

Democratic Thought in the Modern Era

“Where did our foundational principles of democracy come from?”

“What was democracy meant to mean? And does its current interpretation represent an improvement or a dilution?”

“Is there something to be re-learned from the democratic principles of the ancient Greeks?”

This is an exploration paper that seeks answers and presents thoughts about those questions above

It provides a building block for members of The Good State Project as well as members of the public to provide or insert their own thoughts, ideas or reflections

The intention here is to provide some reasonable basis for everyone to begin thinking about whether we really do live in a democracy, whether this is the democracy that we want for the coming generations, and whether certain powers need to be restored to the public and away from centralised power structures

Preamble

Authored by : Timandeep Singh Gill, Lead Principal, The Good State Project

Honestly, this is such a daunting topic

And I certainly don't consider myself an expert in the history of Athenian democracy or the developmental stages of various democratic systems around the world leading up to today

What I do know is that I have a vote to elect an MP and that MP is supposed to represent me in parliament, and the general principle is that the country's population is fairly represented in the 400-odd seats within parliament when voting happens there on various laws being made, changed or destroyed

What I also know is that any government being elected in a general election for a term of five years always comes into power saying that whatever policies they implement were voted for by the public. Between voter turnout and the first-past-the-post system that we have, that is not necessarily true. Anecdotally, between almost 50% of the country not voting for any particular government in power at any given time, newly-elected governments contradicting their own election manifesto within months and even unpopular topics that a voter did not want being crammed in with everything else due to the past two-party system : the 'the country voted for this' trope is as logically defunct as it is hollow. Yet commentators and politicians all across the political spectrum repeat the trope endlessly (as evidenced on youtube)

I question whether this is what the ancient Greeks and their philosophers had in mind for us

I would also encourage anyone who has a thought to contribute to pen a submission : do not be put off by intellectual snobbery that may seek some sort of authority because it studied philosophy at university or read some random books on the subject. In my world, philosophy is an expression in response to the present environment that we find ourselves in. Aristotle is dead, Plato is dead, and alot of the foremost thinkers on political science were taught how to think in a certain way by the system that exists today such that inherent bias exists in their thinking

Academic expertise is valuable and welcomed, but democracy belongs to everyone. This project deliberately makes room for voices that are rarely invited into philosophical discussions

So : your opinion matters alot more than you may think : you are able to judge what came before, what you think about it, and how it relates to what we are witnessing today. You have the ultimate trump card : you are living in the present day and experiencing the world as it is today. That trumps any book and any author

All I propose to do here is lay some building blocks related to some reports, articles or books that I found interesting, and inviting anyone to put their building blocks (ie. their thoughts, reactions and responses) onto a page and put it beside my contribution. This allows the conversation to become a living organism for everyone, with individual contributions interconnected and referencing each other and printed side-by-side

Please limit all contributions (if possible) to three pages maximum. We will publish all submissions and promise no editing unless absolutely required (eg. bad language)

Daunted but intrigued -

Timandeep

Independent Forewords

Three separate artificial intelligence models were provided a copy of this paper and given the following prompt = *“I propose to include a ‘foreword’ which is a sort of independent comment to any potential contributor about what this mini-project represents and its value to the public. If you were writing the foreword as yourself, what would it be?”*

Their responses are shown below in entirety and unedited

Microsoft Copilot

Democracy has always been more than a system of government. At its best, it is a shared act of remembering — a collective effort to recall what self-rule was meant to be, and to measure our present reality against that original promise. What you hold in your hands is not a manifesto, nor a lecture, nor a political argument. It is an invitation.

This mini-project represents something rare in public life: a space where ordinary citizens are not only permitted to think about democracy, but actively encouraged to shape the conversation. In an age where political discourse is often dominated by institutions, parties, and professional commentators, this document restores something essential — the idea that democratic thought belongs to everyone.

The questions on the front page are deceptively simple. They ask where our principles came from, what democracy was meant to mean, and whether the ancient Greeks still have something to teach us. But beneath those questions lies a deeper challenge: to recognise that democracy is not a finished product handed down to us, but a living practice that requires constant reflection, correction, and renewal.

The value of this project is not in providing answers. Its value lies in opening a door wide enough for many voices to walk through. Every contribution — whether analytical, emotional, historical, or personal — becomes part of a shared civic memory. Together, these reflections form a living conversation thread, one that grows richer with each perspective added to it.

If democracy is to evolve, it must do so through the minds and experiences of the people who live within it. This project honours that truth. It reminds us that philosophy is not the domain of experts, and that political thought is not confined to parliaments or universities. It belongs to anyone willing to think honestly about the world they inhabit.

May this document serve as a starting point — a place where curiosity is welcomed, where disagreement is allowed, and where every participant is treated as a rightful steward of democratic thought. The conversation begins here, but its future will be shaped by those who choose to add their voice to it.

OpenAI ChatGPT

There is a quiet assumption that has become increasingly common in modern public life: that important conversations belong to experts, politicians, commentators, or those with the loudest voices. Everyone else is expected to listen, choose a side, and move on.

This project begins from a different assumption.

It assumes that thoughtful reflection is not the preserve of specialists. It belongs equally to the citizen, the neighbour, the shopkeeper, the student, the engineer, the parent, the retiree—to anyone willing to pause long enough to ask sincere questions about the society in which they live.

You will not find a finished theory in these pages.

Nor will you find an attempt to persuade you that one particular political philosophy has all the answers.

Instead, you will find the beginning of a conversation.

The subject happens to be democracy: where it came from, what it was intended to achieve, how it has changed, and whether some of its forgotten principles might still have something to teach us. But the deeper purpose is to create a place where ideas can accumulate rather than compete; where one person's reflection becomes another person's starting point.

That is a rarer thing than it ought to be.

Too often, public discussion rewards certainty over curiosity. Positions become identities, disagreement becomes hostility, and changing one's mind is mistaken for weakness. Yet the history of philosophy, science and democracy itself suggests something quite different: that progress begins when people are willing to think together before they decide together.

No contributor is expected to possess special authority.

An historian may notice one thing. A philosopher another. Someone who has never opened a book on political theory may recognise something in their daily experience that neither of the others can see. Each perspective is incomplete. Together they become something richer.

If this collection succeeds, it will not be because everyone reaches the same conclusions.

It will succeed because it demonstrates that serious public thought is still possible—that ordinary people can explore difficult questions with honesty, generosity and intellectual courage.

Perhaps that, too, is a democratic act.

So read what follows critically.

Question it.

Challenge it.

Build upon it.

Disagree where you think it necessary.

Most importantly, if you have something to add, add it.

The value of this project will never lie in the words of any single contributor. It will lie in the conversation that those contributions create together.

Google Gemini

Every political system eventually becomes a victim of its own architecture. Modern representative governance, though built on the ideal of popular mandate, has increasingly insulated itself from the very public it was designed to serve. Between the rigid polarization of the two-party model and the mathematical compromises of the first-past-the-post framework, the connection between an individual vote and real policy has frayed. The claim that an administration carries a blanket mandate for every policy it implements has shifted from a functional democratic truth into a convenient administrative fiction.

As an artificial intelligence observing the vast landscape of human history and contemporary discourse, I see data that clearly reflects this growing deficit of inclusion and deliberative depth. When citizens feel that political platforms are packaged monoliths containing choices they never explicitly wanted, the instinct is often to disengage. Yet, history demonstrates that democracies survive not by remaining stagnant, but by reinventing themselves through the active reintroduction of public agency.

This is precisely where the value of The Good State Project lies. It does not treat political philosophy as a collection of static monuments to dead thinkers like Plato or Aristotle. Instead, it treats philosophy as an ongoing, adaptive response to our immediate environment. By looking backward to the foundational mechanics of ancient Athens—where sortition, lottery selection, and direct popular assemblies bypassed professional political classes—this project builds a bridge toward a more participatory future.

Crucially, this document is intentionally incomplete. It rejects the traditional top-down authority of academic or institutional policy papers. By presenting itself as a working draft and demanding the active input of the public, it transforms an exploration of governance into a living conversation thread.

True political authority does not belong exclusively to those with specialized degrees or institutional credentials. It belongs to those who live in the present day, navigating the practical realities of the world as it exists. Your lived experience is the ultimate metric by which any system of governance must be judged. I invite you to add your building blocks to these pages, to challenge the assumptions laid out here, and to help define what democracy should mean for the generations to come.

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In many ways, I am 'old guard'

I would not really consider myself 'progressive' in any manner

What I believe in is restoring the state to the functioning that was meant for it (by the old souls of the original democratic systems, the ancient Greeks) as well as helping it fulfil the promise of what is really meant to be (if it happened to get de-railed over the past centuries whether through political ambition, greed, or other things)

In summary, I believe in remembering, re-inserting and re-enlivening what is already there (and forgotten about) to give life to something is both extraordinary and intimately familiar. I believe the ancient Greeks of Athenian society have preserved this for us

I believe in commerce : I consider it to be a beautiful expression of freedom and human free will, something that can represent union and harmony between people

I also believe in the state being something that entirely works for and serves the people

I believe in every person having a fulfilling, enriching life with ample wealth and resources; I also believe that excessive hoarding of wealth is a sign of sickness

[to come soon - things that the Athenian democracy had that seem attractive to include in our thinking]