



Museum & Archives of Rockingham County & Charters of Freedom
Essay Competition

Title: "What is democracy and why do we need it"?

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The Pledge of Allegiance is said every morning in schools, Americans learn the vitality and prosperity of democracy before their toddling feet can manage a run. They stumble through the national anthem at their first baseball game, with heavy kindergarten mouths and tiny hands tucked over tiny hearts. They grow up with Tee-ball and barbecue and stickers saying, 'I Voted!' Americans do not need to be taught to love democracy, it races through their veins like the most American thoroughbred at the Kentucky Derby. They are taught of the bravery their country has endured, that that bravery is a time-honored tradition in America, going back to the very revolution that founded it.

I have grown up with Tee-ball and barbecue and stickers saying, 'I Voted!' But I have also grown up in an America fractured by division and polarization, messages tossed on picket signs and social media posts. I have lived through a pandemic, through a brutal election, and through a coup on our Capitol where blood spread like peanut butter on statues of former presidents. I have seen love and hate and indifference, I have seen dead children and dead grandparents and people shaking with the responsibility of who lives and dies. I have seen great selfishness and great selflessness in day to day life. I have watched things that I never thought I would, I have been scared beyond imagining, and I have seen how we survived it all. I have loved America, and sometimes I have hated it, but I have always believed it was brave.

Let me paint you a picture of the first act of American bravery; hungry men, shirts ragged and war-torn, suntanned farmers turned revolutionaries. They are thought of as noble, but they were not, instead they were ordinary, unremarkable, and probably terrified. These men were not fighting for democracy, in fact, for the majority of the

revolution they were seeking to reconcile with England. They were not fighting for a form of government; they were fighting for change. They could feel it, whispered in every revolutionary heartbeat, they could taste it in the tang of blood and gun-powder, they believed it in so hard that they were willing to die for it.

A simple, elemental definition of democracy would be as follows; a form of government in which government officials are elected by citizens of the government. While this is true and groundbreaking and important, it is a definition we have known all our lives. Things begin to feel redundant when you hear them over and over, ordinary even. Democracy is not ordinary, it is alive and vibrant and constantly moving and breathing with the needs of the people, which is why I would like to offer a new definition of democracy: change, rebirth. People are always changing, growing, stretching, and shrinking. It is only natural that a form of government, designed for the people and by the people, would be engineered by and rooted in change. I think that there is nothing braver than change, than hurtling into the unknown and hoping it will be better than what is now. Nothing that is stagnant can survive, change is the one reliable force in this life, a river does not stop flowing.

There is an ancient monster in Greek legends known as the Hydra, the hydra was said to have many heads, and if one of the heads were to be cut off, two more would grow in its place. American democracy exists as a three-headed Hydra, the Legislative, Executive, and Judicial branches blinking out at the population through weary, grotesque, monster eyes. Every four years or so, American citizens come armed with ballots and cut off the heads of American government, hoping something new and better will grow back in its place. It is a herculean effort, still believing that something good will grow out of this dry, cracked earth, but we do. We campaign and educate and fight for what we believe in. The 2020 election was war-like, but it served to interest people in politics, the population began wondering how they could influence public policy. Voter turn-out was higher than ever, this is due to the overwhelming desire for change in the American government. In this election especially, we began seeing many young people interested in public policy.

I learned in civics class that democracy is the least efficient form of government. It has too many parts, too many cogs and wheels constantly getting stuck on one another. I learned that the most efficient form of

government was a dictatorship, one person making all the snap life or death decisions. We know however, from history class, that dictatorships strip citizens of their rights, and usually end up collapsing violently and suddenly. James Madison, the author of the Constitution, was a man of careful deliberation, often sitting in the middle of issues, he was not searching for efficiency, he was searching for liberty. The American democracy was designed carefully, and very differently from any type of democracy that preceded it. The founding fathers engineered extremely delicate checks and balances to ensure that their descendants would never again live under tyranny. They included many fail-safes in the Constitution, the most important being its ability to change. They wrote out a process for adding amendments, which over time has been used to give many minority citizens equal rights under the law. Equality that would have been seen as inappropriate or unacceptable in the founding fathers' time. They even added an amendment to ensure that their children and children's children could overthrow the government if need be, because the founding fathers knew that change was inevitable and unstoppable.

In a democracy citizens do not merely obey the laws, they have a hand in making them. Likewise, politicians and lawmakers are held accountable by the people that elected them, an idea commonly known and popular-sovereignty. Democracy is necessary in prompting the public to be active and accountable in their government and in their lives. If the population disagrees with something, they can change it through elections and other democratic means of persuasion, seen in the repeal of the eighteenth amendment, the prohibition of alcohol. Democracy also allows for peaceful protests and demonstrations seen in the suffragette movement of the late 1800s early 1900s, the civil rights marches of the 1960s.

Americans have heard all their lives that democracy is the greatest form of government on earth, but John Adams, the second President of the United States disagreed, stating, "It is in vain to say that democracy is less vain, less proud, less selfish, less ambitious, or less avaricious than aristocracy or monarchy. It is not true, in fact, and nowhere appears in history. Those passions are the same in all men, under all forms of simple government, and when unchecked, produce the same effects of fraud, violence, and cruelty." He is not criticizing his new nation; he is criticizing human nature. The key word is unchecked,

democracy unchecked is no better than any other type of government. Cells, when they grow unchecked, become cancerous. We must be mindful of the extremes, we must guard the separation of power our founding fathers so valued, so that democracy can continue to change and grow with society at a healthy rate. Democracy is unafraid of change, it is unafraid of the new and previously untouched. America was formed from a burst of revolutionary spirit, of boldness, of bravery. American democracy does not fear the unknown, it welcomes it.