

POPULAR VOICE and POPULAR POLITICAL MOVEMENTS

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Overview The obvious, and important, divide over the role of ordinary people and groups in affairs of state involves the rise of democracy, which with a few important exceptions is a modern phenomenon. There were reasons that the popular voice was muted during the Agricultural Age. But other forms of popular protest did emerge periodically. On the other hand, achievement of the vote, in many regions during the past two centuries, has not ended questions about actual popular role and voice. The issues are most obvious in authoritarian regimes that grant a vote but without real choice, but there are other topics as well.

Constraints during the Agricultural Age Organizing popular political expression was not easy in agricultural societies, because people lived scattered in villages, and work needs precluded systematic attention to political issues for many. Where systematic opportunities for expression emerged, they were always in city states or other small entities. The idea of electing representatives, rather than direct participation, virtually never emerged. To be sure, Western feudal parliaments did develop selection of representatives of the nobility and urban elite – a real innovation from the 13th century onward. But these were not democratic bodies. Popular voice was greatest in small settings, such as villages and guilds. Russian villages worked to resolve disputes through local meetings, even under serfdom, to take one example. Guilds operated through councils of master artisans, though other workers, and usually women, had no voice.

Democratic Examples The most successful efforts at democracy for actual states, rather than purely local groupings, occurred in the Mediterranean and in India during the classical period. Several city states on the Indian subcontinent were republics, ruled by councils rather than princes. Sometimes the councils were restricted to members of the warrior caste, but in other instances participation may have been more extensive. Thus the city of Nysa worked to preserve its independence during the invasions of Alexander the Great in the 4th century BCE, claiming that “we ourselves are our government.” Several Greek city states during the 5th century evolved away from monarchical or aristocratic rule, setting up assemblies in which citizens made key decisions, even about peace and war. Citizenship was limited: only males, non-slaves, and non-foreigners held this status – less than 50% even of the adult male population. And rural citizens could not in fact regularly take part. Democracy was not the standard form of government either in India or Greece, but the examples did exist and could be recalled in more modern times. The Roman republic included a minor role for popular assemblies, that did elect some key officials to represent the people’s interest; but the aristocratic senate, and its selected leaders, held greater power, and later in the republic the growing role of military generals limited the popular voice still further. The Empire ended even vestiges of the democratic tradition. During the Renaissance period in Italy a number of city states were republics, and there was a brief democratic rebellion in Rome that was quickly put down; urban elites in fact ruled the republics. Even in political theory, discussions of democracy faded until the 17th century. Feudal claims did lead aristocrats in several parts of Europe to set up parliaments, as a check on royal power, but these bodies directly represented only the elite (mainly aristocrats themselves, church leaders, town leaders).

Popular Protest Many societies experienced significant, if sporadic, popular protest during the Agricultural Age, though with rare exceptions democracy was not the goal. China generated an interesting pattern, consistent with Confucianism and its insistence on responsible upper-class rule in return for popular obedience. Periodically, when the effectiveness of the central state declined and landlords seized greater regional authority, peasant risings increased, and in some cases actually toppled the imperial house, setting up a new dynasty in its stead. A significant protest tradition also emerged in various parts of Europe, at least from the later postclassical centuries onward. Peasants frequently rebelled during bad economic times, seeking more access to the land or relief from manorial dues. Peasant protest loomed large in Russia, recurrently from the mid-18th century onward. In Western Europe both peasants and urban elements also participated in bread riots during periods of bad harvest, particularly by the early modern period: they sought government help to lower prices and provide more abundant food, in the belief that the royal government had an obligation to protect the poor. Again, there was no effort here at formal democracy, but a clear indication that ordinary people – as in China – could develop essentially political expectations or standards.

Early Modern Developments The rise of Protestantism and accompanying religious wars helped spur new political theories in Western Europe, including open discussion of democracy as a political option. Theorists like

John Locke, in England, argued that political power ultimately derived from the people, who therefore had a right to rebel against injustice. The English civil war of the mid-17th century generated several movements that sought political rights for the masses, though they did not prevail. Colonial assemblies in North America also provided some wider political experience, though again not full democracy.

The Long 19th Century The establishment of regular, functioning democracies was a surprisingly recent development. The American Revolution established voting rights for non-slave males. The French Revolution briefly set up a democratic system (again, males only), but it was quickly limited. France would develop more durable universal male suffrage only after the revolution of 1848, with really open political competition only after the mid-1870s. Prussia and then Germany granted male suffrage by the 1860s, but with different classes of voters, so that the interests of the propertied classes were protected; full democracy awaited the advent of the Weimar Republic in 1919, and then it proved short-lived. Several successive British reforms, from the 1830s to the 1880s, gradually extended the vote to different classes of males. Overall, even in the West, the willingness to trust mass voting emerged only gradually. Hesitation lasted even longer in Japan and in Latin America. The rise of feminism in the West, effectively from the mid-19th century onward though with some individual voices earlier, began to raise questions about women's participation as well. New Zealand and some western states in the United States moved first here; by the early 1900s Australia and several Scandinavian countries joined in. A larger acceptance of female suffrage emerged after World War I, with Britain, the United States, Germany, the new Soviet Union and soon reformist Turkey introducing the change.

Popular Voice and Democracy The gradual establishment of democracy in many regions raised obvious questions about political tactics and choices. Established parliamentary parties, where they existed, had to develop new electoral skills, and this did not always come easily. Two new mass movements obviously reflected new democratic currents. In many European countries – with Germany in the lead – new voting rights, combined with the pressures of industrialization, created growing support for socialist parties. The leading parties were guided by the doctrines of Karl Marx, officially seeking a revolution that would put the working class in charge. In fact, however, socialist success led many leaders to adopt a more reformist, or revisionist, approach. In most West European countries, socialist parties became one of the two largest political groupings by 1914, with some kind of liberal-conservative coalition as rival. But many political parties also learned how to manipulate the growing mass loyalty of nationalism. Initially linked to liberal goals, nationalism became a key element in conservative success in competing for the popular vote. Nowhere, further, did the establishment of democracy eliminate efforts by various popular groups to develop other forms of protest. In all the industrializing countries, periodic labor riots, often including efforts to win recognition for trade unions, dotted the later 19th century, gradually winning greater recognition of unions as bargaining agents. But mass protest in the 19th century also generated increasing attention to crowd control and police tactics.

The Contemporary Period The ups and downs of formal democracy constitute the most obvious framework for discussing popular voice over the past century. Other themes, however, deserve attention. The inclusion of female suffrage – where voting systems existed at all – became a global standard after World War II, with only a few Middle Eastern countries standing apart by the 1970s. Many countries, after initial experience showed that women voters might still be controlled by husbands or fathers, moved toward further requirements that a certain percentage of all representatives or other elected officials be female. This clearly affected effective female participation in places like India, France, and many Latin American countries, where women's political role often surged ahead of levels in the United States. The establishment of democracy, even with women included, did not always provide adequate representation for all groups – as had been true in the 19th century. Labor unions continued to draw attention, though in many countries their power peaked in the 1950s and then declined because of changes in the labor force and more effective business opposition. Race riots and civil rights agitation gained new significance in the United States but also in many cities in Western Europe. The combination of voting rights and authoritarianism was another key contemporary phenomenon. Mass voting now provided some legitimacy, except in a few remaining monarchies, even when a single political party dominated the ballots and selected the candidates. In some cases, ideologies like communism or nationalism might induce large numbers of people to accept this kind of no-choice democracy, sometimes combined with police intimidation. A popular desire for order, resentment against foreign criticism – various factors could generate widespread acceptance of this semi-democratic option, at least in a number of key regions into the 21st century.

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Suggested Reading:

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1968 in Europe: A History of Protest and Activism, 1956-1977. By Martin Klimke and Joachim Scharloth (Palgrave Macmillan, 2008).

Women's Movements in the Global Era: The Power of Local Feminisms. Edited by Amrita Basu (Westview Press, 2010).

Democracy: A World History. By Temma Kaplan (Oxford University Press, 2014).

A classic in the field: *The Making of the English Working Class.* By E.P. Thompson (Vintage, 1966).

Discussion

1. In what ways were politics participatory in ancient Mesopotamia?
2. What contributed to pluralism in ancient Greece?
3. Was democracy rare during the Agricultural Age, and if so, why?
4. What forms did protest take in early modern China?
5. What were the most important popular protest traditions during the Agricultural Age? What is meant by “cycle of protest”?
6. What role did popular protest have in Mexico’s Revolution? What goals did this movement have and how did it contribute to the construction of the Mexican state?
7. What were characteristic goals and methods in peasant protest?
8. What were the main motives behind popular protest in the major revolutions, from the late 18th century through to the Arab spring? Discuss major changes and continuities.
9. How did women’s suffrage movements differ across regions? What ideas tied the movements together?