populist
7. eroded
8. backsliding
9. disinformation
10. vigilance

8

Grammar Focus — Key Structures in the Text

B2 Grammar: Defining & Non-Defining Clauses, Passive Voice & Emphasis

Non-defining relative clause: The American Revolution, **which took place in 1776**, translated Enlightenment philosophy into political reality.

Complex passive: Democratic institutions **have come under** increasing pressure in recent years.

Cleft for emphasis: **It is** not elections alone **that** make a democracy — it is the entire framework of rights and institutions.

Concessive clause: **Despite** its imperfections, democracy **remains** the system most aligned with human dignity.

Reported speech structure: Political scientists **call this process** "democratic backsliding."

9

Speaking & Writing Tasks

Speaking Task

Discuss these questions with a partner or your teacher:

- Do you think democracy is the best form of government? Can you think of situations where it might fail?
- The text mentions that political opponents should be 'rivals, not enemies.' Is this realistic in today's world?
- How can ordinary citizens protect democracy in their daily lives?
- Should social media companies be held responsible for the spread of political disinformation?

Useful Phrases for Discussion

The text makes a compelling case that democracy requires much more than just elections.

What struck me most was the idea that democratic backsliding often comes from within — from elected leaders themselves.

While I agree that democracy is imperfect, I believe it remains the best system available for protecting individual rights.

One could argue that social media companies bear significant responsibility for the erosion of informed debate.

Writing Task

Write a structured opinion essay (180–230 words) on the following topic:

"Democracy is not just a system of government — it is a set of values that must be actively defended by every generation." To what extent do you agree?

Your essay should include an introduction with a thesis, two or three supporting paragraphs with evidence, and a conclusion. Use vocabulary from the text.