Topic 1

The Philosophical Foundations of the United States Political System

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

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.

But, as researchers with the Varities of Democracy project have noted, there is “no single agreed-upon list of what are (or aren’t) issues of democracy” (FiveThirtyEight, September 1, 2021). Some think about issues of electoral democracy such as the importance of free elections and a free press while others focus on social and economic democracy and issues around women’s rights, civil liberties, economic justice, voting access, and overcoming the historical legacies of slavery and discrimination against people of color.

Here you can find five types of democracy (electoral, liberal, participatory, deliberative, and egalitarian) and issues associated with them.

Topic 1 explores the philosophical and historical origins of the United States system of democratic government, beginning with Ancient Athens and the Roman Republic and including how Enlightenment thinkers, North American colonial governments, and First People tribes influenced the writing of the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, and the structure of U.S. government.

The governments and politics of Greece and Rome profoundly influenced America’s founding
generation. Comparing the educational backgrounds of George Washington, John Adams, Thomas Jefferson, and James Madison, historian Thomas E. Ricks (2020) found Greco-Roman learning was "part of the culture; a way of looking at the world and set of values."

Ricks notes further influences from Greece and Rome. The United States "Senate" meets at the "Capitol." Our political parties are "Republicans" or "Democrats." The Supreme Court's architexture recalls a Roman temple. Latin phrases are familiar parts of the legal and political vocabularies. The Roman word "virtue" (which in the 18th century meant putting the common good above self interest) appears some 6000 times in the writing of members of the Revolutionary generation. At the same time, the Founders, as with their ancient world predecessors, accepted human slavery and built that acceptance into the structures of American government as well as the fabric of American life.

Media Literacy Activities Choice Board

[Image of a choice board with various activities]

Topic 1 Chapters
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