



DEMOCRACY: WHAT IS IT REALLY?

(60 minutes over one or two days)

OBJECTIVE

Students internalize the meaning of democracy as a process for both individuals and societies.

- ✓ In class, discuss the quotes, the time period or events with which they are associated, and the changing views of democracy they exemplify.

MATERIALS

Democracy: What Is It Really? handout;
Democracy in U.S. History handout; Internet access (optional)

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- ★ *What is the linkage between democracy and voting? How have changes in voting requirements modified ideas about the nature of democracy?*
- ★ *In your opinion, what are the benefits of a democratic system?*
- ★ *After reading “Democracy: What Is It Really?”, do you remember what the four conditions are that need to be present in order for a democracy to work effectively?*
- ★ *Do you have any strong opinions on how the U.S. currently defines “the people” — those that are sovereign and have the right to vote? What would you think if the U.S. extended the voting right to resident aliens who pay taxes or felons who have been released from prison and paid their debt to society?*
- ★ *Do you believe in penalizing those that are eligible to vote but don’t utilize this right? Please explain...*
- ★ *Is anyone familiar with one of the other 75 democratic nations? If so, would you like to describe any differences or similarities that nation has with the U.S.?*

GET READY

- ✓ Photo copy the *Democracy: What Is It Really?* and *Democracy in U.S. History* handouts for each student in your class.

INSTRUCTIONS

- ✓ Ask your students to read the *Democracy: What Is It Really?* handout.
- ✓ Engage the class in a discussion of what they think democracy is about. Ask, *Does the definition of democracy change as you consider governments outside of the U.S.?* Interested students could explore the Human Rights Watch Web site to learn more about democracies around the world. (<http://www.hrw.org/>).
- ✓ Have your students read the quotes on the *Democracy in U.S. History* handout.
- ✓ Tell your students that it is important for them to understand how the terms “democracy” and “voting” are linked.
- ✓ Ask each student to choose one or two quotes that best exemplify his or her views on the nature of democracy. Have students discuss or write a short paper about their views on democracy incorporating the quote(s) they have selected.



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Some say democracy means *the majority rules*. Some say it means *freedom* while others claim that it means *rule by the people*. To interpret the word literally we must look back to the ancient Greeks who developed the idea. Linguists often translate “demos” to mean *mob*, and “kratia” to *rule or govern*, but do any of us associate democracy with *mob rule (mobocracy)*? Probably not.

The Greeks conceived of democracy in the context of a relatively small City-State, where citizens could express their views directly on a particular issue. In other words the people could govern themselves without relying on elected leaders to decide matters for them. The small scale of Athens, for example, made it possible for this kind of pure democracy to flourish.

The United States required a type of democracy which placed responsibility for governing in the hands of elected leaders. We call this representative democracy and it has allowed us to address both practical considerations of governing an extended Republic, comprised of numerous States, and certain theoretical concerns about how to mitigate the potential tyranny that is inherent in majority rule.

Representative government doesn't let ordinary citizens off the hook in terms of public policy. Indeed, the legitimacy of representative government depends on the transfer of power that can only occur in democratic terms as a result of an election. This transfer is essential because the people are believed to hold sovereign power, and only through their collective agreement to be governed can the government be empowered to act on behalf of all citizens.

An important, related concept is that we are bound together as citizens by certain core beliefs but beyond these shared beliefs, religious freedom for example—our interests and views can be decidedly different. We use elections to vote for representatives, legislative and executive, who will best represent our interests and views in the process of deciding public policy.

In order for democracy to work well at least four additional conditions must be present. First, all citizens must have equal voting power. This does not mean that they are equally influential. Some, because of wealth, education, natural talent, and willingness to participate responsibly, may have more influence on policymakers. At the polls, however, each person may only have one vote.

Second, all voters must have equal access to information, competing viewpoints, and the ideas of all of the candidates. Free media and strong educational programs are important in this regard. Third, people must be free to organize with others in order to achieve political goals. Persons acting alone are at a disadvantage when trying to make their views known or change policies.

Finally, elections must be decided one way or the other by majorities or at least pluralities. It is also generally thought that majority rule must be constrained by a stated set of minority rights. This responds to the concerns about the possibility of a *mobocracy* developing. Regular elections help as well because they give the minority a chance to organize and try to become a majority.

Democracy is best understood in relation to time, place and circumstances. It is an ongoing social project, one that is still in progress and often seen in different ways by those people who are part of the experiment. As people have changed, so have many of our ideas. One of the major issues in the United States and in other nations as well has been to decide on exactly who “the people” are. We



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usually say that “the people”—those who are sovereign and have the right to vote—must be “citizens.” Today most citizens who are over 18 years of age—including men and women of all races and ethnic groups—who meet certain residency requirements and register to vote can do so. It is when they vote that they become sovereign.

All of the people who have the right to vote now have not always had it. When the nation was founded only white male property holders could vote. Some states even limited voting to those who belonged to particular churches. Over the years, voting rights accorded by ownership of property, church membership, color of skin, gender, and other limitations have been done away with. Citizenship has remained a requirement, but there are many today who believe that voting rights should be extended to resident aliens who pay taxes. There are those, as well, who believe that felons who have been released from prison have paid their debt to society and should not be kept off of the voting rolls. Some states have made it easier to register to vote. Same-day registration and motor voter registration laws are examples of this trend.

At the same time we hear about people who contend that those who do not vote in a certain number of elections should lose their right to vote. Several groups have proposed laws that would force citizens who do not vote to pay a fine or penalty. Others believe that ballots should be printed only in English, which would keep non-English readers from voting. Voting and the right to vote are related to how democratic a nation really is.

Today over 75 nations claim to have democratic governments. However, opinions vary on just *how* democratic they really are. In 2000, 10 nations attended a special conference in Warsaw, Poland, where they initiated an organization known as The Community of Democracies. Among various democratic-related goals the founders stated, “The Community would enable democracies to work together more cohesively, more forcefully and effectively on issues common to democracies.”

Their efforts have drawn the attention of another organization called Human Rights Watch, the worldwide defender of people’s basic rights. In a letter to The Community of Democracies, Kenneth Roth, executive director of HRW, laid out several points of concern in relation to the true democratic nature of some of the Community’s members. He asked that the organization not “render its name meaningless” by allowing nations who are democratic in title only to belong.

Roth reports that the Russian government is controlling a once free press, that Egypt has arrested a democratic reform agent for criticizing election procedures, and that human rights activists in Tunisia have been unfairly detained and deprived of their basic rights. He summarizes the concerns of HRW by urging “the convening states to consult closely with individuals and organizations independent of the government in these countries of concern to determine whether their participation will advance or hinder the cause of democracy.” (<http://www.hrw.org/>)

So, what is a democracy, really? The famed philosopher of government, John Locke, believed that a government should be based on the will of the people. Who are “the people?” What is your will for your democratic government? It is a question we must all answer for ourselves and yet, in true democratic form, perhaps we need to consider others’ views too.



DEMOCRACY: WHAT IS IT REALLY?

DEMOCRACY IN U.S. HISTORY

1. “An honest man can feel no pleasure in the exercise of power over his fellow citizens.”
– Thomas Jefferson
2. “...call on Almighty God who rules over the universe to help the American people find liberties and happiness under a government instituted by themselves.” – George Washington
3. “You degrade us and then ask why we are degraded. You shut our mouths and ask why we don’t speak. You close your colleges and seminaries against us and then ask why we don’t know.” – Frederick Douglas
4. “The ballot is stronger than the bullet.” – Abraham Lincoln
5. “Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free.”
– Emma Lazarus
6. “We hold these truths to be self-evident; that all men and women are created equal... Whenever any form of government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the right of those who suffer from it to refuse allegiance to it, and insist upon the institution of a new government.” – Declaration of Sentiments
7. “History has thrust on our generation an indescribable important destiny — to complete a process of democratization which our nation has developed too slow.”
– Martin Luther King Jr.
8. “We propose that he (the President) test the young people of America...let us see what happens if service to democracy is made ground for exemption from the military draft.”
– Students for a Democratic Society
9. “I think it should be the popular vote. I think the electoral vote works in most cases, but this one. I think our new Congress should look at that. The popular vote is how a true democracy should work. I’d like to see the end of the Electoral College.” – Jeremy Shankel
10. “I can’t see why people who have been in prison and have served their sentence cannot vote when they get out. We say that they have paid their debt to society, but some states won’t let them vote.” – Anonymous
11. “September 11 is a day that will live in history because once again it proved that democracy and freedom will prevail... We all feel like true New Yorkers today.”
– Norway’s Ambassador to the U.S.