

'Democracy is the worst form of Government' – Discuss

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Introduction

Democracy is a political ideology. The literal meaning of Democracy is 'rule by the people'. However, when democracy gets mixed up with governance this is rarely, the case; although supporters of governmental democracy pretend that it is so. Democracy as a form of government is a fallacy – if there is governance over people then there cannot be rule by the people. Due to this paradox the examples of 'democracy' in many modern western countries are infact oligarchies in every detail except name, but people believe that they are free and become apathetic, seeing no further need for revolution. This formation of apathy under conditions of oligarchy makes democracy the worst form of government. This essay will briefly outline the two main ideas of democracy, what representatives are and what role they should play in representative democracy and the ideas for and against democracy culminating in the main reason that democracy is the worst form of government.

Direct Democracy

Direct Democracy can be seen as a 'pure' form of democracy, in that it literally is 'rule by the people'. Direct Democracy is often associated with a form of political organisation that was in practise in the Greek city of Athens from around 500 to 322 BCE, however in Athenian Democracy only males with two Athenian parents were allowed the right to political participation. The key idea behind Direct Democracy is that it is the people that make the decisions in the political process, they do not choose who to rule on their behalf and there is not a separate class of politicians. All people are involved the political process on a regular basis. However, Direct Democracy is next to impossible in large Nation-states due to the level of involvement that is necessary from all people and the sheer number of people that would have to be involved.

Representative Democracy

The form of democratic government that is in most common usage today is that of representative democracy, a form of democracy where people elect others to represent them in decision making processes. It is, basically, a form of rule by professional politicians who are given legitimacy by the people. There are two forms of Representative Democracy: Constitutional Democracy and Majoritarian Democracy. Constitutional Democracy can be defined as "A form of democracy that operates within a clear constitutional framework that both disperses government power and protects minorities and individuals. Majoritarian Democracy can be defined as "A form of democracy that is based on the principle of majority rule and emphasises the general or collective interests of society, rather than particular interests". Representative Democracy has become the more used form of Democracy as it is far easier to manage in large states, especially when compared to the difficulties Direct Democracy would pose on such a scale.

Representatives

As Representative Democracy is the most commonly used form of Democracy it is worth exploring what a representative is. There are two models for representatives, the delegate model and the trustee model. The delegate model holds the idea that a representative should only represent the views of their electorate, use none of their own judgement when deciding on issues and only do what their electorate would want them to. The trustee model was one supported by the Conservative politician Edmund Burke. Burke summed up the trustee model well during a speech to the electorate of Bristol, "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." This means that a representative should use their knowledge to decide of issues rather than just do what they believe the electorate want them to do. In the UK it is the later model that is used for representatives. An example of when representatives have ignored the will of the electorate is on the issue of the death penalty. The majority of MPs (Members of Parliament) do not support and the use of the death penalty, but the majority of voters do. Representatives assume that they have greater knowledge and experience than the electorate and so know what is best to do better than the electorate would in matters of policy making.

Arguments in favour of Democracy as a form of Government

One of the advantages of a Representative Democracy is that political decisions do not have to be made by everybody. People are left with more time to do other things that they need to do in their lives. But they are not totally isolated from the decision making process as they have the opportunity to elect the person they think best represents their views to make their decisions for them.

People can be involved as they wish to be in democracy. There is not, in most countries, a requirement to vote, so it is a choice. But the level of involvement for an individual goes beyond deciding whether to vote or not. People can join political parties, fund the party they support, campaign for their party and run for election. But people's level of involvement is not just limited to voting and party processes, pressure groups are formed to try and put force on governments to influence the decision making process. Pressure groups are especially important as they are not based on party politics but just on one issue.

The main advantage of Democracy as a form of governance and the reason for its success is that power is seen to be legitimate. If people have voted a party into power then that party can be seen to have the right to rule as it has been supported by the people. Regular voting means that legitimacy is constantly transferred or held. This is the idea that puts democracy above Dictatorships and Absolute Monarchies in many people's minds. It makes the system of Government appear to be 'fair'.

Arguments against democracy as a form of government

In the most common form of Democracy, Representative Democracy, power is not held by the people. It is held by a small, elite, ruling class. For example, the UK is a Representative Democracy in which the electorate of over 60 million vote for 646 people to represent them as Members of Parliament in the House of Commons, which is the first chamber of the bicameral legislature. The

second chamber, the House of Lords is made up of hereditary and appointed peers – people who are given power without electoral support, which makes their power illegitimate. This centralisation of power is damaging to the idea of democracy and alienates the people from the decision making processes.

Not only is there a centralisation of power under Representative Democracy but there is also a centralisation of ideologies. This can be seen in the main political parties of the USA and the UK for example. In the USA there are only two main parties. In the UK it is debatable whether there are three main parties or just two but the main parties have been described as ‘the three wings of the same party’. A clear example of this is the Socialist parties that developed during the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century and the success they have had. Rudolf Rocker sums up the situation well when viewing the limited success of socialist parties in Europe *“Participation in the politics of the bourgeois states has not brought the labour movement a hair’s-breadth nearer to Socialism, but, thanks to this method, Socialism has almost been completely crushed and condemned to insignificance... who eats of the state is ruined by it”* With the narrowing differences between parties there is no real choice for the electorate.

The French philosopher Jean-Jacque Rousseau said that the British were only free on Election Day - the rest of the time they were slaves to Parliament. This is, in many ways, true. The only time that the mass of British people get to have their say with the way in which there is run in when an election comes about. Once government has been given legitimacy it is then free to rule over people in any way it sees fit, within reason of course, until the next election takes place. This means that the people have very little true involvement with the political systems that control their lives.

In the UK the party system is funded by the people. Traditionally, Trade Unions give funds to the Labour party, but the Labour party do accept private donations, as do the other two main parties. The problem with this type of funding is that it can often lead to corruption. For example, should Trade Unions expect extra attention to be paid to their point of view because of the contributions they have made to the Labour party? The amount of money that parties get can also influence how well they can run an election campaign. In the four months prior to the 2001 election campaign the Conservative party were given £6million, Labour were given £4million and the Liberal Democrats only received £220,000. The differences in received donations mean that parties with less wealthy supporters do not stand such a great chance as though who do have supporters who are willing to contribute large amounts of money. Another danger of the donations system is that of sleaze. Where individuals can directly influence politicians by contributing large amounts of money to the party in power. An example of this was when Burnie Ecclestone contributed money to the Labour party, who then over ruled a decision to ban tobacco adverts from formula one cars.

Another criticism is that of how representative is Representative Democracy? In the UK over 50% of people are female, yet of the 646 seats in the Houses of Parliament only 125 are held by female MPs. The House of Commons is dominated by white males, which is not representative of society as a whole.

Democracy is the worst form of government

The above reasons against Democracy being a form of government are not what make it the worst form of government, they are flaws in the system, but there is one reason that makes Democracy

the worst form of government. That reason is the one that was mentioned in the introduction to this essay, that Democracy as a form of government is a fallacy. If government is rule by the people then it is contradictory to have rule over the people. Yet this is rarely noticed. People are told that they live in a democracy and so the assumption is made that they are free people and have achieved the height of political advancement. This is not so, a 'Democratic' government is a façade for an oligarchy, this idea was put forward by the anarcho-syndicalist Robert Michels in 1911 in his book *Political Parties*. Michels put forward the idea of the 'Iron Law of Oligarchy', that no matter how democratic an organisation was originally intended to be the moment it is given a hierarchical structure democracy it stops becoming a democracy, "*Who says organization, says oligarchy.*" This idea was earlier noted by John Adams the third American president, "*Democracy never lasts long. It soon wastes, exhausts and murders itself. There was never a democracy yet that did not commit suicide.*" However, the image of Democracy, the idea that political progress is complete is what brings political progress to a halt. People become consumed by apathy and thoughts of revolution against the oligarchy are next to none. If those same people were to be living under an absolute Monarchy or a Dictator, it would be clear that they were not free and history shows that revolutions will often occur against such a regimes, for example the Russian Revolution of 1905, the French Revolution of 1791 and the Hungarian Revolution of 1952.

Conclusion

This essay has briefly outlined the two main ideas of democracy, what representatives are and what role they should play in representative democracy and the ideas for and against democracy culminating in the main reason that democracy is the worst form of government; the ending of revolutionary behaviour is what makes democracy the worst form of government.

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