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# 1

## Origins of Democratic Rule

WE ARE TAUGHT that Europeans invented democracy. We learn that it was invented by the Greeks, who gave us the word itself, and we hear also that democracy in Greece died out after about as much time as the American Republic has existed. Democracy then gradually reemerged in Europe during a long evolution beginning with events like Magna Carta and the rise of Italian city republics. It culminated in the establishment of political systems based on competitive elections and universal suffrage. The practice of democracy eventually spread to other continents.

One problem with this story is that when Europeans began conquering peoples on other continents, they sometimes found that local people had political institutions that were more democratic than what they knew in their home countries. In North America, as French Jesuit missionaries entered the territory of the people they called the Huron, they discovered a political system based on both central and local councils with broad participation—including for women. In the year 1636 one missionary commented that the Huron central council was like the “Estates General” of the country.<sup>1</sup> His home country of France also had an Estates General, but it had not met for over twenty years, and it would not meet again until 1789. In Mesoamerica, Spanish conquerors more commonly encountered societies with hierarchical political systems—but not always. In 1519 as Hernán Cortés entered the territory of Tlaxcala he observed that as far as he could judge, the form of government was “almost like that of Venice, or Genoa, or Pisa, because there

is no one supreme ruler.”<sup>2</sup> His home country of Spain had such a single supreme ruler, King Charles I.

The examples of the Huron and of Tlaxcala are not isolated exceptions. Throughout human history many societies on multiple continents have independently developed political systems in which those who rule have been obliged to seek consent from those they govern. If we see seeking consent as a basic ingredient of democracy, then we can say that democracy itself occurs naturally among humans, even if it is far from inevitable. The question then becomes when and why democratic practices survive and prosper, and why this happened even in places where people had not read Aristotle.

The other question we need to ask is if early forms of democracy existed in many regions, then why did modern democracy—the selection of representatives through universal suffrage—emerge first in Europe and the United States? The answer, I will argue, has to do with the particular trajectory taken by Europe when compared with regions such as China and the Middle East. Ironically, it was Europe’s backwardness that laid the ground for the rise of modern democracy.

## Early Democracy and Modern Democracy

In its original sense as used by the Greeks the word “democracy” simply means that the people govern, or more literally that the people have power. Each citizen participates, and the people as a collective rule.<sup>3</sup> In the middle of the twentieth century, one scholar described the indigenous societies of southern Africa as having a “peculiar type of democracy.”<sup>4</sup> Free election of leaders was unknown, but tribal chiefs had to rule collectively with assemblies and councils that constrained their actions: the people, or a subset of them, participated in governance. Rather than calling this system “peculiar,” I will call it “early democracy.” This term is useful because early democracy differed from the modern form of democracy that we are familiar with today.

Early democracy existed in lieu of a state bureaucracy. It was a system in which a ruler governed jointly with a council or assembly composed of members of society who were themselves independent from the ruler

and not subject to his or her whim. They provided information while also assisting with governance. In some early democracies rulers were selected by a council; in others heredity played the primary role. Some councils in early democracies involved broad participation by the community, but it was on other occasions a more elite gathering. For those who had the right, participation took a deep and frequent form.

Early democracy was so common in all regions of the globe that we should see it as a naturally occurring condition in human societies. I am not the first person to say something like this, but I will try to provide a new and more comprehensive view of this idea while also showing when and why early democracy prevailed.<sup>5</sup> Athens, as well as many other democracies in ancient Greece, presents us with the most extensive example of early democracy, but there have been many other societies elsewhere in which early democracy was also the order of the day. This was true even if participation was not as extensive as in Athens. Examples of early democracy include those among the Huron and in Tlaxcala to which I have already referred. We will also see examples from ancient Mesopotamia, precolonial Central Africa, ancient India, and elsewhere.

Modern democracy differs from early democracy in several important ways. It is a political system in which representatives are chosen in competitive elections under universal suffrage. With universal adult suffrage, political participation is very broad, but in modern democracy popular participation in governance is also more episodic than in early democracy. Representatives meet frequently to engage in governance, but the broader populace does not participate directly, apart from at election time. Episodic participation is the first fracture point of modern democracy because it can produce citizen distrust and disengagement; there must be continual efforts to overcome this problem. The second fracture point of modern democracy is that it coexists with a state bureaucracy that manages day-to-day affairs, and the risk of this is that the people may no longer believe that they themselves are governing. This will be less likely to occur if democratic practices emerge before the creation of a state bureaucracy—then rulers and the people can build a bureaucracy jointly. But if bureaucracy comes first, this is less

likely to happen, and this means that bureaucracy can either substitute for or complement modern democracy. It all depends on the sequence of events.

If early democracy arose independently in many human societies, modern democracy is a more specifically European invention. Early democracy was a form of rule that proved durable over thousands of years. Modern democracy is something much more recent, and we should think of it as an ongoing experiment. To understand when and why this experiment will succeed, we need to first consider how both early and modern democracy emerged.

### Origins of Early Democracy

Early democracy emerged when rulers needed consent and cooperation from their people because they could not govern on their own. People had the opportunity to voice their consent or opposition in some form of an assembly or council. All rulers—both democratic and autocratic—need at least tacit consent from their people by not revolting, but consent in early democracy was not tacit: it was active.<sup>6</sup> In early democracy, even if a council of the governed had no formal prerogative to veto decisions taken by a ruler, it could still exercise power if its members possessed information that a ruler did not.<sup>7</sup>

Three underlying factors helped lead to early democracy. It was first of all more prevalent in small-scale settings. We see this whether we speak of polities in Europe, in precolonial Africa, or in North America prior to European conquest. Small scale made it possible for members of a society to regularly attend the councils and assemblies that were the lifeblood of early democracy. In some early democracies having a system of representation helped confront this problem of scale: instead of having all attend, choose one person. But individual representatives still needed to travel to an assembly, and constituents still needed to monitor them once they were there, and when people were spread over a large area this was more difficult. Representation was an adaptation to the problem of scale, but it did not solve it.<sup>8</sup>

The second factor that led to early democracy was when rulers lacked knowledge of what people were producing.<sup>9</sup> This gave them an incentive to share power to better know what sort of taxes they could levy. We should think of “taxation” in broad terms here—the problem was faced by any ruler who sought to appropriate or redistribute economic resources. Features of the natural environment sometimes drove uncertainty, as they made agricultural production harder to predict.<sup>10</sup> In other cases, rulers faced uncertainty because they lacked a state bureaucracy that could measure and assess production. Throughout history, uncertainty of this sort has been a great problem in taxation for rulers. Form an overly pessimistic judgment of how much you can tax, and you will be forgoing potential revenue; form an overly optimistic judgment of how much you can tax, and you risk provoking either a revolt or an exit of your population.

The third factor that led to early democracy involved the balance between how much rulers needed their people and how much people could do without their rulers. When rulers had a greater need for revenue, they were more likely to accept governing in a collaborative fashion, and this was even more likely if they needed people to fight wars. With inadequate means of simply compelling people to fight, rulers offered them political rights. The flip side of all this was that whenever the populace found it easier to do without a particular ruler—say by moving to a new location—then rulers felt compelled to govern more consensually. The idea that exit options influence hierarchy is, in fact, so general it also applies to species other than humans. Among species as diverse as ants, birds, and wasps, social organization tends to be less hierarchical when the costs of what biologists call “dispersal” are low.<sup>11</sup>

Over time, early democracy persisted in some societies, but it died out in many others. It did so as societies grew in scale; it also did so as rulers acquired new ways of monitoring production; it did so finally when people found it hard to exit to new areas. It is for all these reasons that the title of this book refers first to a decline in early democracy and then to the rise of modern democracy.

## Is Early Democracy an Appropriate Term?

Those familiar with classical Greek thought may fear that my definition of early democracy is an overly broad one. The Greeks distinguished between rule by the one, the few, or the many, and for them the word *demokratia* was only associated with rule by the many, typically in a large assembly.<sup>12</sup> Rule by the few was oligarchy, and it took place in the form of a council with limited participation. Even if governance under oligarchy had a collective air to it, this was not democracy as the Greeks would have understood it. Scholars have used the assembly versus council division to distinguish empirically between democracies and oligarchies.<sup>13</sup>

So why do I adopt a definition of early democracy that the Greeks would have seen as including both democracies and oligarchies? I do this because many human societies that at first blush appear to have had rule by the few also had participation by the many. In some of the early democracies that I will describe, a small number of individuals participated directly in governance, but they had to then face an assembly or council in the locality in which they resided. Among the Huron, only chiefs attended central councils, but they would face another council in their home village. In other societies the few would ordinarily make decisions, but on other occasions there was much broader discussion and consultation.<sup>14</sup> This was the case in the towns of the Mesopotamian kingdom of Mari.<sup>15</sup> This phenomenon was also known in the Greek world, and it would come to be called a mixed constitution. Those who have catalogued the political regimes of Greek cities have found many examples of mixed constitutions, and they have also attested to the fact that it is often difficult to classify a polis as clearly oligarchic versus clearly democratic—almost every Greek polis had some elements of these two regimes.<sup>16</sup> Aristotle himself spoke of cities that mixed oligarchy and democracy.<sup>17</sup> To me all this sounds as if the barrier between oligarchy and democracy was a very porous one.

For all of these reasons it makes sense to adopt a broad definition of early democracy. As I do so, I will take care to emphasize the diversity within the group of early democracies. Some had popular participation that was very extensive while in others this was more limited.



## The Autocratic Alternative

Autocracy was the alternative to early democracy. Since it is impossible in almost any society for someone to truly rule on their own, successful autocracy was aided by the construction of a state bureaucracy. Rather than rely on members of society to help provide information and collect revenue, autocrats created bureaucracies staffed with subordinates they themselves had selected and they themselves controlled. This was fundamentally different from relying on a council or assembly composed of members of society not subject to the ruler's whim. Bureaucrats could be sent out to assess what people were producing and how much they could be taxed, and they could also collect the taxes. They could also be used to enforce a system of conscription without having to give people political rights. Behind all this lay the reality of military force—autocrats needed to hire and pay specialists in violence. Some of the autocracies I will consider were very efficient and others much less so, but in all cases, they were a clear alternative to early democracy.

Opting for the autocratic alternative also depended on the mastery of techniques generally associated with civilization. The most important of these was having a system of writing so that bureaucrats could communicate across distances and over time. In chapter 3 I will provide evidence of where writing came from, showing that there were both demand and supply elements to this story. Writing was more likely to emerge when societies had a need for it, such as when they grew storable crops that could be recorded. But there was also an important supply element because inventing a system of writing from scratch is no easy task. Writing was more likely to be adopted by societies that found themselves near neighbors who had developed writing before them.

Opting for the autocratic alternative depended not only on the presence of writing but also on other elements of civilization. An understanding of geometry helped with surveying fields for tax purposes; an understanding of the soil allowed state officials to classify land according to how fertile it was and to levy differential tax rates on this basis. The paradox of civilization's advance was that it made autocracy function more effectively.

The practice of intensive agriculture was another factor that helped facilitate the bureaucratic alternative by making the landscape more legible. The word “intensive” here refers to efforts to generate higher yields from the same amount of land through increased human effort and increased capital.<sup>18</sup> If we believe that bureaucrats will generally have less information than local people about production, any process that makes production more legible to outsiders—to use the term favored by James Scott—will make it easier for bureaucrats to operate.<sup>19</sup> Intensive agriculture often does this by reordering the landscape to make production more systematic and also often more compact. This was more feasible on some types of terrain than on others, but intensive agriculture did not depend only on the natural environment; it also depended on the advance of civilization in the form of new technologies for crop rotation, plowing, irrigation, and terracing. This brings us back to the paradox that the advance of civilization could further the cause of autocracy.

Ultimately, many autocrats who exercised the bureaucratic alternative were able to do so not because they created a state bureaucracy but because they inherited a bureaucracy from those who preceded them. Max Weber wrote that bureaucracy is “among those social structures which are the hardest to destroy.”<sup>20</sup> In China and the Middle East we will see cases where a bureaucracy endured even in the face of massive dislocations. There may also be a corollary to Weber’s claim: once a bureaucracy is destroyed it is hard to rebuild one from scratch. This is the problem that the Carolingians and other rulers faced in Europe in the wake of Rome’s fall, and it shows why Europe took a different trajectory of political development.

## Why Europe Was Different

The development of early democracy was hardly unique to Europe. The assemblies of classical Greece, the gatherings of the Germanic tribes, and the councils of medieval city-states all bear certain strong resemblances to collective governance as it occurred in other world regions. But Europe was different in several crucial ways. Unlike what happened

in China and the Middle East, early democracy continued to survive and thrive in Europe rather than being fully supplanted by autocratic and bureaucratic rule. This is a first development we need to consider. Europeans were also different because they eventually succeeded in scaling up the practice of early democracy to societies covering large territories. Finally, early democracy in Europe then evolved, through a series of steps, into modern democracy. We need to ask how medieval Europeans developed a practice of political representation and how this eventually gave way to the selection of leaders by free elections with universal adult suffrage.

The irony of early democracy in Europe is that it thrived and prospered precisely because European rulers for a very long time were remarkably weak.<sup>21</sup> For more than a millennium after the fall of Rome, European rulers lacked the ability to assess what their people were producing and to levy substantial taxes based on this.<sup>22</sup> The most striking way to illustrate European weakness is to show how little revenue they collected. Europeans would eventually develop strong systems of revenue collection, but it took them an awfully long time to do so. In medieval times, and for part of the early modern era, Chinese emperors and Muslim caliphs were able to extract much more of economic production than any European ruler with the exception of small city-states.

To see Europe's early weakness, consider the evidence in Figure 1.1 that shows estimates of state revenue as a share of total economic production in four societies: China under the Song dynasty in 1086 CE, Iraq under the Abbasid Caliphate in 850 CE, and England and France circa 1300 CE.<sup>23</sup> Song emperors and Abbasid caliphs were able to extract upwards of ten times the revenue relative to GDP that could be extracted by European rulers. These figures are for central taxation; the question of European local taxation, particularly for tithes that went to the church, will be discussed in chapter 5, and it does not change my overall conclusion.

One of the further lessons of Figure 1.1 is that if early democracy and autocracy were alternative routes of political development, they did not necessarily lead to the same outcome. Even after English monarchs had

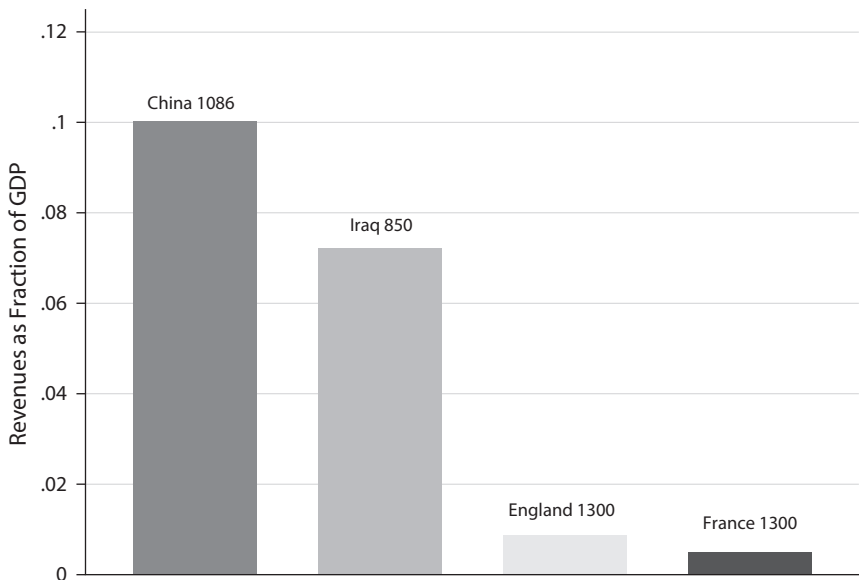


FIGURE 1.1. Fiscal extraction across three regions. (See the text for sources.)

agreed to the Magna Carta, they were forced to settle with a vastly lower rate of taxation than were Chinese emperors or Muslim caliphs.

For a very long time Europe's rulers were in a weak position because they lacked state bureaucracies. They did not dispose of many of the technologies for making a bureaucracy work, and the Romans did not bequeath this institution to them. The consequence was that those who wanted a bureaucracy had to start from scratch. Contributing to all this was the fact that the form of agriculture practiced in Europe—which was extensive rather than intensive—made it more difficult for bureaucracy to operate. European states would, eventually, develop strong state bureaucracies, in large part due to external threats, but by the time this happened democratic practices had become very firmly anchored, and they had also been scaled up to operate in large polities. With this sequence, bureaucracy did not substitute for democracy—as in the autocratic alternative—it instead became a complement.

To see the fundamental weakness of medieval European states, take the case of Philip the Fair of France, who reigned from 1285 to 1314. He is

often credited with creating a centralized royal administration, but even after his extensive efforts, Philip still had a permanent central bureaucracy of only a few dozen individuals, and he lacked permanent military force. Absent this, Philip's biographer Joseph Strayer argued that Philip had to attain his objectives through means other than the threat of force because "he had little force on which to rely."<sup>24</sup> Philip's reign would resemble a litany of negotiations with various local groups—in dispersed order—to obtain consent for and assistance with raising revenues.<sup>25</sup>

The final irony of Europe's political development is that the slow progress of science and civilization favored the survival of early democracy. To take one example, consider the effect of understanding the soil. From an early date, rulers in China and in the Middle East developed an understanding of how different types of soil contributed to agricultural production. Armed with this knowledge, they were in a better position to know how much they could tax their subjects, rather than having to enter a process of negotiation and compromise. In China the legend known as the *Tribute of Yu*, or *Yu Gong*, recounts how Yu the Great, the first emperor of the Xia dynasty, surveyed each of his nine provinces and established different tax rates according to the quality of the soil. Though the story of Yu is apocryphal, the reality of early Chinese understanding of the soil is not, and there is no European equivalent to the story of Yu the Great.

## The State Arrived First in China

The course of Chinese political development resembles the European one stood on its head. To understand the origins of Chinese political development, we need to go back to the second millennium BCE. China's first historical dynasty, the Shang, arose on the Loess Plateau of northwestern China, an area named for the type of soil that is found there. A prior dynasty, the Xia, which may or may not be mythical, would have been located in the same area.

The hallmark of Shang society was that from a very early date, governance took an autocratic form. Shang practice stipulated that kings be chosen according to a strict inheritance rule—there was no reference

to a council or assembly having any choice in the matter, nor any subsequent influence. The Shang may have had a proto-bureaucracy, but we know with more certainty that Shang kings mobilized large military forces, numbering into the tens of thousands. The Shang also had a dominant central capital that was much larger than any of the settlements surrounding it.

The natural environment clearly nudged Chinese society in an autocratic direction. The early Chinese dynasties all emerged in the Loess Plateau. Loess is a type of soil that is soft, making it easy to work with even simple tools, and it is also very porous, ensuring that any water will be delivered to growing plants. Where there was also a source of water, loess soil provided an excellent basis for early agriculture. Loess soil is also present in Europe, and western Europe's first farmers, the Linearbandkeramik (LBK) culture, grew crops on loess soil. But in western Europe loess tended to be deposited in small scattered areas rather than across a giant plain, leading to a more dispersed pattern of early settlement. This may also have led to a longer-term trend toward dispersed political authority.

The precocious development of a state bureaucracy also pushed China in an autocratic direction. Commonly, Western observers will refer to the Qin (221–206 BCE) as the first dynasty to establish bureaucratic rule in China. In fact, the roots of Chinese bureaucracy extend much further back. Our first unambiguous evidence for bureaucratic rule comes from the Western Zhou dynasty, which lasted from 1047 to 772 BCE. The Zhou bureaucracy consisted of parallel administrative divisions involving a Grand Secretariat, the Six and Eight Armies, a Ministry, and the Royal Household.<sup>26</sup> Many of the positions in this bureaucracy were hereditary, particularly in early periods, but over time meritocratic promotion became the norm.

The subsequent evolution of the Chinese state is one where bureaucratic recruitment and rule became ever more routinized, and this occurred at the expense of hereditary lineages. In western Europe, after the fall of Rome rulers pursued a policy of giving grants of land in exchange for military service. These grants tended to be one-way transactions. Over time this led to the creation of a category of members of

society with substantial autonomy. The presence of this group would play a prominent role in the early development of medieval assemblies. In China things pushed in the opposite direction. With the perfection of an imperial examination system during the Tang and Song dynasties, Chinese rulers had at their disposal a means of bureaucratic recruitment that did not depend on societal networks outside of their control. Being a member of the elite now meant being part of the state itself.

### Islamic Rulers Inherited a State

The Middle East took a different route to autocracy from China, one that shows how inheriting a state can be bad for democracy. Early democracy prevailed as the main form of governance in Arabia during the pre-Islamic period—rulers governed in a consensual manner through councils. One explanation for this was that in a nomadic society, people who were unhappy with a ruler’s decisions could simply move elsewhere. The other important fact was that rulers lacked anything even faintly resembling a state: they had no bureaucracy and no permanent military force. This is a pattern that we will also see in other regions as diverse as the plains of North America and the forests of Central Africa.

One way of interpreting what happened next in Arabia is that the arrival of Islam fatally undermined democratic prospects, but this view does not fit the history very well. Hints of governance under Muhammad himself suggest that he operated in a consultative manner for the same reasons that other Arabian rulers had: this was the only way to make things work. The text commonly known as the *Constitution of Medina* provides one way to see this. There is also a tradition in Islam that the first four “righteous” caliphs were chosen collectively rather than purely through inheritance, and the Koran itself refers in two places to the need for rulers to govern through a process of *shura*, which in Arabic implies consultation.

It was the swift inheritance of a preexisting state—not Islam—that led to the demise of early democracy in the Middle East. As the Islamic conquerors spread outward from Arabia, they soon encountered more

densely populated lands where people practiced an intensive and settled form of agriculture, a radically different environment from Arabia. In the territory that is now Iraq these lands were part of the Sasanian Empire, and in the century or so before the Islamic conquests the Sasanians had succeeded in creating a centralized bureaucracy to collect taxes from a fertile agricultural region that would come to be known as the Sawad—"The Black Land." Faced with this inheritance, after deposing the Sasanian leadership, the Arab conquerors co-opted their bureaucracy. The result, in spite of protests, was that caliphs could now govern in an autocratic manner with little need for consultation. Succession to the caliphate became hereditary.

Swift geographical expansion was the other factor that undermined democracy in the Middle East. Early democracy in pre-Islamic Arabia, as in many other human societies, was a small-scale, face-to-face affair; elders from individual tribal groups would assemble, discuss, and reach some sort of a conclusion. The process was an informal one, precisely because the circumstances allowed for informality. With the Islamic conquests, the question was posed of how to govern not in a face-to-face setting but instead across distances of hundreds and even thousands of miles. Some scholars have suggested that in this situation what was needed was the practice eventually adopted by Europeans: a form of political representation that could allow for democratic governance over large distances.<sup>27</sup> But Europeans took centuries of trial and error to arrive at this solution; the inhabitants of the Islamic world would have needed to figure this out within a matter of decades.

The final thing to emphasize about the disappearance of democracy in the Middle East is that contingency played a large role here. Muslim conquerors were able to inherit a bureaucratic state because Sasanian rulers in Iraq had recently constructed one. Had the Islamic expansion happened one hundred years earlier—so in the sixth rather than the seventh century—there would have been no bureaucracy to inherit. The subsequent history of democracy in the Middle East might have been very different.



## The Arrival of Modern Democracy

Modern democracy evolved from early democracy, and this process began in England before first reaching a fuller extent—for free white males—in the United States. Modern democracy is a form of rule where political participation is broad but episodic: citizens participate by voting for representatives, but this occurs only at certain intervals, and there are few means of control other than the vote—representatives cannot be bound by mandates or instructions.<sup>28</sup> All of this contrasts with early democracy. In early democracies participation was often restricted to a smaller number of individuals, but for those who enjoyed the right, the frequency of participation was much higher. It was also the case that those who chose representatives could bind them with mandates, and individual localities could either veto central decisions or opt out of them. This created substantial blocking power and therefore a need for consensus. For this reason, there was less of a problem of “tyranny of the majority,” whereas this is an issue with which all modern democracies must grapple.

If modern democracy takes a particular form, the peculiarities of Anglo-American history provide much of the explanation. England, and then the United States, deviated from the common European pattern, and it will be important for us to understand how and why this happened. This will also help us to understand the potential fracture points of modern democracy.

Council and assembly governance existed throughout Europe during the medieval and early modern periods. In continental Europe assemblies functioned in a manner seen in early democracies elsewhere: deputies were often bound by strict mandates, and local constituencies had the latitude to refuse central decisions. This was not so different from the way the Huron of the Northeastern Woodlands governed themselves, and those continental European rulers who attempted to deviate from this pattern met with limited success.

As early as the fourteenth century, council governance in England started to look very different. While English monarchs governed jointly

with Parliament, they also succeeded in imposing the requirement that deputies be sent without mandates from their constituencies and that majority decisions should be binding. The only constraint that constituencies could impose on deputies was to not reelect them. This British pattern of deputies not having mandates would eventually become the norm for all modern democracies. No representative democracy since the late eighteenth century has allowed for explicit mandates—all that can be attempted are informal efforts like the Republican Party’s “Contract with America” of 1994, and the absence of mandates has major consequences for the way democracy functions.<sup>29</sup>

The irony of England is that it was monarchical power that helped drive the shift away from early democracy, and so modern democracy incorporates an element of autocracy. It is for this reason that once Parliament became supreme after 1688, William Blackstone, the famous jurist, would write that it had “absolute despotic power.”<sup>30</sup>

While England initiated the development of modern democracy, it was slow to advance the process further. Even after what is commonly known as the “Great Reform Act” of 1832, only a tiny fraction of the total population could vote.<sup>31</sup> Here we face a puzzle: while seventeenth-century English radicals like the Levellers first conceived of universal male suffrage as a way to govern a society, their ideas would first be implemented in North America and not in England. Though we often think of 1776 or 1787 as the beginning of American democracy, from the seventeenth century a very broad suffrage—for free white males—became the norm in England’s North American colonies.

A broad manhood suffrage took hold in the British part of colonial North America not because of distinctive ideas but for the simple reason that in an environment where land was abundant and labor was scarce, ordinary people had good exit options. This was the same fundamental factor that had favored democracy in other societies. Granting political rights and shared rule was a necessary consequence because those at the top were in a weak position. The merchant companies and others who were charged with creating colonies initially tried to govern in a hierarchical manner, but this did not last long. Lacking coercive and administrative capacity, they soon found they needed to govern jointly

with assemblies of colonists. The first of these took place at Jamestown, Virginia, in 1619.

There is also a second, tragic side to the story of how labor scarcity influenced governance in North America, and this too began in 1619. The same environmental conditions that pushed colonial governments to offer political rights to whites created incentives to establish a system of slavery for Africans. Whether you enjoyed political rights or were enslaved depended on the quality of what economists would call your “outside option.” Apart from those who were taken involuntarily, and we will see that these cases existed, British migrants faced a choice of not coming to the New World in the first place. Africans arriving in the New World did not have this option. Once in the New World, British migrants unhappy with the conditions on offer could often manage to move elsewhere, but African slaves attempting to escape could hardly expect to meld into the general population, and we know that as early as the Elizabethan period, Africans were seen and portrayed negatively by the English.<sup>32</sup> Political rights for whites and slavery for Africans derived from the same underlying environmental condition of labor scarcity. It would take three hundred and fifty years after 1619 before African Americans would durably enjoy the same voting rights as others. That African Americans did finally secure the vote points to another feature of modern democracy: precisely because it is based on the idea of broad participation, those excluded have a particularly powerful argument for demanding the vote.

The U.S. Constitution of 1787 helped advance the transition to modern democracy. It did this in a surprising way by purging many elements of early democracy that had existed in state constitutions as late as the 1780s. After 1787 representatives could no longer be bound by mandates or instructions, whereas this had been common in colonial assemblies as well as in early state assemblies. Likewise, elections would occur less frequently, whereas even after 1776, in state legislatures elections most often occurred annually. Individual states would also be compelled to accept central decisions with regard to taxation and defense. Unlike in early democracy, the Constitution allowed for the creation of a powerful central state bureaucracy, and it offered a form of political

participation that was broad but also only episodic and that involved governance across a very large territory. We are still in the process of learning whether this experiment can work.

## Alternative Visions of Democracy

So far, I have laid out an account of the spread of early democracy and its transformation into modern democracy. There are also alternative views, and these involve the role of political ideas, inequality, and economic development.

### *Political Ideas*

The most direct possible explanation for the emergence of democracy is that someone needed to invent the practice, and the Greeks got there first. Even if democracy in Greece eventually died out, the memory of it did not, and from the medieval era onward, western Europeans were able to draw on this Greek tradition, as well as a later Roman one. There are two big problems with this argument.

The first is that peoples like the Huron or the Tlaxcalans had never read Aristotle, yet they managed to come up with forms of government that struck Europeans as being strikingly democratic. The members of the Germanic assemblies described by Tacitus had not read Aristotle either.

The second problem is that even for Europe, the political ideas interpretation does not work that well. I will offer one example here before considering this at greater length in chapter 5. We know that Greek ideas about government were lost to western Europeans sometime after the fall of Rome until they first reappeared in Latin translation during the medieval era. The political theorist J. G. A. Pocock argued that the rediscovery of Greek ideas about the polis had a profound effect on the independent city republics of northern Italy, but this does not help us much with understanding how these city republics emerged in the first place. We know that Aristotle's *Politics* first appeared in Latin translation sometime around 1260 CE, but the vast majority of Italian

communes became autonomous long before this date. It would seem that medieval townspeople had to reinvent democratic governance on their own, and it is striking that this happened first in Europe and not in the Islamic Middle East, because Aristotle's works were never lost in that region.

Ideas about democracy matter, and I will emphasize that throughout this book. But the simple notion that Europeans had democracy because of the classical tradition fails to convince. Europeans advanced the cause of democracy even at moments when the classical tradition had been forgotten, and other peoples advanced the cause of democracy without ever having learned the classical tradition in the first place.

### *Inequality*

The idea that inequality is prejudicial to democracy is deeply rooted—in a society divided into haves and have-nots, there will be jealousies that undermine peaceful democratic governance. Have-nots may also be more susceptible to the appeals of demagogues, so democracy should not survive for long in the face of high inequality.

It also stands to reason that there will be powerful forces that foster equality in a democracy. Since the poor outnumber the rich, they can vote for candidates proposing to do something about inequality. This could involve progressive taxation; it could also include progressive spending policies, such as government-subsidized education.

There is less support for the standard view of inequality and democracy than one might think. Exhibit A for this claim is western Europe during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In many countries, modern democracy emerged and was maintained in spite of high and increasing inequality. Simultaneously, democracy alone often did little to change inequality, and over time elites realized this. If the authors of the Federalist Papers were obsessed with the danger that a republic could pose to property, by the late nineteenth century, western European elites learned to take a more blasé attitude—why worry about universal suffrage if it did not result in you being taxed heavily or

expropriated? This conclusion has both good and bad implications: democracy may be more stable than we think in the face of high inequality, but if you are worried about inequality, then democracy alone does not provide the solution.

### *Economic Development*

One of the most tenacious ideas about democracy is that it can only exist in rich countries. It's not hard to see where this idea might come from because the world's richest countries today are almost always democracies. The principal reason offered for this is that when there are fewer poor people, there will be less of an audience for autocratic demagogues. Poor people may feel like they have less to lose from alternatives to democracy, and they may also be less well educated about the political process, or so the argument goes.<sup>33</sup>

The idea that economic development was a prerequisite for democracy was greatly strengthened by Seymour Martin Lipset, one of the most prominent political scientists of the twentieth century. Writing in 1959, Lipset investigated various indicators of development: per capita income, the number of persons per motor vehicle and per physician, and the number of radios, telephones, and newspapers. Lipset's data suggested that countries scoring poorly on these measures found it harder to maintain a stable democracy. Since the time he wrote, there has been much debate about this conclusion. Some believe development does indeed cause democracy.<sup>34</sup> Others say democracy and development are each caused by other underlying factors.<sup>35</sup>

The problem with the economic development hypothesis is that if we see the emergence of democracy in Europe as a very long process stretching back to the medieval era, and even before, then we need to remember that in these earlier centuries Europe was not more developed than the rest of the world—in fact, the reverse was often true. Even when they transitioned to modern democracy, many European countries were quite poor by our current standards. At the advent of the French Third Republic in 1870, France had the same level of per capita GDP that Tanzania does today.

We draw similarly nuanced conclusions when we flip the relationship and ask what effect democracy has on economic development. The standard argument is that democracy will be more favorable to growth because in a democracy people will feel that their property is more secure. I will take a deep dive into this issue in chapter 8. The evidence shows that when we compare early democracy and autocracy, we see that each of these systems had strengths and weaknesses when it came to economic development. Precisely because the early democratic regime was one of decentralized power, there was little risk of a central ruler trampling on property rights. However, decentralized power can also lead to barriers to entry for new market entrants, and for this reason, early democracy could present a brake on innovation. The Dutch Republic presents an example of this. When we look at autocracies we see a reverse pattern: in China and the Middle East it helped to create a very wide market across which ideas and innovations could travel, but the Achilles' heel of autocracy was instability. With centralized power and a bureaucratic state, the risk was that rulers could suddenly shift policy in undesirable directions.

The optimistic view of modern democracy is that it has all the advantages for growth of early democracy without the downsides. Leaders will be usefully constrained, but there is a large national market with fewer barriers to entry. In chapter 9 I will draw a contrast between the United Kingdom and the Dutch Republic to show how this argument might be made. But if this comparison leaves us to be optimistic about modern democracy, the history of the United States could give us reason for pause. As the first true modern democracy, the United States has had an integrated national market, but even so, barriers to entry as a result of monopoly power have emerged time and again. One thinks here of the turn of the twentieth century as well as the turn of the twenty-first.<sup>36</sup>

## Democracy's Future

Early democracy existed for thousands of years in a wide set of human societies: it was a very robust institution. One of my prime motivations for telling this story has been to try to cast modern democracy in a new

light. In comparative terms modern democracy has existed for only a brief time. We should see it as an ongoing experiment and perhaps even be surprised that modern democracy has survived at all. Across the broad sweep of human history, societies either were governed autocratically by someone who disposed of a state bureaucracy or had something resembling early democracy where the state was absent, power was decentralized, and their overall size was likely to be small. The idea that one could sustain a democracy in a polity as large as the thirteen American colonies, combined with a central state, was unprecedented. We can use the lessons of history to draw three conclusions about the future of democracy.

### *New Democracies*

The first conclusion concerns the many new democracies that have emerged since 1989. There is a great deal of justified fear about democratic retrenchment or “backsliding” around the globe today, and news accounts provide us with example after example of countries that are sliding into autocracy. Political scientists have even invented a whole new category for countries that no longer qualify as democracies but still have elections—they call these cases competitive authoritarianism.<sup>37</sup>

To better understand what is going on, we ought to take a step back. Instead of focusing on events over the last couple of years, consider today from the vantage point of 1988, the year before the Berlin Wall fell. If you were armed with the best political science research of the day and someone asked you what the chance was that a country like Ghana would be a vibrant democracy in thirty years’ time, you would have said this was unlikely. Ghana was too poor and too ethnically divided to survive as a democracy.

So why did the predictions from 1988 prove so wrong? The unanticipated fall of the Berlin Wall would be one big reason, but the recent wave of democratization cannot be attributed solely to the disappearance of superpower rivalry. The deeper lesson that history offers is that under certain conditions, and these are hardly rare, democratic



governance is something that comes naturally to humans. Many of the societies that transitioned to democracy after 1989 had practiced forms of early democracy long before they encountered Europeans. The technology of modern democracy, with elections and parties, is something new, but the basic principle of *demokratia*—that the people ought to have power—is not.

There is a further potential lesson from recently democratizing countries: just as early democracy existed in lieu of a state, democratization since 1989 has been more likely to survive when the initial power of the central state is weak. African countries with weaker state structures circa 1989 are more likely to be democracies today, while in the Middle East the persistence of state coercive structures over centuries has weighed against democracy.<sup>38</sup>

One final thing we need to note about the spread of modern democracy is that in many cases, institutions of electoral accountability have been layered over preexisting institutions of early democracy. There is reason to believe, as the political scientist Kate Baldwin has shown, that even in this new context, institutions of early democracy can continue to provide important forms of accountability.<sup>39</sup>

### *Persistence of Autocracy*

The second prediction some people made about democracy in 1989 involves China, and it too proved to be equally wrong. Some asked whether market-driven economic development would necessarily lead to political liberalization and to China starting to look more like the West. It was thought that as society grew richer, people would be in a stronger position to demand democracy. It was also thought that growth could only be maintained with political liberalization. Neither of these predictions has proven true, or at least not so far.

The lessons of history help us understand why autocracy has persisted in China. For a long period during the last two millennia, China was richer than Europe even though the form of governance in China was autocratic and bureaucratic whereas European rulers had to govern through assemblies. The Commercial Revolution of the Middle Ages in

western Europe is often credited with furthering the advance of early democracy, but we will see that China also had a medieval commercial revolution of its own. This was associated with higher levels of income per capita than in western Europe, but this did nothing to shift China away from autocracy, so why should we expect Chinese growth in more recent times to produce a different outcome?

The other key fact to understanding China involves the question of sequencing. Autocracy is a very robust form of political development if the state gets there first. I am not saying here that prior experience with a state bureaucracy makes a subsequent shift to modern democracy impossible, nor am I saying that the absence of state development makes developing modern democracy a sure thing; it is simply a lot more likely.<sup>40</sup> In Europe the pattern was very different as forms of early democratic governance existed for centuries before bureaucracies were built.<sup>41</sup> In the end, rather than seeing China as a deviation from a standard route for political development set by Europeans, it is instead simply an alternative route for governance and a very stable one.

### *The Future of American Democracy*

The lessons of history can finally tell us something about the future of democracy in the United States. According to one view, the United States has been a vibrant democracy thanks to the Constitution provided to us by the Founders, but we have suddenly lost our way. What we thought were inviolable norms of decorum and decency have suddenly been violated. At the same time, trust in many of our institutions is at or near an all-time low. The trajectory of other failed democracies suggests that this is the point at which transitions to autocracy happen. A deeper look at the history of democracy tells us that we may still have reasons for optimism but only if we understand what has allowed American democracy to survive: continued investments to keep citizens connected with a distant state.

The Constitution of 1787 established democratic rule across a large territory, much larger than was common for early democracies, and this was paired with a form of participation that was broad but also episodic.

But the Constitution did not magically solve the problem of scale. Within three short years of the Constitution's adoption, in an essay titled "Public Opinion," James Madison himself would emphasize that in any republic covering a vast territory, concrete investments needed to be made to ensure that the public can inform itself about government. He therefore supported efforts by Congress to subsidize the distribution of newspapers. Some have credited this with helping to stabilize the Early Republic. Others advocated state support of schooling in the Early Republic for exactly the same reason, and this gave birth to the Common School movement.

The broader lesson of Madison's essay on public opinion is that in a large democracy, the idea that the public can accurately inform itself so that it trusts government cannot be taken for granted. We see this today from the fact that larger democracies tend to have lower levels of trust in government than do smaller democracies. We see it also from the fact that in the United States and elsewhere, citizens tend to trust local and state governments more than they trust central governments, and the same holds true for the local, as opposed to national, media. At the same time, we also see that while scale makes it harder to maintain trust, large scale is not fate. What it does mean is that in a large modern democracy we need to pay extra attention to the problem, and we need to address it through continual investments in citizen engagement.

Beyond its large territory, the United States also differs from the early democracies because of its strong central state. In early democracies there was little question of having an authoritarian reversion because this could have only been accomplished with coercive state power, and no such power existed. When rulers like Philip the Fair of France tried to go the authoritarian route in the absence of a state, they found themselves condemned to continued bargaining and negotiations. But what about the United States today?

One possible response is to say that we are in deep danger of sliding into autocracy because we have a powerful state. History points to a more measured response. It suggests that what matters above all here is how political development is sequenced. Once autocrats have constructed a powerful state bureaucracy, it is hard to then transition to

democracy, but if rule by council or assembly comes first, particularly if it involves formalized arrangements extending over a large territory, then democracy has a better chance of emerging and surviving the development of a bureaucracy.<sup>42</sup> Through the practice of early democracy, members of society gain a habit of acting collectively and there is an opportunity for rulers and people to resist autocracy and instead jointly build a state. In England a long tradition of collective action helped Parliament resist attempts by Henry VIII to rule by proclamation with a newly created bureaucracy. We will see in chapter 7 how this same process failed in the Middle East because forms of early democracy adapted only to face-to-face settings were of little use in resisting autocratic encroachment in a polity on the scale of the caliphate.

Ultimately, while our long tradition of collective governance may help protect the United States from autocracy, we should also distinguish between the survival of democracy in general and the survival of a democracy with which we are satisfied. If citizens feel increasingly disconnected and distrustful, and there is a perception that democratic politics is dominated by a few, the survival of our form of government may seem like less of a victory than we originally thought.

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