15.4D: The Spread of Liberal Democracy

Liberal democracy requires universal suffrage, competitive politics, and the rule of law and is currently the dominant world political ideology.

Learning Objectives

• Defend the notion of liberal democracy using examples from its enlightenment origins

Key Points

• Liberal democracy is a common form of representative democracy.
• According to the principles of liberal democracy, elections should be free and fair, with the presence of multiple and distinct political parties.
• The liberal democracies usually have universal suffrage, granting all adult citizens the right to vote regardless of race, gender, or property ownership.
• Liberal democracy traces its origins to the European 18th century, also known as the Age of Enlightenment.
• The Enlightenment intellectuals believed that human affairs should be guided by reason and principles of liberty and equality. They were opposed to the rule of undemocratic and illegitimate monarchies and aristocracies.
• Liberal democracies are currently the dominant form of political ideology in the modern world.
• The rule of law refers to the concept that laws should apply to those who govern as well as to the governed.
• The ideas of the Enlightenment inspired the American Revolution and the French Revolution, which gave birth to the ideology of liberalism.
• Throughout the 19th and 20th centuries, reforms and revolutions helped move most European countries towards liberal democracy.
Key Terms

- **the rule of law**: The rule of law is a legal maxim whereby governmental decisions are made by applying known legal principles.

- **Enlightenment**: A 17th and 18th-century philosophical movement in European history; the Age of Enlightenment or Age of Reason emphasizing rationalism.

- **liberalism**: Any political movement founded on the autonomy and personal freedom of the individual, progress and reform, and government by law with the consent of the governed.

Liberal democracy is a common form of representative democracy. According to the principles of liberal democracy, elections should be free and fair, with the presence of multiple and distinct political parties. Liberal democracies also usually have universal suffrage, granting all adult citizens the right to vote.

Liberal democracy traces its origins—and its name—to the European 18th century, also known as the Age of Enlightenment. At the time, the vast majority of European states were monarchies, with political power held either by the monarch or the aristocracy. The possibility of democracy had not been seriously considered in political theory since classical antiquity, and the widely held belief was that democracies would be inherently unstable and chaotic in their policies due to the changing whims of the people. It was further believed that democracy was contrary to human nature, as human beings were seen to be inherently evil, violent, and in need of a strong leader to restrain their destructive impulses.

The Enlightenment

These conventional views were first challenged by a relatively small group of Enlightenment intellectuals who believed that human affairs should be guided by reason and principles of liberty and equality. They argued that all people are created equal, and therefore political authority cannot be justified on the basis of so-called noble blood, a supposed privileged connection to God, or any other characteristic alleged to make one person superior to others. They further argued that governments exist to serve the people, not vice versa, and that laws should apply to those who govern as well as to the governed, a concept known as the rule of law.

Reform and Revolution

Near the end of the 18th century, these ideas inspired the American Revolution and the French Revolution, the pair of which gave birth to the ideology of liberalism and instituted forms of government that attempted to apply the principles of Enlightenment philosophy in practice. The dominions of the British Empire became laboratories for liberal democracy from the mid-19th century onward. In Canada, responsible government began in the 1840s and in Australia and New Zealand parliamentary government elected by male suffrage and secret ballot was established from the 1850s and female suffrage achieved from the 1890s.

Reforms and revolutions helped move most European countries towards liberal democracy. Liberalism ceased to be a fringe opinion and joined the political mainstream. The political spectrum changed; traditional monarchy became more and more a fringe view and liberal democracy became more and more mainstream. By the end of the 19th century,
liberal democracy was no longer only a liberal idea, but an idea supported by many different ideologies. After World War I and especially after World War II, liberal democracy achieved a dominant position among theories of government and is now endorsed by the vast majority of the political spectrum.

Electoral Democracies: Countries highlighted in blue are designated "electoral democracies" in Freedom House's 2010 survey Freedom in the World.