



2006 essay competition (18 and under category)

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“Does democracy need elections?”

Choosing our government through elections has always been the central part of our democracy, and democracies throughout the world. But fewer and fewer people are going out to vote. Instead they are becoming more interested in ‘issue politics’ such as Make Poverty History, or student fees. Because of this more and more people are turning away from traditional politics. There are plenty of efforts being made to try and get people interested in politics again, but many of them now concentrate on ways of getting involved other than taking part in voting. So can we have a democracy without elections? Should we make elections the most important part of our democracy? If so, how?

Democracy is the greatest “hurrah” word of the post-WWII epoch. Despite – or perhaps because of – this, “democracy” has a loose, almost indefinable resonance. Hitler described the Third Reich as “the true democracy”; one of the most brutal countries of modern times, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, claims eponymous democracy. The word itself derives from Ancient Greek, and may be condensed into the phrase “rule by the people”. The question of how “the people” could fairly and collectively articulate and enact their desires has perplexed a multitude of philosophers; most notably Rousseau, whose “social contract” was premised on mass participation and perpetual referenda so as to affirm the “general will”. Although thinkers since Rousseau have tended to favour representative government, the conventional wisdom that the act of voting is a precondition of democracy has been maintained. This thinking is fallacious: elections are no guarantee of democracy, and democracy is possible without the supremacy of the ballot box.

Voter turnout is in sharp decline, particularly among the traditional western democracies. The past two general elections in the UK have seen turnout at both sides of the symbolic 60% mark, and psephological signs suggest that this is endemic. In 2005, turnout among 18-24 year olds was a mere 37%. Although voting is anathema to the younger generation, democracy is by no means dead. On the contrary, popular protest is in the ascendant: the Make Poverty History campaign, particularly popular with young people, clearly influenced government policy and encouraged Tony Blair to pursue the issue at 2005's G8 summit. Membership numbers of cause groups are soaring because Britons recognise that these organisations provide a direct and democratic means of influencing change. On the other hand, an increasingly affluent and educated populace has come to realise that political parties are too general in scope; in consequence, their membership figures are in terminal decline. For a system that relies so heavily on the strength of political parties, it is unsustainable that a mere 1% of the electorate are party members. A more fundamental threat to the cycle of authority which underpins representative government also exists: that of the democratic deficit. Under Britain's

system of first-past-the-post, Labour (for example) enjoyed a 63% majority in the House of Commons with 43% of the vote in 1997; the Liberal Democrats, meanwhile, won 17% of the vote but held only 7% of the seats. Alternative elective systems provide little comfort: proportional representation in Italy, for instance, has caused tremendous political and, ultimately, economic deadlock.

It may be argued that the upsurge in the popularity of cause-based pressure groups is limited to the section of the electorate that is already politicised. Indeed, a report¹ by Essex University for the Electoral Commission revealed that there is statistically significant data to suggest that voters are more likely to participate in a protest, be active in a voluntary organisation or discuss political issues with friends than are non-voters. In rebuttal, it should be said that the activities surveyed by Essex University are, in the main, manifestations of the orthodox electoral process. The real question is whether the disenfranchised are able to find alternative methods of democratic participation which transcend conventional politics, of which voting and popular protest are indicative. The answer, it seems, is in the affirmative. Non-voters may contribute to the fabric of society via a multiplicity of avenues, many of which are not considered overtly “political”. The principal means of participation is economic: in a free market, consumers' activities create democratic results, as capital follows choice. The allocation of capital is unequal, which runs anathema to the principle of “one member one vote”, but nowhere does democracy imply egalitarianism, although it does require meritocracy. Consequently, it may be said that certain institutional prerequisites, particularly a collective guarantee of individual autonomy and the rule of law, supersede elections in terms of democratic importance. Moreover, a culture which fosters free expression and exchange of ideas is vital to the health of any democracy; a fact evidenced most pointedly in the Middle East, where, despite the prevalence of elections – notably in Iraq – religious protectionism, as well as a sore lacking of guaranteed security, precludes the development of true democracy. In fact, an over-emphasis on elections endangers democracy, as legislatures assume a collective legitimacy with which they may impede on the liberty of the individual. In the words of JS Mill, “whatever crushes individuality is despotism”, no matter what the form of government.

While conventional politics is in decline, a general increase in wealth, security and autonomy facilitates greater participation. “Democracy” is invariably used with regard to the election of a legislature and government, but in fact the word demands more scope. Indeed, by undergoing voluntary transactions in the marketplace, consumers contribute to the democratic make-up of their country: popular products and services are given precedence and unpopular goods sidelined. This truly is “rule by the people”, in a far more direct and effective way than representative government could ever hope to achieve. Evidence from around the world supports this conclusion. Thailand, for instance, has been without a parliament for most of 2006, but the country is no less democratic because of it – GDP growth this year is expected to surpass last year's, thus enabling consumers to better implement their democratic rights of choice and decision. We should not, as the question suggests, “make elections the most important part of our democracy”, because this runs contrary to the spirit of the word: by definition, it would be undemocratic to force elections onto a populace. As is evidenced by the general elections of 2001 and 2005, 40% of the UK electorate has exercised its democratic choice in not participating in the outdated process of representative government. Democracy is defined as “rule by the people”, yet the current government is mandated by a quarter of the total electorate, which undermines governmental legitimacy and authority in general. As such, it is a political reality that elections are in decline *vis a vis* the democratic system.

1 <http://www.essex.ac.uk/bes/Papers/ec%20report%20final.pdf>

Politicians generally emphasise the importance of “re-engaging” people with – and “re-educating” them about – the conventional political system, but that is because their vested interests lie in preserving the status quo. The Power Inquiry's proposal for a “a rebalancing of power away from the executive and unaccountable bodies towards Parliament and local government”² correctly addresses the issue of undemocratic centralisation (caused, in fact, by the aforementioned electoral system of first-past-the-post), but a more fundamental problem remains. Throughout modern history there has been in existence a self-aggrandising system of government whereby the people, persuaded by illusions of grandeur, elect their chosen representative, who thus contrives the myth of a “social contract” in order to perpetuate his power and the stability of the political system in which he operates. In a democracy, it is the people who are sovereign; not their temporary representatives. In JS Mill's time, “the majority [had] not yet learnt to feel the power of the government their power, or its opinions their opinions”. Today's majority is learning how to wield its rightful power, and the weapon used against established political elites is not the ballot box, which is naturally conservative, but capital. This tension was identified in 1973 by Habermas as the “crisis of legitimation”, and it is a conflict which, inevitably, the individual will win; for the alternative is “a state which dwarfs its men”, and “with small men no great thing can really be accomplished”.³

² <http://www.powerinquiry.org/report/documents/ii.pdf>

³ JS Mill, *On Liberty*.