

Democracy, literally, rule by the people. The term is derived from the [Greek](#) *dēmokratīā*, which was coined from *dēmos* ("people") and *kratos* ("rule") in the middle of the 5th century BCE to denote the [political systems](#) then existing in some Greek [city-states](#), notably [Athens](#).

Fundamental Questions

The etymological origins of the term *democracy* hint at a number of urgent problems that go far beyond semantic issues. If a government of or by the people—a "popular" government—is to be established, at least five fundamental questions must be confronted at the outset, and two more are almost certain to be posed if the [democracy](#) continues to exist for long.

- (1) What is the appropriate unit or association within which a democratic government should be established? A town or city? A country? A business [corporation](#)? A university? An international organization? All of these?
- (2) Given an appropriate association—a city, for example—who among its members should enjoy full citizenship? Which persons, in other words, should [constitute](#) the *dēmos*? Is every member of the association entitled to participate in governing it? Assuming that children should not be allowed to participate (as most adults would agree), should the *dēmos* include all adults? If it includes only a subset of the adult population, how small can the subset be before the association ceases to be a democracy and becomes something else, such as an [aristocracy](#) (government by the best, *aristos*) or an [oligarchy](#) (government by the few, *oligos*)?
- (3) Assuming a proper association and a proper *dēmos*, how are citizens to govern? What political organizations or institutions will they need? Will these institutions differ between different kinds of associations—for example, a small town and a large country?
- (4) When citizens are divided on an issue, as they often will be, whose views should prevail, and in what circumstances? Should a majority always prevail, or should minorities sometimes be empowered to block or overcome majority rule?
- (5) If a majority is ordinarily to prevail, what is to constitute a proper majority? A majority of all citizens? A majority of voters? Should a proper

majority comprise not individual citizens but certain groups or associations of citizens, such as hereditary groups or territorial associations?

(6) The preceding questions presuppose an adequate answer to a sixth and even more important question: Why should “the people” rule? Is democracy really better than aristocracy or monarchy? Perhaps, as Plato argues in the *Republic*, the best government would be led by a minority of the most highly qualified persons—an aristocracy of “philosopher-kings.” What reasons could be given to show that Plato’s view is wrong?

(7) No association could maintain a democratic government for very long if a majority of the *dēmos*—or a majority of the government—believed that some other form of government were better. Thus, a minimum condition for the continued existence of a democracy is that a substantial proportion of both the *dēmos* and the leadership believes that popular government is better than any feasible alternative. What conditions, in addition to this one, favour the continued existence of democracy? What conditions are harmful to it? Why have some democracies managed to endure, even through periods of severe crisis, while so many others have collapsed?