

Does democracy work? It depends on the kind of democracy¹

Abstract

Is it fair to say that democracy cannot "work" because it is unable to execute the will of the people? This may not be far from the truth in the case of the form of democracy known as the multi-party system (i.e. a system containing more than two political parties). It turns out that such a system is not very well adapted to execute the will of the people. Perhaps then it has to be rejected and an alternative form of democracy has to be envisaged. A two-party system - imposed by way of modifications in the electoral system, modifications which limit political equality - would perhaps be a solution.

In a democracy, the majority rules and the government has to represent the majority. In a multi-party democracy, however, this is not straightforward. When there are more than two political parties competing for power, it often happens that no single party represents the majority. Therefore, party coalitions are necessary in order to establish a political majority and a government. So far so good.

The problem with coalitions is that they or their policies often do not represent the will of the majority. The electorate cannot decide on the composition of coalitions. The composition of the government is decided without the intervention of the voters. They cannot decide on the political program and policy of the government either, because this program and policy are the result of negotiations and agreements between the coalition partners. Government policy is not something which is proposed to the electorate before the election and then approved or rejected by the electorate. It is established only after the election and during negotiations between parties which bargain on the basis of their relative strength (their strength in turn is based on the election result). The results of these negotiations are never approved by the voters. Government policy is therefore not the execution of the will of the people - which should be the hallmark of democracy - but the execution of an agreement between political parties.

Government coalitions (or organized majorities) are bound together by agreements and compromises between political parties. These agreements and compromises, which are the result of negotiations that take place after the elections (although sometimes political parties announce their alliances in advance), make up government policy. This policy is, by definition, unknown before the election and hence the electorate cannot express itself on this policy. Sometimes, these negotiations as well as its results are even hidden from the public and can result in the return to government of parties that have been decimated in the elections. It is possible that a voter would have voted for another party if he had known the result of the coalition negotiations in advance.

In a multi-party system, the voter does not even know the result of the election after the election has taken place. He ² has to wait for the result of the negotiations between parties and has no input at all in these negotiations. Only then is he informed about which government will take office and which government program will be implemented. There is no direct election of the government, and the composition and the program of the

¹ This paper is a rewrite of some paragraphs which appeared in "Homo Democraticus, On the Universal Desirability and the not so Universal Possibility of Democracy and Human Rights", Cambridge Scholars Press, 2003.

² If have chosen not to use gender-neutral phrasing. An attempt to do so would have produced an unreadable paper.

government are unpredictable, even after the results of the election of parliament are known. The result of an election is, of course, always unpredictable, but in a multi-party system, this result remains unpredictable even after the election has taken place.

All this is not the case in a two-party system, in which the winner of the election forms the government without further ado. The manifesto of one party becomes government policy and government policy is consciously chosen by the majority of the people. The result of the election determines automatically and immediately the composition and the program of the government. There is a direct link between the votes and the government and a party that loses the election cannot be part of the government.

In a multi-party system, the government and the government policies are unpredictable because it is uncertain who will be part of the government. Even when this is known, it is often unclear what the parties have had to surrender in order to achieve the compromises necessary to forge the coalition and the government agreement. Furthermore, it is unclear which compromises will be necessary in the future in order to maintain the coalition. The voter cannot express himself on any of these compromises and agreements, even though they determine government policy. Government policy therefore cannot be the expression of the will of the people.

Election campaigns and government policies are by definition very different things in such a system. Politics loses its credibility and people stop participating because there is no link between cause and effect, between a vote or a party manifesto on the one hand and government policy on the other hand. Voters have practically no influence on the composition and the policies of the government. They can only express their disappointment afterwards, but there is no guarantee that new coalition negotiations take this expression into consideration. Democracy ceases to exist when citizens have no influence and when government policies reflect compromises between political parties rather than the will of the people.

Political parties and individual politicians suffer a loss of credibility. They need party coalitions because they seldom have an absolute majority. As a consequence, they cannot implement their manifesto completely. In the best case, they can only implement a diluted version resulting from compromises with other ruling parties. In the worst case, these compromises force politicians to modify the policies which they have presented to the electorate. Ultimately, the loss of politicians' credibility and trustworthiness which results from this, can affect the entire political system and even the concept of democracy in general.

The often lamented discrepancies between promises and policies are, in part at least, the consequence of a multi-party system. This system makes it impossible to execute the will of the people and therefore makes it impossible to preserve democracy. The will of the people is translated into a number of votes for a number of party manifestos, but government policy is not the implementation of the manifesto with the majority of votes because there is only rarely such a majority manifesto in a multi-party system. Government policy is not even the implementation of a sum of different manifestos. It is the implementation of a negotiated compromise between different manifestos, a compromise moreover which is not subject to the approval of the electorate.

The multi-party system is of course not the only cause of discrepancies between election propaganda and government policies. Power politics also plays a role. Winning the election and profiting from the benefits of elected positions are often the only reasons why politicians formulate policies and promises. They often do not have the intention of

effectively implementing these policies. They intend to pursue their self-interest. This also diminishes the credibility of persons and institutions.

The lack of stability and decisiveness of coalition governments is another phenomenon which makes it difficult to execute the will of the people and which therefore undermines democracy, or, better, a certain kind of democracy. A coalition between different political parties can only result from a mix of different and often contradictory political ideologies and manifestos. The problem is that some things cannot be mixed. Some contradicting opinions cannot be harmonized into one compromise opinion and some opinions are so fundamental that every compromise is unacceptable. If, during the years in government, a problem related to these fundamental and conflicting opinions arises, then the politicians can act in different ways:

1. Decisions and even discussions regarding this matter are prohibited by the coalition agreement. The advantage of such a strategy is the relative stability of the government. Coalitions do not break up because conflicts between opinions are excluded from the political agenda. The downside is that the government is indecisive and ineffective. Problems are not solved and the political parties lose their identity and their distinctive character. A party cannot implement its fundamental principles which distinguish it from other parties when these other parties are necessary partners in government and claim to protect other and incompatible principles. Parties lose their attractiveness and credibility and citizens become indifferent. A related phenomenon is the so-called "move to the political center". All parties start to look alike. Vagueness does not encourage political participation and politics loses its attractiveness for citizens.
2. Second option: decisions regarding a contested matter are not excluded beforehand but avoided the moment the problem enters the political scene. It is decided not to decide. The advantages and disadvantages are exactly the same as in the first possibility. Problems are not solved and political parties are seen as institutions that are more interested in safeguarding the government and thus their own power, than in preserving and defending fundamental ideological principles. Politics becomes a world of pragmatism and opportunism in which basic principles are given up for a seat in the government. Democracy loses its legitimacy.
3. If it is impossible to decide not to decide and if everybody holds on to his initial ideological position, then there can be no decision. The coalition will most likely break up. The problem is not only indecisiveness but also instability. Citizens are not pleased if they have to elect a new government every year. Politicians are praised for their ideological purity, but this does not solve the problem. After all, the image of politicians is less important than efficient decisions and stable government.
4. The last possibility is a compromise decision of some kind. Contrary to the three previous possibilities, there is now a decision, but it is a decision that pleases none of the parties involved because it corresponds to none of their fundamental principles. As in the first two possibilities, politicians are criticized for their ideological wavering.

A multi-party system is therefore often indecisive or unstable and this is another reason why it is very difficult to execute the will of the people in such a system. The problem of the execution of the will of the people is not even a real problem because the vagueness of

politics and its lack of credibility force people to turn away from politics altogether. They do not have a will anymore.

Indecisiveness is often a consequence of the pursuit of stability. Decisions are avoided because they can endanger the coalition and therefore the government. It seems that decisiveness and stability cannot go together in a multi-party system. The fear of instability not only leads to indecisiveness. It can also lead to extreme decisions. Sometimes, parties need the support of small and extremist parties in order to form a majority and a government. These extremist parties can blackmail the government by threatening to leave the coalition, to break up the majority and to bring down the government. These minorities can therefore force the government to take extreme decisions and they create a system of *de facto* minority rule.

Does all this mean that democracy cannot work and has to be rejected? Not necessarily. Perhaps these problems can be solved within the framework of democracy. A so-called two-party system, as it is or was practiced in Great Britain for example, has some advantages:

1. In a two-party system, politicians do not have to decide independently on the composition and the policies of the government after the election has taken place. There is no need for compromises between political parties in order to create or maintain a coalition. The voters are not excluded from important decisions such as the choice of the government or the choice of the policies of the government. The voters decide who is part of the government and which party manifesto becomes government policy. The only thing they have to do is vote for one party or another.
2. Government policy is much more predictable because there is no need for compromises as a means to save the government and to avoid a break-up of the coalition. There is no need for compromises as a means to create a government either. Governments are not coalitions. As a consequence, election propaganda and government policies are more compatible and democracy retains its credibility.
3. Political parties can hold on to their ideological profile because they do not have to adapt their policies to the wishes of their partners. They can reach their goals, they can be decisive and efficient and this means that they can keep their attractiveness. Politics itself remains attractive. On the other hand, if there are only two parties, these parties are bound to contain many different currents. This may limit their ability to take decisions and may force them to make internal compromises.

A two-party system can therefore solve some of the problems created by a multi-party system. However, one has to pay a price for this solution. As all things in life, a two-party system also has some disadvantages:

1. Choices are limited in a two-party system. Instead of being able to choose between many different parties and ideologies, the voter can only choose between two parties. It is very difficult to represent all the different ideological currents when there are only two parties. However, the two parties in a two-party system can be heterogeneous and can incorporate different albeit related and compatible ideological currents. Unfortunately, this means reintroducing the problem of indecisiveness we find in multi-party systems. We are not likely to have a stable majority and a stable government able to take decisions when the governing party is divided on issues.

2. Changing the electoral system and introducing a threshold - for example a threshold limiting representation in parliament to parties that have more than 5 % of the votes - is one of the ways in which to enforce a two-party system. Such a threshold, however, means limiting political equality. Not all voters are treated equally. Those who have voted for small parties are not represented. Their voices are not heard, their interests are not protected and they have less influence on policies. Minorities are discriminated. History has shown that small parties are very useful because they function as a stage for the appearance of new issues (the green parties for example). Large parties have often reacted positively and have incorporated these issues in their own manifestos. They probably would not have done so if small parties had not proven the existence of a grassroots interest in these issues. If an issue can attract votes, even relatively few votes, then large parties will be interested, unless of course these votes do not count.
3. A threshold system makes it much more difficult for parties to grow. A party that is not represented cannot use parliament as a stage to show itself and to generate support. As a consequence, there is a kind of exaggerated stability in politics.
4. The so-called "first-past-the-post" system combined with a system of election districts - whoever has most votes in a district (not necessarily the majority of votes) gets the seat in parliament reserved for this district and becomes the only representative for the district ("winner-takes-all") - is another way in which to enforce a two-party system. In some cases, this electoral system gives power to a relative majority and therefore not necessarily an absolute majority (a party which has a few more votes than all other parties in a majority of districts, will have a majority of seats in parliament, but perhaps a minority of the votes). In fact, it can result in the rule of a minority. An important minority or maybe even a majority may not be represented at all. Again, political equality is limited. There is no longer a perfect match between the views of the people and the views present in parliament. A system of districts also limits political equality when the districts are not of the same size. If both a small group of people and a large group of people have one representative, then we can hardly claim to have political equality. (In some countries, rich minorities have often been given small districts, which favored them politically and offered them a very large and disproportional share of the seats in parliament). However, I believe that some modifications can make the district system acceptable. There can be some kind of safety net for minorities failing to get represented (some kind of guaranteed representation for example). There can also be supplementary conditions for representation, in order to avoid giving power to relative majorities that are in fact absolute minorities.

So it is not so easy after all to choose between a multi-party and a two-party system. Direct democracy does not have the disadvantages of either a multi-party system or a two-party system. In a direct democracy, the majority and the policies depend exclusively on the votes and not on coalitions, negotiations, districts, thresholds etc. There is no problem of decisiveness or government stability either and there is no need to limit political equality. It is obvious that the problems posed by a multi-party system or two-party system should not force us to reject democracy altogether and may force us to take another look at the long forgotten and cursed tradition of direct democracy.