

STUDENT HANDOUT

Do the People Know Best?

People do not cast votes with the intention of making the wrong decision. People vote for what they believe to be right. When every vote is counted, the results are said to be the best way forward. In other words, democracy is a belief that the collective will of the majority is smarter than the judgment of any one individual.

However, democracy occasionally produces head-scratching results. Consider the unexpected results of these recent referendums:

- Thai voters approved a constitution that entrenched military rule
- Colombians rejected a peace deal that would have ended a 50-year-long war
- Swiss voters amended their constitution to restrict religious freedoms

Referendums with unexpected results is nothing new. Perhaps the most outrageous example of a referendum gone awry took place in Nazi Germany. In 1934, 88% of Germans gave approval for Adolf Hitler to declare himself Germany's president, chancellor, and head of the military. In the German referendum, the voting process was flawed: there was widespread voter intimidation and questionable counting of the ballots. Nevertheless, historian Ian Kershaw believes that the majority of Germans supported Hitler.

To be sure, each of these referendums involved complex considerations. People had compelling reasons to vote the way they did. But the results give reason to ask: do plebiscites and referendums always produce the wisest possible decision?

Are We Smart Enough to Govern Ourselves?

For the most part, Canadians are governed by representative democracy. At election time, candidates spell out positions on a wide range of issues. Citizens vote for a candidate to represent them. Plebiscites and referendums are different. Citizens have the opportunity to deeply think through a single issue, then come to a conclusion and cast a vote.

Some people believe that representative democracy is better than direct democracy. Representatives can devote their time to examining complex issues, then make informed decisions. If—on the whole—we are unhappy with the decisions that our representatives have been making, we can vote them out in the next election.

On the other hand, referendums and plebiscites require citizens to do the work of elected representatives. We must take the time



to determine individual laws and public policies. Even if we have the time, critics wonder if we will have all the specialised information needed to make a wise decision.

Critics also worry that people will let narrow self-interest guide their decision-making. People acting out of narrow concerns may cast votes in favour of laws and public policies that ignore the well-being of society as a whole.

These critiques of direct democracy have some merit. Without adequate time and without access to adequate information people may make poor decisions, sometimes out of narrow self-interest.

However, these critiques of direct democracy also suffer from some shortcomings.

First, a handful of countries frequently and successfully use direct democracy. Switzerland and Liechtenstein both rely almost entirely upon direct democracy. Other countries, like Ireland, frequently hold referendums. These nations have not collapsed from their embrace of direct democracy. In fact, they have some of the highest living standards in the world.



Billboards in Cork, Ireland, promoting the Yes and No campaigns for the 2018 referendum regarding abortion. Irish citizens voted to amend their constitution so that abortion would be legal.

Second, if we do not believe that the average citizen is capable of making an informed decision on a single issue, how can we believe that the average citizen is capable of making an informed decision in a general election? In a general election, voters must think through countless issues. In addition, voters must assess the qualities of each candidate, the candidate's party, and the party's leader. Far more considerations are at play in an election than a referendum. Suggesting that the average person is not smart enough to decide on a single issue could be a pathway to undermining democracy as a whole.

If we are capable of choosing our governments, then surely we are also capable of deciding a single issue.

Nevertheless, democracy is not perfect. Making good democratic decisions is not easy.

How We Inform Ourselves

During a referendum, organised campaigns usually form on each side of the issue. The campaigns argue why their side deserves your vote. Each campaign will provide facts, appeal to your emotions, and undermine the arguments of the opposing side.

The information put out by each campaign is a good starting point to make a decision. When looking at this information, try to give each side a fair hearing. After all, very few issues are a simple matter of one side being right and one side being wrong. Even if you disagree with one side's stance, hearing them out in their own words allows for a better understanding of their viewpoint.

Doing our best to give a fair hearing to each campaign is only the beginning. A *truly informed* decision requires that we seek out information beyond the campaign messages.

Sources of Information

We have access to more information than at any other time in history. Consider ways we gather information, especially during a referendum or plebiscite campaign:

- advertisements
- news and media coverage
- editorials and opinion pieces
- endorsements from interest groups and public figures
- opinions of friends and family
- positions held by political parties
- other sources, especially on social media

Every source will have some bias. Sometimes the bias will be strong. For example, some talk radio hosts loudly argue their point of view without giving equal air time to contrary opinions. Sometimes the bias will be minimal. For example, many journalists try hard to put aside their personal beliefs and present a diverse range of views.

No matter how much information we gather, nobody can sift through all the available information. At some point we need to weigh the arguments, then come to our own decision.

Avoiding Pitfalls

Because the amount of information available can be overwhelming, we sometimes use shortcuts to make decisions. Examples of shortcuts include relying on soundbites or simplistic tweets, uncritically accepting the opinions of people we usually agree with, or even things as silly as judging the physical appearance of campaigners.

Shortcuts help us make a quick conclusion. But shortcuts do not challenge us to think. Rather, they provide us with a lazy opinion.

Lazy opinions can also be formed due to something called confirmation bias. Confirmation bias is when people focus on information that

reinforces their existing beliefs, and ignore information that may challenge their beliefs.

Former American President Barack Obama was aware of the pitfalls of confirmation bias. In a 2018 speech, he said:

Most of us prefer to surround ourselves with opinions that validate what we already believe. You notice the people who you think are smart are the people who agree with you. Funny how that works.

But democracy demands that we're able also to get inside the reality of people who are different than us so we can understand their point of view. Maybe we can change their minds, but maybe they'll change ours.

And you can't do this if you just out of hand disregard what your opponents have to say from the start.

Social media users are especially vulnerable to falling into the confirmation bias trap. There can be no doubt that social media has benefitted all of society by giving greater voice to marginalised people. Unfortunately, studies show that social media users tend to congregate in like-minded groups. These like-minded groups are called echo chambers. In an echo chamber, users post and promote opinions they already agree with. Meanwhile, the echo chamber lacks alternative views. Often when people step out of their echo chamber, it is not to engage with the other side but rather to disparage them.

Echo chambers divide us into small homogenous groups, rather than unite us as a diverse society. This is bad for democracy. Recall that in ancient Greece's democracy, all citizens assembled together in a public square. They would discuss, debate, and ultimately vote on issues. The Iroquois Confederacy was similar, with the entire longhouse community assembling together to make decisions.



THE PERCEPTION GAP

A recent American study, *The Perception Gap*, contends that the more partisan and politically active people are, the more they misunderstand the values of their political opponents. Perhaps not surprisingly, people who post political content on social media tend to have the most distorted understanding of the other side. Curiously, the study also shows that Americans who consume less news have a better understanding of their political opponents.

By hearing each other out—face to face—citizens have the opportunity to see things from the point of view of the people they agree with *and* the point of view of people they disagree with. This allows everyone the opportunity to gather diverse information, then make informed decisions. Just as importantly, it requires that people face up to the consequences of their beliefs that may be harmful to others. A full hearing provides everyone with an opportunity to build empathy and understanding with those we disagree with.

We Are Smart Enough to Govern Ourselves

Humans are not perfect. Sometimes, we poorly gather and use information. Occasionally, we act out of narrow self-interest. Now and then, we let emotions override rationality. And often, we make honest mistakes. Little wonder that democracy is not perfect.

Despite these flaws, democracy is still the best way to determine our laws and public policies. As former British Prime Minister Winston Churchill told the British House of Commons:

Many forms of government have been tried, and will be tried in this world of sin and woe. No one pretends that democracy is perfect or all-wise. Indeed it has been said that democracy is the

worst form of government except for all those other forms that have been tried from time to time...

Fortunately, everyone is capable of making good democratic decisions. And more often than not, democracy produces the right decision. However, democracy can only work if we fully consider issues through a broad range of perspectives and make decisions with the public good in mind.



British newspaper front pages on June 23, 2016, the eve of the “Brexit” referendum on European Union membership. Most newspapers took strong editorial stances on how people should vote.

THINK

1. Very few of us can claim to be experts on most issues. If we are not experts, why should we be allowed to directly decide laws through referendums?
2. Consider these three pitfalls associated with forming opinions:
 - shortcuts
 - confirmation bias
 - echo chambers

What can you do to avoid these pitfalls?

3. Why is a sense of human decency necessary for making good democratic decisions?