

Topic 1

The Philosophical Foundations of the United States Political System

Topic 1 explores the philosophical and historical origins of the United States system of democratic government, beginning with Ancient Athens and the Roman Republic and including how Enlightenment thinkers, North American colonial governments, and First People tribes influenced the writing of the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, and the structure of U.S. government.



[The Goddess of Democracy Statue, Portsmouth Square, San Francisco](#), Public Domain

Snapshot of Topic 1

Explore the topic's sub-chapters to learn more about the philosophical foundations of the United States political system.

Supporting Question

- What were the roots of the ideas that influenced the development of the United States political system?

Massachusetts Standards [8.T1.1-5]

1. [The Government of Ancient Athens](#)
2. [The Government of the Roman Republic](#)
3. [Enlightenment Thinkers and Democratic Government](#)
4. [British Influences on American Government](#)
5. [Native American Influences on American Government](#)

Advanced Placement Standards for U.S. Government

- AP Government and Politics Unit 1.1: Ideas of Democracy
- AP Government and Politics Unit 1.2: Types of Democracy

Topic 1: The Philosophical Foundations of the United States Political System

Democracy comes from the Greek words “demos” and “kratos,” meaning “**rule by the people**” ([Defining Democracy](#), Museum of Australian Democracy). Although the term does not appear in either the Declaration of Independence or the United States Constitution, democracy is the foundation for government in this country. Americans believe in government of the people, by the people, for the people.

Democracy, as a framework of government, has evolved over the centuries and now includes concepts that are the foundations of civic and political life in our country: freedom, justice, liberty, individual rights and responsibilities, shared power, and a system of checks and balances among the legislative, executive, and judicial branches of the government.

But, as researchers with the Varieties of Democracy project have noted, there is “no single agreed-upon list of what are (or aren’t) issues of democracy” ([FiveThirtyEight](#), September 1, 2021). Some think about issues of electoral democracy such as the importance of free elections and a free press while others focus on social and economic democracy and issues around women’s rights, civil liberties, economic justice, voting access, and overcoming the historical legacies of slavery and discrimination against people of color.

Here you can find [five types of democracy](#) (electoral, liberal, participatory, deliberative, and egalitarian) and issues associated with them.

Here are the [essential elements of democracy](#) as defined by the United Nations Commission of Human Rights in 2000:

- Respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms
- Freedom of association
- Freedom of expression and opinion
- Access to power and its exercise in accordance with the rule of law
- The holding of periodic free and fair elections by universal suffrage and by secret ballot as the expression of the will of the people
- A pluralistic system of political parties and organizations
- The separation of powers
- The independence of the judiciary
- Transparency and accountability in public administration
- Free, independent and pluralistic media

The governments and politics of Greece and Rome profoundly influenced America’s founding generation. Comparing the educational backgrounds of George Washington, John Adams, Thomas Jefferson, and James Madison, historian

Thomas E. Ricks (2020) found Greco-Roman learning was "part of the culture; a way of looking at the world and set of values." Ricks notes further influences from Greece and Rome on our political system:

- The United States "Senate" meets at the "Capitol."
- Our political parties are "Republicans" or "Democrats."
- The Supreme Court's architecture recalls a Roman temple.
- Latin phrases are familiar parts of the legal and political vocabularies.
- The Roman word "virtue" (which in the 18th century meant putting the common good above self interest) appears some 6000 times in the writing of members of the Revolutionary generation.

At the same time, the Founders, as with their ancient world Greek and Roman predecessors, accepted human slavery and built that acceptance into the structures of American government as well as the fabric of American life.

Foundations of U.S. Political System Media Literacy Digital Choice Board

<p><u>Evaluate Social Media Community Guidelines</u></p> <p>Analyze whether the community guidelines of a social media platform of your choosing upholds the foundational features of democracy.</p> 	<p><u>Design a Film or TV show About Native Americans' Influence on the U.S. Government</u></p> <p>Write a script for a movie or TV show that portrays First Americans accurately and showcases how Native American government shaped the U.S. government.</p> 	<p><u>Evaluating Whether the Government of the Roman Republic Would Have Made the Internet a Public Utility</u></p> <p>Write an opinion article and draw an editorial cartoon commenting on whether the Roman Empire would have made the Internet a public utility at the time.</p> 
<p><u>Analyze Movie Trailers About British Kings and Queens and American Presidents</u></p> <p>Compare how British Kings/Queens and U.S. Presidents are portrayed on film. Then, design your own movie trailer that showcases how British ideas about and practices of government influenced the American colonists and the political institutions that developed in colonial America.</p> 	<p>Foundations of the U.S. Political System</p> <p>Media Literacy Activities Choice Board</p>  <p><i>Building Democracy for All</i>, a free eBook by Robert Maloy & Torrey Trust explores all these topics and more</p>	<p><u>Assessing, Revising, & Writing School Social Media Policies</u></p> <p>Evaluate a school or district social media policy for its alignment with foundational features of Athenian Democracy. Then, either suggest revisions or write one for your own class, school, or district.</p>  
<p><u>Analyze Media Coverage of Harry and Meghan's Interview with Oprah</u></p> <p>Compare and contrast media sources from the U.K. and U.S. covering this interview.</p> 	<p><u>Analyzing the Portrayal of Women in Science and Politics Then and Now</u></p> <p>Assess how women Enlightenment thinkers and women in science and politics today are presented in online materials and media.</p> 	<p><u>Research and Rewrite First American Histories of the Place Where You Live Today</u></p> <p>Analyze how local websites and history materials present the history First Americans from where you live today.</p> 

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Topic 1 Chapters

The Government of Ancient Athens

The Government of the Roman Republic

Enlightenment Thinkers and Democratic Government
British Influences on American Government
Native American Influences on U.S. Government



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