

The Concept of Democracy

In basic terms, **democracy** is a type of government based upon the principle that all people are equal and collectively hold power. The term derives from the ancient Greek words *demos* meaning people and *kratos* meaning power, hence the link to the expression 'people power'. In Ancient Greece, all free men gathered together and debated and decided issues affecting their city-state. This form of democracy is called **direct democracy**, where those involved decide the outcome.

As societies became larger and more complex, it became impossible for all the citizens to meet together to make decisions. So a system developed whereby groups of citizens appointed or elected a person or persons to represent their views; hence the term **representative democracy**. In the UK, there are elections to local, regional and national bodies to elect a local representative on behalf of their communities and are held to account when they next stand for election.

The UK is described as a **liberal democracy**, which is a name given to a system of democracy through which certain freedoms of the individual are upheld and citizens are protected from excessive government power. The extent of these freedoms and rights can vary between countries that describe themselves as liberal democracies.

Referendums

Citizens in the twenty-first century are increasingly seeking more direct democracy. There has been an increase in the use of referendums in the UK since the first national referendum in 1975, which was on the UK membership of the European Economic Community (EEC), now known as the European Union (EU). A referendum is a vote on a single issue, normally with a 'yes' or 'no' response required. A national referendum was held in 2016 on our continued membership of the European Union (EU). In recent years, there have also been referendums on Scottish independence, changing the electoral system and the Good Friday Agreement in Northern Ireland.

There are concerns expressed by many about the growth in the use of referendums. It is claimed that they undermine representative democracy and the power of Parliament. Those in favour of referendums state that there are some issues which are of such importance that they should be made by a referendum and not by our elected representatives.

Winston Churchill famously said:

"Democracy is the worst form of government, except all those other forms which have been tried from time to time."

Extension: What do you think Churchill meant by making this comment? Explain in a few sentences.