

What is Democracy?

The dictionary describes democracy as
rule or government by the people.



This system of government has four key elements:

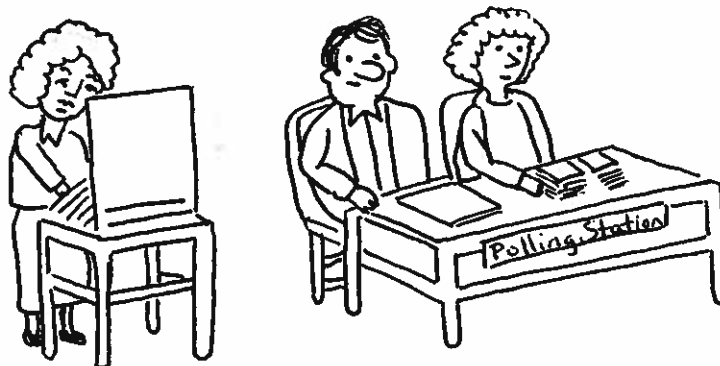
1. Free and fair elections to choose or replace government.
2. Active representation and participation by citizens.
3. Protection of human rights for all citizens.
4. Laws and procedures applied equally to all citizens.



Free and Fair Elections to Choose or Replace Government



In a democracy, free and fair elections are held to choose the people who will represent the citizens in parliament, and who will head the government at the national, provincial and local levels. These elections occur at regular intervals and those in power cannot extend their terms in office without the consent of the people in an election. The people who wish to be elected into office have the right to campaign freely.



The voters must be able to vote in secret, free of intimidation and violence.

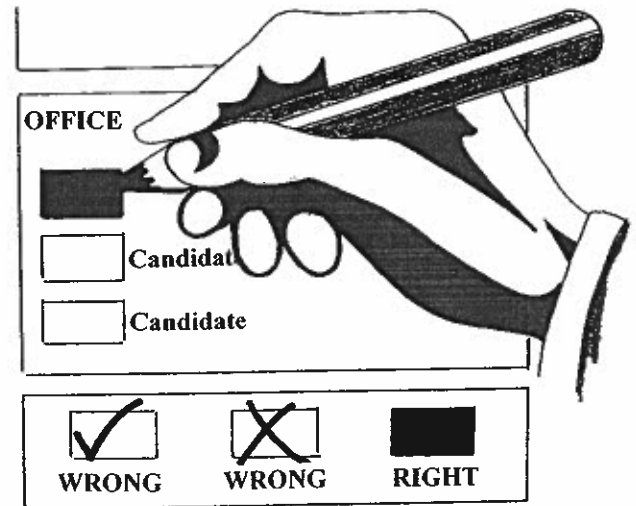
The people who oversee an election must be neutral, fair and professional, treating all political parties and candidates fairly. Independent observers watch the voters and count the votes to ensure that the process is without corruption or fraud. For these reasons it takes a lot of time and excellent organization to hold a good democratic election.

Citizens hold their elected leaders accountable for their policies and conduct in office. Citizens have the freedom to criticize the elected leaders and to watch how they govern. Any laws or policies put forth in government require the support of the majority of the elected representatives.

Active Representation and Participation by Citizens

Active representation and participation by citizens is seen in a variety of roles. For example, campaigning for a political party, standing as a candidate for office, debating public issues, attending community meetings, petitioning the government and even protesting.

It is also the civic duty of all citizens to vote. In order to vote wisely, each citizen should listen to the views of all parties and candidates then make his/her own decision on whom to support. Citizens have an obligation to learn about public issues, observe how the elected representatives use their powers and express their own opinions.



Active membership in an independent non-governmental organization is another form of participation. These organizations represent the interests and beliefs of a broad spectrum of citizens including farmers, doctors, teachers, business owners, religious believers, women, students, human rights activists and workers of all kinds. Participation in these types of civic groups is voluntary and no one should be forced to join an organization against their will.

As you can see, democracy depends on citizen participation in many ways. The participation must be peaceful, respectful of the law, and tolerant of different points of view.

The Rights of Citizens in a Democracy

In a democracy, every citizen has a number of basic rights which cannot be taken away from them by the government.

*In a democracy every individual
has the right...*

- to have their own beliefs, and to say and write what he/she thinks.
- to choose his/her own religion and to worship and practice that religion as he/she sees fit.
- to enjoy his/her own culture, along with other members of that group even if the group is a minority.
- to freedom and pluralism in the mass media. An individual can choose between different sources of news and opinion to read in the newspapers, to hear on the radio, and to watch on television.
- to associate with other people, to form and join organizations as he/she chooses, including trade unions.
- to move freely about the country, and to leave the country if he/she chooses.
- to assemble freely, and to protest government actions.

*However, everyone has an obligation to exercise their
rights peacefully, with respect to the law and for the
rights of others.*

The Rule of Law

A democracy is not ruled by individuals. It is ruled by a set of laws. This set of laws protects the rights of citizens, maintains order and limits the power of government.



Under the Law

- All citizens are equal. No one may be discriminated against on the basis of race, religion, ethnic group, or gender.
- No citizen may be arrested, imprisoned, or exiled without just cause.
- If a citizen is detained, he/she has the right to know the charges and to be presumed innocent until proven guilty according to the law.
- Anyone charged with a crime has the right to a fair and public trial by an impartial court.
- No one may be taxed or prosecuted except by a law established in advance.
- No one is above the law, not even the Queen or an elected member of parliament.
- The law is enforced by courts that are independent of other branches of government.
- Torture of any individual is absolutely forbidden.
- No ruler, minister, or political party can tell a judge how to decide a case.