Democracy

Critical Question
Which is the more effective form of government - democracy or a benevolent dictatorship?

OVERVIEW

In this challenge, students consider the merits of different forms of government by deciding on the best type of government for their new (or newly restructured) student council. They start by building criteria for an effective government. Then, they examine two forms of government (democracy and benevolent dictatorship) and consider the opportunities and challenges presented by each in order to make a judgment. Finally, they communicate their judgment in the form of an opinion paragraph to be presented to the school's administration and parent council.

TYPE OF CRITICAL CHALLENGE

Judge better or best

CURRICULUM EXPECTATIONS ADDRESSED:

- use a variety of resources and tools to gather and analyse information about government processes, the rights of groups and individuals, and the responsibilities of citizenship in Canada, including participation in the electoral process;
- identify concrete examples of how government plays a role in contemporary society and of how the rights of groups and individuals and the responsibilities of citizenship apply to their own lives.
- formulate questions to develop a research focus
- use graphic organizers and graphs to sort, classify, and connect information
- use appropriate vocabulary

REQUISITE TOOLS

Criteria:

Criteria for "an effective form of government":
- best ensures a reasonable quality of life for everyone
- protect social justice
- efficient decision making

Background Knowledge
- understanding of the characteristics and challenges of democratic decision making
- understanding of the characteristics and challenges of benevolent dictatorship

Critical thinking vocabulary
- Criteria
- Judgment
- Justify

Habits of mind
- **Respectful**: Is willing to engage respectfully in discussion with others.
- **Circumspect**: Is tentative in one's belief until there is sufficient evidence to warrant a more definitive position.
- **Fair-minded**: Will judge ideas on their merits and not simply enforce personal interests and bias.

SUGGESTED ACTIVITIES

Providing Context
- Invite students to consider the following scenario: The school is creating (or restructuring) its student council. The decisions made by student council will affect all grades and all grades will be represented at student council meetings. The administration and parents' council is considering how decisions should be made. Two different decision-making models have been proposed:
    1. Representatives from each grade vote on every decision; voting determines final decision.
    2. The teacher advisor for student council makes final decisions based on what he/she thinks is best for students and the school.
- Explain to students that their challenge is to make a judgment about what the best decision-making model is for our new student council and defend their argument in the form of an article to the school newsletter.

Identifying initial ideas and connecting to students' previous knowledge
- On the board, draw a continuum which on one reads: "Students should have the final say on all decisions that have to do with them". On the other end of the continuum, write "Teachers should have the final say on all decisions." Ask student to first think to themselves about where they would place themselves on the continuum. Consider asking small numbers of students at a time to approach the board and print their name on the continuum at the spot that best reflects their opinion. You might ask them to then turn to a partner and explain where they stand and the reasons for it. Consider randomly calling on pairs of students to share the reasons they discussed.
- Record students' reasons on board and categorize them to build criteria for an effective student government body.
- Draw a parallel between criteria that has been built for a student governing body and a country's government. You might guide students toward the following criteria for an effective government:
    1. best ensures a reasonable quality of life for everyone
    2. protect social justice
    3. efficient decision making

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Gathering Information
- Invite students to learn more about the two options before they make a final decision. Provide background reading or parallel fictional stories or movie clips which illustrate both a democratic decision making model and that of a benevolent dictatorship. Consider providing students with a graphic organizer (e.g. a T-chart or Venn diagram) on which to record information that they gather about both types of government.
- Ask students to work with a partner to complete an OCI chart (Opportunities, Challenges, Interesting) on each form of government. At the bottom of the chart, ask them to decide whether, given the criteria they developed earlier for an effective model of government, would they give this option a red light, yellow light or green light:
  - red light: we should not even consider this option; the disadvantages outweigh the advantages and we are unlikely to overcome the challenges it presents
  - yellow light: there are a lot of advantages to this form of government but we should only proceed if certain conditions can be met (list the conditions)
  - green light: we should definitely adopt this form of government; the advantages outweigh the challenges

Communicating their decision
- Explain to students that next month's school newsletter will include a variety of opinion pieces on this topic. The school's administration and parent council will be considering all opinions before making a decision on how the new student council will function. Invite students to write an opinion paragraph outlining their opinion on the issue.
- Consider providing examples of opinion paragraphs in order to draw out the criteria for an effective opinion paragraph (e.g. clearly states the argument, provides convincing evidence to support the argument, counters opposing arguments, etc.)