

The road to democracy

Every year, the World's Children's Prize Program ends with you conducting your own democratic Global Vote. Take a journey through time, charting the rise of democracy in our world.

What is democracy?

You and your friends probably have similar opinions on some issues, but completely different views on other issues. Perhaps you are able to listen to one another and discuss the issue until you arrive at a solution that everyone accepts. If so, you are in agreement and have reached a consensus. Sometimes you have to agree to disagree. Then the majority – the biggest group – gets to decide. This is called democracy.

In a democracy, all individuals should have equal worth and equal rights. Everyone should be able to express their opinions and influence decisions. The opposite of a democracy is a dictatorship. That's when everything is decided by just one person or a small group of people and nobody is allowed to protest. In a democracy, everyone should be able to make their voices heard, but compromise is necessary and decisions are made by voting.

Direct democracy is when you vote on a particular issue; for example, when children decide who should receive the World's Children's Prize. Another example is when a country holds a referendum on a certain issue. Most democratic countries are governed by a representative democracy. This is when the citizens choose individuals to act as their representatives – politicians – to govern the country according to what the citizens want.

Joint decisions

Throughout the ages people have gathered together to make decisions, in a group or village, perhaps about hunting or farming. Some groups have rituals when making joint decisions. Sometimes an object, such as a feather, is passed round, and whoever is holding the feather is allowed to speak.



The birth of the word 'democracy'

The word democracy came into being in 508 BC, derived from the Greek words demos (people) and kratos (power). The citizens of Greece had to climb a stair to give their opinion on important issues. If they couldn't reach an agreement, they would vote on the issue by a show of hands. Only men had the right to vote at this time. Women, slaves and foreigners were not considered citizens and were not allowed a say in any such decisions.

No women or slaves

In 1789, the first constitution of the United States of America was written. It stated that the people should have power over decisions in society, and that individuals should have the right to say and think whatever they want. However, the constitution did not apply to women or slaves.

508 BC

1700s

1789

Autocratic rulers of the 1700s

In the 1700s, most countries are ruled by autocratic leaders. Countries in Europe were ruled by kings and emperors, who might just ignore the will of the people. But some thinkers were interested in ancient ideas that all individuals are born free and equal, with rights. They questioned why some groups in society should have more power and wealth than others. Some criticised the oppression by the rulers and believed that if people had more knowledge they would protest against the injustice in society.

Voice of the rich

1789 was the year the French Revolution began. The people demanded freedom and equality. The ideas behind the Revolution spread across Europe and influenced the development of society. But it was still the case that only men were considered citizens. And what's more; often the only men who were allowed to vote and become politicians were rich ones who owned land and buildings.



Women demand voting rights

In the late 1800s, more and more women were demanding the right to vote in political elections. In 1906, Finland was the first country in Europe to give women the vote. Sweden and the UK followed suit in 1921. In most of the other countries in Europe, Africa and Asia, women were not allowed to vote until 1945, or even later.



Free elections

In 1957, Ghana in West Africa becomes independent from the colonial power, Great Britain, and Kwame Nkrumah becomes the country's first leader. The colonisation of Africa, Asia and Latin America began hundreds of years previously. The great powers of Europe sent out soldiers and explorers to occupy land, steal natural resources, and turn people into slaves.

Equal rights for all

The UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights was adopted. The declaration states that all individuals are of equal worth, and that they share the same freedoms and rights.



MUSEUM OF LONDON

1856 1921 1947 1948 1955 1957

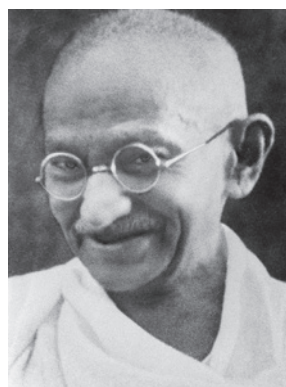
1856 First secret ballot

In 1856, the world's first secret ballot was held in Tasmania, Australia, using ballot papers with the candidates' names printed on them.



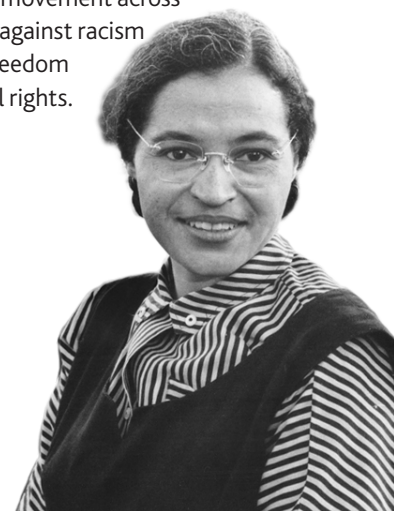
1947 World's biggest democracy

In 1947, India liberates itself from the British Empire and becomes the biggest democracy in the world. The fight for freedom is led by Mahatma Gandhi, who believes in resisting oppression without violence.



1955 Equal rights in the USA

In 1955 a woman called Rosa Parks, who was black, refused to give up her seat on a bus to a white man. Rosa was fined, because in the American South black people did not have the same rights as white people. They were not allowed to go to the same schools as white children, and sometimes they were not allowed to vote. Civil rights champion Martin Luther King started a boycott of the bus company. This marked the beginning of a protest movement across the USA, against racism and for freedom and equal rights.





The children's democratic Global Vote

The World's Children's Prize Program takes place for the nineteenth time. Over 45 million children have taken part. The program helps you and your friends contribute throughout your lives towards building democratic societies, where human rights and children's rights are respected. Organize your own Global Vote day when you feel you know enough about democracy, the rights of the child and the Child Rights Heroes. Your vote is your decision. No-one else can decide how you should vote.



UN Convention on the Rights of the Child adopted

The United Nations General Assembly adopted the Convention on the Rights of the Child. It states that every child has the right to express his or her opinion and to be respected.

The Arab Spring

In 2010, a poor young man in Tunisia sets himself on fire when his vegetable cart is confiscated by the police. When news of his death spreads, hundreds of thousands of unhappy people demonstrate against the dictator who rules the country. People in neighbouring countries are inspired, and the dictatorships in Egypt and Libya are overthrown. Today, these new democracies are still very fragile. People are continuing to demonstrate in many of the countries where the Arab Spring gained a foothold.

Faster towards the Global Goals

Although more countries than ever before have introduced democracy, people are still suffering as a result of injustices and oppression. So in 2015, world leaders in the UN agreed to work towards 17 new Global Goals for a better, fairer world.



1989 1994 2010 2015 2020/2021



Voting rights for everyone in South Africa

In 1994, Nelson Mandela became South Africa's first democratically-elected president. He had been in prison for 27 years for his fight against the country's racist apartheid system, which separated people according to the colour of their skin. The election of Mandela was the first time that all South Africans were able to participate in an election on equal terms.