Is *This* Democracy?

Source: Saward, M. (2003) *Democracy*, Polity Press, pp. 1–31.

`Democracy' can be found in familiar and unfamiliar practices, predictable and surprising contexts. This chapter dips into some such practices, contexts. It contains (a) three real-world case studies of political voices from Pakistan, the USA and the UK, (b) a hypothetical case study of `country X', and (c) close reading of texts arguing for democracy's worth and its limits. My aim is to provoke a set of questions about democracy's meaning and value which arise from our searches. My conviction is that attention to democracy's detailed texture can make us think in fresh ways about the subject. If the conviction is right and the aim achieved, we can move on armed with a creative sense of democracy's multi-sidedness and its perplexities, all the better to deal with the narratives, challenges and revisions that form the focus of later chapters.

Let me start with a little jargon that will help guide us through the explorations in this opening chapter. Literary and cultural theorists often talk about words (and pictures and events and objects) as *signifiers* – they suggest or provoke or signify certain thoughts, ideas and concepts (which we can call the *signifieds*). For example, the word `police' is a signifier; what it signifies might be someone in a certain uniform, or the idea of `law and order' maybe. Looked at another way, what `police' signifies could be a person and a thing (someone in uniform), or another abstract idea (law and order), or something else again. Some words signify in quite stable and straightforward ways – we might all agree pretty much what they refer to, such as `bicycle', for example. Political terms are renowned for their *unstable* nature as signifiers. Even seemingly innocuous phrases such as `the Oval Office' might signify a diverse range of things – authority, deception, patriotism, secrecy, American democracy, American colonialism, strong leadership, history and continuity, and so on.

This chapter is about `democracy' as a signifier. What does this word suggest, convey, evoke? (What does it signify for *you*?) How do politicians and political scientists and ordinary people use it? What work does it do in different contexts? What meanings are constructed for it? And how can we know which meanings, if any, are the `real' ones?

Making and using 'democracy': three contexts

A great many things are done in the name of democracy. Decisions are taken, institutions created and destroyed, wars fought. Governments, dissidents and dictators all claim it for their actions. In order to praise or criticize, or extend or contract, what may be done in the name of democracy, politicians and others attempt to `fix' the meaning of the word when they use it. They try to attach a particular `signified' to the word, to mould it to their purposes. We are now going to look at three quite specific examples of such attempts. Each case will provoke some awkward questions about what we and others think democracy is. In a moment we will take a critical look at how the experts, such as political theorists, define democracy; before that, it is important that we explore our own responses and intuitions.

Justifying the general's coup: Pakistan after October 1999

First, let us look at some recent events in Pakistan, a country that has had unhappy experience of often ineffective and corrupt elected governments interspersed with military coups and military governments since it was created in 1949 out of what was colonial India. Days after leading the successful military coup in Pakistan in October 1999 which overthrew the elected government of Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif, General Pervez Musharraf declared that he was instituting:

not martial law, only another path towards democracy. The armed forces have no intention to stay in charge any longer than is absolutely necessary to pave the way for true democracy to flourish in Pakistan.

He went on:

what Pakistan has experienced in recent years has merely been a label of democracy, not the essence of it. Our people were never emancipated from the yoke of despotism. I shall not allow the people to be taken back to the era of sham democracy but to a true one.

(Quoted in Goldenberg 1999)

What can we learn from this event and its leader's view of it? First, it is clear that to attach the word `democracy' to one's actions is clearly seen as an advantage; it seems to be a way of *commending* the action simply by *describing* it. Invoking democracy, it is assumed, gives credibility or legitimacy to the staging of the coup. Normally we would not think of a military overthrow of an elected civilian government as even a remote candidate for `democratic' status; despite this, the general clearly believes strongly in the legitimacy-conferring capacity of the word, and he makes a point of claiming it for his actions.

Notice, next, that the general is keen to attach prefixes to democracy in order to make it signify what he wants. What came before was `sham' democracy; what he is laying the ground for is `true' democracy. On the one side there is the `label', on the other the `essence' of democracy. Musharraf's rhetorical strategy is simple dualism – democracy divides into just two types (sham and true), one of which is not genuine and is represented by his opponents (the sham), while the other is genuine and is represented by himself (the true). He does more than just evoke and deploy democracy as a weapon in his battle; he wants democracy to have the meaning that suits his purposes. In other words, *to evoke democracy can at the same time be to attempt to fix a (favourable) meaning to it*; to use it is, in a sense, to construct or create it anew.

I say `normally' a military overthrow of an elected government would not be seen as a serious candidate for `democratic' status. But is it the case that it could never be? This begs the question: what *is* the boundary of the reasonable interpretation of `democracy'? How can we decide – can we decide – what is `in' and what is `out'? At what point precisely do claims to democracy become unacceptable, or plain wrong, in this and other cases? And according to *whose standards or criteria*? Would we be prepared to consider, in this case, that the coup could represent genuinely one step back to take two forward ('another path to democracy') in the context of a corrupt and inefficient civilian government? (The question of whether democracy, as a `Western' concept, can apply in `non-Western' contexts is taken up in chapter 4.)

Further, note that democracy is evoked here in a *particular* context. The newspaper report from which these quotes were drawn claims that the general's speech `was tilted heavily towards a domestic audience that is hungry for a better economic future and longing to punish corrupt political leaders'. *Local* circumstances can and do dictate how certain ways of invoking democracy will be received; local language, history, knowledge, levels of trust, religion and other cultural factors condition and shape how `democracy' conveys meaning, how it works *there*. Democracy is always

democracy *somewhere*, for a certain group of people. Evoking the interests of `the people', General Musharraf is addressing the people of *Pakistan* above all.

Certain events since 1999 make this case arguably even more interesting, even before Musharraf's central role in the `war on terror' after September 11, 2001. First, interviewed in May 2001, the general, now `chief executive' and soon to take on the title of president of his country, was adding detail to his earlier rhetoric about democracy. First, a rolling series of *local* elections, the first since 1987, had been instituted. With six out of twenty-one seats on all local councils reserved for women candidates, the administration, wrote the UK journalist of *The Guardian*, was `giving women a rare access to power' (McCarthy 2001). The general himself claimed that devolution of power to local and provincial units was `real democracy': `We are introducing democracy to Pakistan, real democracy at the grassroots level.' He went on to assert that `There has never been democracy in Pakistan, real democracy, because democracy is certainly not having elected governments . . . The more important is how an elected government behaves, whether it is democratic in its dispensation.' Further, he denied that personal or narrow political interest was driving his actions: `I didn't take power, power was thrust on me. But I think as it stands with hindsight it was good for Pakistan that this happened.'[1]

Second, a referendum was held in Pakistan on 30 April 2002 on whether President Musharraf should have five further years in power, despite sticking to his promise to hold new parliamentary elections later in 2002. After September 11, Musharraf had become a key player in the US-led `coalition' against `terror', since the Taliban and al-Qaeda in neighbouring Afghanistan became the first US military target (the swift overthrow of the Taliban government relieved some domestic pressure on Musharraf arising from considerable dislike and distrust of American motives among Pakistanis). Here was a military leader, called upon by other countries to `restore democracy' (before the geopolitical terrain shifted, at any rate), deploying the most democratic of mechanisms, the referendum, which is a direct and decisive vote by the people.

Many reports noted that the general sought legitimacy for his rule, that like all dictators he found it hard to think of relinquishing power, and that by using a democratic mechanism he was merely underlining his lack of democratic legitimacy. Yet the president's claim was that he `was seeking people's opinion in a democratic way': `People can vote in my favour or vice versa. So this is not for me but on the issue which needs to be decided by the people of Pakistan.'[2] In his referendum campaign, the president sought to underline the democratic progress made under his leadership by meeting representatives of local government.'[3] His reforms, mentioned above, had resulted in `thousands of councillors, including for the first time significant numbers of women, [being] elected to new posts' (McCarthy 2002). Musharraf said: `they are the asset of this country and all hopes for a genuine democracy lie with them.'[4]

Of course, my aim here is not to give anything like a full factual account of these events, or to come to any immediate evaluation of the merits of the case. But taking the general's claims at face value, what do you make of them? Voting rights and guaranteed representation for women, instituting fairly elected local government units, devolving power from the centre, asserting the national or general interest, using a direct democratic device to seek people's endorsement of his rule – are these not actions with strong `democratic' overtones? And how strong is the claim that elections are *not* crucial to democracy, but rather what matters is a leader's *behaviour*?

That example has provoked a range of conjectures and questions for us. In particular, we have conjectured that to invoke `democracy' is to say: `this is a good thing, a good action', and that actors will attempt to `fix' or construct democracy's meaning in a way that suits them. We also have key questions: are there criteria for

democracy, and who supplies them? What specific institutions count as democratic? And – is democracy about serving interests, such as national interests, above all else?' These are difficult, provocative issues. Experts on democracy have long debated them, as we shall see as we go through the book. But let us for the moment continue with a second case – this time looking at various views of democracy from a variety of ordinary people in connection with one specific event.

Responding to Florida: the US presidential elections in 2000

The USA, of course, is commonly regarded as a democracy. Certainly the idea of democracy, and a range of institutions and practices associated with democracy, are strongly connected to the basic character of the country in the minds of US citizens. My focus here, very specifically, is on the dramatic conclusion to the story of the US presidential elections in 2000.

We will need to fill in a little background information. The USA has an electoral college system. This means that, in literal terms, when voters vote in presidential elections, they vote not (for example) for Bush or Gore or Nader, but for members of the college associated with these candidates. When elected, the latter go on to vote in turn in the electoral college some weeks later. Further, college members are elected to the college from *states*; in most states in the US federal political system, even a narrow win over other candidates in terms of the percentage of votes gained means that the winning presidential candidate gets *all* of the electoral college votes for that state. This means, among other things, that it is perfectly possible for one candidate to get more popular votes nationally but still lose the presidency on account of having fewer electoral college votes.

In the state of Florida in November 2000, US democracy came into an especially sharp, critical focus. Republican George W. Bush and Democrat Al Gore were locked into an extraordinarily close electoral battle for the state. The stakes could hardly be higher: the winner in Florida would take all of the state's electoral college votes and with them the presidency itself. Arguments raged in the courts, in the streets, in the corridors of power and in TV studios over, for example, whether all Floridians had had an equal opportunity to vote; and whether machine-counted votes had correctly been counted, or whether they should be hand-counted. Fundamental features of electoral fairness were argued openly and in detail.

The Florida poll and its aftermath have raised troubling questions about fairness and equality, starting with access to voting (black voters in particular claiming discrimination) and clarity of voting (allegedly confusing ballot papers that resulted in many claiming to have voted mistakenly), through to higher-level questioning of the role of state courts and the Supreme Court. Indeed, if one looked at the Florida vote as if one were looking at a newly democratizing `third world' country, one might have significant questions about whether, in this instance, the USA fully qualifies as a `democracy'. These are critical issues, to be sure, but my intentions here are not full coverage and so are much more focused. I want to explore how `democracy', the word and the idea, were used by an assortment of people (as weapons, as justifications, etc.) in the heat of the Florida debate.

Amid the arguments, over two weeks into the Florida deadlock and with no resolution immediately in sight, the BBC News website asked: 'US elections: is this democracy?' An odd question, you might think – aren't elections the core of democracy? A number of people felt that they had an answer to the question. Let me stress that I do not take the respondents' words below as correct statements about Florida or US politics; our interest here is in the ways in which the statements illustrate how democracy's meaning is understood and contested, the ways in which the idea figures in people's thinking.

Joe from Philadelphia thought the `whole process' was `certainly not democratic'. This was because `We've apparently sold democracy to moneyed interests who put on banal spectacles and little else. Now we've got to face the sad truth that our election results are probably as contrived as the debates and everything else connected with American politics.' Musa, a Gambian in the UK, also worried about `the role of corporate money and political lobbyists'; `in America as in the UK, the people's choice does not always determine the leader in power, and that to any reasonably minded person is not democracy.' The question we might take from these responses is: to what extent does `democracy' depend on how strings are pulled in selecting candidates or running campaigns – rather than elections merely *happening*? If money can buy political influence, does that make elections undemocratic, or less genuinely democratic? How much money, in whose hands, used how? Do elections need a `level playing field', a considerable degree of social and economic equality, before we can really call them democratic?

Neville in London worried about democracy from another angle, asking: `How low does the electoral turnout have to go before the system loses all democratic accountability?' It is all very well counting, and arguing about recounting, votes in Florida, but is it democracy if fewer than half of the electorate voted in the first place? Majority rule? Okay, but a majority of what, of how many? But Teresa in California protests: `I don't see what all the fuss is about. Let DEMOCRACY take its course. Let the system do what it legally and rightfully has to do to determine who will be our next president.' Maybe moneyed influence and low turnout matter less to democracy than the immediate, tangible process of voting, counting, and confirming victory according to *this* system, *our* legal rules? Then again, what sorts of rules count as democratic – given that there is huge variety in different systems?

Michael from Canada thought it was `time to abolish the electoral college'. One criticism aimed at it (in this debate and otherwise) is that it favours states rather than national majorities. But others, such as Faye, from the USA, protest: `this is democracy in action. We are the United STATES of America.' Our Pakistan example alerted us to the importance of thinking of the *particular* meanings and reception and history of `democracy'. Can democracy rightly be evoked by federalists and non-federalists, centralists and decentralists? Can it, does it, *mean* on one side or the other of *this* dispute?

A further concern, from Paul in London, was that talk about electoral colleges and systems and ballot papers and vote-counting was missing the point: `Democracy is about people making decisions having been presented with honest choices. The near-universal problem in developed "democracies" is the appalling state of the mass media. For the most part, news priorities are set by self-interested proprietors answering the demands of advertisers. News values are regularly determined by rating wars rather than the public interest.' Is democracy less about elections than about quality of media discussion and information? And, if so, to what extent?

What does democracy mean? Whatever the merits of their particular factual arguments, were these respondents on Florida 2000 *wrong* to evoke `democracy' in their quite different ways? We do not have to listen to many of these voices to be creatively confused at the comment of `A' from the UK that: `If this is democracy, then maybe the Americans should start to consider if they've ever understood the word democracy.' The fact that `A' assumes confidently that we will know what he or she means is as interesting as the fact – or I take it to be a fact – that really we can only guess at his or her meaning. What could be as powerful as a word that can, seemingly, mean one and many things at the same time?

Democracy and identity: the British Democracy Campaign

We have found various conjectures and raised a number of questions about democracy's meaning from two specific cases. Let's look at one more, and then take a step back from the detail to think about definitions of democracy.

For the Florida case, the BBC asked: `is this democracy?' The same question is asked in our final case – this time a full-page advertisement in May 2001 from the small lobby group the British Democracy Campaign. First, a little context (though, again, detailed facts are less important here than exploring what `democracy' signifies in these cases). In the United Kingdom, the nature and legitimacy of the country's ties to the European Union (previously European Community) since it joined in 1972 have been highly controversial politically. In the general election campaign of 2001, the context for our present case, the opposition Conservative Party was generally sceptical about `Europe'. Specifically, it was opposed in principle to replacing the UK currency, the pound, with the new European currency, the euro (eight days before the 2001 vote, Conservatives told British voters: 'you have eight days to save the pound'; seven days before ...). The governing Labour Party had promised a referendum on the issue of the adoption of the euro (the `single currency'), and in principle favoured joining if it judged that the circumstances were right for the country. Informally, various figures in both of these major parties more strongly opposed even continuing membership of the EU. The British Democracy Campaign – not a politically significant group in itself – was one of a number of small parties and groups opposed to continued membership.

In the advertisement, under the heading `European Union?', we were told: '71% of British voters want a referendum on our continued membership of the European Union. 52% want to leave the EU now.' The campaign, apparently, commissioned polls which generated these figures. Then we were told: `90% of MPs, including their leaders, will not tell you where they stand' – because they did not respond, apparently, to a letter from the campaign asking them to `support the majority British view and back the call for a free and fair referendum in the next Parliament'. After a long list of MPs who `failed to respond', we were told that `These MPs want your vote in the election but will not give you a vote on who should govern Britain after the election.' And then: `Is this democracy? . . . Let the people decide.'

Clearly, again, `democracy' is taken by the proponents of this anti-EU stance to be a powerful, legitimizing term. By asking `is this democracy?', they are in effect asking `is this right?', thus associating political rightness with democracy. They feel that they can call on another view of democracy – `letting the people decide' – since their own polling makes them confident that the outcome they regard as right, politically, would ensue in a vote of the people on the issue of `our continued membership of the European Union'. Presumably, democracy as letting the people decide might be in tension with democracy as doing what (they think) is politically right if their polls had turned out differently? `Democracy' here is also associated both with `the people' and `the right result'. Although the phrase suggests all of the people, it appears to boil down to a majority of the people – suggesting perhaps that just over half of the people can speak for the whole.

Further levels of signification are interesting in this example. Note that `democracy' appears to signify an anti-EU position generally – `These MPs want your vote in the election but will not give you a vote on who should govern Britain after the election' – quite *apart* from what any particular vote in the UK might produce. Is democracy about which bunch of people *makes up* the group to vote, and to be governed, as well as (or rather than) the groups/countries we *currently* have going about their voting? In other words, the suggestion here is that `democracy' is about the *constitution* of the system itself, as well as what happens *within* the system – in-system and out-system dimensions, you might say. Associated with this is the idea that the EU is by definition non-democratic – this is a campaign to rescue `British

democracy' as the proponents see it. Again, we see here the role of local evocation and signification, the attachment of local particularity to the master term in an effort to `fix' or construct it in a particular way, and to make it useful by conveying meanings helpful to the speaker or writer.

Finally, note the device championed by this campaign – the referendum. Like General Musharraf in Pakistan, as discussed above, the campaign found the referendum to be a useful democratic trump card (in its eyes at least). As we saw, a referendum is a device for *direct* democracy, as opposed to indirect or *representative* democracy. Depending on how it is used, it can be a means for `the people' deciding issues directly rather than having their views mediated by political representatives or others. The suggestion here is that holding a referendum is more democratic than representatives deciding – or, as they are painted here, as failing to engage with the issue at all. Could `democracy' really mean the people *actually* deciding issues for themselves? (In chapter 5 we will look at recent advocacy of direct democracy.)

True, this is a very specific example from a rather obscure group in UK politics, the accuracy of whose claims in the advertisement were queried by many when it appeared in the press. But again we have uncovered a range of conjectures and questions to ponder.

What can democracy signify? Collecting examples together

Let us pause to gather some thoughts from our disparate examples, first by gathering some of the significations of democracy they threw up, and then by looking at some broader, troubling questions they prompted. After that I propose to look at some dictionary definitions.

First, a basic distinction might help as we move forward. The meanings of democracy arising from our three cases are *connotations* – things that `democracy' might suggest to people, even perhaps quite obscure or unexpected things. Connotations differ from *denotations*, which are precise and direct dictionary-style definitions. Both are `signifieds', just different sorts. Often, we rely on the clarity of denotation to guide us through the (sometime) confusion of connotation. Thus, we might weigh how useful five friends' definitions of `democracy' are by comparing them with the one provided by (e.g.) the *Oxford English Dictionary*, using the latter as the `authority'. But, on the other hand, who is to say what a term connotes cannot legitimately undermine or challenge what it denotes?[5]

With that distinction in mind, let's return briefly to our cases and reflect upon what they offered us. On one side, we have the issue of what `democracy' signifies – or, what users may *want* or need it to signify in order to justify or further their own cause. Here, much depends on how receptive particular audiences might be to efforts to construct democracy's meaning in particular ways. On the other, and often closely linked, is the range of important, challenging conjectures and questions about the character of democracy that these examples have thrown up. The cases have certainly revealed a wide array of potential signifieds for democracy. There are different ways to interpret these cases; I do not claim a definitive list. `Democracy' signifies:

- a good, moral political system
- the best available political system
- acting in the national interest
- a deception, or a ruse, to fool people ('sham')
- `what must be right [to do]'
- `what I/we think is right [to do]'
- counting votes

- votes counting
- the proper or appropriate level of voter turnout
- what must be done politically
- opposing special or unfairly favoured interests
- the choice of the people prevailing indirectly [normally for candidates]
- the choice of the people prevailing directly [normally for policies]
- localism, assertion of [authentic] local identity
- collective self-government by a people
- agenda-setting not unduly influenced by commercial considerations
- the voice of the people
- due process (proper procedures being followed)
- the will of the majority
- how we do it politically *here*, in this place, with these historical rules.

Slightly less directly but no less pressing have been critical and challenging questions arising from the focused Pakistani, US and UK cases, to which we will need to return later.

- Is democracy really several `democracies', with its real meaning (if there is such a thing) being local and particular? Are there boundaries to its reasonable interpretation, and are there objective grounds for making these judgements?
- What mix of institutions, and what formal and informal processes, make up democracy? Are elections *most* fundamental?
- Is there a `democratic' way to constitute the political unit which defines the country or other community which is to be governed?

However one might comment on the list and the questions, one key point is that there is no simple or stable signifier–signified relationship when it comes to democracy and its potential meanings. `Democracy' is an enormously rich, suggestive, evocative political term, and it is partly this fact that makes it such a potent political weapon. We can expect that it will mean different things – perhaps very different things – to various groups and individuals. We might miss much of democracy's power and richness as a concept if we try too soon to tie down its meaning to a single institution or principle or practice. General, one-size-fits-all definitions can easily unravel when confronted with the real world of democracy.

That said, there is no shortage of neat, short, seemingly authoritative definitions of democracy available, in both dictionaries and the professional political science literature. These provide denotations of democracy; maybe they can help us to escape the play of connotation which threatens to overwhelm us? Let us look at a sample of such definitions.

Sampling professional definitions

There is a great deal of further work we can do with the list of possible signifieds, and with the key questions, that arise from our cases. Much of that work will be done in the following chapters. I do take the view that democracy's plenitude of potential meaning is not a licence to grant to it *whatever* meaning we might wish; some possible meanings for democracy are more reasonable than others. Chapters 2 and 3, covering influential contemporary narratives on democracy, will discuss a range of perspectives on what really counts, and what is less important, to democracy. Chapter 4 includes a discussion of possible criteria for democracy, and I refer back explicitly to the cases discussed above to argue that certain distinctions ought to be made.

In this chapter, however, my concern remains to explore a range of thoughts, and to question open-mindedly our own intuitions and prejudices about democracy's meaning and value, and to do this without stipulating or even arguing for a `correct' definition. We turn now to a selection of definitions of democracy that have been offered by others. Which ones seem better, and (most importantly) why? What further reflections on the above cases do they prompt? Following that, we will confront the need to make choices with regard to the challenging issues and questions arising from the cases by working through a hypothetical thought experiment, in the hope that we might translate our concerns about democracy's significations into practical, or institutional, effect.

One might imagine that if we turn away from specific instances or cases of the evocation of `democracy', and look instead at general and abstract definitions, we might get to the *essence* of our concept without the distraction of accident, argument and particularity, without prompting a further range of awkward questions to address. The chaos of connotation could be stilled, and the term could denote something clear and straightforward. However, the sorts of conjectures and questions that have arisen from the case studies can serve to disrupt seemingly clear and precise dictionary or other definitions; further connotation always lurks, disruptively, around neat definitions. But let's look at our selection and see what we can make of them.

1. `Government by the people; that form of government in which the sovereign power resides in the people as a whole, and is exercised either directly by them (as in the small republics of antiquity) or by officers elected by them. In modern use often more vaguely denoting a social state in which all have equal rights, without hereditary or arbitrary differences of rank or privilege'; `(b) A state or community in which government is vested in the people as a whole.'

2. `A democracy is . . . a political system of which it can be said that the whole people, positively or negatively, make, and are entitled to make, the basic determining decisions on important matters of public policy.'

3. '"Democracy" is government elected by the people.'

4. `[Democracy is] exactly what the word means etymologically – rule by the demos, the people: the people themselves make the decisions.'

5. `Basically democracy is government by discussion as opposed to government by force, and by discussion between the people or their chosen representatives as opposed to a hereditary clique. Under the tribal system whether there was a chief or not, African society was a society of equals, and it conducted its business by discussion.'

6. `a "democratic regime" is taken to mean first and foremost a set of procedural rules for arriving at collective decisions in a way which accommodates and facilitates the fullest possible participation of interested parties.'

Critically appraising the definitions

Let me start with the first definition, which is from the *Oxford English Dictionary*. (6)

`Government by the people' – immediately two issues are raised. First, again, who are `the people'? The people of Florida, for example, or the USA, or both; of the UK, the EU, or both (or neither)? Second, is it *all* the people? What if they disagree on key issues? Can a majority speak for all? If so, what about the rights of minorities?

The definition does give us an elaboration on `government by the people': that form of government in which the sovereign power resides in the people as a whole, and is exercised either directly by them (as in the small republics of antiquity) or by officers elected by them. If `sovereign power' resides in the people as a whole, we will need

to know what `sovereign' means – `ultimate', or `final', seems likely. But we get little help on the majority/minority question – `as a whole' just begs it once more.

But we do find the distinction familiar from textbooks on democracy – direct democracy and representative democracy. The former, the definition tells us, belongs to the long-departed habits of antiquity, the latter (presumably) common since then, and up to today.

So, interestingly, our reflections on three very specific cases earlier prompted similar questions to those we are compelled to ask of the OED's efforts, too – about the political unit, for example, and about institutional mixes for democracy (direct, representative, etc.). But what can we make of our sample otherwise? (Which do you think makes a good definition, and why?)

I make four brief observations. First, regarding *strategies*, I would point out that three of these definitions stress a mechanism as the core of democracy, while three others stress a principle. In the former group are (3), which highlights the mechanism of elections, and (5) and (6), which underline discussion and procedural rules respectively. The other definitions appear to lay more emphasis on the principle that the people as a whole are entitled to make decisions, to rule, to be sovereign. I have set out in this chapter to be non-judgemental, but I will suggest that definitions based on principles may be easier to defend. What if the mechanism at the core of the first set is not the mechanism that delivers popular power? What if discussion does not work, or if elections are too infrequent and indecisive, or the procedural rules prove to be inadequate? Defining democracy in terms of principles – popular power, for example – leaves open what mix of mechanisms might best *deliver* on the principle.

Second, note that in terms of *focus*, and in the light of our earlier case discussions, certain things are absent from this selection of definitions. Absences include possible features such as `a good, moral political system', `the best available political system', and `acting in the national interest'. There may be various reasons for this, but one is surely that these would-be democratic features are rather *subjective and rhetorical* and difficult to *verify*; defining democracy in accordance with them may leave the door open to *any* political arrangement to be called democratic.

Third, note a key *tension* running through the definitions: the people ruling is a common thread here, but should the people *themselves* rule, or make decisions, or should their *representatives* do it? Between them, the definitions express a range of views on the issue. And fourth, note that a definition is only a definition; it is not a full theory, not the whole story; it does not account for all the institutions one might need to deliver on democracy's principles, and so on. In the next two chapters we will explore larger narratives that are built on specific definitions of democracy, and which tell fuller stories about what democracy ought to involve.

Dictionary and other definitions can help us to refine our earlier questions, derived from the case studies, but they also raise new ones. All these questions go to the heart of 'democracy'. The list of questions itself is not final, or definitive; democracy is always being re-created in new combinations and visions, a process made possible by the multiple and shifting significations that `democracy' can and does provoke for various audiences. As I have suggested, dictionary and other definitions offer us *denotations* – what the word most immediately suggests. But they cannot easily silence the possibilities of *connotation*, a more elusive and plentiful set of potential meanings depending on audience(s), linguistic and cultural context, and so on. The elusiveness of precise meaning, and the shifting focus and range of the issues we would want to raise, are markers of the richness of meaning and the vital importance of democracy to our political lives (and even those who are `not interested in politics' have political lives).

Having said that, it does seem that there are points of commonality, in the particular examples discussed and in the dictionary definition. Rule by the people or popular

power is one claim which very commonly and plausibly accompanies evocations of `democracy'. From the cases and the definitions we might conjecture that any suggested meaning that does not feature *evident popular power* may be suspect. And, linked with this, the ideas of equality and fairness seem to play a key role too. But it is never simply `people power' or `equality' or `fairness' – in the abstract these things mean little, but in particular contexts they can have quite specific resonance, along with the power to engage and enervate people and consequently to revolutionize societies.

Throughout later chapters we will have the opportunity to explore examples of past, present and (potential) future evocations of these ideals. I turn now from actual cases and arguments to a hypothetical puzzle. I do this to see if the challenge of having to design 'democratic' institutions forces us to resolve some of the questions that have arisen so far; or, at least, to see if it can show us more clearly the contours of the problems and dilemmas that seem to come with thinking in depth about democracy. So let us design a democratic system for an expectant country – country X.

How to design a democracy: country X

Country X is a distinctive place. Traditionally its population has been divided in terms of religion, language, politics and culture between three groups – the As making up 45 per cent, the Bs 35 per cent, and the Cs 20 per cent. They live and work together, by and large, but the three communities have a history of tension and mutual suspicion. How would you go about designing a democratic system for country X's national politics?

Immediately we confront what democracy *requires* of us and our institutions. I do not want to suggest there is one best way to respond to the challenge of country X (perhaps readers can think it through for themselves before moving on). But let us pursue one line of thought that will undoubtedly figure prominently whatever the precise approach adopted.

Consider the thought that one might worry from the start about *limiting* power in X as much as *allocating* it or making sure it is in the hands of `all of the people'. For straight away we can see that a high level of agreement across the community in X on any significant political question is unlikely; will we need to embrace some form of majoritarian system, then, as a second-best solution? But how much should any electoral or other majority be able to impose a policy or obligation upon a minority that is unhappy with it (any two of the communities in X would be able to gang up on the third)? Could we act in some specific ways to protect minority `rights' by limiting the powers of any given majority?

These thoughts might lead us in quite specific directions when considering which institutions a democratic X might adopt. First, in terms of voting or electoral systems, we would have a basic choice between a majoritarian system and a proportional system. Various specific electoral systems fit one of these categories more or less neatly – going into great detail here is not necessary. A majoritarian system would allocate seats in a parliament or legislature in a way that tends to create a legislative or governing majority out of an electoral minority. For example, as in the United Kingdom, a vote of less than 40 per cent of the electorate can generate a comfortable legislative majority. In country X, the use of such a system might grant group A a solid governing majority if its members vote as a bloc. Could we avoid this, democratically? A proportional system would (ideally at least) result in parties or blocs obtaining seats in the legislature in proportion to their votes; in X, this would be likely most often to result in no one community having a governing majority, which in turn would necessitate coalition or other cooperative forms of political behaviour (live and let live, agree to disagree, alternation in office, compromise, power-sharing).

But, second, what about the other institutions of government? Given concerns about potentially dangerous hostility between the three communities, we might want to ensure that agencies and departments in the national administration are not dominated by any one or two of the groups. Some form of proportionality might be something we would want to *extend* to administrative and other non-elective offices too. What about some form of separation of powers, a venerable tradition in democratic theory and practice and most famously incorporated in the constitution of the USA? A separation of powers might ensure (as far as institutional designs can guard against any particular outcomes) that no significant group in the society lacks the capacity to have its concerns heard. But perhaps, even more importantly, we might look at the nature and composition of the three communities more closely. Is each group geographically concentrated, or are the communities dispersed, living among one another? Either way, would adopting a *federal* system, in which lower levels of government and administration have a degree of autonomy from centrally determined policies, cement freedoms and rights across the whole community? If that were the conclusion, this would be a further restriction on majoritarianism.

Third, how would the basic political rule-book – the constitution – articulate the powers of the people and their governing institutions? A constitution limits or qualifies powers by creating them: what legislatures can decide, what rights people have, how those rights may themselves have limits (e.g., freedom of speech). What about the potentially difficult status of constitutional limitations themselves as *democratic* devices – generally presided over by judges who are not themselves elected, and therefore perhaps lacking democratic credibility? So far the groups have occupied our thinking centrally; perhaps individuals, their rights, their autonomy, deserve constitutional protection? Maybe, by emphasizing the rights of individuals, we take care of the rights of the groups, too?

And what about the *identities* of the groups and their members – should group cultures, religions or languages, for example, be recognized or protected officially (constitutionally) in country X? Maybe a group could feel it genuinely `belonged' in the overall community if it felt that its culture was valued and protected by community law? Then again, would such a stipulation carry dangers of cementing into place just one, contestable version of what that group *is*, or what it represents? What if a group's culture encompassed, for example, systematic discrimination against girls and women?

In short (and too briefly): a democrat in cases such as this is quickly faced with some fundamental challenges and choices. Does `democracy' demand majority rule or minority protection or both – and, if both, with what balance? Do groups or individuals matter most? Can and should electoral and other governing institutions at various levels be arranged so that no one group can dominate (all of) them at once – no matter who wins the elections?

I would like to make two observations about this outline reasoning. First, note some key assumptions that the above comments involve. I have assumed the importance of equal votes, and the need for some form of equality of (variously) power, protection and dignity between all citizens, regardless of religious or other cultural attachments and outlooks. I have also assumed that the primary form of political structure and activity, and the main means for the expression of popular power, will be representative, rather than (say) direct. Along with this, I assumed that a parliament or legislature was a necessary democratic body. There are other assumptions here which were not defended, but those are the main ones. Let me suggest that making these assumptions is (a) very common and (b) not so easy to defend as is commonly thought. Just how common they are, and how some influential writers on democracy have set out to defend them, we will see in some detail in the next chapter.

Going further, because a common tendency is to think about `democratic designs' in terms of voting, parliaments, and so on, often we tend not to think of quite radically different – but not necessarily democratically `wrong' – ways of organizing political affairs. Among the more radical or unconventional questions we could ask about country X are:

- Does one person, one vote, matter so much, when really it is fair representation of the different cultural communities that counts? Could we not institute instead a kind of quota system, where each community picks its own representatives?
- Why think that *votes* count that much? Voting is not necessarily or naturally *the* major mechanism for democracy. We are very used to regarding it as such – not a fact to be set aside lightly – but in logical terms it need not be. Why not *talk*, or better *deliberation*, instead, for example? Where collective decisions need to be reached, why not discuss the issues in groups until a form of consensus emerges – or, failing that, some workable form of 'agreement to disagree' at least?
- Why should community associations for each of the three groups not control its own affairs? Why do we have to think of them as needing to share joint governing institutions – common `parliament' and `government', for example – rather than each controlling its own, quite separate, set of political institutions?
- Why not direct, or at least more participative, forms of democracy, rather than the concentration on forms of representation? Perhaps `democracy' need not mean *maximizing* the people's power at every opportunity, but why would would-be democratic designers use as a kind of default mode an institutional arrangement – elections for representatives – that limits formal popular participation to marking ballot papers every so often?

Further, and perhaps most fundamentally: why is X `a country'? What *made* it a country, that is, a single political unit? If those forces can be identified, how would we know if they were *democratic* forces? Would one or more of the groups prefer to constitute its *own*, separate and smaller country or political unit? As democrats, should we first look to organize a referendum to see if X should stay as *one* country at all? And, if so, who gets to vote – all members of all groups, or just the ones where there is pressure to secede?

One clear hypothetical example has led us to a sea of important and tricky questions. What can we learn from this brief effort to think about democratic design?

What does the problem of country X tell us? Issues for discussion

Looking at possibilities for country X as we have prompts the thought that there is no one, single, best way to have or to design a democracy. As with much else, when asked what a democracy should really look like, we have to say `it all depends.' It depends on who makes up the political unit in question, what their goals and predilections are, and when we are talking about (designing a `democracy' in 1820 or 1930 would be a radically different task from doing it in 2003, because different things were thinkable). It also depends on where the unit is (culture and geography have an impact on what the people will expect of `democracy' and whether or not they will be prepared to embrace one or other version of it), why the issue of political change is on the agenda in the first place, and how it is proposed change might be achieved. Attempting to shape renewed democratic institutions in Lebanon after the civil war in the mid-1980s was a different task in these respects from the efforts in the Czech Republic in 1989 or South Africa in 1990.

Second, however, our case suggests that, although there is no one right answer, there are and have been various characteristic ways of thinking about the demands of democracy – different traditions, models or paradigms which suggest different sorts of responses. We are not adrift in a sea of wholly unconnected ideals and devices; various of these have conventionally been gathered together into more or

less coherent visions of what democracy is, was, and can become. In particular, tangible evidence of popular power, along with political equality and a basic fairness, seem to have emerged as perhaps instinctively important to any would-be democracy on the basis of the cases and definitions examined in this chapter. Chapters 2 and 3 will chart a course through major late twentieth-century narratives of democracy to see how they construct approaches to democratic answers. From our cases and discussions in this chapter, we will see more clearly the range of questions these narratives will need to encompass and address.

Finally, the narratives considered, in chapters 2 and 3 do not characteristically question the `givenness', or the inevitability or naturalness, of the nation-state as *the* site for the practice of democracy. But the question of what might `rightly' constitute a political unit which forms the appropriate subject for self-government haunts all approaches to the idea of democracy. Does `democracy' ultimately depend on a given political unit which is unlikely itself to have come into being `democratically' (rather than by war, conquest, violence generally)? In recent years the issue of the political unit has been asked more, and more trenchantly, than for some time. This change has been prompted by the fact of, and political concern about, `globalization', the rise in number and intensity of sub-national demands for autonomy, and the increased political salience of culture and identity. In chapters 4 and 5 I will look, for example, at ecological and other arguments that question in basic ways how boundaries (of various kinds) impact upon our thinking about the possibilities of democracy.

Is democracy a good thing?

The issues prompted by our real and hypothetical examples thus set the scene for more detailed discussions of the idea of democracy as we move through the book. But now I want to turn to the final main topic of this chapter. It is a topic that has run through all that has been said so far, but we have not pinpointed it in precise terms or drawn it out as yet. The issue is – is democracy valuable? Is it the best form of political system? If we value it, why is this the case, and *what* exactly do we think we are valuing? Are there, should there be, limits to the extent to which we think democracy is a good thing (or a bad one, for that matter)?

The winner of the 1998 Nobel Prize for Economics, Amartya Sen, looking recently over the history of democracy, commented that:

In any age and social climate, there are some sweeping beliefs that seem to command respect as a kind of general rule — like a `default' setting in a computer program; they are considered right unless *their claim is somehow precisely negated. While democracy is not yet universally practiced, nor indeed uniformly accepted, in the general climate of world opinion, democratic governance has now achieved the status of being taken to be generally right. The ball is very much in the court of those who want to rubbish democracy to provide justification for that rejection.*

(Sen 1999, 5)

As Sen goes on to note, this status of democracy is a recent phenomenon; it is only in the twentieth century, and largely in the second half of that century, that the status was achieved. The category of `those who want to rubbish democracy' is a small one; few outright opponents proclaim themselves as such; and when we find them we might often regard them as marginal, sometimes dangerous, extremists such as racial or cultural or religious supremacists of one type or another. Much more common, as we have seen in this chapter, is the evocation of `democracy' *in support of* goals which many would hesitate to associate with the idea of democracy at all. Such, again, is the power of the word, and in particular the power of its very ambiguity.

Meaning and justification, or, how democracy can be (constructed as) bad for you

Just as there are a range of arguments from political theorists and political philosophers as to *the* meaning of democracy, so there is a familiar set of arguments in this literature as to why democracy is a good thing. With their roots in the language of the discipline of philosophy, these debates are often referred to as being about `the justification of democracy'. Political philosophy has given us some neat categories as to why democracy is indeed a (very) good thing, the best political thing. I will say more about what these are and what we might make of them in a moment. My main purpose in focusing on value here is to examine briefly the relationship between the `justification' of democracy and the construction of its meaning. Like the task of definition, justification is about the *construction*, and not the *discovery*, of reasons and arguments. But first, let us again focus on examining a particular case to concentrate our thoughts: a recent argument from one of the world's leading historians suggesting in its title that `democracy can be bad for you'.

Writing in March 2001, the eminent British historian Eric Hobsbawm cast doubts on the ability of democracy to respond effectively to new global, environmental and other challenges, and placed this in the context of searching questions that have long been asked of democracy's real value. I will look in chapter 4 specifically at these and other challenges, and in chapter 5 at proposed new forms of democracy that might help us to address some of them. Here, I concentrate on the questions that Hobsbawm raises about democracy's value, and what we can learn about debates over its value.

Asserting that the case for `free voting' is that `it enables the people (in theory) to get rid of unpopular governments', Hobsbawm raises three critical observations: first, liberal democracy requires a `political unit' – and it `is not applicable where no such unit exists'. Second, countries can be found where democratic government has not been accompanied by positive effects; in terms of economic prosperity or personal peace and security, for example, beneficial outcomes from democracy are not guaranteed. And third, he argues that `the case for democracy is essentially negative', agreeing with Winston Churchill's comment that: `Democracy is the worst form of government, except all those other forms that have been tried from time to time.' The technical nature of many current environmental and transport problems faced by democratic governments, for example, cannot be resolved by just asking the people, though some reasonable claim that policies represent the interests of the people must be present.

On one level, Hobsbawm's points act as reminders of earlier discussions. The first point reminds us that 'democracy' is normally thought of as belonging in a particular context – that of the `country' or nation-state. One of the limits to its value is the restricted range of places and processes to which it might apply. Hobsbawm underlines this point by reminding us that `Market sovereignty is not a complement to liberal democracy; it is an alternative to it.' In other words, democracy implies *government*, and the justifiability of government, in a defined political unit. The second point questions a longstanding argument in favour of democracy – that it produces beneficial outcomes, and therefore is a good thing (is `justified'). What if it does not produce the benefits – or not unfailingly, in all contexts? The Churchill argument suggests that justifications which claim that democracy embodies certain basic principles we must all accept – political equality is a common candidate – overlook many flaws in democratic practice.

All of that is useful. But to jump to that level straight away – to consider the basic arguments for and against democracy – skips an important stage in thinking about democracy's value (mind you, we would be in good company if we did skip it). That is, it is never simply `democracy', in itself, which is argued to be a good (or bad) thing; it is rather a *specific interpretation* of what democracy is. In order to praise or to

criticize democracy, first one must construct its meaning – or borrow someone else's construction (such as one of the influential narratives considered in chapters 2 and 3).

Any attempt to offer a general or universally applicable justification for democracy must do something it would prefer not to do – namely, construct democracy's meaning in a particular way to make the argument intelligible in the first place. Hobsbawm, for example, does this early on in his article – democracy, for him, equates to `the idea of competitively elected assemblies or presidents'. Elsewhere, he equates the deficiencies of democracy with the deficiencies of people voting. On the increasing range of complex technical issues governments have to deal with, `democratic votes (or consumers' choices in the market) are no guide at all.' Solving global environmental problems `will require measures for which, almost certainly, no support will be found by counting votes or measuring consumer preferences'. So, democracy is about people voting, and that is the problem because voting as a mechanism displays flaws which are at the same time the flaws of democracy itself.

But this is not the only way in which democracy can be understood or constructed, as we have seen. Though there are limits to what democracy can be taken to mean – it cannot be just anything that anyone has ever claimed it is – there remains wide scope for constructing it in different ways, and as a result *qualifying what might be said about its value* in a variety of ways too. Hobsbawm, for instance, does not consider that democracy could include mechanisms of discussion and deliberation along with that of voting; if it could, perhaps deliberative mechanisms might play a role in informing 'ignorant' popular opinion on pressing and complex issues. He also defines some innovative new possibilities out of the frame by stipulating that democracy can occur only within the confines of the nation-state. This particular stipulation rules out, for example, regarding new transnational networks in civil society (such as those opposed to so-called bio-piracy, or to the resumption of large-scale whaling) as forces which reshape and extend democracy's domain and potential (see discussion of the ideas of Held, Dryzek and others in chapters 4 and 5 below).

This is not to say that Hobsbawm is wrong – elected governments have been and remain a core part of what 'democracy' signifies – but rather that his assessment of the value of democracy is the product of a particular perspective; it might have been different if other, perhaps less traditional, perspectives on democracy were to be adopted.'[7] In general terms, then, the question of democracy's value depends on the perspective adopted in order to assess it. It makes a big difference whether one starts with abstract theories and principles or specific cases; with one set of countries rather than another; with a broad and flexible definition of democracy or a narrower and more fixed one. Further, assessments of democracy's value depend on the interpretation of the challenges that democracy needs to overcome, for example, challenges of environmental degradation and economic globalization. Just how problematic and difficult such challenges are is itself contested, though; for instance, expert consensus on the threat of global warming is impressive.

Can it be right that there is no final, absolute justification for democracy? Is this not an uncomfortable position? It may be. But it may also be a liberating one. If there will always be some doubt over the real meaning and value of something, then this fact might act as a spur to the constant rethinking, and remaking, of that thing. A great many models and perspectives, from the past and present and for the future, will be canvassed in the following chapters; as we go through them, the benefits of fluidity and flexibility in helping us to confront new challenges should become clearer. Sometimes it is said that the answer to the problems of democracy is `more democracy'; if so, we can expect that the `more' will be not just more of the same, but something new which alters the character of the thing. Reflecting on Hobsbawm's argument, for example, democracy might need to stretch to encompass cross-border

forms of mobilization outside the confines of the nation-state in response to the limited capacities of national democracy.

A strategic affection?

Finally, one crucial issue thrown up by this brief discussion of the value of democracy echoes one of the core concerns that arose from the discussion of definitions. Can we trust anyone to be disinterested, or more-or-less objective, on such issues? Is there anyone who offers an authoritative voice on democracy's value? Our discussion so far suggests that, although today just about everybody claims to love democracy, no one can love democracy *for its own sake*; all will love it only if so doing serves their strategic purposes.

On one level, this fact looks perfectly reasonable. Parties exist, interest groups exist, and politicians pursue careers to achieve certain outcomes (be these laudable political goals or more narrow self-advancement). Why have a disinterested love for a procedure – such as a democratic procedure – if it will not now, or may not in the future, help you to achieve the outcomes which are the things closest to your heart?

Even the democratic theorist has a strategic interest in democracy, in his or her preferred conception of it being widely accepted. Perhaps this is the secret of democracy's popularity; our love for democracy can be *reinforced* by the fact that there is scope to reconstruct the object of our affection in congenial ways. We can all continue to profess our love, safe in the knowledge that, quietly, we are loving different versions of the thing we refer to by a common name.

In the end, perhaps there is a certain necessary, and encompassing, hypocrisy when it comes to the value of democracy? The British political commentator Decca Aitkenhead put it well when she wrote: `We are all implicated in the contradictions, for there is no such thing as a disinterested love of democracy in politics . . . Just as a belief in God didn't stop priests sinning, so democracy doesn't stop governments bending the rules – so long as they can get away with it.' This mutual implication, she suggests, is a fine (and acceptable) balance – `what we require is that our politicians be sophisticated enough to pass off self-interest respectably. We are complicit in the pretence, but for us to collude they must make it credible . . . Democracy is not safeguarded by reference to some pure, abstract absolute. It is protected by the necessity of governments being able to get away with only so much' (Aitkenhead 1998). The academic commentators' lack of disinterest may be of a different order to that of the politician (though by no means always); it is no less real for that.

Conclusion

This chapter has used a variety of case materials to raise and to explore questions about democracy's meaning and value.

The main message has concerned the open-endedness of the term, about its lack of fixed or fixable meaning, within limits, and how this might impact upon our thinking about it. This open-endedness will prove a key point as we proceed.

Many of the points raised here are picked up and explored further in the following chapters.

Issues around the fertility of `democracy' as a signifier were raised. The cases we looked at underlined the many ways in which actors use, or deploy, what they take to be democracy, in their efforts to win arguments or gain support; they also underlined the point that there is no easy way to maintain that `democracy' is being used wrongly across these diverse contexts. Chapters 2 and 3 pick up on this theme, examining certain influential ways in which the term was reinterpreted and recast in its eventful recent history. Chapter 5, similarly, takes up the issue of how new

significations of democracy try to respond to new challenges, such as that of globalization (see chapter 4).

We shall look at efforts to measure and to assess the quality of democracy in chapter 3, along with the issue of who if anyone can provide reliable criteria for democracy. Regarding the mix of institutions that `democracy' requires – as in the hypothetical case of country X above – all remaining chapters will deal with a variety of views, mainstream and marginal. As part of this, the notion that democracy means many things rather than one thing will be addressed specifically as an issue for the interesting cases of `Islamic democracy' and `non-Western democracy' in chapter 4. Finally, the question of the political unit – which group of people is the right group to be subject to democracy – will be addressed in chapter 5 as we consider (e.g.) cosmopolitan and ecological conceptions of the extension of orthodox democratic practice beyond national boundaries, building on the discussion of globalization and related issues in chapter 4.

So, let us turn now to some influential constructions or narratives of democracy which have framed how many of us view democracy today.