

What is Democracy? Why Democracy?

What is Democracy?

Democracy is a form of government in which the rulers are elected by the people. People choose their government by elections. In this way, it is different from other forms of government.

Some examples of how Democracy is different are

- In Myanmar there is army rule. The rulers are not elected by the people. People had no role in choosing the government.
- Dictators like Augusto Pinochet of Chile are not elected by the people.
- In monarchies such as Saudi Arabia, the king is the ruler not because the people have chosen, but because they are born in a royal family.

Features of Democracy

The democracy has the following features

- Rulers are elected by the people who take all the major decisions.
- Elections offer a choice and fair opportunity to the people to change their current rulers.
- This choice and opportunity is available to all the people on an equal basis.
- It is a form of government where the elected leaders have to do some functions and respect some rights of the citizen.

Chapter Syllabus

- What is Democracy?
- Features of Democracy
- Why Democracy?
- Broader Meanings of Democracy

The given features of democracy can be understood through the following examples:

Major Decisions by Elected Leaders

General Musharraf's rule of Pakistan from 1999 will give us one important feature of democracy.

Case of Pakistan

- In Pakistan, General Pervez Musharraf led a military regime in October 1999. He overthrew a democratically elected government and declared himself the Chief Executive of the country. Later, he changed his designation to President.
- In 2002, he organised a referendum¹ in the country that granted him a five year extension. According to Pakistani media and human rights organisations the referendum was based on malpractices and fraud.
- In August, 2002, Musharraf issued a Legal Framework Order that amended the Constitution of Pakistan. According to this order, the President can dissolve the national or provincial assemblies.
- The work of the civilian Cabinet² was supervised by a National Security Council dominated by military officers. Elected representative had some power, but the final power was in the hands of military officers and General Musharraf himself. This condition can not be termed as people's rule.

From this the first feature of democracy is clear that in democracy the final decision making power must rest with those people who are elected.

Free and Fair Electoral Competition

This feature of democracy can be understood from the cases of China and Mexico.

Case of China

- The members of China's Parliament called *Quanguo Renmin Daibiao Dahui* (National People's Congress) are elected by the people after every five years.
- The National People's Congress has the power to appoint the President of the country.
- The National People's Congress has nearly 3,000 members elected from all over China. Some members are elected by the army.
- Before constituting elections, a candidate needs the approval of the Chinese Communist Party. Only its members or members of eight smaller parties associated with the communist party are allowed to contest only.

¹Referendum is a direct and universal vote in which an entire electorate is invited to vote on a particular proposal. Cabinet: The committee of senior ministers responsible for controlling government policy.

Case of Mexico

- Mexico became independent in 1930. It holds elections after every six years to elect its President. It has never been under military or dictator's rule.
- But till 2000, all the Presidential elections were won by the PRI (Institutional Revolutionary Party). Opposition parties criticised but never managed to win. PRI used dirty tricks to win the elections like forcing people to vote for PRI, shutting polling booths at the last minute, etc.

In both the cases of China and Mexico, elections do not offer the people any serious choice. These are not fair elections. Holding elections of any kind is not sufficient.

Thus, another feature of democracy is that a democracy must be based on a free and fair election, where those currently in power have a fair chance of losing.

One Person, One Vote, One Value

The Principle of Universal Adult Franchise is accepted all over the world. However, there are many examples which deny the equal Right to Vote. For example,

- In Saudi Arabia, till 2015 women do not have the Right to Vote.
- El Salvador has made its citizenship rules in such a way that people belonging to Russian minority find it difficult to get the Right to Vote.
- In Fiji, the electoral system is such that, the vote of an indigenous Fijian has more value than that of an Indian-Fijian.

Democracy is based on a fundamental principle of political equality. This gives us the third feature of democracy that in a democracy, each adult citizen must have one vote and each vote must have one value.

Rule of Law and Respect for Rights

Case of Zimbabwe

- Zimbabwe attained independence from White minority rule in 1980. From then onwards, the country has been ruled by a party ZANU-PF which led the freedom struggle.
- The party leader, Robert Mugabe, has been the President of the country since independence.
- Elections are always won by this party through violence and harassment of the opposition politicians, workers and journalists.

- Protests against the President were illegal and the government does not consider court judgments which were against it. Thus, there is no rule of law and citizen's rights are not respected. Robert Mugabe was forced out of office in 2017.

- The state should respect the basic rights of citizens, like freedom of expression, freedom of protest and freedom to take political action.
- Further, these rights should be protected by the judiciary whose orders should be obeyed by all.

There are some conditions that apply to the way a government is run after the elections.

- A democratic government cannot do whatever it likes, simply because it has won an election.
- It has to respect some basic rules or we can say it has to respect some guarantees to the minorities.
- Every office holder has certain rights and responsibilities assigned by the constitution and the law.
- Each of them are accountable not only to the people, but also to other independent officials.

Thus, another feature of democracy is that a democratic government rules within limits set by constitutional law and citizen's rights.

Check Point 01

- In which form of government, rulers are elected by the people?
- In 2002, Pervez Musharraf held a in the country that granted him a five year extension.
- Which country do not has a democratic government-China or India.
- In 2015, which country gave no right to women for voting?
- Robert Mugabe was thrown out of power.

Why Democracy?

Arguments against Democracy

- Leaders keep changing in a democracy. This leads to instability.
- Democracy is all about political competition and power play. There is no scope for morality³.
- Many people have to be consulted in a democracy which leads to unnecessary delays.

- Elected leaders do not always know the best interests of the people which leads to bad decisions.

- Democracy leads to corruption, as it is based on elected competition.

- Ordinary people do not know what is good for them so they may not be able to decide anything properly.

- Democracy leads to frequent changes in leadership. Sometimes this can set back big decisions and affect the government's efficiency.

- Democracy ensures that people can take their decisions. But this does not guarantee that their decisions will be good. People can make mistakes.

The above mentioned arguments show that democracy may not be the ideal form of government.

Arguments for Democracy

- Democracy is better than any other form of government in responding to the needs of the people. Democracy requires that the rulers have to attend to the needs of the people.

- Democratic government is more accountable form of government.

- Democracy is based on consultation and discussion which reduces the possibility of taking hasty and irresponsible decisions. Thus, democracy improves the quality of decision-making.

- Democracy provides a method to deal with differences and conflicts. Only in a democracy, different groups can live with one another peacefully. In a diverse country like India where people are from different religion and language, democracy keeps our country together.

- Democracy enhances the dignity of citizens. In democracy, the poor and the least educated have the same status as the rich and the educated, because democracy is based on the principle of political equality.

- Democracy allows us to correct our own mistakes.

- In democracy, either the rulers have to change their decisions or the rulers can be changed. From the above arguments in favour of democracy, we can conclude that democracy cannot give us everything, but it is clearly better than any other form of government.

³ Morality: Principles concerning the distinction between right and wrong.

An Example : Comparing Democracies of India and China

The worst recorded famine in the world was the 1959-1961 China's famine. In this, around 3 crore people died. During the same period, the economic condition of India was similar to that of China, but India did not have any kind of famine. According to economists, this was due to different government policies in India and China.

As India is a democratic country, its government responded differently to food scarcity. Due to this, no large-scale famine has ever affected independent India. If China (no had free press, opposition party, not like India to criticise the government, so many people would not have died in the famine. This example tells why democracy is considered as the best form of government.

Broader Meanings of Democracy

The most common form of democracy is representative democracy. In this, the majority of people rule through their elected representatives.

This becomes necessary because

- Modern democracies involve such a large number of people that it is physically impossible for them to sit together and take collective decisions.
- The citizen does not have the time, the desire or the skills to take part in all the decisions, therefore representatives are needed.

Democratic Decision-Making

A democratic decision involves consultation with and consent of all those people who are affected by that decision.

Powerful and non-powerful people should have the same role in taking the decisions. This can apply to a government or a family or any other organisation.

Thus, democracy is a principle that can be applied to any sphere of life and can take many forms.

In a democracy, every citizen must be able to play an equal role in decision-making. For this, an equal right to vote is not sufficient. Every citizen needs to have equal information, basic education, equal resources and a lot of commitment.

Every democracy has to try to realise the ideals of democratic decision-making. Every democracy requires a constant effort to save and strengthen democratic forms of decision-making.

Check Point 02

1. A common problem with democracy is that it often leads to as it is based on electoral competition.
2. A government is a more accountable form of government.
3. Which is the most common form of democracy?
4. In a democracy, consultation and consent of all the people is needed for what?

SUMMARY

- Democracy is a form of government in which the rulers are elected by the people.
- Features of democracy are
 - Rulers are elected by the people.
 - Decision-making power rests with those who are elected by the people.
 - It must be based on free and fair elections.
 - Each adult citizen must have one vote and each vote should have one value.
 - Its government rules within the limits which are set by constitutional laws and citizens' rights.
 - Decision-making is often delayed because a large number of people need to be consulted.
- Merits of Democracy are
 - A democratic government is more accountable to the people.
 - As a large number of people are consulted in the decision-making process, democracy improves the quality of the decisions made.
 - It provides a method to deal with conflicts and differences.
 - Democracy enhances the status of the people.
- Demerits of Democracy are
 - Elected leaders may not be aware about the best decisions for the people.
 - Involvement of electoral competition in a democracy gives rise to corruption.
 - Ordinary people may not understand the meaning of collective good and hence they should not be made a part of the decision-making process.