



The Concepts and Fundamental Principles of Democracy

- 3** The Overall Concept of Democracy
- 4** Popular Sovereignty
- 5** “The People” in a Democracy
- 6** Democracy and Equality
- 7** The Common Good
- 8** Majority Rule/Minority Rights
- 9** Democracy and Human Rights
- 10** Democracy and Representation
- 11** The Vocabulary of Politics:
The Meaning of Common Terms

4 Popular Sovereignty

Popular sovereignty is a basic idea of democracy. Popular sovereignty means that the People are the ultimate source of the authority of their government.

- Popular sovereignty includes the idea that democratic government is *by the People and for the People*—for the benefit of the People, not for the benefit of those who govern in their name.
- When the People mutually consent to form a government, they perform an act of popular sovereignty.
- Government in a democracy is the *servant of the People*; it is not their master. Therefore, those who govern are *public servants*—they hold public office only to serve the People, not to serve themselves.
- The People are the *highest political authority* in a democracy; they are the ultimate rulers.
 - ▶ In a democracy, political authority *flows from the People* to the state (the polity or country)—*not from the state* to the People. Thus all citizens ought to obey laws made by a legislature because the People *themselves* have authorized the legislature to do so, not because the legislature, or the formal political order (the state) of which it is a part, is the source of authority.
 - ▶ Popular sovereignty means that the government can only exercise authority if the People have given it. Therefore, popular sovereignty *limits the powers of government*.
- In a democracy the People delegate their authority to government *only for the purposes* set forth in their constitution.
- The People delegate to the state *only as much authority* as is necessary to fulfill the purposes for which states are established.
- The only legitimate power that government has in a democracy comes from the *consent of the People*. In the real world, however, a variety of problems exist regarding the matter of “the consent of the governed.”
 - ▶ Every democracy affords its citizens the opportunity to consent to the political system by participating in elections and in a variety of other ways. But many citizens—in some instances large numbers—fail to vote or participate in other ways that express their consent. This sign of alienation of individuals and groups from the political system represents a widespread problem in modern democracies.
 - ▶ Modern societies tend to lack the cohesion and intimacy of traditional societies; when such circumstances give rise to widespread alienation from political membership and the responsibilities of citizens,

democracies find themselves with significant numbers who can hardly be said to “consent” to the political system. Such persons, citizens in name only, may be easy prey for a variety of extremists, such as cults, dangerous religious splinter groups, and political groups teaching violence and intolerance.

- ▶ How to deal with those who, for a variety of reasons, do not consent to the democratic political order is a considerable problem that democracies ignore at their peril.
- It is an *abuse of power* for a democratic government to claim more powers than the People have delegated to it. Government may not assign itself new powers.
- In a democracy the People *own the government*. It is theirs and they have the right to change it by lawful, constitutional methods if it does not perform to their satisfaction.
- The sovereignty of the People under democratic rule is *not absolute*, however.
 - ▶ Democracy conceives certain fundamental rights of individuals to lie beyond the power even of the sovereign People to violate. It is, after all, the primary purpose of democracy to protect and preserve these rights.
 - ▶ These rights therefore lay beyond the reach either of majorities or of the People as a whole.

What do you think?

- 1 Why is the idea of popular sovereignty considered to be a fundamental idea of democracy?
- 2 What are some reasons why someone might support the idea of popular sovereignty? What is the basis of this idea?
- 3 Why would someone oppose the idea of popular sovereignty? Are there disadvantages in seeing the People as the basis of sovereignty? Why?
- 4 How does the idea of popular sovereignty support the idea of limited (constitutional) government?
- 5 Why is it said the popular sovereignty is not absolute? Why is this an important idea?