

1.2

Types of Democracy

Explain how models of representative democracy are visible in major institutions, policies, events, or debates in the U.S.

Why government at all?

The word “government” is derived from a Latin word that means, “to manage.” As societies grew more and more complex governments were formed to help manage group norms. These norms are established in the form of laws and public policies. Here our norms have been collected in a written social compact, a constitution. American constitutionalism was established to clearly delineate legitimate policy-making power and to extend ultimate authority to all by giving equally certain inalienable rights. Loyal to a republican form of government, the United States was founded on popular sovereignty. Power and rights, legitimacy and authority are found in the hands of the people who have been endowed with certain inalienable privileges and prerogatives.

Certain salient concepts give breath to the grand American experiment in self-rule. Nevertheless, tension between governmental power and individual rights has characterized American political development.

Whereas direct democracy empowered the people to rule without representatives, the framers of our constitution opted for a representative democracy known to history as a republican form of government. In this way the untrustworthy passions of the people were insulated through the direct election of qualified representatives. Republicanism in theory hopes to represent all of the people and not just majorities. The original constitution only allowed for the direct election of the House of Representatives.

Tensions continue to exist over how best to sustain representative democracy in the United States. Three primary models of representative democracy can be observed in our major institutions, policies, events and debates. The first model emphasizes *participatory democracy*. In this model civil society is maintained when the broadest selection of citizens engages in the political process. A second model emphasizes a *pluralist democracy*. In this model rival groups form to compete against each other in their desire to influence public policy. A third model emphasizes *elite democracy*. In this model the primary political decisions are made and enforced by a select group of advantaged citizens. All three models can be readily seen in the American political arena.

A close look at our Founding documents and the events that give them context suggest that all three representative democracy models have been present since our beginning. Early on in our political history Federalists and Anti-federalists debated the proper meaning and placement of power and rights in American representative democracy. In Federalist 10, one of many Federalist essays written to advance the new constitution,

James Madison argued strongly for a pluralist democracy. The best way to protect the rights of the people from dangerous factions is to encourage a large republic of competing groups. Conversely the Anti-federalists argued a large pluralistic republic would result in an unwieldy polity. A large republic, they argued in an essay entitled Brutus 1, would increase the power and rights of certain elite while diminishing the power and rights of the people. This debate still continues.

So too today we see the tension between these three representative democracy models in our institutions, policies, events and debates. Groups like the Tea Party and Occupy Wall Street demonstrate the ability of everyday citizens to affect policy from the grassroots. Participatory democracy is alive and well in America today. So, it can be said for pluralist democracy. Interest groups like the U.S. Chamber of Commerce and the Sierra Club compete against each other over environmental policy both locally and at the national level. Elite opinions as well continue to play a disproportionate role in our major institutions, policies and events. Elected officials, appointed public servants, corporate voices and even entertainment figures often guide and direct our most pressing debates.

From the beginnings of our republic the ideals of American representative democracy have been translated into reality in various ways. Three models of representative democracy – participatory, pluralist and elite – are reflected through our major institutions, policies, events and debates. Tension between governmental power and individual rights has characterized American political development. At stake nothing less than the legitimacy and authority of our government.