



Democracy, Justice, and Freedom: A Study of John Rawls and Contemporary Political Thought

Research Review Journal of
Interdisciplinary Studies
double-blind peer-reviewed and
refereed online quarterly Journal
ISSN (online): 3108-0472
1(3) 110-116, 2025
©The Author(s) 2025
 10.31305/rrjis.2025.v1.n3.015
 <https://rrjournals.in/>



Received: 12 Sep, 2025

Revised: 16 Nov, 2025

Accepted: 18 Nov, 2025

Published: 31 Dec, 2025

*Arobinda Let

Ex M.A Student, Department of Philosophy & Comparative Religion, Visva-Bharati



Abstract: *Through a critical analysis of John Rawls's political philosophy and its ongoing influence on modern political thought, this study explores the complex link between democracy, justice, and freedom. In my view, Rawls's idea of "justice as fairness" offers a strong normative framework that redefines democratic legitimacy by establishing it in values that equal and free citizens may rationally support. The paper examines how Rawls prioritizes fundamental liberties while simultaneously addressing socioeconomic disparities through the difference principle, thereby resolving the conflict between liberty and equality. It also examines how public reason and overlapping agreement support democratic stability in pluralistic communities with a variety of moral and cultural beliefs. The study illustrates Rawls' framework's virtues and significant limits by placing him in conversation with important modern thinkers, especially with regard to global justice, recognition, and economic disparity. I contend that Rawls's theory is still quite applicable in the twenty-first century, providing a moral framework for assessing democratic institutions in the face of issues like growing inequality, political divisiveness, and changing forms of government. In the end, this study shows that democracy, justice, and freedom are interrelated aspects of a cohesive political vision rather than discrete goals, and that Rawls's philosophical effort remains a crucial lens for reconsidering the moral foundation of contemporary political activity.*

Keywords: *John Rawls, justice as fairness, democracy, political legitimacy, freedom, equality, public reason, contemporary political thought.*

1 | INTRODUCTION

John Rawls' work on democracy, justice, and freedom is one of the most methodical and important in contemporary political philosophy. I understand Rawls' theory as a living framework that shapes equality,

*Corresponding Author

 Arobinda Let, Ex M.A Student, Department of Philosophy & Comparative Religion, Visva-Bharati
 arobindaphilo@gmail.com



Creative Commons Non Commercial CC BY-NC: This article is distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-Non Commercial 4.0 License (<http://www.creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>) which permits non-Commercial use, reproduction and distribution of the work without further permission provided the original work is attributed.

110

Scan and Access



rights, and institutional legitimacy disputes. In *A Theory of Justice*, Rawls proposes “justice as fairness” as a moral underpinning for political order to reconcile liberty and equality in democratic society. The normative emphasis that “justice is the first virtue of social institutions” (Rawls, 1971, p. 3) places political legitimacy in fairness rather than aggregate benefit, challenging utilitarian and procedural views of democracy.

Rawls’s assertion that individual rights cannot be surrendered for communal interest is particularly important. According to Rawls (1971, p. 3), “each person possesses an inviolability founded on justice that even the welfare of society as a whole cannot override”. This idea defines freedom as a protected sphere of equal basic liberties, not only absence of interference. Rawls continues Immanuel Kant’s liberal moral philosophy of human value while reformulating it in a democratic and institutional setting. Commentators say Rawls brought Kantian ethics to modern political theory with analytical rigor and practical significance (Ryan, 1993, p. xii).

The “original position” and “veil of ignorance,” which choose justice principles impartially, are central to my understanding of Rawls. Rawls states that “no one knows his place in society nor his fortune in the distribution of natural assets” (Rawls, 1971, p. 118). This hypothetical framework is ethical and analytical, forcing us to envisage justice without privilege or contingency. Rawls powerfully criticizes hereditary disparities and arbitrary societal benefits, linking his theory with modern egalitarian political thought. Rawls’s first principle of justice—that “each person is to have an equal right to the most extensive basic liberty compatible with a similar liberty for others” (Rawls, 1971, p. 53)—describes democratic freedom. This approach emphasizes that liberty is relational, based on reciprocity and recognition. It resembles Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s democratic ideals of freedom as participation in a social moral order, but Rawls embeds rights inside a framework of fairness to avoid majoritarian rule.

Rawls’s difference principle adds a critical dimension to distributive justice by allowing inequalities only if they assist the poor. Rawls (1971, p. 62) defines injustice as disparities that do not benefit everybody. This principle responds to utilitarian theorists like John Stuart Mill, who prioritize enjoyment over structural inequities, by reorienting democratic discourse from legal equality to substantive justice. I think Rawls’s moral grammar for political arguments makes him relevant. He challenges democratic institutions and proposes a normative transformation. Rawls later stated that justice as fairness is “to provide an acceptable philosophical and moral basis for democratic institutions” (Rawls, 2001, p. 5). Thus, democracy, justice, and freedom are interconnected aspects of a just social order based on human dignity and societal responsibility.

2 | JUSTICE AS FAIRNESS: THE FOUNDATION OF RAWLSIAN THOUGHT

In building my study’s theoretical framework, I view “justice as fairness” as the key normative architecture that redefines democracy, justice, and freedom. I see Rawls’s mission as an attempt to create a political notion of justice that can mediate moral, social, and economic claims in a diverse democracy. In *Justice as Fairness: A Restatement*, Rawls states that “one practicable aim of justice as fairness is to provide an acceptable philosophical and moral basis for democratic institutions” (Rawls, 2001, p. 5), placing his theory at the intersection of moral philosophy and institutional design. My reading emphasizes Rawls’ shift from outcomes to methods in justice discourse. Justice is the fairness of principle selection, not the distribution of things. According to Rawls (1971, p. 11), “the fundamental agreements reached in it are fair” (procedural emphasis). This claim is significant for its methodological innovation: choice fairness assures institution justice. According to researchers like Thomas Pogge, Rawls’s framework states that a social arrangement is just if free and equal people can agree on it (Pogge, 2007, p. 68). This reconceptualization allows a stronger critique of democratic systems’ unjustified inequities. I believe justice as fairness is morally powerful because it values equality as a political position based on reciprocity and mutual acknowledgment. Rawls believes citizens are equal if they have “the moral powers

necessary to engage in social cooperation” (2001, p. 20). Rawls’ political theory of equality is compatible with many moral doctrines, but it recalls Kantian ideas of persons as ends in themselves. Rawls institutionalizes Immanuel Kant’s notion that people should not be used as means by protecting basic liberty and equal opportunity.

Rawls’s theory also balances liberty and equality, overcoming a fundamental contradiction in democratic ideology. Justice as fairness integrates them through principles rather than subordinating them. According to Rawls, a political notion of justice “sets out a framework of thought with which [questions] can be approached” (2001, p. 12). The framework-oriented approach permits democratic societies to survive deep moral pluralism, which Rawls considers permanent in modern politics. Rawls’s emphasis on social cooperation as justice’s foundation is also important. Justice as fairness views society as “a fair system of cooperation” throughout generations (Rawls, 2001, p. 24). This philosophy changes freedom from an individualistic goal to a cooperative endeavour where institutions benefit all participants, especially the poor. This vision aligns with modern egalitarians and offers a principled alternative to utilitarianism, which often excuses inequality in the name of aggregate welfare. The Rawlsian approach also addresses legitimacy in ideologically diverse democracies. Justice as fairness recognizes Rawls’ “reasonable pluralism,” seeking values that all rational persons can support. This dedication to public reason guarantees that political authority is exercised justly, strengthening democratic governance’s ethical basis. Rawls gives both a theory of justice and a blueprint for democratic citizenship. Justice as fairness is Rawlsian philosophy’s foundation, providing a coherent and convincing account of how democratic institutions can balance freedom and equality. It redefines justice as fair cooperation based on impartiality, reciprocity, and respect for humans, shaping democracy and political morality debates today.

3 | DEMOCRACY AND POLITICAL LEGITIMACY:

In applying John Rawls’s political philosophy to democracy and political legitimacy, I view legitimacy as a moral concept based on the justification of political power to free and equal citizens. I think Rawls redefined democratic legitimacy through public reason, where political authority must be justified in terms that all people, as reasonable and rational actors, can accept. According to Rawls (1993, p. 137), political power is only legitimate when it is wielded in conformity with a constitution that all citizens, as free and equal, can reasonably support. This formulation transforms democracy from proceduralism to a normative structure based on reciprocity and fairness. I like that Rawls goes beyond Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s “the general will is always right” (Rousseau, 1762/1997, p. 69) description of democracy. Rousseau emphasizes collective sovereignty, but Rawls insists that democratic decisions must respect individual basic liberty to avoid majority rule. Rawls’s theory resembles constitutional liberalism, which limits democratic authority by fairness. Ronald Dworkin’s claim that “government must treat those whom it governs with equal concern and respect” (Dworkin, 1977, p. 180) supports the premise that political actions’ morality determines legitimacy. I believe Rawls’s political legitimacy and citizens’ participation in a fair social cooperation are intertwined. Democracy is not just a way to aggregate desires, but a moral practice based on mutual recognition. Rawls says a well-ordered society is “effectively regulated by a public conception of justice” (Rawls, 1971, p. 453), suggesting legitimacy comes from internalizing common principles rather than forceful enforcement. This approach emphasizes the ethical aspect of democratic society, where citizens are bound by laws and a sense of justice.

Public reason is crucial to my view of Rawlsian democracy. Public reason requires citizens to debate constitutional essentials and basic justice with reasonable reasons, regardless of their comprehensive doctrines. According to Rawls (1993, p. 49), “citizens are to be ready to offer fair terms of cooperation and to abide by them willingly”. Democracy stays inclusive and appreciative of plurality, a hallmark of modern nations, under this premise. Rawls predicts and complements Habermas’s discourse theory, which bases legitimacy in rational communication. Habermas states that “only those norms can claim

validity that could meet with the assent of all affected” (Habermas, 1996, p. 107), confirming Rawls’ deliberative democracy. Rawls’s theory tackles a major issue in current political thought: substantial moral disagreement and the requirement for stable political order. Rawls uses “overlapping consensus” to show how multiple moral and religious ideologies can agree on political principles, guaranteeing legitimacy without requiring unanimity on ultimate values. In pluralistic cultures, democratic institutions’ legitimacy depends on their ability to accommodate difference while retaining coherence. Rawls’ legitimacy account also undermines instrumental democracy that prioritizes efficiency or outcomes over justice. Instead, it demands justification of decision-making. Democracy is legitimate when institutions “provide a framework for free public reasoning among equals” (Cohen, 1989, p. 22), echoing Rawls’ commitment to fairness and reciprocity. This emphasis on justification emphasizes institutions and citizens’ moral responsibility for democratic life. I believe democracy and political legitimacy in Rawlsian theory are related by justice as fairness, public reason, and equal respect. Democracy is a moral ideal that demands authority to be justified in ways that satisfy everyone. Rawls provides a compelling paradigm for how democratic societies can stay stable, just, and free in the face of plurality by anchoring legitimacy in fairness and reciprocity.

4 | FREEDOM AND EQUALITY: BALANCING COMPETING VALUES

John Rawls provides one of the most appealing theories for reconciling freedom and equality in contemporary political thinking. According to Rawls, justice as fairness prioritizes each value within a coherent moral structure, therefore liberty and equality are not mutually exclusive. First, Rawls states in *A Theory of Justice* that “each person is to have an equal right to the most extensive total system of equal basic liberties compatible with a similar system of liberty for all” (Rawls, 1971, p. 53). This definition makes liberty essential but relational, guaranteeing that one person’s freedom does not undermine another’s. My reading shows that Rawls wants a principled balance between liberty and equality. His second concept, the difference principle, accepts inequities only if they assist the poor. According to Rawls (1971, p. 83), social and economic imbalances should help the least advantaged. This realization turns equality into a dynamic principle of justice, where discrepancies are acceptable only when they benefit all. In this view, equality is a prerequisite for real freedom, not its restriction. I think Rawls’s reconciliation of freedom and equality is better understood in contrast to liberal and utilitarian traditions. John Stuart Mill famously stated that “over himself, over his own body and mind, the individual is sovereign” (Mill, 1859/1974, p. 68). Liberal philosophy relies on Mill’s emphasis on autonomy, but it fails to address systemic inequities that limit people’s chances. Rawls expands this liberal commitment by incorporating liberty within distributive justice, making it substantively available to all.

Isaiah Berlin’s distinction between negative and positive liberty illuminates this balance’s complexity. According to Berlin (1969, p. 122), “I am normally said to be free to the degree to which no man or body of men interferes with my activity” (negative liberty). Berlin worries about positive liberty’s potential for communal goal coercion. In my reading, Rawls balances basic liberties with the socio-economic conditions needed to exercise them. Thus, his philosophy avoids laissez-faire individualism and authoritarian equality. Rawls’s commitment to justice adds morality beyond economics. According to Ronald Dworkin (1985, p. 190), “a political community must show equal concern for the fate of all those who it claims as members”. This fits Rawls’s morality-based equality, which is distributive and based on human worth. I think Rawls’ ethical foundation lets him balance freedom and equality without sacrificing either. Rawls’s priority of essential liberties prevents equality from being oppressive. The first principle’s lexical priority over the second means that economic advantages cannot jeopardize essential freedoms like thought, expression, and association. Rawls believed that liberty allowed people to develop and use their moral powers, hence this hierarchical ordering. Rawls (2001, p. 149) claims that equal basic liberties must be guaranteed their fair worth, emphasizing the need for formal protection and substantive realization. My analysis shows that the Rawlsian paradigm resolves the freedom-equality conflict in a nuanced and lasting way. When based on justice, reciprocity, and respect for people, these values can

reinforce each other. Rawls' normative concept of liberty and distributive justice informs democracy, social justice, and human rights discussions today.

5 | JUSTICE AND CONTEMPORARY POLITICAL THOUGHT:

John Rawls's concept of justice is a core framework and important starting point for various philosophical discussions in contemporary political theory. Rawls's claim that "justice is the first virtue of social institutions" (Rawls, 1971, p. 3) continues to drive political theory's normative orientation, which prioritizes fairness over efficiency, utility, and tradition. I believe this claim has transformed modern philosophy by forcing thinkers to improve, reinterpret, or question Rawls's principles. Modern theorists show that Rawls' theory has created a healthy friction between liberal equality and its adversaries. Michael Sandel asks if "a just society [should] promote the virtue of its citizens" or stay neutral among conflicting conceptions of the good (Sandel, 2009, p. 8). I believe this critique undermines Rawlsian attempts to separate the "right" from the "good," contending that justice is inextricably linked to communal norms and moral traditions. Sandel's argument reopens the dispute over whether political philosophy should be ethical or procedurally neutral. Rawls's influence goes beyond communitarian critiques to liberal and post-liberal perspectives. According to Rawls (2001, p. 5), justice as fairness aims to establish an acceptable foundation for democratic institutions, highlighting its relevance in resolving current problems about legitimacy, pluralism, and institutional stability. This versatility makes Rawls crucial to global justice, human rights, and democratic governance discussions, in my opinion. He calls his theory "a framework of thought" for approaching difficult political issues (Rawls, 2001, p. 10).

Modern political thinking has expanded and refined Rawlsian ideas to address new concerns. Amartya Sen criticizes transcendental justice theories with comparison and realization-focused methods. Rawls aims to define absolutely just institutions, but Sen asks "how justice can be advanced" in practice (Sen, 2009, p. ix). This move supports Rawls by adding a pragmatic approach, which is important for addressing global inequality and development. Robert Nozick and other libertarians defend individual entitlements and property rights against Rawls's redistributive principles. Nozick argues that taxing wages is comparable to forced labour (Nozick, 1974, p. 169), contrasting Rawls's difference principle. I think this discussion shows a fundamental gap in current political thought: whether justice should prioritize equitable distributions or historical entitlements regardless of results. However, Rawls's theory is resilient because it addresses the arbitrariness of natural and social disparities and requires institutions to minimize their consequences. Contemporary theorists use Rawls' theories as a yardstick for critique and progress, demonstrating his continued relevance. Commentators call his thesis "the most compelling case for a more equal society" in modern political philosophy (Sandel, 2009, p. 165). I believe this highlights Rawls's normative force as even people who disagree with his conclusions often function within his conceptual space.

Justice in contemporary political thinking cannot be understood without Rawls' pioneering work. His theory has reshaped philosophical inquiry and established a permanent norm for evaluating rival hypotheses. Rawls' concept of political morality, which frames justice as fairness, inspires, challenges, and evolves in modern political philosophy.

6 | RELEVANCE IN THE 21ST CENTURY:

In the 21st century, John Rawls's concept of justice as fairness remains extraordinarily durable and adaptive for resolving the complex issues of democratic society. Although written in the late 20th century, Rawls's theory addresses current issues like economic inequality, identity-based conflicts, global injustice, and democratic legitimacy. His argument that political institutions must be justified to individuals as free and equal people is essential in an era of pluralism and conflict. According to Rawls, "a basic feature of democracy is the fact of reasonable pluralism" (Rawls, 1993, p. 36), indicating that political diversity is permanent. Rawls's concept of public reason remains relevant in today's

dysfunctional political climate. As ideological extremism and disinformation impact democratic discourse, Rawls's criterion for ethical deliberation requires political power to be justified by reasons that all citizens may fairly accept. According to Rawls (1993, p. 49), "citizens are to be ready to offer fair terms of cooperation and to abide by them willingly". This idea emphasizes citizens' and institutions' moral responsibilities, claiming democracy cannot work without equity and reciprocity. I think this idea is important for resolving global democratic distrust.

In the 21st century, socio-economic gaps increase, making Rawls' difference principle more relevant. As global capitalism generates unprecedented wealth and chronic poverty, Rawls's contention that disparities are justifiable only if they assist the least advantaged (Rawls, 1971, p. 83) powerfully criticizes unrestrained markets. According to Thomas Piketty (2014, p. 20), "inequality is not an economic or technological necessity; it is an ideological and political choice" (p. 20). I believe Rawls's paradigm supports such arguments by highlighting that justice involves both formal equality and real fairness in resource allocation.

In the 21st century, global justice has grown in importance, bringing problems beyond the nation-state. Rawls's later work, *The Law of Peoples*, addresses international justice, but detractors say it is too narrow. According to Amartya Sen (2009, p. 7), justice requires a comparison and realization-focused strategy to eliminate manifest inequities. I believe this critique encourages Rawlsian ideas to be applied to global challenges like climate change, migration, and transnational inequality. Contemporary discussions on identity, recognition, and multiculturalism show Rawls' importance. Rawls values fairness and neutrality, but Charles Taylor believes modern politics is more about "the demand for recognition" (Taylor, 1994, p. 25). This emphasizes culture and identity-based claims, challenging Rawlsian neutrality. I suggest that Rawls's emphasis on equal respect and basic liberty allows such demands to be discussed within a reasonable institutional framework. His philosophy places identity-based issues within a larger commitment to justice and reciprocity.

Digital technologies and new governance methods further demonstrate Rawls's significance. Data privacy, algorithmic prejudice, and technological power concentration require a rethinking of justice as fairness. Rawls's recommendation for fair equality of opportunity in institutions provides a benchmark for assessing emerging difficulties and ensuring technical advancement does not undermine democratic norms. Rawls' relevance in the 21st century rests in his principles' dynamic ability to adapt to changing political conditions. His theory guides morality through the conflicts between freedom, equality, and justice in a complex society. Rawls' vision of democracy is still critically strong and normatively convincing by basing political legitimacy on fairness and mutual respect.

7 | CONCLUSION:

As I wrap up this research, I reiterate that John Rawls' philosophical architecture remains one of the most logical and normatively persuasive frameworks for comprehending the complex interrelationships between democracy, justice, and freedom. My work has attempted to show that Rawls's idea of justice as fairness offers a useful moral basis for democratic living rather than only resolving theoretical conflicts. Rawls redefines democracy as an ethical endeavour based on reciprocity, justice, and respect for people by establishing political legitimacy in values that free and equal individuals may rationally support. Rawls effectively unites liberty and equality inside a hierarchical and structured framework of justice, so bridging the long-standing gap between the two. His dedication to enhancing the lives of the most disadvantaged people and his insistence on the inviolability of fundamental liberties demonstrate a well-rounded perspective that is still very relevant when tackling current injustices and institutional issues. Furthermore, his concepts of overlapping consensus and public reason offer crucial instruments for maintaining democratic stability in heterogeneous communities characterized by profound moral and cultural variety. However, responding to modern criticisms shows that Rawls's theory is dynamic and

amenable to enlargement and reinterpretation. Rawls continues to be a cornerstone and a focal point of critical discourse in discussions about economic inequality, global justice, and recognition. Therefore, I draw the conclusion that Rawls's lasting importance stems from his capacity to provide a moral framework that allows democracy to be continuously assessed and rethought in the quest for a society that is more equitable and freer.

REFERENCES

- [1] Berlin, I. (1969). *Four essays on liberty*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- [2] Cohen, J. (1989). Deliberation and democratic legitimacy. In A. Hamlin & P. Pettit (Eds.), *The good polity* (pp. 17–34). Oxford: Blackwell.
- [3] Dworkin, R. (1977). *Taking rights seriously*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- [4] Dworkin, R. (1985). *A matter of principle*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- [5] Habermas, J. (1996). *Between facts and norms: Contributions to a discourse theory of law and democracy*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- [6] Kant, I. (1996). *Practical philosophy* (M. J. Gregor, Trans.). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- [7] Mill, J. S. (1974). *On liberty*. Harmondsworth: Penguin. (Original work published 1859)
- [8] Nozick, R. (1974). *Anarchy, state, and utopia*. New York: Basic Books.
- [9] Piketty, T. (2014). *Capital in the twenty-first century*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- [10] Pogge, T. (2007). *John Rawls: His life and theory of justice*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- [11] Rawls, J. (1971). *A theory of justice*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- [12] Rawls, J. (1993). *Political liberalism*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- [13] Rawls, J. (1999). *The law of peoples*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- [14] Rawls, J. (2001). *Justice as fairness: A restatement*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- [15] Rousseau, J.-J. (1997). *The social contract and other later political writings* (V. Gourevitch, Trans.). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. (Original work published 1762)
- [16] Ryan, A. (1993). Introduction. In A. Ryan (Ed.), *Justice*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- [17] Sandel, M. J. (2009). *Justice: What's the right thing to do?* New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.
- [18] Sen, A. (2009). *The idea of justice*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- [19] Taylor, C. (1994). *Multiculturalism and the politics of recognition*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Cite this article

Let, A. (2025). Democracy, Justice, and Freedom: A Study of John Rawls and Contemporary Political Thought. *Research Review Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies*, 1(3), 110-116.
<https://doi.org/10.31305/rrjis.2025.v1.n3.015>