

Session TWO

PARTICIPATION IS POWER

Participation is Power: Society is shaped by those who keep turning up

Democracies are built around the idea of public participation. Our system is designed to translate the views of 4 million eligible voters into a 120-seat Parliament. But not every eligible person votes. All we can really say is Parliament reflects the views of the people who voted – not all eligible people. 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 disengagements hands power to the other side.

Overview - The Metaphor "The Voting Ticket Tug of Law"

This session reframes the well-known Tug of War game as a Tug of Law. The objective is to demonstrate that having the majority of aligned values in a community means nothing without the *action* of voting. Civic outcomes are determined by who shows up.

Voting is a ticket to your destination – the Aotearoa you want to live in. If you don't use it, the other side has more power.

- **Step One** is a short activity to split the class according to their preferences. The purpose of this activity is to show every vote is equal, and when everybody participates – the majority wins.
- **Step Two** uses a stacked card deck to disrupt the balance of power that exists within the classroom. The purpose of this activity is to show participation in democracy is rewarded with extra power.
- **Step Three** takes non-participation further. The purpose of this activity is to show disengagement is harmful to democracy itself – by handing power to those who just stick around.



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The Setup

1. Create a physical or visual "Tug of Law" line in the classroom. You can use:
 - a real rope
 - an imaginary line or line on the floor
 - a digital/whiteboard tracker
2. Label each side of the line with a competing values proposition. You can make up your own, use the two largest groups from session 1, or use the following:
 - Left Side: "Burgers are Best"
 - Right Side: "Pizzas are Best"
3. Prepare the deck of 30 Scenario Cards:
 - Create two piles of 15 cards
 - A. **Pile A** must have **10 ACTIVE** cards and **5 PASSIVE** cards.
 - B. **Pile B** must have **10 NON-PARTICIPATION** cards and **5 PASSIVE** cards
4. Get the voting tickets ready (1 per student) and a "voting box" (empty box, container, etc.)

Warm Up The Ultimate Equaliser

In this short warm up, students discuss the value of each vote. The purpose of the discussion is to help students see every vote is equal – no matter what role we play in society.

Key takeaways:

- Every eligible voter has an equal vote
- The real difference in democratic power comes from participation



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Discussion:

"Whose vote do you think counts more?"

Invite a few responses, then ask: Someone who owns a big business? A millionaire? A famous athlete? The Prime Minister? A university professor? A first-time voter who has just turned 18?

Every eligible person's vote counts **exactly the same**.

Whether you are voting for the very first time, earning minimum wage, running a business, retired, wealthy, famous, or the Prime Minister...

You each receive one vote, and every vote carries exactly the same weight.

That's one of the most important principles of democracy in Aotearoa New Zealand:

*"You can't buy extra votes. You can't earn extra votes. You can't become famous and get extra votes. When you vote, your voice has exactly the same value as every other eligible voter. **What makes a difference is whether people vote or not.**"*

Step One Burgers or Pizza?

Step One is a short activity to split the class according to their preferences. The purpose of this activity is to show every vote is equal, and when everybody participates – the majority wins.

Key takeaways:

- Every eligible voter has an equal vote
- When everyone votes – the final numbers accurately reflect the views of the population

How it works:

- I. Set up the room according to the instructions above (The Setup – page 2)
- II. Give every student a voting ticket.
- III. Invite 3 supporters of each proposition to step forward/cast their vote.



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KEY MESSAGE: EVERY VOTE IS EQUAL

- IV. Invite the two groups of voters to give a short pitch to the rest of the class about the benefits of their value proposition:
 - 3 key points
 - 1-2 mins total
- V. Invite the rest of the students to cast their votes and join the group they support

KEY MESSAGE: ALL VOTES ARE EQUAL - IF EVERYONE VOTES, THE VIEWS OF THE CLASS ARE ACCURATELY REFLECTED IN THE FINAL NUMBERS

- VI. Record the final numbers for each side
- VII. Get the students to retreat to opposite sides of the room

Discussion/Guidance:

1.The Equal Ticket: Every vote carries the same weight.

No one can approach the rope until they cast their vote. Place the rope on the floor in the centre of the room.

Tell the students: "Your ticket is your invitation into democracy. It doesn't matter who you are, how old you are, or how much money you have. Every ticket is worth exactly the same. But right now, you are just holding your values in your hands."

Ask: "Can our values influence anything right now?" (*Answer: No. Because nobody has entered the process.*)

2.Cashing the Ticket: Values alone don't create change.

Explain that the rope represents our laws, our shared values in parliament, and our democracy. To have their opinions counted and add power to their side – they must cast their votes.

Invite the first three students from each side to cast their votes.



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3. Building the Line: Adding to the democratic process.

Pause after few students while the vote is equal.

Ask: "What is changing?" (*Answer: Every person who participates makes the group physically stronger.*)

Reinforce: "Your vote doesn't make your personal values *better* than anyone else's. It simply means your values are now actually part of the democratic process."

4. The Power of Mobilisation: Democracy grows when we encourage others.

Get the students who have voted to pitch the benefits of their position to the whole class.

The remaining students to cast their votes and join their team.

The Warm-Up Debrief

Once everyone is holding the rope/standing with their team, reflect on what has happened.

"Look at the rope/group sizes now. What made the biggest difference here?"

When everyone votes – each side maximises its potential. The values/preferences of the class are perfectly reflected in the final result.

Step Two Participation Power

Step Two uses a stacked card deck to disrupt the balance of power that exists within the classroom. The purpose of this activity is to show participation in democracy is rewarded with extra relative power.

How it works:

- I. Get the two groups of students to retreat to their respective sides of the room.



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- II. Take the two piles of participation cards you made earlier (The Setup, page 2).
- III. Give one card from **Pile A** to each student in the smallest group (Pile A should have all the active participation cards!).
- IV. Give one card from **Pile B** to each student in the smallest group (Pile B should have all the non-participation!).
- V. The two sides now take turns reading the cards.
 - If a student reads an **active participation** card, they can step forward into their playing area/pick up their side of the rope.
 - If a student reads a **passive participation** card, they can step forward into their playing area/pick up their side of the rope.
 - If a student reads a **non-participation** card, they must remain outside of the playing area/not touch the rope.
- VI. Once everyone has played a card – calculate the how many players have joined from each side.
- VII. Compare this to the results from the previous activity. Compared to the first activity, students should observe relative power shift from the larger group to the smaller group.

KEY MESSAGES:

- PARTICIPATION IS REWARDED WITH POLITICAL POWER
 - NON-PARTICIPATION INCREASES RELATIVE POWER FOR THE OTHER SIDE
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- VIII. Repeat this activity, but first – let's even things up! Shuffle all participation cards together so each side gets a random distribution amongst their 15 cards. *The students will be hoping for participation cards to ensure their preferences are represented in the final outcome.*



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Step Three The Cost of Letting Go

Step Three takes non-participation further. The purpose of this activity is to show disengagement is harmful to democracy itself – by handing power to those who just stick around. This serves as a metaphor for risks which face all democracies, including rise of anti-democratic forms of government and the erosion of hard-won rights.

How it works:

- I. Reset the room. This time, create two perfectly equal teams (e.g. 10 vs. 10) and have them both take hold of the rope/stand on opposite sides of the room.
- II. Explain that this represents a balanced democracy where everyone is participating. Have them pull against each other gently to feel the equal tension (or just count the numbers) – a system in balance or equilibrium.
- III. Read aloud a series of "Disengagement Scenarios" targeting only one team (Team A).
 - Every time a scenario is read, one student from Team A must let go of the rope/leave the play area.
 - Team B is instructed *not* to pull any harder. They just keep their steady grip.
- IV. As Team A students let go one by one, Team B will naturally and effortlessly drag the rope to their side/outnumber Team A. Team B wins the Tug of Law without exerting any extra effort, simply because Team A surrendered right to participate.



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Debrief

Connecting the physical to the political. Bring the students together while the physical memory of the rope is still fresh.

Guide the Kōrero:

- **To the large group from Step Two:** "How did it feel to have the most people in the room, but lose because you were stuck doing nothing?"
- **To Team A from Step Three:** "Team B didn't pull any harder at the end. Why did they win? What does that mean for our democracy – is it still rule of the people? "What might happen to the rights of people who stop participating – will they be looked after?"

In Aotearoa, Parliament has exactly 120 seats. The rope is always being pulled. If you do not step up or choose to let go, the rope will move towards another vision of what Aotearoa should be like.

This flow respects the reality of where young people are at: first showing them *how* to enter the civic space and then showing them the real consequences of abandoning it once they have a voice.

Potential follow up pātai

- Which actions created the biggest shift?
- Was voting enough on its own?
- Why is encouraging others so powerful?
- What happens when people choose not to participate?
- How could young people influence an election before they are old enough to vote?

Your values only influence Parliament if someone carries them there. In a democracy, voting is the ticket that carries your values into the room. The more people who use their ticket – and encourage others to use theirs – the more likely those values are to be represented.



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Three Levels of Participation Active Participation = Powerful

Active Participation (+2 Pulls)

These actions show how using your ticket and helping others use theirs multiplies your power.

#	Scenario
1	You organise a carpool to take four of your mates to the voting booth after school.
2	You start a kōrero with your whānau over dinner about why the election matters, and you encourage your parents to vote in line with their values.
3	You create a TikTok explaining how to enrol, research the options, and vote, helping other young people take part confidently.
4	You volunteer at a community event that helps people check their enrolment details and understand the voting process.
5	You rally your sports team or kapa haka group to all go to the advance voting booth together after practice.
6	You help an elderly neighbour fill out their postal vote for the local council and drop it in the mail for them.
7	You run a lunchtime workshop at your kura (school) explaining how to enrol to vote.
8	You organise a youth kōrero about a local issue, then help participants find out where the candidates stand before voting.
9	You text 10 of your friends on Election Day morning to remind them to use their voting ticket.



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#	Scenario
10	You attend a local candidate hui and ask a thoughtful question about what each candidate will do to support youth mental health.

Three Levels of Participation Passive Participation = Helpful

Passive Participation (+1 Pull)

These actions are good because you used your ticket, but you didn't mobilise anyone else.

#	Scenario
1	You show up on Election Day, vote, then head home without further involvement.
2	You enrol to vote on your 18th birthday but don't talk to anyone else about it.
3	You take a "Who should I vote for?" online quiz to see which party aligns with your values, then vote accordingly.
4	You quietly drop off your postal vote at the local library drop-box.
5	You read a pamphlet that came in the mail to understand a candidate's values before voting.
6	You watch the leaders' debate on TV by yourself to make an informed decision at the booth.
7	You vote during the advance voting period because it's convenient while you're out shopping.



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#	Scenario
8	You follow a few political pages on Instagram to stay informed, and you cast your vote.
9	You read a news article about the upcoming election and make sure you are enrolled.
10	You tick the box for the candidate you like, though you aren't entirely sure what their wider party policies are.

Three Levels of Participation Non-Participation = No Power

Non-Participation (-1 Pull / +1 for the Opposition)

These actions demonstrate how failing to use your ticket actively helps opposing values get into parliament.

The class quickly experiences that choosing not to participate doesn't stop democracy – it simply allows other people to shape the outcome.

#	Scenario
1	You assume the party that aligns with your values is going to win easily, so you don't bother going to the voting booth.
2	You complain about climate change on social media but don't vote for candidates who have policies to address it.
3	You aren't enrolled to vote because you "didn't have time," missing your chance to have a say.
4	You decide "my vote doesn't matter anyway, politicians are all the same" and stay home on Election Day.

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#	Scenario
5	Your friends are all going to vote, but you decide to just wait in the car while they do it.
6	You mean to vote after work, but you feel tired and just go home to sleep instead.
7	You throw your local election voting papers in the recycling bin unread because they look boring.
8	You don't know where the closest voting booth is, so you give up and play video games instead.
9	You let the loudest person in your flat decide the "vibe" of the house and don't participate in the local board election yourself.
10	You forget it's Election Day entirely until you see the results on the news that night, realising your values lost by a slim margin.

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Disengagement Scenarios (For Step Three)

Use these short prompts during the second phase to instruct students on Team A to drop the rope. Read them out one by one, pausing to let the physical tension shift before reading the next.

Trigger	The Scenario (Read Aloud)	Action
Fatigue	"You voted last time, but nothing changed immediately. You are tired of politics."	<i>One student drops the rope.</i>
Assumption	"Your side has always won in this neighbourhood. You assume your team has it covered."	<i>One student drops the rope.</i>
Distraction	"It's raining on Election Day, and your favourite show just dropped a new season."	<i>One student drops the rope.</i>
Cynicism	"You read a post online saying 'all politicians are the same.' You decide the system is broken."	<i>One student drops the rope.</i>
Confusion	"The voting forms came in the mail, but they looked complicated. You threw them in the bin."	<i>One student drops the rope.</i>