The cultural demographic of Aotearoa New Zealand is ever-shifting, but democratic processes in this country remain the same. For this reason, everyone who is eligible to vote should be actively encouraged to participate, since a notable weakness in our democracy is low voter turnout in specific areas and among specific groups. We noticed that migrants in New Zealand have a lower rate of democratic participation than the average New Zealander—only about 50% vote within the first five years of living in New Zealand, a statistic that steadily increases the longer they have lived in New Zealand (Stats NZ, 2018). The success of a democracy hinges on the citizens being aware of their role in keeping democracy alive.

**An understanding of democracy as a concept.**

Democracy is a government that is by and for the people, directly or through elected representatives. Democracy originated in the Athenian city-state of ancient Greece in the 5th century when citizens voted to make decisions. Democratic values were established and disseminated to the rest of the world through the course of time and continued to evolve in different political and cultural settings. New Zealand democracy has developed into a representative parliamentary system of government by universal suffrage, where everyone over the age of 18 years is entitled to vote. To be acquainted with democracy in New Zealand is to be familiar with the fact that it came from pre-European Māori systems of governance and British settlement, creating a symbiotic fusion of tradition and democratic practice which still characterises the political life of today. The democratic process in New Zealand began at the first election in 1853, beginning as a First Past the Post system (only one vote, for an electorate candidate). After the system was reviewed due to public disillusionment towards FFP, mostly because of the commonality of single-party governments under this system, the Mixed Member Proportional (MMP) system was introduced in 1993 (Electoral Commission, N.D.). The very fact that our voting system and structure of representation in government can be reviewed and shifted to better suit the interests of the population is proof of a thriving democracy. Democracy is practised in New Zealand freely and fairly, through more processes than just voting in general and local elections. Citizens also have a voice to Parliament through referenda, petitions, protests, and speaking to select committees. According to the 2024 democracy index, New Zealand ranks among the most democratic nations in the world (Statista, 2025) because of how safe it is to participate in the democratic process.

**Identify the strengths and weaknesses of democracy**

*“Government of the people, by the people, for the people.” - Abraham Lincoln, 1863.* Democracy is honoured by ensuring *‘the people’* are represented through their own perspectives about decisions that will directly impact their everyday lives. New Zealand further extends this representation by being one of only four countries that allows non-citizens to vote (McMillan, 2015). While New Zealand is strong in its empowerment to citizens having their own voice, a weakness within this is demographics in the population, such as immigrants, being unaware of the importance of their say and position in democracy. Immigrants already face an array of challenges when coming to New Zealand, especially in regards to accessing housing, jobs, and healthcare, with further research highlighting struggles of limited English and low education affecting migrants' abilities to engage with political information (Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment, 2025). Immigrants are fundamental to New Zealand, prevailing as pillars in the workforce, cultural diversity, and global connectedness, remaining crucial to our demographic and economic future as the primary engine of New Zealand's population growth. This signifies the need to increase voter turnout within this demographic to ensure and maintain democratic legitimacy in New Zealand. A key factor impacting this is the lack of awareness and decreasing participation in local government elections, which is reflected in 2022 by a local authority voter turnout of 41.5% while the 2023 parliamentary turnout was 77.5%—a difference of 36% (LGNZ, 2024). It is vital to embrace the global perception of New Zealand being multi-cultural, diverse, and inclusive by actively representing diverse backgrounds locally. Local government is essential to understanding the concerns of communities, bridging the gap between citizens and central government. A study for Auckland City

Council showed that only 1 in 4 non-voters had an understanding of what the council actually does, with the key reasons among different ethnic groups for not voting being due to lack of awareness, disengagement to politics, and an overall apathy towards voting. By improving the diversity of candidates, pushing understanding as well as visibility of local elections through media, and providing easier accessibility to vote, immigrants' beliefs and values can be reflected within their communities and further encouraged to participate in the central government. Advocating the use of accurate, accessible, and relevant resources, such as the Electoral Commission's Official Platform (vote.nz), providing trusted information about enrolling, voting, and understanding the MMP system, with guides available in multiple languages to support migrant communities, will also remain beneficial.

**To appreciate the way the democratic process plays out, especially in terms of checks and balances in New Zealand.**

Democracy is a growing and changing organism, existing in different contexts throughout the history of New Zealand and the world. Currently, many checks and balances exist in order to ensure New Zealand remains a working democracy. With the advancement of technology through the modern age, a free press has become intrinsically linked to fair elections. Nobel Prize in Literature winner Toni Morrison said one of the early steps towards fascism is to: "*enlist and create sources and distributors of information who are willing to reinforce the demonizing process because it is profitable, because it grants power and because it works*" (Charter Day address at Howard University, 1995). This warning against the threat of propagandised 'information' can be spread easily through tools to quickly inform the masses, most notably through social media. The role of the press when it comes to democracy is to inform the public and hold those in power accountable. The press in New Zealand is still protected despite the new threats of social media and AI, and is crucial to the democratic process because it combats false information and government corruption. Secondly, and most prominently, the separation of powers within the government plays a major role in preventing abuses of power. The three branches of government: the Legislature, the Executive, and the Judiciary, work independently, existing as checks for each other. Members of Parliament and the Governor General (the Legislature) create legislation, Ministers and government departments (the Executive) propose and administer legislation, and judges (the Judiciary) interpret statutes and common law. The Supreme Court also maintains the consistency of the legal system, therefore ensuring the rule of law, including matters pertaining to our founding document, the Treaty of Waitangi. Finally, what separates New Zealand from other democratic systems is our multi-party system, aside from our two leading parties. Parliament consists of the engagement of smaller electives as well as representatives of each area, which assures that each decision is without bias and includes civilian perspectives.

New Zealand's democracy is prominent in its long record of open and fair elections, pledging the rights and freedoms of our citizens. Across the three categories in the framework of global state democracy (Representation, Rights, and Rule of Law), New Zealand continues to maintain a high performance, being recognised in the top 25% of all factors, excluding civic engagement (GSODI, 2025). It is vital to embrace our privilege as a nation of a thriving democracy, especially in regards to the current threats in the global political climate. As we continue to acknowledge that we are a growing nation, New Zealand has the opportunity to support fairness and transparency while embracing our diversity. It is designed to give all voices the chance to be heard; therefore, we must aim to increase genuine participation, combating barriers by utilising tools and resources that are capable of making political information clearer and more accessible. By taking these actions, we ensure that immigrants' values are represented and empowered to participate in both local and central government.

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