To justify a practice like democracy is to show either how the practice conforms to a principle or how the consequences of the practice lead to a state of affairs that can be judged good in principled terms. In this chapter I want to consider what kind of justification may be offered for a belief in democracy as a form of government superior to others. For the purposes of this chapter, then, I shall treating the competing conceptions of democracy that I identified in the previous chapter as members of the same class, contrasting the notion of democratic government, whatever specific form it takes, with that of non-democratic government. At this stage, therefore, I shall be laying greater stress on what elements these varying conceptions have in common than on the features that distinguish them.

Someone might think that there was little point in seeking to justify the practice of democracy, since there is now such widespread agreement on its value that the whole task is rather redundant – rather akin to a detailed demonstration that apple pie was tasty. But this would be too quick a move for various reasons. Firstly, insofar as the justification of democracy in general points to specific conceptions in detail a useful purpose is served. It is unlikely that the particular justification for democracy one adopts has no implications for assessing the relative merits of the differing conceptions that I identified in the previous chapter. Secondly, for the reasons I gave in chapter 1, I do not think that the theoretical foundations of democracy elicit as much widespread agreement as the point supposes, and indeed in this chapter and subsequent ones I shall seek to highlight the non-democratic implications of various widely believed theories. Thirdly, fashions change in politics as in every other sphere of life. Opinion-formers may be enamoured of
democracy now, but perhaps disappointed expectations about the benefits that may be thought to flow in the wake of democracy will lead to disillusionment. Intellectual conviction is the surest security against such changes in fashion. It is not fool-proof; but it is the best we have.

A large number of principles have been advanced in the justification of democracy. For example, Pennock (1979, pp. 130–60) invokes the principles of human worth, autonomy, freedom, distributive justice, equality and the rejection of tyranny in his discussion of the justification of democratic theory. Such a list opens up the thought that the practice of democracy might be justified not by reference to one principle but by the fact that it was at the confluence of a number of distinct principles. Moreover, if we can invoke a wide range of principles in the justification for democracy, this might in itself suggest an interesting point of interpretation. The collective justification might be more powerful than the justification in terms of one particular principle, by analogy with the methodological principle of ‘triangulation’ in empirical research: the fact that a finding is established by different methods of enquiry makes its more plausible precisely in virtue of that fact.

Despite the appeal of this approach, one must be careful in simply seeking to amalgamate different arguments purporting to justify democracy. When examined in detail the premisses of the arguments within which these principles appear may not always be compatible with one another, so that we may find ourselves invoking contradictory conceptions of society, citizenship or other features of political life simply by amalgamating different principles. This is not to say that we should adopt a monistic, rather than a pluralistic, justification of democracy. It is merely to say that such pluralistic justifications should contain elements that are compatible with one another.

In this chapter I shall offer a line of argument for justifying democracy that follows a broadly instrumentalist pattern. In this account, the practices of democracy are justified because of the interests that they serve, in particular because of their role in serving certain common or public interests. This instrumentalist justification needs to be supplemented, however, with the assumption of fallibilism, the belief that no one occupies a privileged position with respect to their political knowledge or judgement and