



Election Special

Teachers Guide

INTRODUCTION

The fundamental choice we all face on election day is between competing visions of Aotearoa. But to understand why this is the case, students need to understand the central role of political parties in our electoral and political system.

Each political party represents a vision of how Aotearoa should be. Each voter chooses the party whose vision they share. Through this process, 4 million voices get reflected in a 120-seat Parliament.

The Waha Election Special explores this story in lessons. Each lesson explores a key idea:

- The relationship between personal values and political parties
- The relationship between voter turnout and political representation
- How the party vote translates values into political power on election day.

While note the core focus, the Waha Election Special connects these ideas to the underlying theme of Waha – youth voice. Young people make up the second largest group of eligible voters – yet have significantly lower enrolment rates. These sessions invite students to imagine the political force young people could be if their enrolment rates increased.

“Values become parties. Votes become seats. Seats create power.”

THE 3 SESSIONS

The Waha Election Special contains the following three sessions:

SESSION 1: Where Do You Stand?

Students explore how their own values, beliefs and ideas influence the decisions they make, and discover that political parties are simply groups of people with similar values who've chosen to work together to make the Aotearoa they want.

SESSION 2: Participation is Power

Students discover how party values and ideologies only get into Parliament if their supporters turn out to vote. Using a tug-of-war metaphor, students learn the impact of stepping up, and the danger of letting go.

SESSION 3: Take Your Seat

Students learn how the party vote determines the overall make up of Parliament, and how political parties may need to work together to form a government.

SESSION 1 - WHERE DO YOU STAND?

LESSON OVERVIEW

- This session starts by exploring values, ideas and opinions (i.e. preferences) through politically neutral topics - such as pie flavours or leisure activities.
- The session then explores student preferences through the lens of two public policy continuums:
 - long term policy goals vs. short term policy goals
 - individual wellbeing vs. collective wellbeing
- Students then explore how political parties form – namely, as alliances of people who share similar values or visions of how society should operate.

A FOCUS ON POLITICAL PARTIES

To understand our electoral system students need to understand the central role political parties play. Political parties are important for two reasons:

- Firstly, political parties are crucial is because they are a formal part of our electoral law. Parties must register to take part in an election – and the Party Vote determines the overall make-up of Parliament.
- Secondly, political parties are crucial to understanding the political system as a whole. Political parties are groups of people who share a vision of how Aotearoa should be.

The formal choice we all make at the polling booth is choosing between the different political parties. At a more fundamental level, the real choice is between different visions for Aotearoa.

Political Parties

Throughout human history, people have formed large groups to advocate for their common interests. The modern political party is often said to have emerged in Britain. Different views on the future of the British Monarchy – with the Whig faction preferring advocating for more restrictions over the power of the monarch, compared to the Tory faction who sided with the royals.

In modern politics, political parties tend to be organised around political ideologies. In this context, an ideology is simply a set of beliefs, values, and ideas that explains how the world works - or how it should work. An ideology provides a high-level blueprint for how society should be organised and the general direction it should develop. Some well-known ideologies include socialism, conservatism, liberalism, nationalism, environmentalism, and multiculturalism.

Modern political parties occupy different ideological positions. Each party draws on a different set of values, beliefs and ideas to shape their policy ideas. These policy ideas become the basis of their election campaigns. In some cases, those visions are widely different – and represent the major fracture lines that already exist within society.

Political parties and electoral choice

The connection between policy and ideology provides two ways voters can approach electoral choice:

1. Vote for a party whose policies they like; or
2. Vote for a party whose broad ideology reflects their view of how society should be structured and where it should be going.

Both ways of making an electoral choice are entirely valid, and there are other ways too (such as tactically voting for minor parties for coalition purposes).

In systems of proportional representation systems, the political party is even more critical. In these systems, all candidates are divided into sub-groups (i.e. parties), and the percentage of votes each sub-group gets is reflected in the final make up of Parliament. The more votes a party gets – the more seats it wins. If it wins enough seats – it wins the election. This is the system we have in Aotearoa.¹

¹ Aotearoa, we use the mixed-member proportional MMP system. This works the same way. The more votes a party gets – the more seats it wins. If it wins enough seats – it wins the election. The only difference with a mixed-member system is that the interplay between electorate and party seats can change the individual people who represent a party in the parliament. The more electorate MPs a party wins – the fewer list candidates it will have.

WHERE DO YOU STAND:

The activity in session 1 is a movement-based activity designed to introduce key concepts and scaffold new ideas.

Students begin by making simple, everyday choices before progressing to more complex social decisions. As they move around the room, they begin to notice patterns in their own thinking and recognise that others share similar ways of approaching decisions.

By the end of the lesson, students discover that people naturally form groups because their values align. This provides an understanding of why political parties exist, and helps frame electoral choice around the following two questions:

1. What do you think Aotearoa should be like?
2. Which party is *closest* to this version of the world?

SESSION 2 – PARTICIPATION IS POWER

LESSON OVERVIEW

- This session explores the impact of participation and disengagement on political power
- Using a physical tug of rope activity, students initially explore how active participation by people who share your values increases political strength.
- Using the same tug of war metaphor, students then explore how disengagement hands power to people who do not share your view of how Aotearoa should be.

PARTICIPATION

Democratic systems are built around the idea of public participation: it is the foundation of a democracy and a source of its legitimacy. When lots of people participate, democratic systems are healthy. When participation is absent or starts to drop – democratic systems come under pressure or start to fail.

The word “democracy” means “rule by the people”. It is derived from the Greek word “*dēmokratia*” – coined from *dēmos* (“people”) and *kratos* (“rule”).² Public participation is the essence of any democratic system and what distinguishes it from other forms of governance.

In a *direct democracy* laws are made directly by all eligible voters. Aotearoa is a *representative democracy*. In this type of democracy most people do not participate directly in law making – we elect representatives who make laws for us.

Benefits of Participation

Public participation builds trust in government institutions, which is essential for the stability and legitimacy of a democratic state. Our own system has evolved so

² <https://www.britannica.com/topic/democracy>

that now most people are able to participate fully. In Aotearoa, the first democratic election was in 1854. The only people who could vote were land owning, British men who lived in Aotearoa. Since this time, other groups have won the right to vote (for example, Māori men, all women).

Falling participation rates is currently a global concern. International research shows trust in democratic institutions is falling and disengagement is increasing.³ These trends are concerning because they threaten the legitimacy of democratic systems and are associated with the rise of anti-democratic movements, such as populism.

Participation has other benefits too. While voting is the more formal way to participate, ordinary citizens have important roles to play in shaping public policy, mobilising the public to support good ideas, and getting politicians to turn those good ideas into law.

Participation is Power

While participation has many benefits to society, it is also the source of power. As we saw in session 1, political parties are groups of people with a shared vision of what Aotearoa should be like. People usually vote for the parties who most closely reflect their own views.

If large groups of the population do not participate, their views will not be reflected in Parliament – the centre of decision-making power.

The Theory

In session 1, we introduced the idea that our electoral system is designed to translate the views of 4 million eligible voters into political representation:

- Political parties are groups of people who share similar views on how Aotearoa should be.
- Candidates are people forwarded by each party.
- Voters choose the party which most closely share their vision.

³ For example: <https://www.southampton.ac.uk/news/2025/02/democracy-in-crisis-trust-in-democratic-institutions-declining-around-the-world.page>; and <https://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/CBP-7501/CBP-7501.pdf>

Provided everyone votes, the percentage of people in Parliament who share a particular vision will be the same as the voting age population.

The Reality

Not every eligible voter enrolls or votes. All we can really say is that Parliament reflects the views of the people who voted – not the entire voting age population.

There are lots of reasons why people do not enroll or vote. And research shows some groups experience persistent underrepresentation – not as a matter of choice – but due to systemic barriers to participation.

Young people, for example, make up the second largest group of eligible voters, but enroll at significantly lower rates than other adults. Young people cite lack of understanding, relevance, information, trust, and time as some of the barriers they face.

Children and Young People

Children and young people currently face some of the most challenging issues of recent generations, including climate change, an ageing population, and the rise of AI. They will need to use our existing democratic institutions to address those challenges.

For young people to have a meaningful say in shaping the Aotearoa they want, we need to support them to find meaning in the political system. Waha is built around the idea that young people will participate if they can see their voice is relevant and that it makes a difference.

WAYS TO PARTICIPATE

Participating in elections

The most formal way to participate is through the election process. The difference between winning and losing an election can be quite small. In Aotearoa, 30,000 votes amount to roughly 1 % of the electorate. This can be enough to shift the balance of power in a Parliament.

Children and young people of non-voting ages can still help shape electoral outcomes:

- They can talk to voters about the issues that are important to them, and encourage those people to cast their votes in the interests of children and young people.
- They can talk to eligible voters who didn't vote, and encourage those people to cast their votes in the interests of children and young people. In 2023, 829,000 eligible voters did not vote.

Youth Enrolment

Young people (18-24) make up the second largest portion of eligible voters – but have significantly lower enrolment rates. As of 30 June 2026, only 53.3% of eligible young people have enrolled. This means over 200,000 young people are at risk of being disenfranchised at the 2026 General Election. A significant uplift in youth enrolment rates would significantly increase their voice – and power – at the polling booth.

To increase youth enrolment rates, we need to help young people overcome the barriers they face – including lack of understanding, relevance, information, trust, and time as some of the barriers they face. Most of these barriers can be reduced with better information and education. We just need to be smart about how we do this. For example, research shows rangatahi listen to and trust each other. They are well placed to mobilise and motivate other young people to participate.

Public Opinion

While many children and young people cannot vote, they can influence public opinion and the voting of adults in their lives through conversations about the values and issues that are important to them. Positive change is often driven by people who were not allowed to vote or participate directly in elections.

SESSION 3 – TAKE YOUR SEAT

LESSON OVERVIEW

- This session explores the mechanics of the electoral process and government formation.
- Students start by learning some of the key concepts or features associated with our democracy, including parliament, decision making, and government.
- Students then run a mock election process – voting for parties, counting party votes, and apportioning seats.
- Students then explore how governments are formed through coalition.

KEY CONCEPTS

To understand how the party vote translates into decision-making power, some prior learning is required. The session starts by exploring some of the key concepts below. This session starts we need to understand how parliament is structured, and how the electoral process works.

Parliament

Parliament is the supreme lawmaker in our country. Technically, it is made up of our **Head of State** (The Sovereign (King Charles III and his representative, the Governor General), and the **House of Representatives** (Members of Parliament (MPs) as voted for by the public in an election).

The main role of Parliament is to:

- Pass legislation (make laws)
- Provide a government
- Scrutinise the government
- Represent the people of New Zealand
- Oversee the Budget and provide financial scrutiny of government spending.

Members of Parliament

In a General Election, the country normally picks 120 people to make the laws for all New Zealanders for the next three years. Each of these people is entitled to sit in the legislative chamber when laws are being made.

When those 120 people are chosen, as a group they become known as Parliament. If you are one of these 120 people, you become a Member of Parliament - or an 'MP' for short.

Decision Making in Parliament

Laws are made by MPs. At its most basic, the process looks like this:

1. One of the 120 MPs suggests a new law or a change to an existing law
2. The MPs debate whether to make the law or not
3. The MPs vote on whether to make the law (In reality, they vote three times but we'll learn more about this in another lesson).

To get the law passed, a majority of MPs need to agree to the law. With 120 MPs, a majority is 61 MPs. For example, if we say MPs are deciding whether red or blue is the better colour, then a majority, or half plus one need to be in favour of that colour for it to win.

While MPs have the freedom – legally – to vote however they want, they almost always vote along party lines. This means all the MPs in a party vote for the same thing – either for or against a proposed law. There are two reasons for this:

- All members of a party share the same or similar values, ideas and beliefs.
- By voting as a block – parties increase the influence they have on the outcome of the vote.

Government

Recognising that MPs vote along party lines is key to understanding how power is exercised in Parliament.

The first job of MPs after an election is to create a Government. This occurs shortly after MPs are elected. Government comes from the word “govern”, which means “exercise authority over a country”.

A Government usually made up of at least 61 MPs. They all come from one party or from a group of parties who have agreed to work together (usually until the next election). A group of parties who work together as a government is called a coalition.

By forming a government, these parties charge of Parliament for 3 years, gain political authority over the country, and make all the laws which come out of parliament for the next three years.

Government MPs choose a Prime Minister, who is normally the leader of the largest party that creates the Government.

Coalitions

It is rare for one party to have enough MPs to form Government alone. This is because the party vote is usually split across multiple parties – and it's rare for one party to get more than 50% of the party vote. To avoid Parliament grinding to a halt, parties join together to form a government.

Coalitions are formed after the election. They are usually formed by parties who share similar views of what Aotearoa should be like. The Prime Minister usually comes from the largest party in a coalition.

In the 2023 election, 6 political parties had representative in Parliament (National, Labour, Greens, ACT New Zealand, New Zealand First, and Te Pati Māori). National, ACT, and New Zealand First agreed to work together to form the Government. Together, they had 68 seats – which is 7 more than the 61 needed to control Parliament. National was the largest party in the coalition and their leader, Christopher Luxon, became Prime Minister.

Parties and Party Votes

We know political parties are important because they represent different views of how Aotearoa should be. They are also important in a more formal way because they are a formal part of our electoral law.

Parties must register to take part in an election – and the Party Vote determines the overall make-up of Parliament. Each party gets the same percentage of seats in Parliament as the percentage of party votes it got. For example, a party with 15% of the party vote (roughly 600,000 votes) will get 15% of the seats (18 out of 120).

National, ACT, and New Zealand First agreed to work together to form the Government. As we can see, they have 68 rectangles within the pink boundary on the board, meaning they have a majority of votes in Parliament, and can form Government.

HOW DO MPS GET ELECTED: MMP

New Zealand's electoral system is called Mixed-Member Proportional representation (or MMP for short). During elections you get two votes: a Party Vote and an Electorate Vote.

The Party Vote is the most important. It works out the total number of MPs a political party gets in Parliament. The Electorate Vote works out who some of those people are.

1. Total Party Vote

Party Votes must be for a political party. Different political parties have different values, visions for New Zealand, and ideas on how they would lead the country. People tend to vote for the party they agree with the most and think will best represent their personal values.

Once everyone across the whole country has voted, all of the Party Votes are added up, and then parties are given a number of MPs in Parliament proportional to the amount of the Party Vote they won. The more votes a party gets throughout the country, the more MPs they get.

2. Party Vote Percentages

The total number of party votes each party got is converted into a percentage. For example, 600,000 votes is roughly 15% of the total party.

3. Parliament Proportionality

Then finally, political parties are given a number of MPs proportional to the amount of the Party Vote they won. So, a party with 15% of the party vote (roughly 600,000 votes) will get 15% of the seats (18 out of 120). The more Party Votes a party gets, the more MPs they get.

