

Outcomes of Democracy

Overview

As we begin to wind up our tour of democracy, it is time to move beyond our discussion of specific themes and ask a general set of questions: What does democracy do? Or, what outcomes can we reasonably expect of democracy? Also, does democracy fulfil these expectations in real life? We begin by thinking about how to assess the outcomes of democracy. After some clarity on how to think on this subject, we proceed to look at the expected and actual outcomes of democracy in various respects: quality of government, economic well-being, inequality, social differences and conflict and finally freedom and dignity. Our final verdict – positive but qualified – leads us to think about the challenges to democracy in the next and final chapter.

Chapter 7

How do we assess democracy's outcomes?



Did we reach these conclusions in Madam Lyngdoh's class? I loved that class because students were not being dictated any conclusions.

Do you remember how students in Madam Lyngdoh's class argued about democracy? This was in Chapter 2 of Class IX textbook. It emerged from that conversation that democracy is a better form of government when compared with dictatorship or any other alternative. We felt that democracy was better because it:

- Promotes equality among citizens;
- Enhances the dignity of the individual;
- Improves the quality of decision-making;
- Provides a method to resolve conflicts; and
- Allows room to correct mistakes.

Are these expectations realised under democracies? When we talk to people around us, most of them support democracy against other alternatives, such as rule by a monarch or military or religious leaders. But not so many of them would be satisfied with the democracy in practice. So we face a dilemma: democracy is seen to be good

in principle, but felt to be not so good in its practice. This dilemma invites us to think hard about the outcomes of democracy. Do we prefer democracy only for moral reasons? Or are there some prudential reasons to support democracy too?

Over a hundred countries of the world today claim and practice some kind of democratic politics: they have formal constitutions, they hold elections, they have parties and they guarantee rights of citizens. While these features are common to most of them, these democracies are very much different from each other in terms of their social situations, their economic achievements and their cultures. Clearly, what may be achieved or not achieved under each of these democracies will be very different. But is there something that we can expect from every democracy, just because it is democracy?

Our interest in and fascination for democracy often pushes us into taking a position that democracy can address all socio-economic and political problems. If some of our expectations are not met, we start blaming the idea of democracy. Or, we start doubting if we are living in a democracy. The first step towards thinking carefully about the outcomes of democracy is to recognise that democracy is just a form of government. It can only create conditions for achieving something. The citizens have to take advantage of those conditions and achieve those goals. Let us examine some of the things we can reasonably expect from democracy and examine the record of democracy.



© RK Laxman - Brushing up the years

Is democracy all about coping with multiple pressures and accommodating diverse demands?

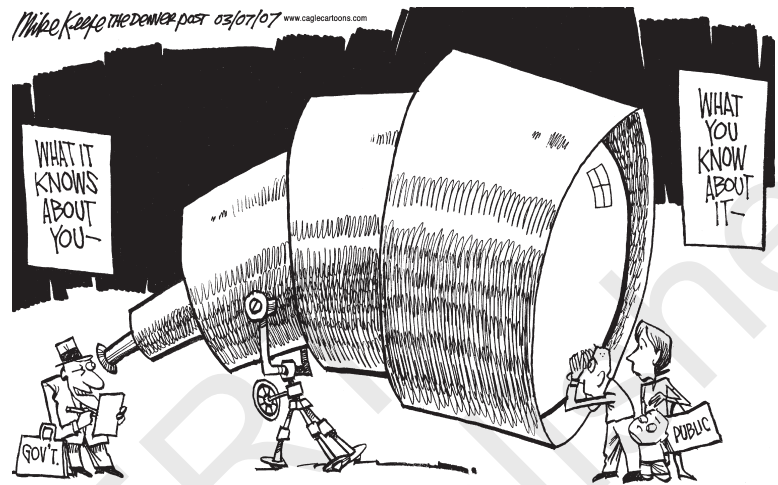
Accountable, responsive and legitimate government

There are some things that democracy must provide. In a democracy, we are most concerned with ensuring that people will have the right to choose their rulers and people will have control over the rulers. Whenever possible and necessary, citizens should be able to participate in decision making, that affects them all. Therefore, the most basic outcome of democracy should be that it produces a government that is accountable to the citizens, and responsive to the needs and expectations of the citizens.

Before we go into this question, we face another common question: Is the democratic government efficient? Is it effective? Some people think that democracy produces less effective government. It is, of course, true that non-democratic rulers do not have to bother about deliberation in assemblies or worry about majorities and public opinion. So, they can be very quick and efficient in decision making and implementation. Democracy is based on the idea of deliberation and negotiation. So, some delay is bound to take place. Does that make democratic government inefficient?

Let us think in terms of costs. Imagine a government that may take decisions very fast. But it may take decisions that are not accepted by the people and may therefore face problems. In contrast, the democratic government will take more time to follow procedures before arriving at a decision. But because it has followed procedures, its decisions may be both more acceptable to the people and more effective. So, the cost of time that democracy pays is perhaps worth it.

Governmental Secrecy



Now look at the other side – democracy ensures that decision making will be based on norms and procedures. So, a citizen who wants to know if a decision was taken through the correct procedures can find this out. She has the right and the means to examine the process of decision making. This is known as transparency. This factor is often missing from a non-democratic government. Therefore, when we are trying to find out the outcomes of democracy, it is right to expect democracy to produce a government that follows procedures and is accountable to the people. We can also expect that the democratic government develops mechanisms for citizens to hold the government accountable and mechanisms for citizens to take part in decision making whenever they think fit.

If you wanted to measure democracies on the basis of this expected outcome, you would look for the following practices and institutions: regular, free and fair elections; open public debate on major policies and

Can you think of what and how the government knows about you and your family (for example ration cards and voter identity cards)? What are the sources of information for you about the government?

So, the best outcome of democracy is that it is a democracy! That is what we have discovered after all this mental gymnastics?

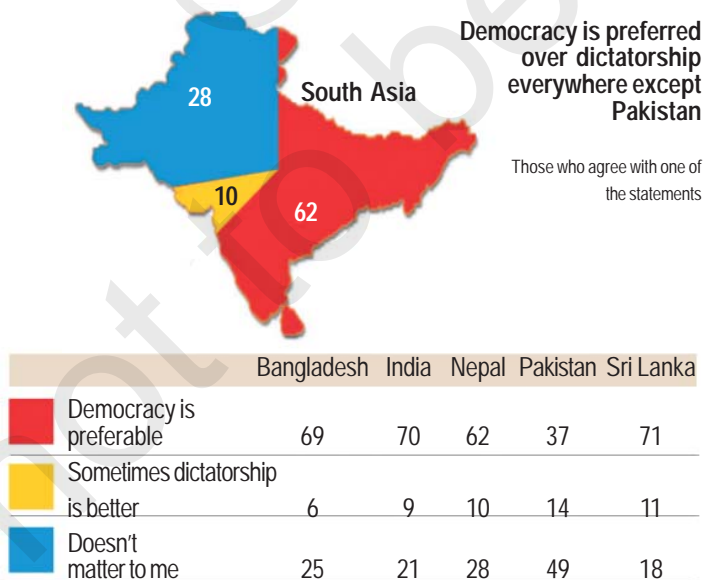


legislations; and citizens' right to information about the government and its functioning. The actual performance of democracies shows a mixed record on this. Democracies have had greater success in setting up regular and free elections and in setting up conditions for open public debate. But most democracies fall short of elections that provide a fair chance to everyone and in subjecting every decision to public debate. Democratic governments do not have a very good record when it comes to sharing information with citizens. All one can say in favour of democratic regimes is that they are much better than any non-democratic regime in these respects.

In substantive terms it may be reasonable to expect from democracy a government that is attentive to the needs and demands of the people and is largely free of corruption. The record of democracies is not impressive on these two counts. Democracies often frustrate the needs of the people and often ignore the demands of a majority of its

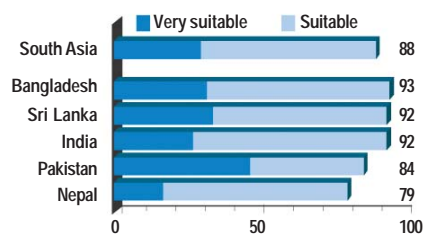
population. The routine tales of corruption are enough to convince us that democracy is not free of this evil. At the same time, there is nothing to show that non-democracies are less corrupt or more sensitive to the people.

There is one respect in which democratic government is certainly better than its alternatives: democratic government is legitimate government. It may be slow, less efficient, not always very responsive or clean. But a democratic government is people's own government. That is why there is an overwhelming support for the idea of democracy all over the world. As the accompanying evidence from South Asia shows, the support exists in countries with democratic regimes as well as countries without democratic regimes. People wish to be ruled by representatives elected by them. They also believe that democracy is suitable for their country. Democracy's ability to generate its own support is itself an outcome that cannot be ignored.



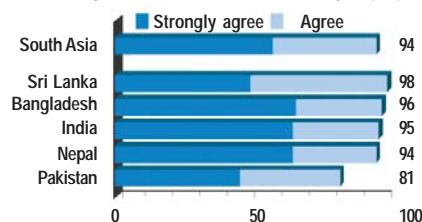
Very few doubt the suitability of democracy for their own country

How suitable is democracy for your country?



Overwhelming support for democracy

Those who agree with the rule of leaders elected by the people



Source: SDSA Team, *State of Democracy in South Asia*, Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2007

Economic growth and development

If democracies are expected to produce good governments, then is it not fair to expect that they would also produce development? Evidence shows that in practice many democracies did not fulfil this expectation.

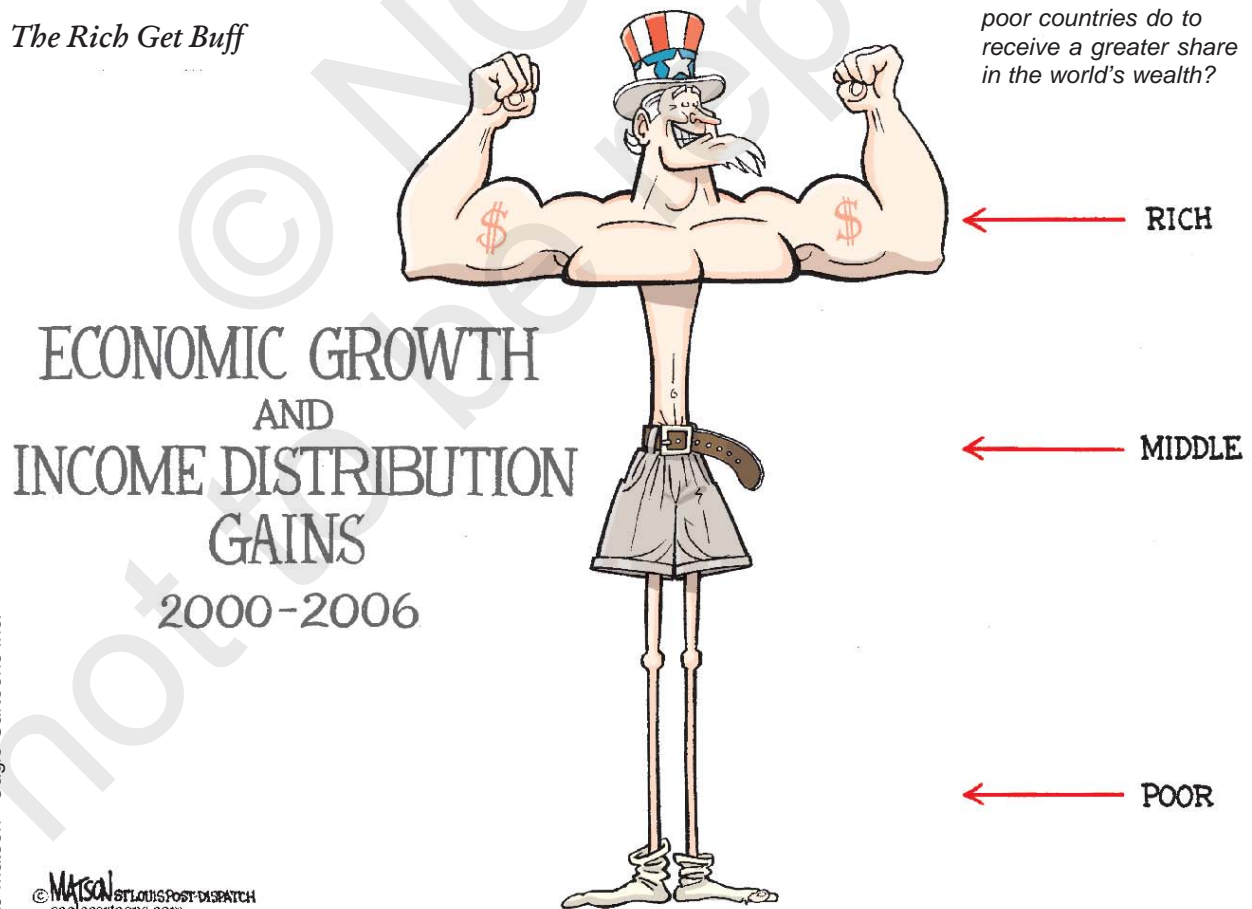
If you consider all democracies and all dictatorships for the fifty years between 1950 and 2000, dictatorships have slightly higher rate of economic growth. The inability of democracy to achieve higher economic development worries us. But this alone cannot be reason to reject democracy. As you have already studied in economics, economic development depends on several factors: country's population size, global situation,

cooperation from other countries, economic priorities adopted by the country, etc. However, the difference in the rates of economic development between less developed countries with dictatorships and democracies is negligible. Overall, we cannot say that democracy is a guarantee of economic development. But we can expect democracy not to lag behind dictatorships in this respect.

When we find such significant difference in the rates of economic growth between countries under dictatorship and democracy, it is better to prefer democracy as it has several other positive outcomes.

Cartoon on this page and next three pages tell us about the disparities between the rich and poor. Should the gains of economic growth be evenly distributed? How can the poor get a voice for a better share in a nation? What can the poor countries do to receive a greater share in the world's wealth?

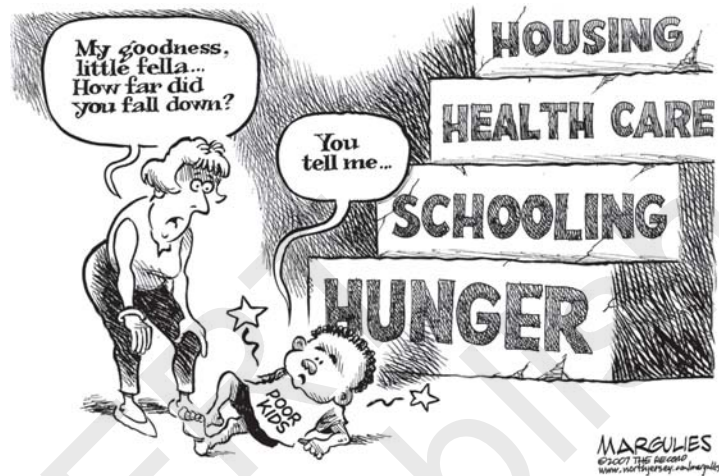
The Rich Get Buff



Economic outcomes of democracy

Arguments about democracy tend to be very passionate. This is how it should be, for democracy appeals to some of our deep values. These debates cannot be resolved in a simple manner. But some debates about democracy can and should be resolved by referring to some facts and figures. The debate about the economic outcomes of democracy is one such debate. Over the years many students of democracy have gathered careful evidence to see what the relationship of democracy with economic growth and economic inequalities is. The tables and the cartoon here present some of the evidences:

Poor Kids



© Jimmy Margulies - Cagle Cartoons Inc.

- Table 1 shows that on an average dictatorial regimes have had a slightly better record of economic growth. But when we compare their record only in poor countries, there is virtually no difference.
- Table 2 shows that within democracies there can be very high degree of inequalities. In democratic countries like South Africa and Brazil, the top 20 per cent people take away more than 60 per cent of the national income, leaving less than 3 per cent for the bottom 20 per cent population. Countries like Denmark and Hungary are much better in this respect.
- You can see in the cartoon, there is often inequality of opportunities available to the poorer sections.

What would be your verdict on democracy if you had to base it purely on economic performance of democratic regimes in terms of growth and equal distribution?

Table 1

Rates of economic growth for different countries, 1950-2000

Type of regimes and countries	Growth Rate
All democratic regimes	3.95
All dictatorial regimes	4.42
Poor countries under dictatorship	4.34
Poor countries under democracy	4.28

Source: A Przeworski, M E Alvarez, J A Cheibub and F Limongi, *Democracy and Development: Political Institutions and Well-Being in the World, 1950-1990*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2000.

Table 2

Inequality of income in selected countries

Name of the Countries	% share of national income	
	Top 20 %	Bottom 20 %
South Africa	64.8	2.9
Brazil	63.0	2.6
Russia	53.7	4.4
USA	50.0	4.0
United Kingdom	45.0	6.0
Denmark	34.5	9.6
Hungary	34.4	10.0

