



Window on America

Вікно в Америку

What is Democracy?

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Country Study Series

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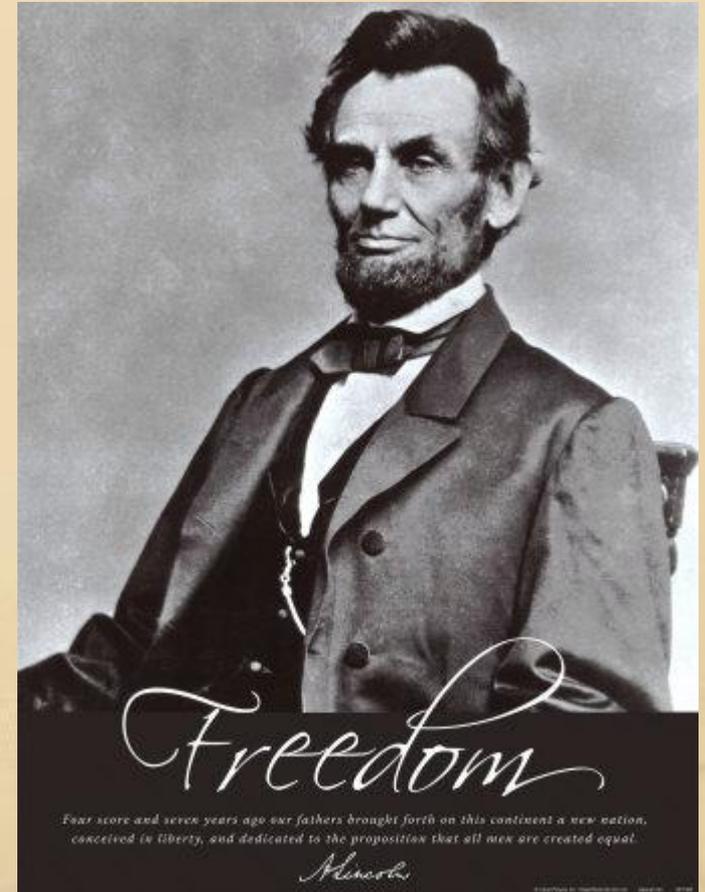
Introduction

- Democracy is the predominant form of government in the world today.
- For the greater part of the world, democracy has been a rare or recent phenomenon.
- The introduction of democracy throughout the 20th century means that by the new millennium more countries were governed through democratic than non-democratic forms of rule.
- Today, more than 60 percent of all countries today have in place at least some form of minimal democratic institutions and procedures.



What is Democracy?

- Democracy is defined as government in which the supreme power is vested in the people.
- In some forms, democracy can be exercised directly by the people; in large societies, it is by the people through their elected agents.
- Abraham Lincoln said that democracy is government “of the people, by the people, and for the people.”
- Democracy is an end in itself, as well as an important means to other ends, such as economic development, poverty reduction and greater protection of internationally-recognized human rights.



Building Democracy

- The building of democracy and the consolidation of democratic institutions are long and complex processes.
- Democracy does not happen quickly, but usually over a long period of time, and often involves many struggles for freedom from an authoritarian government.



Freedom versus Democracy

- Democracy is a set of ideas and principles about freedom, but it also consists of practices and procedures that have been molded through a long, often tortuous history.
- Democracy is the institutionalization of freedom.



Principles in Supporting Democracy

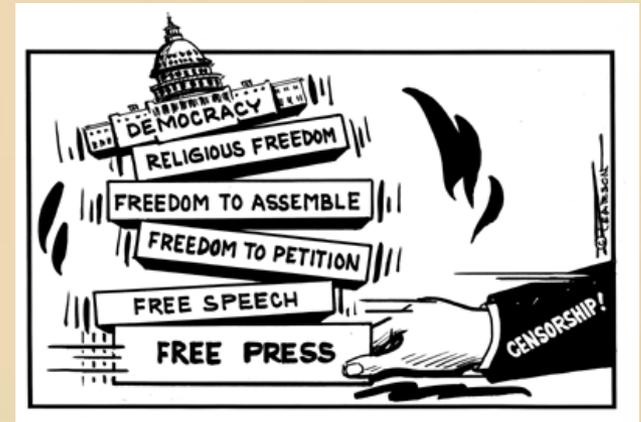
- Democratization is a process that requires time and patience.
- Democracy is not achieved through elections alone.
- Democratic practices can be compared but not prescribed.
- Democracy is built from within societies.
- Democracy cannot be imported, or exported, but supported.



Characteristics of Democracy

Democracies have many characteristics, the core of which are:

- Citizens' Rights and Responsibilities.
- Majority Rule and Minority Rights.
- Protection of Basic Human Rights:
 - Freedom of speech and religion.
 - The right to equal protection under law.
 - The opportunity to organize and participate fully in the political, economic, and cultural life of society.
- Commitment to the values of tolerance, cooperation, and compromise.



Forms of Democracy



- Direct

- Citizens participate in making public decisions.
- Most practical with relatively small numbers of people where members can meet in a single room to discuss issues and arrive at decisions by consensus or majority vote
- Examples - “propositions” and “referenda” — mandated changes of law — or possible recall of elected officials on ballots during state elections.

- Representative

- Citizens elect officials to make political decisions, formulate laws, and administer programs for the public good.



Majority Rule and Minority Rights

- All democracies are systems in which citizens freely make political decisions by majority rule.
- However, majority rule, by itself, is not automatically democratic.
- Majority rule is a means for organizing government and deciding public issues; it should not be a road to oppression.
 - No majority, even in a democracy, should take away the basic rights and freedoms of a minority group or individual.
- In a democratic society, majority rule must be coupled with guarantees of individual human rights that serve to protect the rights of minorities and dissenters.
- The rights of minorities cannot be eliminated by majority vote.
- The rights of minorities are protected because democratic laws and institutions protect the rights of all citizens.
- This principle characterizes all modern democracies, no matter how varied in history, culture, population, and economy.



Pluralism and Democracy

- Pluralism is when government is only one of many and varied public and private institutions, legal forums, political parties, organizations, and associations.
- Pluralism assumes that the many organized groups and institutions in a democratic society do not depend upon government for their existence, legitimacy, or authority.
- In an authoritarian society, virtually all such organizations would be controlled, licensed, watched, or otherwise accountable to the government.
- In a democracy, the powers of the government are, by law, clearly defined and sharply limited. As a result, private organizations are largely free of government control.



Citizen Rights

- Democracies rest upon the principle that government exists to serve the people. In other words, the people are citizens of the democratic state, not its subjects.
- The U.S. Declaration of Independence, written by Thomas Jefferson in 1776, states:
 - *We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. That to secure these rights, governments are instituted among men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed.*
- Core Rights in a Democracy include:
 - freedom of speech and expression,
 - freedom of religion and conscience,
 - freedom of assembly, and
 - the right to equal protection before the law.



Citizen Responsibilities

- Citizenship in a democracy requires participation, civility, patience – in other words, both rights and responsibilities.
- In order to remain healthy, democracies need more than an occasional vote from their citizens. They require an investment of time and hard work – a government of the people demands constant monitoring and support by the people.
- For democracy to succeed, citizens must be active, not passive, because they know that the success or failure of the government is their responsibility.
- Democratic citizens know that they must bear the burden of responsibility for their society if they are to benefit from its protection of their rights. This strengthens the society as a whole.
- At a minimum, citizens should educate themselves about the critical issues confronting their society, if only so that they can vote intelligently.
- The essence of democratic action is the peaceful, active, freely chosen participation of its citizens in the public life of their community and nation.



Citizen Responsibilities

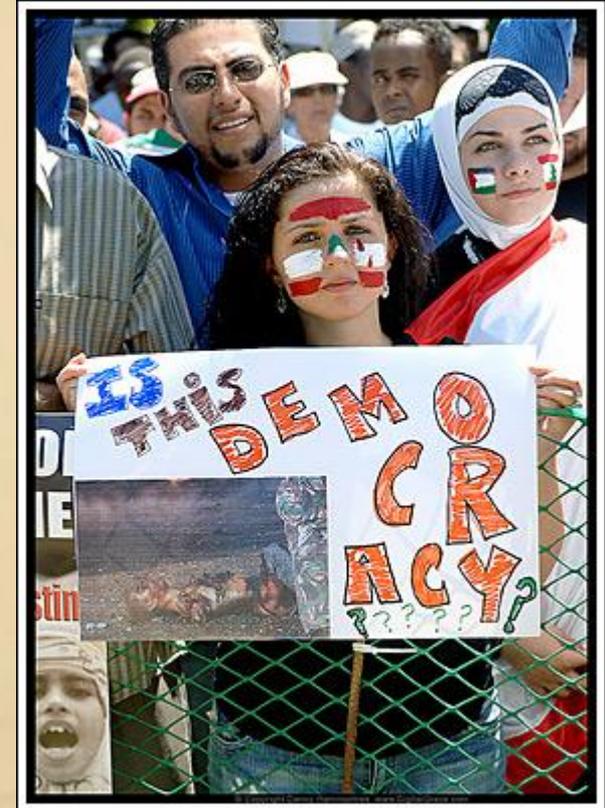
- Scholar [Diane Ravitch](#) said, “Democracy is a process, a way of living and working together. It is evolutionary, not static. It requires cooperation, compromise, and tolerance among all citizens. Making it work is hard, not easy. Freedom means responsibility, not freedom from responsibility.”



The Culture of Democracy

Conflict and Consensus

- Democracy is in many ways a set of rules for managing conflict.
- However, conflict must be managed within certain limits and result in compromise, consensus, or other agreements that all sides accept as legitimate.
- Democracy is not a machine that runs by itself once the proper principles are inserted. A democratic society needs the commitment of citizens who accept the inevitability of intellectual and political conflict as well as the necessity for tolerance.
- It is important to recognize that many conflicts in a democratic society are not between clear-cut “right” and “wrong” but between differing interpretations of democratic rights and social priorities.



The Culture of Democracy

Education

- Education is a universal human right
- Education is a vital component of any society, but especially of a democracy.
- There is a direct connection between education and democratic values: in democratic societies, educational content and practice support habits of democratic governance.
- The educational transmission process is vital in a democracy because effective democracies are dynamic, evolving forms of government that demand independent thinking by the citizenry. The opportunity for positive social and political change rests in citizens' hands.
- Governments should not view the education system as a means to indoctrinate students, but devote resources to education just as they strive to defend other basic needs of citizens.



The Culture of Democracy

Education

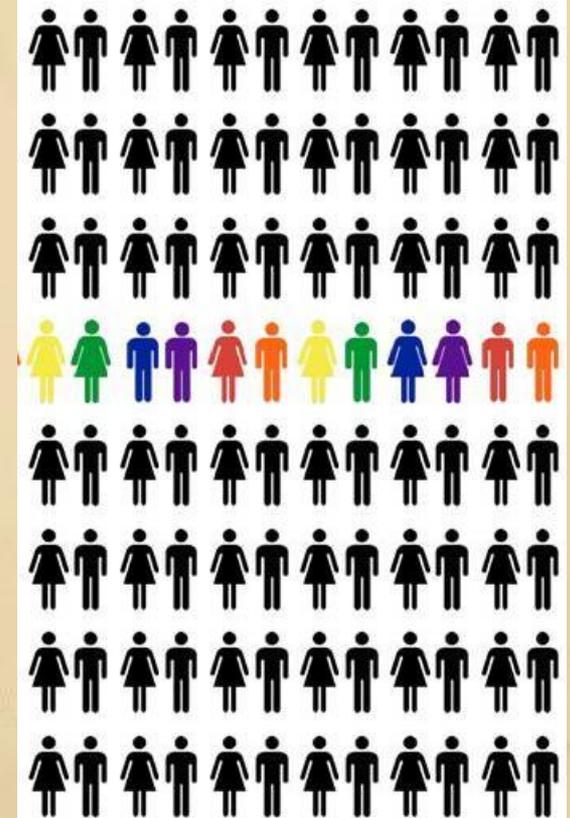
- Education systems in democracies do not preclude study of other political doctrines or systems of government. Democracies encourage students to develop reasonable arguments based on careful research and a clear understanding of history.
- Learning about democracy begins in school; it continues throughout a life of civic involvement, and curiosity about the many kinds of information accessible in a free society.
- Democratic norms and practices should be taught in order for people to understand and appreciate their opportunities and responsibilities as free citizens.



The Culture of Democracy

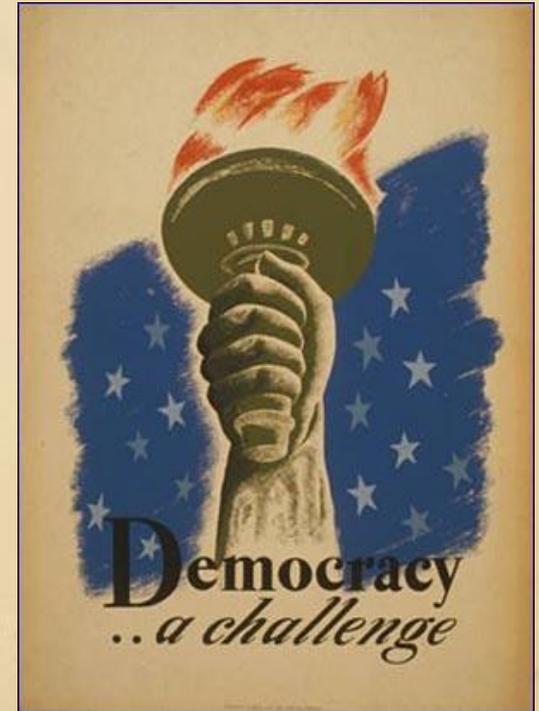
Society and Democracy

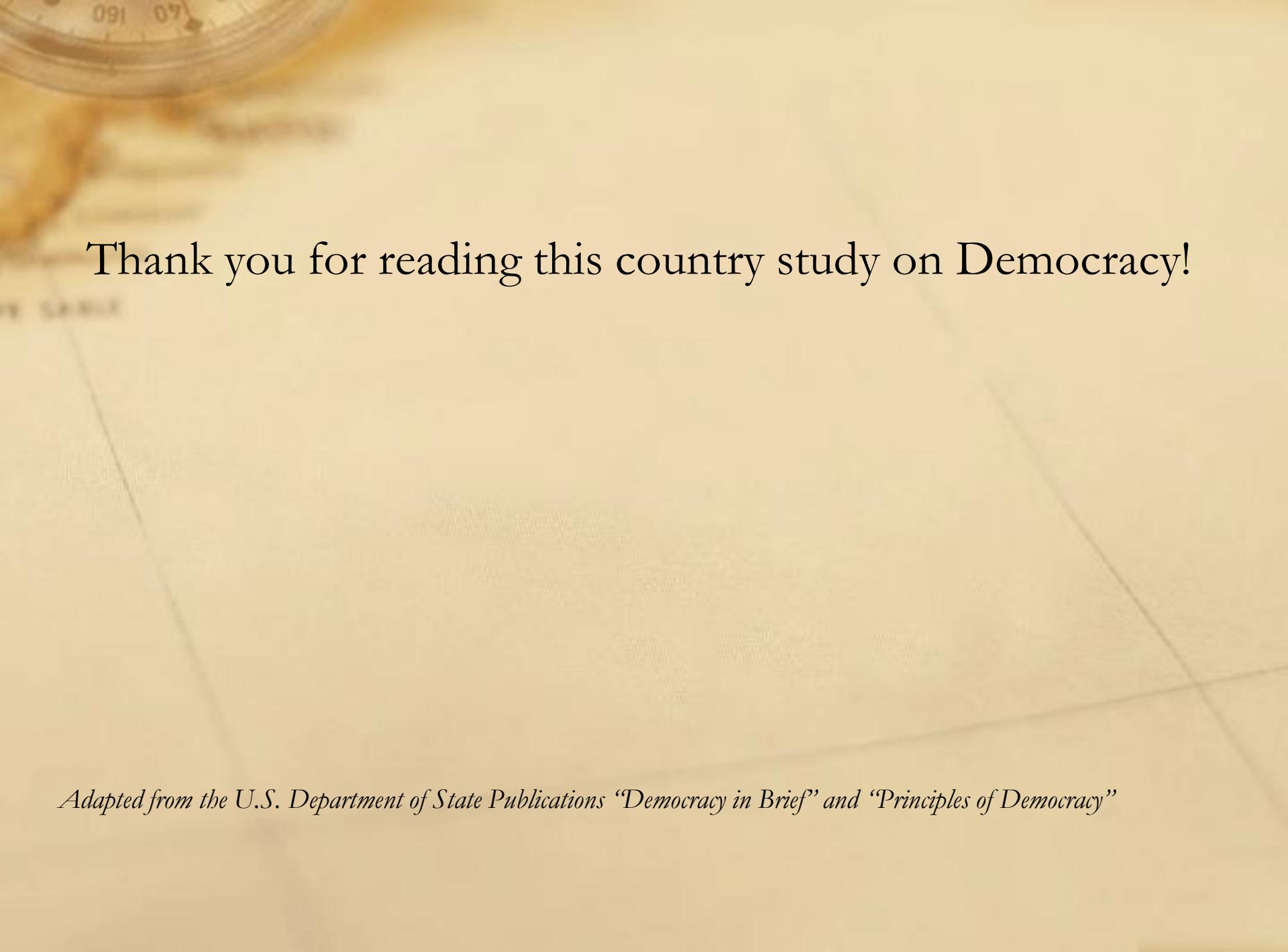
- Democracy is pragmatic.
 - Ideas and solutions to problems are not tested against a rigid ideology but tried in the real world where they can be argued over and changed, accepted, or discarded.
- Self-government cannot always protect against mistakes, end ethnic strife, guarantee economic prosperity, or ensure happiness.
 - It does, however, allow for public debate to identify and fix mistakes, permit groups to meet and resolve differences, offer opportunities for economic growth, and provide for social advancement and individual expression.



The Challenge of Democracy

- Democracy itself guarantees nothing. It offers both the opportunity to succeed and the risk of failure.
- People living in a democratic society must serve as the guardians of their own freedom and forge their own path toward the ideals set forth in the preamble to the United Nations' Universal Declaration of Human Rights:
 - *“Recognition of the inherent dignity and of the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family is the foundation of freedom, justice, and peace in the world.”*
- Democracy is thus both a promise and a challenge.
 - It is a promise that free human beings, working together, can govern themselves in a manner that will serve their aspirations for personal freedom, economic opportunity, and social justice.
 - It is a challenge because the success of the democratic enterprise rests upon the shoulders of its citizens and no one else.





Thank you for reading this country study on Democracy!

Adapted from the U.S. Department of State Publications "Democracy in Brief" and "Principles of Democracy"