

Name \_\_\_\_\_

# The Democratic Ideas at the Heart of the US Government

## 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.

DEMOCRATIC IDEA	NOTES
Limited Government	
Natural Rights	
Social Contract	
Popular Sovereignty	
Republicanism	

## What do you think?

How do some of these democratic ideas continue to show up in American politics today?

How do these democratic ideas influence the decisions and actions of American politicians?

# 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 Founders 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.