

Main Idea

American democracy is characterized by core democratic ideals and principles, as well as by the free enterprise system.

Reading Focus

1. Why are the ideals of liberty, equality, and self-government important to American democracy?
2. What are the principles of American democracy?
3. Why is the free enterprise system important to American democracy?

Key Terms

ideal
liberty
equality
self-government
majority rule
minority rights
liberal democracy
free enterprise

Ideals of American Democracy

(pg. 21–22)

An **ideal** is a conception, or idea, of something in its most perfect form. Liberty, equality, and self-government are the core ideals of American democracy. At our nation’s beginning, these ideals applied only to a small group of people. American democracy has changed over time.

Liberty More than anything, the Founders of our nation aspired to **liberty**, or the ability of people to act and think as they choose, so long as their choices do no harm to the liberty or well-being of others. Liberty has been defined as *freedom from* government control. It has also been referred to as a person’s *freedom to* exercise the rights guaranteed to all U.S. citizens under the Constitution.

Equality Like liberty, Americans have embraced equality as a worthy democratic pursuit. **Equality** is the principle that all people possess a fundamental, moral worth

that entitles them to fair treatment under the law and equal opportunity in all aspects of life—political, social, and economic.

Self-Government From the beginning of our republic, Americans have held fast to the ideal of **self-government**, or the belief that ordinary people could aspire, or hope, to rule themselves and do so as political equals. This was a goal of the American Revolution and was stated in the Declaration of Independence: “Governments are instituted [created] among Men, deriving [gaining] their just powers from the consent of the governed.” People have the right to eliminate their government if it is not serving their needs.

Reading Check Identifying the Main

Idea What are the ideals of American democracy?

Principles of American Democracy (pg. 22–23)

Americans are deeply tied to the ideals of American democracy. They must also make a commitment to act upon certain principles to maintain American democracy.

Worth of the Individual American democracy places a high value on individual freedom, personal responsibility, self-reliance, and individual achievement. The deep respect that Americans hold for the individual is strongly tied to the belief that, if left free to pursue their own path, people can reach their highest potential.

Rule of Law The U.S. government and its officials are subject to recognized and enforced limits on their powers. These limits are spelled out in the U.S. Constitution.

Majority Rule, Minority Rights A basic principle of democracy is that decisions are made by **majority rule**. The Framers feared a too-powerful majority, however, and therefore took steps to protect individual rights, such as freedom of speech.

Americans believe strongly that a balance must be struck between majority rule and protecting minority rights. **Minority rights** are the political rights held by groups who make up less than half of the population. In a **liberal democracy**, such as the United States, the individual rights and liberties of all people, including those in the minority, are protected.

Compromise Another key principle of American democracy is compromise, the ability of two opposing groups to give up

some of their demands and come to an agreement. When conflicts occur, such as those over the raising or lowering of taxes, compromise is necessary to keep the political system moving.

Citizen Participation To be successful, self-government requires participation from citizens. Citizens must be informed about the issues, participate effectively by voting or running for office, pay taxes, join political parties, and fulfill other duties of citizenship.

Reading Check Summarizing What are some of the principles of American democracy?

Free Enterprise (pg. 25)

Economic freedom is one of the freedoms Americans hold most dear. This freedom is best expressed in the economic system of the United States, the free enterprise system. **Free enterprise** allows for people and businesses to make their own economic choices about how best to produce, distribute, and exchange goods and services with limited interference from government.

A free market—a market outside the control of government—is key to free enterprise. Over time the U.S. government has found it necessary to interfere to some degree in the economy. The proper balance between government intervention in and noninvolvement in the economy is something that will continue to change over time.

Reading Check Summarizing What is the free enterprise system?

SECTION 3 ASSESSMENT

1. **Describe** What are the ideals of American democracy?
2. **Define** What is the rule of law?

3. **Explain** How does the U.S. economic system protect economic freedom?