Vote Often

Our representative democracy is scarcely worthy of the name. 21st Century politics demands a more participatory system

You lost, suck it up: this is how our politics works. If the party you voted for lost the election, you have no meaningful democratic voice for the next five years. You can go through life, in this "representative democracy", unrepresented in government, while not permitted to represent yourself.

Even if your party is elected, it washes its hands of you when you leave the polling booth. Governments assert a mandate for any policy they can push through parliament. While elections tend to hinge on one or two issues, parties will use their win to claim support for all the positions in their manifestos, and for anything else they decide to do during their term in office.

If you raise objections to their policies, you're often told, "if you don't like it, stand for election". This response is revealing: it suggests that only 650 people out of 66 million have a valid role in national politics, beyond voting once every five years. Political control under this system is so coarse and diffuse that democracy loses all but its crudest meaning.

It is astonishing that we put up with this. The idea that any government could meet the needs of a complex, modern nation by ruling without constant feedback, and actual rather than notional consent, is preposterous.

Last week I considered some ideas for creating a more participatory economy. This column explores the potential for a more participatory democracy. I'm not proposing we abandon representative democracy, but that we temper it with meaningful deliberation and consent.

I recognise that this is an unpropitious time to call for more referendums. But the Brexit vote was the worst possible model for popular decision-making. The government threw a massive question at an electorate that had almost no experience of direct democracy. Voters were rushed towards judgement day on a ridiculously short timetable, with no preparation except a series of giant lies.

Worse still, an issue of astonishing complexity was reduced to a crude binary choice. Because the only options presented were in or out, everyone knows what the majority voted against; no one knows what kind of Leave it voted for. Why could we not have had a multiple choice, presenting the different ways in which we could have stayed in or left Europe? Without permission to make a nuanced decision, we had no incentive to achieve a nuanced understanding.

A lively and intelligent politics demands an active and empowered electorate, that can hold its representatives constantly to account. Here are three models we could draw upon.

The first is the Swiss system. There, the people vote in about ten or a dozen referendums a year, clustered into three or four polling days, challenging federal laws or proposing constitutional

amendments. The referendums are triggered when someone can gather enough signatures. These plebiscites foster a strong sense of political ownership: people perceive that government belongs to them. This might explain why, in its survey of 40 nations, the *OECD* discovered that the Swiss had the highest levels of trust in government. Far from causing voter fatigue, the process stimulates a rich culture of engagement, debate and persuasion. Across the year, around 80% of the electorate vote in referendums.

When I mention the Swiss system, people tend to react with horror. What if, as they often do in Switzerland, people make conservative choices? Well, they are entitled to their conservatism. A true democracy reveals the character of a nation: in Switzerland it is generally conservative. And if you don't like it, you have the opportunity, through the debates surrounding these plebiscites, to change people's minds. (There is, however, an argument for preserving some constitutional norms, to prevent majorities from oppressing minorities).

The second model is the Reykjavík system. In the Icelandic capital, anyone can propose an idea for improving the city or allocating its infrastructure budget, and anyone can vote for or against it. The most popular ideas are submitted to the city council. The scheme has been remarkably successful: 58% of the city's people have taken part so far and 200 of their proposals have been adopted by the council. The result is better amenities and a resurgence of civic life.

The third, most radical, model is the Kurdish system. Particularly in Rojava, in northern Syria, but throughout the Kurdish region, the people have sought to introduce a system first proposed by the US ecologist Murray Bookchin and refined and adapted by the imprisoned leader of the banned Kurdish Workers' Party, Abdullah Ocalan. It's called democratic confederalism.

Here, power is devolved not from the top down, but from the bottom up: the primary political unit is a local assembly representing a village or an urban district. These assemblies then elect people to represent their interests in wider confederations, which in turn choose members to provide a voice in the region as a whole (Ocalan rejects the idea of the nation state). The federal government is purely administrative: it does not make policy but implements the proposals passed up to it by the assemblies.

The introduction of this system has been bumpy: perhaps unsurprisingly in a region under constant military attack. But it has been accompanied so far by a great enhancement of the representation of women, the development of a cooperative economy and stronger environmental protection. There's a danger in this model of photocopy democracy – political control becomes fainter and greyer as decisions are passed upwards – which might permit political capture. There's also a danger of granting excessive power to civil servants. But already the system, though haltingly, seems to be creating an oasis of democracy and trust in the Middle East's political desert.

So how do we decide whether and how to reform our politics? Democratically, of course. The first step should be a constitutional convention, composed of citizens chosen by lot, accompanied by a small number of parliamentarians (to encourage Parliament to accept the results). Its purpose would be to identify the principles that could govern our politics, then put them to the vote in a multiple-choice referendum. What does democracy mean, if the people are not allowed to choose their political system?

While I voted Remain, my aim is to make the most of Brexit. In the chaos that will accompany our departure from Europe lies an opportunity to do everything differently. Taking back control? Yes, I'm all for it.

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