

# Lesson 1

## Democracy



### GUIDING QUESTIONS

- 1 What does it mean to live in a democracy?
- 2 What responsibilities do citizens have in a democracy?
- 3 Does voting matter?

### OVERVIEW

There are several guiding principles that act as the foundation of a democracy, such as fundamental freedoms, fair elections, political tolerance, citizen participation and the rule of law. Citizens have a responsibility to uphold and support these principles.

In this lesson, students explore what democracy means and what the implications are for them as members of a democratic society. Next, students review voter turnout statistics in federal elections by year and age group, and analyze the impact of these results on our democracy. Afterwards, students discuss the upcoming election and Student Vote Canada program, and what they want to learn from the experience.

### LEARNING OUTCOMES

By the end of the lesson, students can:

- describe the principles of democracy;
- analyze voter turnout statistics;
- evaluate the importance of participating in the voting process; and,
- communicate what they want to learn from the Student Vote program.

## Starter

The following pre-activity can be used to gauge students' existing knowledge about democracy.

1. Read each word to your class and ask them to consider their feelings or form a picture in their mind for each word.
  - Freedoms
  - Equality
  - Elections
  - Accountability
  - Fairness
  - Diversity
2. Ask students to sketch their feelings or mental images on Activity 1.1 and/or have them write a prediction about the topic of today's lesson.
3. Invite students to share and talk about their feelings, mental images and predictions. You can also encourage students to share the feelings they experienced as the words were being read to them.
4. The big reveal: Today's topic is democracy.

## Activities

1. Review the idea of living in a democracy using the "Democratic Principles" video and Handout 1.2.
  - Democracy by definition is "rule by the people," where a majority of the people are included in political decision-making.
  - A democratic society favours equal rights, freedom of speech, rule of law and political tolerance.
  - A healthy democracy requires responsible citizens who value the system of government and actively participate in society.
2. Using Slide Deck 1 (slides 3-15) as a starting point, analyze examples of democratic principles in practice and the different ways they shape our lives. Afterwards, discuss the need for citizens to support and uphold these principles. What would happen if no one cared?
3. Explain the term 'voter turnout' (Slide Deck 1, slide 16). Voter turnout is the percentage of eligible electors or registered voters that cast ballots in an election. Spark an initial discussion with students:
  - What percentage of eligible voters do you think voted in the last federal election?
  - Do you think voter turnout stays the same over time? Why or why not?
  - Do you think voter turnout varies across age groups? Why or why not?
4. Review voter turnout statistics at the federal level from 1970 to 2019 (Slide Deck 1, slide 18).
  - How has voter turnout changed over time?
  - What factors do you think lead to an increase in turnout? (e.g., competitive election, elections that result in a change in government)
5. Show students the infographic comparing voter turnout by age group in the 2015 and 2019 federal elections (Slide Deck 1, slides 19-20).
  - What do you notice about the different age groups? What do you think the reasons are behind the differences?
  - How do you think politics and government decision-making is influenced by different levels of voter participation among age groups? Does voting matter?
6. Share the "Voting is habit forming" slide (Slide Deck 1, slide 21). This graph shows that voting is habit forming: if you vote in your first election, you will probably be a lifelong voter.
  - Will you vote when you are eligible?
  - What can you do to prepare for your first voting opportunity?
7. Introduce the Student Vote program and listen to students and teachers speak about their experience with the program using the "Student Vote Canada 2019" video.
  - In the upcoming federal election, voters throughout Canada will elect representatives to the House of Commons in Ottawa.
  - Students under the voting age will also have an opportunity to take part in the election through a program called Student Vote.
  - After learning about the political parties and candidates, students will vote in a parallel election. In the last federal election, 1.2 million students participated from across the country.
  - Although the votes will not count in the official tallies, the Student Vote Canada results are released publicly and shared with media. This allows young people to have a voice in the election and have their opinions shared.
8. Afterwards, ask students to share their own thoughts about participating in the program and what they hope to learn from the experience.

## Consolidation

Ask students to fill out the exit slip (Activity 1.3).

- The most important thing I learned today...
- The thing that surprised me today...
- I would like to learn more about...
- One thing that made me feel good today was...

## ADAPTATIONS AND SUPPORTS

<b>Language Learners</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Provide students with terms and definitions in advance (e.g., freedoms equality, elections, accountability, fairness, diversity).</li> <li>• Share the lesson videos before class discussions and activities (“Democratic Principles” and “Student Vote Canada 2019”).</li> <li>• Ensure that subtitles are on during videos.</li> <li>• Support students’ understanding of democratic principles with additional real-world examples.</li> </ul>
<b>Culturally Responsive Pedagogy</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Compare democracy to other forms of governance representing different countries and cultures that have meaning for your students.</li> <li>• Students will come from different backgrounds and may have different opinions about democracy. Ensure a safe place for respectful discussion.</li> <li>• Review democratic principles in various social settings, inclusive of Indigenous Peoples, and diverse cultural groups.</li> <li>• Discuss the systemic barriers to equality faced by Indigenous Peoples, and other diverse cultural groups.</li> <li>• Be mindful and aware that there are barriers to democratic participation by certain groups due to language, class and negative historical experiences.</li> </ul>
<b>Accommodations</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• If working in pairs or small groups is not possible, consider using Google Docs for collaborative activities and discussion.</li> </ul>

### BACKGROUND INFORMATION FOR TEACHERS

**Democracy** means rule by the people. It is a type of government where a majority of the people are included in political decision-making.

There are several guiding principles that act as the foundation of a democracy, including human rights and equality, economic freedom, the rule of law, free and fair elections, accountability and transparency, control of the abuse of power, independent judiciary, political diversity and tolerance, multi-party systems, accepting the results of elections and citizen participation. Citizens have a responsibility to uphold and support these principles.

A healthy and vibrant democracy is based on an informed and engaged citizenry – where all citizens are ready, willing and able to participate.

Canada and many democracies around the world have faced a clear decline in voter participation over the last 30 years.

Participation in Canadian federal elections has fluctuated over time. There have been some periods that

showed a decline in voter turnout and while showing an increase at other times. For instance, voter turnout in 1962 was 79 per cent. In 2008, it was 59 per cent and in 2015, it was 68 per cent.

Low voter turnout tends to be disproportionately concentrated among young people. This is concerning, because studies have shown that habits of voting and non-voting persist over time. Essentially, if young people do not vote during their first few eligible years, **they are less likely to vote in subsequent elections.**

The 2015 federal election saw the largest increase in youth voter participation on record. Electoral participation among 18-24 year olds increased by 18 percentage points to 57 per cent (up from 39 per cent in 2011). In the last federal election, it dipped down slightly to 54 percent.

In 2011, Elections Canada commissioned the first National Youth Survey following the federal general election to better understand the reasons why youth may or may not participate in the electoral process. The most significant **motivational barriers** were a lack of political interest and knowledge, and

a lower sense that voting was a civic duty. The greatest **access barrier** was a lack of knowledge about the electoral process, including not knowing about different ways to vote and not knowing how or when to vote. The study also found that youth who voted were more likely to have discussed politics with their family while growing up.

Elections Canada conducted a follow up survey in conjunction with the 2015 federal election. The 2015 *National Youth Survey* found that youth who said they voted were much more likely to say they learned about government and politics in high school, and were more likely to have participated in a mock election (such as the Student Vote program).

This research underscores the importance of civic education and election simulations, which increase political knowledge and interest, encourage political conversation with family, and improve attitudes towards democratic participation among young people. By giving youth an opportunity to practice voting in elementary and high school, they will be more likely to cast a ballot when they become eligible.