



# What is democracy?

KS2

KS3

Ages 7-14 ⌚ 4 min read

Democracy comes from the Greek words *demos* (people) and *kratos* (power or rule): rule by the people. In a democracy, political authority comes from the governed — not from a monarch, a religious authority, or a self-appointed elite. The people (or their representatives) make the decisions that affect collective life.

## Where did it start?

The first democracy we know of was in ancient Athens, around 507 BC. Male Athenian citizens could attend the Assembly and vote directly on laws and policies. It wasn't perfect by modern standards — women, slaves, and foreigners were excluded — but the core principle that citizens should govern themselves was genuinely revolutionary. Most of the ancient world was governed by kings, emperors, or oligarchies.

Imagine your school was run entirely by whoever was most powerful or born into the right family. The headteacher's son makes all the rules; everyone else follows them, or else. Now imagine instead that every student has an equal vote on school rules, elects representatives to make decisions, and can vote those representatives out if they do a bad job. That shift — from "power comes from position or force" to "power comes from the consent of the governed" — is the democratic revolution. Everything in modern democracy flows from that one idea.

## How does modern democracy work?

Most modern democracies are **representative democracies**: citizens elect representatives (MPs, senators, etc.) to make decisions on their behalf rather than deciding everything directly. In the UK, you vote for an MP; enough MPs of one party form a government; that government proposes laws that Parliament debates and votes on. Elections must be regular, free, and fair — the losers must accept the result and the winners must relinquish power when voted out.

## What makes a democracy work (or fail)?

Elections alone aren't enough. Functioning democracies require: an independent judiciary (to protect rights even when governments want to violate them); a free press

(to hold power accountable); protection of minority rights (democracy isn't just "51% can do anything to the other 49%"); and a culture of accepting electoral defeat. When leaders undermine courts, muzzle the press, or refuse to accept election results, democracy erodes — sometimes gradually, sometimes fast.