

DIRECT DEMOCRACY: PROS & CONS

A traditional historical American perspective
- from philosophers to the ballot box

Aryan Sharma - High School Student - Oxford Academy '28



“The biggest danger to this country is
this country becoming a nation of
spectators who, instead of making
things happen, watch things happen”

**-FORMER US SENATOR & PRESIDENTIAL CANDIDATE
JOHN McCAIN**

The Issue

Direct democracy can strengthen voice, but it can also amplify conflict and unintentionally polarize society.

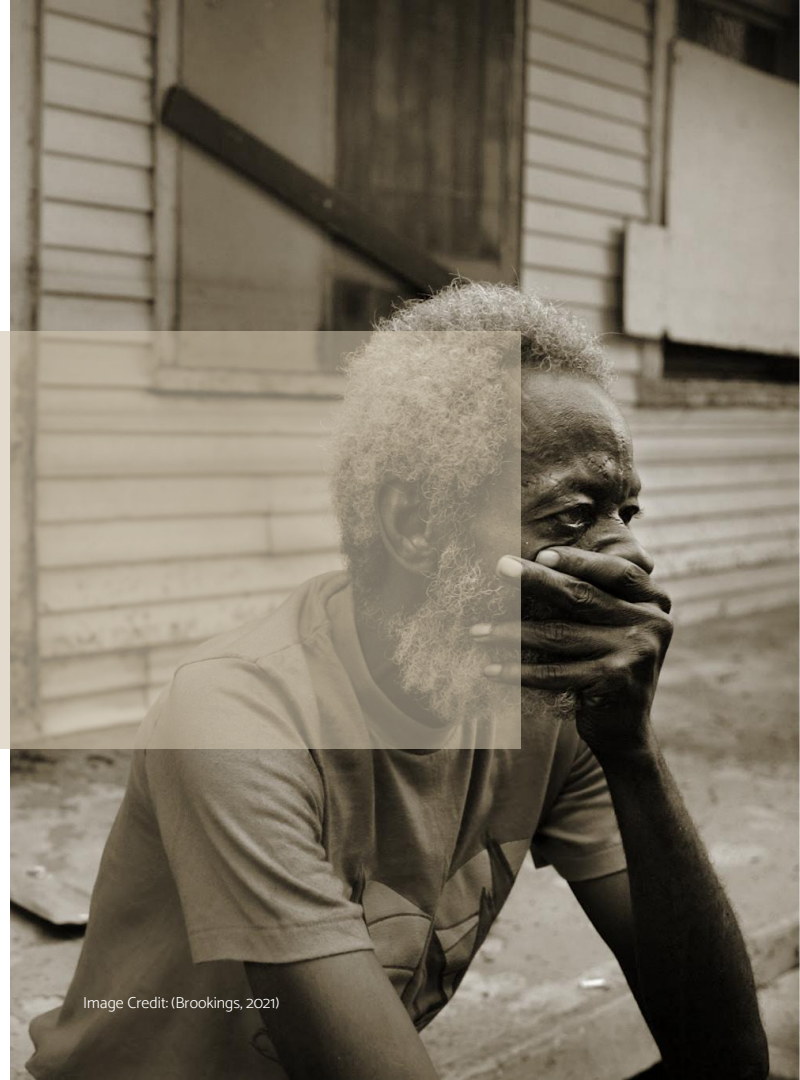


Image Credit: (Brookings, 2021)

Democracy: an early experiment



Image Credit: Study.com

01

ATHENIAN DEMOCRACY

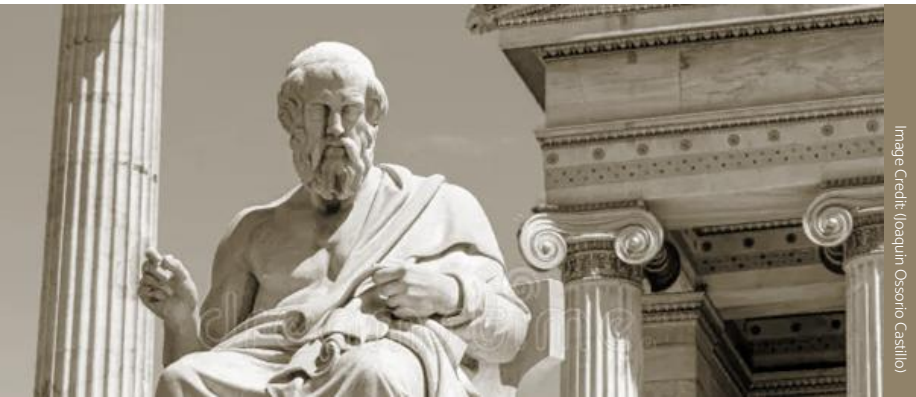
Aristotle

Rule by citizens, yet
citizenship was restricted



Plato

Majority rule needs
wisdom and law



DEMOCRATIC THOUGHT

1689

John Locke: natural rights & consent

1788

US Constitution Ratification:
First democratic nation

1762

Jean-Jacques Rousseau: popular
sovereignty

1861

John Stuart Mill: representation
protects liberty



Stoicism Daily

The democratic republic is a beautiful, sacred contract. The citizen willingly submits to the general will, actively securing freedom and absolute equality for all.

Jean-Jacques Rousseau





Image Credit: (US National Archives)

Congress

Art. I

President

Art. II

Courts

Art. III

Federalism

national + state power

(U.S. Const. arts. I-III; amend. X)



Modern Stress Test

Can a non-democracy be powerful?

02

Image Credit: Slidego

A large crowd of people, many wearing military-style caps, with a flag featuring a hammer and sickle symbol.

China complicates the narrative

China's economic scale and state capacity show that national power is not exclusive to democracies.

- That does not prove authoritarianism causes prosperity - or that rights and accountability do not matter.
- Just that there are other methods to success other than the Western world's 'democracy'

ACCESS ≠ EQUALITY

Anderson documents voter-ID and administrative barriers. In 2016, a federal appeals court struck down North Carolina's 2013 law after finding it targeted Black voters "with almost surgical precision." These are access and structural-barrier concerns—not claims of proven widespread voter fraud.



Image Credit: (YouWorkForThem, 2020)

Voter access

Voting rules can create burdens, even when ballots are counted accurately.

Supplies & staffing

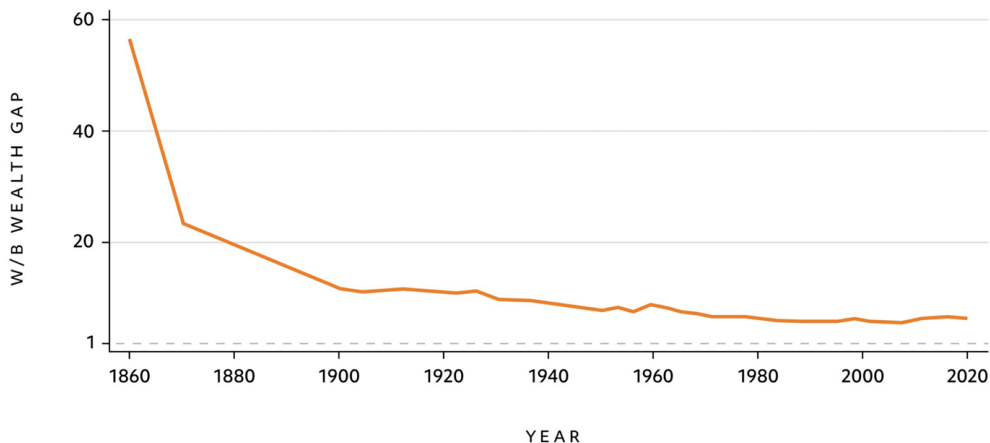
ID, registration, polling access

Election administration

Voting access is part of democratic accountability

(Anderson, 2018; N.C. State Conf. v. McCrory, 2016)
(One Person, No Vote by Carol Anderson, 2019)

FIGURE 1

White-Black Per Capita Wealth Ratio: 1860-2020

Graph credited to Derenoncourt et. al., Princeton Economics, May 2022

For example: Racial Wealth Gap

Black households:

- Median wealth (\$24,520);
 - □ of White households (\$250,400)

(Sullivan et. al, 2024)

- No progress in last 70 years (Kuhn et al., 2020)



The Perspective of the Student

I am 16: affected by
democracy before
I can vote.

03

DEMOCRACY THROUGH MY EYES

Student perspective →

I'm 16 and cannot vote yet, but elections already shape my school, rights, safety, and future.

Responsibility →

Before I can vote, I can learn from credible sources, listen to opposing views, and participate in my community.
I can be the voice before a ballot: learn, listen, organize, and hold leaders accountable.

Risk →

Democracy weakens when misinformation, low civic knowledge, or unequal voting access prevent people from making informed choices.

In a 2024 Annenberg UPenn survey, fewer than two-thirds of adults could name all three branches of government.

Conclusion

Direct democracy has real risks:

- impulsive majorities
- misinformation
- uneven access

Still, democracy gives people ways to challenge power, protect rights, organize, and change course peacefully.

Benefits > Harms

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THANKS FOR LISTENING

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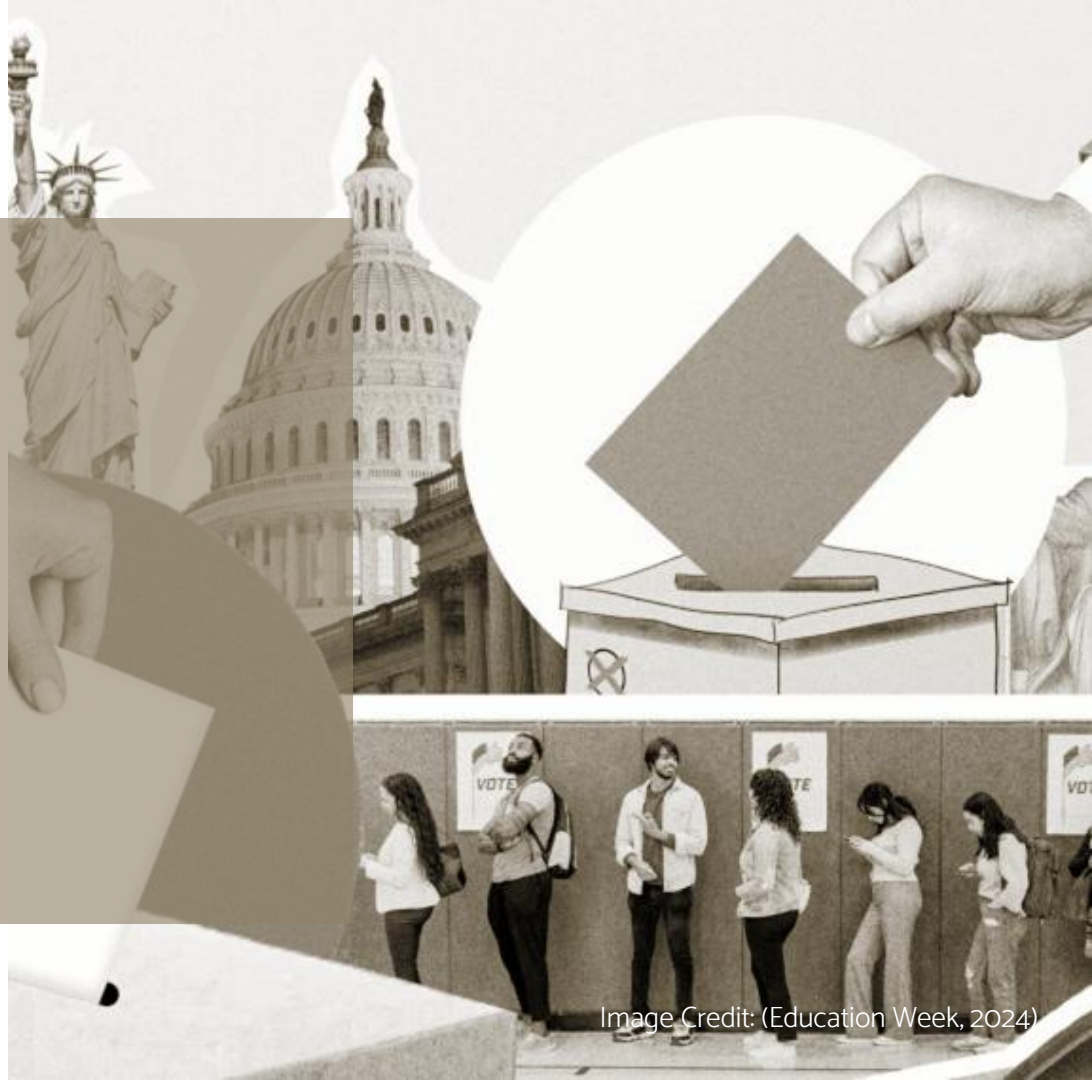


Image Credit: (Education Week, 2024)