

Preface

In this book I present and defend a general theory of democracy. Democracy has become the foremost political ideal in all the world. Praised on every hand, equally by those otherwise in fundamental philosophical disagreement, it is professed by some who understand it little and want it less. As a consequence of careless rhetoric, intellectual confusion, and even some deliberate deception, the term “democracy” has been largely drained of its meaning. Applied to almost everything in the sphere of politics, it has come to mean almost nothing.

The loss is serious. Beneath the confusion and the rhetoric lie principles of highest import. There is a philosophy of government properly called democracy; it deserves to be respected and—in many but not all contexts—to be defended. My object is to provide a theoretical account, coherent and reasonably complete, of what democracy is and how it works.

Of course the same word, democracy, can be used to refer to very different things, and very different words can be used to refer to the same thing. Confusions introduced by this flexibility of language must be guarded against, but it is not words that are my chief concern, and it is neither necessary nor desirable to invent a new name for the philosophy I propose to examine. “Democracy” is a good enough word, and the word will behave itself if we will. The task is to explain this philosophy of democracy, to make it plain, so that it can be fully understood and justly evaluated.

The theory to be developed will address the following questions, here put in bluntest form:

First: What is the *nature* of democracy?

Second: What are the *presuppositions* of democracy?

Third: What are the *instruments* of democracy?

Fourth: What are the *conditions* required for the success of democracy?

Fifth: What arguments are to be given in *defense* of democracy?

Sixth: What are the *prospects* of democracy?

Answers to these six questions appear, respectively, in the six Parts of this book.

PREFACE

Three methodological points deserve mention before development of the theory is begun. *First*: reasonable expectations must be maintained regarding the degree of precision possible in this enterprise. Not political science, but political philosophy is the field of exploration. We may hope for accurate and reliable results, but must be prepared for some degree of vagueness and uncertainty. "It is the mark of an educated man," Aristotle notes in the *Nicomachean Ethics* (I, 3, 1094b) "to look for precision in each class of things just so far as the nature of the subject admits."

Second: in exploring the philosophy of democracy, it is not unreasonable to combine commitment and objectivity. In political affairs, strong feelings of loyalty or aversion are natural and healthy. It is entirely possible to harbor such feelings while undertaking a rational assessment of the governmental system (or other entity) that is the object of affection or repugnance. Unavoidably, bias will distort our judgments. But in the study of political philosophies we are all biased, we necessarily view matters from a particular angle or slant. If now there is a widespread bias favoring democracy, we are challenged to take account of that fact in pursuing its study. The difficulty is not insuperable. Nor should we fear that honest inquiry into the theory of democracy may weaken loyalty to it, or respect for it. A full understanding of democracy and how it operates may prove, in fact, a necessary foundation for enduring loyalty and justified respect. Let us follow the argument where it leads. Strengthened commitment to democracy is not the appropriate aim of an objective study of it, but such commitment may be the natural outcome of that study.

Finally: there is no place for dogmatism in this undertaking. An enormous variety of cultural and philosophic traditions have contributed to the development of democratic theory; that theory is the exclusive property of none of them. It is true that philosophic or religious schools of thought agreeing that democracy ought to be defended do not all agree how it ought to be defended. I aim to provide a defense of it that will prove acceptable to all of its supporters, whatever their religious or metaphysical commitments, and an account of democracy generally acceptable to supporters and critics alike.

In doing this I am allowed no recourse to final authorities; there are none for the resolution of disputes about democracy. No book or document provides the final statement of democracy. No existing scripture is theoretically adequate for the purpose, and even if one were it would be certain to meet with opposition from democrats who

Preface

deny its authority. No person or persons, living or dead, however great, are entitled to the last word on the subject. As a theory of human government democracy rests upon no ultimate authority, nor is there any single body of doctrine from which it is necessarily derived. As the examination of the democratic process will disclose, that process itself excludes absolute authorities in its own defense. There may be dogmatic democrats; there can be no democratic dogma.

Fallibilism, therefore, is a principle I consciously adopt. Every human being is subject to error even upon those matters closest and most important to him. No conviction—whatever the subjective certainty with which it is held—is exempt from critical review. The principle of fallibilism applies in every intellectual undertaking; in the study of democracy it is cardinal.

While it is true that our judgments are always subject to mistake, however, they need not always be mistaken. Error and uncertainty are common, yet we may have good reason to believe that in some spheres our errors gradually become less numerous and less grave. Knowledge men now possess, where it is most extensive and most secure, has been acquired not by the recognition of absolute truths, but by the laborious correction of mistakes, and the improvement of uncertain theories. So it is likely to be also with regard to our knowledge and our judgments of democracy.