

The Philosophical Foundations of the United States Political System



[The Goddess of Democracy Statue, Portsmouth Square, San Francisco](#). Public Domain

Snapshot of Topic 1

Explore the topic's sub-chapters to learn more about the philosophical foundations of the United States political system.

Supporting Question

- What were the roots of the ideas that influenced the development of the United States political

system?

Massachusetts Standards [8.T1.1-5]

1. [The Government of Ancient Athens](#)
2. [The Government of the Roman Republic](#)
3. [Enlightenment Thinkers and Democratic Government](#)
4. [British Influences on American Government](#)
5. [Native American Influences on American Government](#)

Advanced Placement Standards for U.S. Government

- AP Government and Politics Unit 1.1: Ideas of Democracy
- AP Government and Politics Unit 1.2: Types of Democracy

Topic 1: The Philosophical Foundations of the United States Political System

Topic 1 explores the origins of the United States system of **democratic government**, beginning with Ancient Athens and the Roman Republic and including how Enlightenment thinkers, colonial governments, and Native American tribes influenced the writing of the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution.

The word '**Democracy**' comes from the Greek words "demos" and "kratos," meaning "rule by the people" ([Defining Democracy](#), Museum of Australian Democracy). Although the term does not appear in either the Declaration of Independence or the United States Constitution, democracy is the foundation for government in this country. Americans believe in government of the people, by the people, for the people.

Democracy, as a framework of government, has evolved over the centuries and now includes concepts that are the foundations of civic and political life in our country: freedom, justice, liberty, individual rights and responsibilities, shared power, and a system of checks and balances among the legislative, executive, and judicial branches of the government. The following resources show the rise of democracy and its status in the world today:

- [Democracy - Our World in Data](#)
- [March of Democracy: 4,000 years of Democracy in 90 seconds](#) (note: flash plug-in required)
- [Democracy's Rocky Road](#) is an interactive timeline and animated guide to how democracy has spread around the world (note: flash plug-in required)
- [Democracy 2019](#) is *The Economist* magazine's annual index measuring democracy around the world.

More than half the countries in the world consider themselves democracies, although not all are fully democratic ([Desilver, 2019](#)). In the modern world, contends education professor John J. Patrick (2006, p.7), an "authentic democracy" includes the following structures, without which a democratic system cannot exist:

- "free, fair, contested, and regularly scheduled elections";

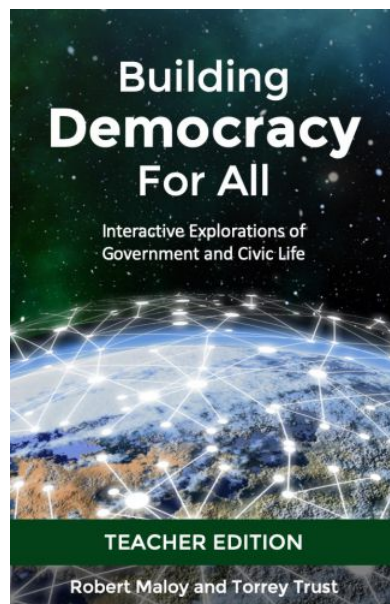
- "practically all adults have the right to vote and to participate in the electoral process";
- "minority parties are able to criticize and otherwise oppose the ruling party or parties";
- a constitution "guarantees the rule of law," established limited government, and protects individuals' rights of speech, press, petition, assembly and association.

Yet the past decade has seen democracy and democratic institutions under assault around the world. The [Nations in Transit 2020](#) report from Freedom House details what it calls a "decade of democratic deficits" in which countries experiencing declines in democracy have exceeded countries with gains every year since 2010. In Central Europe, the report notes, there is a growth of "hybrid regimes" in Poland and Hungary where authoritarian leaders have created quasi-autocracies by undermining the independent judiciary, attacking the free press, curtailing civil liberties, and spreading disinformation and propaganda to inflame people's attitudes toward outsiders such as immigrants and asylum-seekers. Despite these developments, the Freedom House report notes, citizen protests against corruption and for environmental protections, particularly in Ukraine and Armenia, represent a significant counterweight to anti-democracy in the region.

Each of the standards in Topic 1 explore the philosophical and historical origins of the United States democratic political system, beginning with the emergence of democratic principles in ancient Greece and Rome and continuing to political philosophies of Enlightenment thinkers, the struggles between monarchs and nobles in medieval England, and the question of how extensively did Native Americans influence on the structure of American government.

Democracy

Government of the people, by the people and for the people



Maloy, R. W. & Trust, T. (2020). *Building Democracy for All*. EdTech Books. Retrieved from <https://edtechbooks.org/democracy>



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