

## **In what ways can the UK be said to be a democracy?**

There are many countries that claim to be democratic, and the UK is one of them. We elect our government, which is the key feature of a representative democracy, and because of this single reason most people are happy with the definition of Britain as a democracy.

However, there are more features that make Britain democratic, and a few that arguably make it less democratic. As well as election of representatives, the features that make a representative democracy democratic are: - democratic institutions and a choice of political parties, civil and political rights, and an open and accountable government.

To differing degrees, Britain today has each of these features. We have free and fair elections, not just for the general election, which is usually held every four years. We have by-elections, local elections, mayoral elections for the large cities, and elections to the Welsh and Irish assemblies and the Scottish parliament. The elections are free and fair – it cannot be said that anyone is coerced or forced into voting for any particular party. When we vote, we vote for the person we feel is best able to represent us and our views – this is the most widely accepted element of a democracy, the right to vote for representatives to run the country for us.

Another way in which the UK can be said to be democratic is the way in which we have political and civil rights, which are protected by law. As well as the right to vote, we have the right to a fair trial, to equality between sexes, races and religions, the right to an education, the freedom to practice religion, and two of the most basic rights, freedom of speech and the right to life. These rights are given to us and protected by law, which means that freedoms are not absolute – in order to have these rights and freedoms, we have to have limits to them, such as freedom of speech and expression, as long as that speech and expression is not libelous or slanderous.

Another accepted feature of democracy that Britain has is democratic institutions and a choice of political parties. There is a wide range of parties you can vote for to represent you and your views – Labour, Conservative, Liberal Democrat, Green, BNP and UKIP to name a few. This range of parties means that while we have a free and fair election of government, we also have a wide choice of people to select to represent us rather than just one party with just one view.

We also have a range of democratic institutions governing our country – the House of Commons, local councils, the European Parliament, the Scottish Parliament and the Welsh Assembly are all institutions run by people we have voted to represent us. This means that not only do we elect people into their positions, the positions they are in mean that they have power to run the country the way we want them to.

The final aspect of a democratic country that the UK has is an open and accountable government, although this is probably the weakest feature of democracy in Britain. While the government is to an extent open, there is no way of knowing the inner workings and ideas of the it, or government secrets.

Although these things can all be said to make the UK a democracy, there are also factors that are not so democratic, or at least not so democratic as other countries today. For example, our electoral system is not the most democratic. Often referred to as “first past the post”, the way it is run means that only the party that wins the most constituencies can get into government. It is possible that a party can get into power with less than half of the votes – as in the 2001 elections, when Labour received only 42% of the vote. Also, the government does not necessarily reflect the views of the whole country as at the last election only 59% of the people able to vote did so.

Another problem with our country as a democracy is the non-democratic institutions that help to govern our country. For example, the House of Lords, the Cabinet, the Lord Chancellor and the monarchy are all unelected institutions, which have a part in governing our country.

Even though there are some problems with Britain as a democracy, we have all the key essentials that make up a representative democracy – and so the UK can be said to be a democracy, if not the fairest and most democratic in the world.