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11. THE 'AYES' HAVE IT?

INTRODUCTION

Several years ago, I made a commitment to integrate democratic principles into the classes I teach and assignments I offer. I also made it a regular part of classroom decision-making. As the school year began, my grade five students struggled; they had become accustomed to the 'teacher as authority' approach to teaching and classroom management. However, with persistence and a concerted effort to develop a sense of community built on trust, our democratic classroom slowly became a reality.

Once, while immersed in a unit on local history, I put forth two field trip options for the students to consider. I turned the decision into an exercise in democracy whereby students were to consider the pros and cons and put forth a case for each option. True, this was a limited-choice option exercise (i.e., I chose the options) but I felt that beginning the road toward conceptual development had to start somewhere! On voting day, we all listened to one final pitch from a representative in support of each option and proceeded to a secret ballot. The vote was close, 18–16 as I recall, and from my personal perspective, students chose what I believe was the lesser of the two arguments put forward. Nevertheless, when balanced against not only the excitement generated for the field trip but also student participation in decision-making, the exercise was a huge success. Indeed, students felt the gamut of emotions often felt by politicians and supporters after a long electoral campaign – euphoria at victory, pain in defeat, desire to try again and in a few cases, withdrawal from the process.

I particularly enjoyed that year of teaching. By beginning to integrate democratic principles into the classroom, I felt I was starting to live up to my promise as a teacher. I was acting as a guide, facilitating the educational, social and spiritual growth of young citizens. It was exciting! All students in Canadian schools are taught about democracy, but far fewer get an opportunity to experience it in the classroom. That's a shame because it is such a rich and dare I say generative concept with infinite possibilities.

WHAT IS 'DEMOCRACY'?

Students may not get to experience democracy in the classroom as often as I believe they should, but by upper elementary school Canadian children are more or less

familiar with some of the basic premises on which the concept is built. Children have often been involved in democratic decision-making such as voting to go to Disney World rather than vacation at Grandma's house, electing a player to be team captain, or having a say on a family move to another city. Without even knowing it, they have become versed on the democratic notion that persons who are members of a particular group (society) have the 'right' to participate in decision-making. Though parents, teachers and other adults may use their positions of authority to silence or negate that right—sometimes with good reason—in kid-world, the notion that each person has the right to have their say by calling 'dibbs' on the television, computer or video game is well established. Indeed, I believe the resonance that democracy has speaks to our deep-seeded desire to be acknowledged and to be valued.

Democracy is a political philosophy and term used to describe a small number of related forms of government that originated in Ancient Greece around the fifth century BCE. The term is a translation of the Greek word *dimokratia* which itself is an amalgam of *demos* meaning 'people' and *kratos* meaning 'rule'. In short, it is the rule of the people, a concept Abraham Lincoln eloquently encapsulated in his Gettysburg Address of 1863 when he spoke of government "of the people, by the people, for the people". While there is no simple definition of democracy, all agree on two basic tenets: 1) Government of the people, by the people, for the people. Abraham Lincoln spoke these immortal words at Gettysburg in 1863, capturing the essence that democracy is a form of governance based on law whereby 'the people' make the laws and lived under the laws, and 2) There is a common understanding, often enacted in law, of who constitutes 'the people' (Dahl, Shapiro & Cheibub, 2003). However, the nature of the laws enacted and the rights and freedoms that flow from them varies widely throughout the world.

In its purest form, members of a society (citizens) can engage in a form of democratic governance known as 'direct democracy'. In this case, all eligible citizens participate in decision-making, and depending on the particular system, can make laws, elect and dismiss officials, and conduct trials. However, at its core direct democracy is when all eligible citizens vote, whether in favour or against, policy proposals and items that will become law. The Athenians of Ancient Greece engaged in a form of direct democracy whereby approximately 30,000 male citizens, through the assembly, *boule* or Council of Citizens and law courts, effectively ran the entire governance system of the city-state. Political participation was a cornerstone of Athenian citizenship, and many were constantly engaged in the public's business for most of their adult lives. Critics of Athenian democracy always note that citizenship eligibility was extremely narrow in that only adult males were considered citizens. Women and slaves were prevented from participating in the city-state's form of 'direct democracy'. Nevertheless, Athens established an early model of direct democracy, and despite its limitations, continues as a reference point for all who strive for increased civic engagement.

Direct democracy has surfaced a number of times in the years since Ancient Athens. During the years of the Roman Republic, beginning circa 449 BCE, Roman

citizens actively engaged in lawmaking, and also had the right to veto legislative made law. By the 13th century, citizen-made law found an outlet in Switzerland, and by 1847, the Swiss added the 'state referendum' – the right to put proposed laws to a statewide vote – into its constitution. Though Switzerland followed the Athenian example of only permitting adult males to participate in the political system for centuries (women did not receive the federal vote until 1971), today Switzerland stands as a modern example of a direct democracy in action.

Direct democracy has also found an outlet at the state and local levels in the United States. While the framers of the American Constitution disavowed direct democracy at the federal level of government, deeming it impractical, a number of states and communities do allow citizens to directly participate in decision-making through initiatives and referenda (Zimmerman, 1999). Similarly, a number of towns in the New England region have a form of 'home rule', deciding on local issues using the town hall meeting as a means of decision-making.

Notwithstanding the challenge of creating a workable and effective direct democracy (a point to be discussed in a later section), there is no question direct democracy has many attractive attributes. Decisions come with enhanced credibility given that they result from the input of all eligible citizens in the decision-making process. The distributive nature of success and failure is also attractive, eliciting a 'we're all in this together' feeling often termed as a sense of community stewardship.

Students, as 'the people' of the classroom democracy, can experience these benefits by generating a classroom constitution based on a model of direct democracy. The constitution can outline the rules and values of the classroom community, areas of decision-making responsibility, and a process for arriving at decisions that respects the individuals in the community. Students can consider appropriate items for inclusion into the constitution, research similar items from other documents (the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms springs to mind), craft and debate language, and vote on acceptance of the final product. When I did this activity with my grade five students, the resulting constitution was transcribed onto student-created parchment paper and prominently displayed on the wall. Over the course of the year, it was referred to many times to settle disputes between and with students, and it served as a guide for governance within the class. Twice there were student-initiated efforts to bring forth changes to the constitution of which one succeeded and one failed. Not every student was happy with every decision, but they did appreciate the structure—rules that were created and respected by all including myself—and they were also grateful for the opportunity to participate in the world of decision-making; something they seemed to understand would be expected of them as adults.

WHERE DO ELECTIONS COME INTO IT?

Until now, I've been considering democracy in its purest, most direct form—direct democracy. However, students are often aware of or have interacted with MPs,

MPPs, MLAs, senators, ministers, deputy ministers, and prime ministers. Television series and the nightly news permit at least cursory knowledge of American titles and positions such as presidents, vice-presidents, secretaries, congressmen and congresswomen, and governors. Students may not understand how these positions fit together to form a working governance system, but they might have at least a sense that the people elect most of these politicians.

Each title indicates a position within a 'representative democracy'. While direct democracy expects the engagement of all eligible members of a society (citizens) in public business, many people are uninterested in politics, feel ill-informed about important issues, or are too busy with other tasks such as catching criminals,operating on patients, delivering parcels or raising children, to engage in decision-making themselves. Some people are all three—uninterested, ill informed and too busy! As well, direct democracy historically has only worked well with a relatively small number of members in the society (e.g., a city-state, small town, or classroom). It's simply impractical to expect everyone in a large city, province, state, or country to attend a meeting; debate; and vote on important questions, issues, and proposals of policy or law. How large would the room have to be? How extensive would the Internet hook up have to be? Perhaps a reliable and trusted infrastructure will be developed someday to engage all citizens in direct democracy, but that has yet to happen. As a result, a form of democracy was developed whereby certain people put their name forward as possible representatives of a specified number or defined group of people (i.e., someone who'll speak and vote on behalf of their fellow citizens). These people, also known as candidates, try to convince their fellow citizens that they have the experience, knowledge, skills, values, and qualities of character to represent the citizens' interests and to make thoughtful decisions in an elected assembly. In short, candidates engage in a campaign of persuasion, trying to convince citizens to vote them into 'office', whereby they hold a position that allows them to represent the voters when called on vote on their behalf in an elected assembly of officials.

Representative democracy as a form of democratic governance addresses many of the issues that make direct democracy impractical (at least in certain contexts), but it too comes with its own particular challenges. In a representative democracy, there might be one person speaking and voting on behalf of anywhere from 500 to 100,000 people or more. How can one person know what so many people think, need, want or believe? How does one person cast a vote when the group of voters who elected him or her may be split among one, two, three or more points-of-view or policy options?

These are important questions, and as a generative exercise in the civics or politics courses I've taught, I ask students to brainstorm possible answers and develop possible solutions for discussion. With regard to the first question, students frequently come to the realization that when dealing with large groups of people, no elected representative can ever truly know the views of each and every person in the group. Some people are vocal in expressing themselves, but some are not. Some people are very honest and truthful while others may qualify, distort or exaggerate

their views. In short, no elected official actually knows the many thoughts, needs, wants and beliefs of all his or her constituents. Nevertheless, a good representative in a working and effective representative democracy makes every effort to find out as much information about the voters as he or she can. How? Students usually generate a list that includes polling; reading and cataloguing e-mail, telephone, and social media comments; holding public consultations; talking to constituents at fundraisers and community events, and talking to voters directly by going door-to-door. The input from constituents keeps the elected official 'in touch' with the general feeling and viewpoint of voters.

The second question is a bit more challenging for students. Elected officials have to balance a number of factors, of which choosing the option supported by most voters is but one. Elected officials have to take into account information they may have access to that the voters do not. As well, they have to consider short and long term pros and cons. These pros and cons can be related to the question or policy at hand, but also to their own political viability within the larger group of elected officials (i.e., if I support Jane on question X, I might get her support in question Y). Finally, elected officials have to consider their own thoughts, needs, wants and beliefs. They may not be able to take a position simply because it is the most popular with voters if it goes against what they know and believe to be right and appropriate.

Here are three possible ways for students to understand the challenges faced by elected officials in a representative democracy. The first possibility involves researching the platform(s) and action(s) of an elected official, analyzing the data, and judging the official's overall performance as an effective representative of the people. The second possibility is to have students develop powerful questions and interview current or former elected officials as to the ways they ascertain the views of their constituents and the challenges they face in representing diverse views. The third possibility is very participatory, and it involves students becoming active in student councils or as student representatives on school or division committees. Candidates campaign on a platform of ideas and compete in elections. Students could run in these elections, and as a year-end project, report on the particular challenges they faced learning what the electorate thinks, wants, needs or believes; and how they balanced the differing perspectives of voters, their fellow elected candidates, and their own thoughts and feelings about an issue.

SHOULD THE MAJORITY ALWAYS GET WHAT IT WANTS IN A DEMOCRACY?

I recall an incident in the grade five class I was teaching whereby a student resented a decision I made, stating, "But sir, we all have to be treated equally. We voted on it!" The situation involved my decision to allow a fellow classmate, a student with a physical challenge who had particular needs, to sit in the front row of a school assembly nearest the door. The student feeling resentment simply couldn't understand why one student would be given such 'preferential' treatment. Following the assembly, I took the opportunity to explore the concepts of 'equality' and

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'equity', trying to help students understand that though all students have equal and inherent value, they do not all have the same life circumstances, and some need specific accommodations to ensure equitable access to the benefits of life. Further, I stated that in a democracy the right to equitable access actually *supercedes* what the majority may say. That just blew their minds! Slowly, using guided questioning, we scaffolded from the reasons why we do not expect pee wee hockey players to play in the National Hockey League to an exploration of why it is problematic for the majority to exclude someone from a group, club, organization, job, etc. simply because of the colour of his skin, her gender, or their religion. As a class we came to an understanding that *because* we are all equal yet different in so many ways, we have to have protections guaranteeing equitable access to the 'game of life'. The student who was so resentful got it.

From earliest times, democratic theorists have been concerned with the possibility that when decisions are made by the majority (whether citizens or their representatives) they would place their interests so far above the minority that they would essentially turn into tyrannical despots. Plato (380BCE, 2000) was concerned with this prospect in *The Republic,* and the phrase "tyranny of the majority" was used in Alex de Tocqueville's *Democracy in America* (1835/1840, 2000) and further popularized by John Stuart Mill in *On Liberty* (1859, 1985).

On one level, a democracy can operate with the ever-present possibility that the majority may make a poor or ill-informed decision. The option to change the decision or defeat the elected representatives in the next election remains available. However, a democracy without certain restrictions also allows the majority to act in ways that limit the very aspects of democracy that make it vigorous and dynamic (e.g., freedom of expression). As well, an unrestricted majority could act on its prejudices against the very nature of the minority, adversely affecting their ability to survive and thrive in the society. It is these concerns that have led most democracies to constitutionally limit the power of the majority.

In Canada, the Charter of Rights and Freedoms has been enshrined in the constitution since 1982. This charter was borne of previous documents (e.g., the Bill of Rights of 1960) to establish the basic rights each person in the society has, and to protect these rights from infringement by the majority. The United States Bill of Rights (1791) and the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union (2006) serve similar purposes.

To explore this aspect of democracy further, students could be asked to consider what basic rights are necessary for the maintenance of a vibrant democracy. As well, what aspects of personhood may need to be protected from prejudicial decisions made by the majority of people in a society or their elected representatives? Students could compare their lists with the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms or a similar national document. As an extension activity, students could judge which countries currently provide the most and least extensive protection of rights in their constitutional documents and consider why certain things may be included (e.g., U.S. Second Amendment protecting the right to bear arms), while others may be

excluded (e.g., protection against discrimination based on sex and sexual orientation remain outside the main body of the U.S. Constitution). Another possibility is to have students research the two sides of a charter case that has previously been placed before the Supreme Court of Canada (for example). Students could hold a mock court case acting as Supreme Court judges, appellants, lawyers for the Crown, defendants, and/or interveners as they argue the case in reference to the Charter of Rights and Freedoms. On decision, students could compare their decision with that of the actual court. A variation activity would be to create a new case scenario for the 'court' to consider.

In 1965, Mancur Olson Jr. challenged what he believed to be an overstated concern with the tyranny of majority in his book *The Logic of Collective Action: Public Goods and the Theory of Groups*. Essentially a political science and economics tome, he asserted among other things that due to a minority's narrow agenda and active political efforts through lobbying, it is more likely to be able to dominate or distort the democratic political process. Though Olson never uses the term, he is one of many who have raised concerns about the "tyranny of the minority". Democracy is a balancing act, and concerns about power and influence tipping too far in either direction have their place. While there have been examples of extreme minoritarianism in global history (e.g., former apartheid policies in South Africa), most democratic theorists of the Olson persuasion are concerned with and opposed to issues such as the apportionment of seats in an elected assembly to particular ethnic groups, affirmative action policies, and a level of political correctness that, in some peoples' minds, limits freedom of expression and religion.

Students would benefit from a debate on these issues. Is it 'democratic' or a tyranny of the minority to apportion a certain number of seats in the Canadian House of Commons to First Nations people? Francophones? Non-Christians? Women? (a numeric majority, but a group of citizens that have historically been disempowered and underrepresented in political fora such as the House of Commons). Are harassment and discrimination policies necessary and appropriate, or a means of limiting freedom of expression and enforcing conformity to a conception of inclusivity? How far does a society have to go to ensure equity of access? By engaging in this activity, within a climate of respect for all, students can generate arguments in support of a particular position, counter arguments, and explore the extent or limitation of willingness to accommodate minorities. It would be interesting to see how students react to the views of the past when, for example, it was believed that extending the franchise to women would destroy the Canadian family.

IS DEMOCRACY ONLY ABOUT THE RIGHT TO VOTE?

There is no question that the right of citizens to vote, whether on proposals of policy in a direct democracy or for representatives in a representative democracy, is the cornerstone of any society calling itself 'democratic'. The struggle for this single right has been at the root of many movements, riots, rebellions, battles and wars

throughout history. In the Western world, untitled men with property have fought for this right; white men without property fought for this right; men of colour fought for it; women, aboriginal peoples, naturalized citizens, youth under the age of 21 years, and prisoners have all argued and petitioned at various times for the right to participate in the making of decisions within their respective democratic societies. Indeed, the struggle for democracy has frequently been framed as the struggle for extended suffrage. However, while some of these battles continue in various societies around the world (e.g., Germany, Iraq, Afghanistan and India), contemporary democratic theorists are raising new issues that they believe affect the ability of democracies to be truly reflective and representative of 'the people'.

Harry Brighouse (2002) writes, "citizens have equal formal rights, but the economic inequalities generated and preserved by the operation of capitalist markets give the wealthy more resources to make use of their formal rights" (p. 52). John Rawls (1993) made a similar point years earlier when he wrote, "…ignorance and poverty, and the lack of material means generally, prevent people from exercising their rights and from taking advantage of these openings" (pp. 325–6). Do economic inequalities within capitalist systems hinder peoples' ability to participate effectively in a democracy? Does poverty 'matter'? The answer in many peoples' minds is yes. They believe that regardless of the political rights officially available to citizens, those who are relatively wealthy, healthy and educated are far more apt to be informed about issues, to vote, to contribute to political campaigns, and to disseminate their views on issues than those who are relatively poor, unhealthy and un- or poorly educated.

It's difficult engaging with let alone caring about public issues if most of your time, energy, and resources are taken up surviving. Few theorists disagree with this assertion, but there is strong disagreement on what, if anything, can or should be done about it. Milton Friedman (2002), the noted economist, believes that economic freedom (and the possibility of inequalities) is an indispensable means toward the achievement of political freedom that he equates with the liberties of the individual. Stated another way, efforts to find "economic equality" would ultimately infringe on the individual to live a life free of coercion and undermine the democracy as a whole. Ronald Dworkin (1987), an American legal philosopher, took a similar tact using a different topic (i.e., limits on campaign contributions), suggesting that by trying to compensate for unjust differences in wealth we would "…prevent some people tailoring their resources to fit the lives they wanted though leaving others, who had less interest in politics, free to do so" (p. 16).

Many disagree with the points raised by Friedman, Dworkin and others of similar mind. Indeed, the entire conception of the welfare state that emerged in the West out of the Great Depression and World War II is built not only on moral and human rights arguments which justify the mitigation of the potentially deleterious impact of capitalism on citizens' lives but also on the belief that it is in the interest of democracy that citizens are healthy, well-educated and have their basic needs met (Patten, 2003).

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Teachers could provide students with research, information or case studies related to these perspectives and guide students through a consideration of the arguments for and against limitations on lobbying and campaign contributions; or on the 'need' for publicly funded education, health care, and other social programs, and how those arguments impact on the overall 'health' of the democracy.

IS DEMOCRACY AN ALL OR NOTHING PROPOSITION?

Not too long ago there was a minor public uproar when, once again, the Canadian Prime Minister fulfilled his duty and appointed a number of senators to the Canadian Senate, Canada's upper legislative house. Critics of the Canadian Senate called the act "undemocratic," reiterating the oft-shared argument that as a nation that considers itself a democracy, the currently structured Senate is an incongruent affront to democratic principles. A similar argument is often put forth when a new Governor-General, Canada's representative of the Queen, is sworn in. Critics find it incomprehensible as to why the Canadian public continues to tolerate an undemocratic entity such as a hereditary monarch as part of their governance structure.

Castigations of being undemocratic are not new in Canada. Currently, the Canadian Prime Minister appoints the chief justices to the Supreme Court of Canada who serve until resignation, or age 75 years. Political party discipline, a cornerstone of parliamentary democracy, usually demands that the people's representatives (MPs, MPPs and MLAs) vote along party lines rather than in theirconstituents or even their own interests. The Canadian electoral system is of the winner-take-all or first-past-the post variety meaning that the candidate whoreceives the most votes wins the position or seat even if the total votes cast for the other candidates constitutes a majority.

Few would argue that Canada's current governance system contains remnants of structures and processes from its British colonial legacy. These 'left-overs' constitute tradition and are embraced by some, while others view them as irritants waiting to be thrust onto the dust heap of history. But Canada is not unique in this discussion. Great Britain, Canada's imperial forebear, itself has a Senate-like upper legislative house known as the House of Lords, and like Canada, must have its laws signed into effect by a hereditary sovereign. The American republic, borne out of revolution, also has its less than democratic aspects, most particularly the winner-take-all approach to presidential elections. In this case, entire states are termed 'red' or 'blue' based on which party receives the most votes in that state. Then the state sends its entire delegation of electors (the number of which is determined by population) to the Electoral College, who in turn uniformly cast their vote for the red or blue party candidate for President of the United States. Indeed, the list of seemingly undemocratic aspects to the world's democracies could go on, but the question remains: Is democracy an all or nothing proposition? Can a nation consider itself democratic if aspects of it do not measure up to a democratic ideal?

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The simple answer would seem to be yes, though falling short of the democratic ideal does lead to some interesting social movements within the society generally, and to some generative possibilities for students in schools. As a deeper consideration of this question, students could research current structures and processes in Canadian governance, assess their democratic legitimacy and propose alternatives that they believe are more democratic. How would these alternatives work? How would they impact on other parts of the system? What would be the process for instituting such a change? The teacher could then layer in arguments for and against these proposals (e.g., direct election of Supreme Court judges, proportional representation in parliament) and have students consider their alternatives further. Once complete, students could present their proposals to the class in oral or multimedia form.

CONCLUSION

Democracy remains one of the most interesting and exciting of all concepts explored in social studies. I've only scratched the surface of the dimensions to investigate and the means through which it can be made generative both for and by students. I return to my memories of those grade five students long ago. Those young citizens spent a year engaged in learning how to make reasoned and thoughtful decisions. Was it perfect? Absolutely not, and I learned many things I would do differently were I to try it again. But in the main, the students learned how to argue for and against positions and they learned how to deal with victory and defeat gracefully. It wasn't revolutionary by any stretch, but it was preparatory for a more complex understanding of the concept, which will hopefully includesome of the conceptual layers discussed herein. I can only hope those students made use of that grade five experience in their later lives as adult citizens.

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