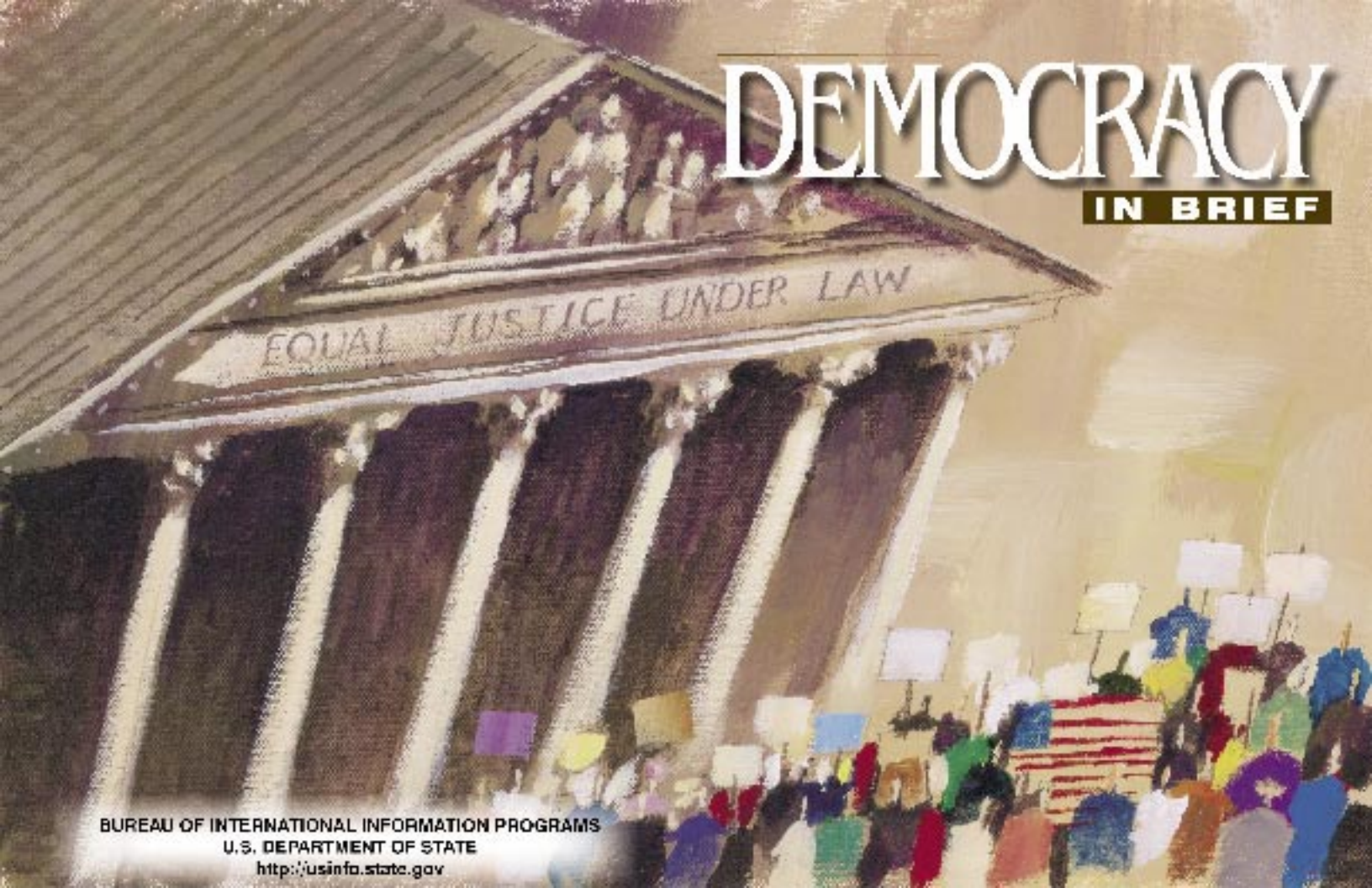
DEMOCRACY

IN BRIEF



BUREAU OF INTERNATIONAL INFORMATION PROGRAMS
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Table of Contents

Introduction: What is Democracy?

Democracy may be a word familiar to most, but it is a concept still misunderstood and misused at a time when dictators, single-party regimes, and military coup leaders alike assert popular support by claiming the mantle of democracy. Yet the power of the democratic idea has prevailed through a long and turbulent history, and democratic government, despite continuing challenges, continues to evolve and flourish throughout the world.

Civilized debate and due process of law are at the core of democratic practice. This woodcut imagines an ancient Greek court on the Areopagus outcrop in Athens.

Democracy, which derives from the Greek word "demos," or "people," is defined, basically, as government in which the supreme power is vested in the people. In some forms, democracy can be exercised directly by the people; in large societies, it is by the people through their elected agents. Or, in the memorable phrase of President

In 1215, English nobles pressured King John of England to sign a document known as the Magna Carta, a key step on the road to constitutional democracy. By doing so, the king acknowledged he was bound by law, like others, and granted his subjects legal rights.

Abraham Lincoln, democracy is government "of the people, by the people, and for the people."

Freedom and democracy are often used interchangeably, but the two are not synonymous. Democracy is indeed a set of ideas and principles about freedom, but it also consists of practices and procedures that have been molded through a long, often tortuous history. Democracy is the institutionalization of freedom.

In the end, people living in a democratic society must serve as the ultimate guardians of their own freedom and must forge their own path toward the ideals set forth in the preamble to the United Nations' Universal Declaration of Human Rights: "Recognition of the inherent dignity and of the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family is the foundation of freedom, justice, and peace in the world."

Characteristics of Democracy

Democracy is more than just a set of specific government institutions; it rests upon a well-understood group of values, attitudes, and practices — all of which may take different forms and expressions among cultures and societies around the world. Democracies rest upon fundamental principles, not uniform practices.

Core Democratic Characteristics

- Democracy is government in which power and civic responsibility are exercised by all adult citizens, directly, or through their freely elected representatives.
- Democracy rests upon the principles of majority rule and individual rights. Democracies guard against all-powerful central governments and decentralize government to regional and local levels, understanding that all levels of government must be as accessible and responsive to the people as possible.
- Democracies understand that one of their prime functions is to protect such basic human rights as freedom of speech and religion; the right to equal protection under law; and the opportunity to organize and participate fully in the political, economic, and cultural life of society.
- Democracies conduct regular free and fair elections open to citizens of voting age.

Fair, frequent, and well-managed elections are essential in a democracy. Here, election officials staff a voting station in Paraguay.

- Citizens in a democracy have not only rights, but also the responsibility to participate in the political system that, in turn, protects their rights and freedoms.
- Democratic societies are committed to the values of tolerance, cooperation, and compromise. In the words of Mahatma Gandhi, "Intolerance is itself a form of violence and an obstacle to the growth of a true democratic spirit."

Two Forms of Democracy

Democracies fall into two basic categories, direct and representative. In a direct democracy, citizens, without the intermediary of elected or appointed officials, can participate in making public decisions. Such a system is clearly most practical with relatively small numbers of people — in a community organization, tribal council, or the local unit of a labor union, for example — where members can meet in a single room to

discuss issues and arrive at decisions by consensus or majority vote.

Some U.S. states, in addition, place "propositions" and "referenda" — mandated changes of law — or possible recall of elected officials on ballots during state elections. These practices are forms of direct democracy, expressing the will of a large population. Many practices may have elements of direct democracy. In Switzerland, many important political decisions on issues, including public health, energy, and employment, are subject to a vote by the country's citizens. And some might argue that the Internet is creating new forms of direct democracy, as it empowers political groups to raise money for their causes by appealing directly to like-minded citizens.

Some local jurisdictions in the United States still practice a form of direct democracy, as in this town meeting in Harwick, Vermont. Schools and taxes tend to be popular issues.

However, today, as in the past, the most common form of democracy, whether for a town of 50,000 or a nation of 50 million, is representative democracy, in which citizens elect officials to make political decisions, formulate laws, and administer programs for the public good.

Majority Rule and Minority Rights

All democracies are systems in which citizens freely make political decisions by majority rule. In the words of American essayist E.B. White: "Democracy is the recurrent suspicion that more than half the people are right more than half the time."

But majority rule, by itself, is not automatically democratic. No one, for example, would call a system fair or just that permitted 51 percent of the population to oppress the remaining 49 percent in the name of the majority. In a democratic society, majority rule must be coupled with guarantees of individual human rights that, in turn, serve to protect the rights of minorities and dissenters — whether ethnic, religious, or simply the losers in political debate. The rights of minorities do not depend upon the good will of the majority and cannot be eliminated by majority vote. The rights of minorities are protected because democratic laws and institutions protect the rights of all citizens.

Minorities need to trust the government to protect their rights and safety. Once this is accomplished, such groups can participate in, and contribute to their country's democratic institutions. The principle of majority rule and minority rights

An educated citizenry is the best guarantee for a thriving democracy.

characterizes all modern democracies, no matter how varied in history, culture, population, and economy.

Pluralism and Democratic Society

In a democracy, government is only one thread in the social fabric of many and varied public and private institutions, legal forums, political parties, organizations, and associations. This diversity is called pluralism, and it assumes that the many organized groups and institutions in a democratic society do not depend upon government for their existence, legitimacy, or

Tolerance and cooperation build democracy.

authority. Most democratic societies have thousands of private organizations, some local, some national. Many of them serve a mediating role between individuals and society's complex social and governmental institutions, filling roles not given to the government and offering individuals opportunities to become part of their society without being in government.

In an authoritarian society, virtually all such organizations would be controlled, licensed, watched, or otherwise accountable to the government. In a democracy, the powers of the government are, by law, clearly defined and sharply limited. As a result, private organizations are largely free of government control. In this busy private realm of democratic society, citizens

Public discussion on all kinds of topics – personal, cultural, political – is the lifeblood of democracy. Above: Nigerian Nobel-prize winner Wole Soyinka at a Swiss book fair.

can explore the possibilities of peaceful self-fulfillment and the responsibilities of belonging to a community — free of the potentially heavy hand of the state or the demand that they adhere to views held by those with influence or power, or by the majority.

Rights and Responsibilities

Democracies rest upon the principle that government exists to serve the people. In other words, the people are citizens of the democratic state, not its subjects. Because the state protects the rights of its citizens, they, in turn, give the state their loyalty. Under an authoritarian system, by contrast, the state demands loyalty and service from its people without any reciprocal obligation to secure their consent for its actions.

Fundamental Rights

This relationship of citizen and state is fundamental to democracy. In the words of the U.S. Declaration of Independence, written by Thomas Jefferson in 1776:

> *We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights, that among these*

In this illustration, Benjamin Franklin, John Adams, and Thomas Jefferson draft the Declaration of Independence. The Declaration laid the groundwork for American democracy by proclaiming, "All men are created equal. …"

are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. That to secure these rights, governments are instituted among men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed.

More specifically, in democracies, these fundamental or inalienable rights include freedom of speech and expression, freedom of religion and conscience, freedom of assembly, and the right to equal protection before the law. This is by no means an exhaustive list of the rights that citizens enjoy in a democracy, but it does constitute a set of the irreducible core rights that any democratic government worthy of the name must uphold. Since they exist independently of government, in Jefferson's view, these rights cannot be legislated away, nor should they be subject to the whim of an electoral majority.

Speech, Assembly, and Protest

Freedom of speech and expression, especially about political and social issues, is the lifeblood of any democracy. Democratic governments do not control the content of most written and verbal speech. Thus democracies are usually filled with many voices expressing different or even contrary ideas and opinions. Democracies tend to be noisy.

Democracy depends upon a literate, knowledgeable citizenry whose access to information enables it to participate as fully as possible in the public life of society and to criticize

unwise or oppressive government officials or policies. Citizens and their elected representatives recognize that democracy depends upon the widest possible access to uncensored ideas, data, and opinions. For a free people to govern themselves, they must be free to express themselves — openly, publicly, and repeatedly — in speech and in writing.

The protection of free speech is a so-called "negative right," simply requiring that the government refrain from limiting speech. For the most part, the authorities in a democracy are uninvolved in the content of written and verbal speech.

Protests serve as a testing ground for any democracy — thus the right to peaceful assembly is essential and plays an integral part in facilitating the use of free speech. A civil society allows for spirited debate among those in disagreement over the issues. In the modern United States, even fundamental issues of national security, war, and peace are discussed freely in newspapers and in broadcast media, with those opposed to the administration's foreign policy easily publicizing their views.

Freedom of speech is a fundamental right, but it is not absolute, and cannot be used to incite to violence. Slander and libel, if proven, are usually defined and controlled through the courts. Democracies generally require a high degree of threat to justify banning speech or gatherings that may incite violence, untruthfully harm the reputation of others, or overthrow a constitutional government. Many democracies ban speech that promotes racism or ethnic hatred. The challenge for all democracies, however, is one of balance: to defend freedom

Democracy as hope: In 2006, 20,000 people marched in Hong Kong carrying banners reading "Justice, Equality, Democracy, and Hope."

of speech and assembly while countering speech that truly encourages violence, intimidation, or subversion of democratic institutions. One can disagree forcefully and publicly with the actions of a public official; calling for his (or her) assassination, however, is a crime.

Religious Freedom and Tolerance

All citizens should be free to follow their conscience in matters of religious faith. Freedom of religion includes the right to worship alone or with others, in public or private, or not to worship at all, and to participate in religious observance, practice, and teaching without fear of persecution from government or other groups in society. All people have the right to worship or assemble in connection with a religion or belief, and to establish and maintain places for these purposes.

Like other fundamental human rights, religious freedom is not created or granted by the state, but all democratic states should protect it. Although many democracies may choose to recognize an official separation of church and state, the values of government and religion are not in fundamental conflict. Governments that protect religious freedom for all their citizens are more likely to protect other rights necessary for religious freedom, such as free speech and assembly. The American colonies, virtually theocratic states in the 17th and 18th centuries, developed theories of religious tolerance and secular democracy almost simultaneously. By contrast, some of the totalitarian dictatorships of the 20th century attempted to wipe out religion, seeing it (rightly) as a form of self-expression by the individual conscience, akin to political speech. Genuine democracies recognize that individual religious differences must be respected and that a key role of government is to protect religious choice, even in cases where the state sanctions a particular religious faith. However, this does not mean that religion itself can become an excuse for violence against other religions or against society as a whole. Religion is exercised within the context of a democratic society but does not take it over.

Democratic development and economic prosperity often go hand in hand: above, a market in Istanbul.

Citizen Responsibilities

Citizenship in a democracy requires participation, civility, patience — rights as well as responsibilities. Political scientist Benjamin Barber has noted, "Democracy is often understood as the rule of the majority, and rights are understood more and more as the private possessions of individuals. ... But this is to misunderstand both rights and democracy." For democracy to succeed, citizens must be active, not passive, because they know that the success or failure of the government is their responsibility, and no one else's.

As democracies become stable, they permit more freedoms. When French voters were given the right to vote by referendum on the proposed European Constitution (here being mailed to them in May 2005), they expressed their binding opinion by rejecting it.

It is certainly true that individuals exercise basic rights — such as freedom of speech, assembly, religion — but in another sense, rights, like individuals, do not function in isolation. Rights are exercised within the framework of a society, which is why rights and responsibilities are so closely connected.

Democratic government, which is elected by and accountable to its citizens, protects individual rights so that citizens in a democracy can undertake their civic obligations and responsibilities, thereby strengthening the society as a whole.

At a minimum, citizens should educate themselves about the critical issues confronting their society, if only so that they can vote intelligently. Some obligations, such as serving on juries in civil or criminal trials or in the military, may be required by law, but most are voluntary.

The essence of democratic action is the peaceful, active, freely chosen participation of its citizens in the public life of their community and nation. According to scholar Diane Ravitch, "Democracy is a process, a way of living and working together. It is evolutionary, not static. It requires cooperation, compromise, and tolerance among all citizens. Making it work is hard, not easy. Freedom means responsibility, not freedom from responsibility." Fulfilling this responsibility can involve active engagement in organizations or the pursuit of specific community goals; above all, fulfillment in a democracy involves a certain attitude, a willingness to believe that people who are different from you have similar rights.

Democratic Elections

Free and fair elections are essential in assuring the consent of the governed, which is the bedrock of democratic politics. Elections serve as the principal mechanism for translating that consent into governmental authority.

Elements of Democratic Elections

The late Jeane Kirkpatrick, scholar and former U.S. representative to the United Nations, offered this definition: "Democratic elections are not merely symbolic. ...They are competitive, periodic, inclusive, definitive elections in which the

As democracy expands worldwide, so does the ballot box. Above: Yemeni voter.

Free choice is essential in elections. Here, voters in the Democratic Republic of Congo peruse choices in 2006.

chief decision-makers in a government are selected by citizens who enjoy broad freedom to criticize government, to publish their criticism, and to present alternatives."

Democratic elections are competitive. Opposition parties and candidates must enjoy the freedom of speech, assembly, and movement necessary to voice their criticisms of the government openly and to bring alternative policies and candidates to the voters. Simply permitting the opposition access to the ballot is not enough. The party in power may enjoy the advantages of incumbency, but the rules and conduct of the election contest must be fair. On the other hand, freedom

The more self-confident the democracy, the greater the variety of candidates. Michelle Bachelet's election as Chilean president expanded political horizons for women.

of assembly for opposition parties does not imply mob rule or violence. It means debate.

Democratic elections are periodic. Democracies do not elect dictators or presidents-for-life. Elected officials are accountable to the people, and they must return to the voters at prescribed intervals to seek their mandate to continue in office and face the risk of being voted out of office.

Democratic elections are inclusive. The definition of citizen and voter must be large enough to include the adult population. A government chosen by a small, exclusive group is not a democracy — no matter how democratic its internal workings may appear. One of the great dramas of democracy throughout history has been the struggle of excluded groups — whether racial, ethnic, or religious minorities, or women — to win full citizenship, and with it the right to vote, hold office, and participate fully in the society.

Democratic elections are definitive. They determine the

Citizens vote on laws and issues as well as candidates for office. This 2007 photo shows an Ecuadorian woman voting on constitutional reform.

leadership of the government for a set period of time. Popularly elected representatives hold the reins of power; they are not simply figureheads or symbolic leaders.

Democracies thrive on openness and accountability, with one very important exception: the act of voting itself. To minimize the opportunity for intimidation, voters in a democracy must be permitted to cast their ballots in secret. At the same time, the protection of the ballot box and tallying of vote totals must be conducted as openly as possible, so that citizens are confident that the results are accurate and that the government does, indeed, rest upon their "consent."

Loyal Opposition

One of the most difficult concepts for some to accept, especially in nations where the transition of power has historically taken place at the point of a gun, is that of the "loyal opposition." This idea is a vital one, however. It means, in essence, that all sides in a democracy share a common commitment to its basic values. Political competitors don't necessarily have to like each other, but they must tolerate one another and acknowledge that each has a legitimate and important role to play. Moreover, the ground rules of the society must encourage tolerance and civility in public debate.

In democracy, losers and winners wage political warfare via parliamentary procedure. Above: Japanese parliament, Tokyo.

When the election is over, the losers accept the judgment of the voters. If the incumbent party loses, it turns over power peacefully. No matter who wins, both sides agree to cooperate in solving the common problems of the

Election workers count votes by candlelight in Dakar, Senegal.

society. The opposition continues to participate in public life with the knowledge that its role is essential in any democracy. It is loyal not to the specific policies of the government, but to the fundamental legitimacy of the state and to the democratic process itself.

Democratic elections, after all, are not a fight for survival but a competition to serve.

Administering Elections

The way public officials in a democracy are elected can vary enormously. On the national level, for example, legislators can be chosen by districts that each elect a single representative, also know as the "winner-take- all" system. Alternatively, under a system of proportional representation, each political party is represented in the legislature according to its percentage of the total vote nationwide. Provincial and local elections can mirror these national models.

Whatever the exact system, election processes must be seen as fair and open so that the election results are recognized as legitimate. Public officials must ensure wide freedom to register as a voter or run for office; administer an impartial system for guaranteeing a secret ballot along with open, public vote counting; prevent voter fraud; and, if necessary, institute procedures for recounts and resolving election disputes.

Rule of Law

For much of human history, law was simply the will of the ruler. Democracies, by contrast, have established the principle of the rule of law for rulers and citizens alike.

Equal Adherence to Law

The rule of law protects fundamental political, social, and economic rights and defends citizens from the threats of both tyranny and lawlessness. Rule of law means that no individual, whether president or private citizen, stands above the law. Democratic governments exercise authority by way of the law and are themselves subject to the law's constraints.

In democracy, trials are open to the public. Here, a group of American teens gets a civics lesson and a symbolic choice.

Citizens living in democracies are willing to obey the laws of their society because they are submitting to their own rules and regulations. Justice is best achieved when the laws are established by the very people who must obey them. Whether rich or poor, ethnic majority or religious minority, political ally of the state or peaceful opponent — all must obey the laws.

The citizens of a democracy submit to the law because they recognize that, however indirectly, they are submitting to themselves as makers of the law. When laws are established by the people who then have to obey them, both law and democracy are served.

Due Process

In every society throughout history, those who have administered the criminal justice system have held power with the potential for abuse and tyranny. In the name of the state, individuals have been imprisoned, had their property seized, have been tortured, exiled, and executed without legal justification and often without formal charges ever being brought. No democratic society can tolerate such abuses.

Every state must have the power to maintain order and punish criminal acts, but the rules and procedures by which the state enforces its laws must be public and explicit — not secret, arbitrary, or subject to political manipulation — and they must be the same for all. This is what is meant by due process.

In order to implement due process, the following rules have evolved in constitutional democracies:

- No one's home can be searched by the police without a court order showing that there is good cause for such a search. The midnight knock of the secret police has no place in a democracy.
- No person shall be held under arrest without explicit, written charges that specify the alleged violation. Moreover, under the doctrine known as *habeas corpus*, every person who is arrested has a right to be brought before a court and must be released if a court finds that the arrest is invalid.
- Persons charged with crimes should not be held in prison for protracted periods before being tried. They are entitled to have a speedy and public trial, and to confront and question their accusers.
- Authorities are required to grant bail, or conditional release, to the accused pending trial if there is little likelihood that the suspect will flee or commit other crimes.
- Persons cannot be compelled to be witnesses against themselves. This prohibition against involuntary self-incrimination must be absolute. As a corollary, the police may not use torture or physical or psychological abuse against suspects under any circumstances.
- Persons shall not be subject to double jeopardy; that is, they cannot be charged with the same crime a second time if they have once been acquitted of it in a court of law.
- Because of their potential for abuse by the authorities, so-called *ex post facto* laws are also proscribed. These are laws made after the fact so that someone can be charged with a crime even though the act was not illegal at the time it occurred.
- Cruel or unusual punishments are prohibited.

Rule of law can be complicated: above, a lawsuit alleging wrongful employment termination begins in court in the State of Washington, 2005.

None of these restrictions means that the state lacks the necessary power to enforce the law and punish offenders. On the contrary, the criminal justice system in a democratic society will be effective to the degree that its administration is judged by the population to be fair and protective of individual safety, as well as serving the public interest.

Constitutionalism

A constitution, which states government's fundamental obligations and the limitations on state power, is a vital institution for any democracy.

Constitutions: Supreme Law

A constitution defines the basic purposes and aspirations of a society for the sake of the common welfare of the people. All citizens, including the nation's leaders, are subject to the nation's constitution, which stands as the supreme law of the land.

Signing of the U.S. Constitution, Philadelphia, 1787.

At a minimum, the constitution, which is usually codified in a single written document, establishes the authority of the national government, provides guarantees for fundamental human rights, and sets forth the government's basic operating procedures. Constitutions are often based on previously uncodified, but widely accepted, practices and precedents. For instance, the U.S. Constitution is based on concepts derived from British common law as well as 18th-century philosophers' attempts to define the rights of man.

Constitutionalism recognizes that democratic and accountable government must be coupled with clearly defined limits on the power of government. All laws, therefore, must be written in accordance with the constitution. In a democracy, a politically independent judiciary allows citizens to challenge laws they believe to be unconstitutional, and to seek court-ordered remedies for illegal actions by the government or its officials.

Despite their enduring, monumental qualities, constitutions must be capable of change and adaptation if they are to be more than admirable fossils. The world's oldest written constitution, that of the United States, consists of seven brief articles and 27 amendments — the first 10 of which are known as the Bill of Rights. This written document, however, is also the foundation for a vast "constitutional" structure of judicial decisions, statutes, presidential actions, and practices that has been erected over the past 200 years and which has kept the U.S. Constitution alive and relevant.

In general, there are two schools of thought about the process of amending, or changing, a nation's constitution. One holds that it is best to adopt a difficult procedure, requiring many steps and large majorities for amendment. As a result, the constitution is changed infrequently, and then only for compelling reasons that receive substantial public support. This is the U.S. model.

A simpler method of constitutional change, which many nations use, is to provide that any amendment may be adopted by approval of the legislature and passed by the voters at the next election. Constitutions revised in this fashion can become quite lengthy.

Federalism: Dispersal of Power

When free people choose to live under an agreed constitutional framework, it may be implemented in various ways. Some democracies have unitary administrations. Another solution is a federal system of government — power shared at the local, regional, and national levels.

The United States, for example, is a federal republic with states that have their own legal standing and authority independent of the federal government. Unlike the political subdivisions in nations such as Britain and France, which have a unitary political structure, American states cannot be abolished or changed by the federal government. Although power at the national level in the United States has grown significantly,

In the U.S. federal system, institutions such as the police and schools are largely funded and managed at the local level.

states still possess significant responsibilities in fields such as education, health, transportation, and law enforcement. In turn, individual U.S. states have generally followed the federal model by delegating many functions, such as the operation of schools and police, to local communities.

The divisions of power and authority in a federal system are never neat and tidy — federal, state, and local agencies can all have overlapping and even conflicting agendas in areas such as education and criminal justice — but federalism can maximize opportunities for the citizen involvement so vital to the functioning of democratic society. Americans believe their federal structure protects their individual autonomy.

Three Pillars of Government

As has been noted, through free elections citizens of a democracy confer powers that are defined by law upon their leaders. In a constitutional democracy, the power of government is divided so that the legislature makes the laws, the executive authority carries them out, and the judiciary operates quasi-independently. These divisions are sometimes described as a "separation of powers." In actual practice, however, such divisions are rarely neat, and in most modern democratic states these powers are overlapping and shared as much as they are separated. Legislatures may attempt to manage programs through detailed regulations; executive offices routinely engage in detailed rulemaking; and both legislators and executive officers conduct judicial-style hearings on a wide range of issues.

Executive Authority

In constitutional democracies, executive authority is generally limited in three ways: by separation of powers, just noted, among the national government's executive, legislative, and judicial branches, with the legislature and judiciary able to check the power of the executive branch; by the constitutional guarantees of fundamental rights, and by periodic elections.

For authoritarians and other critics, a common misapprehension is that democracies, lacking the power to oppress, also lack the authority to govern. This view is fundamentally wrong: Democracies require that their governments be limited, not that they be weak.

Some democracies combine elements of presidential and parliamentary systems: above, Indian President Pratibha Patil arrives at swearing-in ceremony, 2007.

Executive authority in modern democracies is generally organized in one of two ways: as a parliamentary or a presidential system.

In a parliamentary system, the majority party (or a coalition of parties willing to govern together) in the legislature forms the executive branch of the government, headed by a prime minister. The legislative and executive branches are not entirely distinct from one another in a parliamentary system, since the prime minister and members of the cabinet are drawn from the parliament; even so, the prime minister is the national leader.

England's House of Commons, the lower chamber of the British Parliament, is one of the world's oldest and most successful democratic institutions.

In a presidential system, by contrast, the president usually is elected separately from the members of the legislature. Both the president and the legislature have their own power bases and political constituencies, which serve to check and balance each other.

Each system has its own institutional strengths and weaknesses.

A principal claim for parliamentary systems, which today make up the majority of democracies, is their responsiveness and flexibility. Parliamentary governments, especially if elected through proportional representation, tend toward multiparty systems where even relatively small political groupings are represented in the legislature. As a result, distinct minorities can still participate in the political process at the highest levels of government. Should the governing coalition collapse or the strongest party lose its mandate, the prime minister resigns and a new government forms or new elections take place — all usually within a relatively short time.

The major drawback to parliaments is the dark side of flexibility and power sharing: instability. Multiparty coalitions may be fragile and collapse at the first sign of political crisis, resulting in governments that are in office for relatively short periods of time and unable to address difficult political issues. On the other hand, other parliamentary systems are stabilized by strong majority parties.

For presidential systems, the principal claims are direct accountability, continuity, and strength. Presidents, elected for fixed periods by the people, can claim authority deriving from direct election, whatever the standing of their political party in the congress. By creating separate but theoretically equal branches of government, a presidential system seeks to establish strong executive and legislative institutions, each able to claim a mandate from the people and each capable of checking and balancing the other.

The weakness of separately elected presidents and legislatures is a potential stalemate. Presidents may not possess enough political allies in the legislature to cast the votes to enact the policies they want, but by employing their veto power (the right of the executive under certain circumstances to annul

laws passed by the legislature), they can prevent the legislature from enacting its own legislative programs. The late political scientist Richard Neustadt described presidential power in the United States as "not the power to command, but the power to persuade." What Neustadt meant is that a U.S. president who wants Congress to enact a legislative program to his liking — or at least to avoid laws he disagrees with being passed by political opponents — must command political popularity with the public, and be able to forge effective alliances in the Congress.

The Legislative Realm

Elected legislatures — whether under a parliamentary or presidential system — are the principal forum for deliberating, debating, and passing laws in a representative democracy. They are not so-called rubber-stamp parliaments merely approving the decisions of an authoritarian leader.

Legislators may question government officials about their actions and decisions, approve national budgets, and confirm executive appointees to courts and ministries. In some democracies, legislative committees provide lawmakers a forum for these public examinations of national issues. Legislators may support the government in power or they may serve as a loyal political opposition that offers alternative policies and programs.

Legislators have a responsibility to articulate their views as effectively as possible. But they must work within the democratic ethic of tolerance, respect, and compromise to reach

When out of office, the "loyal opposition" criticizes and checks the government. Spain's opposition party leader speaks to the press.

agreements that will benefit the general welfare of all the people — not just their political supporters. Each legislator must alone decide on how to balance the general welfare with the needs of a local constituency.

Lacking the separation of powers characteristic of a presidential system, parliamentary systems must rely much more heavily on the internal political dynamics of the parliament itself to provide checks and balances on the power of the government. These usually take the form of a single organized opposition party that "shadows" the government, or of competition among multiple opposition parties.

Independent and professional judges are the foundation of a fair, impartial, and constitutionally guaranteed system of courts of law. This independence does not imply judges can make decisions based on personal preferences, but rather that they are free to make lawful decisions — even if those decisions contradict the government or powerful parties involved in a case.

In democracies, the protective constitutional structure and prestige of the judicial branch of government guarantees independence from political pressure. Thus, judicial rulings can be impartial, based on the facts of a case, legal arguments, and relevant laws — without restrictions or improper influence by the executive or legislative branches. These principles ensure equal legal protection for all.

The professionalism of judges is one of their best defenses against social and political pressure.

The power of judges to review public laws and declare them in violation of the nation's constitution serves as a fundamental check on potential government abuse of power — even if the government is elected by a popular majority. This power, however, requires that the courts be seen as fundamentally independent and non-partisan and able to rest their decisions upon the law, not political considerations.

A judge leaves his bench during a criminal trial in Rome, 2005. The judge's costume reflects centuries of legal tradition.

Whether elected or appointed, judges must have job security or tenure, guaranteed by law, in order that they can make decisions without concern for pressure or attack by those in positions of authority. To ensure their impartiality, judicial ethics require judges to step aside (or "recuse" themselves) from deciding cases in which they have a personal conflict of interest. Trust in the court system's impartiality — in its being seen as the "non-political" branch of government — is a principal source of its strength and legitimacy.

Judges in a democracy cannot be removed for minor

complaints, or in response to political criticism. Instead, they can be removed only for serious crimes or infractions through the lengthy and difficult procedure of impeachment (bringing charges) and trial — either in the legislature or before a separate court panel.

Free and Independent Media

As modern societies grow in size and complexity, the arena for communication and public debate has become dominated by the media: radio and television, newspapers, magazines, books — and increasingly by newer media such as the Internet and satellite television.

Whether Web logs (known as blogs) or printed books, the media in a democracy have a number of overlapping but distinctive functions that remain fundamentally unchanged. One is to inform and educate. To make intelligent decisions about public policy, people need accurate, timely, unbiased information. However, another media function may be to advocate, even without pretense of objectivity. Media audiences may benefit from various, conflicting opinions, in order to obtain a wide range of viewpoints. This role is especially important during election campaigns, when few voters will have the opportunity to see, much less talk with, candidates in person.

Freedom of expression relies on vibrant, multi-faceted press and information services.

A second function of the media is to serve as a watchdog over government and other powerful institutions in the society. By holding to a standard of independence and objectivity, however imperfectly, the news media can expose the truth behind the claims of governments and hold public officials accountable for their actions.

The media can also take a more active role in public debate through editorials or investigative reporting, and serve as a forum for groups and individuals to express their opinions through letters and articles, and postings on the Web, with divergent points of view.

Commentators point to another increasingly important role for the media: "setting the agenda." Since they can't report everything, the news media must choose which issues to highlight and which to ignore. In short, they tend to decide what is news and what isn't. These decisions, in turn, influence the public's perception of what issues are most important. Unlike countries where the news is controlled by the government, however, the media in a democracy cannot simply manipulate or disregard issues at will. Their competitors, after all, are free to call attention to their own lists of important issues.

Citizens of a democracy live with the conviction that through the open exchange of ideas and opinions, truth will eventually win out over falsehood, the values of others will be better understood, areas of compromise more clearly defined, and the path of progress opened. The greater the volume of

Freedom of expression also takes the form of peaceful assemblies and demonstrations. Above: political rally, Zanzibar, 2005.

such exchanges, the better. Writer E.B. White once put it this way: "The press in our free country is reliable and useful not because of its good character but because of its great diversity. As long as there are many owners, each pursuing his own brand of truth, we the people have the opportunity to arrive at the truth and dwell in the light. ...There is safety in numbers."

Political Parties, Interest Groups, NGOs

Citizens cannot be required to take part in the political process, but without citizen action, democracy will weaken. The right of individuals to associate freely and to organize themselves as they see fit is fundamental to democracy.

Political Parties

Political parties recruit, nominate, and campaign to elect public officials; draw up policy programs for the government if they are in the majority; offer criticisms and alternative policies if they are in opposition; mobilize support for common policies

Aggressive questioning of political figures is routine in free societies. Above, a journalist directs a question at a French presidential candidate.

Open access to judicial proceedings is part of the free flow of information. Here, a man in China watches a televised trial.

among different interest groups; educate the public about public issues; and provide structure and rules for the society's political debate. In some political systems, ideology may be an important factor in recruiting and motivating party members. In others, economic interests or social outlook may be more important than ideological commitment.

Party organizations and procedures vary enormously. On one end of the spectrum, multiparty parliamentary systems can be tightly disciplined organizations run almost exclusively by full-time professionals. At the other extreme is the United States,

Connecticut senatorial candidate Joseph Lieberman courts firefighters in 2006. Interest groups are wooed and won by politicians one at a time.

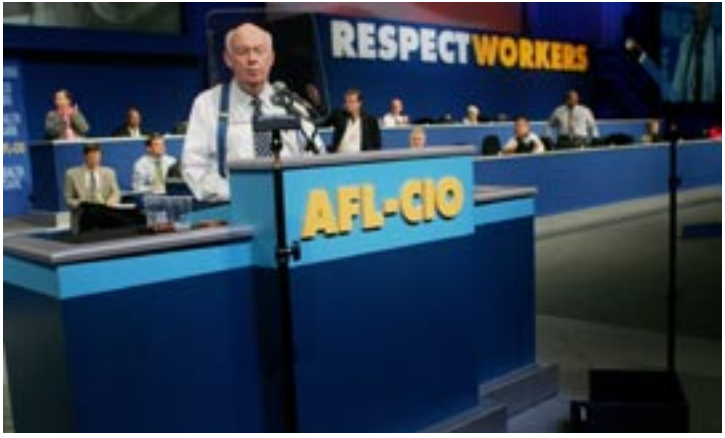
where rival Republican and Democratic parties are decentralized organizations functioning largely in Congress and at the state level — which then coalesce into active national organizations every four years to mount presidential election campaigns. Election campaigns in a democracy are often elaborate, time-consuming, and sometimes silly. But their function is serious: to provide a peaceful and fair method by which the people can select their leaders and determine public policy.

Interest Groups and NGOs

A citizen of a democracy may be a member of a number of private or volunteer organizations — including interest groups that try, in some fashion, to influence public policy and persuade public officials of their views. Critics may decry the influence of "special interests," but all citizens recognize that every democracy protects the right of such interest groups to organize and advocate for their causes.

Many traditional interest groups have been organized around economic issues; business and farm groups, and labor unions still wield powerful influences in most democratic systems. In recent decades, however, the nature and number of interest groups has grown and proliferated enormously to encompass almost every area of social, cultural, and political, even religious, activity. Professional organizations have risen to prominence, along with public interest groups that support causes — from improved health care for the poor to protection of the environment — that may not directly benefit their members. Governments themselves may function as interest groups: in the United States, associations of state governors, big-city mayors, and state legislatures regularly lobby the U.S. Congress on issues of concern to them.

The dynamics of interest group politics can be complex. Numbers matter — groups with large national followings will draw automatic attention and hearings from public officials. But in many cases, small, tightly organized groups that are



John Sweeney, head of the U.S. Federation in labor organizations, AFL-CIO, addresses a meeting. Trade unions are still important interest groups.

strongly committed to their issues can exercise influence out of proportion to their numbers.

One of the most striking developments in recent decades has been the emergence of internationally based nongovernmental organizations (NGOs). In attempting to serve the needs of a community, nation, or cause, which may be defined globally, these NGOs try to supplement or even challenge the work of the government by advocating, educating, and mobilizing attention around major public issues and monitoring the conduct of government and private enterprise.

Governments and NGOs frequently work as partners.


Non-governmental organizations work worldwide. Here, a Uganda aid worker uses a solar-powered computer provided by an American NGO.

NGOs may provide expertise and personnel on the ground for implementation of government-funded projects. NGOs may be politically unaffiliated, or they may be based on partisan ideals and seek to advance a particular cause or set of causes in the public interest. In either model the key point is that NGOs operate under minimal political control of states.

A field worker for a British NGO removes and stores a land mine in Sri Lanka.

Civil-Military Relations

Issues of war and peace are the most momentous any nation can face, and at times of crisis, many nations turn to their military for leadership.

Not in democracies.

In democracies, defense issues and threats to national security must be decided by the people, acting through their elected representatives. A democracy's military serves its nation rather than leads it: Military leaders advise elected leaders and carry out their decisions. Only those who are elected by the people have the ultimate authority and the responsibility to decide the fate of a nation. This principle of civilian control and authority over the military is fundamental to democracy.

Ukranian soldiers examine ballots in Kiev in 2002.

Civilians need to direct their nation's military and decide issues of national defense, not because they are necessarily wiser than military professionals, but precisely because they are the people's representatives and, as such, are charged with the responsibility for making these decisions and remaining accountable for them.

The military in a democracy exists to protect the nation and the freedoms of its people. It must not represent or support any particular political viewpoint or ethnic or social group. Its loyalty is to the larger ideals of the nation, to the rule of law, and to the principle of democracy itself. The purpose of a military is to defend society, not define it.

Any democratic government values the expertise and advice of military professionals in reaching policy decisions about defense and national security. But only the elected civilian leadership should make ultimate policy decisions regarding the nation's defense — which the military then implements.

Military figures may, of course, participate as individuals in the political life of their country, just like any other citizens. Military personnel may vote in elections. All military personnel, however, must first withdraw or retire from military service

U.S. military cadets throw their hats in the air upon graduation. A professional military needs to be as well educated as its civilian overlords.

before becoming involved in politics; armed services must remain separate from politics. The military are the neutral servants of the state and the guardians of society.

The Culture of Democracy

Human beings possess a variety of sometimes contradictory desires. People want safety, yet relish adventure; they aspire to individual freedom, yet demand social equality. Democracy is no different, and it is important to recognize that many of these tensions, even paradoxes, are present in every democratic society.

Conflict and Consensus

According to scholar and writer Larry Diamond, a central paradox exists between conflict and consensus. Democracy is in many ways nothing more than a set of rules for managing conflict. At the same time, this conflict must be managed within certain limits and result in compromises, consensus, or other agreements that all sides accept as legitimate. An overemphasis on one side of the equation can threaten the entire undertaking. If groups perceive democracy as nothing more than a forum in which they can press their demands, the society can shatter from within. If the government exerts excessive pressure

Democracy needs both conflict and consensus. In this photo, men in Sierra Leone discuss law.

to achieve consensus, stifling the voices of the people, the society can be crushed from above.

There is no easy solution to the conflict-consensus equation. Democracy is not a machine that runs by itself once the proper principles are inserted. A democratic society needs the commitment of citizens who accept the inevitability of intellectual and political conflict as well as the necessity for tolerance. From this perspective, it is important to recognize that many conflicts in a democratic society are not between clear-cut "right" and "wrong" but between differing interpretations of democratic rights and social priorities.

Education and Democracy

Education is a vital component of any society, but especially of a democracy. As Thomas Jefferson wrote: "If a nation expects to be ignorant and free, in a state of civilization, it expects what never was and never shall be."

There is a direct connection between education and democratic values: in democratic societies, educational content and practice support habits of democratic governance. This educational transmission process is vital in a democracy because effective democracies are dynamic, evolving forms of government that demand independent thinking by the citizenry. The opportunity for positive social and political change rests in citizens' hands. Governments should not view the education system as a means to indoctrinate students, but devote

An educated citizenry is, potentially, a free citizenry.

resources to education just as they strive to defend other basic needs of citizens.

In contrast to authoritarian societies that seek to inculcate an attitude of passive acceptance, the object of democratic education is to produce citizens who are independent, questioning, yet deeply familiar with the precepts and practices of democracy. Chester E. Finn Jr., a senior fellow at the Hoover Institution on education policy, has said: "People may be born with an appetite for personal freedom, but they are not born with knowledge about the social and political arrangements that make freedom possible over time for themselves and their

Education frees the spirit from the mundane, as with these Turkish university students.

children. ...Such things must be acquired. They must be learned." Learning about democracy begins in school; it continues throughout a life of civic involvement, and curiosity about the many kinds of information accessible in a free society.

Society and Democracy

Democratic constitutionalism is ultimately the foundation by which a society, through the clash and compromise of ideas, institutions, and individuals, reaches, however imperfectly, for truth. Democracy is pragmatic. Ideas and solutions to problems are not tested against a rigid ideology but tried in the real world where they can be argued over and changed, accepted, or

Using one's energy fully for one's own goals fosters individual identity.

discarded.

Scholar Diane Ravitch observes: "Coalition-building is the essence of democratic action. It teaches interest groups to negotiate with others, to compromise, and to work within the constitutional system. By working to establish coalition, groups with differences learn how to argue peaceably, how to pursue their goals in a democratic manner, and ultimately how to live in a world of diversity."

Self-government cannot always protect against mistakes, end ethnic strife, guarantee economic prosperity, or ensure happiness. It does, however, allow for public debate to identify and fix mistakes, permit groups to meet and resolve differences, offer opportunities for economic growth, and provide for social advancement and individual expression.

The late Josef Brodsky, Russian-born poet and Nobel Prize winner, wrote, "A free man, when he fails, blames nobody." It is true as well for the citizens of democracy who, finally, must take responsibility for the fate of the society in which they themselves have chosen to live.

Freedom permits people to live a peaceful, private life.

Democracy itself guarantees nothing. It offers instead the opportunity to succeed as well as the risk of failure. In Thomas Jefferson's ringing but shrewd phrase, the promise of democracy is "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness."

Democracy is then both a promise and a challenge. It is a promise that free human beings, working together, can govern themselves in a manner that will serve their aspirations for personal freedom, economic opportunity, and social justice. It is a challenge because the success of the democratic enterprise rests upon the shoulders of its citizens and no one else.

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