

## What is democracy?

The word “democracy” cannot be found in both the *Declaration of Independence* and the Constitution.

Democracy derives its authority from its citizens. The origin of the word is Greek [*demos* – the people and *kratos* – authority or power]. Therefore, democracy is government by the people, not government by one person (monarch, dictator, priest etc).

Ancient Greece had a **Direct Democracy**: citizens came together to discuss and pass laws and select their rulers. These City-States did not last long; too many dictators emerged.

A Definition of **Direct Democracy** is:

**A Government in which citizens vote on laws and select officials more directly**

The term “democracy” was later used in the 17<sup>th</sup> century by James Madison in *The Federalist*, No. 10. He used it as a negative word:-

*“Such democracies [as the Greek and Roman]...have ever been found incompatible with personal security, or the rights of property; and have in general been as short in their lives, as they have been violent in their deaths.”*

A **Definition of Democracy** for today’s America is:-

**A Government by the people, either directly or indirectly, with free and frequent elections.**

**Today’s America is becoming a combination of representative and direct democracies.** The Direct Democracy was added around 100 years ago with the inclusion of **direct primaries** – which selects who runs for office; the **initiative and referendum** – which allows citizens to put to a vote of the people laws or constitutional amendments; the **recall** – which allows voters to remove elected officials from office between elections. (2003 California voters recalled Gov. Gray Davis and replaced him with Arnold Schwarzenegger).

Due to the population and size of the nation, it is impossible to assemble all of the citizens so the nation has created a **system of representation**. This has led to the term **Representative Democracy – A government that derives its power indirectly from the people, who elect those who will govern; also called a republic**

**Republic:** a word first used by Plato – those who have governmental authority obtain and retain authority directly or indirectly as a result of winning free elections in which all adult citizens are allowed to participate.

The Framers of the Constitution used the term “republic” over the negative word “democracy.” Today, the words “democracy” and “republic” are used interchangeably.

As the United States of America was created by the use of the Constitution, there are two other issues relative to democracy that have to be included:-

1. **Constitutional Democracy** – a government where individuals who have substantial government powers do so as the result of winning free and relatively frequent elections. The exact definition is: **A government that enforces recognized limits on those who govern and allows the voice of the people to be heard through free, fair, and relatively frequent elections.** It is a government in which there are recognized, enforced limits on the powers of all governmental officials. It must have a written set of governmental rules, i.e. the *Constitution*
2. **Constitutionalism** – the set of arrangements, including checks and balances, federalism, separation of powers, rule of law, due process, and a bill of rights, that required leaders to listen, think, bargain, and explain before they act or make laws. We hold them politically and legally accountable for how they exercise their powers.

**Democracy can be divided into three (3) categories:-**

### 1. **Democracy as a System of Interacting Values.**

The components can be subdivided into basic terms and are:-

- A. **Personal Liberty** where all individuals must have the opportunity to realize their own goals. This belief goes back to the Revolutionary War and the Constitution. The Greater the people’s freedom, the greater the chance of discovering better ways of life.
- B. **Respect for the Individual.** This links to our unalienable rights. Constitutional democracies make the person – rich or poor, black or white etc. Remember, not all political systems put the person first, namely China and Cuba – the State is first, the people second. In America, it is “We the People.”
- C. **Equality of Opportunity.** Remember “All men are created equal and from that equal creation they derive rights inherent and unalienable, among which are the preservation of liberty and the pursuit of happiness.” The key word here is Egalitarian meaning free, equal, classless and democratic. However, is this really true in society? Reflect on the Native Americans and the treatment towards immigrants. Do we really try hard enough to make this happen?

- D. **Popular Consent**. This is the idea that a just government must derive its powers from the consent of the people it governs. Not everyone will get their way. People must be willing to accept losing when the majority of the population has voted the other way.
- E. **Democratic Values in Conflict**. Individualism can conflict with the general well-being of the people. Democracy has to balance between the individual and the rest of the population. As society advances there are those who oppose new ideas and growth. For example, we need more lower income housing but then there are those who say “not in my neighborhood.” An individual or small number of people may oppose such an idea but they have to remember that democracy, as this country practices, is on the side of the population and more people will benefit from such housing than those who oppose it.

## 2. **Democracy as a System of Interrelated Political Processes**.

There are millions in the world who dream of their countries being democratic. Perhaps they key to their nations success is having a stable government structure. To become a reality, democracy must have a sound political process that must include:-

- A. **Free and Fair Elections**. This is the only true way to keep officials and representatives accountable to the people. Other segments that are necessary include the need for opposition parties, two or more political parties and choice of candidates running for office. All citizens should have equal voting power but free and fair elections do not imply that everyone must have equal political influence. There are people within the country that at election time has more political influence over others. Wealthy or famous people have more influence over voting than your local storeowner but at the end of the day, each citizen – president or carpenter, corporate CEO or bus driver, casts only one vote.
- B. **Majority Rule**. This is the basic rule of democracy – Governance according to the expresses preferences of the majority. The majority candidate is the one that received more than half of the total votes. However, in practice, majority rule is often the *plurality rule*, where the candidate or party with the most votes cast in an election wins, even though it may not constitute a true majority in the popular vote rather than majorities. This is why during elections the media focuses on the voter turnout, trying to see the percentage of the population that actually went to vote. *About one third of the presidents have won with pluralities in the popular vote rather than majorities.* Remember, the framers of the Constitution wanted to stop any one faction of the people acting unjustly toward another faction of the people.
- C. **Freedom of Expression** If the government controls what is said and how it is said then there are no free and fair elections. Proper elections require non-government owned radio, television and newspapers. Voters must have access to the facts and the policies of the candidates. It is the role of the media to not have any bias. People have the right to the real facts and not those created by the government.

- D. **The Right to Assemble and Protest.** Citizens must be free to organize for political purposes. This right must be peaceful. The very nature of democracy is the right to oppose the government and make changes necessary and proper for the people.

### **3. Democracy as a System of Interdependent Political Structures**

This major component is obtained directly from the Constitution and the first ten amendments (The Bill of Rights). The system is simple in concept; the framers created government power yet introduced checks and balances as to their power. This system has five distinctive elements:-

1. *federalism* – the division of powers between the national and state governments
2. *separation of powers* – the executive, judicial and legislative branches
3. *bicameralism* – the Senate and the House of Representatives
4. *checks and balances* – checking the powers of the other branches
5. *Bill of Rights* – the guarantee of the individuals’ rights and due process before the law.

#### **Conditions Conducive to Constitutional Democracy**

1. **Educational Conditions:** A high level of education does not guarantee a democratic government. The largest democracy in the world, India, has many who are still illiterate yet they are allowed to vote freely.
2. **Economic Conditions:** Any nation with a prosperous economy has a better chance of keeping a democracy than a poor nation. Who has a better chance of keeping a democracy, Canada or a poverty-stricken African nation? There are no democracies in a country that has a highly centralized, government-run economy and little or no private ownership of property. There are no truly democratic communist states!
3. **Social Conditions.** Individuals are not likely to identify completely with a single group. For example, a doctor who is a Southern Baptist and a registered Democrat may split his vote due to his beliefs on health-care, welfare, immigration and other factors that affect his daily life.
4. **Ideological Conditions.** Ideology is a consistent pattern of beliefs about political values and the role of government. These beliefs come from education, economic and social conditions of the individual person. Again, the fact that a substantial part of the population must agree on these principles allows the nation to be democratic. This acceptance or agreement is sometimes called the *democratic consensus*.

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