



# Global express

The rapid response information series for schools  
on development issues in the news

## VOTE, VOTE, VOTE

### Democracy in the international context

Perhaps the young people in your classrooms do not see the relevance of the election for them. They may not understand the role of the fight for democracy in many of today's conflicts. By examining democracy in an international context, pupils will gain a greater insight into the importance of, and their role in, democracy.

#### What is democracy?

Democracy comes from the Greek 'demos' (people) and 'kratos' (power). It is about the power that people have *by right* to contribute to the process by which their country or area or group is run.

While the people of many countries believe in democracy (it is Article 21 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights - see page DEM4), some argue that it is unsuitable or impossible for their country. There are many different systems and it is difficult to say one system is democratic and another is not. For example, in a country with only one political party, it is possible to hold elections so the people can choose between different members of the party who might represent alternative viewpoints. Is this democracy?

Ways of voting and electing representatives in national democratic systems vary. In principle, they all try to reflect the views of the people through a representative body like Parliament.

Comparing the systems of India, Ghana, America and the UK illustrates how different systems can be. Sometimes they differ between national or local levels. China's national government is not democratic, yet over the next year the majority of the population will cast their votes to elect local leaders. So far, the majority of leaders elected are not from the ruling Communist party.

#### Democracy for whom?

Having elections every few years does not necessarily mean that everyone feels involved. In the UK, a MORI poll in 1997 indicated that almost 90% of young Black people say they will not vote because they feel the political parties do not listen to them and they don't have enough power to influence the political process.

All democratic systems have rules about who has the right to vote. In most countries, no one under the age of 18 is allowed to vote. In others, women or minorities or indigenous people are excluded from voting. In the UK, homeless people are not allowed to vote.

Some people argue that referendums - when people can vote on a specific question - should be held regularly, but others argue that, because political parties lay out their beliefs during an election, the election vote is enough.

There are other ways of influencing decisions besides voting. Many grassroots organisations, special interest or local area

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## What is Global express?

Do your pupils ask you about what they see and hear on the news? Do you want ideas for how to tackle important issues in class while they are still current in the media?

*Global express* brings you information and teaching ideas on important world development issues  
**AS THEY ARE HAPPENING**

### INSIDE...

- ◆ Teachers' notes
- ◆ Photocopiable classroom activities for KS 2&3
- ◆ Information & ideas for Assemblies, English, Tutorial time, Personal & Social Education, Education for Citizenship

# Myths about democracy

**"We are democratic, people in the developing world are not!"**

More than two-thirds of the world's population now live in countries described as 'democratic'. We have seen Africa's political landscape transformed recently as many sub-Saharan countries exchanged military regimes, one-party states and authoritarian rule for a more democratic system. Close to half of Africa will hold elections during 1996/97.

In Latin America, many military dictatorships have fallen, and a recent survey by Latinbarometer showed that a democratic system of government was supported by 80% of Uruguayans, 71% of Argentines, 64% of Bolivians and 63% of Peruvians.

Many people question whether there can be true democracy if so many people in developing countries cannot read or write. But people can make informed choices irrespective of whether they are literate. In Bangladesh, where only 24% of women are literate, in the 1996 election women made up 73% of the votes cast, with a high overall turnout. These women had been able to exercise their wisdom about the needs of their community. Commentators agreed - winners and loser alike - that the election showed a magnificent assertion of the popular will.

Lastly, there are arguments about just

how democratic the UK system is. For example, some feel we should have a different system of electing a government (e.g. proportional representation). See page DEM2.

**"Democracy is easy. The South ('Third World') should just copy what we do."**

History has shown that it is not easy to set up a democratic state, especially when not everyone supports the idea. It is particularly difficult if one group in society is afraid of what will happen to them if their 'side' loses in an election or because they don't want to give up power.

For a democracy to work, everyone has to agree that the winner, or majority view, has the right to govern until the next election. If a group, however large or small, decides not to accept the result, democracy comes under threat. Instead of resolving contentious social issues, elections can create new ones, bringing out old or underlying conflicts. When the people of Angola had a multiparty election, they thought it would end the years of civil war. But the losing side, UNITA, did not accept the results and decided to continue to fight.

**"Voting doesn't change anything anyway."**

People the world over have fought and died for the freedom to elect their choice of

government. For us in the UK, that fight is a relatively distant memory but that should not lessen the value of our vote. More recently, there has been a long and bloody struggle by Black South Africans to have the right to vote in their country's elections. In March 1992, the apartheid regime held a whites-only referendum to decide whether or not to dismantle apartheid. An overwhelming majority of 85.5% of the 3.28 million white electorate voted 'yes'. As the journalist Fergal Keane commented, 'it was a victory for the ordinary people, because the choice to reject racism and embrace peaceful coexistence was a deeply personal one'.

Mexico City has never had local government elections, but soon the people will have the chance to vote in the first one. Candidates want to be elected, and for the first time leaders must think about what they intend to do and how to keep their promises. The people will have the power to change things and hold their leaders responsible.

Sometimes, it is not until you realise that people might have prevented you from voting that your vote becomes precious. Women in the British suffragette movement in the early 20th century had to struggle to gain their vote - women were thought 'too silly and uneducated to have an opinion'. But it has taken longer for women to get the vote in some places - in Switzerland they didn't until 1971! However, some countries - India, Philippines, UK, Sri Lanka and Bangladesh amongst others - have elected women as leaders of their countries.

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groups want to be heard at other times. They lobby representatives directly, get the media to write about their ideas, use petitions, marches and peaceful demonstrations.

## Worldwide struggles for democracy

Many wars are fought over what kind of political system is used and who has the right to be part of it. The biggest challenge in fighting for democracy is getting dictators to give up their power and privileges.

Democracy is often described as an 'evolutionary process'. But we should not assume that people within democracies have 'succeeded' while others have not. Many

people in the UK and in other 'democracies' believe that their systems are not democratic enough. Some also would argue that the Western democracies have not always supported movements in other parts of the world which were fighting for democracy. For example, should the UK government have shown more support for the anti-apartheid struggle in South Africa?

The recent problems in Albania and Bosnia show how difficult it is to introduce and maintain democracy. On the other hand, democracy appears to be doing well in India, a country which had to struggle for its independence from Britain.

There is a lot of debate about the link between democracy and economic development. Many believe that if people

don't have the right to influence policies that affect their lives, sustainable development will not be possible. Others, like China's recent leader Deng Xiaoping, have argued that democracy can only come after development, and that addressing poverty must be the top priority.

Poverty, illiteracy, unemployment, human rights abuses and inequality can exclude people from the democratic process. But, throughout the world, people are striving to have a say in the way their countries are run and believe that this is a basic human right and a way of achieving a more positive future.



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