

What is Democracy?

Presentation by Dr Peter Jepson

Textbook –'Essentials of UK politics' written by A. Heywood [2008]

What is expected?

- Before the class you should have read and précised the relevant parts of the textbook (précis notes will be checked).
- Turn off your mobile.
- Raise your hand to ask a question.
- Annotate your notes.

What is democracy?

- **Winston Churchill** 'Democracy is the worst form of government except all the other forms which have been tried from time to time.'

**What does he mean by that statement?
What other forms of government could exist?**

What do the following mean?

- Monarchy could turn into tyranny.
- Aristocracy could turn into oligarchy.
- Aristotle equated 'democracy' with rule by the many in their own interests - at the expense of the minority.

Types of democracy ...

- Two main forms of democracy '**Direct Democracy**' and '**Representative Democracy**'.
- Classical writers such as Plato and Aristotle experienced '**Direct Democracy**' where small city states are directly governed by the people (e.g. a meeting of all Law students to decide things).

Representative Democracy

- The idea of this is that Citizens elect their representatives who govern on their behalf (class reps on the LSB).
- Thus, nearly all citizens may elect MP's - but they indirectly govern on behalf of the public.

Representative Democracy

- To safeguard against abuses the representative must be accountable to the electorate. How is this achieved?
- What is the difference between a representative and a delegate?
- Is an MP a delegate? Is a member of the LSB a delegate?

Criticisms of Direct Democracy ...

- (1) Only suitable for small states.
- (2) In modern states quick decisions needed - to call all to a meeting takes too long.
- (3) Professional representatives have more time to become involved and informed.

Criticisms of representative democracies

- (1) Rep democracies tend to encourage people to switch off politics - i.e. other than at elections.
- (2) Not directly accountable - wait years for an election and issues get merged and ordinary voters fail to take an interest.

Criticisms of representative democracies

- (3) Representative government seems to be inseparable from political parties, which impose their views on members (is that true?). The party political system encourages people to vote for parties rather than individuals - with the system encouraging people to conform to the opinion of others - rather than speak up for themselves.

Criticisms of representative democracies

- (4) Regardless of their backgrounds representatives tend to lose touch with voters when elected. Spend more time with other reps and lose contact with voters. Thus, they become part of a club and relate to the members of that club. They also develop powers of persuasion which cover up their failures.

Totalitarian Democracies

- It is said that in totalitarian democracies there is one candidate and one party that are allowed to win (example of President Saddam Hussein of Iraq in 2002 - nearly 100% support).

What is the difference between 'Power - Legitimacy and authority' (see pages 7 and 64 of Heywood)?

Break into Political Groups

- Determine what the term 'liberal democracy' means.
- Then determine what type of society/ democracy we live in.
- Try to identify a country in which there is no democracy.

Each political group should report back to the class via a representative.

Democracy in the UK

- Representative democracy in the UK has arrived gradually/recently.
- Prior to 1832 right to vote related to property ownership (excluded women).
- Haphazard - constituencies created at different times (what is a constituency?).
- No secret ballot until 1872.
- Before 1832 village of 'Old Sarum' in Wiltshire had two representatives - Manchester no MP's of its own!

Sexist regime?

- In 1918 - women over 30 given right to vote (men could at 21).
- Was not until 1928 that men and women had equal rights to vote.
- In 1969 right to vote changed to 18 - since 1885 constituencies have been similar in size (Boundary Commission).

Criticisms of UK democracy

- FPTP
- Jean-Jacques Rousseau (French philosopher) jeered that the British are only free to election time (What did he mean by that?).
- Parts of Parliament (e.g. House of Lords) do not face elections. Neither does the Monarch (Define Parliament).

Inadequate legitimacy when reforming ...

- Since 1997 the Government have been reforming Parliament- but we have no idea what they are proposing or doing?
- Quangos exist which undermine the democratic principle (What are Quangos?).
- This inadequacy is called a democratic deficit

Marxist approach.

- Some people (particularly Marxists) argue that any form of democracy in a capitalist system is irrelevant (Ken Livingstone: "*If voting changed anything - they would abolish it.*").
- The basis of this argument is that the real power in society does not rest with governments - but with owners of the dominant economic powers (owners of business and the media are not elected).

Break into Pressure Groups ...

- One group will argue that the UK does operate within a democracy - the other will argue it does not.
- After discussion, students will elect a representative of the group and they will present the groups argument to the entire class (using the roving keyboard).

Referendums ...

- What is a referendum?
- Is a referendum indicative of direct or indirect democracy?
- Could/should a government ignore a referendum result?

UK referendums ...

- 1973 Northern Ireland's membership of the UK.
- 1975 UK membership of the EEC (EU).
- 1979 Devolution for Scotland & Wales.
- 1997 Devolution for Scotland & Wales.
- 1998 Devolution for Northern Ireland.
- 1990 onwards - elected mayors.

Arguments 'against' referendums ...

- Associated with totalitarian rule?
- Questions can be phrased in ways that influence voters.
- People can be swayed by emotional rhetoric.
- Even if equal funding is provided - people tend to follow the best-trusted politicians.

Arguments 'against' referendums ...

- The time of the referendum can suit the ruling party.
- In other EU states, a vote that does not suit the ruling party often results in another vote.
- People do not vote on just that issue - influenced by economy etc.

Arguments 'for' referendums

- Form of direct democracy
- Encourages political participation
- A check on elective dictatorship
- Can provide a clear answer to a specific question.
- Unites divided parties

Arguments 'for' referendums

- Deals with flaws in the mandate theory
- Proves a mandate for controversial issues.
- Device for resolving controversial moral issues (abortion mandate).
- A form of entrenchment
- Legitimises important decisions affecting the constitution.

The rise of apathy in the UK.

- Electoral turnout in 1992 - 77.7%.
- Electoral turnout in 1997 - 71.5%.
- Electoral turnout in 2001 below 60%.
- (2010 was about 66%)

Low voter turnout could suggest govt satisfaction.

It could also suggest a loss of interest in politics and/or a disdain for the people who stand for Parliament.

- So what do we do about it? Email? Pop idol?

Making it easier to vote ...

- In 2002 Cabinet Office published - '*In the Service of Democracy*' with the intent of making it easier to vote.
- Possible options - vote via email - on a Sunday - postal votes.

Compulsory Voting

- Fine a person who does not vote - allowing them to tick 'none of the above'.
- If they are forced to vote in say a General Election they may do so in local (habit etc).
- Australia have compulsory voting and in 1998 the UK Parliaments 'Home Affairs Select Committee' expressed a desire for a wider public debate
- What are the problems with this idea?

For the next lesson

- Compile a list of the reasons both for and against compulsory voting