DEMONSTRATION AND LIBERALISM IN AUSTRALIA

THIS CHAPTER:
- Critically examines the concepts of democracy and liberalism
- Provides a brief introduction to the Australian political system
- Shows the ways in which democracy and liberalism interact in our political system.

ISSUE IN FOCUS
How well do Australia’s political institutions realise liberal democratic values?

KEY TERMS
- Bicameral parliaments
- Bourgeois democracy
- Checks and balances
- Civil society
- Consensus democracy
- Consent
- Constitutional monarchy
- Constitutionalism
- Democratic deficit
- Electoral system
- Elitist
- Enlightenment
- Federalism
- Fraser, Malcolm
- Great Depression
- Humanism
- Kerr, Sir John
- Legitimacy
- Liberalism
- Lobbying
- Locke, John
- Madison, James
- Majoritarian democracy
- Mandate
- Parliamentary system of government
- Political ideology
- Political socialisation
- Pluralism
- Presidential system of government
- Prime minister
- Proportional representation
- Representative democracy
- Responsible government
- Rousseau, Jean-Jacques
- Rule of law
- Semi-presidential systems
- Social contract
- Whitlam, Gough

In March 2012, Labor Treasurer Wayne Swan warned that ‘the rising power of vested interests is undermining our equality and threatening our democracy’ (Swan 2012, p. 20). Swan was particularly concerned at the influence of Australia’s billionaire mining magnates—Gina Rinehart, Clive Palmer and Andrew Forrest—on Australian politics. The federal government’s relationship with these figures had been tense because of the government’s Minerals Resource Rent Tax (and its predecessor, the ill-fated Resource Super Profits Tax) and Clean Energy...
Future Policy (which placed a price on carbon). These mining magnates had been vocal critics of the Resource Super Profits Tax in particular, and had helped fund and orchestrate a major campaign against it. In November 2011, Rinehart also bought into two of Australia’s major media companies, television broadcaster Channel Ten and Fairfax Media—owner of *The Age*, *The Sydney Morning Herald* and *The Financial Review*—apparently to strengthen her political clout. In an article in *The Monthly*, Swan (2012, p. 24) emphasised the need to ensure ‘that the voices of the majority are not drowned out by the interests of a well-funded, noisy handful’. Swan’s criticism, and the debate it sparked, reflected some of the major themes that have long characterised liberal democratic politics—the tension between the rule of the majority and individual rights and liberties, the relationship between democracy and equality, and, most fundamentally, how the concept of democracy should be understood.

**INTRODUCTION**

This chapter introduces the concepts of democracy and liberalism. It sets out the models of democracy that have been tested at various times over thousands of years, paying attention to the substance, as well as the form, of democracy. While the institutions that we associate with democracy, such as parliament, are easy to describe, many people have observed that the values originally associated with democracy have been left out of modern political institutions. Representative political systems, originally developed in North America and Europe, are usually designed to limit the power of governments rather than give effect to the popular will. The tension between liberalism (limiting and dividing the power of the state) and democracy is one of the major themes of this book. This chapter shows that both liberal and democratic traditions played a role in the design of Australia’s political institutions. The resulting Australian Constitution provides for elections but also divides power between levels of government, the houses of Parliament and, at least partially, the branches of government. The Issue in Focus in this chapter assesses whether Australia’s major political institutions are living up to the liberal democratic ideal.

**DEMOCRACY**

The word ‘democracy’ is derived from Ancient Greek—literally *demos kratia*, or rule by the people. In ancient Athens, the citizens (although not everyone counted as a citizen) did just that. Citizens gathered in the city square to make the most important decisions in the running of the city-state. This method of political organisation is now known as direct democracy, in order to distinguish it from the more common modern variant, representative democracy. Direct democracy is a means of citizens exercising power without the mediation of representative political institutions such as parliaments. The citizens of ancient Athens regularly voted on a range of issues of state such as security and finance.

The political community of Athens consisted of a small minority of the population that was usually made up of wealthy landholders. Women, slaves and foreign residents were excluded from the *demos*. In large, complex societies with big populations, however, direct
democracy is not usually considered a practical form of government. The citizens of large
nation-states do not generally have the time or the inclination to become involved in regular
decisions of state and, even if they did, it would be impossible for them to meet en masse to
discuss issues and vote. Large modern nation-states lend themselves more to representative
political institutions (Held 1987, p. 64).

Today, direct democracy tends to be limited to occasional referenda on particular issues,
although there are some jurisdictions, such as Switzerland, that use direct democracy more
than others. The main form of direct democracy in Australia is the use of referenda to
change the Constitution, although non-binding plebiscites are also held by the states on
controversial issues such as whether to deregulate shop trading hours. Other democracies,
such as the United Kingdom, rarely consult their citizens outside of parliamentary
elections. For the most part, the citizens of modern democracies delegate power to elected
representatives to make decisions on their behalf. Because citizens’ participation in political
decision-making is so indirect, some have criticised representative democracy for being a ‘façade’
that departs too far from the original democratic ideal of ‘rule by the people’
(Heywood 2004, p. 228).

Despite this radical criticism, the term ‘democracy’ is now generally used to describe any
political system where the will of citizens with equal political rights is reflected in law-making
and governing, whether the people exercise that power directly or indirectly. Within this
broad definition, there are many models of democracy.

In part, this reflects the fact that political systems are rarely designed from the ground
up. Their shape is influenced by tradition, the size and nature of the political community,
and the ideas about politics dominant at crucial times in the development of each system.
Even among contemporary democracies, presidential and parliamentary systems, as well
as the many different types of electoral system and varying levels of citizen participation,
provide quite different models of democracy. As democracy spread around the world in
the twentieth century, local cultures and institutions ensured that the forms and values of
democracy were interpreted slightly differently in each country.

All of the states featured in Table 1.1 have democratic political systems, yet each system
is quite different from any of the others. Due to its unique history, Switzerland retains a
good deal of direct citizen participation in government. The United States, on the other
hand, was founded in response to heavy-handed colonial power, and its constitution seeks
to limit the power of the majority to dominate the interests of the minority. Parliamentary
systems, such as that of the United Kingdom, provide fewer checks on the ability
of the majority to exercise its will. In spite of the different structure of their political
institutions, all of the systems in Table 1.1 have enough in common for us to refer to them as
democracies.

The various models of democracy not only represent different ways of achieving the same
goal, they also interpret the substance of democracy in different ways. Some democratic systems
value direct public participation more than others. Some systems value human equality more
## Democratic and Liberal Features of Selected Political Systems

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Source: Adapted from Lijphart 1999

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### Checks and Balances:
A system that ensures that power is divided between different institutions.

### Majoritarian Democracy:
Described by Arend Lijphart as a model of democracy that aims to concentrate ‘political power in the hands of a bare majority’; it is characterised as ‘exclusive, competitive and adversarial’, it creates political rules and institutions, which ensure ‘government by the majority in accordance with the majority’s interests’ (Lijphart 1999, p. 3).

### Consensus Democracy:
Described by Arend Lijphart as a model of democracy that seeks to ‘share, disperse and limit power’; it is characterised by inclusiveness, bargaining and compromise—endeavouring to maximise popular participation in decision-making through the establishment of rules and institutions that encourage ‘broad participation in government’ and ‘broad agreement on policies’ (Lijphart 1999, p. 3).

### John Locke:
English philosopher most famous for his 1689 work, Two Treatises of Government.

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than others. Some incorporate many checks and balances in their constitution in order to prevent a simple majority vote having too much influence. So, democracy may mean that the views of the majority are paramount, which is often referred to as majoritarian democracy, or it may mean that the views of all citizens (including vulnerable minority groups) should be taken into account—not just the views of those in the majority. The latter understanding of democracy is sometimes referred to as consensus democracy (for example Lijphart 1999). Different notions of equality, liberty and participation, as well as the various ways to structure political institutions, give us different types of democracy.

### Liberalism
As representative democracy developed hundreds of years ago, the rights of individuals in relation to the state were often the primary concern of reformers and revolutionaries, rather than participation in government. In other words, the role of parliament was not principally to achieve widespread participation in government by citizens, but to limit the power of the government in order to protect citizens’ rights and liberties. Theorists such as John Locke (1632–1704) sought to counteract the power of the state with the recognition of the rights
of individual citizens. This provided the basis for the political ideology that we now know as liberalism.

Locke, who is probably the most important early liberal thinker, believed that human beings had God-given rights, particularly rights to life, liberty and property. He also believed that human beings were equal, in the sense that ‘no person has a natural right to subordinate any other’ (Wolff 2006, pp. 17–18). The belief in God-given rights and equality were both important because they challenged the idea that monarchs had an automatic right to exercise absolute power over all the people living in their territory. Locke thought that government was ultimately necessary, but that its power was limited and its authority depended on the consent of the people. While Locke’s ideas on consent are complex, the basic idea is that citizens obey the government as long as it protects their rights; in effect, there is a social contract between citizens and the government. If the government starts infringing the rights of citizens, then it has violated the social contract, going beyond the limits of its authority, and rebellion may be justified (Heywood 2004, p. 30). Linked to this, Locke supported a range of institutional constraints designed to limit the power of the government, reducing the risk it would violate the rights and liberties of individuals.

Locke was writing over 400 years ago, and not surprisingly, liberalism has evolved in a variety of different ways since that time. It has come to be a broad political ideology encompassing a variety of thinkers, who sometimes differ markedly over important issues. Nonetheless, despite their other differences, most contemporary liberals are likely to agree on the following tenets of government:

- The rights of individual citizens should be respected. Liberals disagree over the extent of these rights but they include basic freedoms of assembly, speech and religion.
- The rule of law should ensure that the state treats each citizen equally.
- Power should be divided. Executive and legislative functions should be separated. The government should be accountable to citizens. The judiciary should be independent of government influence.
- The above tenets are best secured through a written constitution.

These principles are rarely contested in modern societies, and this represents a massive change in the way that human beings have been governed since Locke’s time (Heywood 1997, pp. 41–2).

Contemporary liberals are also committed to representative democracy with regular, free and fair elections; and universal suffrage. However, despite the association between democracy and liberalism in contemporary society, they are different political traditions, as mentioned above, and the relationship between the two has never been entirely reconciled. Many liberals are wary of democracy because they fear that it poses a threat to the individual. The fact that a government has been elected by the majority of the people is no guarantee that it will respect individual rights and liberties. This is the problem of the ‘tyranny of the majority’, and it is one of the reasons many liberals believe the power of democratic governments should be limited. This leads into the idea of liberal democracy, which combines representative democracy (including free and fair elections with universal suffrage) with a variety of safeguards that are designed to limit government power, such as the rule of law, constitutions, the dispersal and fragmentation of power, and a flourishing civil society (Heywood 2004, pp. 70–1). The aim is to develop a form of democracy that minimises the risk that majority rule poses to individual rights and liberties. Nonetheless, because the liberal safeguards associated with liberal democracy place limits on the power of a democratically elected government, there is tension at the core of the liberal democratic ideal.
That said, for all the tension between liberalism and democracy, it is also important to note that there are more positive connections between the two traditions. First, certain rights and liberties must be protected for democracy to be meaningful, particularly freedom of speech and assembly, which are crucial democratic rights (Heywood 2004, p. 70). In a democracy, citizens must be able to debate political ideas with each other, and to protest against the government and the laws it passes. Second, liberals have strong instrumental reasons for supporting democracy. Although the tyranny of the majority is always a risk, on the whole, individual rights and liberties seem more secure in a democracy than they would be under a dictator or a hereditary ruler. Third, some liberals (for example Waldron 1999) argue that there is a deeper connection between democracy and the liberal commitment to individual rights. Liberals support individual rights because of their belief in the autonomy and equal moral status of human beings, and, given this belief, it makes sense for them to endorse democracy, which aims to give citizens an equal say in resolving political disagreements. Finally, some conceptions of democracy, such as Lijphart’s notion of consensus democracy, are based on the notion that minority views must be taken into account in a democracy; ‘rule by the people’ does not simply mean majority rule (Lijphart 1999). The sort of institutions that are required to give minorities more influence in politics are also likely to help protect individual rights and liberties.

**TYPES OF LIBERAL DEMOCRACY**

Liberal ideas about the role of government helped to shape the representative institutions under development in Western Europe and North America during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. In parts of Europe, these ideas were associated with the development of parliamentary systems, while in the United States liberalism spawned a more radical form of government—the first presidential system.

**PARLIAMENTARY SYSTEMS**

Liberalism had a gradual effect on European political institutions over centuries. This occurred partly through the influence of Enlightenment thinking, and partly because the liberal prescription of divided power suited the rising middle class, who wished to place greater limits on the power of the traditional aristocracy. A crucial part of the changes to European politics was the growing acceptance of liberal and humanist views of the rights and worth of the individual. Systems of responsible government contained many liberal features, such as freedom of speech and an independent judiciary.

The role of parliament was essential to the development of European constitutional monarchies. In some countries, such as France, the monarchy was overthrown, but in many others, including the United Kingdom, it remained in place, and there was a more gradual process of change as parliament wrested power from monarchs over a longer period of time (Heywood 1997, p. 295). In the United Kingdom, for example, a particularly important development occurred when the Crown lost the power to raise taxes without the consent of the parliament. Over time its power was further eroded, and in the modern era, the monarch’s role is largely ceremonial. The parliament is now sovereign, which means that it has ultimate legal authority in the United Kingdom.

These European parliaments were populated by the landed gentry and middle classes rather than by representatives of the population as a whole. However, they did establish
the principles of responsible government that remain with us today. Centuries before the extension of voting rights to all adult citizens, the formal institutions of parliamentary government were established, with executive power in the hands of a cabinet drawn from the Members of Parliament. This chain of accountability from the ministers to parliament and from parliament to voters is at the heart of responsible government.

In parliamentary democracies, a deliberative, representative parliament was historically thought to be the best way to ensure that the rights of the people were protected. The growth of liberalism did not change the structure of parliamentary government. More recently European countries have taken on a different approach to democratic institutions, with the advent of the European Union and its courts, charters of rights, and the introduction of proportional representation to ensure minority representation in parliament.

While many of the changes in parliamentary systems have been evolutionary, the United States took a more radical route to its present political system.

**PRESIDENTIAL SYSTEMS**

The American Revolution (1775–83) gave the residents of thirteen former British colonies the opportunity to build a new political system. Having fought a war against the world’s foremost colonial power in the name of freedom from tyranny, liberty was the highest priority for the leaders of the new nation in designing its political system. Many of the founders of the American Constitution, such as James Madison (1751–1836), saw representative institutions as a deliberate check on the passions and interests of the majority. Men such as Madison had no intention of replacing a despotic king with a despotic electorate. The American system, therefore, is designed to limit the accumulation of power.

The American Constitution separates executive, legislative and judicial power and provides a number of checks and balances (such as two houses of Congress (parliament) with equal power) in order to limit the power of any single institution. Further, federalism limits the power of the central government. The United States adopted a bill of rights by amending its constitution soon after it was written. Perhaps most importantly, given the Americans’ rebellion against the arbitrary use of power, was a sense among the citizenry that government must be subject to rules. This sense of constitutionalism is much more difficult for nations to develop than other elements of liberalism and democracy. The design of a constitution can easily be imported from elsewhere. The commitment of political leaders to constitutionalism—to obey the ruling of courts, for example—has historically proven much more elusive.

The United States is the archetypal presidential democracy. Yet, while we tend to think of the President of the United States as a uniquely powerful figure, in fact the separation of powers places many restrictions on the president’s freedom to act (Hague & Harrop 2001, p. 237). Further, the president is now limited to two terms in office. Outside the United States, presidential systems have been highly unstable. The basic form of a presidential system is simple to incorporate into a constitution. However, a true separation of powers has proved much more difficult to sustain because constitutionalism represents a set of values about government, not just a set of rules. Presidential systems in Latin America and Asia have proved susceptible to strong presidents whose power overwhelms the legislative and judicial branches, leading to dictatorship. Many democracies limit the power of the presidency by formalising a system of power-sharing with parliament. The best known of these semi-presidential systems is France.
THE EVOLUTION OF AUSTRALIA’S LIBERAL DEMOCRATIC SYSTEM

The Australian Constitution was neither a product of a revolution (as in the United States) nor a long process of institutional struggle (as in the United Kingdom). It was designed by men who had respect for both systems of government. Just as the British had insisted on written constitutions for the Australian colonies, a written constitution was necessary for Federation in 1901. Indeed, Australia’s constitution was in the first instance an Act of the British Parliament. The system of responsible government was not fully explained in the Constitution. Attendees of the Federation conventions during the 1890s were mostly drawn from colonial parliaments and simply assumed that the system of government with which they were familiar would persist at the Commonwealth level. The Australian Constitution thus says nothing about the office of prime minister or cabinet, and very little about political parties. A casual reading of the Australian Constitution gives the impression that the Governor-General is the most powerful actor in national politics. A lack of clearly codified rules for government is not as unusual as you might think. The United Kingdom has no written constitution at all, relying instead on conventions and certain pieces of legislation.

**FIGURE 1.1 THE AUSTRALIAN POLITICAL SYSTEM**
Australia’s Commonwealth Parliament plays a role in both responsible government and federalism. It holds the executive branch accountable, and in the upper house provides equal representation for each state. A powerful upper house at the national level, similar to the American model, was a natural progression in Australia’s political development since bicameral parliaments were well entrenched in colonial political systems prior to Federation. As the Australian colonies achieved self-government in the second half of the nineteenth century, all adopted powerful upper houses in their parliaments. Bicameralism was an expressly conservative institution. One of the fathers of self-government in New South Wales, William Charles Wentworth, had suggested that the upper house (the Legislative Council) consist of a hereditary aristocracy like the British House of Lords. The New South Wales Constitution instead allowed for an upper house whose members were appointed by the governor, which still had the effect of protecting the interests of wealthy landowners (such as Wentworth himself) from the popular passions of an elected lower house (Hirst 1988, pp. 34–7). Even in the more democratic Legislative Assemblies, property qualifications allowed wealthy citizens to vote in as many electorates as they held property, facilitated by elections held over multiple days.

Importantly, the national Constitution provided for elected representatives in both houses of Parliament. The appointed membership or property qualification for voting persisted in state upper houses well into the twentieth century. South Australia abolished its property qualification as late as 1973. The democratic nature of the federal Constitution served as an example for reform of state parliaments (although Queensland took the even more dramatic step of abolishing its Legislative Council in 1922). However, the direct elections for upper houses gave them a legitimacy that supporters of responsible government did not welcome.

Even though bicameralism was an established part of Australian constitutional practice prior to Federation, the fusion of responsible government and federalism was in some quarters thought to create a potentially unstable hybrid (Emy & Hughes 1991, p. 265). The combination of an electoral system providing clear majorities to governments in the House of Representatives, with an elected Senate carrying a different type of mandate led to an inevitable clash between the political principles of responsible government and federalism. The advent from about 1910 of disciplined political parties tilted the balance of the system away from its federalist principles towards that of responsible government. Leaders of those parties promoted the idea of responsible government (often referred to as the Westminster system) because it was that feature of the system that gave prime ministers the uniquely powerful position we see today. Even leaders of the Liberal Party, notionally a defender of federalist principles, have had an interest in promoting the idea of responsible government and the power-of-the-majority view when they win elections in the lower house. After winning the 1996 election, for example, Prime Minister John Howard insisted that he had a mandate to implement his policies by legislation without obstruction from the Senate.

The decade before and after Federation was one of political experimentation in Australia. As was the case in Europe and the United States, liberal institutions were in place in Australia before they were given democratic substance with the introduction of the universal franchise. However, Australia was among the first countries to extend the electoral franchise to all adult men and women, with the exception of Indigenous Australians, who did not fare so well in this democratic laboratory, only gaining voting rights in the 1960s. Introducing salaries for Members of Parliament was also an important step in ensuring that those from backgrounds other than the wealthiest in society could afford to run for parliament. The secret ballot was
another Australian initiative, and is still referred to in some countries as the Australian ballot. Freedom of the press was an established principle in both the United States and the United Kingdom by 1901, although it was more firmly entrenched in the United States courtesy of the Bill of Rights. In Australia, the British model was preferred as a method of rights protection.

Although the United States Bill of Rights did not serve as a model of rights protection, federalism in Australia did necessitate a constitutional court to resolve disagreements about the division of power between the Commonwealth and the states (as in the United States). Elected governments from both sides of politics have had contentious legislation struck down by Australia’s High Court. While supporters of responsible government might argue that the Court’s role dilutes the democratic elements of the constitution, often the Court’s decisions are designed to strengthen Australia’s democratic processes. The Menzies Government’s 1950 attempt to ban the Communist Party of Australia was rejected by the Court, although the reasons for that decision had as much to do with an overreach of legislative power as with civil liberties.

The power of the High Court underlines the limits to the democratic authority of parliament. If parliament is not sovereign (as it was in the British model of responsible government), which of Australia’s political institutions is the highest authority? Who has the final say? Galligan argues that the referenda endorsing the Constitution were the true source of legitimacy for the Australian political system, and that the popular amendment process reinforces that feature of Australian democracy (1995, pp. 14–15). While a written constitution may constrain the actions of a popularly elected government, the Constitution itself is in the hands of the Australian people. Thus, the people are sovereign in the Australian political system.

**THE LIMITS OF LIBERAL DEMOCRACY**

Although it took different forms around the world, the liberal democratic ideal—the combination of representative democracy with free and fair elections, along with safeguards to limit the power of the government—had come to enjoy widespread popularity by the end of twentieth century, particularly in the Western world. Some political thinkers even claimed that liberal democracy was the ultimate political system; it represented, in a sense, the ‘end of history’ (Fukuyama 1992). However, despite this success, critics of liberal democracy remained. Many of these critics argued that liberal democracy was an abandonment of the democratic ideal; its commitment to democratic ideas of equality and participation were too weak.

This was certainly an apt criticism of liberalism in its early forms. As mentioned above, liberalism and democracy are different political traditions, and while liberal ideas were important to the development of political institutions designed to fragment and limit government power, early forms of liberalism were not fundamentally concerned with advancing the rights of all people to vote and participate in politics. While a commitment to human equality is implicit in liberalism, it took liberal societies such as the United States and the United Kingdom hundreds of years to ensure that all members of the political community were treated equally. Until the twentieth century, the right to vote was accorded to a minority of the population. The extension of this right to all males, regardless of whether they owned property and regardless of race, was a widespread development in the nineteenth century (although not, as we discussed, in Australia). Similarly, votes for women became common...
from around the 1900s. Thus, in most liberal democracies, equality between citizens was only extended in a formal way in the twentieth century.

While this extension of voting rights is essential to realising the true meaning of democracy, the focus in modern democracies remains on consent rather than democratic participation (Held 1987, p. 182). Free and fair elections give governments the authority to act on behalf of citizens, but citizens’ involvement in politics is rather limited. We might interpret the movement towards universal franchise in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries as the process of democracy becoming wider but not necessarily deeper. Adult citizens could vote and form political parties, but there were few formal opportunities to influence government policies in between elections. Representation of all citizens, rather than popular participation, characterised most democratic systems. This criticism of representative democracy has deep roots. As far back as the Enlightenment, Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712–78) argued that true democracy could only be achieved with the direct participation of citizens in the decisions that affect them; except during elections, representative democracy is ‘slavery’ (Rousseau 1968; Heywood 1997, p. 73). Rousseau’s ideas continue to inspire those who believe that representative democracy fails to live up to the democratic ideal.

Of course, contemporary liberal democrats could respond to Rousseau’s critique, and its contemporary variants, by arguing that choosing political representatives is only one of a number of ways in which citizens can participate in politics. Civil society is also important in a liberal democracy, and participation in this realm entails a level of political activity that sits in between periodic votes for elected representatives and full participation in the decision-making process. In civil society, citizens and interest groups are free to raise and debate issues, organise themselves into trade unions or protest government decisions. It is important, though, that the concerns of a vibrant civil society are reflected in democratic parliaments. The idea of a democratic deficit has recently been coined to describe the difference between the ideals of democracy and the systems of government in industrialised societies that sometimes seem remote from the concerns of ordinary citizens. However, formally bringing the kind of participation we see in civil society and social movements into a system of representative democracy would be expensive. Parliaments already spend considerable time consulting community groups about proposed legislation. Critics of the notion of increased participation argue in favour of the right of private citizens to be left alone rather than being drawn into social conflict. Participation in politics is time consuming. Delegating that responsibility to elected representatives may be a rational response to the demands of a modern society rather than a democratic deficit.

Advocates of democratic participation acknowledge the practical limitations of democracy in large industrialised societies. Rather than seeking to overturn representative democracy, some advocates look to social movements such as feminism and environmentalism for signs of stronger democratic participation. Social movements may include groups that attempt to influence party parliamentary politics and groups that prefer direct action such as protests and boycotts. The environmental movement, for example, comprises many organisations that deploy a variety of political methods to achieve their objectives. Sea Shepherd undertakes direct action to prevent whaling in the Antarctic, while the Australian Conservation Foundation runs public awareness campaigns and lobbies governments.

Another major criticism of liberal democracy relates to the exercise of power. In a liberal democracy, it is important that parliamentarians are responsive to the wishes of the people.
In *Who Governs?* (1961), liberal pluralist Robert Dahl argues that although democratic societies often fall well short of democratic ideals of equality and participation, public offices in such societies are open to a greater range of candidates than they were in the past. The modern state is also responsive to a wide range of interests. While some individuals and groups have demonstrably more resources than others, the state is also responsive to groups with few resources but a large number of supporters, whether or not they participate in formal organisations (Held 1987, p. 189). Thus, democratic governments are not beholden to a narrow section of the population.

C. Wright Mills, on the other hand, saw modern liberal democracy as a means of legitimising the rule of a tiny elite. In *The Power Elite* (1956), Mills argues that it is the interests of business that are paramount to democratic governments. This elitist view of democracy sees voters as powerless because the power elite places limits on the types of issues and options that constitute political debate. The mass media, then, is a conservative force in the elitist conception of democracy, filtering the messages we receive in order to support the status quo. More generally, well-resourced vested interests are also able to shape elite decision-makers in their favour by making large donations to political parties, paying for professional lobbyists, and shaping public opinion through expensive advertising campaigns. The concerns of ordinary voters are thus overlooked by politicians, and the views of the wealthy minority will drown out the legitimate policy preferences of the majority (Held 1987, p. 203; DeLue & Dale 2009, p. 163). Some contemporary liberals are awake to these concerns, arguing that campaign donations and political advertising should be regulated and limited to prevent economic inequality from generating political equality (see, for example, Dworkin 2006). Nonetheless, radical critics of liberal democracy argue that these reforms do not go far enough, and that genuine political equality is only possible in a society with a much more egalitarian distribution of social resources.

**BOX 1.1: WHAT IS POWER? THREE DIMENSIONS**

Power is a fundamental concept in political science. It underlies everything we discuss in this book. Who has power? What do they do with it? How is power distributed or limited? Definitions of power affect our view of other political concepts such as democracy and liberalism. Considering how important this concept is to the study of politics, it is surprising that there is no consensus on just what power is.

**POWER AS DECISION-MAKING**

One of the most famous definitions of power comes from Robert Dahl (1970). Power, according to Dahl, is the ability of one political actor to change the behaviour or disposition of another political actor. This simple definition of power helps us understand the way in which political institutions decide who gets what and how.

**POWER AS AGENDA SETTING**

Naturally, the simple definition of power as decision-making fails to capture much of the complexity of power in our society. Steven Lukes (1974) argues that our understanding of power needs to be much more subtle if we are to truly understand how democratic systems work. Dahl’s definition, Lukes maintains, applies only to political decisions that we can observe and measure.
Lukes identifies two further dimensions of power. The second dimension, originally identified by Bachrach and Baratz (1962), concerns the ability of office-holders (and others) to control the agenda of a public organisation. It is the nature of the issues that do not make it onto the public agenda that reveal this dimension of power; that is, we need to be aware of ‘non-decisions’ as well as the observable behaviour of political actors.

**POWER AS POLITICAL SOCIALISATION**

The third dimension, or ‘face’, of power identified by Lukes goes further still in asking why some issues but not others are matters of public controversy. We need to think about the way that citizens are politically socialised in a liberal society — through the education system and the media, for example (1974, p. 24). We become used to debating politics within parameters acceptable to those in power. Radical alternatives to the current system are simply not debated, in part because those who might benefit from an alternative political system are not aware of just where their true interests lie.

In these contrasting definitions of power, we can observe the differing attitudes of pluralists and elitists to democracy. Pluralists such as Dahl see in a representative democracy a system of government responsive to the needs of diverse groups of citizens. Elite theorists, on the other hand, share the view of Lukes that our political institutions hide more than they reveal, and that the promise of democracy is a long way from being realised in contemporary societies.

Which of these conceptions of power do you think is most useful in analysing politics? Is real power in a democracy easy to observe, or do the most powerful political actors work outside parliament?

**ISSUE IN FOCUS**

**HOW WELL DO AUSTRALIA’S POLITICAL INSTITUTIONS REALISE LIBERAL DEMOCRATIC VALUES?**

While the above discussion of the Australian political system shows that we have incorporated many key liberal institutions and embraced a representative model of democracy, not everyone is content with the system. A number of commentators, both historical and contemporary, have been critical of the Australian system for having undemocratic and illiberal tendencies. This section will examine some of these criticisms, exploring the extent to which Australia’s political institutions live up to the ideals of liberalism and democracy.
As we have seen, many political thinkers argue that liberal democratic systems are characterised by ongoing tension between their liberal elements and their democratic elements. In Australia, this can be seen in the tension between the British elements of the system, particularly responsible government, which tends to concentrate power in the hands of the government of the day; and the American elements, particularly federalism, an entrenched constitution, and a strong Senate (Galligan 1995).

The radical view is that these federal, liberal elements of the Australian system dilute democracy by placing limits on the ability of elected governments to bring about the changes they have promised to the electorate. For example, the Senate has the capacity to block the legislative agenda of the government, or to force amendments to it. The division of legislative responsibilities between two levels of government also breaks up the clear chain of political accountability that is the primary strength of responsible government. It is difficult, for example, to hold state governments accountable for the state of public hospitals (owned and run by the states) when the Commonwealth also plays such an important role in funding these hospitals. Critics argue that this is undemocratic.

Traditionally, critics of these ‘undemocratic’ aspects of the Australian system tended to be on the left of the political system. Their concerns reached a peak seven decades after Federation, when the Constitution received its biggest test. Gough Whitlam led the Australian Labor Party to its second consecutive election victory on 18 May 1974, but by 1975, the Whitlam Government faced a hostile Senate, and could not get its budget through parliament. On 11 November 1975 the Governor-General, Sir John Kerr, dismissed the Whitlam Government and appointed the Liberal Party’s Malcolm Fraser as caretaker prime minister. This event, according to Graham Maddox, ‘shook the foundations of Australian democracy’ (2000b, p. 515).

How strong are those foundations if an unelected governor-general can simply dismiss a government elected by millions of Australians? Supporters of the system argue in response that political actors have been careful to avoid a repeat of the acrimony of 1975 and that governments have had few problems passing their budget bills despite having a minority in the Senate for much of that period (Parkin & Summers 2006, p. 60). Supporters also emphasise that although the events of November 1975 may have been troubling, the end result was a free and fair election, and the system has continued to run smoothly since then. Others take a more critical view, seeing a calculated effort by the ruling class to deny the legitimacy of a democratically elected government. This was only possible because of the flaws in the Constitution that provide obstacles to the enactment of the will of the people as expressed in the elections of 1972 and 1974. Maddox argues that the dismissal of the Whitlam Government ‘placed democracy itself under question’ (2000b, p. 515).

The 1975 crisis also led to debate over the Constitution’s mix of democratic and monarchical elements. The Governor-General’s ability to dismiss an elected government is a vestige of the power of the British monarchy. The ensuing debate over whether Australia should become a republic revealed some interesting differences of opinion about Australian democracy. That move to cut Australia’s ties with the British monarchy failed, at least in part, because of the widespread view that Australia was already a republic in all but name (see Maddox 2000a); that is, Australia’s political institutions were already democratic and the
powers of the monarch and the Governor-General were less important than the power of the people to elect their representatives and change the Constitution. Others saw the republic debate as an opportunity to raise longstanding concerns about the limitations of our political system. The Real Republic group argued that Australia, once a laboratory of democratic experimentation, had fallen behind democratic developments elsewhere in the world. The group was critical of the Australian Republican Movement proposal for a president appointed by the Commonwealth Parliament. In addition to direct election for any new head of state, Real Republic members supported a more proportional voting system, citizen-initiated referenda, and a bill of rights (E. Thompson 1999). It is interesting to note that many advocates for change in Australia’s political system call for both liberal reforms such as a bill of rights and more popular participation in decision-making. They do not necessarily see liberalism and democracy as conflicting values.

However, when considering these debates, it is important to remember that the concept of democracy can itself be understood in different ways, and there are many liberals in Australia who see the checks and balances in the Australian system as an enhancement of democracy. As we discussed, Galligan argues that there is no conflict between liberalism and democracy because the Constitution was ratified by the people (albeit, in an age when the franchise was restricted) (1995, pp. 14–15). Others point out that the Senate is no less democratic than the House of Representatives. It is also democratically elected and, because it uses a form of proportional representation, it is actually a better reflection of the people’s political preferences than the House of Representatives because there is representation for minor parties. Those who subscribe to this view tend to support the consensus model of democracy, rather than a majoritarian model, and this reduces some of the tension between liberalism and democracy.

**RIGHTS AND FREEDOMS**

As discussed above, individual rights and freedoms are central to both liberalism and democracy. Australians, for the most part, enjoy a high degree of political freedom. They are free to join political parties, organise protest movements and petition against government decisions. However, this is not to claim that Australia has a perfect human rights record. In fact, in recent times, human rights campaigners have highlighted a range of concerning developments, including the mandatory detention of asylum seekers, mandatory sentencing laws, the Northern Territory intervention in Indigenous communities, and far-reaching anti-terrorism laws, which they criticise for violating human rights.

There have also been particular concerns about freedom of speech and freedom of the press in Australia, which are crucial to both liberalism and democracy. When it comes to freedom of the press, Australia was ranked only thirty-sixth in the 2011–12 Reporters Without Borders *Worldwide Press Freedom Index*. Although press freedom in Australia was described as ‘satisfactory’, a ranking of thirty-sixth puts Australia behind many other liberal democracies. In recent years, Australian journalists have also expressed concerns about anti-terrorism legislation that constrains the reporting of police investigations, the narrow interpretation by the public service and the courts of Freedom of Information laws, and other restrictions on freedom of speech. This led a coalition of media organisations to launch the *Australia’s Right to Know* campaign in 2007. They argued that while any single restriction on the right of free speech might be justifiable on its own terms, the cumulative effect of hundreds of such
restrictions casts a pall over political debate. Many media organisations have also expressed concern at recent proposals to tighten regulation of the media in Australia.

Many human rights advocates suggest that the protection of human rights and liberties in Australia would be significantly bolstered by the adoption of a charter of rights (for example Williams 2007). This would help institutionalise the discussion of rights when parliament is considering new laws, thereby strengthening the liberal character of the Australian political system and preventing the sorts of threats to human rights outlined above. As we will see in the next chapter, there has been a great deal of debate over this proposal, and one of the major issues of contention has been whether a charter of rights undermines democracy by placing limits on a democratically elected parliament. Here again, we see arguments about the nature of, and the relationship between, liberalism and democracy playing out in Australian politics.

PARTICIPATION

Widespread political participation is central to the democratic ideal, so an important measure of the health of Australian liberal democracy is the extent to which citizens are involved in politics. Low levels of participation would suggest that we are failing to live up to the democratic ideal, and that citizens may be alienated from the political system.

Voting is compulsory in Australia, and at the 2010 federal election over 93 per cent of enrolled voters turned out to vote (Australian Electoral Commission 2011a). For most citizens, however, voting is the beginning and the end of our participation in politics. For instance, in the survey period for the Australian Social Attitudes report (2001–03), less than a third of people had contacted a political representative, while only 12 per cent had taken part in a protest or demonstration (Passey & Lyons 2005, p. 70). Perhaps many Australians are sceptical about the value of political protest.

Membership of political parties is another useful measure of democratic participation, but the proportion of citizens who are a member of a political party in Australia has fallen dramatically since the mid-twentieth century. The membership of each of the major parties is now below 100 000. One of the reasons for this decline is that the major political parties have become much more professional in their approach to winning elections. Members and volunteers were, in the 1950s and 1960s, essential to the success of a political campaign and membership during this period was measured in the hundreds of thousands. Now, the major parties concentrate on expensive advertising campaigns and sophisticated policy-formulation strategies that target swinging voters. Party members find that they have little say in the running of their organisation. The membership of the Greens, on the other hand, is growing, and is now estimated to be over 10 000 (Jackson 2011). Green parties around the world, in contrast to the established parties, pride themselves on encouraging democratic participation. The Australian Greens promote grassroots democracy as one of the four principles of green politics. This is consistent with the direct action, such as protests and blockades, that environmental activists bring to politics.

Although this may leave us with a sense that levels of political participation are low in Australia, pluralists would argue that instead of being represented through direct participation in the political system, the concerns of citizens are represented by the many interest groups active in politics and society. Australia certainly has a vibrant and growing set of interest groups. It is difficult to imagine a social group or political interest that is not represented in some way. A citizen does not need to be a formal member of an interest group for their views
to be taken into account. When governments negotiate with, say, Seniors Australia, they are
aware that this body is representative of the views of a great many people over and above the
formal membership of the group. Of course, some interest groups have more resources than
others. While some interest groups, such as environmentalists, like to protest directly (for
example against a property development), other groups directly lobby governments behind
closed doors. The lack of transparency in the lobbying industry is of great concern to those
without the resources to influence politics in this way (Warhurst 2007).

The Australian Electoral Survey reported that in 2010, 44.4 per cent of Australians
thought that the government was entirely or mostly run for ‘a few big interests looking out
for themselves’, rather than ‘for the benefit of all the people’ (McAllister & Pietsch 2011,
pp. 42, 95).

EQUALLY

Australians like to think of themselves as living in an egalitarian society. This idea stems from
the absence of inherited titles and the informal way in which the most powerful people in
the country conduct themselves. This myth of equality, however, is belied by the actual level
of economic inequality between classes in Australia. Australia’s ruling class is a network of
business leaders, politicians, judges and journalists. Many company directors sit on numerous
boards. Many went to exclusive private schools and network through clubs. The wealthiest
10 per cent of Australian families own nearly half of Australia’s private assets, while the
poorest half own less than 10 per cent (Headey et al. 2004). Macquarie Bank CEO Alan
Moss was reported in 2007 to have earned over $33 million, more than a hundred times the
salary of the prime minister, or 450 times the wage of a construction worker.

The level of social and economic inequality in Australia raises questions about our
commitment to democracy. The lack of social equality in turn affects the ability of each citizen to
participate in politics. As discussed above, wealthy citizens and corporations can make donations
to political parties, hire professional lobbyists, and launch expensive campaigns to get their
view across. This means they may be able to wield disproportionate influence on Australian
politicians. For example, the Howard Government’s response to global warming was heavily
influenced by the coal industry. The coal industry had much to lose if greenhouse emissions
were to be reduced, and it lobbied aggressively in order to influence government policy. More
recently, mining companies launched a $22 million advertising campaign against the Rudd
Labor Government’s Mining Super Profits Tax (Irvine 2012). This campaign contributed to the
downfall of Prime Minister Kevin Rudd, and led to major modifications to the tax under new
Prime Minister Julia Gillard.

The fact that Australia has a market economy also means that managers and owners of
capital exercise direct control over important aspects of the lives of Australian workers: their
wages, hours of work and working conditions. More generally, in a liberal democracy, many
of the decisions about how and where economic resources are deployed are made either by
powerful private individuals in the market sector or by politicians with an eye to the needs
of business. For example, commercial banks have been criticised in recent years for failing
to pass on interest rate cuts in full to mortgagees. Socialists point to these sorts of examples
to support their pessimism about modern democratic institutions. They argue that we live
in a bourgeois democracy where the dominant class are the owners of capital. The election
of a Labor government makes little difference to the direction of public policy. Workers are ‘subject to the despotism of capital’ regardless of which party is in office (Kuhn 2005, p. 49).

However, any substantial effort to reduce the level of social equality in Australia and to adopt greater ‘democratic’ control over industry would involve a high degree of intervention on the part of the government. While liberals disagree over the extent to which government intervention in the economy is justified, they are supporters of markets and the right to private property, so they are opposed to the sort of government control of the economy that socialists envisage. Past attempts to adopt more democratic control of Australian industry have also been limited by the liberal elements of the Australian system. The most famous example was in the 1940s, when the Chifley Labor Government (1944–49) attempted to nationalise Australia’s banks. Prime Minister Ben Chifley was hardly a radical, but like many, he thought that failures in the banking sector were an important cause of the Great Depression and sought to avoid a similar economic catastrophe. The private banks were joined in their protests against the proposed nationalisation by other industries fearing similar government intervention. The High Court ruled against the government, causing many in the Labor movement to question their ability to implement socialist policies under the Australian Constitution (Crisp 1961, p. 337). Thus, from a socialist perspective, the commitment to market capitalism and private property that is associated with liberalism prevents liberal democracy from fully realising democratic values.

However, this does not mean that all liberals are opposed to any form of government intervention in the economy. Over the course of the twentieth century, many liberals became strong supporters of the welfare state and of the idea that the government has a legitimate role to play in limiting inequalities in income and wealth, and fostering greater equality of opportunity (see for example Rawls 1971). In addition, although our political system, with its divided power, is designed to prevent the rapid adoption of radical policies, Australia was a pioneer early in the twentieth century in many areas of policy designed to reduce social inequality, such as the aged pension, and minimum wages and conditions for workers. Although Australia is no longer a ‘social laboratory’ where progressive social policies are tested out ahead of the rest of the world, we still have lower levels of income inequality than liberal democracies such as the United States and the United Kingdom.

A variety of measures are also in place to limit the ability of the wealthy to dictate policy to parliamentarians. Political parties and politicians must declare any large donations they receive, and there is also a register of lobbyists and (partial) public funding of election campaign costs. These measures are not perfect, and as the examples above illustrate, large mining companies, banks and other organisations continue to wield great power in Australian politics; but they do illustrate that measures are available to try to prevent economic inequalities from corrupting democracies.

CHAPTER SUMMARY

After more than two-and-a-half thousand years, democracy remains a vigorously contested concept. We tend to take our own system of representative democracy for granted, but it is in fact still taking shape; a hundred years is a relatively short time for a political system to evolve. Further, while Australia has inherited political traditions from other countries, the unique nature
of the resulting democratic system, and the flaws within it, are yet to be fully understood. There is no such thing as a perfect political system.

The Australian political system is a blend of competing ideas, values and interests. Although it is a liberal democratic system, there is ongoing debate over the extent to which it realises the core liberal democratic values of freedom, equality and participation. In part, this reflects a deeper theoretical debate over the relationship between liberalism and democracy.

Whatever complaints we may have about aspects of our political system, Australians are generally happy with the way we are governed. In international surveys of trust in government, Australia ranks highly among the world’s democracies. According to the 2007 Australian Electoral Survey, 86 per cent of Australians reported that they were happy with the democratic system (Donovan et al. 2007, p. 84). Central to living in a democracy, however, is the continual debate among citizens about the effectiveness of our political system and suggestions for improvement and refinement. Debates over a republic and the protection of rights show that the Australian political system continues to evolve.

WEBSITES

Centre for Democratic Governance Network:
www.ruc.dk/forskning/forskningscentre/demnetgov/

A collaborative research centre that conducts research on the interaction within and among governance networks.

Democratic Audit of Australia:
http://democraticaudit.org.au/

Publishes papers on the health of Australia’s political institutions.

Documenting a Democracy:

A website that hosts 101 key foundational documents that have been central to the evolution of Australia’s political and social history.

FURTHER READING

