

# M11 Leading idea “The majority rule”

The concept of justice is closely connected to the question of the best form of government: a just society will express a just government. In a cosmopolitan context, it could be important to reflect on what is, or should be, the form of government or political structure capable of sustaining societies which are increasingly becoming a mixture of different cultures, ideas, and traditions. It would seem that nowadays the form of government deemed as the most just is democracy, in its Western version. However, the debate is on going over what kind of democracy is the fairest: representative or participatory. It is evident that, due to the growth of the modern states, and the increase in the number of citizens, it would be difficult to have an effective bureaucratic functioning and state apparatus under direct democracy. As a consequence, most states in our world are based upon representative democracy as their system of government.

Democracy should be the form of government that recognizes and sanctions the equality of all citizens before the law, and guarantees the freedom of opinion of each and every person. Freedom of opinion implies the possibility of debating and expressing one’s own critical judgment and, therefore, the possibility of thinking for oneself.

Through the representative system, there is the risk of what has been called “the tyranny of the majority,” which is the danger of a massive levelling and homogenization of individual liberties. The power of the majority is dangerous because it leaves no room for discussion and is based on the idea that “wisdom” resides purely in the larger numbers, while there is actually no guarantee that the choices of the majority are necessarily just or that the minority has chosen wrongly. The risk looms large that the minority will in the end acquiesce to the will of the majority. At this point, it is interesting to remember Solomon Asch’s experiment. In 1956, Asch demonstrated how, in a group, the choices of the majority, even if clearly wrong, influence and modify a person’s judgment - even regarding his or her visual perception.

Representative democracy is in danger of taking the possibility of active participation in political life away from the citizens, who, through the mechanism of delegation, are relieved of any responsibility and lose interest in what should concern them and in debate, exchange, and critical reflection. How can this danger be avoided? What do your students think?



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