

Democracy

The word 'democracy', like so many political terms, including the word 'politics' itself, comes from the Greeks.

Democracy is when there is a system of government, whose representatives have been elected by the population. This means that society is able to choose them-selves and they have freedom of speech and views. The opposite is a Dictatorship, this is when a ruler has total power over a country, or a person who tells people what to do, in an autocratic way or who determines behaviour in a particular area.

In the dictionary, democracy is defined as, "is government by the people in which the supreme power is vested in the people and exercised directly by them or by their elected agents under a free electoral system. In a phrase by Abraham Lincoln, democracy is government "of the people, by the people and for the people.

Democracy falls into two basic categories: direct and representative. In a direct democracy, all citizens without the elected or appointed personnel can participate in public decisions. Direct democracy can be looked at as the 'purest' interpretation of democracy. Looking at the question, it is true to say democracy in its purest form is impractical. Such a democratic system can only be practical with a small number of people, for example, a community organisation where members can meet in a room, discuss issues and arrive at decisions by consensus or majority vote.

However in Britain today, we live in a representative democracy because of the problems in having a direct democracy. Ancient Athens was the world's first democracy, which managed to practice direct democracy with a small population, as with having a big

population it is hard to manage a direct democracy. A small population that would be ideal for managing a direct democracy would be a couple thousands. This is because with this amount you would be able to maintain regular meetings, where most can consistently attend to and less hassle and argument would be created as all are granted an opportunity to voice their opinions.

To transfer direct democracy onto a larger body is very difficult. Whereas a small town/city can meet on a regular basis, a city would find it difficult for its entire people to attend even an annual meeting, due to other commitments. For example, for 10,000 people to meet in one place and all to be heard equally would likely take the entire year, if democracy is to be implemented.

It is clear that, while direct democracy is a highly desirable form of government, it is completely unworkable for any realistically sized society, unless there are suitable means for resolving the problems involved. A suggestion could be internet voting.

One further problem to look at is the variety of possible responses that can emerge in a large gathering, all from the one same issue. Given that most democratic systems work on a majority-minority system, and the possibilities of having a whole variety of opinions, would any particular problem ever be agreeably resolved.

This is the question that people such as Jean-Jacques Rousseau in the 18th century looked at. The solution is the transportation of each individual's intentions from the self - to the whole, rather than voting and deciding in a self-interested way. All should act for the good of the society as a whole. This theory solves the problems of direct democracy, that of the variety and ambiguity of results, since if everyone thinks for the common good.

There should only be a majority and nothing else. Rousseau argued that if there is a minority who are also compelled towards the common good, then they are simply wrong. While this sort of democracy works acceptably with small groups, it has not solved the problems surrounding democracy as applied to larger bodies. Therefore, since the primary concern here is size, it seems logical to find some way of reducing it.

Even though there are problems in having a direct democracy, which are clearly noticeable, people still tend to argue in favour of having a direct democracy rather than a 'representative' democracy, which is what Britain is in. Jean-Jacques Rousseau described an ideal community of free citizens in a small city-state in which democracy could be practiced directly by the people. In this setting, citizens develop a sense of freedom that went beyond a sense of shared responsibility for the whole of the community. This type of setting is known as a 'direct' democracy; even though he knew of the faults in having a 'direct democracy' he was in effect saying: give democracy a chance; citizens can become free if they belong to a loving, caring, organic community. The idea of Rousseau's political theories is that the moment people allow themselves to be represented, they surrender their freedom.

Thomas Jefferson (1743-1826) is the founding father most frequently quoted by supporters of direct democracy. Though not a supporter himself, he was more willing than most of his celebrated contemporaries to place his trust in the wisdom and goodness of the numerical majority, while maintaining a deep suspicion of government

Speaking to James Madison from Paris in 1787, Jefferson admitted; "I own, I am not a friend to a very energetic government. It is always oppressive; it places the governors indeed more at ease, at the expense of the people".

Rousseau, when forced to think as a pragmatist did not believe a large country such as the United States could realize this kind of deliberative democracy. A large nation would need checks and balances and centralized leadership institutions.

A problem which is quite visible is the fact that the idea of having a 'direct' democracy in the UK is impractical because of its population size. This introduces the second type of democracy; the idea of a representative democracy. This idea of representation was first developed by thinkers such as Edmund Burke and John Stuart Mill in the 18th and 19th centuries respectively. If a body, for example, twenty people can be adequately represented by one in an assembly, the problem of size and equal say would be eliminated. In a large city state, there should be sub-divisions, perhaps that of a county, then town. Britain has such a type of a democracy, where each town or community would elect amongst them a representative to stand for them and their opinions.

This system of representation would mean that these 'representatives' who would operate each community and then gather with other representatives to discuss and co-operate on any decisions given. Of course, the self-interests of the elected are also involved, since they are still a part of the people, but they should occupy the opinions that he/she has been told so by the people that he/she is representing. Speaking to the Electors of Bristol in 1774, Edmund Burke gave this speech, "Certainly, gentlemen, it ought to be the happiness and glory of a representative to live in the strictest union, the closest correspondence, and the most unreserved communication with his constituents. Their wishes ought to have great weight with him; their opinion, high respect; their business, unremitting attention. It is his duty to sacrifice his repose, his pleasures, his satisfactions, to theirs; and above all, ever, and in all cases, to prefer their interest to his own. But his

unbiased opinion, his mature judgment, his enlightened conscience, he ought not to sacrifice to you, to any man, or to any set of men living. These he does not derive from your pleasure; no, nor from the law and the constitution. They are a trust from Providence, for the abuse of which he is deeply answerable. Your representative owes you, not his industry only, but his judgment; and he betrays, instead of serving you, if he sacrifices it to your opinion.....”

On top of having two types of democracies, representative democracy is split into two; the first is passive; whereby the representative is merely the messenger, from the people to the government. The function to this method is uncertain, since the government consists of the representatives, who would then have to go back to the people to acquire their responses to the issues and suggestions raised by the government.

It is assumed that by voting, the citizens place a trust in the elected to make good and proper decisions.

In order to avoid the possibility of not being able to successfully voice their opinions (as in a pure democratic system), the citizen must surrender their right to this altogether, in the hope that their representative will do so in the end.

Each and every person has the opportunity to decide who makes their decisions, and they shall do so based on the opinions of others and those wishing to be elected. However, this does not guarantee the outcome expected by a voter, and as such is not really ‘rule by the people’, indirectly perhaps.

John Stuart Mill gave a very interesting point regarding those people who actually vote. He spoke of those with a lesser intelligence and with limited access to information cannot be relied upon to make an informed decision, and inevitably could lead to a ‘bad’

outcome. He adds that there is and always will be, a class system in society, and if one class wins a majority (most likely the upper classes) then the minority will be subjected to legislation of another class of which they disagree with.

Mill's also added another problem, in that those who are able to vote on terms of class and intellect combined with the fact that those elected cannot be relied upon to continually make correct and right decisions, then 'the people' consists only of a few, the elite.

The media plays a big influence on who is elected to be the 'representative'. Those who wish to be elected persuade the people to vote in their favour. They try to catch out the opponent by using images or interviews where they look as if they were going against what they said they would do in their manifesto, for example, printing a certain phrase they said, out of context so they look bad. If they are unable to do this, they might make up things about them and use it to get the public to vote for them. These techniques are a type of propaganda because they want you to believe in something that may not be true, but as long as they look like the 'good representative' it does not matter. This is another problem with having a representative democracy, where those who are elected to represent the people cannot be trusted.

Britain is democratic because we get to vote in the Members of Parliament who are there to represent us. But there is a minority of people who have an incredible power within our government who make Britain an undemocratic country because it is up to them to pass a law or any other decisions. This would not be a problem if they thought the same way nation does, but their backgrounds have a great influence in the way they think and their thoughts are very different to ours. If the government wanted a true democratic

Britain they would bring in a new system to vote, in who want to be at the top deciding what the right thing would be for our society.