

The Principles of Democracy

Democracy is a type of government that involves rule by the people. Democratic principles include universal participation in government. It also involves free and open elections. A government is responsive to the popular will. And, democracy involves basic freedoms, such as those found in the First Amendment. These are necessary for a functioning democracy.

What is Democracy?

There are [many types of government](#).

But, democracy seems to be special. "Democracy" comes from words meaning "rule by the people." Our Constitution begins in the name of "We the People of the United States."

Basic Principles of Democracy

Democracy involves both procedural (actions) and substantive (ideas) aspects.

Procedural Democracy

Procedures are ways we do things. It is concerned with the principles involved with how the government should make decisions. There are four basic principles: universal participation, political equality, majority rule, and responsive government.

Democracy means that **everyone can take part** in the process of government.

There are many ways this can be done. The basic way is voting. But, some people (for example, children under eighteen) cannot vote. They still can participate, including by speaking out. The students who [wore black armbands](#) against the Vietnam War were participating in government.

There are various ways for the public to directly take part in actual government besides voting. Jury duty might be inconvenient, but it gives the people a direct role in the carrying out of justice. The people also have a right to serve in the military. In times of war, this right becomes an obligation when there is a draft in place.

Each person has **basic equality** in the voting process. The Constitution has many provisions against inequality in voting. The secret ballot at the polling place guards against coercion and pressure from the powerful. Campaign finance laws try to limit the power of money in politics.

Democracy means **majority rule**. The candidate with the most votes wins. This is even the rule in our federal courts. If a majority of judges decide something, that is the law of the case.

Under a democratic government, the will of the people is respected. This is the ideal of "**responsiveness**," which means a government respecting the wants of the people. If the

government does not do this, there can be protests, electoral losses at the ballot place, or even [violence](#).

Substantive Democracy

Substantive democracy involves the rights and duties necessary for the procedures listed above. They include such things as civil liberties, civil rights, economic and social rights, and civil responsibility.

Civil liberties are freedoms such as those found in the First Amendment (freedom of belief, [expression](#), association, and petition). They are the life's blood of democracy. We have the ability to formulate our own beliefs, join together, and make them known.

Civil rights are protections against discrimination. These rights promote political equality. They sometimes involve government assistance, such as a ramp provided to help the disabled.

Economic and social rights provide a safety net that allows people the ability to be full members of society. They also include such things as the right to public education. They are not only "benefits" but essential to democracy.

Our preferred candidate does not always win in the end. But, certain basic rights, even for the losing "minority," are protected for all. The people in the end are able to govern. And, in return, we have a [civil responsibility](#) to take part. Voting rights lead to a duty to vote.

"A Republic for Which it Stands"

A **republic** is a type of government where people choose representatives to carry out their will. When the Constitution speaks of a "republican form of government" (Article IV), it also assumes certain basic principles, including rule of law.

And, overall, our republic honors democratic principles. It's a **democratic republic**.

We the People

Democracy is messy. Congress often gets the worst marks of the 3 branches, though a large number of people also distrust the president, and more and more people now distrust the Supreme Court.

We should remember the saying about throwing stones in glass houses. The people themselves govern in a democracy. How are we doing? While we complain on our social media of choice, how many even show up to vote? Are we informed about the issues?

As Uncle Ben warns Spiderman: "With great power comes great responsibility." **We the People** have the power in this country. We have a responsibility to use it wisely.