

1. New Zealand is a liberal democracy. What do you understand by this statement?

To find out the meaning of democracy, we should start by looking at the origins of the word. Democracy comes from 'demos,' the Greek word for people and 'kratos,' the Greek word for power/force. This means that democracy can literally be translated to 'power of the people.' The earliest examples of democracy came from Athens. The main difference between Athenian democracy and modern day democracy is that Athenian democracy was direct democracy, while modern day democracy typically is representative democracy. We can see that the term democracy has changed over time, and the meaning of democracy will most likely change moving forwards as well.

Here is our current definition of democracy. Democracy is a state of government that is freely elected, which seeks to entirely embody the population it represents. To define liberal democracy however, we also need to look at the word liberal. The prefix liber means free while the suffix al means relating to or characterised by. Liberal therefore is roughly 'characterised by a free/open mind.' In the context of liberal democracy, the term 'liberal' comes from classical liberalism. Classical liberalism refers to a branch of liberalism that advocates for free market economics, individual autonomy, limited government, economic and political freedom, and freedom of speech. Importance is placed on individuals, and their freedoms. These freedoms are regarded as human rights, typically enshrined in the form of constitutions or declarations, and they accompany government prohibitions of interference with said rights. These rights cannot be violated or changed by the government without breaching these prohibitions, so these human rights are protected.

Combining these two concepts gives us liberal democracy, a democracy with emphasis on certain freedoms, and New Zealand is a liberal democracy under this classification. In New Zealand, our government utilises a parliamentary system, which is representative democracy. Our government is freely elected, and there are measures in place for it to try and embody the general population, such as Maori electorates. New Zealanders have their personal rights as listed in the Bill of Rights, and New Zealand also has rule of law, meaning every single citizen is subject to the same law, including Government. Our branches of government also play a role in keeping New Zealand liberally democratic. There are three of them, legislature (Parliament) which consists of MPs and implements legislation, the Executive cabinet (Government), which consists of Ministers and proposes laws and policy, and the Judiciary (Courts) which consists of judges who interpret and apply the law. Each power operates independently, but all three work towards a common goal of ensuring justice.

2. Looking at the current education system - what would you suggest should be done to improve the understanding of democracy among young people?

The current democratic education system in New Zealand is not targeted towards youth. Young people are less likely to engage with and understand democracy, because there is no incentive for them to. One way we can incentivize young people to understand democracy is to lower the voting age, directly providing a reason for youth to engage with democracy. The Make it 16 campaign in New Zealand was formed in Youth Parliament during September of 2019, and the Supreme Court of New Zealand ruled that preventing 16 and 17 year olds from voting is unjustified age discrimination in November 2022. A bill to lower the national voting age was introduced but never made it to Parliament, however passing legislation around lowering the voting age for local councils would be a great first step. One major benefit to lowering the voting age would be education implementation. Civics education is currently not compulsory, and while there are recommendations, they are for Years 1-10, meaning a minimum wait of four years before students can utilise what they have been taught. School leavers who never had this education are at a disadvantage, as they would make uninformed votes.

Changing the voting age to 16 would add pressure to the government to implement better civics education into the curriculum, and students would be more likely to retain this information because it would be currently relevant. This push for civics education should include a matauranga Maori perspective, potentially through MPs visiting maraes and pushing the importance of democracy to target groups. MPs would have incentive to engage with rangatahi, as they would become a target voter demographic, leading to a more educated youth voter population. Lowering voting to school age would also encourage enrolment, as it could be done through the schools, removing a potential accessibility barrier to enrolment. All of this would increase youth voter understanding and engaging with democracy.

3. And personally - what measures do you think you - and/or your fellow students - could take to assist this process?

Understanding democracy is a long and difficult process which requires support on all levels. We believe that the best way we can assist youth engagement with democracy is personal involvement. Creating a culture around democratic participation isn't easy, but everyone can start small, by starting conversations with family and friends and slowly integrating politics into everyday life. A good way to do this is to take an active interest in democracy, by reading the news, attending protests of interest, and signing petitions. A cultural shift is necessary, but will take time. This could be helped with support from the government and local MPs, offering opportunities to get involved with democracy through things like the aforementioned civics education or school visits.

4. And regarding the post school age population - what practical steps could improve their understanding - and participation?

Lowering the voting age would not only benefit students, but a post school age population as well. Students are leaving high school with no civics education, and are unlikely to develop any as they progress through life. We see there is a dropoff in youth voting rates, so lowering the voting age would both prepare young people to vote throughout their lives, but would also likely start a generation of voters, as when someone votes once, they are more likely to continue throughout their lifetime. One practical step that could be easily implemented and would greatly benefit understanding of democracy is to mandate bills and laws be in common or plain English, alongside a common Maori translation. Often these bills are long and unnecessarily wordy, adding yet another accessibility barrier, and translating them to plain English and Maori would remove part of that.

We see also that Maori voters typically have a lower turnout rate. This may be in part due to lack of trust with the government over things such as Te Tiriti violations. We think this could be combated in a few different ways, and we see that these changes would help all post school age population voters stay engaged with democracy. The first way is government accountability. The majority party needs to keep their promises that were made during their election campaign. Realistic targets must be set, not numbers that look good on paper to win votes. We also need to see the reality behind these targets. Laying out what needs to be sacrificed or changed in order for these targets to be met is important, as well as holding the government accountable by being public about what may be at stake.

The second way is through direct reach. Younger voters may be more accessible through things like social media campaigns, while older voters may be more reliant on television or radio. However we are in the age of misinformation. One way that the government could combat this lack of trust would be returning to basics. MPs visiting local communities and maraes. Local councils are making an active effort

to bring in new voters. Face to face communication with youth. Things like the Cullen breakfasts are a great start.