19.1 Defining Democracy

People lined up to vote in South Africa in 1994 after the end of Apartheid.

Instructions: The English word democracy comes from the Greek word *dēmokratía*. *Demos* means the common people and *kratos* means strength. A number of historical figures have offered definitions of democracy, some of which are critical. Nelson Mandela, who led the anti-Apartheid struggle in South Africa, wrote in his 1990 autobiography: "I have become more convinced than ever that the real makers of history are the ordinary men and women of our country; their participation in every decision about the future is the only guarantee of true democracy and freedom." Examine the different definitions below organized in roughly chronological order. Select between one and three that best aligns with your understanding of the meaning of democracy today and explain why you chose these definitions.

Socrates, Greek Philosopher, (about 400 B.C.): "No man will ever be safe who stands up boldly against democracy. The man who is to fight for justice, must work in private, not public."

Aristotle, Greek Philosopher, (about 325 B.C.): "But one factor of liberty is to govern and be governed in turn; for the popular principle of justice is to have equality according to number, not worth . . . Democracy arose from men's thinking that if they are equal in any respect, they are equal absolutely. Where the poor rule, there is democracy."

Thomas Jefferson, *Declaration of Independence* (1776): "Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just power from the consent of the governed."

James Madison, *Federalist Papers* (1787): "In a democracy the people meet and exercise the government in person."

Robespierre, French Revolutionary leader (1794): "Democracy is the state in which the people, guided by laws that are its own work, executes for itself all that it can do well, and by its delegates, all that it cannot do itself."

Alexis De Tocqueville, *Democracy in America* (1835): "The very essence of democratic government consists in the absolute sovereignty of the majority."

Abraham Lincoln, *Gettysburg Address* (1863): "Government of the people, by the people, for the people."

Helen Keller, American activist (1911): "Our democracy is but a name. We vote? What does that mean? It means that we choose between two bodies of real, though not avowed, autocrats. We choose between Tweedledum and Tweedledee."

Vladimir Lenin, Russian revolutionary leader (1917): "Freedom in capitalist society always remains about the same as it was in ancient Greek republics: Freedom for slave owners."

Adolf Hitler, *Mein Kampf* (1923): "Ideas such as 'Democracy' disintegrate our race consciousness, breed cowardice. It is a deceitful theory that all men are created equal."

Mahatma Gandhi, Leader of non-violent movement for independence for India from British colonial rule (1940): "What difference does it make to the dead, the orphans and the homeless, whether the mad destruction is wrought under the name of totalitarianism or in the holy name of liberty or democracy?"

Franklin Roosevelt, American President (1941): "Democracy alone, of all forms of government, enlists the full force of men's enlightened will. It is human history."

Winston Churchill, former British Prime Minister (1947): "Many forms of Government have been tried, and will be tried in this world of sin and woe. No one pretends that democracy is perfect or all-wise. Indeed, it has been said that democracy is the worst form of Government except for all those other forms that have been tried from time to time."

Harry Truman, American President (1949): "Democracy is based on the conviction that man has the moral and intellectual capacity, as well as the inalienable right, to govern himself with reason and justice."

Albert Einstein, scientist (1950s): "My political ideal is democracy. Let every man be respected as an individual and no man idolized."

Martin Luther King, Jr., American civil rights advocate (1963): "I have a dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed: We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal."

Ronald Reagan, American President (1984): "Democracy is worth dying for, because it's the most deeply honorable form of government ever devised by man."

Vandana Shiva, Indian philosopher and activist (c. 2000): "Democracy begins with freedom from hunger, freedom from unemployment, freedom from fear, and freedom from hatred. To me, those are the real freedoms on the basis of which good human societies are based."

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