

CIVICS



What is Democracy? Why Democracy?

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It is not possible to give only one definition of democracy. Democracy has many features. Some features of a democracy are

Democracy is a form of Government in which the rulers are elected by the people.

- Chile under Pinochet was not a democratic country because Pinochet was not elected by the people. Saudi Arabia is also not a democracy as it is a monarchy.

In a democracy, all major decisions are made by the elected leaders.

- General Pervez Musharraf led a military coup in Pakistan in October 1999. He later changed his designation to President. He also amended the Constitution of Pakistan according to which the President could dismiss the national or provincial assemblies. Moreover, although the people elect representatives to the provincial and national assemblies, the elected representatives were not authorised to make final decisions.
- The final decisions could only be taken by Musharraf and other senior military officers who were not actually elected representatives of the people.
- Pakistan, under such circumstances can not be called a democracy as the elected representatives of the people have the power to make major decisions in a democracy.

In a democracy, free and fair elections should be held regularly.

- In China, elections are held regularly after every five years. People elect the members of the Parliament called National People's Congress. The Parliament has the power to elect the President of the country.
- In China, only the members of the Chinese Communist party or its eight allied parties can contest elections, and thus, only the Communist party can form the Government.
- In Mexico, elections are held after every six years, but until 2000, every election was won by the Institutional Revolutionary Party (IRP). The IRP used every legal and illegal method to win the elections. Teachers in schools were forced to influence parents to vote for the IRP, media ignored all activities of the ruling party but only focused itself on criticising the opposing parties and large sums were spent on campaigning for IRP candidates.
- Thus, democracy must be based on free and fair elections where those currently in power have a fair chance of losing the elections.

Democracy should be based on the principle of one person, one vote and one value.

- In Saudi Arabia, women do not have the right to vote.
- In Fiji, the vote of a local Fiji has more value than that of an Indian-Fijian.
- In Estonia, the citizenship rules are such that the people belonging to the Russian minority find it difficult to vote.
- Therefore, we find that each adult citizen must have one vote and each vote must have one value.

Rules of Law and Respect for Rights

- In Zimbabwe, President Robert Mugabe has been ruling since independence. Although Mugabe is popular, he uses unfair practices during elections.
- He has amended the Constitution multiple times in order to increase the powers of the President and to make him less accountable.
- The members of opposition parties are jailed if they raise their voice against the Government and protests against the Government and its policies are declared illegal.
- It is important for a democratic government to grant basic rights and freedoms to its citizens and the government should be accountable to its citizens.
- Therefore, a democratic government rules within the limits set by constitutional law and citizens' rights. The government must function within basic rules of the Constitution and citizens' rights.

Why Democracy?

Some arguments against a democratic government are

- Democracy leads to instability as leaders keep on changing in a democratic setup.
- The decision-making process is delayed in a democracy because several people have to be consulted in a democratic setup.
- Sometimes even elected people do not know about the best interests of the people. Thus, at times, it leads to bad decisions.
- There are several cases of corruption as democracy is based on electoral competition.
- Most people do not know what democracy is. Thus, they should not decide anything.

According to these arguments, democracy does not seem to be an ideal form of government. But it is not so. The following arguments prove that democracy is the best form of government.

A democratic government is a better government because it is a more accountable form of government.

- China suffered from one of the worst famines in 1958–1961. Nearly three crore people died in the famine. No major famine occurred in India at this time. According to economists, it was perhaps because India is a democratic country.
- Democracy in India made the Government respond to food scarcity in a way in which the Chinese Government did not. It was because India has a multi-party system and free press. The Government may be criticised and even lose the next elections.
- This is not the case with the Chinese. Because China is ruled by the Communist party and no one can criticise the Government, the Chinese Government took the famine very casually.

Democracy improves the quality of Decision Making

- Democracy is based on consultations and discussions. People collectively discuss and take decisions.
- This reduces the possibility of taking any irresponsible decision.

Democracy provides a method to deal with differences and conflicts

- Differences are bound to take place in a society where people belonging to various castes, religion and classes live together.
- People belonging to different religions and castes have their own preferences and interests of one group may clash with the other.

- If a powerful group begins to dictate its terms and forces its decisions over the other groups, it may lead to discontentment and resentment among the other people.
- Democracy provides peaceful solution to this problem because decisions which are taken by mutual consent are followed and respected by all.

Democracy allows people to correct their own mistakes

- There are possibilities of taking wrong decisions in a democracy. However, as there is a space for public discussions, such mistakes cannot remain hidden from the people for long.
- If the representatives of the people do not change their incorrect decisions, they may not get elected by the people in the next elections.

Currently most of the countries practice a form of democracy in which representatives of the people make laws and take decisions on behalf of the people who voted for them. This is called representative democracy.

We find that no country in the world is a perfect democracy but certainly it is the best form of government.