

## **'Democracy is the worst form of government' Discuss**

**Written by Daniel Newport**

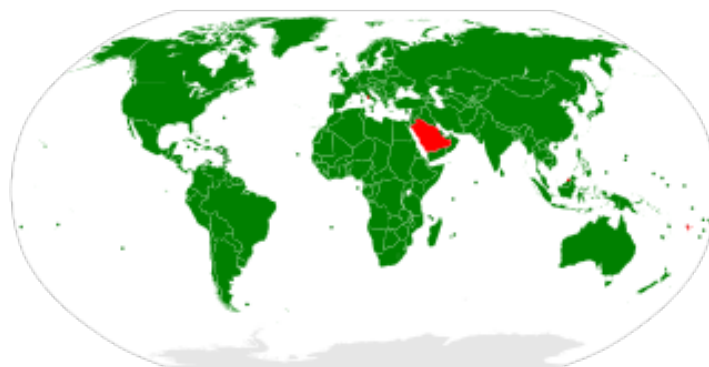
### **Introduction**

Democracy is not the worst form of government. Democracy could be looked at as the best of a bad group. When looking at some other forms that are used, it is easy to see that democracy is one of very few that is concerned about the views of the population and then in turn, lets the population effect the way that they are governed. It is important to recognise that there are large numbers of different definitions on democracy, many different types and that many governments around the world claim to be democratic when they are not.

### **Democracy – Advantages & Defences**

#### **Criticism**

Democracy is a form of government that has more than its fair share of critics. However, this large base of criticism directed towards it is not unjust or unfair. Every form of government is going to have defects and problems that arise, these problems could be small and involve a small group or section of constitution or legislation, or they could be large and threaten to undermine the very ideals the government is based upon. It would be wrong for anyone to assume that there is a perfect form of government. It really depends on the country the form of government is being set up in, who is put in charge and how the form of government moulds with the people and the culture. The vast amount of criticism planted on democracy is due to it being the most popular form of government in the world. This diagram shows those countries who claim to be democratic (shown in green) and those who don't (shown in red). Although not all of these countries shown in green are democratic, with some just claiming they are, this diagram clearly shows the reach and the appeal that democracy presents all over the world.



This criticism and bias makes it difficult to make a fair judgement on the effectiveness and fairness of democracy as a form of government.

#### **Variations**

It should also be recognised that democracy, as well as being a far reaching form of government, is also open to a substantial amount of interpretation. Democracy can be heavily influenced by the country that it is implemented in. Culture, religion, previous governments and the mix of the population can have a large effect on the type of democracy that forms. Just like the political spectrum there are varying degrees of different types, some are rare, some are extreme and others

are more common and mainstream. These differing varieties make it difficult to judge democracy squarely on what is seen in one country, one form of government or one mistake made. The two types that are most common in a democratic society are representative and direct. Both of these are used in the UK. Put basically, Representative democracy is the most common form of democracy, it is based around the idea that the public will vote for a representative or a delegate who will take into account the wants and needs of the public. Direct democracy is almost completely opposite. Instead of people deciding on a representative who will represent them and make decisions, the representatives are cut out and people make political decisions themselves.

These two different variations on democracy have very different ways of operating (i.e. representative democracy is carried out in elections, while referendums are a good example of direct democracy at work), this means again that making a fair judgement is more difficult than it first seems. The sheer amount of different variation means that democracy would be extremely successful in one part of the world and be terribly unsuccessful in another.

### Fair Decision-Making

The basis of democracy is the idea that the supreme power to govern how the country is run is in the hands of the people. People are free to make their decisions themselves or to elect representatives or delegates to make the big decisions for them. Freedom and equality are very important factors in democracy. With these ideals it is natural that the population have a large part in the decision making at every level, local, national or international. No other form of government places responsibility in the hands of the people like democracy does.

### Representatives

The main type of democracy used in the UK is representative democracy. The idea of giving power to the people can be have its downsides. Sometimes it can be impractical to listen to everyone. That's why representatives are elected. Unlike in other forms of government, these representatives use their ideas and expertise to assist the population in making decisions. There aren't many other forms that assist representation of the public like this. The representatives are accountable to the public and this gives the public another dimension of control where they can control the government if they are doing things wrong or unjustly.

### Political Stability

Democracy provides a very solid basis for a government to be built on. Most democracies are built up around a constitution or a set of rules that even those at the very top of the hierarchy wouldn't try and manipulate. These rules are the basic principles and laws of government and help to outline for everyone things like, who can be in charge, for how long, how they get in charge (i.e. the electoral system), how decisions are made and how the general population can make a change to the system. Without these rules forms of government are much more open and defenceless to those who would manipulate it for their own gain. This would always end up with harm being done to people's rights and freedoms.

Although many other forms of government draw up a list of general rules, it seems many use this list as something that is quite insignificant and open to interpretation. Many of these lists seem unfair in

the first place. A good example of this is a monarchy or an aristocracy. These forms have an old and accepted ideal, however when looked at again it is clear that without some form of democracy power is shifted further to one side than the other.

Democracy is one of few forms of government that is rigidly based around this idea.

Political stability is also maintained in the public's ability to remove governments that they do not like. Removing a government in a democracy is done legally and most often through elections. The public's ability to remove a government provides the public with a sense of power of their own. It helps to rid people of uncertainty in politics, when people know they have the chance to get rid of something they don't like they become more confident in politics. It is important that the public know that they will have a reasonably regular chance to change politics. Political stability is insured with this ability.

### Corruption

Corruption is a problem that dogs every form of government; however it has been accepted that the amount corruption in democracy is substantially lower than the amount in other forms of government. Research from bodies such as the World Bank has confirmed this. Corruption in democracy is kept low due to parliamentary and electoral systems, political stability and a firm constitution and freedom of speech and press. These things are partly designed to stop corruption and mostly corruption is prevented. However it is naive to believe that is always the case. There is no escaping corruption on any scale in any form of government.

Corruption is rife in many other forms of government. A lack of structure, guidance and security has made this the case.

### **Democracy – Disadvantages & Problems**

#### Tyranny of the Majority

Tyranny of the majority is one of the most popular phrases associated with criticisms of democratic government. There has always been concern regarding democratic government and this problem. The idea is that democracy is so focussed on looking after the interests of the majority of people that the minorities in society are forgotten, not defended and are even exploited.

This can lead to people feeling they are not represented. People who feel that they are not represented often feel compelled to change their views to fit in with other people; they end up not expressing themselves. This problem can lead to some minorities fading into obscurity and ceasing to exist.

In other forms of governments this problem is often eliminated or is present to a lesser extent. This is due to people not getting such a high level of participation and representatives not listening as intently to their needs. In some forms of government everything is already set out for people, many people get exactly the same treatment. However, in others there is even more indiscriminate treatment of minorities.

#### Short-Term Focus

Democracies allow regular elections. This is to try and help the population move in who they believe will represent them best and move out who won't. In the UK elections are held every 4-5 years and a trend in party behaviour has emerged, it is known as short-term focus. With such a small term in government, parties have been known to drift away from hard policy making and instead fill their time with trying to persuade the public to elect them back for a second term. With short-term focus policies made are likely to bring short term benefits to the public not long term solutions.

With this problem it is clear that democracy is suffering. Those who are being elected in to represent the public are doing a half-hearted job and the wants and needs of the public are not being fully resolved or are not being looked at.

Those forms of governments that don't have regular or any elections do not have this problem.

### Political Stability

Although I have described democracy as being a form of government that it politically stable, there can be exceptions to the rule. The main problem is the excessive stability. A government needs to be flexible and open to change in some way, sometimes this doesn't happen. A government can become excessively stable when a party or group has been in charge for a long time. A good example of this situation is the two-party system that has arisen in the UK over the years. Labour and the Conservatives jostle for position and alternate between leaders and opposition. It is incredibly difficult for a third party to gain any significant power in this situation.

Compared with other forms of government this problem never really arises. Some have no parties to vie for control. Others see a one party system. There may be other parties in this government however there is often no way they can realistically win an election.

### Voter Incompetence/ Voter Apathy

With the extra power given to the people in a democracy there is a risk of poor decisions being made. Depending on the type of democracy there are varying amounts of control for the people. Particularly with direct democracy and the political tools used (e.g. referendums), there is a risk that the inexperience and lack of education on political issues that the public has will cause bad decisions to be made and damage to be done. The lack of voter enthusiasm can also cause bad decisions to be made. In elections if a member of the public doesn't really care they may not vote, they may waste their vote or they would vote for any party. These could damage the government and the country.

Voter apathy can be present in all forms of government elections. Voter apathy tends to present itself in the minorities that do not get fairly represented.

### **Other Forms of Government**

When considering whether democracy is the worst form of government it is important to take into consideration some of the other popular forms and how they compare with democracy.

#### Autocracy

This form of government is based around the idea of a self appointed ruler holding all of the political power. This self appointed ruler is free to govern how they please, whether they form some kind

government or they don't. It is up to them to decide whether the population have any political power at all, it is often decided that they do not. It is a form of government that has become synonymous with tyrants and dictators. This means that often an autocracy is controlled by absolute rule, which is not restricted either by law, rules on government or the people.

Although autocracies can sometimes be particularly brutal they can create a form of government that is very quick at making decisions. These decisions might not be the correct ones but with the added hassle of legitimate elections and consulting the public gone the government can move very quickly. Autocracies don't ask for the support of the population, they demand it. This can also speed government up and can also lead to a very efficient workforce, in many cases people work because they are afraid.

Although autocracies are efficient they are cruel and often have problems with controlling the population. Often there are poor, and sometimes, strained relationships between the population and the government. A 'them and us' mentality sometimes develops. There is a lack of communication and the population doesn't feel very valuable or respected.

When compared with democracy an autocracy's downsides are emphasised. The connection between the government and the population is very different. Within a democracy this relationship is usually quite calm and easy-going; this is because the people are voicing their views and opinions and have an opportunity to change the way they are governed. This can only come with a choice of people or parties to vote in. Within an autocracy there is no choice, many people are unhappy and the relationship between the government and the population is weak.

### Oligarchy

This form of government is based around the idea of power resting with a small group of elite people. These elite few are usually distinguished from others in society by their wealth, intellect, their family, their religion, their military or status (i.e. royalty).

There are a few advantages to an oligarchy. Similarly to an autocracy decisions can be made relatively quickly. Traditionally oligarchies have not given the people much power at all. There is a feeling of supreme superiority in an oligarchy. This lack of public consultation means decisions can be made without hearing the opinions of the public.

Oligarchies although similar to autocracies have the added advantage of being able to have experts in power and avoid some of the pitfalls of having one person in charge. Having such a group would be seen as being slightly fairer.

In theory oligarchy is a good idea. Having the most educated members of society in power seems like the perfect way to achieve very successful and efficient rule. However, much like autocracies, oligarchies can be related to dictatorships and the injustices that go along with this. The needs of the people are not necessarily listened to and the people don't normally have a say in who is ruling them. The lack of opportunity in regards to changing government is common and in extreme cases the people have been known to revolt against the government.

Again, when compared with democracy there is an obvious lack of representation of the people in an oligarchy. There is also a certain amount of risk involved in oligarchies and autocracies when it comes to the exploitation of the people. If the wrong people have been brought in there is often little or no opportunity to change what is going on in government. This is almost the polar opposite in a democracy, whether representative or direct democracy, or through elections or referendums

there are numerous chances to remove administrations that aren't fulfilling their promises or tackling problems.

### Monarchy

This is a form of government that is based around the idea of power being absolutely given to an individual who is also the head of state. There are quite a few different types of monarchies, for example the UK has constitutional monarchy. Another type is elective, in which a king or queen is elected through gaining votes from a specific section of society. However, once elected the monarch still has no obligation to form a government or to listen to the people.

The kind of monarchy that is in control of government is called an absolute monarchy. These absolute monarchies are less common in modern times. With an absolute monarchy the king or queen has complete control over the people's lives. There is no constitution or legislature to restrict the monarch's power in any way; it is a form of government built around the idea of trust.

There are few advantages for an absolute monarchy. Without government and a constitution decisions can be made easily and changes to the people's way of life can be made quickly without any opposition.

Absolute monarchy is a good example of an autocratic form of government. In theory people would have less control over the government than they would in an autocratic government. This is due to the complete absence of any government or parliament.

In comparison with democracy, similar to autocracies and oligarchies, monarchies restrict the abilities, equality and freedoms.

This is the same for the vast majority of other forms of government. Aristocracy, bureaucracy, theocracy, plutocracy and anarchy all struggle to match the advantages of democracy. Many of the same disadvantages arise with all of these forms of government.

### Conclusion

After looking closely at the advantages and disadvantages of democracy as well as some other major forms of government it is clear that democracy is definitely not the worst form of government. Democracy has its faults however after looking at various other forms of government the most important features of an effective government and effective rule are often absent.

Abraham Lincoln said, "You can please some of the people some of the time, and some of the people all of the time, but you cannot not please all of the people all of the time". This quote sums up the difficult situation that democracy finds itself in.