

Direct Democracy Primer

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What is direct democracy, in a phrase?

It is the right of citizens to hold referenda on any issue, and to veto existing legislation.

Why do we need direct democracy?

In a word -- *accountability*. Our governments are not accountable to *anyone*. To whom should governments be accountable? The answer is "the voters". We now live in what we call a democracy, and every few years we get to elect our next dictator.

Why would we want direct democracy?

We hear a lot about "western alienation" or "eastern alienation". We believe that most people are alienated from our political system because they are excluded from it, and that direct democracy will significantly improve access to law-making at all levels.

How many people want direct democracy?

In 1991, 83% of BC citizens voted for citizen-initiated referenda, in a referendum that was part of the BC election. In 1995, the Harcourt government introduced an act carefully designed to make citizen-initiated referenda virtually impossible.

Don't ordinary citizens lack time, intelligence & wisdom to make good decisions?

No. If this is true, then democracy of any kind is a poor system.

Does this actually work somewhere, or is it just right-wing theory?

It has worked in Switzerland at all levels of government for over 140 years, and in several other countries, including many U.S. states. While it was the policy of the right-wing Reform Party, many left-wingers support it also. The Green and the Marijuana Parties have supported it. The people who don't support it are those who have, or aspire to, power -- i.e. the government and the official opposition.

What are the most serious objections to direct democracy?

- I, your representative/cabinet minister/PM/chief bureaucrat, am not about to give up any of my power;
- I am full time on this job, and therefore I know more than you do, and besides, I am smarter than you;
- I fear the will of the people (I call it "mob rule") because it does not correspond with the party line, or my private agenda.

But doesn't Proportional Representation (PR) have the same benefits?

No. We support PR, which would make our electoral system much fairer by allocating seats in proportion to the popular vote. But PR keeps power in the hands of the politicians -- direct democracy lets citizens overrule politicians on major issues. More importantly, direct democracy creates, over time, a culture where politicians become (reluctantly) more responsive to the electorate on most issues.

But doesn't it lead to mob rule? Won't referenda take away the rights of minorities?

"Majority rule" is not "mob rule". People voting in referenda take their responsibility very seriously. The Charlottetown referendum showed this -- all the major parties supported it, yet voters turned it down. A referendum is very different from a poll. Our constitution and our courts protect us; and the "supermajority" is a protective feature that we can build into direct democracy.

Don't low petition thresholds to get a referendum lead to "neverendums"?

The percentage can vary from 1% (in large or geographically diverse populations), to 20% in a small town. Each situation requires its appropriate percentage. The hurdle should not be so high that a referendum can never be called. Most citizen-initiated referenda fail. Most referenda that try to overturn government legislation also fail. And the people can call a referendum to change the percentage.

But won't we get interest groups running the country through endless referendums?

They already run the country by lobbying government. In fact, some say that a government that wins an absolute majority of seats with only 41% of the popular vote is itself a "special interest group". 99% of legislation will continue to be made by government. Only a few laws will be made, or overturned, by referenda. The majority, which is not a special-interest group, will make these decisions.

How about the cost?

Referenda can be held on election day at minimal cost. The cost of a separate referendum is about \$.70 per voter, but with the advent of electronic and telephone voting, this cost will decrease. What is the cost of undemocratic legislation?

Can referenda solve complex issues?

Referenda do not solve all problems, eg. the Charlottetown referendum should have been broken down into a series of simple questions.

What other advantages does direct democracy have?

It allows a majority of citizens to create legislation that governments shy away from, like Kyoto; and to veto legislation that our governments ram through, like the GST, or NAFTA. It allows citizens to vote on major issues, not just for political parties. Voters will gain some power. And government will be better able to resist lobby groups.

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