We believe that democracy is a system of government that strives to represent the people of its nation. In the context of New Zealand, the people choose the government through a general election, where voters cast their votes for a political party they believe best represents their views and beliefs. New Zealand is a liberal democracy as members are required to encourage diverse perspectives and allow for the free and frank expression of views. Also, to ensure representatives uphold the 'liberal' aspect in both public life and debate, members are expected to represent a range of societal views. All these factors are to be considered in state laws and decision-making. Furthermore, to help maintain the liberty and equality in New Zealand laws, such as the New Zealand Bill of Rights Act 1990 and Human Rights Act 1993, both uphold laws which exemplify a liberal democracy with strong democratic institutions, civil liberties, and protection of people's rights. Furthermore, the main feature of New Zealand's liberal democracy is the Mixed Member Proportional (MMP) system, which was established to bring together a range of political representation through the coalition government. These ideas of diversity among the government to best serve a greater number of people minimise the possibility for corruption in our democracy, as democracies should function as a device for the entire populace of New Zealand.

The young Māori/Pasifika people are the demographic we have chosen. This is because the Māori population in New Zealand is estimated to be around 940,000, and the Pacific population is an estimated 475,000, with a total of 1.415 million out of the 5.25 million people in New Zealand. Making it a very large but important demographic in New Zealand. In the 2023 election, the overall voter turnout was 78.2% of enrolled voters. However, in the Māori population it was 70.3%. This alone shows that compared to the national average, Māori are voting less. Among individuals aged 18-24, the rates were 70.3% for those of Māori descent and 75.4% for non-Māori.

We must look at ways to improve the knowledge of democracy among young Māori and Pasifika people, as they represent the future of Aotearoa New Zealand. Their participation is vital so they can be actively involved in the issues and decisions that will shape their lives and communities. Programmes such as The Māori Electoral Option education campaign and local youth advisory groups have laid a strong foundation for increasing democratic awareness and civic participation among rangatahi Māori and Pasifika youth. These initiatives connect young people with real-world political processes and community decision-making, exposing them to social and economic issues while encouraging critical thinking about local and national challenges. They provide spaces where Māori and Pasifika youth can contribute ideas, advocate for their communities, and build the skills to work collaboratively with others. Such experiences help empower these young leaders and give them the confidence to speak up and take action. However, these opportunities are often seen as a privilege rather than a right, meaning many Māori and Pasifika students miss out due to barriers like cost, transport, or lack of awareness. To address this, schools should bring more opportunities for civic discussion, debate, and social justice education into the classroom. Students should be taught how voting and elections work, encouraged to role-play political scenarios, and given the chance to design their policies or initiatives. This would make politics more relatable and help them understand the power of their voices. It is also important not to overlook the voting process itself, as learning about it reinforces the importance of fair and inclusive elections. Encouraging student councils is another practical step toward engaging young Māori and Pasifika in the democratic process. For instance, the South Auckland youth councils have proven how local young people can influence council decisions, raise community concerns, and grow into leadership roles. Beyond civic education, schools must also promote cultural understanding and inclusion. A liberal democracy should represent all New Zealanders and reject racially divisive policies. Schools should prioritise Te Ao Māori and create opportunities for students to engage with diverse communities and cultural spaces. By doing so, Māori and Pasifika rangatahi will see their identities and voices reflected in the education system. These experiences help nurture future voters who value indigenous rights and cultural understanding, strengthening democracy for everyone in Aotearoa.

Although democracy in our country seems to be a large and out-of-reach issue for young people to influence, the actions of individuals, especially as a collective, can have a significant impact. One of the most important

factors in maintaining democracy in New Zealand is awareness and understanding. When the people of New Zealand no longer vote then the people in power making important decisions that will impact our country and its people will no longer represent the populace, and these decisions will not be made by a true reflection of the democratic process. To strengthen democracy, we as students can take action to ensure that the young Māori and Pasifika demographics understand the political structure and that they have a position in politics in New Zealand. First of all, to make a difference, students can write informed letters to certain elected officials, and they can provide their unique proposals for new laws. As bills pass through parliament, they mostly go through a public consultation process of submissions. This is where action can be taken and students can write their submissions, which will be considered when the bills are put forward. With bills that affect the demographic, making sure that they truly benefit and best suit the people, submissions are a great course of action that will maximise the representation of views that will then be heard in parliament. A big way young people can get engaged is with petitions. Petitions can be used to make light of important issues where key discussion is absent in parliament. For example, one of the biggest petitions that appeals to young people is the ‘Make it 16’ petition, where the goal is “advocating for the vote to be extended to 16 and 17-year-olds in Aotearoa.” Submissions and petitions are centred around the parliamentary process and are good ways of helping, but other forms, such as protesting, have the intention of making the voices of people heard. The key features of protesting are that it is a better representation of how passionate people are, as opposed to petitions, which require less effort to be a part of. Protests allow people to find others whose views align and work together, and make the issues visible. Despite the wide array of possible actions to take, students' best course of action is just to educate those who don’t and help increase and develop their understanding. Just being educated gives you the ability to educate others and especially for the large Māori and Pasifika demographic, whose position in politics plays a big role. Even if it is encouraging them to register to vote, a common thing for people around the age of 17 when there isn’t an election soon, they don’t realise that the number one thing for democracy is the people’s vote. This is one of the things that students can influence.

For those of the young Māori and Pasifika outside of the education system, strengthening democratic understanding is crucial to build an inclusive and representative Aotearoa. Although a big part of voting alone is not what democracy is about, it’s also about feeling empowered to speak up, challenge injustice, and influence decisions that shape our communities. There are barriers that the young Māori and Pasifika face to formal civic education, but the practical and community-based solutions can help to bridge the gap. Workshops hosted in familiar spaces such as marae, churches, and community centres can break down political processes and make democracy more accessible. These sessions should connect real-world issues, such as housing, health, and employment, to political systems, helping those youth understand how decisions are made, why their voices matter, and why they have a position in politics. Social media and digital platforms are also a big key. Collaborating with Māori and Pasifika influences, artists, and content creators can bring democratic conversations into everyday life in a relatable and engaging way. In-person events like local markets and festivals can also serve as democratic hubs, offering enrolment support, interactive learning, and safe spaces to openly discuss political issues and also the important point to ask questions. Internships, mentoring, and local youth advisory groups can provide hands-on experience and help these young people to step into leadership roles. To truly strengthen democracy through improving understanding, information given must be clear, culturally relevant, also easily available in different languages. This helps to dismantle language and literacy barriers that can cause these young people to not engage in politics. Encouraging collective action through youth-led initiatives and protest movements is also vital, as these are powerful tools that Māori and Pasifika communities have used and must understand the importance of continuing to use to fight for change. Improving understanding and participation among the young Māori and Pasifika strengthens democracy by ensuring their voices shape the decisions that will impact them. Inclusive participation builds trust, representation, lasting change and makes their position in politics stand strong. As “Democracy should be about the right to belong, not the power to exclude.” - Moana Jackson.

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