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Other Normative Political Concepts

Democracy

Democracy

- We all know what we mean by the phrase democracy don't we?
- What does it mean to you?
- As with 'politics' this concept has its roots in Ancient Greece
- The word is formed from two Greek words
 - *Demos* – meaning 'the people', and
 - *Kratos* – meaning 'to rule'
- Therefore, in its literal sense it means **rule by the people** (rather than a monarch etc.)
- Thus, in Ancient Greece, all **citizens** were expected to play a role in the running of the city/state (Athens in the first instance)
- However, those who were considered a citizen only included 'free men'
- Thus, Ancient Greek democracy did not include women, children, foreigners or slaves.

Any observations?



Democracy

- Plato (c. 448-348 BCE) criticised Athenian democracy on two counts;
- As a concept he questioned whether democracy was the ideal system of rule
- He promoted the social reproduction of talents and abilities i.e. those 'born to rule' were best placed to rule because of their background
- 'Those inborn' have 'carefully fostered talents' necessary for good government
- For Plato, the most 'just' form of government was the **aristocracy**, headed by a 'philosopher king'
- *Aristos* - the best + *Kratos* – rule literally rule by those best suited

(Schofield & Griffith, 2016)

Any observations?



Democracy

- Plato's second criticism was, as follows;
- As a political system Plato felt that democracy was flawed because it meant that the 'masses' of free men could be influenced by **demagogues** [see later in this Theme]
- He argued that the masses care nothing for the past behaviour of the man who enters public life.
- 'He need only proclaim himself a friend of the people, and he will be honoured' meaning that the democratic city 'has embraced **anarchy**' (Schofield & Griffith, 2016)

Any observations?



Mass Democracy

- It is important to recognise that **democracy**, in the Athenian sense, meant that **every free man** could vote on **every** issue
- Plato's pupil, Aristotle (384 – 322 BCE), saw this as **mass democracy** and argued that this was a dangerous form of government, for the following reasons;
- **Mass democracy**, by its very nature, undermines the rule of law; that is to say that, in a functioning state, the laws must be supreme
- It is the supremacy of the law that stops people in power doing anything they want and becoming tyrants
- However, in a **mass democracy**, the will of the people is **sovereign** and not the law and not the state.
- In a mass democracy, if the majority of the people decide that someone should die, then they are killed regardless of whether the death penalty exists in law or not
- For Plato, such a society is no longer run according to a set of established laws but simply at the 'whim of the people'.

(See for example *Aristotle's Political Theory* in Zalta, 2021)

Direct Democracy

- Aristotle posited a distinction between two forms of democracy;
- Firstly, **Direct** democracy – where everyone has a say in the final decision (also known as a **referendum**)
- Probably the most elaborate and complete form of direct democracy in the contemporary world can be seen in Switzerland (Federal Department of Foreign Affairs, 2023)
- Although, **citizen's initiatives** are used in the **federal states** of Germany and elsewhere in the world
- In Britain referenda are used rarely used but there are some examples.
- *Can you think of any?*
- As Plato argued, this means that the mass vote can be swayed by populist arguments and a simple majority wins

(See for example *Aristotle's Political Theory* in Zalta, 2021)

Direct Democracy



Are Plato & Aristotle's criticisms of democracy evident in the Brexit debate?

You can also share your thoughts using the 'Democracy and Brexit' forum on Moodle.



EU referendum campaigns 'misleading voters' (BBC News, 2016)



N.B. This is an example of a secondary source – let us find the original source

Representative Democracy

Aristotle's second type of democracy was;

- **Representative** democracy – where the electorate chose who to lead them from a 'wise elite'
- This wise elite can then balance the wishes of the populace against the rule of law
- This can also be seen as balancing 'what is popular' against 'what is right'
- For example, it can be argued that this balancing is evidenced in the UK in terms of the debate regarding the death penalty in the UK (Ibbotson, 2019)
- Most modern systems of government that we consider to be democracies are some form of **representative** democracy



N.B. The source above is a Market Research company – what do we need to consider when using such sources?

(See for example Aristotle's Political Theory in Zalta, 2021)

Representative Democracy

- N.B. Most 'democratic' systems are a combination of forms of democracy
- Forms of representative democracy include;
- **Constitutional monarchy – Government** is carried out by elected representatives in some form of **parliament**; the **head of state** is the monarch
- Examples include Morocco, UK, Netherlands, Belgium, Sweden and Japan
- **Constitutional democracy - Government** is carried out by elected representatives in some form of **parliament**; the **head of state** is often a President either chosen by the parliament or directly elected by the people
- Examples include Germany and India

(See for example Brown *et al*, 2018)21

Representative Democracy

Forms of representative democracy include;

- **Presidential democracy** – the **head of state** is directly elected and is also the head of **government** with other branches of government beneath them (e.g. the US Senate)
- Examples include Nigeria and the USA
- **Authoritarian democracy** – also known as an **oligarchy**. Whilst there may well be elections and representative bodies, de facto government, is carried out by an elite
- Russia is often given as an example but this definition is complex
- **Religious democracy** – also known as a **theocracy**. In these cases, whilst there may be elected representative bodies the system of laws is also governed by observance of a religious code
- Pakistan and Iran can be seen as an example of this form (and some would argue so could Israel)

(See for example Brown *et al*, 2018)

Federal Democracy

- One further complexity to the 'map of democracy' is the concept of **federal** democracy
- In most examples power is shared by a central government and a number of states or provinces that are given considerable self-rule, usually through their own legislatures.
- Central Government usually controls defence, international diplomacy and trade and macro-economics (e.g. USA, Germany and Australia)
- States often control education, policing etc. This is why, for example some States in the USA have the death penalty and others don't
- Although various forms of devolution have been granted to Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, the UK is not a federal state.

(See for example Brown *et al*, 2018)

Electoral Systems

- As well as having different forms of democracy, nation states will also have differing electoral systems
- Each system of electing a leader or government has its positive and negative elements and each has implications for social inclusion and equity
- We will briefly look at several key examples, starting with;
- **‘First past the post’**: in this system, also known as single vote: single member, the person who obtains the majority of votes in a constituency is elected as its representative
- This is the system used in UK Parliamentary elections

(See for example Brown *et al*, 2018)

First Past the Post

- It is interesting to note that versions of this electoral system only exist in the UK and countries that were previously part of the British Empire, for example;
 - United States – Used in most states for congressional and local elections.
 - Canada – Used for federal and provincial elections.
 - India – Used for Lok Sabha (lower house) elections and many state assemblies.
 - Bangladesh – Used for parliamentary elections.
 - Pakistan – Used for National Assembly elections.
 - Nigeria – Used for presidential and legislative elections.
 - Kenya – Used for presidential and parliamentary elections.
 - Jamaica – Used for parliamentary elections.
 - Bahamas – Used for general elections.
 - Belize – Used for parliamentary elections.

First Past the Post

Positive Aspects of First Past the Post Voting

Simplicity

Easy to understand and implement: the candidate with the most votes wins.

Voters mark one candidate, and counting is straightforward.

Quick Results

Votes are counted quickly, often producing results within hours.

Strong, Stable Governments

Tends to produce majority governments, reducing the need for coalitions.

Encourages decisive governance.

First Past the Post

Positive Aspects of First Past the Post Voting

Clear Constituency Representation

Each elected representative serves a specific geographic area, fostering accountability.

Prevents Extremist Parties

Makes it harder for fringe parties to gain seats unless they have concentrated support.

First Past the Post

Negative Aspects of First Past the Post Voting

Disproportional Outcomes

A party can win a majority of seats without a majority of votes.

Smaller parties often get fewer seats than their vote share warrants.

Wasted Votes

Votes for losing candidates don't contribute to representation.

Can discourage voter turnout in “safe” seats.

Encourages Tactical Voting

Voters may choose a “lesser evil” candidate to block another, rather than their true preference.

First Past the Post

Negative Aspects of First Past the Post Voting

Marginalizes Smaller Parties

Difficult for new or smaller parties to gain traction unless they have regional strongholds.

Can Lead to Gerrymandering (manipulating the boundaries of electoral districts to favour a particular political party or group)

Since outcomes depend on district boundaries, there's potential for manipulation.

Gerrymandering

- N.B. In the UK constituency boundaries are created by the Boundary Commissions for England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland in order to try to prevent the manipulation of boundaries for political gain
- These are non-departmental public bodies (NDPBs)
- NDPBs are a type of quango (quasi-autonomous non-governmental organisation): organisations that are funded by the government but operate independently and are not directly controlled by ministers
- See for example the [Boundary Commission for England's 2023 review of constituency boundaries](#)

Second Ballot

- **Second ballot or two-round** system – in this case, if a candidate wins a more than 50% of the vote in a constituency, then they become the representative.
- However, if there is not a clear majority in the first round of ballots then a second ballot is held between the first and second placed candidates
- Thus, forcing those who voted for other candidates to choose between the two most popular candidates from Round 1
- France has had second ballot elections since the revolution in 1789.
([Electoral Reform Society](#), 2017a)

Second Ballot

Positive Aspects of Second Ballot Voting

Majority Support

Ensures the winner has broad support by requiring a majority in the second round, enhancing legitimacy.

Reduces Vote Splitting

Voters can support their preferred candidate in the first round without fear of "wasting" their vote, knowing they can choose between the top two in the second round.

Encourages Coalition Building

Candidates often seek alliances between rounds, promoting compromise and broader representation.

Second Ballot

Positive Aspects of Second Ballot Voting

Discourages Extremism

Extreme candidates may struggle to gain majority support in the second round, favouring more moderate contenders.

Voter Engagement

The two-round format can increase public interest and participation, especially in the decisive second round.

Second Ballot

Negative Aspects of Second Ballot Voting

Cost and Complexity

Running two rounds of voting is more expensive and logistically demanding for election authorities.

Voter Fatigue

Turnout often drops in the second round, especially if voters feel their preferred candidate was eliminated.

Strategic Voting Still Takes Place

Voters may still vote tactically in the first round to ensure their least preferred candidate doesn't make it to the runoff.

Second Ballot

Negative Aspects of Second Ballot Voting

Delayed Results

Final outcomes take longer, which can create political uncertainty.

Disenfranchisement Risk

Supporters of eliminated candidates may feel unrepresented in the second round, especially in polarized contexts.

Proportional Representation

- **Proportional representation** refers to any electoral system which seeks to have elected representatives that reflect the opinions of the whole population rather than dominant parties

‘Rather than the all-or-nothing approach of First Past the Post, each area elects more than one representative. The size of this area can vary according to the system, ranging from the size of the whole country to a county or village. This means that you have a team of MPs that reflect the strength of the different political opinions in your area’.

(Electoral Reform Society, 2017b)

- There are many forms of proportional representation (Electoral Reform Society, 2017b) but they include;

Party List Systems

- The **Party List** system – in which the electorate vote for a party and seats are then allocated according to the proportion of votes that each party gets
- In Party List systems, seats in parliament closely match how many votes each party receives, but there is often a weaker constituency link.
- Rather than electing one person per area, in Party List systems each area is bigger and elects a group of MPs that closely reflect the way the area voted.
- Party Lists are the most popular way to elect representatives in the world, with more than 80 countries using a variation of this system to elect their parliament.
- Variations of the party list system can be seen in the Netherlands, Brazil and Turkey

(Electoral Reform Society, 2017b)

Party List Systems

Positive Aspects of Party List Systems

It is more Representative of the electorate as a whole

Seats are allocated based on the percentage of votes each party receives, leading to fairer representation of political views.

Encourages Multi-Party Systems

Smaller parties have a better chance of gaining seats, which can lead to a more diverse and representative legislature.

Fewer 'Wasted' Votes

Since votes contribute to the overall party total, fewer votes are 'wasted' compared to winner-takes-all systems.

Party List Systems

Positive Aspects of Party List Systems

Simplifies Voting

Voters typically choose a party rather than individual candidates, which can make the process easier to understand.

Promotes Coalition Governments

Encourages cooperation and compromise between parties, which can lead to more balanced policymaking.

Party List Systems

Negative Aspects of Party List Systems

Weak Voter-Candidate Link

Voters choose parties, not individuals, which can reduce accountability and the personal connection between constituents and their representatives.

Party Control Over Candidate Lists

Party leaders often decide the order of candidates on the list, giving them significant power over who gets elected.

Fragmentation and Instability

A large number of parties in parliament can make it harder to form stable governments and pass legislation.

Party List Systems

Negative Aspects of Party List Systems

Coalition Challenges

Coalition governments can be slow to form and may struggle with internal disagreements.

Less Local Representation

Representatives may not be tied to specific geographic areas, which can weaken local advocacy.

Single Transferable Vote

- The **single transferrable vote** system – this allows electors to list the candidates in an order of preference.
- If no one wins the required number of votes then the candidate with the lowest number of first choice votes is eliminated
- Their second choice votes are then given to those candidates and so on
- This continues until a candidate wins the required number of votes
- Versions of this system are used in Eire, Malta, Australia and Scottish Council elections. (Electoral Reform Society, 2017b)



Single transferable vote explained (Electoral Commission, 2022a)

Single Transferable Vote

Positive Aspects of Single Transferrable Vote (STV) Systems

It is more Representative of the electorate as a whole

STV tends to produce results that reflect the overall distribution of public support for different parties or groups more accurately than winner-takes-all systems.

Voter Choice and Empowerment

Voters can rank multiple candidates, even from the same party, giving them more control over who gets elected.

Minimizes Wasted Votes

Because surplus and eliminated votes are transferred, fewer votes are "wasted" compared to systems like First Past the Post (FPTP).

Single Transferable Vote

Positive Aspects of Single Transferrable Vote (STV) Systems

Encourages Moderate Campaigning

Candidates benefit from being ranked second or third by supporters of other candidates, which can encourage more civil and inclusive campaigning.

Reduces 'Safe Seats'

Multi-member constituencies make it harder for parties to take seats for granted, increasing competition and accountability.

Single Transferable Vote

Negative Aspects of Single Transferrable Vote (STV) Systems

Complexity

The voting and counting process is more complicated, which can confuse voters and delay results.

Longer Counting Process

Counting and transferring votes can take a long time, especially in close contests or large constituencies.

Weaker Constituency Link

With multiple representatives per area, the personal link between a voter and their representative may be diluted.

Single Transferable Vote

Negative Aspects of Single Transferrable Vote (STV) Systems

Strategic Voting Still Possible

While less common than in FPTP, voters might still try to game the system by ranking tactically.

Difficult for Smaller Parties in Some Contexts

If the district magnitude (number of seats per constituency) is low, it can still be hard for smaller parties to gain representation.

Additional Member Voting

- The **additional member** system – is a blending of the first past the post system and the party list system (as if things weren't complex enough!)
- Voters have two ballot papers, on one they vote for their constituency representative and on the second they vote for a Party.
- Party list votes are used to appoint Regional representatives
- It is a 'proportional compromise'
- Versions of this system are used in Germany, New Zealand and the London Assembly
- It is also the system used in elections to the Senedd up to 2026. (Electoral Reform Society, 2017b)



Welcome to Your Vote - Additional Member System - England
(Electoral Commission, 2022b)

Additional Member Voting

Positive Aspects of Additional Member System (AMS) Voting

Proportionality

AMS helps ensure that the overall result reflects the proportion of votes each party receives, reducing the disproportionality seen in FPTP systems.

Local Representation

Voters still have a local representative (via FPTP), maintaining a direct link between constituents and one of their representatives.

Voter Choice

Voters get two votes: one for a local candidate and one for a party. This allows them to support a local representative from one party and a different party overall.

Additional Member Voting

Positive Aspects of Additional Member Voting

Reduces 'Wasted' Votes

Even if a voter's preferred candidate doesn't win locally, their party vote still contributes to the overall seat allocation.

Encourages Coalition and Consensus Politics

Since it's harder for one party to dominate, AMS often leads to coalition governments, which can encourage more consensus-based policymaking.

Additional Member Voting

Negative Aspects of Additional Member Voting

Complexity

The system can be confusing for voters, especially when understanding how the two votes interact and how seats are allocated.

Two Types of Representatives

Having both constituency and list members can create tension or confusion about who is accountable for what.

Party Control Over Lists

Political parties often control the order of candidates on the party list, which can reduce voter influence over which individuals are elected.

Additional Member Voting

Negative Aspects of Additional Member Voting

Potential for Tactical Voting

Voters might try to game the system by voting strategically (e.g., voting for a smaller party in the list vote to influence proportional outcomes).

‘Overhang’ Seats

In some cases, a party may win more constituency seats than its proportional share, leading to an increase in the total number of seats (as seen in Germany), which can complicate governance.

The D'Hondt System

- One final system that attempts to reflect the wishes of the electorate as a whole is the D'Hondt system
- This is another form of transferrable vote system, known as the highest averages method, used to allocate seats in the European Parliament
- It is also the system to be used in the **Welsh Senedd Elections in 2026** (Senedd Cymru, 2025)
- Here is an explanation of how the system works from another source;



D'Hondt Explainer (Vine, 2009)

The D'Hondt System

Positive Aspects of the D'Hondt System

It is more Representative of the electorate as a whole

It ensures that parties receive a number of seats roughly proportional to their share of the vote, which is more democratic than winner-takes-all systems.

Encourages Stable Governments

Compared to other proportional systems, D'Hondt slightly favours larger parties, which can lead to more stable coalition governments.

Simple and Transparent

The method is mathematically straightforward which helps with transparency and public trust.

The D'Hondt System

Positive Aspects of the D'Hondt System

Reduces Wasted Votes

Since seats are distributed proportionally, fewer votes are 'wasted' compared to majoritarian systems.

Encourages Broad-Based Parties

Because it slightly favours larger parties, it can encourage the formation of broad coalitions or alliances before elections.

The D'Hondt System

Negative Aspects of the D'Hondt System

Bias Toward Larger Parties

The system tends to favour larger parties over smaller ones, which can marginalize minority voices and reduce political diversity.

Disadvantages Independents and Small Parties

Smaller parties or independents may struggle to gain representation unless they have concentrated support.

Can Lead to Tactical Voting or Alliances

Parties may form pre-election coalitions or voters may vote tactically to avoid 'wasting' their vote on smaller parties.

The D'Hondt System

Negative Aspects of the D'Hondt System

Less Proportional Than Other Systems

Compared to methods like Sainte-Laguë or Single Transferable Vote (STV), D'Hondt is less proportional, especially in smaller constituencies.

Threshold Effects

In practice, there's often an effective threshold (minimum percentage of votes needed to win a seat), which can exclude smaller parties even without a formal legal threshold.

Democracy as a Normative Concept

- We have seen that the notion of democracy is complex and contested
- Direct democracy / representative democracy
- Types of democratic structures
- Types of electoral systems
- All have their proponents and their critics
- Therefore, it can be argued that there is no such thing as an essential, absolute 'democracy'
- But instead, a plurality of 'democracies', each with its strengths and weaknesses
- This can be seen as another example of what Derrida calls 'differance'.

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