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4.2 Indirect Democracy

PLEASE NOTE: This book is currently in draft form; material is not final.

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

In this section, you will learn:

1. What a republic is.
2. The different kinds of republics.
3. Alternatives to republican forms of government.

Republics

The problems and opportunities of direct democracy haven’t changed in 3,000 years of written history. At best, they empower the people to make needed changes. At worst, they put important decisions directly in the hands of people who may get carried away by the passion of the moment, or simply aren’t paying enough attention.

How then do we create a government that both gives people a voice but still manages to let government be run by folks who are at least paying attention? The answer for some has been the republic. In a **republic**, strictly speaking, people elect others who make decisions on their behalf. When you consider that even in ancient Athens, the assembly of 6,000 still elected a council of 500, you see that most democratic governments have included some features of a republic. Because they typically let a broad range of citizens vote, we might call them **democratic republics**, but as that term was used by so many erstwhile communist states, “democratic republic” can have multiple meanings.

Republics are designed to put a check on the passions of the people, which can make

them seem remote and unresponsive. The designers of the U.S. Constitution did not see themselves as “democrats,” as democracy to them, from their reading of history, looked like rule by the mob. The party of Thomas Jefferson and James Madison, which eventually became the Democratic Party, originally called themselves Republicans (in some texts, they are referred to as “Democratic-Republicans,” but they apparently never referred to themselves as such). Hence the many layers of government, and checks and balances, that one finds in various republics—all designed to slow the whole process down.

This, of course, can be maddening if what you want is government to do something—anything—make a change. On the other hand, making government work more slowly, forcing the governors to deliberate and discuss, isn’t lacking in virtue either. Governments are full of people, and people are simultaneously capable of flights of inspiration and genius as well as complete foolishness. So in a republic, the goal tends to be to stop things from happening as much as it is to make things happen. What we also hope for in republics is that an idea that becomes a law is hammered, recut and welded until the idea is so compelling that everyone says yes.

Of the 192 recognized sovereign nations in the world, only about 10 are not some kind of republic, in which people vote for representatives who in some way make up the government. Not everyone is called a republic—there are around 40 constitutional monarchies, in which they still have a king or queen who remains head of state in a ceremonial role. The United Kingdom, Spain, Norway and Sweden are constitutional monarchies. Despite the presence of a monarch, it is the people who are elected to office who make the real decisions.

In some republics, such as the United States, power is divided between executive, legislative and judicial branches. In other countries, such as Canada and the United Kingdom, the legislative branch (parliament) holds both legislative and executive power.

A handful of states call themselves republics, and also still call themselves communist, such as China and Vietnam, which should be an oxymoron. Republics rely on elections, and communism does not allow meaningful elections.

True republics are distinguished by elections, in which people seek office and citizens decide by voting who gets in office. A republic also features an elected legislature, such as an assembly, a congress or parliament, whose job it is to make laws. A republic may have a separately elected president, or a prime minister who is chosen from the majority party in parliament. Some parliamentary republics also have a separately elected president, whose job is largely ceremonial.

Some republics are categorized as **illiberal democracies**. They have elections, which aren’t necessarily free and fair. They tend to have less meaningful preservation of civil rights and liberties. They also tend to control the media. Russia tends to be the prime example of such a state. People who oppose sometime president, sometime prime minister Vladimir Putin keep ending up in jail. Singapore is sometimes considered an illiberal democracy, because a single party tends to dominate the government and citizens there lack some civil liberties. Mexico was an illiberal republic for much of the 20th century, as the Institutional Revolutionary Party (the PRI, in its Spanish-language acronym) dominated elections, even when they probably weren’t winning.

Some are in between the parliamentary and president/congress models. France is a **semi-presidential republic**. Power is divided between executive, legislative and judicial

branches. But the president shares some powers with the prime minister, who represents the majority party in the French parliament and is appointed by the president. This is no problem if the president and the majority in the National Assembly are from the same party, and quite a bit trickier if they're not. The president can dissolve the assembly and call for new elections, but if the new elections don't change the balance of power, the president can expect to have an even more difficult time with an assembly dominated by his or her opponents. (And if that wasn't enough complexity, there's an appointed constitutional council to rule on the constitutionality of new laws.)

Other Forms of Government: Monarchy

Monarchy means rule by a monarch, a king, a queen, a sultan—whatever title fits the language and tradition of that country. As we just noted, most monarchies that remain in the world—around 40, depending on who's counting—are constitutional monarchies, in which someone maintains the title and the job of "head of state" but all real political power rests with some elected portion of government, such as a parliament or other-named legislative body. For example, in 1892, William Gladstone was chosen as prime minister (head of government of Great Britain) when his Liberal Party won a majority in the House of Commons. Queen Victoria (1819-1901) didn't like Gladstone (who had qualms about Britain's growing empire, and the queen found herself liking this idea of empire more and more as it grew), but she was effectively bound by law to name him prime minister.

Four nations in the world (Brunei, Oman, Qatar and Saudi Arabia) are still absolute monarchies. In several states states, Swaziland, Kuwait, Bahrain and the United Arab Emirates, are mixed, in which the monarch shares some power with elected officials. In each of these countries except Kuwait, legislative bodies are partially elected and partially appointed by the monarch. In Jordan, Morocco, Monaco and Lichtenstein, the monarch still plays an active role in government. You will note that aside from Lichtenstein, Swaziland and Monaco, are all these are Middle Eastern states, most of which are relatively wealthy from oil.

Consider Saudi Arabia. It may be the only state in the world that is named after its ruling family, the Sauds. Adul-Aziz Ibn Saud created the kingdom by force in 1932, and his descendants have ruled ever since. Normally, royal succession proceeds from generation to generation; the kings of Saudi Arabia to date all have been brothers. Abdul-Aziz ibn Saud had 22 wives, and 37–45 sons (estimates vary). As a consequence, he is survived by about 15,000 family members, including 2,000 more-or-less direct descendants who help run the country. It was only in 2006 that the ruling family agreed that subsequent kings would by chosen by a council of 32 top-ranking family members, who are to consider the skill, experience, popularity and religious sentiments of eligible candidates.

How does this all work? Saudi Arabia has 13 provinces, all governed by royal princes (of whom there may be as many as 7,000). Royal family members hold all of the top offices, such as head of defense, foreign relations, and minister of the interior. The king is both head of state and head of government.

We might also ask how such a state maintains legitimacy. Public protests against the government are officially banned, and the royal family justifies its rule as sanctioned by the Quran, the Moslem holy book. In fact, Abdul-Aziz ibn Saud gained power in part by allying himself with leaders of the Wahabbist/Salafi sect of Islam, thus adopting a fairly strict interpretation of the Quran. Religious authorities still have a great deal of influence

on government and policy. Women can’t vote, but then again, not much of anybody else can either. The country had local elections in 2005 and 2011, and King Abdullah has said that women will be able to run for office and vote in local elections in 2015.

Legitimacy comes in part through the elevation of faith; the Quran and other holy documents are regarded as the national constitution. Some public participation in governance is possible through the court system, in which separate court systems deal with religious matters (the Sharia courts), grievances, and local matters. The government also maintains some of its tribal heritage, in that anyone can petition the king to discuss a grievance, and members of the royal family are regularly employed in hearing such petitions.

The state also attempts to provide higher standards of living by investing its oil wealth in education and economic development, with some positive results. But citizens sometimes complain that some members of the royal family treat national wealth as personal wealth. So the monarchy, while absolute, must balance the competing demands of citizens, religious authorities, other wealthy families within the country, and forces within and without the country that would prefer to see some other form of government there. This may be part of the reason why the great majority of monarchies evolved into constitutional monarchies—the challenges of maintaining legitimacy are greater when citizens lack enough of a voice in the affairs of state.

Authoritarian Governments/Dictatorships

Including monarchies, the world still has a fistful of **authoritarian governments**, but that is slowly changing. The popular uprisings of the Arab Spring in 2011 toppled authoritarian governments in Tunisia, Libya and Egypt. Syria is suffering through what amounts to a civil war between opponents and supporters of rule by the Assad family. Myanmar (Burma) finally allowed elections after 40 years of military rule. Turkmenistan, a former Soviet republic in Central Asia, is effectively a one-party state, as is Belorussia, another former Soviet republic.

But others remain. The magazine The Economist, using a method that relies heavily on surveying “experts,” counted 53 states as authoritarian, plus 37 as “hybrid,” 53 as “flawed democracies,” and only 25 as full democracies. The Economist looked thing such as for “free and fair elections,” political participation, and whether government works the way it’s supposed to (such as civil servants being able to perform their jobs fairly). So flawed democracies don’t score well on all categories, and hybrid states have authoritarian and well as democratic elements at work.

Only two states, North Korea and Cuba, still operate the collectivized economy typical of 20th century communist states such as the Soviet Union. And from time to time, a state is ruled by its own military, such as recently in Fiji and Guinea-Bissau, while the Vatican City and Iran are theocracies—states ruled by a church.

Whereas the remaining monarchies attempt to remain in power by sharing enough of their oil wealth that citizens are willing to put up with rule by a hereditary monarch, authoritarian governments tend to hang on through force and propaganda. Authoritarian states do not have meaningful elections; public dissent is discouraged if not forbidden. They tend to grow out of responses to public unrest and dissension, but hang on because of fear, greed and a lust for power. Many authoritarian states are poor. Modernization theory suggests that states will not become democratic until they become wealthy

enough; a state's chance of becoming and remaining democratic improves greatly after per capita GDP surpasses $5,000. Mexico did not have truly free elections until 1993, when a candidate from a party other than the PRI won the presidency and control of the Mexican Congress (and Mexico has had competitive elections ever since). The key difference seems to be Mexico's growing wealth. When people are wealthy enough, they seem more willing to let democratic institutions work.

The two most authoritarian states, according to rankings of The Economist, are North Korea and the Central African Republic. The Central African Republic has suffered from 150 years of slave raids, colonial oppression, and the last 50 years of uncertain elections, military coups and general misrule. And it's still probably a more free place to live than North Korea.

North Korea, at the bottom of nearly every ranking, is the better known of the two. Korea, since about 700 CE, was one country, even when it was under the thumb of China or Japan. During World War II, communist guerrillas fought the Japanese, along with non-communists. After the war, the country was divided, north and south, with the communists ending up in the north. The south, formally the Republic of Korea, was not a very liberal state, but its economy grew and eventually it entered the ranks of true democracies with real elections in 1993. By at least one measure, it has the world's 13th largest economy.

Figure 4.1 *graphic TK...satellite photograph of the two Koreas at night*

North Korea attempted to reunite with the south by force in the Korean War (1950–1953). Things went downhill from there. The Democratic People's Republic of Korea turned inward, using the United States (and the rest of the world) as a bogeyman to keep people in a perpetual state of fear. Members of the Kim family have ruled the country throughout its history. The nation spends 25 percent of GDP on defense (the U.S. spends less than 5, which is high by world standards), including developing a nuclear weapons program, even as malnutrition and starvation plague much of the population. South Korea has roughly twice as many people as North Korea, but its economy is 17 times larger than the north's. One report said that a third of North Korean children show visible effects of malnutrition."Millions of North Korean children suffering from malnutrition, says UN," http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2012/jun/12/north-korean-children-malnutrition-un

So how does the government stay in power? Geography plays a role—North Korea is bordered only by South Korea and China, so it's a little harder for people to flee. The government has eliminated all potential sources of opposition—the only real interest group is the military, and it is well supported by the state. There are no unions, no business groups, no other political factions. The state apparatus sniffs out any hint of dissent, which is dealt with brutally. People are either "re-educated" or simply executed, and under the "three-generations" policy, entire families are punished if one member makes a mistake. North Korea's constant saber-rattling at the rest of the world keeps the military happy and many people apparently believing that whichever Kim is currently in power is the only thing that stands between them and annihilation by foreign powers. Meanwhile, other nations continue to give North Korea aid, in between nuclear tests. Economic sanctions designed to force change only affect the ruled, not the rulers; China, South Korea and the United States avoid sanctions that might hurt the elites who run the country because nobody wants to see North Korea collapse (a cure that might be worse than the disease).Daniel Bynum, et al, "Keeping Kim: How North Korea's Regime Stays in

Power," http://belfercenter.ksg.harvard.edu/publication/20269/keeping_kim.html

Authoritarian governments rarely make people better off, and yet they persist. Some scholars distinguish between totalitarian and authoritarian governments. Totalitarian governments are seen as more extreme, with a single ruler relying on charisma to convince the people that he's really on their side. Authoritarian governments have a higher level of corruption (raiding the public treasury for private gain, or simply accepting bribes). Totalitarian governments are ideological—there's an overriding, underlying philosophy that drives the system.Sondrol, P. C., "Totalitarian and Authoritarian Dictators: A Comparison of Fidel Castro and Alfredo Stroessner". Journal of Latin American Studies, Vol. 23, No. 3, 1991. So, Benito Mussolini's Fascist rule of Italy was totalitarian; the military dictatorship of Myanmar/Burma was not. Totalitarian governments don't usually have elections. Authoritarian governments might, but the results are often in doubt—the elections may not have been free and fair.

Figure 4.2 TABLE TO COME

TMS graphic TK... chart detailing the different kinds of government in states around the world

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Most governments in the world are some kind of republic, although they don't all work the same way, or even work as advertised.
- Republics usually feature open elections, and some kind of elected legislative body.
- The world still has a handful of monarchies, and a number of authoritarian governments in which political freedom is limited.

EXERCISES

1. Pick any country other than the one you live or are from. Visit a source such as the CIA World Factbook, https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook. What kind of government do they have? Is it a republic? Do they have political liberty there?
2. Some people have campaigned for a national initiative process for the United States. How would that work? What might be better or worse about that?