

# Roots of American Government

## The Meaning of Democracy

Democracy is a system of government that bases its legitimacy on the participation of the people. While democratic governments come in many varieties, they are uniformly characterized by (1) competitive elections, (2) the principle of political and legal equality, and (3) a high degree of individual freedom, or civil liberties. Due to reliance on elections, democracies have as their default principle the concept of majority rule. However, one of the dominant tensions running through democratic societies is the balance struck between the will of the majority and minority rights. The compromise between these two principles differs in different democratic states.

Democracy itself comes in many shapes and sizes. Be aware of the following distinctions when considering the type of democracy organized by the US Constitution:

### Direct Democracy vs. Representative Democracy

- A *direct democracy* is a system of government in which public decisions are made by the people directly, rather than by elected representatives. Generally only possible in small communities, although elements of direct democracy exist in California's referenda, initiatives, and recall elections.
- A *representative democracy* is a form of government in which representatives are elected to make policy and enforce laws while representing the citizens. All modern democratic countries are representative, not direct, democracies. A representative democracy is also known as a republic.

### Constitutional Democracy vs. Non-constitutional Democracy

- A *constitutional democracy* is a system of government based on popular sovereignty in which the structures, powers, and limits of government are set forth in a constitution.
- A *non-constitutional democracy* is a form of government that does not have, or follow, constitutional rules. The government does whatever those currently in power choose to do.

For a citizen, such governments are unpredictable and they may violate a person's rights with impunity.

### **Federal Democracy vs. Unitary Democracy**

- A *federal democracy* is a system of government in which power is constitutionally divided between a central governing authority and constituent political units (like states or provinces). Each enforces its own law directly on its citizens and neither the national government nor constituent political units can alter the arrangement without the consent of the other.
- A *unitary democracy* is a system of government in which constitutional authority lies in the hands of a single central government. Administrative divisions (subnational units) created by the central government are responsible for the everyday administration of government, but exercise only powers the central government chooses to delegate. Great Britain is an example of a country with a unitary system of government.

### **Presidential Democracy vs. Parliamentary Democracy**

- A *presidential democracy* is a form of government in which the executive branch is elected separately from the legislative branch. The chief executive, the president, is elected for a fixed term and cannot be removed except by extraordinary measures. The powers vested in the president are usually balanced against those vested in the legislature. In the American presidential system, the legislature must debate and pass bills. The president has the power to veto a bill, preventing its adoption. However, the legislature may override the president's veto if it can muster enough votes.
- A *parliamentary democracy* is a form of representative democracy in which political power is vested in an elected legislature, but the executive and legislative branches are not separate. The elected legislature (parliament) chooses the chief executive (prime minister). The legislature may remove the prime minister at any time by a vote of no confidence and often approves the prime minister's cabinet members. The fusion of the legislative and executive branches in the parliamentary system leads to party members voting along party lines.

## **American Democracy in Comparative Perspective**

An important theme running through this course is the desirability of examining American government in a comparative context by utilizing the comparative method. The United States' formal democratic institutions are considerably different from those of most other democracies. For example, while practically all modern democracies are constitutional democracies, the United States is a federal democracy but most democracies are unitary. And while most democracies are parliamentary democracies, the US is a presidential democracy. Americans who have not studied other countries often assume that the United States provided the model for the rest of the world's democracies. While there is little doubt that the United States and its story have inspired democratic ideals worldwide, most democratic governments have chosen to design their institutions in different ways.

Why should we care how other democracies work? It is our belief that to accurately evaluate the quality of American democracy it is important to compare it to the alternatives out there. The point is not to make any sweeping generalizations about whether the United States is better or worse than its democratic counterparts around the world, but to help you better understand the consequences of the way our government institutions have been designed. The point is also not to make you an expert about other countries, but to provide just enough foreign examples for you to make more informed judgments about American politics. The question we ask is how can someone make sound judgments about American democracy if they have no knowledge of the alternatives? The comparative method should help you answer questions that, in social science parlance, are both positive ("What is the reality of things as they are?") and normative ("How should things be?"). We believe that studying the United States in a larger context will help you be more successful in thinking critically about government than those who only study it in isolation.

## **Characteristics of American Democracy**

Democracy is more than a set of specific government institutions; it encompasses values, attitudes, and practices which may take different forms among cultures and societies around the world. This activity examines the characteristics of American democracy.

## **Interactive Activity: Characteristics of American Democracy**

Focuses on the characteristics of American democracy. Characteristics include: (1) the consent to govern comes from the people, (2) equal protection of the law; each vote counts the same, etc., (3) freedom to pursue one's own economic future and moral matters, (4) sovereignty rests with the people, (5) political leaders are elected by majority vote, and (6) government must keep the rights and liberties of the individual secure.

## **Additional Resources**

### **Websites**

#### **[National Endowment for Democracy](#)**

[www.ned.org](http://www.ned.org)

Chaired by former US Representative Martin Frost, this nonprofit foundation is “dedicated to the growth and strengthening of democratic institutions around the world.” The website contains articles from the organization’s *Journal of Democracy*, a searchable resource library, and stories about democratic growth throughout the world.

#### **[Freedom House](#)**

<http://www.freedomhouse.org/>

This nongovernmental research institute, founded in 1942 by Wendell Willkie and Eleanor Roosevelt, describes itself as “a clear voice for democracy and freedom around the world.” The organization’s annual *Freedom of the World* report surveys each country’s degree of political freedom and civil liberties.