

## Revisiting what is democracy?

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If being clear about the DNA of democracy, [as Janusz Ruskowski says](#), is important to nurturing and safeguarding it, how then to define this slippery concept?

I propose that there are a set of value propositions that can be used as a guideline against which a government or governance system can be assessed to say whether they are democratic. I set these out below.

CAPaD has looked at this issue previously; in our [very first blog post about representation](#) and in a more recent [post on democracy in Canberra](#). In neither however did I lay out the assessment criteria.

Here are those criteria, gleaned from the sources listed below.

First however, a couple of other definitions, derived and combined from multiple sources:

**Governance:**

*the structures and mechanisms a community develops to make decisions about its internal affairs and external relationships for the common good of its members, means of ensuring compliance with those decisions, and mechanisms for the monitoring and review of those decisions.*

**Government:**

*the institutions and bodies that take, implement, enforce and monitor those decisions.*

**And Democracy:**

*Governance system for **collective decision taking** by those who are going to **live with the consequences** of those decisions. (See citations 1 through 7)*

Now the criteria. A democratic system will display these features:

Political Equality: all citizens have equal opportunity to participate and control their polity;

Tyranny (majority or minority) Avoided or Freedom from Domination ensured: no group or section dominates the polity. No individual or group exercises power over others;

Deliberative: decisions taken are well informed, collectively considered, discursive, made in face to face conversation;

Reflective: the system or polity thinks about and reviews processes and outcomes;

Adaptative: the polity or decision makers update processes and decisions as circumstances or evidence suggests;

Subsidiarity: decisions are taken and action implemented closest to those who will be affected. This does not preclude higher orders of support or coordination.

(See citations 8 through 13)

Ostrom and practitioners of confederalism would suggest these attributes are maintained across geographic scale.

Other organisations have differing methods of assessing the democratic health of a nation state, or aspects of that state's democracy. There include the [World Bank's Worldwide Governance Indicators](#), the [Centre for Systemic Peace Polity Project](#), the Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) [Democracy Reports](#), the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (International IDEA)'s [Global State of Democracy Initiative](#), and organisations that look at aspects of good governance such as [Transparency International](#) and [Freedom House](#).

The challenge lies in collecting the data using that to create a score. At least this article opens discussion about a framework to be used.

## References

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