

Published with assistance from the Louis Stern Memorial Fund.

Copyright © 2006 by Yale University. All rights reserved.  
This book may not be reproduced, in whole or in part, including illustrations, in any form (beyond that copying permitted by Sections 107 and 108 of the U.S. Copyright Law and except by reviewers for the public press), without written permission from the publishers.

Set in Adobe Garamond type by Keystone Typesetting, Inc.  
Printed in the United States of America.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Dahl, Robert Alan, 1915-

On political equality / Robert A. Dahl.

P. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN-13: 978-0-300-11607-6 (hardcover : alk. paper)

ISBN-10: 0-300-11607-1 (hardcover : alk. paper)

1. Democracy. 2. Equality. I. Title.

JC423.D2498 2006

323.5—dc22 2006009072

A catalogue record for this book is available from the  
British Library.

The paper in this book meets the guidelines for permanence and  
durability of the Committee on Production Guidelines for Book  
Longevity of the Council on Library Resources.

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Although we might reasonably add refinements and qualifications to this prudential judgment, for at least three reasons it is difficult to see how any substantially different proposition could be supported. First, Acton's famous and oft-quoted proposition appears to express a fundamental truth about human beings: power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely. Whatever the intentions of rulers may be at the outset of their rule, any commitment they may have to serving "the public good" is likely to be transformed in time into an identification of "the public good" with the maintenance of the their own powers and privileges. Second, just as free discussion and controversy are, as John Stuart Mill famously argued, essential to the pursuit of truth—or, if you prefer, to reasonably justifiable judgments—a government unchecked by citizens who are free to discuss and oppose the policies of their leaders is more likely to blunder, sometimes disastrously, as modern authoritarian regimes have amply demonstrated.<sup>2</sup> Finally, consider the most crucial historical cases in which substantial numbers of persons were denied equal citizenship: does anyone really believe today that when the working classes, women, and racial and ethnic minorities were excluded from political participation, their interests were adequately considered and protected by those who were privileged to govern them?

I do not mean to say that the reasons I have given were in

CHAPTER 2

...  
Is Political Equality a Reasonable Goal?

If we make two assumptions, each of which hard to reject in reasonable and open public discourse, the case for political equality and democracy becomes extraordinarily powerful. The first is the moral judgment that all human beings are of equal intrinsic worth, that no person is intrinsically superior to another, and that the good or interests of each person must be given equal consideration.<sup>1</sup> Let me call this the assumption of intrinsic equality.

Even if we accept this moral judgment, the deeply troublesome question immediately arises: who or what group is best qualified to decide what the good or interests of a person really are? Clearly the answer will vary depending on the situation, the kinds of decisions, and the persons involved. But if we restrict our focus to the government of a state, then it seems to me that the safest and most prudent assumption would run something like this: Among adults no persons are so definitely better qualified than others to govern that they should be entrusted with complete and final authority over the government of the state.

the minds of the persons who brought about greater political equality. I am simply saying that moral and prudential judgments offer strong support for political equality as a desirable and reasonable goal or ideal.

#### POLITICAL EQUALITY AND DEMOCRACY

If we conclude that political equality is desirable in governing a state (though not necessarily in all other human associations), how may it be achieved? It almost goes without saying that the only political system for governing a state that derives its legitimacy and its political institutions from the idea of political equality is a democracy. What political institutions are necessary in order for a political system to qualify as a democracy? And why these institutions?

#### IDEAL VS. ACTUAL

We can't answer these questions satisfactorily, I believe, without a concept of an ideal democracy. For the same reasons that Aristotle found it useful to describe his three ideal constitutions in order to classify actual systems, a description of an ideal democracy provides a model against which to compare various actual systems. Unless we have a conception of the ideal against which to compare the actual, our reasoning will be circular or purely arbitrary: e.g., "the United States, Britain, France, and Norway are all democracies;

therefore, the political institutions they all have in common must be the basic institutions that are necessary to democracy; therefore, since these countries possess these institutions, they must be democracies."

We need to keep in mind that a description of an "ideal" system can serve two different but entirely compatible purposes. One is to assist in empirical or scientific theory. The other is to help us make moral judgments by providing an ideal end or goal. These are often confused, though an "ideal" in the first sense does not necessarily imply an "ideal" in the other.

In empirical theory the function of an ideal system is to describe the characteristics or operation of that system under a set of perfect (ideal) conditions. Galileo inferred the rate at which an object would fall in a vacuum—i.e., under ideal conditions—by measuring the speed of a marble rolling down an inclined plane. Obviously he did not and could not measure its rate of fall in a vacuum. Yet his law of falling bodies remains valid today. It is not uncommon in physics to formulate hypotheses concerning the behavior of an object or force under ideal conditions that cannot be perfectly attained in actual experiments but that can be satisfactorily approximated. In a similar spirit, when the German sociologist Max Weber described "three pure types of legitimate authority" he commented that "the usefulness of the above

classification can only be judged by its results in promoting systematic analysis . . . [N]one of these three ideal types . . . is usually to be found in historical cases in 'pure' form."<sup>3</sup>

An ideal in the second sense is understood as a desirable goal, one probably not perfectly achievable in practice, but a standard to which we ought to aspire, and against which we can measure the good or value of what has been achieved, what actually exists.

A definition and description of democracy may be intended to serve only the first purpose; or it may serve the second as well. As an aid to empirical theory, a conception of democracy may come not from an advocate but from a critic for whom even the ideal is unsatisfactory, or simply irrelevant to human experience because of the enormous gap between the goal and any possibility of a satisfactory approximation.

#### I D E A L D E M O C R A C Y

Although an ideal democracy might be portrayed in many ways, a useful starting point is the etymological origins of the term: *demos* + *kratía*, rule by "the people." In order to leave open the question of just which "people" are provided with full political equality, instead of "the people" let me briefly use the more neutral term "demos."

At a minimum an ideal democracy would, I believe, require these features:

- Effective participation. Before a policy is adopted by the association, all the members of the demos must have equal and effective opportunities for making known to other members their views about what the policy should be.
- Equality in voting. When the moment arrives at which the decision will finally be made, every member must have an equal and effective opportunity to vote, and all votes must be counted as equal.
- Gaining enlightened understanding. Within a reasonable amount of time, each member would have equal and effective opportunities for learning about the relevant alternative policies and their likely consequences.
- Final control of the agenda. The demos would have the exclusive opportunity to decide how (and if) its members chose which matters are to be placed on the agenda. Thus the democratic process required by the three preceding features would never be closed. The policies of the association would always be open to change by the demos, if its members chose to do so.
- Inclusion. Every member of the demos would be entitled to participate in the ways just described: effective participation, equality in voting, seeking an enlightened understanding of the issues, and exercising final control over the agenda.

## THE POLITICAL INSTITUTIONS OF REPRESENTATIVE DEMOCRACY

Throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries in Europe and the English-speaking countries a set of political institutions needed for democratic representative governments evolved that, taken as a whole, was entirely new in human history.<sup>4</sup> Despite important differences in constitutional structures, these basic political institutions are similar in their broad outlines. The most important are:

- Important government decisions and policies are directly or indirectly adopted by, or accountable to, officials who are chosen in popular elections.
- Citizens are entitled to participate freely in fair and reasonably frequent elections in which coercion is uncommon.
- Citizens are entitled to run for and serve in elective offices, though requirements as to age and place of residence may be imposed.
- Citizens may express themselves publicly over a broad range of politically relevant subjects, without danger of severe punishment.
- All citizens are entitled to seek out independent sources of information from other citizens, newspapers, and many other sources; moreover, sources of information not under the control of the government or any single group

actually exist and are effectively protected by law in their expression.

- In full contrast to the prevailing view in earlier democracies and republics that political "factions" were a danger to be avoided, both theory and practice came to insist that in order for citizens to achieve their various rights they must possess a further right to form and participate in relatively independent associations and organizations, including independent political parties and interest groups.

Political institutions like these developed in different countries under various political and historical circumstances, and they were not necessarily fostered only by democratic impulses. Yet it would become increasingly apparent that they were necessary institutions for achieving a satisfactory level of democracy in a political unit, like a country, that was too large for assembly democracy.

The relation between the institutions of actual (large-scale) democracy and the requirements of an ideal democracy can be summarized thus:

---

In a unit as large as a country, these political institutions are necessary:	in order to satisfy these criteria of ideal democracy:
1. Elected representatives	Effective participation Control of the agenda
2. Free, fair, and frequent elections	Voting equality Effective participation
3. Freedom of expression	Effective participation Enlightened understanding Control of the agenda
4. Alternative sources of information	Effective participation Enlightened understanding Control of the agenda
5. Associational autonomy	Effective participation Enlightened understanding Control of the agenda
6. Inclusion of all members of the demos	Effective participation Voting equality Enlightened understanding Control of the agenda

---

LEGITIMATE LIMITS ON THE  
POWER OF THE DEMOS

If citizens disagree on policies, whose views should prevail? The standard answer in democratic systems is that the decision must follow the will of the majority of citizens, or in representative systems, the majority of their representatives

in the legislative body. Because the principle of majority rule and its justification have been the subject of careful and, I believe, convincing analyses from John Locke to the present day, I shall not undertake to justify majority rule except to say that no other rule appears to be consistent with the assumption that all citizens are entitled to be treated as political equals. Although majority rule is not without problems, these are not at issue here.<sup>5</sup>

To return now to our question: If we assume that membership in the demos and the necessary political institutions have been satisfactorily established, what *limits* may properly be placed on the authority of the demos to enact laws, and more concretely, on the authority of a *majority* of the members of the demos?

NECESSARY DEMOCRATIC RIGHTS

If we believe in the desirability and feasibility of representative democracy for large-scale political systems, and if the institutions I have just mentioned, together with their requisite rights, are necessary for representative democracy, then it follows that actions that would significantly weaken or even destroy these rights cannot be legitimate and may properly be placed outside the legal and constitutional authority of majorities. Although a thorough examination of the issue would take us further than I wish to go here, as a matter of

straightforward logic it seems obvious that *the fundamental rights necessary to democracy itself* cannot legitimately be infringed by majorities whose actions are justified only by the principle of political equality. Simply put, if we assume that:

1. Achieving political equality is a desirable and feasible goal.
2. Majority rule is justified only as a means of achieving political equality.
3. A democratic political system is a necessary (though not sufficient) condition for achieving political equality.
4. And certain rights are necessary (though not sufficient) for fully achieving a democratic political system.

Then it follows that:

- To deny or infringe on these necessary rights would harm a democratic political system.
- By harming a democratic system, these denials or infringements on necessary rights would harm political equality.
- If majority rule is justified only as a means of achieving political equality (assumption 2, above), the principle of majority rule cannot reasonably justify actions that inflict harm on rights necessary to a democratic system.

It would not be inconsistent with democratic beliefs, then, to impose limits on the authority of a majority to undertake

actions that would destroy an institution like freedom of speech that is necessary if a democratic system is to exist. This is the intent, for example, of a Bill of Rights embedded in a constitution that cannot be altered by ordinary majorities of 50 percent plus one, but instead requires that amendments must be passed by *supermajorities*.

Logically, of course, even the members of the requisite supermajority required for constitutional change could not logically believe both in the desirability of democracy and at the same time support a constitutional amendment that would severely impair or destroy one of its requisites, such as freedom of speech, free and fair elections, and others listed above.

Here we pass over the threshold from *ought* to *is*. In the world of empirical reality, if a preponderant majority of active citizens in a democratic country persistently believe that a right necessary to democracy is undesirable and should be sharply limited or abolished, then that right is very likely to be curtailed. Even an independent judiciary would be unable to stem a strong tide running steadily against democratic rights. When a demos ceases to believe that the rights necessary to democracy are desirable, their democracy will soon become an oligarchy or a tyranny.

There is, however, another and more insidious route from democracy to oligarchy. Even if most members of the demos

continue to *believe* in the desirability of these fundamental rights, they may fail to undertake the *political actions* that would be necessary in order to protect and preserve those rights from infringements imposed by political leaders who possess greater resources for gaining their own political ends.

#### IS POLITICAL EQUALITY A

##### FEASIBLE GOAL?

These observations pose a fundamental and troubling question. Even if we believe that political equality is a highly desirable goal, and that this goal is best achieved in a democratic political system, is the goal really achievable, even in a democratic system? Or do some fundamental aspects of human beings and human society present barriers to political equality so high that for all practical purposes the goal is and will remain so distant that we should abandon efforts to achieve it?

The United States provides telling examples of the huge gap between the rhetoric and reality of political equality. In the second paragraph of a document that is otherwise a rather tedious listing of the "repeated injuries and usurpations" inflicted by the king of Great Britain, we encounter the famous assertion of a supposedly self-evident truth, that all men are created equal. The authors of the American Declaration of Independence and the fifty-five delegates to

the Second Continental Congress who voted to adopt it in July 1776, were, of course, all men, none of whom had the slightest intention of extending the suffrage or many other basic political and civil rights to women, who, in legal contemplation, were essentially the property of their fathers or husbands.

"Of women," Rogers Smith writes in his masterful work on American citizenship, "the Constitution said nothing directly. It did, however, use masculine pronouns thirty times describing U.S. Representatives, Senators, the Vice-President and the President . . . The salient fact . . . was the Constitution left intact the state constitutions that denied women the franchise and other legal and political privileges."<sup>6</sup>

Nor did the worthy supporters of the Declaration intend to include slaves or, for that matter, free persons of African origin, who were a substantial fraction of the population in almost all the colonies that now claimed the right to become independent self-governing republics.<sup>7</sup> The principal author of the Declaration, Thomas Jefferson, owned several hundred slaves, none of whom he freed during his life; and he freed only five on his death.<sup>8</sup> It was not until more than four score and seven years later (to borrow a poetic phrase from Lincoln's Gettysburg Address) that slavery was legally abolished in the United States by force of arms and constitutional enactment. And it took yet another century before the rights



of African Americans to participate in political life began to be effectively enforced in the American South. Now, two generations later, Americans white and black still bear the deep wounds that slavery and its aftermath inflicted on human equality, freedom, dignity, and respect.

Our noble Declaration also silently excluded the people who for some thousands of years had inhabited the lands that Europeans colonized and came to occupy. We are all, I think, familiar with the story of how the settlers denied homes, land, place, freedom, dignity, and humanity to these earlier peoples of America, whose descendants even today continue to suffer from the effects of their treatment throughout several centuries when their most elementary claims to legal, economic, and political—not to say social—standing as equal human beings were rejected, often by violence, a lengthy period followed more recently by neglect and indifference.

All this in a country that visitors from Europe like Tocqueville portrayed, quite correctly, I think, as displaying a passion for equality stronger than they had ever observed elsewhere.

It would be easy to provide endless examples from other democratic countries. Many Europeans would probably agree that over many centuries the people of one of the most

advanced democratic countries in the world, Britain, have been concerned more passionately than in any other western European country with maintaining social inequalities in the form of differences in class and status, which in turn played out in many ways, notably in higher education, the admirable British Civil Service, the professions, including law and justice, and business. Until only a few years ago, unlike any other democratic country in the world, Britain maintained the astonishing anachronism of an upper house in its national parliament consisting overwhelmingly of hereditary peers.

The historical gap between the public rhetoric and reality of political equality is by no means unique to the United States and Britain. In many “democratic” countries, large parts of the adult male population were excluded from the suffrage until late in the nineteenth century, or even until the twentieth century. And only two “democratic” countries—New Zealand and Australia—had extended the suffrage to women in national elections before the 1920s. In France and Belgium, women did not gain the suffrage in national elections until after the Second World War. In Switzerland, where universal male suffrage was established for males in 1848, women were not guaranteed the right to vote until 1971.

So much for the rhetorical commitment to political equality so often asserted by leaders and by many citizens—male citizens—in “democratic” countries.

#### THE GROWTH OF POLITICAL EQUALITY

Despite the obvious fact that equality has often been denied in practice in many places, remarkably over the past several centuries many claims to equality, including political equality, have come to be strongly reinforced by institutions, practices, and behavior. Although this monumental historical movement is in some respects worldwide, it has been most conspicuous, perhaps, in democratic countries like Britain, France, the United States, the Scandinavian countries, Holland, and many others.

In the opening pages of the first volume of *Democracy in America* Tocqueville pointed to the inexorable increase in the equality of conditions among his French countrymen “at intervals of fifty years, beginning with the eleventh century.” Nor was this revolution taking place only in his own country: “Whithersoever we turn our eyes,” he wrote, “we shall witness the same continual revolution throughout the whole of Christendom.”

“The gradual development of the equality of conditions,” he goes on to say, “is . . . a providential fact, and it possesses all the characteristics of a Divine decree: it is universal, it is

endurable, it constantly eludes all human interference, and all events as well as men contribute to its progress.”<sup>9</sup>

We may wish to grant Tocqueville a certain measure of hyperbole in this passage. We may also want to note that in his second volume several years later he was more troubled by what he viewed as some of the undesirable consequences of democracy and equality. Even so, he did not doubt that a continuing advance of democracy and equality was inevitable. If today we look back to the changes since his time, we, like Tocqueville in his own day, may well be amazed at the extent to which ideas and practices that respect and promote political equality have advanced across so much of the world—and, for that matter, aspects of a broader human equality as well.

As to political equality, consider the incredible spread of democratic ideas, institutions, and practices during the century just ended. In 1900, forty-eight countries were fully or moderately independent countries. Of these, only eight possessed all the other basic institutions of representative democracy, and in only one of these, New Zealand, had women gained the right to vote. Furthermore, these eight countries contained no more than 10 to 12 percent of the world's population. At the opening of our present century, among some one hundred ninety countries the political institutions and practices of modern representative democracy,

including universal suffrage, exist in around eighty-five, at levels comparable to those in Britain, western Europe, and the United States. These countries include almost six out of every ten inhabitants of the globe today.<sup>10</sup>

In Britain, as we all know, the working classes and women were enfranchised, and more. Men and women of middle, lower middle, and working class origins not only gained access to the House of Commons and its facilities but to the cabinet and even the post of prime minister. And the hereditary peers in the House of Lords have, after all, at last been sent packing—well, most of them. In the United States, too, women were enfranchised; the Voting Rights Act of 1965 protecting the right of African Americans to vote did in fact become law; the law was actually enforced; and African Americans have become a significant force in American political life. I wish I could say that the miserable condition of so many Native Americans had greatly changed for the better, but that sad legacy of human injustice remains with us.

Failures and all, if we simply assume that beliefs about equality are always hopelessly anemic contestants in the struggle against the powerful forces that generate inequalities, we could not possibly account for the enormous gains for human equality over the past two centuries. Yet the question remains: given all the obstacles to political equality, how can we account for these gains?

## A BRIEF SKETCH OF MOVEMENTS TOWARD POLITICAL EQUALITY

To help us understand how change toward political equality may come about despite the superior resources of the privileged strata, I want to present a schematic portrayal of the process.<sup>11</sup>

### PRIVILEGE IS JUSTIFIED BY DOCTRINE

The most highly privileged members of a society—the political, social, and economic elites, if you will—typically espouse and, when they can, even enforce doctrines that justify their superiority. Often these doctrines are supported, and perhaps have been created, by religious authorities who themselves are members of the upper strata—as with “the divine right of kings” that over many centuries served in Europe to justify the rule of monarchs. Philosophers also contribute to the defense of elite rule—famously and enduringly in the case of Plato. But even the more moderate Aristotle was not particularly sympathetic with idea of political equality. In some cases, hierarchy and privilege may be legitimized by an official philosophy, as with Confucianism, which prevailed for several thousand years in imperial China. In recent totalitarian regimes, a dogmatic and unquestionable ideology has served to give legitimacy to power and privilege: Marxism-Leninism in the Soviet

Union, Fascist doctrine in Italy, the dogmas of Nazism in Hitler's Germany.

SKEPTICISM ABOUT ELITE DOMINANCE  
AMONG THE LOWER STRATA

Privileged elites often appear to believe that their legitimizing doctrines are generally accepted among the lower strata: "Upstairs" assumes that its entitlements are accepted as perfectly legitimate by the inferior orders "Downstairs." Yet despite the fervent efforts of elites to promote views intended to give legitimacy to their superior power and status and their own unquestioning belief in the rightness of their entitlements, doubts arise among many members of subordinate groups that the inferior positions assigned to them by their self-proclaimed superiors are really justified.

James Scott has shown pretty convincingly that people who have been relegated to subordinate status by history, structure, and elite belief systems are much less likely to be taken in by the dominant ideology than members of the upper strata are prone to assume. As one example, he writes that "among the untouchables of India there is persuasive evidence that the Hindu doctrines that would legitimize caste domination are negated, reinterpreted, or ignored. Scheduled castes are much less likely than Brahmins to believe that the doctrine of karma explains their present condi-

tion; instead they attribute their status to their poverty and to an original, mythical act of injustice."<sup>12</sup>

MORE FAVORABLE CONDITIONS

Given the open or concealed rejection of the elite ideology by members of the subordinate groups, a change in conditions, whether in ideas, beliefs, structures, generations, or whatever, offers the subordinate groups new opportunities to express their grievances. For a variety of reasons, the British were unable to impose their political, economic, and social structures on the colonials who emigrated to America in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Sheer distance across the Atlantic, the ready availability in the colonies of property in land, new opportunities in commerce and finance, the resulting growth of a large class of independent farmers, businessmen, and artisans, and other differences between colonial America and the mother country offered the colonials much greater opportunities to engage effectively in political life than they had enjoyed in Britain.

GROWING PRESSURES FOR CHANGE

With the emergence of these new opportunities, and driven by anger, resentment, a sense of injustice, a prospect of greater individual or group opportunities, group loyalty, or other motives, some members of the subordinate groups begin to press for change by any available means. For

example, following the introduction of democracy in India, the members of the lower castes quickly began to seize their new opportunities to improve their status.

#### SUPPORT WITHIN THE DOMINANT STRATA

Some members of the dominant group choose to support the claims of the subordinate strata. Insiders ally themselves with outsiders—an Upstairs rebel takes on the cause of the discontented Downstairs. Insiders may do so for a variety of reasons: moral convictions, compassion, opportunism, fear of the consequences of disorder, dangers to property and the legitimacy of the regime, and even the real or imagined possibility of revolution.

#### THE SUBORDINATE STRATA MAKE GAINS

These factors culminate in a change by which the previously subordinate strata make significant gains in power, influence, status, education, income, or other advantages—and quite possibly all of these. For example, among the colonials in America the percentage of white males who gained the right to vote in elections to local and colonial legislatures was far higher than in the home country.<sup>13</sup> Sometimes, as was ultimately true in America, the gains are achieved, at least in part, by means of a violent revolution in which the subordinate strata overturn the dominance of the privileged strata. In many cases, however, change occurs more gradually

and peacefully, as with the expansion of the suffrage by acts of parliament in Britain, Sweden, and other European countries, and by constitutional amendment and congressional action in the United States.

Although specific accounts of the changes toward political equality that have occurred in so many countries over the last several centuries would vary enormously, these general factors would, I believe, have played a part in most of them.