

Mini Documentary

What is democracy?

Prof Derek Matravers:

What is democracy? Well here's a definition: it is a method of decision-making within a state in which each of us get an equal say; that's everyone's voice counts equally.

And this is surely a good thing? What could be wrong with it?

For the first time since the great dictatorships of the mid-20th Century, people are really starting to question democracy. Is it delivering good government?

Is it able to change the world in the way we think the world ought to be changed?

Plato, the great ancient Greek philosopher had two arguments against democracy. First, the leaders we get are those who are most expert at winning elections and there is no reason at all to think this such a person is the one best placed to run the country – especially if difficult decisions need to be made. So the outcome of a vote will only tell us who is the most popular, rather than who is the most competent, candidate.

So Plato asks us to consider a ship making a dangerous voyage. Who would be the best captain? Would it be the person who offered extra rum rations, unlimited food, time on the beach, light work? Or the person who was actually an expert in sailing a ship, made accurate assessments about how tough it would be, and be able to get everyone back to safety? In a democracy, it's likely that we'll get the first person rather than the second – and that's not a good thing.

And here is Plato's second big problem. Which of us has the time to learn in detail about the big problems of the day? If the electorate are going to make informed decisions, they need to be, well, informed. And most of us don't have the time or the inclination to make ourselves informed. And what happens when you ask an uninformed population to make a decision?

Well you get an uninformed decision.

Now I actually do think these are big problems with democracy.

Plato is right that elections are a stupid way to pick experts. Nobody thinks that jobs that require expertise (such as brain surgery) should go to the most popular kid on the block.

But maybe this is the wrong way of thinking about it. Instead of thinking of elections as a way to pick experts (although we might hope they do that as well), we should think of them as a way of picking someone to carry forward the will of the people. We are not picking someone to make things go in the best way they can go (elections would not be good for that), but we are picking someone to make things go the way we want them to go (and elections are a good method for picking someone to do that).

And that's OK... But this only makes the second problem worse. If the electorate is uninformed, then picking someone who will make things go the way the electorate wants

them to go sounds like a bad idea, because the way an uninformed electorate wants things to go may well be a bit disastrous.

What can we do about this? The Irish philosopher, Edmund Burke, said that we should stop thinking that the job of people we elect is to represent our views. Instead, we elect people to do our thinking for us; to come to a considered and informed view about what is in our best interests, even if that is something we disagree with.

Flawed as it is, democracy does start to look good once we consider the alternatives: absolute monarchies, one-party states, or dictatorships of various sorts.

Now even if they are better at delivering government by experts (and even that isn't obvious), that comes at a cost. I wouldn't want to live in one of those countries; I value my freedom too much. Now also, Amartya Sen has pointed out that democracies tend not to suffer from disasters such as famine, and it can't be an accident that the more democratic states tend not to go to war with each other. Now also, it's worth noting that democracy is very good at getting rid of governments without the need to take up arms or riot (although whether such governments are bad governments or simply unpopular governments, is still open to question).

So, to quote E.M. Forster, we should raise our glasses and give at least 'two cheers for democracy'.