

New Zealand is a liberal democracy. What do you understand by this statement? We believe that a liberal democracy is a system of government that endeavours to best represent its populace. Our government is chosen by the people, as they elect eligible candidates who best represent their voice. In order to do the word 'liberal' justice, the representatives are required to be able to have respect for opinions and ideas different to their own. This degree of acceptance allows for a wider range of opinions to be considered in the state's laws and fundamental decision making. Moreover, this openness to new and different ideas minimises the opportunity for corruption in democracies, as the chosen representatives ideally work to best serve their people. Democracies should work to serve the entire populace. The Mixed Member Proportional (MMP) system is New Zealand's main feature of liberal democracy, as it was established to better represent New Zealanders' different opinions in Parliament. Even liberal democracies, however, have flaws. Issues around voting age, laws passing under urgency, voter apathy, and laws being passed that are racially divisive are key problems. We believe that these flaws in the system need to change urgently if we are to have a democracy that the people of New Zealand (NZ) can trust.

Looking at the current education system, what would you suggest should be done to improve the understanding of democracy among young people? We must look at ways to improve the knowledge of democracy among young people, as they represent the future. Their participation is vital so that they can be involved in issues and decisions that will impact them for the rest of their lives. With the well-deserved recognition events such as Model UN and Model Parliament have received at schools, there is a strong start to improving the understanding of democracy among young people here in Aotearoa NZ. Events that are held regularly, from year to year, expose youth to social and economic issues and encourage them to dive deeper into regional and global issues. These events introduce youth around Aotearoa NZ to the practices of advocating on behalf of their assigned cities or countries while working with others. They also gain experiences that can help empower them and grow their confidence in speaking up and taking action. These experiences, however, are seen as a privilege and not a right, which means that many students do not have the opportunity to do them due to affordability and accessibility. Because of this, schools should at least bring more opportunities for debate and topics that explore social justice into the classroom. Students should be taught how voting and elections work, and could be asked to take on practice-political roles and design their own laws. This would be really beneficial in teaching more NZ students about politics and help them understand the importance of having their voices heard. The voting process should not be overlooked, as it would also highlight the importance of fair elections. We also believe that encouraging student councils would be an easy measure to educate students on the political process. Dave Armstrong, a Stuff.co.nz reporter, writes about the importance of school councils as it gives students voices and a chance to be heard. He talks about how he learnt "a salutary lesson about referendum democracy."

In addition to tackling voter ignorance and apathy, we believe that schools could play more of a part in promoting understanding of all cultures in Aotearoa New Zealand; a liberal democracy should represent the voices of all New Zealanders, and should not make racially divisive policies. It would also be worthwhile for schools to consider arranging visits to different communities and cultural attractions, and to continue to prioritise te ao Māori. These actions would allow students to interact with people from different backgrounds, learn about cultures different to their own, and hear about the issues that matter the most to them. This interaction would strengthen democracy by encouraging future voters to value the importance of indigenous rights.

And, personally, what affirmative action do you think you, and/or your fellow students, could take to strengthen democracy? While maintaining democracy in our country may seem like a large and intimidating issue, the action of all individuals (including young people) can have an impact. An important factor in maintaining a liberal democracy is representation. If those being listened to in the making of important decisions for our nation are no longer representative of our population, these decisions are no longer democratic. To strengthen democracy we must ensure that the greatest

number of people are engaging with politics in any ways they can. Firstly, students should write letters to elected officials, and make their own submissions on proposed laws. There are bills going through parliament on a regular basis but first (generally) they must go through a public consultation process of submissions. To have your voice heard on an issue you can make a submission, which will then be considered when the bill is put forward. An individual sharing their views on a specific issue through a submission allows for greater representation of views on that bill to be heard by parliament. An example of this is youth action groups who made submissions on the fast track approvals bill. Petitions (a collection of signatures supporting a cause) also allow young people to engage with politics. They can be used when an issue has not been discussed in parliament and there are individuals who want action to be taken. As an individual you can both make or sign a petition, allowing you to present your views to parliament. A current example of a petition with a strong youth voice is the Make It 16 petition, which is aiming to lower the voting age. We see the failure of governments to acknowledge petitions and passing laws under urgency, so that they do not conduct a full consultation and submissions process, as threats to democracy that limit youth voice. As a young person, those around you are unlikely to be involved and engaged in the political system. This could be due to not feeling like it does not affect them, not feeling like they have power or feeling it is not an effective use of their time. All young people could encourage friends to vote and learn more about politics by discussing issues that are important to them, and how voting for parties that align with their priorities could lead to positive change.

In combination with submissions, letters, petitions and political discussions, protests can be carried out to make the voices of a group heard. As an individual, anyone can start a protest or join an existing movement. While protests do not always directly engage with parliamentary processes, they are important for developing visibility of movements. They allow people who are passionate about a cause to find others like them. Allowing for ideas to be seen and discussed in public increases the representation of different views within our society. School Strike for Climate has been an excellent example of how young people can mobilise, work together, and express their desire for change.

And regarding the post school-age population, what practical steps could improve their understanding and participation in democracy? There are several ways to get people involved and increase general understanding of our democracy once they have left school. In New Zealand, we already have educational campaigns aimed at the general public (particularly around election times). These campaigns are educational, but not enough people are able or willing to take action and get involved in politics simply because of an advertisement. A wider range of educational campaigns could be useful to improve understanding and consequently participation in our democracy (for example, as a public service initiative in workplaces and tertiary education institutions), but these will not reach everyone. Some countries have laws in place to increase voter participation, such as Australia's compulsory voting. Evidence, however, shows that although this does increase the number of votes, the amount of enthusiastic participation may not be very different. There are many examples of people working around this system by casting ineligible "donkey votes" to avoid the fine. Compulsory voting is a good idea in theory, but it would be a very large change to make in NZ, comparable in scale to the switch to the MMP system in 1994, while not significantly tackling voter apathy. Instead, we should look for ways to encourage the voting age population to get into the habit of voting early so that it can be continued later in life; what works for the school-age populace will have a massive impact on the post school-age population. A strong civics education system at schools is something that our national curriculum is lacking, and that will equip young people with the tools that they need to navigate politics. A democracy that is truly representative of all of the population is the strongest democratic system that there is. Lowering the voting age could build lifelong voting habits that will allow more people to actively participate in democracy throughout their lives. When more of the population cares about the democratic process, there will be less opportunity for our representatives to ill-use systems such as those for the construction of bills and laws, and better representation of **all** of Aotearoa New Zealand's people in the selection of our governments.