



The Concepts and Fundamental Principles of Democracy

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6 Democracy and Equality

The *political, legal, and moral equality of every citizen* is a fundamental value of democracy. These aspects of equality are summarized in the idea that there can be no second-class citizens in a democracy. Thus, according to an old adage, “each is to count for one and for no more than one.” The democratic principle of political equality is that no one is born with the right to rule others; and no one is born with the obligation to political obedience. On account of this elemental political equality, the only way that legitimate political authority can be established is through the consent of the governed.

- Equality in democracy may be said to have the following dimensions:
 - ▶ *Political equality* means that each citizen is to be able to vote in elections and to stand for office. No one is to have more than one vote, and electoral districts are to have approximately the same population so that each vote counts roughly the same.
 - ▶ *Legal equality* means that all persons (noncitizens as well as citizens) are to enjoy the equal protection of the laws. That is, no one is to be discriminated against by law on account of accidents of birth such as race, ethnicity, gender, or ancestry; nor on account of personal choices such as religion, group membership, or occupation.
 - ▶ *Moral equality* means that each citizen (in most circumstances noncitizens as well) is to be given equal concern and respect in the eyes of the law and in the policies of governments.
- Among the most important forms of democratic equality to be guaranteed by the equal protection of the laws is “*equality of opportunity*.” This means that law must not unfairly disadvantage anyone in their opportunity to seek a variety of social goods such as education, employment, housing, and political rights.
 - ▶ Policies among democracies vary widely with respect to promoting *equality of condition* (“equality of result” as opposed to “equality of opportunity”) among citizens. “Equality of result,” of wealth or condition, however, is not inherent in the idea of democracy.
 - ▶ Democracy tends not to work well, however, in societies in which there are vast disparities of wealth, in the absence of a substantial middle class.

- Beyond the formal equality of each citizen in a democracy, there can be said to be an *informal “spirit of equality”* that is manifest in democracies. As democracy deepens in a society, the idea of equality generally spreads to social habits and mores. These aspects of a mature democracy may take a considerable period to develop. Examples of informal equality include the following:
 - ▶ citizens treat each other with equal respect, despite differences in wealth and social status;
 - ▶ individual merit counts more in the estimation of society than accidents of birth, such as race, gender, and ancestry;
 - ▶ consciousness of social hierarchy and class resentment declines.
- As the result of a prolonged period of equality of opportunity and the freedoms that promote economic prosperity, a *middle class grows between rich and poor*, adding to political stability. A substantial “middle class” is among the most important characteristics of a stable democratic state.

What do you think?

- 1 Why are various forms of equality essential to democracy?
- 2 What is the place in democracy of political, legal, and moral equality?
- 3 Why is a substantial middle class important to democracy?
- 4 What is the difference between equality of opportunity and equality of condition?
- 5 How can the existence of inequalities undermine democracy?
- 6 What is the importance to democracy of an informal “spirit of equality”?