

Models of democracy

Key points

- **Participatory democracy** is a model of democracy in which citizens have the power to decide directly on policy and politicians are responsible for implementing those policy decisions.
- **Pluralist democracy** is a model of democracy in which no one group dominates politics and organized groups compete with each other to influence policy.
- **Elite democracy** is a model of democracy in which a small number of people, usually those who are wealthy and well-educated, influence political decision making.

Models of democracy

When the United States was founded, the Founders created a **democratic republic**, a system of government in which the power to govern comes from the people, but elected officials represent their interests. This system of government allows American citizens to participate in government in many ways.

The United States also has many different levels and branches of government that any citizen or group might approach. Many people take this as evidence that US citizens, especially as represented by competing groups, can influence government actions. Some political theorists, however, argue that this is not the case. These different opinions have sprouted three popular models of democracy: participatory, pluralist, and elite.

We can see each model of democracy in the American government today. In this article, we'll define participatory, pluralist, and elite democracy and describe examples of each.

Participatory democracy

A **participatory democracy** is a model of democracy in which citizens have the power to make policy decisions. Participatory democracy emphasizes the broad participation of people in politics. However, this is not a **direct democracy**, in which citizens are directly responsible for making policy decisions. In a participatory democracy, citizens can influence policy decisions, but do not make them. Politicians are still responsible for implementing those policy decisions. The United States does not have a pure participatory democracy, but at some levels of government, we can see examples of a participatory democracy playing out.

Examples of participatory democracy today

We can see participatory democracy in local and state forms of government, where citizens have multiple access points to influence policymakers. **Town hall meetings** are a way for local and national politicians to meet with constituents to hear their opinions on topics they are interested in or to discuss upcoming legislation.

Initiatives and referendums are two ways in which local and state governments allow for citizens to influence policy decisions. An **initiative** is a process that allows citizens to bypass their state legislature

by placing proposed laws on the ballot. Some states even allow citizens to place constitutional amendments on the ballot.

Only 24 states have an initiative process. Nevada is one of those states, and in 2016, the state of Nevada voted on Nevada Background Checks for Gun Purchases, Question 1 which would require individuals who intend to purchase guns from someone who does not have a firearms license to undergo a background check. Citizens of Nevada initiated the process in 2013 by collecting at least 101,667 signatures for the initiative to be on the ballot. After the signatures were collected, the proposed law was then sent to Nevada's State Legislature.



From there, the State Legislature had two options: 1) accept the petition, and it would become law or; 2) reject the petition (or refuse to act on it). If the legislature rejected the petition, it would then go on the ballot at the next general election. Governor Brian Sandoval vetoed the legislation after it passed the State legislature, prompting the initiative to be on the ballot in 2016. The governor's veto put the measure on the 2016 ballot as follows: *Shall Chapter 202 of the Nevada Revised Statutes be amended to prohibit, except in certain circumstances, a person from selling or transferring a firearm to another person unless a federally-licensed dealer first conducts a federal background check on the potential buyer or transferee?*

51% of voters selected "yes" on Question 1, making it law. Despite the initiative passing, the law has yet to be enforced by the state of Nevada. The Nevada Attorney General Adam Laxalt argued that the law isn't enforceable because the law explicitly says the FBI has to conduct the background checks, not the state. How does this example show the limitations of initiatives on creating laws?

A **popular referendum**, on the other hand, allows voters to approve or repeal an act of the state legislature. Similar to initiatives, voters sign a petition to get the measure on the next ballot, but popular referendums differ in that the law in question has already passed in the state legislature. In 2016, Maine conducted a referendum vote on a measure that would outlaw hunting bears after baiting them with doughnuts. Because doughnuts are so popular for controlling Maine's bear population, voters overwhelmingly defeated the measure.

Both initiatives and referendums show how local and state governments allow for the broad participation of voters to influence policymaking. Elected representatives are then responsible for enacting the decisions of their constituents.

Pluralist democracy

Pluralist democracy is a model of democracy in which no single group dominates politics and organized groups compete with each other to influence policy. We see examples of pluralist democracy at both the state level and the federal level. As in a participatory democracy, anyone can participate in influencing political decisions, but in a pluralist democracy, individuals work through groups formed around common causes.

Theorists who back pluralist democracy argue that people self-select which causes them to spend their time on and then support those groups. Those groups then compete over gaining support from notable politicians who will advocate their interests.

Examples of pluralist democracy today

The most notable example of pluralist democracy in the American political system is the role that interest groups play in political decisions today. **Interest groups** are groups of people who attempt to influence policymakers to support their position on a particular common interest or concern.

We'll go into more detail about interest groups later in the course, but for now, what you need to know is that groups like the National Rifle Association (NRA) and the National Organization for Women (NOW) influence policymakers in many ways. They influence politicians through monetary donations, lobbying, and testifying in Congressional hearings.

Interest groups are an example of pluralist democracy because people join groups that are focused on issues that they care about.

Elite democracy

Elite democracy is a model of democracy in which a small number of people, usually those who are wealthy or well-educated, influence political decision making. Advocated by some of the Framers, like Alexander Hamilton, the elite democratic model argues that participation in politics should be limited to a small group of highly-informed individuals who can make the best decisions for all citizens.

Examples of elite democracy today

We can see the influence of elite democracy today in the structure of the Electoral College. Although the people popularly elect a presidential candidate, the Electoral College serves as a check on the potential tyranny of the majority. In US history, there have been three presidential elections in which the people popularly elected one candidate for president, but the other candidate won the Electoral College and therefore the presidency.

2016 Electoral College map
Reported as of November 28th

Candidate	Running Mate	Popular Vote	States Carried
Hillary Clinton (D)	Tim Kaine	48.1%	20 + DC
Donald Trump (R)	Mike Pence	46.5%	30

*Clinton won Maine's statewide vote, but Trump received an electoral vote for winning the 2nd district

The Electoral College is an example of elite democracy because it places a small group in charge of making major political decisions, even if those decisions contradict the popular will.

Ideals of Democracy

Key points

- The US government is based on ideas of limited government, including natural rights, popular sovereignty, republicanism, and social contract.
- Limited government is the belief that the government should have certain restrictions in order to protect the individual rights and civil liberties of citizens.

Introduction

In 1776, the Second Continental Congress issued the **Declaration of Independence**, stating their specific grievances with the British monarchy and why they were going to create a separate government. After the colonies separated from the British monarchy and formed the United States of America, they had to answer some crucial questions: 1) If not a monarchy, what type of government was the United States going to have? 2) What kind of government was going to protect the people without violating their individual liberties?

The Framers decided to create a limited government based on ideas of natural rights, popular sovereignty, republicanism, and the social contract. We can see some of these ideas pop up in the foundational documents of the United States, including the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution. But what are these democratic ideas and why has the United States continued to hold onto them for more than 250 years?

This article describes each of these democratic ideas and explains why the Framers used them as a basis for government.

What is a limited government?

After the colonies decided to separate from the British monarchy, the Framers had to develop a system of government that would gain the support of all of the Patriots. They agreed on a system of limited government.

Limited government is a political system in which there are certain restrictions placed on the government to protect individual rights and liberties. This decision to create a limited government was a deliberate departure from the British monarchy, which the Framers felt violated their rights. They intentionally created a limited government that would have to abide by a set of rules designed by the people of the country.

Now that the Framers had a plan for the type of government they were going to have, they had to decide a few things:

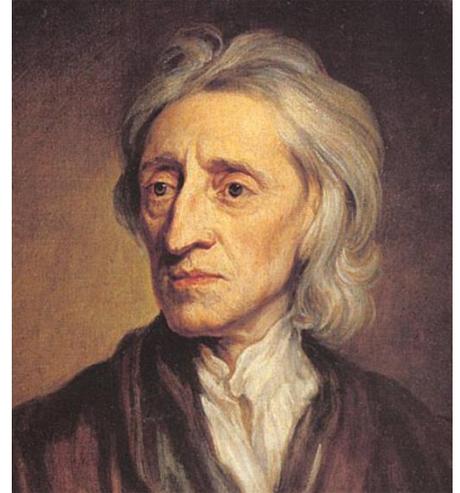
- What are the roles and responsibilities of this government?
- How will the government respond to the will of the people?

To answer these questions, the Framers turned to political philosophers like **Thomas Hobbes** and **John Locke**, whose ideas about what makes a government successful inspired the current system of government in the United States today.

What are natural rights?

The main argument in the Declaration of Independence was that the British monarchy violated the natural rights of the American people. **Natural rights**, sometimes called unalienable rights, are rights the Framers believed all people are born with and can never give up. The Founders argued that the government's central purpose should be to protect and uphold these rights.

John Locke, an Enlightenment philosopher, described natural rights as the rights to one's own "life, liberty, and property." His work inspired Thomas Jefferson, the main author of the Declaration of Independence, who described unalienable rights as "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness." Having defined these natural rights, the Founders of the United States then had to answer the question: "How do we make sure society safeguards natural rights without giving the government too much power?"



What is a social contract?

For the government to protect the natural rights of American citizens, people would have to see the government as an authority they must respect. They would enter into a **social contract** with each other, meaning that American society as a whole would agree to give up some freedoms to be protected by the federal government. Thomas Hobbes, an English political philosopher, theorized that the social contract was the foundation of government.

If the people did not give up some freedoms, then the government would have no way to rule over them. For instance, you can't just walk into someone's house if the door is open and claim that the house is now yours. That is a freedom that you give up so the government can protect you from someone else doing the same thing to you. However, by ensuring that the government was limited, the Founders created a system that protected the freedoms granted to the people.

Still, the Founders were concerned about a strong central government turning into a tyrannical monarchy again. They faced yet another question: how do the people ensure that the government does not get too powerful and start restricting all of their freedoms?

What is popular sovereignty?

The Founders believed that the United States should be founded on the principle of popular sovereignty. **Popular sovereignty** is the idea that the government's power comes from the will of the people or the "consent of the governed." If the government started to violate the will of the people, Americans would have the right to change that.

This idea is the main argument within the Declaration of Independence, which claimed that the British monarchy had become too powerful and was not listening to the needs and desires of the colonists, who therefore had the right to rebel.

In the United States, we see popular sovereignty at a smaller level in most elections when the power of the government shifts from one political party to another. When control of the government shifts from one party to another, it shows that the will of the people has also changed.

Changes in leadership gives us insight into what the people want from their government. Political parties play a vital role in American politics, as they represent the opinions and needs of the people to the government.

What is republicanism?

Leading up to the Revolutionary War, a famous phrase was “No taxation without representation!” To feel like their wants and needs were being heard by the government, the colonists wanted direct representation, but the British were unwilling to grant that to the colonies. Keeping that in mind, the Framers wanted to make sure that they were creating a political system that represented the people. But how do the people get the government to listen to their will?

The Framers believed that the best form of government is one in which elected leaders represent the interests of the people. This is known as **republicanism**.

The Framers wanted the will of the people to be reflected in the daily decisions of government and to prevent a tyrannical government from rising. By creating a system of government in which the people elected their leaders, the Framers believed that there was less of a chance of a government that would hold onto power and refuse to give it up.

Despite the Framers' desire to create a representative government, they extended the privilege of voting only to a small portion of US citizens: white, landowning men. It took nearly 200 years to extend voting rights to all people in the United States, meaning that not every person's needs and wants were heard or represented in government for a lot of American history.