

DEMOCRACY IMPLIES EQUALITY BY DEFINITION

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RJ *Dear Mr. Lijphart, what standards of democracy do you believe have become largely consensual worldwide? Notwithstanding their legitimacy, which ones are still regarded as controversial from country to country?*

In the very beginning of the fourth chapter of my book *Patterns of Democracy*, I argue the basic definition of this rather complex term, as given by Robert Dahl in his work of 1971 entitled *Polyarchy: Participation and Opposition*, which remains the most widely used to this day. Dahl argues that democracy is defined by eight factors such as the

right to vote and so on.

Another classic definition is attributed to Abraham Lincoln who noted that, ‘Democracy is the government of the people, by the people, for the people.’ This means that a country has to be ruled by the chosen representatives of a nation and that they must act for the benefit and in the interests of the people.

I do not think that new circumstances have led us to change our definitions. Some factors are difficult to implement equally in every country, such as freedom of speech, for example. But I believe that complete freedom of speech doesn’t exist anywhere in the world, because there is always some kind of propaganda that goes against the interests of the society as a whole. So the degree of freedom varies from country to country. **This does not imply any difference in the standards of democracy, but rather in their implementation, as such standards ultimately remain the same.**

Certain countries may claim that their citizens have the right to vote and to be elected, but the implementation of said rights may still be quite limited. Switzerland is a good example. I mention it as a democratic country in my book, yet Swiss women only received the right to vote in 1971. The USA is another fine example – African Americans were unable to vote until the United States Department of Justice Voting Rights Act of 1965.

RJ *Professor Philippe C. Schmitter claims that the key qualitative characteristic of any existing democracy is accountability – the rulers must be held publicly accountable before their citizens. Do you agree with his definition?*

Absolutely. **A government has got to be accountable to its people, which is the case when elections are free and the people can vote the rul-**

ing elite out. This is a good criterion of democracy.

However, this principle occasionally misfires. Great Britain claims its political system to be accountable to voters that can vote an unpopular government out, as was the case with the Labour Party just recently.

However, a ruling party often wins several elections in a row in Great Britain, so the British system makes it possible to win without having an actual majority. In other words, the government really represents a minority, but it is very easy for it to be re-elected. Therefore, the British system isn’t quite as dependent on the mood of the voters as the Brits would have one think.

RJ *Could you give an assessment of the working principles of co-existence between democracy and the market? What social and economic standards does society require for harmonious development?*

Democracy can coexist with market systems of different types that differ by the degree of market freedom. There are countries where the state controls many aspects of the market economy (Western welfare states, for instance), but that doesn’t automatically make them non-democratic. On the contrary, these tendencies usually lead to greater equality.

Equality is one of the key elements of the definition of democracy with social and economic equality being one of the democratic ideals. Obviously, complete equality is nothing but a utopian ideal and is not attainable in reality. Nevertheless, I am convinced that high levels of inequality testify to a job poorly done by an allegedly democratic government. ■

Arend Lijphart was speaking with Yulia Netesova