
EXERCISE: What is a democracy?

A dictionary defines democracy as follows:

1. Government in which the people hold the ruling power either directly or through elected representatives; rule by the ruled.
2. a country, state, etc. with such a government.
3. majority rule.
4. the principle of equality of rights, opportunity, and treatment. . . .
5. the common people. . . as the wielders of political power.

Instructions: For each of the societies described below, tell (a) whether or not it is a "democracy," (b) Why or why not, and (c) which meaning of "democracy" listed above it most closely resembles.

- A. Twenty-five people are shipwrecked on a desert island. They agree to abide by the rules and regulations which they will all decide upon together.
- B. Twenty-five people are shipwrecked on a desert island. They all agree that Mary M., Tom T. and Ulysses U. are the fairest and most intelligent members of their group, so they group chooses them to make the decisions.
- C. Twenty-five people are shipwrecked on a desert island. Five of them own all the tools and clothing. They decide to run things, and the rest of the group allows them to do so since everyone is dependent upon tools and clothing.
- D. Twenty-five people are shipwrecked on a desert island. Big Bertha is the only person with a weapon, a rifle. She announces that she will be the ruler, and all the rest had better follow her.
- E. Five hundred men, women, and children are shipwrecked on a desert island. Together they decide that all persons over the age of fourteen shall have an equal vote in electing a tribunal to pass laws and administer the government.
- F. Five hundred men, women and children are shipwrecked on a desert island. They decide that all blue-eyed men between the ages of 25 and 28 wearing yellow shirts shall have an equal vote in electing a tribunal to pass laws and administer the government.

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DISCUSSION PLAN: Democracy

1. Can a society where there are no parties be democratic?
2. Can a society where there is only one party be democratic?
3. Can a society where there are only two parties be democratic?
4. Can a society where there are many parties be undemocratic?
5. Can a society where all the voters are illiterate be democratic?
6. Can a society where all the voters are highly educated be undemocratic?
7. Can a society be democratic even though it has a high crime rate and many of its judges and politicians are corrupt?
8. Can a society where some people are above the law be democratic?
9. Can a society where the citizens do not know the issues and problems of the society be democratic?
10. Can a society be democratic where there is no freedom of speech?
11. Can a society be democratic where some people have too little to eat and some have too much?
12. Can a society where some people have better opportunities than others be democratic?
13. Can a society ruled by the rich be democratic?
14. Can a society ruled by the poor be democratic?
15. Can a society be democratic and yet lack representative government?
16. Can a society be democratic and still be aristocratic?
17. Can a society be democratic and still be capitalistic?
18. Can a society be democratic and still be socialistic?
19. Can a society be democratic and still be tyrannical?
20. Can a society be totalitarian and still be democratic?

EXERCISE: Democracy

Once upon a time, when our ancestors still had tails, it happened that a woman gave birth to a child without a tail. Such a monstrosity was unheard of. The people were appalled, and ordered the creature to be put to death at once. In time another woman gave birth to a child without a tail, and again the child was promptly dispatched. But more and more of the tailless little creatures were born, and their parents made such a fuss about the cruelty of putting little children to death just because they lacked tails that the children were permitted to live.

They grew up together with normal children, spoke the same language, and except for the fact that they had no tails, were very much like the others. When they became adults, they began to complain about their status, claiming that they had no rights or privileges whatsoever. With great reluctance, they were given the ranking of "second-class citizens." But this still failed to appease them. They continued their clamor, and eventually they were granted equal ranking with the first-class citizens endowed with tails.

But by this time, those without tails had become so numerous as to be in the majority. They promptly proposed and were able to pass a law to the effect that citizens *with* tails were henceforth to be considered "second-class citizens." And they continued their domination for a long time, so that the point was eventually reached at which, when a woman gave birth to a child with a tail, she was immediately denounced by the whole community, and the child was left on the mountainside to die of exposure.

—adapted from George Santayana

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1. Do you believe this story has a "moral"? If so, what is it?
2. Does this story resemble Swift's account (in *Gulliver's Travels*) of two countries that were fighting a war over whether eggs were to be broken on the large end or on the small end?
3. Does this story make fun of disputes in today's society over trivial differences among human beings?
4. Does this story make fun of democracy, or is it trying to show that human beings are ridiculously fickle?
5. Is the story aimed at the principle of majority rule, or at the claim anyone might have to "individual or minority rights"?

EXERCISE: Tyrannies, totalitarian governments and democracies

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"In Syracuse, when there was a time that everybody desired the death of Dionysius, a certain old woman kept constantly praying that he might be unharmed and that he might survive her. When the tyrant learned this he asked why she did it. Then she said, 'When I was a girl we had a harsh tyrant and I wished for his death; when he was killed, he was succeeded by one who was somewhat harsher: I was very eager to see the end of his dominion also. Then we began to have a third ruler still more harsh—that was you. So if you should be taken away a worse would succeed in your place'."

--St. Thomas Aquinas, *On The Governance of Rulers*,
Chapter VI

St. Thomas wrote this passage in the 13th century, probably around 1265. The Dionysius referred to was a tyrant in Sicily during the 4th century B.C.

In answering, you may choose more than one alternative.

1. Do you think a story like this is told in order to suggest that
 - (a) in politics, "the more things change, the more they remain the same"
 - (b) we can count on progress in history; everything turns out for the best
 - (c) in politics, if things are bad, they can be expected to get worse
 - (d) no matter how tyrannical leaders are, they can always count on the loyalty of the common people.
2. The chief difference between ancient tyrannies and modern totalitarian governments is:
 - (1) tyrants were always bad, but some modern totalitarian governments are very good;
 - (2) some tyrants were benevolent, but all modern totalitarian governments are benevolent;
 - (3) tyrannies are generally satisfied if their citizens behave obediently; totalitarian governments want thought control as well.
 - (4) tyrants are one-man dictatorships; totalitarian governments are always ruled by groups or juntas.
3. Would you say that
 - (1) there are no longer any tyrannies in the world, although there are some totalitarian governments
 - (2) there are no longer any totalitarian governments, although there are still some tyrannies
 - (3) it is impossible for there to be tyrannies nowadays.

EXERCISE: The requirements of democracy

Although democracy is sometimes glibly defined as government "of, for and by the people," there is no one simple answer to the question, "What is a democracy?"; several things are required.

One list of these "requirements of democracy" includes:

1. Educated citizens
2. Intellectual freedom
3. Economic security
4. Majority rule
5. Freedom to form political parties
6. Popular agreement that democracy will work
7. The individual is considered important

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To see how each of these items contributes to the definition of democracy, divide your class into groups of seven. In each group, each member should select one of the requirements of democracy to pursue further. Then for the characteristic selected the individual student should do enough research to answer the following questions:

1. What does the phrase, (*insert name of characteristic under consideration*) mean?
2. Name three ways that your life would be different if this characteristic were not found in America:
 - A.
 - B.
 - C.

Once you have found at least tentative answers for your questions, then compare notes with the other students in your class (not in your group) who are working on the same characteristic of democracy as you are. Add to *your* responses the questions one thing that impressed you from the answers given by these other students.

Then reform in the original groups of seven and prepare to present a panel to the rest of the class on "The Requirements of Democracy and How They Affect Our Lives."

After all panels have been presented, discuss as a class whether these seven requirements can stand alone or if they are related to one another. See if you can find some connections between them.

Then, by yourself, find at least one connection between the particular requirement of democracy you researched and each of the other six. Continue your class discussion after you have engaged in this individual reflection.

E.R.

EXERCISE: Democratic government is founded on certain ideas

The word “democracy” comes from a Greek term meaning “rule of the people.” However, because this phrase is very broad it must be further refined to capture the flavor of democracy in any particular country. The ideas upon which American democracy is founded include:

1. delegation of power to officials elected by the people,
2. safeguarding of each citizen’s personal freedom,
3. majority rule,
4. belief that individual citizens are most capable of deciding their own welfare.

Explore these ideas a little with your classmates by answering these questions:

A. Delegation of power

1. Does anyone have power over you that you didn’t delegate to them?
2. What about parents? teachers? Do they have power over you?
3. How did they get this power if you didn’t delegate it to them?
4. Does this mean that your home isn’t a democracy? What about your classroom?
5. If your answer to the question above is “no,” how can America be a democracy?

B. Personal freedom

1. Are you free?
2. What constraints are there on your freedom?
3. Are there any American citizens who are not free?
4. Does this mean that the United States is not a democracy?

C. Majority rule

1. Describe a situation in which you were involved where the minority prevailed, that is, where one person or a small group

of individuals got their way in opposition to what the larger group wanted. (As a class, find at least ten examples of this).

2. Does this mean that you don't live in a democracy?

D. Individual decisions about personal welfare

1. Are there individuals who are not capable of deciding their own welfare?

2. What about those who are mentally retarded? Those in prison?

3. Are these individuals citizens?

4. What happens to the definition of democracy if some citizens don't have the rights that are considered an essential part of the democratic form of government?

E. Conclusions

1. Do you live in a democracy?

2. If your answer to the above question is "yes", what would it take (in terms of the four ideas characteristic of American democracy) to make your answer "no"?

E.R.