

# Democracy and Its Alternatives

Course Guidebook

Ethan Hollander



## LEADERSHIP

---

President & CEO	PAUL SUIJK
Chief Financial Officer	BRUCE G. WILLIS
Chief Marketing Officer	CALE PRITCHETT
SVP, Marketing	JOSEPH PECKL
SVP, Content Development	JASON SMIGEL
VP, Content Production	KEVIN BARNHILL
VP, Marketing	EMILY COOPER
VP, Customer Engagement	KONSTANTINE GELFOND
VP, Technology Services	MARK LEONARD
VP, Content Strategy	KEVIN MANZEL
VP, General Counsel	DEBRA STORMS
VP, People	AUDREY WILLIAMS
Sr. Director, Content Operations	GAIL GLEESON
Director, Talent Acquisition	WILLIAM SCHMIDT
Director, Creative	OCTAVIA VANNALL

## PRODUCTION

---

Studio Operations Manager	JIM M. ALLEN
Video Production Director	ROBERTO DE MORAES
Technical Engineering Manager	SAL RODRIGUEZ
Quality Assurance Supervisor	JAMIE MCCOMBER
Sr. Post-Production Manager	PETER DWYER
Sr. Manager of Production	RIMA KHALEK
Executive Producer	JAY TATE
Producer	ALISHA REAY
Post-Production Producer	TOM KRZYWICKI
Sr. Content Writer	ELLIOT BLAIR SMITH
Assistant Content Developer	EZRA COOPER
Sr. Image Rights Analyst	ABBY INGHAM LULL
Post-Production Manager	OWEN YOUNG
Sr. Editor	BRENDA SPEVAK
Editor	CHARLES GRAHAM
Audio Engineer	CHRIS HOOTH
Camera Operators	ERICA CORSO
	LAKE MANNIKKO
Production Assistants	PAUL SHEEHAN
	VALERIE WELCH

## EDITORIAL & DESIGN SERVICES

---

Director	FARHAD HOSSAIN
Sr. Writer/Editor	MARTIN STEGER
Editorial Associates	MOLLY LEVY
	MARGI WILHELM
Editorial Assistant	WILLIAM DOMANSKI
Graphics Manager	JAMES NIDEL
Graphics Coordinator	KATE STEINBAUER
Graphic Designer	RHOCELLE MUNSAYAC

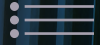


## Ethan Hollander

**Ethan Hollander** is an Associate Professor of Political Science at Wabash College. He earned a PhD in Political Science from the University of California, San Diego, where he was also a faculty fellow. He has received the McLain-McTurnan-Arnold Research Scholar distinction and *The Story Collider* podcast's Artistic Director's Pick award. He is the author of *Hegemony and the Holocaust: State Power and Jewish Survival in Occupied Europe*, and he has published research on authoritarian rule in Eastern Europe and democratization in the Middle East.

# Table of Contents

About Ethan Hollander	i
<b>1.</b> Is Democracy Built to Last?	1
<b>2.</b> Politics and Personal Sacrifice	7
<b>3.</b> Government and the Invention of Law	11
<b>4.</b> The Rise of the Modern State	18
<b>5.</b> Nations, Nationalism, and the Kurds	24
<b>6.</b> Why Care about Hobbes, Locke, and Rousseau?	32
<b>7.</b> Who Gets to Vote?	38
<b>8.</b> Voters and the Dangers of Too Much Democracy	43
<b>9.</b> Should Presidents or Parliaments Lead?	50
<b>10.</b> The Vote Counter Decides Everything	57
<b>11.</b> Do Political Parties Help or Hurt?	63
<b>12.</b> The Problems with Federalism	69
<b>13.</b> Are Courts and Constitutions Democratic?	77
<b>14.</b> The Controversial Politics of Central Banks	83
<b>15.</b> Who Backs Authoritarians?	88
<b>16.</b> The Dictator's Playbook	94
<b>17.</b> When States Fail, What Comes Next?	100
<b>18.</b> Partition, Peacekeeping, and Human Crisis	106
<b>19.</b> What Really Causes Wealth and Poverty?	112
<b>20.</b> The Global Fault Lines of Trade	119
<b>21.</b> Is the European Union a Success or Failure?	125
<b>22.</b> When the Balance of Power Breaks Down	132
<b>23.</b> Why It's So Hard to Work Together	138
<b>24.</b> Gridlock and Democracy	143



1

# Is Democracy Built to Last?

---

In January of 2021, American democracy hit a speed bump. The transition of presidential power from Donald Trump to Joseph Biden was anything but seamless. Since then, politicians and ordinary citizens have been more polarized than ever. Around the world, democratic government seems to be under attack from all directions, whether by populist strongmen, nationalism, religious radicalism, or multinational corporations. To start looking at how this situation came to be, this lecture examines politics in general and democracies and dictatorships in particular.

# Politics in General

Politics is the way groups of people make decisions, even when people in the group want different things. Politics can even be a group of countries deciding how they want to address a problem like climate change or trade hurdles. These scenarios involve situations where a group of actors wants or needs to make decisions that will affect each of them, but they all have different interests in terms of what those decisions should be.

Public decision-making depends on the situation. A group of friends deciding on where to go to dinner probably just talks it out until they come to a decision that everyone's OK with. But with a city or a country, direct decision-making and unanimous consent become impossible. Therefore, we generally resort to having a small group of people make decisions on behalf of all of us. The key questions become: How do those decision-makers make their decisions? And how much say do we the people have in deciding who they are?

# Sacrificing Individual Freedom

Every political situation involves a surrender of individual freedom: People give up some say over their affairs to reap the benefits of living in a group. Most people are comfortable giving up some autonomy for the sake of those benefits. But the question of how much autonomy to give up can spark intense political disagreements.

Typically, it's our political institutions—the government and the law—that do the difficult work of reconciling our divergent interests. But when the views of people in society become too divergent, those institutions get stretched to the breaking point. For instance, if a subset of society comes to feel as if they've been systematically excluded from the collective benefit, they might resort to violent means of getting what they desire.

Of course, if violence comes about because people go around the established political institutions, you might be tempted to call violence a failure of politics. But to paraphrase the Prussian general Carl von Clausewitz: War

is simply the extension of politics by other means. In other words, trying to influence the decisions you're subject to is a political act, whether you do so peacefully or otherwise.

That's the fear that many people had in January 2021, when a violent mob converged on the US Capitol in Washington. The rioters eventually went home, Congress certified the election results, and President Trump stepped down. But that clearly wasn't how presidential transitions were supposed to take place, especially not in a country that holds itself up as a beacon of democracy. And divisions that led to the violence of 2021 clearly predated the 2020 elections.

## From the Cold War to Polarization

When the Cold War ended in 1989, everyone thought that democracy had won. Supposedly, with the final victory of democracy over dictatorship, the ideological battles of the past would now give way to a new, globalized world of cooperation, trade, freedom, and prosperity. But that's not how it turned out.

One reason was that the end of the Cold War didn't mean an end to international rivalry. In a way, the number of conflicts around the world increased as the one big fault line between the US and the Soviet Union gave way to ethnic and religious conflicts all over the world. Examples include violence in Yugoslavia and Rwanda as well as the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks that drew the United States into festering conflicts around the world.



The failure of the United States and its allies to tamp out these conflicts decisively exposed a subtle weakness in their military might: Military hardware only means so much without the will to use it. Additionally, the US-led war on terror raised the specter of terrorism more globally. Dictatorships like China and Russia could now justify just about anything by referring to it as a fight against terrorism, no matter how real or imagined the threat actually was. Together, these developments demonstrated that predictions of post-Cold War peace and prosperity were too optimistic.

Meanwhile, the end of the Cold War did usher in a period of sustained economic growth. Trade flourished, technology got better, and a lot of countries got richer. However, industrialized countries increasingly outsourced much of their labor to the developing world, where wages and working conditions were often poor. Greater automation also made many jobs obsolete. Unemployment was low, but wages stagnated.

As a result, the new prosperity wasn't evenly distributed. Growing inequality came to a head with the global financial crisis of 2008, which revealed deep socioeconomic fissures. These economic developments also played an important role in ending the post-Cold War dominance of democracy.

## Dictatorships

With democracy unable to stave off the crisis, alternatives to democracy were inevitably going to gain steam. The clearest alternative to a democracy is a dictatorship. Some people argue that dictatorships are superior to democracies, especially in times of crisis. In their line of thinking, the lack of accountability allows dictatorships to take more decisive action. Dictators generally have more coercive power than democracies do, and they use it not just to quash resistance but also to provide public goods that make people less likely to resist in the first place.

Dictators can also look at the bigger picture and think in the longer term. A democrat might have trouble convincing people to go along with a plan that won't pay dividends until later. A dictator doesn't have to worry about that.

But dictatorships also face challenges. Since dictatorships put a premium on crushing dissent, smart people are often afraid to speak their minds. The best ideas might never see the light of day. By contrast, democracies can be marketplaces for ideas. The best ideas have a chance of being heard, regardless of how inconvenient they might be for the government.

When it comes to dealing with crises, democracies and dictatorships both have assets and liabilities. Perhaps that is why we've seen certain countries turn to governments like the popular dictatorships of Brazil, Hungary, and Turkey. These countries' populist strongmen remain popular, not just despite their violation of democratic norms but sometimes because of it. Popular dictatorships reflect a growing sense, justified or otherwise, that traditional democratic institutions simply aren't up to the task of solving today's problems.

## Conclusion

In some ways, for democracies, political paralysis can be part of the plan. America and other democracies all over the world struggle with an inescapable dilemma: While the majority should get its way, individual rights still matter, including the rights of the minority. This dilemma was a central concern of the founders of American democracy. They wanted to cast off the tyranny of the British king and replace it with representative democracy. But they were also concerned that, in replacing monarchy with democracy, they might replace British tyranny with a tyranny of the majority.

The many checks and balances of the American system are intended to prevent that. The checks do stifle majority rule. They cause gridlock, and they slow down the decision-making process. But that's what they were designed to do. They were based on the idea that if government can't do very much, it also can't do very much harm. In other words, the paralysis—frustrating though it may be—is purposeful. It's proof that the system is working.

The point is that democratic political systems around the world grapple with a common challenge: While they have to empower the majority to get what it wants, they also have to limit the amount of harm it can do. And all political systems, democratic or otherwise, have to manage the difficult task of providing public goods in an environment where people have deeply divergent interests.

## READING

Applebaum, Anne. *Twilight of Democracy: The Seductive Lure of Authoritarianism*. Doubleday, 2020.

Chua, Amy. "Divided We Fall: What Is Tearing America Apart?" *Foreign Affairs*, July/August 2020.

Levitsky, Steven, and Daniel Ziblatt. *How Democracies Die*. Crown Publishing, 2019.

Luce, Edward. *The Retreat of Western Liberalism*. Atlantic Monthly Press, 2017.

## QUESTIONS

- 1 What is politics? Why do we need it?
- 2 What are the various ways that societies around the world have tried to organize collective decision-making?
- 3 What are the causes of the current crisis in democracy?



2

# Politics and Personal Sacrifice

---

Politics is our attempt to maximize the benefits—and minimize the dangers—of living communally. However, politics creates dangers of its own. Namely, there's no way to give government enough power to govern effectively without also giving it the power to oppress us. We can build institutions with the power to make collective decisions—but only by putting individual freedom and individual livelihood at risk. The benefits and the costs of political community come in a package.

## Public Goods

Public goods are one matter in which the trade-offs of politics become apparent. A public good is a good or service that's provided to everyone in a group—even those people who didn't want the public good in the first place. That can make the provision of public goods controversial. However, they're also unavoidable. People constantly benefit and suffer from the consequences of a political process.

Public goods are not things that can be paid for individually. For instance, protection from firefighters doesn't work unless it's provided for everyone, which is why the commitment must be made collectively.

Public goods are also subject to intense debate, even when they're primarily about something we all agree on. We all agree that we need some sort of criminal justice system. We need laws, and we need police to catch the people who break the law, and courts to figure out what to do with them. But what should we do with them? What powers should the police have to catch them? And what laws should we have in the first place?

Sometimes we disagree about a public good because we attach different priorities to it. For instance, nobody likes pollution, and nobody hates the environment, but people disagree about how much we should sacrifice to protect the environment.

## Distribution and Interests

Many conflicts aren't about the provision of public goods but about their distribution—that is, where they go and who should have access. Where do we build fire stations? Where do we dump toxic waste? Issues like these mean that interests are going to be in conflict whenever people live in close contact with one another.

Debates about political process are particularly intense when they involve a face-off between diffuse and concentrated interests. A diffuse interest is a situation where a large group of people want something, but they don't feel particularly strongly about it. A concentrated interest, on the other hand, involves a small group of people who feel very passionately about their cause.

Free trade is a helpful example here. Most economists agree that free trade is a good thing, overall. Free trade tends to lower consumer prices, and since everyone's a consumer, everyone tends to benefit from free trade, at least somewhat.

The problem is that free trade can destroy certain industries. If a worker loses their job because their employer went out of business, that worker becomes more likely to oppose free trade and more likely to feel very strongly about it. This is a situation where a large group of people—consumers—experience a small benefit from free trade, but a small group of people faces a huge loss.

## Three Strategies for Political Decision-Making

In any given society, the most intense debate is likely to be about a basic question: How should people in the society make political decisions in the first place? Serving as examples of answers to that question are three broad strategies.

The democratic majoritarian approach is one strategy. In this setup, people vote, and the majority gets what it wants. This is an attractive solution in some ways: Most people probably agree that most of the time, the majority should get what it wants. The downside is that this approach can produce the tyranny of the majority. This is a situation where a majority of the people can prevent a minority from having any influence whatsoever over a decision about a public good.

That's why many democratic communities strive for consensus. If a decision requires everyone's approval to pass, then every individual holds an effective veto over the collective decision. The majority must consider minority interests, or else nobody will get anything at all. The problem is that decision by consensus is terribly inefficient. Negotiation takes time, and there might not be a compromise that satisfies everyone. This is illustrative of the fundamental dilemma of democratic politics: How does a society protect minority rights while also empowering the majority to rule?

There may be a way to avoid the trade-off entirely: rule from a benevolent dictator. Such a person might be efficient and might be able to protect minority interests at the same time. However, there's no guarantee that the dictator will be benevolent. If the dictator's a tyrant, there's also no guarantee that anyone will have a say in the decision-making process.

In the real world, no government follows any one of these recipes completely. But in comparative politics, there really is a spectrum. On one end of the spectrum, there are democracies that strongly emphasize consensus, even at the cost of efficiency. In the middle, democracies empower the majority to have its way, gaining efficiency but losing ground in minority representation. Finally, the other end of the spectrum, there are dictatorships, which can be very efficient but which do away with the idea of representation entirely.

### READING

Huber, John D., and G. Bingham Powell, Jr. "Congruence between Citizens and Policymakers in Two Visions of Liberal Democracy." *World Politics* 46 (April 1994).

Lijphart, Arend. *Patterns of Democracy: Government Forms and Performance in Thirty-Six Countries*. 2nd ed. Yale University Press, 2012.

Publius. *The Federalist Papers*, nos. 10 and 51. Published by The Avalon Project. [https://avalon.law.yale.edu/subject\\_menus/fed.asp](https://avalon.law.yale.edu/subject_menus/fed.asp).

Verney, Douglass V. *The Analysis of Political Systems*. Glencoe, IL: The Free Press, 1960.

### QUESTIONS

- 1 What do humans sacrifice by living in society? How do we try to reap the benefits of living socially while reducing the costs?
- 2 What is the trade-off between efficiency and minority protections? Why is it impossible to achieve both?



### 3

# Government and the Invention of Law

---

In the modern world, the most important thing a government can do is provide consistent, predictable responses to the common problems that a society faces. Predictability and consistency are what most people are thinking about when they say that a government is good or effective. Good governments fight crime in places where crime would otherwise be a problem. Governments regulate industries and enforce contracts in places where informal institutions, like reputation and trust, are no longer able to do so. This explains why formalized legal codes came about with the advent of larger human societies such as the Babylonian empire of Hammurabi, famous for originating Hammurabi's Code, an early law set.

# The Role of Government

Smaller, simpler societies don't need formal procedures for making collective decisions. In a village, handshakes might be all the contract enforcement people ever need. Additionally, in a small group, there's a clearer connection between what's good for an individual and what's good for the collective. If an individual doesn't pull their weight, their reputation will suffer, and beyond that, their group might go down, taking the individual with it.

By contrast, the size and anonymity of large modern societies make government an absolute necessity. While governments' roles differ from place to place, they almost universally provide responses that are institutionalized—that is, consistent and predictable. There's a tendency for governments to develop formal procedures, clear chains of command, and a dedication to processes that characterizes modern bureaucracy.

Bureaucracies can be annoying. However, there's a good side to modern bureaucracies, too: They help solve problems that are unique to modern life. Bureaucracies allow people living in modern society to plan and shape their behavior knowing what they can expect. For instance, an entrepreneur will find it easier to open a business in a given place if they know what to expect from the regulations there.

The downside is that bureaucracies are often so standardized, so regulated, and so frustratingly inflexible that they can be resistant to change, powerless in novel situations, or insensitive to



The Code of Hammurabi

individual needs. Nobody openly wishes for bureaucracy. But a bureaucracy is usually preferable to a system where the rules are unclear. The same goes for government itself.

## Law as a Public Good

Law is the most important public good that governments provide. People usually think of laws as restricting behavior. However, because a public good like the law applies to everyone, laws enable us to do things that would otherwise be impossible. For instance, contract enforcement allows people to enter agreements, knowing that court is an option if the other party breaks the agreement. Without law, such agreements would have to rely entirely on trust. It's hard to see how the modern economy would work without laws that are consistent and predictable.

Written laws are clearly more than just ordinary rules. They're institutionalized responses to recurring issues that societies face. And that makes them important public goods because they provide us with the ability and the predictability necessary to live in large groups.

## Enforcing and Applying Laws

For laws to matter, they must be first written and then enforced. And no matter how clearly a law has been written, there are always going to be situations where it's unclear how the law should be applied. Therefore, to be effective, all governments must perform legislative, executive, and judicial functions. They must write (or legislate) the law, enforce (or execute) the law, and make judgments about the law.

In some countries, including the United States, these functions are separated among three arms or branches of government. That isn't the only setup, though. For instance, in most parliamentary regimes, the prime minister and the other cabinet ministers are themselves members of the parliament. In places like the United Kingdom and Canada, the prime minister even represents an individual district in the country, just like their fellow

parliamentarians. In such examples, the executive and legislative functions are essentially collapsed into one branch, with the prime minister and cabinet being part of the legislature.

## Laws for Governments

The institutions that lay out how government is supposed to work and how the lawmaking process is supposed to proceed are usually defined in a country's constitution. A constitution lays out the processes by which lawmakers are selected, the procedures they must follow, and often the scope and limits on what government can do.

Constitutions come in many shapes and sizes. When Americans think of a constitution, they often think about a dusty yellow document with flowery handwriting, and that's because that's what the US Constitution is. (It's the world's oldest constitution still in use today.)

But all governments have constitutions, even if they're not necessarily called constitutions and even if they're unwritten. Germany, for example, doesn't have a formal constitution. However, it does have a document called the Basic Law, which lays out how German government operates. Thus, political scientists would consider the Basic Law to be Germany's constitution.

Even nondemocratic regimes, like North Korea and Iran, have constitutions. They have laws and norms that define how their governments operate. In these cases, though, the decision-making power of ordinary citizens is much more limited. Besides, there's always a gap between what's written in the constitution and the procedure that's actually followed.

The United Kingdom doesn't have a written constitution at all. Instead, true to Britain's common law tradition, the workings of the House of Commons and its relationship to the House of Lords are governed by custom and established by precedent. Even the limitations on the monarchy are established by a set of unwritten traditions. The UK is a constitutional monarchy, which means that the monarch's power is curtailed by a constitution, even if that constitution isn't actually written down.

In short, constitutions are the highest laws in the land. They establish the policies and procedures from which all other laws flow.



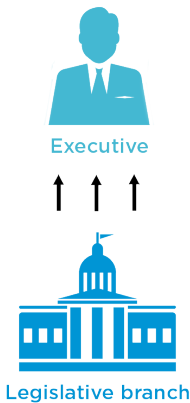
# Regimes

When discussing constitutions and governments, and especially when comparing them with one another, it's helpful to organize them into types. In political science, these broad types, or families, of government are called regimes. Generally speaking, it's the constitution that defines what kind of regime a country has.

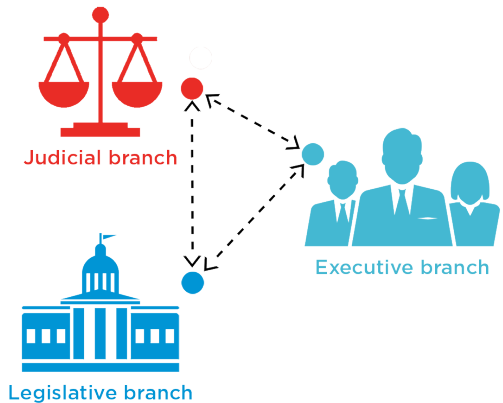
For instance, presidential regimes differ from parliamentary regimes. There are even broader distinctions between democratic regimes and authoritarian ones as well as between constitutional and absolute monarchies.

A country's laws must be consistent with its constitution and with its regime type. Constitutions provide the essential instructions for how government is supposed to work. That's why they're treated with such reverence.

## Parliamentary



## Presidential



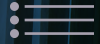
## READING

O'Neil, Patrick H. *Essentials of Comparative Politics*. 4th ed. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2013.

Shepsle, Kenneth A. *Analyzing Politics: Rationality, Behavior, and Institutions*. 2nd ed. W. W. Norton & Company, 2010.

## QUESTIONS

- 1 What does it mean for government procedures to be institutionalized?
- 2 Why is it important that our responses to social problems are consistent and predictable?
- 3 What are the benefits of bureaucracy?



## 4

# The Rise of the Modern State

---

The sovereign state is the fundamental unit of political organization in the world today. Virtually every inch of the world's dry surface is controlled by one sovereign state or another. To understand how governments differ around the world, it's essential to understand what a sovereign state is, how it functions, and why this type of state has become so important.

# Traits of a Sovereign State

In a sovereign state, the state gets to decide who uses force and who doesn't. And anyone who uses force without state permission is subject to discipline for violating the state's rightful monopoly. Likewise, the state's use of force is considered legitimate: When the state forces a person to do something, the person thinks of its actions as acceptable or legal in a way that wouldn't apply if some other actor—someone who wasn't the state—did the very same thing. One final characteristic of the modern state is that it's territorial. This means that the state exercises its sovereign monopoly over a clearly defined territory.

## Feudalism

To illustrate just how important states are, and how important a development they were in world history, it makes sense to look at how things worked before the modern state emerged in the late Middle Ages. Relevant here is feudalism, which preceded the modern state. Feudalism is the political system that emerged after the decline of the Roman Empire, in about the 5th century CE. It lasted until about the 1600s, when certain historical developments ushered in a new era of political organization.

With the decline of the Roman Empire, people all over Europe suddenly faced pressures that they hadn't felt in a very long time. Whereas the Roman Empire might have protected them from barbarians or marauding tribes (in exchange for tribute), they were now vulnerable. Barbarians essentially plundered their way through the territories that the Roman Empire used to defend.

Feudalism emerged in this context as a defensive system. Peasants who couldn't defend themselves put themselves at the service of a local lord—someone who would defend them in exchange for the peasants' promise to work the lord's land. This relationship was called vassalage. The peasants were vassals to the lord, and they provided the lord with certain goods and services, all in exchange for the lord's promise to protect them. It was in the lord's interest to do so because the vassals ultimately provided the lord with much of his wealth.

The system didn't stop there. A group of local lords might recognize that there were advantages to working together, and so they might organize themselves as vassals to a particularly powerful lord. They might give the overlord a certain number of days of military service per year in exchange for the overlord's protection of them.

This hierarchic system of organization spawned many of the common titles of nobility. A local lord might acquire the title of baron. A group of barons might make themselves vassals to an earl or a count, who ruled over a county. Counts might put themselves at the service of a marquis or a duke, who might in turn be a vassal to a king.

In many ways, a feudal realm wasn't a state. Take territoriality, for example. In the Middle Ages, transportation and communication were slow and unreliable. This meant that local lords, who were far away from the king (in physical distance), could often get away with disobedience to an extent.

The boundaries of a feudal realm, unlike the boundaries of a modern state, were fuzzy. They blurred out around the edges. It wasn't always clear where one king's sovereignty ended and the other one began, and it certainly wasn't clear whose law would prevail on any given patch of land.

Power in feudal times was also very decentralized. If a local lord—or group of lords—resisted the king, there wasn't a lot the king could do. A lord could barricade himself up in a fortress or his castle. Laying siege to a castle was expensive and slow, especially in a day and age where the most powerful offensive weapon was a catapult. There was a very real risk that a king would run out of money before breaking such a siege, and this gave the lords considerable power to resist him.

Additionally, the king didn't have a standing army. His vassals were his army. It is easy to imagine situations where the lords shared more in common with one another than with the king.

Finally, in feudal times, the lines of authority were unclear. Life and society at the time were local. Travel was rare, and most people lived their entire lives within just a few miles of where they'd been born. This meant that local lords usually had a much closer working relationship with their immediate overlords than with the king.

In these conditions, it was nearly impossible for any entity to maintain a monopoly on the use of force. This situation was exacerbated by the wars of religion that raged through Europe in the 15th and 16th centuries: When a Protestant king had a Catholic vassal, for example, it wasn't always clear if the vassal owed his primary allegiance to the king or to the pope. This added a religious dimension to what was already a fractious patchwork of rival fiefdoms and overlapping lines of authority.

## The Thirty Years' War and the Modern State

In 1618, a seemingly minor incident in Prague touched off a massive war that involved players from all over Europe for the better part of 30 years. This was the Thirty Years' War, which ended in 1648 with the signing of the Treaty of Westphalia.

This treaty ushered in the modern era, in part because it established the idea that kings would have sovereign authority over their territories. From then on, political authority would be exclusive and territorial in nature: Within a given territory, one entity (the state) would have complete say over what went on. The modern state was born.



This era saw the rise of absolutist monarchs who had absolute power and didn't share it with the pope or local lords. Louis XIV of France was the quintessential absolutist monarch. He ruled from the mid-1600s until 1715—that is, just as the consequences of the Treaty of Westphalia were beginning to take shape.

It's hard to overstate the importance of the Treaty of Westphalia for the emergence of the modern state. However, the treaty isn't the whole story. Over the course of the 16th and 17th centuries, matters started to change in ways that gave the advantage to central powers over local lords.

Many of these changes were military in nature. For example, the cannon was coming into wider use in Europe at just about the same time as the Treaty of Westphalia. Whereas a castle or a fort used to be a very powerful defensive weapon for a local lord, the cannon was a powerful offensive weapon for the king. With it, a king might be able to discipline a disobedient vassal and ultimately enforce his monopoly.

There was also an increase in the use of foot soldiers, rather than men on horseback. Firepower was coming into wider use. This meant the development of things like muskets and eventually rifles in place of swords and horses. That gave an advantage to big, centralized states over localized, feudal fiefs. The reason was that a peasant could be taught how to use a musket much more easily than a noble could be taught how to wield a sword, meaning modern armies became bigger. Powers were better off commanding a large army of citizen soldiers.

In medieval times, each knight obtained his own gear. By contrast, the mass army had a uniform. And the guns were better if they were mass-produced and the same training and the same ammunition went into making them



Louis XIV of France

work. This kind of large-scale production gave the advantage to centralized states, with their unrivaled power to levy taxes and people, then to press people into military service in large numbers at short notice.

There were cultural changes, too, which created clearer lines of authority and thereby enabled modern rulers to claim a monopoly on the use of force over large areas. This was an era of increasing secularism, when religious authority—especially papal authority—was in decline. In the modern era, the king's threats were more credible than the pope's. This was an advantage for secular authorities over religious ones, and it had the effect of clearing up lines of authority that had previously been more ambiguous.

Today, Westphalian sovereignty is still a defining feature of international relations. We see evidence of this in the ways that states treat each other in their international interactions, and we especially see it in the ways that they usually respect each other's sovereignty in the international community.

### READING

Howard, Michael. *War in European History*. Oxford University Press, 2009.

Tilly, Charles. *Coercion, Capital, and European States*. Cambridge, MA: Basil Blackwell, 1990.

Weber, Max. "The Profession and Vocation of Politics." In *Weber: Political Writings*. Edited by Peter Lassman and Ronald Speirs. Cambridge University Press, 1994.

### QUESTIONS

- 1 What are sovereign states? What differentiates them from the ruling entities of feudalism, the political order of the Middle Ages?
- 2 What factors contributed to the emergence of sovereign states?



5

# Nations, Nationalism, and the Kurds

---

Nationalism is the idea that an ethnic, racial, or religious group should be free to rule itself. It's a force to be reckoned with. This lecture discusses the topic by focusing on one nationalist conflict: that of the Kurdish people in Turkey, Syria, Iraq, and Iran. Their struggle for a homeland illustrates how thorny and intractable these conflicts can be, both for the ethnic group in question and for the countries in which they live.



## Background on the Kurds

Numbering 30 to 40 million people, the Kurds are the largest stateless ethnic group on earth. They live in a vast mountainous region that straddles four countries, which have tense and tenuous relations with one another. The Kurdish language is distinct from Turkish, Arabic, and Farsi. Most Kurds are Muslim, specifically Sunni Muslim, which sometimes puts them at odds with the majority Shia Muslim populations of Iran and Iraq. These religious, linguistic, and cultural differences distinguish the Kurds from the ruling ethnic groups in the countries where they live.

Though the Kurds may want their own state, there are barriers to creating one. The majority ethnic groups typically don't want to give up parts of their own territory, even if it is predominantly inhabited by Kurds. The area might have natural resources. Iraqi Kurdistan has plentiful oil, for example. If Kurdistan became an independent country, that oil revenue would belong to it and not to Iraq.

Additionally, while the Kurdish regions are predominantly Kurdish, they're not entirely so. There are plenty of ethnic Turks, Arabs, and Persians living among their Kurdish neighbors. Therefore, if Kurdistan became an independent state, the Arabs living in, for instance, northern Iraq would suddenly find themselves in the minority. The new majority, the Kurds, might see this as an opportunity for payback for years of oppression at the hands of the Iraqi government. The same could happen elsewhere.

Turkey has fought a bitter and protracted civil war against Kurdish rebels—a group called the Kurdistan Workers' Party, or PKK. Turkey views the PKK as a terrorist organization. But to Kurds in the region, whose language was outlawed and who have suffered for generations under Turkish rule, the PKK aren't terrorists; they're freedom fighters. As the Kurdish case illustrates, the overlapping boundaries between countries and the various ethnic groups that live within them can be tinder for volatile flashpoints around the world.

## Nations and States

There's a subtle but important difference between the words *nation* and *state*. Formally speaking, the word *state* refers to the political unit—the country—with a monopoly on the use of force within its boundaries. The word *nation* refers to a group of people who have (or feel like they have) some connection with one another—often based on a shared language, religion, or culture.

When political scientists use the word *nation*, they mean something like an ethnic group: a political community consisting of people who share a set of cultural characteristics or historical experiences. They often also share an attachment to a particular piece of land.

It's this attachment to territory—or the idea that a nation should have its own nation-state—that leads to some of the violence and instability that nationalism so often entails. If the state is a country, and the nation is a group of people who have an attachment to a particular piece of land, problems can arise when the boundaries of the state and the place where a nation's members live don't line up.

The Kurds are a stateless nation; they're an ethnic group bound together by a common language and a common sense of identity. Kurds in southeastern Turkey and Kurds in northern Iraq likely feel a connection to one another.

In a multinational state—that is, in a state with more than one ethnic group living in it—the various ethnic groups are sometimes locked in bitter and protracted struggles for control over the state. In situations like this, one side's victory is often just the opening stage for a new round of persecution.

Nationalism, in its extreme form, can be the spark for ethnic cleansing or genocide. That's what the Ottoman Empire did to Armenians during World War I, and it's what Nazi Germany did to Jews and Poles during World War II. It's also what Eastern Europeans did to ethnic Germans in the aftermath of World War II. And it's what Hutus did to Tutsis (and then Tutsis to Hutus) in Rwanda in 1994.

## Partition's Challenges

In situations where violent nationalism threatens to tear a region apart, it's tempting to think of partition as an easy fix. In theory, partition gives each nation its own nation-state. However, ethnic populations are seldom divided as cleanly as they appear on a map. Additionally, some ethnic minorities may still end up isolated in territory that doesn't belong to their nation-state under the new borders. Those groups are going to be prime candidates for the next round of oppression, ethnic cleansing, or genocide.

Other confounding factors include natural resources and places of cultural significance. Israel and Palestine are covered with holy sites, shrines, and cities that are important to Jews, Muslims, and Christians alike. None of these are easy to divide.

International borders are already frequent flashpoints for military conflict, and so forming more of them is seldom a recipe for success. For instance, look at Israel and Palestine, India and Pakistan, Northern Ireland, and South Sudan. These places were partitioned, presumably with the best of intentions. They did not, however, serve as models of regional peace and international cooperation.

# Making Nationalism Work

Switzerland and Belgium are multiethnic states with quite distinct ethnic communities. By and large, they make it work. Switzerland, for its part, encompasses four major ethnic groups. The identities are based on the four groups' primary languages: German, French, Italian, and Romansh. (Romansh is a language of fewer than 60,000 native speakers, all of them in Switzerland. It's said to be the closest living relative of Latin as it was spoken in the Roman Empire.)

Switzerland functions rather well: It's one of the world's wealthiest democracies, and it has a long history of neutrality and peace, both internationally and internally. Switzerland is an example of a well-functioning multinational state.

Some people would say that Switzerland's ethnic groups coexist precisely because they're not nationalist, at least not in the traditional sense. And it's true that Switzerland's ethnolinguistic groups don't each aspire to an independent existence. Ethnic identity in Switzerland isn't tied to territory in the way that it is in so many other places. In short, the people of Switzerland largely regard themselves as Swiss, despite their distinct identities. In one line of thinking, this is why Switzerland is able to make multinationalism work.

But some people would point the causal arrow in the other direction. Perhaps Switzerland's ethnic groups get along because they don't aspire to independence. But it's equally plausible that they don't aspire to independence because they get along.

Switzerland's linguistic regions have considerable autonomy, and the federal government is broadly representative. And if political power is shared, the resources tend to be shared as well. In such a situation, the groups don't have to turn to violence or separatism to get their fair share. Political institutions shape nationalism every bit as much as nationalism shapes politics.

Belgium is a case in point. Belgium is a relatively well-functioning, multiethnic democracy. It's primarily divided between Dutch speakers in the north (in Flanders) and French speakers in the south (in the Walloons). The country is divided into various regions, each with its own government

and considerable local autonomy. And the constitution stipulates that ruling coalitions in the federal parliament must have equal representation from both communities.

Even the political parties in Belgium tend to be divided into Flemish and Walloon factions. There are twice as many political parties as there might otherwise be. But part of the reason Switzerland and Belgium both function as well as they do is precisely because of the complexity of their institutions.

One of the main fears associated with national identity is that it's so easily turned into an exclusionary principle. But in Switzerland and Belgium, that largely doesn't happen, in part because the political institutions are reasonably good about representing all of the constituent language groups.

For example, Switzerland and Belgium are both federal in nature, which is to say that decision-making is decentralized, and local regions have a lot of autonomy. They also have institutions that represent the various regions as regions, rather than in proportion to their populations. Both countries have laws that guarantee each language group a certain amount of representation, regardless of what their numbers or distribution might suggest.

In sum, the political institutions in Switzerland and in Belgium put limitations on the majority's ability to get what it wants. The institutions enhance minority representation and thereby protect minority rights, even if those same institutions slow down government decision-making.

Norms and traditions are another factor. Behind every set of well-functioning laws, there's often a halo of norms and traditions that help the law reach places where it couldn't otherwise go. These informal rules are often unspoken, and as a result, they're often ignored—not just by the people who live under them but by political scientists analyzing the situation.

In addition to well-functioning political institutions, democracies also rely on trust and reciprocity as well as on the expectation that the rules will be fairly applied and enforced. Sadly, these things tend to be in short supply in places with a history of conflict. These are often places where political institutions were simply imposed on local populations by imperial overlords, with little regard for local history or culture. Formal political institutions are important, but they also must be consistent with local conditions and traditions.

There's one final reason why Belgium and Switzerland make multinationalism work: wealth. It's simply easier to be fair with the distribution of public goods when the state has more public goods to distribute.

## **New Nationalism: Scotland and Catalonia**

Despite the helpful role of wealth, there has been a resurgence of nationalist separatism in two of the world's advanced, industrialized democracies: Scotland and Catalonia (in Spain). In much of the developing world, nationalist movements are fueled by poverty, oppression, and the legacy of colonial rule.

But, far from being poor, the Catalan region of Spain is actually richer than the rest of the country. Situated in the northeast corner of Spain, Catalonia accounts for 16% of Spain's population (and just 6% of its territory), and yet it generates more than 20% of Spain's wealth. Catalonia is part of Spain, and so much of that wealth benefits Spain as a whole. But if Catalonia was an independent country, or even if it just had more autonomy than it currently does, then the distribution of Catalonia's wealth would be up to Catalonia.

That alone is a powerful incentive for Catalan independence and a powerful explanation for why the rest of Spain is so resistant to it. This isn't to discount issues of national pride. Catalonia has a distinct national identity and history of being oppressed, particularly under Spain's former dictator Francisco Franco. But there are powerful economic incentives for national sovereignty in addition to the historical ones. Nationalist aspirations are a powerful force for separatism, and when coupled with economic aspirations, the consequences can lead to strife, even in an industrialized democracy like Spain.

There are also powerful economic factors behind the Scottish movement for independence from the United Kingdom. Scotland isn't exactly wealthier than the rest of the UK, but many people in Scotland think that national sovereignty would change that.

Right now, the UK has access to vast oil fields in the North Sea. But much of that oil is actually closer to Scotland than it is to England. Many Scottish nationalists claim that that's Scotland's oil, and if Scotland gained independence, it very well could be.

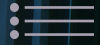
Differences of opinion came to light when the UK voted to leave the European Union. The pro-Brexit camp won a narrow majority in the UK as a whole, 52% to 48%. But in Scotland, 62% voted to remain. This made the different attitudes between Scotland and the rest of the UK plain to see. The question of Scottish independence will likely remain on the agenda for years to come.

## READING

- Cahoone, Lawrence. "Nationalism and a People's War." Lecture 12 of *The Modern Political Tradition: Hobbes to Habermas*. The Great Courses.
- Hobsbawm, Eric. *The Age of Revolution*. Abacus, 1988.
- Tamir, Yael. *Why Nationalism*. Princeton University Press, 2019.
- Wimmer, Andreas. "Why Nationalism Works." *Foreign Affairs*, March/April 2019.

## QUESTIONS

- 1 How are nations different from states?
- 2 What is nationalism?
- 3 Why has nationalism become such a potent force in the modern world?



## 6

# Why Care about Hobbes, Locke, and Rousseau?

---

States use their power to provide public goods and to protect people. Many people find it helpful to think of states as deriving their power from a contract of sorts: an agreement by which people give the state a monopoly on the use of force under the condition that the state then uses that power in certain ways. This way of thinking of state power is called social contract theory, and historically, three important political philosophers have been closely associated with social contract thinking: Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, and Jean-Jacques Rousseau. That trio of Enlightenment thinkers is the subject of this lecture.

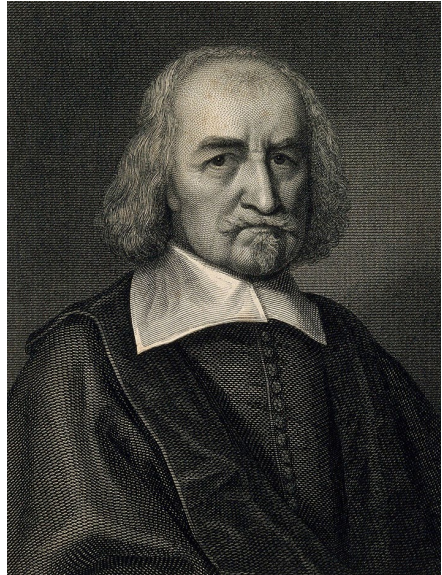
# Thomas Hobbes

As someone who lived in England and France during the 1600s, Thomas Hobbes was witness to a period of tremendous political transformation.

In 1640, England was on the brink of civil war, with parliamentary forces (led by Oliver Cromwell) challenging King Charles I. Parliament wanted to subject the king to democratic accountability. The king wasn't giving in. In that conflict, Hobbes was sympathetic to the monarchy. And fearing that he'd fall foul of Cromwell's forces, Hobbes fled to France.

Hobbes arrived just in time to witness the end of the Thirty Years' War (in 1648). This allowed him to see firsthand the devastation that occurs when the breakdown of political order leads to a war of all against all. This was the context in which Hobbes wrote what was to become his most famous work, *Leviathan*. Published in 1651, *Leviathan* is a justification for a powerful, centralized state authority—preferably a strong monarchy. Throughout, Hobbes yearns for order in a world of chaos.

Hobbes begins his defense of a centralized state with a famous thought experiment. He asks us to think about what life would be like in a state of nature: a world that has no king or government but rather is just a mass of individuals competing with one another to survive. Such a world would obey the law of kill or be killed. Living in this situation would be terrible.



Thomas Hobbes

But there is one thing in the state of nature that almost everybody agrees on: In the state of nature, every individual wants to protect their own life. Longing to live a life free of fear of violent death is common among every reasonable person.

This forms the basis of what comes to be known as the social contract. It's an agreement—or covenant, as Hobbes calls it—that every person in the state of nature would sign up for, if given the chance. And the agreement essentially says if one person doesn't threaten another person's life, that non-threatening status will be reciprocal.

To secure the agreement, humans in the state of nature agree to subject themselves to the rule of a sovereign: a single entity with the power to enforce the social contract. We give the sovereign the power to rule over us, and the sovereign power uses that power to protect us from each other, taking us out of the state of nature.

However, once the sovereign power is empowered to protect us, there aren't really any limits on what the sovereign power can do. In fact, in naming his book *Leviathan*, Hobbes is referring to a biblical sea monster—an awesome, fearsome creature. And Hobbes knew what he was doing when he made the connection between this all-powerful creature and the sovereign power.

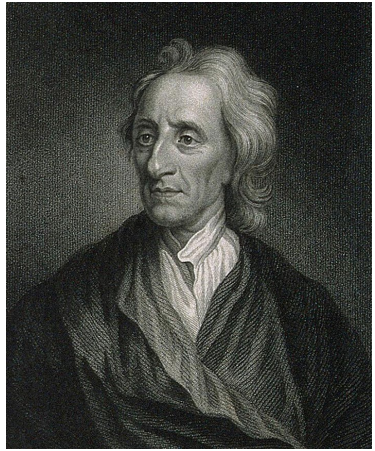
However, in Hobbes's view, the fear of violent death in the state of nature is so extreme that giving control to a sovereign power in exchange for protection is worth it. It is easy to see why the absolute monarchs of Europe would be fans of Hobbes and his *Leviathan*.

## John Locke

John Locke was born a generation after Hobbes, in 1632. He came of age at a time when the English Parliament was already ascendant. Locke's father had fought with the parliamentary forces in the English Civil War. Unlike Hobbes, Locke and his family were predisposed to side with parliament and democracy against the rule of a tyrannical king. This led Locke to provide a radical defense of limited government and individual rights.

In Locke's view, people created government to secure the rights that they had but couldn't exercise in the state of nature. And no one would consent to the creation of such a government if that government was prone to violating the very rights it was meant to secure.

For Hobbes, as long as the government protected its people's lives, it was doing what the people created it to do. Hobbes's state of nature was so terrible that even that minimum protection was better than the alternative. For Locke, by contrast, the government wasn't so much the people's sovereign as their servant. And as a result, it had a longer list of obligations that it had to provide to live up to its end of the contract.



John Locke

In Locke's view, since the social contract obligates the government to protect natural rights, if government ever violates those rights, it has broken the contract, and people have the right to overthrow it. Locke reverses the power dynamic in Hobbes's *Leviathan*.

Not surprisingly, the American revolutionaries loved John Locke. There are echoes of John Locke in the American Declaration of Independence, which outlines the rights of "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness" and also posits that "to secure these rights, governments are instituted among men." Importantly, the document additionally says:

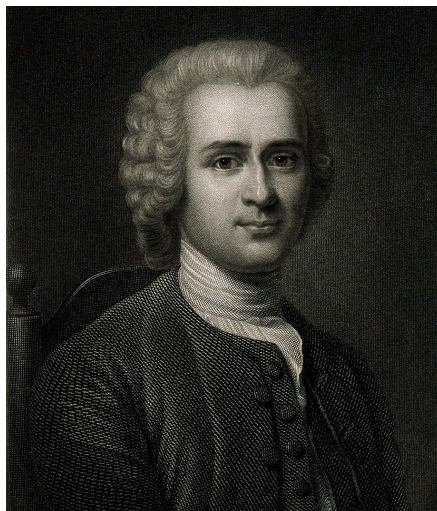
*Whenever any Government becomes destructive of those ends, it's the Right of the People to alter or abolish it.*

Far from demanding obedience to an all-powerful sovereign, Locke proposes a government so limited in power that if it oversteps its bounds, the people have an obligation to rebel.

## Jean-Jacques Rousseau

While John Locke became the voice of the American Revolution, Jean-Jacques Rousseau would become the voice of the French Revolution. Born in 1712, Rousseau had a very different view of human nature than either Hobbes or Locke did. Rousseau believed humans in their natural state were equal and free. However, modern society had created inequality and corrupted people. And government, according to Rousseau, had become a tool used by the rich

and powerful to solidify their claims to private property, which didn't even exist in the state of nature.



**Jean-Jacques Rousseau**

In Rousseau's view, government could also be part of the solution to the problems of modern life. Just as government had been used to justify inequality and oppression, so too could the right kind of government be used to make us free. If government decisions reflected what Rousseau called the general will—the will of the people taken as a whole—we could at least reverse some of the damage.

If government would rule on behalf of everyone, not just the rich and the powerful, then it would make decisions that would help recover some of the freedom and equality that we'd had in the state of nature. However, Rousseau wasn't very clear on what this looks like in practice.

Regardless, in Rousseau's line of thinking, rights aren't natural. They're human inventions. As a result, there's nothing to stop a government from infringing on them. As long as government power is deemed to be in the service of the general will, it can be used to justify just about anything.

Rousseau's philosophy was used to justify the French Revolution, which brought democracy to France. However, it was also used as a justification for the Reign of Terror that followed. In the Reign of Terror, tens of thousands of people were sent to the guillotine, in some cases just because they weren't enthusiastic enough about France's new democratic system.

Rousseau's philosophy had helped put power into the hands of ordinary citizens. But there weren't any limits on what ordinary citizens could do with that power once they had it.

## READING

Hobbes, Thomas. *Leviathan*. Edited by C. B. MacPherson. Penguin Books, 1985 (1651).

Locke, John. *Two Treatises of Government*. Edited by Peter Laslett. 2nd ed. Cambridge University Press, 1988.

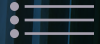
Rousseau, Jean-Jacques. "Discourse on the Origins of Inequality." In *The Discourses and Other Early Political Writings*. Edited by Victor Gourevitch. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997.

———. *The Social Contract and Other Later Political Writings*. Edited by Victor Gourevitch. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997.

Strauss, Leo, & Joseph Cropsey. *History of Political Philosophy*. 3rd ed. University of Chicago Press, 1987.

## QUESTIONS

- 1 How do Hobbes, Locke, and Rousseau differ in their views of what makes government authority legitimate?
- 2 How were the views of Hobbes, Locke, and Rousseau influenced by their historical contexts?



# 7

## Who Gets to Vote?

---

Modern democracy can be thought of as a solution to one of the most fundamental problems in contemporary politics: Government can't govern unless it has the power to force us to do things. But once we give it that power, how do we turn back around and force government to rule in our interests? Democracy solves that problem by making leaders accountable to the people they govern—at least in theory. In practice, democracies have strengths but also face challenges. This lecture looks at some of democracy's advantages and disadvantages by examining its three key traits.

# Participation

There are three essential characteristics of modern democracy: participation, competition, and a set of liberal rights (the right to free speech, a free press, and so on). Participation is the “by the people” part of democracy. It’s the way that most people try to affect the decision-making process.

Political participation takes many forms. A person might serve as an elected representative on the city council where they live. They might donate time or money to a political campaign, or they might belong to a political interest group. People march and show up at demonstrations. At the extreme end, they engage in political violence. That’s not a kind of participation we expect to see in a functioning democracy, but violence is a form of political participation.

For most people, the predominant form of participation is voting. That can mean voting on public policy directly or voting for representatives who vote on our behalf. The question of who can vote is an important one, and the answer differs from place to place.

For example, the United States is, by most accounts, one of the oldest democracies in the world. But when the United States was founded, women, Native Americans, and African Americans could not vote. In fact, most African Americans were still enslaved. It took many decades of legal changes before suffrage was widespread. Switzerland is also considered one of the world’s oldest democracies, yet women there didn’t get the right to vote until 1971.

Participation isn’t just about who votes for our leaders. It’s also about the leaders themselves: who can serve and why we choose representatives in the first place. Part of the reason we rely on representatives is obvious: In a country of millions, it’s simply not possible for all of us to gather in a public square and vote directly. Full-time representatives are also better at what they do because they specialize at it. In theory, they have the time and resources to study the issues, making them an integral part of a modern division of labor.

On the other hand, there are disadvantages to having a professional class of full-time politicians. If politicking is a full-time job, we must pay the politicians—and that brings up the delicate question of who decides how

much they get paid. Citizens tend to get suspicious when representatives vote on their own salaries. Generally speaking, though, paying politicians is considered a good idea. If politics wasn't a paid position, only rich people could do it. Paying politicians opens the opportunity to be a representative to more people than could otherwise afford to do it.

A bigger potential problem with indirect democracy is that if we send our representatives far away to represent us, it's hard to keep track of what they're doing. The problem gets worse because most of us only participate in the political process at election time, whereas lobbyists and special interest groups participate all the time.

Problems like this have led to calls for the adoption of elements of direct democracy, even in modern-day republics. A number of US states now have referendums, for instance. More and more countries are doing the same. A referendum is a political question that's put directly to the public for a vote.

## Competition

Competition is the second essential characteristic of a democracy. The lynchpin between participation and competition is the political campaign. That's where people or parties compete for the opportunity to be the people's representatives.

In most democracies, it's a free market where almost everyone has the right to serve. However, the competition must be fair. That's not always the case: Some flawed democracies interfere with the electoral process at the back end, when votes are counted. Others do so at the front end by restricting who can run for office in the first place.

Competition in democracies can also come among the institutions of government itself. Unchecked power—even by democratically elected representatives—

### Competitive Ideas

Many people celebrate the fact that democracy is built on competition. Just as competition in the economy is said to spark innovation and efficiency, it's certainly possible that democracies are better off because their leaders are those with the best—or at least the most popular—ideas.

is seldom good for democratic stability. Therefore, many regimes set up government in such a way that the different parts of government compete against one another. An example from the American system is the separation of powers. Accountability can lead to less-efficient government, but the upside is that it helps keep leaders in check.

## Liberal Rights

The third characteristic of democracy, liberal rights, produces the most contention. That's because even though everyone would agree that democracy needs participation and competition, reasonable people disagree about how essential rights are to the equation.

For example, how do we describe a democratically elected government that uses its mandate to restrict liberal rights? What if a leader wins a free and fair election but then uses that position of power to impose censorship, truncate civil liberties, or persecute an ethnic minority? And what if that leader remains popular among the non-persecuted majority?

The political commentator Fareed Zakaria labels countries like this illiberal democracies. He's referring to the fact that they follow democratic procedures by electing people to power, but the policies they enact violate rights and freedoms that we usually associate with democracy. Such rights include the right to free speech, the right to protest, freedom of the press, freedom of worship, and equal treatment under the law. Many of the world's most brutal dictatorships—now and historically—are illiberal democracies.

As an extra twist, we should remember that illiberal democracies often voice their actions in the language of democracy itself. For instance, Adolf Hitler claimed he was protecting the rights of the German people from Communism and foreign domination. And even when he invaded other countries, he often justified his actions by claiming that he was protecting the ethnic Germans who lived there.

More recently, Russia claimed similar justifications during its invasions of Ukraine and Georgia. Dictators from Cuba to Congo have long claimed that they were the true democrats, patriotically defending their own people from imperialist domination.

Paradoxically, it's often the majority that gets to decide what gets called democratic and what doesn't. That's why many of the world's so-called democracies are democratic in name alone.

## READING

Freedom House. *Freedom in the World 2021: Democracy Under Siege*.

[https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/2021-02/FIW2021\\_World\\_02252021\\_FINAL-web-upload.pdf](https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/2021-02/FIW2021_World_02252021_FINAL-web-upload.pdf).

Jones, Garrett. *10% Less Democracy: Why You Should Trust Elites a Little More and the Masses a Little Less*. Stanford University Press, 2020.

Pfeffer, Anshel. "From Catalonia to Kurdistan, Referendums Only Bolster Dictators' Power." *Haaretz*, October 27, 2017. <https://www.haaretz.com/world-news/europe/why-catalan-kurdish-votes-will-not-lead-to-independence-1.5454672>.

Zakaria, Fareed. "The Rise of Illiberal Democracy." *Foreign Affairs* 26, no. 6 (November/December 1997).

## QUESTIONS

- 1 What are the essential characteristics of democracy?
- 2 How essential are liberal rights for modern democracy? Can you have real democracy without liberal rights?



8

# Voters and the Dangers of Too Much Democracy

---

Democracy has been envisioned as the form of government most able to prevent leaders from abusing their power. When leaders are accountable to ordinary citizens, their ability to abuse those citizens should, in theory, be diminished. But democracy is also subject to a number of dangers and disadvantages, including voter apathy and ignorance, inefficient decision-making, and the potential for mob rule.

*Reflecting on democracy's dangers led Winston Churchill to call the system "the worst form of government, except for all the others."*

## **Voter Ignorance**

In the United States, many voters don't know who or what they're voting for. That makes other people concerned about voter ignorance. But there is a counterargument that suggests that voter ignorance isn't something to worry about. It suggests that even though a lot of people can't articulate why they vote for one candidate or another, they still vote in ways that match up with their interests.

This is possible because political parties play an important role in counteracting voter ignorance. They act as what economists call information shortcuts. They sum up information to help us make informed decisions. For instance, if a voter sees a Republican candidate on the ticket, and they're aware of what Republicans stand for, they can make a good guess as to what the Republican candidate will focus on in office.

Party signaling doesn't always work. Not every candidate follows the party on every issue. However, so long as the political parties have well-articulated platforms, the information shortcut should help the average voter arrive at decisions that reflect their interests, even if they can't fully explain the details as to why.

## Voter Apathy

Voter apathy is another concern regarding democracies. Voter turnout rates hover around 60% in many of the world's advanced democracies. However, that means 60% of the population that is of age to vote, and not every citizen who is of legal age is registered to vote. As a percentage of registered voters, voter turnout rates in most advanced democracies are considerably higher. It's about 70% in the United Kingdom and Canada, 75% in Germany and France, and around 80% in South Korea and a few Scandinavian countries. In the 2020 US presidential election, 67% of the eligible population voted—the highest voter turnout in more than a century.

Still, some countries have turned to compulsory voting to encourage citizens to get more involved. In places like Belgium, Australia, Costa Rica, and Brazil, voting isn't just a right; it's the law. If a person doesn't show up at the polls on election day, they could get a fine. In most of these places, that's enough to drive voter turnout to 90% or more.

But there is a downside to compulsory voting. One argument against forcing people to vote is that it forces participation by people who may not know anything about the issues.

## Monitoring Representatives

A more serious democratic discontent has to do with supervision and oversight of the people we elect to represent us. When we delegate decision-making to other people (representatives), we create a new set of challenges: Now we must keep an eye on our representatives to make sure they do what we want. It's also necessary to make sure that they don't take advantage of the fact that we can't watch their every move.

In a representative democracy, there are two views on how we want our representatives to represent us. On the one hand, we want them to be our advocates (or delegates), which is to say we want them to represent our interests. That's called the delegate model of representation, and it is generally how most people think a representative performs their job.

A contrasting, more conservative view holds that a representative isn't so much our delegate as our trustee. In this view, the representative is there to make decisions in our place. In the trustee model, we entrust our representative with the ability to make important decisions on our behalf, even if those decisions aren't necessarily in our interest.

The argument supporting this view is that the representative specializes in these things and has the time and expertise to learn about the issues firsthand. Therefore, they are more qualified than everyday voters are to know what the best decision is.

If we think of representatives as delegates, then the electorate must know what their representatives are up to and has to be able to hold them accountable if they're not faithful advocates. On the other hand, if voters think of representatives as trustees, then voters will trust them more to make decisions.

Whether a person thinks representatives should be delegates or trustees might affect their views on voter ignorance and government transparency. This issue also matters when it comes to who voters think representatives should really represent when national and regional interests come into conflict.

## National and Regional Interests

Another potential problem with representative democracy is that national interests and regional interests don't always align. Representative democracy invites us to think more about our local interests, even when they might be damaging to the polity as a whole.

This was a big issue after the Cold War. As international tensions dissipated, many Western democracies started to think about closing military bases. Bases are expensive to maintain, and this looked like an easy way to cut costs. However, individual communities often benefit from having a base nearby. A base is a boon to the local economy, and closing one down means people lose jobs. In such a situation, a representative may have had to choose between:

- ★ Maintaining a local base the country didn't need, thereby helping their constituents' local economy

- ★ Closing a local base the country didn't need, thereby hurting their constituents' local economy

In a democracy where representatives represent local districts, leaders often look out for local interests, even when that goes against the interests of the nation.

## Long-Term Planning

Democratically elected leaders also find themselves torn between the present and the future. Democracies have a real problem when it comes to long-term planning. For democratic leaders, the most obvious time horizon is the next election: They want to generate payoffs for the next time they're running to maintain their office.

This raises questions: What happens when we must pay for something that won't come to fruition until after the next election cycle? What happens when our representatives must make us temporarily unhappy to bring about a better future?

This issue can pose serious problems for democracies. For example, democracies are notoriously slow about paying for infrastructure. A politician may not want to put money into fixing roads and bridges if the result—traffic alleviation—won't be visible until they're out of office years down the line.

Deficit spending is another example. For a politician, it can be quite tempting to pay for a popular social program but leave the bill to their successors—or the next generation.

## Mob Rule and Tyranny of the Majority

The dangers of too much democracy are nothing new. They were right there from the beginning. The ancient Athenians, who essentially invented democracy, were also its first critics. Socrates, as reported by Plato, feared mob rule, and he argued that the most just republic would be one that was ruled by

an elite, educated caste of philosopher kings. (Socrates was right to be fearful of democracy. He was later convicted and sentenced to death by a majority of his fellow citizens.)

America's founding fathers also feared that majority rule might turn into mob rule. That's why they invented many institutions to try to keep the majority in check. (The US Senate is an example of this. It keeps the majority in control by overrepresenting small states.)

The founding fathers had many reasons for wanting the government to have non-majoritarian institutions, and fear of mob rule was certainly one of them. Their concerns were valid: At the very same time that they were embarking on the experiment of American democracy, French revolutionaries were undertaking an even more radical experiment. The French revolutionary government had far fewer checks on majority power and arguably did result in mob rule.

Among the most infamous chapters of the French Revolution was the Reign of Terror, when—in the name of defending the revolution—the parliament appointed the Committee of Public Safety. That committee went on to send tens of thousands of people to the guillotine, sometimes on the mere suspicion that they didn't love democracy enough.

The Reign of Terror wasn't so much a deficiency of democracy as an excess of democracy. At the time, France's National Convention saw majority rule in its purest form. There weren't checks and balances or limits on the convention's power. There was no second legislative body, like the US Senate. When people, caught up in revolutionary fervor, went after the so-called enemies of democracy, there wasn't anything to stop them.

The fear that the masses might act in destructive ways calls into question what democracy is. Citizens of a functioning democracy need certain rights. It's impossible to have free and fair elections if some citizens are systematically denied the ability to organize, assemble, or share and disseminate ideas. But public order requires some limits on these things, and there aren't many ways to empower the majority to decide what those limits should be without putting minority rights at risk.

In a democracy, some group of people—generally, the majority—has to decide what limits there should be on the rights that people have. However, it will always be a matter of interpretation whether something counts as free speech or as a dangerous threat to public order. Presumably, in a democracy, the prevailing interpretation will be the majority's.

## READING

Carothers, Thomas, “Is Democracy the Problem?” *American Interest*, January 16, 2019.

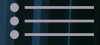
DeSilver, Drew. “In Past Elections, U.S. Trails Most Developed Countries in Voter Turnout.” Pew Research Center. May 21, 2018. <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2018/05/21/u-s-voter-turnout-trails-most-developed-countries/>.

“Diseases Like Covid-19 are Deadlier in Non-Democracies.” *The Economist*, February 18, 2020.

Jones, Garrett. *10% Less Democracy: Why You Should Trust Elites a Little More and the Masses a Little Less*. Stanford University Press.

## QUESTIONS

- 1 To what extent are voter ignorance and apathy threats to representative democracy? Is compulsory voting a good solution to the problem?
- 2 How can regional interests and short time horizons incentivize representatives to work against the public good?
- 3 Why do some critics of democracy fear that it will lead to tyranny of the majority and mob rule?



## 9

# Should Presidents or Parliaments Lead?

In a presidential system, the chief executive is directly elected by the people and, for the duration of their term, governs largely independently from the legislature. In a parliamentary form of government, the chief executive—the prime minister—isn't directly elected by the people.

Rather, the people vote for members of a legislative body, the parliament, which then selects one of its own to head the executive branch. Direct versus indirect election of the chief executive is the core difference between presidential and parliamentary forms of government, but this seemingly subtle difference has a big effect. This lecture examines how presidential and parliamentary democracy are supposed to work and also how the two systems sometimes fail to function.

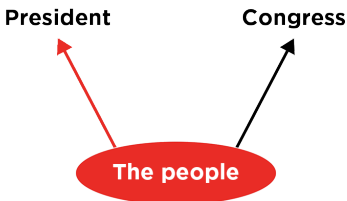
# Presidential versus Parliamentary Systems

In general terms, political scientists call a democracy presidential or parliamentary based on three distinguishing characteristics:

- ★ The chief executive of a presidential regime is selected through a popular election. By contrast, the chief executive of a parliamentary regime (the prime minister) is elected indirectly by the legislature.
- ★ A president is often said to be immune from the legislature, meaning that the legislature can't easily remove a president from office. A prime minister, on the other hand, is directly accountable to the legislature, meaning they can be summarily removed, often as the result of a simple majority vote of no confidence.
- ★ Presidents serve for a fixed term of office, usually four or five years. After that, they must stand for reelection. A prime minister's term of office, on the other hand, is more variable. While a parliament can dismiss a prime minister and replace them, a prime minister can dissolve a parliament and call for new elections. This is a tactic that prime ministers sometimes use to try to extend their time in office or to increase their party's standing. It can sometimes backfire.

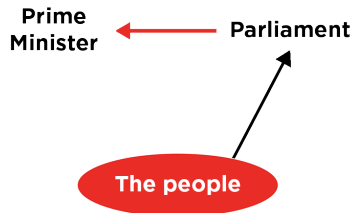
## Presidential

Direct election of chief executive



## Parliamentary

Indirect election of chief executive



The terminology of presidential and parliamentary government doesn't always follow reality. For example, a country with a parliamentary form of government might have a president in addition to their prime minister. Germany and Ireland are parliamentary systems that have presidents. But these presidents are mostly ceremonial.

Confusingly, there are even a few places where they call the prime minister a president. In Botswana, for example, the chief executive is called the president. However, Botswana's president is selected by the parliament and can be removed by parliament, too. Technically, then, this "president" is a prime minister.

The method of selection and the interplay between the chief executive and the assembly are what really matter. Those determine the strengths and weaknesses that a country's political system is likely to have.

In a parliamentary system of government, there's a good chance that the prime minister and parliament will be able to work together. The two institutions almost always start with at least some kind of broad agreement. If they didn't, that parliament wouldn't have picked that prime minister in the first place.

In a presidential system, by contrast, the chief executive and the legislature are stuck with each other. The relative immunity of the president means they can block legislative proposals with impunity. And the legislature can block the president's actions as well. This creates the potential for a standoff. In theory, the president and the legislature must compromise to get anything done. In practice, the result may be gridlock. This is an example of checks and balances in action.

## **Presidents and Prime Ministers in Office**

Once a president or prime minister is in office, their first and most important task is selecting a cabinet. The cabinet is the group of people who will work with the chief executive to implement policy.

In a presidential system, the cabinet officers are called secretaries, and each secretary heads up a department. In parliamentary systems, the prime minister has a team of cabinet ministers, each one the head of a ministry.

Because a president can't easily be removed from office by the legislature, they have a freer hand in choosing their cabinet. For instance, in America, a Republican president can choose an entirely Republican cabinet, and there's not much that a Democratic Congress can do about it.

A prime minister, on the other hand, must work hard to make their cabinet reflect the parliament that selected them. If they don't, they risk getting removed from office.

When the prime minister's party doesn't have a majority of seats in parliament, they'll likely have to form a coalition with other parliamentary parties. That involves an exchange of seats on the cabinet for parliamentary support.

By giving junior parties seats on the cabinet, the prime minister gives them influence on the political process. The prime minister also gives them a stake in that cabinet. If junior parties in a coalition ever jump ship and vote with the opposition, they risk getting kicked out of the coalition themselves and losing the influence they had. Junior factions in a coalition are seldom inclined to bite the hand that feeds them. That's another way that parliamentary systems build in loyalty between the two branches.

In presidential systems, the two branches face no such pressure to work in concert. A president can't force a legislature to go along with something it doesn't want. Meanwhile, a president might find their efforts blocked by a downright hostile legislature, especially when the legislature is dominated by a rival political party.

To get anything done in circumstances like this, the two branches must find ways to work together. In the best of circumstances, this forces compromise and encourages moderation. In the worst of circumstances, it can bring the decision-making process to a halt.

Meanwhile, a prime minister is in theory able to bring legislation to pass, but keeping together a coalition is a bit like herding cats. A president can't strong-arm a legislature into submission, and that's either good or bad, depending on what one thinks of what the president is trying to do.

# Potential Parliamentary Problems

For their part, parliamentary systems of government aren't immune to dysfunction. Because their cabinets are often coalitions, parliamentary regimes encourage the participation of smaller political parties: A small party might not have any hope of winning the presidency, but in a parliamentary system, they might make it into the ruling coalition. This can give even a tiny party disproportionate influence.

Another potential problem with parliamentary regimes is that coalition governments can be very unstable. The defection of just one party from the ruling coalition can trigger a new election at a moment's notice. Meanwhile, competition among parliamentary factions and the possibility of a no-confidence vote mean that government transitions can come at a blistering pace.

A case in point is Germany between the two world wars. Germany's government at the time, the Weimar Republic, had a fractious parliament, with dozens of political parties, including Communists and Nazis. In this factionalized environment, even the biggest political parties didn't have much more than 30% of the vote. This led to the formation of large and unwieldy coalitions, oftentimes comprised of political parties that had little in common. Not surprisingly, these coalitions crumbled almost as quickly as they were formed.

The Weimar Republic had eight elections between 1919 and 1932, some of them just months apart. In the last two, the Nazis got more votes than anyone else (albeit never a majority). That's how, through totally democratic channels, Adolf Hitler became chancellor. Weimar's parliamentary politics set the stage for its own destruction.

Today, Germany has a few features built into its parliamentary system that are meant to prevent history from repeating itself. For instance, if a political party doesn't get at least 5% of the vote, it doesn't receive representation in parliament. This is called a representation threshold, and it's meant to keep small, fringe parties out of parliament and to limit the number of parties overall.

Germany also has a constructive no-confidence vote. This streamlines the transition from one administration to the other, and it is intended to limit the chaos and uncertainty of the Weimar period.

## Potential Presidential Problems

In presidential politics, the worst conflicts come when the legislature as a whole finds itself at odds with a powerful president. A vivid example of this occurred in Russia in the early 1990s, just after the end of the Cold War. The Soviet Union had crumbled, and in Russia's first-ever presidential elections, a moderate, independent reformist named Boris Yeltsin won a landslide victory. This was a time of hope for democracy, not just in Russia but around the world.

But things took a dark turn after Yeltsin took office. A clear majority of the Russian people supported Yeltsin and his reforms. But the Russian congress at the time (the Congress of People's Deputies) was still dominated by the old guard. This set the stage for a constitutional crisis.

In 1993, the congress impeached President Yeltsin and sought to replace him with his vice president. Yeltsin, for his part, tried to dissolve the congress and call for new elections. Following that was the most intense civil conflict in Russia since the Revolution of 1917. The legislators blockaded themselves in their chambers and refused to budge, while their supporters demonstrated outside. In the meantime, Yeltsin called in the army, which proceeded to shell the legislature with tanks. The country was on the brink of civil war.

When the dust settled, Yeltsin was left standing, and democracy managed to survive in Russia, at least for a while. But even today, people are bitterly divided in their attitudes about the crisis. Some in Russia even blame it for the skepticism and mistrust of democracy that remains to this day.

Russia in the early 1990s wasn't exactly a stable democracy. The Soviet Union had just crumbled, and in Russia, democracy was a new thing. But this kind of crisis can happen even in the world's established democracies, as shown by the case of Chile.

In 1973, Chile was South America's oldest democracy. The people there had just elected a new president, Salvador Allende, who was a Marxist. Allende quickly embarked on an ambitious program aimed at helping the

country's poor. Though Allende had won the presidency through established democratic channels, as a Marxist, he quickly found himself at odds with entrenched interests both in the country and abroad.

Chile's congress at the time was dominated by right-wing parties that opposed Allende and feared that he was dragging the country too far to the left. Eventually, the Chilean military stepped in on the side of the congress and staged a coup. On September 11, 1973, the air force bombed the presidential palace. And as troops tried to storm the building, Allende committed suicide. Within hours, South America's oldest democracy became a dictatorship.

## READING

- Cox, Gary W. *The Efficient Secret: The Cabinet and the Development of Political Parties in Victorian England*. Cambridge University Press, 1987.
- Epps, Garrett. "The Founders' Great Mistake." *The Atlantic* (January/February 2009).
- Horowitz, Donald L. "Comparing Democratic Systems." *Journal of Democracy* (Fall 1990).
- Linz, Juan J. "The Perils of Presidentialism." *Journal of Democracy* (Winter 1990).
- . "The Virtues of Parliamentarism." *Journal of Democracy* (Fall 1990).
- Rose, Richard. "Presidents and Prime Ministers." In *Comparative Politics: Notes and Readings*. Edited by Roy C. Macridis and Bernard E. Brown. 7th ed. Pacific Grove, CA: Brooks/Cole Publishing, 1990.
- Shugart, Matthew Søberg, and John M. Carey. *Presidents and Assemblies*. Cambridge University Press, 1992.

## QUESTIONS

- 1 How is presidentialism meant to encourage compromise between the executive and legislative branches? Why doesn't it always work out that way in practice?
- 2 What are the relative strengths and weaknesses of parliamentary and presidential government?



10

# The Vote Counter Decides Everything

---

At first glance, determining the winner of an election would seem like an easy task: The person with the most votes wins. But around the world, there are countless ways to count votes. Different voting systems lead to different outcomes, and each voting system is subject to its own host of pros and cons. This lecture examines three voting setups, two of which are widely used. The third is hardly used at all, yet it is the system that some people believe is the best.

# Plurality Voting

The first electoral system is plurality voting, also known as first past the post. In this system, the candidate with the most votes wins.

Plurality voting is notable because it's not a majority voting system. A majority means more than half. In this system, a candidate only needs a plurality—more votes than anyone else—to win.

Still, first-past-the-post voting is very common. It's the system used in the United Kingdom, and as a result, it was inherited by many countries that used to be part of the British Empire, including the United States, Canada, India, Pakistan, and dozens of former British colonies in Africa and the Caribbean. One reason people like this system is that it's very straightforward: It only requires one round of voting, and the candidate with the most votes wins.

However, plurality voting is susceptible to the spoiler effect, in which two ideologically similar candidates split votes. The spoiler effect can sometimes cause a minor candidate to draw votes away from a major candidate, damaging their chances of winning. A bigger problem is that because a candidate doesn't need a majority of the votes to win, there are bound to be cases where the representative for a district is supported by only a minority of the voters. And the problem is exacerbated when there are many candidates in the race.

First-past-the-post voting is also sensitive to the way that voters are distributed around a society. If one political party has a plurality across many districts or states, then there's virtually no limit to how disproportionate the results can be. A party with a tiny plurality in 100 legislative districts could, in theory, win all 100 seats, even if that political party represents only a fraction of the electorate.

As an example of plurality voting's issues in practice, consider this: In 2005, there was a close three-way race for seats in the British House of Commons. The Labour Party eked out a narrow lead with 35% of the votes cast against the Conservative Party's 32%. But the votes were distributed in such a way that the Labour Party won 55% of the seats in the House of Commons—an outright majority.

Additionally, the third party in the race, the Liberal Democrats, won about 22% of the vote nationwide, which was better than they had ever done before. But their support was spread out in such a way that they ended up with only 10% of the parliamentary seats. For many voters, especially supporters of the Conservative Party and the Liberal Democrats, this was very frustrating.

## The Two-Round System

In the two-round system, if no candidate gets a majority, the election drops all of the other candidates and turns to a runoff between the top two. The majority runoff system is used in France as well as in presidential elections in a lot of other countries, too. It is especially prevalent in those with French influence, such as Haiti and a handful of former French colonies in Africa. Even a few US states use the runoff system. Louisiana, with its French influence, is one of them. The runoff system provides a way to lessen the spoiler effect common in first-past-the-post elections.

In the plurality system, many people who might have preferred one candidate will nevertheless vote strategically for another candidate who they think is more likely to win. But in a two-round system, voters can vote for their favorite candidate, knowing that even if this person doesn't win in the first round, there will still be a chance to choose between the two remaining options in the runoff.

Third-party candidates and independents tend to do better in the two-round system. If voters know that backing a long-shot candidate isn't throwing away a vote, then that candidate might not be such a long shot after all.

This is part of the story of how Emmanuel Macron became the president of France. In 2017, Macron's political party was a



**Emmanuel Macron**

complete newcomer in French politics. And in early polling, he looked like a long shot, trailing far behind two other candidates, including Marine Le Pen of the far-right National Front.

But Macron and a leftist candidate behind him steadily gained ground, such that the first round of the election was close: The four top vote recipients each gathered between 20% and 25% of the vote. Macron and Le Pen advanced into the second round. This time, most of the people who voted for other candidates in the first round unified behind Macron in the runoff. He wasn't their favorite candidate, but they liked him more than they liked Le Pen, whom many saw as a radical.

Alas, the two-round system has problems of its own. For instance, it doesn't completely eliminate the spoiler effect. After all, a runoff system has two winners in the first round: the two people who make it into the runoff. While people might be willing to vote for the person who's running in third place (in the hopes of pushing that person into the runoff), the voter is still in a bind if their preferred candidate appears to be polling fourth.

In the end, the runoff system reduces some of the problems with first-past-the-post elections, but it doesn't eliminate them. And it presents a bit of an inconvenience for voters who must vote twice instead of once. But unlike the first-past-the-post setup, the runoff system is truly majoritarian. It delivers winners who can claim to command majority support, at least in the final round.

## Ranked-Choice Voting

One system may offer voters a chance to vote both sincerely and strategically: ranked-choice voting. This is also known as an alternative or transferrable voting system. With ranked-choice voting, voters are given the opportunity to rank all of the candidates on the ballot. Voters either write their names down in order of preference or number them as their first choice, second choice, and so on. The ballots are then effectively laid out in different piles based on the top choice on each ballot.

Imagine there are four candidates: Jesse, Phil, Geoff, and Roger. In this example, Roger gains the fewest first-preference votes. Instead of tossing the Roger-favoring ballots away, though, this system looks at who Roger backers

voted as their second preference, then redistributes those ballots accordingly. If a Roger voter had Geoff as their second choice, for instance, then that initially Roger-favoring ballot shifts to Geoff's pile after Roger is eliminated. Ballots with Roger in first place and Phil in second shift to Phil's pile, and ballots with Roger in first place and Jesse in second shift to Jesse's pile.

After each round of this, vote counters see if there's a majority. If there isn't one, the process repeats. Eventually, vote counters will make their way through the list, eliminating one candidate at a time, until just a single person has a majority. That candidate is declared the winner.

The instant-runoff system does have some problems, beginning with the fact that it's complicated to explain. That's probably why so few places use it. Its homes include Ireland, Australia, and the US state of Maine. These are all stable democracies. It would probably be more difficult to use the system in a developing democracy, where there might be more mistrust of the democratic system.

However, the system has some real advantages. It ameliorates the spoiler effect because voters can rank their choices sincerely, knowing that if their favored long-shot candidate loses in an early round, their vote will still be transferred toward their next choice.

The system also has a moderating influence on candidates. With ranked-choice voting, candidates know that if they're not a particular voter's first choice, they might still benefit by being that person's second or third choice. Therefore, it's not unusual for candidates in a ranked-choice election to compete by trying to seek out compromise, even with the other candidates.

If a candidate can benefit by being somebody's second choice, the last thing they want is to be divisive. Divisive behavior might excite one's base, but it'll put off everyone else.

## Conclusion

If ranked-choice voting has numerous advantages, why don't more places use it? One reason is that, generally, established politicians are reluctant to change the way that elections are held. Politicians in elected office are in there because they

won an election using the electoral system that's already in place, reducing their incentive to change it. While voters might see the benefits of changing electoral systems, successful politicians tend to like things as they are.

This is particularly true when a political system consists of two dominant political parties. Even if they disagree on everything else, the dominant parties probably agree that they don't want spoiler candidates entering the fray. That's why alternative voting systems are unlikely to gain much traction. They've taken root in a few places in the United States, but many of these are municipal elections, which are usually nonpartisan. While voting systems do change, such changes tend to be slow and rare.

## READING

Brooks, David, "One Reform to Save America." *The New York Times*, June 1, 2018.

Cox, Gary W. *Making Votes Count*. Cambridge University Press, 1997.

Farrell, David M. *Electoral Systems: A Comparative Introduction*. 2nd ed. Red Globe Press, 2011.

Jacobson, Gary. *The Politics of Congressional Elections*. 6th ed. New York: Pearson, 2004.

Soudriette, Richard W., & Andrew Ellis. "Electoral Systems Today: A Global Snapshot." *Journal of Democracy* 17, no. 2 (April 2006).

## QUESTIONS

- 1 What are the disadvantages of plurality-based electoral systems?
- 2 What is the spoiler effect?
- 3 Why is ranked-choice voting so seldom used, despite its many advantages over other voting systems?



11

# Do Political Parties Help or Hurt?

---

This lecture discusses what political parties are and how they differ around the world. It also gives a sense for why some democracies have many political parties whereas others have just two, and it considers the relative advantages and disadvantages of two-party and many-party systems.

# What Are Political Parties?

Political parties are organizations that attempt to gain and maintain political power and to influence public policy, usually by participating in elections or by helping their members attain political office. That is how they work in stable, functioning democracies, at least. In dysfunctional states and dictatorships, political influence is sometimes achieved by other means, such as violence or intimidation. And political parties play an important role in places like that as well.

In areas with weak or dysfunctional governments, political parties often step in and perform the functions that a government normally would. They'll build schools and hospitals, provide security, and collect trash, for instance. They do this (at least in part) with the resources they collect, either in the form of taxes or extortion.

This lecture, however, zooms in on organizations that compete for power in the context of a stable democracy. They do so in elections and campaigns as well as in the houses and halls of legislative assemblies. Democracy is about competition, and so too are political parties.

## Information, Coordination, and Compromise

In a modern democracy, political parties help the electorate make informed decisions. They do so by acting as an abbreviation for what a given representative stands for. For instance, while a voter might not know much about a specific Democratic candidate's views, they can make a good guess about what that candidate stands for based on their party affiliation. Such guesses are not 100% accurate. But they are much more accurate than random guesses.

Political parties also help people with similar political views coordinate their actions. It's usually advantageous for people on the same side of the political spectrum to form a political party that, broadly speaking, represents the views they have in common. Such a party will also have certain procedures for deciding who among them is going to run. That way, the candidates can

compete with one another before the general election, but then they pick a single nominee. Everyone else can get behind that nominee and give that person a real chance of beating the other side.

In the United States, this preliminary process is called a party primary, and it's a very public process—one that gives ordinary citizens influence in choosing each party's eventual nominee. But in most other countries, the process is more closed, and the selection of a party's nominees is largely handled by the card-carrying members of that political party, often at a party convention or meeting.

Once in office, political parties also promote stability and open possibilities for compromise. If a legislature consisted of 100 individuals rather than a handful of political parties, it's hard to see where the process of negotiation would even begin. It would be a complete free-for-all. But political parties allow the members of a legislature—and thus the political factions in society—to negotiate, and form coalitions, and make deals as a smaller number of voting blocs.

## **Two-Party Systems versus Bigger Systems**

More political parties emerge in some societies compared to others. For instance, the United States has just two dominant political parties, whereas Germany has five or six, and places like the Netherlands and Israel can have dozens.

Part of the reason lies in the nature of coalition politics. In a place like the United States, where there's a single (and very powerful) president, most people don't want to vote for a third party. There's only going to be one president, and voting for a third-party candidate can feel like throwing away a vote.

But if there's a realistic chance of coalition politics—of a prime minister building a coalition of a few political parties—the situation is a little different. A small party—even if it can't win the prime minister's office—can still play a meaningful role in the governing coalition.

A similar process happens at the local level. This can be another reason why some systems tend to see the development of just two competitive political parties rather than many. In the United States and the United Kingdom (and a handful of other countries), there is generally one parliamentary or congressional representative per district. Except for Washington DC residents, everyone in the United States has one—and only one—representative in the House of Representatives. (Washington DC residents currently have zero.)

As an alternative, imagine a legislature with 200 members but only 100 districts, with each district electing their two representatives at the same time. In such a setup, voters may no longer feel penalized for voting for third parties. A third-party vote might be enough to put a preferred candidate in second place, and in a two-member district, that would be enough for that person to win a seat.



**Maurice Duverger**

In comparative politics, there is a clear trend, first discovered by the late political scientist Maurice Duverger. This trend, known as Duverger's law, suggests that single-member districts will usually give rise to the creation of just two dominant political parties. When the number of representatives per district goes up, so too does the number of competitive political parties.

## Duverger's Law

District Magnitude Affects the Number of Political Parties.

$$\# = M + 1$$

Single-member districts will usually give rise to the creation of two dominant political parties.

When the number of representatives per district goes up, so does the number of competitive political parties.

## Party-List Elections

There are political systems where voters vote for political parties rather than individual candidates. The percentage of the votes a party gets determines how many seats a party gets in the legislature. These voting systems tend to increase the number of political parties, sometimes quite dramatically. Party-list voting systems appear in many of the world's democracies, including Italy, Spain, Portugal, Israel, and a host of newer democracies in Eastern Europe. A variant has also appeared in the Netherlands, Switzerland, and Scandinavia.

## Is It Better to Have More Parties?

Parties can factionalize and divide, or they can coalesce and merge around a broader set of interests. But this isn't really a function of how factionalized society is or of how many interest groups there are. Instead, it reflects the way that votes are counted and seats are filled. It can also be a function of the government formation process and the capacity for coalitions.

The United States has two dominant political parties not because people necessarily want it that way, but rather because the way America holds elections disincentivizes voting for small political parties. If the United States had parliamentary coalitions and party-list voting, new political parties would almost certainly emerge.

Many people find systems with more than two parties appealing. They say such systems can be more proportional, promote broader coalitions, and provide more opportunity for compromise and consensus. Most of all, they like that it gives voters many choices.

Such advantages may be why systems with more than two parties usually have higher voter turnout and higher levels of engagement than two-party systems. The relative lack of choice in a two-party system can lead to apathy: People get tired of compromising their values and voting for what they see as the

lesser of two evils. In multiparty systems, political parties can get away with catering to a small but passionate subset of the electorate. This has a way of enhancing political participation.

However, that can bring a downside in that it can be easier for undesirable fringe elements to gain a foothold. The German Nazis rose to prominence in a highly factionalized multiparty democracy. That's likely why people today are so wary of seeing small, populist movements—of the right and left—gaining power.

## READING

ACE Electoral Knowledge Network. “Electoral Systems.” <http://aceproject.org/ace-en/topics/es/default>.

Appelbaum, Yoni. “America’s Fragile Constitution.” *The Atlantic*, October 2015.

Duverger, Maurice. *Political Parties: Their Organization and Activity in the Modern State*. New York: Wiley, 1954.

Hill, Michael, “It’s Not Just a Game for Soccer Party.” *The Baltimore Sun*, April 23, 1994. <https://www.baltimoresun.com/news/bs-xpm-1994-04-23-1994113013-story.html>.

## QUESTIONS

- 1 How do political parties help the political process and encourage compromise?
- 2 Why do some countries have many political parties, whereas others have just two?
- 3 What are the advantages and disadvantages of democracies with many parties?



12

# The Problems with Federalism

---

At America's formation, the choice of federalism—a system of government that brings individual states together under a common government—was a compromise of sorts: an attempt to preserve some degree of local control while also reaping the benefits of centralization. Americans and people around the world have been arguing about the balance between state and federal control ever since federalism's emergence.

# Federalism Basics

Globally speaking, federalism is rare. Of the world's roughly 200 independent countries, only about 20 or 30 are federations. But because one of the main aims of federalism is to localize control and to bring government closer to the people, it's more common in countries that are big. In fact, many of the world's biggest countries (by land area or population) are federations. These include the United States, Russia, India, Argentina, Canada, and Brazil. The two most populous countries in Africa—Nigeria and Ethiopia—are also federations.

The constituent units of a federation go by different names in different parts of the world. They're often called states. But they're also called provinces in Canada and Argentina, regions in Belgium, cantons in Switzerland, and *Länder* (meaning "lands") in Germany.

The division of labor between federal governments and their constituent units also differs from place to place. Oftentimes, the federal government will take care of foreign policy and national defense. It will also regulate trade and settle disputes between the regions. But this leaves much for the individual states or provinces to determine on their own: everything from language policy and education to the day-to-day laws that govern health care, transportation, and contracts. In the United States and Canada, even the legal system itself can differ from state to state or province to province.

Inevitably, federal and regional jurisdictions sometimes overlap. For instance, in the United States, the federal government sets the dates on which federal elections occur, but individual states control the time of day that polls are open, whether or not they allow early voting, and what kinds of ID voters need to register.

## A Continuum

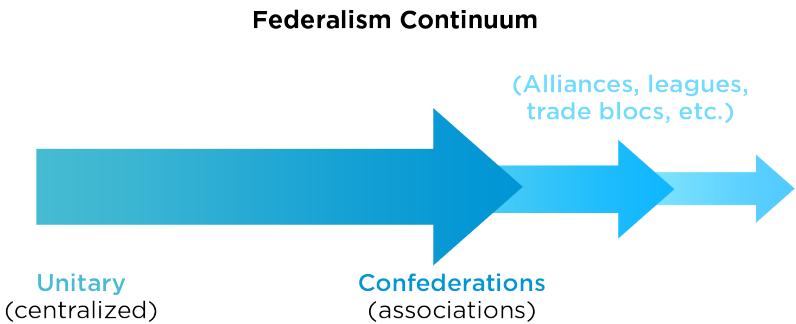
Federalism exists on a continuum, with very centralized, unitary governments on one end and looser political associations—or confederations—on the other. With the adoption of the Constitution in 1789, the United States

moved from a loose confederation of independent states to a true federation: something that was much more centralized than it had been but that nevertheless still left a lot up to the individual states.

The ensuing centuries saw the United States become progressively more centralized, especially after the Civil War and with the New Deal (which was Franklin Roosevelt's effort to combat the Great Depression). The trend continued in the 1950s and 1960s as the federal government took on a more active role, promoting racial justice and fighting poverty. These were all times when the federal government forced states to abide by federal mandates, even as state officials resisted, claiming that the federal government had no such authority.

Many of the world's countries go much further than the US in the direction of centralization. France has a quintessential unitary government, with most decision-making authority held by the national government in Paris. There are administrative offices all over the country, but matters such as traffic laws, business regulations, taxes, and school systems are quite centralized and uniform across France.

On the other end of the spectrum, some federations are looser than in the United States. Canada is one example of this. At the very loosest end of the federalism continuum, there are associations like the European Union, which most people wouldn't consider to be a country in the first place.



# Federations in Law and in Practice

In a federation, the law (or even the constitution) often spells out certain rights that the federated units have. But no matter how explicit those are, the federal government is usually stronger and thus can usually make sure that its laws are the ones that prevail.

An example of this comes from the issue of the drinking age in the United States. At one time, each US state determined its own drinking age. Even as late as the 1980s, most states had legal drinking ages that were less than 21.

But in 1984, to combat drunk driving, Congress and President Ronald Reagan tried to pressure states into raising their drinking ages to 21. They did this by giving the states an offer they couldn't refuse: Either raise their legal drinking age to 21, or risk losing a portion of their federal highway funding.

That's how the federal government persuaded every state in the Union to raise its drinking age. Technically speaking, it was voluntary. But money talks, and on this issue, the federal government was clearly ready to enforce its will.

## Preserving Local Autonomy

Given the potential for federal governments to encroach on the jurisdiction of state and local authorities, it's worth asking how states and provinces preserve their autonomy. For starters, it's usually written into a country's constitution. The US has the Tenth Amendment, which says that all powers not explicitly granted to the federal government are reserved by the states. However, even a constitution is subject to workarounds and creative interpretation, as demonstrated by how the US government encouraged states to adopt the national drinking age.

That's why federations will often have a second legislative body, like the US Senate, that represents individual states as states. Bicameralism involves the presence of two legislative houses rather than just one, and it is very common in federations, especially where one of the houses is set up in such a way

that it overrepresents small states. It's often combined with a whole array of institutions that amplify the voice of states, with an example being the US Electoral College.

## Motivations for Federalism

The adoption of federalism can be the result of many motivations, including protection: Oftentimes, states are simply stronger together than apart. For instance, in the early United States, the primary benefit of creating a union was security from others and from within. There are also economic benefits to association. Trade is easier when there are a common set of standards, free travel, and a referee.

The problem with coming together to achieve economic efficiency is that the associated entities still want to preserve their autonomy, and they don't like giving others a say over their own affairs. It's also hard to guarantee that a powerful federal entity, once created, won't then use its power to break the promises agreed to at the establishment of the federation.

Federalism can also appeal to culturally diverse countries, where ethnic minorities want to continue to enjoy the benefits of federation but fear being oppressed by the majority. Ethiopia and Nigeria, for instance, are incredibly diverse. Both have had episodes of ethnic unrest and civil war. But because the ethnic minorities are often concentrated in regions that have a lot of influence over their own affairs, the federal government can entice them to stay together, promising them the benefits of continued union without too much federal interference.

Switzerland is another country with a diverse population that uses federalism. Switzerland has four major language groups: French, German, Italian, and Romansh. Federalism divides the country in such a way that in 22 of its 26 cantons, there is typically one dominant language to contend with. This is partly a matter of convenience. Additionally, Switzerland's language groups are also cultural groups, and there are social and economic conditions that are particular to each region. In this context, local decision-making means that regions decide for themselves what kinds of policies they want, and fewer people find themselves subject to a one-size-fits-all policy handed down by the central government.

# Canadian Federalism

Canadian federalism provides a useful case study. In many ways, Canada is more decentralized than the United States. Canada's various provinces (and particularly Quebec) maintain a significant degree of autonomy. However, on paper, Canada's constitution makes it look like the country would be more centralized.

The US Constitution grants only very limited powers to the federal government, and its Tenth Amendment declares that all other powers are reserved for the states. The Canadian constitution does the opposite: It spells out the rights that the provinces have and then suggests that everything else is the prerogative of the federal government. However, the Supreme Court of Canada has consistently ruled in favor of the provinces, giving them expanded powers and imposing limits on what the central government can do. US judicial norms have evolved in the opposite direction.

An added decentralizing force in Canadian politics is the province of Quebec, which is distinct compared to the other Canadian provinces. Canada is bilingual: About 80% of all Canadians speak English as their primary language, whereas about 20% speak French. But Canada's French speakers are concentrated in Quebec. The numbers there are essentially reversed: 80% of Quebec's population speaks French, while English speakers are in the minority.

Because Canada's French speakers largely view themselves as culturally distinct, they add a nationalist dimension to Canada's provincial politics. At various points in Canadian history, the Québécois have demanded independence—and not always peacefully. In the 1960s and 1970s, there was even a homegrown terrorist organization dedicated to the cause of Quebec independence.

In 1995, the issue was put to a vote in a referendum for the people of Quebec. The independence campaign lost—but only by a razor-thin margin. The notion that Quebec might someday declare independence from Canada is far from theoretical, but this is where Canadian federalism comes in.

Canadian federalism can be seen as an attempt to keep Quebec in the union. So long as Canadian federalism is real, in law and in practice, the people of Quebec are more likely to give ground on the issue of sovereignty. For many Quebecers, provincial autonomy lowers the cost of staying Canadian, while the benefits of staying Canadian remain the same. Quebec has been the engine for the continuation of federalism throughout Canada, in both law and practice.

In fact, Quebec has been consistent about turning down federal funding when it's tied to conditions that might result in a lessening of regional autonomy. Unlike the US states, which adopted the federal drinking age because they wanted federal highway funds, Quebec has turned down very similar grants—especially when they touch on matters of language or education.

Federalism might have the capacity to keep a country together, but one concern is that it also has the potential to exacerbate separatist tendencies. When individual regions—especially culturally distinct ones like Quebec—have local autonomy, that autonomy magnifies the voice of those who advocate for even greater degrees of separatism. Regional leaders tend to cater to—or exploit—local resentments. And regional political parties representing region-specific interests sometimes come to dominate regional legislatures.

Additionally, separatists can achieve election to federal office, where they find a national platform on which to air local grievances. Bloc Québécois, a separatist political party, has had seats in the Canadian House of Commons for decades. Ironically, they use their positions in Canadian government to advocate for Quebec's secession.

## READING

Mahler, Gregory S. *Comparative Politics: An Institutional and Cross-National Approach*. 3rd ed. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2000.

Mamdani, Mahmood, “The Trouble with Ethiopia’s Ethnic Federalism.” *The New York Times*, January 3, 2019. <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/01/03/opinion/ethiopia-abiy-ahmed-reforms-ethnic-conflict-ethnic-federalism.html>.

Rector, Chad. *Federations: The Political Dynamics of Cooperation*. Cornell University Press, 2009.

Riker, William H. *The Development of American Federalism*. Boston: Kluwer Academic, 1987.

Weingast, Barry R. "Political Stability and Civil War: Institutions, Commitment, and American Democracy." In *Analytic Narratives*. Edited by Robert Bates, Avner Greif, Margaret Levi, Jean-Laurent Rosenthal, and Barry R. Weingast. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998.

## QUESTIONS

- 1 Why would independent political units come together to form a federation?
- 2 How can federalism accommodate cultural, linguistic, and regional differences?
- 3 In what ways can federalism encourage separatism?



13

# Are Courts and Constitutions Democratic?

---

Constitutions embody the highest laws in the land. These are laws that other, lesser laws—like statutes and regulations—must comply with. An important duty is deciding whether a government’s law is consistent with the constitution. Another is resolving disputes between the institutions of government itself. In most countries, these jobs fall to the courts, making courts among the most powerful actors in a working democracy. But the power of courts and constitutions is not without controversy.

# The Role of Constitutions

Constitutions constitute a country's government: They lay out how government is structured, the procedures it has to follow, and the laws by which all other laws are made. Constitutions are subject to competing interpretations, though. Without interpretation and enforcement, constitutions are powerless. Governments can violate constitutional law—they're just not supposed to. This means that the fact that a country has a constitution doesn't mean the country's government is necessarily subject to it.

Some constitutions look realistic and enforceable, with appropriate checks and balances and carefully codified procedures. But in practice, some parts of constitutions don't match up with reality. For instance, the American Constitution guaranteed Black men the right to vote in 1870, and yet the struggle to see that law enforced continued for another century. Voting rights remain an issue to this day.

No matter how well-intentioned or carefully crafted, constitutions (like any laws) are still just words on paper. Our real defenses against tyranny will always remain amorphous and dependent on fuzzier factors like political culture, social norms, and the rule of law.

# Amending Constitutions

One of the major ways that constitutions differ around the world is in how hard or how easy it is to amend them. On the one hand, many democratic constitutions are fairly rigid, which makes sense: If a constitution embodies higher law, changing or adding to it should require more widespread agreement—a higher threshold—than changes to ordinary laws require.

The rigidity of a constitution is also envisioned as a way of protecting minority rights—rights that would otherwise be at the mercy of a fickle and potentially oppressive majority. A majority might have enough power, from time to time, to determine the makeup of a country's government. But if the constitution puts limits on what government itself can do, then mere control of the government isn't enough for a majority to have its way. A more flexible

constitution wouldn't provide the same level of protection; in theory, the majority would have an easier time amending such a constitution to give the majority more power.

Some countries take the notion of constitutional rigidity to an extreme. In a few Caribbean countries, constitutional amendments require a three-fourths parliamentary majority. The United States only requires a two-thirds majority, but that majority has to come in both houses of Congress, and then three-fourths of the states have to agree to it as well.

Other countries have differently difficult ways of assuring widespread agreement for constitutional change. Japan and South Korea require supermajorities in their parliaments, and they then put the issue to a national referendum. Australia and Switzerland also have national referenda, and constitutional amendments there have to win not just a nationwide majority, but also a majority in a majority of the country's states or cantons.

Given the difficulty of meeting such thresholds, it's not surprising that constitutional change in these countries is slow. The Japanese constitution has never been amended. And since the initial passage of the Bill of Rights in 1791, the US Constitution has only been amended 17 times.

But there are countries where the thresholds for change are lower. In fact, some countries don't have written constitutions at all. In the United Kingdom, New Zealand, and Israel, the only real constraints on what government can do—and hence, on what the majority can decide—are political norms and traditions about how things are done.

Such flexibility is positive from the standpoint of government efficiency: If the majority wants to do something, it generally can. But constitutional flexibility takes away an important check against the power of the majority.

## Courts

The job of interpreting constitutions is as important as what they say. And in most democracies, that job falls to the courts. Additionally, countries need ways to resolve disputes between the institutions of government, and they need to make judgments about the compatibility of individual statutes with the constitution itself. In the United States, this job falls to the Supreme

Court. The US Supreme Court is also the country's final appellate court. Likewise, the high courts of Canada, Australia, and Japan also fill the role of constitutional court and final appellate court at the same time.

Other setups exist, too. France, Germany, Italy, and Spain all have separate constitutional courts. The argument behind having a separate constitutional court is that it provides for a tidy division of labor and therefore greater clarity as to which institutions perform what functions.

The constitutionality of a law is a matter of interpretation. And if a judge were so inclined, they could become creative in their interpretations to such an extent that they're not so much judging the constitutionality of a law as much as deciding whether or not they agree with it. This is judicial activism.

Judicial activism involves a court stepping beyond the strict function of applying the law and instead letting politics creep into what's supposed to be a more restricted process. When appellate and constitutional functions are combined, virtually any case—no matter how mundane—can become the source of constitutional reinterpretation and revision, especially if activist judges want it that way. Some people think that having a separate constitutional court limits the degree to which this happens. But this is a much-debated question in political science.

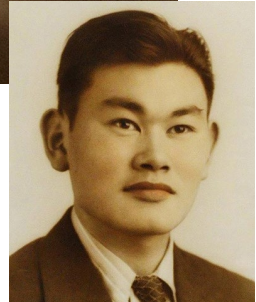
## Judicial Review

Whatever the division of labor among a country's courts might be, the most important function of a constitutional court—and the most controversial—is its ability to interpret the constitution. The power to determine the constitutionality of government action is called the power of constitutional review or judicial review. Courts in virtually every democracy have it to one degree or another. This is the role that courts play in resolving disputes, clarifying ambiguity, and solving problems that come up when applying abstract principles (like laws) to real-world situations.

Constitutional courts resolve disputes between the institutions of government, such as when investigators wanted to listen to tapes of President Richard Nixon's conversations, and Nixon claimed that he didn't have to turn them over. (Nixon lost.) Constitutional courts also resolve disputes between levels of government,



**President Richard Nixon**



**Fred Korematsu**

such as when states and counties in the US South wanted to maintain segregated schools, and the federal government argued that they couldn't.

And constitutional courts also answer questions about the compatibility of government actions with the rights of ordinary citizens, such as when a Japanese American man named Fred Korematsu challenged his internment during World War II. (The Supreme Court held that Korematsu's imprisonment was constitutional.)

The resolution of that last case has been roundly criticized in the years since. It is a reminder that even constitutional review has its limits. It's there to protect minority rights in the face of abuse by a powerful majority, but no protection is 100% guaranteed, especially in times of war.

## **Is Judicial Review Democratic?**

A constitutional court's power to weigh in on weighty matters makes them lightning rods for controversy. And the problem is exacerbated by the fact that judicial review strikes some people as undemocratic. Judges are usually appointed, not elected, and in many countries, they serve for very long terms. For instance, in the US, federal judges serve for life.

However, American federal judges are appointed by the president and confirmed by the Senate. And these bodies are elected. Therefore, the process of judicial appointments can be seen as an indirect election. (In parliamentary democracies, the prime minister is elected in almost the same way.)

Moreover, it's the independence of judges that is often regarded as the judiciary branch's chief asset. Once appointed, federal judges aren't beholden to anyone—not to big industry, not to fickle electorates, not to corrupt congressmen, and not even to the president who appointed them.

Indeed, if judges were subjected to the same electoral pressures as the other branches of government, there's a good chance that those judges would agree with the other branches of government. And if those branches, or the majority they serve, were to ever pursue an insidious interest, there would be no branch of government left to stop them. A court can't check the other branches of government if it's not truly independent of them.

The US founders wanted institutions that would prevent tyranny at the hands of the federal government. But they also wanted institutions that would prevent tyranny of the majority—a majority that, in a democracy, would have the government itself as its most powerful weapon.

## READING

Colley, Linda. *The Gun, the Ship and the Pen: Warfare, Constitutions, and the Making of the Modern World*. Liveright Press, 2021.

Llewellyn, Karl N. *The Bramble Bush: The Classic Lectures on the Law and Law School*. Oxford University Press, 2008.

Shively, W. Phillips. *Power & Choice: An Introduction to Political Science*. 6th ed. McGraw-Hill College, 1999. Especially relevant to lecture 13 is the chapter “Law and the Courts.”

## QUESTIONS

- 1 How does a rigid constitution protect minority rights?
- 2 Is judicial review democratic?



14

# The Controversial Politics of Central Banks

---

The US Federal Reserve, the European Central Bank, and the Bank of Japan are examples of central banks. Central banks often oversee the printing of a country's currency. In most countries, they're also charged with determining how much money is in circulation, which sets the underlying conditions for a country to maintain economic growth and stable prices. The economic decisions that central banks make have such deep repercussions that they are important—and sometimes controversial—political institutions.

# The Job of Central Banks

In short, central banks are supposed to promote stable economic growth while at the same time keeping inflation under control. Achieving these goals requires a delicate balancing act on the part of the central bank. Most central banks have three tools in their arsenal for accomplishing these aims.

One tool is setting the reserve requirement for all other banks in the country. The reserve requirement is essentially the amount of money that a bank is required to always keep on hand. If the central bank didn't set a reserve requirement, banks could be tempted to loan out as much money as possible, and this could put them in danger of not having enough money to give customers requesting withdrawals.

When the central bank lowers the reserve requirement, that means that banks are no longer required to keep so much money in reserve. Instead, that money becomes available for people to borrow, leading to economic growth.

Another important tool of central banks is participating in open market operations—that is, buying bonds. When the central bank buys a bond, the institutions that sold those bonds now have cash money instead, and they can use that new money to buy things. That, too, is going to stimulate economic growth.

A third tool central banks have is the power to set interest rates. Banks themselves often have to borrow money. Banks borrow that money either from other banks or from the central bank, and the central bank determines the interest rates that banks use to borrow money.

As an example of this in action, if the Federal Reserve lowers its interest rate, that means that commercial banks can borrow money more cheaply. That in turn might translate to lower mortgage interest rates. People might also take advantage of lower interest rates to borrow to expand factories, go to college, and so on.

## Inflation

While central banks' three tools can increase employment and promote economic growth, they also tend to increase inflation. For instance, when people buy more houses, construction materials, supplies, and houses

themselves become scarcer. And that drives up the price of housing. When prices are higher, a dollar, pound, or euro isn't going to buy as much as it used to.

Because of inflation, just as central banks must stand ready to increase the money supply to stimulate economic growth, they also have to be ready to do the opposite. Their inflation-taming options include raising the reserve rate, selling bonds, and raising interest rates.

## Independence and Politicians

In trying to walk the line between stimulating the economy and overheating it, central bankers often find themselves at odds with politicians. Politicians generally want to do anything they can to stimulate economic growth. For a politician—especially in a democracy—the economy's health can be the difference between winning the next election or getting thrown out of office.

Politicians don't want inflation, either—at least not a lot of it. Generally speaking, though, inflation is a longer-term effect of economic growth. Politicians often have a shorter time horizon than central bankers: The central banker must think about the long-term health of the economy; the politician might need to see economic growth before the next election.

This brings up the importance of central bank independence. In an effort to see strong growth and high employment before the next election, a politician might risk putting the economy into overdrive and destroying it for years to come. That's why countries, especially democratic ones, often take control of the money supply out of the hands of politicians and put it into the hands of unelected central bankers instead.

The idea behind central bankers being independent and unelected is that it makes them immune from political meddling. This enables them to make decisions that are economically wise in the long term, even if they are politically unwise in the short term.

In places where political power is unchecked, or where central banks are packed with hacks and cronies of those in charge, politics makes its way into central bank decision-making—often to the long-term detriment of the

economy. This is particularly common in dictatorships. Venezuela under Hugo Chávez and Zimbabwe under Robert Mugabe experienced high inflation as a result of their leaders' interference with their central banks.

## Vulnerabilities and Conflicts

Central bank independence is important but precarious. It's usually not written into a country's constitution. In most countries, it's just an ordinary statute—or even simply a tradition—that the bank's independence is respected.

Recent years have seen a rise of populist strongmen around the world—leaders who are often only too happy to challenge established norms, especially if they can frame it as a way of defending the little guy from big, bad bureaucrats and bankers. If this trend continues, there could be further assaults on central bank independence.

Even international conflicts can arise. In the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis, the European Central Bank found itself at the center of an international dispute, in this case between Germany and Greece. Germany and Greece share a currency: the euro. The European Central Bank is the central bank for the group of countries that use the euro as their currency (also known as the eurozone).

In the early 2010s, much of the world—especially Europe and North America—was recovering from the financial crisis. Germany recovered much more quickly than Greece did. In fact, while Germany had largely made a recovery by 2012, Greece was still deeply in debt.

Greece wanted its central bank to increase the money supply and stimulate economic growth. However, Greece's central bank is also Germany's central bank, and the Germans were afraid of inflation. The European Central Bank was stuck between countries with conflicting interests.

In the end, there wasn't much the European Central Bank could do. Its interest rates were generally already as low as they could go. And many of the countries in the eurozone that were doing well didn't want to take more drastic measures. This forced Greece to undertake some very unpopular domestic reforms.

## READING

- Calomiris, Charles W., and Stephen H. Haber. *Fragile By Design: The Political Origins of Banking Crises & Scarce Credit*. Princeton University Press, 2014.
- Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis. “In Plain English: Making Sense of the Federal Reserve.” <https://www.stlouisfed.org/in-plain-english>.
- Granville, Kevin, “A President at War with His Fed Chief.” *The New York Times*, June 13, 2017. <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/06/13/business/economy/a-president-at-war-with-his-fed-chief-5-decades-before-trump.html>.
- “Interference Day.” *The Economist*, April 13, 2019.
- Koech, Janet. “Hyperinflation in Zimbabwe.” *Globalization and Monetary Policy 2011 Annual Report*. Federal Reserve Bank of Dallas. <https://www.dallasfed.org/-/media/documents/institute/annual/2011/annual11b.pdf>.
- Todd, Tim. *The Balance of Power: The Political Fight for an Independent Central Bank, 1790–Present*. Federal Reserve Bank of Kansas City, 2012.
- Wheelan, Charles. “The Federal Reserve.” In *Naked Economics: Undressing the Dismal Science*. New York: W. W. Norton, 2002.

## QUESTIONS

- 1 What tools do central banks have at their disposal to control the money supply?
- 2 Why are political leaders and central bankers sometimes in conflict when it comes to economic growth and inflation?



15

# Who Backs Authoritarians?

---

Authoritarian regimes, or dictatorships, are mysterious to many. Contrary to conventional wisdom, not all authoritarian regimes are ruled by a dictator with total control over how decisions are made. In many cases, even a dictator's ability to dictate is checked—or guided—by a powerful party bureaucracy, a religious establishment, the military, or other entrenched political institutions. In this sense, dictatorship turns out to be every bit as complex, interesting, and diverse as democracy.

# Defining Dictatorship

Dictators have job security without accountability. Authoritarian regimes are often seen as deriving their power to rule through force or coercion. In fact, they're called authoritarian regimes because the leadership's authority (its right to make decisions and enforce commands) is said to be based not on public approval but simply on the office or position that it holds.

And they're called dictatorships because, in the traditional view, a powerful individual or a small group of decision-makers can simply dictate public policy without consultation. They do so without fear of being removed from office just because those decisions don't meet with public approval. However, even dictators generally rely on some amount of public support, and they generally don't rule alone but with the cooperation of other powerful institutions in society.

Dictators do not have electoral competition. Some authoritarian regimes do hold elections, but these elections are so fraudulent or unfair that any real competition is effectively silenced, and the results are a foregone conclusion.

Authoritarian regimes curtail civil liberties such as freedom of the press and assembly as well as the right to a fair trial. The prisons of authoritarian regimes are filled with supposed terrorists and criminals. These are often just journalists or poets who found themselves on the wrong side of those in power.

Authoritarian leaders also tend to fill their prisons with marginalized racial and religious groups, particularly if they're considered threats to the regime or if they make convenient scapegoats for the country's troubles. Importantly, many authoritarian regimes quash dissent, restrict civil liberties, and even oppress ethnic minorities with widespread public approval. This is part of what makes the topic of dictatorships so complex.

# Types of Authoritarian Regimes

Analysts distinguish between at least two broad types of authoritarian regime: personalistic and bureaucratic. In personalistic authoritarianism, there's typically one undisputed leader of the regime. The leader can come to power through many ways, including inheriting the position, taking it by force, or even winning an election. Power within these regimes is often determined by how close a person is to that leader. Examples of personalistic authoritarian regimes include Vladimir Putin's Russia, Kim Jong-Un's North Korea, Mao's China, and Hitler's Germany.

## Fidel Castro

In some ways, the most iconic personalistic authoritarian was Fidel Castro of Cuba. The fact that Castro's image is so recognizable illustrates that he wasn't just the figurehead leader of a small island nation but a global icon—universally recognized (and loved or hated) around the world.



Bureaucratic authoritarianism, rather than a single leader, features an institution in charge. This might be an institution with a clear ideological disposition like the Communist Party or a religious establishment. It might also be or a secular or pragmatic institution like the military. In regimes like this, the path to power is followed by rising through the ranks of that institution. Modern-day examples of bureaucratic authoritarianism include China, a one-party state ruled by the Chinese Communist Party; Iran, a theocracy where the clerical establishment holds authority; and Egypt, a military dictatorship. In some cases, bureaucratic authoritarian governments evolve out of personalistic regimes, especially after the top figure retires or dies.

A third type of authoritarian regime sometimes overlaps with the other two, and it often escapes notice because it seems to defy many preexisting assumptions about dictatorship and democracy. This is a form of government called electoral authoritarianism.

Electoral authoritarianism features a regime that follows democratic procedures—like holding free and fair elections—but then uses its power to restrict civil liberties, quash dissent, or persecute ethnic minorities. Electoral authoritarianism is sometimes called illiberal democracy, and it blurs the line between democracy and dictatorship.

## Electoral Authoritarianism in Turkey

One of the best examples of electoral authoritarianism comes from Turkey. Turkey's government has elements of authoritarianism and democracy at the same time. For much of the 20th century, Turkey was secular and democratic. Islam was the dominant religion in the country, but its government and constitution were secular. It had laws explicitly designed to limit the influence of Islam on public life. For example, women were forbidden from wearing headscarves in public buildings and universities.

Turkey's military became the guarantor of the country's secular, democratic system. The military even stepped in on a number of occasions to oust civilian political leaders for things that the military considered attacks on the secular foundations of the Turkish state.

The conflict between the religious and the secular in Turkey also had an economic dimension. The religious voters were disproportionately poor, and they tended to live in Turkey's rural regions. The secularists, on the other hand, were typically more educated, more Western-oriented, and more urban.

This was the political context for the rise of Turkey's leader, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, in the early 2000s. Together with his political party, the Justice and Development Party (or AKP), Erdoğan exploited divisions in Turkish society and started to do very well at the ballot box. He became prime minister in 2003.

He then delivered a menu of policies that, among other things, helped Turkey's poor. He also slowly introduced policies that seemed to threaten Turkey's secular order. For example, he reversed a headscarf ban, and he imposed restrictions on the sale of pork and alcohol. Erdoğan also appointed

judges and generals he knew he could rely on. And he imposed severe restrictions on the press, including the imprisonment of journalists on trumped-up charges of inciting terrorism.

This paved the way for more foundational moves against Turkish democracy. In 2007, Erdoğan sponsored a referendum that introduced sweeping changes to Turkey's constitution. These changes all solidified his hold on power. All the while, Erdoğan's base celebrated these changes, but they were a source of concern for Turkey's urban, secular elite. They were also of concern for Turkey's military, which saw itself as the defender of the country's secular way of life.

This set the stage for a 2016 coup attempt, where the military tried to oust Erdoğan. The coup failed, and Erdoğan then used it to justify a huge purge. He arrested tens of thousands of people, including judges, journalists, and generals—anyone he thought posed a threat to his leadership. A year later, with his opponents out of the way, Erdoğan pushed through another referendum. This was arguably the last nail in the coffin of Turkish democracy.

It's important to remember that Erdoğan made almost all of these changes with significant public support. His constitutional reforms—even the first one, which passed when he had only just started his attacks on the media—passed overwhelmingly. Moreover, one of the main reasons the 2016 coup failed was because so many members of the public opposed it and backed Erdoğan. As word of the coup spread, huge crowds of civilians descended onto streets, bridges, and public squares. They effectively stopped military units from taking over.

On one hand, people might view the failed coup as a victory for Turkish democracy. It featured ordinary citizens crowding the streets to prevent the military from taking over. But they were defending a regime that had done much to dismantle democracy. That shows the ambiguities of electoral authoritarianism.

## READING

“A Pandemic of Power Grabs: Autocrats See Opportunity in Disaster.” *The Economist*, April 23, 2020.

Aydıntaşbaş, Asli. “Erdogan the Nationalist vs. Erdogan the Islamist.” *The Caravan*, December 13, 2018. <https://www.hoover.org/research/erdogan-nationalist-vs-erdogan-islamist>.

Frye, Timothy. “Russia’s Weak Strongman.” *Foreign Affairs*, May/June 2021.

Kagan, Robert. “Springtime for Strongmen.” *Foreign Policy*, Winter 2019.

Koesel, Karrie, Valerie Bunce, and Jessica Weiss. *Citizens and the State in Authoritarian Regimes: Comparing China and Russia*. Oxford University Press, 2020.

Staten, Clifford L. *The History of Cuba*. St. Martin’s Griffin, 2005.

## QUESTIONS

- 1 How do personalistic and bureaucratic authoritarianism differ?
- 2 What is electoral authoritarianism, and why does it present such problems for distinguishing dictatorship from democracy?



16

# The Dictator's Playbook

---

This lecture looks at how dictators gain and maintain power, especially when they do so in the context of otherwise functioning democracies. Such dictators are often successful because they're able to persuade society that democracy itself lies at the root of their problems.

# How Dictators Come to Power

Dictators typically have power without accountability. They can gain that power through several paths. Traditionally, the path was inheritance. For millennia, kings, queens, emperors, and pharaohs gained their posts because they descended from people who had the job before them. They usually constructed a mythology to try to show that their right to rule was something more than that—that their family's authority was sanctioned by God, for example. Traditional monarchies are mostly gone, but they still exist in a few places, such as Saudi Arabia.

Authority can be inherited even if the line it follows isn't strictly familial. For example, Hugo Chávez was the leader of Venezuela from 1999 until 2013. By late 2012, he was very ill and didn't have long to live. In December 2012, Chávez gathered key staff members in the presidential palace and named Nicolás Maduro as his successor.

Some dictators are installed in office not by their predecessors but by a foreign power. Installing a puppet regime is a convenient way for a powerful country to maintain influence over its neighbors. This method of succession was particularly evident during the Cold War, when the United States and the Soviet Union both sponsored coups and propped up authoritarians in their respective spheres of influence.

Neither was very loyal to its own ideology when it did so. The Soviet Union, for all its talk about empowering workers and standing up for the poor, propped up multiple kleptocracies. And the United States, for all its rhetoric about spreading democracy, installed some very brutal dictatorships.



**Hugo Chavez**

Dictators can also take power by force. Julius Caesar, Oliver Cromwell, and Napoleon all used this method. Dictatorships often result from the violent seizure of power, even when the stated reason for the power grab is something else. Dictators might seize power in the name of protecting the nation from a threat or rooting out corruption, or even by falsely claiming that they're there to protect democracy.

Power grabs like this don't occur in a vacuum. Revolutionaries need foot soldiers, conspirators need allies, and even a palace coup needs some amount of public support.

Meanwhile, if aspiring dictators can harness sufficient public or institutional support, they can take power from below. Fidel Castro's Cuban Revolution fits this mold. Other examples include Iran's theocratic revolution in 1979, the Russian Revolution against the tsar in 1917, and the French Revolution. These were popular social movements that resulted in dictatorships, and they grew out of widespread discontent with the existing regime.

## Dictators Once in Power

New dictators, once they take over, often reach out to a foreign power for sponsorship. That's what Castro did, and he ended up in the Soviet orbit. Dictators also try to connect themselves with symbols that they hope will legitimize their rule. For instance, Adolf Hitler was fond of an image that portrayed him in a line of German leaders such as Otto von Bismarck and Frederick the Great.

Some of the historical connections are made up out of thin air. For instance, North Korea's first dictator, Kim Il-Sung, concocted a legend that he was born on Mount Paektu, a mountain that plays a role in Korean mythology.

## Replacing Democracy

When new dictators acquire followers and take power, they're not always overthrowing a reviled dictatorship. Sometimes they overthrow freely elected democracies to restore some other public good that people want, such as stability, prosperity, or secularism.

Egypt serves as an example. From 1981 to 2011, Egypt was ruled by Hosni Mubarak, a military dictator who had a lot of support among Western governments because he was seen as a stabilizing force in the region. He also gained favor with Western governments as a secularist and an ally in the war on terror. But in 2011, Mubarak was ousted in the Arab Spring, a wave of pro-democracy movements that swept through the Middle East.

Presidential elections in 2012 were set up to determine Mubarak's successor. These were essentially going to be the first real elections in Egypt. Because Egypt is one of the largest countries in the Middle East, many people hoped this would set the tone for democratic reform in the rest of the region.

However, the person who won the election, Mohamed Morsi, was a member of the Muslim Brotherhood, an organization that had long been illegal in Egypt. In fact, the Egyptian government had designated it a terrorist organization. It is associated with a number of other Islamist political parties in the Middle East, such as Hamas.

For many people, democracy is supposed to come along with other things: liberal rights, religious toleration, certain guarantees in terms of the way that women and religious minorities are going to be treated, freedom of the press, and respect for the rule of law. To put it mildly, the Muslim Brotherhood wasn't likely to prioritize those areas. Nobody was really sure if Morsi's election should be viewed as a victory for democracy or a threat to it.

Moreover, when Morsi's elected government was ousted in a military coup a year later, people didn't know what to make of that either. A freely elected, democratic government—the first one in 5,000 years of Egyptian history—was overthrown by a military cabal. In some ways, the very definition of democracy had been turned on its head. The Egyptian military had stepped in to overthrow an elected leader who was seen as a threat to liberal rights. The military was essentially saving democracy and saving the country from democracy at the same time. At the time of this course's production, the Egyptian military still essentially controls the country.

# Winning Elections

This tension between democracy as a matter of elections and democracy as a matter of rights lies at the heart of one of most common ways dictators come to power: They win elections. This may not fit the classic image of a dictator seizing power by force or being installed by his parents, the military, or a foreign power. But not every population wants democracy. Some countries and some groups of people don't want the messiness, uncertainty, factionalism, or gridlock. Even if they do want democracy, they may see it as just one good thing that has to be balanced with others, like stability, prosperity, or equality.

When the Nazis came to power in Germany in the 1930s, they did so through free and fair elections. And when Adolf Hitler became chancellor, he did so as the leader of a political party: the Nazi Party, which was by far the biggest party in Germany's parliament.

The Nazis campaigned and won on a platform that included many promises that sound familiar, even today: economic growth, infrastructure spending, support for local industry, and even environmental protection. The problem was that voting for these things meant turning a blind eye to the more notorious elements of Nazi policy: its radical nationalism, militarism, anti-foreigner and anti-Semitic sentiments, and so on.

Another element of the Nazi Party's appeal was its opposition to democracy itself. The Weimar Republic—the democratic system of government that Germany adopted after World War I—was beset with deep structural and institutional problems. That made democracy a convenient punching bag for the Nazis and various other radical movements in the 1920s and early 1930s.

If Hitler came to power through elections, how did German democracy die? A few months after Hitler became prime minister, the German parliamentary building, the Reichstag, mysteriously burned down. To this day, there is debate about who was responsible. (Many people think the Nazis themselves set the fire to justify what they then did.)

However it happened, the Nazis blamed the Reichstag fire on agitators, Communists, and terrorists. They used that claim to justify imposing a state of emergency, imprisoning their opponents and outlawing the free press. In that environment of fear and panic, they called for new elections—and that's what solidified their hold on power.

## READING

- Cambanis, Thanassis. "Egypt's Sisi Is Getting Pretty Good ... at Being a Dictator." *Foreign Policy*, May 22, 2015. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2015/05/22/egypts-sisi-is-getting-pretty-good-at-being-a-dictator/>.
- Diamond, Larry. "Thinking about Hybrid Regimes." *Journal of Democracy* 13, no. 2 (2002).
- Gott, Richard. *Cuba: A New History*. Yale University Press, 2005.
- Hollander, Ethan J. *Hegemony and the Holocaust: State Power and Jewish Survival in Occupied Europe*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2017.
- Khorshid, Sara. "US Promoting Dictatorship, Not Democracy, in Egypt." *Foreign Policy*, February 14, 2019. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/02/14/western-leaders-are-promoting-dictatorship-not-democracy-in-egypt-sisi-amendments-trump-macron/>.
- Snyder, Jack, and Karen Ballentine. "Nationalism and the Marketplace of Ideas." *International Security* 21, no. 2 (Fall 1996).
- Snyder, Timothy. *On Tyranny: Twenty Lessons from the Twentieth Century*. New York: Tim Duggan Books, 2017.
- . "The Reichstag Warning." *The New York Review*, February 26, 2017.

## QUESTIONS

- 1 What are the various ways that dictators gain power?
- 2 How did the Nazi Party appeal to German citizens in the early 1930s?



17

# When States Fail, What Comes Next?

---

If a state is an institution that maintains a monopoly on the use of force, a failed state is one that doesn't. In failed states, the government's ability to collect taxes, maintain order, and provide public goods is severely limited. Its institutions may be too weak to provide these things with any regularity, or its leaders might be too corrupt to care. As a result, failed states are chronically challenged by competitors, be they gangs, militias, warlords, or criminal syndicates. These non-state actors operate within the boundaries of the state, but they're generally strong enough to escape or challenge the state's authority.

## A Vicious Cycle

A discouraging element of state weakness is that the problems failed states face build on each other, creating a vicious cycle. If a state is too weak to collect taxes, it can't maintain the infrastructure necessary for economic growth. This leads to unemployment and poverty, which further undermines the state's ability to collect resources.

If a state can't collect enough resources, its security services will be weak, and its police will be underpaid. This makes them more likely to take bribes, and it paves the way for organized crime, militias, and other rivals to move in. All of this further erodes the state's legitimacy, and with it, the state's ability to maintain the rule of law. In other words, the weakness of failed states is self-perpetuating. Failed states lack the strength necessary to break the cycle of failure. Additionally, in failed states, the state and its rivals—the police and the criminals—are sometimes hard to distinguish from one another.

### Democracy and Strength

There is often a correlation between democracy and state strength.

That's because in places where ordinary citizens have a say in how their governments govern, their leaders have the incentive to spend their tax dollars wisely. This tends to give democratic governments the legitimacy and the strength they need to rule effectively.

## Concerns about Failed States

Failed and failing states are clearly a concern for those who live there. Many of the poorest countries in the world today are not those with authoritarian governments but those with no government at all.

When there's no state to build roads or enforce contracts, economic progress becomes impossible. When there's no state to resolve disputes, conflict—and sometimes violent conflict—becomes the norm. When regional warlords hold sway, the distribution of food, medicine, and even international aid can be interrupted: Militants steal it and use it to feed themselves or sell it on the black market.

It's a sobering fact that in the world today, famine isn't usually caused by food shortages. Instead, it occurs when the distribution of food becomes difficult or impossible. If failed states are mired in civil war—and they often are—rival groups can use food (or access to food) as a weapon. In other words, they block the distribution of food to try to starve out their enemies. This was the case in Ethiopia in 1984, and more recently, it has been a threat in Somalia, South Sudan, and Yemen.

Failed states also cause international ripple effects, sometimes sparking refugee movements. Deprivation, misery, and war in one corner of the globe lead people to seek refuge somewhere else. Leaving one's home and livelihood is a tragedy for those who are forced to do it, and at the same time, migrations can test a country's ability to handle influxes of new arrivals.

The consequences of state failure also tend to cross borders. Piracy in the Indian Ocean, especially off the coast of Somalia, threatens international shipping and complicates relationships among the countries in the Middle East. Meanwhile, in societies torn apart by civil war, militants often set up camp just across international borders, taking refuge from their adversaries and using neighboring states as bases to regroup and resupply.

Finally, failed states can be breeding grounds for international terrorism. Osama bin Laden and most of the hijackers who carried out the September 11 terrorist attacks were from Saudi Arabia, which, though not democratic, was a functioning state and a US ally. But bin Laden found refuge and a base of operations in Sudan and then in Afghanistan, which were failed states. From there, he planned his biggest attacks.

Failed states are ripe for humanitarian disaster, and this alone is a reason to care about them. But the problems that originate in failed states also have global consequences.

## Why States Fail

States fail for a variety of reasons. But for simplicity's sake, let's think of the causes as stemming from two principal sources: those that come from outside the failed state (the external causes) and those that come from within the failed state itself (the internal ones).

One of the key external causes of state failure is imperialism. Many of the world's weakest states were, until relatively recently, colonies of large European empires. In the 18th and 19th centuries, powerful Western empires like Britain, France, and Belgium colonized much of Africa, Asia, and the Middle East. Oftentimes, the colonizers divided and traded these territories among themselves. They didn't really pay attention to the ethnic distinctions and institutions of the people who already lived there.

Western colonies in Africa and the Middle East were also exploited for their natural resources, including diamonds, rubber, and oil. The colonizers often put more energy into extracting resources—and suppressing the local population—than into building the infrastructure and institutions that were needed for state survival. In the 1950s and 1960s, the European powers pulled out of most of these places. But by then, much of the damage was already done.

Today's failed states are also battlegrounds for bigger, international rivalries. During the Cold War, the United States and the Soviet Union never fought each other directly. But they both propped up puppet regimes around the world, and they turned a blind eye to it when their puppets squandered the local resources.

The superpowers also fought proxy wars against one another. A proxy war is when two small countries or groups fight each other on behalf of—and often with the support of—larger, outside powers. In the 1980s, the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan to support its Communist government, while the United States backed an ad hoc array of anti-Soviet rebels.

The war raged on for more than a decade and continued to simmer even after the Cold War came to an end. Therefore, Afghanistan became a haven for terrorist organizations like al-Qa'ida. More recently, in the 2010s, Yemen and Syria both experienced protracted civil wars, but these countries were really battlegrounds for a proxy war between Saudi Arabia and Iran.

Ethnic and religious differences can also play a role in state failure. When the big European empires carved out colonies, they sometimes exploited local rivalries to divide and conquer. As a result, when they withdrew, the native

populations often had no sense of common identity. In many cases, the people there probably had more loyalty to their clan or their ethnic group than they did to whoever was left in charge.

When politics in the newly independent states developed, personalistic attachments and ethnic attachments were bound to be stronger than loyalty to the new state. In many of these countries, the political parties that develop don't divide along lines such as business versus labor or liberal versus conservative. Instead, the more obvious rivalries were one religious group against another, or one warlord's clan against a rival warlord's clan.

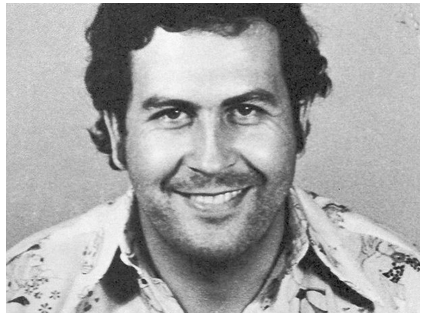
When the state is weak and its rivals are strong, a person might have trouble deciding who they owe their primary allegiance to. For instance, should a taxpayer send money to an inept and corrupt official who may squander the cash, or should they send it to the local militia? The latter might spend some of it on a local project like a school, if only to win loyalty.

When vulnerable groups are ignored by the state, it's not unusual for them to turn to the mob or a gang for protection. This helps explain gang activity in underserved communities.

## Governance in Failed States

Wherever people live, they want benefits like security, roads, and schools. They also need ways to resolve disputes. States are generally good at providing these. But when states fail, the mafia, a gang, a cartel, or even a terrorist organization is often more than willing to step in and fill the void.

In Columbia in the 1980s, Pablo Escobar, a drug lord, had a large amount of public support, especially among the poor. Part of the reason for this was that he used some of his drug money to



Pablo Escobar

help the poor. For instance, he built soccer stadiums and affordable housing, and he provided public goods that the state was either unable or unwilling to provide.

By providing public goods to a needy population, drug lords and gang figures buy loyalty. And this can come in handy whenever the state does try to assert its authority. The same could be said for groups like Hamas in the Palestinian territories or the Provisional Irish Republican Army in Northern Ireland.

In much of the world, these groups are known for their terrorist activities—and rightly so. But they (or their partner organizations) also operate vast charitable networks. This creates loyalty and occasionally a place from which to base their operations. Schools are also ideal places from which to recruit the next generation of soldiers.

Dynamics like this suggest that failed states aren't necessarily places of anarchy. Instead, they're often places where the state doesn't do the governing.

## READING

“Conquering Chaos: Why States Fail and How to Rebuild Them.” *The Economist*, January 7, 2017.

Rapley, John. “The New Middle Ages.” *Foreign Affairs*, May/June 2006.

Rotberg, Robert I. “The New Nature of Nation-State Failure.” In *Essential Readings in Comparative Politics*. Edited by Patrick O’Neil and Ronald Rogowski. 4th ed. W. W. Norton & Company, 2013.

Schwartz, Mattathias. “A Massacre in Jamaica.” *The New Yorker*, December 12, 2011.

## QUESTIONS

- 1 What is a failed state?
- 2 Why are failed states dangerous to their neighbors and to the global community?
- 3 What are the internal and external causes of state failure?



18

# Partition, Peacekeeping, and Human Crisis

---

This lecture focuses on possible solutions for ethnic conflict. Specifically, it focuses on two commonly proposed solutions for ethnic conflict: partition and international peacekeeping. Sadly, neither solution works particularly well. By way of conclusion, the lecture considers the feasibility of using democratic institutions to mitigate ethnic conflict—a process called institutional design.

# Partition

The idea behind partition is simple: If two ethnic groups are living side by side in a state that both want, then split the state in half and give each group its own nation-state. In theory, partition is easy and fair. However, theory and reality diverge in inconvenient ways.

Natural resources present one problem. For instance, Iraq is home to three major ethnic groups with a history of not getting along: Kurds and Sunni and Shia Muslims. Each group has grievances, but partition as a solution would run into the issue of dividing Iraq's oil fields, a significant, valuable natural resource. The oil isn't evenly distributed around the country, and much of it is located along blurry boundaries between the various ethnic groups.

Splitting up populations is even more difficult than dividing natural resources. Here, India is an example. In 1947, India had been a British colony for almost a century. Its land included modern-day India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh. The majority religion in the colony was Hinduism, but British



India was also home to a large Muslim minority. That Muslim minority was concentrated in the north of the country, but they were not entirely confined to that region.

The two religious groups had been living side by side for centuries, long before the British arrived. And for much of their history, they got along well. As a result, their populations were geographically mixed.

By 1947, Britain was trying to extricate itself from a number of its imperial holdings all over the world. The British drew up a partition plan—one that would create a Muslim-majority Pakistan in the north and a Hindu-majority India in the rest.

However, no matter how the British drew the boundary, the former colony would be home to two potentially oppressed minorities rather than just one. The new sovereign state of India would still have a very large Muslim minority living within it, and the newly created Pakistan would have a Hindu minority living there.

Following partition, violence erupted on both sides, resulting in a massive refugee crisis and millions of people displaced. Tensions between India and Pakistan remain high to this day. Much of that has to do with border disputes (that partition did little to resolve). Also factoring in are claims and counterclaims by the displaced populations on both sides.

Tragic stories like this unfolded all over the British Empire in the 20th century. While the details differ, there are similar stories of partition between Protestants and Catholics in Ireland and between Jews and Arabs in Palestine.

## International Peacekeeping

To cure ethnic conflict, in the last few decades, analysts and policymakers have turned to another set of possibilities: international peacekeeping. The theory is that if an ethnic minority is under threat, perhaps a foreign power can intervene, keep the peace, and ultimately protect the ethnic minority from the majority (or the government) that threatens it.

Unfortunately, there are problems with this solution as well. The first has to do with state sovereignty—the notion that, within its boundaries, the state is the supreme, undisputed authority. States are very protective of their sovereignty. As a result, the idea that a state would allow a foreign power—even an ostensibly neutral one—to enter its territory is often a nonstarter.

Additionally, to be an effective peacekeeper, a foreign power has to intervene in precisely the places where tensions are highest and where the dangers are most immediate. One case where this became particularly apparent was in Somalia in 1992. Somalia, at the time, was being torn apart by clan-based factional conflict. The US and a handful of other countries deployed a small force to keep the peace and to make sure that food and humanitarian supplies could get to the people who needed it.

This mission was relatively noncontroversial, at least at the start. US forces had been deployed to Somalia with United Nations approval and as part of a broad international coalition. But despite these good intentions, the story didn't end well. A Somali militia shot down two US helicopters. Another force, sent to rescue the helicopter team, came under fire and became pinned down. Eventually, 18 US service members had been killed, along with several soldiers from other UN forces who had come to the aid of the besieged Americans.

### ***Black Hawk Down***

American journalist Mark Bowden covered the 1992 Somalia mission in his book *Black Hawk Down*, which was later turned into a film of the same name.

In many ways, the incident changed the nature of international peacekeeping forever. It underscored just how dangerous such operations could be. From then on, no matter how noble the mission seemed, finding the political will for dangerous peacekeeping operations would be much more difficult.

## **Institutional Design**

A third possible approach to resolving ethnic conflict is institutional design (or constitutional design). It grows out of the idea that ethnic rivalry is just another form of political rivalry. Institutional design is the notion that democratic political institutions can be designed such that rival ethnic groups try to get their way in the political arena rather than resorting to violence.

One fear with democratic politics, particularly in the context of ethnically divided societies, is that all of the decision-making power will be held by the majority ethnic group. If the ethnic groups in a country have a history of conflict and mistrust, and if one ethnic group is numerically superior to the others, there may be a fear that the majority could use the democratic process to oppress the minority. This is a scenario called tyranny of the majority, and it's a key concern for almost any designer of a democratic institution.

But there are defenses against tyranny of the majority: institutions that aim to guarantee a certain amount of minority representation, even in the context of democratic politics. An example is the US Senate, which awards two senators to every US state, regardless of population. Distributing representation in this way effectively overrepresents smaller states. And if ethnic minorities are concentrated in certain regions of a country—as they often are—institutions like this can be used to give them more representation than their numbers would ordinarily justify.

In fact, there are many institutions that have the potential to amplify or protect minority voices. Elections can be designed in such a way that they encourage the emergence of multiple political parties, with the hope that at least some of those parties will represent the interests of ethnic minorities. Executive power can be organized to encourage the formation of broad governing coalitions, increasing the likelihood that those very ethnic parties will have a seat at the table. Federalism grants autonomy to a country's constituent regions, thereby insulating minorities from majority power.

The problem with these institutions is that they have a tendency to slow down and complicate the decision-making process. Federalism decentralizes political power and can make it difficult for a state to take decisive action. Broad governing coalitions can be unwieldy and unstable. Having a diverse array of small political parties—rather than just a few large ones—complicates coalition building and may bring extremist voices into the mix. Even something as simple as having two legislative houses, rather than just one, means that bills have to clear an additional hurdle before becoming law.

In short, institutions can be designed to enhance minority representation, but these very enhancements increase the likelihood of paralysis and gridlock. Still, designing democratic institutions in such a way that rival groups stage political battles rather than military ones is a worthy effort. And given the problems with partition and peacekeeping, it might be the only alternative. Unfortunately,

constitutional design is subject to the same dilemmas as all democratic politics: The very institutions that prevent the government from oppressing minorities can hinder the government's ability to do anything at all.

## READING

- Colomer, Josep. "Institutional Design." *The SAGE Handbook of Comparative Politics*. Edited by Todd Landman and Neil Robinson. Sage, 2008.
- Grignon, François, and Daniela Kroslak. "The Problem with Peacekeeping." *Current History* 107, no. 708 (April 2008).
- Kuperman, Alan J. "Rethinking the Responsibility to Protect." *Whitehead Journal of Diplomacy and International Relations* 10, no. 1 (Winter/Spring 2009).
- Lijphart, Arend. *Thinking about Democracy: Power Sharing and Majority Rule in Theory and Practice*. London: Routledge.
- Luttwak, Edward N. "Give War a Chance." *Foreign Affairs*, July/August 1999.
- Mandelbaum, Michael. "The Reluctance to Intervene." *Foreign Policy*, Summer 1994.
- Reilly, Ben. *Democracy in Divided Societies: Electoral Engineering for Conflict Management*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001.
- Reynolds, Andrew. *The Architecture of Democracy: Constitutional Design, Conflict Management and Democracy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002.
- Roeder, Philip G., and Donald Rothchild, eds. *Sustainable Peace: Power and Democracy after Civil Wars*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2005.
- Russett, Bruce, and James S. Sutterlin. "The U.N. in a New World Order." *Foreign Affairs*, Spring 1991.

## QUESTIONS

- 1 What are the problems associated with partition as a solution to ethnic conflict?
- 2 Can international peacekeeping ever be politically neutral?
- 3 What limitations does the United Nations face in its efforts to provide peace in situations of ethnic conflict?



19

# What Really Causes Wealth and Poverty?

---

Why are some countries rich and others poor?

This sounds like a simple question, but its many answers come from myriad angles. As varied as the answers to those questions may be, their importance is indisputable. Countless people live on little income and suffer from inadequate food, housing, or health care.

# Measuring Wealth

A question relevant to the topic of global poverty is this: What does it mean when people say a country is poor or developing? The social science that addresses such matters is called development economics. And the people who study it typically start with GDP (or gross domestic product), which is the total monetary value of all goods and services produced in that country over the course of a year.

Bigger countries will have bigger GDPs simply because they're bigger. Therefore, a typical practice is to divide GDP by a country's total population, which gives an average amount of production per person. This is called GDP per capita, and it's an important comparative measure of how much one country's consumption outpaces another's.

However, GDP per capita doesn't tell us anything about the distribution of a country's wealth. Some of the world's poorest countries are home to some of the world's richest people. The rich people there are so rich that they bring up the country's average, even if almost everyone else in the country lives in poverty. This can make a country look wealthier than it really is. Extreme inequality is endemic in the developing world.

There's also a problem with the concept of development itself: Saying that a country is developing leaves the question of what it is developing into. The focus on GDP per capita might shroud alternative development goals. For instance, many socialists would accept a lower overall GDP if it came along with more equality and better social services.

Other people might prefer a society with fewer possessions but more free time. Societies with those features would probably have lower GDP per capita, but if people prefer it, who's to say that it represents a lower level of development?

# Boosting Wealth

When it comes to why some countries are richer than others, many explanations rely on environmental influences. Among other factors, geography and natural resources, climate, coastline, arable land, and mineral deposits can play a role in increasing a country's wealth.

## Diverse Economies

It is critical for countries to have diversified economies. If a country has many industries, a downturn in any one isn't necessarily a disaster: People who lose their jobs in one industry may be able to make do by finding jobs somewhere else. But in countries with too much dependence on just one resource, price fluctuations in that one industry can lead to substantial volatility in the economy.

However, the presence of natural resources isn't a guarantee of economic health. For instance, some industries don't help the overall economy in the same way that others do. Farming and manufacturing require a lot of workers, and when employers pay those workers, it tends to spread the wealth around. Oil drilling and diamond mining, on the other hand, tend to concentrate wealth in the hands of a few—namely, the people who own the land and the equipment. As a result, mining and

drilling don't have the positive ripple effects that other industries have. In fact, they can exacerbate other political problems.

This was the case in Nigeria in the late 1960s. Nigeria has plentiful oil, but the bulk of Nigerian oil comes from just one region near the Niger River delta in the country's south. Nigeria is also home to a sometimes tense religious divide, with a Christian majority in the oil-rich south and a Muslim majority in the north. As a result, oil didn't lead to prosperity but to civil war, famine, and a severe humanitarian crisis.

# Political Institutions and Natural Resources

Political institutions clearly play a role in determining how—and how efficiently—natural resources get used and distributed. Roads and ports, a stable currency, standardized weights and measures, and so on are essential for commerce. Also essential are laws to regulate commerce, courts to interpret the laws, and a government with the ability to enforce them.

Consider the vastly different experiences of Zambia and Botswana. Both are landlocked, both gained independence from Great Britain at about the same time, and both are endowed with substantial mineral resources, particularly copper.

And at the time of independence in the 1960s, Zambia was richer than Botswana. But the Zambian government nationalized the copper industry and misspent the earnings. Botswana, on the other hand, invested in public goods like infrastructure and education. Today, Botswana is one of the wealthiest countries in sub-Saharan Africa, and Zambia is among the poorest.

## Colonialism's Legacy

Some of the institutional preconditions for development today were set in place a long time ago. In their influential book *Why Nations Fail*, economists Daron Acemoglu and James Robinson attribute economic dysfunction in much of the developing world to the legacy of colonialism. As they see it, not all colonies were built the same way.

In some parts of the world—especially in places with temperate climates—the chief aim of the colonizers was to build a place where Europeans could settle. This is where the colonizing powers put a priority on setting up stable legal institutions and infrastructure—features that led to long-term investment and economic development.

Evidence for this is present in many former British colonies, including Australia and Canada. The same is true for what became the United States. There, each of the 13 colonies had its own legislature and courts, not to mention the backing of the British military. Thanks to British intervention and protection, the prerequisites for economic development were already in place by the time the colonies finally achieved independence.

Other European colonies—especially those with rich resources but climates the Europeans found undesirable—weren't so lucky. There, the colonizers set up extractive institutions, where the primary aim wasn't to settle but to extract the natural resources and ferry them back to the home country. This was the case in many British colonies in Africa and India, many of which remain poor to this day.

The same model applies to Spanish colonialism in Latin America. In Chile and Argentina, the Spanish emphasized settlement rather than extraction. Today, those are among the wealthiest countries in the region.

## **Democracy and Economic Growth**

Some have argued that democracy is a key contributing factor to economic growth. Political scientist David Lake and his colleague Matt Baum have a theory for economic development that hinges on the analogy between democratic competition on the one hand and the workings of the free market on the other.

They ask us to think of political competition as a marketplace where leaders compete for our support. In this marketplace, leaders are selling policies that will promote economic growth. Particularly attractive are those with the lowest possible taxes. Citizens pay the leaders who do that best by giving them our support. Meanwhile, politicians who don't promote economic growth aren't likely to get repeat business when they run for reelection.

Things are different in a dictatorship, where the competition is more limited and where it can be hard (or even dangerous) to try to outcompete the dictator. Dictators don't usually face competition, and as a result, the quality of what they offer tends to go down. When political competition is limited, it's the consumers—the citizens—who suffer.

## Development as a Cultural Value

Perhaps the most important cultural determinant of economic development is the value that people place on economic growth in the first place. For example, it's easy to imagine a group of people who value simplicity, equality, and leisure time even at the cost of economic growth.

In a paper titled “The Original Affluent Society,” the anthropologist Marshall Sahlins argues that so-called primitive hunter-gatherer societies are actually quite wealthy. This is a provocative thesis. Hunter-gatherers are usually thought of as primitive and poor. They move from place to place in small bands, subsisting on whatever it is they can find.

But Sahlins reminds us that wealth—that is, the satisfaction of our desires—can be attained in one of two ways. One route is to produce the technical and institutional capabilities to provide enough stuff to meet our every demand. Alternatively, we can simply limit our demand. If we didn't want so many things, societal happiness could be achieved, even if it didn't come along with a higher GDP. According to Sahlins, that's the position that hunter-gatherers find themselves in.

Sahlins concludes that hunter-gatherers are notably efficient. To support this theory, Sahlins cites anthropological studies of the !Kung people in the Kalahari Desert in southern Africa and of the aboriginal inhabitants of the Australian bush. Sahlins notes that, on average, these people only spend about two to three days a week working, oftentimes for a total of less than 20 hours. For them, that's enough time to find everything they need to survive. Their workweek contrasts markedly with the 40-hour workweek typical in American society.

Sahlins shows that these hunter-gatherers spend the rest of their time engaged in leisure: They talk, they visit neighbors, and they play with their children. They spend hours sitting around the fire, telling stories. And they sleep. Essentially, they do a lot of what many Westerners do on vacation. Their lives are simple by Western standards—but it's only by Western standards that they're considered poor. What we think of as the good life is as dependent on culture as anything else.

## READING

Acemoglu, Daron, and James A. Robinson. *Why Nations Fail: The Origins of Power, Prosperity, and Poverty*. New York: Crown, 2012.

Baum, Matthew A., and David A. Lake. "The Invisible Hand of Democracy: Political Control and the Provision of Public Services." *Comparative Political Studies* (August 2001).

Diamond, Jared M. *Guns, Germs, and Steel: The Fates of Human Societies*. New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1999.

Sahlins, Marshall. "The Original Affluent Society." In *Culture in Practice: Selected Essays*. New York: Zone Books, 2000.

Weber, Max. *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. New York: Scribner, 1958.

## QUESTIONS

- 1 Why are some countries rich and others poor?
- 2 How does the presence of valuable natural resources hinder economic development in some countries?



20

# The Global Fault Lines of Trade

---

Debates about international trade as are old as international trade itself. It involves important questions: Should countries allow—or even encourage—goods and services to cross borders freely, or should they put up barriers to trade to protect local industries? The debate between free trade and protectionism is often associated with esoteric theories of classical economics, but it also takes center stage in persistent and contentious political disagreements.

## The Pros of Free Trade

To dive into the topic of free trade, it's helpful to examine two countries that have had a long free-trade relationship with one another: the United States and Canada. Wine and syrup are relevant products here. When it comes to wine, the United States has a comparative advantage relative to Canada. Generally speaking, the United States can make wine that's better and cheaper than the Canadian equivalent. On the other hand, Canada has a comparative advantage over the United States when it comes to maple syrup. Canadian maple syrup is generally better and cheaper than American maple syrup.

In a world without international trade, Americans and Canadians would both have a problem. Americans would have access to good, inexpensive wine but inferior maple syrup. Canadians would face the reverse problem: They would have access to good, inexpensive maple syrup but have to deal with inferior or expensive wine.

With international trade, there's an easy solution to the problem: Canadian wine drinkers can patronize American winemakers, who will benefit from the business and likely increase production. Canadians now have access to both good wine and good maple syrup.

Americans benefit as well. They can access high-quality maple syrup from Canada, plus the American wine they could already enjoy. Canadian maple syrup producers will now have access to a huge American market. This adds up to a situation in which almost everyone benefits.

## The Cons of Free Trade

While many people benefit from free trade, a few people suffer greatly. For instance, a person working in a Canadian winery may lose their job if Canada suddenly becomes flooded with cheap American wine. American maple syrup makers could face a similar challenge from floods of Canadian maple syrup entering the market.

The problem becomes thornier when considering certain inputs businesses rely on. Automaking is a helpful example here. The production of vehicles relies primarily on labor. When labor is cheap, automobiles are more profitable. Places where labor is more expensive are going to be at a comparative disadvantage in automaking. If other factors are equal, free trade means that car production is going to migrate to places that have cheap labor. Those are the places that have a comparative advantage when it comes to making cars.

The United States used to have an enormous auto industry, and it was centered in Indiana, Michigan, and Ohio. But over the last generation or two, and especially after the increase in free trade with Mexico in the 1990s, automobile manufacturers moved more and more of their operations to Mexico.

And the reason is simple: Mexican labor is cheap. The minimum wage for a worker in the United States is \$7.25 an hour; the minimum wage in Mexico is also about \$7—except it's \$7 per day! In other words, when it comes to labor-intensive industries, Mexico has a huge comparative advantage. The result was a net migration of jobs from America to Mexico in this industry.

## Protectionism

There are certain measures countries can take to protect domestic industries from international competition. Tariffs are one of the most common. A tariff is simply a tax on imported goods, and it's used to protect a domestic industry from imports that would otherwise outcompete it. Tariffs essentially protect domestic goods by making imported goods more expensive.

Other barriers do not rely on tariffs. One very common non-tariff barrier to trade is an import quota. These occur when a country simply limits the amount of a foreign good that can legally be imported. Quotas ultimately have the same effect as tariffs: They limit the amount of competition that domestic producers of a good face from foreign producers of the same good.

But quotas can have unexpected, undesirable consequences. For instance, if the demand for a good exceeds the amount that can be legally imported, a black market may result.

Quotas can also backfire in terms of competition. In 1980, Japan surpassed the United States as the world's top auto producer. A year later, the US responded with an import quota on Japanese cars. The Japanese car industry responded by shifting gears: Rather than focusing on economy cars (like they had been doing), they started making luxury cars, which have a higher profit margin.

Soon, American luxury cars had to compete both with each other and with new Japanese luxury models that hit the market in the 1980s. Japanese luxury cars have been a force to be reckoned with in the American auto market ever since.

Countries sometimes resort to other non-tariff barriers to protect local industries. Subsidies, regulations, and even currency manipulation can all be used by a country to give its own producers an advantage on the international market. These tactics are harder to detect. Therefore, even when countries have an agreement not to tariff or quota each other's goods, they sometimes resort to these other tactics as a way of skirting the rules.

## Trade Agreements

Different trade agreements help head off international trade conflicts. Trade blocs and treaties are basically agreements among groups of countries to lower trade barriers and resolve disputes.

The World Trade Organization (WTO) is the world's largest international economic organization. It's based in Geneva, Switzerland, and it provides a venue for countries to negotiate trade agreements and resolve trade disputes. Studies generally show that the WTO has led to increases in the amount of international trade and a reduction in trade barriers.



**The World Trade Organization  
in Geneva, Switzerland**

Meanwhile, the European Union (EU) has become the world's largest trade bloc, with tariff-free movement of goods across its 27 member states and special trade relationships with a number of neighboring states. The EU started as a trade agreement between Germany, France, and a handful of other countries in the aftermath of World War II. The idea was that if these countries traded with one another, they'd stop trying to conquer each other. To that end, it has been a success.

## Continuing Controversy

Even if international trade has contributed to world peace, it's still controversial. For instance, if a US factory closes and moves to Mexico, that's a loss of American jobs, but it's also a gain in jobs for Mexico. Arguably, the jobs don't go away; they just move. And since the move makes consumer goods cheaper on both sides of the border—and thereby promotes economic growth—one could argue that the long-term benefits are widespread, even if the short-term pain is real and concentrated.

On the other hand, there are also powerful arguments against free trade. For instance, Mexican workers make a fraction of what American workers do. To some people, that's exploitation. And it's often true that where labor is cheap, it's cheap because wages are low, factories are overcrowded, working conditions are hazardous, and environmental regulations are lax.

Free trade advocates will respond that low-paying work is still work. And an international corporation closing its overseas operations might leave people with no jobs at all. Such issues don't have clear solutions.

### READING

Blinder, Alan S. "The Free-Trade Paradox: The Bad Politics of a Good Idea." *Foreign Affairs*, January/February 2019.

Dunne, Finley Peter. "The Tariff." In *Economics: A Reader*, edited by Kenneth G. Elzinga. New York: Harper & Row, 1972.

Lighthizer, Robert E. "How to Make Trade Work for Workers: Charting a Path Between Protectionism and Globalism." *Foreign Affairs*, July/August 2020.

- Rodrik, Dani. *Straight Talk on Trade*. Princeton University Press, 2017.
- Wheelan, Charles. "Trade and Globalization." In *Naked Economics: Undressing the Dismal Science*. New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 2002.
- "World Trade—Lampoon Style." In *Economics: A Reader*, edited by Kenneth G. Elzinga. New York: Harper & Row, 1972.

## QUESTIONS

- 1 If free trade is beneficial for countries that engage in it, why do some countries restrict it anyway?
- 2 What are some ways that countries limit free trade?
- 3 Do the benefits of free trade outweigh the costs?



21

# Is the European Union a Success or Failure?

---

The European Union (EU) is one of the most ambitious international projects in modern history. What started in the 1950s as little more than a trade agreement between a few countries in Western Europe has become a massive international organization with 27 member states, almost 450 million citizens, and economic output so large that if it were a country, it would be the second largest in the world.



## What Is the European Union?

The EU isn't a state in a traditional sense. The institutions of the EU don't have a monopoly on the use of force. However, the EU is clearly a closer and more integrated institution than a trade bloc or alliance.

The EU is an association of countries that have agreed to give up some sovereignty in return for the benefits of membership. These benefits include access to the world's largest common market, tariff-free trade with other members, unrestricted travel to other member states, fishing rights in EU waters, and participation in EU programs for everything from education and infrastructure to law enforcement and defense.

In exchange, member states and their citizens get the right to participate in EU decision-making—the political process that determines the details of the aforementioned public goods. EU member states also pay dues—a percentage of GDP. The union has additional sources of revenue, including a sales tax (the value-added tax, or VAT) and tariffs paid by nonmembers who trade with the EU.

The European Union started in 1951, with a more limited agreement and much more modest ambitions. In the wake of World War I and World War II, much of Europe lay in ruins. Hoping to find a solution for the fighting that had racked the continent for decades, six countries (West Germany, France, Belgium, the Netherlands, Luxembourg, and Italy) formed the European Coal and Steel Community. The hope was that this simple trade agreement would lead to prosperity and peace.

From those humble and hopeful beginnings, the European Coal and Steel Community steadily grew, adding member states as well as responsibilities and obligations to what would eventually become the European Union. Today's EU has institutions for common defense and diplomacy. It establishes common business standards and regulations. (Recent laws include a ban on single-use plastics and a sweeping agreement for data security and telecommunications.) Importantly, it also allows for the free movement of goods and people throughout its 27 member states, plus it has a common currency.

## How Does the EU Work?

When it comes to how the EU works, four institutions are particularly relevant: the European Council, the Council of the European Union, the European Commission, and the European Parliament.

The European Council is perhaps the most visible of the EU institutions. It meets a few times a year and consists of the leader of each EU member state. The European Council is where the major players of European politics—the chancellors, prime ministers, and presidents of EU member states—come together and set broad policies for the European Union. They focus on overarching decisions rather than the details of day-to-day operations.

## 21. Is the European Union a Success or Failure?

The Council of the European Union is a counterpart to the European Council. The Council of the European Union also only meets periodically. This is a meeting of cabinet ministers relevant to the topic at hand. For example, when the Council of the European Union convenes to discuss agriculture, agriculture ministers from each of the EU member states will attend. When they put together the EU budget, finance ministers will be present, and so on.

Members of both councils owe their first allegiance to their states. When push comes to shove, their interests are going to be with their home countries, even when those interests conflict with those of the European Union as a whole.

The European Commission is the engine of the European Union. It takes an active role in the union's day-to-day affairs. It is also the only EU institution that can draft legislation and submit it to the European Parliament. The European Commission consists of 27 members, who are appointed by the European Council and confirmed by the European Parliament. Each member of the commission is in charge of a specific policy area.

Importantly, the commissioners aren't supposed to represent those states. The EU commissioners work for the European Union. They're supposed to eschew national interests and represent the interests of the European Union as a whole. (Despite their obligation to look out for the interests of the EU as a whole, commissioners sometimes let their national interests show.)



The European Parliament is the only EU institution that directly represents EU citizens. Parliamentary elections take place across Europe every five years. Representation is proportional: Large countries have more representatives, and smaller ones have fewer.

In the European Parliament, Europeans discuss and debate political differences while largely ignoring national ones. For example, most members of the European Parliament are associated with political factions. These are like political parties that represent particular political ideologies, but they cut across national lines. For instance, the Green faction is made up of members of environmentalist parties from all across Europe.

## Euroskepticism

Euroskepticism is a political view that is critical of the EU. Regarding current anti-EU sentiment, a recent culprit is the one-two punch that hit the EU in 2009, which started with the sovereign debt crisis and was followed by a migration crisis a few years later.

The sovereign debt crisis was a European aftershock of the Great Recession of the late 2000s. When the financial crisis hit Europe, it exacerbated preexisting divides. On one side of the schism were the EU's wealthy, industrialized northern countries, including Germany, the Netherlands, and Belgium. On the other side were a number of peripheral EU member states, many of which had struggling economies, high unemployment, and massive levels of public debt, along with a smattering of corruption and bloated national bureaucracies. These included Ireland, Italy, Portugal, Greece, and Spain.

The meltdown in these economies put European cohesion—and especially the euro, the EU's common currency—to the test. There was immense pressure in some parts of the EU to bail out the struggling countries. The idea was to use common EU resources to stabilize their economies, to recapitalize their banks, and even to forgive some of their debts. For those wishing to strengthen the EU, there was palpable fear that economic contagion in the periphery would infect the entire bloc.

But there was also resistance to such a plan, especially from more frugal member states such as Germany. Resistance also came from ordinary EU taxpayers who didn't want the EU to spend public money for the sake of debtor countries they saw as fiscally reckless.

Even the common currency became a target of discontent. One way to counter an economic slowdown is to increase the money supply, which stimulates economic growth. This is something that would have helped the debtor countries, and so they wanted the European Central Bank to do just that: to increase the amount of euros in circulation and thereby give their economies a boost. The problem is that increasing the money supply can also cause inflation, especially in economies that are otherwise strong. (An example was Germany, which was weathering the financial crisis quite well.)

In the end, the two sides reached a deal: The countries with distressed economies were partially bailed out in exchange for commitments to reform their finances. But discontent and resentment lingered on both sides.

Just as the financial crisis was winding down, a migrant crisis was ramping up. In 2015, civil war in Syria and unrest in other parts of the Middle East and Africa led to streams of migrants seeking refuge in Europe. They often entered Italy, Greece, and Spain—countries that were still recovering from the financial crisis and were least able to absorb hundreds of thousands of refugees.

In the end, the EU came to the rescue. Most of the refugees were able to migrate further north to countries that were better able to take them in. (Germany received almost 450,000 asylum applications in 2015 alone.) The EU also used its collective strength and influence to get Turkey and other countries to help resettle the refugees, or at least manage the flow.

## Conclusion

The migrant crisis—like the financial crisis—was a reminder that with European integration, problems in one part of the union are ever more likely to become problems across the EU. Political union comes with shared benefits and shared risk.

Nowhere were these risks more obvious than in Britain, where, in 2016, a slim majority of voters decided that the costs of union outweighed the benefits. That led to Brexit—the United Kingdom’s departure from the European Union. This was a clear outcome of the crises and of Euroskepticism more generally.

But with all the misfortune that has hit the EU in recent years, it’s worth remembering that the EU survived. There were missteps, to be sure, but the EU weathered major crises through collective action, which featured flexibility, bailouts, resources, and influence. All of these would have been next to impossible had it not been for the relative cohesion of the EU.

## READING

Chrysoloras, Nikos. “Did Europe Just Agree to Joint Borrowing? Not Exactly.” *Bloomberg*, May 27, 2020. <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2020-05-20/did-europe-just-agree-to-joint-borrowing-not-exactly-quicktake>.

Matthijs, Matthias. “The Right Way to Fix the EU.” *Foreign Affairs*, May/June 2020.

McCormick, John. *European Union Politics*. 3rd ed. London: Red Globe Press/Macmillan, 2020.

Zimmermann, Hubert, and Andreas Dür, eds. *Key Controversies in European Integration*. 2nd ed. Red Globe Press, 2016.

## QUESTIONS

- 1 How do the institutions of the EU attempt to reconcile group interests with the sovereignty of member states?
- 2 Have the institutions of the EU helped or hindered the union’s ability to respond to crises?



22

# When the Balance of Power Breaks Down

---

Imbalances of power can be a big problem in modern society because they give rise to issues called commitment problems. Commitment problems emerge when a person or an entity is so powerful that they're unable to make believable promises—that is, promises that other people know the promisor will keep.

## Commitment Problems, Examined

Mutually assured destruction is a helpful illustration of why commitments need to be credible. Mutually assured destruction involves a situation where both parties can make a credible commitment not to attack the other. For instance, the United States promised not to use its nuclear weapons against the Soviet Union, and its commitment was credible because the two parties knew that if the US attacked, it would be attacked in turn. That meant that the US wouldn't attack, even if it otherwise wanted to. The same mutualism buttressed the Soviet commitment not to attack the US.

Matters would deteriorate if the balance were somehow disturbed—or even if either party just thought that the balance was disturbed. If one party thought that it could somehow get away with a first strike, it would be more likely to try. And if the other party thought that the first party was thinking this way, it might try to attack preemptively. Fear alone could cause the situation to break down, even if both sides were genuinely committed to peace.

That's the destructive power of a commitment problem. When one side loses its ability to convince the other that its commitments are credible, both sides might end up in a situation that neither wants.

## Commitment Problems and Governments

Commitment problems pop up—and lead to suboptimal results—in all kinds of situations. And they're nothing new. Kings in the Middle Ages often had to pay higher interest rates to moneylenders than ordinary noblemen did, which is strange: One would think that the king would have more resources and would therefore only be more able to cover his debts.

But because the king was so powerful, moneylenders sometimes viewed him as a credit risk. They feared that when the time came to repay the loan, the king might go back on his word. This ended up hurting kings, who often had trouble finding people who were willing to lend them money. It hurt the moneylenders as well because they were too scared to do business with potentially lucrative customers.

There's even evidence that Britain's dominance in the 18th and 19th centuries resulted from the fact that Britain's monarchs were less powerful than their counterparts elsewhere in Europe. Britain was strong, but the British monarchy was weak. Unlike the monarchs of Spain, France, and Austria, the British crown was subject to certain limitations: Its power was counterbalanced by its parliament and by other institutions in British society.

As a result, Britain's kings and queens couldn't just confiscate wealth when it was in their short-term interest to do so. Other countries' monarchs couldn't credibly commit to the same good behavior. They were too powerful for their own good. These limits on British royal prerogative allowed capitalist, industrial interests to flourish—and made Britain the superpower of its day.

The dynamic is still at work. Political scientists have long observed that democracies tend to be wealthier than dictatorships. Part of the reason for this is that democratic governments are held accountable for their actions in a way that dictatorships are not.

If a dictator takes tax money and spends it on a lavish palace, there's not much taxpayers can do. Democratic leaders, on the other hand, have powerful incentives to spend taxpayers' money wisely: If they don't, they won't get reelected. Elected leaders tend to pursue policies that promote the general welfare because they'll be punished if they don't.

## Limitations and Commerce

In many circumstances, limitations help parties reach mutually beneficial agreements that would otherwise be impossible. When we ask government to regulate commerce, we're essentially asking it to take away our freedom to cheat—forcing us to stand by our commitments and thereby assuring others that we can be trusted. Stripping us of our freedom to break promises is one of the most important and underappreciated public goods that governments provide.

This is why government is called on to play such an active role in the regulation of private commerce. For instance, imagine this scenario: A drug company announces that it developed a new medicine that's effective and safe. The problem is that the public, on its own, can't be sure the pharmaceutical company is telling the truth.

That is why government agencies like the Food and Drug Administration regulate the drug approval process and essentially verify that the company's claims are true. This is a limitation on free industry, and it slows down the process of introducing new drugs. However, most parties, including the drug companies, benefit from a process that prevents businesses from making false claims.

Consumers benefit from the guarantee that a company's products are safe and effective. On the other side, government regulation gives companies the ability to believably promise that their claims are true. This makes consumer protection just as important for producers as it is for consumers.

## Moral Hazards and Risks

An entity having too much power and being unaccountable for its actions is a combination that gives rise to unintended consequences. Relevant here is a concept called a moral hazard, which refers to the ways that people tend to change their behavior when they know they're insulated from risk. People are more likely to act in a risky or reckless manner when the negative consequences of that behavior are removed.

Governments around the world may have contributed to a moral hazard with their reaction to the Great Recession of 2007–2009. This recession was touched off by one of the worst financial crises in history. At the height of the crisis, many governments proposed bailing out major banks and corporations. The rationale was that these companies were so big that if they failed, the entire economy might collapse with them. Governments also passed measures to help individuals who couldn't keep up with their mortgages.

On the one hand, these measures probably aided the recovery. (They were also politically popular with the people and corporations that received the bailouts.) But critics were quick to respond that programs like this risked the creation of moral hazard, where people in the future would engage in riskier behavior because they think the government will bail them out. If people are insulated from pain, they might not try as hard to avoid that pain as they otherwise would.

However, there are times when risk can be a good thing. Invention, by definition, means trying something new. Therefore, it's sometimes necessary for people to be free to take risks. For instance, the Wright brothers took a risk and achieved a momentous step forward in aviation.

Because of risk's occasional necessity, governments sometimes find themselves in the business of encouraging people to take risks. They do this by allowing businesses to form corporations. A corporation is a legal entity that separates a business from the people who own it.

Allowing businesses to incorporate shelters entrepreneurs from risk. Liability is limited to the assets of the corporation itself. Creditors can't foreclose on an entrepreneur's house just because their business was a failure.

Governments around the world walk a tightrope when it comes to the management of risk. On the one hand, incorporation encourages innovation by freeing businesspeople to take risks, but too much protection from risk encourages recklessness, which can bring an economy to ruin.

## **Governments' Role in Solving Commitment Problems**

A controversy in comparative government stems from the issue of how much governments should be involved in solving commitment problems. In certain circumstances, commitment problems have the potential to solve themselves. For instance, in smaller communities where everyone knows one another, reputation alone might be enough to allow for trust: A person is less likely to break promises if word will spread and prevent them from being trusted in the future.

But in today's globalized economy, reasonable people are going to disagree about when, where, and under what circumstances government regulation is required to enforce commitments. Some people would argue for free-market solutions to commitment problems: things that don't require government intervention. Influences like *Consumer Reports* magazine and Yelp reviews encourage businesses to stand by their commitments, even in a marketplace that's too big and anonymous for word of mouth to do the trick.

In failed states, organized crime sometimes steps in to fill the same role. Drug cartels and mafias are very good at making sure that people honor their commitments, and they often act as informal regulators in places where the state is unable or unwilling to intervene.

But most people would argue that some government regulation is necessary. The modern marketplace is too big for free-market solutions alone to do the trick. The question of where to draw the line is the source of one of the most contentious arguments in comparative government today.

## READING

- Elster, Jon. *Ulysses and the Sirens: Studies in Rationality and Irrationality*. Cambridge University Press, 1985.
- North, Douglass, and Barry Weingast. “Constitutions and Commitment: The Evolution of Institutions Governing Public Choice in Seventeenth-Century England.” *The Journal of Economic History* 49, no. 4 (December 1989).
- Olsen, Mancur. “Dictatorship, Democracy, and Development.” *The American Political Science Review* 87, no. 3 (September 1993).
- Root, Hilton L. “Tying the King’s Hands: Credible Commitments and Royal Fiscal Policy during the Old Regime.” *Rationality and Society* 1, no. 2.
- Schelling, Thomas C. *The Strategy of Conflict*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1980.
- Sorkin, Andrew Ross. *Too Big to Fail: The Inside Story of How Wall Street and Washington Fought to Save the Financial System—and Themselves*. Viking Press, 2009.

## QUESTIONS

- 1 What is a commitment problem? Why do governments intervene to solve them?
- 2 Why do most governments allow businesses to incorporate? How does becoming a corporation shield the corporation’s owners from risk?



23

# Why It's So Hard to Work Together

---

Perhaps the most important role of governments is helping citizens overcome collective action problems. These problems emerge from situations where society could benefit if people contributed to a common cause, but people don't contribute because contributing is costly to the individual. Understanding how collective action problems work helps demystify a whole range of political interactions.

# Government as a Solution to Collective Action Problems

In many cases, the state is the only institution that can solve collective action problems. Everyone wants roads, fire protection, and national defense, but these things are expensive, and someone has to pay for them. The government, therefore, must force people to pay for these. It is very unlikely people would pay for them voluntarily, even though everyone wants them.

That leads to difficult political questions regarding how much to spend in certain areas and who pays how much. Government, law, and politics are all the unavoidable result of our attempt to make collective action possible.

Oftentimes, the most fundamental political decision is whether a collective action problem is worth solving in the first place. For instance, some people think there should be a federal highway system; others think long-distance roads should be left to private industry.

Additionally, collective decision-making entails a sacrifice: We sometimes must live with decisions that we ourselves wouldn't have made. But the only way to avoid the sacrifice is to leave the collective. Most people have decided that putting up with a few unwanted decisions is better than being a hermit.

## The Prisoner's Dilemma

Even though collective action problems are often the business of governments and states, the problems can arise anywhere—even in a society of just two people. A two-person collective action problem is called a prisoner's dilemma, and it gets its name from a classic example of the interaction in which two prisoners are brought in for questioning after robbing a bank and speeding away from the scene in a stolen car.

The authorities have enough evidence to convict the men of the lesser charge: stealing the car. But to convict them of bank robbery, they need to get one of the prisoners to turn on the other. The authorities separate the suspects and question them under these parameters:

- ★ If both suspects remain silent, they'll both go to jail for a year for the lesser offense of car theft.
- ★ If they both confess, they'll both go to jail for a long time for the more serious offense of bank robbery, minus a small reduction for cooperating.
- ★ If one of the suspects confesses and the other does not, the police will use the testimony of the cooperating witness to convict the non-confessing suspect of the bank robbery. The confessor will go free as a reward.

For the two prisoners, the best overall situation is for both to remain silent, resulting in a relatively short prison sentence for each. But taken individually, each suspect faces a powerful incentive to turn on his former accomplice—to confess. The most likely scenario is one in which both suspects confess. They turn on each other, and as a result, they both go to jail for a long time.

The suspects could have limited the damage had they remained silent. But in their individual attempts to avoid jail altogether, they end up worse off than they otherwise could have been. That's the prisoner's dilemma.

## The Prisoner's Dilemma in Real Life

The prisoner's dilemma models many real-life situations, including an arms race between two superpowers. During the Cold War, the United States and the Soviet Union were rivals, and so each built up a huge arsenal, either to attack the other or to deter the other from attacking. A much better situation would have been for both sides to agree not to build any weapons. That would have freed them up to spend their money on other things.

The problem is that if one country's rival didn't arm itself, the other would see an opportunity to secretly build up an arsenal, leaving the rival helpless. The rival, realizing this, would do the same, building up their own arsenal and leading to the same end result: huge arsenals on both sides.

An equivalent situation in economics is a price war. For instance, two rival airlines might compete one another into oblivion. In their attempts to get more market share, they could each lower their prices repeatedly. But they may end up in a situation where prices are so low that neither firm is profitable.

In a few situations, collective action problems have an uncanny ability to solve themselves. For instance, when there are just a few competitors in an industry, they sometimes find a way to coordinate their efforts. Price-fixing is illegal, but it still happens because firms know that if they get into a price war, they'll both lose. The would-be competitors agree to restrict supply and artificially keep prices higher than they would otherwise be. Prosecutors call this kind of agreement collusion.

In an industry with many firms each trying to outcompete the others, collusion and price-fixing aren't likely. But when there are just a couple firms, it's easier for them to keep track of each other and work out a deal. This creates a situation that's good for the companies and bad for consumers.

### **Dictators' Use of Collective Action Problems**

Just as good governments can help us overcome collective action problems, bad governments such as brutal dictatorships use collective action problems to their advantage. For instance, if all of a country's citizens hate the dictator in charge, they could theoretically rebel and overthrow him. But nobody will want to be the first one to attack the dictator, and people who sit the rebellion out will enjoy the benefits anyway.

## **Conclusion**

Collective action problems raise many enduring questions: What collective action problems should the state solve? What responsibilities do we, as individuals, have to the societies in which we live? And if we decide that a social dilemma requires a collective solution, what solution do we turn to? How do we pay for it? Questions such as these have puzzled thinkers for a long time, and they continue to do so.

## READING

- Elster, Jon. *Nuts and Bolts for the Social Sciences*. Cambridge University Press, 1989. Chapter 13, titled “Collective Action,” is especially relevant to lecture 23.
- Glance, Natalie S., and Bernardo A. Huberman. “The Dynamics of Social Dilemmas.” *Scientific American*, March 1994.
- Hardin, Russell. *Collective Action*. Routledge, 1982.
- Rasmussen, Dennis C. *The Infidel and the Professor: David Hume, Adam Smith, and the Friendship that Shaped Modern Thought*. Princeton University Press, 2018.
- Shermer, Michael. “The Doping Dilemma.” *Scientific American*, April 2008.

## QUESTIONS

- 1 What is a collective action problem?
- 2 How does government help us solve collective action problems?
- 3 Under what conditions do collective action problems resolve themselves?



24

# Gridlock and Democracy

---

The founders of the American political system were the authors of a revolutionary social experiment: They wanted to know if representative democracy could work on the scale of a modern state. The early success of their experiment—the fact that American democracy survived—meant that they had a lot of influence on how other countries set up their institutions: either copying the merits of the American system or trying to avoid its pitfalls. That’s why comparisons to the United States are so helpful in analyzing world politics.

# The Uniqueness of US Democracy

The US founders had a fear of government oppression. Their fear was based on concerns that if a society empowers the majority to rule, the minority will be left with no protections. Democracy created a risk of tyranny. That's why the founders staked out a radical position in favor of individual protections. They were willing to put up with a decision-making process that was cumbersome and inefficient, so long as the institutions that made government inefficient had the effect of protecting minority interests.

They did this by dividing government against itself with minority-empowering institutions such as the US Senate, which amplifies the representation of small states. Another tool was federalism, which introduces a vertical check on the central government's power. These checks and balances empower people to resist the will of a tyrannical government while also empowering minorities to resist a tyrannical majority.

More than almost any political system in the world, the US government favors minority protections at the expense of government efficiency. However, if democratic decision-making becomes impossible, people might resort to nondemocratic ways of getting things done.

## Democracy outside the US

Different democracies strike different balances between individual and collective interests, they have different ways of determining what the collective interest is, and they stake out different positions on the continuum between efficiency and minority rights. Some democracies opt for a more centralized approach, sacrificing minority protections for the sake of a more streamlined political process. But in practice, most include at least some protections against the tyranny of the majority.



Take, for example, the multiparty parliamentary democracies present in most of the democratic world outside the United States, from Canada and Costa Rica to Germany and Japan. Most of these countries are led by prime ministers who oversee coalitions and parliaments with more than two political parties. This is also known as multiparty democracy.

Multiparty democracy has its virtues. One advantage is that it gives voters more choice. With just two political parties, voters are constantly faced with the unpleasant task of picking the party they dislike less. Multiparty democracies, on the other hand, are like marketplaces with a wealth of options and therefore a higher likelihood that each voter can find a party that represents their particular combination of interests.

The downside is that multiparty systems' broader inclusion of options can give a louder voice to racists and other problematic fringe elements. Just as we've seen regimes stagnate under US-style gridlock, we've also seen multiparty democracies torn apart by radicalism. Additionally, while

multiparty parliaments can remedy some of the worst dangers of two-party presidentialism, they sometimes replace conflict between the branches of government with infighting among the parties of the ruling coalition.

There's no magic formula. Even in the world's democracies, there's a constant tension between efficiency and representation—a constant debate about how best to identify the collective interest and how to reconcile that with the rights of minorities and individuals.

## How Dictators Survive

Dictators aren't held accountable in the same way that their democratic counterparts are. However, they are often checked and balanced by other powerful institutions in society, such as the military, the religious establishment, or the bureaucracy of the ruling political party. Sometimes a figurehead ruler is as much at the mercy of these institutions as a democratic leader is of the electorate.

Moreover, few dictatorships maintain power solely at the point of a gun. Most dictators don't want to do things that way. Coercion is expensive; it sucks up resources to suppress dissent and to mete out injustice. Every dollar spent on quashing a dissident is money that the dictator can't spend on himself or in furthering his own ideological goals.

Besides, even in dictatorships, the people ultimately do have a vote of sorts: They can revolt. They can try to overthrow the government. And while this is a risky strategy for those who try and fail, the fact remains that even dictators have something to lose if resistance to their rule gets out of control.

As a result, even dictators pay attention to public opinion. They also work hard at legitimizing their rule—be it by stressing their place in history, battling the so-called enemies of the state, or making the trains run on time. If dictators can do those things, they can manufacture consent, even when it wouldn't otherwise be freely given. Dictators who can do that end up having more resources left over to shore up vital constituencies, and in many cases, that's their strategy for survival.

It's hard to tell how well dictators' strategies work for garnering public approval. Many dictators do very well at election time. But these elections are often a sham, there is often no freedom of the press, and would-be opponents often aren't brave (or foolish) enough to speak out.

## Dictatorial Problems and Advantages

Dictatorial tactics sometimes have a way of backfiring on the dictator. One problem is that dictators have a hard time getting reliable information about what's really going on in their countries. People tend to tell dictators what they think the dictator wants to hear and not necessarily what's true. That can have disastrous results.

For example, the largest famine in world history took place in China in the early 1960s. China's leader Mao Zedong implemented wide-ranging agricultural reforms. They didn't work. An additional problem was that local officials didn't want to tell him that. Therefore, the local officials exaggerated their production figures: They claimed to have more food than they actually did. That led the regime to double down on the reforms, which made the situation even worse. The resulting food shortages killed almost 50 million people.

Dictators also have a hard time providing an environment that's conducive to economic growth. It's hard for citizens to believe a dictator's commitment to honoring property rights, for instance.

In short, dictatorships are sometimes cursed by their own power. To the extent that they can't be held accountable, they also can't be trusted, and that makes it hard for them to act in the public interest. These are just some of the trade-offs that dictators have to consider when deciding how much dissent they're willing to tolerate or how much they really want to insulate themselves from public pressure.

Still, dictatorships are relatively common. They hold certain advantages when it comes to executing plans and staying in power. Dictators don't have to worry about elections, and that means they can undertake ambitious but

costly projects that might result in their countries' long-term good. And they have unparalleled capacity to muster the resources of the state—in no small part because they don't have to worry about matters like human rights. Finally, authoritarian regimes don't have to put up with nearly as much gridlock or dysfunction as democracies do. And the more the world's democracies flounder, the more the world's people might end up casting their votes in favor of dictatorship.

## International Agreements and Governance

In the international realm, countries face the same challenges that individuals do when trying to make collective decisions. Many solutions to international problems just don't make sense unilaterally. For instance, a country can't form a trade bloc or sign an arms-control agreement with itself. A country can cut CO<sub>2</sub> emissions as much as it wants, but if the rest of the world doesn't follow suit, the impact will be limited.

For steps like those to have true power, countries need to do them as part of a group. Countries need to make collective decisions even when they often have deeply divergent interests. Politics happens between countries every bit as much as it does within them.

But in international politics, there's an added wrinkle: There's no world government, meaning there's no one there to enforce international agreements. Additionally, countries are radically protective of their sovereignty. They deeply dislike it when other countries get involved in their domestic affairs. (It's hard to blame leaders for being that way. Citizens elect their leaders to serve them, not the interests of the world.)

The lack of a world government and the inherent self-interest of states combine to make international agreements very difficult to enforce. However, international agreements still happen, raising several questions: What keeps international agreements together? Who enforces international law? And why do countries obey it? We can answer these questions by going back to our earliest human ancestors: the people in small, familiar communities that didn't rely on the foundation of established government or law.

In a village—and in our global village—individuals and countries tend to behave themselves because those communities are small. In small societies, people care more about their reputations because those reputations are the only thing assuring others that they can be trusted. And people can operate on things like trust because the trustworthiness of others is easy to monitor and the long-term benefits of cooperation are easier to see.

But as our societies and our world have gotten bigger and more complex, those relationships—between individuals and between countries—have started to break down. Norms, customs, and reputations don't mean as much in large, anonymous communities, and they don't mean as much among countries that are blindly beholden to their own citizens without an eye to the global good.

When human societies faced that problem, government was the solution: an institution that would provide security and dispense justice, ultimately stepping in to fill the role that tradition used to provide. Some of those governments even endeavored, in the words of the Declaration of Independence, to derive “their just powers from the consent of the governed.” They gave ordinary citizens a significant say in making the laws to which they would be bound.

At present, that form of government appears to be under strain. But it's worth remembering that humankind has solved this kind of problem before, at least once in our million-year history. In different places all over the world, we've come together and figured out ways to make collective decisions, even when we all wanted different things.

## READING

Diamond, Jared. “The Worst Mistake in the History of the Human Race.” *Discover*, May 1, 1999.

Mayer, Lawrence C. *Comparative Politics: The Quest for Theory and Explanation*. Cornwall-on-Hudson, NY: Sloan Publishing, 2007.

Mead, Walter Russell. “The End of the Wilsonian Era: Why Liberal Internationalism Failed.” *Foreign Affairs*, January/February 2021.

Minogue, Kenneth. *Politics: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford University Press, 1995.

Mounk, Yascha, and Roberto Stefan Foa. "The End of the Democratic Century." *Foreign Affairs*, May/June 2018.

Norris, Pippa. "It Happened in America." *Foreign Affairs*, January 7, 2021. <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2021-01-07/it-happened-america>.

## QUESTIONS

- 1 What were the political repercussions of the agricultural revolution?
- 2 What are the unique features of United States government?
- 3 What are the pros and cons of European-style multiparty parliamentary democracy?
- 4 Why are international agreements so difficult to force?

# Image Credits



- i:** Joel Carillet/E+/Getty Images
- 3:** Peter Božič/Wikimedia Commons/CC BY 3.0
- 12:** Mbzt/Wikimedia Commons/CC BY 3.0
- 15:** National Archives and Records Administration
- 21:** Nastasic/Getty Images
- 22:** Digital image courtesy of the Getty's Open Content Program
- 33:** Wellcome Library, London/CC BY 4.0
- 35:** Wellcome Library, London/CC BY 4.0
- 36:** Wellcome Library, London/CC BY 4.0
- 59:** EU2017EE Estonian Presidency/Wikimedia Commons/CC BY 2.0
- 66:** UAB/Wikimedia Commons/CC BY 3.0
- 81:** National Archives and Records Administration,  
United States National Park Service
- 90:** Bibliothèque et Archives nationales du Québec/Wikimedia  
Commons/Public Domain
- 95:** BartocX/Wikimedia Commons/CC BY-SA 2.0
- 104:** Colombian National Police/Wikimedia Commons/Public Domain
- 122:** Benoît Prieur/Wikimedia Commons/CC BY-SA 4.0
- 128:** Diliff/Wikimedia Commons/CC BY-SA 3.0
- 145:** Fibonacci Blue/flickr/CC BY 2.0











**Copyright © The Teaching Company, 2022**

Printed in the United States of America

This book is in copyright. All rights reserved.

Without limiting the rights under copyright reserved above, no part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in or introduced into a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form, or by any means (electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise), without the prior written permission of The Teaching Company.

4840 Westfields Boulevard, Suite 400

Chantilly, VA 20151-2299

USA

1-800-832-2412

[www.thegreatcourses.com](http://www.thegreatcourses.com)