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Democracy comes from the Greek 'dēmos', meaning "people", and 'kratos', meaning "rule". It is a system of government based on the will of the people, as represented through votes in regular free and fair elections. It was first established in Athens in the 5th century BCE. Men would gather in the Ecclesia (Assembly) and discuss important political decisions. To join the Ecclesia, you had to be male, not a foreigner, not a slave and not a child, which excluded much of the population (meaning that the world's first democracy could be viewed as rather *un*democratic). Despite these exclusions, the system created in Athens has grown into, as Winston Churchill put it, "the worst form of Government except for all those other forms that have been tried from time to time" and is the most common form of government around the world. A functioning democracy must balance majority rule and individual rights, and balance citizen rule and rule of law. It must also encourage citizen participation and run free and fair elections.

Our project will focus on young women in New Zealand, so this essay will outline New Zealand's democratic processes, and its strengths and weaknesses, through the lens of what most affects young women. New Zealand follows the 'Westminster' system of democracy. It adopted this system in 1852 and had both an elected lower house, known as the House of Representatives, from which the government had to be composed, and an appointed Upper House. The House of Representatives was in charge of making and updating laws, representing the views of the people they were elected by, examining government taxes and spending, and holding ministers accountable. Despite New Zealand being the first country in the world where women gained the right to vote, in 1893 after years of campaigning led by Kate Sheppard, it was only in 1919 that women were allowed to stand for Parliament. Three women ran in 1919 and all were unsuccessful. 14 years later, in 1933, New Zealand's first female MP, Elizabeth McCombs, was elected.

New Zealand's Upper House, also known as the Legislative Council, was modelled on the House of Lords in the UK. It started with 13 members and reached a maximum of 54. Women were not allowed on the Council until 1941, and 1946 saw the appointment of the only five women ever to serve. However, the Council was abolished on the 1st of January, 1951, making New Zealand a unicameral Parliament.

Under the current MMP system, each eligible voter gets two votes. The first of these is called the party vote. This helps dictate how many seats in Parliament the party you vote for gets. The other is the electorate vote. With this, voters choose the candidate they want to represent the area they live in. To get into parliament, parties must win either 5% of the party vote or win an electorate. Party and electorate votes translate into seats in Parliament, which allows smaller parties to be fairly represented.

While being unicameral, New Zealand still has checks and balances on power. These are our three branches of government – the Legislature (Parliament), the Executive (Cabinet and the Ministers outside Cabinet), and the Judiciary (the courts system). Each of these branches operates independently from the others, which is known as "the separation of powers". This ensures that no single part of government has too much power, and it checks and balances our democratic system.

Just like in Ancient Greece, current democracies can become undemocratic when people do not understand that a healthy democracy requires more than simply voting at a general election. New Zealand had a good voter turnout for the 2023 general election, at 77.5%, but only 36% voted in local council elections in 2022. A lack of public engagement in the process of local democracy risks undermining the democratic principle of representation. This makes democracy less of the rule of the people and more of the rule of the people in power. For democracy to function well, it is important that the public gets involved locally as well as nationally, in aspects such as council meetings, submitting feedback on proposals, contacting MPs if needed, and most importantly staying educated and aware.

Participation comes from having faith in New Zealand's democratic systems. A recent OECD report has found that young women in New Zealand have the least faith in New Zealand's democracy out of any

demographic, and that the faith of this group is declining. Having faith comes from a feeling of political agency, and only 35% of women in New Zealand feel confident to participate in politics, and most women believe they do not have a valid political voice.

This may be due to a number of factors. Women have consistently been met with worse outcomes in government policy areas like health, family violence and sexual violence, and the justice sector, and these problems are exacerbated for Māori and Pasifika women. Pay and childcare burdens are also issues that have commonly gone unrecognised by successive governments – and if you are regularly faced with situations in which you believe the Government offers little support, you are less likely to think New Zealand's democratic processes offer a solution to your issues.

There are some promising signs - female representation in local council elections has been steadily increasing. In 2022, women were 45.5% of elected local council officials, and tended to be younger than their male counterparts. In 2022, New Zealand also had its first majority female parliament, with women holding 61 seats. However, since then, that number has declined, suggesting that the change could be fragile - women now hold only 57 seats, making up 46.3% of MPs. There has also been an increase in abuse of female MPs. A survey found that 62.5% of the women MPs who responded faced some form of gendered abuse, compared to around 25% of men. Women also received threats of sexual violence (which did not come up for male MPs) and were four times more likely than their male colleagues to be exposed to sexist comments. Women were also twice as likely to receive death threats, and five times as likely to have their friends or family members threatened. It is ironic that the only category in which women did not receive as much abuse as their male counterparts was for their political views. Overseas studies have suggested that female politicians receive abusive messages as often as every 30 seconds. And this has a real, and dangerous, effect on our democracy. A recent article from *The Conversation* warns that abuse of female MPs might cause some to resign prematurely unless the problem is tackled. This would hinder our democratic processes by stopping elected officials from seeing out their work.

Unfortunately, New Zealand's legislation for dealing with abuse of MPs lags behind other countries. New Zealand requires evidence of harm towards the victim for the case to be viable. It does not take into account targeted campaigns, often perpetrated by many individuals. It requires significant action from a single individual to meet the threshold for prosecution. The act of one person may be small, but the cumulative effect of hundreds, possibly thousands, of such messages can have a devasting effect on the victim, while being hard to prosecute.

We propose two solutions to encourage young women to participate in our democracy. The first is a series of workshops, supported by a website, called *Run Like a Girl*. These workshops would teach young women strategies for putting themselves forward for all manner of positions – whether they be on local councils, for student councils, or as MPs. Women would have access to a wide range of resources, including opportunities for mentorships. *Run Like a Girl* would match applicants with a current female leader who could help them plan a campaign or offer support for other initiatives. The *Run Like a Girl* website and workshops would also offer information about how best to deal with different forms of abuse and provide information about what could legally be done to stop it. Our aim would be to encourage more women into leadership positions, ensuring they are supported throughout the process, and in office. This would help to increase representation across our elected bodies, and ensure they can 'keep running' - remain happy and physically and mentally healthy - while in office.

Our second solution would involve petitioning for changes to current regulations, like the Harmful Digital Communications Act, 2015, to ensure that they encompass a wider field of online abuse, therefore clamping down on harm being caused to MPs. Our aim would be to assure young women who are thinking of entering politics that they have legal framework behind them to combat abuse and thereby encouraging participation.

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