One fundamental problem of political philosophy has to do with showing why there should be a state and government; this involves justifying the existence of a state. The existence of a state implies in some sense making laws or policies that are inconsistent with what the people will personally want or freely choose to do. The ability of individuals to make free choices is an important aspect of human dignity which should not be violated without a reasonable justification. One part of the enterprise of justifying a state or government requires that we conceptually or theoretically articulate or describe the nature of a set of structures, values, and characteristics of a state or government. On the basis of such description, we can show that the structures are consistent with what people consider justifiable or acceptable. The other part of justifying a state or government may require showing that what we have in reality is an exemplification of the described set of structures, values, and characteristics.

Democracy represents one attempt to justify the existence of a state and government. It involves in a simplistic sense the organization of a state and government by the people or citizenry for the purpose of furthering their own individual interests in the context of the group. But what does it mean to say that there is a government “by the people”? This may be understood to mean a number of things. It may mean that there is direct, active participation in the activities of government by the people. This may take the form of freely, openly, and periodically electing officials to represent people in the activities of the government or state. It may also take the form of people knowing what the issues are with respect to governmental policies, making their voices heard, and participating in the debate of the issues. Thus, the policies of government are said to represent the will of the people to the extent that they incorporate or are sensitive to the people’s interests, views, and concerns.
These meanings of democracy or government by the people imply certain values that are considered a set of characteristics of democracy. These values include a set of rights such as the right to vote; freedom of speech, opinion, and conscience; freedom from indiscriminate coercion and freedom of choice; freedom of the press; and the rule of law that provides safeguards for these freedoms and rights. Embedded in these rights and freedoms is the idea that people are accorded some sense of dignity, which requires that they be treated equally as it relates to these freedoms and rights. We can identify a basic point about the nature of democracy: it is sensitive to or a reflection of the will, interests, views, and concerns of the people—at least the majority. Given this basic point we can identify in the following readings two fundamental theoretical approaches to understanding and justifying democracy. The first is the best outcome approach, and the second is the procedural approach. The best outcome approach argues that the justification of a democracy has to do with the idea that governmental policies provide or have the capacity to provide the best possible outcome that is consistent with the will, interests, views, and concerns of the people. The procedural approach argues that the justification of a democracy is internal to its structures and procedures, in that these structures and procedures reflect the values of fairness, equality, and freedom, which are embedded in the very idea of a government by the people, even if this does not necessarily result in the best outcome.

These two approaches are sometimes seen as mutually exclusive. However, it is pertinent to point out that the two approaches may not indeed be mutually exclusive. A system of government can consistently produce the requisite outcomes of a democracy only if it has the requisite procedures that are particularly geared toward achieving the desired outcomes. If such procedures do not exist we will have to rely on some hope that the system will produce good outcomes, and there will be no basis for the stability of a democratic government aimed at achieving the outcome of being sensitive to people’s views, will, and interests. The fundamental procedures that guarantee certain rights and freedoms are a material condition which determines whether we can achieve some desired good outcomes. These procedures are ways of ensuring fair and just laws and policies that give equal opportunity and consideration to everyone. Not having the appropriate or fair procedures likely to lead to good or fair outcomes is what characterizes a repressive government and distinguishes it from a democracy as a justifiable government.
The following readings address issues about the nature of a democracy and how it can be justified. Jean-Jacques Rousseau describes the nature of a general will and how it may be achieved. He argues that the ability of a democracy to engender the general will justifies it as a good government. Moreover, it resolves the fundamental problem of how we can resolve the conflict between the freedom of the individual to make decisions and the coercion of the government in making sure that its laws and policies are obeyed. So, for Rousseau, the laws and policies of the government are not forced on people as such; instead, they are decisions that people have made by themselves: a reflection of the general will. One of the issues raised about Rousseau’s view is how we can arrive at a general will in a complex state with different and incompatible wills. Joseph Schumpeter argues that the idea of a general will is unrealistic and impossible. The ideas of “representative democracy,” according to John Stuart Mill and J. Roland Pennock, and “majority rule” according to Friedrich Hayek, have been offered as two different but not mutually exclusive ways to arrive at a semblance of what Rousseau tries to capture with the idea of a general will. Since every individual cannot participate in the process of making policy decisions, the notion of representation suggests that people will have to choose representatives to indicate or be responsive to their will. Moreover, the idea of a majority rule says we have to adopt the view that is accepted by a majority as elicited in a voting process, which is an ad hoc way to capture how the will of many may coalesce as a semblance of a general will.

These views raise a number of issues about the justification of a democracy. It is suggested by Carole Pateman and Bernard Boxill that majority rule represents the totalitarianism of a majority over the minority. This is considered inherently unfair to the extent that, for Brian Barry, it does not determine that we will have a good outcome because the majority is not always correct. The idea of majority rule creates a paradox, according to Richard Wollheim: it involves a situation where one is asked to accept a policy against one’s will that is at the same time the policy chosen by the majority in a democratic process. Pateman and Boxill address how a democracy may give voice to women, minorities, and their concerns in a way that preserves the values of equality and fairness. The suggestions regarding how this may be done indicate giving representations to minorities and women. Schumpeter argues that we need to create a set of procedures that will preserve equal opportunity and considerations, that people be allowed to equally participate in government by either contesting for office or making their views
known on issues. In this regard, Peter Singer argues that a democracy is a way or set of procedures by which to arrive at a fair compromise in the face of differences in interests and points of view. One such procedure requires that the issues are made public and that the discussions are open to all; Carl Cohen, for example, believes everyone must be allowed equal opportunity to make a contribution to the discussion.

Polycarp Ikuenobe argues that one of the features of a democracy is that it guarantees freedom of expression, which in turn ensures the ability and opportunity of people to engage in inquiry, to make informed decisions regarding how they should live their lives. Such inquiry not only expands people’s knowledge, but also allows them to apply such knowledge to improve their well-being. This is an essential justification of a liberal democratic system in so far as a justified political system must aim to ensure the well-being of its citizens. For instance, the idea that there is a procedure which allows people to vote means that credence is given to the value of an individual making free and informed choices—the freedom and equal opportunity to inquire and make choices in a way that will lead to their well-being. This means that people’s choices, views, or interests are given consideration and recognition: the procedures are fair to everyone and they allow people to contribute to the discussion of issues and for different views to be recognized. After due recognition is given to all views and interests, what eventually emerges from discussion may be a semblance of a general will; that is, a kind of fair compromise.

These readings raise and address the following questions:

• What is the meaning of democracy or a government “by the people”?
• What does it mean for people to participate in government?
• Can everyone participate in the decision-making process of a government?
• What conditions or structures are necessary for people to adequately participate?
• In what way does democracy enhance freedom of expression and speech?
• How can freedom of speech enhance rational inquiry, education, deliberation, discussions, and debates?
• In what way is democracy also enhanced by freedom of speech, inquiry, discussions, and debates?
• Does “the people” in a democracy mean literally everyone, or the majority?
• Can a government policy be responsive to the views, opinions, and interests of everyone?
• If a democracy means “majority rule,” what happens the interests of the minorities?
• Is majority rule fair? Does it not involve the totalitarianism of the majority?
• Why is majority rule a fairer way of arriving at public policy decisions than other processes?
• Does the fact that everyone cannot participate in government mean that there should be representatives?
• What is the function or role of a representative?
• What conditions are necessary for people to be adequately represented?
• Can we have adequate representation in a culturally plural society?
• Can a person meaningfully represent the views, opinions, and interests of another?
• Is a representative supposed to cater to the true interest or desires of the people being represented? Is a representative supposed to cater to the interest of her constituency or to the national interest?
• What justifies democracy as a reasonable process of making public policy decisions: outcomes or procedures?
• Are the outcomes of a democratic system necessarily just? How can we ensure just outcomes? Can good procedures ensure just outcomes?
• What is unique about democratic procedures that justify democracy as a reasonable system?
• In what ways do democratic procedures allow for equality among people?
• Can people of all races, social classes, and gender be truly equal in a democratic society?
• What can we do to bring about social and political equality in a democratic system?

SUGGESTED FURTHER READING


