

39 Elections and Voting

Elections and voting lie at the heart of the democratic process. By voting in elections, the sovereign People decide who will exercise the powers of government and frequently make other decisions, such as whether a proposed measure shall become law. If democracy is to be successfully realized, the integrity of the process of exercising this sovereign power cannot be compromised. The sovereign People must know that their voices will be accurately recorded in the electoral process.

Elections

Not all elections qualify as democratic elections. Moreover, holding elections that do qualify as democratic does not of itself make a country a democracy, since democratic elections are only one element of a democracy. Other elements of democracy include the protection of the basic rights of individuals and other aspects of constitutional government. Nevertheless, elections are one of the central institutions of democracy. To qualify as democratic, elections must meet certain requirements.

■ Elections must be *free*

- ▶ *All adult citizens*—male and female—must be able to vote and to stand for office.
- ▶ *All democratic political parties* must be able to compete in elections. However, many democrats argue that since democracy is not a suicide pact, it is legitimate to exclude parties that wish to gain power in order to destroy democracy.
- ▶ *All individuals, candidates, and political parties* must have freedom of speech and freedom of the press in order to advocate their political programs.

■ Elections must be *fair*

- ▶ All political parties must have the right to hold peaceful political rallies; to print political pamphlets and books; and to print and post political posters and signs.
- ▶ Political parties must be allowed to distribute political literature freely to the public.
- ▶ Political parties must have access to the ballot through clear rules that provide fair procedures for qualifying to be on the ballot.
- ▶ Principal political parties and candidates must have equal access to means of mass communication, including television and radio, and must not be barred from addressing the public. This means that the governing political party must not be the only party to appear on television or be heard on the radio.
- ▶ Governments may not undertake measures that provide undue advantage to one party over others in the electoral process.

- **Elections must be *regular*** Elections must be held within certain fixed intervals or within pre-established time periods, such as annual, biannual, or quadrennial.
- **Elections must be *frequent*** The People must decide through their constitution how often elections are to be held, but the time between elections must not be too great. The electorate cannot exercise control over those entrusted with political authority if those in office can escape popular judgment over a prolonged period.
- **Purposes of elections** Democratic elections are held for various purposes. The most common purpose is to elect candidates to public office. Other elections, for example, are to decide upon proposed laws. Laws proposed by ordinary citizens are called "initiatives." Laws proposed by governments are called "referendums". In some systems, referendums have been previously passed by the legislature and then presented to the electorate for approval. In some electoral systems, voters may also take part in elections (called "recall elections") to dismiss an elected official from office.

Voting

Voting in elections decides which candidates for office will hold power and, frequently (as just illustrated) decides a variety of other matters. The voting process is consequently an essential process in any democratic political system. For this reason:

- **Voting must be *fair and honest*** The integrity of the voting process, of ballot boxes, and of the tallying of votes must be safeguarded in a publicly visible (transparent) way. Thus:
 - ▶ Legitimate voters are not to be excluded.
 - ▶ Persons who are not eligible must not be allowed to vote. Most democracies do not, for example, allow noncitizens to vote.
- **Voting must be *private*** The secret ballot must be used.
 - ▶ All voters must be able to vote without anyone knowing how they vote and they must be made aware of the privacy of the act of voting. Without the secret ballot, voters may be subject to forms of intimidation or to outright threats.
 - ▶ The vote of each citizen is to be the equivalent of every other voter; each is to count.
- **Citizens must *not be intimidated*** from voting for whom they please. Polling places must be secure so that voters do not fear being there.
- **Citizens must *know the location of voting sites*** on election days. Without this knowledge, the right to vote is nullified.

- **Governments *may not undertake measures that give an advantage to one party over another at elections.***
- **Government and political parties *must be separate***
 - ▶ Winning an election does not make government a possession of the winning party. Government must not be seen as exclusively owned by the governing political party.
 - ▶ To ensure the separation of parties and government, a civil service system must be in place to ensure that government employees cannot be coerced by the governing political party into compromising the rule of law.

What do you think?

- 1 Why is voting a central element of democracy?
- 2 What is the importance of the secret ballot?
- 3 Why is it essential that government and political parties remain separate?
- 4 Why are elections a central element of democracy?
- 5 What is the relationship between elections and popular sovereignty?
- 6 Why are democratic elections by themselves insufficient to constitute a democracy?
- 7 What is the importance of freedom, fairness, regularity, and frequency to elections being democratic?