

Today, debate is still essential to democracy. The democratic process has changed—modern countries are demographically and geographically larger than ancient Athens. Nevertheless, debates continue about how people making up those democracies should best handle issues affecting them. Some debates are conducted in legislative assemblies; some are held in lecture halls and public arenas; some are presented in schools and universities; some may be read in magazine and newspaper columns or heard on radio or television. Like their predecessors, citizens argue about what is best for their societies, and through these debates citizens help to shape the course of law, policy, and action.

By learning and thinking about other kinds of political systems, we can better understand the relationship of debate to democracy. In some societies, power shapes the course of the state. Those who have power run the government as they see fit. That power may reside in absolute monarchs, theocrats, dictators, military juntas, or totalitarian governments. Those in power do as they wish regardless of the opinions or desires of the citizens. Popular debate has no meaningful role in such a society.

According to democratic theory, power belongs to the people. In John Locke's famous formulation, governments derive their legitimate power from the consent of the governed. Citizens direct the course of the state, but they do not always agree. Citizens may have conflicting interests; they may have different ways of understanding a common problem. They may have different priorities and different ideas about what is most important. Citizens may have different understandings of what is right. Debate is the means for airing and considering all these differences as decisions are made.

Debate is essential and vital in a democracy. Debate is not simply a form of expression; rather, it is a form of persuasion. Debaters hope to change others' minds; they hope their listeners will come to see things their way. Debate does not produce immediate unanimity, but over time it can produce consensus and a changed understanding of what is right and what is prudent.

The evolving view of slavery illustrates how debate can produce consensus. In ancient Greece and Rome, slavery was not a debatable proposition. Aristotle, for example, thought slavery was a natural result of racial or social superiority. Two thousand years later in the United States, however, slavery was hotly debated. Some people saw it as a violation of a human being's natural right to liberty, while others argued for the primacy of a citizen's right to own and manage private property without government interference. Today, of course, Americans would not debate the issue of slavery because they regard it as a categorically unacceptable violation of human rights. But that recognition—that common consensus—is the product of centuries of debate.

In other instances, debates have not produced a public consensus. In many countries, for example, people continue to debate the morality as well as the legal status of abortion, with those on both sides of the issue trying to convince one another and government officials that their view is reasonable.