

Definition of Democracy

We now know that the basic idea of democracy is that it is rule by the people, for the people. We may not individually rule directly, but we select our leaders who will represent us in government. They look out for our interests and strive to make society a better and more equal place. Democracy, however, can mean very different things to very different people.

Broadening the Definition of Democracy

A fairly standard and accepted definition of democracy usually runs something like this:

“Democracy refers to a society in which the authority of the government comes from and depends upon the consent of the people, and in which citizens have the opportunity to make informed decisions with regards to leadership selection, the creation of government policies and the passage of laws.”

This standard definition highlights the importance of the “consent of the people” and the need for “informed and effective” citizen participation in leadership selection, the development of policies and the creation of laws. There are several other fundamental beliefs and values associated with democratic citizenship (e.g., rule of law, human dignity, freedom of worship, respect for rights of others, work for common good, sense of responsibility for others, freedom of expression). It is evident that democracy is a complex form of self-

government that is multi-faceted in meaning and precious to citizens in a variety of different ways.

There are some general ideas of what democracy means, which are outlined below:

Principles to be Observed by all Governments




What follows are several principles which apply to any government, at any time and under any circumstances.



Governments must balance the rights, obligations and opportunities of various segments of society. We recognize that we live in a society which is fragmented in many ways. Government policy has to balance the needs, not desires, of existing groups as well as protect those who do not belong to organized groups. All must share fairly in the payment of taxes; all must accept their share of the sacrifices which have to be made; all must have the freedom to pursue their legitimate interests, but government must ensure that they do so on an equitable basis.



Governments must support the right to private property, but at the same time recognize that that right is not absolute. Every person, therefore, has the right to what he or she needs to live in a decent manner in society. All must share its benefits: material goods; social goods, like education and health care; and an opportunity for recreation and full self-development. Appropriate legislation, effective social programs and fair forms of taxation should ensure that these goods are truly available to all...

	<p>Governments must support the rights of workers to unite in order to protect the quality of their lives, their safety and their security. Hence the right of labour to form unions and to bargain collectively must be guaranteed. Actions taken by all parties in labour relations must withstand the scrutiny of what is good for the parties but also what is good for society at large...</p>
	<p>Governments must encourage and facilitate involvement in the process of political decision-making. A democratic government is elected with a mandate, and has every right to pursue the direction set by that mandate. There are, however, many means of reaching a goal, and citizens have the right and responsibility to make their views known on the relative value of taking one course rather than another. A government which respects its people will ensure that means are made available for the voices of citizens, singularly and in groups, to be heard and to have influence in dialogue with their government.</p>
	<p>Governments worthy of support must respect other governments and non-governmental bodies with respect to decision-making. While responsible for setting a tone and providing overall policy direction, governments should not take over those functions which can be carried out by other bodies at lower levels of government or by non-governmental organizations. Governments should do for people what they cannot do for themselves or cannot do as well for themselves.</p>