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# Goals of Democracy

By *W. Robert Parks*

Although it is common practice to refer to the goals, rather than the goal, of democracy, probably democracy has only one ultimate goal—the well-being of each individual as a distinct and significant item of humanity.<sup>1</sup> It rests upon the ancient Christian-Jewish belief that each individual human being, however mean his worldly status, as a son of God has a dignity and worth which is equal to that of every other man.

## ENDS AND MEANS IN DEMOCRATIC THEORY

From this ultimate democratic goal derive a series of propositions which have led to the establishment of democratic sub-goals (or what might be described as the substantive means for achieving the ultimate goal) and also to the development of a variety of procedural means for reaching the ends of the democratic state. Just as the economist is careful to distinguish between means and ends in his analyses, so the political scientist must also make this nice distinction. Indeed, in the political complex it may be even more important that means and ends do not become confused. For, whereas the essential end of democracy—the well-being of the individual—is ultimate and changeless almost in the Platonic sense,<sup>2</sup> the means for achieving this goal, if they are to be effective, must be continuously modified to fit a changing environment. Thus, a democratic society must have the capacity to distinguish between ends and means if it is to winnow out and retain from the apparatuses of a democracy those elements in its structure and functioning which are essential to the preserving and strengthening of a democratic state.

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<sup>1</sup>What the well-being of the individual may be composed of is, of course, a value judgment. But surely it cannot be defined in materialistic terms alone. For example, the right of an individual to participate in the democratic process, as a part of the expression of his personality, is probably a factor in the composition of his well-being. The American concept of the well-being of the individual is set forth in the proposition that each individual is entitled to "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness." It is significant that Thomas Jefferson substituted the broader sociological concept of "pursuit of happiness" for the term "property." However, both liberty and pursuit of happiness can be widely interpreted. In a democracy, the well-being of the individual is subject to continuous redefinition by the members of that society.

<sup>2</sup>That is, the concept of well-being is changeless. But, as stated above, the definition of well-being in a truly democratic society will change with changes in the environment. For example, with an expansion in a society's capacity to produce, which results in an increase in national per capita output, men's standards for material well-being will rise.

## PRINCIPLES OF A DEMOCRATIC PROCESS

Along with the democratic concept of the innate worth of the individual go other propositions concerning the means by which a democratic society is to be achieved. Some of these propositions have become procedural principles which seemingly are unchanging necessities in the maintenance of a democratic state and must be distinguished from mere mechanical devices developed for putting these principles into effect.

The first of these propositions deriving from the innate worth of the individual is that he is intelligent. It is a belief in the capacity of masses of men to govern themselves. Many great democrats, such as Thomas Jefferson, have believed, of course, that mass education was a necessary prerequisite to an intelligent electorate. However, the principle of the capacity of men for self-government is the first assumption in a democratic political process. A second proposition has been that the best guarantee that the end of the state will be the well-being of the individual citizen is some form of popular control over state action. A final proposition is that the well-being of the individual can be protected only if, in addition to popular control, a democratic society offers certain protections against the state's encroachment upon the individual's freedom to think and act.<sup>3</sup>

A system of rights, of course, assumes the obligation not to impair the rights of others. An individual's rights must be balanced in terms of the rights of other individuals. As Abraham Lincoln put it, the Declaration of Independence defines with "tolerable clearness" the equality of status to which all men are born. It is an equality of rights before the law. Not only is a system of rights an essential in protecting a man's personality as an individual, but it is also an indispensable factor in the operation of a democratic process. For it is in the possession of the freedom to think, talk, and act that a minority has the opportunity of making itself the majority.

## MEANS FOR IMPLEMENTING DEMOCRATIC PRINCIPLES

The procedural means that democratic societies have developed for implementing these basic principles of democracy range

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<sup>3</sup>This can take the form of a bill of rights, as in the American constitutional system. Or, as in the British system where the power of the majority is theoretically unlimited, it can take the form of unwritten social sanctions, which seemingly are sometimes stronger protections than constitutional guarantees.

from a high order, those which are in themselves almost principles of democratic government, to those which are little more than mechanical apparatuses. Too frequently these apparatuses have been mistakenly considered as ends in themselves, whereas, in truth, in a changing economy with its shifting social structures, they may well thwart the real ends of democratic society.

One of the mechanical devices of democracy which thus far has proved so indispensable that it perhaps should be classified as a principle of democracy is that of government through popular representation. Only in the smallest of political societies can a direct democracy function. Even the Greek city states, small as they were and excluding as they did large segments of their population (the slaves) from citizenship, could not make direct democracy function effectively. Although the Roman Republic and even the government of the Caesars was based upon the concept of popular sovereignty, men had not developed the concept of popular control through representation. It was not until the emergence of parliaments in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries that the apparatus of government through elected representatives accountable to their constituencies began slowly to develop. Today representation is an essential in the democratic process.

The mechanisms for achieving representation are clearly in the nature of apparatuses which should be subject to change with changing needs and circumstances. Thus, the geographical bases for representation, now common to all democratic states, are not an immutable part of representative government. For example, good cases have been made by democratic theorists for representation according to the major interest groupings in society.

Another series of democratic conventions has grown up around the problem of consent. How is the democratic principle of consent of the governed to be carried into practice? The first part of the problem of consent is: How is consent to be measured? Majority rule has been the solution developed. Indeed, majority rule, in the eyes of many, has become an end in itself. Yet there is nothing mystical about the figure of 51 percent. Are the 51 percent always right, and the 49 percent always wrong? Why should the 51 percent have a right to impose its will upon the 49 percent?

The apparatus of majority rule is merely a mechanical means developed for measuring the "will of the community," which has been so important in democratic theory since medieval times. It is little more than a convenience and has no sanctity in and of itself. Its great value lies in the fact that, until now at least, men have found no better method for making popular control and representation work.

The second part of the problem of consent is the question of the nature of the decisions which the individual is to make in the political process. What form is the individual's participation in government to take? To what is the citizen to consent? The popular election of those who are to manage the state is the great consent citizens in a representative democracy give. But should citizen consent, citizen decisions in the political process, be limited to the periodical election of representatives? Or does modern democracy call for new forms of citizen participation? For example, the Progressive movement of the early twentieth century brought into operation new devices for more direct democracy such as the initiative, the referendum, and the recall. With modern government stepping even further into the economic lives of its citizens, new forms of participation in the building of governmental programs may prove of value. The old Land Use Planning Program, the Soil Conservation Districts, and the local farmer committee systems set up by extension services, PMA, FHA, and REA are experiments in this form of functional democracy.

Perhaps the democratic convention around which the most unpleasant connotations have gathered is that of the procedure of compromise. Yet compromise is an essential process in a democratic society. When compromise is not possible, the democratic process breaks down as it did in the 1860's with a Civil War resulting. The legislatures and the courts are built for working out acceptable social compromises. The President, in the American system is the great compromiser. More properly he should be described as the great integrator. As a representative of all the people, he must weigh and balance conflicting social claims and integrate them in the wisest public policy proposals possible. At its best, then, democratic compromise is an integrating process which prevents the centrifugal forces in society from tearing society apart and which works out the wisest adjustments of interests which are socially and politically acceptable.

Finally, there are several types of apparatuses used by American democracy which derive from the priceless democratic principle that the individual possesses a body of rights which are inviolate from state action. The first of these apparatuses is the concept of limited government. In the fear that government cannot be popularly controlled and also as a protection against the excesses of the majority, the sphere of governmental authority is to be limited.

The belief that government can, in democratic propriety, be limited grows out of the old social contract theory, according to which men possessed rights in a "state of nature" before they entered into a political compact to create a state. Thus men are entitled to reserve certain rights, certain areas of activities, over which the state has no control. In the American constitutional system, some of these basic rights are set forth in the first eight amendments.

That a narrow concept of limited government is not always necessary for the protection of individual freedoms is testified to by the British system where the government's sphere of action is theoretically unlimited. Moreover, when the concept of a limited government is held up as an end of democratic society, it may actually thwart the true ends of democracy. Thus, pre-1937 Supreme Court decisions in the fields of labor, social security, and agriculture, which turned on a belief in the sharply limited power of the federal government, not only were thwarting popular will on what a democratic government should do for its citizens, but also (and of course, this is a value judgment) they were preventing the true end of democracy—that of the well-being of the individual—from being served.

Another outgrowth from the belief that democracy calls for mechanical limitations on the powers of government is the development of certain formulas for dispersing the powers of government. The federal system and the separation of powers among the three branches of the national government are sometimes held up as essential ends in a democratic state. Yet they are no more than devices for preventing the consolidation of power in the hands of one level or branch of government. Neither a unitary nor a parliamentary-cabinet system of government means dictatorship. Many democratic political scientists contend that the British unitary and parliamentary system is more responsive to popular will than is the American system.

The dispersal of powers among an executive, a bicameral legislature, and a supreme court, designed in a day when it was believed that the individual's welfare was best promoted by state inaction, multiplies the opportunities for preventing the state from taking action which modern democratic society may demand. In like fashion, federalism is not an indispensable cog in democracy. Repeatedly in recent history, the states' rights argument has been advanced to prevent the national government's acting to protect or promote the well-being of groups of individuals. Frequently the paramountcy of state responsibility in a given field of social action is claimed merely as a means of circumventing all government action. For many modern problems are beyond the capacity of the states to solve because of their geographical scope, their cost, or because of political obstacles present within a state.

The glorification of local government as an end of democracy sometimes also has the aim of limiting the action of both the national and state governments. Although local government offers more mechanical opportunities for fuller citizen participation in government, local government can be oligarchical government and less responsive to the will of the community than is national or state government. The changing nature of time-space relationships means that the citizen can now keep in closer touch with the workings of his national government than he often does with that of his town or county government.

In short, there are certain democratic procedural principles for achieving the end of democratic society—the well-being of the individual—which are almost changeless. These are popular control of government or government through popular consent, the protection of minority thinking, and government through representation. The means for implementing these principles, however, need not remain fixed and changeless. They are not immutable and inviolate. Indeed the keystone in a truly democratic process is change. Procedures, if they are to serve the ultimate goal of democracy, must be modified to meet the changing needs of the environment from which government springs.

#### **CHANGING NATURE OF SUBSTANTIVE MEANS OR SUBGOALS**

Nor is change merely the keynote for the processes of democracy. It is also the key to defining the substantive means, or programs, by which the ultimate goal of the democratic state—the

well-being of the individual—is to be achieved. Because the factors which comprise the welfare of the individual are largely value judgments, no one student can undertake to define the nature of individual welfare or to set forth what the subgoals or programs for achieving this state of welfare should be.

However, an historical examination of the policies of the American national government reveals how public goals have shifted and changed in response to an environment which, through the throes of vast technological change, has become industrialized and urbanized and has tied groups scattered throughout the nation into close patterns of interdependence. Early in American history it was commonly held by democratic theorists that the well-being of the individual could best be served through a *laissez-faire* state which did not enter the economic arena. Jefferson's famous statement that government which governs best is the one which governs least typifies this view of the end of the democratic state.

Later in the nineteenth century, however, men began to feel that the individual's well-being could best be promoted by government's stepping into the economic arena to hold the ring, to regulate and control the rules of the economic game in the interest of fair play. Thus it became the goal—or rather subgoal, according to the terminology used here—of the democratic state to eliminate monopoly and re-establish free competition, to protect the weak against the strong in the economic struggle. These goals of democracy emerged in the "Square Deal" program of Theodore Roosevelt and the "New Freedom" of Woodrow Wilson. Indeed the name of the Wilsonian program for domestic reform reflects the theory that an individual's true freedom can only be re-established by government's acting in a positive way to guarantee that freedom.

Still later, it was the democratic verdict that government to promote the well-being of its citizens must do more than regulate in the interest of fair play. It must establish a series of subgoals or programs for providing positive assistance to individuals in meeting the hazards of the new urban, industrial environment.

The public goals which American democracy has established to promote the well-being of its citizens in agriculture generally follow the same historical pattern from *laissez-faire* to positive



governmental assistance. But despite the traditional independence and individualism of the American farmer, the agrarian group, perhaps more than any other economic group, has always seen government as an agent for promoting its well-being in a positive fashion.

Although the distribution of the public domain to those who wished to establish farms either at a cheap price or on a free homestead basis was an act of positive governmental assistance, such a parceling out of land was held, even in early days, to be compatible with the ends of the democratic state. For a nation of freeholders, owning land in small parcels was seen as the basis for a vigorous democracy. This concept is basic today in public goals for maintaining and strengthening the family-size farm. Long before the Civil War, farmers, frontiersmen though they were, were pressing the government to provide the internal improvements in the West which would give them ready access to their lands. They sought government intervention to break the hold of eastern capitalists on the money they needed to build the West. They wanted government to act to get them cheap credit and cheap money.

With the Civil War, were established those two public institutions—the USDA and the land-grant colleges—which were to give the farmer the positive assistance of new scientific knowledge which was to promote his welfare by making him a more efficient producer.

Even before the opening of the twentieth century, however, agrarian groups were recognizing that scientific knowledge of production methods was not enough to secure the farmer's welfare. The new commercial agriculture, which changing agricultural technology, industrialization, urbanization, and new modes of transportation were producing, was becoming dependent upon a market and transportation system over which the individual farmer had no control. Thus, such agrarian movements as those of the Grangers and Populists saw it as compatible with the goals of democracy for government to step in and regulate the transportation monopoly in the interest of fair treatment for the farmer. The inspection and control over the transportation of livestock in the interest of protecting the farmer's markets was also seen as a legitimate subgoal of democracy.

The growing economic instability of commercial agriculture and the growing poverty of those farm groups which did not have the resources to commercialize were climaxed by the twin catastrophes of depression and drouth. These dramatic events focused the attention of American democracy on the need for developing public agricultural goals which called for even more positive governmental assistance in promoting the well-being of citizens in agriculture. Thus, it became a subgoal of American democracy to underwrite for farmers a minimum opportunity for obtaining some minimum level of living. Such a goal is compatible with the now generally accepted belief that a democratic state, to carry out its responsibility for its citizens' well-being, must take positive steps to underwrite a minimum level of welfare. But the democratic principle of "equality of rights" is basic in measuring the democratic justification or programs for underwriting a minimum level of living in agriculture. An individual citizen's right to the opportunity of obtaining a minimum level of living implies an equitable distribution of this right among all citizens. It implies that such a right is not to be given to one individual or group of individuals at the expense of the welfare of other individuals and groups. In short, it implies a balancing of the needs and interests of individuals, groups, and the public.

### CONCLUSION

In conclusion, then, it should be re-emphasized that democracy is a humanitarian philosophy. As such, it has content. Democracy is not just a procedure, or a group of procedures, such as majority rule. As a philosophy, democracy has an ultimate changeless goal. But the element of flexibility is always present in society's definition and redefinition of the subgoals in order to bring them into closer harmony with shifting environmental circumstances and changing needs of the individual.

Democracy also has certain high-level principles which may be changeless. The American political process involves many mechanical devices for implementing these principles which, through traditional association, we may come to consider as democracy itself. But such mechanical apparatuses as a federal system, a two-house legislature, a separation of powers scheme are all simply means chosen from among several alternatives for achieving democratic ends. As means, they have no inherent sanctity and must always be subjected to the pragmatic test of utility.

If alternative mechanical apparatuses can be shown to offer more promise for achieving democratic goals and subgoals, it is not only permissible but mandatory, under the democratic theory, that the alternative devices be adopted in order that the end of democracy—the well-being of the individual—be better served.

We have attempted to dissect and analyze the democratic theory in the belief that this sort of knowledge is not just academic or extraneous to the interests of the worker in agricultural policy. The student working with agricultural policy needs to understand the limits and the leeways of the democratic theory, so that, on the one hand, his analyses and suggestions will not violate the essential elements of democracy, and, on the other hand, they will not be inhibited by his fear of suggesting changes in traditional political institutions and procedures which are not essential to democracy and which are, therefore, entirely susceptible of change.