

HANDOUT:

Defining Democracy

In a democracy, the people rule. This is the very meaning of the word democracy. In Greek, *demos* means people and *kratein* means rule.

At first glance, the idea of democracy seems simple. The people rule. However, the more we think about this concept, the more complicated it becomes. Surely not every person can rule. If not, then who actually rules?

To understand who actually rules in a democracy, we need to look more closely at the origins of democracy. Our first stop will be the original democracy: Athens of 5th century BC.

Athens and Direct Democracy

In ancient Athens, democracy meant that citizens would assemble in the public square to debate policies, vote on laws, and choose public officials. This type of democracy—where everybody directly participates in all law-making—is called *direct democracy*.

Athenians took their direct democracy seriously. The city-state even paid citizens a day's wages to attend the assembly. However, not everybody who lived in Athens could participate in direct democracy. Only free males 20 or older—an estimated 10-20% of the population—had the right to participate in political rule.

Direct democracy could work in a small city-state like Athens. However, numbers alone make it unlikely that modern-day Canada could be governed like ancient Athens. Consider that:

- Canada's population is about 100 times bigger than Athens, and
- virtually every adult Canadian has the right to vote.

Because there are so many voters in Canada today, it would be impossible for Canada's 25 million voters to assemble into a single square to debate and vote on laws.

Could technology solve this problem? Perhaps, though an online debate amongst 25 million people would be unwieldy.

Direct democracy in Canada would also be difficult because the Canadian government has more responsibilities than the ancient Athenian government had. The Athenian government was only responsible for a handful of issues. On the other hand, modern governments oversee countless issues. From taxes on junk food to evacuation rules for aircraft, government plays a huge role in our lives. Would Canadians have the time to thoroughly understand and vote on every law and policy of the land?

These reasons illustrate why it would be almost impossible to govern Canada today as a true, direct democracy.

Rome and Representative Democracy

Because direct democracy is difficult to achieve, many countries rely on *representative democracy*. Representative democracy first appeared in ancient Rome, around the same time that direct democracy appeared in Athens.

In a representative democracy, citizens elect representatives who will govern on their behalf. These elected representatives assemble to consider and vote on laws and public policies. Representative democracy allows citizens to have a say in governing, without citizens needing to be directly involved in every issue.

Elected representatives have many responsibilities. They must understand how government works. They must understand proposed laws. And most importantly, they must represent the collective views of their constituents.

Periodic elections ensure that citizens have the opportunity to pass final judgment on their representatives.

Today, almost every democracy in the world is a representative democracy. In Canada, municipal councils, provincial legislatures, and the House of Commons are all representative democracies.

The Majority Gets Its Way

Regardless of whether it is direct democracy or representative democracy, democracy—the people rule—does not mean that every single person will get their way. Democracy means that each individual’s vote should count equally. When all the votes are counted, the will of the majority should be enacted.

As societies have advanced, so too has the understanding that the will of the majority cannot be left unrestrained. Today, the consensus is that the majority should only get their way so long as their desires do not trample the rights of minorities.



THE RIGHT TO VOTE

Virtually every adult Canadian has the right to vote. However, it was not always this way. Barely 100 years ago, many citizens were excluded from voting. Women, many minorities, prisoners, younger adults, people with mental illness, and people without property were not allowed to vote. Gradually, these restrictions were lifted. The most recent recognition of voting rights came in 2002, when the Supreme Court recognised that prisoners must have the right to vote.

THINK

1. Life is complex. Very few issues are black and white.
 - a) Is the average citizen capable of fully understanding every issue and law that governments consider?
 - b) Are politicians capable of fully understanding every issue and law that they consider?

2. Proposed laws are reviewed by specialised government committees. Committees try to ensure that:
 - proposed laws are written using the best research
 - proposed laws will achieve their intended public policy objective.

To help build these understandings, the committees interview and hear testimony from experts in relevant fields.

- a) Does all this scrutiny necessarily mean that the best laws will be passed?
- b) Why do you think inadequate laws are sometimes passed?

3. We live in a representative democracy. However, direct democracy still exists. Sometimes, voters directly decide an issue through referendums or plebiscites.

- Referendums are binding votes. The result of the vote must be respected. For example, in 1992 a national referendum on reforming Canada's constitution took place. Voters rejected the reforms. The constitutional changes were shelved.

- a) What are the benefits and drawbacks of holding a binding referendum?
- Plebiscites are non-binding votes. The government only needs to consider the results. For example, in 1991, Saskatchewan held a plebiscite on whether or not abortion procedures should be publicly-funded. People voted 63% in favour of defunding abortion procedures. However, the government refused to respect the result of the referendum. One of the many reasons they cited was that defunding abortions was discriminatory against women.
- b) What are the benefits and drawbacks of holding a non-binding plebiscite?

4. In a representative democracy, people are often elected into office based on their party affiliation.

- a) Do voters start with opinions or beliefs, then choose a party that best reflects their opinions and beliefs? Or do voters start with a party, and use the party's position as the basis for their opinions and beliefs?
- b) How do you form your opinions and beliefs?
- c) How can you know if your opinions and beliefs are on stable ground?