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## UNIT 21 DIRECT AND PARTICIPATORY DEMOCRACY

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### 21.0 OBJECTIVES

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In this unit, you will learn about direct (ancient) and participatory (modern) democracy. After going through the unit, you should be able to:

- Explain the meaning of democracy;
- Distinguish between its various forms such as direct and participatory;
- Examine the strengths and weaknesses of different forms.

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### 21.1 INTRODUCTION: MEANING OF DEMOCRACY

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Democracy is both a form of government and an ideal, an aspiration and a standard. The core element of democracy is self-rule. The origin of the term democracy can be traced back to ancient Greece. Derived from the Greek word '*demokratia*', it means rule by the people. In the literal sense, it rejects the separation of the two, i.e., between the ruler and the ruled. It is interesting to note that unlike the terms communism and socialism, which have a point of reference in Marxism, democracy has not been associated with a specific doctrinal source or ideology. Infact, it is a byproduct of the entire development of Western civilization and therefore, tends to be used rather loosely. Thus, the history of the idea of democracy is rather complex and is marked by conflicting and confusing conceptions. It is confusing because "this is still an active history" and also because the issues are complex. However, it has been justified and defended on the grounds that it achieves one or more of the following fundamental value or goods like equality, liberty, moral self-development, the common interest, private interests, social utility etc.

### 21.1.1 Various Meanings

Varied meanings have been attached to the word ‘democracy’. Some of them are as follows:

- A form of government in which people rule directly;
- A society based on equal opportunity and individual merit, rather than hierarchy and privilege;
- A system of decision-making based on the principle of majority rule;
- A system of rule that secures the rights and interests of minorities by placing checks upon the power of the majority;
- A means of filling public offices through a competitive struggle for the popular vote;
- A system of government that serves the interests of the people regardless of their participation in political life (Heywood, 1997:66).
- A system of government based on the consent of the governed.

### 21.1.2 Linking Government to the People

From the different meanings that are associated with democracy, one thing that becomes clear is that democracy links government to the people. However, this link can be forged in a number of ways depending upon the larger political culture of that society. Due to this, there have been ideological differences and political debates regarding the exact nature of democratic rule. Nonetheless, any discussion on democracy tends to address three important questions:

- Who are the people
- In what sense the people rule
- How far should popular rule extend (Heywood, 1997:66)

#### Check Your Progress 1

**Note:** i) Use the space given below for your answer.

ii) See the end of the unit for tips for your answer.

1) What do you understand by democracy?

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2) Enumerate some of the various meanings of democracy.

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## 21.2 WHAT IS DIRECT DEMOCRACY?

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Direct Democracy is a form of self-government in which all collective decisions are taken through participation of all adult citizens of the state in the spirit of equality and open deliberations. Deliberations or discussions are important because decisions arrived at through discussions are better informed, logical and rational. This is because discussions allow a group to reconcile different interests, inform members about various issues and draw on the group's expertise. In other words, debates enable people to both influence and to be influenced by the group (Hague et al 1998:20). According to the ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle, the important aspect of direct democracy is the mechanism that "all command each and each in his turn all". It was achieved in ancient Athens through a form of government brought about as a result of a mass meeting. Its modern manifestation is the referendum. 'Gram Sabha', as envisaged in the 73<sup>rd</sup> Constitutional Amendment, is an instance of direct democracy in rural India.

### 21.2.1 Principles governing Direct Democracy

In a direct democracy, therefore, the best decisions can never be arrived at through voting. The principle of direct democracy is to govern through consensus, which emerges from careful deliberations of options or alternatives. In the absence of formal representative institutions, people make decisions themselves through public discussions. In other words, the following principles apply in direct democracy:

- People are sovereign
- Sovereignty is inalienable and cannot be represented
- People must express their general will and make decisions directly through referenda
- Decisions are to be based on majority rule

To sum up direct democracy is based on direct, unmediated and continuous participation of citizens in the tasks of government. It obliterates the distinction between government and the governed and between state and civil society. In direct democracy, state and society become one. It is a system of popular self-government.

### 21.2.2 Merits of Direct Democracy

The merits of direct democracy include the following:

- It heightens the control that citizens can exercise over their own destinies, as it is the only pure form of democracy.
- It creates a better informed and more politically sophisticated citizenry, and thus it has educational benefits.
- It enables the public to express their own views and interests without having to rely on self-serving politicians
- It ensures that rule is legitimate in the sense that people are more likely to accept decisions that they have made themselves.

#### Check Your Progress 2

**Note:** i) Use the space given below for your answer.

ii) See the end of the unit for tips for your answer.

1) What do you understand by direct democracy?

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2) What are the merits of a direct democracy?

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### 21.3 GREEK DEMOCRACY AS DIRECT DEMOCRACY

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The classic example of a direct democracy is that of ancient Athens during the 4<sup>th</sup> century BC. It can be considered as the only pure or ideal system of popular participation known so far. It had a specific kind of direct popular rule in which all-important decisions were taken through mass meetings. The Assembly or *Ecclesia* to which all citizens belonged made all major decisions. This assembly met at least 40 times a year to settle issues put before it. When full time public officials were required, they were chosen on the basis of lots. This process was adapted to ensure that they were a part of the larger body of citizens. The posts were, however, not fixed and were rotated in quite a frequency so that all citizens gained experience in the art of governing and thus, tried to achieve the broadest possible participation. A council consisting of 500 citizens acted as the executive or steering committee of the assembly and a 50 strong committee in turn made proposals to the council.

#### 21.3.1 Athenian Democracy: Reasons for its Fame

It is important to understand what made Athenian democracy so remarkable. Athens, in fact, symbolized a new political culture enfranchising the whole citizenry. The citizens not only participated in regular meetings of the assembly, but they were in large numbers, prepared to undertake the responsibilities of public office and decision-making. Formally, citizens were differentiated on the basis of rank and wealth in their involvement in public affairs. The *demos* held sovereign power, i.e., supreme authority to engage in legislative and judicial activities (Held, 1987:17). The Athenian concept of citizenship entailed taking a share in this function, participating directly in the affairs of the state.

Athenian democracy was marked by a general commitment to the principle of civic virtue which actually meant commitment and dedication to the republican city-state, the subordination of private life to public affairs and the achievement of common good. In other words, there was no separation of public and private life and individuals

could attain self-fulfillment and live an honorable life “in and through the polis”, i.e. the city-state. For example, citizens had rights and obligations but not as private individuals, rather as members of the political community. There were, thus, public rights and good life was possible only in the polis. Thus, according to Robert Dahl, “In the Greek vision of democracy, politics is a natural social activity not sharply separated from the rest of life. Rather political life is only an extension of and harmonious with oneself”. (Dahl, 1989:18). It seems that the Athenians believed in a “free and open” political life in which citizens could develop and realize their capacities and skill and the *telos* (goal or objective) of the common good. And justice meant securing and realization of the citizen’s role and place in the city-states (Held, 1987: 18).

**21.3.2 Aristotle’s ‘The Politics’**

We find the most detailed and remarkable account of ancient democracy in Aristotle’s famous work *The Politics* which was written between 335 and 323 BC. His work analyses the claims, ethical standards and aims of democracy and states distinctly, the key features of a number of Greek democracies. According to him, liberty and equality are linked together, particularly if you claim to be a democrat. Without the existence of one, the other is difficult to achieve. There are two criteria of liberty: a) to rule and in turn being ruled, and b) living as one chooses. If one wants to execute the first criterion as an effective principle of government, it is necessary that all citizens are equal. Without numerical equality, it is not possible for the majority to be sovereign. Numerical equality here means that everyone has an equal share in the art of ruling. The classical or the earlier democrats felt that numerical equality was possible to achieve because a) citizens are paid for their participation in government and therefore, are not losers because of their political involvement, b) citizens have equal voting power and c) in principle, everyone has an equal opportunity to hold office. In a nutshell, what we can understand from this is, that equality is the practical basis of liberty and it is also the moral basis. Thus, on the basis of Aristotle’s account, classical democracy including direct democracy entails liberty and liberty entails equality.

**Check Your Progress 3**

**Note:** i) Use the space given below for your answer.

ii) See the end of the unit for tips for your answer.

1) Why is the Athenian Democracy considered remarkable?

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2) Briefly examine Aristotle’s views as given in ‘The Politics’.

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## 21.4 LIMITATIONS OF DIRECT DEMOCRACY

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A distinctive feature of direct democracy as practiced in ancient Athens was its exclusivity. The City-State was marked by unity, solidarity, participation and a highly restricted citizenship. As mentioned before, there was no separation between public and private life and even though state and government were inextricably linked with the lives of the citizens, it only involved a small section of the population. It is interesting to note that the Athenian political culture was an adult male culture, i.e. only men over the age of 20 years were qualified to become citizens. It was a democracy of patriarchs in which women had no political rights and even their civic rights were strictly limited. There were also other types of residents who were ineligible to participate in formal proceedings; like ‘immigrants’ who had settled in Athens several generations earlier, but were not the original inhabitants. However, the slave population constituted, by far, the most politically marginalized people. Here, what we find is that ‘political equality’ as practiced in Athens did not mean ‘equal power’ for all. It was rather a form of equality that was applicable to those having equal status and in the Athenian context, it was meant for only males and Athenian born. Thus, many were a minority of the larger citizenry (Finley, 1983). Unquestionably, the politics of ancient Athens rested on a highly undemocratic base.

### 21.4.1 Flaws of Athenian Democracy

What we can conclude from the above description is that democracy practiced by ancient Athens had serious flaws. If modern democracy is based on the market economy, Athens was a democracy built on slavery; the labour of slaves created the time for the citizen elite to participate. The lack of permanent bureaucracy contributed to ineffective government, leading eventually to the fall of the Athenian republic after defeat in war. It is interesting to note that the most influential critic of this form of democracy i.e. direct democracy was the philosopher Plato. Plato attacked the principle of political equality on the grounds that the masses are not made equal by nature and therefore, cannot rule themselves wisely. This is because they possess neither the wisdom nor the experience to do so. The solution, according to him, as stated in his famous work *The Republic* was that the government be placed in the hands of a class of philosopher-kings, the Guardians, whose rule would be something similar to what can be called enlightened dictatorship. At a practical level, however, the principal drawback of Athenian democracy was that it could operate only by excluding the mass of the population from political activity. This was possible only in small city-states with limited populations and not in larger modern democracies with bigger populations as they exist today. Despite its flaws, the Athenian model was crucial in establishing the democratic principle. According to Finer, “The Greeks invented two of the most potent political features of our present age: they invented (a) the very idea of citizen as opposed to subject and (b) they invented democracy.

#### Check Your Progress 4

**Note:** i) Use the space given below for your answer.

ii) See the end of the unit for tips for your answer.

1) Discuss the limitations of a direct democracy. Give a suitable example.

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## 21.5 DIRECT DEMOCRACY IN MODERN TIMES

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The classical model of direct and continuous popular participation in political life has been kept alive in certain parts of the world, notably in township meetings of New England in the USA and in communal assemblies which operate in smaller Swiss cantons. The most common method used in recent times is referendum as compared to the mass meetings of ancient Athens. Referendum is a vote in which the electorate can express a view on a particular issue of public policy. It differs from an election in that the latter is essentially a means of filling a public office and does not provide a direct or reliable method of influencing the content of a policy. A device of direct democracy, referendum is used not to replace representative institutions, but to supplement them. They may either be advisory or binding; they may also raise issues for discussions (propositions or plebiscites).

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## 21.6 LET US SUM UP

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Broadly speaking, the term democracy means rule by the people. However, varied meanings have been associated with it over a period of time. Debates about the nature of democracy have tended to focus on three important questions. First, to what extent should political power be distributed. Secondly, should the people in effect rule themselves or should the government be left in the hands of elected representatives. Thirdly, is it appropriate to decide collectively through the use of democratic process? In direct democracy as originated and practiced in ancient Greece, citizens make decisions themselves, without representative institutions. This interpretation stresses the value of public discussion, both for the participants and for the quality of decisions. This model of democracy has serious limitations and, therefore, is not a popular form of government in modern times.

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## 21.7 SOME USEFUL REFERENCES

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Dahl, R., *Democracy and Its Critics*, New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1989

Finley, M.I., *Politics in the Ancient World*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983.

Hague R. et. al., *Comparative Government and Politics: An Introduction* London: Macmillan Press, 1998

Held David, *Models of Democracy*, Oxford: Polity Press; Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996.

Heywood Andrew, *Politics*, London: Macmillan Press, 1997

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## 21.8 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS EXERCISES

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### Check Your Progress 1

- 1) See Section 21.1
- 2) See sub-section 21.1.1

**Democracy**

**Check Your Progress 2**

- 1) See Section 21.2
- 2) See sub-section 21.2.2

**Check Your Progress 3**

- 1) See sub-section 21.3.1
- 2) See sub-section 21.3.2

**Check Your Progress 4**

- 1) See Section 21.4