

Is representative
democracy an
effective way to
distribute political
power



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This essay will seek to give examples of both effective and ineffective ways representation has been used in British politics to distribute power amongst Parliament.

And whether representative democracy has contributed to a legitimate and equal system of power or if it has made political power unjust and imbalanced. Representative Democracy involves the selection of government officials by the people being represented. It is more properly called a democratic republic. The most common mechanisms involve election of the candidate with a majority or a plurality of the votes 1. Hanna Pitkin is often referred to as the pioneer on the theory of representation, in her ground breaking work ' The Concept of Representation. ' '

representation, taken generally, means the making present in some sense of something which is nevertheless not present literally or in fact' 2 Pitkin's famous quote indicates that political activities and opinions of citizens and the electorate should be made present and ubiquitous in all decision and policymaking policies.

Descriptive Representation is a form of representation, opposite to that of substantive representation, whereby the representatives resemble physical or emotional attributes similar to that of the represented. This form of representation forms an integral part of the democratic electoral system. ' Black legislators represent Black constituents, women legislators represent women constituents, and so on 3. If representation is divided collectively in these terms, does it make for a fair system? Are all groups and individuals then adequately and proportionately represented by a politician because they can more readily identify with the represented? History and current

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sociological factors tell us that ethnic minorities, women, lower socio economic groups and other marginalised groups are under represented in Parliament. Let's begin with women in politics.

With women making up 19.6% of our MPs, the UK is ranked 14th within the EU. UK is ranked 52nd out of 189 countries listed by the Inter-Parliamentary Union in terms of the percentage of women holding office in the lower or single House of the national Parliamentary body 4. These figures being accurate, they indicate a very low presence of women actively taking part in UK politics and Parliament. Women's issues are more liable to be under-addressed or inadequately represented and debated in parliament, if descriptive representation is not being successfully achieved. Many of the current arguments over democracy revolve around what we might call demands for political presence: demands for the equal representation of women with men demands for a more even-handed balance between the different ethnic groups that make up each society; demands for the political inclusion of groups that have come to see themselves as marginalized or silenced or excluded 5.

This poor under representation of women in politics, obviously then equates to an ineffective and unequal distribution of political power. The only logical understanding that can be deduced from this abysmal representation, is that women's issues and debates are being addressed solely by a majority male Parliament. Women's movement activists in many parts of the world, for example, claim that legislatures peopled mostly by men cannot be said properly to represent women 6. How can men legitimately stand in for women when what is at issue is the representation of women per se? 7 It is <https://assignbuster.com/is-representative-democracy-an-effective-way-to-distribute-political-power/>

imperative to have gender equality within Parliament, in terms of descriptive representation. Not only does it make for issues such as childcare, abortion and equal pay a transparent and unpredictable debate, it also provides role models for the citizen and society as a whole.

There are many other marginalised groups in UK society which are not adequately represented in a political setting. Some of these groups include lower socio-economic class, single and lone parents, the disabled and the ethnic minority. Let's now look at the latter of these groups; ethnic minorities. This is one group, which after women in politics, is heavily debated upon. But in practice is yet still an elusive area to be effectively represented. There have only ever been three non-white Cabinet members in Britain and there are only 15 MPs (2% of the total) 8 % of Labour's new parliamentary candidates are from ethnic minorities, a figure that rises to 15% in Labour-held seats.

Only 4% of new Tory candidates are from ethnic minorities, though this rises to 9% in Tory-held seats. The Liberal Democrats have selected 5.6% of their candidates from ethnic minorities. The UK democratic system often sidelines or neglects the needs or values of the ethnic minority. This is obvious when one looks at the House of Commons and almost immediately it becomes visibly apparent that there is a lack of Black or Asian faces.

Judge terms this as a problem of how to prevent the practical exclusion of sections of the people, because of their minority position, from influencing decisions. The danger is that some minorities might become 'non-people' effectively excluded from influencing decisions which affect them directly¹⁰.

With the recent inauguration of Barack Obama as President of the USA in the 2008 US Presidential Elections, it can be argued that black African Americans across the US will finally be given a representative voice in the highest of forms. Is it at all fathomable that the UK can follow in the footsteps of the US and elect a black Prime minister? Trevor Phillips says in an interview that the public would be happy to vote for a black leader, but the political system would prevent an ethnic minority candidate getting to the top.

11 In such a large and diverse society as the UK, there are complex political and social issues concerning marginalised groups. Often members of these groups, as Judge remarks, feel alienated or ostracised from the decision making process and are not given a standing block or adequate representation within politics. Increasingly Labour MPs and candidates including Chuka Ummuna and Sadiq Khan and Jon Trickett have been arguing for tackling race, gender and class cohesively in trying to achieve fair chances across all of these dimensions while avoiding a politics of competitive grievance between the advocates of fair chances for women, black and Asian candidates or those from poorer backgrounds. 12 If this is the case, then I argue the point that in fact, the UK is not conducting a legitimate and fair legislature. In the conventional understandings of liberal democracy, difference is regarded as primarily a matter of ideas, and representation is considered more or less adequate depending on how well it reflects voters' opinions or preferences or beliefs. 13 This begs the question therefore, how to include minorities more integrally into democratic politics.

Their political power and needs are being illegitimately underrepresented.

Should there be a system in place to ensure the definitive inclusion of all
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marginalised groups and appropriate legitimate representation? The Labour Party used positive discrimination in its recruitment process in 1993 and introduced an all women shortlists in half their 'inheritor' seats and half their 'strong challenger' seats. 14 This gave women the power, inspiration and ability to apply themselves politically within the labour Party. While women are not yet half of Labour Party candidates and office holders, the change within the space of a decade has been both dramatic and substansive.

15 Similarly an action plan or system is needed to encourage and promote cohesion and inclusion from ethnic minority groups. Recent research published by the Fabian Socirty showed that evidence does challenge the claim that there could never be fair chances without all minority shortlists. It was a reasonable hypothesis to suggest that what has been shown to be true historically of gender would also prove true of race. 16 In the 2001 elections, following low turnout amongst the young and black minority population, Operation Black Vote (OBV) was established in a sustained effort to engage with the minority illegitimately population. 7 The success of this initiative proved a record breaking turnout at the 2005 elections and saw 113 minority ethnic candidates, compared to the paltry 65 who had competed in the 2001 election¹⁸ Having raised the issue of the benefits of descriptively representing women and ethnic minorities, are there any disadvantages to quotas and all women/ethnic minority shortlists? Are such policies and initiatives impeding on liberal democracy in the UK and are they in fact contributing to an unfair bias representation? Every person in society has different needs, issues and characteristics which may be exclusive only to them.

It transcends borders of race, ethnicity, class, education, gender, sexuality, disability and so forth. No single representative could speak for any group, because there are too many intersecting relationships among individuals. 19 This brings to light the issue of cross sectioning issues. If a descriptive representative is able to adequately represent ethnic minorities, for example, how can they then represent women ethnic minorities simultaneously? Only if demand is satisfactorily addressed, what about a Muslim, female ethnic minority from a lower socio economic group who is disabled? That will surely call for representation on a multiplicity of issues. In representative politics, physical appearances such as gender and ethnicity may be accounted for, albeit marginally. But when faced with a multitude of differences, our pool of able and descriptive representatives become increasingly smaller and the issue becomes convoluted.

It can then be argued, at what point can we say enough is enough and draw a line. As a democracy, it is virtually impossible to expect a representative to be able to manifest all qualities of each and every electorate and citizen as their needs are multi faceted. There simply isn't the physical space in Parliament in terms of seats and the gap between group and individual politics keep on widening. Pitkin wielded nearly thirty years ago against mirror or descriptive representation. In particular, they have shared her perception that an over-emphasis on who is present in the legislative assemblies diverts attention from the more urgent questions of what the representatives actually do. 0 Other theorists and academics have gone on to cite the disadvantages of descriptive representation and the limits it can bring about in terms of distributing equal powers in politics.

In Representative Democracy and its Limits, Hirst has aptly surmised that a mass electorate can only cope with relatively simple choices and so electoral competition tends to reduce itself to a small number of major parties. 21 Once again it brings us back to the issue of legitimacy and representation. Representative democratic politics means infrequent and restricted choices for a mass electorate, even if the vast majority of individuals identify with the political process, they only vote when required and acquire a modest knowledge of politics. 22 Representatives can often fail to successfully and effectively represent the represented once they are in power. According to Pitkin in 'Concept of Representation,' representation means acting in the interests of the represented in a manner responsive to them. The representative must act independently; his actions must involve discretion and judgment.

23 In the UK, general elections take place at least every five years²⁴ . However the if general consensus amongst the electorate is one of positive political acceptance, a feeling of increased economic wealth and security, then the party in power can call a general election anytime before the compulsory five year expiry. The current economic situation in the UK (as of November 2008), indicates that is quite unlikely that a general election will take place before June 2010. The economy will contract by around 1% in 2009 as the squeeze on consumers and a sharp fall in investment produce the first year of recession since the early 1990s, the chancellor said yesterday.

25 Growth next year is likely to be worse than predicted and it is doubtful that positive quarterly GDP growth will start as early as mid-2009. 26 When <https://assignbuster.com/is-representative-democracy-an-effective-way-to-distribute-political-power/>

the time is right for a general election, those citizens whom actively take part and cast their votes, are immediately engaging fully in the political process. There is a hope that their needs, views and liberties will be sufficiently represented in the general political forum. It seems however that once their participation during the elections has ended, their voices and opinions are seldom heard again. To follow on, if general elections are so infrequent and limited to once every five or so years, participation for the electorate and citizen is fragmented and curtailed.

In England people are only free during the election of members of parliament. As soon as they are elected, slavery overtakes it, and it is nothing²⁷ A similar accounts given by Young as citizen's vote for their representatives, and there is no further need for them²⁸This to me is not an effective way of distributing political power in a consistent and legitimate way. Other theorists have famously voiced their concerns for the democratic representation and the limitations of the electoral system and the way in which the UK votes. Parliamentary representation serves to include 'the people' in decision making, indirectly and infrequently through the process of elections; yet simultaneously, it serves to exclude them from direct and continuous participation in the decision-making process²⁹. Once in power the newly elected or continual representative will act in the way in which they deem to be sufficiently responsible.

Representation becomes like a 'black box' shaped by the initial giving of authority, within which the representative can do whatever he pleases³⁰.

This leads onto the theory of trustee vs delegate ³¹ whereby the former is a representative who understands the views of the represented, but ultimately

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takes the course of action they deem best and will suit their party's needs. On the other hand, a delegate representative³² will follow the wishes and views of the represented and their political actions are determined by their constituents. The represented may, for a short while, feel as they have had a vital role to play in the UK democratic electoral process, but realistically this feeling is short lived.

The representative has the full given autonomy whether or not they would like to act as a trustee or a delegate. As an electorate, I only see these two types of representative politics occurring within UK democracy today. It is conflicting and contradictory to give power to one under the false illusion of representation when ultimately the represented may as well be set aside. Representative government includes both democratic and undemocratic features. The duality lies in its very nature, not just in the eye of the beholder³³. Similarly Judge also recounts this idea in that whatever the precise role of Parliament, the end result was still the same, the self-exclusion of the bulk of the population from systematic involvement in decision making³⁴.

Elections, by definition, are mechanisms for the selection of the elites: but they are simultaneously mechanisms for mass participation. This duality is at the heart of the practice of representative democracy³⁵. Judge goes on further to say in 'Representation: Theory and Practice in Britain', that a full participatory process of decision making would entail each and every individual in the making of each and every decision³⁶. As mentioned earlier in regards to descriptive representation and the number of seats available in parliament, including each and every individual in the decision making
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process would be virtually impossible. There are issues concerning level of interest each citizen has in politics, the level of knowledge they have and generally current pop culture and society has given politics some what a battering and is just not perceived as ' sexy' enough.

Total participation in decision making is impossible given the vast numbers of people in modern nation- state, therefore handing decision making over to others, this form of democracy allows the citizen to pursue other activities.

37. This is an advantage, according to Judge of indirect or representative democratic politics. One way to overcome this problem of duality and contradictory politics of representation is to have more frequent elections or to carry out mass demonstrations to illustrate to the government that the represented are still ultimately the ones who hold the political power.

Demonstrations and lobbying are particular ways during non-elective times, for example the mass demonstration against the war in Iraq in 2003. The representative can be reminded that the represented have the power and position to be heard.

That ultimately the position of the representative is a precarious and perhaps transitory phase. Representative democracy has the limited virtue of enabling certain leading decision making and policy- initiating personnel in the state to be changed periodically or be threatened with change 38. Manin sums up the process of elections as an aristocratic or oligarchic procedure in that it reserves public office for eminent individuals whom their fellow citizens deem superior to others 39. Descriptive representation is not always necessary, but rather the best approach to descriptive representation is contextual, asking when the benefits of such representation might most

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likely to exceed the cost 40. In conclusion, I have argued the case for and against representative democracy and the way it affects the distribution of political power.

Descriptive representation is the only way forward for a liberal democracy such as the UK and the only format that works well. The UK however needs to be careful in how they treat descriptive representation and understand that there has to be a line drawn somewhere. There is a risk of being so preoccupied with the physicality's and outward manifestation of representation that the issues and policies at hand are liable to be given less significance. The elective system is far too intricate and complicated as well as being firmly imbedded within UK democracy to warrant any change. Especially as the government in power would be very reluctant to administer such a radical shake up. I do not think that descriptive representation is completely necessary to successfully implement and move forward with policies.

What is necessary is the need for the representative to effectively and positively represent their constituents and the citizen. Once this is achieved, then representative democracy is an effective way to distribute political power.