

1.1

Ideals of Democracy

Explain how democratic ideals are reflected in the Declaration of Independence and the U.S. Constitution.

Life is a power struggle. Collectively government reflects how we as a people resolve that struggle. The essence of our government has been codified in the words of the United States Constitution. Our limited government was and is rooted in historical tradition, theory, conflict and compromise. Both the writers of our constitution and the vast majority of voters today have settled upon a representative democracy. **A balance between governmental power and individual rights has been a hallmark of American political development.** Our limited government is rooted in the ideals of natural rights, popular sovereignty, republicanism and social contract. Political disputes invariably collide at the intersection of power and rights, legitimacy and authority.

Fundamentally our Founders maintained an essential commitment to a limited government. The United States government would set boundaries as laid out in explicit formal expressed powers. The new government would be comprised of three branches – the legislative, executive and judicial – all separate but responsible for checking and balancing each other. This separation of powers not only limited government but also fulfilled the promise of our revolution. Ultimate legitimacy and authority are found in the people. Popular sovereignty could only be safeguarded if government was limited. The Constitution diluted power even more by creating a federal form of government. In this way power and authority would be shared between central, state and local governments. In the end the rule of law would protect not only the liberty but also the equality of all.

The experiment that is American republican government is rooted in the laboratory of history. Certain individuals and the debates they initiated have proven to be critical in the development of the fundamental ideas that make up our political thought. Key documents instruct American thought on limited government, natural rights, popular sovereignty, republicanism and social contract.

The English commitment to the rule of law traces at least back to the Magna Charta (1215) when the nobles rose up and challenged the king's absolute rule. Yet arguably the truest ancestor of American representative democracy is Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679). In his seminal book *Leviathan* (1651) Hobbes found man to be "nasty and brutish" in his "state of nature." Therefore, a just society required consent through a social contract, a constitution, in order to protect the rights and liberties of the "body politic." John Locke's *Second Treatise on Government* (1690) aimed to resolve the sovereignty question. The "laws of nature" established certain standards; equality of all for instance, and it was the role of government to protect these absolute rights. Locke also emphasized popular sovereignty as the legitimizing authority in building a social contract rooted in natural rights. Montesquieu's *Spirit of the Laws* (1748), however,

gave form to many of these foundational commitments. Republicanism, representative democracy, cannot be preserved through virtue alone. The rights of man can only be protected when governments dilute their legitimate authority through the separation of powers. Montesquieu's clear delineation of legislative, executive and judicial functions provided a prototype of good government. Our democratic ideals can clearly be seen as offspring of these foundational texts.

The story of American government has its seminal texts as well. Historians note that some of our first colonists who signed *The Mayflower Compact* (1620) were committed to "equal laws" enacted for all peoples for the "general good." Yet it was the towering achievement of Thomas Jefferson credited for authoring the *Declaration of Independence* (1776). Along with help from John Adams and Ben Franklin, Jefferson's transformative text still serves as a manifesto of freedom to oppressed peoples around the world. Written with the specificity of a lawyer's brief, our *Declaration* makes our purposes quite clear:

"We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable 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. That whenever any form of government becomes destructive to these ends, it is the right of the people to alter or to abolish it, and to institute new government, laying its foundation on such principles and organizing its powers in such form, as to them shall seem most likely to affect their safety and happiness."

There can be little doubt as to our first principles. Limited government, natural rights, popular sovereignty, republicanism and social contract can all be found in our *Declaration*. It was James Madison, however, who is credited for superintending the conflict and compromise in Philadelphia that ended up as our *United States Constitution* (1789). In the heat of a Philadelphian summer in 1787, 55 delegates codified into a social contract a constitution based upon democratic ideals. The work of George Washington, Alexander Hamilton, James Madison and members of the "Grand Committee" assembled a blue print for a unique form of political democracy in the United States. Today it still stands. The U.S. Constitution is the longest lasting and most durable government charter in human history. By adding a *Bill of Rights* our founders sealed a "body politic" that would have vindicated the work of Thomas Hobbes and those political theorists that could only have dreamed of a true and just commonwealth in their day.