CFE Higher Politics

Political Theory

**DEMOCRACY**

**(Direct Democracy and Representative Democracy)**

**THEORISTS**



**Niccolo Machaivelli**

* Lived a t a time of unrest in the Italian city-state of Florence
* He favoured republicanism over monarchy
* His main idea was that it was better for a ruler to be feared than loved

**Plato**

* Ancient Greek philosopher and thinker
* Likened the state to a ship. He said the leaders of the state should know how to “steer the ship”
* He believed true democracy was a danger as it could put inexperience in control and lead to chaos
* **“in a Democracy fathers and sons change places and there is no distinction between owners and slaves”**





**John Locke**

* “the father of Liberalism”
* Believed in Individual freedom
* Came up with the idea of a ‘social contract’ i.e. the government needed the consent of the governed otherwise they would have no legitimate power
* He accepted though, that if the people CHOOSE to be governed by a Monarch that was ok
* Social contract theory does not directly link to democracy but makes it more likely

**Thomas Hobbes**

* Many of his ideas are related to the chaos of the English civil war
* He believed that democracy was dangerous as argument would destabilise the state
* He believed in a strong leader who gave direction and united the people
* He believed that the common good could only be achieved by someone who could take an impartial overview i.e. a King



**JS Mill**

* John Stuart Mill was a liberal
* He believed that democracy was the best way to run a government
* He believed that democracy involved “ordinary people” in decision making and it made them more critical thinkers
* The discussion and debate which democracy encourages would allow people to come to the “right decision”
* More people’s view are also taken into account.

**Jean Jacques Rousseau**

* A thinker who was influenced by Locke and who partly inspired the French Revolution
* Rousseau believed in the General Will
* He advocated a strong leader who could recognise what the will of the people was.
* He believed that Democracy was unworkable and that it would lead to constant civil war
* **“Man should be forced to be free”**

**Key Features/ Advantages of Direct Democracy**

Another strength or advantage of direct democracy could be that it is argued that Direct Democracy creates **better-informed and more politically literate citizens** i.e. need to be informed to make decisions.

This means that direct democracy should create a more informed and educated citizenry. Regular participation in government creates a more vibrant society where people care about events and the factors behind a wide range of issues. It is claimed that this would enhance public understanding of key issues.

**For example, Referenda campaigns like the Scottish Independence referendum provide an opportunity to inform the public on the merits of the respective arguments.**

**The Media coverage of the main arguments surrounding the issue could only result in a more informed and better educated electorate.**

**HOWEVER!**

It could be claimed by some that if more direct democracy were to be introduced, the public soon tire of the effort and commitment to the process and are more content with limited involvement.

**For example participation levels in general elections are only around 65%, local council elections around 50% and elections for the European parliament can be less than 30%**

*Therefore, although initially voters may become better informed politically, it could be claimed that the more involved the more likely participation ‘fatigue’ and lower participation rates are. Critics argue that if people choose not to participate, then decisions may be made by a relatively small section of the electorate and may not accurately represent the views of the public. As a consequence the result may lack legitimacy.*

A benefit or advantage of direct democracy could be claimed to be that Direct Democracy **heightens control** = ‘pure form of democracy’ i.e. making decisions for yourself.

It is genuine democracy in action. With popular participation emerges the precise and true view of all citizenry. The people determine their destiny and shape accurately their society. There is no distinction between the government and the people.

**For example, some argue that the expansion of the use of referenda and e-voting may enhance the standing of direct democracy i.e. Swiss cantons frequently provide opportunities for citizens to make political decisions directly**.

**HOWEVER!**

Direct democracy could be claimed to be impracticable. In a large scale society direct democracy is not achievable with a voting population of over 45 million people.

It is estimated that in Ancient Greece in the city state of Athens despite an estimated population on 250,000 only around 40,000 male citizens had the right to participate in the democratic process.

*Therefore although forms of direct democracy do heighten control, continuous direct democracy is not practical in modern societies with populations in the tens of millions, It worked to an extent in Ancient Athens and in smaller communities today due to lower numbers involved.*

Another benefit or advantage of is that it could be claimed Direct Democracy enables the public to express their own view **without having to rely on SELF-SERVING politicians**.

At a time in which confidence and trust is limited in representatives, direct democracy would remove this link.

It would take away a layer of people who may distort the actual views of the people and make politics more relevant and purposeful.

**For example, many politicians are accused of serving their own self-interest or are constrained in parliament by party discipline. In 2015 MPs voted to give themselves a pay rise which was met with a negative public reception.**

**HOWEVER!**

There is a need for experts in certain fields who can take informed decisions and have a practical long term view for the whole of society. On major economic or health issues experts can be more informed and have greater insight. **Plato likened the state to a ship, he said leaders of the state should know how to ‘steer the ship’.**

**For example California is often highlighted, as voters in that state have frequently initiated referenda and have passed laws which have limited the ability of elected representatives to take effective action to deal with the problems facing California and its financial crisis.**

*Therefore, removing the need for politicians could create a situation where unintended or unexpected consequences of direct decisions could create larger problems. Plato used the simile about a state being like a ship in order to make this point.*

Direct Democracy **ensures legitimacy** – people are more likely to accept decisions that they have made themselves.

This means that more direct democracy in the UK would extend greater legitimacy to the government and its actions. The widespread use of referendums could develop this. Decisions reached in this way will carry greater authority.

**For example there have been referendums on the establishment of a Scottish Parliament, Changing the voting system, Scottish independence and an upcoming referendum on the UK’s membership of the EU.**

**HOWEVER!**

The constant reference and involvement of the public may create greater political instability. Decisions may be made by a relatively small section of the electorate when turnout is low and therefore decisions may not reflect accurately the view of the public on a particular issue

**For example – voter fatigue referendum on having a London Mayor in 1998 had a turnout of 34.1%, the referendum on a North East Regional Assembly in 2004 had only a 47.7% turnout**

*Therefore, although in theory decisions made through direct democracy would be legitimate, many decisions could in fact lack legitimacy if they are decided by a relatively small group if turnout is low.*

