2 Varieties of Democracy

We have seen that democracy is a form of government in which public policy depends in a systematic, if sometimes indirect, way upon public opinion. However, subject to this criterion, there are various forms that democratic governments can take. Indeed, looking at the literature on democracy, it is clear that it reflects this diversity with classifications, categories and typologies in abundance. We read of pluralist democracy, radical democracy, liberal democracy, socialist democracy, one-party democracy, deliberative democracy, polyarchy, elitist democracy, equilibrium democracy and so on. (For examples of such typologies, see Held, 1996; and Macpherson, 1977.)

The reasons for this proliferation of categories is not hard to find. First, democracy, whatever it is, is a complex phenomenon, and it is bound to take a variety of forms. To understand and account for this complexity requires us to have some typology in mind that will reduce the complexity and clarify our thinking. Second, given the favourable connotations the term ‘democracy’ often seems to possess, it is not surprising that many people from different ideological persuasions have wished to identify their preferred arrangement of political life with the ideals of democracy. Whatever the merits of liberalism, socialism, capitalism, republicanism and so on, each ideology will receive considerable intellectual and moral support from being associated with a plausible account of democracy. In consequence, ideas like ‘liberal democracy’, ‘social democracy’ and so on are bound to flourish.

Amid so many competing typologies it is hazardous to offer another. Yet, simply in order to organize the subsequent discussion, it is necessary to offer some particular account of the varieties of democracy, and this is what I shall seek to do in this chapter.
I do not claim that this is the ‘best’ or ‘most desirable’ typology. Typologies are essentially instruments of enquiry and which instrument one chooses depends upon the job at hand. I do want to claim, however, that for the purposes of normative political theory a relevant typology ought to be based upon institutional, rather than behavioural, features of political life. Let me explain the distinction and why it is important in this context.

An institution can be defined, in the words of Oran Young (1989, p. 5), as ‘identifiable practices consisting of recognised roles linked by clusters of rules or conventions governing relations among the occupants of these roles’. Institutions in this sense may be highly informal. The practice of leaving your coat on your seat in the train when you want to keep your place is an institution in this broad sense, as is the practice of shaking hands when meeting people. But institutions may be formalized into organizational structures such as firms, political parties or systems of government. If we offer an institutional account of democracy, therefore, we essentially make our typology turn on the way that we characterize and categorize the rule-governed and convention-governed system of roles and practices that constitute a mode of politics. Examples of institutional accounts in this sense include the following: the scope that the rules of decision-making assign to popular participation; the division of authority between the government of the day and the courts that guard the constitution; the ways in which membership of the polity is assigned or denied to individuals; and the processes by which statements of popular preference are amalgamated into a collective choice.

A behavioural typology of democracy, by contrast, would focus upon how people act within institutional constraints and possibilities. It would ask whether citizens at large avail themselves of the institutional possibilities open to them to influence public policy, or whether decision-making in practice is largely concentrated in the hands of a few people. It would examine the ways in which powerful political actors use the rules of the game to maintain or enhance their own strategic advantage, say by moving amendments and procedural motions during the passing of legislation. It would assess the extent to which social agents have the ability to ignore, bend or alter the rules to their own advantage given the political resources they are able to mobilize. In short, a behavioural account shifts attention from the institutional structures of government to the actions of individuals and groups within those structures.