

Democracy: The Cornerstone of a Free and Just Society

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DESCRIPTION

Democracy, derived from the Greek words *demos* (people) and *kratos* (power or rule), is more than just a political system—it is a philosophy of governance grounded in the belief that sovereignty belongs to the people. It promotes individual freedoms, equality, and the right to participate in decision-making processes that shape society. In an increasingly complex and interconnected world, democracy serves as both a guiding ideal and a practical framework for achieving inclusive, responsive governance.

Origins and evolution

The concept of democracy dates back over 2,500 years to ancient Athens, where citizens participated directly in legislative decisions. However, this early form of democracy was limited to a small segment of the population—excluding women, slaves, and non-citizens. Over centuries, the idea evolved, especially through the Enlightenment period, where philosophers like John Locke and Jean-Jacques Rousseau emphasized the importance of individual rights, the social contract, and representative governance.

Modern democracies are primarily representative, wherein citizens elect officials to make decisions on their behalf. This structure balances efficiency with public participation and accountability. The evolution of democratic institutions has been marked by expansion of suffrage, the development of constitutions, and the institutionalization of checks and balances that protect against tyranny and abuse of power.

Core principles of democracy

The ultimate authority rests with the people. Governments derive their legitimacy through the consent of the governed, usually expressed through free and fair elections. All individuals, including leaders, are subject to the law. A functioning legal system ensures accountability, justice, and protection of rights. Democracies uphold the rights to speech, religion, assembly, and the press. These freedoms create an informed and engaged citizenry capable of holding leaders accountable. Democracy thrives on diversity of opinion and active civic engagement.

Political parties, civil society organizations, and free media contribute to a vibrant democratic culture. The separation of powers among the executive, legislative, and judicial branches prevents any single entity from gaining unchecked power.

The role of elections

Elections are the most visible manifestation of democracy. They provide a mechanism for citizens to choose their leaders and influence public policy. However, for elections to truly reflect democratic values, they must be free, fair, transparent, and competitive. This includes universal suffrage, impartial electoral commissions, and the absence of coercion or manipulation.

Beyond the act of voting, democracy demands continual civic participation. Town hall meetings, public consultations, activism, and peaceful protest are all vital channels through which citizens can influence governance and demand accountability.

Challenges to democracy

Despite its ideals, democracy faces numerous challenges in the 21st century. Authoritarianism, misinformation, political polarization, and declining trust in institutions threaten the integrity of democratic systems around the globe.

In some countries, elected leaders undermine democratic norms by concentrating power, silencing dissent, and weakening judicial independence. Populist rhetoric can erode institutional checks in the name of majority will. The digital age has made it easier to spread disinformation, distort public discourse, and manipulate voter perceptions. Social media algorithms can reinforce echo chambers, reducing exposure to diverse viewpoints. Increasing ideological divisions can hinder cooperation, paralyze legislatures, and breed intolerance. When political opponents are viewed as enemies, democratic dialogue and compromise suffer. When economic disparities become extreme, they undermine political equality. Wealthy individuals and corporations may wield disproportionate influence, distorting the democratic process.

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Received: 31-Jan-2025, Manuscript No. JPSPA-25-37820; **Editor assigned:** 09-Feb-2025, PreQC No. JPSPA-25-37820 (PQ); **Reviewed:** 17-Feb-2025, QC No. JPSPA-25-37820; **Revised:** 24-Feb-2025, Manuscript No. JPSPA-25-37820 (R); **Published:** 03-Mar-2025, DOI: 10.35248/2332-0761.25.13.068

Citation: Biwas P (2025). Democracy: The Cornerstone of a Free and Just Society. J Pol Sci Pub Aff. 13: 068.

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Strengthening democratic institutions

To preserve and strengthen democracy, societies must invest in robust institutions, civic education, and inclusive policies. Transparency, accountability, and citizen engagement are essential for a healthy democracy. Educational systems should emphasize critical thinking, media literacy, and the responsibilities of citizenship.

Independent media, active civil society organizations, and impartial courts act as guardians of democratic norms. Whistleblower protections, anti-corruption agencies, and electoral reforms can reinforce public trust and integrity in governance.

Moreover, democracy must be adaptive. It should evolve to reflect the changing needs of society, including digital governance, environmental sustainability, and the protection of minority rights. Inclusive dialogue and participatory

polymaking can help ensure that all voices are heard, especially those historically marginalized.

CONCLUSION

Democracy is not a static achievement but a continual process that requires vigilance, participation, and commitment. It is both an ideal to strive toward and a system to be constantly nurtured. While it faces significant challenges, democracy remains the most promising path toward a society where freedom, justice, and human dignity are upheld.

By fostering civic responsibility, protecting institutions, and promoting inclusive governance, we can ensure that democracy not only survives but thrives in the face of adversity. In doing so, we honor the fundamental principle that power truly belongs to the people.