

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 Three 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 it 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 Three 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 Representatives** – even if a representative is elected with more than half of the votes, how do they fairly represent the people who DIDN'T vote for them?

So, let's start at the beginning: **Selecting a Representative**

Let's look briefly at the mechanics of the way we select our representatives.



For someone who represents part of a country, we call the area which they represent their '*constituency*' (or '*seat*') - and the people in that part of the country are called their '*constituents*'.

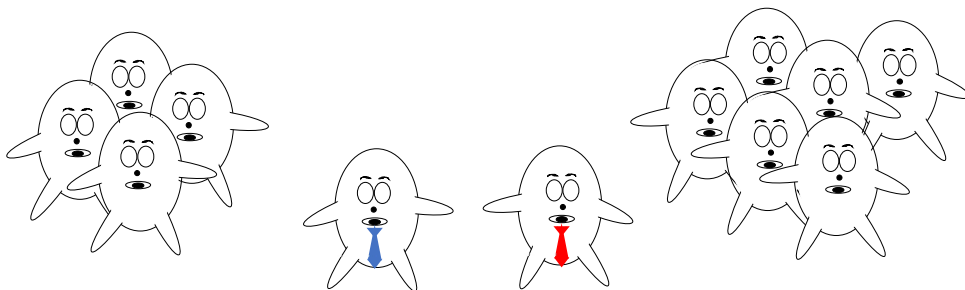
For a single leader, such as a directly elected president, their constituency is the whole country.



If there are two people between whom we have to choose our representative - two 'candidates' - then it's possible (for the sake of simplicity, let's assume that a constituency has 100,000 people living there) that all the 99,998 other people might vote for one candidate, and no one would vote for the other.



It's more likely, however, that opinion would be divided. Perhaps 60% might vote for one candidate, and 40% for the other. So, the candidate with 60% of the vote would be elected as our representative. - and would be expected to try to represent the needs and the preferences and the wishes of ALL the 99,998 other people in the constituency, *not just the ones who voted for him or her.* In fact, our new representative would be expected to try to represent the needs and the preferences and the wishes of ALL the 99,999 other people in the constituency – including the candidate who just lost the election!



We can immediately see that – even with the very best of intentions – it might be hard for the elected representative to be completely fair, and to *represent everyone equally*. And that's even if absolutely everybody voted for our new representative. Even if absolutely everybody voted for our new representative, we are still not absolutely identical. We still have slightly different needs and preferences and wishes.

And, in fact, it is pretty unlikely that 99,998 out of 100,000 would vote for the same candidate. Even deluded dictators don't try to pretend that absolutely everybody in the country loves them, even if they do twist the reported results.

It's more likely that some figure like $\frac{3}{4}$ or $\frac{2}{3}$ of the people would vote for the winning candidate. For the sake of an easy, round number, let's assume as an example, that 60% of the people voted for the winning candidate – for our new representative.

Now, let's imagine that our new representative was elected on the basis of promises to deliver on a specific set of policies. I don't know. Let's choose something a bit silly, just so that we can remember it. Our new representative was elected on the basis of a promise to make it the law that no one can play any sport other than football. I know, I know, that's pretty unlikely. But this is just an example.

So, in our example, 60% of the people who voted, voted for our new representative, and the key election promise was to make it the law that the only sport which will be allowed in the future is football.

Now, on the one hand, that is the point of our system of Representative Democracy. We can't all be involved in all the thinking, and all the details of all the decision-making, all the time. If we were, then no one in the country would ever get anything else done. We elect our representatives to deliver on our preferences, and to give us as much as possible of what we want, and certainly to ensure that we get what we need.

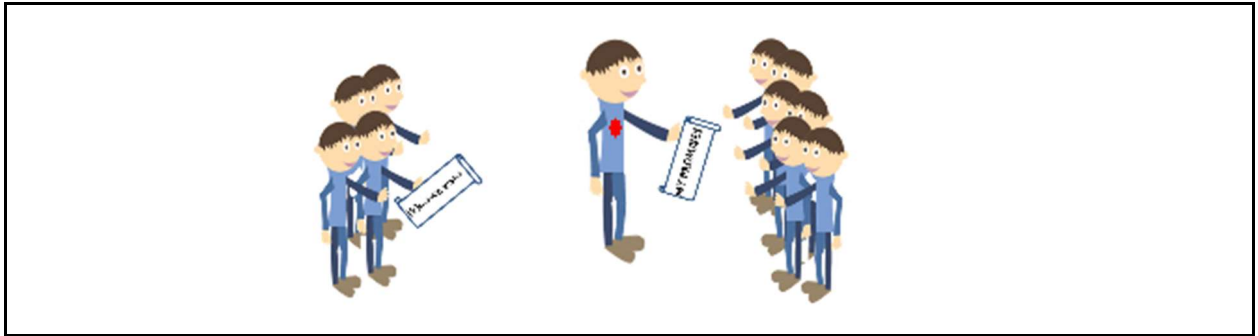
If we have elected someone to deliver on something – even something as bizarre as banning all sports other than football – well then our system of Representative Democracy sort of should require our new representative to do exactly that.

But. But.

But a lot of people (a minority, but still a lot) didn't want that.

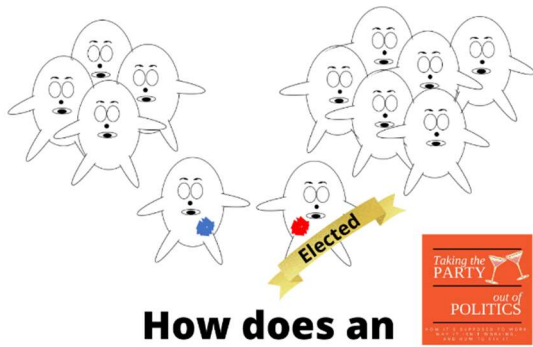
In fact, in our example, 40% of 100,000 people voted to keep other sports. That's 40,000 people who also want to be allowed to play, I don't know, tennis, and rugby, and tiddlywinks. Is that actually so unreasonable?

Now, our new representative was elected on the basis of making us a football-only constituency. If our new representative wants the 60% who voted for them last time to re-elect them at the following election – well, our new representative is going to feel quite a lot of pressure to deliver on that promise, and so is going to feel that they should do what the 60% want, and not necessarily what everyone wants, to make sure that they are re-elected.



Well, that's a problem, of course. We want our democratic system to respect the needs of minorities, as well as to represent the wishes of the majority. We want our system to value and respect minorities – even if we are in the majority – because, well, we might be in the minority next time, or on another issue.

It's a silly example, of course. Why shouldn't people be allowed to play a whole range of different sports? But if the difference is more subtle, such as how much more money is going to be invested into schools rather than into hospitals, then it's more complicated.



How does an elected representative represent the people who DIDN'T vote for them?

Or, what about if it was only the richest 60% who voted for our new representative – perhaps because our new representative said that they were going to lower taxes on the rich. But, by lowering taxes on the rich, there would be less money to spend on services for the poorer 40%. The rich don't care if the state hospitals aren't any good. They face lower taxes, and they can pay for private health care. But the poor do care.

Does our new representative just ignore the needs of the poorer 40%, reduce taxes, and so reduce the money going into state hospitals?

Or, it could be a different division, where the 60% were of one religion, and the 40% were of a different religion. Are we going to expect our new representative to ban a particular religion? Or if the 60% were black, and the 40% were white. Are we going to expect our new representative to create new laws to control the unruly, white minority?

There isn't an easy solution to this problem. As long as the majority keep electing the same representative, there isn't much that the minority can do to influence the representative to change what he or she does. In fact, the only way that the minority can change things is to try to persuade the majority to modify their wishes a bit, to include at least some of the things which the minority wants or needs.

That happens. At least some of the time.

I mean, in practice, most people understand that we don't want to create a society where only one sport is permitted, or where a particular religion is banned, or where taxes don't help everyone (even those who can't afford to pay for some things themselves), or where people of one race or skin colour deliberately make life difficult for people of a different race or skin colour, just because they can – because we want to be in a society which is working together, not a society which encourages division.

So, at least some of the time, the majority does modify its wishes a bit, to include at least some of the things which the minority wants or needs.

But not all of the time.

There are no guarantees.

* * *

So, where have we got to, so far.

If our new representative is elected by people with a particular set of preferences, or on the basis of a particular set of promises, then our new representative is going to feel the pressure to push for things which keep those people happy.

Partly to get re-elected.

And partly because, well, that's how the system of Representative Democracy works. We elect people to represent what we want, need, and prefer to happen. And, when they are elected, we expect them to deliver on those things.

But our new representative also represents the wants, needs, and preferences of all the people who *didn't* vote for them. Our new representative represents the *whole* constituency, and *all* the people in the constituency – not *just* the ones who voted for them.

How does our new representative do both of those things?

And that's the **Impossible Puzzle for Representatives**.

Unless, of course, 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 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 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.

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Next time, we'll be looking at the **Impossible Puzzle for Representative Governments** – because, although it might seem at first that we have a government which represents the way that people across the country voted – that's not actually what happens!
Yet another a big problem with the way our political 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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