

Hello and Welcome to *Taking the Party out of Politics!*

This is a podcast about understanding how politics is supposed to work, ...
... why it isn't working as well as it should be working, ...
... and what we might be able to do about it.

Because:

by understanding a little bit more clearly *how* things are supposed to work,
and *why* they are a bit messed up,
we *might* be able to get things to work a *bit better*. Perhaps even a *lot better*.

This is **not** a podcast about Party Politics.

This is about politics *without* the political parties. Literally, *Taking the Party out of Politics*.

This is about Politics. Not *Party* Politics. Just *Politics*.

It is about the systems which get us a government, and about how effective those systems are at delivering *good* government (such as good *planning*, good *organisation*, and generally *delivering* the things we need). This is a podcast about how the systems are supposed to work, whether you are left-wing *or* right-wing.

And this podcast is about

understanding: what is supposed to happen.

understanding: why it isn't always happening in the way it is supposed to.

And it is about

understanding: what sort of things we might do to make things better.

This is Season 1, in which we are taking a look at how government is *supposed* to work, from the perspective of us – the voters.

In Season 2, we will be looking at how government is supposed to work, from the perspective of someone trying to get elected, and then trying to do a good job once they are elected. That's where Political Parties can really get in the way.

Finally, in Season 3, we will be looking at what we might be able to do, to make things work a bit better.

In the introduction, we had an overview of what the issues are, and a general idea of the route we are going to take through this. Last time, in Episode 2, we started to think about why we have a government at all, and the tacit – perhaps unspoken – agreement which exists between:

- those who do the governing, and
- those who agree to be governed

(what we call the *Social Contract*) – such as the exchange of our good behaviour and our taxes, in return for our safety and for the public services we all need.

This is Episode 3. Today we are going to have a look at some different possible political systems, and use that to explore what we mean by the word 'Democracy', along with other ideas, such as consideration for others and respect for minorities. Then we will move from there to understand the particular *form* of democracy which we use.

Because, though we might blithely use the blanket term 'Democracy', we actually have a fairly specialised form of 'Democracy'.

The system we have is actually more accurately referred to as: '*Representative Democracy*'.

But, what does that word 'Representative' actually mean, in this context?

What does it actually mean in practice?

We could certainly ask ourselves whether our government represents us.

Is our government a good representation of who we are?

Is it a good representation of what we want?

Does it represent our needs accurately?

What do we actually mean, when we use terms like 'Democracy' or '*Representative Democracy*'?

So, let's get started ...

From Democracy to Representative Democracy

Let's have a quick Review of where we have got to so far...

In Episode 2, we talked about *The Social Contract*

So ... we understand that societies function because the members of those societies work together, in a sort of unspoken agreement that some compromises are worth making, (behaving with respect for others, paying taxes), in return for certain advantages (communal services, safety). An unspoken agreement, but one which is understood to be there, even if we don't think about it in those terms; at least not all of the time.

We call that implicit agreement *The Social Contract*.

The *Social Contract* gives us security and good laws.

And that allows us to live safely, and to live well.

OK. Perhaps not always as well as we might do.

But to live better than we would do – if we were all just acting completely independently.

There are lots of interesting questions to explore about how good our Social Contract is, in practice.

Are the rules by which we have to live fair for everyone? Are the expectations placed upon us reasonable, in return for the benefits which we get from being part of society?

If we were going to design a social contract today, would we design it like this?

Probably not. After all, this is just where we happen to have ended up. It's not as though we ended up here because, at some point when prehistoric humans set up the first permanent villages, everybody agreed that in the 21st Century we were going to have mortgages, tax bills, social security and speed limits.

And, perhaps very importantly, a contract has two sides.

It's not just about us, the governed.

It's also about the people who do the governing – in our case, that's our elected government, our *Representative Democracy*, but in other cases it could be a King, or a President, or any one of a number of other forms of government.

It doesn't matter what the form of government is, there are two sides to the Social Contract.

Yes, we agree to be governed. We agree to follow the rules. We agree to live up to the expectations which are placed upon us, even if there aren't explicit rules about it.

But those who are doing the governing also have to live up to their expectations.

And, do they? Do our governments live up to the expectations we should have of them?



So, how does that work?

How do we manage that *Social Contract*, in a way which benefits us all, not just the leaders or the rulers.

In fact, what do we do if the laws are not good?

Throughout history (and almost certainly before history was ever recorded), there have been different answers to this question, from pressuring a ruler to change their mind, to killing an unpopular king, to civil war, to revolution.



In the modern world, many countries organise things in what is called a 'Democracy'.

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1.1.1. Democracy

So, let's start at the beginning.

What is democracy? A relatively small word, but one which carries many, many different meanings, for many, many different people. Not least for the different assumptions which might be placed on the use of the term.

Some might speak of 'bringing' Democracy to countries which don't have either a democratic political system; or to countries and people who haven't developed all the habits and customs which go with making it possible for a Democratic System to bumble along.

After all, in even the countries with the most modern democratic systems, there have been problems.

And there continue to be problems.

It *sort* of works. Some of the time; perhaps even most of the time.

It might be, as they say, better than all the alternatives; but it is not necessarily great.

Or easy. Or simple.

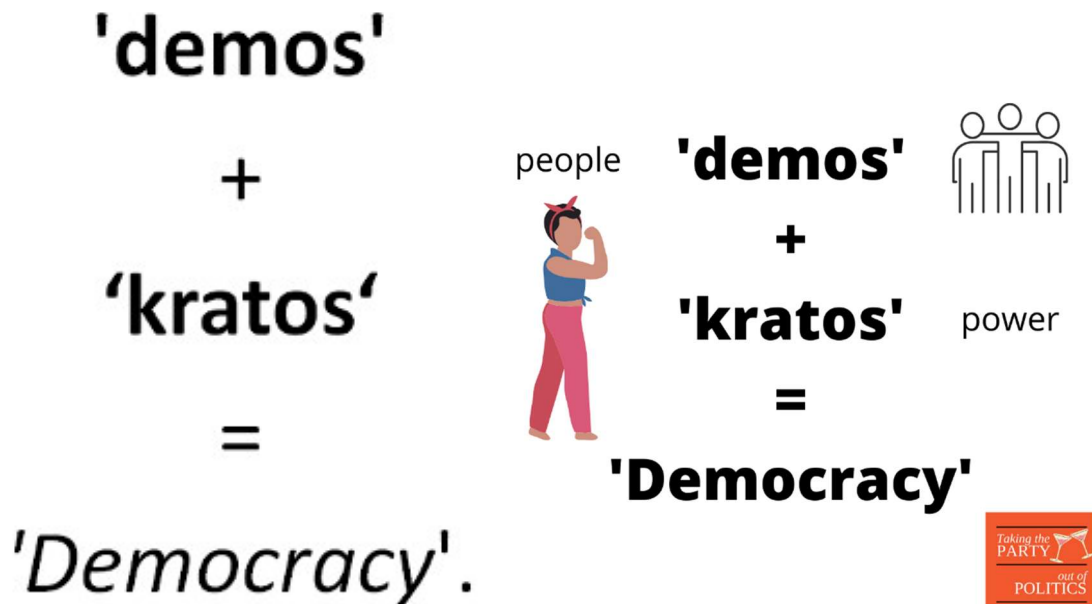
What **IS** simple is to look at where the word comes from.

The word 'Democracy' comes from two Greek words: '*demos*' and '*kratos*'.

'*Demos*' means 'people', and '*kratos*' means 'power'.

So, '*Demos*' + '*kratos*' = '*Democracy*'.

'*Democracy*' means that the people have the power.



1 person

What does this actually mean in practice?

Well, if it's just me, deciding where I want to go for a walk, it's up to me where I decide to go.



2 people

If there are two of us, we might discuss it together. We might think about things like how much time we have. How energetic we are feeling. Whether there is anything we want to get back to watch on TV ... and agree where we go for our walk.

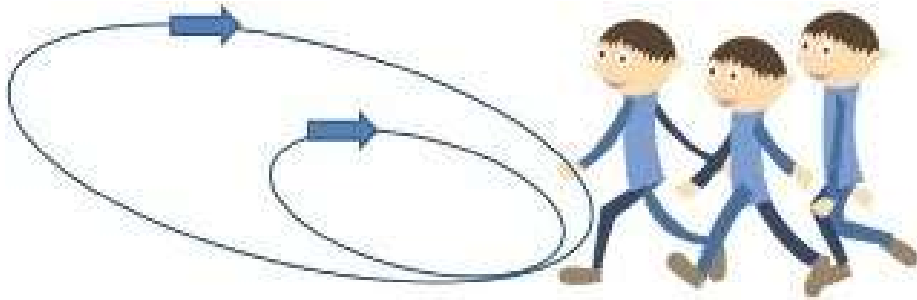


3 people

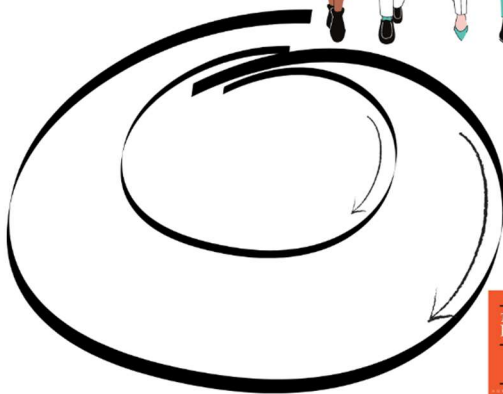
If there are three of us, we might all agree, after a similar discussion, and all set off together.

However, two of us might want to go for a long walk, and one might want to go on a short walk.

Well, that's not a problem, it's a democracy, and most people (the majority) – 2 out of 3 – want to go for a long walk.



Long Walk? or Short Walk?



And that's Democracy

So (at least, in this imaginary situation, wherein we have all somehow committed to going together for some sort of walk), a long walk it is.

For all of us.

And that's Democracy.

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1.1.2. Majorities and respecting minorities

Review so far

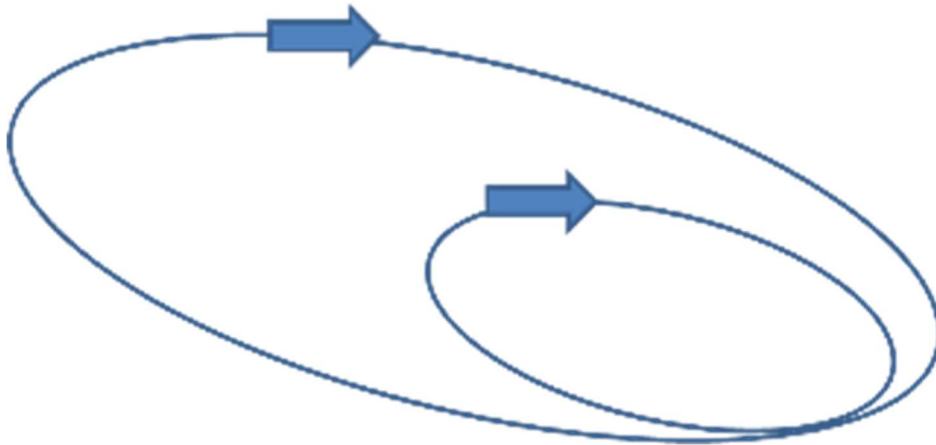
So ... that's democracy for you.

No one was telling us what to do.

The decision – long walk or short walk – was completely up to us.

No one who was not going for a walk was involved.

However, once we had a decision – a majority decision – then we all had to go along with it.



Hmm.

But what about the person who might not have wanted to go for the long walk?

Or for the short walk?

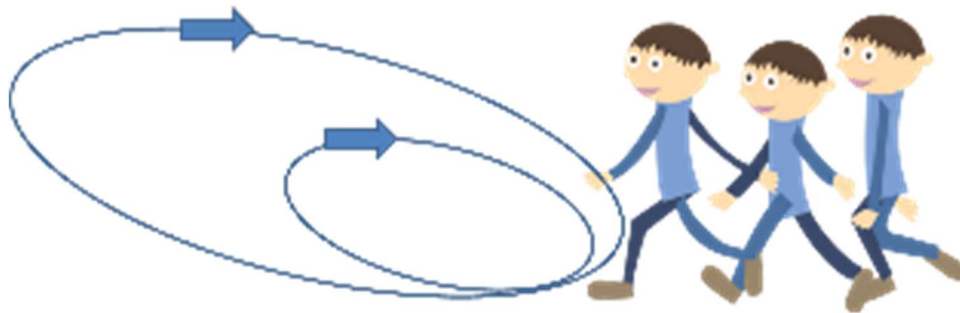
Yes: what about **Respecting minorities**?

That's exactly the right next question....

Now, obviously, in a real democracy, people who want to go for a short walk are not forced to go for a long walk.

Wherever possible, we respect minorities, and people can do more or less whatever they want.

In pretty much all democratic societies, the working arrangement is that you can do whatever you want to do ... AS LONG AS IT DOESN'T (ADVERSELY) AFFECT EVERYONE ELSE.



We might describe this as being free to do whatever we want, up to the point where what we want to do might start to restrict someone else's freedom.

You can play your music as loudly as you want – up to the point where it is disturbing your neighbour. And, yes, the person in the car, stuck outside in the rush hour, where I can feel the bass from your stereo through the walls of my building! Yes, that means you. Just because you may think that your music is cool, making me listen to it (and, especially making me listen to part of it, either the bass from a car stereo, or the TSS TSS TSS from your earphones if they are too loud), making me listen to your music isn't cool. Even if I could hear it all, it wouldn't be cool. Even if I liked your taste in music, and I could hear it all clearly, it still isn't cool to make me listen to it just because you want to listen to it. And making me listen to it doesn't make you look cooler. It just makes you look self-obsessed, and a bit desperate.

OK, OK, calm down, Andrew.

Yes, OK, I have a bit of a thing about people who play their music too loudly. Sorry about that.

But the point is valid.

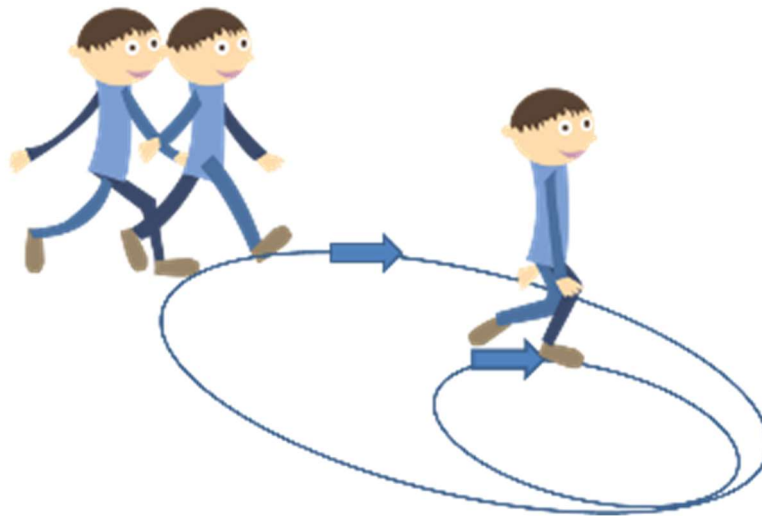
You are free to do pretty much whatever you want, up to the point where what you are doing starts to impact on someone else's freedom. For example, my freedom to sleep in peace....

Long Walk, Short Walk

So, let's go back to the walk.

If two of us want to go for a long circular walk, and one just wants to go for a short circular walk, and we all meet up back at the bus later on, then that's fine.

Your (minority) short walk is not affecting my (majority) long walk – although you might find that you have to wait for the majority to get back, if you just went for a short walk.



Long Walk?
or
Short Walk?



**Respecting
Minorities**

People who want to go for
a short walk are not forced
to go for a long walk

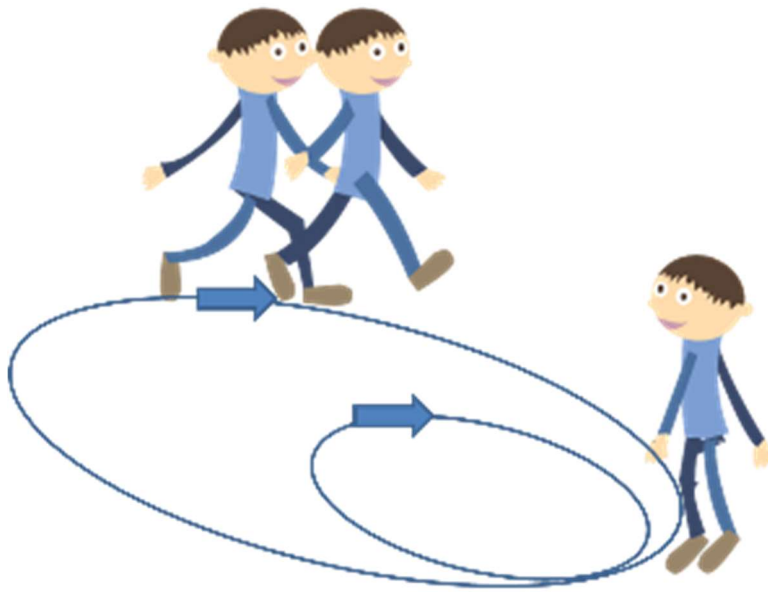


A bit of give and take

Because what you can't do, after your short walk, is just drive off and leave us.
You have to wait for us.

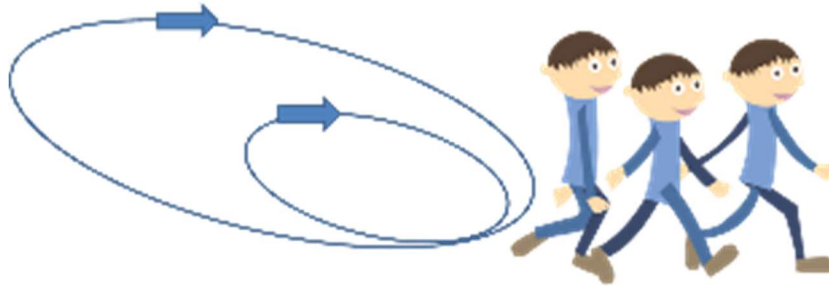
And if the walking boots had been on the other feet, and the majority had wanted just a short walk, the minority can't FORCE the majority to wait around.

Well, at least ... not for too long.



In practice, we might actually be a bit flexible, because we understand that next time it might be us, and we would want others to be a bit flexible with us!

(If you remember back to the last episode, this is pretty much like the idea which the political philosopher John Rawls was talking about when he described the 'Original Position'. We would want the rules to be set up so that they would be fair, or at least mostly fair, at least most of the time, whether we ended up finding ourselves in the minority or in the majority, all of the time, some of the time, or even never any of the time at all).



A bit of tolerance and flexibility (a bit of give and take) can go a long way!

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1.1.3. Alternatives to Democracy

Review so far

So ...

In a Democracy, the people have the power, and the majority decides what is going to happen.

But, in practice...

A bit of flexibility and tolerance means that not everyone has to do exactly the same thing, as long as the alternatives aren't too disruptive.



Because, if the minority is requiring the majority to fit in with what they minority wants - especially if it is in a way which adversely affects the majority - well, that's not democracy anymore.

In fact, looking at alternatives to democracy is a useful way of understanding what a democracy is.

Let's start with ***Aristocracy***

If there is a minority which is setting the rules, then we would probably call that an aristocracy. Particularly if the group which sets the rules has inherited its rule-setting power from their parents.

One group in society has all the power.



Then there is ***Dictatorship***

If it is a single person who is setting the rules, then we might call that person a dictator, and we would be living in a dictatorship.

If we called our dictator a king (or queen), and we allowed their children to be our dictator after their death, then it would be a monarchy.

If it is just a few people who have all the power (for example, just the rich people), then it is an ***oligarchy***.



Oligarchy often sounds as though it has something to do with *oil* – particularly because we have recently heard the term ‘Russian Oligarch’, and we might have some sort of idea that many of them obtained their wealth through something to do with oil (and gas). But, actually, it has nothing to do with oil (well, not necessarily: some oligarchs may have made their money from dubious oil deals, but that’s another story).

The Greek word ὀλίγος (*olígos*) actually just means ‘few’. So, rule by the few.

So far, I think that we would all recognise that rule by a dictator, or rule by oligarchs, or rule by aristocrats – none of those is what we would understand as ***Democracy***. But, these are all perfectly possible systems of government.

There would still be a Social Contract (at least an implied one).

Taxes in return for public services, such roads and drains.

Good behaviour in return for safety – the safety to get on with stuff, living, making a living, meeting up with friends, and so on.

And there are lots of other possible systems...

And so on. There are lots of possible variations.

One of my favourites is used to describe a time when it was said that the prostitutes and other courtesans who lived and worked in the Vatican actually held all the power.

That was called a *Pornocracy*!



Or, if you prefer something more timeless, a *Kleptocracy* is when officials or a ruling class take advantage of corruption to extend their personal wealth and political power - typically at the expense of everyone else, sometimes without even pretending to be honest!



Selfish politicians?

What?

Surely not!

If you like unusual words for things, then you might like the word: **Kakistocracy**.

This is a word for anyone who has ever thought that their government was particularly useless, or clueless.

A **Kakistocracy** is Government by the least qualified or worst people.

Some of us might even think, at least at some times, that our governments are just filled with **Snollygosters** (people who have intelligence but no principles, especially politicians), who spend too much time **Fudgelling** (giving the impression of working but actually doing nothing). As has been said before, you might think that; I couldn't possibly comment.

But, is there any point in getting all **Uhtceare** about it? (that means Lying awake and worrying about the day ahead).

We are all **Grumbletonians** at times (that means People who are angry or unhappy with the government). We might think that our government is filled with people who are merely **Ultracrepidarian** (that describes people who give opinions about topics they know nothing about). Or even that our governments are just filled with **Snollygosters** (Remember? That was people who have intelligence but no principles, especially politicians), who spend too much time **Fudgelling** (giving the impression of working but actually doing nothing), or even **Twatting** (no, I'm not being rude – well, not in the way you might at first think – because that actually means gossiping idly about unimportant things – even though I have always assumed that it referred to using certain Social Media channels).

But on the other hand, lying awake and worrying about the day ahead (Uhtceare, remember?) isn't actually going to change anything.

That's why we are exploring our understanding about how things are supposed to work. So that we can work out how to make them work better.

That idea in itself might give you a certain **Shivviness**.
That refers to the uncomfortable feeling of wearing new underwear.

But there is no time like the present.

If we allow ourselves to **Perendinate** (which is To put off until the day after tomorrow), that will merely leave us feeling **Philogrobilized** (Which is sort of having a hangover but without actually drinking).

Or even **Frobly-mobly**ⁱ.

(No. I'm not going to explain that one. You can probably work it out, but if not, look it up!).

So, let's push on. And let's get to the point where we might be able to look at how to make things better.

Anyway, where were we?

So ... would the Alternatives (to Democracy) be any better?

There are advantages

Well, there are advantages – at least in terms of decision making.

A dictator might (if he or she were sensible) take advice before making a decision, but in the end, the decision comes down to just one person.

In a democracy, it can be tiresome to have to ask everyone what they want to do, perhaps having to persuade different people to agree with things.

It all takes time.

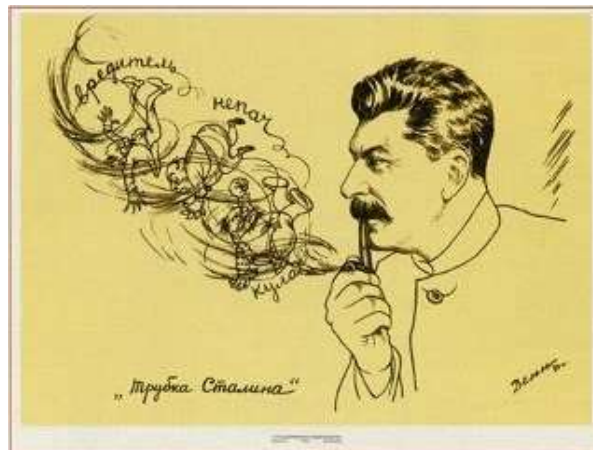


Some people like being led

In fact, some people, at least some of the time, actually quite like to be told what to do. They like not having to think about complicated questions.

Even mean dictators can sometimes be seen - at least by some of the people for some of the time - as a sort of father figure, guiding the people for the best.

For at least some of the time, for at least some of the people, this was true for Stalin (for example): even though he was also sending potential political challengers to forced labour camps where they were almost certain to die.



Some people (and I am not suggesting that everyone felt like this; not for a moment), but some people like the clarity which strong leadership provides. It may not be great, but you know where you stand.

Well, I know that doesn't apply to me.

And, the fact that you are listening to this means that it almost certainly doesn't apply to you.

Certainty is all very well.

But it has to be a good certainty.

Not just a certainty that you'd better keep your head down and not get noticed, or you might get sent to a prison camp.

- Simple
- Not your choices



Dictator?

...Or...

Democracy?



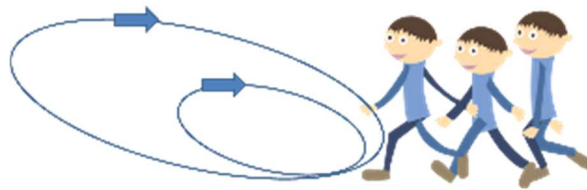
- Your choices
- Complicated

So, we mostly prefer to be free

On the whole, we tend to prefer to have more control over decisions which affect us.

Or, at least, we like to believe that we have some control over such decisions.
We might, as a majority, mostly prefer long walks.

But if, on the third day, we want just a short walk, then we want to be able to choose a short walk.



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1.1.4. Representative Democracy

So, if dictatorships are more efficient at making decisions, but perhaps (at least some of those decisions are) the decisions we don't want, how do we organise a democracy to reach decisions more efficiently.

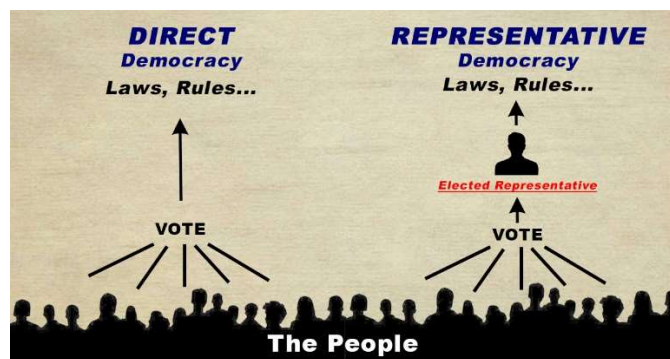
We can't ask everyone's opinion about every little decision all the time.

The solution which most democratic societies use is to have some form of *Representative Democracy*.

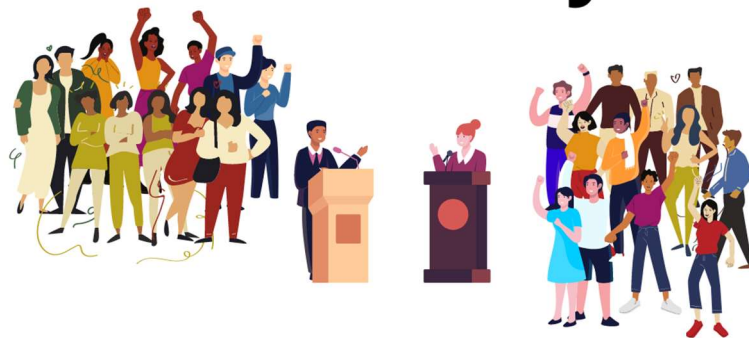


For example, in a country of 50 million people, each group of a hundred thousand people would choose one of their group to represent the other 99,999.

Then just the 500 representatives would get together, to decide what to do.



Representative Democracy



Elected Representatives
get together
to decide what to do

Or perhaps all 50 million would elect one president, who would then take all the decisions.

If the representatives were not making good decisions, then each 99,999 could select a different representative.

Or if the president were not doing so, then or the whole 50 million could select a different president.

Hmm. Can you imagine a president who was not doing a good job not getting re-elected? I wonder ...



Anyway.

That's the idea. At least.

Do a good job = get re-elected.

Don't do a good job = someone else gets elected instead.

In practice, there are quite a few challenges - not least the very word '*representative*'.

Is there anyone who can truly *represent* the views of even a majority of the population which has elected them?

Well.

We will come back to that.

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* * *

So ... next time, on *Taking the Party out of Politics* ...

Next time, we will explore more of the detail of how all of that is supposed to work, taking a path from *Representative Democracy* through to *Party Politics*.

* * *

For now, thank you for listening.

If you have enjoyed this podcast, then I hope that you will take the time to tell your friends.

And perhaps you could also take a moment to give us a rating wherever you found us – that not only helps other people to find us; it also just really makes us feel appreciated. 😊

That would be great. Thank you.

ⁱ Neither well nor unwell.