



Museum & Archives of Rockingham County & Charters of Freedom
Essay Competition

Title: "What is democracy and why do we need it"?

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Throughout the entire history of the United States of America, our country has survived countless conflicts. Whether foreign, domestic, or social, the US has prevailed and will continue to do so as long as the power of democracy is preserved and protected. Democracy is arguably the most important aspect of American Government because it fosters peaceful solutions to difficult problems. Democracy places the power of government into the hands of the people who are being governed, it is paramount that this aspect of government is protected because, without it, the people are left unprotected to oppression and tyranny.

The origins of democracy can be traced back to the city of Athens which was a part of the ancient civilization of Greece. In the early days of democracy, only land-owning males were allowed to speak and vote on issues concerning how the government would handle its business. Later on, democracy would be practiced by the Romans who developed the idea of representative democracy. This idea meant that the citizens would elect individuals to represent their interests and that person would handle the decisions of the government. A current example of this practice is used by the United States when we elect Congressmen and women to represent the interests of different states and people. During the period of Roman civilization, the type of government eventually shifted from a democracy to having an emperor rule over its citizens. Although some regard the Roman Empire as the greatest civilization of the ancient world and draw parallels between Rome and the United States of America, a major difference between the two is that America practices the use of democracy. This key contrast between the two governments enables the American people to have a say in how their government functions by voting for people that share similar beliefs. If a decision was made in Ancient Rome, a normal citizen had no power to

object or fight it. This practice of having one non-elected leader of the country carried Rome far but eventually proved to be the cause of its fall due to weak leadership and strife between the citizens and its oppressive government. If Rome would have maintained its democratic practices and enabled the citizens of its nation the ability to have a say in how the government would function, then Rome may still be flourishing to this day.

After the fall of Rome around two thousand years ago, the ideals of democracy did not resurface until the time of the birth of a new nation: The United States of America. Ideas such as the consent of the governed emerged shortly before the Revolutionary War of 1776. Consent of the governed is the idea that the citizens of a nation and its government have an unspoken agreement that allows the government to function properly as long as the government does not oppress or infringe upon the individual liberties and rights of its citizens. This idea and others like it inspired our founding fathers to finally decide to formally separate from the British government and to establish their own form of government. These American revolutionaries had grown tired of the oppressive and unjust practices of the British government. This included the heavy taxes placed on the colonists and also regulations placed on how certain businesses had to operate. After our American founders won the hard-fought victory of Independence, they established a representative democracy. One major reason behind this decision was that they were first-hand witnesses to the tyranny that can happen when a government does not allow its own citizens to have input into how their government operates.

American democracy can be outlined by three basic principles: liberty, equality, and self-government. These three principles are all equally essential to the ideal of democracy and would cause the value of democracy to diminish if one was taken away. The first, liberty, is the basic freedom that all Americans have. Liberty enables Americans to make their own choices, to choose their profession, to believe and practice whatever religion or philosophy that they see fit, and it enables them to take part in what most call the American dream. This important idea that if a person puts in hard work and effort that they have the chance and capability to achieve their goals no matter how unattainable they may seem is a valuable piece of American culture and shows that Americans have the freedom to make their own choices.

Equality is another important aspect of democracy. It ensures that every single individual has the right and opportunity to vote. At first, when the United States was first established, only white, land-owning, males could vote. Then, voting rights were expanded to all white males. This meant that women and other Americans of different races were unable to participate in voting. This meant that America at the time was not truly equal. It took bloodshed and many years of fighting for African American men to not only vote but to also be freed from the oppressive system of slavery that had existed in the United States for almost one hundred years. Finally, in 1920, women were given the right to vote which meant that all Americans could vote which meant that the United States had achieved equal voting rights for all of its citizens. America has faced many social issues that have changed the way Americans view many topics and issues. This constant pursuit of equality by different groups and ideas has enabled the continuation of equality and also democracy as a whole.

Lastly, self-government is a key aspect of democracy. Self-government simply means that the people of a nation are enabled and entitled to make their own decisions regarding how their country's government operates and functions. This has allowed the United States and its citizens to protect its interests both at home and abroad. A prime example of this is when the United States entered to fight in WWII to fight the oppression of Nazi Germany and the Axis Powers. But protecting Democratic ideals is not the only responsibility of democratic countries. As equally important as protecting democracy is fostering the growth of democratic principles. After the United States and its allies had defeated the Axis powers, they didn't pack up and leave these countries to revert to their oppressive governments, they stayed and invested money and manpower into rebuilding these war-torn countries and showed the citizens what democracy really was and helped to establish democratic based governments. Self-government allows the opinions of a nation's citizens to be heard and shown.

The beginning of 2020 brought a worldwide pandemic that has not only affected people's health and wellness but also has changed the way that people go about their daily lives. Almost a year later, this mass pandemic is continuing to be an issue throughout the world. Surprisingly enough, due to social distancing needs and other restrictions, democracy itself has been threatened by this disease. In 2020, a presidential election

was held. Due to most Americans voting on one day, this problem posed a threat by possibly restricting people who needed to stay at home from making their voice heard by voting. This problem was fixed by implementing a larger amount of mail-in ballots for those who needed them. Although the 2020 election may be the most contested election of the modern era, which ultimately has led to nationwide violence, democracy has still been protected by overcoming this obstacle and allowing people to have their voices heard. In the presidential election of 2020, over 159 million Americans voted, which is a significantly larger number than years past, this means that more Americans wanted to have an input on who the leader of our country was. Democracy must be protected because it is a key building block upon which the rest of the United States of America was established and without it, the voices of the many would not be heard.