

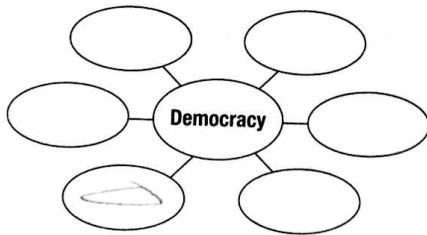
SECTION 3

Basic Concepts of Democracy



Guiding Question

What are the basic concepts of democracy? Use a concept web like the one below to take notes on the basic concepts of democracy.



Political Dictionary

- majority rule
- free enterprise system
- compromise
- citizen

Objectives

1. Understand the foundations of democracy.
2. Analyze the connections between democracy and the free enterprise system.

What do you make of this assessment of democracy by British statesman James Bryce: "No government demands so much from the citizen as Democracy, and none gives so much back"? What does democratic government demand from you? What does it give you in return?

Foundations

Democracy is not inevitable. It does not exist in the United States simply because Americans regard it as the best of all possible political systems. Rather, democracy exists in this country because the American people believe in its basic concepts. It will continue to exist only for as long as we, the people, continue to subscribe to and practice those concepts.

Sir Winston Churchill (1874–1965) once put the argument for democracy this way: "No one pretends that democracy is perfect or all-wise. Indeed, it has been said that democracy is the worst form of government except all those other forms that have been tried from time to time."

The American concept of democracy—what we believe democracy means—rests on these basic notions:

1. Recognition of the fundamental worth and dignity of every person;
2. Respect for the equality of all persons;
3. Faith in majority rule and an insistence upon minority rights;
4. Acceptance of the necessity of compromise; and
5. Insistence upon the widest possible degree of individual freedom;

Of course, these concepts can be worded in other ways. No matter what the wording, however, they form the very minimum with which anyone who professes to believe in democracy must agree.

Worth of the Individual Democracy is firmly based upon a belief in the fundamental importance of the individual. Each individual, no matter what his or her station in life, is a separate and distinct being.

Image Above: Children gather to celebrate Flag Day in New York City.

This concept of the dignity and worth of the individual is of overriding importance in democratic thought. At various times, of course, the welfare of one or a few individuals is subordinated to the interests of the many in a democracy. People can be forced to do certain things whether they want to or not. Examples range from paying taxes to registering for the draft to stopping at a stop sign.

When a democratic society forces people to pay a tax or obey traffic signals, it is serving the interests of the many. However, it is not simply serving the interests of the many who as a mass of people happen to outnumber the few. Rather, it is serving the many who, as individuals, together make up that society.

The distinction we are trying to make here between *an* individual and *all* individuals may be difficult to grasp. It is, however, critically important to a real understanding of the meaning of democracy.

Equality of All Persons Hand in hand with the belief in the worth of the individual, democracy stresses the equality of all individuals. It holds, with Jefferson, that "all men are created equal."

Certainly, democracy does not imply an equality of condition for all persons. Thus, it does not claim that all are born with the same mental or physical abilities. Nor does it hold

that all persons have a right to an equal share of worldly goods.

Rather, the democratic concept of equality means that every person is entitled to (1) equality of opportunity and (2) equality before the law. That is, the democratic concept of equality holds that no person should be held back for any such arbitrary reasons as those based on race, color, religion, or gender. It states that each person must be free to develop himself or herself as fully as he or she wishes to, and that each person should be treated as the equal of all other persons under the law.

We have come a great distance toward the goal of equality for all in this country. It is clear, however, that we are still a considerable distance from a genuine, universally recognized and respected equality for all of America's people.

Majority Rule, Minority Rights In a democracy, the will of the people and not the dictate of the ruling few determines public policy. But what is the popular will, and how is it determined? Some device must exist by which these crucial questions can be answered. The only satisfactory device democracy knows is that of **majority rule**. Democracy holds that a majority will be right more often than it will be wrong, and that the majority will also be right more often than any one person or small group will.

✓ Checkpoint

To what are citizens entitled under the democratic concept of equality?

subordinate

v. of lesser rank

arbitrary

adj. based on unsupported opinion, random choice

inevitable

adj. unavoidable, sure to happen

In *Brown v. Board of Education*, (1954) the Supreme Court ruled that segregation denied African Americans equality guaranteed by the Constitution and the democratic system. Arkansas fought the integration of its schools. Elizabeth Eckford (inset) was one of nine African Americans who enrolled at Central High School in Little Rock in 1957.

Below, seven of the students known as the Little Rock Nine sit with Thurgood Marshall, who argued the case.



Democracy can be described as an experiment or a trial-and-error process designed to find satisfactory ways to order human relations. Democracy does not dictate that the majority will always arrive at the best decisions on public matters. In fact, the democratic process is not meant to come up with “right” or “best” answers. Rather, the democratic process is a search for *satisfactory* solutions to public problems.

Of course, in a democracy the majority’s decisions will usually be more, rather than less, satisfactory. Democracy does admit the possibility of mistakes; there is the possibility that “wrong” or less satisfactory answers will sometimes be found. Democracy also recognizes that seldom is any solution to a public problem so satisfactory that it cannot be improved upon, and that circumstances can change over time. So, the process of experimentation, of seeking answers to public questions, is a never-ending one.

Certainly, a democracy cannot work without the principle of majority rule. Unchecked, however, a majority could destroy its opposition and, in the process, destroy democracy itself. Thus, democracy requires majority rule restrained by minority rights. The majority must always recognize the right of any minority to become, if it can by fair and lawful means, the majority. The majority must always

be willing to listen to a minority’s argument, to hear its objections, to bear its criticisms, and to welcome its suggestions.

Necessity of Compromise In a democracy, public decision making must be largely a matter of give-and-take among the various competing interests. It is a matter of compromise in order to find the position most acceptable to the largest number. **Compromise** is the process of blending and adjusting competing views and interests.

Compromise is an essential part of the democratic concept for two major reasons. First, remember that democracy puts the individual first and, at the same time, insists that each individual is the equal of all others. In a democratic society made up of many individuals and groups with many different opinions and interests, how can the people make public decisions except by compromise?

Second, few public questions have only two sides. Most can be answered in several ways. Take the apparently simple question of how a city should pay for the paving of a public street. Should it charge those who own property along the street? Or should the costs be paid from the city’s general treasury? Or should the city and the adjacent property owners share the costs? What about those who will use the street but do not live in the city? Should they have to pay a toll?

Remember, compromise is a process, a way of achieving majority agreement. It is never an end in itself. Not all compromises are good, and not all are necessary.

Individual Freedom It should be clear by this point that democracy can thrive only in an atmosphere of individual freedom. However, democracy does not and cannot insist on complete freedom for the individual. Absolute freedom can exist only in a state of anarchy—the total absence of government. Anarchy can only lead, inevitably and quickly, to rule by the strong and ruthless.

Democracy does require that each individual must be as free to do as he or she pleases as far as the freedom of all will allow. Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes once had this to say about the relative nature of each individual’s rights: “The right to swing my fist ends where the other man’s nose begins.”



► Analyzing Cartoons Who do the chefs represent in this cartoon?

Drawing the line between the rights of one individual and those of another is not easy. Still, the drawing of that line is a continuous and vitally important function of democratic government. As John F. Kennedy put it: "The rights of every man are diminished when the rights of one man are threatened."

Striking the proper balance between freedom for the individual and the rights of society as a whole is similarly difficult—and vital. Abraham Lincoln described democracy's problem in these words:

PRIMARY SOURCES

Must a government, of necessity, be too strong for the liberties of its own people, or too weak to maintain its own existence?

—Message to Congress,
July 4, 1861

Human beings desire both liberty and authority. Democratic government must work constantly to strike the proper balance between the two. The authority of government must be adequate to the needs of society. At the same time, that authority must never be allowed to become so great that it restricts the individual beyond what is absolutely necessary.

Duties and Responsibilities of Citizenship

Over the centuries, any number of statesmen, philosophers, and others have told us that citizenship carries with it both duties and responsibilities. Theodore Roosevelt put that point this way in 1902: "The first requisite of a good citizen in our republic is that he should be able and willing to pull his weight."

In a democratic society, the *duties* of "a good citizen" all revolve around his or her commitment to obey the law—a point long accepted in this country. In his Farewell Address in 1796, George Washington put that obligation this way: "the very idea of the power and right of the People to establish Government presupposes the duty of every individual to obey the established Government."

The several *responsibilities* of "a good citizen" in a free society all come down to this: an abiding respect for each of the core beliefs on which democracy is based in this country. A **citizen** is one who holds both rights and responsibilities in a state. Look again at page 20 and then ask yourself this question: Do I understand and am I committed to honoring the basic concepts of American democracy?

Checkpoint
Name two duties of every U.S. citizen.

Democracy and the Free Enterprise System

The American commitment to freedom for the individual is deep-rooted, and it is as evident in the nation's economic system as it is in the political system. The American economic system is often called the **free enterprise system**. It is an economic system characterized by the private ownership of capital goods; investments made by private decision, not by government directive; and success or failure determined by competition in the marketplace. The free enterprise system is based on four fundamental factors: private ownership, individual initiative, profit, and competition.

adequate
adj. enough to meet the needs of a situation

initiative
n. enterprise, resourcefulness

Duties and Responsibilities of Citizenship

Duties

- Serving on a jury
- Serving as a witness when called
- Attending school
- Paying taxes
- Registering for the draft (men only)
- Obeying local, State, and national laws
- Respecting the rights of others

Responsibilities

- Voting
- Volunteering
- Participating in civic life
- Understanding the workings of our government

» Analyzing Charts Many duties and responsibilities come with being a citizen. Why might obeying the law be a duty rather than a responsibility?