

National level

# A fairly democratic country

Free elections, freedom of expression and other institutionalised rights are usually mentioned as indicators that certain countries are democratic. By the standards of the ABC model, however, even those countries do not match the democratic ideal. Still, these large-scale, representative systems have crossed a crucial threshold and therefore deserve to be called 'fairly democratic'. Here we consider how this common view of democracy, based on rights, compares with the ABC model. We shall:

- compare the ABC model's basic criteria for democracy with the usual indicators of a fairly democratic (FD) country
- list the political institutions which the indicators imply. They are based on the human rights that are laid down in the UN Declaration
- arrange the FD institutions around the Lifebuoy and see how they compare with the ABC model's criteria for democracy. By the standards of those criteria, countries cannot be more than fairly democratic
- consider the political changes that are needed for a successful transition to FD rule and distinguish the FD institutions from a similar set of institutionalised rights that ensures rule of law in a country

The ABC model represents a community where no one has more influence than anyone else over common concerns. That may be possible in small groups but for a country it is out of the question. Most countries' political institutions are a product of political struggles; the power relationships behind them have a long and often bloody history. It may therefore be hard to find a link between a national political system and democracy's fundamental principles, such as *Equal consideration* and *Personal autonomy*.

Is it, moreover, meaningful to compare countries that differ in their ownership rules, legal systems, electoral procedures and political institutions?

Yes, it is always relevant to ask: do the citizens have the power to dismiss political leaders that dissatisfy them without resorting to violence? This is the threshold that is generally applied when some countries are seen as democratic and others not. In order to pass it, a wave of peaceful demonstrations rolled across North Africa and the Middle East in spring 2011. In Libya and Syria the protesters were met with massive violence. But the stone is rolling on and the movements for democracy will continue.

## The ABC principles and indicators of an FD country

### 1. Large-scale communities with representative government

It was not until the American and French revolutions in the late 18th century that people in general began to think of applying the notion of equality to such a large community as a country. There was, of course, no way in which a population numbering millions could assemble to decide all matters it had in common. But if the citizens elected representatives instead at regular intervals, the latter could meet in a parliament in order to govern in place of the people until the next election. Representative government was soon regarded

as a democratic alternative in a world otherwise ruled by authoritarian elites – this despite objections from Jean Jacques Rousseau, a political philosopher who argued that these representatives were only an elite among all the other elites.

## 2. Politically equal citizens

The move towards democracy made it necessary to treat most of a country's adults as politically equal citizens and to have institutions that guaranteed free and impartial elections. That was the core of the struggle from the 19th century onwards to establish a general and equal right to vote. For many years the struggle focused on the interests of men; by the mid 20th century, however, women had also achieved political equality in many countries. The principle of *Equal consideration* applied to them as well as to men.

## 3. Autonomous citizens

In an FD country the citizens must be in a position to choose for themselves. To be able openly to resist undesirable rulers and dismiss them peacefully, the citizens must be *free to organise* themselves as they wish and to form an effective opposition. They must be able to *express themselves freely* without fear of reprisals and have access to *information from various sources*. This point is ultimately a matter of believing in people's ability to think and act independently; of applying the *presumption of Personal autonomy* and treating people as capable of safeguarding their own interests.

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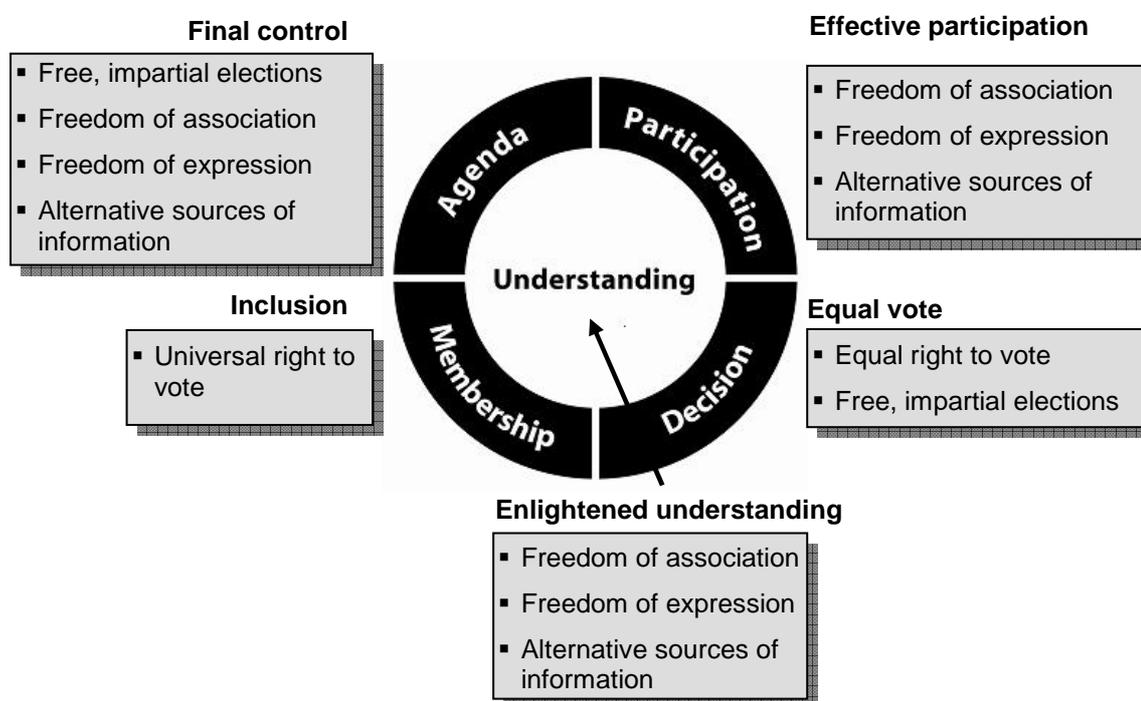
Indicator	Necessary institutions	Link to the UN Declaration of Human Rights
<b>1. Representative government</b>	Elected political leaders  Right to stand for election	<i>Article 21</i> 1. Everyone has the right to take part in the government of his country, directly or through freely chosen representatives. 2. Everyone has the right to equal access to public service in his country.
<b>2. Most adults are politically equal citizens</b>	Free and impartial elections  Universal and equal right to vote	<i>Article 21</i> The will of the people shall be the basis of the authority of the government; this will shall be expressed in periodic and genuine elections which shall be by universal and equal suffrage and shall be held by secret vote or by equivalent free voting procedures.
<b>3. The citizens can openly oppose and dismiss their political leaders by peaceful means</b>	Freedom of expression  Alternative sources of information  Freedom of association	<i>Article 19</i> Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers  <i>Article 20</i> Everyone has the right to freedom of peaceful assembly and association  <i>Article 23</i> 4. Everyone has the right to form and to join trade unions for the protection of his interests

Democracy at national level is usually assessed in a rights-based approach. A country that is fairly democratic will have effective institutions – generally accepted mechanisms and procedures – that impose limits on the actions which public authorities are entitled to take in relation to citizens. The individual is protected in practice by a set of political and civil rights:

- *Popularly elected leaders* and a *right to stand for election* make government representative
- *Free and impartial elections* and a *universal and equal right to vote* mean that in practice most adults are politically equal citizens
- *Freedom of expression, freedom of association* and *access to alternative sources of information* enable people to organise in order to promote their interests without fear of reprisals. They will then be in a position to dismiss their political leaders without resorting to violence. They can vote for alternative candidates they have nominated themselves in elections where the outcome is not determined in advance

When a country is identified as a *democracy*, it is generally the above characteristics that people have in mind. However, ‘democracy’ is a loaded word and usage varies; other labels are *liberal* and *western democracy*. An alternative proposed by Robert A. Dahl is *polyarchy*. We who have developed the ABC model on the basis of Dahl’s theory of democracy prefer to talk about *fairly democratic countries*.

## FD institutions, the Lifebuoy and the criteria for democracy



The Lifebuoy above illustrates the decision-making process for a term of government in an FD country. It is surrounded by the FD institutions that are necessary – but not sufficient – to satisfy each of the criteria for democracy. *Elected political leaders* and the *Right to stand for election* are not included; these two institutions guarantee that the system is representative rather than democratic.

The following review shows that it is the *universal and equal right to vote* that does most to meet two of the criteria: Inclusion and Equal vote. Otherwise the links between FD institutions and the criteria for democracy are more debatable, above all because countries are such huge communities that the representative component predominates.

In terms of the ABC model, in other words, countries are, at most, fairly democratic. A more common practice is to distinguish between *representative democracy* and *direct democracy* but that is liable to be misleading. After all, practically every more or less permanent community, whatever its size, has some kind of executive body. Even associations, which are often cited as a lesson in direct democracy, have their representatives.

### **Inclusion**

A *universal right to vote* is required if everyone is to be included as a full and equal citizen. In Sweden today, ‘citizen’ is a word that does not mean much more than “a person who is entitled to vote”. The criterion is then met almost as a matter of course, though not entirely – immigrants have to wait 3 years and others must have passed their 18th birthday.

### **Final control**

This calls for *free and impartial elections*. If elections or electoral districts are rigged, those who win – and are likely to have a different policy – will not be the ones whom the citizens would prefer to be represented by. *Freedom of association, freedom of expression* and *alternative sources of information* are also needed so that citizens’ opinions about what government should be about can be expressed in party platforms and election campaigns.

Note, however, that these institutions make it possible for citizens to control their representatives rather than the agenda. It is primarily the representatives, not the citizens, who determine which matters are to be included on the agenda and how they are decided.

Another matter is that political leaders’ freedom of action has become more restricted in recent decades. The ongoing process of globalisation is imposing more and more limits on national sovereignty.

### **Effective participation**

*Freedom of association* and *expression* are, like *alternative sources of information*, also necessary for citizens to participate effectively and for elections to have the desired outcome. But this calls, in addition, for money, time, access to information and so on. The more uneven the distribution of these resources is, the greater will be the inequality in people’s possibility of making themselves heard and the further the community will be from fulfilling the criterion. Participation will be more effective if political parties manage to activate large numbers of people in the political process; otherwise, interest groups that are not equally open for everyone will exert more influence.

Participation in elections is the crucial yardstick here. A decline in the proportion who vote is a sign that people are feeling less involved and that politics is tending to become a matter for specialists.

### **Equal vote**

In this respect the necessary FD institutions almost match the Lifebuoy’s requirements: given an *Equal right to vote* and *Free and impartial elections*, citizens will have an equal influence on election day. The condition is met for the election of representatives.

### **Enlightened understanding**

Reliable information calls for *freedom of association* and *freedom of expression*. Political leaders with a monopoly of information are not particularly credible. A fair number of independent organisations that can express themselves freely are also needed as *alternative sources of information*.

These institutionalised rights have paved the way for a powerful media industry. Citizens are exposed to a huge amount of information. Matters that are important and relevant for understanding the democratic process, for instance, tend to drown in the media's torrential flow.

At the same time, the possibilities of obtaining information have never been greater. A brief session with a computer can be sufficient to get the necessary information. But the opportunities are not the same for everyone; they vary with, for example, the duration and level of education – resources that are increasingly important for social status in most FD countries, which accordingly fall short of the Lifebuoy's demand for enlightened understanding.

## Political conditions for a democratic breakthrough

Effective FD institutions constitute the threshold that the Covenant on Civil and Political Rights calls on UN member countries to cross; this formal transition is a decisive step in the process of democratisation. Before it is crossed, authoritarian regimes can suppress whatever threatens their interests; afterwards, no one can be certain that their own interests will prevail. Simplifying somewhat, this step means that power is transferred from a group of people to a set of rules.<sup>1</sup> This comes at a cost – a peaceful transition requires concessions to those who previously controlled the political system. They demand institutional guarantees in return for relinquishing their monopoly of power and accepting compromises on factual issues:

- In Sweden, for example, voting was extended to all adult men at the beginning of the 20th century only after the right-wing forces had gained acceptance, in protracted negotiations, for continuing with a two-chamber parliament and a proportional voting system – two institutions that guaranteed the existing order in an era of popular mobilisation. Yet another decade of agitation and political struggle was needed before women were also included in Sweden's political system
- In Chile, General Pinochet overthrew Salvador Allende, the elected president, in 1973 and imposed a bloody military regime. In 1989 Pinochet handed over power to an elected president in exchange for parliamentary immunity. A decade later, a judge in Spain questioned this protection and called for Pinochet's extradition from the United Kingdom for crimes against international law. Pinochet died before the procedural issues connected with this and a similar Chilean demand could be resolved.
- A move towards democracy in a country sometimes occurs as a result of a political breakdown rather than of negotiations. The collapse of the Soviet Union was followed in 1991 by elections in Russia that were relatively free. In time, when this outcome was threatened by a coup, President Jeltsin managed to stay in power even though the movement for democracy, which supported him, was not particularly strong. The instigators of the coup failed to mobilise the former elite, which preferred to benefit from the gigantic, headlong privatisation that the regime initiated simultaneously. Russia lacked the strong civil society that could drive the process of democratisation forward. Instead, the power elite's internal settlements continued and towards the end of 2007 President Putin had reinstalled an authoritarian government through his control of the NSD institutions.

- In response to the September 11 attacks on the Twin Towers the USA attacked Afghanistan in 2001 and overthrew its Taliban regime. A decade later the country was still engaged in a civil war despite the presence of a large force of foreign troops. Clan leaders of various religious bents have not been capable of achieving the fundamental compromise that is needed to share power in joint FD institutions.
- In Iraq the situation is somewhat better. After the USA in 2003 invaded the country to forcefully establish a fairly democratic rule, there were many years of bloody chaos. The Iraqi army and the ruling Baath party were disbanded overnight without members of the former elite obtaining any guarantees of survival. Seven years later, in 2011, the foreign troops are being withdrawn from Iraq and political violence is diminishing. The country has a government that has been approved by an elected parliament but is not yet particularly effective.

### **Violence, rule of law and democracy**

The road to a lasting peace in the last of these cases will be hard because what is at stake is the political entity – a single state or several smaller states where those who control means of violence make up a fairly stable group. Moreover, before the entity can be even fairly democratic, there must be some resemblance to a rule of law so that the parties to the conflict and their allies are prevented from continuing to take the law into their own hands

A state can be constitutional, that is, ruled by law, without being particularly democratic. In Sweden, for instance, rich and poor were fairly equal under the law even *before* the democratic breakthrough, though in many respects the laws did discriminate against the working class and women. The opposite may be the case in countries that have recently taken this step: Brazil at the beginning of the 21st century was a fairly democratic country but a small privileged minority could use their wealth to stay above the law, while innumerable poor people lacked the law's protection in important respects, for example in São Paulo's *favelas*, where murder was seldom investigated.

In the long run, rule of law is essential for a lasting peace between social, ethnic and religious groups. Such a peace is essential in turn for a sustainable FD regime.

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<sup>1</sup> Adam Przeworski, "Democracy as a Contingent Outcome of Conflicts" in *Constitutionalism and Democracy*, Cambridge University Press 1988)