

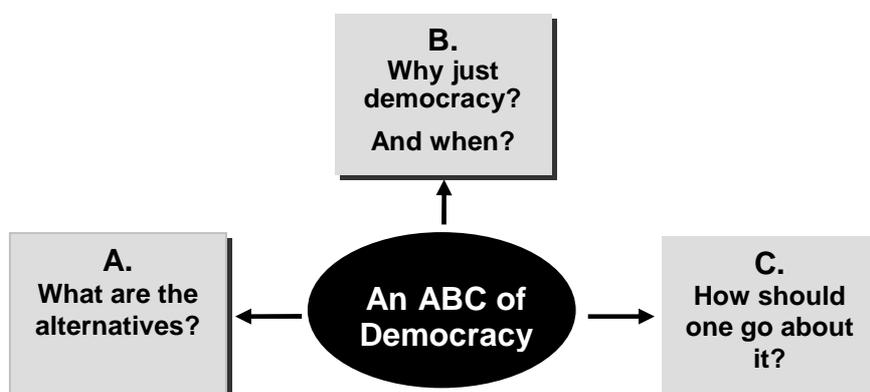
## An ABC of democracy

# Three basic issues

Every day and in a variety of situations, decisions are made that affect many people. When should the decision-making process be democratic and what does that mean?

To answer that question, this theoretical background presents an ABC of democracy. The model is general – it applies at every level, from small groups to global organisations such as the United Nations – and consists of three stages:

- A. First of all, get a clear idea of the alternatives to democracy
- B. This provides a sounder basis for arriving at democracy's fundamental principles and deciding when they are most appropriate
- C. If the democratic alternative is chosen, there is the question of how to put it into practice



### A. Alternative forms of rule

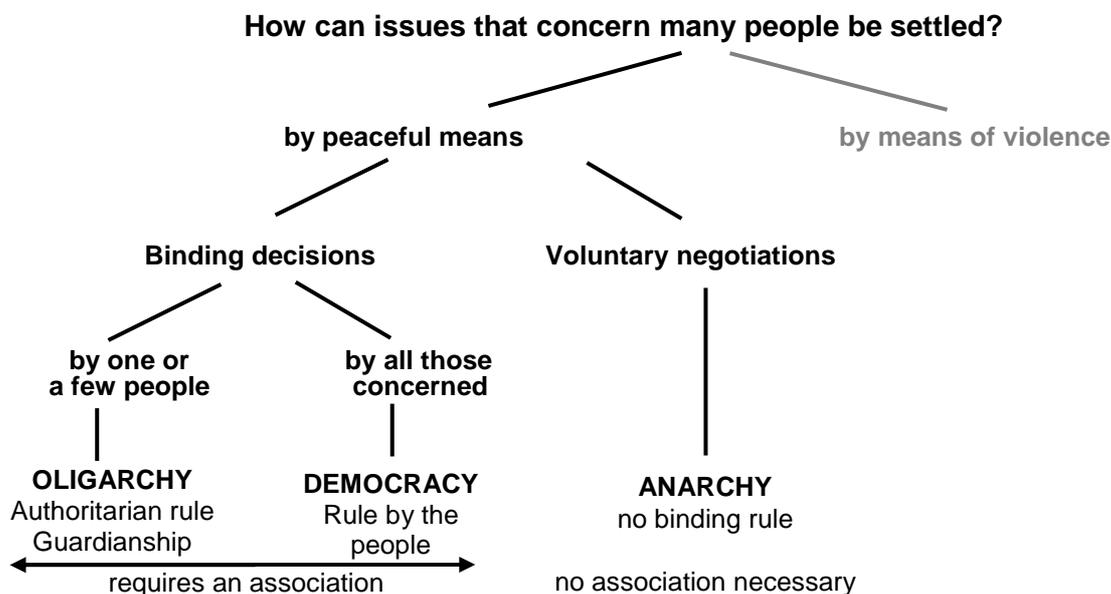
How can matters that affect many people be decided? Or, to be more specific, who has the *authority* to decide and how should the process be *managed*?

With such a general formulation of the foundation for politics, one can begin by distinguishing between alternatives that are peaceful and those that rely on violence. This step is often ignored and the choice is reduced to peaceful democracy versus violent dictatorship. While pitching good against evil in this way may help to win an argument, it is misleading because it implies that there are only two alternatives. The starting point here instead is that violence disrupts any political order – democratic or otherwise – because a legitimate exercise of power is replaced by physical violence.<sup>1</sup>

Taking the next step and looking at the peaceful alternatives a dispute can, in principle, be resolved either by free negotiation or by an arrangement for collective decision-making that is drawn up in advance and binding on all those concerned.

Decisions which are collectively binding, so that a particular group of people is expected to follow them, can be made in principle in one of two ways: by a few or by all those concerned.

The above is illustrated by the following diagram of alternative forms of rule. This is an ideal model; in practice, a combination of alternatives is often used.

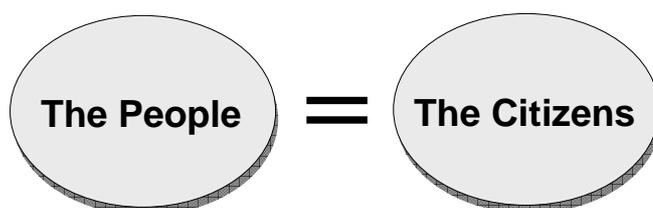


A variant of this classification, which treats democracy as one of three possible forms of rule, was put forward more than 2300 years ago by the Greek philosopher Aristotle. This general and fairly neutral scheme brings out another main point:

- to be democratic, decisions must be reached within the framework of an association or community: without an association one cannot have democracy.

If we call the members of a community that are affected by the decisions *the People* and those who participate in the making of decisions are called *the Citizens*, we can formulate the following basic democratic identity:

- everybody who is one of the people is a citizen and no one is a citizen who is not one of the people.



### **Oligarchy, authoritarian rule, guardianship**

An oligarchy presupposes a community but does not enable all those concerned to participate in decisions, either directly or indirectly. A hundred years ago, for instance, when the struggle for democracy in Sweden was most intense, the country was not a dictatorship. There was a rule of law but it was a minority rule, with class distinctions that the champions of democracy aimed to overthrow by giving everyone the right to vote.

Guardianship is considered to be the most appropriate form of rule in many contexts. The right of parents to bring up their children is seldom questioned. Teachers in school and other forms of education are seen as being competent to direct their pupils'

learning process. In companies and public authorities it is generally accepted that work is led by managers with special qualifications.

### **Anarchy<sup>2</sup>**

International politics is a classic example of an anarchic system, uncontrolled by any form of collective decision-making. Countries negotiate freely with each other and may or may not reach an agreement. They abide by their agreements as long as the parties to them stand to benefit or as long as the strongest wants this.

Markets are another example. Goods and services are bought and sold in voluntary bargaining between producers and consumers. The outcome is determined by the relative strength – measured in money – of the parties concerned.

The anarchic, voluntary alternative has been spreading recently at the expense of the democratic arrangement: market solutions are being introduced around the world for matters that previously were managed by collective decisions. At the same time, many countries have shifted from an oligarchic to a more democratic rule. International development organisations often stipulate changes of both these types as a condition for granting loans and debt relief to poor countries.

### **The democratic middle way**

Oligarchy and guardianship base their legitimacy on the special competence of the leaders, while anarchy gives precedence to the individual's freedom of action. Democracy is a middle way – sometimes rather hard – based on a sharing of power and on everyone respecting the decisions in which they have participated.

In practice, none of these three types of rule occurs in its pure form. Where, for instance, is the line to be drawn between a decision made by a few and one made by all concerned? That is a pertinent question in large-scale political systems for representative government. In the best case, popularly elected leaders make political decisions that match the interests of a majority of the voters – that is how western democracies like to see themselves. But although they do not have a delimited elite with a monopoly of power, not everyone participates in decisions. In terms of the ABC model, representative rule comes somewhere in between oligarchy and democracy.

## **B. Democracy's basic principles and conditions**

We have mentioned associations where an oligarchic rule is considered to be legitimate on account of the decision-makers' special competence. We have also considered examples of an anarchic system in which individual freedom is valued more highly than the benefits of association. So what favours democratic rule? What are its basic principles and conditions?

### **1. Community**

Firstly, there needs to be a common interest, *a defined unit in which people come together to make joint decisions about certain matters*. To some extent the members must be able to rely on and identify themselves with each other so that they are prepared to agree in advance to abide by the joint decisions. Some form of collective identity is required so that members see themselves as a 'we'. Such a community rules out the anarchic alternative.

## 2. Equal consideration

Having rejected some form of anarchy in favour of democratic rule, we can proceed to two other basic principles of the latter. One is the principle of everyone's equal value, which can be formulated as a demand for equality: *the interests of each and every member merit equal consideration*.

If this demand is taken at face value, it implies a radical redistribution of power: everyone must have the same possibility of having their interests provided for. All forms of privilege, no matter what they are based on (gender, age, wealth, education, class, ethnicity, etc.), are at odds with the principle of *Equal consideration*. That makes feminism, for example, a democratic issue.

## 3. Personal autonomy

The final principle is likewise associated with power. In determining who is to decide which interests and needs are to be taken into consideration, the presumption must be: the people themselves. *The members are sufficiently mature to be the best judge of their own interests* – their private interests as well as those they have in common with other members of the community.

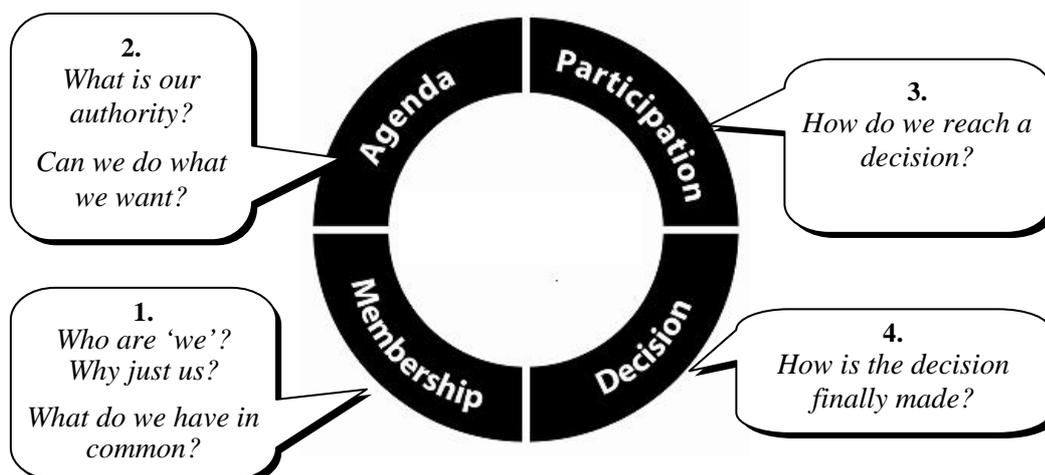
In other words, defending equality by itself is not enough. Each member must also be treated as sufficiently competent to make her own judgements and take a stand for himself. This *Presumption of personal autonomy* is needed to prevent some people from claiming to be particularly competent, intellectually and morally, as judges or guardians and asserting their authority over the others.

## C. The lifebuoy and criteria for a democratic process

### The Lifebuoy

From the time when a group of people realize they have something in common, it may take quite a while for them to reach an agreement and make a decision. But whether this process takes an hour or a year, it can be divided into four phases in which matters to do with membership, the agenda, participation and decision-making, respectively, are regulated in one way or another.

Many associations are more or less permanent and make decisions on a continuous basis. Decision-making in such cases can be seen as a cyclical process along the lines represented in the Lifebuoy below, starting at the bottom left:



The first two phases – membership and the agenda – are about constituting the community. They involve identifying the members, their common interests and their authority. Next comes the phase of deliberation: what is to be the course of action for arriving at a decision about a particular matter? At last there is the decisive moment itself: by what procedure is the matter to be finally decided?

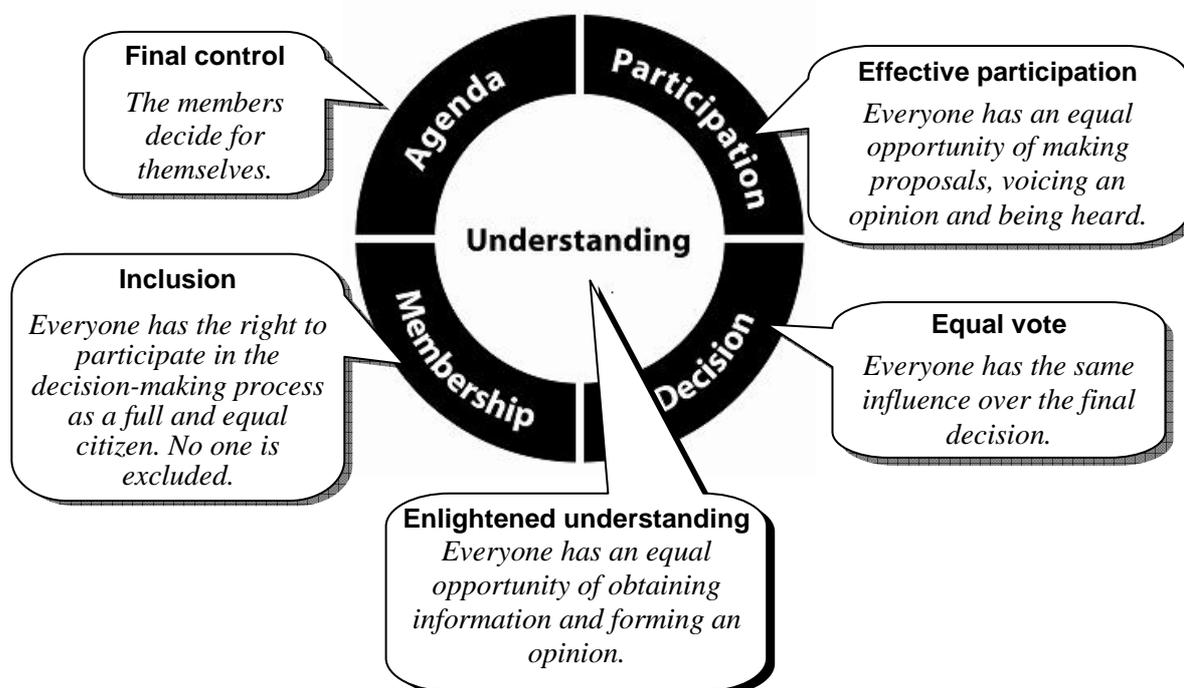
### Criteria for democracy

Applying the basic principles of democracy to the different phases of a decision-making process yields four more specific criteria for democracy:

1. *Inclusion*. All those concerned must have the right to participate in decision-making as a full and equal citizen. No one shall be excluded, which calls for alertness to discrimination and bullying.
2. *Final control*. The members must be in a position to decide which matters they want to deal with. The agenda shall not be set by an outsider.
3. *Effective participation*. In this phase everyone must have an equal opportunity to put forwards proposals, voice an opinion and make themselves heard.
4. *Equal vote*. Each and everyone must have the same influence over the final decision. What counts is the members' standpoints at this moment, nothing else.

For a decision-making process to be completely democratic, there is an additional requirement that must apply in *every* phase:

5. *Enlightened understanding*. The members must have an equal and real opportunity of obtaining information and working out what is in their best interest.



When a community has been functioning for some time, the constituent phases tend to be regarded as something that was settled long ago. The focus is liable to be on the present, on the right-hand half of the Lifebuoy: participation and decision-making. If things are not working properly here, however, it may be advisable to look for the reasons in earlier phases of the process. One then often finds that things have changed since the community

was formed: it may have acquired new members with other interests, or conditions in general may have changed, raising new issues to consider while others are no longer relevant. In that case, the time will have come to overhaul the decision-making process and renew the democratic contract.

Whether it is a question of a small workplace, a sports association or a large country, a wholly democratic process must therefore meet these five requirements or criteria: *Inclusion, Final control, Effective participation, Equal vote and Enlightened understanding.*

Nowhere in the world is there a community where the decision-making process meets all these requirements in full. In most organisations there are, for example, tendencies to discrimination. Nevertheless, the term ‘democracy’ is usually loaded in this strong manner. Therefore, the criteria for democracy should be taken as yardsticks with which to measure reality. They are standards that can be applied to disclose shortcomings in our existing associations and to work out what needs to be done about them.

Democracy is an ideal; getting closer to it requires that one knows what one is aiming for.

---

<sup>1</sup> The circumstances whereby a political order degenerates into a regime based on violence is one of the themes of peace & conflict research, see Adam Przeworski, “Democracy as a Contingent Outcome of Conflicts” in *Constitutionalism and Democracy*, Cambridge University Press, 1988, where the conditions for a peaceful transition to democracy are discussed. The article has inspired a number of more recent empirical studies.

<sup>2</sup> Anarchy is a classical term for a system without binding decisions. It should not be confused with ‘anarchism’, which refers to a doctrine of government, and ‘anarchist’, which denotes someone who believes in that doctrine.