



# Liberal Democracy and Its Limits: A Politico-Philosophical Analysis.

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This study sheds light on the philosophical core and practical implementation of the idea of liberalism, emphasizing its limits as a philosophical and political framework. Liberalism, as a school of thought in contrast to authoritarianism, concerned with individual rights, freedom, and equality, has undoubtedly shaped present-time governance and enhanced social structure. However, the analysis laid emphasis not only on its positive side but also delved into its challenges as a whole that arise within liberal ideology. With this ideology, it faces several drawbacks by neglecting the importance of communal values, emphasizing more on individual freedom, and in addressing inequalities. The paper investigates the key critiques from various perspectives, including Marxist, communitarian, and feminist, highlighting the ways in which liberals lay emphasis on individual freedom and pay little attention to the well-being of society as a whole. By addressing these limitations, the study aims to contribute to a more nuanced understanding of liberalism and its role in contemporary political discourse, suggesting pathways for reconciling its principles with broader societal needs.

**Keywords:** *Liberalism, Democracy, Liberal Thought, Liberal Democracy.*



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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Liberal democracy has long been considered a fundamental component of modern political philosophy. With its origins in the principles of equality, individual liberty, and the rule of law, it influenced national political systems and sparked freedom and justice movements all over the world. However, given that its tenets have been put to the test in various sociopolitical circumstances. This analysis initially begins by discussing democracy as a whole, including its definitions, salient characteristics, and guiding

ideals. The origins of liberal democracy are then explored, along with its historical development and the interaction of its liberal and democratic components. The paper also explores the true meaning of liberal democracy, including its accomplishments, real-world applications, and any inherent difficulties or disadvantages in modern administration. By critically examining these facets, this politico-philosophical approach seeks to reveal liberal democracy's advantages and disadvantages, providing a sophisticated grasp of both. Reflecting on the significance of these

findings for the continued viability of liberal democratic systems in tackling contemporary political and societal issues is how the article ends.

## 2. DEMOCRACY: MEANING, DEFINITION AND FEATURES

The term 'Democracy' originated from Greek in the middle of the 5th century. It is made up of two words, i.e., *demos* and *'kratos'*. *Demos* mean 'common people,' and *kratos* means 'strength.' Democracy, then, literally means "power to the people," indicating that the state's citizens have the authority to select the government representatives that best suit their interests.

The term Democracy was defined by different philosophers and politician such as:

**In the words of Abraham Lincoln, Democracy is:**

*"The government of the people, by the people, for the people"*

**J.S. Mill defines:**

*"The whole people or some numerous portions of them, exercise the governing power through deputies periodically elected by them".*

**In his statement John Seely defines Democracy as:**

*"A government in which everyone has a share"*

**A V Dicey defines Democracy as:**

*"Democracy is a form of government in which the governing body is a comparatively large fraction of the entire nation".*

**In the words of Roosevelt:**

*"Democracy was not a mere matter of universal suffrage and unhampered expression of the popular will. It must be a positive and constructive force in the daily lives of the people and provide not merely for political but economic needs also. If men were forced to choose between liberty and bread, they would choose bread".*

From the above definitions we can say that Democracy is a form of government that provides us political equality, freedom and also economic

need. When we call state a democratic state then there are certain principles on which democracy works these are as follows:

### Principles of Tolerance:

Democracy gives people the freedom to express their own beliefs, criticize those of others, and disagree with others on any topic.

- **Individual rights** are yet another crucial democratic tenet. People enjoy social and political equality as well as liberty in every democratic nation.
- **The rule of law** is a prerequisite for the state. The law is obeyed by everyone, including the government. If someone follows the law, they will receive the appropriate punishment.

**Principles of majority rule:** One of the most prominent democratic tenets is majority rule, which states that decisions are taken by the majority while always taking minorities' rights into consideration.

- **Universal suffrage:** The right to vote, also referred to as universal suffrage or common suffrage, allows all residents to express their opinions.
- **Welfare of all:** Democracy protects the weaker members of society and seeks to ensure their well-being. Discrimination on the basis of wealth and poverty, caste, creed, and color is nonexistent.

**Consent principles:** democracy is founded on these principles rather than the question. The most prominent democratic premise is the guarantee of fundamental human rights. Individual rights should not be infringed upon since it guarantees that they will be protected.

## 3. TYPES OF DEMOCRACY:

Democracy is broadly and primarily divided into two types:

- Direct Democracy
- Indirect Democracy

### 3.1. Direct Democracy

A direct democracy is one in which the people make all of the decisions. This includes establishing laws, altering the government, removing representatives, determining road taxes, and more. Although this kind of democracy is

uncommon, Switzerland is regarded as the best example of it. In addition to national votes on all subjects, the Swiss government opposes modifications and demands bills through popular initiatives, voluntary referendums, and forced referendums.

Direct democracy is generally associated with two schools of thoughts:

- Participatory democracy
- Deliberative democracy

According to the first subtype of direct democracy, citizens participate in their government through initiative and referendums. Like the idea of Switzerland, this enables everyone to contribute in a significant way. To create the finest laws and policies for everyone, citizens in the second kind of democracy would discuss reforms and policies among themselves

### 3.2. Indirect Democracy

It is the most prevalent form of democracy in the world, and representatives represent us at all levels, from the legislative and executive to the regional. Indirect democracy has taken many different forms, including the following:

- Parliamentary democracy
- Presidential democracy
- Authoritarian democracy
- Religious democracy

### 3.3. Parliamentary Democracy:

Under this kind of representational democracy, the prime minister and parliament oversee the legislative arm of the government. Although it has less authority, the executive branch is also present in these governments. The United Kingdom has this kind of governance. The Houses of Commons and Lords are the two houses that make up the United Kingdom's parliament. The prime minister and these houses collaborate to enact legislation, monitor government expenditures, and other tasks.

### 3.4. Presidential Democracy:

In this system, the executive branch holds all the authority. The president is chosen by the people to lead the government. But the legislative branch checks and balances the president. This type of government is present in Nigeria and the United States. The president and his cabinets are part of the executive branch. The president has the final say, but all three parts of government—the

legislative, judicial, and executive—work to maintain checks and balances.

### 3.5. Authoritarian Democracy:

under an authoritarian democracy, the government's power is controlled by the wealthy and elite. Although there aren't many examples of this kind of representative democracy, Russia is usually the best fit because it has a legislature and elections, yet the Vladimir Putin administration currently controls the country.

### 3.6. Religious Democracy:

Islamic democracies are the most prevalent example of this kind of democracy. Here, the formulation of policy is guided by Islamic law. This democracy's leader must likewise adhere to Islamic principles. Leaders, however, are chosen by their constituents. Pakistan and Afghanistan are the best examples. Besides, liberal democracy also known as western democracy goes with representative democracy.

## 4. LIBERAL DEMOCRACY: MEANING AND GENESIS

Liberal democracy is the term used to describe how democracy emerged in modern times. The 16th century saw the emergence of liberal democracy as a result of a number of historic events, including the Bourgeois Revolution, the fierce and ongoing debate about the merits of democracy, the British Revolution of 1688, the French Revolution of 1789, and the American War of Independence in 1776 and 1787. Liberal democracy also included many ideals associated with contemporary constitutionalism and liberalism. Therefore, the Bourgeois Revolution is regarded as the most significant event in history, but it wasn't without concerns and discussions about the merits of democracy. Those who support this kind of democracy typically highlight its "consent of the people" because democracy ultimately stands for the consent of the people and how that consent is secured. The subject of obtaining consent was the subject of several discussions.

Particularly in the contemporary era, John Locke discussed natural rights and the people's consent to the government's authority. He discusses individual rights to agree to the government in addition to natural rights, which is crucial for the social contract theory and crucial

for the emergence of liberal democracy. The 16th century saw the rise of the social contract doctrine, which mostly focused on democracy as a means of regulating the government. The fundamental idea of liberal democracy, limited government, is introduced here. Locke (1689/1980) “argued that the right to vote is tied to natural rights, particularly the rights to life, liberty, and property, and that government legitimacy is based on the consent of the governed”. Mill (1861/2008), “in contrast, supported the expansion of suffrage but believed that voting rights should be linked to qualifications like literacy to ensure informed decision-making in a representative government”.

Normally there are two ways at looking at this type of democracy firstly instrumentalist and secondly non-instrumentalist argument. In former way, democracy is seen for the larger good thinker like Locke support this way to protect natural right and another way says democracy is not a means for larger but rather democracy is an end in itself thinker like Rousseau propagates general will i.e. participation of people in politics and obedience to general will is freedom and he is considered as the father of direct democracy. Another aspect is taxation which is considered as the main component of every government. If government through taxation possessed power to expropriate property, citizens were entitled to protect themselves. They can protect themselves by controlling the composition of sites of taxation and taxation is done through legislature i.e. why one of the most famous slogans emerged in modern time “no taxation without representation”. (Paine, 1776) From this slogan the concept of franchise and representation emerged. It is another aspect which we have to know in the contribution of birth of liberal democracy. Later on, radical notion of universal franchise’ initiated by Bentham the utilitarian thinker on the basis of greatest happiness but later on basis of equal value of each interest. This is how the birth of liberal democracy takes place

## 5. WHAT LIBERAL DEMOCRACY IS?

A democratic system of governance in which individual liberties and rights are formally recognized and protected, and the rule of law limits the exercise of political authority.

As the name implies, it developed from liberalism and democracy, with liberal

characteristics appearing first, followed by democratic ones.

### Liberal features in liberal democracy:

- It emphasizes the importance of individual freedom and rights; for example, the United States and other nations guarantee the protection of individual rights.
- One of the most crucial aspects of liberalism present in liberal democracies is tolerance and diversity. Locke discusses this and is recognized for introducing this idea.
- Individual autonomy is one of the most crucial components of liberal democracy. An individual of this type is unencumbered by the ruler of all dominance. Especially devoid of monarchical and hierarchical governmental structures. Popes, churches, and kings used to rule Europe; this is why this feature is taken into account.
- The concept of **limited government** is a cornerstone of liberal democracy, first extensively discussed by thinkers like **John Locke**, who argued for the protection of individual rights and the limitation of state power. “Locke described the state as a ‘necessary evil’ due to human nature, asserting that while people need governance to manage societal affairs; the state's powers should be strictly constrained to avoid tyranny.” (Locke, 1689) Mechanisms such as **constitutionalism**, the protection of **negative rights**, and the **independence of the judiciary** play a key role in limiting the government's scope and ensuring that individual freedoms are safeguarded.
- Procedural democracy: it is the most important element of liberal found in liberal democracy. This type of democracy is usually procedural in nature.
- The concept of choice in liberal democracy refers to the freedom of individuals to make decisions, especially in market societies. It involves the idea of consumers having the freedom to buy and sell goods according to their preferences. “This principle reflects a broader belief in personal freedom and autonomy within an economic context, supporting individual rights and opportunities for self-determination” (Smith, 1776, p. 43).
- **Constitutionalism** is another cornerstone of

liberal democracy. "It emphasizes the rule of law and the establishment of a constitution that limits government powers and protects individual rights. A key aspect of constitutionalism is preventing the **tyranny of the majority**, ensuring that even the majority cannot infringe upon the fundamental rights of minorities" (Locke, 1689, p. 98)

- Finally, "**civil society** plays a crucial role in liberal democracy. It consists of various social organizations and institutions that exist outside of the government, such as non-governmental organizations, pressure groups, and interest groups. Civil society fosters the protection of civil liberties, property rights, and promotes associational life and contractual relationships. These organizations ensure that citizens have a platform to express their interests and can hold the government accountable" (Putnam, 2000, p. 202).
- Now Democratic elements present in liberal democracy.
- Consent: arguably the defining characteristic of democracy, it is founded on the idea of the "consent" of the people. "No taxation without representation" is the most significant slogan of this kind.
- Indirect representatives: the public elects the representative. An electoral democracy is in place. In liberal democracy, it is essential
- Political equality: in the current context, having one person, one vote, and one set of values is crucial. All forms of discrimination based on caste, color, creed, race, religion, etc. are condemned in liberal democracies. Everyone is granted equal rights based on their qualifications and abilities; no one has special rights.
- Liberty is still another crucial component. The foundation of liberalism and democracy is liberty, which includes the right to think and express oneself, to practice any religion and to worship it, to organize into associations, to participate in citizen government, and more.
- Fraternity: when people act like brothers, they are being fraternal. In terms of caste, color, etc., no one is better than anyone other.
- Participation from the public is the key component. Increased participation makes liberal democracy more successful.

"Participation is the principle means through which consent is granted or withdrawn in democracy and rules are made accountable to the ruled," according to Herbert Mclosky, who defined this characteristic. Provisions are made in a democratic system to guarantee maximum involvement.

- By combining the features of these two elements we get the notion of liberal democracy it is defined by different politician and philosopher such as:
- liberal democracy, according to Webster dictionary mean "a democratic system of government in which individual rights and freedoms are officially recognized and protected, and the exercise of political power is limited by the rule of law". (<https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/liberal%20democracy>)
- Liberal democracy according to John Locke means "a system of government based on law. That is created after long consideration by appropriate elected representatives of the people and proclaimed in a way, that all men can become acquainted with them". (Locke, 1689, p. 75)

## 5. PRACTICE OF LIBERAL DEMOCRACY AND ITS DRAWBACK

A country accepts liberal democracy in consideration of the social and economic circumstances that were in place at the time, which not only improves the situation but also contributes to the nation's greater growth and development. Over the past century, numerous nations have embraced this system of governance. Some of them are:

- "Liberal democratic state in Asia: India, Israel, Japan, South Korea, Taiwan
- Liberal democratic state in Europe: Iceland and Switzerland
- Liberal democratic state in Africa: South Africa
- All American country Liberal democratic North: Canada, united States and Mexico
- Liberal democratic state in South America: Argentina, Brazil and Chile". (Doe, 2023)

These are the countries where liberal democracy is practiced and there are certain criteria on which it works such as the right of life and security, freedom from slavery, movement, speech, association and assembly, education and religion. But, when we will see in present scenario, we find there are certain freedoms. These limits include copyright laws and laws against defamation. There may be limits on anti-democratic speech, on attempt to undermine human rights, and the promotion or justification of terrorism. This type of restriction is best suited to United State applied on communist. These restrictions are frequently justified by the necessity to protect their democracy or their freedom in general. For instance, granting freedom of speech to individuals who support mass murder compromises the rights to security and life. There is disagreement over how far democracy can go in order to involve its adversaries in the democratic process. The state can still be regarded as a liberal democracy even if a comparatively small number of citizens are denied these liberties. Some contend that while fewer individuals are impacted and the limitations are less harsh, this is merely quantitatively different from autocracies that persecute their opponents. Others emphasized that, at least in theory, democracy is different and that those who oppose it are entitled to fair process under the law. Democracies, in theory, permit critics to alter political and economic systems as well as leaders.

## 6. CRITIQUE OF LIBERAL DEMOCRACY

Liberal democracy has numerous advantages and disadvantages, many philosophers and thinkers have criticized it for a variety of reasons. Marxists, communists, socialists, and anarchists have cited the following as some of the primary points:

**“Bureaucracy:** A common libertarian and monarchist criticism of democracy is bureaucracy, which is characterized in Herbert Spencer's *The Man Versus the State*” (<https://www.wikipedia.org>) as encouraging elected officials to alter the law without need and, in particular, to enact a plethora of new laws. In every case, this is viewed as harmful. What were once private privileges were now restricted by new legislation. It is challenging for a willing non-specialist to stay law-abiding when rules change

quickly. This could enable police enforcement to abuse their authority.

**Short-term focus:** Since it is done every four or five years, the government primarily prioritizes its own interests over the interests of the general population. Short-term focuses in a democracy may also come from collective short-term thinking, in addition to the regular evaluation of governing bodies. For instance, take into consideration a campaign for laws meant to lessen environmental harm while temporarily raising unemployment. But other political systems are equally susceptible to similar danger.

**Majoritarianism:** The worry that a direct government, representing the opinions of the majority, may act in a way that oppresses a specific minority is known as the tyranny of the majority. Examples of how the majority oppresses minorities include the prohibitions placed on private religious symbols in public schools in several European nations. The opposition views it as a breach of the freedom of religion. This context also mentions how society treats gays, etc.

**Dictatorship of the Bourgeoisie:** “Liberal democracy under capitalism ideology is fundamentally class-based and, as such, can never be democratic or participatory, according to Marxists, communists, some socialists, and anarchists”. (<https://www.wikipedia.org>) Karl Marx argues that it is obvious that society is divided into many classes, and that the corporate classes influence public affairs. The corporate elites control the media and even run the election campaign, which is the worst aspect of democracy. The liberal democracy that results ends, but the so-called government continues to exist because of the enormous benefits that the corporate family receives. Russian politician and revolutionary Vladimir Lenin famously claimed that liberal democracy had only been employed to provide the appearance of democracy while upholding the dictatorship.

**Authoritarianism:** The idea and application of liberal democracy have been contested by numerous scholars and writers, including Peter Baofu. He asserts that liberal democracies have the potential to be more dictatorial than authoritarian governments in some situations. He suggests that liberal democracy should be characterized as “authoritarian-liberal-democratic,” rather than “authoritarian nor liberal democratic.” He goes on

to say that the two do not necessarily have to be "mutually exclusive opposites." Other writers have also clarified how liberal democracies employ authoritarian tactics to uphold economic liberalism and elite control.

**Bureaucracy:** The argument that democracy encourages elected officials to alter the law without cause and, in particular, to enact a plethora of new laws is a common libertarian and monarchist criticism of democracy. The extent of what were once private liberties is becoming more limited due to new laws. It is challenging for a willing non-specialist to stay in compliance with rapidly evolving laws. This leads to the abuse of authority by law enforcement authorities. It was also criticized for making decisions slowly and intricately. The phrase "red tape" generally refers to sluggish bureaucratic operations that impede prompt replies in modern democracies.

**Individual rights:** Liberal democracy emphasizes individual rights, which may lead people to become self-centric and egoistic. Communitarians, such as Charles Taylor, reject this view and argue that we live in a society with certain group identities. Similarly, American sociologist Robert Neelly Bellah criticizes this perspective in his work *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life* (1985), stating that while individual rights contribute to modernization, they also foster an impersonal society (Bellah, 1985, p. 47)

Media People rely on information from print and electronic media, which now includes mobile phones and the internet. The media determines what is newsworthy and uses a variety of techniques to edit and present the material in a way that often suits their preferences. Since individuals base their decisions on the information that political party leaders provide them, the media is essential to liberal democracies. Additionally, it is noted that business families primarily employ the media to support the ruling party government, and as part of their strategy, these media outlets exclusively report stories that support and defend their.

**Ethnic and religious conflict:** The notion and practice of liberal democratic politics seem to be challenged by the ethnic and religious dilemmas that have emerged in western society during the 1980s and 1990s. The emergence of ethnic, cultural, or religious movements among minority groups and the resurgence of overtly

racist and xenophobic attitudes among majority populations are just a few examples of the problems of racial or cultural origin. At the most extreme, separatist movements and claims of self-determination pose a threat to the integrity of federal or nation states. There are also ongoing issues with race relations and the appearance of a so-called multicultural society. Many of these issues have arisen in Western European countries as a result of post-war immigration and the integration of newly arrived and remained ethnic groups. Therefore, multiculturalism emerged as a movement to protect the cultural clash in order to address the concept of this conflict.

"The threat of Populism: It is an ideology which is basically anti – liberal and based around conflict between 'the people' and 'the elites' with the ideology sliding with the people. it is therefore a form of majoritarianism, hindering some of the basic principles of liberal democracy such as the right of the individual".

(<https://www.wikipedia.org>)

## 7. CONCLUSION

In light of the aforementioned facts, we have concluded that liberal democracy, which operates under the framework of classical liberalism, emerged as a response to centuries of oppressive, authoritarian governance, tyrannical communities, and inflexible doctrine. Considering it originated in the western world, this form of democracy is sometimes referred to as western democracy. Because of its advantages, including the protection of individuals, it was taken into consideration. Rights, creating a culture free from prejudice, empowering each person and most importantly, improving the country as a whole.

The effectiveness of liberal democracy depends on how the government and its institutions carry out the various policies outlined in the constitution; if there is any lack of implementation, it can lead to the worst outcomes. However, this does not imply that the government is solely responsible; we, as the nation's citizens, also have obligations. This type of government has several advantages in the current environment, such as lowering corruption, but its drawback is the business class's dominance. At last I just want to end with the quote of Dwight D. Eisenhower "extremes to the right and to the left of any political dispute are always wrong".

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