

# Representative Democracy

Democracy is a form of government wherein citizens are allowed to govern themselves by participating in the formulation and passage of laws and in making governmental decisions. Although democracy had been practiced in many ancient civilizations, it was thought to have originated in ancient Greece particularly in the city state of Athens; Athenian democracy was a direct democracy.

**Direct democracy** is also known as pure democracy. In a direct democracy, citizens propose, decide, and change Constitutional laws; initiate referendums; and choose and remove public officials who are not effectively doing their jobs. It is practiced in only a few places, like Switzerland, where citizens approve laws using a single majority in the town or city levels, and a double majority at the national level. Laws are proposed by its citizens and must be approved by a majority of the voters. This type of system works best with smaller groups, where it is easy to hear every single person's vote and voter participation is high.

A **representative democracy** is when citizens elect or choose a government officials to represent them in the lawmaking process. Those elected officials, called *electors*, are the ones to propose and approve laws based on the interests of the public that they are representing. This type of system is more effective in larger countries, where it would be difficult to gather each individual's vote, or where voter participation is lower. In many countries, like the United States, electors are used on the national and state levels of government, but not used on the municipal (city or town) level.

While most developed countries today have representative democracies, there are both benefits and drawbacks to a system like this.

## Advantages of a Representative Democracy

### 1. When operating as it should, it is a highly efficient form of government.

Instead of forcing everyone to vote on everything, a representative democracy allows decisions to be made by a group of elected officials who can dedicate themselves full-time to the decision-making process. A representative democracy is often a desirable choice for larger countries where the logistics of voting are a long and painstaking process. Rather than waiting for each citizen to turn out to vote, shortcuts can be made to expedite the process.

### 2. People still have a voice.

Although a representative democracy takes away the direct decision-making power of individuals, it does not completely eliminate their influence on the government. If the population is dissatisfied with the performance of their elected official, they can vote to remove that person on the next election cycle.

### 3. It can help everyone, even if they don't participate in the political process.

Elected officials are tasked with making decisions for their entire district or region. Everyone who lives in that area benefits from the decisions made by their representative. Even individuals who are not engaged in the political process benefit from this representation. For example, if the representative helps pass a law to lower taxes in that district, everyone benefits, even those who did not vote.

### 4. Controls can be put into place to limit the individual action of an elected official. Recall elections, which is when an official is voted to be removed from office, and other similar rules can be used within a representative democracy to allow a district to remove an elected official who is not meeting their expectations.

## **Disadvantages of a Representative Democracy**

### **1. Trust is required to make this government structure work.**

Once an official is elected to represent them, the population must trust that their representative will work to do what is best for their constituents. Someone with a secret agenda could say one thing during an election, become a representative, and then pursue something entirely different than what their election campaign promised.

### **2. It can still be difficult to get things done.**

A clear majority does not usually rule in a representative democracy. There are many political parties in most systems that each have a specific platform of priorities they wish to pursue. When those platforms are opposing one another, it creates gridlock within the government that can stop some of the work from being done.

### **3. Representatives may not represent everyone.**

A common complaint about a representative democracy is that the elected officials are “out of touch.” This occurs because a representative must be present where the government meets, which could be thousands of miles away from their district where their constituents live. Some communities or districts may also have highly varied types of people that have conflicting needs, making it difficult for one elector to meet the needs of everyone.

### **4. In some ways, it discourages participation.**

When there is a representative democracy in place, people know that they will receive governmental representation, whether they choose to vote or not. For some, that means they choose not to participate in the voting process because they automatically receive this representation. Others choose not to participate because the officials running in an election do not represent their needs. Sometimes, because of the

## Representative Democracy Questions

1. What is the difference between a representative democracy and a direct democracy?
2. What makes a representative democracy so efficient?
3. If electors are making the lawmaking decisions, how do citizens still have a voice in the process?
4. How can representative democracy benefit everyone, even those who don't participate?
5. What is a recall election? How can it be used in a representative democracy?
6. How does trust play an important role in a representative democracy?
7. Even though it is efficient, how can decisions in a representative democracy still be difficult or time-consuming?
8. What can be a problem with having one elector to represent an entire community/district?
9. How could a representative democracy actually discourage (decrease) participation?

## Representative Democracy or Direct Democracy?

**In the chart below, identify whether each scenario is describing representative democracy (RD) or direct democracy (DD)**

RD or DD?	Scenario
	1. Your school invites all students to vote for a new mascot.
	2. Your family is planning a vacation. Everyone sits down together and offers suggestions on where to go, and you will all vote to make a final decision
	3. Your hockey league is considering changing some of its rules. Each team is asked to send one person to speak on their behalf and vote for changes.
	4. Parents on your block are concerned about increased traffic on the street, so they take their concerns to the next town council meeting.
	5. Your teacher agrees to postpone a test. There are three possible dates for the test, and she invites all students in class to vote for the date they prefer.
	6. The LHS student council decides on the theme for homecoming.

**For each scenario below, identify whether you think direct democracy or representative democracy would be the best system, and explain why.**

1. Your school needs to make many decisions on upcoming issues. Issues include social events, such as dances; school budgets, such as which things to buy first; and, school conduct, such as dress code. Most often these decisions need to be made quickly, and teachers are concerned about the amount of time needed for students to vote on all the issues that arise throughout the year.
2. The club you belong to needs know what system will be best for them. During the year there will be some decisions to make, including selecting a club president, deciding on the style for new t-shirts, and deciding when to hold meetings. Since participation in this club is voluntary, everyone involved feels it is important that their voice is heard.
3. A small town of 1000 people is considering changing the way decisions are made. The town includes about 900 adults over the age of 18. The town wants to ensure that residents have an opportunity to voice their concerns and have their suggestions considered, but it is also important that the town be able to make decisions in a timely manner.