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Basic Concepts of Democracy

Section Preview

OBJECTIVES

1. **Understand** the foundations of democracy.
2. **Analyze** the connections between democracy and the free enterprise system.
3. **Identify** the role of the Internet in a democracy.

WHY IT MATTERS

Democracy insists on the fundamental importance of each and every individual. The free enterprise system is a natural counterpart to democracy—for it, too, is built on the concept of individualism.

POLITICAL DICTIONARY

- ★ **compromise**
- ★ **free enterprise system**
- ★ **law of supply and demand**
- ★ **mixed economy**

What do you make of James Bryce's assessment of democracy? "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



▲ At Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, Abraham Lincoln declared that the United States was "conceived in liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal." **Critical Thinking** Which of the five foundations of democracy are best described by this quote?

concepts. It will continue to exist only for as long as we, the people, continue to subscribe to and practice those concepts.

Winston Churchill (1874–1965) once argued 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 rests on these basic notions:

- (1) A recognition of the fundamental worth and dignity of every person;
- (2) A respect for the equality of all persons;
- (3) A faith in majority rule and an insistence upon minority rights;
- (4) An acceptance of the necessity of compromise; and
- (5) An insistence upon the widest possible degree of individual freedom.

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

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.

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 a mass of people who happen to outnumber the few. Rather, it is serving the many who, as individuals, together make up that society.

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* insist on 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 argue that all persons have a right to an equal share of worldly goods.

Rather, the democratic concept of equality insists that all are 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. The concept holds that each person must be free to develop himself or herself as fully as he or she can (or cares to), and that each person should be treated as the equal of all other persons by the law.

We have come a great distance toward the goal of equality for all in this country. It is clear, however, that the journey is far from over.

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 argues that a majority of the people will be right more often than they will be wrong, and that the majority will also be right more often than will any one person or small group.



▲ **Equality of Opportunity** Under Title IX of the Educational Amendments of 1972, women must have the same athletic opportunities as men in schools and colleges. **H-SS 12.7.5**

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* say that the majority will always arrive at the best decisions on public matters. In fact, the democratic process does not intend to come up with “right” or “best” answers. Rather, the democratic process searches for *satisfactory* solutions to public problems.

Of course, democracy insists that the majority’s decisions will usually be more, rather than less, satisfactory. Democracy does admit the possibility of mistakes; it acknowledges 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 never-ending.

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 as well. Thus, democracy insists upon majority rule restrained by minority rights. The majority must always recognize the right of any minority to become, 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.



Interpreting Political Cartoons If the two chefs represent lawmakers in a democracy, what might the stew represent?

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 insist, however, 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."

Drawing the line between the rights of one individual and those of another is far from 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 once stated 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?"

—Response to a Serenade, November 10, 1864

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 necessity.

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**.