



Modern Governments and Their Avatars: Understanding Legitimacy in Contemporary Political Systems

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Abstract: *It is estimated that more than fourteen hundred Israeli citizens have been killed by Hamas in recent events. Israeli Finance Minister Bezalel Smotrich stated, "The Israeli government failed to protect its citizens, and we failed to uphold the unwritten contract between the state and its citizens." When the state fails to protect its citizens, it loses its legitimacy to govern. This raises the question: What is the purpose of government? What kind of government is morally legitimate, and why? In other words, what is the best form of government for us? This paper seeks to understand the concept of political legitimacy from four different perspectives within the Enlightenment tradition and one unique perspective from the anti-Enlightenment tradition.*

Keywords: *Political Legitimacy, Democracy, Utilitarianism, Social Contract Theory, Conservatism, Marxism.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Prominent anti-establishment thinker Henry David Thoreau said, "That government is best which governs not at all" (Thoreau, H. D., 2013). In contrast, Winston Churchill remarked, "Democracy is the worst form of government except for all the other forms that have been tried from time to time" (Nord, M, Angiolillo, F., Good God, A., & Lindberg, S. I., 2025, pp. 839-864). Johann Wolfgang von Goethe suggested that "the best government is that which teaches us to govern ourselves" (Michaela Keck, 2021, pp. 26-40). Ultimately, no one perceives the world as it truly is; we all view it through a lens of theories, presuppositions, and assumptions (Heywood, A., & Laing, M, 2025, pp. 461-464). Consequently, modern Western political theory can be broadly categorized into five models to address these questions: the Social Contract model, the Conservative model, the Utilitarian model, the Marxist model, and the Democratic model.

2. Utilitarian Tradition

Happiness is the central principle of the Utilitarian model. In the words of 18th-century English political thinker Jeremy Bentham, the purpose of government is to create "the greatest happiness for the greatest number of people" (Nicholson, H, 2017, pp. 461-464). According to him, we are all governed by the feelings of pain and pleasure, which are our sovereign masters. Naturally, we all seek pleasure and avoid pain. Therefore, the government's duty is to promote the overall happiness of society. However, there are several disagreements about what happiness is, how we measure it, and who should determine its definition.

John Stuart Mill attempts to strengthen the utilitarian theory by respecting human dignity and individual rights. He argues that the government should maximize happiness not on a case-by-case basis, but in the long run; over time, he believes that respecting individual liberty will lead to the greatest human happiness (DiIulio, J. P, 2022). His central argument is that people should be free to do whatever they want as long as they do not harm others. In other words, as long as they are not harming anyone else, they are sovereign over their own bodies and minds. Thus, the government should not interfere with individual liberty.

Unlike Bentham, Mill believes it is possible to distinguish between higher and lower pleasures. He argues that it is better to be a dissatisfied human than a satisfied pig; better to be a dissatisfied Socrates than a satisfied fool (Mill, J, S, 1861). Five minutes of intellectual pleasure produces better outcomes than five minutes of sexual pleasure of the same intensity.



Nevertheless, utilitarianism has inspired many social reforms worldwide. In the words of George Orwell, utilitarianism remains highly relevant in the 21st century because it provides a practical system for governing large groups of people, offering simple and powerful guidelines for maximizing happiness and minimizing pain.

3. Marxist Tradition

The Marxist tradition revolves on the idea of exploitation. According to the 19th-century thinker Karl Marx, the ideal government is one that prevents the exploitation of individuals by others. Marxists argue that exploitation is deeply rooted in history. In Marx's words, the history of all previous societies is the history of class struggle. Consequently, present capitalist society exploits workers in various ways by controlling the means of production and political power. To address this, Marx proposed the abolition of all private property to establish a classless society, which he regarded as the best form of government according to his theory of communism.

From the outset, the Marxist tradition has witnessed significant disagreements regarding the nature of exploitation, how individuals can recognize it, and the methods to eradicate it. The role of governments in addressing these issues is also a contentious topic.

Neo-Marxists, such as Antonio Gramsci, sought to expand the concept of exploitation from a direct to an indirect form through his analysis of cultural hegemony. Gramsci posited that the ruling class exploits society through both political society (which maintains control through force) and civil society which exerts control through consent (Gramsci, A, 2011). Without the development of counter-hegemony within civil society, a classless society becomes unattainable. Although Marx did not foresee the rise of fascism or the welfare state and mistakenly believed that communism would emerge in the most advanced economies, the influence of his ideas has profoundly shaped our understanding of the world (Nester, W. R, 2010). As Isaiah Berlin stated whether one agrees with Marx's analysis or opposes it, he cannot be overlooked.

4. Social Contract Tradition

The social contract tradition revolves around the idea of consent. According to the 17th-century English political philosopher John Locke, the best government is one based on the consent of the governed (Fatovic, C, 2004, pp, 276-297). In other words, the will of the people should be the foundation of any government. However, the concept of consent is rooted in the state of nature and has evolved from an agreement among rational individuals. There are significant disagreements regarding who enters into the contract, how it is formed, whether it is hypothetical or real, and how applicable it is to contemporary societies. Three prominent Enlightenment thinkers sought to describe their views on the best form of government.

The 17th-century political realist Thomas Hobbes, who advocates for absolute sovereignty, argues that a large and powerful government is the best because it ensures the safety and security of its citizens. He arrived at this conclusion based on his views of human nature, believing that humans are inherently selfish and aggressive; thus, they require a strong system of governance. In essence, Hobbes supported an autocratic form of government. In contrast, the 17th-century English liberal thinker John Locke, who promotes limited sovereignty, contends that a small, constitutional, and representative government is preferable. He argues that such a government is created by the people through a contract to protect their natural rights—namely, life, liberty, and property. Locke's ideas laid the foundations of classical liberalism and extreme individual liberty in economic activities in modern Western societies. Moreover, his concepts of limited government influenced 20th-century neoliberal thinkers like Robert Nozick, who described government as a necessary evil. Nobel Laureate Friedrich Hayek famously asserted that government is not a solution to our problems; it is the problem.

The 18th-century Enlightenment thinker Jean-Jacques Rousseau believed in popular sovereignty, advocating for a form of government without representation, separation of powers, or majority rule. He argued that humans are naturally good but are corrupted by society. Therefore, the government's primary purpose is to promote fraternity and harmony based on the will of the people, which he termed the general will—the true will of all. In other words, individual cannot be adequately represented. Rousseau proposed that all citizens should actively participate in law-making bodies through direct deliberations, a concept known as direct democracy or deliberative democracy. The 20th-century political thinker Harold Laski noted that the social contract tradition has significantly influenced various countries over the past three centuries. For instance, Hobbes's idea of absolute sovereignty was adopted by the United Kingdom in the form of constitutional monarchy, while Locke's concept of limited sovereignty was incorporated into the American Constitution



as representative democracy. Finally, Rousseau's notion of popular sovereignty was embraced by Switzerland's federal system in the form of direct democracy.

5. Conservative Tradition

Eighteenth-century anti-Enlightenment thinker Edmund Burke advocated for a traditional social order and established customs by rejecting the notion of radical reform. He supported a form of aristocratic government that emphasizes gradual, constitutional reforms in society rather than revolution. According to Burke, human beings are deeply irrational and emotional, requiring traditions to guide them; sudden changes would lead to unrest and confusion, ultimately resulting in anarchy and tyranny. Consequently, he promoted natural aristocracies, traditional hierarchies, and religious values as sources of stability and security. He opposed the French Revolution because it sought to eradicate the past and create something entirely new. In contrast, he supported the American Revolution, as it did not erase the British legacy. In his book *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, he accused the French monarchy of being responsible for its own fate due to its refusal to adapt in order to conserve.

According to conservative belief, social hierarchies are natural and inevitable. For instance, there are hierarchies between employers and workers, teachers and students, and parents and children. This hierarchy and inequality do not create conflict because society is bound together by mutual obligations and reciprocal duties. Conservatives also believe that authority is exercised from above, providing leadership, guidance, and support for those who lack knowledge and experience, as seen in the authority of parents over children (Magee, J. C., & Galinsky, A. D. 2008, pp, 351-398). Thus, they argue that natural aristocracy is the best form of government. However, contemporary conservatives broadly oppose stem cell research, abortion, same-sex marriage, and immigration, while supporting the prohibition of drugs, prostitution, euthanasia, and the censorship of pornography and offensive language on television. Interestingly, most conservatives in current societies support the death penalty.

6. Democratic Tradition

Although ancient Greece is the birthplace of democracy, which emerged 2,500 years ago, prominent Greek philosophers did not consider democracy the best form of government. For instance, Plato and Aristotle viewed democracy as a system of rule by the masses at the expense of wisdom (Ober, J. 2013, pp, 104-122). They believed that ordinary people are often uninformed and unable to analyse problems effectively; thus, they do not understand what is truly beneficial for them. Consequently, these thinkers argued that leadership is necessary to guide the populace, advocating that the best and brightest minds should govern. In Plato's view, philosophers and intellectuals ought to be the rulers.

Democratic ideas were revived in the 18th and 19th centuries, particularly in Western Europe and North America. Since then, various political thinkers have sought to define democracy in different ways.

American President Abraham Lincoln famously described democracy as a government of the people, by the people, and for the people. In contrast, former British Prime Minister Winston Churchill stated that democracy is the worst form of government, except for all the other forms that have been tried from time to time (Bhattacharjee, D. 2010, pp-215-218). Meanwhile, Indian jurist Ambedkar asserted that democracy is a method of governance that facilitates revolutionary changes in the economic and social lives of people without bloodshed (Husain, Z. 2025, pp-39-53). Like all traditions, democracy has encountered disagreements regarding the best form and the extent of people's participation. For instance, ancient Greeks practiced a form of direct democracy among a limited population, while modern democracies have generally functioned as limited and indirect systems of governance. However, contemporary democratic systems are increasingly moving towards deliberative democracy. American political scientist Francis Fukuyama, in his book *The End of History*, posits that Western liberal democracy represents the final form of human government (Fukuyama, F, 2020). According to the latest democracy index rankings, democracy is practiced in 123 out of 196 countries, where 59 percent of the global population lives under democratic rule (Weibrecht, F., Sato, Y., Nord, M., Lundstedt, M., Angiolillo, F., & Lindberg, S. I. 2023, pp-769-793).

7. Conclusion

In recent decades, democracy has sparked both hopes and fears around the globe. In Afghanistan, the ultra-conservative government was replaced with little resistance from citizens, highlighting a growing fear regarding the future of democracy. Additionally, the impact of globalization is destabilizing democracies worldwide, raising questions about their sustainability. While growth narratives have taken a back seat, human development claims have gained



prominence, fostering the belief that social democracy may be the only viable option moving forward. A brief examination of these models reveals that none is perfect in securing citizens' lives and protecting rights, even in the twenty-first century. Technological advancements and artificial intelligence have not succeeded in enhancing citizen safety. Therefore, the best is yet to come. Ultimately, it is essential for citizens to determine which model of government suits them best, as they are the most qualified judges of their own needs.

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