

Unit 12 HOW CAN EVERYONE HAVE AN EQUAL SAY?

■ AIMS

This unit aims to help students to:

- become familiar with different ideas of democracy
- learn about different voting systems
- reflect upon the advantages and disadvantages of different voting systems.

■ CITIZENSHIP THEMES

- The electoral system and the importance of voting
- Parliamentary and other forms of government
- Legal and human rights and responsibilities

■ KEYWORDS

constituency	(1) section of the population from which a politician or political party draws support (2) geographical area whose inhabitants elect a representative to Parliament
constitution	set of rules, written or unwritten, that governs the way an organisation is run
delegate	representative who is under instruction to act or vote in a particular way
democracy	system of government in which power lies with the people or their representatives
direct democracy	system of government in which decisions are taken directly by the people
electorate	people entitled to vote in elections
parliament	body of people with the power to make and change laws
political party	group of people with a particular set of political beliefs, formed to elect people to Parliament
referendum	vote taken by the people to decide a particular political issue rather than to elect representatives to Parliament
representative	person chosen to act or vote on behalf of a community or number of people
representative democracy	system of government in which decisions are taken by elected representatives on behalf of the people as a whole

■ BACKGROUND

This unit is about democracy. Democracy is first and foremost about political equality. It is about everyone involved in a community having an equal say in the running of that community. In practice, this means two different things:

- majority voting
- free and open debate.

Although most people believe in democracy as the ideal form of government, there is considerable disagreement about how it should be put into practice. 'Direct' democracy – a system in which all citizens vote directly on an issue – may have the advantage of being immediate and be a good way of reflecting grassroots opinion, but it is very time consuming and can stretch the technical knowledge and understanding of the ordinary voter. For these reasons, modern societies usually reserve forms of direct democracy for issues affecting the basic constitution of a country, e.g. entry into the European Union, devolved parliaments for the regions.

'Representative' democracy – a system in which citizens elect fellow citizens to act and make decisions on their behalf – is not without its problems, however. One problem relates to the role of the representative. Are representatives meant to:

- stand up for the views of the citizens who voted for them, or
- reflect the feelings of the electorate as a whole, or
- pursue their own ideals?

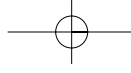
A second problem relates to the manner in which they are to be elected. Should representatives be elected:

- as individuals or as members of a political party?
- by the first-past-the-post system or some form of proportional representation?

Thirdly, should the make-up of an elected parliament be representative of the general make-up of society, e.g. in ethnic, gender or age terms? If so, how is this to be achieved?

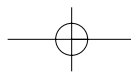
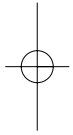
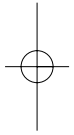
Perhaps one of the most intractable problems is finding a form of democracy that prevents dominant groups in society from ignoring the interests and views of minority groups – what is sometimes called the 'tyranny of the majority'. This is one of the reasons for having a formal constitution.

The central activity in this unit revolves around an allegorical story in which a group of farm animals consider the consequences of making decision-making on their farm more democratic. The story raises a number of questions about democracy as a way of organising community life e.g.,



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- What is the most effective form of democracy?
- In a democracy, how can you ensure that minority groups are listened to and not outvoted all the time?
- At what age should someone be entitled to vote?
- Does participation in a democratic society require special skills or knowledge? If so, how are they to be gained?
- What should society do about people who refuse to participate or use their vote?
- What is fairest way of electing representatives?
- Whose views is an elected representative meant to represent?



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■ INTRODUCTION

This is a lesson about democracy. In this lesson, you will learn about different ideas of democracy, different types of voting systems in use in the UK, and what you think are their advantages and disadvantages.

■ STARTER

How can you explain it?

- In the 1951 general election, the Labour Party got 49 per cent of the votes and lost to the Conservatives. Yet in the 1997 general election, it got only 44 per cent of the votes and beat the Conservatives with a massive majority.
- In the 1997 general election, the Liberal Democrats got 700,000 less votes than in 1992, yet gained an extra 26 MPs in Parliament.

How can you explain these results? What different reasons can you think of?

Suggested answers

- *caused by having more than two parties in the running – depends upon the proportion of votes the other parties got*
- *number of MPs is not proportionate to number of votes in the first-past-the-post system*

■ ANIMAL PARLIAMENT

To help you think about the fairness of voting systems, read **Animal Parliament** (Student Sheet 12.1, pp106–107).

1. In pairs, think about the arguments for and against the animals deciding things for themselves. How many different ones can you find? You may wish to note down your thinking on Student Sheet 12.2, p108.

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Suggested answers

FOR:

- *it is not fair that one animal should dictate how the others live*
- *it gives animals a chance to express/share their points of view*
- *the animals have a right to a say in the things that affect them.*

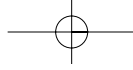
AGAINST:

- *there would be chaos if all of them were involved*
- *everyone knows where they stand at the moment*
- *some animals are too ignorant to know what to do with a vote*
- *it is time consuming and impractical*
- *it will be unfair on the pigs*
- *big groups of animals will always be able to outvote smaller ones*
- *it is difficult to know which animals should/should not be allowed to vote*
- *the group may vote for something that conflicts with individual conscience.*

2. Imagine the animals decide to elect their own parliament. In small groups, look at the suggestions on the Discussion Cards (Student Sheet 12.3, p109). Decide what you think are the advantages and disadvantages of each of these different voting systems. Which do you think is the best? Why? You may wish to note down your thinking on Student Sheet 12.4, p110.
3. Present your ideas to the class for discussion.
4. In your small groups, draw up a set of rules, no more than five or six, to help make sure the animal parliament is run fairly. Issues to think about include:
 - the balance between representatives of different species
 - the balance between male and female representatives
 - how to prevent the parliament being used by some animals to discriminate against others
 - the animals that should or should not be entitled to vote
 - whether voting should be compulsory
 - which issues should be decided by the parliament and which by a vote involving all the animals eligible to vote.
5. Share your work with the class. Is it possible to agree a class decision on this?
6. As a class, think about the role of the animal representatives. Once they are elected, do you think the animal representatives should be able to act and vote as they like? Should they only be allowed to act and vote as instructed by the animals that voted for them? What do you think? Why?

■ **PLENARY**

Reflect upon what you have learned from this lesson. What do you think are the most important things the animal parliament exercise can teach people about politics in real life? Write down three or four ideas and share them with the class.



★ ANIMAL PARLIAMENT

One day, Farmer Giles rose early and drove off to the agricultural show with Rex, his loyal sheepdog.

When the farmer and his dog were safely out of sight, some of the farm animals gathered together in the big barn.

‘Phewww!’ said Emily the sheep. ‘I’m sick to death of being bossed around by that sheepdog!’

‘Me, too,’ said Francis, the fat, furry farm cat. ‘It’s not fair that one farm animal should be able to tell all the others what to do.’

‘Yes. Farm animals should be able to make their own decisions,’ said Emily.

‘No way!’ grunted Sid the pig. ‘There’d be chaos if you let farm animals make their own decisions. At least you know where you stand with Rex.’

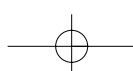
‘But think how much fairer it would be if we *all* had a say in things,’ said Emily. ‘One animal, one vote.’

‘What’s so fair about one animal, one vote?’ grunted Sid. ‘I’ll tell you the first thing that’d happen. You’d all gang up against the pigs and vote for a ban on mud – or at least to reduce it to such an extent that it’s not worth wallowing in. We pigs are always getting little digs about our mud-wallowing habits and how “offensive” they are.’

‘Ooooooh!’ said Emily. ‘We’d never take a vote on anything without discussing it first. Pigs should get the same chance to explain their point of view as the next farm animal.’

‘And *then* get outvoted!’ grunted Sid.

‘Don’t be so negative,’ said Emily. ‘Have more faith in your fellow farm animals.’



 **ANIMAL PARLIAMENT**

‘Fellow farm animals?’ said Sid. ‘What counts as a “fellow farm animal”, for mud’s sake? Does it include bees, for example? One animal, one vote and the bees would get their own way every time. There’s thousands of the little buzzers in the orchard.’

‘And don’t even *think* about giving ducks a vote,’ said Damian, the insensitive chicken. ‘Ducks wouldn’t have a clue what to do with a vote if they got one – not a cluckin’ clue.’

‘Ducks have as much right to a say in things that affect them as other farm animals,’ replied Gordon, the rather more sensitive donkey. ‘What worries *me* is what would happen if you all voted for something beastly that went against my conscience – like taking revenge on Rex. You know how I feel about violence.’

‘We all respect your views, Gordon,’ said Emily, ‘but you can’t go against a vote just because you don’t like it.’

‘I’d vote for taking revenge on Rex, no problem,’ whispered Francis, the fat, furry farm cat.

‘I’ve...been...thinking,’ moaned Mollie the lugubrious cow. ‘Voting is not a bad idea...and discussing is not a bad idea...either...But if we all had to discuss *everything*...nothing would ever get decided.’

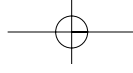
‘And if we all had to vote on *every* decision, nothing would ever get done,’ interrupted Francis.


‘What we should do,’ suggested Mollie, ‘is elect a small group of farm animals to do some of the discussing and voting...for us.’

‘An animal parliament!’ the animals chorused in unison.

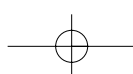
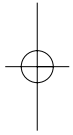
‘What’s the betting it’s never a pig that gets elected?’ grunted Sid.

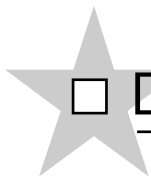
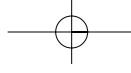
To be continued...



 **SHOULD THE ANIMALS DECIDE FOR THEMSELVES?**

FOR	AGAINST





DISCUSSION CARDS

A

Animals of each species elect one of their members to represent the species, e.g. cows elect a cow, sheep elect a sheep, and so on.

B

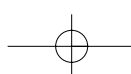
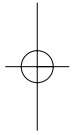
Different species are grouped together in terms of things they have in common, e.g. size, diet, and so on. Each group elects one of its members to represent the group.

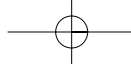
C

The farm is divided into different areas. Animals in each area elect one of the animals that lives there to represent the area.

D

Animals elect a set number of fellow animals to represent the farm as a whole.

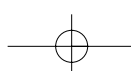
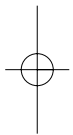
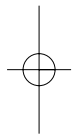




ADVANTAGES AND DISADVANTAGES

■ **VOTING SYSTEMS**

	Advantage	Disadvantage
A		
B		
C		
D		





□ RESEARCH TASK 1

■ **PROPORTIONAL REPRESENTATION**

MPs elected to the UK Parliament are chosen by a system called 'first-past-the-post'. Under this system, the country is divided up into different areas, called constituencies, each of which selects its own MP. All the voters in a constituency have one vote and the winning candidate is the one with the most votes – even though the majority of people may not have voted for that person.

Some people believe that this system is unfair and argue that MPs should be chosen by some form of 'proportional representation'. Proportional representation is a way of trying to make sure that every vote cast contributes to the overall position of the party voted for.

1. There are a number of different systems of proportional representation. Find out how the following systems work:
 - list system
 - additional member system
 - single transferable vote system.
2. Find out which system of proportional representation is used for elections to:
 - the Scottish Parliament
 - the Welsh Assembly
 - the European Parliament.

3. What are the main arguments for and against proportional representation? Which do you think is fairer – proportional representation or the first-past-the-post system? Why?

For information about different voting systems, go to www.electoral-reform.org.uk

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□ RESEARCH TASK 2

■ **SUMMERHILL SCHOOL**

At Summerhill School, decisions are made at the weekly meeting. At the meeting, anyone can raise a subject for discussion or propose a motion to vote on and everyone has one vote – from members of staff to the youngest of the pupils.

All changes to the school rules are made at the meeting. Accusations of people having broken the rules are dealt with at another meeting of the whole school, called the tribunal, which also takes place weekly.

Up to 70 people of different ages attend the meeting. The chairperson is usually one of the older pupils. He or she can fine anyone for making a noise, ask them to sit elsewhere, or throw them out altogether. Not only do pupils have equal power in the meeting, they also greatly outnumber the adults.

Recent school rules include:

- you must have working front and back brakes on your bike
- you cannot ride little kids' bikes – even with permission
- you cannot watch TV during lessons or meal times
- no graffiti (penalty: £1 fine), except on the special graffiti wall where graffiti is allowed.

There are certain things the meeting is not allowed to decide, e.g. teachers' pay, hiring and firing of staff, building work. The principle is that pupils should have the power to make decisions over what is important in their daily lives. Bringing these other subjects to the meeting would burden them with unnecessary worries rather than increase their freedom.

1. Compare the advantages and disadvantages of this form of decision-making with having an elected school or college council. Which do you think is the better system? Why?
2. In what ways is the system of decision-making at Summerhill School similar to, and different from, the one in place in your school or college? Do you think it is any fairer? Why or why not?
3. Conduct your own survey into whether young people feel they have enough power to make decisions over what is important in their daily lives at your school or college. You may wish to compare their views with those of the adult staff. Decide how you are going to present your findings and any recommendations you wish to make.