



The Concepts and Fundamental Principles of Democracy

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3 The Overall Concept of Democracy

Democracy originated more than 2,400 years ago in ancient Greece. The word “democracy” means “rule by the people.” While this definition tells us that the citizens of a democracy govern their nation, it omits essential parts of the idea of democracy as practiced in countries around the world. The principal purposes for which the People establish democratic government are *the protection and promotion of their rights, interests, and welfare*. Democracy requires that each individual be free to participate in the political community’s self-government. *Thus political freedom lies at the heart of the concept of democracy*. The overall concept of modern democracy has three principal parts: “democracy,” “constitutionalism,” and “liberalism.” Each must exist in a political system for it to be a genuine democracy.

Democracy— Rule by the People through free and fair elections and other forms of participation

- Popular sovereignty—the idea that the People are the ultimate authority and the source of the authority of government—is a fundamental principle of democracy.
- The political equality of all citizens is an essential principle of democracy.
- In a democracy, the just powers of government are based upon the consent of the governed.
- Free elections and other forms of civic participation are essential to democracy.
 - ▶ If the People are to rule, they must have practical means of determining who shall exercise political power on their behalf.
 - ▶ If they are to rule, the People must also monitor and influence officials’ behavior while in office.
 - ▶ Elections are at the heart of the practical means for the People to assert their sovereignty.
- Elections in themselves do not fulfill the requirement of modern democracies; they must be *free, fair, and sufficiently frequent* if the People’s will is to have effect.
 - ▶ “Free elections” means all adult citizens can vote in elections and stand for office. Candidates for office are not in any way blocked from addressing the electorate.
 - ▶ “Fair elections” means elections that are fundamentally honest. Voters must not be stopped from voting and all votes must be accurately counted.
 - ▶ “Frequent elections” means that elections must be held often enough to enable the People to exercise their control of government.
- As overseers of government, the People must have *alternative sources of information*.
 - ▶ No single source, especially an official government source, is sufficient.
 - ▶ Freedom of the press is therefore an essential aspect of democratic government.

Constitutionalism—The use of constitutions to limit government by law

- The People do not give power to government to oppress or abuse, but rather to protect their fundamental rights, interests, and welfare. Therefore they limit government power by authoritative fundamental laws called “constitutions.” In every democracy, with three exceptions (Britain, Israel, and New Zealand), the constitution is a written document.

- Constitutions are the means used to state what powers government shall have. In defining these powers, constitutions limit them. This is so because governments may exercise only the powers defined in the constitution.
- Constitutional government is government that as a practical matter is *limited* both in *what* it does and *how* it acts.
- Government is limited to acting within the law and cannot make up rules to suit its convenience. The law applies to everyone, including those who govern. *No one is above the law.*
- An essential means of limiting government is establishing a *rule of law*, beginning with the constitution itself, which is a fundamental law. Thus the rule of law is a primary element of constitutionalism. (See 24. The Rule of Law.)
- The judiciary in political systems such as Germany and the United States has the power of *judicial review* in order to enforce constitutionalism.
 - ▶ “Judicial review” refers to the power of the courts to declare laws passed by legislatures to be null and void if they contradict the nation’s constitution.
 - ▶ In these judicial systems, the rule of law begins with the rule of the most fundamental law, the constitution.
- Some legal systems employ further means to establish limited, “constitutional,” government. A “bill of rights” in constitutions, which, combined with judicial review, ensure that the legislation, legal decisions, and acts of government officials do not violate basic rights.

Liberalism—Freedom, equality, and dignity of the individual

Liberal democracy recognizes the moral primacy of the individual and that *all persons have certain fundamental rights*. A central purpose of democracy is to protect these rights in the practical world of everyday life. Examples of these fundamental rights are

- Freedom of religion/conscience—the right to practice any religion or none.
- Political freedom—the equal right, for example, of all citizens to participate in choosing those who govern and to remove them at will through elections.
- Freedom of the press, including electronic media.
- Freedom of individual expression—orally, in writing, and symbolically.
- Right to privacy and to a private sphere of life free from governmental interference.
- Right to freedom of association in public and private.

Further discussion of this topic is found in 17. Freedom and Liberalism.

What do you think?

- 1 How is democracy linked with constitutionalism and liberalism?
- 2 Why are freedom of belief, conscience, and expression essential to democracy?
- 3 What is the difference between democracy and a dictatorship of the majority?
- 4 Can you think of ways that democracy can protect the rights of minorities?
- 5 How does limited government help to fulfill the purposes of democracy?
- 6 What responsibilities does democracy place upon citizens?