Democracy

Democracy describes a system of making rules for a group of people. It comes from the Greek words *demos* - meaning people - and *kratos* meaning power. Accordingly, democracy is often defined as "the rule of the people"; in other words, a system of making rules which is put together by the people who are to obey those rules.

Could such a system exist and could it possibly be a good way of making decisions? Why did such an idea originally arise and why is it today considered, at least by most people and most countries in the world, *the only* system that is worth our attention? Does it really make sense for everyone to rule?

Why Democracy?

There are two fundamental principles that lie at the base of the idea of democracy and which help to explain its appeal:

1. the principle of *individual autonomy*: that no one should be subject to rules that have been imposed by others.
2. the principle of *equality*: that everyone should have the same opportunity to influence the decisions that affect people in society.

Both of these principles are intuitively appealing to everyone, and a democratic system of government is the only one that, at least in theory, accepts both as fundamental. Other systems, such as oligarchy, plutocracy or dictatorship, normally violate both principles: they give power to a certain (constant) sector of society and these people then take decisions on behalf of the rest of the population. Neither equality nor individual autonomy is respected in such cases.

The two principles above provide the moral justification for democracy, and we can see that both are in fact key human rights principles, but there are also pragmatic reasons that are often given as justification for a democratic system of government, rather than any other.

1. It is often claimed that a democratic system provides for a more efficient form of government, because the decisions that are taken are more likely to be respected by the people. People do not usually break their "own" rules.

2. Acceptance by the population is also more likely because decisions have been reached as a result of building a consensus among different factions; the rules would not be realistic if they were unacceptable to large sections of the population. Thus, there is a form of internal control on the type of laws that a democratically accepted government ought to consider.

3. A democratic system is also supposed to foster more initiative and therefore to be more responsive to changing conditions, on the "two heads are better than one" principle.

? **Do you feel any 'ownership' of the rules in your country? What might be the reasons for this?**

A good theory...

In practice, it is not of course reasonable to expect everyone in society to contribute to the rule-making process and nor would everyone want to, so many countries use a system whereby citizens appoint representatives to make decisions on their behalf: *representative* rather than *direct* democracy. Every citizen, in theory, has an equal possibility to select the person they think will best represent their interests. In this way, the principle of equality is observed.

This was not always the case: at the birth of democracy, in Ancient Greece, women and slaves were not allowed to vote and neither, of course, were children. Today, in most countries of the world, women do have the vote but the struggle was won only relatively recently.

There are other sections of society, which commonly include immigrants, prisoners, children, who are not entitled to vote, even though they are obliged to obey the laws of the land.

? **Could excluding certain sectors of society from the democratic process ever be justifiable?**

Control over the law-making process

If the principle of *equality* is more or less respected today, at least as far as voting is concerned, how does the first principle, of *autonomy* stand in the existing democracies? To what extent do individuals in these societies feel any "ownership" of the laws that are made by their representatives? The answer here is a great deal less encouraging. Indeed, most people, in most democracies of the world, would claim that the laws of the land *are* "imposed" on them by rulers who do not represent their interests. So has the first principle gone astray?

? **Is it possible, under a representative democracy, for people to have real power over those decisions that are made on their behalf?**

There are a number of senses in which people can be said to have some control over the law-making process in a representative democracy. Again, we shall consider the ideal model, even if it does not seem to represent accurately the political situation in many countries. At least it assists us in identifying the problem areas and suggests ways in which these may be overcome.

1. Citizens influence the law-making process because they select the people who will make the laws: in theory, at elections, citizens choose between different possible representatives of their interests. Thus, they can choose the individual that offers the platform that is closest to their own interests.

"One ballot is stronger than the bullet."

Abraham Lincoln

"Two cheers for democracy: one because it admits variety and two because it permits criticism. Two cheers are quite enough: there is no occasion to give three."

E.M. Forster

2. Politicians have to stand for re-election. In the time period between elections, lawmakers will be aware that they will be judged at the next election on their performance and therefore should not be inclined to pass laws that will be obviously unacceptable to the populace. This is a form of tacit control.

3. There are, in principle, ample opportunities for citizens to indicate actively their displeasure with particular policies or laws, and thus to send a message back to their representatives that this is an area of concern.

4. There are also, in theory, opportunities for citizens to have a more positive influence on the legislative process by engaging in consultation with political representatives, either through NGOs, or other pressure groups and consultative bodies.

5. Ultimately, any individual is free to stand for election if they feel that none of the candidates is able to represent their interests.

Free and fair elections – a means to an end

"The will of the people shall be the basis of the authority of government; this will shall be expressed in periodic and genuine elections which shall be by universal and equal suffrage and shall be held by secret vote or by equivalent free voting procedures."

Article 21, paragraph iii, UDHR.

Elections are a method of exerting control over the lawmakers, and they exert that control, in theory at least, through invoking a desire, or need, for politicians to take their electorate into account in everything they do. Such a method clearly requires the elections to be free and fair but it also requires something that is perhaps more fundamental: that politicians *believe* that they will be held to account by the electorate if they fail to represent their interests. No politician has any need to represent interests that are different from his or her own unless he or she *fears* the punishment of the electorate. The system depends on that belief to operate effectively; and it therefore depends, ultimately, on the electorate applying that sanction from time to time or at least appearing to be ready to do so.

Thus "elections" may be quite easily introduced into a political system without necessarily having the effect of making that system genuinely democratic. Structural elections only contribute to a democratic system where the electorate uses them to call its representatives to account. High voter apathy in most democratic countries at the beginning of the twenty-first century threatens the effectiveness of this system of control.

It also calls into question the legitimacy of so-called democratically elected governments, which are, in some cases, actually elected by a *minority* of the total electorate.

Elections and apathy

"Stockholm, May 17 (IPS) - Apathy among voters muted celebrations after the first-ever elections to a national parliament for Sweden's indigenous reindeer-herding people, the Saami … the turnout in Sunday's inaugural election was low, with less than 50% of 12000 eligible voters going to the polls." *InterPress Third World News Agency (IPS), 1993*

"The Vladivostok City Duma's elections set for December 17 are already facing major setbacks when 12 candidates withdrew their nominations over the absence of voters in previous elections." *Vladivostok Daily, 29 November 2000*

"Although the election results represent a swing to the left, what is more indicative of the political atmosphere in Romania is the number of voters who failed to vote. Turnout was registered at an all-time low with a mere 44.5% participating in the election as compared to 56.4% in 1996." *Central Europe Review, 12 June 2000*

"Turnout at the general election in the UK dropped to an 80-year low with around 60% of the electorate bothering to cast their vote. Among the lowest was Liverpool Riverside where it stood at 34.1% of the electorate. Across the country 18-25 year olds were most apathetic, poll evidence suggests." *BBC, 9 June 2001*

"While turnout in the 1994 Slovak parliamentary elections was more than 70% overall, it is estimated that turnout among voters aged 18-25 was as low as 20%." *Rock volieb, 1998*

Democracy in the real world

There are as many different forms of democracy as there are democratic nations in the world. No two systems are exactly the same and no one system can be taken as a "model" of democracy. There are presidential and parliamentary democracies; democracies that are federal or confederal or unitary in nature; democracies that make constant use of referenda; ones that involve more consultation, or less, with outside organisations; democracies that use a proportional voting system, and ones that use a majoritarian system – or combinations of the two; and so on.

Each of these systems can lay some claim to being "democratic" in virtue of the fact that they are, nominally at least, based on the two principles above: equality of all citizens, and the right of every individual to some degree of personal autonomy. It is clearly not realistic to regard "autonomy" as meaning that every individual can *do what he or she likes,* but at the least the system, in allocating equal votes to all citizens, recognises that each individual is capable of independent choice and is entitled to have that choice taken into account. After that, a great deal depends on the individual citizens.

Nevertheless, despite the claims of almost every nation in the world to be "democratic", there is no doubt that every democratic system currently in existence is quite capable of being *more democratic* than it is at present, something that each of them is arguably in need of.

Problems with democracy

There is fairly universal concern about the status of democracy at the beginning of the twenty-first century. Much of this is based on the low levels of citizen participation at elections, which appear to indicate a lack of interest and involvement on the part of citizens and which undermine the democratic process in some of the ways that have been discussed.

Although this is undoubtedly a problem, there are other studies which indicate that participation in different forms is actually on the increase – for example, pressure groups, civic initiatives, consultative organs, and so on. These forms of participation are just as essential to the effective functioning of democracy as voter turnout at elections, if not more so. Elections, after all, are a crude way of ensuring that people's interests are accurately represented, and four or five years, which is the normal gap between elections, is a long time to wait to hold the government to account. People have short memories!

There are two further problems that are more intricately connected to the notion of representative democracy, and these concern minority interests. The first problem is that minority interests are often not represented through the electoral system: this may happen if their numbers are too few to reach the minimum level necessary for any representation, or it may more commonly happen because electoral systems often use a "winner-takes-all" system. The second problem is that even if their numbers are represented in the legislative body, they will have a minority of representatives and these may not therefore be able to summon up the necessary votes to defeat the majority representatives. For these reasons, democracy is often referred to as "rule of the majority".

Democracy itself cannot be relied upon to solve the second of these issues. It is perfectly conceivable - and has happened innumerable times - that the majority authorise decisions that are detrimental to the minority. That it is the "will of the people" is no justification for such decisions. The basic interests of minorities as well as majorities can only be safeguarded through adherence to human rights principles, reinforced by an effective legal mechanism – whatever the will of the majority may be.

Key date

10 December
Human Rights Day

"In Northern Ireland we are discussing a new Bill of Rights. I want to link the rights in this bill to the lives of the youngsters in our youth club."

Tara Kinney, Northern Ireland Youth Forum, participant at the Forum on Human Rights Education, 2000.

"Democracy is the theory that the common people know what they want and deserve to get it good and hard."

H.L. Mencken

We fight for:

freedom and human rights, so that every individual, woman and man, can have full political rights without being discriminated against on the basis of class, caste, gender, religion or race.

equality, and against any form of discrimination among individuals; for social justice; for equality between the genders; for equal opportunities and equal access to knowledge.

democracy, based on the principles of freedom and equality, and against authoritarianism, populism and dictatorship; for the right to self-determination, to liberty and freedom of expression for all peoples.

universal solidarity, because we believe in the possibility of collective action for the liberation of individuals.

political solutions to problems, because we believe in the ability of human beings to change the world.

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