Democracy Explained, Sort of (Condensed Version)

In our *Brief Essay on Democracy and You (Part one)* the point was made that the word *democracy* is difficult to define. This essay expands on that premise.

Democracy is a surprisingly difficult concept to define, but for purposes of this website, and the reader's appreciation of that complexity, let's give it a go. Here's our working definition: **A country is considered to be democratic if it regularly holds free, fair, and meaningful elections.** There is not a word in that definition that isn't controversial or hard to define, but let's give that a go as well.

Elections are *free* if there are few restrictions on who can run for election and who can vote in those elections. In France all citizens are automatically registered to vote when they turn 18, and any citizen over the age of 23 is eligible to run for office so long as they have fulfilled their required military obligations. By contrast, in South Africa under apartheid the vast majority of adults were forbidden from participating in national elections because they were black.

Elections are *fair* if they are untainted by bribery, intimidation, or corruption, and if the outcome is not predetermined by the leadership. In Great Britain, Parliamentary elections are regularly held with little or no controversy, and small political parties frequently claim unexpected victories in various districts. In Cuba, the Castro regime has regularly been reelected every couple of years, but those elections have always been rigged so that it was impossible for there to be any other outcome than a landslide victory for Castro.

Elections are *meaningful* if the winners of those elections are put into positions of real power and authority. In Japan, the winners of the parliamentary elections become legislators, capable of creating the laws of the land. By contrast, in Iran the president is elected democratically, but once in power, all of his decisions can be vetoed by an unelected council of religious leaders.

The definition we presented in those bold letters above is not without its faults. In particular, it is purposefully vague. For example, it does not say exactly what percentage of the population needs to be eligible to vote in order for a country to be a democracy. As was stated in an earlier essay, in the early days of American government, only white men who owned property were allowed to vote. While the property restrictions were lifted over the next sixty years, African Americans were, for the most part, not legally allowed to vote until after the Civil War, and restrictions existed for most black voters until the 1960's. Women were not guaranteed the right to vote until 1919. 18-year-olds were not allowed to vote until 1971, and many convicted felons are barred from voting even today, and after having served their sentence, their "debt to society." So, ask yourself: When did America become a democracy?

Similar debates can be had about many countries. We can quibble over the details of how free, fair, or meaningful a given election is, but some countries are clearly more democratic than others. The paradox of democracy applies to all democracies. All people are irrational and uninformed and all electoral systems are flawed. Yet democracy is an extraordinarily successful form of government, and has proven successful in almost every region of the globe, despite whatever local forms of craziness plague any given country. So, yes, America is unique, but it is just a unique form of craziness that is ours. Embrace it, or try to modify it. Heck, it's your government, after all.

Please don't take this as a personal attack on American democracy, or any democracy for that matter. If our own democracy appears to be inhabited by ignorant and foolish pawns of a political system they do not understand, to be honest, that's a fairly accurate description. But then, that includes those of us who are trying to make the system work. We are trying to inform both you and ourselves, not trying to insult people. In short, people may be

irrational but democracies are quite sane. The sum is greater than its chaotic parts. The late journalist Molly Ivins once said that democracy "requires a certain relish for confusion." In other words, democracy is crazy—but maybe that's not so bad.

(Much of this essay is excerpted and manipulated from *Democracy Despite Itself,* by Danny Oppenheimer and Mike Edwards, published by The MIT Press, of Cambridge, Massachusetts. We believe the authors would graciously understand and appreciate the intent of our borrowing from their work.)