

What Is Democracy?

Democracy comes from the Greek word “demos,” meaning people. In democracies, it is the people who hold sovereign power over the legislature and government.

Although nuances apply to the world’s various democracies, certain principles and practices distinguish democratic government from other forms of government.

- ★ Democracy is government in which power and civic responsibility are exercised by all citizens, directly or through their freely elected representatives.
- ★ Democracy is a set of principles and practices that protect human freedom; it is the institutionalization of freedom.
- ★ Democracy rests upon the principles of majority rule, coupled with individual and minority rights. All democracies, while respecting the will of the majority, zealously protect the fundamental rights of individuals and minority groups.
- ★ Democracies guard against all-powerful central governments and decentralize government to regional and local levels, understanding that local government must be as accessible and responsive to the people as possible.
- ★ Democracies understand that one of their prime functions is to protect such basic human rights as freedom of speech and religion; the right to equal protection under law; and the opportunity to organize and participate fully in the political, economic, and cultural life of society.

- ★ Democracies conduct regular free and fair elections open to all citizens. Elections in a democracy cannot be facades that dictators or a single party hide behind, but authentic competitions for the support of the people.
- ★ Democracy subjects governments to the rule of law and ensures that all citizens receive equal protection under the law and that their rights are protected by the legal system.
- ★ Democracies are diverse, reflecting each nation’s unique political, social, and cultural life. Democracies rest upon fundamental principles, not uniform practices.
- ★ Citizens in a democracy not only have rights, they have the responsibility to participate in the political system that, in turn, protects their rights and freedoms.
- ★ Democratic societies are committed to the values of tolerance, cooperation, and compromise. Democracies recognize that reaching consensus requires compromise and that it may not always be attainable. In the words of Mahatma Gandhi, “intolerance is itself a form of violence and an obstacle to the growth of a true democratic spirit.”



Soweto residents wait for their turn to cast votes in South Africa’s third democratic election, held in 2004. (© AP Images)

Human Rights

All human beings are born with inalienable rights. These human rights empower people to pursue lives of dignity — thus, no government can bestow them but all governments should protect them. Freedom, built on a foundation of justice, tolerance, dignity, and respect — regardless of ethnicity, religion, political association, or social standing — allows people to pursue these fundamental rights. Whereas dictatorships deny human rights, free societies continually strive to attain them.

Human rights are interdependent and indivisible; they encompass myriad facets of human existence, including social, political, and economic issues. Among the most commonly accepted are:

- ★ All people should have the right to form their own opinions and express them individually or in peaceful assemblies. Free societies create a “marketplace of ideas” where people exchange their views on any number of issues.
- ★ All people should have the right to participate in government. Governments should create laws that protect human rights while justice systems enforce those laws equally among the population.
- ★ Freedom from arbitrary arrest, detention, and torture — whether one is an opponent of the ruling political party, an ethnic minority, or even a common criminal — is a basic human right. A professional police force respects all citizens as it enforces the laws of the nation.
- ★ In ethnically diverse nations, religious and ethnic minorities should be free to

use their language and maintain their traditions without fear of recrimination from the majority population. Governments should recognize the rights of minorities while respecting the will of the majority.

- ★ All people should have the opportunity to work, earn a living, and support their families.
- ★ Children deserve special protection. They should receive at least an elementary education, proper nutrition, and health care.
- ★ To maintain human rights, citizens in any free society need to be vigilant. Citizen responsibility — through a variety of participatory activities — ensures that government remains accountable to the people. The family of free nations is committed to work toward protection of human rights. They formalize their commitment through a number of international treaties and covenants on human rights.



Demonstrators in Madrid, Spain, on December 12, 2006, display photos of people missing during the regime of the late Chilean dictator Augusto Pinochet. (AP/Getty Images)

Freedom of Speech

Freedom of speech and expression, especially about political and other public issues, is the lifeblood of any democracy. Democratic governments do not control the content of most written and verbal speech. Thus democracies are usually filled with many voices expressing different or even contrary ideas and opinions.

According to democratic theorists, a free and open debate will usually lead to the best option being considered and will be more likely to avoid serious mistakes.

- ★ Democracy depends upon a literate, knowledgeable citizenry whose access to information enables it to participate as fully as possible in the public life of their society and to criticize unwise or tyrannical government officials or policies. Citizens and their elected representatives recognize that democracy depends upon the widest possible access to uncensored ideas, data, and opinions.
- ★ For a free people to govern themselves, they must be free to express themselves — openly, publicly, and repeatedly; in speech and in writing.
- ★ The principle of free speech should be protected by a democracy’s constitution, preventing the legislative or executive branches of government from imposing censorship.
- ★ The protection of free speech is a so-called negative right, simply requiring that government refrain from limiting speech, unlike the direct action required of other so-called affirmative rights. For the most part, the authorities in a democracy are uninvolved in the content of written and verbal speech in the society.

- ★ Protests serve as a testing ground for any democracy — thus the right to peaceful assembly is essential and plays an integral part in facilitating the use of free speech. A civil society allows for spirited debate among those in deep disagreement over the issues.
- ★ Freedom of speech is a fundamental right, but it is not absolute, and cannot be used to justify violence, slander, libel, subversion, or obscenity. Consolidated democracies generally require a high degree of threat in order to justify banning speech which may incite violence, untruthfully harm the reputation of others, overthrow a constitutional government, or promote lewd behavior. Most democracies also forbid speech that incites racial or ethnic violence.
- ★ The challenge for a democracy is one of balance: to defend freedom of speech and assembly while countering speech which truly encourages violence, intimidation, or subversion.



The Reverend Martin Luther King Jr. acknowledges the thousands gathered for the “March to Washington” in support of U.S. civil rights legislation in 1963. (© AP Images)

A Free Press

In a democracy the press should operate free from governmental control. Democratic governments do not have ministries of information to regulate content of newspapers or the activities of journalists; requirements that journalists be vetted by the state; or force journalists to join government-controlled unions.

- ★ A free press informs the public, holds leaders accountable, and provides a forum for debate of local and national issues.
- ★ Democracies foster the existence of a free press. An independent judiciary, civil society with rule of law, and free speech all support a free press. A free press must have legal protections.
- ★ In democracies the government is accountable for its actions. Citizens therefore expect to be informed about decisions their governments make on their behalf. The press facilitates this “right to know” by serving as a watchdog over the government, helping citizens to hold government accountable, and questioning its policies. Democratic governments grant journalists access to public meetings and public documents. They do not place prior restraints on what journalists may say or print.
- ★ The press, itself, must act responsibly. Through professional associations, independent press councils, and “ombudsmen” (in-house critics who hear public complaints), the press responds to complaints of its own excesses and remains internally accountable.
- ★ Democracy requires the public to make

choices and decisions. In order for the public to trust the press, journalists must provide factual reporting based on credible sources and information. Plagiarism and false reporting are counterproductive to a free press.

- ★ Press outlets should establish their own editorial boards, independent of government control, in order to separate information gathering and dissemination from editorial processes.
- ★ Journalists should not be swayed by public opinion, only by the pursuit of truth, as close as they can get to it. A democracy allows the press to go about its business of collecting and reporting the news without fear or favor from the government.
- ★ Democracies foster a never-ending struggle between two rights: The government’s obligation to protect national security; and the people’s right to know, based on journalists’ ability to access information. Governments sometimes need to limit access to information considered too sensitive for general distribution. But journalists in democracies are fully justified in pursuing such information.



Pakistani journalists shout anti-government slogans during a demonstration in Karachi in 2005. (Amir Qureshi AFP)

Freedom of Religion

All citizens should be free to follow their conscience in matters of religious faith. Freedom of religion includes the right to worship alone or with others, in public or private, and to participate in religious observance, practice, and teaching without fear of persecution from government or other groups in society.

- ★ All people have the right to worship or assemble in connection with a religion or belief, and to establish and maintain places for these purposes.
- ★ Like other fundamental human rights, religious freedom is not created or granted by the state, but all states should protect it. Democracies include language pertaining to protection of religious freedom in their constitutions.
- ★ Although many democracies may choose to recognize an official separation of church and state, the values of government and religion are not in fundamental conflict.
- ★ Democracies generally do not create governmental agencies or other official bodies to regulate religious affairs, although they may require houses of worship and religious groups to register for administrative or tax purposes.
- ★ Governments that protect religious freedom for all their citizens are more likely to protect other rights necessary for religious freedom, such as free speech and assembly.
- ★ Genuine democracies recognize that individual religious differences must be respected and that a key role of government is to protect religious choice, even in cases where the state sanctions

a particular religious faith. Democracies also:

- Do not determine the content of religious publications, education, or sermons.
- Respect the right of parents to direct the religious education of their children.
- Prohibit incitement of religious-based violence against others.
- Protect members of ethnic, religious, or linguistic minorities.
- Allow people to observe days of rest associated with their faith and to celebrate holy days in accordance with their beliefs.
- Allow interfaith movements to flourish, as members of different faiths seek common ground on various issues and cooperate to solve challenges facing the entire population.
- Provide the freedom for government and religious officials, nongovernmental organizations, and journalists to investigate reports of religious persecution.
- Respect the right of religious organizations to freely participate and contribute to civil society — to operate faith-based schools, run hospitals and care for the aged, and create other programs and activities that benefit the society.



A devout Muslim-American family, the Tagouris, pray in their sunroom at home. (Wolfgang Hoyt/EstoArhitect Skidmore, Owings, & Merrill)

The Rights of Women and Girls

Discrimination against women means that specific laws or practices create a distinction, exclusion, or restriction on the basis of gender.

- ★ Democracies should strive to protect women's rights, encourage women's participation in all aspects of society and government, and create places for women to associate freely and express their views openly.
- ★ Legal rights for women include equal representation under the law and access to legal resources.
 - Women's rights must be clearly stated — ambiguity of women's legal status remains a leading cause of poverty worldwide.
 - Women should have rights to ownership and inheritance.
 - Women should have the opportunity to take part in the drafting and implementation of constitutions and legislation.
- ★ Women's political rights include the right to vote in elections, to run for public office, to participate in government, and to organize politically.
 - Democracies should support civil society initiatives — public and nongovernmental — that teach women how to vote and train them in political campaign techniques and the legislative process.
 - Women's activism at all levels strengthens democracies.
- ★ Women and girls should have access to primary education. They should not be barred from attending or teaching in secondary schools and universities.
- ★ Economic rights give women control over their economic assets and help them avoid risky sexual and abusive

relationships. These rights include:

- The same employment opportunities and criteria as men.
- Protection from job termination because of pregnancy or marriage.
- Participation in programs, such as micro-enterprise lending and vocational training, that enable women to generate income.
- The right to equal pay and to equal treatment and respect at work.

★ Democracies should strive to ensure the health and well-being of women and girls and provide equal access to programs such as:

- General health care, disease prevention, and prenatal care.
- Preventing HIV/AIDS, improving health care delivery to those infected, and reducing mother-to-child transmission of the disease.
- Combating traffickers who lure women and girls into forced prostitution or domestic servitude through deception, fraud, or coercion.
- Fighting so-called sex tourism that often exploits women and children.
- Educating families about the social and health consequences of early marriage.
- Supporting victims' organizations, including domestic violence and rape crisis centers.
- Training police, lawyers, judges, and medical personnel to reduce domestic violence.
- Eliminating female genital mutilation.



Top, award-winning Indian scientist Indira Nath, a leading leprosy expert, with patients in Chochin, India. Left, Russian women — all World War II veterans — dance during Victory Day in Moscow, the annual commemoration of Russia's victory over Nazi Germany. Right, U.S. entrepreneur Anousheh Ansari at Moscow's Russian Space Training Center, before joining the rest of the crew of the manned international space station. (Corbis Sigma, © AP Images (2))

Majority Rule, Minority Rights

On the surface, the principles of majority rule and the protection of individual and minority rights would seem contradictory. In fact, however, these principles are twin pillars holding up the very foundation of what we mean by democratic government.

- ★ Majority rule is a means for organizing government and deciding public issues; it is not another road to oppression. Just as no self-appointed group has the right to oppress others, so no majority, even in a democracy, should take away the basic rights and freedoms of a minority group or individual.
- ★ Minorities — whether as a result of ethnic background, religious belief, geographic location, income level, or simply as the losers in elections or political debate — enjoy guaranteed basic human rights that no government, and no majority, elected or not, should remove.
- ★ Minorities need to trust that the government will protect their rights and self-identity. Once this is accomplished, such groups can participate in, and contribute to their country's democratic institutions.
- ★ Among the basic human rights that any democratic government must protect are: freedom of speech and expression; freedom of religion and belief; due process and equal protection under the law; and freedom to organize, speak out, dissent, and participate fully in the public life of their society.

★ Democracies understand that protecting the rights of minorities to uphold cultural identity, social practices, individual consciences, and religious activities is one of their primary tasks.

★ Acceptance of ethnic and cultural groups that seem strange if not alien to the majority can represent one of the greatest challenges that any democratic government can face. But democracies recognize that diversity can be an enormous asset. They treat these differences in identity, culture, and values as a challenge that can strengthen and enrich them, not as a threat.

★ There can be no single answer to how minority-group differences in views and values are resolved — only the sure knowledge that only through the democratic process of tolerance, debate, and willingness to compromise can free societies reach agreements that embrace the twin pillars of majority rule and minority rights.

Principles of Democracy

Core Rights and Obligations

