

Political Challenges to Liberalism

Chapter

10

KEY SKILLS

Integrating and synthesizing argumentation and evidence into an informed position

KEY CONCEPTS

Exploring the extent to which liberal governments reflect the will of the people

Key Terms

Authoritarianism
Consensus decision making
Direct democracy
Military dictatorship
Oligarchy
One-Party state
Party solidarity
Proportional representation
Representative democracy
Responsible government



Figure 10-1

David Kilgour was first elected to the House of Commons in 1979 as a Progressive Conservative in an Edmonton riding. When he refused to support the introduction of the GST (goods and services tax) in 1990, he was expelled from the Progressive Conservative party, and he became a Liberal. In 2005, he crossed the floor (resigned from the Liberal party) and became an independent because he opposed several Liberal policies.

After almost 15 years as a Liberal MP, and after serious consideration, I concluded last week that I can no longer remain in the party's caucus. My objection to many of the party's new policies...proved painfully decisive.

Calls and e-mails to my office suggest that most constituents support my decision to sit as an independent legislator. Like me, they are concerned by the Liberals' stance on numerous issues.

—David Kilgour, “Why I left the Liberal Party.”
National Post April 19, 2005, p. A18.

Kilgour opposed these party policies because of his own beliefs and the unpopularity of those policies in his riding. He considered that his first duty as a Member of Parliament (MP) was to represent the will of his constituents rather than the will of his party. The tradition of **party solidarity** is a key aspect of Canadian politics: it requires that all party members vote with the party (except in rare instances when party leadership explicitly frees them from this obligation, in what is known as a free vote). Because of the adversarial nature of the parliamentary tradition, party solidarity is enforced.

The party in power can be forced to resign or call an election if

- it loses a vote on an appropriation bill (which authorizes government spending), a taxation bill, or the annual budget
- a motion of confidence (that is, confidence in the government) is rejected by a majority vote
- a motion of non-confidence (that is, non-confidence in the government) is passed by a majority vote

In such cases, the government is considered to have lost its mandate to govern.

The question arises, therefore, as to whether MPs should vote according to the will of their constituents or according to the policy of their party, regardless of their personal beliefs or their constituents' opinions. Most of the time, because of our parliamentary system, party solidarity prevails and each MP votes with his or her party. Occasionally, however, MPs take a stand and refuse to endorse a policy with which they or their constituents disagree. This usually results in the MP either being forced out of the party or leaving voluntarily. MP Kilgour went through both of these situations, first when he disagreed with the Progressive Conservative party in 1990 over the GST, and then in 2005 when he disagreed with the Liberal party's position on several issues.

Chapter Issue



Figure 10-2 ▲



Figure 10-3 ▲

Citizens of a country have a variety of needs and wants. Is it possible for a democratic government to meet the needs of everyone all the time? Should this be the goal of government?

Democracy is never a final achievement. It is a call to an untiring effort.

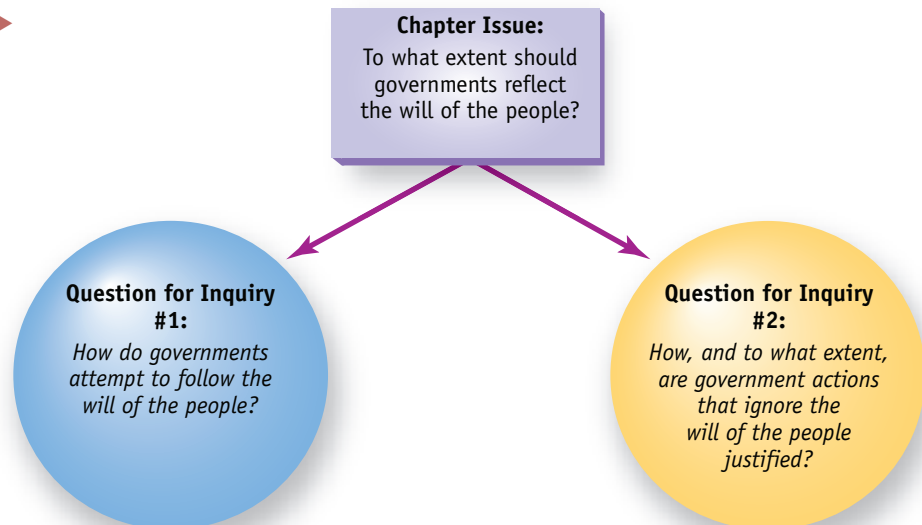
—John F. Kennedy, speech in Costa Rica, March, 1963.

Liberal democracy stands as a fragile but enduring human experiment to test the hypothesis that ordinary human beings are capable of making wise judgments in matters concerning their own and others' well-being.

According to liberal principles, the ordinary individual citizen (and the aggregated opinions of citizens, referred to as the “will of the people”) is central to the shape and workings of government. Ideally, the governing system, its institutions, actions, and legal structures, are designed with the individual citizen’s participation and inviolability in mind. This is, of course, an ideal, and the actual practice, even within democratic governments, often falls far short of this ideal. This chapter explores how close to the ideal various systems of government come by asking the question *To what extent should governments reflect the will of the people?*

This exploration will touch on some of the principles central to liberalism, such as individual equality and worth, the rule of law, respecting private property, and ruling through the consent of the governed (the will of the people). It will also help you address the Related Issue for Part 3 of this text: *To what extent are the principles of liberalism viable?*

Figure 10-4



Does Government Serve the People or Lead the People?

Question for Inquiry

- How do governments attempt to follow the will of the people?

The will of the people...is the only legitimate foundation of any government, and to protect its free expression should be our first object.

—Thomas Jefferson, 1801

As we consider the question of whether the liberal principle of following the will of the people is viable in a contemporary world, we will see that this principle is an *ideal* toward which many governments aim, rather than a goal that they consistently achieve. Since liberal democracy was born in the countries of the United States, France, and Great Britain, and then adopted elsewhere, most of the examples in this section will focus on North America and Europe. Nonetheless, this point applies to any and all other democracies, wherever they are.

Some Questions about Democracy

What I want is to get done what the people desire to have done, and the question for me is how to find that out exactly.

—attributed to Abraham Lincoln (1809–1865)
(16th president of the United States)

Lincoln's question was a pertinent one: How can a government determine what the will of the people is? Do you believe that Canada, where a party often forms the government even though it receives less than 50 per cent of the votes, is governed according to the will of the people? Is governance by the will of the people even a desirable or realistic goal? Are there circumstances in which a government should act contrary to public opinion? Is public opinion informed opinion?

A 2005 Gallup Poll commissioned by the BBC indicated that 65 per cent of the world's citizens—including 55 per cent of Canadians and Americans—thought that their countries were not governed by the will of the people (that is, by listening to what the people want and trying to enact laws that address those needs and wants). What are some possible reasons that people might feel this way? How might this belief affect people's commitment to getting involved in the affairs of their countries?



Figure 10-5

Thomas Jefferson was the third president of the United States and was the principal author of the Declaration of Independence. He was instrumental in shaping the democratic system of the new US government.



PAUSE AND REFLECT

Jefferson's words echo the ideas of John Locke, who put forward the concept of "the consent of the governed." If the will of the people is the foundation of government, in what ways can a government accurately discern the will of the people? What are some possible problems with this principle?

Elections, open, free and fair, are the essence of democracy, the inescapable sine qua non. Governments produced by elections may be inefficient, corrupt, shortsighted, irresponsible, dominated by special interests, and incapable of adopting policies demanded by the public good. These qualities make such governments undesirable but they do not make them undemocratic.

—Samuel P. Huntington, *The Third Wave: Democratization in the Late Twentieth Century* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1993), p. 9.

Several experts on the Middle East concur that the Middle East cannot be democratized. According to this view, democracy is a product of western culture, and it cannot be applied to the Middle East which has a different cultural, religious, sociological and historical background. Similarly, it is argued that the culture of Islam is incompatible with democracy. Basically, this conventional perspective of the Middle East thus contends that democracy in that region is neither possible nor even desirable... On the other hand, it is obvious that the Turkish example demonstrates the invalidity of [this]... I do not subscribe to the view that Islamic culture and democracy cannot be reconciled.

—H.E. Recep Tayyip Erdogan, prime minister of Turkey, address to Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University, January 30, 2003.

These quotes suggest that democracy is difficult to put into practice, but most would agree with Winston Churchill, who said the following:

Democracy is the worst form of government, except all those other forms that have been tried from time to time.

—Winston Churchill, speech to the House of Commons, November 11, 1947.

It can be argued, as Winston Churchill and others do above, that democracy has its faults and weaknesses. No system of governing is perfect. As you read through the following pages, keep in mind the Question for Inquiry: How do governments attempt to follow the will of the people?

The Will of the People

As citizens of this democracy, you are the rulers and the ruled, the lawgivers and the law-abiding, the beginning and the end.

—Adlai Stevenson (a US politician), speech in Chicago, 1952.

A **democracy** is a form of government in which power is ultimately vested in the people. We will begin by looking at two forms of democracies, direct and representative. The people participate in

deciding issues directly (direct democracy) or through elected officials who represent them and make laws in their interests (representative democracy).

The quotation by Jefferson that opened this section states that a government's legitimacy is dependent on popular consent. Many supporters of liberal democracy are likely to agree with this idea. But is it sufficient for governments to win the support of voters during periodic elections, or should they rely on public opinion polls to guide day-to-day and issue-by-issue decisions? How is the will of the people expressed, and does it vary from issue to issue and from time to time? How much influence should the general population have on government policies?

Principles of Liberalism in Direct Democracies

A **direct democracy** operates on the belief that every citizen's voice is important and necessary for the orderly and efficient operation of society. Some economic and political philosophers have argued in favour of this system as an expression of liberal principles. Direct democracy seems practical only with small numbers of people, however, because it requires everyone to get together in one space to discuss issues, then make decisions based on the majority vote. Ancient Athens, the world's first democracy, practised direct democracy with an assembly that may have numbered 5000 or 6000 people.

Pure democracies have ever been spectacles of turbulence and contention; have ever been found incompatible with personal security or the rights of property; and have in general been as short in their lives as they have been violent in their deaths.

—James Madison, *Federalist Papers*, No. 10, 1787.

Some characteristics of direct democracy are found in the practices of many liberal democracies, however. For example, three important instruments of direct democracy are initiatives, referendums or plebiscites, and recalls.

Citizens in the United States can use *initiatives* to create legislation. To create an initiative, a citizens' group draws up a petition. If the petition is signed by a certain number of citizens, it can force a public vote on an issue. Examples of this form of direct democracy in the 2008 election in California were the following:

Proposition 2: to treat food-producing animals (calves, chickens, pigs) more humanely



Figure 10-6 ▲

In a direct democracy, people vote directly on issues. Such a situation is more practical with small numbers of people, such as in some small towns where the citizens can assemble, discuss issues affecting the community, and arrive at decisions by majority vote.

Proposition 6: to get tougher sentencing for gang-related violence
Proposition 9: to increase the rights of victims of crime
Proposition 10: to provide rebates to citizens who buy cars that use alternative fuels

—Source: adapted from Steve Wiegand,
“Initiatives crowding California’s November ballot run the gamut.”

The Sacramento Bee September 28, 2008.

<http://www.sacbee.com/111/story/1271437-p2.html>

In *referendums* or *plebiscites*, all citizens may vote on whether to accept or reject a proposed piece of legislation. Referendums, in effect, *refer* the decision to the people. The word *plebiscite* literally means “the common people (plebians) speak.” There have been only three referendums held at the federal level in Canada’s history. In the most recent referendum, in 1992, citizens were asked whether they approved or disapproved of the changes to the Constitution proposed in the Charlottetown Accord. Even though the Constitution does not require the use of referendums to make amendments, politicians wished to gauge public reaction to these contentious amendments before implementing the accord. Defeated in the referendum, the Charlottetown Accord was not implemented. Some political observers believe that the defeat of the Charlottetown Accord set a precedent whereby citizens will expect to be consulted before any constitutional amendments are passed. Numerous municipal and provincial plebiscites have been held over the years.

In a *recall* election, a majority of voters may choose to remove an elected official or government from power. This is usually initiated through a petition. In Canada, British Columbia is currently the only province that allows recalls. If enough registered voters sign a petition to recall a Member of the Legislative Assembly (MLA), the Speaker announces the recall, and a by-election is held as soon as possible. Since representative recall was enacted in 1995, over 20 recall efforts have been launched, but no one has actually been recalled so far. In the United States, only 15 states allow recalls. California governor Arnold Schwarzenegger was elected in 2003 in the state’s first-ever recall election.

Liberalism through Representative Democracy

Most modern liberal democracies, because of their size and complexity, use a form of **representative democracy**. In this system, citizens elect governing officials to make decisions on their behalf.

In representative democracies, the will of the people is expressed in the selection of representatives to the government during elections. Representative democracies ensure that those elected remain true to the will of the people through periodic elections, the presence of multiple

parties whose members represent different perspectives and watch one another with a critical eye, the separation of powers among different branches of government, an independent media, an independent judiciary, and the rule of law. These act as tools to entrench basic citizen rights and freedoms and prevent abuse by those who wield power.

Canada's Parliamentary Democracy

There are many variations of representative democracies. Canada, for example, has a parliamentary democracy and follows a tradition known as **responsible government**. This means that the branch of government that proposes laws, the executive branch of government (the prime minister and the cabinet ministers), is dependent on the direct or indirect support of elected members of the legislative branch (a majority of MPs in the House of Commons). If the legislature, which officially represents the will of the people, does not approve of important laws proposed by the executive branch (for example, with regards to spending, taxation bills, or the annual budget), then the executive branch may be forced to resign or call an election. Responsible government is about accountability: the prime minister and cabinet ministers need to be accountable not only to Parliament, but also through Parliament to their constituents and Canadians as a whole. If they are suspected of not carrying out the will of the people, a motion of non-confidence may be proposed in the House of Commons. If the vote of non-confidence passes, the government must immediately resign or submit to a new general election. Stephen Harper's Conservative government came to power in 2006 in an election triggered by a parliamentary vote of non-confidence against then Prime Minister Paul Martin's Liberals. This mechanism, then, is designed to ensure that the government (the executive) is listening to the will of the people (as represented by the MPs in the House of Commons). The possibility of the abuse of power is avoided by the watchful eyes of the MPs who represent the electorate, especially the MPs from the opposition parties.

Because Canada, like most liberal democracies, operates on the basis of representation by population, the entire country is divided into electoral districts, ideally of 100 000 people, which are called ridings or constituencies. Each constituency sends a single representative to the House of Commons in the federal Parliament in Ottawa, which is why Canada's electoral process is known as a **single-member constituency**

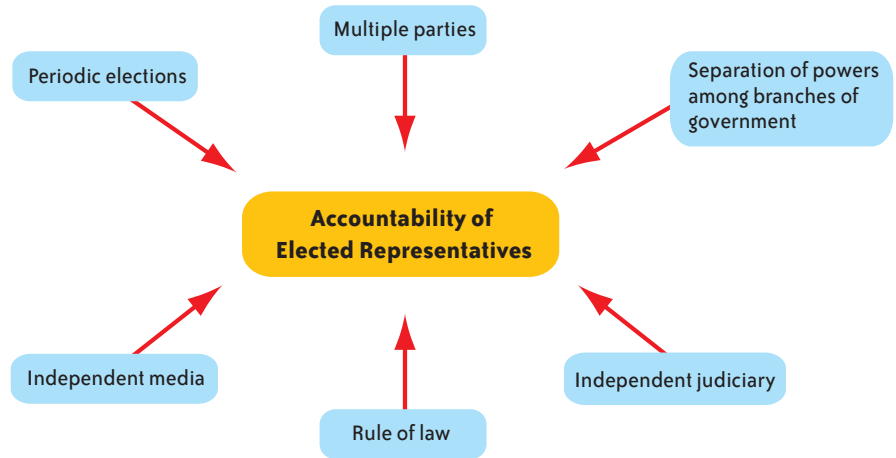


Figure 10-7 ▲

How could each of these features in a representative democracy help to ensure that those who are elected remain true to the will of the people?

PAUSE AND REFLECT

Do you think that the main role of citizens is to legitimize the system by electing the government? Do citizens play other roles in a representative democracy? Explain.

system (sometimes referred to as the “first-past-the-post” system because, as in a horse race, candidates who pass a certain point in the race with the highest number of votes in each of their ridings win). At present there are 308 Members of Parliament representing all areas of the country in the House of Commons.

Like many government systems, Canada has a bicameral (two-chamber) legislature to provide two different legislative bodies, each based on a different form of representation. Canada’s 105-member Senate is based on representation by region rather than on

Figure 10-8 ►

The number of ridings in each province and territory is generally based on population size (the numbers of electors in each province on the map are as of 2008). Because of the principle of *representation by population*, all of Western Canada has 92 seats in total, and the Atlantic provinces have only 32 MPs. When this is compared to Ontario and Québec, it raises the issue of voter parity: is it fair that over one-third of all MPs come from just one province? Is it fair that urban voters are under-represented in comparison with rural voters? Can you think of reasons why population is the main criterion used in determining ridings? What would happen if all provinces and territories were given the same number of seats? Would this be more fair or less fair?

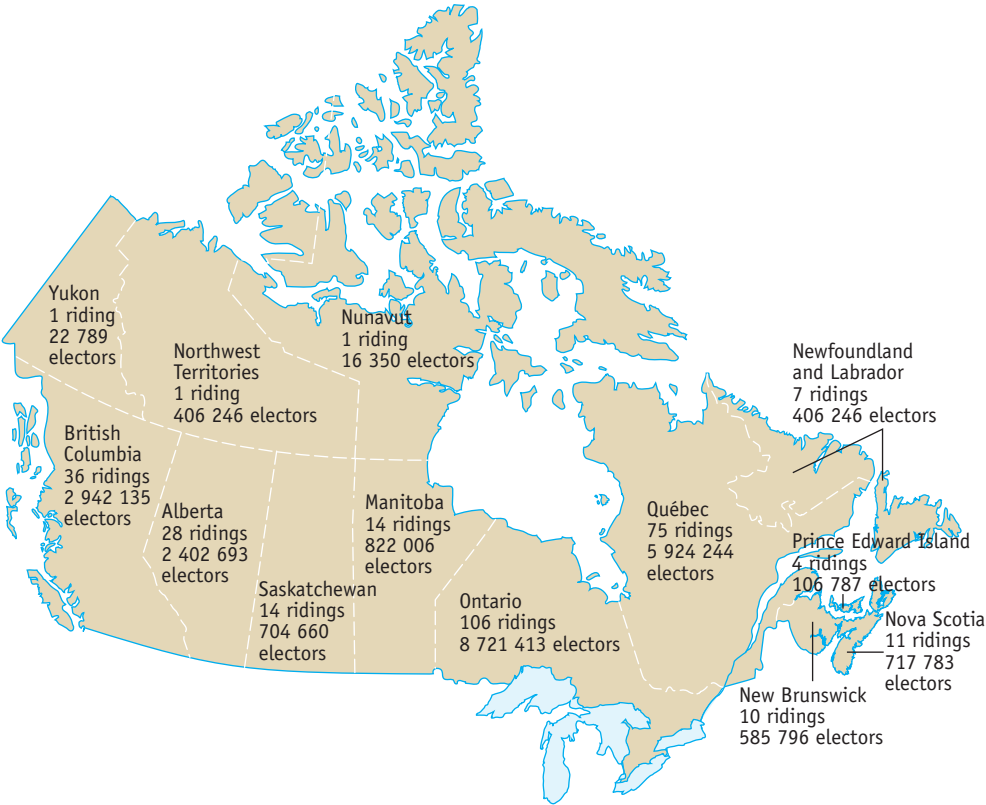


Figure 10-9 ►

In the 2008 federal election, a majority of Canadians who voted, voted *against* the Conservative Party, yet it formed the government. How well do elections reflect the will of the people in a multi-party democracy? Only 59 per cent of eligible voters voted in this election. Do the 37.6 per cent of the 59 per cent who voted (or 22 per cent of the electorate) really represent the will of the people? Is this an indication of something that needs fixing in Canada’s parliamentary system?

Party	Seats	Percentage of Popular Vote
Bloc Québécois	49	10.0
Conservative	143	37.6
Green Party	0	6.8
Independent	2	0.7
Liberal	77	26.2
NDP-New Democratic Party	37	18.2

representation by population. Senators are not elected; as a seat becomes vacant in the Senate, the prime minister appoints a new senator—who may remain until age 75—to fill it. Any piece of legislation that has been passed by the House of Commons must also be passed by the Senate before it can become law. It is extremely rare, however, for the Senate to reject a bill that has been approved by the House of Commons. It is, however, common for the Senate to recommend changes (amendments) to bills passed by the House of Commons, and to have the House of Commons consider and pass the bill as amended by the Senate.

Clearly, it can be argued that there are challenges in Canada's system in terms of reflecting the will of the people. Keep these shortcomings in mind as you read the chapter and think about the difficulties they cause and possible solutions to these difficulties.

The United States' Republican Democracy

Unlike Canada, which has a monarch, the United States follows a republican system of government. A republic is a country where the people are sovereign and there is no king or queen. Like Canada, the United States has three branches of government: legislative, executive, and judicial. To ensure that the government adheres to liberal principles, the United States uses a system of checks and balances to make sure that no one branch of the government becomes too powerful. The legislative branch (Congress) has checks over the executive branch (the president and members of the Cabinet) and also over the judicial branch (judges and the court system), and the same is true for the other two branches. For example, the legislative branch can override a presidential veto with a two-thirds vote. The legislative branch also plays a deciding role in choosing individuals to fill vacancies on the Supreme Court, and can remove judges or the president through impeachment. This system was created based on the beliefs that checks and balances would keep the government too weak to override the will of the people, and that the least intrusive government provides more freedom to its citizens.

There are two chambers of the US Congress: the House of Representatives and the Senate. Like Canada, the House of Representatives works on a single-member constituency system and the country is divided into electoral districts based on representation by population. Currently there are 435 members in the House, and the numbers of representatives from each state reflect the relative population of each state. In the United States, the Senate is elected: each state has two senators, regardless of the population of the state. Representatives are elected every two years, and Senators are elected every six years. The elections for the Senate are staggered (one-third of the seats are up for election every two years) to maintain continuity after each election. This system ensures that there are always experienced senators who can carry on the business of Senate, and who can help to initiate new senators into the legislative process.

Figure 10-10

The breakdown of the Electoral College by state and the District of Columbia, 110th Congress, 2008–2012. There were 538 members in 2008.



Legislation (a “bill”) is voted on in both the House and the Senate; if it passes, it can be signed into law by the president. The president can choose not to sign a bill into law; this is called a veto. A vetoed bill is sent back to the house of Congress where it originated. There, the members of that house can pass a revised bill and submit it again for the president’s signature, or they can override the presidential veto with a two-thirds majority vote, thus making the bill into law without the president’s approval.

In Canada generally, the party that obtains the most seats in Parliament becomes the government, and its leader becomes prime minister. The process of electing the president in the United States is somewhat different. The people go to the polls and vote for the presidential candidate of their choice by voting for electors pledged to support their choice of candidate. The president is actually elected by a body known as the Electoral College. The framers of the US Constitution were somewhat suspicious of the will of the people and did not want the people to elect the president directly. As a result, they established a process whereby each state and the District of Columbia select electors equal in number to their Congressional representation, and the electors actually elect the president. In all states but two (Nebraska and Maine), it is a winner-takes-all situation: the winner of the popular vote in each state receives all the Electoral College votes for the state. Nebraska and Maine apportion their votes according to the popular vote. The system usually works—that is, the person elected as president usually has a majority of the popular vote; but, it has failed four times—that is, the person elected as president did not have a majority of the popular vote. In the 2000 presidential election, for example, Republican candidate George W. Bush, with 50 456 002 popular votes, won 271 electoral votes. His Democratic opponent, Al Gore, won the popular vote with 50 999 897 votes, but won only 266 electoral votes. Bush was elected president.

The United States has essentially a two-party system, and it is extremely difficult for a third party to win an election. While this has the advantage of stability—there are no three- or four-way votes and no minority governments—it is virtually impossible to challenge the established parties to consider minority opinions. However, the party with the most seats in Congress usually has the support of the majority of voters.

The American system of representational democracy, like Canada's, also has challenges in reflecting the will of the people. Think about this as you continue to search for a way to respond to the Chapter Issue: *To what extent should governments reflect the will of the people?*

Proportional Representation

In Sweden and many other countries, the government uses a different form of representation: **proportional representation**. In this system, citizens vote directly for a party, and then representatives are assigned based on the amount of popular support obtained. The system encourages and legitimizes participation by minority or marginal parties who would not obtain representation in the systems used in Canada or the United States.

Usually, countries using a proportional representation system have many more parties than countries using a single-member constituency system. This often results in coalitions where two or more parties must work together to form the government. On occasion, a minority government might be formed. In Sweden, four major parties have had the most political control and have formed coalition governments for years.

Many people argue that proportional representation is more representative and democratic than a single-member constituency system since the proportion of seats in the legislature more accurately and directly reflects the popular vote (and therefore better reflects the will of the people). It is receiving increasing attention in more and more countries, including Canada. Ontario held a referendum in the 2007 provincial election to see if Ontarians wanted to move to a mixed-member proportional (MMP) system. This means that each voter would vote for a candidate to represent them (as in the single-member constituency system), but would also vote for a party. The Ontario legislature currently has 107 seats; under the MMP system, the constituencies would be rearranged to create 90 ridings for direct representation, and 39 additional seats would be filled based on party votes. The proposed electoral system was voted down by Ontarians, however.

PAUSE AND REFLECT

In the lead-up to the 2007 Ontario referendum on proportional representation, advocates of the reform complained that Elections Ontario had not done enough to inform the public about the proposed changes to the electoral system. Why do you think Ontarians voted against moving to a mixed-member proportional system? Would you be in favour of such a system? What obstacles are in the way of moving to a proportional representation system in Canada?

Figure 10-11 ▼

This is only a partial list of countries using proportional representation. This system is common in Europe, especially in the Scandinavian countries, and in South America.

Austria	Germany	Netherlands
Argentina	Greece	Peru
Belgium	Hungary	Portugal
Brazil	Iceland	Scotland
Croatia	Ireland	South Africa
Czech Republic	Israel	South Korea
Denmark	Italy	Sweden
Dominican Republic	Mexico	Turkey
Finland	New Zealand	Venezuela

Examining Proportional Representation

Democracy, loosely translated from its Greek roots, means “rule by the people,” or “people power.” One of the most important aspects of a democracy is elections: the process by which we choose representatives to sit in Parliament and make laws. As we have seen, there are two predominant types of systems used in democracies to choose representatives, the single-member constituency system and proportional representation.

Your Task: Investigate the results from the 2008 federal election, and determine how the results would have been different if Canada used a proportional representation system. You will form an opinion on the fairness of Canada’s system of representative democracy and on whether you think a proportional representation system would be more desirable. You will then find another student in the class who disagrees with you and discuss the issue. Use the Questions to Guide You to for assistance.

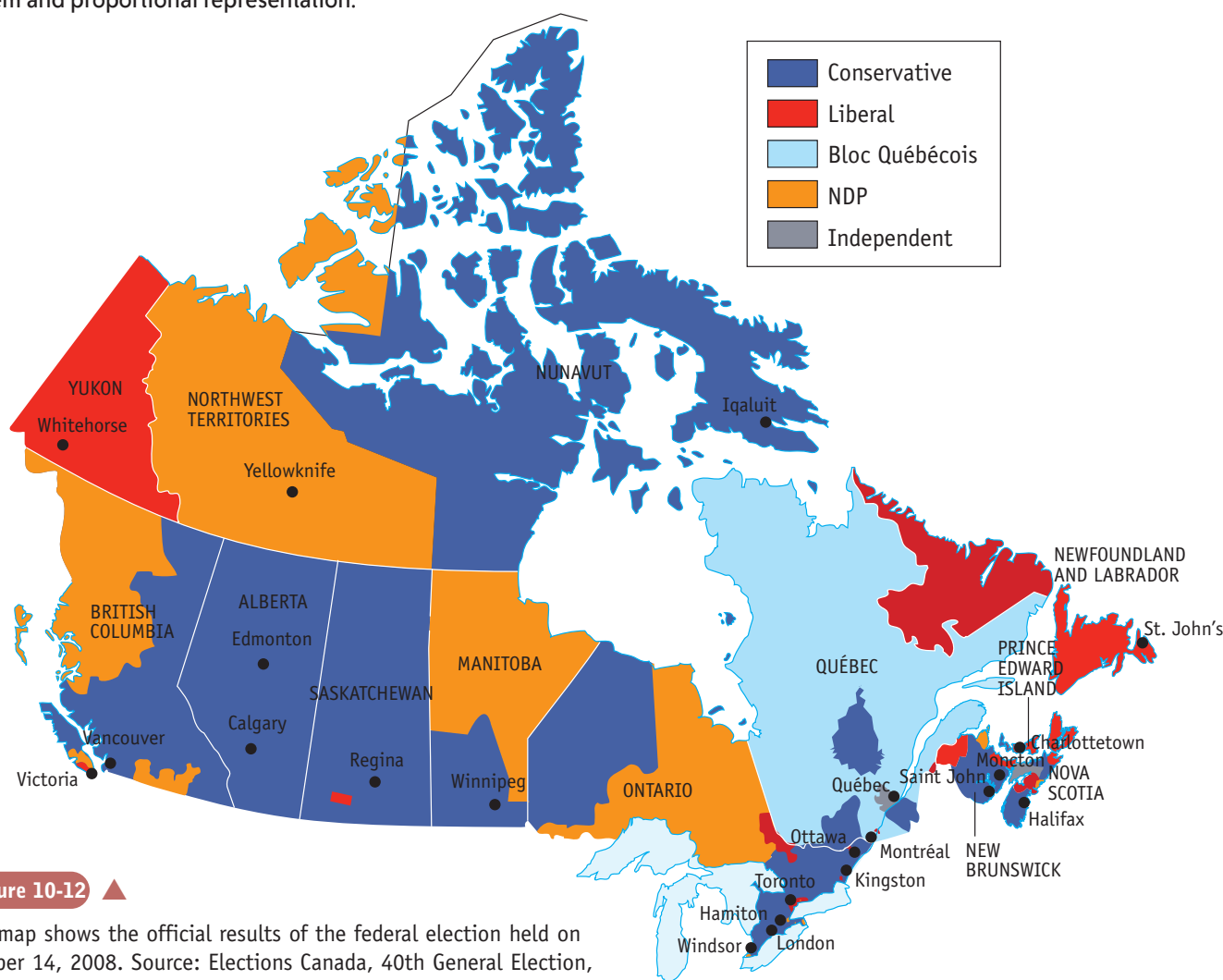


Figure 10-12 ▲

This map shows the official results of the federal election held on October 14, 2008. Source: Elections Canada, 40th General Election, Official Results <http://www.elections.ca/pas/40ge/40official.pdf>

Party	Number of Votes	Number of Seats
Bloc Québécois	1 379 991	49
Conservative Party of Canada	5 209 069	143
Green Party of Canada	937 613	0
Liberal Party of Canada	3 633 185	77
New Democratic Party	2 515 288	37
Total Votes Cast	13 929 093	

—Source: Elections Canada, Fortieth General Election Official Voting Results.
<http://www.elections.ca/scripts/OVR2008/default.html>

Figure 10-13 ▲

This table shows the total number of votes cast for each major party and the number of seats each party won during the 2008 election.

Questions to Guide You

- Calculate the percentage of the popular vote each party received. Round to the nearest decimal place. To do this, divide the total number of votes cast per party by the total number of votes cast.
- Calculate the number of seats each party would have received under a proportional representation system. To do this, multiply 308 (because there are 308 ridings in Canada) by the percentage you obtained in question 1 (remember to divide your percentage by 100 to arrive at a decimal number that you can use for multiplying). Round to the nearest full number.
- Answer the following questions:
 - How many seats would each party have under the proportional representation system? Would the Conservative party still have won the election?
 - Compare the number of seats you obtained in question 2 to the number of seats each party actually won, shown in Figure 10-13. What is the difference?
- How would Parliament be different if the number of seats you calculated in question 2 were the actual distribution of MPs in Parliament? Which parties would gain representation? Which parties would lose MPs?
- Which system do you think is more democratic? Which one seems to better represent the will of the people?
- How might politics change in Canada if the proportional representation system were adopted?
- Go online and find the results of another Canadian federal election (you will need to find the total number of ballots cast, and the total number of ballots cast for each party). Work out the results for proportional representation. How does the actual percentage of seats obtained by each party differ from the percentage of seats it would have received under proportional representation?

Challenges to the Will of the People

We have seen that the systems of representative democracy are not perfect methods of reflecting the will of the people, although mechanisms which attempt to do so are in place, such as the concept of responsible government in Canada, the checks and balances in the US republican system, and proportional representation. In addition, in all three types of representative democracy, countries have electorates that select representatives, and in all three, a written constitution exists that serves the interests of the people, outlines and guarantees their rights, outlines the responsibilities of the government, and contains the mechanisms for the system to be changed. What other conditions are necessary to realize the liberal ideal that government should reflect and be shaped by the will of the people?

Some thinkers believe that citizen participation in a democracy requires a kind of civic-mindedness, or a democratic personality. They also believe that this quality can be developed in the citizenry through education.

Any democracy must pay explicit attention to the development of its young people's civic skills, habits, and attitudes. We human beings do not instinctively develop the skills necessary for democracy. We are not automatically capable of working together with others on common problems. We do not naturally understand alternative perspectives. Unless we are taught to care about other people, we are unlikely to show concern from anyone beyond our immediate circle of family and friends.

Citizens are made, not born. Civic education is the process by which we teach young people to be effective and responsible members of democratic communities. Increasingly, we know how to make civic education work in our schools. Nothing is more important to the future health of our democracies.

—Peter Levine, “A blog for civic renewal,” October 14, 2005.

<http://www.peterlevine.ws/mt/archives/000707.html>

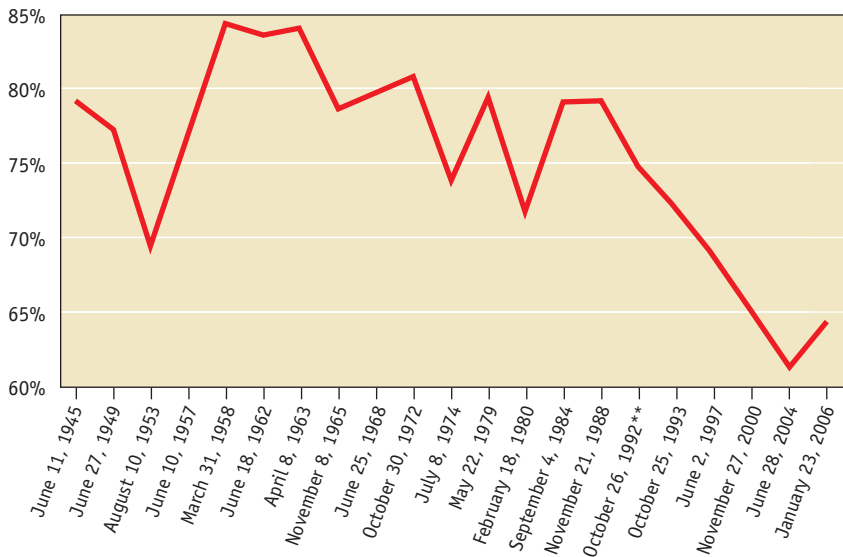
Citizen participation is a requisite of any democratic system. Voting—perhaps the most obvious evidence of democracy—is a minimal act. It alone does not define democracy. Democracy requires much more. And if citizens abandon their responsibility, then democracy is in danger of falling into the hands of people who will use the powers of government for their own purposes.

The highest measure of democracy is neither the “extent of freedom” nor the “extent of equality,” but rather the highest measure of participation.

—Alain de Benoist (1943–), French political philosopher

Voter Turnout

Evidence suggests that people are failing to execute even the minimal expectation of democracy by not exercising their right to vote. Voter turnout is generally decreasing. In the 2006 federal election, for example, only 64.7 per cent of eligible voters voted, and in the 2008 election, only 59 per cent of eligible voters voted. This is a problem that plagues all democracies. Some voters are simply indifferent to the issues or to who makes the decisions. This problem creates a challenge to the fundamentals of democracy: If the power resides with the people, what do you do when the people choose not to exercise that power? How does low voter turnout undermine or endanger a democratic system?



*Official turnout in Canada is based on the number of electors on the final lists of electors.

** Date of the referendum on the Charlottetown Accord proposing constitutional changes.

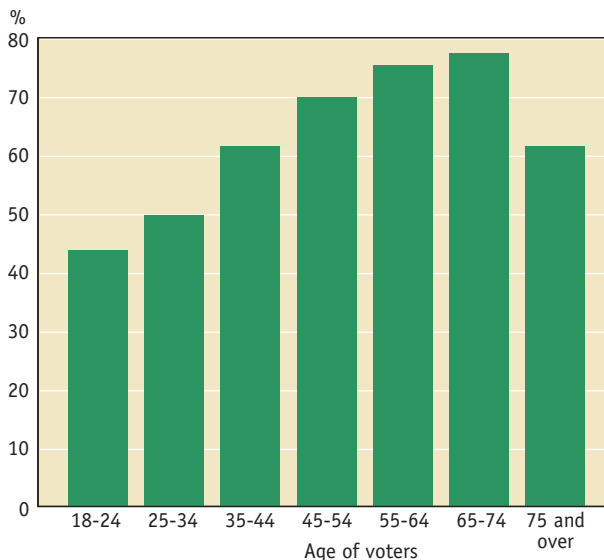


Figure 10-15

This chart shows voter turnout by age in the 2006 federal election.

Source: Elections Canada, "Estimation of Voter Turnout by Age Group at the 39th Federal General Election, January 23, 2006."

http://www.elections.ca/loi/res/rep39ge/estimation39ge_e.pdf

PAUSE AND REFLECT

Why do you think voting becomes more likely as people get older? Do young people take their right to vote for granted? What effect do you think voter age has on government policy? Do you think this is something the government takes into account when deciding what laws to pass or where to focus spending?

Figure 10-14

This graph shows the percentage of eligible voters who have participated in federal elections in Canada since 1945 up to the 2006 election.

Source: Elections Canada, Figure 1: Turnout rate in federal elections (1945–2006) in "Estimation of Voter Turnout by Age Group at the 39th Federal General Election, January 23, 2006," p. 2.

http://www.elections.ca/loi/res/rep39ge/estimation39ge_e.pdf

INVESTIGATION

Mandatory Voting

Something to Think About: Should voting be compulsory in Canada?

An Example: Voting, as a minimal act of participation, is necessary if a democracy is to function properly. In the 2006 Canadian federal

election, only 64.7 per cent of eligible voters turned out to vote. In Australia's 2004 election, there was a 94.5 per cent voter turnout rate. You may wonder why there is such a big difference between the two countries' voting rates. The answer lies in legislation. In Canada, voting is non-compulsory, and since the 1990s, all federal elections have had a voter turnout rate below 70 per cent. In Australia, voting is mandatory by law and the voter turnout rate has not fallen below 94 per cent since 1955. Do you think that voting should be compulsory in Canada?

Canadian senator Mac Harb was interviewed after his speech on mandatory voting to the Frontier Centre for Public Policy in Winnipeg on October 4, 2005.

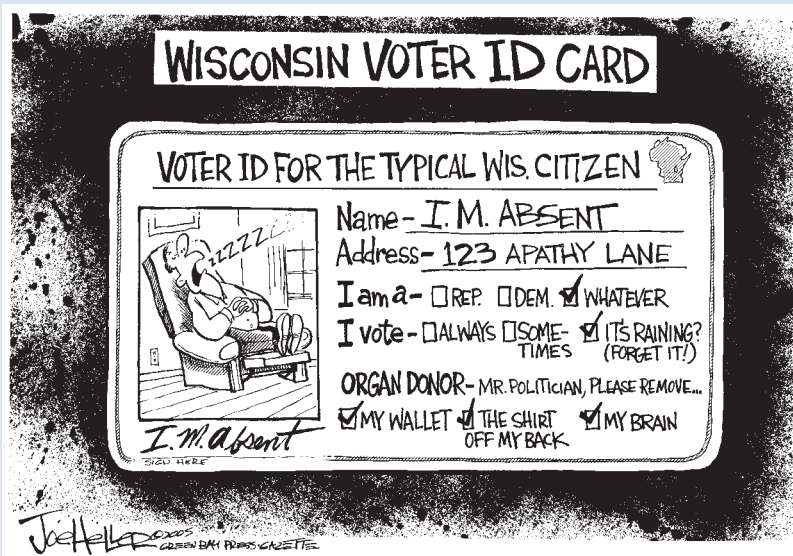


Figure 10-16 ▲

While this cartoon pokes fun at voter apathy in the United States, poor voter turnout is a problem in Canada too. To what extent might an American citizen agree or disagree with the specific messages in this cartoon?

Frontier Centre: Why do you want to make voting mandatory?

Mac Harb: Because of the fact that people, young people in particular, are not participating in the electoral process; less than one out of four bother.

FC: Do you think that policy should apply at all three levels of government?

MH: I believe that all three levels of government should adopt mandatory voting to ensure that all the people vote at all times for those who govern them.

FC: More than thirty countries have mandatory voting but most of them don't enforce the law. Wouldn't we be creating another victimless crime that is a waste of resources to enforce?

MH: Not at all. The mere fact that you have a law creates a deterrent. Seat-belt law is a case in point. Even though we don't do a lot of enforcement of seat-belt compliance, the compliance rate is about ninety percent. I believe that just having the law would by itself have a positive impact.

FC: Should such a provision be embodied in the constitution or in statutory law?

MH: No, it should be a part of legislation or bylaws at the municipal level.

FC: Should voting merely be declared to be a civic duty as in Italy's constitution or established as an affirmative citizen obligation, as in Australia?

MH: I would go with the Australian formula, because their system is very similar to ours.

FC: According to many, Australia has much better government policy than many countries, including Canada. In your opinion, is mandatory voting part of that?

MH: I take the position that, because of the fact that they have mandatory voting, they have more representative government than we do.

FC: Aren't you confusing rights with responsibilities? Classical liberal rights are negative in nature; they only require you to be left alone.

MH: Rights go with responsibilities. We have a right to drink fresh water but we have the responsibility to ensure that we pay taxes in order to keep waterways clean.

FC: In Australia where compulsory voting is at least minimally enforced, they have a problem called the "donkey vote," where unwilling voters exercise their franchise randomly. Wouldn't we be making the process a joke?

MH: That is the question, to do or not to do. In fact you have to look at the lesser of the two evils, and the lesser here is to ensure that everybody votes and then go out and educate those who you believe need education.

FC: Australia's voters also spoil more than five percent of their ballots. Why bother to drag people out if that's what they will do?

MH: The reality of it here is that those who do not vote are close to about thirty percent. As five percent, I would say it was worth the effort for us, for the sake of five-percent waste to reach out to the other twenty-five percent.

—Source: interview between Mac Harb and the
Frontier Centre for Public Policy, October 4, 2005.
Frontier Centre for Public Policy.

http://www.fcpp.org/main/publication_detail.php?PubID=1178

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

- 1 Do you think mandatory voting would help increase the voter turnout rate in Canada? Use some of the questions and answers in the Mac Harb interview to defend your position.
- 2 How might mandatory voting in Canada change citizen participation, besides having more citizens voting?
- 3 Examine the voter turnout graph in Figure 10-14. What other strategies besides mandatory voting might the Canadian government employ to try to increase voter turnout?



© 2006 Brian Fairrington and PoliticalCartoons.com

Figure 10-17 ▲

Is the responsibility of voting too great a burden for the typical voter?

The best argument against democracy is a five-minute conversation with the average voter.

—Winston Churchill

PAUSE AND REFLECT

How much time and energy would you want to devote to participating in the electoral and democratic process? As a citizen of Alberta, and of Canada, how much do you feel you should know about current issues? Do you care enough about what is going on in your area, the province, and the country to research and keep up to date with the news? Is your opinion an informed opinion?

Elite Theories of Democracy

Some people claim that the needs of a society are best served when one elite group of people, deemed to be better qualified than other citizens, is given the task of making decisions for all. Such a critique of mass participation in democracy is known as the “elite theory of democracy”. Voicing criticisms of democracy similar to those of Plato and Thomas Hobbes, economics theorist Anthony Downs has argued that, because a single vote has little weight in a very large group of decision makers, individuals have little or no sense of responsibility for their decision, and are thus less likely to make a rational and well-informed decision.

This theory poses a dilemma for those who favour increased citizen participation in decision making in order to ensure equality of power among citizens: either a small group of well-informed and qualified people make decisions for all of society, and thus there is an inequality of power among individuals; or all members of society have an equal say in the decision-making process but may have little concern for the outcomes of their decisions. Furthermore, it has been argued that, in the second option, ensuring that citizens are well-informed about the decisions they are making is not a viable option, because in order to become well informed about the various decisions, citizens would have to neglect their other duties in society.

Lobbying by Interest Groups

Lobbying is an attempt to influence the direction of governmental policy by groups that represent a particular interest or perspective. These are often well-organized groups designed to raise money to inform and persuade (lobby) representatives or government bureaucrats to consider their perspectives. Frequently, they donate money to representatives’ election campaigns, although most democratic governments have limited the allowable amount of their contributions to prevent the actual “buying” of influence. Some lobby groups are self-interested, such as unions, business and development groups, or farmers groups who want specific economic policies that favour their interests. Others lobby in the interests of a particular segment of society, for example, people who are homeless, some Aboriginal peoples, cultural groups, or women. Still others may act to protect the environment, change abortion laws, or protect the right to bear arms.

Whatever the cause, lobby groups spend time and raise money to influence public policy, and some people worry that that this influence may sometimes conflict with the welfare or interests of the voting public. The will of the people may occasionally be overridden by the will of a group of well-organized, vocal, and influential people.

Ethics and the Common Good

Governments may face the following question when considering whether to follow public opinion on a specific issue: Does the will of the people necessarily indicate the right course of action? Is majority public opinion always consistent with the values and principles of a liberal democracy? (The *will of the people* is generally taken to refer to the majority opinion.)

Nineteenth-century thinkers Alexis de Tocqueville and John Stuart Mill used the phrase *tyranny of the majority* to describe one of the potential problems in a democracy: that the will of the majority may be imposed on minorities to the detriment of other liberal principles. In 2005, for example, when the government of Canada introduced legislation into Parliament to recognize same-sex marriages, some Canadians wanted a referendum to be held on the issue so they could express their opinions. Justice Minister Irwin Cotler, however, announced that there would not be a national referendum. Cotler stated that if a referendum had been held to decide whether women were entitled to vote in the early 20th century in Canada, women would likely never have been enfranchised. Was Cotler right in favouring the extension of rights over the will of the people?

Another such example is the abolition of capital punishment. After 109 years and 710 executions, Canadian Parliament abolished the death penalty in 1976. The voting was 131 MPs to 124 in favour of the abolition. Parliament had previously held a vote on abolishing the death penalty in 1966, and it was retained. At that time, 60 per cent of Canadians favoured keeping it, according to polls. A bill to reinstate the death penalty in Canada was introduced and voted on in 1987, but it was defeated. At the time, an Ipsos-Reid poll indicated that 73 per cent of Canadians were in favour of reinstating the death penalty. By 2001, this number had dropped to 52 per cent. Most arguments against the death penalty claim it is unethical, while some also cite the possibility of wrongful convictions as another reason not to use it. Why do you think the majority of MPs voted against the death penalty when polling seemed to indicate that a majority of Canadians were in favour of it?

As Cotler's comments on women's enfranchisement demonstrate, there are times when government claims to be wiser than the people—meaning that the will of the people may not be the best or most ethical course of action. Following are a number of other examples:

- Currently in Canada, juvenile offenders are being tried as minors in the criminal justice system. Following a series of high-profile criminal cases where juvenile offenders committed heinous crimes, many Canadians are starting to feel that minors should be tried in adult courts and sentenced accordingly.



Figure 10-18 ▲



PAUSE AND REFLECT

Are government members still following the will of the people if they make wise decisions that go against the wishes of the majority?

- Some Québécois, wishing to preserve their own cultural heritage, language, and customs, have expressed concern to their governments over the degree to which they should accommodate other cultural practices within Québec.
- In Ontario, SUV owners and drivers have faced heavy taxation and even, in certain cases, penalties imposed by government in order to discourage these environmentally unfriendly vehicles.

Do you agree that in these cases the government may be more objective and “wiser” than the people? John F. Kennedy had this to say about the will of the people in a democracy:

The true democracy, living and growing and inspiring, puts its faith in the people—faith that the people will not simply elect men who will represent their views ably and faithfully, but will also elect men who will exercise their conscientious judgment—faith that the people will not condemn those whose devotion to principle leads them to unpopular courses, but will reward courage, respect honor, and ultimately recognize right.

—John F. Kennedy, *Profiles in Courage*
(New York: Harper & Brothers, 1956), p. 264.

Practicality versus Popular Opinion

Can you think of a situation in which a decision is made based on practicality or necessity, despite the fact that it contradicts the wishes of the people it affects? For example, shelters for people who are homeless are one of the social services provided by many larger Canadian communities. Most Canadians recognize the necessity of shelters for people who are homeless, given our climate. Those same Canadians, however, may strongly resist a decision by the provincial or municipal government to establish a shelter in their neighbourhoods. Sometimes governments make unpopular decisions because they believe they are necessary for the common good.

Consider the 1987 decision by the federal government to replace the Canadian \$1 bill with a coin, which came to be known as the loonie. Economically speaking, the decision was a good one from the government’s perspective, because a paper dollar typically wore out within a year, whereas a coin would last 20 years on average. The government expected to save approximately \$250 million over the course of the next 20 years. Nonetheless, a year after the coin’s introduction, Canadians were not supportive of the decision.

Polling by the mint revealed that the loonie was not embraced by Canadians so long as paper \$1 bills were still available. In July 1988, 39 per cent of Canadians said they liked the coin, 25 per cent were indifferent and 36 per cent disapproved of it. But certain groups were

pleased with it, including vending-machine companies, transit authorities, and the visually impaired.

—Source: “Introducing the loonie,” CBC,
first broadcast June 30, 1987. CBC Digital Archives.
http://archives.cbc.ca/IDC-1-73-2325-13535-11/politics_economy/twt/

As you can see, there are many times when a democratic government might form policy that goes against the will of the people. Look back at the Thomas Jefferson quote that opened this section (see page 335). Given the reality of government policy, what does government’s willingness to go against the will of the people say about the fundamental principles of liberal democracies? Can you identify any inherent flaws in the principle of the will of the people?

Consensus Decision Making

In **consensus decision making** a group of individuals share ideas, solutions, and concerns to find a resolution to a problem that all members of the group can accept. There are many variations on the process, but most have a similar structure.

1. The question for consideration is presented to the group.
2. All members of the group contribute their opinions on the question.
3. A response to the question is proposed, and the members of the group come to some agreement on the response.
4. If all the members do not agree to the response, those who disagree present their concerns to the group.
5. The proposed response to the question is modified to address the concerns of those who disagree.
6. Another round of discussion is held on the newly modified response. The process repeats until a resolution is reached that all members can accept.

The governments of Nunavut and the Northwest Territories are consensus governments (see chapter 8, pages 294–295). In Nunavut, there are no political parties at the territorial level, which allows each MLA to vote as he or she thinks best. Once the MLAs are elected by the people, they hold a secret ballot to elect a speaker of the Legislative Assembly, a premier, and the cabinet. Approval of any matter before the legislature requires agreement by the majority. They wanted a government that would serve the people’s needs as closely as possible. Jack Stagg, a chief federal negotiator of the Nunavut political accord, said “political control is always a better exercise close to the people than far away.” (Source: Jack Stagg, quoted on Nunavut 99, http://www.nunavut.com/nunavut99/english/public_gov.html.) A government based on consensus was envisioned as the best way to

include the constituents of Nunavut in a more comprehensive way.

One benefit of this system is that the Legislative Assembly is not nearly as adversarial as assemblies and parliaments based on the party system. Certainly, MLAs disagree with one another, and may get upset or critical, but the proceedings in the legislature are, for the most part, calm and respectful. MLAs listen to one another and seldom interrupt. MLA Kevin O'Brien made the following comment about the difference in a consensus legislature:

Nunavut MLAs certainly are not shy about voicing criticism of the cabinet, but they do not criticise and oppose just for the sake of criticism and opposition.

—Kevin O'Brien, "Some Thoughts on
Consensus Government in Nunavut."

Canadian Parliamentary Review 26, 4, 2003.

<http://www.parl.gc.ca/Infoparl/english/issue.htm?param=60&art=26>

Another example of consensus can be found in the Quaker-based model. In this model, consensus is grounded in the beliefs and values individuals have about themselves and the group, and the conviction that decision making should reflect the search for truth and goodness. Consensus in this context does not mean unanimity, as the individual's beliefs are always respected. It does, however, mean that "constructive engagement of differences and dissent are integral to the process." (Source: Monteze M. Snyder et al, *Building Consensus: Conflict and Unity* [Richmond, IN: Earlham Quaker Foundations of Leadership Program], 2001.) Differences are resolved by the commitment to carry on the discussion, no matter how time-consuming or difficult.

Proponents of consensus decision making argue that it is egalitarian and inclusive, allowing everyone to participate in a decision, and thereby reflecting more closely the will of the people. As a decision-making process, it aims to find a solution that serves the common good, while taking into consideration the individual and collective beliefs and values of all participants. In addition, the process tends to elicit a high level of commitment to the decision from those involved, and may create a higher quality decision than a majority vote, because it requires more input from those affected.

Like all political systems, however, consensus governments are not without their problems. In Nunavut, MLAs complain that the cabinet does not consult them adequately, that ministers are often unwilling to share critical information, and so on. In addition, voters are not able to vote based on competing sets of policies, since for the most part, they do not even know who will be in the cabinet, and even if they did, they have no way of influencing that process. Others argue that the Nunavut model has little in common with the traditional Inuit consensus decision making on which it was based and that it represents a rejection rather than an affirmation of Inuit culture and values.



PAUSE AND REFLECT

Do you think moving toward a consensus decision-making model would make the Canadian government more representative of the will of the people? What obstacles stand in the way of making Canadian Parliament into a consensus government?



Should Government Rely on the People's Will?

The conservative French thinker Joseph de Maistre once claimed that “every nation has the government that it deserves.” Some might see this as a cynical interpretation of the idea that government is an expression of the people’s will. Many contemporary thinkers, however, wonder about the reliability of people’s choices. Do you think the general population of a country knows what is in the best interests of the country? Consider the following viewpoints on the question.

A vexing problem of democratic theory has been to determine whether ordinary citizens are up to the task of governing a large society. There are three distinct problems here. First, Plato (Republic, Book VI) argued that some people are more intelligent and more moral than others and that those persons ought to rule. Second, others have argued that a society must have a division of labor. If everyone were engaged in the complex and difficult task of politics, little time or energy would be left for the other essential tasks of a society... Third, since individuals have so little impact on the outcomes of political decision making in large societies, they have little sense of responsibility for the outcomes. Some have argued that it is not rational to vote since the chances that a vote will affect the outcome of an election are nearly indistinguishable from zero.

—Tom Christiano, “Democracy.” *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, July 27, 2006.
<http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/democracy/>

The following is an excerpt of a review of economist Bryan Caplan’s *The Myth of the Rational Voter: Why Democracies Choose Bad Policies*.

...Caplan argues that “voters are worse than ignorant; they are, in a word, irrational—and vote accordingly.” Caplan’s complaint is not that special-interest groups might subvert the will of the people, or that government might ignore the will of the people. He objects to the will of the people itself. In defending democracy, theorists of public choice sometimes invoke what they call “the miracle of aggregation.” It might seem obvious that few voters fully understand the intricacies of, say, single-payer universal health care. (I certainly don’t.) But imagine, Caplan writes, that just 1 percent of voters are fully informed and the other 99 percent are so ignorant that they vote at random. In a campaign between two candidates, one of whom has an excellent health care plan and the other a horrible plan, the candidates evenly split the ignorant voters’ ballots. Since all the well-informed voters opt for the candidate with the good health care plan, she wins. Thus, even in a democracy composed almost exclusively of the ignorant, we achieve first-rate health care.

The hitch, as Caplan points out, is that this miracle of aggregation works only if the errors are random. When that's the case, the thousands of ill-informed votes in favour of the bad health plan are cancelled out by thousands of equally ignorant votes in favour of the good plan. But Caplan argues that in the real world, voters make systematic mistakes about economic policy—and probably other policy issues too.

—Gary J. Bass, “Clueless.” From *The New York Times*, May 27, 2007
© 2008 *The New York Times*. All rights reserved. Used by permission and protected by the Copyright Laws of the United States. The printing, copying, redistribution, or retransmission of the Material without express written permission is prohibited. www.nytimes.com

The role played by citizens in holding leaders to account is a core tenet of all theories of democracy, but most theories seek to satisfy this requirement electorally, through infrequent voting, rather than through continuous feedback such as is now provided by opinion surveys. In part, this is because elections simplify the judgmental task. Competing candidates present themselves as alternative choices for the future, allowing citizens to decide, on whatever basis they find credible, which candidate represents the better option. Choosing among competing candidates is quite another thing from choosing among rival policy proposals, where the complexity of problems, the frequency with which such judgments must be made, and staggering information costs place enormous cognitive burdens on even the policy expert, let alone the typical voter.

—Scott L. Althaus, “False Starts, Dead Ends, and New Opportunities in Public Opinion Research,” *Critical Review* 18, 1–3 (2006): 75–104. Reprinted by permission of the publisher (Taylor & Francis Group, <http://www.informaworld.com>).

- 1 In the first quotation of this feature, Tom Christiano notes that one of the problems of democracy is determining whether ordinary citizens “are up to the task of governing a large society.” Do you agree? Is voting too big a responsibility for the average citizen?
- 2 Talk to your parents or other adults about how much they consider political issues before voting. Based on these interviews, do you feel that voters are responsible enough that government should rely on their will? Share your thoughts with the class.
- 3 How do you think each of the people quoted here would respond to the question **To what extent should governments reflect the will of the people?** Can these views be considered critiques of democracy in general?
- 4 Technology exists that would make it possible for all citizens to vote on all governmental decisions each day. Would citizens become more informed and responsible if they were required to participate more frequently in decision making?

Explore the Issues

Concept Review

- 1 a) What are the three types of representative democracies discussed in this chapter?
b) Which type do you think best reflects the will of the people? Why?

Concept Application

- 2 Examine Figure 10-7 on page 339. Which mechanisms are the most critical to ensure that governments follow the will of the people? Select the top three and justify your choices.
- 3 Find three articles about children or teens participating in or influencing democratic processes in Canada or abroad. Each article should represent a different perspective or point of view. Working in small groups with other individuals who have different articles, consider how these young people are fostering change. For each article, with each group of young people in mind, create a short response to the following question: To what extent should governments reflect the will of the people, including young people?

Authoritarianism

Question for Inquiry

- **How, and to what extent, are government actions that ignore the will of the people justified?**

We have seen that liberal democracies sometimes ignore the will of the people in order to implement policies that governments believe serve the common good. Authoritarian systems of government are generally regarded by outsiders as being unconcerned with the will of the people, but this is not necessarily true. In this section of the chapter, we will examine how authoritarian systems of government attempt to discern and respond to the will of the people through non-democratic means. Authoritarian governments may claim that order and security are more important than freedom, and, like a wise father figure, will make decisions in the interests of the people. Some of these governments believe that since they have the best interests of the people at heart, they embody the will of the people, whether the people know it or not. Authoritarian governments may have a detailed vision of a wonderful future—a vision of a world that will be more secure, more morally advanced, and more accurately fitted to the nature of humans—but their vision will require sacrifices and hardship and must therefore ignore the immediate will of the people. We will explore a variety of authoritarian systems to see how they justify their claim to decision-making power. The following section provides understandings of how, and to what extent, actions by authoritarian governments that ignore the will of the people are justified.

Authoritarian Political Systems

The people who cast the votes decide nothing. The people who count the votes decide everything.

—**Joseph Stalin (leader of the Soviet Union from 1924–1953),**
quoted in **Helen Thomas, *Thanks for the Memories,***
***Mr. President* (New York: Scribner, 2002), p. 197.**

Authoritarianism describes a form of government that vests authority in an elite group that may or may not rule in the interests of the people. Authoritarian political systems take many forms, including oligarchies (Putin’s Russian Federation), military dictatorships (Myanmar, formerly known as Burma), ideological one-party states (Cuba), and monarchies (Saudi Arabia). Some of these forms may make reference to the will of the people, or a similar concept, in their

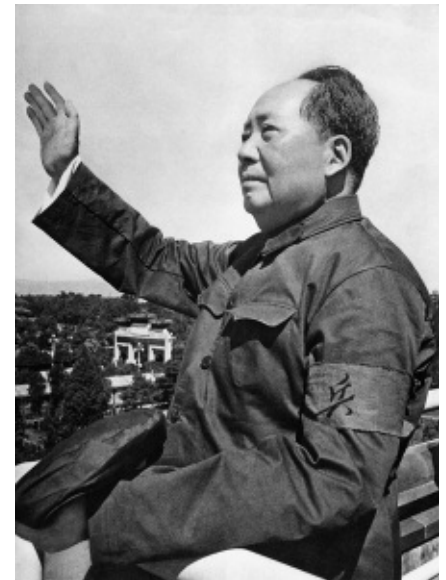


Figure 10-19 ▲

Mao Zedong, better known as Chairman Mao, ruled The People’s Republic of China from 1949 to 1976 as the leader of the Communist party. Although revered by many as a hero, his campaign to create a new society and a new citizen resulted in the deaths of hundreds of thousands of the country’s citizens.

How does the Saudi Arabian constitution address the will of the people?

Articles 6 and 7 of the constitution of Saudi Arabia read as follows:

Article 6—Citizens are to pay allegiance to the King in accordance with the holy Koran and the tradition of the Prophet, in submission and obedience, in times of ease and difficulty, fortune and adversity.

Article 7—Government in Saudi Arabia derives power from the Holy Koran and the Prophet's tradition.

The constitution justifies the monarchy as follows:

Article 10—The state will aspire to strengthen family ties, maintain its Arab and Islamic values and care for all its members, and to provide the right conditions for the growth of their resources and capabilities.

—Source: “Saudi Arabia–Constitution.”

International Constitutional Law,

http://www.servat.unibe.ch/icl/sa00000_.html, January 7, 2004.

PAUSE AND REFLECT

Consider the term *guiding parent* with respect to government. How might this term be used to refer to the constitutional relationship between government and citizenry in Saudi Arabia? What, if anything, ultimately checks the power of the leaders in this system? What issues could potentially stem from this distribution of power in society?

laws or constitutions, but their interpretations of the concept differ greatly from democratic traditions.

The central institution of the Saudi Arabian government, for example, is an absolute monarchy. The Basic Law adopted in 1992 declares that Saudi Arabia is a monarchy ruled by the sons and grandsons of King Abd Al Aziz Al Saud, and the constitution asserts that the Quran (also spelled *Koran*) is the basis for all laws of the country. This means that the country is governed on the basis of Islamic law (sharia).

Although it is easy for us to view democracy as “better” than any of the systems presented here—especially since many of the governments that will be discussed are infamous for enforcing their laws through repressive and brutal measures—some of these systems have developed in response to particular historical conditions or as attempts to counter the challenges and problems faced by democracies that this text discussed earlier. Many authoritarian governments also believe that they are serving the best interests of the country.

Some scholars believe that authoritarianism is an expression of collectivism, in opposition to individualism (which, at least theoretically, is favoured by democracies). John Duckitt, in his paper entitled “Authoritarianism and Group Identification: A New View of an Old Construct,” argues that both authoritarianism and collectivism subvert individual rights and goals in favour of group goals, expectations, and conformities. Keep this in mind as you read about some types of authoritarian governments.

Oligarchies

Oligarchy is a form of government in which political power rests with a small elite segment of society. They are often controlled by politically powerful families who pass on their influence to their children. Present-day Russia has been called an oligarchy because of the power that some individuals, previously associated with the Communist party in the Soviet Union, gained after the fall of communism.

It is interesting to note that some scholars believe that any political system eventually evolves into an oligarchy. This theory is known as the “iron law of oligarchy”. For example, Robert Michels, in his book *The Iron Law of Oligarchy* (1911), says that he

came to the conclusion that the formal organization of bureaucracies inevitably leads to oligarchy...under which organizations originally idealistic and democratic eventually come to be dominated by a small, self-serving group of people who achieved positions of power and responsibility. This can occur in large organizations because it becomes physically impossible for everyone to get together every time a decision has to be made. Consequently, a small group is given the responsibility of making decisions.

**—Robert Michels, from *The Iron Law of Oligarchy*,
quoted in Henry L. Tischler, *Introduction to Sociology*
(New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1990), p. 181.**

While this may seem to be an exaggeration, some people consider the United States to be an oligarchic democracy, since third-party candidates stand little chance of being elected because of the enormous amounts of capital needed to run for national office. According to this view, in a political system such as the United States, actual differences between political rivals are small, the oligarchic elite imposes strict limits on what constitutes an acceptable and respectable political position, and politicians' careers depend heavily on unelected economic and media elites. These same people would point to the recurrence of two names (of four people) in four recent US election campaigns: Clinton and Bush. Few would argue, however, that the United States is not a democracy. What do you think? Are some modern democracies oligarchic?

One-Party States

A **one-party state** is a type of system where only one party forms the government and no other parties are permitted to run candidates for election. Some of the appearances of democracy exist but the absence of choice and the barriers against change eliminate the liberal democratic principle of the will of the people. One-party states are often communist states, but they describe themselves as a *people's republic*, *socialist republic*, or *democratic republic* to indicate that they somehow embody the will of the people.



Figure 10-20 ▲

As prime minister of Italy from 1922 to 1943, Mussolini transformed the country into a fascist dictatorship and wielded absolute power. He suppressed individual rights, followed an imperialist foreign policy, and allied Italy with Nazi Germany during the Second World War. Was he simply self-serving and power hungry, or was he driven by a vision of what he thought his country should be (however detrimental that vision may have been to his people)?

Supporters of one-party states often point to the sense of unity, strength, and community that a single-party government can give to a country. They argue that multi-party systems introduce too much division and conflict, which impedes economic and political development; therefore, a single-party state is best for the country as a whole.

Critics say that this system is not truly democratic and does not represent the will of the people, since a choice of only one party is really no choice at all. However, in some single-party states, such as Italy under Mussolini, constituents often could choose for which candidates to vote, although they were all from the Fascist party. One-party systems can easily disregard previous laws or even the constitution, if they so desire. The inclusion of some aspects of democratic government, such as elections, serves as one way to legitimize the government's authority to other countries.

Military Dictatorships

A **military dictatorship**, sometimes known as a military junta, is a form of government in which political power resides with the military leadership. Countries in Latin America, Africa, and the Middle East have presented many examples of military dictatorships. Like any dictatorship, a military dictatorship can be official or unofficial, and sometimes mixed forms exist where the military exerts strong influence over those in power. Military dictatorships often come to power through a coup d'état, in which the existing government is overthrown by military personnel. Examples of such regimes are General Augusto Pinochet's overthrow of Salvador Allende's democratically elected government in Chile in 1973 and General Pervez Musharraf's assumption of power in Pakistan in 1999.

Some military dictatorships have justified their claims to power as a way of bringing political stability to their countries or of rescuing them from "dangerous ideologies." For instance, Pinochet's takeover of Chile was justified as necessary to prevent Allende from creating an authoritarian socialist regime. Military regimes tend to portray themselves as neutral third parties who can provide interim leadership during times of turmoil. This is seen as being better for the people in the long run, even if the will of the people needs to be ignored or undermined in the short term. Musharraf, for example, claimed that the incumbent president of Pakistan was undermining the constitution by abolishing the system of checks and balances. Musharraf claimed that the country had to be saved.

Despite these portrayals, military dictatorships tend to be unwilling to give up power unless forced to do so. Musharraf, for instance, was forced out of power in Pakistan in 2007 because of escalating internal dissension in the country between pro-Islamic and pro-democratic

factions, and because he lost the support of the international community. Since the 1990s, military dictatorships have become less common, in part because they have less international legitimacy.

Techniques of Authoritarian Governments

Authoritarian governments use several techniques to first gain power and then maintain it. As you read this section, consider whether the use of these techniques takes into account the will of the people. How then do authoritarian regimes justify the use of these techniques?

Vision

One of the most important aspects of any ideology, including those of authoritarian governments, is a vision: a **vision** of what the country could be if led by a leader who could obtain the vision. Some visions revolve around security—protecting the country from some perceived threat. Adolph Hitler’s Nazi party was elected in the early 1930s based on an economic stabilization program, anti-Semitism, and an anti-communist platform. As you read in Chapter 5, Germany at the time was saddled with massive war debts, reparations payments, national humiliation, and political and economic instability. Hitler capitalized on people’s fear of communists, and his nationalistic vision of a united, strengthened German Empire in Central Europe appealed to many Germans. Once he became chancellor, Hitler was able to stifle his opponents until the Nazi party was declared the only legitimate party in Germany. When the president died in 1934, at the height of the Depression, the cabinet passed a law transferring the powers of the president to the chancellor—even though the constitution did not allow it. This effectively eliminated any checks or balances on Hitler’s power. This move had the approval of 84.6 per cent of the electorate at the time. The people voted for a strong leader with a vision to take them through the years of turmoil. They were not necessarily voting for war or the horrors of the Holocaust to come.

Joseph Stalin consolidated his power in the Soviet Union with a nationalist vision. Instead of following the traditional Bolshevik emphasis on permanent revolution (spreading communism throughout the world by helping other revolutionaries), Stalin instead began a policy known as Socialism in One Country. That is, he focused on improving the country internally. One of the biggest features of this vision was transforming the Russian agrarian economy to an industrial economy. As you read in Chapter 5, Stalin introduced his first Five-Year Plan in 1928. This was a program of agricultural collectivization, which was a means to increase agricultural production to pay for industrialization and to centralize control in a command economy under his leadership. The program met

PAUSE AND REFLECT

Virtually all authoritarian governments say that they are working for the best interests of the people; however, many also argue that the will of the people is unimportant because it does not reflect what is best for the country. Is this ever a legitimate justification for ignoring or even subverting the will of the people?

One-Party Systems	Military Dictatorships
China	Burma (Myanmar)
Cuba	Fiji
Laos	Libya
Syria	Mauritania
Vietnam	

Figure 10-21



Here are just a few examples of authoritarian governments in existence as of November, 2008. There are many more that could be added to this list, and even more countries have instances of authoritarianism at some point in their histories. Oligarchies are not listed because no country considers itself an oligarchy today, even though some countries, such as Russia, are widely believed to be one.

PAUSE AND REFLECT

To what extent did Stalin's implementation of collectivization (and the resulting famine) reflect the will of the people? The common good?

with intense opposition from the people who owned the land. The collectivization policy and efforts to enforce it and eliminate any resistance to it eventually led to widespread famine, and millions of Soviet citizens, especially in Ukraine, starved to death or were killed. In a meeting during the Second World War, Winston Churchill had the following exchange with Stalin:

Have the stresses of the war been as bad to you personally as carrying through the policy of the Collective Farms?" To which Stalin replied: "Oh, no, the Collective Farm policy was a terrible struggle...Ten million [he said, holding up his hands]. It was fearful. Four years it lasted. It was absolutely necessary..."

—Winston Churchill, *Memoirs of the Second World War* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1959), p. 633.

Propaganda

Another technique most dictatorships—and indeed, most governments in general—use to gain and maintain power is propaganda. Propaganda is the use of a set of messages designed to influence the opinions or behaviours of large numbers of people.

Propaganda is the deliberate, systematic attempt to shape perceptions, manipulate cognitions, and direct behaviour to achieve a response that furthers the desired intent of the propagandist.

—Garth S. Jowett and Victoria O'Donnell, *Propaganda and Persuasion*, 4th edition. (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, 2006), p. 7.

As you discovered in your exploration of Nazi and Soviet propaganda in Chapter 5, propaganda is spread through the news media, entertainment media, posters, testimonials, the arts, and a country's education system. The most effective propaganda is done subtly so people are unaware that they are being subjected to a one-sided picture of reality. They have no reason to feel that they are being manipulated.

Propaganda is not always this blatant. The government of the Soviet Union under Stalin, for example, controlled artistic expression. The arts were used for political education, and were meant to shape the will of the people into admiration and acceptance of the regime. The acceptable art form under Stalin was known as Socialist Realism, and its purpose was to glorify the revolution in concrete terms.

Propaganda is never neutral; there is no attempt to equally display both sides of the story. We have, for example, examined the ideological conflict between the United States and Cuba. This conflict is carried out, in part, through a war of words. In 2008, US president George W. Bush called Cuba "a tropical gulag" and "a failed regime". Posters and billboards in Cuba, meanwhile, denounce the United States and its policies, while encouraging Cubans to support the Cuban government.

Valentina Kulagina, 8 Million Tons of Pig Iron (1931), Lithograph. © Estate of Valentina Kulagina / SODRAC (2009)



Figure 10-22 ▲

This 1931 propaganda poster from the Stalin years promotes the rapid establishment of industries in the Soviet Union. Depictions of happy workers and strong soldiers would have been the norm in propaganda at that time.



Figure 10-23 ▲



Figure 10-24 ▲

Controlled Participation

Authoritarian governments also use the technique of controlled participation. The population is allowed to feel as if it is contributing to the country in some ways, for example, by attending rallies, helping to spy on “subversives,” preparing for the war effort, becoming the “block boss” for the party—anything that will convince the public to buy into the accepted ideology and prevent the development of contrary opinions. The Nuremberg rallies of Nazi Germany were famous in this respect; they were large, carefully orchestrated events that had a mesmerizing impact on the participants.

Mao Zedong instituted the Cultural Revolution in China in 1966. The revolution was designed to suppress those with liberal leanings, particularly academics. To carry out the revolution, Mao recruited thousands of young people to spread the message of communism throughout the country. Known as Red Guards, these young people went to China’s schools and universities to attack traditional culture and spread communism. The media and writers were also targeted. Labelled *capitalists* or *anti-revolutionaries*, thousands of people were hounded from their posts into manual labour or imprisonment. Some were executed. Museums, temples, shrines, old books, and works of art were destroyed. The Red Guards were noted for their propensity for violence and fanatical devotion to Mao. The Cultural Revolution lasted a decade or so, although Mao declared that it was officially over in 1969 because other Communist party members were opposed to the policy.

Directing Public Discontent

Another way of stifling a populace’s independent thought consists of directing public discontent. The people are provided with an enemy on which they can safely unleash their frustrations. Their focus can be directed by *show trials*, a foreign threat, or an internal threat. Pro-Islamic forces in the Middle East use the existence of Israel and foreign influence to great effect. Hitler used anti-Semitism.

These are examples of propaganda used in Cuba. The billboard on the left shows former Cuban dictator Fidel Castro and reads “Homeland or Death.” The billboard on the right shows a Cuban soldier shouting towards the United States: “Mister imperialists, we are absolutely not afraid.” Are any beliefs and values being challenged in these billboards? What are they implying about which values should be most important for Cuban people? To what extent might an American citizen agree or disagree with the specific messages in this billboard?

Stalin used show trials to convict dissidents in the Soviet Union, banishing those convicted to the gulags. To consolidate power and remove anyone who might challenge his authority, Stalin would charge his targets with a manufactured crime and put them on trial. The trials are called *show trials* because the verdict of guilt was assured. On the surface, the trials looked like proper trials, but the charged people who refused to “confess” were tortured, and evidence was fabricated to prove their guilt. These campaigns of repression, which claimed hundreds of thousands of victims in the Soviet Union, were carried out against liberals, writers, the army, and other Communist party members.

Terror

Another means of influencing the will of the people is terror. Some South American governments used quick, brutal, and arbitrary violence to “disappear” dissidents. People simply vanished from everyday life, never to be heard from again. Relatives searched for them in vain, only to discover later that they had been tortured and murdered. The Argentine government carried out such a campaign from 1976 to 1983 following a coup d’état by a military determined to retain power. Some 30 000 people vanished. At times, the dissident’s children were given to “acceptable” families for adoption. DNA testing has allowed some of these children to identify their real parents. In 2008, one such child, Maria Eugenia Sampallo Barragan, now 30 years of age, took her adoptive parents to court. The parents were convicted of concealing the identity of a minor and of falsifying documents. The former army captain who had given the child away was also convicted. At a press conference following the trial, Sampallo held up a photo of her adoptive parents and said, “These are not my parents. They are my kidnappers.” Sampallo then held up a picture of her biological father and mother and said, “These are my parents.” Sampallo’s parents are both activists who remain missing. (Source: The Associated Press, “Adoptive parents convicted in landmark Argentine ‘dirty war’ trial.” CBC News, April 4, 2008, www.cbc.ca/world/story/2008/04/04/argentina-trial.html.)

The techniques used by an authoritarian government to enforce its will and negate individual freedoms and the people’s will are effective, at least in the short term. If citizens subscribe to the government’s vision, if they are soothed by its propaganda, and if they feel they are contributing to the greater good, they may be less aware of the authoritarian nature of the government. The identification of state enemies is a unifying factor, but the use of violence merely drives the will of the people underground. Authoritarian governments are aware of the advantages and disadvantages of these techniques, and use them to varying degrees to meet their particular needs. The premise in all

cases, however, is to create the impression that the government is using its authority to protect the country, the interests of the people, and the will of the people, as well as to unify the people behind a vision. People are expected to understand that individuals sometimes need to be sacrificed in the interests of the greater good.

Strengths and Weaknesses of Authoritarianism

Even though many authoritarian governments have sometimes resorted to horrible acts of human rights violations to enforce their power, the fact remains that authoritarianism seems to accomplish many of its goals in many situations. The visions many dictators paint for their countries often address the needs of the people and often result in positive circumstances for many. Many Russians, for example, long for the days of the Soviet Union; under communism they were able to obtain food for their families and heat their homes. Many of the “liberating” market reforms that have come since the collapse of communism have hurt people who were unprepared for a competitive, individualistic lifestyle.

Another interesting example can be found in the Philippines. Ferdinand Marcos, a dictator who ruled the country from 1965 to 1986, was driven from power in a massive, but peaceful, street revolution. He is known to have been extremely corrupt, stealing billions of dollars and stashing the money away in Swiss banks. With recent political and economic instability, however, many in the Philippines are remembering his reign as “better times” because Marcos built roads and hospitals and struck deals with foreign governments to allow Filipinos to work abroad and send home foreign currency, which is now a major feature of the Filipino economy. In fact, the dictator is remembered so fondly now that a nationwide poll in 2005 rated Marcos as the best of the last five Philippine presidents. His rating even topped the rating of the man who organized the revolution that ended his dictatorship. Some say that his greatest achievement was that, even as a dictator, he did listen to the will of the people when it was most important to do so. For example, when the street protest happened, Marcos would not let his guards attack the protestors. Instead, he resigned from power.

Just like democracy, however, authoritarianism has its weaknesses. The willingness by many authoritarian governments to sacrifice individual citizens for the perceived needs of the country is clearly unacceptable on many levels. Most authoritarian governments also seem unable to change leadership in a peaceful manner. This often results in periods of violence and misery during the transition from one leader to another. At other times, authoritarian leaders may be popular leaders whose publics see them as guiding father figures. Later, because

of economic circumstances, international pressures, or a general feeling that the leader has become unresponsive, popular support disappears and spontaneous opposition arises. Again, violence is often the result.

Many authoritarian governments have become democracies over the years, partly due to international influence, but also due to the will of the people. Any government, even a dictatorship, will not last if it ignores the people. Such regimes raise difficult questions about why authoritarian leaders are sometimes popularly supported while at other times their popular support disappears. Are there circumstances in which an authoritarian regime can be seen as an expression of the will of the people?

Explore the Issues

Concept Review

- 1 Create a chart outlining the forms and features of the types of authoritarian political systems that were discussed in this section. Include information on who is in charge, the main features of each system, and a few examples of countries that use that form of government.

Concept Application

- 2 Given the difficult circumstances some countries find themselves in economically, make an argument that supports an authoritarian political system as a solution to these problems. How could authoritarianism be beneficial to a country with a failing economy? How might the interpretation of the will of the people change in these circumstances? Would it be necessary to ignore it, or could the people's voices be part of the solution? Are there any other examples that you can identify, outside of authoritarian systems, where a group has interpreted what is best for the will of the people differently than the liberal democratic government in power?
- 3 Choose one of the two assignments below, and for the example chosen, indicate the dictator's perspective on the concept of the will of the people.
 - a) Find an example of a 20th-century dictator, and conduct research into how he came to power and exercised his power. Write an essay of two to three pages to share your informed response to the issues: To what extent should governments ignore the will of the people, and to what extent are their actions justified?
 - b) Find an example of a 20th-century dictator who was initially very popular, but who eventually lost the support of his people. What were the reasons for the initial support and the subsequent erosion of popular support? Write an essay of two to three pages to share your informed response to the issues: To what extent should governments ignore the will of the people, and to what extent are their actions justified?



Reflect and Analyze

In this chapter you have explored the question *To what extent should governments reflect the will of the people?* First you looked at democracies and explored how well various types of democracy reflect the will of the people. You also looked at some of the challenges democracies face and how this affects the policies democratic governments follow. You then looked at various types of authoritarian political systems, including some of the techniques authoritarian regimes use to gain and maintain power, as well as some of the strengths and weaknesses of these types of political systems.

Respond to Ideas

- 1 Reflect on what you have read, thought about, and researched in this chapter. Express your thoughts on the following question: When are governments, whether democratic or authoritarian, justified in ignoring the will of the people?

Respond to Issues

- 2 Find a country that represents one of the following systems in the 21st century:
 - direct democracy
 - representative democracy
 - military dictatorship
 - ideological one-party state

Find an article discussing a situation in which the government failed to follow the will of its citizens. Write a one- to two-page report on the conflict, answering the following questions:

- a) What was the situation in question?
- b) What did the people want?
- c) What reasons did the government give as to why it did not follow the will of the people?
- d) Does the writer of the article have an opinion on the issue (that is, is the article biased)? If so, what is the writer's opinion? What information does the writer share to validate his or her opinion?
- e) In your informed response, who was right in this situation, the government or the people? Why?

Recognize Relationships among Concepts, Issues, and Citizenship

- 3 The need to address HIV/AIDS is a global issue. Its impact reaches every facet of humanity, with children being the victims most dramatically affected. Create a product (for example, a website, brochure, or poster) that persuades people aged 15 to 19 to encourage the Canadian government to take initiative, prevent the spread of this disease, listen to the people affected, and try to find solutions that support the people already involved in this battle. How important should the will of the people be in determining how to address such a global crisis as HIV/AIDS?