

Dear students,

Thus far we will examine the drawbacks and limitations of democracy, namely (i) the tyranny of the majority and (ii) the problem of the ignorant voter. Below is a bonus reading that will give you another argument you could use when examining the drawbacks and limitations of democracy.

It will also give you context for understanding why governments – even in a democracy - may not always act in the interest of its citizens.

*It's a little dense, but if you are up to the challenge, there are insights to be gleaned!
☺ - Mrs Koh (Feb 2018)*

This reading will introduce you to:

- How the electoral process has been put on a pedestal in democratic societies
- The growing disillusionment with politics and how elections have contributed
- Some recent developments that contribute to elections being potentially counterproductive to good governance

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Why Elections are Bad for Democracy

Our voting system worked well for decades, but now it is broken. There is a better way to give voice to the people

Adapted from an article dated 29 Jun 2016, David Van Reybrouk | The Guardian

Brexit is a turning point in the history of western democracy. Never before has such a drastic decision been taken through so primitive a procedure – a one-round referendum based on a simple majority. Never before has the fate of a country – of an entire continent, in fact – been changed by the single swing of such a blunt axe, wielded by disenchanted and poorly informed citizens.

But this is just the latest in a series of worrying blows to the health of democracy. On the surface, everything still seems fine. A few years ago, the World Values Survey, a large-scale international research project, asked more than 73,000 people in 57 countries if they believed democracy was a good way to govern a country – and nearly 92% said yes. But that same survey found that in the past 10 years, around the world, there has been a considerable increase in calls for a strong leader “who does not have to bother with parliament and elections” – and that trust in governments and political parties has reached a historical low. It would appear that people like the idea of democracy but loathe the reality.

Growing distrust in politics

There is something explosive about an era in which interest in politics grows while faith in politics declines. What does it mean for the stability of a country if more and more people warily keep track of the activities of an authority that they increasingly distrust? How much derision can a system endure, especially now that everyone can share their deeply felt opinions online?

Fifty years ago, we lived in a world of greater political apathy and yet greater trust in politics. Now there is both passion and distrust. These are turbulent times. And yet, for all this

turbulence, there has been little reflection on the tools that our democracies use. It is still a heresy to ask whether elections, in their current form, are a badly outmoded technology for converting the collective will of the people into governments and policies.

25 Elections are no guarantee for liberty and may even engender instability

We discuss and debate the outcome of a referendum without discussing its principles. This should be surprising. In a referendum, we ask people directly what they think when they have not been obliged to think – although they have certainly been bombarded by every conceivable form of manipulation in the months leading up to the vote. But the problem is not confined to referendums: in an election, you may cast your vote, but you are also casting it away for the next few years. This system of delegation to an elected representative may have been necessary in the past – when communication was slow and information was limited – but it is completely out of touch with the way citizens interact with each other today. Even in the 18th century, Jean-Jacques Rousseau had already observed that elections alone were no guarantee of liberty: “The people of England deceive themselves when they fancy they are free; they are so, in fact, only during the election of members of parliament: for, as soon as a new one is elected, they are again in chains, and are nothing.”

Referendums and elections are both **arcane** instruments of public deliberation. If we refuse to update our democratic technology, we may find the system is beyond repair; 2016 already risks becoming the worst year for democracy since 1933. We may find, even after the folly of Brexit, that Donald Trump wins the American presidency later this year¹. But this may have less to do with Trump himself, or the oddities of the American political system, than with a dangerous road that all western democracies have taken: reducing democracy to voting.

Isn't it bizarre that voting, our highest civic duty, boils down to an individual action performed in the silence of the voting booth? Is this really the place where we turn individual gut feelings into shared priorities? Is it really where the common good and the long term are best served?

By refusing to change procedures, we have made political turmoil and instability defining features of western democracy. Last weekend Spain had to hold its second general election in six months, after the first run did not deliver a government. A few weeks ago, Austria almost elected its first extreme rightwing president, while a Dutch referendum in April voted down a trade agreement between Ukraine and the EU. My country, Belgium, became the laughing stock of Europe a few years earlier, when it failed to form a government for 541 days. But nobody is laughing now that it seems that many western democracies are in the process of turning “Belgian”.

Democratic fatigue syndrome

Countless western societies are currently afflicted by what we might call “democratic fatigue syndrome”. Symptoms may include referendum fever, declining party membership, and low voter turnout. Or government impotence and political paralysis – under relentless media scrutiny, widespread public distrust, and populist upheavals.

But democratic fatigue syndrome is not so much caused by the people, the politicians or the parties – it is caused by the procedure. Democracy is not the problem. Voting is the problem. Where is the reasoned voice of the people in all this? Where do citizens get the chance to obtain the best possible information, engage with each other and decide collectively upon

¹ This article was published in 2016 so this is a **prescient** statement...

65 their future? Where do citizens get a chance to shape the fate of their communities? Not in the voting booth, for sure.

The words “election” and “democracy” have become synonymous. We have convinced ourselves that the only way to choose a representative is through the ballot box. After all, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 1948 states as much: “The will of the people shall be the basis of the authority of government; this will shall be expressed in periodic and genuine elections which shall be by universal and equal **suffrage** and shall be held by secret vote or by equivalent free voting procedures.”

The words “this will shall be expressed” are typical of our way of thinking about democracy: when we say “democracy”, we only mean “elections”. But why should such a concise text about basic rights, which is fewer than 2,000 words long, pay particular attention to the practical execution of one of these rights? It is as if the people who compiled the declaration back in 1948 had come to see the specific method as a basic right, as if the procedure was in itself sacred.

It would appear that the fundamental cause of democratic fatigue syndrome lies in a blind faith in the ballot box.

This blind faith in the ballot box as the ultimate base on which popular sovereignty rests can be seen most vividly of all in international diplomacy. When western donor countries hope that countries ravaged by conflict – such as Congo, Iraq or Afghanistan – will become democracies, what they really mean is this: they must hold elections, preferably on the western model, with voting booths, ballot papers and ballot boxes; with parties, campaigns and coalitions; with lists of candidates, polling stations and sealing wax, just like we do. And *then* they will receive money from us.

Why elections jeopardise democracies today

That elections can have all kinds of outcomes in states that are fragile, including violence, ethnic tensions, criminality and corruption, seems of secondary importance. That elections do not automatically foster democracy, but may instead prevent or destroy it, is conveniently forgotten. We insist that in every country in the world people must traipse off to the polling stations. Our electoral fundamentalism really does take the form of a new, global evangelism. Elections are the **sacraments** of that new faith, a ritual regarded as a vital necessity in which the form is more important than the content.

Elections then and now: a case of contrast

In the years after the second world war, western democracies were dominated by large mass parties, and they held the structures of the state in their hands. Through a network of intermediary organisations, such as unions, corporations and party media, they succeeded in being close to the lives of individual citizens. This resulted in an extremely stable system, with great party loyalty and predictable voting behaviour.

This changed in the 1980s and 1990s, when discourse was increasingly shaped by the free market. Party newspapers disappeared or were bought up by media concerns, commercial broadcasters entered the field and even public broadcasters increasingly adopted market thinking. Viewing, reading and listening figures became hugely important – they were the daily share price index of public opinion. Commercial mass media emerged as the most important builders of social consensus, and organised civil society lost ground. The consequences were predictable, as citizens became consumers and elections hazardous.

110 Parties began to see themselves less as intermediaries between people and power, and instead settled into the fringes of the state apparatus. To retain their places in the state apparatus, political parties had to turn to the voter every few years to top up their legitimacy. Elections became a battle fought out in the media for the favour of voters. Today, public electoral debates have become tightly controlled spectacles, managed by rival teams of professionals who are experts in the techniques of persuasion.

115 After the rise of the political parties, the introduction of universal suffrage, the rise and fall of organised civil society and the dominance of commercial media, another factor has now been added: social media.

120 At the beginning of the 21st century, citizens could follow the political theatre, minute by minute, on radio, television or the internet, but today they can respond to it from second to second and mobilise others. The culture of immediate reporting now has instant feedback, resulting in even more of a **cacophony**. The work of the public figure, and especially the elected politician, is not made easier by any of this. He or she can immediately see whether new proposals appeal to the citizen, and indeed just how many people the citizen can whip up. New technology gives people a voice, but the nature of this new political involvement
125 makes the electoral system creak at the joints all the more.

Commercial and social media also reinforce one another – picking up each other's news and bouncing it back to create an atmosphere of perpetual mudslinging. Tough competition, loss of advertising revenue and falling sales prompt the media to produce increasingly vehement reports about increasingly exaggerated conflicts. For radio and television, national politics
130 has become a daily soap opera, and while editors determine to some extent the framing, the script and the typecasting, politicians, with varying degrees of success, try to slant things this way or that. The most popular politicians are those who succeed in altering the script and reframing the debate – in other words, those who can bend the media to their will.

How good governance is thwarted by election fever

135 This collective hysteria has made election fever permanent and has serious consequences for the workings of democracy. Efficiency suffers under the electoral calculus, legitimacy under the continual need to distinguish oneself, while time and again, **the electoral system ensures that the long term and the common interest lose out to the short term and party interests**. Elections were once invented to make democracy possible, but in these
140 circumstances they seem to be a hindrance.

Since we have reduced democracy to selecting representatives, and reduced representative democracy to mean simply voting, a valuable system is now **mired** in deep difficulties. Winning the next election has become more important than fulfilling the promises made in the last. Making the best of the system we have is becoming increasingly difficult.

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Related Cambridge/essay questions

- 1) 'Democracy does not guarantee a good life for all.' Discuss. (RJC 2004, JC2 CT@)
- 2) 'The government always acts in the interests of the people.' Discuss. (RI 2011, Y6 CT1)
- 3) 'Fine in principle but a failure in practice.' How far do you agree with this assessment of democracy? (RI2012 Y6 CT1)