

1.2 What is democracy?

Introduction

The term democracy comes from the Greek – *demos* (meaning ‘the people’) and *kratia* (meaning ‘power’). Literally, therefore, democracy is ‘rule by the people’ or ‘people power’. Some argue, however, that the word *demos* could just as easily be defined as ‘the mob’. This would leave democracy as ‘mob rule’. John Kingdon sees a natural progression from the ‘pure form’ of democracy to the corrupt form of mob rule, in the same way that monarchy can descend into tyranny and aristocracy into oligarchy.

As a term, democracy – like ‘justice’ and ‘freedom’ – has become so widely misused as to become almost meaningless in itself. More commonly, it is qualified.

Different strands

Many writers draw a distinction between what they call ‘representative democracy’ and what is known as ‘direct democracy’.

What is representative democracy?

Edmund Burke, in a speech to his Bristol constituents in 1774, summed up what many see as the essence of representative democracy in Britain.

‘Your representative owes you not his industry only,’ Burke noted, ‘but his judgement; and he betrays you if he sacrifices it to your opinion.’

The Burkeian view is, therefore, that we elect individuals to represent us in Parliament and other assemblies. They then represent our interests to the best of their ability but they are not delegates sent with specific instructions or orders to follow. As a result, our elected representatives might make decisions which are contrary to our wishes.



What is direct democracy?

Direct democracy is said to have its origins in Athens around 500BC, where the 40 000 free men of the city had the right to attend forum meetings at which certain policies could be approved or rejected. The classic modern tool of direct democracy is the **referendum**. In a referendum voters are asked to voice their view on a particular issue. The result of this vote may be binding or advisory, depending on the nature of the referendum, but the question is normally framed by the government of the day. In some countries **initiatives** operate alongside referendums. Through an initiative a predetermined number of registered voters can initiate legislation.

Does direct democracy get in the way of representative democracy?

Some argue that referendums and other forms of direct democracy undermine our system of representative democracy. If we elect representatives to act in our best interests, it is argued, they should not have to come back to us on a regular basis to ask us what we want. Indeed, it is bad for them to do so because . . .

- *in doing so it could be argued that they are abdicating their responsibility to govern.*
- *we have elected them as individuals who we believe are capable of judging the issues on our behalf, and they need the space in which they can do this.*
- *our representatives will often have access to a far better body of information on which to make their judgements and a lot more time in which to do it.*
- *people are likely to make decisions which they see as being in their immediate interest, whereas politicians may be able to make decisions which are unpopular but which are in our long-term interests.*

Others argue that such tools of direct democracy actually help strengthen our representative democracy by . . .

- *helping to focus the mandate on particular issues.*
- *refreshing the mandate several years into a Parliament when circumstances might have changed.*
- *legitimising major constitutional changes that might appear to bind future Parliaments and governments and should not, therefore, be made without explicit public approval.*

NB. Referendums are dealt with more comprehensively in Ch 10.3 and Ch 24.4.

What is liberal democracy?

The essence of liberal democracy is limited government. In a liberal democracy the state stands back from the free market and imposes only minimal regulation. It does, however, preserve basic civil rights (expression, assembly, association, movement etc. – see Ch 14) and allow people to vote in regular free and fair elections. The term liberal democracy is applied to many western democracies.