

Hello and Welcome to *Taking the Party out of Politics!*

This is a podcast about understanding how politics is supposed to work, ...
... why it isn't working as well as it should be working, ...
... and what we might be able to do about it.

Because:

by understanding a little bit more clearly *how* things are supposed to work,
and *why* they are a bit messed up,
we *might* be able to get things to work a *bit better*. Perhaps even a *lot better*.

This is Episode One of our special bonus mini-series, in which we will be looking a little more deeply into the **5 Impossible Puzzles of Political Participation**, from our perspective, as voters.

We first discussed these Impossible Puzzles during Season One of the ***Taking the Party out of Politics*** podcast. If any concept here doesn't immediately make sense, or if you feel that you want to learn more about that topic, please go back to listen to the appropriate earlier episode

Taking the Party out of Politics is joining you on a little journey, to explore the systems and functioning of Politics: systems which we should all understand, because those systems affect all of our lives, all of the time.

Left-wing or right-wing.

Intergovernmental Climate Change Summit, or Parish Council Zoom Meeting.

And this podcast is about how we might be able to make those systems work a bit better.

By understanding: what is supposed to happen.

By understanding: why that isn't always happening in the way it is supposed to.

And by understanding: what sorts of things we might do to make things better.

So, this is Episode One of the **5 Impossible Puzzles of Political Participation** mini-series (5 puzzles, so you won't be shocked to learn that there will be 5 episodes in total, in this mini-series).

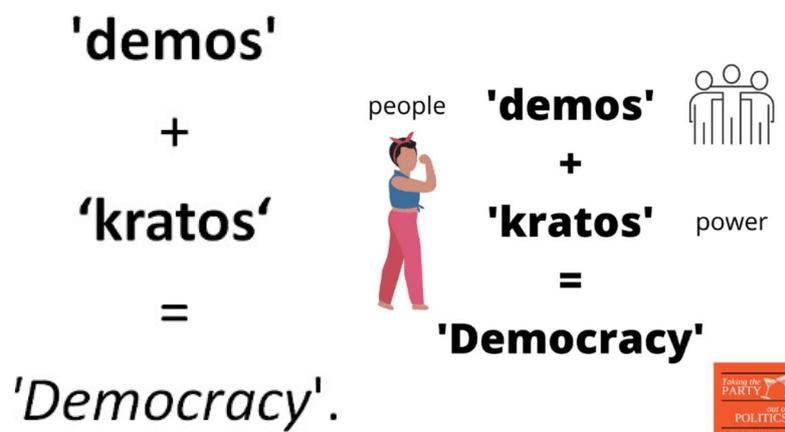
This episode is about the **Impossible Puzzle for Voters – trying to achieve three, different things, with just one vote, just once every 5 years.**

As voters, we vote for a local representative. So, let's start at the beginning.

1. A Good Local Representative

Our political system is called a 'Representative Democracy'. It's a Democracy, in the sense that the power is with the people, not with a king or a queen or a dictator, or any other sort of ruling elite.

The word 'Democracy' comes from two Greek words: '*demos*' and '*kratos*'. '*Demos*' means 'people', and '*kratos*' means 'power'. So, '*Demos*' + '*kratos*' = '*Democracy*'. '*Democracy*' means that the people have the power.



If it was a small Democracy, such as just me and my two friends, and we were trying to decide on where we were going to go for a walk, we would just get together and talk about it – discuss what sort of walk we fancied, what the weather was like, what time we were going to start, and so on.

However, in a country of nearly 70 million people, we can't all get together to talk through all of the issues. At least, not all the time. We would never get anything else done!

Instead, in our Representative Democracy, we choose someone locally ...

- To represent our interests and views.
- To read all of the details
- To think about all of the implications

You may already be aware that the local representation part of the job of our elected representatives is pretty important. We often hear candidates (the people who are hoping that we will elect them as our representative) stressing their local background – how long they have lived in our area; what they think about what our local area needs; and so on.

And it is important. This is the person who really is representing our area, and trying to get the best deals for our area – both locally (for example, to help get more jobs) and nationally (for example, to ensure that the education system works as well as possible everywhere), and even internationally (for example, to ensure that we have good relationships with other countries).

2. A Competent Government

Having been elected, all the representatives get together to talk through all the issues. They get together in a place which is actually named after the process of talking – Parliament.

The representatives then become a member of the group of people who talk through all the issues – a Member of Parliament (MP).

That's good for thinking about stuff that someone else is suggesting, or perhaps for reacting to situations. But how do all these local representatives (MPs) get together to make a plan for what our country wants (planning for the future, not just reacting to stuff that happens)?

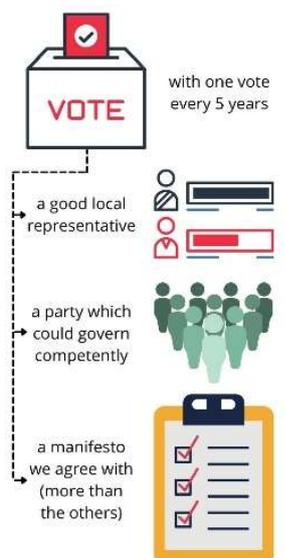
Well, what happens is that the MPs who think in a similar way get together (as a political party) as a smaller group within the overall group of MPs, and they put together their plan (their policies, their manifesto).

In fact, we already know which political party each candidate represents, before we cast our votes. We know that we are voting not just for a person, but that we are also voting for a person who is a member of a political party (well, almost always: there are occasionally people who stand for election as independent candidates; but not often).

And so, we end up electing not just any local representative, but a representative of a particular national political party. A national political party which we hope is going to be able to form a competent Government.

Because, if enough people are elected from that national political party, then that national political party gets to form the Government.

Three impossible things before breakfast



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Parliament and the Government

<https://www.parliament.uk/about/how/role/relations-with-other-institutions/parliament-government/>

Now, it's important to be clear here that, Parliament and the Government are different.

They have different roles and they do different things.



The Government

The Government is the group of people who are responsible for running the country. The Government sets taxes, chooses what to spend public money on and decides how best to deliver public services



Parliament

Parliament is all our elected representatives (650 MPs in the House of Commons), and it also includes the members of the House of Lords. They are all there – House of Commons and the House of Lords – to represent our interests and to make sure that our interests are taken into account by the Government.



The Government cannot make new laws or raise new taxes without Parliament's agreement.

If we imagine that the Government is an Olympic athlete, like a long jumper, or a javelin thrower, or a downhill skier, then Parliament have a special committee which is checking up on how long the long jump really was, or whether the javelin is the right weight and shape, and whether the Government managed not to step over the line when the javelin was thrown – or all those people, all the way down the ski slope, checking that the Government went the right side of each of the poles on the slalom. And behind the scenes, too, checking that everything that went into that performance was fair, whether it might be performance enhancing drugs, or a special – but unfair – pair of shoes.

OK, so the Government isn't really an Olympic athlete, and Parliament isn't really a load of Olympic judges and referees, but it's not a bad analogy. Parliament really does look closely at the Government's plans and monitors the way the Government is running things.

Government ministers are required to come to Parliament regularly to answer questions, to respond to issues raised in debates and to keep both Houses informed of any important decisions they take.

The idea is that this makes it possible for Parliament to hold the Government to account for its actions.

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But it is the Government which is doing the leading.

Parliament is there to do the really important job of checking up on what the Government is doing, and to make sure that the Government isn't racing off in a particular direction, if most of the Members of Parliament think that that is the wrong direction.

But the Government is setting the pace. The Government is doing the leading.

The Government is formed of a smaller group of MPs (not the whole 650 MPs, plus all the members of the House of Lords, who are in Parliament).

And the Government is selected by the political party which got more MPs elected than any of the other parties. Normally, that's more than half of the 650 MPs (so more than 325 MPs) – though sometimes political parties club together, in what is called a 'coalition'.

Well, in fact, it is the *Prime Minister* who is selected by the political party which got more MPs elected, and it is then the *Prime Minister* who chooses the other ministers. There's a whole lot of deal-making going on there, well, because you can imagine that the Prime Minister of a group of over 325 MPs needs to keep them all happy – in order that the Prime Minister is able to remain as Prime Minister – so they often have to appoint certain, particular people as Ministers, to ensure that they have not just a good team of Ministers, but also are able to remain sufficiently popular with their political party. But that's a whole story for another day.

The important point here is that when we vote for our local representative, we are not only choosing a good local representative, we're electing not just any local representative, but a representative of a particular national political party. A national political party which we think is likely to be able to form a good government.

So, that's two things. One vote. Two things.

Choosing a good local representative, to represent our interests, and to think about the details of all the important stuff going on in the country, on our behalf.

And also choosing someone who is a member of a national political party which we think is likely to be able to form a good government.

Not necessarily the same thing.

Susan might seem to be a really good person.

But we might not think much of some of the other members of Susan's political party.

Or we might not think much of the leader of Susan's political party – the person who would be likely to become the Prime Minister, if Susan's political party had enough MPs elected.

But, still, we are trying to achieve both of these things. At the same time. With one vote. With only one vote, only once every 5 years.

Hmm. Well. Makes you think, doesn't it?

3. A Manifesto We Like

However, there's even more, here.

We are not only trying to select a good local representative, who also happens to be a member of a political party which we think could form a competent government.

We are *also* selecting a Manifesto of policies.

Well, what is an Election Manifesto?

A **manifesto** is a published declaration of the intentions, motives, or views of the candidates who are standing for election, and normally also for their political party. It sets out things such as the candidate's values and beliefs, and says what the individual and their political party intend to do, if they are elected.

Of course, a candidate from one party may be elected in your constituency, but their party may not win the election nationally. In that sort of situation, it will be very hard for your new MP to achieve very much of what they promised in their manifesto.

But, why is an Election Manifesto important?

Well, it's important, because the theory is that the list of promises and plans which are in the Manifesto then becomes the list of actions and policies and new laws and regulations which the new Government puts into practice.

There are two important questions to unpick, at this point, if we are to understand how much significance Manifestos actually have – in other words, how much attention we should really pay to Manifestos.

First: do all those promises actually turn into actions?

and

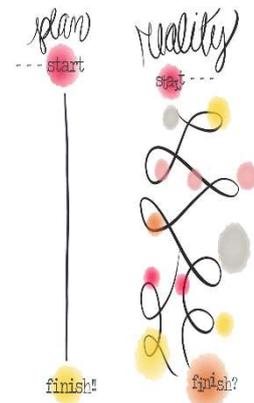
Second: does the fact that any particular promise was just one of the (perhaps) 100 promises on the list, give that particular promise any particular importance?

From Election Manifesto to Queen's Speech

Well, first, then: do all those promises actually turn into actions?

After the election (and, indeed, at the start of each session of parliament – which is sort of like the start of a new school term), the government gives the Queen a prepared speech to read to the Members of Parliament. It is a formal ceremony. It started back when the speech would actually be setting out the policies and objectives of the King or Queen. Today, in Europe only the UK, the Netherlands and Norway have a version of this ceremony, but other countries often have a similar process (such as the State of the Union address, in the United States and other countries).

The speech outlines what the government is planning to do in the forthcoming session. The Queen's Speech is expected to reflect the election manifesto of the winning party, though



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there may be some changes and adjustments, depending on the election results, and perhaps depending on changing circumstances in the country or in the world.

So, the Manifesto is important, because (at least in theory) it is what a political party intends to do. When we are voting for a good local representative, who is also a member of a political party which looks as though it could form a competent government, we are also voting for a Manifesto – a whole list of things which that *political party* intends to do – and by voting for it, we are also saying that this is the list of things which *we* want to happen.

How does that actually work out in practice? Do all those Manifesto promises actually turn into actions? Well, there's a lot more we could say about how accurately a manifesto actually reflects what actually happens. But the short answer is: some of the time, but certainly not all of the time.

If you are interested in more about Manifestos, then listen to Episode 6 of Season One: *Smoke, Mirrors, and Manifestos*. The title might give you a clue as to how often manifestos actually reflect what actually happens in practice!

In terms of what we are interested in here, it is certainly the theory that the list of Manifesto promises should turn into action. If Governments turn out to be not very good at keeping their promises, well, that's a different story. But as voters, we at least have to take the list of what is in the Manifesto seriously – because those things listed in the Manifesto, even if Governments aren't very good at keeping all of their promises, well those things listed in the Manifesto at least *might* turn out to be actions which the new Government *might* take.

Our second question, though was whether the fact that any particular promise was just one of the (perhaps) 100 promises on the list, does just being one thing on a list in a Manifesto give that particular promise any particular importance?

This is important, because we can sometimes find that a Government might claim that they have a *mandate* for this or that particular policy, just because it was in their manifesto at the last election.

For example, there might be a hundred things in a political party's manifesto. But with our one vote, remember that we are not just

- voting for our local MP **and**
- for a national party which seems as though it could govern competently.

We are also

- voting for that manifesto – that list of what the political party says that it plans to do.

~~After the election, the political party might decide that:~~

~~'Oh! Look! Things have changed in the world! There are different pressures, now.~~

~~Whoops! We can't do all of those things.~~

~~But ... what we **will** do, is to do this thing and this other thing.'~~

~~Not everything in the whole manifesto.~~

~~Just some of the things.~~

~~Selected by the political party.~~

~~Way after the point at which the voters voted.~~

OK, and so, at first glance, that might not sound too bad. BUT!

Remember that we were choosing at least three things already, with our one vote.

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And

Remember that we were choosing between a few different manifestos – perhaps, realistically in each constituency, only choosing between two different manifestos, of the two candidates most likely to win.

But then, is it reasonable for the political party which wins the election, the new Government (at least some times) to turn round and say:

'Well, we've GOT to do this. I mean, we have a MANDATE to do this.'

What they mean is that the people voted, and this manifesto is the one they voted for, and therefore the people have given us this job to do, and we'd better get on and do it.

Sort of like the Blues Brothers, being on a mission.

But without the cool hats, sunglasses, and suit.

And without the cool music, too!

Now, is that really fair? Is it really fair for the political party to claim that they are 'on a mission', that they have been 'given a mandate' to do this or that particular bit of their whole manifesto?

Was there REALLY a national vote, in favour of those particular bits of their manifesto?

Or did those bits of the manifesto just happen to be the ones which got through, because ...

... well, remember that we were voting for at least three different things.

And one of those things, the manifesto, was in fact perhaps just the thing we paid the least attention to, out of the three things.

And, even if we did pay attention to it, then it was just the manifesto which was, overall, more like the sort of stuff that we wanted to happen, more like that than any of the other manifestos on offer.

We didn't REALLY vote for *this* or *that* particular little bit of the manifesto.

And certainly not for EVERY bit of the manifesto.

But the political party – the new Government – might be claiming that we *specifically* gave them that mission ...

... OK, well, I hope that you can see why that is not really working in the way that it is supposed to.

Or, at least, it's not working in the way that political parties are claiming:

- that they now have legitimacy,
- that they now have national backing,

for this or that particular bit of a manifesto.

But, I also hope that you can see why we need to pay attention to what is in that Manifesto. Because, although it is the third of the three things which we are trying to achieve with our one vote, just once every 5 years, it might turn out to be a list of things which actually happen, and it might turn out to include some things which the new Government then claims a special 'legitimacy' for, claims that we have given them a special mission to do this thing,

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claims a special mandate for this or that particular policy. Parliament is checking; but we need to pay attention, too.

So, where have we got to, so far.

We have one vote, every 5 years.

With that one vote, in our Representative Democracy, we are trying to select a good local representative, who will represent our interests, locally, nationally, and internationally.

We are also trying to select a good political party, one which we think is probably going to be able to form a competent government.

And we are also voting for a manifesto – a list of political plans and promises, which that political party aims to put into practice, if it gets to form the government.

Now, it's possible – just about – that for at least a few people, all three of those things line up perfectly. Their first choice of candidate is also a member of the political party which they think is the best, and *everything* in that political party's manifesto is *exactly* what they think should happen.

But, let's be honest – is it really likely that all three of these things will happen to line up perfectly for everyone in the constituency. Or even for a majority of voters in a constituency. ~~Or even for more voters than vote for any other candidate in a constituency (not a majority of the voters, just for more voters than for the voters for any of the other candidates)?~~

Three, quite complicated things.

The right person. Who really knows what your constituency wants, and who is going to be a good representative for your constituency.

And the right political party to form a good government.

And all of the details of a whole great long list of policies in a manifesto.

That's a little bit like trying to cook dinner, and play tennis, and write a letter.

All at the same time. One handed.

Well: that's the **impossible puzzle for voters**.

Let me say that again.

We are trying to achieve too many things with just one vote, just once every 5 years -

1. select a good local representative,
and
2. select a party which seems as though it could govern competently,
and
3. select a manifesto of what we want to happen.

All three of these things. With just one vote. Once every 5 years.

Right. So, what we are saying is that, right from the very basics of how our electoral system works – voting for an MP, and a political party, and a manifesto set of political plans and promises, once every 5 years – well, right from the very start, that system isn't good enough.

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What we want, at *Taking the Party out of Politics*, is to include you in the discussion of how we can make that system better.

First, we want to help you to understand what is supposed to be happening.

Then we want to help you to understand why that isn't always happening in the way that it is supposed to.

And finally, we want to include you in the discussion of how to make our systems work better – to work better for all of us, the voters.

~~[So, the electoral system of our representative democracy (of one vote, every 5 years) is trying to achieve at least three, completely separate things. And there are all sorts of problems with that.]~~

We want to hear from you, if you have some different ideas. Some suggestions as to how things could be different. Perhaps about how we could use our systems differently, or about how we could tweak them so that they worked better, in all of our interests.

If you have any ideas, we would love to hear from you. In Season Three of *Taking the Party out of Politics*, we will be exploring various ideas about how we could make things work better. And we would love to hear from you. Just email us with your ideas, on info@talktogether.info. If your ideas are good – or if they help us and others to understand things more clearly – then we will include them in Season Three. We might even contact you, to interview you about your suggestions!

We look forward to hearing *your* thoughts.

* * *

Today, we have looked at the **Impossible Puzzle for Voters**.

Next time, we'll be looking at the **Impossible Puzzle for Voting** – not the same thing at all, as it turns out, but still a big problem with the way our electoral system works.

Or, rather, doesn't work.

At least, not properly.

For now, thank you for listening to *Taking the Party Out Of Politics*.

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