

*Learn*  
BRIGHT

# WHAT IS DEMOCRACY?



**GRADE 4-6**

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# Classroom Procedure:

1. Introduce the lesson by having students vote on a topic. Tally the vote on an anchor chart. Ask students to explain why voting is important. Write the word democracy on the board. Ask students to define the word on a sheet of scratch paper. Have the students keep the scratch paper until the end of the lesson.
2. Distribute *What is Democracy?* Content pages to the students. Review with students. On the anchor chart where you recorded the votes, ask students to suggest lessons learned about democracy in the Content Pages. Record these on the anchor chart.
3. Distribute the Activity Page to students. Read the Activity Page with students and define any terms they may not be familiar with. Use the additional resources to supplement the lesson. Divide the students into two groups – Electoral College and Popular Vote. Engage students in a debate about which system is better for Presidential elections.
4. The Practice Page can be completed in groups of two students. Distribute the Practice Page and have students read their responses. Review with students the Practice Page and answers.
5. Distribute the Homework Page. Read exemplary work to the classroom and post the responses for other students to read.
6. In closing, ask students: Review their definition of democracy. How has the definition changed after the lesson? What is the popular vote? What is the Electoral College? Why is voting important and essential to democracy?

Lesson Title: **What is Democracy?**

Subject: Social Studies

Approximate Grade Level: 4 - 6

**Objectives:** Students will identify the core civic virtues and democratic principles that guide democratic governments. Students will learn to differentiate democracy from other forms of government (monarchy, democracy, oligarchy, authoritarianism, and totalitarianism). Students will explain how democracy relies on people's participation in civic responsibilities (voting, volunteerism, activism, and civil discourse).

**State Educational Standards\***

D2.CIV.8.3 -5,  
D2.CIV.2.3 – 5,  
D2.CIV.6.3 - 5

**Class Sessions (45 minutes):** 3 Class Sessions.

**Teaching Materials/Worksheets:**

Content Pages (2), Activity Page (1),  
Practice Pages (2), Homework Pages (2)

**Student Supplies:**

Pencils, pens, highlighters

**Prepare Ahead of Time:**

Copies of worksheets

**Options for Lesson:** One option for the lesson is to conduct class votes on various issues. The first step is to randomly assign students to represent states and the Electoral College Votes. Choose a topic and have the students vote. Count the popular vote and the Electoral College Vote. Create an anchor chart with both votes. Ideally, the topic you choose to vote will generate two different outcomes – the popular vote or Electoral College vote in contradiction with each other.

\*Lessons are aligned to meet the education objectives and goals of most states. For more information on your state objectives, contact your local Board of Education or Department of Education in your state.



# What is Democracy?



No doubt, you have learned that Americans live in a democratic form of government or democracy. But do you really know what that means? **Democracy** is government by the people. It is a form of government in which power is vested in the people. People exercise their power by voting. In a direct democracy, every decision the government makes requires voters to approve of the decision by voting. In an indirect democracy, voters vote for people to represent them when the government makes a decision.

Some examples of direct democracy are:

- Your class votes on options for field trips.
- Your family votes on where they would like to get take-out food.
- Your community votes to raise taxes to build a new school.

In a direct democracy, the **majority** vote rules, or at least 51% of the voters agree on an issue before an action can be taken. For example, pretend your class is taking a field trip. There are two choices – the beach or a state park with a lake. There are twenty-five students in the class. **How many votes does it take to decide between the two field trip options?** \_\_\_\_\_ If you said at least 13, then you are right! Thirteen votes form a majority. So, if 13 votes go to the beach and 12 to the state park, then your class will be going on a field trip to the beach!



Direct democracy works great when there are not a lot of people involved, or the decisions have few choices. For class, family, or club votes, direct democracy is the easiest way for groups to make decisions. For big decisions, direct democracy is not very efficient. Think about this for a minute. Would you want to vote on every decision your school board makes about how they spend money? How many pens, paper clips, scissors, or how much construction paper to buy? When you think of the thousands of decisions made every day by government leaders, is it a good idea to vote on every one of them? Probably not. It would take too much of your time. In a direct democracy, if you are not happy with a decision, you can only change it by convincing a majority to vote to make a change. This is why indirect democracy is preferred by governments and voters.

# What is Democracy?

In an indirect democracy, voters vote for people to represent them to make decisions on their behalf. Voters **delegate** or give the authority for someone else to decide for them. Indirect democracy is also known as **representative democracy**. Voters elect people to *represent* their wishes in government decision making. Some issues voters still decide by voting, but in the day to day operation of government, the voters delegate their authority for decision making to elected officials. The United States is an example of representative democracy. Voters elect people to serve as city council members, county officers, legislators, governors, or at the federal level, Congress and the Senate.



Some examples of indirect or representative democracy are:

- Congress or Senate.
- Mayors, City Council, County Officials, Governors.
- The President of the United States.



In an indirect democracy, you don't always need to have a majority to elect a person to represent the interests of voters. In many elections, only a **plurality** is required. A plurality means a person received the highest number of votes but didn't have enough for a majority (51%). A plurality election is the most common in the United States.

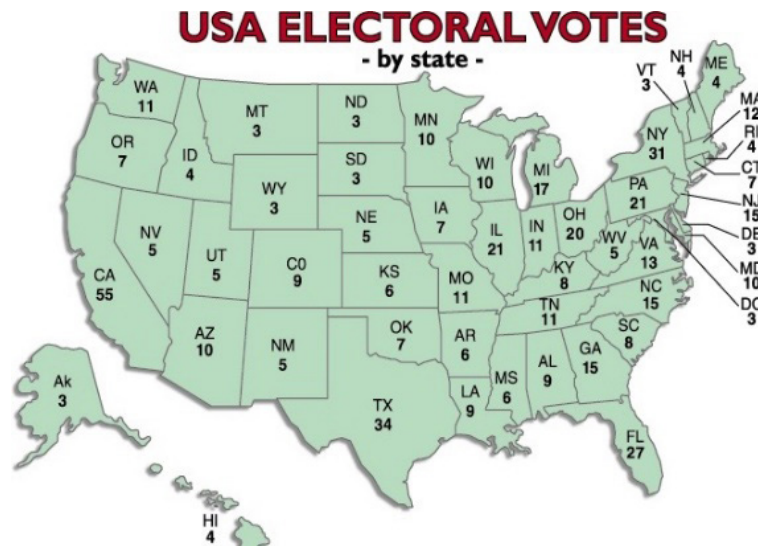
Here is an example of a plurality election – Hillary Clinton (Democrat) and Donald Trump (Republican) – the 2016 Presidential Election.

Candidate	Vote Total	Electoral College Votes	% Total Vote
Hillary Clinton	65,853,514	227	48%
Donald Trump	62,984,828	304	46%

In presidential elections, voters elect representatives to the Electoral College. Each state based on the size of the state's population is allotted a certain number of electoral college votes. Once the state tallies the votes, the electors cast a vote for the candidate with the highest number of votes in the state. In a Presidential election, a person can have less total votes and a plurality, but still, be elected President if they have the highest amount of Electoral College votes. The winner needed 270 Electoral College votes to be elected as President of the United States.



**Instructions:** Read the passage about the Electoral College. With a partner and your class, discuss if you think Presidential elections should be decided by majority vote or decided by representatives of the Electoral College.



## The Electoral College

The history of the Electoral College is as old as the Constitution of the United States. The writers of the Constitution and delegates to the Constitutional Convention debated how presidential elections were to be held. Some thought the candidate getting the most votes should be President. Others didn't think this was fair. They were concerned if the only the popular vote was counted, then states with most people living in them would nearly always choose who the President was. For example, in a small state like Maine with few people, their vote would count less than a large populous state like New York. Some even went so far as to say the big states could get together and choose the President for everyone else!

This was when the delegates to the convention came up with the idea that was agreeable to most of the attendees. Here's how it works. Each state is allotted a specific number of electors based on the population of the state. For example, New York has 31, and Maine has 4. After a state has counted the votes for President and certified the election as accurate, the candidate with most votes in the state is awarded electoral college votes. Let's say Mary Smith won New York, and Lonnie Brown wins Maine. Mary Smith is awarded 31 votes and Lonnie Brown 4. Candidates continue to earn electoral college votes every time a state decides in their favor. Once a candidate reaches 270 votes (538 votes total), a majority of the Electoral College, they become President of the United States.

Some people don't like the Electoral College because they say if someone wins the majority of the popular vote, they should be President. Five times in U.S. history, a person has won the popular election but was not elected President because they did not have enough Electoral College votes. Others think without the Electoral College, candidates would never campaign in a small state like Maine. The candidate would only go where most people are – California, New York, Ohio, Texas, Pennsylvania, Illinois, and Florida. The combined total vote of these seven states could be enough to elect a candidate without them having to campaign in the other 43 states!



**Instructions:** The chart is a list of countries. Research each country. Write what type of government the country has and explain how the government is different from the United States. An example is done for you.

COUNTRY	TYPE OF GOVERNMENT	HOW DOES IT DIFFER FROM THE U.S.?
The U.S.A.	Representative democracy	
Great Britain	Parliamentary democracy	The members of Parliament choose a Prime Minister who acts similarly as the President of the United States.
Canada		
China		
France		
Mexico		
Russia		





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Great Britain	Parliamentary democracy	The members of Parliament choose a Prime Minister who acts similarly as the President of the United States.
Canada	Parliamentary democracy	Similar to Great Britain with a Prime Minister as head of the state.
China	Communist-led state.	People vote, but only members of the Communist Party can rule.
France	Semi-presidential republic	France has a President and a Prime Minister. The Prime Minister is similar to the Majority Leader of the U.S. House or Senate.
Mexico	Federal presidential representative democratic republic	President is elected to one six-year term.
Russia	Socialist presidential republic	The President can dissolve the Parliament (Duma) at any time.









**Instructions:** Explain why voting is important in a democracy. Use examples.

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Answers will vary.

Voting is one way everyone has a say in how the government is run.

Some decisions are too important to leave to just a few people to make on our behalf.

Being able to vote is a sign of freedom.