



# Direct Democracy

**& Why We  
Need It Now.**

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## Why We Need Direct Democracy

The current political system does not work. A small economic elite wield a disproportionate amount of power. They have the power to bring powerful lobbying forces to the doors of the political hierarchy. In turn, the politicians work within an adversarial political system that, not only stops the best from influencing policy, but also compels the rest to tow a party line.

They do this rather than properly represent the concerns and aspirations of the people who installed them. What's worse is that the party machines that enforce brand loyalty, both figuratively and literally, are themselves totally beholding to the economic elite who lobby them.

We, the electorate, though we suffer their decisions, have little say in any of this.

The result of this catastrophe is that we are powerless to stop obviously destructive, illogical and poorly evidenced decision making. In the Four or Five year intervals between election, where we can vote for a slightly different style, we may as well abandon reasoned debate for all the good it does us.

The thing is, it's not the fault of the bankers, the politicians or the oil producers that we're in this mess. They are simply the individual cells of the same cancer.

It's our fault! Yours and mine.

For too long we've trusted our lives to distant bureaucrats because we believed they took

decisions, broadly speaking, in our best interests. Very clearly that is no longer the case, if it ever was.

But it does not have to be this way. We can be in charge. We can have a democratic system that allows us to represent ourselves fully and completely. Both at a local and a national level. That way is call Direct Democracy (actually I favour a more participatory model of representative democracy myself but lets' check out DD here)!

### **Direct Democracy Definition:**

Direct democracy is a form of democracy that affords the electorate far more influence in policy making. In direct democracy policy is driven by the concerns and desires of the people rather than party leaders and their influential backers. This is quite simply achieved by asking the people what they want to happen far more often.

In addition, if the politicians that make decisions make one that the people really don't like they can use something called "recall" to both stop that decision and, if necessary, force a new election to remove that politician from power.

So this means that the politicians power is reliant upon public support, not only at election time, but also on a continuing basis throughout their period in office. The decisions they make must reflect the considered wishes of the electorate not, as is currently the case, the vested interests of global corporations who's only concern is profit.

In actuality democracy ([demokratia] meaning "rule of the people") is only defined as the people

being able to control the rule of law. This means that the political systems we mostly live in are, in fact, not democracies at all. By electing people to represent us we are devolving power to a selected elite. In effect, at every election, we give away, rather than exercise our democracy.

### **Direct Democracy vs. Representative Democracy:**

In our current system, called representative democracy, every four or five years we elect people to our Parliament, House of Representatives, Bundestag or whatever. The people we elect to represent us have many names (especially in private) but are collectively referred to as politicians. Whilst some of them are capable of some pretty inspiring stuff most of them seem to be either corrupt or incompetent.

Generally speaking the problem seems to be that once they get into power they start to invent "career paths" which are carefully managed to ensure they stay in power as long as possible, within their respective parties. In turn this enables them to "have influence" and makes the really rich people want to make friends with them. Once they've made friends with the rich people they then represent their interests rather than the poor people (relatively speaking) who elected them in the first place.

Direct democracy on the other hand means that "politicians", as we know them, would pretty much cease to exist. They would instead be replaced by a constitutionally defined legislative administration.

The sole purpose of this administrative body would be to implement the rule of law. In turn the

rule of law would be controlled solely and exclusively by the will of the people.

Therefore when questions arise like "should we bomb some people we don't like?" Or others like "shall we build some houses for people to live in?" We would all have a vote to decide what we should do. Once the "politicians" have understood the will of the people it would be their task to administrate the implementation of policy based upon that decision. This is the way that all decision making, from international accords through national legislation to local funding allocation would be decided. The concept's pretty simple really.

### **Direct Democracy Advantages and Disadvantages:**

Firstly the possible advantages of direct democracy are that we can make some decisions in our interests occasionally. Massive corporations will still exist, I'm sure we will all still want the occasional bottle of the real thing, but they won't be able to influence political decision making. Decisions could be taken following an evidence based, reasoned, public debate focused upon the pertinent issues.

Party politics would be almost meaningless and elections would serve only to ensure that the administrative body remained skilled for the task. Politics would be about issues and solution focused policy rather than tribal loyalties. Leaders would still emerge but would do so because they demonstrate that they have the best ability to implement the wishes of the people rather than the will of their party.

The disadvantages of direct democracy could be pretty bad. If the people have direct control of all

policy then we could decide to bomb people we don't like after all. A majority of us may decide that God was right and all gay people should be killed. The possibility of majority rule becoming mob rule would exist. Although we all have our opinions we currently have a system that has safeguards within it designed to protect minorities from oppression. Critics of direct democracy claim that it lacks these safeguards and would, almost certainly, lead to the collapse society and, ultimately, anarchy.

Another major criticism of the direct democratic system is that people have neither the time nor the inclination to engage with policy debates, especially if they are required to regularly vote upon them. With current election turnout often as low as 30%, some argue that people are simply not interested in politics and would prefer others to make decisions for them.

### **Examples of Direct Democracy:**

Well... er! There's like Iceland and Switzerland, some U.S States ( see below for more.) Then there's the British Prime Minister's laughable promise of direct democracy. This actually amounted to a spurious claim from Mr Cameron that he would allow people have some of their concerns listened to in the British Houses of Parliament. He didn't though.

The only true democracy that ever existed on this earth occurred in Ancient Greece around 480BC. Every other so called democracy, since then, has progressively moved us towards what we now call "representative democracy." To be clear, and if you don't get anything else from reading this rubbish then remember this; our system is not a democracy and anyone who tells you that it is either mistaken or lying. If your conclusion is that they are lying then you need simply ask why.

## **Countries With Direct Democracy:**

There aren't many countries on the world that operate direct democracy. There are political, practical and socio-economic reasons that partially explain this fact.

However Switzerland operates something closer to a direct democratic legislature. People are consulted on important policy decisions. They take an open and free vote following a public debate on the issue. Unfortunately this has resulted in some less than edifying decisions such as the outlawing of Minarets. But they're sticking with it. Time will tell.

Perhaps more interesting is Iceland recent move towards direct democracy. This resulted in electoral success for the Pirate Party to the Icelandic legislature called the Althing. The Pirate Party in Iceland support a range of libertarian principles including complete freedom of information, online privacy and progressive civil rights.

However they also propose and support direct and participatory democracy. Whilst the Althing is controlled by a centre right coalition of the Independence and Progressive parties, shortly before the 2013 Icelandic elections, the people of Iceland formed a peoples National Assembly of 950 citizens randomly selected from the over 18 population.

In October 2012 this assembly convened and elected 25 members to a Constitutional Council who were tasked with presenting constitutional reform to the Althing. The National Assembly produced a model for a new Icelandic constitution that proposed, amongst other measures, the

nationalisation of all natural resources, increased voting rights for the people (more frequent plebiscites) and the power for the Icelandic population to force a referendum on any issue that gains sufficient public support.

Perhaps most surprisingly direct democracy (or rather a more participatory democracy) has actually been implemented in 24 U.S states; introduction of a more direct democracy in the U.S has met with varying results, it has to be said.

The constitutional amendment initiative has been introduced in states including California, Florida and Illinois. These states have set a precedent whereby the electorate assumes the power over the national legislature to call for referendums on state law and recall elected officials if they fail to represent the will of the people.

#### **Direct Democracy Disadvantages:**

Yes I know I've briefly touched on this topic earlier in this article but I think it's important to look at these disadvantages in more detail.

In 1787 the United States Constitution defined and implemented a representative democracy. The signatories of the Declaration of Independence did so having carefully considered direct democracy as a viable alternative. Broadly speaking they identified a "trilemma" of concerns which they agreed made direct democracy not only unworkable but also potentially dangerous. This trilemma identifies three elements for the full implementation direct democracy which present significant challenges.



Participation of as many people as possible in decision making presents a number of problems.

Firstly it is argued that only those interested in a particular issue will be bothered enough to vote on that issue. This raises the potential that the views expressed will actually be more polarised than under the current system.

More concerning perhaps is the danger that the direct rule of the majority will actually lead to mob rule and the oppression of minorities. John Witherspoon said "Pure democracy cannot subsist long nor be carried far into the departments of state - it is very subject to caprice and the madness of popular rage."

The third concern regarding participation is that people are generally disinterested in politics. They want to devolve power to a representative body who will run their lives for them. Given the profound lack of engagement in current politics some argue that asking people to vote even more frequently would be a none starter. Finally, but certainly not least, full participation in 1787 would have been extremely expensive to administer and scrutinise. The potential for electoral fraud would have been almost impossible to mitigate against at the time.

The second problem identified concerned deliberation. People have suggested that, if informed evidence based decision making is wanted, it would be necessary to present a balance of evidence, to the population as a whole, prior to any subsequent referendum. Critics of direct democracy suggest that this would be exorbitantly expensive and long winded. They further suggest that many people lack sufficient understanding to be able to make a balanced decision. This, they claim, again raises the increased possibility of oppressive, mob rule and ill informed essentially reactionary decision making.

Finally a significant argument against direct democracy seems counter-intuitive because it suggests that equality would be undermined rather than promoted under true democracy.

Firstly many have stated that the concept of involving all of the population in decision making on a more frequent basis would be both impossible to achieve and result in incredibly slow and inconsistent decision making. Even more concerning, critics claim, is that direct democracy leads to increased social inequality. The argument is that no state would be able to compensate people for their time debating important issues. Therefore, they suggest, only those who could afford to do so would be able to participate in the decision making process.

So, as you can see, there are apparently some significant obstacles to the implementation of direct democracy. However, whilst these criticisms are merit worthy, they do not reflect the modern reality of the multi-media societies we live in. Furthermore they suggest that representative democracy successfully addresses these concerns.

Exponents of direct democracy would argue that it is the singular failure of representative democracy to encourage participation in government, to produce effective evidence based decision making following open debate and to address the increasing inequality in our societies that warrants the adoption of direct democracy.

Whilst full participation of the populace in decision making was almost impossible to envisage in 1787 (from a practical and economic perspective) the advent of ever improving communication technology means this objection no longer stands up to scrutiny.

It would now be both entirely possible and relatively inexpensive to frequently consult the population on policy.

Secondly the objection that people are not sufficiently well informed to take balanced decisions is not only elitist and condescending in the extreme but also raises two significant questions.

Foremost, if people lack the empirical evidence necessary to make a balanced decisions then what educational and media reforms do we need to ensure that they don't. Secondly, what evidence is there to suggest that representative democracy leads to sensible decision making?

We only need to look to the so called WMD debacle that led to the 2nd Iraq war to seriously question where evidence based decision making exists in the current system. Had we a direct democracy at the time, then the millions that marched on the streets of our major cities, pleading that the weapons inspection teams be given a chance, would have been able to effect the decision making process.

Despite massive public opposition our representatives went to war on the basis of no evidence whatsoever. Hundreds of thousands of people, including our brave troops, have died as a result.

How many people seriously believe that this war was about anything other than the protection of the multinationals oil profits? How did our representative democracy fair in this and many other similar scenarios?

And finally that brings us to the question of equality.

Whilst the potential for direct rule to become mob rule would require the agreement of constitutional safeguards prior to adopting a more direct democracy, are the detractors seriously suggesting that representative democracy promotes equality?

Currently our representative democracy takes all power away from the electorate and places it in the hands of the political and economic elite. Following the economic collapse of 2008 the banking industry, who were entirely responsible for mess we found ourselves in, simply told our governments to protect their shareholder profits by taking all of our money and giving it to them.

On the whole this is exactly what our own representatives did.

Whilst the people have lost so much the bankers have continued to make gargantuan profits.

Direct democracy would have completely changed this power dynamic. The lobbying power of global corporations would remain significant but so would that of the public. The corporations would no longer be able to simply dictate policy, as they currently do.

So, in conclusion, whilst the adoption of direct democracy presents significant challenges these are not insurmountable.

It would mean massive constitutional reform (not least of all having one - which those of us in the UK currently don't.) A tremendous amount of thought and debate would be required to ensure

that the liberal values and freedoms we currently enjoy are not only protected but enhanced under a new system.

The electoral reform needed would be revolutionary and the transition would be fraught with problems but is, nonetheless, entirely feasible.

If anyone ever tells you that representative democracy is the only way forward then simply ask yourself who's interests they are representing. They are not representing mine! Are they representing yours?

So get involved and make direct democracy a reality. If you want to start somewhere then go [here](#) to learn more about how you can really make a difference.

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