What Is Democracy?

Democracy is a way of making group decisions that allows everyone in the group to have a say. It is a system that tries to work out what is best for the whole group while keeping in mind the rights of the individuals within it. The word 'democracy' comes from the ancient Greeks, and it means the 'rule of the people' or 'majority rule'. Abraham Lincoln, the 16th president of the United States, described democracy as 'government of the people, by the people, for the people'.

Democracy: Key Beliefs

- Individuals within a group are equal and no one is better or has a higher value than anyone else.
- The things that happen to a group affect all its members.
- The best decisions for a group are those that everyone has discussed and understood.
- Every individual within a group needs to feel safe and be protected.

Forms of Democracy

There are two main forms of democracy—direct democracy and indirect democracy.

Direct Democracy

In a direct democracy, people can have a say in decision-making by voicing their opinions or voting directly on any issues that might affect them. Direct democracy works best in small groups and communities where it is easy for everyone to get information or to voice an opinion. In larger communities, this becomes too difficult. There are often hundreds of issues that need to be discussed, and it is impossible for each person to know enough about every issue to make an informed decision.

Indirect Democracy

In an indirect democracy, commonly called a **representative** democracy, certain people are **elected** by members of the community to represent them in an **assembly** or **parliament**. These representatives make decisions on behalf of the people who voted for them. Because of their size, modern democratic nations are nearly always representative democracies.

Protecting Democracy

In order for a democracy to be truly representative, it is important to ensure that there are safeguards to stop the government from becoming too powerful, and to guarantee that people's rights and freedoms are protected. Some of the safeguards in a representative democracy include a written **constitution**, fair laws that can be upheld by an independent legal system, freedom of speech, a free media and access to government information.

About This Book

This book explores how people came to believe in democracy, how democracy has been shaped over time by social and **economic** forces, and how we arrived at the kind of democracy we have today. It also looks at what history can teach us about keeping democracy safe and serving us into the future.

These students are voting for a class leader, which shows democracy in action at school.

These workers are meeting to discuss improving their work conditions, which shows democracy in action.

Democracy—Where It All Began

Democracy has always been a part of human life. In prehistoric times, people lived, worked and made decisions together in small tribal groups. However, as populations grew, these small groups became large communities that were controlled by kings or ruling families who allowed their people very little say in what went on.

First Democratic Governments

Despite the widespread power of kings and ruling families, there were pockets of democracy in many places, such as the democratic **assemblies** that could be found in city-states in the Middle East and northern India around 2500 BCE. By the 5th century BCE, the Roman **Republic** and many of the city-states of Greece had taken on broader forms of democratic government. The most advanced of these, and the one that has most influenced our own ideas about democracy today, was that of Athens.

Athenian Democracy

In its early years, Athens was ruled by kings, but over time the **monarchy** was replaced by a system of elected officials. However, between the late 600s BCE and the early 500s BCE, single rulers, or **tyrants**, frequently gained power.

Athens was not a particularly fair society. A number of powerful families owned much of the land and held a lot of **political** power. There were many poor people who worked the land for rich people, and there were many slaves. Sometimes, poor people could not afford to pay their bills and were forced to became slaves to the rich in order to survive.

Cleisthenes

Cleisthenes (570–? BCE) was a powerful politician in Athens who introduced laws to stop tyrants from taking over. Around 510 BCE, he developed a **constitution** and promoted the idea of **citizenship** as the basis for having a say in the governing of the state. Cleisthenes also set up the Council of 500, which took in members from every tribal group in Athens and changed members each year so that power did not stay in the same hands.

Solon

Solon (639–559 BCE) was an Athenian leader who made important changes that eventually led to democracy. Before his time, only the traditional ruling classes could hold positions of power, but he allowed ordinary citizens to become public officials (although they had to be quite wealthy). He set up a governing council of 400 as well as a popular court where ordinary people could appeal against the council's decisions if they were unhappy.

The city-states of Ancient Greece

Delphi
Thebes
Athens
Corinth
Olympia
Mycenae
Argos
Sparta

Demokratia

The word 'democracy' comes from the Greek word 'demokratia'. This comes from two words: *demos* meaning 'people' or 'many', and *kratos* meaning 'rule' or 'power'. So demokratia usually translates as 'rule of the people'.

Despite early advances in democracy, ancient Athens remained an unfair society for slaves and poor people.

Athenian Assembly

Athenians created an **assembly**, or large gathering of its citizens, in order to discuss and vote on issues affecting the general population. Tens of thousands of citizens were **eligible** to attend the assembly, although usually only a few thousand attended at a time. It was expected that people take an interest in politics and it was frowned upon not to be involved in some way.

Pericles

Pericles (490–429 BCE) was the leader of the Athenian Government for more than 30 years. One of the most important changes he made during that time was to pay public officials, such as judges, a **salary**. Before then, only wealthy people could afford to do these jobs. When these powerful positions became paid, anyone who was a citizen, no matter how rich or poor, was able to hold them.

Council of 500

From around 510 BCE onwards, a council of 500 people was chosen randomly each year from members of the assembly. The council would decide on proposals for the assembly to discuss and vote on. These proposals could include anything from raising taxes to deciding whether or not to go to war. Another aspect of democracy at this time was the right of free speech and the ability for eligible citizens to voice their opinions on any matters that came before the assembly.

Athenian democracy ended when the Macedonians imposed their rule over the Greek states in 322 BCE.

Direct Democracy in Athens

Athenian democracy was very different from the kind of democracy we know today in two important ways. The first was that it was a direct democracy, meaning that any eligible citizens could take part in the assembly and have a direct say in what was going on. The second was that eligible citizens did not make up a large part of the total population. Only men with Athenian-born parents were allowed to vote. Women, men born outside of Athens, and slaves had no say at all in what went on in their community.
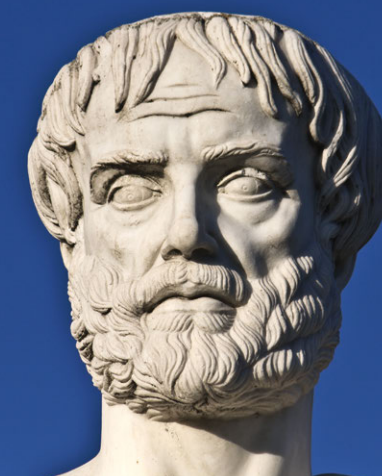
Some Famous Critics of Democracy

Some Athenians did not think very highly of democracy. They believed it would lead to mob rule and the end of their society. The philosopher Plato (427–347 BCE) thought that allowing uneducated people to become part of the decision-making process was a terrible idea. He believed only those with special training should be allowed to run the state. Another philosopher, Aristotle (384–322 BCE), thought that democracy was no better for ordinary people than other forms of government—even **tyranny**. He thought a good tyrant would be better for the population than a **corrupt** democracy.

Men with Athenian-born parents could have a say in the running of Athenian society.

The famous philosopher Aristotle believed that a bad democracy could be worse for the people than the rule of a good tyrant.

Middle Ages

After the fall of Athens, the idea of democracy disappeared for a long time. Throughout the Middle Ages (mid 400s CE to the late 1400s CE), most communities were ruled by kings. While a few **assemblies**, **parliaments** and democratic self-governing cities sprang up around Europe, most people had little say about the way they were governed.

Feudalism

The majority of Europeans were poor serfs, or peasants, living in small communities on or near large estates—large farms owned by rich **nobles**. The nobles gave the peasants work and protection, but offered them little freedom and no choice in how they ran their lives. This system was known as feudalism.

Reappearance of Democracy

After the 1100s, the world slowly began to change. Across Europe, populations increased and communities grew larger and wealthier. New towns sprang up, and peasants began to move away from estates and into the towns where they took up trades like building, baking and weaving. People working in these trades set up guilds—democratic organisations that helped to protect their members and make sure that they were paid properly for their work.

Although many people had become better off and some had more control over their day-to-day lives, they still did not a have a voice in **political** decision-making. Some people, especially those with more education, began to question why royalty had so much power. In England, questioning led to action, which led to the beginning of some far-reaching changes.
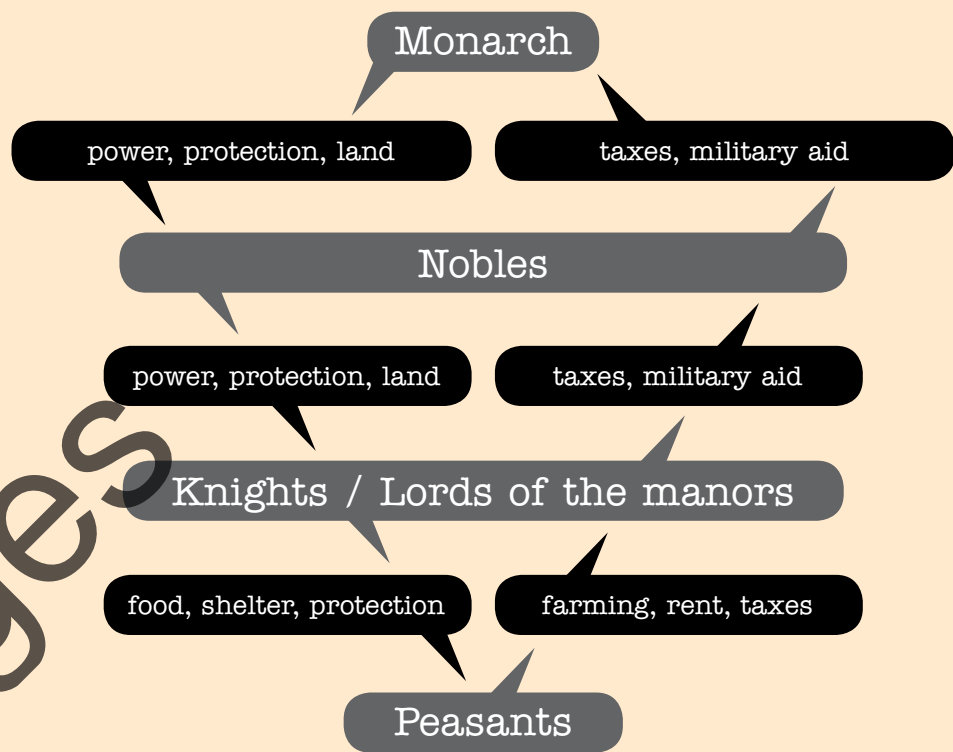
English Power Struggles

Like other European countries during the Middle Ages, much of the population of England resented the power of royalty and wanted more control over their lives. For centuries there had been struggles between kings and some nobles who wanted more power. Most kings managed to keep control of the country either by using force or by allowing the nobles just enough freedom and power of their own to keep them satisfied.

Trouble with King John

In 1199, King John came to the throne of England. He proved to be a difficult **monarch** who waged unnecessary wars, treated many of his subjects badly and did not listen to the nobles who advised him. One group of **barons** became so resentful at the huge taxes and the bad treatment handed out to them by their ruler that they decided to do something about the situation. In 1215, the barons stormed the city of London, captured King John and took him to a place called Runnymede. There, they forced him to sign a document called the Magna Carta, which limited his powers and gave more rights to the people.

Structure of Feudal Society

Monarch

power, protection, land — taxes, military aid

Nobles

power, protection, land — taxes, military aid

Knights / Lords of the manors

food, shelter, protection — farming, rent, taxes

Peasants

In feudal society, those in positions of power gave some protection to those below them, in return for money and military support.

Against his will, King John limited his own powers by signing the Magna Carta.