

Models of Democracy

Third Edition

# Study Guide

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## *Finding your way around!*

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# 1 Introduction

## 1.1 My approach: studying actively

I have been asked to write this study guide by David Held and help introduce *Models of Democracy* to a student audience. I am delighted to do this, having taught democratic ideas and practices to students over many years at the Open University. I hope you find the guide useful. I've tried both to clarify the key themes of the book and to introduce some valuable study guide skills.

In writing this study guide I gave a lot of thought to how I could help you to study a book on political ideas. I decided that my basic approach would be to 'read' the book along with you, pausing from time to time to reflect on what we had read, and comparing notes on what it meant and how the bits fitted together. I introduce each chapter, placing it in the 'storyline' of the course, and making links backwards and forwards with important themes and developing concepts. Some chapters are quite long, so I have broken these down into self-contained chunks, and have included an exercise or activity with each chunk that aims to reinforce your understanding of the key points, and will help you remember them for later use in essays and exams.

Now I realize that, whatever your level of study, you probably have your own ideas about what does and does not work for you in terms of study techniques. It is of course possible just to bash on with the chapters, one after the other, and hope you remember the important bits. *But all the evidence we have suggests that working actively with the material produces extraordinarily better results than passively absorbing the reading as it comes to you.*

So this guide contains notes and activities on every chapter, in the suggested order of study. Apart from introducing, contextualizing and helping you to 'unpack' the text, I shall be doing two more things as I go along. Because *Models of Democracy* deals with many famous theories and theorists, it is also a gentle introduction to the history of political thought.

Now for those of you who worry about the idea of ‘doing political theory’, all I can say is – don’t! There really is no need. Individuals have always thought about politics, and in every age writers have turned over in their own minds the big political questions. How does one create order out of anarchy? What form of government is the best? Why should I obey the state? Why are some groups wealthier or more powerful than others? What is the right balance between individual rights and social responsibilities? Should everyone have a say in how they are governed? Is politics about ideals, such as equality or justice or fairness, or is it about the clash of interests in the pursuit of selfish advantage? Is a political system more like a machine or like something that has grown organically? (Your answer to this will dictate what degree of change you think is possible – gradual conservative evolution along existing lines, or radical social engineering.)

This book, needless to say, does not look at all these questions; nor is it going to bury you in masses of abstract political theorizing. Instead we are going to study just one particular set of ideas, around democracy, and in thinking about them together we are also going to look at some practical details of actual democratic political systems. Here and there I insert an occasional *note on theory*, just to give you a bit of background, an ABC if you like, of the study of political ideas where I think you will find it useful. Similarly, where I think there is something particularly important or valuable in the way David Held goes about his writing or analysis in the text, I point this out explicitly. These notes are just asides of the kind I would make if we were having a face-to-face tutorial on the material. Simply read them when you come to them. Lastly, after each cluster of chapters I will offer a brief summary review and leave a space for some critical reflection by you on what you have done.

## **1.2 How to use this study guide**

If you want to pace yourself through the book, test your understanding of it and reinforce your memory of key concepts and models, here is the method of study I suggest.

1 Before starting a chapter:

- Read the section of the guide introducing the item and ‘placing’ it in the story of the book. Note any important points or questions we ask you to keep in mind as you read, watch or listen.
- If the guide suggests breaking up a long chapter with an exercise or discussion on a subsection of it; make a note to yourself to come back to the guide at that point in the text.

2 During your study of that item:

- Try any exercises the guide may contain for subsections of the text, thus pacing yourself through long chapters and aiding retention.

**or**

Read the chapter through, marking the text as usual. Then at the end, come back and speed-read the relevant pages of the study guide, checking if they match up to your impression, before making your summary chapter notes.

## **1.3 Reading and study skills**

Throughout this guide, I will be offering you advice on the principal academic and study skills you need to work at this level. To kick off, I am going to say something about effective note taking and how to read a book of this kind.

### ***Note taking***

Academic reading is reading done for a purpose. One of your main objectives in studying a chapter is to be able to understand the arguments and give a rough summary of the main points in your own words, for example in an essay or examination.

Because no human being can possibly remember everything in a book, all the reading you do should be with a view to selecting key points for future reference. Some students ignore study guides, and many seem to ignore book and section introductions,

so as to get straight on with what they see as the meat of the course. This is a mistake: in these places you find an overview which gives you the right context for what is to follow, and often a lucid summary of the main themes and concepts which can so easily get lost in historical detail or the mere facts of a case study.

Similarly, every text is littered with sentences in which the author, often just before or just after a lengthy disquisition, states his or her main point in a vivid, sharp way. Look out for any short summary paragraphs or striking phrases which encapsulate a key point. Often these occur in the first and last paragraphs. Active reading means being alert to that, and (if you own the book!) always having a soft dark pencil to mark what seem to you to be important passages or phrases as you go through. When you come back to the chapter in your revision, your pencil marks will lead you straight to the key passages you need to reread. By the way, I recommend using a pencil because I used to mark passages in ink, and then, on rereading with the benefit of hindsight, I would sometimes find that I had completely ignored absolutely crucial sentences, and wonder why I had marked other passages at all! At first I was disheartened by this, but then I reflected that I had clearly gained enough critical understanding of the subject to know what was important and what wasn't.

An important question to consider is whether you should make a full set of notes of your own as you go through the book. It is certainly true that writing something down makes it much more likely to stick in your mind. For my own part, I would be inclined to mark key points on the text, and do any exercises which tested my understanding of it (thus accumulating some chapter notes divided into short practical subheadings). At the end of a chapter, I have also found it very useful to write out for myself, on no more than one sheet of A4 paper, a summary outline of the chapter's main points, while they were still fresh in my mind. This is a most valuable resource when the time comes for revision.

### ***Critical reading, and assessing arguments***

The main purpose of academic reading is to understand and evaluate arguments. What you want to achieve is critical understanding. Now the word 'critical' needs care: in ordinary life, to have a critical attitude is to feel negative or hostile towards something, to see and emphasize its bad points. But in academic reading and writing, to work on

something critically, and perhaps to produce a written or verbal ‘critique’ of it, means to evaluate it carefully, to assess the strength of the evidence, the validity of the assumptions, the quality of its logic, and so on. In this case your overall conclusion would take account of its strengths as well as any weaknesses.

Your verdict might be that it was outstanding, which of course is not what most people would expect from a ‘critical’ assessment.

What you are looking for is what is called ‘rigour’ – a systematic attempt to achieve objectivity by very careful and scholarly marshalling of evidence and argument to support the conclusions argued for. The opposite of this would be a generally loose, sloppy and subjective piece of work, exhibiting unsupported statements, unargued assumptions, alleged facts which were not supported by evidence, quotations without references, and faulty logic. The conclusion of such a piece might happen to be true, but it would not be proved, or plausibly supported, by the weak argument which had preceded it.

To read or listen critically is to ask, of any statement or argument presented to you: Is that valid? What is the authority claimed for it? What is the quality of the evidence being brought forward in support of it? Is the logic of the argument watertight? What would count as factual evidence *against* the validity of the statement? What are the *assumptions* built into it, and are they defensible? In short, do you find the argument convincing, and can you explain why? Of course, you first have to be sure that you have understood the argument, and it helps to have some background knowledge in that subject area. If you are reading a new author on a new subject it is harder, or rather it takes longer, to develop the capacity to read critically. But you can ask of absolutely any statement: Is it a statement of fact or a statement of opinion (sometimes dressed up as fact)? And what is the evidence given for it?

In fact, you should always try to distinguish between empirical or factual statements, which refer to how things *are*, and *normative* or subjective statements which express a value judgement about how things *ought* to be. It isn’t always easy, because facts *don’t* speak for themselves, and of course words can be loaded with meaning. The word ‘democracy’ itself has positive associations for most of us, but, as you will discover, it

has been regarded negatively in many historical periods. It can be very difficult for writers describing a particular set of ideas or institutional arrangements not to invest those they approve of with positive value, or those which they disapprove of with negative connotations. Writers who claim to be doing nothing but *describing* a political system often turn out to produce an account in which you can clearly read a value judgement about that system.

Sorting this out is complicated because, whereas statements of fact can, in principle, be disproved, at one level it is harder to argue with statements of value, or preference. If I say I prefer a red tie to a blue tie, how are you going to talk me out of it? Nevertheless, there is a profound difference between asserting an opinion – for example, that you think Chinese communism is less democratic than liberal capitalism – and arguing for a point of view: defining key terms, marshalling evidence, making careful deductions, and perhaps showing the weaknesses of contrary positions. I asked David Held to define good academic writing in a sentence. He said, ‘It’s about producing a considered balance of arguments, and other relevant considerations, arriving at a well-reasoned judgement.’ Such a judgement may exhibit the values of the writer, but it deserves to be taken more seriously than a mere assertion of opinion.

Another thing which you are looking out for, in reading a particular author, is ‘where is she or he coming from?’ By this I mean developing a sense of where the author stands in relation to famous intellectual debates, and whether it is possible to discern that she or he is a member of any distinct tendency – for example, a kind of conservative, a kind of empiricist, or a kind of feminist. Of course, a person might fall into one or more of these categories, and yet advance or combine arguments in a novel and original way. So it is always a mistake to try to predict in a cynical way where you think the argument is probably heading, given the stance of the author.

But as you get to know the author’s mind, you can often predict or run ahead to the likely conclusions, and ‘file’ the author in a preliminary way, as, for example, a type of critical pluralist (see chapter 6). For me, one of the most interesting things about reading *Models of Democracy* has been to see whether I can discern some of the deep value judgements of the author himself!

## 1.4 The Preface and Introduction: an exercise

### ACTIVITY

To kick off our study of *Models*, I'd like to work on the Preface and Introduction as an exercise in the kind of critical reading and note taking I have been talking about. They are both short! What you need to do is read these twelve pages through, mark the sentences you think summarize key points, and perhaps make yourself a brief summary note of these for future reference. I'll do the same, marking the text and making my set of notes. Then let's come back to this point in the guide and compare notes. OK?

(Later) How did you get on? Here's how I read the Preface and Introduction. The sentences I marked on the text as significant are reproduced here in bold. The first thing I marked was this. In the second paragraph of page x: **'Not only is the history of democracy marked by conflicting interpretations, but also ancient and modern notions intermingle to produce ambiguous and inconsistent accounts of the key terms of democracy ...'** This tells me that we are going to be dealing, not with a set of clearly different ideas, but with a changing and overlapping series of ideas of democracy, and I bet that sorting these out is going to be crucial!

Third paragraph of page x: **'questions ... not only about the internal or domestic character of democracy, but also about its external qualities and consequences'** and **'the emergence of issues which transcend national democratic frontiers ... environmental, social and economic globalization'**. Major point here: we are not just talking about democracy in the context of a single country or nation. I wonder what that external democratic dimension amounts to exactly? The next paragraph gives a clue: global problems exist but, bottom of page x, **'profound ambiguity still reigns as to where, how and according to what criteria decisions about these matters can be taken'**. So I guess we may be talking about world government, or some sort of transnational community and democratic mechanisms for that. But, top of page xi, **'democratic theory ... has not seriously questioned whether the nation-state itself can remain at the centre of democratic thought'**. OK, so it looks as if David Held is going to have a go at that; interesting.

Page xi: Ah, here it is, the aim of the book summed up in a sentence:

**'Models of Democracy ... [has] two prime purposes: the first, to provide an introduction to central accounts of democracy and, above all, to those of the Western tradition from ancient Greece to the present day; the second, to offer a critical narrative about successive democratic ideas in order to address the question, raised directly towards the end of the book: what should democracy mean today?'**

I note that the narrative is going to be *critical* – no mere history of democratic ideas and systems. In fact you will find that Held does not simply review particular models and theoretical positions, but makes his own summary critical assessment of each of them. Finally, I note from this passage that the book is heading towards some sort of discussion, not about what democracy **is** now, but what it **ought** to be; that is, an explicitly normative account.

On to the Introduction, page 1 second paragraph: You might assume that everyone agrees democracy is a good thing. **'But it has not always been so. From ancient Greece to the present day the majority of political thinkers have been highly critical of the theory and practice of democracy. A general commitment to democracy is a very recent phenomenon.'** This challenges our contemporary assumptions or prejudices. Page 1, end of third paragraph: **'This book is about the idea of democracy, but in exploring the idea we cannot escape too far from aspects of its history in thought and practice.'** Right, so we'll be getting an account, not just of the history of ideas, but of how some historical democracies actually worked. And, in fact, when you come to look at the sketches of each model, you will find not simply a set of political structures, but a careful unpacking of assumptions about social and economic conditions associated with that model.

Page 1, fourth paragraph (at last – a definition of democracy): **'Democracy means a form of government in which ... the people rule. [It] entails a political community in which there is some form of *political equality* among the people.'** This may seem helpfully clear, but as soon as you begin to ask precisely what each word in the phrase

‘rule by the people’ means **‘definitional problems emerge’**. Crucial examples follow. Then, middle of page 2: **‘There is much significant history in the attempt to restrict the meaning of “the people” to certain groups ...’**

That’s very interesting: so at once we seem to be faced with a contradiction: the concept of democracy is about the people ruling, rather than some smaller group (this seems to be an egalitarian notion), but its history is full of attempts to restrict that to a smaller set of people (an apparently inegalitarian or elitist notion). **‘There is also a telling story in the various conceptions and debates about what is to count as “rule” by “the people”.**’ Equally interesting, it sounds as though the mechanisms of rule by the people are also a problem, and it will not surprise me if arguments around this are sometimes used to justify elitist positions. Indeed, bottom of page 2, **‘Positions taken [within this debate] derive partly from different ways of justifying democracy.’** In other words the discussion is not just around what democracy *is*, but how it can be implemented and, indeed, what it is *for*. The crucial focus of the struggle is this (top of page 3, same paragraph):

**‘Within the history of the clash of positions lies the struggle to determine whether democracy will mean some kind of popular power (a form of life in which citizens are engaged in *self*-government and *self*-regulation) or an aid to decision-making (a means to legitimate the decisions of those voted into power – “representatives” – from time to time).’**

So an absolutely fundamental debate we are going to be dealing with is **‘What should be the scope of democracy?’**

Held says almost at once that this is a very difficult question (second paragraph of p. 3): **‘The history of democracy is often confusing, partly because this is still very much an *active* history, and partly because the issues are very complex.’** (By the way, notice how David acknowledges his debt for this point to Raymond Williams, even though the absence of quotation marks tells us Held has not used Williams’s exact words.) At this point Held explains that he is not a wholly unbiased reporter of democratic ideas and institutions (no one could be), and that he himself takes up (second paragraph of p. 3) **‘a particular position within this active history: a belief**

**that democratic ideas and practices can in the long run be protected only if their hold on our political, social and economic life is *extended and deepened*.**

So Held is not among the historical majority who thought democracy, on the whole, a bad idea, but is one of those modernists who not only approve of democracy in general, but also think that we should have even more of it than we have now. He says, '**I am inevitably more sympathetic to some democratic theorists than others**', and I make a mental note to see if he is scrupulously fair to those theorists who produced absolutely excellent arguments against democratic ideas.

I mark the whole of the paragraph in the middle of page 4 because there, in just a few lines, David neatly sums up the contents and layout of the whole book. I expect you did the same. I won't repeat it here.

On page 4 something important happens. After fleshing out his outline of the book a bit, Held introduces the concept of models. I miss a general definition here (it comes later on p. 6) but I look at the very useful map of the different models coming up in the book (figure 1). What strikes me again is that the models don't seem to progress simply from one to another, but have links backwards and forwards to each other.

Clearly particular 'old' models can develop in two or more different directions, and newer models can be influenced by more than one older model. It is also very clear that liberal (representative) democracy is going to be very important! I go on to mark one point in the text on the second paragraph of page 4 which appears to be important: '**All but one of the models could reasonably be divided into two broad types: direct or participatory democracy ... and liberal or representative democracy.**' I also make myself a note on my 'problems' sheet that I am not sure I understand what is meant by a model in this context, and I hope David says more about it later. In the second paragraph of page 6 this arrives: '**As I use the term here it refers to a theoretical construction designed to reveal and explain the chief elements of a democratic form and its underlying structure of relations.**' These '**models are ... complex networks of concepts and generalizations**'. Hmm – still thinking about that one!

Pages 6–7: Excellent long paragraph on a topic we have already discussed – the very important difference between kinds of writing: those which are descriptive or explanatory and those which are normative ... **‘that is, between statements about how things are and why they are so, and statements about how things ought to or should be’**. Held makes clear that **‘one can find in all models of democracy an intermingling of the descriptive and the normative’**, whether or not their authors are clear that they have produced such a mixture, and that it is extremely important for you to learn to recognize and distinguish between the two things.

In the second paragraph of page 7 there is another crucial paragraph, the whole of which I marked, where Held says just *how* he is going to set about the study of democratic models. He does not simply propose to set out their key features and recommendations, but:

**‘their assumptions about the nature of the society in which democracy is or might be embedded, their fundamental conceptions of the political capabilities of human beings, and how they justify their views and preferences. And in assessing these models we must attend to the nature and coherence of theoretical claims, to the adequacy of empirical statements and to the practicality of prescriptions.’**

On page 7 (in the third paragraph), after some more sentences about prejudice and objectivity, I marked an interesting sentence:

**‘While I believe that the most defensible and attractive form of democracy is one in which citizens can, in principle, extend their participation in and deliberation about decision-making to a wide range of spheres (political, economic and social), I do not think any one existing model alone provides a satisfactory elucidation of the conditions, features or rationale of this democratic form.’**

Get ready for a new model from Held towards the end of the book! At the end of page 7, Held addresses a question which had been forming in my mind: in studying the history of democracy, is there an assumption that it is ideas which are decisive in shaping social and political life? Held writes: **‘I believe that it is only when ideas are connected to propitious historical circumstances and structural forces that they**

**develop sufficient influence to alter the nature and workings of institutional forms.’** In the first paragraph of page 8, I am struck by the sentences: **‘in a world like our own where there is pervasive scepticism and cynicism about many aspects of political life ... it is more important than ever to examine the possible ways in which politics – democratic politics – might be transformed to enable citizens more effectively to shape and organize their own lives’.**

Finally, in the last paragraph of page 8, Held very clearly sets out the four major objectives of the book:

- **first, to introduce leading models of democracy in terms of their central ideas and broad historical conditions;**
- **second, to set out the distinctiveness of each model in contrast with previous models;**
- **third, to explore the strengths and weaknesses of each model, both in relation to what critics have said and in relation to the general argument developed in this book as a whole;**
- **fourth ... to present a novel understanding of democracy.**

This is a useful list. Note the repeated emphasis on historical conditions in the first point. Clearly the discussion to follow cannot remain at the level of ideas. Note in the second point that the models are to be compared and contrasted. And note the phrase tucked neatly into point three: **‘the general argument developed in this book as a whole’.** So there is a general argument, apart from the detailed analysis of democratic theory and practice, perhaps leading up to the **‘novel understanding of democracy’** which appears in point four. I find myself looking forward to seeing what that might be.

In the rest of this guide I won’t be going into the chapters to follow in anything like the same detail as I have done here, but I hope you found it interesting to shadow my thought processes as I read and marked the Preface and Introduction. Looking back, I find I marked not only those bits which seemed to be particularly important, and which I knew I would want to find quickly in any rereading or revision, but also the

occasional sentence I simply found interesting or arresting. I have a great appetite for vivid, arresting phrases, especially ones which sum up something brilliantly. (They are ever so useful in exams!) And I must tell you I spotted a tiny nugget of Held's which I am sure will be our motto in the reading ahead – '*definitional problems emerge!*'

I must say I felt well briefed for what was to come, and thought I grasped everything, except for some questions about the idea of models themselves. And because the text passages in bold above, when you skim through them quickly, omitting my remarks in normal type, do act as a record of the key points, jogging the memory about the text in between, I felt no need to construct a separate summary A4 sheet for this bit. In many of the longer chapters your text marks will be very useful, but you will need to reduce many more passages to manageable sets of key points. It's not really worth marking and transcribing long passages for yourself: you have to condense them to the key points being made. Don't forget that in almost every case, historical detail and case studies are brought in to demonstrate or test some underlying theoretical principle: *it is the theoretical point being made which is important, not the detail*. Making up that one-page summary at the end will also give you two very significant benefits: by practice it will improve your capacity to search out and synthesize the gist of any text; and, by working actively with the text – thinking and writing rather than passively reading – you will fix the points much more firmly in your memory for future use. Finally, as I have said, the summary sheets should be a great help to your revision.

**NB** Almost every chapter in the book discusses a set of ideas which culminate in a significant version of democracy, and you will find a one-page summary outline of each model in the text. It's actually quite a good idea to have a look at the model before you set out on the chapter itself, just to see where the discussion is heading. Model I is on p. 27.