

What Is Democracy? Liberal Institutions and Stability in Changing Societies

by William Anthony Hay

William Anthony Hay (Wilhay6248@aol.com) is assistant professor of history at Mississippi State University and author of *The Whig Revival, 1808–1830* (Palgrave-Macmillan, 2005). This article is based on a presentation he made to FPRI's Study Group on America and the West on September 12, 2005, in Philadelphia.

Is it possible to export democracy? That question underlies current U.S. foreign policy, and answering it requires an operational definition of democracy that distinguishes its essential attributes from circumstantial ones. Liberal representative government under law, sustained by a political culture that accepts open disagreement and demands accountability, provides the only form of democracy that has sustained itself over time. Democracy typically emerges from within a society, and history demonstrates the difficulty of making democracy work. Imposing it externally presents further challenges while risking a backlash. The project of spreading democracy must therefore be separated from the objective of establishing a stable order favoring American interests so that the latter end can be achieved by more modest means.

Promoting democracy overseas has been an important theme in American grand strategy since the days of Woodrow Wilson. In 2005, George W. Bush, in his second inaugural address, put support for democratic movements at the center of his foreign policy. Behind the debate over current American policy lies the operational question of whether outsiders can impose democracy on Iraq or other societies. Answering that question, however, requires a definition of democracy that explains how it works as a political system. The term “democracy” allows for diverse meanings to suit particular objectives, and the consequent lack of clarity makes it difficult to effectively implement policy. Theory matters less than history in grasping empirical reality. Understanding the realities of promoting democracy requires one to have a foundation in democracy’s history.

Two Views of Democracy

Current debate reflects two conflicting views of democracy, each with deep roots in American thinking on international relations. Advocates of

spreading democracy seek a global order favorable to American interests and see in democratization a way to counter the threat of terrorism backed by authoritarian regimes. Despite vigorous disagreements over nation-building during the 1990s and sharp criticism of what Michael Mandelbaum called “foreign policy as social work,” many realists saw advantages in extending democratic stability when it could be done at reasonable cost.¹ But 9/11, which demonstrated that containment and deterrence had failed to address the problems of rogue states and transnational terrorism, shifted the Bush administration toward a more aggressive policy that echoed Woodrow Wilson’s.² By invoking history’s “visible direction” and likening democracy to “a fire in the mind of men” in his second inaugural speech, Bush cast the spread of democracy as both an inevitable direction and a moral obligation. Democratization was “the only means of securing peace in a world where tyranny abroad threatens peace at home.”³ Condoleezza Rice used a September 2005 speech commemorating the 75th anniversary of Princeton University’s Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs to describe Bush’s aim as forging realistic policies from idealistic principles. She related the administration’s Iraq policy in a wider context of spreading democracy the Middle East, which in turn follows the precedent of American policy toward Europe during the 20th century.⁴ Bush’s rhetoric paralleled Wilson’s address to Congress in April 1917, which defined German acts as “a warfare against mankind” that “cut to the very roots of human life” and therefore left no choice but resistance. Since Germany’s government had placed that country beyond the pale of civilized states, Wilson insisted that only what a later generation would call “regime change” could end the threat.⁵ Despite the different contexts of their speeches, Bush and Wilson both described tyranny as an aggressive threat to the United States to be countered by spreading democracy.

Skeptics question whether democracy necessarily favors American interests overseas, holding that the answer depends largely on what “democracy” means. Democracy can either provide an institutional structure and political culture that fosters cohesion, or it can undermine the stability of societies in transition by dissolving consensus and fueling differences. Fareed Zakaria points out that illiberal democracy, which combines authoritarianism with regular elections, differs greatly from the liberal order

¹ Michael Mandelbaum, “Foreign Policy As Social Work,” *Foreign Affairs*, Jan./Feb. 1996, pp. 16–32.

² Francis Fukuyama, *State-Building: Governance and World Order in the 21st Century* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2005), p. 93.

³ Second Inaugural Address, Jan. 20, 2005.

⁴ Condoleezza Rice, “Princeton University’s Celebration of the 75th Anniversary of the Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs,” Sept. 30, 2005, at www.state.gov.

⁵ Woodrow Wilson, War Messages, 65th Congress, 1st Session Senate Document No. 5, Serial No. 7264. Washington, D.C., 1917, pp. 3–8.

typically associated with democracy. He observes that unchecked majority rule often brings authoritarianism and disorder, and suggests that excessive deference to popular sentiment can undermine the balance in many societies.⁶

The relationship between democratization and ethnic conflict also raises questions that have become more prominent since the end of the Cold War. Amy Chua argues that democracy often shifts power to majority groups with real or imagined grievances against “market dominant minorities,” and tensions generated by economic dislocation have a greater impact in multi-ethnic societies that lack cohesion. Michael Mann calls ethnic cleansing a dark side of democracy, where the *demos*, or political nation, becomes confused with the *ethnos*, or nationality. A nation defined by ethnicity rather than civic allegiance makes the forcible exclusion of minorities more likely.⁷ Superseding ethnic loyalties with a civic identity, however, presents great difficulties. Lee Kuan Yew holds that democracy fails in multiethnic states, which require a strong regime to coordinate competing groups. Conflicts and unrest since 1991 prompted Robert Kaplan to ask whether liberal democracy marked only a passing era that would fade under growing social and economic strain. His pessimistic view struck a chord among many realists, given the problems of failed states and disorder beyond the developed world.⁸

A useful definition of democracy identifies its essential attributes and distinguishes them from other attributes derived from particular circumstances. Real democracy means liberal representative government under law, sustained by a political culture that accepts open disagreement and demands accountability. This definition emphasizes the role of institutions in making a political order work. Representative institutions grew organically from particular challenges in the medieval and early modern period, and their repeated failure outside the sphere of Anglo-American governance underlines their fragility. Public opinion became a recognized factor in eighteenth-century Europe, and the ways in which institutions accommodated or failed to accommodate public opinion shaped political culture. Parliamentary liberalism emerged as a paradigm for democracy during the early nineteenth century through the conjunction of representative government with an articulate public opinion. Historical development, much more than theoretical concepts, explains democracy’s emergence and the prospects for its viability in different contexts.

⁶Fareed Zakaria, *The Future of Freedom: Illiberal Democracy at Home and Abroad* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2003), pp. 1–27, 90–1, 96–101.

⁷Amy Chua, *World on Fire: How Exporting Free Market Democracy Breeds Ethnic Hatred and Global Instability* (New York: Doubleday, 2003), pp. 6–17; Michael Mann, *The Dark Side of Democracy: Explaining Ethnic Cleansing* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), pp. 55–69.

⁸Robert D. Kaplan, “Was Democracy Just a Moment?” *Atlantic Monthly*, Dec. 1997.

Defining Democracy: Democratic Institutions and Political Culture

Liberal, representative democracy, where political parties mobilize public opinion and alternate in power to ensure accountability, is the only case one finds of a sustainable democratic order. It combines institutions with a reinforcing political culture that together guarantee the rule of law while ensuring that policy follows the considered preferences of public sentiment. Other models of democracy either mimic some democratic attributes or under pressure simply lapse into anarchy or authoritarianism. Truly democratic institutions and political cultures engage public opinion within a framework of checks and balances that limit both majority rule and executive power. Transparency in public business and debate marks another characteristic of a liberal regime. Stable, periodic transfers of power help ensure accountability. Representative democracy along these lines allows citizens to rule themselves in polities beyond the smallest communities by enabling leaders to mobilize opinion that facilitates consensus and allows them to implement policies. It operates as both a political culture for regulating behavior within the system and an institutional framework for governance.

Democracy's institutional role sharpens this operational definition. Samuel Huntington points out that institutions, whether democratic or otherwise, allow for predictability and act as buffers to shocks to the system. Without such buffers, disputes within a polity have a greater and wider social impact. Besides controlling the inevitable competition that arises within a society, institutions link governments with the people and important groups beyond the capital, thereby enhancing ties between the core and the periphery to give the state legitimacy among those it rules. Legitimacy derives partly from meeting popular expectations and partly from effective institutions that allow states to secure consent, mobilize resources, and accomplish their everyday business. Without such institutions, sovereignty exists only nominally, and competition brings ongoing civil strife. Simple governments prove "fundamentally defective," in Edmund Burke's phrase, lacking the resilience, redundancy, and adaptability needed to respond to complex and varying purposes.⁹ The preoccupation of many Americans with protecting liberty from a strong state neglects the need for institutions with the strength to govern effectively. The wave of new states created by decolonization during the 1950s and '60s brought the question of state-building to the fore, and the problems spawned by "failed states" during the 1990s indicated the consequences of failing to arrive at a suitable answer.¹⁰

⁹ Samuel Huntington, *Political Order in Changing Societies* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1968), pp. 1–7, 20, 24, 86, 143, and 250; Burke quotation from *Reflections on the Revolution in France* [1790], J. C. D. Clarke, ed. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001).

¹⁰ Fukuyama, *State-Building*, pp. ix–xi, 3–23.

The British Archetype. Parliamentary liberalism in early nineteenth-century Britain serves as the archetypal definition of liberal, representative democracy. At a time of stressful transition, it brought stability of the kind Huntington describes. Its institutional structure could be adapted, as in the American combination of federalism and presidential government, but the fundamental assumptions of the political culture had to remain constant in the places where representative democracy proved successful. The British model operated as “a political system in which a large number of potentially incompatible interests—whether classes, nationalities, or sects—were mature enough to accept an overarching code of law which guaranteed each a wide variety of liberties.”¹¹ Liberal institutions and political culture integrated public opinion into politics, made government accountable to it, and imposed checks on executive authority. The convergence of liberal ideas with representative government also expanded politics beyond the metropolitan world, where national elites competed for power to include a wider range of provincial interest groups. Other societies underwent a similar transition that expanded the political nation, but the convergence of representative government and liberal ideas set Britain on the most consistent and contiguous path toward democracy. How, then, did the newly evolving system keep a stable order in Britain during a period that brought turmoil elsewhere? Exploring the historical roots of democracy underlines the difficulty of establishing it without an organic growth within societies.

Parliaments and Representation: Democracy’s Historical Roots

If parliament’s central role set Britain apart from most European countries before 1789, representative institutions were far from a uniquely British or English phenomenon. Assemblies identified variously as parliaments, diets, or estates developed throughout Europe from the middle ages onward, and until the seventeenth century some of them held greater power and prestige than their English counterpart. Representative institutions appeared in Iberia during the late twelfth and early thirteenth centuries and later spread through the western Mediterranean and beyond the Pyrenees. They solved major problems in medieval Europe by assisting monarchs in responding to pressing military needs. Besides depleting money and resources, prolonged conflicts led rulers to seek advice and consent from subjects. Corporate bodies, along with leading individuals, played an important part in the process, and assemblies became a vehicle for bringing urban communities and feudal estates within the government. Nobles sought to limit royal power as feudalism declined, while kings tried to tap the wealth cities

¹¹ Jonathan Parry, *The Rise and Fall of Liberal Government in Victorian Britain* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), p. 3.

had generated. Rulers and subjects reached a bargain by which assemblies gave counsel and the king agreed to act in accordance with the advice of bishops, nobles, and learned men.¹² The system worked because subjects had an opportunity to present their grievances, while their rulers had a vehicle to gain consent and bind communities to decisions accepted by their representatives.

Parliaments had become characteristic of European government by 1500, a development that seemingly entrenched the principle of consent by the community. Within two centuries, however, the balance had shifted drastically toward royal absolutism. Changes during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries show how institutions fail when they cannot adapt to pressures or contain conflict. Regardless of particular forms, sixteenth-century government retained an essentially contractual nature from the middle ages, in which consensus remained both a means of governing and an objective of state policy. Rulers, particularly those of states composed of culturally distinct provinces, appreciated the need to avoid provoking oppositions by attacking the provincial liberties that representative institutions carefully guarded.¹³ But consensus broke down due to pressures from social and economic change, the religious disputes of the Reformation, and problems of royal succession; these developments precipitated confrontations that the existing system could not manage. Limiting royal authority mattered less by the mid-1600s than the need for a strong state that could contain civil strife during an era of religious and dynastic war.

The French model. France under Louis XIV, with its centralized royal bureaucracy, defined absolutism. It became a model of a successful state that other European courts emulated through the eighteenth century. Mobilizing and sustaining large armies had already expanded the responsibilities of royal officials in France at the expense of both local institutions and the old military classes, while the failure of the Fronde rebellions of 1648–53 allowed the crown to enforce its own authority more effectively. Alexis de Tocqueville later claimed that provincial assemblies throughout Europe remained closed to the spirit of the age with their defense of feudal privileges, and where they “preserved their old constitutions unchanged, they hindered the progress of civilization more than they helped.”¹⁴ His description reflected common assumptions of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. French kings did not call an Estates General after 1614, and the Marquis de Torcy rejected the idea of summoning one in 1712 because such assemblies inevitably led to trouble.¹⁵

¹²Michael A. R. Graves, *The Parliaments of Early Modern Europe* (London: Longman, 2001), pp. 1–2, 13–15.

¹³Ibid., p. 35; Jeremy Black, *Kings, Nobles and Commoners: States and Societies in Early Modern Europe* (New York: I. B. Taurus, 2004), pp. 2–3.

¹⁴Alexis de Tocqueville, *The Old Regime and The Revolution*, François Furet and François Mélonio, eds., vol. I (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), p. 104.

¹⁵Jeremy Black, *Eighteenth-Century Europe* (New York: St Martin's Press, 1990), p. 370. Torcy was not only France's foreign minister, but also the son of Louis XIV's finance minister and advisor Jean-Baptiste Colbert, who had been an architect of French absolutism.

Absolutism met challenges that had undermined the earlier partnership between rulers and estates, but it lacked the strong institutional framework Huntington identified as necessary for a nation to withstand the stresses of modernization. Resources came in fits and starts, and the monarch's lack of steady income had wider political consequences that grew over time. However, absolutism still worked well enough in the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries to offer an appealing model of efficient royal governance.

The absolutist state proved more fragile than it seemed. Rulers beyond France attempted to turn old institutional forms to modernizing ends that enhanced their own power, especially under "cameralist" regimes in Central Europe during the 1700s.¹⁶ Corporate approaches to privilege encouraged resistance to centralization, as people regarded society in terms of distinct groups with specific privileges and functions rather than as citizens all equally subject to the state. Provincial estates served as institutional barriers to central authority and as signifiers of identity even where they retained only limited powers. A living constitutionalism sustained by the defense of local rights carried greater weight than abstract references to restraints on royal power. Tensions in the Habsburg domains, particularly the Austrian Netherlands, worsened under Joseph II in the 1780s when localities resisted administrative reforms that collided with local customs and liberties. Concessions by Joseph and Leopold II in 1790 that quelled the revolt highlighted absolutism's limits even before the crisis of the French state metastasized into a revolution that shook Europe.

The British model. Britain offered a different model, where representatives in Parliament bolstered effective partnership between royal government and social elites; parliamentary government there had solved the problems that brought absolutism elsewhere. England's parliament, which absorbed the Scottish parliament with the Act of Union in 1707, was more deeply entwined in government than its counterparts. Along with the exclusion of Roman Catholics from succession to the crown after 1688, limited toleration among Protestants facilitated cooperation and contained religious conflicts that had poisoned earlier decades. Foreign threats from France and the potential for a dynastic challenge by the Stuart pretenders acted as incentives through the 1760s for cohesion among the elite. Britain acquired the main features of a fiscal military state between 1688 and 1714, as a parliamentary regime able to secure resources through consensual taxation and the floating of long-term debt. The government conducted business through the House of Commons, facilitating executive accountability and

¹⁶Cameralism involved the planned application of state power from above to foster economic and social development that would expand both available resources and the reach of the state itself.

elite consensus.¹⁷ High politics at Westminster operated in parallel with a vibrant local politics in the boroughs and shires, and politicians derived much of their authority from local support. The fact that so much time and money went to managing public opinion within the constituencies, notwithstanding the prevalence in elections of bribery and corruption, suggests the degree to which governance rested on consent and accommodation. Britain had greater public political involvement than countries on the continent because its system allowed greater opportunities to express views and compete for influence.¹⁸ Although complex and unwieldy, the system had the strength and flexibility to weather crises that shook Europe from the 1780s onwards.

Public Opinion and Political Culture

The way government accommodated public opinion during the ancien régime to a large measure defined the wider political culture. Public opinion became a recognized political category in the wake of the pressures that established Europe's ancien régime. The term carried different meanings, however, depending upon context.

Public opinion in France. Jean-Jacques Rousseau understood public opinion as a social category summarizing “the opinion of others in society” and involving “a collective judgment in matters of morality, reputation, and taste.” Rousseau’s view framed public opinion’s meaning in French discourse. The financier Jacques Necker later defined it as “‘the spirit of society,’ the fruit of the continual communication among men.”¹⁹ Public opinion involved an ongoing discussion that produced generally accepted judgments. It expanded from determining matters of taste and mores to advancing ideas about government and its affairs. Significantly, it became primarily the domain of elite intellectuals and publicists. A critic in 1767 argued that, while the powerful command, men of letters truly govern because they form opinion, which eventually subjugates every kind of despotism. Rousseau and other French intellectuals defined public opinion in terms of unanimity, viewing the rough give-and-take of Britain’s more boisterous culture as a danger to security, which they saw as an essential precondition for liberty.²⁰ Compromise

¹⁷ John Brewer, *The Sinews of Power: War, Money and the English State, 1688–1783* (New York: Knopf, 1989), pp. 137, 145, and 159.

¹⁸ Frank O’Gorman, *Voters, Patrons and Parties: The Unreformed Electoral System of Hanoverian England, 1734–1832* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), pp. 1–2.

¹⁹ Keith Michael Baker, “Politics and Public Opinion,” in Jack R. Censer and Jeremy Popkin, eds., *The Press and Politics in Pre-Revolutionary France* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), pp. 232–3, 241.

²⁰ J. A. W. Gunn, *Queen of the World: Opinion in the Public Life of France from the Renaissance to the Revolution* (Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 1995), p. 6; Baker, “Politics and Public Opinion,” pp. 233, 224.

stood at a steep discount, and distrust of factions opened a path towards despotism that only became apparent later.

In France, public opinion entered the gap created when the estates general failed to leave an outlet for criticism and discontent. Provincial estates and judicial *parlements* served to advise the crown and occasionally acted as a venue for expressing public opinion, but they had only a narrow focus and role. Public opinion became an abstract source of authority invoked to give the government's policies and actions legitimacy. Because only the king could decide questions on behalf of the community, absolutism did not permit a public politics aside from court politics. Factions within the court or bureaucracy lacked accountability, and during the ancien régime's last decades critics highlighted the theme of secret influence and corruption in their attacks. The notion of government as private royal business made illegal the unauthorized discussion of policy or rendering of advice to the king. All the same, the French crown failed to stop debate, and political contestation forced the government into arguing its own case.²¹ Tensions involving public opinion in France predated the crisis of the late 1780s. While rulers did face the need to acknowledge public opinion, their failure to give it a stabilizing institutional role polarized the ancien régime's political culture.

Just as it had influenced political institutions, France set the pattern for public opinion's development in much of continental Europe. Over the eighteenth century a bourgeois public sphere developed across Europe that brought individuals together beyond the supervision of the state, but it relied largely on the circulation of printed matter rather than on direct interaction or open debate.²² The structure that followed from this dependence on print culture limited the public sphere's participation and operation. Goethe noted that the dispersal of literary men throughout Germany made personal contact or direct exchange of ideas rare.²³ France's more centralized culture differed from Germany's. Tocqueville described it as the one country whose people above the masses had become more alike and where the capital set the tone for the provinces. In both cases, however, a print culture dominated by intellectuals set the terms for public opinion.

While Paris had a lively print culture in the period before 1789, few pamphlets or other publications initiated from elsewhere in France.²⁴ Diverse views on politics existed, but by the late 1780s the ideas that had sufficient traction to shape opinion and real political options largely followed Paris's

²¹ Baker, "Politics and Public Opinion," pp. 209–13.

²² For an overview, see Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1989), and "The Public Sphere: An Encyclopedia Article (1964)" *New German Critique* 1.3 (1974), pp. 49–55.

²³ Norbert Elias, *The History of Manners: The Civilizing Process*, vol. I (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978), p. 28.

²⁴ Tocqueville, vol. I, pp. 147–9.

lead. Men of letters who set themselves as arbiters of public opinion effectively operated as outsiders, working apart from the political system and at odds with its rulers, a pattern that fostered a destructive culture of critique. Disengaged from practical concerns and lacking a political role, public opinion tended to act as a negative force that turned on society itself. The flawed relationship between public opinion and the late Enlightenment state created a self-destructive political culture that drove politics toward extreme solutions.

Public opinion in Britain. Public opinion played a far different role in Britain's political culture. Where the *philosophes* abhorred the turbulence of British politics, Englishmen took its robust disputation as a given. The concept of public opinion had a firm place in British political language by 1700, with various terms used to describe the people's voice on political matters. Phrases like "general opinion" and "opinion of the people" recurred in parliamentary debates. Political practice rather than philosophical reflection shaped British understandings of public opinion.²⁵ Legitimacy derived from parliament itself, but politicians still bid for support "out of doors" to bolster their positions. Interest groups pressured the government, particularly on commercial policy or taxation, and several governments withdrew measures in response to popular agitation.

The British press influenced public opinion in ways ranging from whipping up partisan fury to engaging policy at a sophisticated level. War and political controversy expanded the newspaper press in the 1750s. Circulation of successful papers grew rapidly in the late 1700s, and numerous attempts to start new ones indicate an expanding, if highly competitive, market. Close coverage of parliamentary debates by the newspapers tied parliament into a broader discourse that extended beyond the political elite or educated classes. Readership exceeded the number of copies sold, and newspapers became valued items that neighbors shared and that taverns and coffee houses used to attract patrons. Foreigners commented on the depth and breadth of political discussion, which included plebeians along with the educated and propertied classes. Magistrates feared the potential for popular discontent, especially after 1791, when the implications of the French Revolution raised fears among the elite. The radical publicist William Cobbett thought that cheap papers gave wives and children a potent means of influencing husbands and fathers. Periodicals, including famous reviews that followed the founding of the *Edinburgh Review* in 1802, were firmly grounded in empiricism and political engagement. Their articles engaged important books and pamphlets along with parliamentary debates, sparking further debate in newspapers and public discussion. A vibrant and diverse press encouraged Britain's public sphere to extend beyond print culture and engage the wider society.

²⁵ J. A. W. Gunn, *Beyond Liberty and Property: The Process of Self-Recognition in Eighteenth-Century Political Thought* (Kingston and Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1989), pp. 263, 261.

Parliamentary elections also shaped the development of British public opinion. The electoral system focused attention on constituencies, where local elites competed for support that established their position in the metropolitan political world dominated by parliament. Electioneering preoccupied nearly all politicians, even those in the House of Lords, and elaborate systems of professional agents and election committees managed the process. Participation by non-voters, including women and plebeians, indicated how campaigns appealed beyond the electorate to the community as a whole. Neglecting constituents opened the way for rivals to mount a challenge or win voters to their side, and contested elections were rowdy affairs that sometimes brought unrest and ruinous expense for candidates. Elaborate rituals governed the process, mediating relations between elites and population in a way that showed the limits of elite authority, and elections tested the standing of a candidate or his patron within the constituency.²⁶

After 1800, British observers acknowledged public opinion as a major force, particularly as provincial interest groups become more engaged with national issues. A Tory pamphleteer noted that public opinion and the press exerted an influence over parliament that prevented ministers from imposing truly unpopular measures. Henry Brougham, a Whig politician and publicist, concurred by describing press reports of parliamentary debates as the only check on ministerial actions. Amid agitation in 1821, the Tory minister Sir Robert Peel privately questioned whether “public opinion” had not become more liberal than the government and consequently insisted on a greater voice in policy.²⁷ Francis Jeffrey saw openness to outside influence by constituted authority as the measure of whether a government could be seen as good or bad. Where institutions failed to either represent public opinion effectively or convince rulers that they indeed represented it, he predicted that “even in the most civilized and intelligent countries, the most hazardous and tremendous distractions may ensue.”²⁸ The French Revolution had recently pointed to such consequences, indicating the need to integrate public opinion with governance.

William Mackinnon’s more elaborate overview in *On the Rise, Progress and Present State of Public Opinion in Great Britain and Other Parts of the World* (1828) stressed the role of the middle classes in political development. Noting the increasing power of public opinion, he concluded that its influence

²⁶ Frank O’Gorman, “Campaign Rituals and Ceremonies: The Social Meaning of Elections in Britain, 1780–1860,” *Past and Present* 135 (1991), and *Voters, Patrons, and Parties*, p. 238.

²⁷ John Ranby, *An Inquiry Into the Supposed Increase of the Influence of the Crown* (London: Hatchard, 1811), p. 45; Henry Brougham to Leigh Hunt [no date] (1812), British Library Additional Manuscripts 38108; Peel to John Wilson Croker, Mar. 23, 1821, *The Croker Papers: The Correspondence and Diaries of John Wilson Croker*, Louis J. Jennings, ed. (London: John Murray, 1885), vol. II, p. 170.

²⁸ Francis Jeffrey, “Leckie on the British Government” *Edinburgh Review*, Nov. 1812, pp. 239, 331.

depended upon citizens' affluence and education. Economic growth and the expansion of the middle classes joined with the spread of education to give public opinion greater weight and thereby promote a liberal political order. Mackinnon equated public opinion with the educated, respectable middle classes. Virtue gave those classes weight, and Mackinnon stressed "a proper religious feeling" along with information as a guarantor of liberty. He carefully distinguished between "clamor" and "opinion," with the former driven by passion rather than reason and tending to foster instability. By sacrificing the upper and middle classes, the French Revolution had thrown that country to the passions of the mob and eventually despotism. Mackinnon stressed the social, cultural, and institutional context for public opinion, contrasting the England of his day with Turkey. Were the Turks to adopt middle-class ways, "then would public opinion have its influence, and despotism fall."²⁹ His interpretation of the relationship between the educated middle classes and a liberal political order remains timely today.

The Emergence of Parliamentary Liberalism

A general pattern of institutional failure pushed Europe's ancien régime into a general crisis in the late eighteenth century. Governments failed to forge consensus or mobilize adequate resources within the structure of the existing order. The French Revolution marked only the most prominent case, alongside upheaval in Sweden, the Netherlands, and the Habsburg domains. Despite the protections of wealth and geography, Britain faced the strains of war and industrialization, but it managed to accommodate change within its constitutional order by bringing representative government and public opinion together. Parliamentary liberalism tamed democracy and avoided revolution, making it a model for other societies in transition.

Britain began with a stronger and more flexible system than its European counterparts, but tensions existed below the surface. Since no new seats had been created in the House of Commons since the Tudors and Stuarts, representation reflected patterns that preceded eighteenth-century population growth and the industrial revolution. New interests found themselves pitted against entrenched rivals with either monopolies or close ties to vested interests in London. After 1770, non-Anglican Protestants felt excluded to an even greater degree as the Hanoverian regime moved closer to the Church of England. Distinct provincial identities, particularly in the North and Midlands, underpinned new economic interests that challenged vested metropolitan institutions. Groups like the Yorkshire Association and the General Chamber of Manufacturers, established in 1779 and 1785, respectively,

²⁹ Mackinnon, *On the Rise, Progress, and Present State of Public Opinion in Great Britain and Other Parts of the World* (London: Saunders and Otley, 1828), passim.

set a trend, and the expansion of an articulate provincial press promoted their efforts. Where London and the borough of Westminster had once led extra-parliamentary opinion, provincial interests with their own distinct perspectives now demanded a greater voice.

Few observers in 1800 would have predicted the political structure that would follow from the 1832 Reform Act, with organized, popularly supported national parties alternating in power. Britain effectively operated as a one-party state under the Tories from the 1760s to the 1820s. However, the Whigs had recast themselves by 1830 into a credible governing party with support from provincial groups that allowed them to gain power and reform parliamentary representation in 1832. Both the Whig revival and the consequent development of parliamentary liberalism came from the struggle for power. Henry Brougham responded to his party's marginalization by building an alliance between the political heirs of Charles James Fox and provincial interest groups that he cemented through a series of election contests and parliamentary campaigns to secure legislative change. He thus transformed a faction of aristocratic, metropolitan followers of Fox into a national party that dominated British politics until 1886.

The need to reconcile competing groups within a wider constitutional system shaped Victorian political culture. Liberals would later make overtures to new groups as the political nation expanded over the course of the nineteenth century. The struggle for power before 1832 fueled the development of a party system as changes in representation produced a closer balance in the House of Commons. This balance made ministers increasingly reliant on party support. With general elections now determining a government's tenure, Whigs and Tories built more sophisticated means to coordinate electioneering, including centralized party organizations. Huntington's view of modernization as the expansion of the political order beyond metropolitan elites, thereby producing institutions that more effectively link government with the governed, aptly describes the emergence of parliamentary liberalism.³⁰

The Spread of Parliamentary Liberalism

France and the United States both underwent major changes in the same years as Britain. Economic stagnation in France during the late 1820s undermined the stability of the Bourbon Regime, which had been restored in 1815, and the political system afforded only limited opportunity for the young and ambitious. A society with 70 percent of the population under 40 had a political system with high property qualifications and a minimum age of 40 to sit in the Chamber of Deputies, and a vibrant press became the main outlet for opinion. Since France lacked experience with representative government,

³⁰ Huntington, *Political Order*, pp. 140–7.

liberal writers and politicians who sought a balanced order, such as Benjamin Constant, François Guizot, and Adolphe Thiers, looked to Britain. Some had ties with the Whigs and closely followed periodicals like the *Edinburgh Review*. The architects of the July Revolution of 1830, which overthrew the Bourbons, aimed to replicate Britain's Glorious Revolution of 1688, which they saw as a painless transition to parliamentary government.³¹

While the institutional framework in the United States differed greatly from Britain's parliamentary monarchy, particularly with respect to federalism, similar patterns emerged with the nationalization of politics during the Jacksonian era. State and local politics operated largely in parallel, with a national competition dominated by elites. The struggle between Andrew Jackson and his opponents expanded popular engagement in national politics. Beyond the populist symbolism of Jackson's election in 1828, the political machine that backed his campaign marked an institutional shift. Martin Van Buren extended structures developed in New York to much of the nation, connecting national party structures with local and state political networks that supported party candidates and allocated patronage. His organizing efforts also created a denser network to support party activity between elections. During the crisis over the 1832 Reform Act, Van Buren served as minister to Britain, where he had a close view of political agitation and changes in party organization. Liberal government as it emerged in nineteenth-century Britain persistently held American attention, and several generations of Americans, including Woodrow Wilson in his early years as a political scientist, viewed it as a model for their own country. Many Europeans, though more in Western Europe than beyond the Rhine, took the same approach, and even those who felt threatened by liberal trends after 1814 faced the pressures they generated.

Challenges to Parliamentary Liberalism

Parliamentary liberalism in nineteenth-century Britain operated as both an institution and a political culture to accommodate within a framework of law disputes among potentially incompatible interests. The system could also include new groups that claimed a voice. Lord John Russell had equated "the people" with the middle classes in 1831, but by 1861 he expanded its scope to include the working classes, whom he believed would bring more intelligence to the representation.³² Benjamin Disraeli realized that expanding suffrage would add ballast to the political order by enfranchising working men with conservative sentiments. Extending suffrage later to women, who usually held conservative sentiments, had a similar impact. As early as 1816, the French

³¹ Vincent E. Starzinger, *The Politics of the Center: the Juste Milieu in Theory and Practice, France and England 1815–1848* (New Brunswick: Transaction, 1991).

³² W. E. H. Lecky, *Democracy and Liberty* (Indianapolis: Liberty Classics, 1981 [1896]) vol. I, 18; Parry, pp. 208–10.

nobleman Jean-Baptiste, comte de Villèle, had urged appeals to the lower classes to counter middle-class radicalism. The liberal writer and parliamentarian William Lecky saw an extended suffrage as reaching “below the regions where crotchets and experiments and crude utopias prevail” to a working class of settled habits and “the deep conservative instincts of the nation.”³³ Expanding the political nation could thus stabilize politics and society by broadening the basis of consent.

If extending the political nation built a stable democratic order, failure to accommodate groups or resolve interests threatened it. Parliamentary liberalism broke down when it could not reconcile differences within a framework of law. On the issue of Home Rule for Ireland, when Charles Stuart Parnell’s Irish Nationalist party obstructed parliamentary business to force its agenda, the political system lacked recourse beyond changing its rules to prevent their being used against it. The Irish question split William Gladstone’s government in 1886 and ended the Liberal ascendancy that had shaped British politics since 1830. It also showed that parties had to accept the rules lest pressures stretch the system beyond its breaking point, driving it to curtail minority rights and stifle debate. George Dangerfield described the turbulent years in Britain from 1910 to 1914, when suffragettes, trade unions, and Ulster Protestants threatened extra-constitutional action to force their demands on the nation, as the “death” of liberal England. Instead of pursuing their interests by persuasion, those groups threatened direct action and resistance to constituted authority. The political crises of the 1910s that Dangerfield outlined departed from the general patterns of stability in Victorian and Edwardian Britain, and only ended with the outbreak of World War I. Although Britain avoided revolution, those years showed the fragility of parliamentary liberalism.³⁴

Deeper problems existed elsewhere. Anti-clericalism among liberals in France, Spain, and Germany made the Catholic Church more confrontational. Liberals defined themselves against Catholics, whose church adopted what they considered retrograde positions. Liberal governments excluded key groups rather than bring them into consensus. Catholics then organized themselves against the liberal parties, polarizing the national political culture just as mass democracy was emerging.³⁵ Party systems acquired a confessional or class base, and parliaments became an arena for political theater where pressure or bargaining brought one side to yield grudgingly. Instability followed.

³³ Villèle to his father, Mar. 6, 1816, in Jean-Baptiste Guillaume Joseph de Villèle, *Mémoires et correspondance du comte Villèle*, 2nd ed. (Paris: Perrin, 1904), vol. I, pp. 489–90; Lecky, vol. I, p. 248.

³⁴ George Dangerfield, *The Strange Death of Liberal England* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997).

³⁵ James J. Sheehan, *German Liberalism in the 19th Century* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), pp. 68–9, 136–7, 144.

Late nineteenth-century Italy cast liberal parliamentarianism in a different form than Britain, with public opinion less important than patronage in brokering among interests. Conflict between the Papacy and the Italian state alienated Catholics, while representation in much of Sicily and the Mezzogiorno remained under the control of landowners, who manipulated the system through self-interested political bargaining in Rome. The fact that 20 percent of the population controlled 80 percent of Italy's wealth limited the possibility for a national middle class to provide effective leadership. Italy's politics tended toward deadlock, especially from the 1890s–1920s, making its representative government weak and ineffectual. Italy's history showed that real democracy cannot work in nations with non-functioning parliaments, weak administration, and a public culture dedicated to egotism. Vilfredo Pareto and Gaetano Mosca drew on Italian affairs to develop a profound general critique of parliamentary government, and their analysis gave an intellectual foundation for others beyond Italy to question whether democracy offered a viable order.³⁶

Illiberal Democracy

These historical challenges to parliamentary liberalism highlight a contrast between liberal and illiberal democracy, which contrast remains important today. Liberal democracy allows for the expression of public opinion and reconciling competing interests with the rule of law; illiberal democracy preserves institutional forms while hollowing out the substance of representation and accountability. The democratic order that parliamentary liberalism created was not the only democratic solution to social and economic transformation. Louis Napoleon established the French Second Empire in 1852 through a plebiscite, a different path toward establishing legitimacy. He deliberately appealed to the French peasantry over elites that might check his power. Representation under the Second Empire meant embodying the nation rather than providing voice to its citizens. Decades later, Henry Cabot Lodge would remark that “Wilson’s comprehension of government is that of the third Napoleon, an autocrat to be elected by the people through a plebiscite and no representative bodies of any consequence in between.”³⁷ Lecky noted from the French case that plebiscitary despotism offered “just as natural a form of democracy as a republic,” and warned that “some of the strongest democratic tendencies are distinctly adverse to liberty.”³⁸

³⁶ Vilfredo Pareto, “The Parliamentary Regime in Italy” *Political Science Quarterly* (1893), pp. 677–721; *The Transformation of Democracy* [1921], Charles H. Powers, ed. (New Brunswick: Transaction, 1984), pp. 47–50; Gaetano Mosca, “Parliamentarianism,” in Arthur Livingston, ed., *The Ruling Class* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1965), pp. 244–70.

³⁷ Henry Cabot Lodge to Lord Charnwood, Jan. 24, 1920, Box 66, Lodge Papers, Massachusetts Historical Society.

³⁸ Lecky, vol. I, p. 217.

Populism and the managerial state are two sides of the authoritarianism that developed in response to the perceived inadequacy of parliamentary liberalism. Populist challenges to elites prompt efforts to limit the impact of public opinion, and the consequent lack of accountability sparks a populist backlash. “Populism” covers a range of movements that challenged the existing order, demanding a more direct voice for the people. American progressives saw referenda as a means of bypassing corrupt legislators and strengthening popular sovereignty, but such plebiscites only register votes: they are not a forum for thoughtful debate. Moreover, by shifting attention to the ballot box, referenda absolve representatives from accountability.³⁹ Far from empowering the people, populism strengthens leaders claiming to embody the people in their struggle against elites.

Managerialism solves political deadlock by redefining major decisions as problems for experts rather than the political process. As it developed in the late nineteenth century, business administration in large corporations provided a model for governance. Like populism, the managerial state grew from the perception that representative government had failed, and World War I and the Great Depression raised its appeal in Europe and North America. John Dewey seized upon the word “liberal” as a label for his social reform program and decisively recast its meaning in American political discourse. Liberal concepts that made government a mediator among interests gave way to a preference for direct control. Karl Lowenstein argued that democracy must become “the application of disciplined authority by liberal-minded men, for the ultimate end of liberal government: human dignity and freedom.”⁴⁰ Planning defined the new liberalism after World War II, and the view that benevolent elites with expertise and vision would give the people what the elites thought best for them shaped policy in the United States and Europe. Resistance grew, however, when the failure of grand projects cost institutions and elites their legitimacy.

David Marquand coined the phrase “democratic deficit” in the 1970s to describe the lack of public accountability in the European Community. More recently, the shift of decision-making from national authorities to the European Union brought the EU nations’ citizens a sense “of being governed by *les autres*, which a democratic political class seeks to prevent,” if only to secure order and its own legitimacy.⁴¹ The EU pattern builds on the earlier trends in national politics to gradually undermine civil society and respect for government institutions. European politics since 2001 has seen voters turning to radical parties in a populist backlash that reflects the political establishment’s

³⁹ Zakaria, *Future of Freedom*, pp. 61–3, 187–8.

⁴⁰ Karl Lowenstein, “Militant Democracy and Fundamental Rights” *American Political Science Review*, June 1937, p. 657.

⁴¹ Larry Siedentop, *Democracy in Europe* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001), pp. 119–22; Jonathan Rauch, “Does Democracy Need Voters?” *Atlantic Monthly*, Mar. 2002.

failure to address key issues. A system intended to defuse conflict now promotes it, reinforcing a vicious, anti-democratic circle linking populism and the managerial state.⁴²

Promoting Democracy

Democracy cannot be transferred as a package because it developed organically from a supportive political culture. The problematic history of liberal breakthroughs suggests that few countries will create sustainable liberal democratic regimes without long preparation and development of a sophisticated political culture. Copying superficial aspects of democracy without the whole framework required typically produces illiberal or unsustainable outcomes. Some countries, like Singapore, sustain a relatively liberal order without being a complete democracy. A historical example is the German conception of the *Rechtsstaat* that brought the state within the constraints of law without guaranteeing its subjects' participation. Other authoritarian regimes today, like Egypt, Morocco, and Jordan, restrict their population's opportunity for political activity while limiting the scope of state intervention in personal or economic life. Rather than an absolute polarity between democracy and despotism, politics operates at different levels with a variety of systems.

No easy path to national cohesion and democratic institutions exists in developing nations. Forcing democratization's pace risks unrest, particularly where deep faultlines exist within societies. Both sectarian differences and opposing economic interests can work against the basic level of consensus that democracy requires, and ethnic conflict introduces another volatile factor that often combines with religion and economic disparities. Rapid change and competition for power within a society exacerbates preexisting ethnic tensions, as seen with post-1989 conflicts from Yugoslavia to Rwanda. Populists from Slobodan Milosovic to Robert Mugabe and Hugo Chavez seize upon ethnic resentment as a tool for maintaining their power as leaders of populist movements operating behind a quasi-democratic façade. Whether conflict derives fundamentally from ethnic differences or economic disparities matters less than its impact on stability. Civic patriotism cannot establish a demos without social cohesion and a general agreement on rules for public behavior. Public opinion driven by demagogues or ideology exerts a destructive force.⁴³ Forcing democracy can unleash these forces, defeating its own aims and risking a backlash that can make the world less secure.

Promoting democracy today uncannily echoes the global meliorism that brought profound disillusionment when it failed during the Vietnam War

⁴² Simon Jenkins, "The Peasant's Revolt," *Sunday Times*, June 5, 2005.

⁴³ See Michael Chege, "Africa's Murderous Professors," *National Interest*, Winter 1996/97 for recent examples.

years. Indeed, the Bush administration has qualified its position over the past year when questioned about the specific policies the president envisioned. The current debate between democracy-promoters and skeptics reprises earlier tensions between realist and idealist perspectives. Such cycles typically end with frustrated idealism giving way to a cautious, realist focus on stability and protecting American interests. Besides the impossibility of exporting democracy, the attempt itself distracts resources and attention from other pressing challenges.

A better way for the United States to guide political change abroad would be to reform existing structures and political institutions with the aim of securing a rough balance among competing groups, strengthening them so that they can weather change, and promoting civil society. This approach offers no dramatic results in the short run, but it serves American interests better than the grand project of spreading democracy across the world.

