



2006 Essay Competition (18 and under category)

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Does Democracy Need Elections?

Freetown, Massachusetts. The Moderator calls for silence as votes are cast by all of its adult inhabitants; the budget has finally been agreed. A quaint remnant of a quieter time, perhaps, but these town meetings still take place across much of New England. Some miles away in Nashua, New Hampshire, residents go to the polls, but here it signals the beginning of primary season – the first step towards the election of a new President of the United States. Both exercises in democracy, yes, but which is the true manifestation of their former President Abraham Lincoln's ideal of "Government of the people, by the people, for the people"?

This worthy cause of rule by the people is intertwined in our minds with elections, a view that we foist on other countries as a mark of their movement towards 'civilisation' – any call for reform is seen as sacrilege. However, while Jean-Jacques Rousseau saw democracy as the perfect way for human beings to achieve freedom, he criticised the British system, claiming that only in the actual moment of placing their vote in the ballot box were the British people free; thereafter they were effectively enslaved by those who had been given a democratic mandate to govern. With the rise in political disengagement in recent years, perhaps it is worth looking inwards to see if that very symbol of democracy, the election, is really needed.

One of the findings of this year's Power Inquiry was that British citizens feel the processes of formal democracy do not allow them enough influence over decisions which will affect their everyday lives. An extreme and controversial solution to this would be the abolition of elections themselves. Elections are simply representative democracy, where voters choose another person to speak on their behalf – in theory, at least. Surely a fairer system would be one in which the electorate themselves make the decisions? This was the first manifestation of democracy in Ancient Greece – direct democracy.

This system, often seen as the only 'pure' form of democracy, operated in the city-state of Athens in the 4th and 5th centuries BC. All decisions were made by the Ecclesia, or Assembly, to which all citizens belonged. When full-time politicians were required, citizens were chosen on the basis of a rota and terms were short to increase participation. Therefore, all decisions were

effectively made by the people. However, Plato attacked it, feeling that the 'masses' did not have the wisdom or experience to govern themselves, and this view was shared by the framers of the American constitution. Direct democracy all but vanished, leaving representative democracy as the supposedly ideal form of government.

But perhaps it is time to take another look at this method. It has become popular to lament the decline in democratic engagement in Britain, but what is often ignored is the fact that this disengagement is essentially confined to elections. This is extremely dangerous in a country which prides itself on its democratic tradition, because it gives Parliament a lack of legitimacy – in 2005 the Labour Party won 9.5 million votes, while 17 million registered voters did not turn up to their polling place at all (Power Inquiry). We have no way of knowing which party these potential voters would have supported – had they all cast their vote for the British National Party, for example, a group sidelined in UK politics would have been immediately elevated to the limelight. Despite this, the Power Inquiry also found that of those who do not vote in General Elections, 37% were either members of or active in charities, their communities or various public bodies and campaign organisations. This clearly indicates that it is not that people do not want to be active citizens, but rather that they do not see elections as the most useful way of exercising this right. So would direct democracy give a new lease of life to a country where democracy has become so stagnant that in 2001 six million more votes were cast in *Pop Idol* than in the General Election? (*50 Facts That Should Change The World* – Jessica Williams)

Apart from the aforementioned New England town meetings, direct democracy is currently exercised to some extent in Switzerland and particularly California in the United States. Any Swiss citizen can initiate a referendum by collecting 100,000 citizens' signatures (BBC) and referenda have rejected important proposals such as joining the EU in 2001. In 1911 the Progressive Party brought the powers of initiative, referenda and recall to California, and they have continued to be exercised vociferously, as in 2003 with the recall of Governor Gray Davis. He subsequently lost the special election to Arnold Schwarzenegger, whose own proposals were rejected by the California electorate in November 2005.

The electorate are always keen on referenda – they want their voices to be heard, and it is a mechanism which clearly allows this. But the same problems exist with this system as with elections – how do you ensure that the result reflects the views of the entire population? Should it be illegal not to vote, as in Belgium? And what extent of the population would be enfranchised (for example, do we include prisoners, who obviously have informed views on law and order issues)? This was not a problem that citizens of Athens faced, since the extensive use of slavery relieved citizens of the need to work and women (who were also denied citizenship) performed all domestic tasks. Therefore, while it was claimed that all decisions were being made by the people, they were in fact only decided by a small and elitist sector of the population. It is this very fact that makes the idea of a country governed entirely by direct democracy completely impracticable. There is simply not time for referenda

on every decision a government must make on a day-to-day basis, and while it can be argued that the public has access to the same information as the Government with the internet and the Freedom of Information Act, this is particularly false in cases of defence and law and order. In these cases decisions must be made on the basis of intelligence that cannot be made available to the general public, as in the case of Iraq. Perhaps Plato's concerns about the ignorance of the masses should also be taken into account – in California voters reported having difficulty understanding at least half of the measures on the November 1996 ballot (Vermont Legislative Research Shop).

Alexander Hamilton criticised direct democracy for being able to “admit no cure for the mischief of faction”, and while in theory these referenda decisions in California are made by the people they end up governed entirely by opposing pressure groups who pour money into advertising and inundating the electorate with campaign leaflets. People in Britain find campaign leaflets at election time annoying enough without being flooded with literature telling them to vote ‘no’ on such-and-such a proposition. And, in fact, referenda in the UK do not, in general, have a higher turnout than elections – in 2005 61% voted in the General Election while only 47% voted in the referendum on a Northern England assembly (BBC). Numerous studies in the United States have also shown that ballot initiatives fail to raise turnout. But perhaps the most important question concerning direct democracy is this: where does it end? In 1994 Californian voters supported the passage of Proposition 187, which would have denied benefits to illegal immigrants, yet in 1998 it was declared unconstitutional by the Supreme Court. In a direct democracy there is no check on the view of a people who may have been won over to a particular point of view through demagoguery, sophistry, or even violence.

So what is the solution to democratic disengagement? Put simply, democracy cannot do without some form of election in order to be workable. However, democracy cannot simply rely upon elections. What the Power Inquiry shows is that increasingly voters feel as if their views are not taken into account by political parties, or that their vote in an election is wasted. To deal with this problem referenda must be used more extensively, although not on every issue, and, more importantly, our system of elections needs to evolve. It is not surprising that voters feel disillusioned when a party with only 35% of the vote can win 55% of the seats (BBC) – and that such a party can then continue to govern almost unopposed due to their majority despite being behind in opinion polls. The answer to this is a form of proportional representation (PR), which would allow the votes of all the electorate to count and provide for a more deliberative, fairly-elected assembly. According to a Make Votes Count poll in 2001, 67% of people would support a PR system in a referendum, so it is clear that this issue is popular among the electorate. Yes, democracy needs elections, but only when those elections themselves are truly democratic.