

From a Stanford Lecture

Democracy consists of four basic elements:

1. A political system for choosing and replacing the government through free and fair elections.
2. The active participation of the people, as citizens, in politics and civic life.
3. Protection of the human rights of all citizens.
4. A rule of law, in which the laws and procedures apply equally to all citizens.

I. Democracy as a Political System of Competition for Power

- Democracy is a means for the people to choose their leaders and to hold their leaders accountable for their policies and their conduct in office.
- The people decide who will represent them in parliament, and who will head the government at the national and local levels. They do so by choosing between competing parties in regular, free and fair elections.
- Government is based on the consent of the governed.
- In a democracy, the people are sovereign—they are the highest form of political authority.
- Power flows from the people to the leaders of government, who hold power only temporarily.
- Laws and policies require majority support in parliament, but the rights of minorities are protected in various ways.
- The people are free to criticize their elected leaders and representatives, and to observe how they conduct the business of government.
- Elected representatives at the national and local levels should listen to the people and respond to their needs and suggestions.
- Elections have to occur at regular intervals, as prescribed by law. Those in power cannot extend their terms in office without asking for the consent of the people again in an election.
- For elections to be free and fair, they have to be administered by a neutral, fair, and professional body that treats all political parties and candidates equally.
- All parties and candidates must have the right to campaign freely, to present their proposals to the voters both directly and through the mass media.
- Voters must be able to vote in secret, free of intimidation and violence.
- Independent observers must be able to observe the voting and the vote counting to ensure that the process is free of corruption, intimidation, and fraud.
- There needs to be some impartial and independent tribunal to resolve any disputes about the election results.
- This is why it takes a lot of time to organize a good, democratic election.
- Any country can hold an election, but for an election to be free and fair requires a lot of organization, preparation, and training of political parties, electoral officials, and civil society organizations who monitor the process.

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II. Participation: The Role of the Citizen in A Democracy

- The key role of citizens in a democracy is to participate in public life.
- Citizens have an obligation to become informed about public issues, to watch carefully how their political leaders and representatives use their powers, and to express their own opinions and interests.
- Voting in elections is another important civic duty of all citizens.
- But to vote wisely, each citizen should listen to the views of the different parties and candidates, and then make his or her own decision on whom to support.
- Participation can also involve campaigning for a political party or candidate, standing as a candidate for political office, debating public issues, attending community meetings, petitioning the government, and even protesting.
- A vital form of participation comes through active membership in independent, non-governmental organizations, what we call “civil society.”
- These organizations represent a variety of interests and beliefs: farmers, workers, doctors, teachers, business owners, religious believers, women, students, human rights activists.
- It is important that women participate fully both in politics and in civil society.
- This requires efforts by civil society organizations to educate women about their democratic rights and responsibilities, improve their political skills, represent their common interests, and involve them in political life.
- In a democracy, participation in civic groups should be voluntary. No one should be forced to join an organization against their will.
- Political parties are vital organizations in a democracy, and democracy is stronger when citizens become active members of political parties.
- However, no one should support a political party because he is pressured or threatened by others. In a democracy, citizens are free to choose which party to support.
- Democracy depends on citizen participation in all these ways. But participation must be peaceful, respectful of the law, and tolerant of the different views of other groups and individuals.

III. The Rights of Citizens in a Democracy

- In a democracy, every citizen has certain basic rights that the state cannot take away from them.
- These rights are guaranteed under international law.
- You have the right to have your own beliefs, and to say and write what you think.
- No one can tell you what you must think, believe, and say or not say.
- There is freedom of religion. Everyone is free to choose their own religion and to worship and practice their religion as they see fit.
- Every individual has the right to enjoy their own culture, along with other members of their group, even if their group is a minority.
- There is freedom and pluralism in the mass media.

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- You can choose between different sources of news and opinion to read in the newspapers, to hear on the radio, and to watch on television.
- You have the right to associate with other people, and to form and join organizations of your own choice, including trade unions.
- You are free to move about the country, and if you wish, to leave the country.
- You have the right to assemble freely, and to protest government actions.
- However, everyone has an obligation to exercise these rights peacefully, with respect for the law and for the rights of others.

IV. The Rule of Law

- Democracy is a system of rule by laws, not by individuals.
- In a democracy, the rule of law protects the rights of citizens, maintains order, and limits the power of government.
- All citizens are equal under the law. No one may be discriminated against on the basis of their race, religion, ethnic group, or gender.
- No one may be arrested, imprisoned, or exiled arbitrarily.
- If you are detained, you have the right to know the charges against you, and to be presumed innocent until proven guilty according to the law.
- Anyone charged with a crime has the right to a fair, speedy, and public trial by an impartial court.
- No one may be taxed or prosecuted except by a law established in advance.
- No one is above the law, not even a king or an elected president.
- The law is fairly, impartially, and consistently enforced, by courts that are independent of the other branches of government.
- Torture and cruel and inhumane treatment are absolutely forbidden.
- The rule of law places limits on the power of government. No government official may violate these limits.
- No ruler, minister, or political party can tell a judge how to decide a case.
- Office holders cannot use their power to enrich themselves. Independent courts and commissions punish corruption, no matter who is guilty.
- V. The Limits and Requirements for Democracy
- If democracy is to work, citizens must not only participate and exercise their rights. They must also observe certain principles and rules of democratic conduct.
- People must respect the law and reject violence. Nothing ever justifies using violence against your political opponents, just because you disagree with them.
- Every citizen must respect the rights of his or her fellow citizens, and their dignity as human beings.
- No one should denounce a political opponent as evil and illegitimate, just because they have different views.
- People should question the decisions of the government, but not reject the government's authority.
- Every group has the right to practice its culture and to have some control over its own affairs, but each group should accept that it is a part of a democratic state.

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- When you express your opinions, you should also listen to the views of other people, even people you disagree with. Everyone has a right to be heard.
- Don't be so convinced of the rightness of your views that you refuse to see any merit in another position. Consider different interests and points of view.
- When you make demands, you should understand that in a democracy, it is impossible for everyone to achieve everything they want.
- Democracy requires compromise. Groups with different interests and opinions must be willing to sit down with one another and negotiate.
- In a democracy, one group does not always win everything it wants. Different combinations of groups win on different issues. Over time, everyone wins something.
- If one group is always excluded and fails to be heard, it may turn against democracy in anger and frustration.
- Everyone who is willing to participate peacefully and respect the rights of others should have some say in the way the country is governed.