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## Global politics

# What's the difference between an autocracy and a democracy?

This article should be read alongside *China and Russia: the dawn of an autocratic century?* by Will Bridges in issue 4 (April 2023).

## Democracy

Having studied UK politics, you should have a clear understanding of what a democracy looks like and how power is distributed. However, it is important to outline the key elements of a democratic state. Within a democracy, power is distributed across many layers of society, from local councils to the nationwide legislatures. Participation is both encouraged and widespread, with free and fair elections that are held regularly. The government that is elected has democratic legitimacy, thus it cannot act without established checks and balances constraining it. Furthermore, the government is accountable and responsive to the populace. The rule of law is applied equally to everyone within the democratic state, which ensures that there are limits on what a government can do, further protecting the rights of citizens within that state.

Germany is a democratic country. Elections are regular and use proportional representation. It is a federal system so there are strong regional and local governments. The powers of the 16 state governments are protected by the constitution, which was created in 1949. There are a range of political parties to choose between, including the Christian Democrats, Social Democrats and the Greens. These parties have very different agendas, so there is a genuine choice for voters. Due to the voting system, there are often coalitions in government. Rights are protected by the constitution, which starts with the sentence 'Human dignity is inviolable'. This focus on protecting liberties is due to historical events in Germany in the first half of the twentieth century.

## Autocracy

An autocracy differs from a democracy, as within an autocratic state power is centralised and held within the hands of an individual or a single dominant party or group. There are no elections confirming democratic legitimacy, although there may have been an election which allowed the individual to gain power. However, once power has been gained and concentrated within this individual or group there is no further democratic legitimacy, often with changes made to a constitution to confirm this. Should the ruler or ruling party wish to confirm they are acting with legitimacy they may choose to hold a referendum, but these are not freely or fairly held, and are simply used to provide the government with the appearance of popular support. The separation of powers, which is the cornerstone of a democratic state, does not exist within an autocracy. There is no independence of the judiciary from the government, and judges simply rubber stamp government decisions, undermining the principle of the rule of law. The population within an autocracy lack many of the freedoms enjoyed

by those within a democracy, such as freedom of the press, and there is often heavy state control and influence over the daily lives of the population.

China is a useful example of an autocracy. Elections do take place at a local level to People's Congresses, but there is a single party system, so no genuine choice for voters. The system is hierarchical, so the higher levels of People's Congress are elected by the level below, ensuring tight control. The judiciary is controlled by the Chinese Communist Party's Political and Legal Affairs Commission, so is clearly not independent. Rights are severely restricted. During the Covid pandemic, whistle-blowers who tried to discuss the rising death toll were arrested and 'disappeared'. There is no free media and Wikipedia, Google and YouTube are banned.

## How to use this information in an essay

Making synoptic links is the key to success in a global politics essay. The characteristics of different systems of government, and the consequences of this on the global world order, can obviously inform essays on power and development. However, you should also consider the impact of particular systems of government and how this could feed into essays on the changing nature of the world order since 2000, and also the impact of institutions of global governance on the world order. Within this, you could consider the implications of membership of institutions of political global governance (and non-membership) and link these systems of government to concepts of polarity, and hard and soft power. Considering current political events is a way to show the examiner that you are engaged in global politics. For example, you could consider the differing responses of democracies and autocracies to the Covid pandemic. You could also explore how democracies and autocracies have responded differently to the crisis in Ukraine. These examples will allow you to move from simply discussing theory to exploring the impact of how these political systems operate in reality.

### Student task

For all systems of government that you are studying, make sure you are clear on the following:

- Who holds power?
- How is power allocated?
- How can power be transferred?
- What are the extent of freedoms and rights?

Apply this information to the following countries:

- the UK
- the USA
- Russia
- Iran

***Clare Stansfield is head of politics at Francis Holland School.***

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