

Democracy's Purpose – What is the Answer?

An evaluative short essay by Lara Blackmore, exploring the political philosophy behind improving democratic systems.

As a democratic country, the United Kingdom has seen the variance of opinion and political views since the beginning of time. With core foundations of our modern system rooting back to the outcomes of protest and uprising, such as resistance from the barons and nobles under the tyrannical King John in 1215, it is undeniable that controversy of opinion has guided the actions of our leading democratic bodies over time. This being said, however, would the resistance of King John's subjects have been beneficial to improving democracy in society, had they fought for a completely immoral cause? Had their voicing of opinion not led to the creation of the Magna Carta, would society still see this as upholding democratic values of the time? The question we must ask ourselves, as members of a modern democracy today, is what do we find to be the most significant goal of the system itself: letting individuals vote and choose, or reaching the most logical and beneficial solution for our society?

We may look upon Aristotle's theory of teleological reasoning behind distributive justice: to reason a discrimination as fair, one can look at the purpose - or telos - of the decision. To put this idea simply, upon selecting students to attend a top university, an institution can examine its telos; a prestigious university may define its purpose or goal to be to produce the best academics and scholars. As a result, selecting only the top performing students from a school is reasoned and justified, following teleological reasoning that they are most likely to achieve the university's goal. Therefore, this analogy is essential in understanding why defining democracy's goal clearly may make simpler the decisions of our governing body, to refine and prioritise policy in relation to the voting system. Two main purposes we may therefore consider for a democracy can be to let the public's votes be heard and equally considered, or to reach the greatest benefit to society.

Our current system stands that a majority wins in voting, and that petitions, if sufficiently supported, must be considered in due process. However, should the government or parliament be *obliged* to enact change, if the support is widespread, or does the autonomy to deny action keep our system rational? What if the cause is completely absurd, or the repercussions would be damaging? Does the nature of this protest itself as being desired by a large group justify its success? If, as a society, we

defined the purpose of democracy to be to adhere to the votes of the public, many questions can be raised to the extremities of this. There comes the problem of a narrow majority, where just over 50% of a population may agree on a decision, yet the rest may completely despise it. Applying our purpose of letting the population come to a decision alone, using a majority system, flaws arise that the minority may be unjustly punished with the consequences of a poor policy or decision. That is not to say, however, that our majority will make a good decision for themselves either; there is no educational requirement for the average voter. Therefore, it is questionable whether the population is even fully informed about their voting decisions; being a requirement within many professions before serious action is taken, informed consent is essential. If this system was in effect, we could be left with unregulated decisions from poorly chosen options, leaving society worse off with consequences such as economic collapse or extreme inequality. As a result, it is arguable whether the absolute liberty of the voting majority should be accessible, if this could lead to extremity, such as economic disparity, political inequality or even social prejudices being made the norm.

On the contrary, using a different defined purpose of democracy as being intending to fulfil the needs of society, by reaching the most rational solutions, the perspective changes. If we centred our focus solely on the benefits of governing policies to society as a whole, this could largely impact the country in a utilitarianism method. Philosopher Jeremy Bentham's idea that moral justice, a key feature of democracy, can be reasoned by maximising the happiness of the most people possible could apply here, in a similar way that the voting system prioritises a majority agreement. However, this focus would likely be reasoned and decided primarily by the governing body itself, as the moderator of our society's democracy, leaving questions for consideration. What happens to the individual? What if the decided benefit for a group of people has not been agreed on by the people themselves? Is it justifiable to push the votes of the population aside to prioritise a goal of the "best" solutions? The extent of this concept may be susceptible to corruption or abuse of power, if only the most educated and well-versed experts were debating the most rational option to implement within society. We could be left with under-representation of classes, or issues disregarded despite the potential for promising progression. However most of all, the greatest underlying issue would be the struggle to initiate a convergence of opinion: how easily and efficiently could our society accept one defined rational solution to a problem? The time taken to truly evaluate all considerations of a decision, checked and regulated, would welcome the danger that is political inertia. Inaction, or delayed action, can be just as damaging to a society as the wrong decision. Therefore, in practice, this purpose of democracy being to achieve the best outcomes for all would be problematic.

In conclusion, the benefits and drawbacks of each potential defined purpose leave much space for issues in the reality of our imperfect society. Whilst all ideologies have the potential for the abuse of power, by removing the weight that the public's vote holds over our government and parliament, through elections and petitions, we risk inviting those in power to make decisions fuelled by malintent, bending the idea of the most "beneficial rational solution" to their liking. On the other hand, leaving the liberty to make decisions entirely in the hands of the public majority could easily lead to chaos and instability, in the economy or other major areas affecting the whole country, if not properly reasoned. Therefore, the balance of purpose within our democracy allows objectives to be used, which can be shaped and fit to the current political climate, leaving our democracy as adjustable as possible whilst enforcing boundaries.