



Meeting the Moment Insights

Democracy – The Power Is in Your Hands

Democracy is your best way to ensure that when leaders make decisions affecting your future, they focus on what you and your neighbors want and not solely on what's good for themselves and their friends.

The Essence of Democracy

The basic idea underlying democracy is simple and straightforward. When important decisions are made, everyone has an equal say in determining the outcome. That means, for example, that when choosing the Governor of your state, every citizen of age has the right to vote.

Democracy ensures that a Governor who wants to raise taxes, fire government workers, increase in-state tuition, or build a road through a neighborhood, knows that an unpopular decision could prove fatal in the next election. If the right to vote is removed or threatened, the Governor becomes more a ruler than a representative of the people. The same principle applies to a President on even the most consequential decisions, such as whether our nation should go to war.

How our Constitution Guarantees Democracy

You have probably heard the U.S. system of government described as a republic or, alternatively, as a representative democracy. That's because, as in the example of choosing elected officials, Americans typically vote for those who lead us and not generally on individual policies. Specifically, our Constitution entitles us to vote for those who represent us in Congress and in the White House. And state constitutions do the same for state officials, meaning that U.S. citizens live inside two democracies.

There's tremendous value in directing our votes toward people charged with explaining their goals and ideals, rather than expecting that every voter could be versed on the vast array of matters handled by government. Most people do not have the time or capacity to become experts on policy proposals impacting the environment, interest rates, foreign affairs, or any of the significant issues leaders must address on a regular basis in order to then cast knowledgeable votes. Democracy ensures that government officials charged with managing such complex topics are ultimately accountable to all of us for the wisdom of their decisions. Without democracy, our leaders would be accountable to no one but themselves.

How Decisions Made by Representatives Affect You

It's easy to lose track of how many things the government does that affect ordinary life. Ultimately, each of us is primarily responsible for much of what helps our families flourish. But none of us can get there without a societal structure that ensures laws are enforced and the country remains safe and secure.

Government officials set the level of taxes you pay, build the transportation networks that allow you to move about, fund medical and scientific research, provide some financial assistance to those most in need, guarantee health care for our seniors and veterans, inspect our food and water, punish polluters, and many other functions that touch our lives each day. All these decisions involve tradeoffs. For example, we all want cheap energy and yet none of us wants an overheated climate. Democracy means that you and your fellow citizens have the last word in determining how such tradeoffs will be resolved.

How Democracy is Practiced

Our right to vote is the entry point for our democratic system of government. There are many ways that votes can be cast and tabulated, and no single method defines what it means to be living in a democracy, as long as citizens can vote and have that vote counted.

Generally, the predominant approach in our country today is that citizens vote first in primaries of political parties to determine which candidates appear on the ballot, with the person receiving the most votes ultimately representing their party in the general election. Then, in the general election, the candidate who garners the most votes is declared the winner and later sworn into office. Some states require runoff elections between the two top vote getters if no candidate receives a majority of the vote. But the crucial point is that democracy demands that the votes of the people, and not the desires of the leaders, are what set our national direction.

Frequently Asked Questions

Q. Who gets to vote?

A. In all federal elections and nearly all state and municipal elections, citizens 18 years of age and over are eligible to vote. There is no evidence to support the claims of widespread voting by undocumented (noncitizen) immigrants in U.S. elections. Indeed, research shows that reported incidents are isolated and rare.

Q. Aren't the Senate and the Electoral College undemocratic?

A. For historical reasons and to prevent dominance by larger states, our constitutional structure gives political weight to states rather than solely to people. This means that California, our largest state, has the same number of Senators, as Wyoming, our smallest. Over time this gap has become significantly more important because California is now roughly 68 times the size of

Wyoming. In 1920, the date of the first census after we switched to directly electing Senators, California was only 18 times as large as Wyoming. Although our current system may need reform, but its flaws should not obscure the fundamental benefit of placing power in the hands of the people rather than leaving decisions to just the governing few.

Q. Aren't elections just rigged anyway?

A. Absolutely not. There is no evidence of any significant fraud in U.S. elections. Detailed analysis reveals the opposite. For example, an analysis published by the Brookings Institution revealed that examples of voter fraud in America are rare.

This overview was prepared by LDAD Meeting the Moment Volunteer Jeremy Paul, Professor of Law, Northeastern University School of Law.