What is Democracy?

"Like fire, or painting or writing, democracy seems to have been invented more than once, and in more than one place"

- Robert A. Dahl - On Democracy

Literally meaning 'rule by [the] people', democracy is ***a form of government involving collective decision-making.*** Political legitimacy comes from the consent and control of the governed - rather than from wealth, divine-right conferred by a deity, or military might.

Democracy has meant different things, to different people, at different times. The nature of democracy - who 'the people' are, and the systems and institutions which make democratic rule realisable - has been ***contested throughout its 2,500 year history.***

When we refer to 'democracy', we could be talking about an ideal of how the public ought to govern a state. Or, we could be talking about the particular political system and institutions that are practically needed to bring about the conditions for democracy.

Key principles of democracy

How democracy has been understood has changed and evolved over time. The *International Institute for Democratic and Electoral Assistance* (International IDEA) defines democracy as having two conditions:

1. Popular Control — ***Concerns what powers are being distributed (political control over authoritative political decision-making)***

2. Political Equality — ***Concerns how the powers should be distributed (equally) and implemented (impartially)***

According to their *State of Democracy* framework, the extent to which a system of government is democratic is based on how far it meets the following criteria:

Representative government *e.g. free political parties*

Fundamental rights *e.g. social rights and equality*

Checks on government *e.g. judicial independence*

Impartial administration *e.g. absence of corruption*

Participatory engagement *e.g. direct democracy*

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