

THE MEANING OF DEMOCRACY TODAY ESSAY COMPETITION

International Debate Education Association essay competition

Guidelines:

Each essayist must refer to Ambassador Palouš's article and may want to consider using personal experience, examples from your own country and other supporting evidence.

Topics (choose ONE):

1. The author argues that there are "natural limits" to the idea of democracy, and that a democratic world government is undesirable. What are the possibilities of incorporating democratic ideals and practices in the international world order?
2. The author discusses preconditions that have made democracy possible historically. What can be done in today's world to promote the spread of democracy?
3. The author notes that democratic governments have "a greater inclination toward peace in their international behavior." But he also notes that democratic societies tend to co-operate with each other. Is conflict between democracies and non-democracies inevitable?
4. What did you think of this essay?

The essay should be 1500 words or less and written in English.

The top 3 essayists will be selected by an international panel of IDEA associates.

The top essayist will be given funding to travel to and participate in one of IDEA's debate institutes or forums and the winning essay will be published in IDEBATE magazine and on our web-site. The second and third place essayists will each receive an IDEA watch and a free subscription to IDEBATE magazine.

Essay applications should be postmarked or preferably emailed by February 1st 2003 to :

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WHAT DOES DEMOCRACY MEAN TODAY?

by Martin Palouš

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What does the word democracy mean today? There is certainly more than one answer to this question, because democracy is a word with a long and rich history and multiple meanings. First, a meaningful analysis must distinguish among the meanings it must than examine their interdependencies and relationships. I suggest that the question of democracy today be approached from four perspectives:

I. Democracy as a form of government

II. Democracy as a political culture; the ethos of democracy

III. Democracy from the historical perspective: ancient and modern

IV. Democracy as a central and truly "cosmopolitan" value in the age of globalization; democracy as a precondition for peace among nations; the internationalization of democracy

I. DEMOCRACY AS A FORM OF GOVERNMENT

According to its classical definition, democracy is a form of government. It is the rule of the many (literally, "the people"), in contrast to a monarchy, which is the rule by one, or an oligarchy, which is the rule by a few. As with any other rule, democracy requires a system of offices and institutions designed to order the social body, to administer its necessary functions, and to defend its vital interests in the external environment. The successful building and marketing of institutions is a necessary condition for democracy's development and its enduring, vigor and prosperity. The institutional set-up of democracy (which may include constitutional frameworks; executive, legislative and judiciary branches of the national government; political parties; elections; local or regional governments; the protection of individual, economic or social rights before independent courts of justice; media and information; civilian control of the military; a system of edu-

cation; etc.) can be described and studied from all possible perspectives. Legal, functionalist, and historical analyses of democratic institutions represent the principal point of departure for every student of democracy today, making up the foundation of our cognitive basis for understanding and evaluating its actual state.

Nonetheless, democracy is always more than a static functioning system. Above all, it is a political idea that is endowed with the power to set human matters in motion rather than to keep them as they were. It opens human society under its rule, rather than keeping it closed. Therefore, a synchronic analysis is not sufficient to grasp the very essence of democracy. One needs to look at the process by which democracy came into existence—the transition from the traditional hierarchical way of administering human matters to a radically new, "egalitarian" organization of human society.

When democracy first emerged in

ancient Greece in the eighth century BC, it was perceived as an epoch-making, truly revolutionary event; power that had originally been in the possession of kings who administered human communities as their own households, was given “unto the midst of the people.” Prior to the discovery of democracy, it was the will of the deified rulers who acted as mediators between heaven and earth that was recognized as the ordering principle in human society and the basic source of its laws. A city-state or polis, governed democratically, was placed under the law (nomos), which was above all of its members. It was the rule of law that made all citizens of a polis free and equal. This endowed them with certain unalienable rights, and enabled Aristotle to say that in the polis, “those who rule and those who are ruled are the same.” It was freedom based on equality that made the Greeks see themselves as different from and “more human” than the “barbarians”—those who were subordinated to the unconditional will of their rulers, like immature children. Freedom, based on equality, was the fundamental value, the *raison d’être* of their democracy.

In short, in order to understand the actual state of democracy, we have to start not only with a description of a democratic form of government, but also with a historically informed analysis of the processes of democratization. It is essential to study the conditions under which the democratic idea historically was set in action. Sections II, III and IV will address the three areas of interest which are relevant in this context.

II. DEMOCRACY AS A POLITICAL CULTURE; THE ETHOS OF DEMOCRACY

As I stated in Section I, a democracy is not just a state whose goal is to survive and maintain its existence. Rather, a democracy must always have a dynamic process driven by the conscious decision to make people equal before the law; it must be informed by the deliberate will to institute freedom as one of the fundamental human values; it must be animated by the belief that being free is not just a privilege of some individuals—according to their status—but an open possibility for every human being, something that all humans can achieve under favorable conditions because it is rooted in human nature. Thus we shift our focus from the objective components of the democratic system to the subjective preconditions of a democratic, open society.

Without the proper institutional architecture, the life of a democratic society is likely to be emotionally loaded, messy and short. It cannot exist without people sharing the conviction that the Greek form of a free life (even if sometimes harsh, demanding and full of uncertainties) is incommensurably better than the “barbarous” life of slavery. In short, if individuals are not truly committed to the democratic values of freedom and equality, they cannot create a democratic society.

“While the state came about as a means of securing life itself, it continues in being to secure the good life,” according to Aristotle in his *Politics* (1252b31). According to

modern political theory, the origin of the state is connected with a kind of primordial agreement—a social contract that must be upheld as binding by future generations. The debate on the state of democracy in the contemporary world reminds us once again of what such a social contract is about. It affirms the recognition of the difference that Aristotle was speaking of: the difference between a “sheer life” that might be luxurious, pleasant and sufficient for one’s material well-being and a “good life”—one that can flourish only in the freedom of the polis and in the openness of its public space. A democratic society, then, is a community which has deliberately selected a democratic form of government where all activities and functions are performed under the conditions of the rule of law, in which respect for privacy and the individual rights of the citizens are upheld, and where there exists an open political system in which those in power can be replaced peaceably by others with different policies.

The contractual basis of democracy requires a democratic ethos and political culture, a democratic education, and the “intermediary bodies” of civil society, which occupy the space between the private sector and government. It is these intermediary bodies of civil society that Alexis de Tocqueville recognized as essential to democracy during his visit to America in 1831. The intermediary bodies not only perform various functions that do not need to be performed by the state government, they also act as guardians of the social contract and important indicators that the

decision to choose the freedom of a “good life” over the slavery of a “sheer life” continues to be cherished and unconditionally recognized as valid.

III. DEMOCRACY IN THE HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE: ANCIENT AND MODERN

Ancient

The principal objection to the use of historical arguments in discussing democracy, especially the “Greek example,” is well known. There is a critical difference in the very foundations of ancient and modern societies. The number of free citizens in the Greek city-states was both proportionally and in absolute numbers rather small, and the vast majority of inhabitants, including slaves, women and foreigners with permanent residency, had no chance to participate in the political processes and enjoy the freedom of democracy. Accordingly, some thinkers would argue that “Greek nostalgia,” as it might be called, has no place in current progressive political thought. I believe that they are mistaken.

It is true that Greek society did not reach our level of individualism and emancipation. Nonetheless, the trend to free more and more individuals and enable their entry into the public space was one of the most dynamic factors animating Athenian politics, triggering several fundamental constitutional reforms in Athens. The political culture of the period was ingrained in the dominant polytheistic reli-

gious beliefs as well as in kinship and blood ties (the web of gentilician relationships), which had a profound influence on the formation of human identity—more than we can ever imagine in our current context, which has been formed predominantly by a Judeo-Christian monotheistic personalism. Notwithstanding major differences, we need to acknowledge that the very idea of an open society and of a democratic government structure was born among the inhabitants of small city-states in the Aegean region who shared a common language, common religious traditions, a common cultural heritage and who called themselves, in opposition to all the “barbarians” in their region, *Hellénés*.

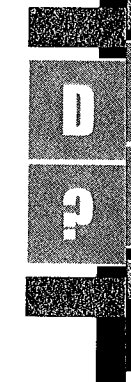
The ancient Greeks were the first nation to discover the liberating power of the public sphere, where individuals—freed from the duties to their families, tribes, or gentes, could stand face to face with other free men as equals among equals, ready to deal with the matters of the world. Having emerged as equal citizens, they had the right to speak and to be heard, to voice their agreements or disagreements, to participate with their peers in collective decision-making, and to protect their polity by common action. The very fact that the public space was constituted in the “midst of people” with free individuals ready and able to leave the privacy of their households and to act, as Hannah Arendt continually said, “in concert,” changed the whole of human existence, giving history a new direction. The previous tendency of human societies to be protected against the erosive impact

of time and to participate in the immortality that the cosmic divinities bestowed upon their deified rulers, was overruled by the tireless efforts of mortal men to immortalize their finite existence on earth by virtue of their own words and deeds.

Just as democracy cannot be reduced to a form of government, it is also not sufficient simply to list the objective components of a democratic system. The subjective preconditions for democracy are indispensable for the formation of civil society and democratic political culture.

The emergence of democracy is a historical event of enormous magnitude, one of the crucial events in the history of both man and being. One does not need to be a Hegelian speculative philosopher to believe that only when man invented democracy did he become fully conscious of his own historical existence. The founders of democracy in ancient Greece were the first people that we know of who realized and acted upon the insight that the human condition does not bind human beings to a stable and unchangeable place in the cosmos; that humans qua humans can abandon their inherited passive attitude and adopt an active stance toward the world; that they can understand the finiteness and fragility of their own historical situation, accept responsibility for it and thus begin to shape their own history.

Democracy allows for the replacement of those in power by others with different policies, functioning even as the pendulum swings from



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one side to another. It is the steady pendular rhythm of democratic process that provides the element of order and regularity in public space, which is “disorderly” by the very fact of the diversity of those who occupy it. Democracy functions by moving back and forth between extremes and hovering around the center. The major virtue of a true democracy is not so much its smooth functioning, however, but rather its open-mindedness and creativity, its capacity to “tolerate” and integrate change; its readiness to take difficult, courageous decisions and actions.

Where a genuine democratic spirit and culture prevail, there is an inclination to move between the conservative forces committed to maintaining the status quo, on the one hand, and the progressive forces of innovation and change on the other.

But there is even more than that. Democracy derives its strength and vitality from the capacity of human beings to break the circle of necessity imposed on them from outside forces and making them open for the freedom of the world.

In analyzing democracies over the course of history, we should consider the *Iliad*, in which Homer mentions the famous dilemma that Achilles faced—choosing between a long but tedious life at home and a short but adventurous life out in the world. Taking part in the Achaean military campaign against Troy, Achilles chose the second option—a short life filled with deeds worthy of being remembered and transformed into song. Being

genuinely democratic does not necessarily mean being as militant and bloodthirsty as the ancient Homeric heroes. It does, however, mean that one should be prepared to face dilemmas often and to be able to make choices similar to the one made by Achilles. Democracy liberates human beings to act freely, but for the sake of our common freedom, our common human values, and, last but not least, our civility.

Modern

Democracies as we know them today are products of a different historical era. The rediscovery of the democratic form of government coincides with the transition of European Judeo-Christian civilization from the “Middle” to the “Modern” Age. The origins and growth of modern democracy are part of the all-encompassing process of modernization, which includes the gradual but profound transformation from predominantly agrarian societies to industrial societies; the crises of medieval political and religious authorities; the emergence of new arts and sciences; the formation of modern political nations; and the radical enlargement of the inhabited world resulting from the discovery of new naval routes and new lands.

In the context of this treatise, we will consider ancient and modern democracies, looking at the similarity in the basic attitude of their respective advocates and protagonists. What is important to our debate is the fact that those who had the courage to dethrone the established regal rule and replace it

with the political rule saw the rediscovery of democratic ideas by the emerging European nation-states as a major historical event—a new beginning. We know well from the biographies of English political thinkers and politicians of the 17th and the 18th centuries, as well as from the American founding fathers and those who inspired the French Revolution, how much attention those well-educated men paid to ancient political thought and how deeply they were influenced by classical Greek and Roman authors. The three great revolutions of the modern era—English, American and French—which set the whole “civilized” world on its way toward constitutionalism and democracy as we know them today, were not inspired by utopias, even if certain utopian elements are embedded in political revolutions, but by their ambition to find new uses for the old, well-tested, “liberal” ideas of classical antiquity.

Modern revolutionaries took these ideas from their original contexts and, by using them in a new situation, gave them a new content and new meaning. The building and strengthening of democracy, nonetheless, presented them with a challenge very similar to the one experienced by their ancient predecessors. When we look closely at how modern democracies function, what we see is the old problem of isonomia and the rule of law; questions of the protection of individual “unalienable” rights; questions of the independence of the judiciary; and struggles for political emancipation and corresponding constitutional reforms. We are again reminded that it is the ethos of soci-

ety that is the most important condition for the survival of its democracy, the belief that the free life is better than enslavement; that the “good” political life lived in the public space is worthy of defense and personal sacrifice.

IV. DEMOCRACY AS A CENTRAL AND TRULY COSMOPOLITAN VALUE IN THE AGE OF GLOBALIZATION; DEMOCRACY AS A PRECONDITION FOR PEACE AMONG NATIONS; THE INTERNATIONALIZATION OF DEMOCRACY.

The final part of this brief journey through the world of democracy will focus on democracy’s international life, on the behavior of democracies towards the external environment in which they operate. It will begin with an analysis of the question in the context of the historical evolution of international systems. Second will be a commentary on the ideas, visions, and blueprints that are currently being considered. Sometimes these concepts are too ambitious, and sometimes they are too dangerously down-to-earth.

There is a traditional, well-tested response to threats to the existence of states, and democracies are no exception in this regard: the use of force. When the rebelling Greek cities, discovering, constituting, and occasionally experimenting with the democratic form of government, had to resist the military campaigns

of the Persian Empire, they were left with one single option to keep themselves in existence: to fight and win. After the American founding fathers signed their famous Declaration of Independence on July 4, 1776, they also had no other choice but the use of force if they were to succeed in turning their political ideas into a political reality and separate their republican cause from the British Crown. They had to defeat the British colonial armies if they were to gain as well as declare their independence. In these cases, war was not only an act of self-defense, but also a crucial state-making event. It gave their revolutionary ideals full meaning, laid the foundations for state traditions, and endowed the emerging political body with a proper “reason of the state” and state ideology. Eventually the democracies stopped being so bellicose and were ready to negotiate agreements with their former enemies. But regardless of how peaceful and peace-loving they became, they never abandoned the “golden rule” of any state—regardless of whether they are democratic or undemocratic: to protect themselves in the environment of international anarchy and to survive. The state’s survival, the sacrosanctity of its basic prerogatives, such as territorial integrity and sovereign equality, remained the supreme “meta-value” above all values that animate the civil society contained within its borders. It is true that the rule of law was the landmark of a democratic government—but all good democrats were aware of the iron logic that dominated the tough world outside: in order to have democracy, you have to have a law; in order to have a law, you must

first have a state; in order to have a state, you must be able to defeat and to keep warding off its enemies.

Realistic conceptions of the international behavior of states—based on the belief that “international society” is doomed to operate in a state of nature and thus be, by definition, “anarchic” (in the state of permanent war of all against all)—have had their fundamentum in re throughout human history. At the same time, it is evident that the “realists” do not offer the full picture of the world of international relations. Although confrontation is an indisputable fact of life for states in the international environment, it is not the only possible modus operandi of states among themselves. What always has been available as a plausible and more attractive alternative to the use of force, or threats of force, is peaceful coexistence and cooperation.

Under what conditions are states inclined not to fight each other, but rather to cooperate? What has been the most important instrument to define, promote and bring into existence various forms of cooperation? Is a democratic form of government more conducive to the peaceful solution of international conflicts, or is the international behavior of a state entirely independent of its internal organization, influenced only by the nature of the international system? Every elementary textbook on international relations answers these questions. States show the tendency to cooperate under certain conditions: when they do not threaten one another, when they have to face a common enemy,

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and when the way of life their inhabitants cherish—the civilization they embody, the religious or cultural values they stand for—are in danger. The instrument they use to define cooperative frameworks, to determine and gradually broaden the scope of their actual cooperation—be it military alliance, trade and economics, culture, people-to-people contacts, education or anything else—is international law.

The history of modern conflicts proves the Kantian thesis that democracies have a greater inclination toward peace in their international behavior. On the one hand, there have been situations in human history when democratic ideals and values turned out to be powerful enough to influence decisively the international politics of the time, motivating the collective resistance of “civilized” nations to “barbarity,” initiating intensive activities in the field of international law, giving birth to new treaties or even whole legal corpuses, inspiring the founding of new international organizations or even starting the process of integrating cooperating nation-states into a larger, supranational political unit. Still, it is not advisable to succumb to the illusion that the fundamental difference between domestic and international politics can and should be abolished entirely; that planetary mankind can be brought to its final historical stage—international civil society—with a democratic world government. Such an idea, as Kant realized, could be dangerous for the future of democracy. The situation of the world at the beginning of the 21st century, in the ever-faster and more dynamic process of globaliza-

tion, and considering the horrible experience with totalitarianism in the 20th century, offers many good reasons why it is advisable not to stretch the capabilities of the democratic idea beyond their natural limits. The problem of democracy in the international environment, regardless of how much power is eventually delegated to democratic international institutions, how large is the territory under their jurisdiction and how strong and enforceable is their international law, must ultimately be conceived not as a “state” (i.e. a stable form of government), but as an open-ended process.

Let us consider in this context the case of the Greek poleis that managed to organize themselves in defense of their Hellenic civilization—formed by their common religious and cultural heritage, the poetic insights contained in Greek philosophy and most important, by the common idea of democracy and politics—against their common “barbarous” enemy during the Persian Wars. Their coalition held together and their “customary” international law was able to survive only in the unique situation of confrontation with the Persian Empire. After that war had been won and the Greek poleis had experienced their golden age, life-and-death conflicts burst out among them. The war between former allies set the entire Aegean region in motion and the entire Greek political experiment, the entire Hellenic civilization—as though inspired by Achilles, who preferred a short but glorious life to a long but tedious one—was turned into ruins in a couple of decades. Thanks to

Homer, the heroic deeds of Achilles were turned into a song, and Greek political thought has illuminated the path of mankind through its history, even in the darkest times.

Another less poetic, but perhaps more relevant case of historical dynamism for our debate is the history of European (or Western) civilization in the Modern Age, which gave birth to the idea of nation-states and their international politics. The history of international systems came into existence after the Treaty of Westphalia (1648) and has been evolving up to the present. From time to time it is exposed to the strikes and blows of revolutions, ravaged by either local or all-out wars or struggles for independence.

Those who debate the future of international (or even cosmopolitan) democracy should be aware of the long and winding road that modern political thought has traveled—from its origins in the works of Bodin and Hobbes, who laid down the theoretical foundations, to the concepts of state sovereignty, state supremacy and sovereign equality of states, through various stages of modern political debates, either connecting the modern situation with the classical political thought of the past or reflecting on fresh and raw historical experience. Current discussions concern the European integration and its endemic “democratic deficit,” transatlantic cooperation between Americans and Europeans based on Western values, or possibilities for international governance in the environment of a more connected, global world. What must be con-

sidered is the dynamic evolution of modern international law, from Grotius and Vattel to current concepts of human rights and fundamental freedoms. From the classical doctrines of “humanitarian intervention” we go to the language of the European Convention which states that “common understanding and observance of Human Rights” represents “an effective political democracy,” creating “greater unity between its Members” — i.e., European countries which are like-minded have a common heritage of political traditions, ideals, freedom and the rule of law.

In the current context, Kant’s 1795 project of “perpetual peace” represents the most articulate theory for bringing the idea of democracy to the international level. Departing from a simple postulate that “all men who can mutually influence one another must accept some civil constitution,” Kant not only formulates his famous thesis that for the sake of peace all civil constitutions should be republican, but proceeds to the idea that the rights of nations be based on a federation of free states, and to the cosmopolitan right that “shall be limited to conditions of universal hospitality.” The Kantian project, scorned by political realists as sheer utopia, has never been realized. However, it is a fact that Kant’s key postulate of the project of perpetual peace—that it is the republican constitution, provides for this desirable result, namely, perpetual peace — has been empirically confirmed by modern European history. This idea is in fact being tested day after day by the existence and everyday life of the European Communities (the

European Union).

The European integration proves that it makes sense to talk about democracy among “like-minded states,” within a region that has been historically and spiritually tied to the concept of civilization.

Can we extend this debate to democracy on the global level? Is it possible to confirm the principle of the rule of law as valid in the realm of international relations, and by doing so limit in an unprecedented way the sovereignty of nation-states and their territorial jurisdiction? Who should approve this step and how? In history it was the citizens of small city-states and, later, the larger, well-defined political bodies born in the Modern Age, that entered into the social contract, constituting their civil societies and polities. It was always a finite, exclusive and homogenous people that shared the same elementary values and common understanding of the difference between the “good” life of the democratic polis and the forms of life available to the members of non-democratically administered communities. Is it not somewhat beyond our common sense, and therefore somewhat unrealistic, to expect that humankind, with all of its cultural, religious, social and historical diversities, could ever enter into a social contract that expresses the consent of the governed with the idea of a global, even if very limited, government?

Can we think meaningfully about a democracy that is all-inclusive? Shouldn’t we, on the contrary, be

worried that the transformation of the whole planet into one political body would rather kill the very idea of democracy, her open political culture and her ethos? Is it not more likely that such a step would bring us into the “Promised Land” of peace and justice for all, but deprive us of our freedoms and condemn us and our posterity to live in a prison or concentration camp, from which there would be no escape, because it would embrace all territories of our Mother-Earth? Would it not be much better to indulge in the fantasies of cosmopolitan democracy, international civil society, and the New Age, etc., and then return to earth and ask ourselves not how to transform our world into one big democratic monster, but to raise once more the century-old question posed by Woodrow Wilson, the question of how to make the world “safe for democracy”?

I am going to stop here and leave the rest for future discussions. In trying to clarify the theoretical roots of our currently used political concepts, it is useful to look back in history to refresh our political thought, making it less rigid and more dynamic, less judgmental in an absolute sense, and more open to making political judgments that are appropriate to our changing world. Whatever happens, one thing is certain: Whether we are liberal reformers or political realists, democracy has indeed become the flagship of our hopes for a better future. The idea of its wreckage in the ocean of international affairs, running extremely high after September 11, 2001, is rightly perceived as a major disaster.