

Introduction

The idea that the preferences of citizens should be taken into account to determine a government's public policies is a relatively new one in human history, only a few hundred years old. Until Enlightenment ideas became influential in the late seventeenth century, citizens were viewed – and viewed themselves – as subjects of their governments. The population was divided into two classes – the rulers and the ruled – and one duty of the ruled was to serve the interests of the state, as determined by its rulers. Enlightenment ideas offered an ideology that reversed that relationship. Rather than citizens serving the state, the state should serve its citizens.

Before the state can act to further the interests of its citizens, it must know what those interests are, and that is often viewed as one of the main functions of a democratic government. Democratic government works, first, to place the control of government in the hands of its citizens. But democracy is often also viewed as a mechanism for revealing and aggregating the preferences of its citizens so that government can carry out the will of the people. When democracy is viewed that way, as a mechanism that reveals the preferences of its citizens, the actions of democratic governments gain a legitimacy that can lead to an abuse of power.

The way that social scientists have analyzed how political institutions aggregate citizen preferences took a major step forward in the 1960s, which marked the beginning of the public choice revolution. Forerunners can be found, to be sure,¹ but a major premise upon which this revolution

¹ See Appendix 2 in James M. Buchanan and Gordon Tullock, *The Calculus of Consent* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1962). This book could be viewed as initiating the public choice revolution, and Appendix 2 is titled “Theoretical Forerunners.”

in political thought was based is that there is little difference between the motivations of people in the private sector and people in the public sector. In contrast to the view (still widely held) that people in the private sector act to further their private interests while those in the public sector work to further the public interest, the public choice approach recognizes that while most people do want to do what is best for others, everyone responds to the incentive to do what is best for themselves.

Elected officials often take actions that help them to maintain their offices, or move up the political hierarchy, even when those actions may not further the public interest. Government bureaucrats will act to further their careers, and will avoid actions that threaten their job security, even when those actions may not further the public interest. The public choice assumption is that people in the public sector are no better and no worse than those in the private sector. The public choice approach to politics looks at the incentives people face when they make decisions and the information they have available to them when they make those decisions. This approach looks at the way political processes actually work, not how we might hope that they would work. When analyzing politics, objective analysis should replace wishful thinking. James Buchanan, one of the founders of the public choice movement, referred to this approach as “politics without romance.”²

Thinking about democratic institutions as a way of aggregating the policy preferences of individual citizens into some vision of the public interest requires an understanding of how those institutions aggregate individual preferences, which has been done extensively in the public choice analysis undertaken by political scientists and economists. Efforts along these lines will be discussed below. But it also requires an understanding of how citizens form the preferences they express through democratic institutions, and this has seen much less development. Political preferences are often assumed as given and exogenous, and the primary interest of this volume is to examine in more detail how those preferences are formed, and as a result, the implications for public policy.

Social scientists typically assume citizen preferences to be given, and examine how politicians and other government officials design their political platforms to correspond to the preferences of their citizens.³ There are

² James M. Buchanan, “Public Choice: Politics without Romance,” *Policy* 19, no. 3 (Spring 2003), pp. 13–18.

³ Anthony Downs, *An Economic Theory of Democracy* (New York: Harper & Row, 1957), is a good example. Downs concludes that politicians design their platforms to conform to the preferences of the median voter.

good reasons to believe that the direction of causation goes mainly in the other direction: that citizens adopt the policy preferences of the political elite, rather than the elite adjusting their platforms to conform to the preferences of their constituents. This idea is far enough away from the mainstream views in political science that much of this volume is devoted to explaining how this happens. If policy preferences ultimately are determined by the elite, this raises the further question of what determines the preferences of the elite. Answering those questions links political preferences and public policy.

1.1 THE IMPACT OF ENLIGHTENMENT IDEAS

For most of human history, societies were divided into the rulers and the ruled. Citizens were subjects of their governments and were obligated to obey the orders of their rulers. Thomas Hobbes, writing in 1651, argued that doing so was in the best interest of the citizens.⁴ Without a government to enforce order, Hobbes argued that life in anarchy would be solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short, and would be a war of all against all. Everybody would always be at risk from predation, both from others in their society and from outside invaders. Productivity would be low because people would have no incentive to produce things that would likely be stolen from them in a lawless society. The solution, Hobbes said, was for everyone to agree to abide by the government's rules. This would allow an escape from anarchy and enable an orderly society. Obeying the rules of the sovereign was a social contract that would be – and must be – agreed to by all members of society, according to Hobbes.

Several features of Hobbes's social contract point toward the pre-Enlightenment view of government. Hobbes argued that the sovereign had the right to put to death anyone who violated the rules of government. That is one way to ensure that everyone agrees to abide by the rules: kill those who do not! Hobbes saw no alternative to abiding by all of the sovereign's rules. People could not pick and choose which rules they wanted to follow; to do so would lead right back to anarchy. What if some of the sovereign's rules were in some way flawed? It did not matter. One could hope to live under a government that acted in the best interests of its subjects, but allowing people the discretion to decide that some rules are unjust or otherwise flawed would undermine the order created by a government's rules.

⁴ Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan* (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1950 [orig. 1651]).

Hobbes's vision of the social contract divided people into two classes: the rulers and the ruled. The rulers made the rules, and the ruled were required to follow them. Government's subjects had the obligation to act in the interest of their government, that is, in the interest of the ruling class, because as Hobbes described it, to do so was also in the interest of the government's subjects. It allowed them to live in an orderly society and escape from an anarchy that would be a war of all against all.

According to Hobbes, people got their rights from government. The ruling class made the rules and their subjects were obligated to follow them. This idea is difficult to comprehend in the twenty-first century because Enlightenment ideas have reinforced the notion that everyone should be equal in the eyes of the law and that in some cases governments violate people's human rights. When Hobbes wrote, even the world's most civilized nations assigned people to different classes based on their birth. Some people were born into royalty and enjoyed privileges associated with it. Commoners, simply as a result of the families they were born into, could never enjoy the privileges of royalty.

Slavery was common throughout the world, and people accepted these class divisions with Hobbesian reasoning. Government makes the rules and its subjects are obligated to follow them. If some people were born into higher status than others, the social contract obligated everyone to recognize the distinction. Slavery, rejected as immoral in the twenty-first century, was accepted in the seventeenth as a part of the orderly society enforced by the mandates of government.

Only a few decades later, John Locke published his *Two Treatise of Government* in 1690, with a very different view of the social contract.⁵ In contrast with Hobbes, who argued that people got their rights from government, Locke argued that people naturally have rights and that the role of government is to protect those rights. Locke begins with the idea that people own themselves. They have a right to their bodies, and therefore they have a right to their labor. Therefore, they have a right to own what they produce with their labor. Locke thus develops a theory of self-ownership that leads to the right to own property, and the social contract, as Locke saw it, is that people are obligated to not violate the rights of others.

Locke saw a problem similar to the one Hobbes saw, which is that opportunistic individuals might violate that social contract and infringe

⁵ John Locke, *Two Treatises of Government* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1960 [orig. 1690]).

the rights of others. The role of government, Locke argued, is to protect people's rights. Here, Locke and Hobbes are in agreement. But Locke's vision of the social contract differed from Hobbes's vision in (at least) two important ways. First, Locke viewed that people naturally have rights, in contrast with Hobbes who said that the government makes the rules and determines what rights people have. Second, government is a party to the social contract as Locke describes it, whereas Hobbes's social contract is among government's subjects, who are obligated to abide by government's rules.

Locke put forward the revolutionary idea that if government fails to uphold its obligations under the social contract, citizens have a right to overthrow and replace their government. This idea was, quite literally, revolutionary. Prior to the American Revolution, pamphleteers were arguing that the king of England was violating the rights of the colonists, so the colonists had the right to replace that government with one that was dedicated to protecting their rights. While most Americans at the time would not have read Locke, pamphleteers advocating independence from Britain were referring to Locke's ideas, so the colonists would have been familiar with Locke's ideas.⁶

Throughout the eighteenth century, Enlightenment ideas changed the way that citizens viewed their relationship to government. The view that citizens were subjects of their governments and obligated to serve their governments was reversed, so people increasingly thought that government should serve its citizens rather than the other way around. A series of newspaper columns published in the *London Journal* under the name of Cato from 1720 to 1723 advocating Enlightenment principles of liberty was very influential, and the columns were ultimately compiled into a book, first published in 1755, titled *Cato's Letters*.⁷ By the time of the American Revolution in 1776, the idea that government should serve the interests of its citizens was well established, changing the dominant view from a century prior that citizens should serve their governments.

If governments should serve the interests of their citizens, what are those interests? One thought is that democratic decision-making processes can reveal those interests. The institutions of democracy serve as

⁶ The role of Locke's ideas in the American Revolution is discussed by Bernard Bailyn, *The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1967).

⁷ The authors of the letters were Thomas Gordon and John Trenchard. The letters can be found in *Essays on Liberty, Civil and Religious, and Other Important Subjects*, Ronald Hamowy, ed. (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1995).

a preference revelation mechanism that identifies the interests of its citizens. Democracy is widely viewed that way, and politicians promote the idea with claims, after winning elections, that they have a mandate to implement policies on which they campaigned. This vision points to a direct link between political preferences and public policy. As appealing as that idea might at first appear, thinking of democracy that way is problematic.

I.2 DEMOCRACY AS A MECHANISM FOR AGGREGATING PREFERENCES

James Buchanan and Gordon Tullock depict democracy as a mechanism for revealing the collective preferences of groups of individuals. They say, “Collective action is viewed as the action of individuals when they choose to accomplish purposes collectively rather than individually, and the government is seen as nothing more than the set of processes, the machine, which allows such collective action to take place.”⁸ They recognize, however, that groups have no preferences; only individuals have preferences. So, to say that some policy is in the interest of a group of people can mean nothing more than that it is in the interest of the individual members of the group. Democracy can aggregate preferences to make a collective choice, but it is misleading to say that the group, as such, has expressed a preference.

Buchanan and Tullock use agreement as a benchmark to judge whether collective action is in the best interest of members of a group, recognizing that individuals cannot expect that every collective action a group takes will benefit every single individual. Rather, the expectation of group members is that everyone is better off with collective action undertaken by government than without it. If this is not the case, then the ideas of Locke and other Enlightenment thinkers would lead citizens to work to replace their government with one that does improve their welfare.

Consider, for example, a system of traffic lights that regulates the flow of traffic. In some cases, an individual may come to a red light and have to stop even though there is no other traffic at the intersection. The individual is worse off for having to stop, and nobody is better off because there is no conflicting traffic, so in this specific instance, stopping at that intersection imposes a cost on the driver, but nobody benefits. Social

⁸ James M. Buchanan and Gordon Tullock, *The Calculus of Consent* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1962), p. 13.

welfare is reduced. But overall, drivers are better off with the system of traffic lights than without that system, even if in specific cases the system imposes some costs in excess of their benefits. In the aggregate, everybody benefits from an orderly flow of traffic. The example extends to collective decision-making more generally. Ideally, democracy produces a set of institutions that improves the welfare of everyone.⁹

There is no guarantee that this is the case, and when public policies are enacted that benefit some, even if it is a large majority, but harm others, there is no way to compare the gains for some against the losses of others, so any suggestion that the outcome of democratic decision-making reveals the public interest is problematic. Even if somehow such a determination could be made, one would still be hard-pressed to say the outcome is in the public interest. If one person were to gain more utility from owning a slave than another would lose from being enslaved, could we say that enslaving the second person would be in the public interest? Ultimately, the hope is that even if some individual policies go against the interest of some individuals, everyone agrees to the process by which those policies are made. They agree to the rules and institutions, even if they do not always agree with the outcomes those rules and institutions produce.

Democracy does not always work that way. John Stuart Mill refers to a “tyranny of the majority” in which “society is itself the tyrant – society collectively, over the separate individuals who compose it,”¹⁰ which suggests the possibility that democracy and freedom can be at odds with each other. People do benefit from collective action to produce goods that are collectively consumed, such as roads, municipal water supplies, wastewater treatment, and more. The challenge is to design a system of collective decision-making that enables people to cooperate to produce those goods, without enabling some people to use that same system to benefit themselves at the expense of others.

Daron Acemoglu and James Robinson describe such a system as a narrow corridor between a government so weak that it fails to protect people’s rights and a Leviathan government that abuses its power to violate people’s rights.¹¹ Similarly, James Buchanan describes the limits

⁹ This example is taken from James M. Buchanan, “The Relevance of Pareto Optimality,” *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 6, no. 4 (December 1962), pp. 341–354.

¹⁰ John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty*, People’s Edition (London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1913), p. 8.

¹¹ Daron Acemoglu and James A. Robinson, *The Narrow Corridor: States, Societies, and the Fate of Liberty* (New York: Penguin Press, 2019).

of liberty as lying between anarchy and Leviathan.¹² It should be obvious that if citizens' preferences are aggregated through any mechanism in which some people – a majority, or even a powerful minority – can impose their decisions on others, public policies may not reflect the political preferences of the citizens they affect. Without unanimous support, it is obvious that they do not reflect the political preferences of everyone. The risk is that democratic governments might slip out of that narrow corridor, beyond the limits of liberty, to become an oppressive Leviathan.

1.3 MAKING SOCIAL CHOICES

Democratic decision-making is more than just majority rule voting. Democratic institutions vary substantially from one government to another, and those differences can make nontrivial differences in the scope and nature of government activity. Differences among democratic governing institutions include presidential versus parliamentary systems of government and plurality versus proportional voting mechanisms, but many smaller nuances also differentiate various democratic governments.¹³

Presidential systems, as in the United States, elect the executive and legislative branches of government separately, whereas the parliamentary systems that are commonly used in Europe elect a parliament which then chooses government ministers who lead the executive branch. Plurality voting selects the candidate who receives the most votes as the single winner in an election, whereas proportional voting elects party members in proportion to their total votes. In plurality voting, a candidate who gets 20 percent of the vote loses the election. In proportional voting, a party that receives 20 percent of the votes gets 20 percent of the seats in the parliament. These nuances are important, but an analysis of the basic framework underlying democratic decision-making reveals issues that call it into question as a mechanism for revealing collective preferences.

One commonly used framework for describing the results of democratic elections is the median voter model, which concludes that when

¹² James M. Buchanan, *The Limits of Liberty: Between Anarchy and Leviathan* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1975).

¹³ Torsten Persson and Guido Tabellini, *Political Economics: Explaining Economic Policy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), discuss the different outcomes that tend to result from presidential versus parliamentary democracy, and from plurality versus proportional voting.

TABLE 1.1 *Preferences that produce a cyclical majority*

Voters		
1	2	3
A	B	C
B	C	A
C	A	B

preferences are aggregated by majority rule, the aggregated preference of the group is the preference of the median voter.¹⁴ The model assumes that voter preferences can be arrayed on a single-dimensional continuum, and concludes that the outcome preferred by the median voter can defeat all other alternatives by simple majority rule. Looked at in this way, majority rule voting is a system of preference aggregation. The group wants to make a collective decision, and if the model is descriptive, aggregating the individual preferences of group members through majority rule voting means that the collective choice will be the outcome that the median voter prefers.

The model is likely to be descriptive in many but not all situations. Voter preferences are often viewed as existing on a left-to-right continuum, and the model concludes that in representative democracies, candidates and parties tend to design platforms that appeal to the median voter.¹⁵ However, under some circumstances there may be no option that can win the support of a majority over all others. Table 1.1 gives a well-known example in which preferences are aligned so that there is a cyclical majority.

The table represents the rank-order preferences of three voters for three different alternatives, A, B, or C. For example, voter 1 prefers A to B and B to C. In a majority rule vote pitting A against B, voters 1 and 3 would vote for A, so A defeats B. But if A runs against C, C gets the votes

¹⁴ This model was introduced and developed by Howard R. Bowen, "The Interpretation of Voting in the Allocation of Economic Resources," *Quarterly Journal of Economics* 58, no. 1 (November 1943), pp. 27–48; Duncan Black, *The Theory of Committees and Elections* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1958); Anthony Downs, *An Economic Theory of Democracy* (New York: Harper & Row, 1957).

¹⁵ I discuss the model in more detail in Randall G. Holcombe, *Advanced Introduction to Public Choice* (Cheltenham, UK: Edward Elgar, 2016), but this simple description is sufficient to give the flavor of the conclusions the model draws.

TABLE 1.2 *Value of preferences that produce a cyclical majority*

Alternatives	Voters		
	1	2	3
A	\$1000	\$1	\$2
B	\$2	\$3	\$1
C	\$1	\$2	\$3

of voters 2 and 3, so C defeats A. And if B runs against C, B gets the votes of 1 and 2, so B defeats C. B defeats C, A defeats B, and C defeats A, so no alternative can defeat all others in a majority rule vote.¹⁶

This example shows that under some circumstances there will be no equilibrium outcome under majority rule voting. If democratic decision-making is used to select among policies A, B, or C, none of those alternatives is preferred by a majority over all others. That does not imply that none of the alternatives is better than the others. One possibility, illustrated in Table 1.2, is that voter 1 places a high value on alternative A (\$1000), and voters 2 and 3 place values of only \$3 on alternatives B and C, respectively. The rank order of preferences in Table 1.2 is the same as in Table 1.1, so the same cyclical majority exists, but with the values in Table 1.2, A would clearly be the highest valued choice. Majority rule voting will not reveal that. The democratic choice is as likely to be the lower-valued alternatives B or C as the higher-valued alternative A.

Furthermore, once an alternative is chosen, there will always be another one that a majority of voters prefer to the chosen alternative. Even if A is chosen, a majority would prefer C over A. This suggests the possibility of instability in democratic government. If preferences resemble those in Table 1.1, regardless of the status quo, a majority would always prefer something different. In light of this possibility, it is remarkable that democratic governments (often) appear to be so stable.¹⁷ Reasons for this remarkable

¹⁶ This example is given early in Kenneth J. Arrow, *Social Choice and Individual Values* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1953), and is sometimes referred to as the Arrow paradox.

¹⁷ R. D. McKelvey, "Intransitivities in Multi-Dimensional Voting Models and Some Implications for Agenda Control," *Journal of Economic Theory* 12, no. 3 (June 1976), pp. 472–482, suggests that instability in democratic government may be a common

stability will be explored later in this volume, but one implication from this discussion is that democratic decision-making may not be a good method for identifying outcomes that best represent the interests of citizens.

If a group has very homogeneous preferences, then it will not matter much what type of collective decision-making mechanism is used. Everybody wants about the same thing, so almost any collective decision-making mechanism will produce what the people in the group want. When preferences differ among group members, democratic decision-making tends to break down, as the cyclical majority example illustrates, and results may not reflect the preferences of the members of the group. Democracy works worst when an effective collective decision-making mechanism is needed the most. This, along with the possibility of the tyranny of the majority, suggests that democratic decision-making is not a robust system for identifying the preferences of a group.

Ultimately, groups do not have preferences and groups make no choices. Individuals have preferences and individuals make choices, so any reference to group preferences must be shorthand for references to the preferences of the individuals in the group, and any references to group choices must be references to an outcome of a preference aggregation mechanism that aggregates the preferences of the individuals in the group. In general, there is no mechanism that can identify some unique “group preference” that can be discovered by aggregating votes.

Democratic decision-making offers a mechanism for making collective choices, but those choices are not necessarily the ones that are best for the members of the decision-making group. This is worth noting in light of the fact that elections are often viewed as reflecting the policy preferences of the voters. However, for precisely this reason, democratic governments are always subject to constitutional constraints on allowable actions. In the American case, the Constitution of the United States gives the government limited and enumerated powers rather than determining the scope of government through democratic processes. Increasingly, the popular view of government is moving away from the idea of constitutionally limited powers toward the idea that government should do what its citizens want, as revealed through democratic processes. To see the effects of that shift, one must understand the relationship between political preferences and public policy.

condition. However, Gordon Tullock, “Why So Much Stability?” *Public Choice* 37, no. 2 (1982), pp. 189–202, observes that democratic governments appear very stable, questioning McKelvey’s conclusion.

1.4 DEMOCRACY AS IDEOLOGY

Evaluated as a mechanism for making collective decisions, the preceding discussion shows that democracy falls well short of a method to identify the public interest. When there is widespread consensus, democracy can identify the consensus view, but then, so can any other method of choosing public policy. When preferences among individuals differ, democracy may be no better than choosing policies at random, and might be worse because of the possibility that a majority can use democratic institutions to exploit minorities. But democracy is more than just a mechanism for making collective decisions. It has a strong ideological component. Democracy as an ideology cuts two ways. When viewed as a method for identifying the general will, it runs the risk of legitimizing government actions that exploit minorities, or worse, actions that allow an elite few to exploit the masses. A different ideological vision of democracy is that government should be responsive to the interests of its citizens, and that democratic institutions give citizens the right to replace their governments when they are not, as, for example, the American colonists did with their Declaration of Independence.

1.5 DEMOCRATIC INSTITUTIONS AND THE GENERAL WILL

Jean-Jacques Rousseau, in 1762, gave a clear explanation of the view that the democratic decision-making process reveals the will of the people. He said,

The citizen gives his consent to all the laws, including those which are passed in spite of his opposition, and even those which punish him when he dares break any of them ... When in the popular assembly a law is proposed, what the people is asked is not exactly whether it approves or rejects the proposal, but whether it is in conformity with the general will, which is their will. When therefore the opinion that is contrary to my own prevails, this proves neither more nor less that that I was mistaken, and what I thought to be the general will was not so.¹⁸

This view of democracy legitimizes the decisions of democratic governments by asserting that the outcome of a democratic decision-making process conforms with the will of the people.

¹⁸ Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Social Contract, or Principles of Political Right*, translated by G. D. H. Cole. www.constitution.org/jr/socon.htm. 1762, Book IV, Ch. 1, no. 2. While this is a translation from the original French, note that Rousseau uses *people* as a singular term, further reinforcing the idea that there is a general will that transcends the individual wills of those who compose the people.

Rousseau's vision of democracy has been reinforced in the twentieth and into the twenty-first centuries in the ideology of progressive democracy. For the first century of its existence, citizens of the United States perceived their government as founded on an ideology of liberty, which viewed the role of government as protecting individual rights, along the line of reasoning followed by Locke. Toward the end of the nineteenth century and into the twentieth, the ideology of progressivism began displacing the ideology of liberty. The progressive ideology incorporated an expanded vision of the role of government: Government's role was not only to protect individual rights but also to look out for people's economic well-being.¹⁹

Progressivism began largely as a reaction against increasingly concentrated economic power. As the nation industrialized, industrialists and financiers such as Rockefeller, Vanderbilt, Carnegie, and Morgan amassed wealth more rapidly than anyone before in human history, and many believed that they were using their economic power to take advantage of those who had less economic power. Progressive policies included regulation – especially of the railroads – antitrust laws, and even court decisions

Terry Anderson and P. J. Hill cite the 1877 Supreme Court decision of *Munn v. Illinois* as a major advance in progressive public policy.²⁰ In response to the complaints of farmers that grain elevator operators were using their monopoly power to undercompensate them for their crops, the state of Illinois began regulating grain elevator prices. When those regulations were challenged, the Supreme Court ruled in favor of Illinois. This was the first time the courts ruled that government has the right to set the terms of exchange, including prices, for private transactions. The Interstate Commerce Commission was established in 1887 to regulate railroads, and the Sherman Antitrust Act was passed in 1890, which allowed the federal government to break up firms that were accused of monopolizing industries.

Progressivism was from its beginning redistributive in nature. It justified imposing costs on some for the benefit of others. In its earliest

¹⁹ I discuss the implications of this ideological shift in Randall G. Holcombe, *Liberty in Peril: Democracy and Power in American History* (Oakland, CA: Independent Institute, 2019). See also Robert Higgs, *Crisis and Leviathan: Critical Episodes in the Growth of American Government*, Twenty-Fifth Anniversary Edition (Oakland, CA: Independent Institute, 2012), for a discussion of the implications of this ideological shift.

²⁰ See Terry L. Anderson and P. J. Hill, *The Birth of a Transfer Society* (Stanford, CA: Hoover Institution Press, 1980), for a discussion of the implications of *Munn v. Illinois*.

days, the costs of progressive policies were borne primarily by the very wealthy – those who were perceived as abusing their substantial economic power. As progressivism developed through the twentieth century, the ideology of progressivism increasingly justified imposing costs on some not because they were taking advantage of others but as a means to the end of providing economic benefits to some other group. The progressive welfare state imposes costs on a broad range of citizens to enhance the economic well-being of others. Progressive regulation is designed to limit the power of business for the benefit of workers and consumers. Progressive taxation is designed to transfer income from those with higher incomes. The twenty-first-century ideology of progressivism, embodied in the welfare state and the regulatory state, justifies imposing costs on some for the benefit of others.

Combining the ideologies of progressivism and democracy, the ideology of progressive democracy legitimizes the activities of democratic government. The ideology of progressivism justifies imposing costs on some for the benefit of others, and the ideology of democracy says that when this is done by a democratic government, it is carrying out the will of the people. If one could be confident that democratic institutions revealed the will of the people, as Rousseau suggested, this would not be a concern, but as noted earlier, democratic institutions fall short as a method of aggregating individual preferences to identify the preferences of a group.

The language used to describe government actions influences how people perceive those actions. Progressivism conveys the impression of policies that serve the public interest rather than narrow individual interests, and democracy conveys the impression of a government that responds to the demands of its citizens. What some might call the tyranny of the majority is what others call progressive democracy. But the institutions of democratic governments do not always benefit a majority at the expense of a minority. Often it is a minority that benefits at the expense of a majority – narrow special interests can benefit at the expense of the general public. The ideology of progressive democracy legitimizes all actions undertaken by democratic governments.

The actions of a democratic government are justified because they embody the preferences of the governed, according to the ideology of progressive democracy. One cannot even disagree with this statement, according to Rousseau, who says that anyone who disagrees is mistaken. Those who have political power in a democracy can use it to benefit themselves at the expense of others, and the ideology of progressive democracy says that when they do so, they are acting in the public interest. This

places a heavy burden on any links between political preferences and public policy. If the link is weak, the ideology of progressive democracy offers what amounts to a blank check to the political elite who exercise political power.

1.6 DEMOCRACY AS FREEDOM FROM GOVERNMENT OPPRESSION

The ideology of democracy does not always conform with the ideology of progressivism. People often view democracy more broadly as a form of government that holds those with political power accountable to their citizens. Democratic institutions facilitate that accountability, but features of democracy, such as elections, do not guarantee it. In this broader vision of democracy, voting is of secondary importance; the primary characteristic of a democratic government is that it is accountable to its citizens. Democratic elections enable citizens to have some say over who holds the power of government, but the scope of government, in this vision of democracy, is limited to that narrow corridor between anarchy and Leviathan.

Democracy in this sense means that citizens control their governments rather than governments controlling their citizens. This idea goes back at least to John Locke and is embodied in the Declaration of Independence that created the United States. The Declaration of Independence consists mostly of a list of grievances against the king of England. The colonists asserted that the British government was violating their rights, and therefore they had the right to establish their own government dedicated to protecting their liberty. Democratic institutions are a means to an end that allows citizens to control their governments. In this view, democracy means government that is accountable to, and controlled by, its citizens.

This ideology that views democracy as a component of a government that preserves freedom and protects individual rights remains strong, if often underappreciated. When people are generally in agreement with the activities of their governments, they tend to view democracy as a set of institutions – elections, legislatures, and so forth – rather than viewing it as a guarantor of freedom. When citizens view democracy as a system of government that is controlled by and accountable to its citizens, they are inclined to rise up in protest when government compromises their freedom. The influence of Locke's ideas on the American Revolution has already been noted, but more contemporary examples show that people still hold Locke's ideas, even if they are not expressed that way.

When the Berlin Wall fell in 1989, citizens of the Eastern bloc countries rose up and rallied for democracy to replace their dictatorships, but as they looked across the wall to the West, the right to vote was a small part of what they sought. They wanted the freedom that they saw in the democratic West relative to the oppression that they experienced themselves. While in many ways democracy is an impediment to freedom, in this powerful way the ideology of democracy supports freedom because popular opinion equates the two.²¹ Martin Luther King spoke against government discrimination that compromised individual freedom in the democratic United States. In addition to the civil rights movement that gained prominence in the 1960s, student protests against the Vietnam war offer another example. College students had personal reasons for opposing the war because they were subject to the military draft that compromised the freedom of those who were drafted, but like Martin Luther King, they were protesting a nominally democratic government that was violating this broader ideology of democracy by compromising the freedom of individuals.

The Occupy Wall Street movement that began in 2011 offers another example. After the financial crisis that began in 2008, the bursting of the housing bubble along with an accompanying recession meant that many people could not pay their mortgages, and their homes were foreclosed. They perceived a government policy that bailed out the financial firms that owned depreciated mortgage-backed securities, leaving foreclosed homeowners to fend for themselves. In the language of the protesters, the government was supporting the 1 percent rather than the 99 percent – the vast majority of citizens. Government policy supported the insiders and cronies rather than doing what was in the broader public interest. The Occupy Wall Street protesters were objecting to a government that, as they viewed it, subverted democracy by favoring the few at the expense of the many.

One can debate the claims of the protesters and some will argue that the government's policy response was appropriate to the situation, but the point here is that the protesters were objecting to policies that, in their views, were antithetical to the ideology of democracy because they were

²¹ Bo Rothstein, "Epistemic Democracy and the Quality of Government," *European Politics and Society* 20, no. 1 (2019), pp. 16–31, notes that citizens will rebel against their nominally democratic governments when they believe they are acting against the interests of their citizens.

not in the best interest of most citizens. Rather than accept Rousseau's view that policies constructed through democratic institutions express the will of the people, they were objecting to policies that they viewed as being designed by a group of cronies for their own benefit. They were explicitly rejecting the idea that their democratic government was furthering the general will. Believing that a democratic government should act to benefit the masses, the protesters perceived that in this case the policies created through a democratic decision-making process worked against the public interest.

In 2019 there were widespread protests against the governments in Hong Kong and in Iran precisely because the protesters viewed their governments as compromising their freedoms. In both cases, some protesters lost their lives to government violence during the protests, indicating a willingness of the protesters to risk their lives to rise up against oppressive governments and demand their freedom. People do not just identify democratic government with citizen rights to vote. Viewed in this way, the ideology of democracy can create a link between political preferences and public policy. When citizens view that link as broken, even when they have the right to vote, history reveals many instances in which they take to the streets to protest the actions of their governments.

1.7 THE IDEOLOGY OF DEMOCRACY CUTS TWO WAYS

One ideological view of democracy is that it is a form of government that aggregates citizen preferences to identify a collective preference that represents the general will. Rousseau clearly expressed this view of democracy. Another ideological view is that democracy is a system of government that acts in the interests of its citizens. While similar on the surface, a major difference between them is that the first view of democracy legitimizes the actions of government, whereas the second offers a route to call them into question. The political elite – the people who make the rules that the masses must obey – have a strong interest in promoting that first view because it legitimizes any actions they take. The chapters that follow suggest that the political elite have been fairly successful at promoting this vision of democracy – but not always successful. In general, the political elite have been able to lead citizens to think that the policies they enact embody the political preferences of the masses. When forming their political preferences, citizens are often following their leaders.

1.8 THERE IS NO PUBLIC INTEREST

One complication in thinking about the relationship between political preferences and public policy is that groups do not have interests; only individuals have interests. When one thinks about the interests of a nation, that can mean nothing more than the interests of the individuals who make up that nation. Surely there are some broadly shared interests that can be thought of as national interests, but still, it is the individuals in a nation who have those interests, not some aggregate “nation” that exists beyond the individuals who compose it. People do have broadly shared values, mostly associated with the protection of individual rights, which might constitute a public interest. There is widespread agreement that people should not assault each other or kill each other, and that people should not take the property of others (although there may be disagreement about what constitutes just ownership of property). Public policy can garner widespread agreement in addressing these issues.

Issues can be referred to as being in the public interest as a shorthand way of saying that they are in the interests of all of the individuals who make up the public. Issues like these are a small subset of public policy in the twenty-first century. Consider a policy such as requiring that motor fuels contain ethanol, as is the case in the United States. Proponents of this mandate claim it is in the public interest because it lessens the nation’s dependence on foreign oil, and because it is more sustainable and environmentally sound. Meanwhile, it produces financial gains to the producers of ethanol and imposes costs on motorists who must accept ethanol in their fuel regardless of whether they want it. (It is easy to conclude that they do not want it because if they did, there would be no reason for a mandate.)

This mandate would appear to be a policy that furthers the interests of a narrow special interest group by imposing widely dispersed costs on the general public. However, supporters of this policy (and every other public policy) argue that the policy is in the public interest. For the policy to be enacted, the public interest argument must at least be plausible enough that the politicians who support it can claim to be acting in the public interest. Many citizens may not care enough about issues like this to become informed, especially if a plausible public interest argument is offered by the policy’s supporters. This raises the question of how interest groups are able to shift political preferences sufficiently that policies that benefit their interests are supported, or at least not opposed, by the political preferences of the masses.

Political preferences are subject to outside influences, and the next several chapters discuss how this happens. There is no such thing as the public interest beyond the individuals who make up the public, but there are good reasons to think that narrow special interests and the political elite can influence the political preferences of the masses.

1.9 CONCLUSION

Prior to the Enlightenment, the ruling class dictated public policy and the masses viewed themselves as subjects of their governments, obligated to act to further the interests of their governments. Enlightenment ideas reversed that view of the relationship between citizens and their governments. Rather than citizens serving their governments, governments should serve the interests of their citizens. This Enlightenment ideology implies that public policies reflect the political preferences of a nation's citizens.

One question, that has been dealt with extensively by scholars over the ages is what correspondence (if any) exists between political preferences and public policy. A second question, which has not been dealt with as extensively, is what determines people's political preferences. Social scientists often take preferences as given and begin their analysis from there, but one major conclusion in the following chapters is that the masses get their political preferences largely from the political elite. They are following their leaders. This conclusion is enough of a deviation from most analyses in the social sciences that it merits explaining in some detail.