

Rallying For Democracy

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What is Democracy?

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Democracy is a system of political governance whose decision-making power is subject to the controlling influence of citizens who are considered political equals. A democratic political system is inclusive, participatory, representative, accountable, transparent and responsive to citizens aspirations and expectations. Fundamentally, it means a government of, by and for the people.

Democracy is a principle whereby people in a country freely elect representatives who make laws and govern with popular support. A democratic government also implies that the people can change a government if they are dissatisfied with it, which means that power is derived from the consent of the majority and that government acts according to the will of the majority.

The term democracy is derived from two ancient Greek words demos (the people) and kratos (strength); power of the people.

How democracy works

Democracy, and especially liberal democracy, necessarily assumes a sense of shared values in the demos (otherwise political legitimacy will fail). In other words, it assumes that the demos is in fact a unit.

One argument for democracy is that by creating a system where the public can remove administrations, without changing the legal basis for government, democracy reduces political uncertainty and instability, and assures citizens that however much they may disagree with present policies, they will be given a regular chance to change those who are in power, or change policies with which they disagree. This is juxtaposed to a system where political change takes place through violence of the powerful against the weak(er).

Free elections alone are not sufficient for a country to become a true democracy; the culture of the country's political institutions and civil service must also change.

A successful democratic political culture implies that the losing parties and their supporters accept the judgment of the voters, and allow for the peaceful transfer of power. This form of political legitimacy implies that all sides share common fundamental values. Voters must know that the new government will not introduce policies they find totally unacceptable. Shared values, rather than democracy as such, guarantee that.

All forms of government depend on their political legitimacy, that is, their acceptance by the population. Without that, they are little more than a party in a civil war, since their decisions and policies will be resisted, usually by force.

In practice, democracies do have specific limits on specific freedoms. In democratic theory, the common justification for these limits is that they are necessary to guarantee the existence of democracy, or the existence of the freedoms themselves.

Liberal democracy is, strictly speaking, a form of representative democracy where the political power of the government is moderated by a constitution which protects the rights and freedoms of individuals and minorities (also called constitutional liberalism). The constitution therefore places constraints on the extent to which the will of the majority can be exercised. In any case, institutional protection for specific minority rights limits the democratic power of the majority, on those specific issues, and can not in itself resolve a conflict between the two groups. Democracies without protection of minority rights are now often called illiberal democracies.