

Democracy. Of the people, by the people, for the people. A simple definition could be everyone having an equal vote in a fair election with transparent systems. However, in this modern age, we cannot afford to think that this description represents the real substance of democracy. Our group defines democracy as free and fair elections and continuous citizen engagement facilitated by accessible information and inclusive decision-making processes, addressing challenges such as the influence of social media on public discourse and the imperative to bolster youth participation in civic affairs.

How do we know if we live in a democratic society? A clear indicator that we live in a democratic society is, in a quote from Colin Keating, that the systems set up are of the people, by the people, for the people. While we may think that New Zealand's current systems reflect this, we have found through our research that this is unfortunately not the case, especially for young people. In another quote from Colin Keating, there are many shades of democracy, and it needs to be sustainable and reflect the reality of situations. The people the system is working for must be engaged and reflected within the system. It is wrong to call our democracy an accurate representation of the country's view when the next generation of voters has proven in our interviews to have a severe lack of political confidence. This alone is highly concerning without even taking into consideration the lack of education that high-risk minority groups of all ages receive.

Throughout our research, we have identified three clear threats to our current democracy for young people. The first is a lack of youth engagement. The second is the difficulty for young people to access any means of civics education. The third is a lack of understanding of politics and its importance. To expand, social cohesion is the extent of connectedness and solidarity amongst different groups in society. A socially cohesive society is reflected by members of said society feeling as though they belong, are included, can participate, are recognised, and that the systems they are engaging with are legitimate. A key thing to recognise in understanding social cohesion is that the goal is progress, not perfection and that it will likely look different for different generations. One of the largest contributors to the lack of social cohesion that our country is experiencing in comparison to previous decades is access to social media and all the extremist views and groups that social media holds. This proves just how powerful a tool social media can be and that it is the defining influence on any modern democracy. The algorithms of social media make echo chambers, pushing biased content, which creates a major concern for our democracy as it means that the education young people are receiving around civics is not only skewed but often not even relating to the political landscape of New Zealand. The only exposure to politics and democracy that the majority of youth are receiving is through extremist algorithms on social media. From this exposure, young people are then presented with two choices: engage in extremist, polarising views or write off politics as an aspect of society far too complex to engage with.

We have concluded that improving social cohesion & education around civics are key solutions to strengthening our democracy and limiting the threats we have already identified. We have identified three potential solutions to strengthen our democracy. The first potential solution would be to introduce a new civics education system into the high school curriculum. However, upon interviewing teachers in our community we found that whilst there is an importance for civics to be taught in schools, there is currently a large amount of stress placed on teachers and schools, and that introducing a new program into our curriculum would likely be pushed back against those that would need to teach it. In speaking to teachers, we have found that between coursework and extra-curricular activities, as well as various admin tasks, there would not be adequate time to properly teach a curriculum around civics. We fear that if there was a

curriculum around civics created, and it was not taught properly, it would damage young people's understanding and ability to engage even more than if the system was not offered at all. Especially with new curriculum For NCEA being introduced, as well as initiatives such as tikanga/te reo māori education for teachers, that are actively working to improve our society and education system, there is a lot on teachers & school plates, and there are only so many hours in a day. Adding another curriculum or stressor to teachers would not be likely productive to the education of young people.

Our second potential solution which directly addresses one of our identified threats, the lack of youth engagement with democracy, is lowering the voting age to 16. We initially believed that this would promote youth engagement and make it necessary for our peers to educate themselves on government processes and the policies of current parties. Towards the tail end of our interview process, we realised that young people as a whole lack the confidence to even begin the process of civic education. Their lack of knowledge serves as an offputter rather than a motivation. It's almost that they understand the importance of political knowledge but they are daunted by the expectation that they should have a full understanding of our current system. While lowering the voting age to 16 is something our group believes the nation should strive for it is clear that we need to implement a realistic and ethical change to the system of education for young people. Only when we have that system should we feel fully confident that this is a worthwhile solution.

So what can we do? We have identified that the youth is our target pathway to strengthening democracy as this means that we can hope for a secure future. There is only one guaranteed way of engaging with the youth of today. Social Media. It is this precisely the tool that is arguably the reason that our democracy is under threat in the first place, polarising our society and pitting us against each other. However, seeing how powerful this tool is the only way to fight fire is with fire. If we can not control youth reliance on social media we must change the content that they consume. Our group propose politics prompted on social media of youth, by youth, for youth. A vetted government-run TikTok account, for example, where young people can access legitimate, trustworthy, unbiased and engaging political information presented by someone approachable and relatable to them, another young person. Also, allowing young people to orchestrate this project will allow issues directly affecting young people (for example changes to the Fees-Free initiative, legalising marijuana, fiscal policy, and renters rights) to be discussed and debated among young people in an accessible way. The key thing we think needs to be prioritised in an initiative like this would be...

- The legitimacy of information being shared, information would need to be approved by a non-biased government figure, not an MP or party, but rather public servants.
- A trustworthy group of people sharing the information, a group of young people actively wanting to improve civics education for young people.

The social media posts could include talk with interesting and influential figures much like the people we got to hear during the process of this project. The willingness of such participants will prove to youth that their engagement is valued.

In conclusion, addressing the challenges to democracy for young people highlighted by our research—such as social media polarisation and youth disengagement—requires urgent action. By prioritising initiatives that enhance civic education, promote inclusive political discourse, and leverage social media responsibly, we can forge a stronger, more resilient democracy that truly reflects and serves all members of our society, ensuring a promising future for generations to come.