

# The Fundamental Concepts of Democracy

Democracy is the government of the people, by the people, for the people.

- Abraham Lincoln

The word **democracy** originated in ancient Greece over 2400 years ago.

'*demos*' means common people

'*kratos*' means strength



Today, the word democracy refers to a system of rule that is determined by majority of the population, typically through chosen representatives.

A democratic government is a system of government that is elected by the whole adult population, people over the age of 18 years. They do this by choosing someone to represent their community at a local, state and federal level. The purpose of the elected government is to protect the people and promote their rights, interests and welfare to the benefit of everyone. In this system, the people of a nation have 'supreme power' over how they would like their societies to be managed.

There are three overarching principles of democracy: **democracy**, **constitutionalism**, and **liberalism**. The actioning of each principle enables a country to exercise genuine democracy for their citizens.

## DEMOCRACY

### *Rule by the people through free and fair elections and other forms of participation*



The people of the nation have the ultimate say in who will govern them as a society. Therefore, all citizens must be considered equal when exercising their freedom to vote. In the past, it was common for a wealthy ruling class to be the only party allowed to vote as they were considered the most worthy and important members of society.



The citizens must be able to participate in free elections. The election process provides opportunity for the people to enact their civic responsibility in deciding who shall exercise political power on their behalf. To be able to choose who they want to represent their interests and beliefs in the governing power, or to be nominated and elected representative themselves. The people must also be able to observe and have influence on political decisions and behaviour whilst a government is in office.



Elections must be free, honest and fair. All votes are accurately counted through a rigorous process of observance and scrutiny. Voters must not be prevented from exercising their right to vote and instead, be protected from any practice that can involve intimidation, bribery and coercion. It is vital to ensure illegal interference does not impact the final result of the vote, otherwise the citizens' confidence in the process of democracy would be severely eroded.



Elections must also be frequent to enable citizens to exercise their control of government.

The people must have access to alternative sources of information in their everyday lives. Having access to multi-media sources enables citizens to become better educated about what is happening, in their communities and around the world. With unlimited access to information, people are better able to learn about their society and make informed decisions and therefore, act accordingly to live a safe and healthy life. Governments that control and restrict media and news content do not adequately inform their citizens about what is going on around them.

The 'freedom of the press' is an important right of a democratic government.

# CONSTITUTIONALISM

## *The use of constitutions to limit government by law*

A constitution is a body of fundamental principles (usually laws) that an organisation, or governing party, must abide by; a *charter* or *agreement*.

A constitution is usually a written document that states what powers the government can and can't have. The constitution not only defines *what* a government must do, but also *how* it must act. The constitution is based on law; therefore, the government cannot make up their own set of laws or redefine the law by using their own interpretation. Remember, the law applies to everyone, including those who govern. *No one is above the law*.

The *rule of law* is a primary element of a constitution, as it is a fundamental concept of democracy.

Constitutions are rarely changed, as this would add instability to the essential rule of law principles of a country. The process of *Judicial Review* enables courts to scrutinise any legal challenges and/or be declared null and void if they contradict the nation's constitution.

A *Bill of Rights* is a set of rules that can be added to a constitution to outline in detail what a government may not do; as opposed to a constitution, which sets out what a government can do and how to do it.

Here is an example:

A constitution sets out how a governing system will be implemented and what powers each party will have. A system of equal rule and representation



A Bill of Rights (a list of *articles* or *amendments*) sets out how a government may not infringe on freedom of speech, or deprive people of their life, liberty, or property

# LIBERALISM

## *Freedom, equality, and dignity of the individual*

All persons have certain fundamental rights. A healthy democracy protects these rights in the everyday life of its citizens.

Some examples of these fundamental rights can include:

- *Freedom of religious belief – the right to practice any religion of choice*
- *Political freedom – all citizens have equal right to participate in and choose those who govern, and to be able to remove them by participating in the voting process*
- *Freedom of the press – to have the right to express and circulate opinion without punishment, and to enable all citizens to be well informed*
- *Freedom of individual expression – all citizens have the right to their opinion*
- *Right to privacy and free from government interference – without breaking the laws of their society and endangering others.*



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## TASKS TO COMPLETE

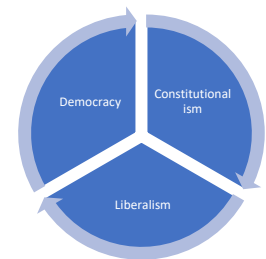


1. The purpose of the people electing their own governing authority has many advantages. Explain why it is so important for the citizens of a nation to be able to determine their own representatives for government.
2. How important is the 'free election' process? Explain what actions are in place to ensure a democratic process is implemented during election times, and what can happen if these processes are not scrutinised and enforced?



3. How would citizens be able to exercise their rights if they wanted to let the government know they were unhappy? Research a world event that has happened as the people of a country fight to retain their democratic freedom and rights in their society.

4. How is democracy linked with constitutionalism and liberalism? Design a poster as an education resource to help explain your thinking.



5. What is the difference between democracy and dictatorship? Choose which format you prefer to present your findings:

1. VENN diagram
2. Digital collage
3. Information booklet

6. It is important for all citizens to be reminded of their civic duties when living in a democratic society. What responsibilities does democracy place upon citizens? Create a set of task cards which can be displayed in your classroom, or on a school notice board for everyone in your school community to see.

7. Create a Tagxedo using terminology from the concepts of democracy. <http://www.tagxedo.com/>



8. Investigate the ruling systems of the following countries and explain how much influence the citizens of each country have in determining who governs them

(you may want to present your findings in poster or digital form):

- |           |                          |
|-----------|--------------------------|
| Australia | United States of America |
| Russia    | Great Britain            |
| China     | United Arab Emirates     |

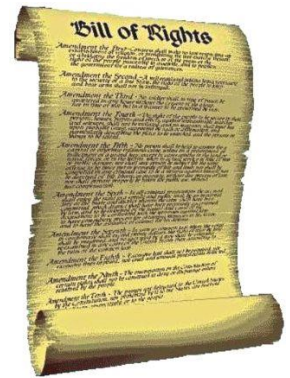


World Press Freedom Day 2017

9. What is 'freedom of the press' and how important is it in maintaining a democratic society?

10. What is *Propaganda*? How does propaganda affect a country's citizens, and why would a ruling system use it? To support your explanation and understanding, investigate an example of a country that engages in the use of propaganda today.

11. Why does America have a *Bill of Rights*, and does Australia need one? If so, explain how it would improve the present situation and conditions for Australian citizens. If not, why not? Explain your thinking.



12. Great Britain, New Zealand, and Israel do not have a written constitutional document. However, their citizens live and work under the fundamental principles of rule of law. How do they do this?

13. In what ways do you and your family demonstrate the attributes of being responsible democratic citizens? What areas do you think you could improve? Who or what has influenced your attitudes towards being a responsible citizen?

14. How does everyone live by the expectations and rules in your classroom?

As a class, create a mini constitution with your own set of rules and laws.

- ✓ set up a checklist of criteria for what would make a good law the class citizens will want to abide by
- ✓ determine what laws you would like included in your constitution
- ✓ identify the principles of fairness and equality for each law
- ✓ support a process that is open and public to discuss why each law should be included, and determine what the consequences will be if a law is broken
- ✓ decide on a governing body to uphold the constitutional laws
- ✓ Make sure you support all your arguments with reason

Complete a checklist to be completed by every student in the class at the conclusion of the designated time the class constitution has been followed. Then discuss:

- a. Did our laws work?
- b. Are our laws good ones that support all class citizens? How do we know?
- c. What specific features make each law a good or bad law?
- d. Are there any laws that have been set by the teacher (or school)? Why would that be?

15. 'People Power' refers to the potential that ordinary people can have in order to activate change in their communities. Standing together and organising action in a democratic way can influence governments to change according to the will of the people.



Investigate how Australians were able to improve their working conditions during the 1850s. One example of this is the *Eight-hour Day movement*, of which the efforts of the people resulted in a change in the law regarding skilled tradespeople and the protection of workers' rights.

Research this example (or another of similar influence, such as miner's rights during the Gold Rush) and write a report explaining how the determined efforts of others through history, have resulted in better conditions for people today.