

# Chapter 1

## When Is a Monarchy not a Monarchy?

*The usual classification of states as either “monarchies” or “republics” is superficial and misleading. For example, the United Kingdom and Japan are both found in the “monarchy” column, while Russia (the Russian Federation) and the People’s Republic of China are labeled “republics.” From a power-structure vantage point this makes no sense. Instead, both Russia and China should be classified as monarchies, while the United Kingdom and Japan should be classified as oligarchies. No state, past or present, can properly be labeled a democracy.*

A leitmotif of this book is power structure, in particular the relationship between monarchy and oligarchy—the importance of which is not often recognized, even by historians—and, beyond that, the relationship between the power structure of a society and other features, such as stability, liberty, equality, foreign policy, and ethos.

The term “oligarchy” (literally, “rule of the few”) covers any ruling minority and any regime controlled by such a minority. If a ruling minority is hereditary, it is still an oligarchy but can be termed an “aristocracy” (literally “rule of the best”), as can a government controlled by them. The terms “noble” and “nobility” are synonyms for “aristocrat” and “aristocracy.” And, to add to the confusion, “nobility” and “aristocracy” can also refer to a titled minority that does not have political power.

Monarchy exerts a certain fascination on the human mind. It is hard to imagine what it was like to be a regular person in some past age. Evidence tends to be scarce and unreliable, and the subject matter may well turn out to be mind-numbing. The swashbuckling and flamboyant, or scandalous and dissolute, antics of rulers, on the other hand—and especially of those who “bestride the narrow world like a Colossus” (Shakespeare’s description of Julius Caesar)—are

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the stuff, not only of popular entertainment, but also of the majority of historical writing, ancient and modern alike.

Governmental titles are many and varied—and extremely misleading. For example, the title of king, emperor, or president may indicate the possession of genuine power, or may represent a titular or nominal headship with purely ceremonial functions. It is virtually impossible for one person to wield total, or absolute, power. Even the most autocratic or absolute monarch is likely to have to delegate power to others to some extent. The test must be: Who has the whip hand?

The formal division among modern Western states into “monarchies” and “republics” has no real significance, as monarchy in the modern West is not real monarchy at all. The royal heads of state of “constitutional monarchies” have no more power than the presidents of republics such as Germany, Portugal, Greece, or India. Present-day China is supposedly a “people’s republic,” while Japan is classified as a monarchy. In reality, China under Xi Jinping is a monarchy and Japan is an oligarchy.

Just as modern Western monarchies are generally oligarchies in disguise, so the nominally republican governments of Vladimir Putin’s Russia, Xi Jinping’s China, Viktor Orbán’s Hungary, or Turkey under Recep Tayyip Erdogan can probably be labeled as essentially “populist” monarchical regimes.

In every society, past and present, it is possible to identify an elite (or group of elites)—whether labeled aristocracy, aristocrats, nobles, nobility, oligarchs, oligarchy, power elite, or simply elite (or *élite*), whether hereditary or not, and whether based on birth, wealth, status or office, or a combination of two or more of these factors. This elite (or combination of elites) is normally dominant socially and economically, and often politically as well in the form of an oligarchy, or, if hereditary, an aristocracy. This “power elite,” intent on preserving and perpetuating its own group dominance, tends to have a deep-seated fear of one-person or monarchical rule.

At the same time there is a natural antipathy inherent in the lower classes toward any oligarchy or aristocracy. This tends to impel the common people to give their support to a strong leader as their champion against the privileged classes, which may lead to the establishment of a form of popular, or “populist,” monarchy or dictatorship.

There are essentially only two forms of government: on the one hand, oligarchy, morphing into aristocracy, and, on the other, monarchy. True monarchy, properly so called (from the Greek *monarchia*, “the rule of one person”), is a form of government where power is concentrated in the hands of a single individual, whether a hereditary crowned head, a dictator, or an elected politician. Genuine monarchical power is essentially anti-aristocratic, and generally, though not invariably, depends on lower-class support—a form of what tends now to be labeled as “populism.”

Although true monarchy and oligarchy/aristocracy are the only pure forms of government, hybrid forms are possible, combining populist monarchy with elitist, oligarchical, or aristocratic features. Among these are the current or recent regimes of Narendra Modi in India, Boyko Borisov in Bulgaria, Andrej Babiš in the Czech Republic (Czechia), Evo Morales in Bolivia, Daniel Ortega in Nicaragua, Rodrigo Duterte in the Philippines, and Donald Trump's presidency of the United States.

What, then, about democracy? According to my analysis, Athenian "direct democracy" under Pericles and his successors was in reality a form of populist monarchy, and modern "representative democracies" are in reality oligarchies (see later).

But why, you may well ask, does power structure matter in any event? The answer is that the whereabouts of power reveals who benefits from a particular regime. The power structure in a society goes to the very heart of that society, relates to its stability, impacts directly on the degree of social mobility and equality in that society, and is related, directly or indirectly, to the ethos of the society concerned.

### "Five Kings"

King Farouk of Egypt (r. 1936–52) is reputed to have predicted that there would soon be only five kings left in the world: the king of England, the king of spades, the king of clubs, the king of hearts and the king of diamonds. A list of current "monarchies" at the time of this writing would appear to belie this prediction, showing as it does no fewer than 43 sovereign states with a monarch at their head, though only a few of these are absolute, autocratic, or true monarchs. In terms of power structure, regardless of labels, "constitutional monarchies" are in fact oligarchies. The (usually hereditary) monarch occupies a position somewhere between a purely ceremonial head of state and one with certain very limited prerogative or reserve powers, and with actual power in the hands of an elected legislature and executive government, generally under a prime minister. A key feature of a constitutional monarchy is separation between head of state and head of government, which is also found in many modern republics. The chief difference between, say, the king of Sweden and the president of Germany is that the king is there for life and his position is hereditary.

In the West, at least, monarchy usually began with a ruler who combined in his own person executive, legislative, and usually judicial power. The monarch would be likely to surround himself with advisers in one or more of these spheres. The monarch would need to raise money, whether to finance wars, to keep law and order, or simply to administer his domain. For these purposes he

would have to raise taxes, for which he would require the consent of the aristocracy, who would want some redress of grievances in return. Sooner or later some form of consultation would be extended to the propertied classes below the aristocracy, generally through their elected representatives. Most European monarchies have ended up as “constitutional” monarchies. The monarchs have been largely or essentially reduced to ceremonial heads of state. They reign but do not rule.

## Venetian Republic

A classic example of this is the Republic of Venice, which existed for a millennium before being dissolved under pressure from Napoleon in 1797. The Venetian head of state, known as the *doge* (derive from Latin *dux*), was a byword for a powerless monarch. Elected for life in a complex process combining election and sortition, he was drawn from one of the inner circle of Venetian aristocratic houses and there were safeguards in place to prevent hereditary succession, although the same family names do recur from time to time on the list of doges. Instead of receiving payment for his service, on his election a doge was required to lay out a large sum of money as a bounty to his subjects when coins were thrown to the crowd thronging his coronation. Treated with the utmost dignity and respect both in Venice itself and internationally, the doge nevertheless had essentially a ceremonial role. Between 742 and 1423, real power resided in the *Concio*, or “assembly,” and from 1423 until 1797 in the *Signoria*, or “Senate.”

## “A Republic... If You Can Keep It”

As he was leaving the Philadelphia Convention, which had just concluded its deliberations on the United States Constitution in 1787, Benjamin Franklin was accosted by a Philadelphia matron. “Well, doctor, what have we got,” she enquired, “a republic or a monarchy?” “A republic,” came the reply, “if you can keep it.”

The implicit warning in this succinct reply was that a republic was so delicate as to require tireless vigilance to prevent supreme power from being usurped by a single autocratic ruler. Living three thousand miles from the seat of the British Government, the American “Founding Fathers” were under the false impression that King George III was an autocratic monarch, and they therefore aimed their barbed attacks at him personally. In fact, the British Crown had lost most of its power in the so-called “Glorious Revolution” of 1689, over 70 years before George III’s accession in 1760.

Yet the American Declaration of Independence, drafted by Thomas Jefferson in 1776, accused the king of having established “an absolute Tyranny over these states.” The rest of the Declaration consists of a long series of accusations directed against King George personally. The American Founding Fathers were educated men who would have been familiar with the standard exposition of English law, Blackstone’s *Commentaries on the Laws of England*, which included such statements as: “Besides the attribute of sovereignty, the law also ascribes to the king, in his political capacity, absolute perfection. The king can do no wrong” (Blackstone 1765, Chapter 7). Blackstone does go on to set out certain limitations to this absolute power, but the general impression that he presents is one of overweening royal supremacy.

Besides overestimating the degree of control exercised by George III on policy, the American Founding Fathers, who were steeped in the Classics, also felt an exaggerated admiration for the Roman Republic, an oligarchy, whose watchword was “liberty,” meaning opposition to one-man rule, which was successfully resisted for 450 years, and whose constitution of checks and balances formed the basis of the US Constitution in certain important respects. It was also no accident that the upper legislative chamber created by the US Constitution should have been called the Senate, a name drawn directly from the Roman Republic.

“Liberty” was also a slogan of the American Revolution. It is no accident that the American Founders should have had this affinity with the Roman Republic. For both, “liberty” meant opposition to and freedom from one-man rule, but it certainly did not mean democracy, the prospect of which instilled fear into



**Figure 1** President Donald Trump swearing-in ceremony, 20 January 2017.

SOURCE: The White House / Wikimedia Commons / Public domain.

the hearts of the Founders. John Adams, who was to become the second US president, warned: “Democracy will soon degenerate into an anarchy, such an anarchy that every man will do what is right in his own eyes and no man’s life or property or reputation or liberty will be secure.”

The US Constitution guaranteed “a Republican Form of Government,” not “democracy,” a word that does not appear anywhere in the Constitution. James Madison, the “father of the Constitution” and future president, did not mince his words on the dangers of democracy: “Democracy is the most vile form of government – 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.”

The fallacious identification of “republic” with “democracy” dates from the French Revolution of 1789 and persists to the present day. The “People’s Republic of China,” the “Democratic People’s Republic of Korea” (North Korea), and the “Republic of Cuba” (since 1959) are in fact autocratic monarchies. The former “socialist” (commonly called “communist”) states describing themselves as “democratic republics,” “people’s republics,” “democratic people’s republics,” or “socialist republics” were either autocratic monarchies or oligarchies. The former Soviet Union (properly, the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics) was an autocratic monarchy under Stalin (1924–53), as is the Russian Federation (since 2012), and the rest of the time an oligarchy.

Other states that claim the democratic label are “constitutional monarchies,” sometimes termed “crowned republics,” such as Denmark, Norway, Sweden, the Netherlands, Belgium, Spain, Japan, Thailand, the United Kingdom, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand, all of which are in fact oligarchies.

The V-Dem (“Varieties of Democracy”) Institute, founded by Political Science Professor Staffan Lindberg of Sweden’s University of Gothenburg, modestly ranked Sweden as the eighth most democratic state in the world in 2023, reserving the top spot for its neighbor, Denmark, despite that country’s rocky relationship with Greenland, an autonomous territory under the Danish Crown. Although over 70% of Greenlanders opposed entry into the European Economic Community, Greenland found itself part of the Community on Denmark’s accession in 1973. Opposition to this in Greenland resulted in Greenland’s withdrawal from the Community in 1985 (while Denmark remained a member). On the basis of a referendum in which 75% of Greenland voters approved greater autonomy, Greenland was granted self-rule in 2009 and the official language was changed from Danish to Greenlandic, an Eskimo-Aleut language, closely related to the other Inuit languages spoken in Canada and Alaska.

This aside, there is a much more general problem with vaunted democratic systems of government. The type of “democracy” that we are dealing with is

parliamentary, representative, or indirect democracy, the only type claimed by any modern state.

## Rousseau

The French philosophe Jean-Jacques Rousseau famously remarked: “The English people believe themselves to be free; they are gravely mistaken; they are free only during election of Members of Parliament; as soon as the Members are elected, the people are enslaved.” This was written in 1762, long before there was universal adult franchise, which was only introduced in 1918 (at the age of 21 for men and 30 for women). It even predates the so-called Great Reform Bill of 1832, at a time when the electorate amounted to only about 10% of the adult male population.

Yet Rousseau’s stricture remains true today, as election results by no means always reflect majority opinion. Even in the general election of 2024, widely proclaimed a Labour Party “landslide victory,” that party actually obtained only 33.7% of the vote, which, however, gave them 63.2% of the seats in the House of Commons, an absolute majority entitling them to form a government with their leader, Sir Keir Starmer, as prime minister. In the previous general election, held in 2019, Labour’s share of the vote had not been very different, 32.1%, but on that occasion they won only 31.1% of the seats, while the Conservatives, with 43.6% of the vote, got a majority of 56.2% of the seats, on the basis of which they formed the government under their then leader, Boris Johnson.

How democratic was either of these outcomes? What it really means is that in neither election did the elected government have the support of the majority of the participating voters. Rousseau is actually doubly right. Not only do the voters lose all say between elections on who their representatives should be, but the elected representatives themselves have no obligation to take their constituents’ views into account. They are not *delegates*, bound by a mandate given to them by those they represent, but *representatives*, who are free to adopt whatever position they choose. This was explained in Edmund Burke’s famous 1774 Speech to the Electors of Bristol, whom he represented in the House of Commons from 1774 to 1780: “Your representative owes you, not his industry only, but his judgment; and he betrays, instead of serving you, if he sacrifices it to your opinion.... You choose a member indeed; but when you have chosen him, he is not member of Bristol, but he is a member of *parliament*” (*The Founders’ Constitution*, Vol. 1, Chapter 13, Document 7; Kurland and Lerner 1987).

But even that is not the whole story. There are broadly two types of electoral systems: those based on some form of proportional representation, on the one hand, and, on the other, systems commonly referred to as “first past the post” or “winner take all.” The chief advantage of a first-past-the-post electoral system is

that it tends to result in a two-party system in which one or other party generally ends up with a majority of seats. This is particularly important in a country like the United Kingdom, in which the right to form a government goes to the party with a majority in the House of Commons, the Lower House of Parliament. But it is far from being democratic, however defined.

In a parliamentary, first-past-the-post electoral system, the country is divided into constituencies or voting districts, commonly referred to as “parliamentary seats.” To win a seat costs a good deal of money, so candidates generally band together in “parties,” which finance election campaigns for their candidates. But that gives them a deciding voice both in the selection of the candidates in the first place and over the successful candidates once elected. In Britain there is strong party discipline, enforced by aptly named “whips,” who make sure their members toe the party line, especially on any important issues, for which there is what is termed a “three-line whip.” Rebellious members of parliament may have the whip removed from them, which sounds liberating and cuts them loose from party discipline and in that sense does give them more independence, but it also means that they will not be selected by that party at the next election. So, unless they can “cross the floor” to an opposing party that can offer them a home and a winnable seat in the next election, their political career is likely to be over. It is even possible to cross the floor twice, first in one direction and then back again. To my knowledge, the only British politician to have achieved this feat successfully was Winston Churchill (1874–1965), who, with characteristic mock modesty, opined: “Anyone can rat, but it takes a certain amount of ingenuity to re-rat.”

With its command of a majority in the House of Commons the British Government can pass virtually any legislation it likes. This highly undemocratic feature was identified and stigmatized as “elective dictatorship” by Lord Hailsham, Lord Chancellor under Edward Heath and Margaret Thatcher in a BBC lecture in 1976, and again in a book in 1979 (*Elective Dictatorship*, Richard Dimbleby Lectures, BBC, 1976; Hailsham 1979). The only (slight) check on this power is the even more undemocratic House of Lords, the unelected Upper House of Parliament, made up of life peers (political nominees of the various parties) plus (at the time of writing) 90 hereditary peers, who, strangely enough, actually *are* elected, though only by other hereditaries, but who are about to be excluded from membership of the House of Lords altogether.

So much for British “democracy,” not to mention the privileges accorded to special interest groups favored by “politically correct” policies. Other states with a first-past-the-post electoral system share some, but not all, of the undemocratic features of the British system. But what about those with proportional representation?

The basis of all the various proportional representation electoral systems is that every party will have approximately the same proportion of seats in the

legislature as their proportion of the vote. This sounds democratic and fair, but there are some serious drawbacks. What is labeled a “hung parliament” in a first-past-the-post system like that in Britain is the norm in proportional systems, because it hardly ever happens that one party wins a majority of seats in parliament. Proportional systems generally tend to result in a proliferation and fragmentation of parties, which in turn makes coalition government almost inevitable. All coalition partners have to compromise, so that none of them can carry out their policies. Coalitions are also notoriously fragile and short-lived, making for instability, ineffectual government and periods of interregnum during which a *formateur*, or sometimes the constitutional monarch, attempts to broker a deal amongst the various parties with a view to reaching agreement on a new coalition and a new prime minister.

All vaunted “democracies” in existence at the time of this writing are essentially indirect, representative electoral systems, a means to electing a government with popular support. As we have seen, these “democracies” do not succeed in achieving this objective. But in fact many adulators of democracy go much further and identify democracy with some definite ethical and political values. Here is one commentator’s self-contradictory take on the subject: “For people in the West, democracy means ‘liberal democracy’: a political system marked not only by free and fair elections but also by the rule of law, a separation of powers, and the protection of basic liberties of speech, assembly, religion and property. But this bundle of freedoms—what might be termed ‘constitutional liberalism’—has nothing intrinsically to do with democracy and the two have not always gone together, even in the West. After all, Adolf Hitler became chancellor of Germany via free elections” (Zakaria 2003, p. 17).

## Direct “Democracy”

Up to now we have been dealing solely with indirect, representative democracy. What about direct democracy? There is much adulation expressed by politicians, academics, and “liberal-minded” people generally for the supposed direct democracy epitomized particularly by ancient Athens, a topic to which I shall be returning in a later chapter, but I shall summarize my views here. It is worth quoting the authoritative judgment on Athenian democracy by the highly trustworthy contemporary historian Thucydides (c. 460–400 BCE): “What was in name a democracy became in Pericles’s hands government by the first citizen. With his successors it was different. More on a level with one another, and each grasping at supremacy, they ended by committing even the conduct of state affairs to the whims of the multitude” (Thuc. 2:65.9–10). According to this, Athenian “democracy” was an autocratic monarchy under Pericles and then degenerated to ochlocracy, or mob rule, neither of which is “democracy” *tout court*.

To put it in a nutshell, therefore, neither direct nor indirect “democracy” actually exists. So what? How important is the power structure in any given state? Or, in other words, what difference does it make how a state’s form of government is classified? Isn’t this just an exercise in bottling and labeling? The answer is decidedly “no.” As will be seen in future chapters, there is some correlation between the power structure of a state and its stability, the degree of liberty and equality prevalent there, as well as its foreign policy and its overall ethos.

In United States presidential elections, on five occasions, most recently in 2016, the winner lost the popular vote. This is in a complicated “electoral college” system, where each state is allocated a certain number of electoral votes and (except in two states) the winner of the popular vote in each state (even by a margin of one vote) carries all the electoral votes for that state.