

SECTION 3

WHAT IS DEMOCRACY?

*The government of the United States is a **democracy**. In this section, you will learn about the important ideas behind democracy.*

VOCABULARY

compromise

when each side gives up something in order to agree

Congress

the part of the national government that makes the laws and that is made up of the House of Representatives and the Senate

democracy

a government that is run by the people

elected

chosen by getting the most votes

majority

the largest number of voters

minority

the smallest number of voters

representative

an elected person who speaks for a group of people

The most important thing about democracy is that the government is run by the people. In the United States, citizens choose **representatives** to speak for them in the government. These **elected** officials do the actual work of running the government. Elected officials include members of **Congress**, the President and Vice President, and state and local officials.

Democracy is based on several other important ideas. These ideas include importance of the individual, **majority** rule, **minority** rights, and **compromise**.

Importance of the Individual

Every person is important in a democracy, and every person has dignity and worth. Each person should be valued no matter what the person’s wealth, race, or gender is. Together, individuals make up society.

Thomas Jefferson wrote that “all men are created equal.” This does not mean that everyone should have the same things or make the same amount of money. It means that everyone should

have a chance to make something of himself or herself. This is called equality of opportunity.



U.S. citizens elect leaders to represent them.

Jefferson's statement also means that everyone must follow the same laws. Every person who breaks the law must be treated the same way. This is called equality under the law.

Majority Rule, Minority Rights

You have learned that in a democracy, the people run the government. However, people sometimes disagree with each other. How can the government make decisions that are good for all the people?

In a democracy, the majority rules. If more than half of the people want things to be a certain way, then that is the way it will be. To believe in democracy, you must believe that the majority will make the right decision most of the time. People in a democracy also know that decisions can always be made better. For example, there might be one good way to fix a public problem now. However, there might be a better way to fix the same problem later.

Democracy would not work without the idea of majority rule. What about the minority, though? What happens to those who disagree with the majority? A democracy must protect minority rights. The minority is the smaller group, which does not agree with the majority. The minority must always have the right to argue against the majority. The majority must respect the ideas of the minority.

Compromise

The way to get a majority to agree is compromise. People and groups often have many different ideas about what a government should do. For a majority to agree with a law or policy, these people and groups must compromise.

For example, say a city is planning to build a new sports stadium. The city will have to decide where to build the stadium. The city will also have to decide where to get the money to pay for building the stadium. Different groups will have different ideas about these issues. In the end, they must compromise.

Did you know?

During the 1900s, many countries replaced their existing governments with democracies. Germany and Italy are two countries that changed their governments. Can you name another country whose government has recently changed?

SECTION 1

THE CONSTITUTION AND AMENDMENTS

*Citizens' rights and freedoms come from the U.S. Constitution. In this section, you will learn about the Constitution and its **amendments**.*

VOCABULARY

amendment
a change

articles
the seven sections of the U.S. Constitution

constitution
a paper that lists the rules of a government

conventions
meetings

Preamble
the introduction to the U.S. Constitution

propose
suggest

ratify
approve

state legislature
the part of a state's government that makes the laws

unconstitutional
actions or laws not allowed by the U.S. Constitution

Parts of the Constitution

SECTION	SUBJECT
Preamble	Introduction
Article 1	The Legislative Branch
Article 2	The Executive Branch
Article 3	The Judicial Branch
Article 4	The States
Article 5	How to Make Amendments to the Constitution
Article 6	The Constitution is the Supreme Law
Article 7	How to Ratify the Constitution

The U.S. Constitution is made up of a **Preamble**, seven **articles**, and 27 amendments. The Preamble is the introduction to the Constitution.

The first three articles explain the rules for the government of the United States. They also list the powers of the three branches of the national government. The fourth article explains the relationship between the national government and the states. The fifth shows how the Constitution can be changed. The sixth article says that the Constitution is the supreme law

of the United States. If an action or a law goes against the Constitution, then it is **unconstitutional**. The seventh article explains how the states had to **ratify** the Constitution to make it law.

For over 200 years, the Constitution has been the supreme law of the United States. How can a paper written that many years ago still work today? The writers of the Constitution knew the government would have challenges as the



country grew. They knew the Constitution would have to be able to change to meet these challenges. Therefore, the writers made sure the Constitution could be changed by amendments.

There are two ways to **propose**, or suggest, changes to the Constitution. Congress can propose amendments, or the states can propose amendments. After an amendment has been proposed, it must be ratified.

Amendments Proposed by Congress

Two-thirds of both the House of Representatives and the Senate must vote for the amendment. Then, three-fourths of the **state legislatures** must ratify the amendment for it to become law. Or, **conventions** are called in each state, and three-fourths of the state conventions must ratify it.

Amendments Proposed by the States

If two-thirds of the state legislatures ask for a national convention, Congress must have a convention. The amendment is proposed at the convention. Then, three-fourths of the state legislatures must ratify the amendment for it to become law. The other way for the amendment to become law is for conventions in three-fourths of the states to ratify it.

It is difficult to get an amendment proposed and approved. For this reason, there have only been 27 amendments made to the Constitution. The first ten amendments are called the Bill of Rights. They were all ratified in 1791, soon after the Constitution was written.

The other 17 amendments were ratified between 1795 and 1992. Some of the changes made by these amendments include:

- the end of slavery in the United States.
- citizenship for African Americans.
- the right of men of any race to vote.
- the right of women to vote.
- limits on how long the President can stay in office.
- the right of citizens who are at least 18 years old to vote.

Did you know?

The most recent amendment was ratified in 1992. Amendment 27 says Congress is allowed to vote on whether to give itself a raise. However, the raise will not happen until after the next congressional election. This amendment was first proposed in 1789. It took 203 years to finally be ratified.