

VOTING RIGHTS

Introduction

Many countries around the world today, including Australia, have chosen democracy as their form of government. Each country practices democracy slightly differently from the way other countries do, but most have a form of representative democracy. Representative democracy is where the people of a country elect certain people to represent them in parliament. This is different from the direct democracy practiced in ancient Athens where each citizen became involved themselves rather than electing someone else to make decisions for them.

As well as elected representatives, most modern democracies have a number of other characteristics in common. This article will look at three of those: voting rights, citizenship and freedom of speech.

Voting rights

A government is only considered truly democratic if it is voted in by its country's citizens. Democracies are often considered to be more democratic today than they were a century ago because more of the population is allowed to vote. A hundred years ago some countries did not allow all people to vote. Now all people are able to vote and become members of parliament.

Most countries do not allow children to vote but allow all adult citizens to do so. As well as children, certain other groups often cannot vote such as people who are not citizens (usually those born overseas), people who might have a mental disability and people who are in prison.

Generally any person who is born in a democracy automatically becomes a citizen of that country and can vote once they turn 18. In some countries, like Australia, all citizens *must* vote (compulsory voting).

Democracies hold elections on a regular basis. All citizens are able to vote. Elections allow citizens to vote out representatives they don't like or to vote in representatives who they think would be better. These regular elections are a voting right. Without them a government could stay in power for as long as it wanted, which would not be truly democratic.



An important voting right is the right to keep your vote secret, meaning a voter does not have to let anyone know who they voted for. This makes sure that people cannot be pressured into voting for someone they do not really want to vote for. In Australia, people do not put their names on voting forms (ballot paper) and once they have voted the ballot goes into a box so that no one can see who they voted for.

Citizenship

Most people have citizenship of the country in which they are born. It is the official tie they have to that country. Citizenship of a country usually brings certain rights. It also comes with responsibilities to the country. A citizen is entitled to protection from their country's government, especially if they find themselves in trouble overseas. Citizenship often gives someone the right to stand for election in that country or to work for the government. In a democracy, most citizens can apply for a passport from their government which allows them to travel overseas. A citizen may be called upon to sit on a jury or to fight for their country in a war.

Freedom of speech



Freedom of speech means the right people have to say what they like and to hear what other people have to say. This applies particularly to saying things in public, especially in the media. Freedom of speech extends to things that are said in other areas such as the arts.

In non-democratic countries, people often have to be much more careful about what they say, especially if they criticize the government. No governments like to be criticized but because democracies are supposed to be ruled by the people, citizens can criticize democratic governments if they don't like what they do. In non-democratic countries

governments have absolute rule and they usually do not tolerate anyone saying negative things about them. For this reason they control the media and the arts very strictly.

In many democratic countries there is a belief that people should be allowed to say what they like as long as this does not cause serious harm to other people. Some countries have laws that prevent people from saying things that would encourage other people to be violent towards anyone.