

# Is democracy the best form of government?

## By Leo Rogers

Since the end of the cold war, democracy's position as the world's dominant political ideology has seemed unassailable, and today the global number of democratic governments is at an all-time high. Many in the West hail a new age of freedom, and a consensus has formed that democracy has won the battle of ideas. However, this consensus is increasingly fragile: Brexit and the election of Donald Trump have arguably exposed democracy's chaotic nature, and some argue that 'people power' is simply tyranny of the majority. China's ascendancy, say critics of democracy, proves the superior efficiency and planning of an autocratic government. Democracy is certainly flawed, but is there a better system? Or is democracy 'the worst form of government, except for all the others'<sup>1</sup>?

Firstly, democracy is arguably the best form of government in terms of guaranteeing the rights and freedoms of the majority. In the older democracies, America, France and Britain, the ballot box freed society from the power of the monarchy and aristocracy, in 'rights-setting acts of epochal importance'<sup>2</sup>. In the 20th Century, democratic movements and ideas smashed Europe's colonial empires, freeing hundreds of millions from exploitation. In India for example, nearly two centuries of British rule was overturned: where armed uprisings had failed, the language of peace and democracy offered a solution. In recent decades, many oppressive dictatorships have been toppled by democracy; in the Eastern bloc, Popular Fronts removed brutal regimes such as Ceausescu's in Romania, and the 2011 Arab Spring uprisings produced a handful of new democratic states. Democracy has arguably been so

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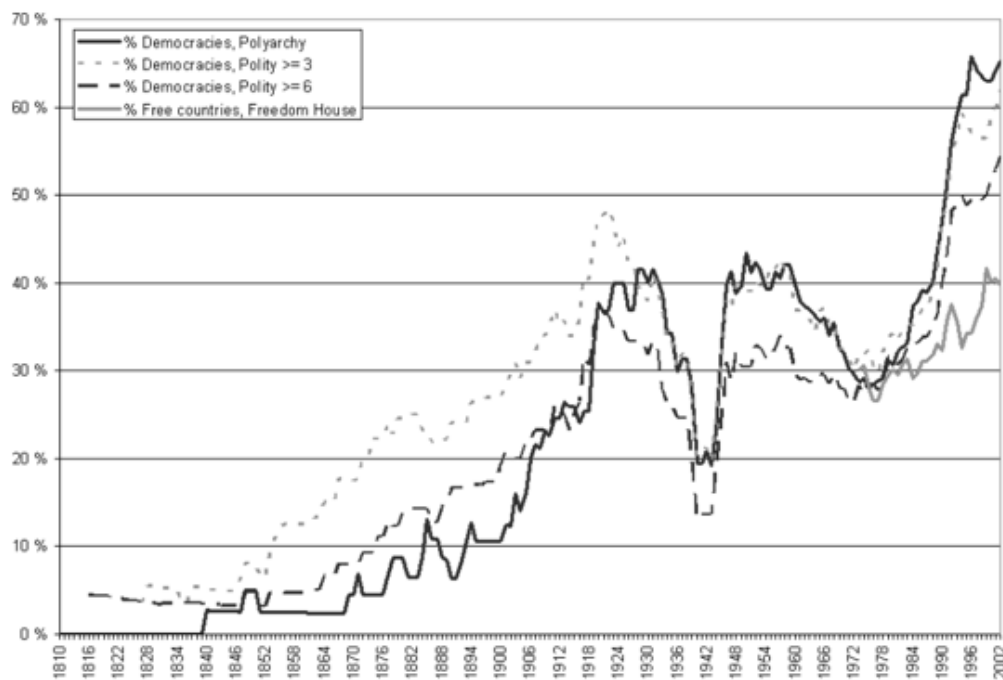
<sup>1</sup> Churchill, W. 11/11/1947

<https://www.winstonchurchill.org/resources/quotes/the-worst-form-of-government/>  
(accessed 1/12/17)

<sup>2</sup> Alexander, A.C. & Welzel, C. (2011)

Measuring Effective Democracy: The Human Empowerment Approach, Comparative Politics Vol. 43, No. 3 (April 2011), pp. 271-289

successful in liberating humanity that Rousseau's lamentation, 'Man is born free and everywhere he is in chains', perhaps no longer applies.



This graph<sup>3</sup> illustrates the global spread of democracy, with the proportion of world governments that are at least partially democratic exceeding 65% by 2002. Democracy has spread so rapidly because it proves the most viable tool for combating tyranny and asserting the rights of the many, as elections, referenda and public meetings force the powerful to heed their wishes. Other forms of government tend towards exploitation of the many by the elite: this is because without the vote, citizens have no means of redress, so the actions of the government go unchallenged, allowing it to abuse its power. Leaders experience a form of moral hazard, as there are no limits on their actions, and they themselves do not suffer the consequences. If there is no democratic representation, there is nothing to stop the elite terrorizing the many.

On the other hand, some argue that democracy merely results in tyranny of the majority, as minorities are afforded little power in democratic institutions that award representation

<sup>3</sup> Roser, M. (2017) – 'Democracy'  
<https://ourworldindata.org/democracy/> (accessed 1/12/17)

quantitatively. Decisions are, they argue, often made “not according to the rule of justice and the rights of the minor party but by the superior force of an interested and overbearing majority.”<sup>4</sup> This is a legitimate criticism; many democracies have a record of side-lining ethnic, religious and political minorities, from the struggle for African Americans’ civil rights, to the exploitation of indigenous communities in Australia. Democracy can certainly be ineffective in safeguarding the rights of the minority; however, there is no one form of democracy. It is a loose term, encompassing many different political systems, some of which are more effective than others in protecting the rights of the individual.

For example, a democracy’s structure can offer varying degrees of representation to minority interests. Majoritarian systems allow a majority absolute control over the government; this winner-takes-all arrangement excludes political minorities. Such systems feature plurality or majority voting, where the largest group or majority group wins a district’s single representative, and a simple majority (>51% of representatives) in the legislative chamber can pass laws. In the UK under First past the Post, if a party gains a simple majority of seats in Parliament, it can technically pass any legislation it wishes, denying much of the electorate any effective political power. A simple majority in Parliament requires only a plurality of votes within enough seats, meaning a very narrow majority can wield power, or even a large enough minority. This is especially an issue under the British constitutional model, as the constitution is uncodified and Parliament is sovereign, meaning there are no entrenched protections of individual rights. Having considered the British political system, majoritarian democracies certainly seem to offer insufficient protections to the minority. As Guiner

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<sup>4</sup> Hamilton, A. Madison, J. and Jay J. (1788)  
The Federalist: A Collection of Essays, Written in Favour of the New Constitution, as Agreed upon by the Federal Convention, September 17, 1787

argued, ‘In a world of bloc voting, with one candidate per bloc, the minority is completely shut out.’<sup>5</sup>

However, consensual democracies are characterized by a conscious effort to include minorities in the decision making process. Such countries elect legislatures through systems of proportional representation, where one party cannot easily exercise power on its own, as all major groups are represented. Additionally, some powers are often devolved to regional assemblies. Iraq and parts of Canada employ such systems. The inclusive nature of consensual democracy offers a counterweight to the notion that democracy always results in ‘mob rule’, as it shows that democracy can be modified, and is not inevitably tyrannical; Another powerful counterargument to democracy is made in William Golding’s novel *Lord of the Flies*, in which an island of schoolboys led by a charismatic leader descends into bloodshed and chaos. Golding’s allegory captures the tumultuous nature of democracy: the government is forced to carry out the will of the People, but their decisions are often fickle and unwise. Many cite Britain’s vote to leave the EU and America’s election of Donald Trump to the Presidency in 2016 as examples.

This leads some to contend that other forms of government are more stable and efficient, as a single leader or governing elite is often better educated, more informed and less capricious than the population at large. For example, current critics of democracy point to China’s economic growth and political stability, arguing that its success shows the merits of an autocratic system, as positive decisions seem to have been made by an unelected elite, the Chinese Communist Party. Many in China maintain that the country would split apart if it were democratic, and return to the division of the pre-1949 era. Similarly, Thomas Hobbes

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<sup>5</sup> Guinier, L. (1994) *Tyranny of the Majority: Fundamental Fairness in Representative Democracy* Free Press, 28/2/1994

argued in his 1651 work *Leviathan* that, to prevent society descending into chaos following civil war, England needed an individual leader vested with absolute sovereignty.

However, some variations of democracy arguably moderate its inherent chaos, creating a compromise between democratic control and stability. Systems that employ the trustee model of representation arguably strike a functional balance; citizens are entitled to elect representatives, but said representatives are obliged to exercise their own judgement, in theory blocking democratic decisions that would prove detrimental to society. Bristol MP Edmund Burke elucidated this idea in a speech to his electors in 1774, insisting “your representative owes you, not his industry only, but his judgment”<sup>6</sup>, and arguing that mute deference to the electorate’s wishes is a betrayal more than a service. This contrasts with the delegate model of representation employed in the United States, in which representatives are expected to merely carry out the People’s decisions without discretion. The American view is summarized in the words of Supreme Court Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes Jr., who wrote “if my fellow citizens want to go to Hell I will help them. It’s my job.”<sup>7</sup>

Furthermore, the chaotic tendencies of a democracy can arguably be mitigated through a well-educated citizenry. Education is considered to give the population more of a stake in maintaining a democratic society, and a better understanding of the value of elected institutions. There is much evidence to support this view; for example, between 1960 and 1980, the probability of a well-educated democracy remaining democratic was 95%. The probability of a well-educated dictatorship becoming a democracy was 87%<sup>8</sup>.

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<sup>6</sup> Burke, E. (1774) Speech to the Electors of Bristol, 3 Nov. 1774  
<http://press-pubs.uchicago.edu/founders/documents/v1ch13s7.html> (accessed 30/11/17)

<sup>7</sup> Holmes, O.W. Jr., in a letter to Harold Laski  
<http://www.libertylawsite.org/2014/03/19/holmes-if-my-fellow-citizens-want-to-go-to-hell-i-will-help-them-its-my-job-and-he-meant-it/> (accessed 30/11/17)

<sup>8</sup> Glaeser, E.L., Ponzetto, G. & Shleifer A. (2007)  
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Considering the differing forms of democracy today, in their differing models of representation and varying levels of education, one cannot simply conclude that all democracy ends in chaos. Including the People in government may inject a level of instability into a political system, but this can be mitigated, and is arguably justified by the freedom democracy affords. Furthermore, autocracy is not necessarily any more stable: China's history under the unchallenged leadership of Chairman Mao and the CCP is chequered with disaster and chaos.

In conclusion, throughout its history, democracy has proven to be the best form of government in providing freedom for the majority. This can potentially result in the exclusion of minorities, but many democratic countries adopt a consensual approach, allowing minorities to participate equally in government. Democracy is indeed chaotic, but this too can be mitigated if representatives have the bravery to exercise judgement, and the citizenry is well educated. On balance, if freedom and civil rights are considered a priority, it is difficult to argue any form of government is superior to democracy.

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