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DEMOCRACY IN PLAY

GAME RULES

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Abstract

The board game *Democracy in Play* is an educational tool designed to foster political literacy, critical thinking, and participatory skills among young people. The game uses experiential learning and role-based simulation. These methods encourage active involvement, allowing participants to shape political processes and gain deeper insights than would be possible through passive learning.

The game is rooted in the idea that young people learn most effectively through experimentation. They can test ideas, challenge assumptions, and face consequences within a controlled, safe environment. The game introduces political dilemmas, restricts access to full information, and requires strategic decisions. It mirrors real society, where information is incomplete, interests are hidden, persuasion matters, and collective outcomes arise from competing worldviews.

Rules

1. Overview

In **Democracy in Play,** players listen to two governance approaches, respond to political dilemmas and vote privately each round. Each player must evaluate which philosophy is more convincing. Players encounter ideas firsthand through a structured environment that reflects real-world political dynamics. The game puts players in situations where they must balance values, navigate disagreement, and assess risks. They see how their choices contribute to a shared social outcome.

The central engine features two speakers who defend contrasting governance philosophies without ideological labels, helping players develop political judgment through reasoning rather than stereotypes. The central idea of the game is not victory but awareness, as choices accumulate into a collective political model that serves as the basis for reflection.

Ultimately, **Democracy in Play** bridges theory and lived experience, transforming political discourse from abstract and intimidating to tangible, accessible, and participatory, allowing young people to wield power, confront its consequences, and understand governance as a collective act.

At the end, players confront the system they have built and read two fully developed scenarios describing different societies. The process is diagnostic, inviting players to observe, evaluate, and articulate their relationship to political structures.

2. Components of the game

- Game board
- 21 Role cards
  - 1 card *"Speaker 1"*
  - 1 card "*Speaker 2"*
  - 4 cards "*Secret Supporter 1"*
  - 4 cards "*Secret Supporter 2*"
  - 11 cards "*Neutral voter*"
- 42 Voting cards
  - 21 cards "*Speaker 1*"
  - 21 cards "*Speaker 2*"
- 70 Question cards (10 question cards per each category).
- 2 tokens (1 per each team)
- Rule book (this book)

Role Cards

Role Cards define how each participant should behave, think, and vote during the game. They simulate social roles present in real political systems.

Speaker 1: Represents a governance philosophy based on public participation, openness, accountability, and inclusive decision-making. They must persuade the group that shared processes and diverse contributions produce stronger societies.

Speaker 2: Represents a governance philosophy based on stability, decisiveness, order, and centralised direction. They must demonstrate that disciplined coordination and efficient leadership protect a society from chaos and crisis.

Secret Supporters: Players with hidden loyalty to one of

the speakers. They do not reveal their identity. Their task is to subtly influence discussion and voting. They represent informal power networks, interest groups, ideological factions, lobby structures. Secret Supporters test the group's resistance to social pressure, covert influence, and echo-chamber dynamics.

Neutral Voters: Participants who hold no assigned agenda. They evaluate the arguments presented and vote based on their own judgment. They represent the general public:

- exposed to persuasion,
- influenced by tone and emotional appeal,
- dependent on limited information,
- responsible for collective consequences.

Neutral Voters are the backbone of the simulation.

Voting Cards

Voting Cards are the only mechanism by which political preferences can be measured. Every player has two voting options—one for Speaker 1 and one for Speaker 2—and must choose one in every round.

Voting is conducted simultaneously and blindly:

- No debate during the vote.
- No justification is required. (If they want, they can)
- No one explains their motives. (If they want, they can)

This format prevents signalling, coalition pressure, and performative alignment.

Voting Cards simulate:

- electoral secrecy,
- strategic voting,
- internalised values,

- the gap between intention and outcome.

A decision made silently often differs from one made publicly. The voting mechanic turns this psychological phenomenon into gameplay reality.

Question cards

These cards provide the thematic anchor for each round. They introduce dilemmas from seven key domains relevant to civic and political life:

- Democracy & Voting — electoral participation, legitimacy, institutional trust
- Rights & Responsibilities — freedoms, limits, civic duty, collective vs. individual interests
- Power & Leadership — representation, authority, efficiency, checks and balances
- Society & Inclusion — minorities, equality, social justice, cultural identity
- European & Global Context — supranational structures, cooperation, sovereignty
- Ethics, Media & Misinformation — information control, truth, digital environment
- Youth & Future — civic engagement, education, empowerment of young people

Point Tokens and Score Track

Tokens represent the cumulative effect of persuasive success. Each round produces one point for the winning speaker. Tokens move forward on the score track accordingly.

The score is not merely a scoreboard. It is a record of how the group has collectively shaped the state model over time.

This mirrors real societies:

- Leadership momentum grows gradually.
- Ideological dominance accumulates vote by vote.
- A single policy rarely defines a country; patterns do.

3. Objectives of the game

The central engine of the game features two speakers who defend contrasting governance philosophies. Secret supporters mirror the invisible dynamics of real society: lobbying, ideological tribes, informal power networks, partisan influence, and algorithmic echo chambers. Neutral voters represent the general public — individuals who must interpret incomplete information and pressure from competing actors.

You will listen to two different governance approaches, respond to a series of social and political dilemmas, and vote privately after each round. You are not trying to find "the correct answer" — you are evaluating which approach you find more convincing in each situation.

The central output of the game is not "victory", but awareness. Players move through multiple rounds of debate, persuasion, and voting; their choices accumulate into a collective political model — a form of simulated state.

4. Set up of the game

Player Count: 7-21 players. The game scales by adjusting the number of Neutral Voters and Secret party members:

- At minimum 7 players, including
- Team 1 – 1 speaker, 1 Secret Party member
- Team 2 – 1 speaker, 1 Secret Party member
- 4 Neutral voters

In larger games, the number of Secret Party members and Neutral Voters increases. There should be more Neutral Voters than Secret Party members, so for every 4 players above the minimum (of 7 players), you will add Team 1: 1 Secret Party member, Team 2: 1 Secret Party member and 2 Neutral Voters.

Step-by-step instructions for preparing the game:

The game unfolds through a series of structured rounds. Each round consists of thematic input, scripted interaction, argumentation, and collective decision-making. By repeating this flow several times, participants simulate how political narratives accumulate into systemic outcomes.

Each participant draws one Role Card at random. Only the two designated Speakers openly reveal their roles. All other players keep their identities secret.

Speaker 1

- Advocates a governance style based on openness, cooperation, and community participation.
- Aims to show how shared decision-making can lead to trust and collective responsibility.

Speaker 2

- Advocates a governance style based on efficiency, structure, and coordinated leadership.
- Aims to show how decisiveness and order can protect society from instability and chaos.

Secret Supporters (hidden)

- Support one of the Speakers without revealing it.
- Their goal is to influence opinions quietly — through arguments, questions, tone, or social pressure.

Neutral Voters

- Have no assigned preference.
- Evaluate each round independently and vote based on what they personally find convincing.

This initial role distribution establishes the game's political ecosystem: visible leadership, invisible influence networks, and a general voting population.

Each player receives a Voting Card set containing two options:

- one card linked to **Speaker 1**,
- the other card linked to **Speaker 2**.

Voting cards simulate private choice and ideological alignment over time. They ensure that every participant can vote in every round, regardless of their role. Players cannot trade them, announce their intentions, or present them publicly during the speech phase.

Game Flow

1. **A Question Card is drawn**

A player reads the question aloud. No interpretation, no additional explanation. Speakers 1 and 2 have two minutes to prepare their argument.

2. **Speaker 1 presents their argument (1–2 minutes)**

They explain their approach using examples, logic, narrative, or values.

3. **Speaker 2 presents their argument (1–2 minutes)**

They respond to the same question from their approach.

4. **Short open discussion (up to 2 minutes)**

Players may ask questions or make comments. Speakers may

respond briefly.

5. **Secret voting**

Everyone votes privately using their Voting Card. No one explains or justifies their choice. (If you want, you can)

6. **Count the votes**

The majority wins the round — the winning Speaker moves one point forward on the score track.

The process then repeats with the next Question Card.

Important rules

- No personal attacks or insults.
- Do not reveal your role during the game.
- Do not pressure others to vote a certain way.
- Speakers must present arguments, not accuse or target the opponent.
- You may change your preference every round.

End of the Game — "Paint the Picture"

After all rounds are complete:

1. Any player counts the final score.
2. Both state models are read aloud:

State Model of Speaker 1:

Imagine a state where key decisions are made through public dialogue, consultations, and collective proposals. Citizens have access to information, can openly criticise those in power, and participate in decision-making processes — not only during elections, but also in the everyday life of their community. Political authority is distributed across multiple institutions to prevent abuse. Media outlets, social networks, and public forums have the

right to analyse and question the actions of leaders.

Progress can sometimes be slower, requiring debate and compromise, but people become part of the system rather than its subjects. Minorities, youth, and vulnerable groups have avenues to seek protection for their rights through legal and social mechanisms.

Wrong decisions can be corrected through changes in leadership, public criticism, and reform.

Such a state grows through dialogue, negotiation, and solidarity — imperfect at times, but continuously building trust and shared responsibility.

State Model of Speaker 2

Imagine a state where speed and stability are the highest priorities.

When a problem arises, decisions are made immediately—from the top down —to prevent chaos and uncertainty. Citizens rely on an authority with a clear vision and the power to implement it without obstruction. The media space is regulated to protect public order and to prevent the spread of misleading or dangerous information.

Protests, disruptions, and individual interests are limited to safeguarding security and a functional society. The system is efficient — projects are executed quickly, crises are resolved without delay, and citizens know who holds responsibility and to whom they report.

Minorities and vulnerable groups receive protection as long as they respect the rules and contribute to collective goals. Such a state grows through discipline, results, and clear directives — firm at times, but offering order and long-term stability.

They must read both neutrally, without interpretation or commentary.

After both scenarios are read, the participant states which of the two models received the majority of votes throughout the game.

Players are invited to reflect silently or through open discussion:

- Did they consciously support that outcome?
- Do the cumulative consequences surprise them?
- Would they have voted differently if they saw the full picture earlier?



Pedagogical logic & values

The pedagogical foundation of *Democracy in Play* is built on the principle that democratic competencies cannot be developed merely by providing information; they must be cultivated through context, interaction, and experience. Young people often encounter politics as something distant, abstract, or reserved for adults, institutions, or formal experts. The game reverses this perspective. It brings political reasoning into a setting where every participant becomes an active agent rather than a passive observer.

The game integrates multiple layers of learning that reinforce one another:

1. **Political decision-making in conditions of uncertainty**

Participants are exposed to complex dilemmas without the ability to foresee the consequences of their choices. They must weigh competing priorities: safety versus liberty, efficiency versus pluralism, clarity versus inclusion. Through repeated exposure, they learn that political life rarely offers perfect answers and that responsible decision-making often involves accepting imperfection.

2. **Negotiation between personal and collective values**

Players enter each round with their own beliefs but must also consider the group's sentiments. Voting becomes a negotiation between what “I think is right” and what “the group prefers.” Young people thus observe how identity, empathy, influence, and persuasion shape outcomes in real societies.

3. **Argumentation as a democratic skill**

The game centralises argumentation not as a competition of opinions, but as a process of civil reasoning. A speaker who disagrees with the other is not their enemy; they are an alternative interpreter of reality. This helps participants internalise respect toward dissent, even when they reject a position. Unlike simplistic models in which one side is inherently good and the other inherently bad, the game demonstrates that governance is a dialogue among competing ways of managing risks, resources, and people.

4. **Social learning through role immersion**

Speakers and voters experience the game from different social positions. A speaker must persuade, manage attention, and project credibility. A voter must listen, interpret, and choose without full certainty. This dynamic encourages empathy: players see politics from multiple angles, fostering tolerance and reducing polarisation.

5. **Structured reflection rather than indoctrination**

The game does not instruct young people on what they should believe. Instead, it offers a framework for them to:

- articulate their values,
- test their convictions,
- confront disagreement,
- and recognise how their choices shape society.

This approach aligns with the principles of non-formal education, in which the facilitator does not impose conclusions but creates opportunities for self-discovery. The final phase of the game illustrates this clearly: participants see the consequences of their own decisions without being told which model

is superior.

Throughout gameplay, participants practise essential democratic competences identified in contemporary youth work and EU education frameworks:

- critical and analytical thinking,
- verbal expression,
- listening and empathy,
- participation in collective decision-making,
- responsibility for shared outcomes,
- evaluating trade-offs,
- recognising manipulation and rhetorical strategies.

These are not theoretical values — they are exercised repeatedly in each round. As a result, players internalise how political systems evolve through thousands of small decisions made by millions of ordinary people.

Finally, the game protects young learners from ideological discomfort. By avoiding explicit names of political models, labels of political identity, or normative judgments, the game invites participants to explore ideas without fear of being associated with stereotypes. The exercise becomes safer, more inclusive, and more reflective of real-world diversity. The absence of ideological branding also forces players to evaluate arguments on their own merits rather than on the perceived moral weight of ideological categories.

In this sense, *Democracy in Play* is more than a game: it is a controlled laboratory of democracy and governance, where young people develop the intellectual, emotional, and social skills necessary to participate in society as informed citizens.

Core concept of the game

The core concept of *Democracy in Play* is grounded in the idea that political systems emerge not from abstract principles, but from the interaction of multiple actors operating under uncertainty, competing interests, and different interpretations of the public good. The game, therefore, simulates the social mechanics of governance by placing participants in three interconnected roles — two public speakers, a group of hidden supporters, and a group of neutral voters — each with distinct behavioural incentives and strategic challenges. Through this triangulation, the game models how political narratives are formed, communicated, contested, and ultimately legitimised through collective decision-making.

Unlike classical political simulations that assign ideologies explicitly (e.g., "liberal," "authoritarian," "left," "right"), this game deliberately removes ideological labelling. Participants are not given a pre-defined moral hierarchy of systems. Instead, they encounter two contrasting philosophies of governance only through argumentation and persuasion. This neutrality forces them to evaluate political approaches based on perceived benefits, risks, consistency, and rhetorical credibility, rather than on ideological identities. As a result, the game becomes an exercise in evaluative thinking rather than identity-based alignment.

At its core, the game operationalises three fundamental dimensions of political experience:

1. Competing visions of governance

Two players act as public speakers. Each embodies a distinct governance philosophy — one oriented toward participation, inclusiveness, and transparency, and another emphasising stability, efficiency, and central direction. These approaches are not presented as inherently superior or inferior; they are frameworks for solving social problems, each with its own strengths and vulnerabilities. Speakers must construct arguments, respond to criticism, and present their model as feasible and desirable. By doing so, they bear the burden of political leadership: communicating complex values in a limited time, maintaining credibility, and adapting to the audience's mood.

2. Hidden interests and informal alliances

A subset of players receives secret roles indicating support for one of the speakers. These “hidden actors” simulate the networks of influence that frequently shape political decision-making behind the scenes. Their presence captures realities such as lobbying, factionalism, ideological activism, and agenda-setting. They do not speak publicly or reveal their affiliation; instead, they participate by shaping discourse through subtle persuasion, tone, or strategic voting. Their influence reflects a central truth of modern politics: support is not always visible, and legitimacy is often engineered indirectly.

3. The public as rational but imperfect decision-makers

Neutral voters are the decisive force in the game. They represent citizens who must evaluate information in the face of uncertainty, often guided by their own biases, emotions, and incomplete understanding. They observe the debate, listen to arguments, and weigh consequences without having privileged

insight into either side's intentions or hidden supporters. In doing so, they replicate the democratic dilemma: the need to act even when knowledge is partial, arguments are imperfect, and the future is unpredictable. Their votes determine the trajectory of the "state" that emerges during the game — not by moral correctness, but by collective perception.

4. Collective decision-making as a dynamic system

Across multiple rounds, the interplay between speakers, hidden supporters, and neutral voters produces a sequence of aggregated decisions. No single round defines the outcome; instead, the cumulative influence of arguments, tone shifts, strategic framing, and group psychology gradually shapes the final state model. This reflects how real societies evolve: not suddenly, but through incremental, iterative decisions that embody collective priorities and tolerances.

Participants therefore experience politics not as a binary dispute, but as a fluid ecosystem — one in which leadership, communication, allegiance, and public sentiment continuously transform one another. Individuals may change their voting patterns mid-game, shift loyalties, or reinterpret the meaning of "the common good." These behavioural dynamics are not accidental side-effects of the game; they are its most valuable educational component.

5. Legitimacy derived from process, not from authority

A central conceptual element of the game is that legitimacy is earned, not granted.

No player is privileged above others except through persuasion.

The speakers cannot impose their decisions; they must persuade the majority.

The hidden supporters cannot declare their affiliation; they must influence indirectly.

The neutral voters do not need to justify their decisions; they simply exercise their judgment.

This absence of top-down authority forces participants to confront the reality that political legitimacy emerges from collective acceptance, even when the accepted model is imperfect, risky, or controversial. The game thus teaches that governance is procedural, not idealistic: it is constructed through processes of communication, mobilisation, uncertainty, and negotiation.

6. Political education through controlled ambiguity

The game's conceptual strength lies in its ambiguity. It does not instruct participants on what is right or wrong; it reveals how societies choose.

- If players prioritise safety over rights, the outcome reflects a preference for order.
- If they prioritise discussion over efficiency, the outcome reflects a preference for participation.
- If persuasion outperforms principle, the outcome reflects the power of rhetoric.
- If hidden influence shifts results, the outcome reflects the effects of interest networks.

This design avoids ideological indoctrination and instead cultivates political literacy through self-discovery, group negotiation, and consequence-based learning.

Learning Outcomes & Educational Impact

The game provides an experiential learning environment where participants actively explore how political systems evolve through public persuasion, institutional design, and collective decision-making. Rather than relying on theoretical definitions or ideological labels, players learn by navigating moral dilemmas, resource constraints, rhetorical choices, and uncertainty in real time. This design allows participants to understand complex political dynamics instinctively, before they learn to articulate them conceptually.

The primary educational outcomes are both individual and collective:

1. Personal Agency and Political Literacy

Participants are repeatedly exposed to competing viewpoints. They must assess not only which argument "sounds right", but also:

- its long-term consequences,
- its alignment with shared values,
- its hidden trade-offs,
- its impact on vulnerable groups.

Players develop political literacy by experiencing how narratives shape public perception, even when incomplete or emotionally driven. They learn to distinguish between emotional reassurance and structural safety, between short-term comfort and systemic resilience.

2. Negotiation with Uncertainty

Unlike formal debates, the game never identifies "correct answers". Participants navigate ambiguous situations where:

- both choices contain risks,
- there are no perfect solutions,
- priorities are in tension,
- and personal values collide with collective needs.

The goal is not to win an argument, but to confront discomfort, limitations, and responsibility.

3. Civic Empathy

Because players temporarily inhabit distinct social roles — leaders, hidden influencers, or everyday voters — they are encouraged to reflect on how different perspectives view the same problem.

This immersion helps them understand:

- why certain groups advocate efficiency and stability,
- why others defend freedom and inclusion,
- and how legitimate interests can conflict without being hostile or malicious.

The game shows that disagreement is not a failure of society, but a foundation of democratic coexistence.

4. Ethical Responsibility in Decision-Making

Every vote in the game has consequences. Votes accumulate, shape trajectories, and eventually define the "state model" the group creates. The game reveals a critical insight often lost in traditional education: Collective outcomes emerge from individual choices that feel small at the moment they are made.

Participants learn that power is not merely institutional—it is also emotional, narrative, silent, informal, and relational.

Ethical Considerations & Participant Safety

Although the game engages with sensitive topics—rights, leadership, public pressure, cultural identity—its structure prioritises participants' well-being and respectful exchange. The environment is intentionally constructed to protect players emotionally and socially.

1. Neutral Language and Non-Ideological Framing

The terms used in the game avoid political labels. Speakers are identified simply as Speaker 1 and Speaker 2, each representing a *governance philosophy* rather than an ideology or political faction.

This prevents stigmatisation such as:

- "Good vs bad,"
- "Left vs right,"
- "Democrat vs authoritarian."

Instead, players evaluate:

- participation vs efficiency,
- deliberation vs decisiveness,
- personal freedom vs collective stability.

This neutral framing makes the simulation accessible across different countries, cultures, and educational backgrounds.

2. Psychological Safety

Participants are not required to reveal personal beliefs. They vote in secret and do not declare their opinions aloud. This reduces peer pressure and prevents social exclusion.

The game does not ask:

- who is "correct,"
- who is "moral,"
- who is "weak" or "strong."

It asks: Which argument orientation produced the state you built together?

3. Protection from Manipulation and Harassment

The game explicitly prohibits personal insults, identity-based attacks, humiliation, coercion, forcing participants to justify their identities.

Even the competitive elements are focused on governance models—not on character judgments.

4. Moderation through Structure, Not Authority

The game does not require a dominant facilitator or teacher to arbitrate discussion. Moderation is embedded in the rules: fixed speaking time, voting, structured rounds, and pre-formulated dilemmas.

This reduces the risk of interpersonal conflict and prevents the most charismatic individual from dominating the environment.

5. Cultural Adaptability

The methodology is intentionally designed to travel across borders. The state models are metaphors and do not refer to real countries or current governments. This prevents political accusations and allows players to reflect on universal principles instead of national politics.

6. Post-Game Decompression

The reflection phase is not confrontational. Participants are not evaluated. They are invited to analyse a simulated outcome, not their own personal values. The distance between the role and the self is maintained throughout the game, preventing the internalisation of critique.

Conclusion

The *Democracy in Play* game shows that experiential learning can profoundly improve young people's understanding of political processes, civic engagement, and decision-making. By combining hidden roles, debate, and interactive voting, the game goes beyond theoretical instruction. It lets participants experience the complexities of political influence, persuasion, and collective responsibility firsthand. The game demonstrates that outcomes depend not only on arguments but also on social dynamics, individual motivations, and others' perceptions. Through this process, participants develop critical thinking and analytical skills. They also gain a nuanced understanding of ideological pluralism in a safe, engaging environment.

From a project perspective, the game supports the objectives of fostering youth political literacy, encouraging participation, and promoting reflection on democratic and alternative governance models. It turns abstract concepts into tangible experiences, creating lasting educational impact. The methodology is replicable for workshops, youth exchanges, and education programs. Ultimately, the game shows that meaningful civic learning comes not just from observation but from active involvement. Participants leave with a greater awareness of how decisions affect outcomes, how social and political structures influence choices, and the importance of informed engagement.

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