

Teaching Democracy Resource

The big picture

“It has been said that democracy is the worst form of Government except for all those other forms that have been tried”

(Winston Churchill, 1947)

Teachers are being asked to promote the values underpinning democracy and this seems like a reasonable expectation in a democratic society. However, the concept of democracy is far from straightforward, and it is important to understand the ways in which democracies operate, to fully appreciate why it should be defended. This requires taking a little time to build students’ knowledge around the broad idea of what constitutes a democratic system of government.

Teaching about democracy is a key part of effective Citizenship education and a requirement of the National Curriculum for Citizenship. This activity introduces pupils to the key features of democracy through a balloon debate activity. Students build their argument to defend a principle of democracy using historical and contemporary people who have contributed to parliamentary democracy in the UK. Student resources are also provided.

Activity instructions

Lesson 1: What is democracy?

See also Student Resources 1 and 2 (below)

The activity focuses on teaching about the essential components for a democratic society. The purpose is to demonstrate that elections are not sufficient and that there are other elements, which combine to constitute genuine democracies.

Teachers might like to start with an activity to elicit students’ prior knowledge, for example by asking students to describe the lives of two people – one who lives in a democracy and another who doesn’t. The examples given can be historical or contemporary and this will help the teacher to gauge prior levels of understanding.

Through careful questioning the teacher should be able to elicit many of the 9 factors listed below. It will be useful to draw out these factors (and any others the students can think of) before the lesson starts so students are aware of the general argument. It is likely that the class will know about each factor in its own right, but the teacher could use this opening session to gauge the extent to which students are aware of the inter-connections between them and their relationship to the overarching concept of democracy.

If the class starts with the suggestion that elections are the most important feature of democracy, this list can easily be extended by asking basic follow-up questions such as:

- Who can vote in an election?
- What happens to the votes?
- How do we know who to vote for?
- How do we make sure the vote is fair?
- Can the winners do whatever they want?

Students may also benefit from being given the chance to review the timeline of democracy, to introduce them to some of the key changes over time in the UK:

<https://www.parliament.uk/education/teaching-resources-lesson-plans/journey-to-democracy/>

The resources have been devised to facilitate a 'balloon debate' in which up to nine characters start off in the balloon, and then the rest of the class vote people out until just one is left. In this case, each character represents a feature of democracy.

Resource 2 includes nine briefing sheets to help students prepare for their short speeches in the balloon that relate to some of the features of democracies:

1. Regular elections to elect representatives to govern (represented by Nick Clegg, initiator of fixed term Parliaments Act).
2. Freedom to stand as a candidate in elections (represented by Dr Richard Taylor, Independent Kidderminster Hospital and Health Concern MP).
3. Free and secret ballot (represented by Feargus O'Connor, Chartist MP).
4. Political parties to help organise representatives around core policy ideas (represented by Keir Hardie, Founder of the Labour Party).
5. Free media to ensure information and a range of opinions are widely spread (represented by Tim Berners-Lee, Inventor of the Internet).
6. The rule of law (represented by Tom Bingham, former Lord Chief Justice).
7. Freedom of assembly for citizens and the freedom to organise (represented by Lech Walesa, Leader of Solidarity and President of Poland).
8. Minority rights (represented by Darcus Howe, a black rights campaigner).
9. Equal citizenship rights for women (represented by Princess Sophia Duleep Singh, a Suffragette leader).

Students take on the role of an individual defending their principle. They put forward arguments for their importance to democracy using information from their character's life as well as general arguments. The students who assume these roles will need to spend some time researching their arguments and preparing speeches and they could be assisted by small teams from the rest of the class.

The teacher can use as many or as few of these cards as they want, and they can run the debate for as many rounds as they feel will hold the students' interest.

Resource 1 suggests doing this in three rounds – de-selecting three people each time, and then choosing the favourite from the remaining three. But this could be done in many other ways. The key issue to focus on is to encourage students to make a reasoned response at the end of each round.

The questions in resource 1 ask students to think about what effect losing those elements that have just been de-selected would have on a society. At each point, students are asked to reflect on the question 'would you still have a democracy?' The idea here is to help students understand how these factors combine to constitute a democracy and that losing just one or two of these features weakens a society's claim to be democratic. This will also help students understand how countries may continue to have some of the formal attributes of a democracy without functioning democratically. This comparative aspect is reflected in the final section of each briefing sheet which links to a country where one characteristic of democracy is absent, even though others may well be present, for example, North Korea has elections, but no choice between candidates.

Student Resources

Resource 1

Student Lesson Record

Democracy is more than just having elections. In order to have a democratic society we need many other things to be present. In this lesson a group of people will start off presenting features of democracy which many people think are important. Your task is to listen carefully to their arguments and to decide which seem most important. In each round of voting, you will de-select some of the speakers until you just have one left.

Your job is to think about whether you can still have a democracy with some of these features missing. You can also decide at which point you think democracy would end.

Round 1

Listen to all the opening speeches and think about which seem to be the most important features. You will have three votes to cast for your top three choices. As a class, count up the total votes and de-select the bottom three (they can re-join the audience).

Write down what you think the effect would be – how would society change?

Would you still have a democracy?

Round 2

Listen to the second speeches from the remaining speakers. Cast your three votes again and de-select the bottom three (they too can re-join the audience).

Write down what you think the effect would be – how would society change?

Would you still have a democracy?

Round 3

Listen to the final three speakers. This time you have just one vote to cast. The person who wins is the last dimension left.

Write down what you think the effect would be – how would society change?

Would you still have a democracy?

Resource 2

Briefing 1 – Regular elections, Nick Clegg

The principle

Regular elections to elect representatives.

One of the main ideas of democracy is that every adult has a say in who runs the government. However, it is also important to think about how regularly this should take place – too long and people don't feel the government reflects their wishes, too short and government changes too much to get things done.

The person

Nick Clegg was Deputy Prime Minister in 2010. He introduced a new law called the Fixed-term Parliaments Act.

Until this law was passed, the date of the next general election was decided by the Prime Minister. They had to call an election within five years, but could choose any date within that period. This was criticized because it gave them an unfair advantage because they could call an election when things were going well for them and badly for the other political parties.

“The Bill has a single, clear purpose: to introduce fixed-term Parliaments to the United Kingdom to remove the right of a Prime Minister to seek an election for pure political gain. This simple change will have a profound effect because for the first time in our history the timing of general elections will not be a plaything of Governments. There will be no more guessing games over the date of the next election, distracting politicians from getting on with running the country. Instead everyone will know how long a Parliament can be expected to last, bringing much greater stability to our political system.”

“Some people have asked why Parliaments will run for five years, not four. Let me explain: five years is the current maximum length. Five years is the length of Parliaments in France, Italy, and South Africa, among others, and it is the maximum length of Parliament in India. In the United Kingdom, three of the past five Parliaments have run for five years. Leaving aside the very short Parliaments, half of all Parliaments since the war have run for more than four years, so five years is both in keeping with our current arrangements, and fits with international examples.”

Speech in the House of Commons, 13 September 2010 (slightly adapted)

Further research

<http://researchbriefings.parliament.uk/ResearchBriefing/Summary/SN06111>

What if this doesn't happen?

If you don't have elections then you don't really have a democracy because the government is not chosen by the people.

Eritrea has not held a general election for over 20 years. You can read more here:

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Eritrea#National_elections

<https://awazetribune.com/index.php/2016/12/06/eritrea-might-conduct-presidential-elections-in-2018-sources/>

Resource 2

Briefing 2 – Freedom to stand, Dr Richard Taylor MP

The principle

Freedom to stand as a candidate in elections.

It's important that everyone in a democracy can vote but also that anyone can put themselves forward in an election as a candidate. That means we can vote for anyone we want. It also means if we don't like any politicians, we can stand ourselves and do a better job.

The person

Dr. Richard Taylor MP (Independent)

Richard Taylor was a doctor who worked in Kidderminster General Hospital for 23 years until 1995. He also supported the hospital as chairman of the volunteers who helped, and from 1997-2001 he was a member of the campaign group Save Kidderminster Hospital, after plans for cuts were announced.

In 2000 the local Accident and Emergency department was closed and in 2001 Dr. Taylor stood as an independent candidate in the general election for Kidderminster Hospital and Health Concern. He won the election with a majority of over 17,000 and became the Member of Parliament (MP) for the area. He won again in 2005, but finally lost in the 2010 election. Whilst he was in parliament he became a member of the Health Select Committee, which allowed him to directly question ministers and NHS managers about the health system and cuts to hospitals. He was also a member of several groups in parliament campaigning on health issues and he made speeches in the House of Commons about the health service.

Mark Garnier won the election there in 2010 and said this about Dr. Taylor's impact:
"He has single handedly shown us all that local issues are everything, and it is very risky for political parties to ignore local issues. And he showed that no outcome is a foregone conclusion."
(Slightly adapted from original)

Further research

You can read more about Dr. Taylor's political activism here: <http://www.healthconcernwf.org.uk/>

What if this doesn't happen?

If people can't stand freely as candidates then it means those in power and in charge of political parties control who can be an MP. This narrows the range of people you can vote for and puts some people off voting at all.

In China, anyone can stand for election in theory, but in practice, the government makes it very difficult. There's a report on how an independent candidate is bullied here:
<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-china-37997706>

Resource 2

Briefing 3 – Free and secret ballot, Feargus O’Connor MP

The principle

Free and secret ballot.

In an election, voters should be free to choose the candidate they prefer and no-one should be able to interfere in this free choice. This also means that the voter does not have to tell anyone who they voted for, so they can avoid people trying to put pressure on them.

The person

Feargus O’Connor, MP.

Feargus O’Connor was from County Cork in Ireland, when Ireland was still ruled as part of Great Britain. He became an MP (1832-35 and 1847-52) and helped to start up the working class political movement called The Chartists in 1838. This movement wrote a People’s Charter which included six changes to make the system more democratic. As well as demanding the vote for working men, one of their other demands was for a ‘secret ballot’. Over the next few years the Chartists put pressure on government, presenting petitions signed by millions and holding huge public meetings. These were often put down with violence from the government and some leaders were arrested.

Gradually though their ideas were introduced and the vote was extended to more people. In 1867 the Ballot Act introduced the idea of the secret ballot. This meant that tenant farmers, who owed their livelihood to the landowner, could now vote against the local landowner if they wanted, without anyone knowing. Not only did it free voters from intimidation but it also helped to end bribery, in which rich candidates would pay poorer voters to vote for them. Now no-one would know who voted for whom.

Further research

There’s information about the secret ballot here: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-leeds-31630588>

And more information about O’Connor here:

http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/historic_figures/oconnor_feargus.shtml

What if this doesn’t happen?

If there is no secret ballot it means powerful people can punish poorer people for voting ‘the wrong way’ (i.e. against them) and it also makes it easier to bribe people and effectively pay for their votes.

Nigeria has held open ballots, which some thought were fairer, but you can read concerns about corruption here: <https://www.opendemocracy.net/gram-matenga/cash-for-votes-political-legitimacy-in-nigeria>

Resource 2

Briefing 4 – Political parties, James Keir Hardie

The principle

Political parties to help organise representatives around core policy ideas.

Political parties pull together separate ideas into a programme for government. This presents voters with a simpler choice between different sets of ideas. They also help organise politicians together so they can build support for change in parliament.

The person

James Keir Hardie, Founder of the Labour Party

Keir Hardie was a working class Scotsman who helped to start the Scottish Labour Party, and then the Labour Party in 1900 to represent the interests of working people. He called for:

"A distinct Labour group in Parliament, who shall have their own organisation, and agree upon their policy, which must embrace a readiness to cooperate with any party promoting legislation in the direct interests of labour [workers]"

(slightly adapted).

From starting the party with no MPs it took just 24 years until the first Labour government formed in 1924. It did not last long but was able to introduce policies to build homes at affordable rents, increased unemployment benefits and increased pensions. He believed political parties could represent the interests of different groups, and bring together their elected representatives to create change.

Further research

There's more about Keir Hardie here: <http://spartacus-educational.com/PRhardie.htm>

And lots of information on political parties here: <http://www.historylearningsite.co.uk/british-politics/political-parties/>

What if this doesn't happen?

Some people argue that we should have no political parties, but that would make it very difficult to choose a leader, or provide any coherent plan for government. Imagine 650 individually elected and independent MPs turning up after the election to work out what to do next.

Some countries only have one political party. They may still hold elections, but people don't really have much choice. For example in North Korea there is effectively one-party The Democratic Front for the Reunification of Korea, and whilst there are four other parties named, all the candidates have to be approved by the Democratic Front. In each area there is only one candidate to vote for!

<https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2014/03/north-korea-elections-guide/358875/>

Resource 2

Briefing 5 – Free media, Tim Berners-Lee

The principle

Free media to ensure information and a range of opinions are widely spread.

In a democracy it is important that citizens can find out what is going on, so they can form an opinion of the government, and decide if they are doing a good job. It's also important that people know what other parties and candidates propose to do differently. If you have information you can make an informed choice.

The person

Tim Berners-Lee, Inventor of the Internet

In the past information was passed on through books, newspapers, radio, TV and conversations. Governments often banned speakers or books they didn't agree with, but in a democracy this is quite rare. Organisations like the BBC try to be neutral between different political parties and during elections they show party political broadcasts from all the main parties so voters can hear a range of messages.

Now we have the Internet, which makes more information more easily available to more people than ever before. However, it also creates new ways for others to control what we see. It's easier for large companies, and sometimes governments, to promote certain information and make it difficult to find other stuff. Tim Berners-Lee has said:

"When you make something universal it can be used for good things or nasty things, we just have to make sure it's not undercut by any large companies or governments trying to use it and get total control."

Further research

For some of Tim Berners-Lee's current thinking:

<https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2017/mar/11/tim-berners-lee-web-inventor-save-internet>

For more ideas about how important information is in a democracy:

<https://www.cartercenter.org/news/documents/doc1860.html>

What if this doesn't happen?

If you don't have access to information then it's easy to get a one-sided view of what's happening. This means you don't know when the government is getting things wrong, or you don't even know about some problems at all. In China, which is a one-party state, the government controls the internet so citizens only get limited information.

<http://abcnews.go.com/Technology/story?id=4707107&page=1>

Resource 2

Briefing 6 – Rule of Law, Lord Bingham of Cornhill

The principle

The rule of law.

In a democracy it is important that the laws that are passed by parliament are implemented fairly. This means people can live their lives relatively freely and that everyone's human rights are respected. This means government makes the law, but independent judges and magistrates interpret the law. This division of power between politicians and the courts is important because it provides a limit on the government's power.

The person

Tom Bingham, Lord Bingham of Cornhill

Tom Bingham was a judge who held two of the most important legal jobs in the country. He was the Lord Chief Justice – the head of the whole justice system of England and Wales; and also Senior Law Lord, when the House of Lords operated as the highest court in the country. In 2009 the House of Lords powers were transferred to a Supreme Court, which Tom Bingham also helped to establish.

For Bingham, there are some important rules a fair legal system should have:

1. The law must be straightforward and easy to understand.
2. The courts should apply the law and not grant favours to anyone.
3. The law should apply equally to all.
4. Ministers and public officers should exercise their power within the law.
5. The law must protect human rights.
6. People should have access to the courts to resolve their disputes.
7. Fair trial.
8. Countries should also comply with their international obligations.

Further research

There is a video about the rule of law here: <https://binghamcentre.biicl.org/schools/ruleoflaw>

What if this doesn't happen?

If you don't have the rule of law then it means people do not feel their freedom is guaranteed. This also undermines democracy because people do not feel they can trust others – anyone could get locked up or mistreated or forced to pay bribes to protect themselves.

Zimbabwe is frequently criticized for not following the rule of law, and especially for arresting people who are trying to criticize the government and campaign for democracy. You can read about some of the recent arrests and incidents here:

<https://www.amnesty.org/en/countries/africa/zimbabwe/report-zimbabwe/>

The principle

Freedom of assembly for citizens and the freedom to organise.

If people are free in a democracy, that means they are free to organise groups together, to meet together, and to campaign for what they want. The government should expect organisations to form with different opinions. Some of these groups remain small and do not achieve much, but some of them become important sources of new ideas and new answers to problems. These freedoms stop society getting stuck in old-fashioned ways of doing things by generating new ideas.

The person

Lech Walesa, Leader of Solidarity and President of Poland (1990-95).

After the Second World War Poland became a Communist state run by one political party, and heavily dependent on the USSR (Russia). Throughout this period, there were a number of illegal organisations that tried to organise opposition to the government. In particular, a trade union emerged to represent the interests of the Polish workers called Solidarity. The government started a crackdown against Solidarity in 1981 and arrested the leadership and 5,000 supporters. The armed forces appeared on the streets and when union members tried to go on strike they were beaten and forced back to work. A public demonstration against the government was attacked by the armed forces and 9 people were killed and 22 injured. Arrests and attacks continued over the next few years and the movement was forced into secret. Lech Walesa, one of Solidarity's leaders received the Nobel Peace Prize in 1983. Finally, as the government experienced more and more problems, they legalized Solidarity in 1989, and by the end of that year Solidarity had won elections and formed the government. In 1990 Lech Walesa became the first democratically elected President of Poland.

Further research

You can read more about Walesa's work here:

http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/peace/laureates/1983/walesa-bio.html

And you can read more about the struggles to defend the right to association here:

<https://www.frontlinedefenders.org/en/right/freedom-association>

What if this doesn't happen?

If people can't join together to share their ideas and try to influence others then their democratic freedoms are limited. That means some ideas are prevented from being spread. It also means some campaigns are stopped. This means people's freedom to try to pursue the change they want is also limited and that means the power of the government over the people grows.

In Saudi Arabia it is illegal for unrelated men and women to 'mingle' socially, even in a private home. <http://www.nydailynews.com/news/world/saudi-court-punishes-group-men-women-mingling-party-lashings-prison-time-article-1.181505>

The principle

Minority Rights

If elections were all that mattered, then any government that represented the majority of people could do whatever they wanted. However, this would be unfair to anyone in the minority. Therefore, another important aspect of a democracy is respect for minority rights. This guarantees that everyone will have their democratic freedom respected, even though a majority might not approve of aspects of a minority lifestyle or belief.

The person

Darcus Howe, journalist and activist

Darcus Howe was an important leader of the Civil Rights Movement in Britain. As a young man he experienced racism in London. He worked in a Caribbean restaurant in Notting Hill called The Mangrove, and police raided it repeatedly. The police said they were looking for drugs but they never found any and never arrested anyone. In 1970, after 12 such raids, Darcus Howe and others organised a protest against the police. The protest of 150 people ended with a violent clash with police, who had mobilized 700 officers, and they charged the 'Mangrove Nine' for incitement to riot. Howe conducted his own defence and none of the defendants were found guilty of incitement to riot. The judge made history by concluding that the trial had "regrettably shown evidence of racial hatred on both sides." This was the first time to government had to admit the police force was behaving in a racist manner towards black people.

Darcus Howe continued a life of activism, arguing passionately that the London Riots in 2011 were partly explained by the police force's continued insistence on stopping and searching young black people without good cause, and alienating them from the authorities. He constantly struggled to challenge racism and improve the rights of black people in Britain.

Further research

There is a video of Howe here: <https://youtu.be/-CQw4fZ8oXA>

You can read more here: <http://www.ourmigrationstory.org.uk/oms/darcus-howe-and-britains-black-power-movement>

What if this doesn't happen?

Minority rights are restricted all over the world. The point about a democracy is that it should be committed to tackle these restrictions and improve equality. Failure to do this limits the ability of the government to claim to govern for everyone, it also undermines the claim to be a free and fair society.

In 2017 the Chechnyan government began a violent series of attacks against LGBT people.

<https://www.rferl.org/a/chechnya-gay-human-rights-watch-torture-abuse-kadyrov-report/28509223.html>

The principle

Equal citizenship rights for women.

You can't have a democracy unless all citizens have equal rights and have a free vote. But in many democracies, women were not allowed to vote until quite a long time after men had the vote. When everyone has a say in choosing the government, those in government have more reason to act in the interests of both men and women.

The person

Sophia Duleep Singh, Suffragette

Princess Sophia Duleep Singh was the daughter of Maharaja Duleep Singh, the last Maharaja of the Sikh Empire. She was brought up in Britain and Queen Victoria was her godmother. She was a leading member of the Suffragettes movement and sold newspapers, helped organise meetings and marches, and withheld her taxes as a form of protest. She was fined for avoiding taxes, had some property confiscated by bailiffs and tried to throw herself in front of the Prime Minister's car as a protest. She was never arrested, some have suggested this is because the authorities did not want to deal with the embarrassment of arresting someone so close to the Queen.

In 1928 she became President of the Committee of the Suffragette Fellowship and she also auctioned off some of her belongings to support the Women's Tax Resistance League, whose motto was, 'No Vote, No Tax!'

"When the women of England are enfranchised I shall pay my taxes willingly. If I am not a fit person for the purposes of representation, why should I be a fit person for taxation?"

Further research

You can read more about Princess Sophia Duleep Singh here:

<http://historysheroes.e2bn.org/hero/whowerthey/3521>

You can read a Suffragette speech here:

<https://www.theguardian.com/theguardian/2007/apr/27/greatspeeches>

What if this doesn't happen?

A democracy that denies half the population equal rights can't really be considered a democracy, but it's amazing how long it took for that happen around the world. Getting the vote is just the first step though. The next challenge is to ensure women have equal access to stand for elections and then equal access to be elected. If democracy is based on equal rights and an equal voice, we need to think about why it's not fully equal and what that means.

There's an article about Japan's problems with gender equality in politics here, women make up less than 10% of parliament, one of the lowest figures in the world: <http://theconversation.com/japans-politics-is-opening-up-to-women-but-dont-expect-a-feminist-revolution-yet-67243>