

Democracy? You think you know?



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Contents

Introduction	4
Learning Outcomes	5
1 Is democracy really such a good thing?	6
2 What are some possible alternatives?	6
3 Doing it directly	7
3.1 The Athenians, the Swiss, and Arnold Schwarzenegger	7
4 Democracy and deliberation	8
4.1 Can talking do more than voting?	8
5 Who are the real democrats?	9
5.1 A story of fox hunting	9
5.2 Further reading	9
Conclusion	10
Keep on learning	10
Acknowledgements	11

Introduction

Participating in the democratic processes is seen as being a fundamental aspect of citizenship. All pupils need a broad knowledge and understanding of the rights, responsibilities and duties of citizens, as well as an understanding of forms of government. Notions of citizenship have been forged alongside the expansion of the right to vote and the development of our ideas about democracy. In this unit we explore different interpretations of democracy and strategies for involving pupils in consideration of these issues within the citizenship curriculum.

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Learning Outcomes

After studying this course, you should be able to:

- consider the value of democracy, through examples
- challenge perceived wisdom about our political systems.

1 Is democracy really such a good thing?

Politics is vital to all of our lives. The way our schools and businesses are run, how we travel and make a living, even how we see ourselves – it all depends on political decisions. And we are all democrats today. We have elections, parties compete, we vote, and the winners govern us. But how often do we ask: is democracy really a good thing? Is there another way?

We take it for granted that democracy is a good thing and the best political system. But many people complain that democracy is messy because there is too much talk and argument; that it is inefficient because it takes too much time; and that it does not get decisions right because people have to bargain and compromise too much.

Shortly after World War II, Winston Churchill famously said: 'Democracy is the worst form of government. Except for all the others that have been tried from time to time.' This implies that democracy is deeply imperfect but that there is no better alternative.

2 What are some possible alternatives?

Dictatorship – one person decides for all. If one person is superior to all others, what is wrong with this? But what would we mean by superior, and is that what should really count anyway?

Religious leaders – if there is a moral code, such as a religious one, which sets out right and wrong, why should we vote and why should everyone have a voice? Surely, we just need religious leaders to tell us what, for example, the Bible or the Koran requires of us?

Expertise – modern life is complex. Should not experts, who understand complexity, make decisions for us, rather than all of us voting in ignorance?

Anarchy – why have organised politics at all? Why not let everyone be free to do as they wish? Surely people can work out their own rules as they go along, and find ways to live together without governments telling them what to do?

Now start thinking more about what democracy is in Activity 1.

Activity 1

- 1 The class needs to make a decision on an issue. Once the decision is made, everyone has to stick to it. Without prior discussion, ask pupils for ideas about how the decision ought to be made. Ask them to give reasons for their choice. Build up a list of these reasons for a picture of democracy's strengths and weaknesses.
- 2 Alternatively, you might consider the current pressing issue of whether the reformed House of Lords in the UK should be elected or if some of its members should be appointed rather than elected.
 - Can there be 'people's peers'?

- How can an unelected body like the House of Lords have survived until today?
- What should democrats want when it comes to reform?

See the sections on History, People's Peers and Democracy on the BBC News website.

Lords reform is ongoing. The most recent step was a government consultation exercise, the results of which are available on the Department for Constitutional Affairs website.

3 Doing it directly

3.1 The Athenians, the Swiss, and Arnold Schwarzenegger

Abraham Lincoln defined democracy as rule of, by and for the people.

If democracy is such a good thing, why don't voters get to decide on policies as well as just vote for candidates? Some countries practise 'direct democracy', where people can vote on policy, alongside 'representative democracy', where we choose others to decide for us. When democracy was invented, in ancient Athens, it was direct democracy – citizens met face-to-face to make decisions for the city-state (though women, slaves and foreigners could not be citizens).

Switzerland is the most famous example of direct democracy today, though the recall vote which led to Arnold Schwarzenegger becoming Governor of California is probably the biggest recent direct democracy event.

Can the people be wrong? Should they be trusted? Many argue that, for example, capital punishment would be favoured by a majority if there was a vote in the UK, but that it would still be the wrong thing to do. Crime detection and conviction are not perfect – what if innocent people were executed?

So, what sorts of issues should we have a say, a vote, on?

- Who is taxed, and how much?
- How much money should be spent on health care, education, and defence?
- Whether we should generate electricity using nuclear power, solar power, or gas?

Are there some issues that especially lend themselves to being dealt with by direct democracy?

Try some experiments to see how far democracy should go using Activity 2.

Activity 2

Consider an exercise along the following lines:

A school is like a mini political system – it has rules, a community of people, and a system of authority. If it was a direct democracy, then all members of this community would have a say – probably in the form of a vote – on such things as meal times, playground rules, and even the content of lessons. Should direct democracy apply to this community? If so, how far should it go? If not, why not?

The point of the exercise is to tease out your intuitions about how far democracy should go. There are no 'right answers', but rather stronger and weaker arguments for more or less democracy in a school (and other political communities). Arguments about how far experts (teachers) should be freed from democratic rule are particularly critical, in this case and in others.

Information on the unique combination of representative democracy and extensive direct democracy can be found on the **Direct Democracy in Switzerland** website.

Information on the recall device for direct democracy, and its recent manifestation in California, can be found on the **Focus on Direct Democracy** website.

4 Democracy and deliberation

4.1 Can talking do more than voting?

We normally think of democracy as being about voting. But what if people don't know about the candidates or issues they vote on? Shouldn't talk, aimed at informing us about the issues, be more important in a democracy?

Many commentators on democracy today think we need to create a more deliberative democracy. Voting is fine, but what is critical in our complex world is understanding issues and willingness to give adequate reasons for one's opinions and votes. Without understanding and knowledge, what value does a vote have?

Deliberation – open and reasoned debate and discussion of an issue or issues – is seen as the ideal source of understanding.

Various visions of a deliberative democracy have been offered. Normally, these suggest that open debate, which offers equal access and opportunities to participants, is vital for democratic deliberation. Attempts to put the vision into practice include citizens' juries and deliberative polls.

Citizens' juries have been used in the NHS, for example, while deliberative polls (invented in the USA) have been conducted in various countries, including the UK. Both are forums in which a random selection of citizens meet for a few days, have access to experts and information, and form views on an issue. Their advocates claim that the resulting views represent something elusive and special: the view of the people, which is informed on the issue at hand.

Activity 3 will help you to see the effect of deliberation on democracy.

Activity 3

Does deliberation produce more informed opinions?

Consider the following activity. Take a vote in class on whether the UK should get rid of the pound and replace it with the euro, without providing more than basic information. Record the outcome of the vote, but don't reveal exact numbers.

Break the class down into small groups to read and discuss a short pro and con information sheet on the single currency. If there is time, students could be asked to find out about the debate as homework and come back to class ready for structured, small-group discussion.

After discussion, take another vote. Did the result change? Is it a 'better' result?

Information on pros and cons of Britain joining the single currency can be found on the Euro Debate website.

5 Who are the real democrats?

5.1 A story of fox hunting

Democracy is a thing, a practice. It is also a word – a powerful one, politically, because we all think it is a good thing. When people take part in politics, they try to claim that 'democracy' is on their side, and not on that of their opponents.

In November 2004, pro-hunting protesters breached House of Commons security and broke into the chamber to disrupt the debate on banning fox hunting. As a significant minority group, passionately committed to the cause of continuing hunting, the Countryside Alliance and others feel that democracy is on their side – minority rights and freedoms are vital to democracy, they say, and street demonstrations and even civil disobedience against undemocratic laws are a democratic mechanism.

Who is right? The answer is a shade of grey rather than black and white. Democracy is generally accepted to be about both majority rule and minority rights, and sometimes striking a balance is difficult.

Activity 4

Pupils could be asked to read some of this material, pro and con, with an eye to the types of arguments the different sides offer, especially ones that invoke 'democracy'.

5.2 Further reading

For further reading on the topic of citizenship and democracy, please click on the following 'view document' links.

Click on 'view document' below to read New Answers to Old (and New) Criticisms

[View document](#)

Click on 'view document' below to read Is This Democracy?

[View document](#)

Click on 'view document' below to read Reinventing Democracy
View document

Conclusion

This free course provided an introduction to studying Social Sciences. It took you through a series of exercises designed to develop your approach to study and learning at a distance, and helped to improve your confidence as an independent learner.

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