

## **To what extent has the UK political system become more democratic in recent years**

In recent times in the UK we have seen the more frequent use of referendums. These are votes where the electorate votes on a specific issue such as devolution. It is thought of as a good way of including elements of direct democracy in our representative system. Although this method does seem to infringe on the principle of parliamentary sovereignty if in the UK our representatives are supposed to put forward the views of the electorate it cannot be seen as a bad idea.

However some critics of referendums argue that its frequent use in recent years has actually detracted from the democratic process. They argue that the questions used can be worded to influence voters, no matter how carefully they are phrased they will always have an element of bias to them. Also they argue referendums are expensive and disrupt the government. Others argue that because referendums are held at a time of the ruling party's choice, they have the biggest influence on the outcome of the vote. If these criticisms are true then obviously the use of referendums are actually degrading from the democratic process, however others disagree.

Supporters of referendums argue that their use in our political system will re-connect voters, after having participated in this process they will take more notice of real issues, rather than say a party leader's personality therefore allowing them to become more involved. Also some argue that certain decisions such as whether to join the EU constitution are too important to be settled in parliament and that the electorate have a right to decide.

Despite criticisms of its use, undoubtedly the use of referendums has become more frequent in the last 10 years. We have had four in all since 1997, but are the use of referendums really an asset to our liberal democracy?

Well in theory most people would agree that they are definitely representative of the electorate, however after the people have 'spoken' it is possible for parliament to re-visit the decision and have another vote in parliament which seems somewhat to defeat the point of the referendum in the first place. However it is strongly argued that a decision made by the people makes for a much stronger mandate than one made by MP's.

In conclusion, referendums seem to add an element of direct democracy in our system, however in order for them to do so they must be carefully constructed and the phrasing used must be as unbiased as it can be. It also puts death to the saying 'Britain is only truly free every five years' by letting the electorate participate in the decision making more directly. In this sense Britain has, if you believe that referendums held have been fair, become more democratic. However it is important to realise that in order for the referendums to work they must be carried out properly.

But what other efforts have we made to make our electoral system more democratic over recent years? Well we have experimented recently with alternative methods of voting. Although democracy by e-mail has not yet taken place we have used postal voting as another method of voting in the 2005 general election and some small local elections. This form of voting undoubtedly makes it easier for the public to vote but has also been heavily criticised for its association with electoral fraud, many argue that the system is not safe and many have doubts about its efficiency. However it could be argued that it was the main reason for boosting participation during the 2005 election where 2% more of the population voted than in 2001.

Also the government is hoping to use voting by e-mail sometime after 2006, this form of voting is usually associated with television shows which use this method

frequently, however until security concerns are answered regarding this form of voting, it is unlikely that it will be used.

So finally, how far has the UK come to making its system more democratic in recent years? Well its use of referendums if used in the right way certainly is a way that the UK has used to try and re-connect voters and improved voter turnout using postal voting despite some widespread concerns about its reliability. Some measures have still not yet been introduced to make it easier for the electorate to cast their vote, in this context until these measures have been introduced and are completely secure it is difficult to say we are doing everything we can to make ourselves as democratic as possible. However new voting techniques and innovations in how we vote in recent years have been promising and as these types of vote casting systems mastered it can only contribute to our democratic status.