

Arguments For and Against Democracy

Ever since ancient times, democracy has had its proponents and detractors. For most of human history, the critics of democracy have far outnumbered its advocates. Only within the last two hundred years has support for democracy in its constitutional and representative form gained momentum. And only within the past 50 years have the promoters of democracy in the world greatly outnumbered its opponents.

Among the major claims of its proponents are the propensities of democracy to:

- Enhance the individual's sense of dignity and self-worth
- Encourage individuals to promote the well-being of their community
- Provide equal opportunities for individuals' self fulfillment
- Draw upon the collective wisdom of the people in making decisions
- Treat individuals as political and civic equals
- Protect the equal rights of all persons to life, liberty, and property
- Encourage economic productivity and a high quality of life by distributing rewards based on merit rather than inherited status
- Promote international peace, order, and stability, because democracies tend not to fight against each other
- Bring about orderly resolution of conflict within a country
- Make rulers accountable to the people they rule
- Justify the legitimacy of government by basing it on popular consent

Opponents of democracy dispute the claims of its advocates. Some major deficiencies of democracy, say the detractors, are its tendencies to:

- Govern inefficiently due to excessive deliberation in decision making
- Govern ineptly because the most able persons are not selected to rule
- Make unwise decisions in government by pandering to public opinion
- Erode political and social authority and unity by encouraging criticism and dissent
- Obstruct excellence by catering to conventional ideas and to the lowest common standards among the masses of the people
- Overemphasize political and social equality to the detriment of liberty
- Encourage abuse or disregard of unpopular persons and opinions
- Discourage innovation and creativity by ignoring or marginalizing unpopular sources of ideas and artistic expression
- Fail to achieve its ideals or to adhere to its basic principles.

Most people in the world today believe the strengths of democracy greatly exceed its weaknesses. The case for democracy has been greatly augmented by the demise in the 20th century of prominent non-democracies, such as the Japanese Empire, Nazi Germany, Fascist Italy, The Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR), and communist dictatorships in central and eastern Europe. The acceptance of democracy by countries of diverse histories and cultures—such as Argentina, Germany, India, Italy, Japan, Mexico, the Philippines, Poland, Portugal, South Africa, and Sweden—indicates a pervasive desire for freedom and self-government throughout the world.

Answer the questions on a separate piece of paper:

1. Explain five claims of support and five disputed claims of democracy.
2. Do you think democracy is the best form of government? Explain.