Introduction

Democracy arises out of the notion that those who are equal in any respect are equal in all respects; because men are equally free, they claim to be absolutely equal.

~ Aristotle

Welcome to Unit 3 *Democratic values and structures*. In this unit, we explain democracy as both a set of values and a set of institutions and practices. You are asked to grapple first with the question of what reasonable limitations governments can place on individual rights in a democracy; and then with what the relationship should be between rights and duties. We examine democracy as a style of government – including citizen participation, organised opposition, the rule of law, 'just and honest' government. Three styles and techniques of democratic decision-making are described. You will learn about some of the ways that the Commonwealth Secretariat works to support and progress democratic culture in member countries. Finally, we look at some techniques for encouraging democracy in youth work. It will take you roughly 6 hours to review and reflect on the material in this unit.

Learning Outcomes

When you have worked through this unit, you should be able to:

o   summarize the definition of democracy

o   understand the key principles that underpin democracy

o   identify how different rights are protected in democratic systems, and the means by which democratic systems operate

o   reflect on the various threats and challenges to democracy.

What is Democracy?

If liberty and equality, as is thought by some, are chiefly to be found in democracy, they will be best attained when all persons alike share in government to the utmost.

What do you think of when you hear the word 'democracy'? For many people, the word calls up images of elections, parliaments, and systems of majority voting. In the dictionary definition, democracy "is government by the people in which the supreme power is vested in the people and exercised directly by them or by their elected agents under a free electoral system." The word democracy first appeared in ancient Greek political and philosophical thought, and means rule of the people. The Greek city state of Athens established what is generally held as the first democracy in 507 BCE.

But is democracy just about governments? Someone unhappy with the way decisions are taken in their home, workplace, or community, may complain that the process has been 'undemocratic'. This might mean that they felt that they were not consulted, or that a few people controlled the decision, ignoring the views of many colleagues.

Core Meaning of Democracy

There are common elements entailed in all types of democratic decision-making. They involve:

o debate

o participation in decision-making

o respect for alternative views

o protection for minority interests

o a willingness to work towards understanding and agreement.

It is important to realise that 'democracy' has a range of meanings, but the list of elements above comprises the 'core' meanings which should be present every time the word is used.

In reality, various states have called themselves democratic even when they appear to practice all sorts of things that contradict some, occasionally all, the elements of this core meaning. The ancient Greeks invented the concept of democracy, yet they had slaves in their city states! Therefore, you have to be careful about the word being used as an ideological term to persuade you that a state or group is more democratic than it actually is, and attempting in this way to prove its ethical and political credentials.

A Definition of Democracy

Democracy means more than a particular set of government institutions. It refers to relationships: between the state and its citizens, among diverse groups and among individuals.

A good inclusive definition of democracy as a way of organising society is provided by John Gastil (1993). He defines democracy in the following terms:

> Democracy connotes wide-ranging liberty, including the freedom to decide one's own course in life and the right to play an equal role in forging a common destiny. Democracy means social and civil equality and a rejection of discrimination and prejudice. Democracy embraces the notion of pluralism and cultural diversity. It welcomes a wide range of perspectives and lifestyles, moving different social groups towards peaceful coexistence or respectful integration. Democracy represents the ideal of a cohesive community of people living and working together and finding fair, non-violent ways to reconcile conflicts. In sum, democracy embodies all three elements of the famous French Revolutionary slogan (liberty, equality, fraternity). (Gastil, 1993: p.5)

As you know from Unit 1 in this course, Heads of Government identified democracy as a fundamental political value for the Commonwealth in the Harare Declaration, recognising 'the inalienable right to participate by means of free and democratic processes in framing the society in which they live.' This means that the Commonwealth is committed to democracy both as a style of government and as a style of decision-making.

What Are Democratic Values?

Democracy is all about being able to make informed choices. For example, if there are three political parties in an election, you make a choice from the individual candidates, and/or from the programmes and positions of the parties they represent.

In order for you to make genuinely informed choices, you need to be able to:

o engage meaningfully in open dialogue and debate

- access relevant and objective information so that your views are informed
- perceive that your participation in the debate and subsequent decision-making has value
- feel safe
- make a free decision without suffering or fearing harm to yourself or your family.

Amartya Sen, a Nobel Prize-winning economist from India, provides this view of how these elements combine:

> We must not identify democracy with majority rule. Democracy has complex demands, which certainly include voting and respect for election results, but it also requires the protection of liberties and freedoms, respect for legal entitlements and the guaranteeing of free and uncensored distribution of news and fair comment. Even elections can be deeply defective if they occur without the different sides getting an adequate opportunity to present their respective cases, or without the electorate enjoying the freedom to obtain news and to consider the views of competing protagonists. (Sen, 1999, pp.9–10)

Based on what we have read so far, in the next section we are going on to look in some detail at the principles that underpin our ideas of democracy.

Reflection

Consider your own ideas about democracy. If someone asked you, how would you summarise the ideas and principles behind it? What examples would you use?

Reflection Activity for Certificate Students

eJournal Reflection Activity 3.1 (about 15 minutes)

Log in to the Mahara ePortfolio Website. In your learning journal, write down a series of bullet points, with examples, that capture your key ideas. Title the entry, "Reflection Activity 3.1".

If you need help writing an eJournal, please refer to the Learning Journal. If you need help posting your reflection, please refer to the Mahara Learning Journal Guide.

Principles Underpinning Democracy

Based on the accounts we have read so far, we can identify three principles that lie at the heart of democratic values:

- pluralism/diversity
- citizenship
- human rights

If these three principles are in operation, they create the conditions under which critical debate and dialogue can flourish. These connections can be shown in a diagram (below):

Principles underpinning democracy

Now let us look at each part of this more closely.

Pluralism and Diversity

A dictionary definition of pluralism is:

> **Pluralism**: a state of society in which members of diverse ethnic, racial, religious, or social groups maintain an autonomous participation in and development of their traditional culture or special interest, within the confines of a common civilisation.

In a pluralist society, no one group or characteristic totally dominates social organisation because all groups have to act as if they value and accept diversity. In other words, pluralism guards against totalitarianism and against tribalism, though not against tribes asserting their separate identities, providing that they accept the equal value of other tribal cultures.

The majority of Commonwealth countries are plural societies, where different ethnic, racial, cultural and religious groups live peacefully together. Recent examples of ethnic cleansing in countries like Bosnia or Rwanda are examples of anti-pluralism or the complete breakdown of pluralism. The Rwandan genocide was tribal in nature, but its roots derived from the colonisation processes in the country which used a smaller tribe to manage a much larger tribe in the control of the country.

Pluralism and democracy

Pluralism contributes to democracy at several levels. We will look two of them now.

At the **'grassroots' level**, pluralism works for democracy because:

o it allows people to develop a wide variety of attachments and associations

o it enhances a sense of belonging and provides opportunities for people to participate actively in building the kinds of communities they want to live in

o where effective interest groups or pressure groups are formed, people also have an increased ability to influence political decision-making.

At a **direct political level**, pluralism works for democracy because:

o it allows for a variety of political parties. A sign of healthy pluralism is the operation of a range of political parties.

o the political parties are formed around different values and beliefs, but seek to be broad-based in their membership. In other words, the membership base of parties in a pluralist society cuts across racial, class or other lines and brings people with similar convictions together.

Of course, these levels of influence are present in an ideal type of a democratic society. While most countries are unlike Bosnia and Rwanda, nevertheless there are many democratic countries where racial or ethnic-based political parties are common, and where they serve to draw attention to what divides people rather than what brings them together. The reality is that pluralism is something we have to strive towards, rather than something that automatically exists within democracy.

Challenges to pluralism

Structural imbalances of power as well as structured social exclusion can be challenges for pluralism. How can there be full democracy when a society effectively excludes some groups from education because of gender or because they can't afford it?

In your own experience, you may well find that some groups have suffered educational and cultural exclusion throughout childhood. To integrate them into pluralist society, you have to help them counteract the effects of long-term exclusion.

How can there be effective democracy when some groups are so powerful that they can ignore what the voting population votes for?

Is pluralism attainable?

If any nation can be said to be pluralist it must be modern South Africa. The strength of South Africa lies in the richness and diversity of its cultures, but that ethnic diversity can also be a real impediment to the benefits of pluralism unless very carefully managed.

Former Commonwealth Secretary-General, Chief Emeka Anyaoku, in a speech on *Democracy in Africa: The Challenges and the Opportunities* (delivered in front of the South African Parliament in Cape Town on 1 June 1998), noted that democracy can help to prevent or eliminate divisive pluralism. He noted that every African nation is a multi-ethnic nation, which can be a source of strength if it is protected in the right way.

Ethnicity is particularly dangerous to national unity when it becomes a blunt instrument exploited by politicians in their quest for power. An obvious example of this abuse is that of President Idi Amin who used a racist attack on Asian business people to drive them out of their businesses in Uganda, in the 1960s. This was meant to consolidate his own ethnic political credentials but badly damaged the Ugandan economy.

Some countries have banned ethnic politics. Another way of averting this danger is to provide for power-sharing arrangements in the constitution in such a way that no particular ethnic group can feel permanently excluded from government. This can of course be enormously difficult to achieve, as the situation in Iraq following the toppling of Saddam Hussein's regime exemplifies: the numerical dominance of Kurds and Shia has clearly raised the fear among some Sunnis that they will be edged out of power in any power-sharing arrangement.

Next, we look at the second of the principles underpinning democracy: citizenship.

Citizenship

Threats to democratic governance caused by a) the uneven distribution of power and b) the existence of potentially conflicting groups, often means that democracy cannot function in a community without a high level of active participation of its members.

In this sense, citizenship – legal membership of a democratic society – combines holding certain rights with having some defined duties and responsibilities. For example, in a democratic state, adult citizens have the right to vote in elections. It is therefore reasonable to argue that they have a responsibility to vote, to exercise that right, because, without wide participation, it is difficult to demand that the activities of a new government should reflect the general will of the people.

But levels of voter turnout differ widely between different countries that continue to call themselves democracies. In Britain today it is the lowest it has been for many decades. In many local elections the turnout is well below 50 per cent. Clearly, voting is not seen by British citizens as the most central part of exercising active citizenship.

Given examples like this, it is clear that there is a range of concepts regarding citizenship.

Conceptions of citizenship

There are now rapid and potentially threatening political, economic and social changes everywhere. If we are going to achieve higher levels of social inclusion, equity, and sustainable development in face of this change, we have to evaluate and challenge our systems of governance. One concept that enables us to challenge the effects of change, and to assess the quality of the human and official relationships in our society is that of 'citizenship'.

While ideas and definitions of citizenship vary and have been debated throughout the centuries, there is a core concept of citizenship amongst these definitions:

o A citizen is generally seen as a member of a political entity, such as a state; he or she owes allegiance to that state's government and is entitled to protection from that government.

o A citizen is entitled to the state's privileges: access to the state's security and support, access to the state's franchise, the right to participate in government and its processes including choosing and also perhaps running the state's government.

In summary, citizenship should entail statutory rights and responsibilities between individuals/groups and their governments.

Citizens' rights and responsibilities

As we have seen, the core concept view sees citizenship as a 'social contract' between the state and the individual. This means that there is a widely accepted agreement among citizens of what the rights and responsibilities of the state and citizens are to each other.

Citizen's rights have come to include the right to:

o own property

o have freedom of speech and association

o choose who governs

o vote and/or participate in electoral or governance processes

o have a minimum standard of living

o gain the protection of the law

o have a fair trial

o have access to public services

o be allowed free movement.

Citizens' responsibilities include the obligations to:

o pay taxes and other legally imposed levies

o obey laws and behave in a socially acceptable way

o respect the needs of others

o uphold individual and group rights

o protect the environment and natural world

o play an active part in citizenship i.e. in the local community and also wider involvement and service.

Citizenship, both as an idea and in practice, is evolving and changing. The most notable challenges to citizenship are coming from what people have broadly called 'globalisation', a term used to describe an increasing economic interconnectedness among individuals, organisations, groups, and states.

Youth citizens

The active participation of young people in decisions and actions at local and regional level is essential if we are to build more democratic, inclusive and prosperous societies. Participation in the democratic life of any community is about more than voting or standing for election, although these are important elements. Participation and active citizenship is about having the right, the means, the space and the opportunity and where necessary the support to participate in and influence decisions and engage in actions and activities so as to contribute to building a better society.

Local and regional authorities, as the authorities closest to the young person, have a very important role to play in promoting youth participation. In doing so, they can ensure that young people not only hear and learn about democracy and citizenship, but also have the opportunity to practice it.

Respect for Human Rights

Do not do to others what would anger you if done to you by others.

~ Isocrates

The third principle we are going to discuss in this unit is that of respect for human rights. As we have already seen at the

beginning of this unit, there is a powerful connection between human rights and democracy. You may remember the three categories of rights from Unit 2:

o Civil and political rights are sometimes also referred to as 'liberty rights', since they provide protection from state violations of the individual.

o Economic and social rights are called 'equality rights' because they seek to guarantee access to essential social and economic goods, services and opportunities for all.

o Collective rights are also called 'fraternity rights' because they propose new forms of national and international co-operation and solidarity.

Clearly if liberty, equality and fraternity are embodied in democracy, then a broad understanding of human rights is also central.

As Article 1 of the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* suggests, we should all 'act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood' and sisterhood. We all have a duty to respect each others' rights.

Freedom of expression

Freedom of expression is a cornerstone of democratic rights and freedoms. In its very first session in 1946, before any human rights declarations or treaties had been adopted, the UN General Assembly adopted resolution 59(I) stating

> Freedom of information is a fundamental human right and … the touchstone of all the freedoms to which the United Nations is consecrated.

Freedom of expression is essential in enabling democracy to work and public participation in decision-making. Citizens cannot exercise their right to vote effectively or take part in public decision-making if they do not have free access to information and ideas and are not able to express their views freely. Freedom of expression is thus not only important for individual dignity but also to participation, accountability and democracy.
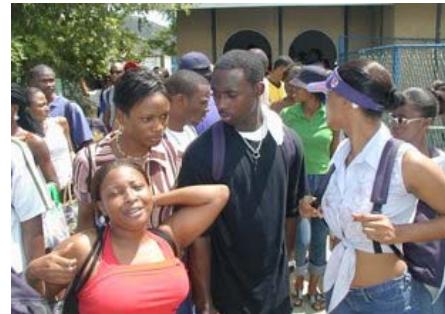
Should there be limitations on rights in a democracy?

At the end of Unit 2, we noted that we would return to the issue of whether there are or should be any limitations on human rights. There is a kind of 'rule of thumb' that some people use to consider whether particular constraints or limitations on the exercise of rights can be considered just and reasonable in a democratic system. This rule declares that: 'Practices that attack the fundamental values of democracy cannot be considered valid.'

For example, most democracies have laws to prevent inciting hatred against certain groups. Such laws may result in restrictions of free speech or censorship, but they are considered by many (not all) as essential to protecting pluralism. Those who do not support this view sometimes argue that 'the solution to bad speech is more speech', meaning that the general population will not be swayed by a few people preaching hatred as long as there are enough moderate views also being expressed.

So it has been argued that such hatred inciting speeches should be ignored and opposite views encouraged. In the UK, following the events of September 11th 2001 in New York, and 7th July 2005 in London, there was a lot of openly anti-Muslim rhetoric from one of the right-wing political parties. The government passed a bill making this an illegal act but were attacked by some commentators as anti-democratic.

What restrictions on rights are reasonable?

Decisions about the kinds of restrictions on rights that are 'reasonable' in society can be very difficult to make. This is probably a good thing, as it means democratic governments are less likely to make them flippantly or on matters of convenience.

The essential guideline is in Article 29 of the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* which describes when laws may limit fundamental rights: such limits should always be proportional to the good that is being sought. For example, it should be allowable to limit free movement of people when there is an outbreak of a deadly disease, where movement would be likely to spread contact with the disease. Here, the harm caused by limiting freedom of movement is justified by the likelihood of the greater harm that might be caused by the disease if there was no limitation on movement.

New technologies, such as the Internet, satellite and digital broadcasting, offer unprecedented opportunities to promote freedom of expression and information. Action by the authorities to limit the spread of harmful or illegal content through the

use of these technologies should be carefully designed to ensure that any measures taken do not inhibit the enormous positive potential of these technologies. The application of rules designed for other media, such as the print or broadcast sectors, may not be appropriate for the Internet. Obviously, limitations on such technologies will be a fine balancing act between defending the freedom of expression and information and ensuring protection from abuses (e.g. spread of child pornography).

Reflection

The Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (1979) (article 3) states that equal access to and representation of women in the media are crucial to ensuring proper coverage of issues of concern to women and to enable their full participation in public decision making.

The Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) (article 13) clearly establishes not only children's right to freedom of expression, but also their right to have their views heard and to be given due weight in matters concerning them. Children are to be given effective opportunities to provide input into public decisions affecting them, for example in the areas of education, health and prevention of crime.

Despite some recent progress, women and youth continue to be excluded from political and economic participation in many part of the world. Oftentimes, it is the combination of cultural and legal and regulatory barriers that prevents them from participation.

Is it reasonable in a democracy to restrict women and young people from participating in decisions and actions at local and regional levels? Are you satisfied with how democracy works in your country?

Reflection Activity for Certificate Students

eJournal Reflection Activity 3.2 (about 20 minutes)

Log in to the Mahara ePortfolio Website. In your learning journal, share your thoughts on the questions. Title the entry, "Reflection Activity 3.2".

If you need help writing an eJournal, please refer to the Learning Journal. If you need help posting your reflection, please refer to the Mahara Learning Journal Guide.

Democratic Decision-Making

There are three main styles of decision-making that are used in democratic systems of any kind:

o   majority vote

o   consensus

o   proportional outcomes.

We look at each of these next.

Majority Vote

Majority voting is common in groups all through society, such as workplace employee associations or community associations. It works in the following way.

Group members discuss different suggestions for courses of action on a particular issue, and then the options are put to a vote. If any one suggestion receives a clear majority of votes cast, it is adopted as the decision, with those who initially supported

other alternatives agreeing to abide by the will of the majority.

Majority decision-making works best where there are only a few options under consideration. It can be adapted by including successive rounds of decision-making, or by taking members' first, second and third choices into account during the voting.

Majority rule is perhaps most classically associated with democracy in relation to elections. In many electoral systems, the winner in each electoral constituency is decided by a simple majority of votes, and then the winning party that forms the government is decided on the basis of who has the largest number of individual constituencies won (which may not always be a majority).

We also see majority rule decision-making in use within the structures of democratic government, such as in the Houses of Commons or National Assemblies. Here, the passage of new laws and of important policies is usually done on the basis of a casting of votes, where a simple majority (or in some instances a larger majority, such as two thirds) is required for success.

Consensus

In a consensus style of decision-making, group members discuss all sides of a problem thoroughly and attempt, by considering possible compromises and exploring people's different 'bottom-line' positions, to find common ground and the agreement of all to a course of action. Obviously, it is less straight-forward than the majority vote approach outlined above.

As we noted in Unit 1, this is the style of decision-making used by Commonwealth Heads of Government. It is also occasionally used in political systems such as where there are governments of national unity and parties agree to suspend voting due to its potentially divisive nature, and agree to develop consensus agreements on important decisions.

Consensus decision-making is obviously easier to do if there are fewer people involved in the discussions and negotiations. Clearly, it would be difficult to hold a national election through consensus, but many small groups can decide their leaders and their policies in this manner. (More details about how to work in a consensus style are included in Unit 4.)

Proportional Outcomes

In this method, decisions are designed to reflect the proportions of the group membership that hold different views.

This system of decision-making works like a cross between consensus and majority rule. A proportional outcome could mean that a majority-favoured solution is adopted along with a decision to accept part of a minority position, or to compensate those supporting the minority position in some other way. Alternatively it can be built into a process of decision-making where minority interests are given slightly more weight in determining the outcome.

Proportional outcomes are also used in elections in many countries. With a system of proportional representation, citizens cast their votes for different political parties, and then the seats in the Parliament or National Assembly are assigned according to the proportion of total votes that each party receives.

One of the positive aspects of this system is that it ensures a parliament that reflects the real mix of views in society.

In the final section of this unit, we consider the way in which the Commonwealth operates to ensure democracy in its activities.

 Reflection

Since the Convention on the Rights of the Child came into force in 1990, there has been a great deal of discussion and practical action to give effect to the principle embodied in Article 12 that children have a right to be listened to and taken seriously. It has become clear that children can become successfully involved in:

o Research

o Monitoring and making decisions regarding their health

o Managing their own institutions such as schools

o Evaluating services intended for younger people

o Peer representation

o Advocacy

o Project design, management, monitoring and evaluation

- Campaigning and lobbying
- Analysis and policy development
- Publicity and use of the media
- Conference participation

Their involvement can take place at all levels from the family to local communities to the international arena. However, if their participation is to be meaningful, it is imperative that their engagement is directly linked to their own first-hand experience and is identified by the children themselves as a key area of concern.

Children are rarely heard in adult arenas. What issues do you think the youth in your area would like to have a voice in?

Reflection Activity for Certificate Students

eJournal Reflection Activity 3.3 (about 20 minutes)

Log in to the Mahara ePortfolio Website. In your learning journal summarize what you think are the key areas of concern for the youth in your country. Title the entry, "Reflection Activity 3.3"

If you need help writing an eJournal, please refer to the Learning Journal. If you need help posting your reflection, please refer to the Mahara Learning Journal Guide.

The Commonwealth and Democracy

As an association, the Commonwealth embraces diversity and firmly rejects discrimination on the basis of race, culture, size or level of development. Where members hold different perspectives on issues, there is agreement to disagree but to continue dialogue, and efforts are made to pursue peaceful reconciliation of disputes.

The Commonwealth works to ensure that democratic arrangements are characterised by gender equality, full and equal participation of both women and men and a genuine and effective partnership between them. In emphasising the importance of representative democracy, the Commonwealth urges member countries to review and repeal structural and/or legal obstacles and discriminations that are likely to perpetuate cultural, social, economic and political marginalisation of women in political processes, and ensure that international legal standards are incorporated into their national laws.

Critics have suggested that the Commonwealth's support for democracy has been inconsistent, particularly since there have been military governments and one-party states in several Commonwealth countries in Africa, Asia and the South Pacific, during the 1980s.

Yet since the *Harare Declaration* of 1991, there has been a dramatic increase in the Secretariat's operational support for democracy, including:

- sending teams to assist with preparations for elections and then acting as observers during the election period: by 1997, 18 countries in three of the four Commonwealth regions had benefited: many more have benefited since
- the publication of manuals on the mechanics of free and fair elections
- training for election officers and policy-makers
- assistance with constitutional and legislative document drafting
- providing emissaries to countries facing political crises and the possible breakdown of democracy
- training for lawyers and judges on international human rights law.

There has also been an increase in the number of democratic states, and a reduction in military governments among Commonwealth members. For a brief period in 1999, all Commonwealth countries were classified as democracies. In strengthening their commitment to democracy, Heads of Government have also strengthened their political and diplomatic machinery to support such a stand. The *Millbrook Commonwealth Action Programme on the Harare Declaration*, endorsed in 1995, outlines the range of actions that the Commonwealth will take when faced with violations of the Harare Principles by a member state, from public expression of disapproval to suspension from the Association.

As we have seen in this unit, democracy is all about being able to make informed choices. Democratic decision-making processes aim to ensure that all people have a voice and that they feel some responsibility for any final decisions.

We have discussed here the principles that underpin this view, as well as the procedures and strategies that are used to ensure that these principles are upheld.

Unit Summary

In this unit you have covered the following main points:

o   a definition of democracy

o   democratic values and underpinning principles, including pluralism and diversity, citizenship, respect for human rights

o   the nature of democratic government, its common elements and three different democratic decision-making styles

o   the role of the Commonwealth in promoting and supporting democracy.

To check how you have got on, look back at the learning outcomes for this unit and see if you can now do them.

When you have done this, look through your learning journal to remind yourself of what you have learned and the ideas you have generated.

In Unit 4, the last unit in this module, we look at some practical strategies for implementing democratic decision-making.

Unit 3 Quiz

1. What does the Greek word democracy mean? (choose all that apply)

☐   participation in decision-making

☐   respect for alternative views

☐   protection for minority interests

☐   a willingness to work towards understanding and agreement

☐   rule of the people

☐   all of the above

2. What 3 principles lie at the heart of democratic values? (choose three)

☐   Pluralism

☐   Truth

☐   Happiness

☐   Citizenship

☐   Human rights

☐   Liberty

3. Match the word to its correct definition: **Consensus**

○   Decision based on general agreement

○   Decision based on more than one half of the votes cast

○   Decision based on the proportion of differing views

4. Match the word to its correct definition: **Majority Vote**

○   Decision based on general agreement

○   Decision based on more than one half of the votes cast

○   Decision based on the proportion of differing views

5. Match the word to its correct definition: **Proportional Outcomes**

○   Decision based on general agreement

○ Decision based on more than one half of the votes cast

○ Decision based on the proportion of differing views

6. Democratic decision-making processes aim to ensure that all people have a voice and that they feel some responsibility for any final decisions.

○ True

○ False

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