

the power of
EDUCATION

where the people
RULE

THE PEOPLE:
an equal-opportunity employer

the makings of
DEMOCRACY

pass the bill
**HOW A BILL
BECOMES LAW**

land of the
FREE

the free press:
**GUARDIAN OF
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the power of
ONE

what the survey
SAYS

making your voice
HEARD



it's your
GOVERNMENT

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Sources:

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the power of EDUCATION

*“Democracy is the recurrent suspicion that
more than half the people are right
more than half of the time.”*

– E.B. WHITE



Consider this analogy: A small child who knows no better will choose candy over good, nutritious food every time. But if candy were all she ate, her health would begin to break down. An informed adult, however, knows the importance of nutrition, and that candy must be consumed only in small doses.

Similarly, an uninformed, uneducated electorate might choose leaders who are friendly or physically attractive but who lack the ability to do the job. Over time, more and more leaders would be chosen on this basis and fewer and fewer would be able to do the job they were elected to do. And the “health” of the democratic system would begin to break down.

For a democracy to be successful, it must have the participation of an informed electorate. That means the citizens of the government must take the time to learn about the issues and be able to make sound, well-thought-out decisions on those issues. That is why education is such an important part of democracy and why the government makes free education available to everyone. By teaching you to read, write, and think critically, your government is giving you the tools you need to be a good citizen.

If the citizens of a democracy are not adequately educated, the democratic process will begin to break down. The success of the process depends on the majority of people being able to make the right choices on leaders and on important issues.

ACTIVITIES

1. Using your newspaper, begin a collection of clippings that relate to democracy and the way democracy works. Look especially for evidence of the effects of an individual or small group on the workings of government. Share an example with the class.
2. Invite a local lawmaker or official to address your class about what he or she does. Make a list of reporter's questions to ask. After the visit, write a brief newspaper article about it.
3. Write an editorial explaining why you think the government should continue to support public education.

where the people...

In his Gettysburg Address, Abraham Lincoln called the United States government a government “of the people, by the people, and for the people.” You’ve probably heard that before, but have you ever given much thought to what it means to you as a citizen of the United States?

Our government is called a democracy, a word derived from the Greek words *demos*, which means “people,” and *kratos*, which means “rule.” Literally, “the people rule.” It was created that way because the people who did the creating – the American colonists, led by such historical figures as George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, Benjamin Franklin – were tired of living under a distant monarchy and having no say in the way they were governed. “No taxation without representation,” was one of the major battle cries of the American Revolution.

So when the colonists declared independence from England in 1776, they set out to create a government in which the citizens did have a say.

Their ideas were not unprecedented. Democracy had existed in various forms as far back as ancient Greece in the 500s B.C. Ancient Athens was a direct democracy, in which each male citizen was expected to serve throughout his adult life in the assembly, where laws were made and policies decided.

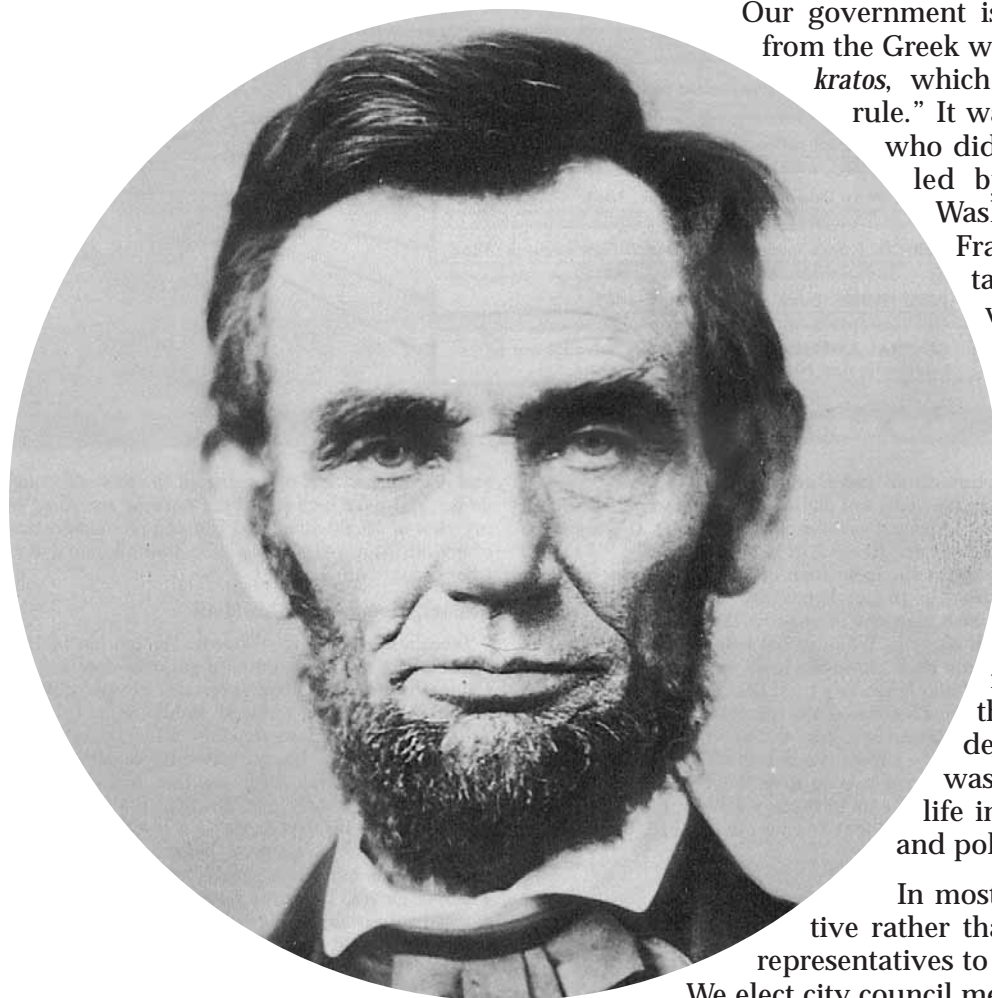
In most cases, democracy today is representative rather than direct. That means the people elect representatives to serve their interests in the government. We elect city council members, or their equivalent, to represent our interests within the city we live in. We choose legislators to serve our interests at the state level. And we choose senators and congressmen to represent us at the federal level. All other elected officials, regardless of the position they hold, are also expected to serve the interests of the people they represent.

Although direct democracy does still exist in some places – the New England Town Meeting, for instance – there are simply too many people in most places for direct democracy to be practical. Can you imagine expecting every citizen in your state to show up at the capitol when the legislature was in session?

When a decision, such as whether to increase school taxes, does require the attention of every citizen, it is put on the ballot as a “referendum.” Just as with an election, the people then vote and the decision goes to the side with the most votes.

ACTIVITIES

4. Find out who the U.S. congressman and senator are for your district. Then, using the newspaper as well as other sources (you might need to visit your school or public library), find out what issues have been important to your area during their terms and where the elected officials have stood on those issues. Do you agree or disagree with those stands? Do you think they accurately represent the people of the district you live in? Discuss in small groups.
5. One of the most difficult jobs for a government representative is balancing the wants and needs of his or her constituents with the needs of the state or nation as a whole. For this reason, a congressman or senator may sometimes vote in opposition to the majority of his or her constituents. Using your newspaper, look for examples of elected officials who acted against the wishes of their constituents. (They don't have to be from your district.) In your opinion, was the decision right or wrong? Explain.
6. Choose an issue written about in your newspaper and find out as much as you can about it. Be sure to consider the arguments on both sides. Now, weigh those arguments and decide where you stand on the issue. Write a letter to the editor explaining why you took the stand you did.
7. Choose a lawmaker or government official who is mentioned in your newspaper and find out as much as you can about him or her. What in this person's educational background qualifies him or her to serve as a representative of the people?



Democracy is the only form of government that is founded on the dignity of man, not the dignity of some men, of rich men, of educated men or of white men, but of all men.

– RICHARD MAYNARD HUTCHINS
(1899-1977)

RULE



THE PEOPLE:

As a citizen of the United States, there are many ways for you to have an influence on your government. One very direct way you can get involved is by becoming one of its leaders. Democracy is based on the idea that all people are created equal, so leadership roles are not limited to a particular group of people as they would be in a monarchy or a dictatorship. With very few exceptions, all citizens of the United States are eligible to become its elected officials, although there are usually age and residency restrictions that vary with the office.

The Constitution outlines the restrictions on the offices of representative, senator, vice president, and president. Representatives must be at least 25 years old, have been U.S. citizens for at least seven years, and live in the state from which they are elected. They are elected to two-year terms.

Senators must be at least 30 years old, have been U.S. citizens for at least nine years, and live in the state from which they are chosen. They are elected to six-year terms. Every two years, one-third of the members of the Senate are elected and the other two-thirds are holdovers, which gives the Senate a sense of consistency.

The requirements for president and vice president are the same, since the vice president must be eligible to take the president's place if necessary. To be eligible for these offices, you must be at least 35 years old, be a natural-born citizen of the United States, and have lived in the United States for at least 14 years prior to your election.

Some people are what's known as career politicians. That means they spend their working lives holding one office or another, usually starting with lower-level offices, such as mayor or state legislator, and working their way up to higher and higher offices. Other people may choose to get involved with politics later in life or may choose to jump into the race for a higher office, such as governor or congressman, from private life.

Politics is open to women and men, whites, African Americans, Asian Americans, Native Americans, and members of other minority groups. And there are representatives of each of these groups in Congress.

There are also no specific educational requirements for politicians, although a life in politics can be complex and difficult, so people who are interested should get as much education as possible. Many politicians have degrees in law, but others may have very different backgrounds. Courses in political science, history, sociology, psychology, and English are highly recommended.



APPLICANT PROFILE

BORN: July 12, 1936
BIRTHPLACE: Austin, Texas
RESIDENCE: Seattle, Wash. (33 years)
U.S. CITIZEN: Yes (61 years)



APPLICANT PROFILE

BORN: September 11, 1959
BIRTHPLACE: Lyon, France
RESIDENCE: Chicago, Ill. (18 years)
U.S. CITIZEN: Yes (17 years)

an equal-opportunity employer



APPLICANT PROFILE

BORN: January 14, 1967
BIRTHPLACE: Burlington, Vt.
RESIDENCE: Baltimore, Md. (8 years)
U.S. CITIZEN: Yes (30 years)



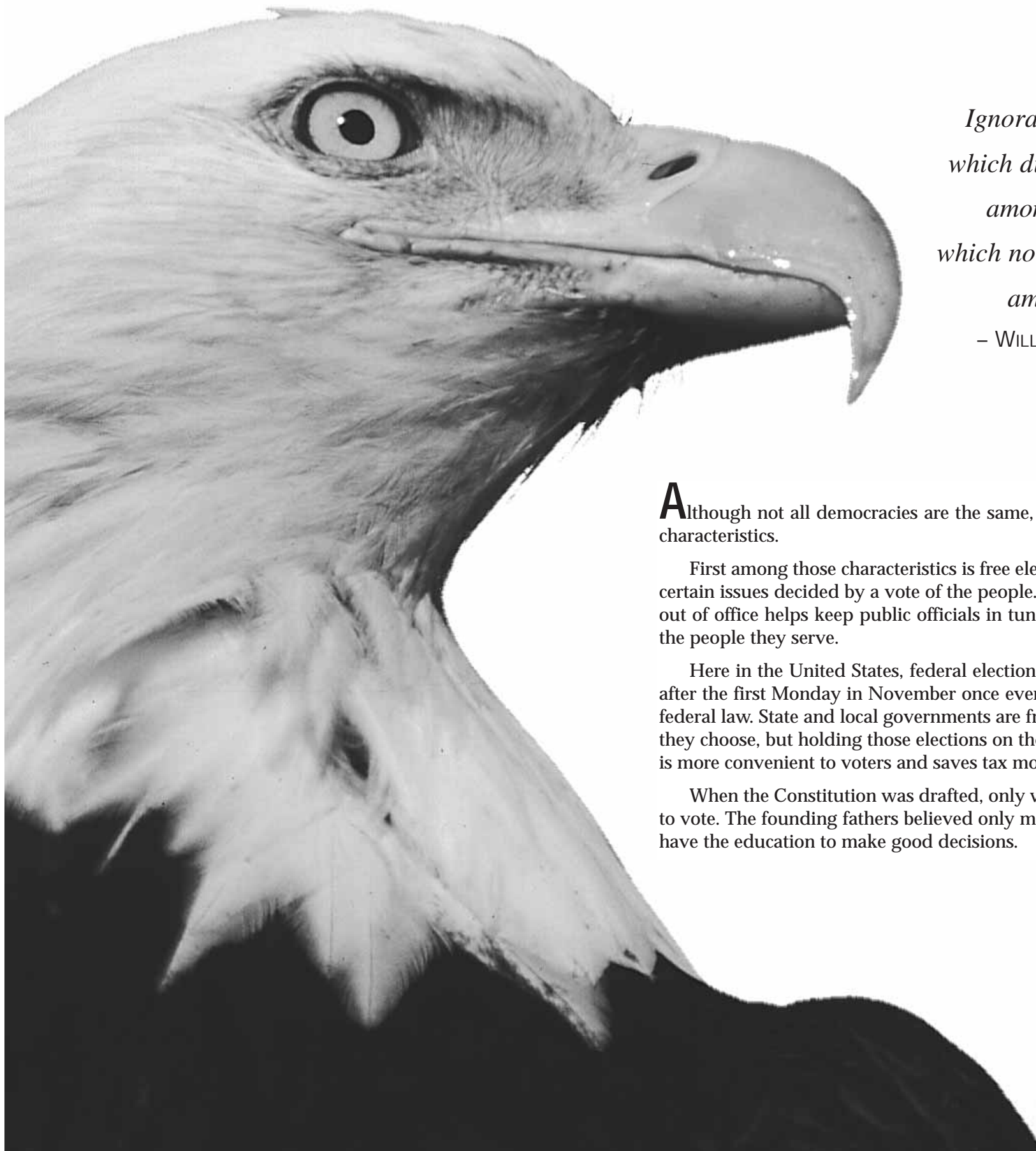
APPLICANT PROFILE

BORN: June 30, 1961
BIRTHPLACE: Atlanta, Ga.
RESIDENCE: Atlanta, Ga. (35 years)
U.S. CITIZEN: Yes (35 years)

ACTIVITIES

8. Design a newspaper ad promoting your candidacy for office.
9. Write an editorial column explaining why people should vote for you and what you would do if you were a public servant.
10. Choose one of your classmates and make a list of reporter's questions you would ask if that person were running for office. Ask your questions, then write a brief article that incorporates the answers.
11. The age, citizenship, and residency requirements for legislative and executive federal offices vary according to the Constitution. Why do you think the founding fathers set the requirements up this way? Do you agree with the age requirements? Why or why not? Discuss as a class.
12. Look through your newspaper or the newspaper archives in your library for biographical sketches of at least two elected officials from your area. Compare their educational and career backgrounds. Are they different from each other? From what you might expect? In your opinion, how does each person's background influence the kind of leader he or she is?
13. Now choose another lawmaker from your area. Using the newspaper articles you read in the previous exercise as a guide, research and write a biographical sketch of this person.
14. Do some research to find out what the age and residency requirements are for members of your state legislature and your state's governorship. Use the information to write a help-wanted classified advertisement.
15. Choose a lawmaker who represents you, and, using evidence from your newspaper, describe what that person's job consists of. What is a typical day like? What is the most important thing that person does? If you were in that person's place what would you do the same? What would you do differently?

the makings of
DEMOCRACY



*Ignorance is an evil weed,
which dictators may cultivate
among their dupes but
which no democracy can afford
among its citizens.*

– WILLIAM HENRY BEVERIDGE
(1879-1963)

Although not all democracies are the same, they do all share certain basic characteristics.

First among those characteristics is free elections. Leaders are chosen and certain issues decided by a vote of the people. The possibility of being voted out of office helps keep public officials in tune with the wants and needs of the people they serve.

Here in the United States, federal elections are held on the first Tuesday after the first Monday in November once every two years, as spelled out by federal law. State and local governments are free to set their Election Days as they choose, but holding those elections on the same day as federal elections is more convenient to voters and saves tax money.

When the Constitution was drafted, only white men were given the right to vote. The founding fathers believed only men from the upper class would have the education to make good decisions.

But gradually more and more people were granted the right.

The 15th Amendment gave black men the right to vote. The 19th Amendment gave the right to women. The 24th Amendment outlawed the use of poll taxes, so that even the very poor could vote. And the 26th Amendment changed the minimum voting age from 21 to 18.

Today, virtually every citizen age 18 or older can vote.

Another basic feature of democracy is majority rule with the preservation of minority rights. Most decisions are made by a majority or plurality of voters. That is, the side with the highest number of votes wins. Extremely important decisions, such as changes to the Constitution, generally require more than a simple majority. In the United States, such changes require a two-thirds majority, or twice as many votes for as against.

The idea behind majority rule is the equality of the citizens: If everyone is equal, the judgment of the many should be better than the judgment of the few. But because individual freedom is also integral to a democracy, measures are taken to ensure that the rights of the minority are also preserved. Guaranteed rights, such as the rights of free speech and freedom of religion, ensure that people may live free lives even when their views are not shared by the majority.

Political parties are also an important element of democracy. Parties allow people to join with others who share their basic views about the way the government should be run. By working together, they combine their individual influence on the political process. In the United States there are two major political parties, the Republicans and the Democrats, and many smaller parties.

In a true democracy, there are limitations and controls on power, so that no one person can become too powerful and every person remains equal. In the United States, this is accomplished by the division of power – among local, state, and federal governments as well as among branches within those governments.

Another crucial feature of a democracy is an independent judiciary. That is, the court system is not under the influence or control of any person or group. It is the responsibility of the court system to protect the rights of individuals and ensure that the laws, both written and implied, are fair. One of the ways this is accomplished in the United States lies in the power of the Supreme Court to declare laws passed by Congress unconstitutional. When such a declaration is made, the law becomes void. Supreme Court justices are appointed for life so that they are not subject to outside influences when they make their decisions.

An independent judiciary is one of the ultimate tests of a democracy. Sometimes dictatorships will call their country a democracy and claim that their citizens have freedom, but the court system does not protect those citizens' freedom. Freedom that is not protected does not really exist.

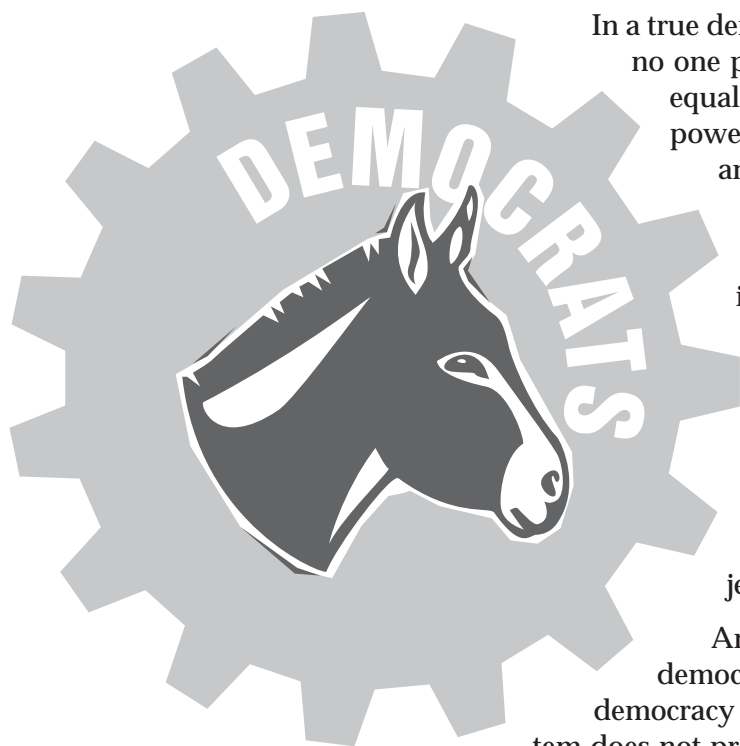
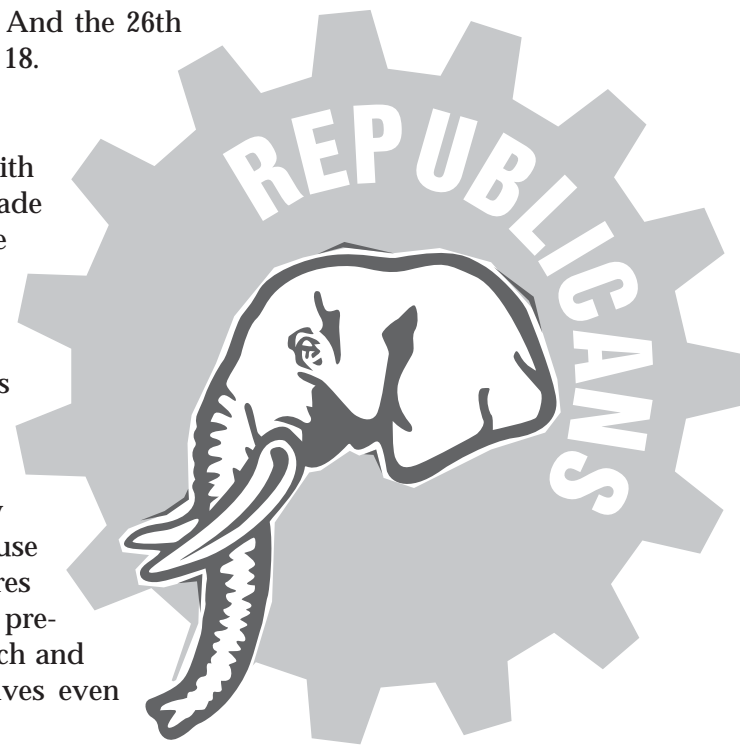
All democracies also give individuals the right to own organizations. In dictatorships, all organizations, particularly powerful ones such as the news media, are owned and/or controlled by the government.



19th AMENDMENT

The right of citizens of the United States to vote shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any state on account of sex.

RATIFIED AUGUST 18, 1920



15th AMENDMENT

The right of citizens of the United States to vote shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any state on account of race, color, or previous condition of servitude.

RATIFIED FEBRUARY 3, 1870

ACTIVITIES

- From your newspaper, collect examples of the elements of democracy in action. Look for evidence of the division and limitation of government power, protection of minority rights and so on. Label each article with the facet of democracy it represents.
- Democracies are set up to give power to the people. Using the basic features detailed in the text above, brainstorm ways the average citizen can influence government.
- From your newspaper, collect evidence of the ideological differences between the two main parties (include other parties if there is information available). In your opinion, how does the debate between parties aid democracy? Explain your thoughts in writing.
- Look for a newspaper article that illustrates one of the basic features of a democracy. Explain in a one-page essay how that feature benefits you as a citizen.

IDEAS FOR BILLS

Ideas for proposed laws can come from many different sources. Individuals who see a need for a particular law often call (or write, or e-mail) their representatives or senators to make suggestions. If the legislator sees merit in the idea, he or she will sponsor the bill. Ideas also come from special-interest groups (such as farmers, car dealers, or doctors), from the legislators themselves, or from the president.

IDEAS FOR BILLS

PASS

START HERE

Representatives Sponsoring Bills

Every bill must be sponsored by a member of the Senate or the House of Representatives. Our example is of a bill that originates in the House.



Introduction in the House. When a sponsor either gives a copy to the House clerk or places a copy in a bin called the "hopper," the clerk then reads the bill's title into the Congressional Record. This is called the bill's "first reading." Copies of the bill are then printed and distributed.

Next, the bill is assigned to a committee. There are about 20 permanent committees in the House. The House Speaker, other members, or "standing" committees are formed periodically for particular purposes and are dissolved once those purposes are fulfilled.



The bill's committee studies it by hearing testimony from experts and other concerned people. Once the bill has been studied, the committee either makes a recommendation that the bill be passed, makes a recommendation that it be revised, or "tables" it so that the House cannot vote on it.

BILL TABLED

House of Representatives

There are 435 members of the House of Representatives. The number of representatives a state has depends on its population and may change every 10 years when the U.S. Census is taken. California has the largest number, with 52; Alaska, Delaware, North Dakota, Montana, South Dakota, Vermont, and Wyoming each have only one. By tradition, only the House may introduce bills dealing with taxes or spending; and only the House may bring impeachment charges against a president.

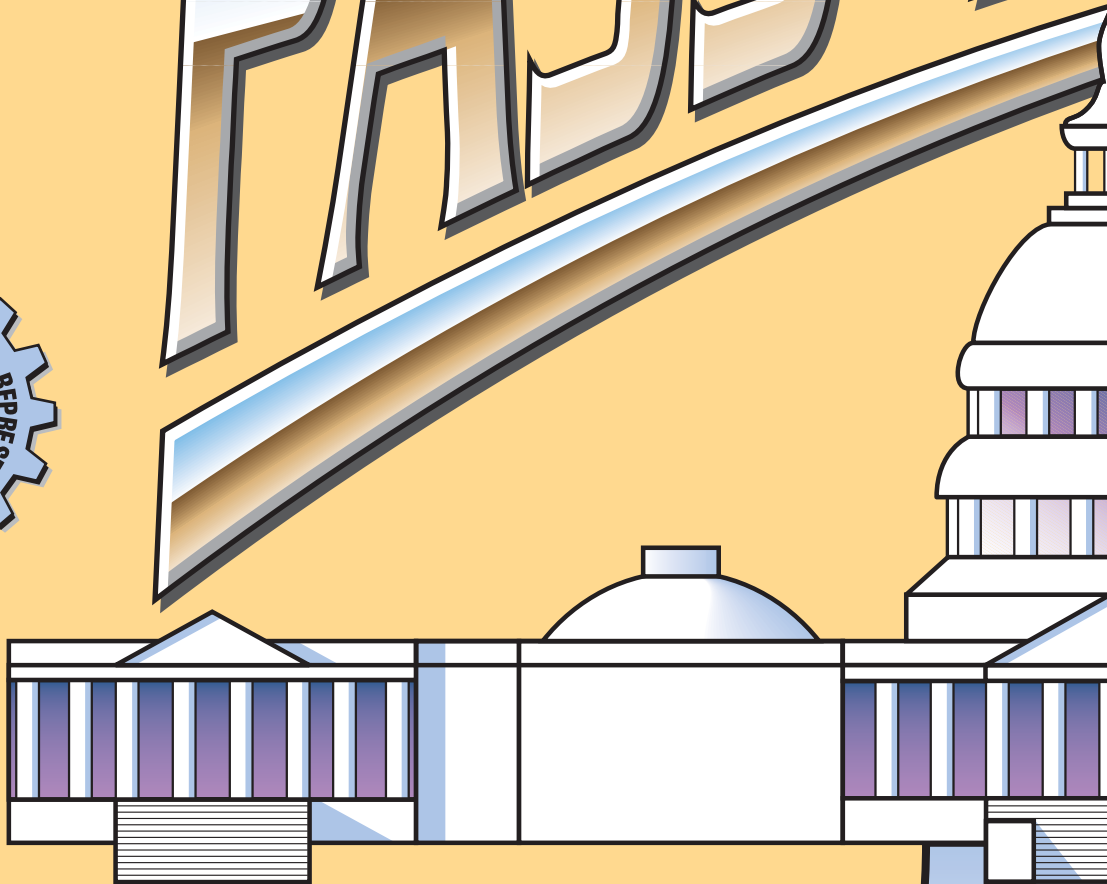
The bill is then placed on a calendar with other bills awaiting action.



The bill is signed by the President of the United States. Then it goes to the President's desk, where the bill comes into play.

The bill is then printed in the Congressional Printing Office. This is called the "second reading."

If a bill passes both chambers, it goes to a "conference committee." In this committee, members from both chambers work out differences between the House and Senate versions of the bill. The final bill then goes through both houses for approval.



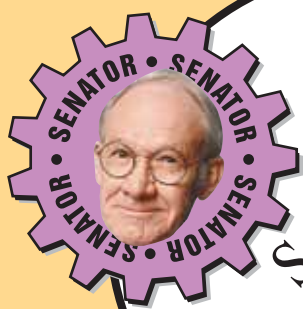
THE BILL

How a Bill Becomes Law

PRESIDENTIAL WILDCARD

Once a bill is on the president's desk, he has 10 days, not including Sundays, to do one of several things with it. He can allow the 10 days to pass without doing anything. If the Congressional session ends during that time, the bill dies; otherwise, it becomes law. The president may also approve the bill. Or he can veto it, in which case it must go back through Congress and receive a two-thirds majority vote to pass.

PRESIDENTIAL WILDCARD



Senators Sponsoring Bills

After a bill successfully makes its way through the House, it must go to the Senate. For our example, make sure you've gone through the House steps first.

To be introduced in the Senate, a bill must be introduced by a senator or who has been received by the Senate's presiding officer.

The bill is then assigned to a Senate committee by the vice president of the United States, who is also the president of the Senate. There are about 15 standing committees in the Senate.

The Senate committee studies the bill in much the same way the House committee did, then either tables the bill or releases it with a recommendation that it pass or be revised.

BILL TABLED



Senate

The Senate has exactly 100 members – two for each state regardless of its size. Senators serve six-year terms (representatives' terms last only two years). The Senate is presided over by the vice president of the United States, who is also called the president of the Senate. The Senate's special powers include approval of all international treaties and approval of presidential nominations for major federal offices. It also holds the court of impeachment when the House brings impeachment charges against the president.

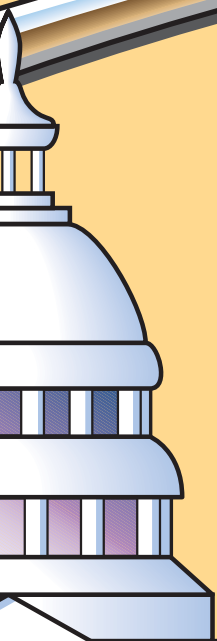
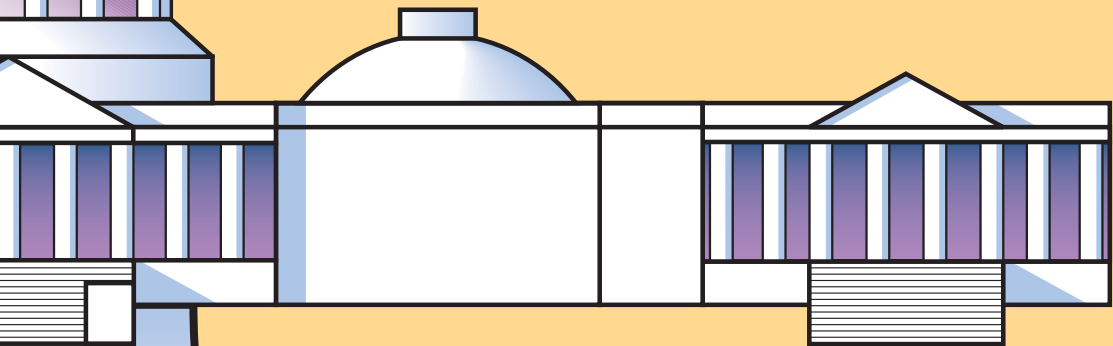
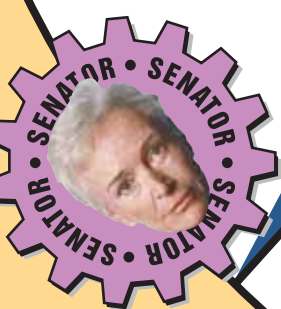
The Senate considers the bill. Unlike the House, where debate is limited, senators can debate indefinitely. One way senators may defeat a bill is by extending debate so long that a vote is never held. This is called a "filibuster." If the session ends while the bill is still being considered, the bill dies.

The bill goes back to the full Senate for consideration. Unless the bill requires immediate action, it will usually be considered in the order it arrives from committee.

by the Speaker of the House or the vice president of the House. If it moves to the president's desk, it becomes the president's wildcard.

authorized by the Government called "enrolling."

Members of Congress, it goes to the House, where members of both the House and the Senate meet. The revised bill must go back to the House.



land of the FREE

“The basis of a democratic state is liberty.”

– ARISTOTLE

Freedom and equality are intrinsic to a democracy. There are many nations in the world that call themselves democracies but whose people are not free. In particular, they are not free to challenge or even criticize the government.

Without freedom, individuals are powerless against the government, an idea in direct opposition to democracy.

In the United States, our freedoms are guaranteed in the first 10 amendments to the Constitution – the Bill of Rights. The First Amendment, in particular, guarantees the right of citizens to express themselves openly, without fear of government reprisal. It calls for freedom of religion, freedom of speech, and freedom of the press, and guarantees the rights of assembly and petition. Thanks to this amendment, United States citizens may speak out against the government, may criticize the government publicly, may assemble in groups to protest actions of the government, and may petition the government for change.

The next nine amendments provide protection from other unjust acts of the government. The Second Amendment guarantees the right to bear arms; the Third prohibits the forced housing of soldiers in private homes. The Fourth Amendment prohibits unreasonable searches and seizures, which means that officers must have a search warrant before they can enter private homes. The Fifth Amendment covers individual rights in criminal cases; the Sixth covers rights to a fair trial; and the Seventh deals with rights in civil cases. Amendment Eight prohibits excessive bails and fines as well as unreasonable punishment for crimes. The Ninth Amendment reserves for the people rights not listed in the Bill of Rights. And the 10th Amendment says that powers not given directly to the federal government by the Constitution belong to the states and the people.

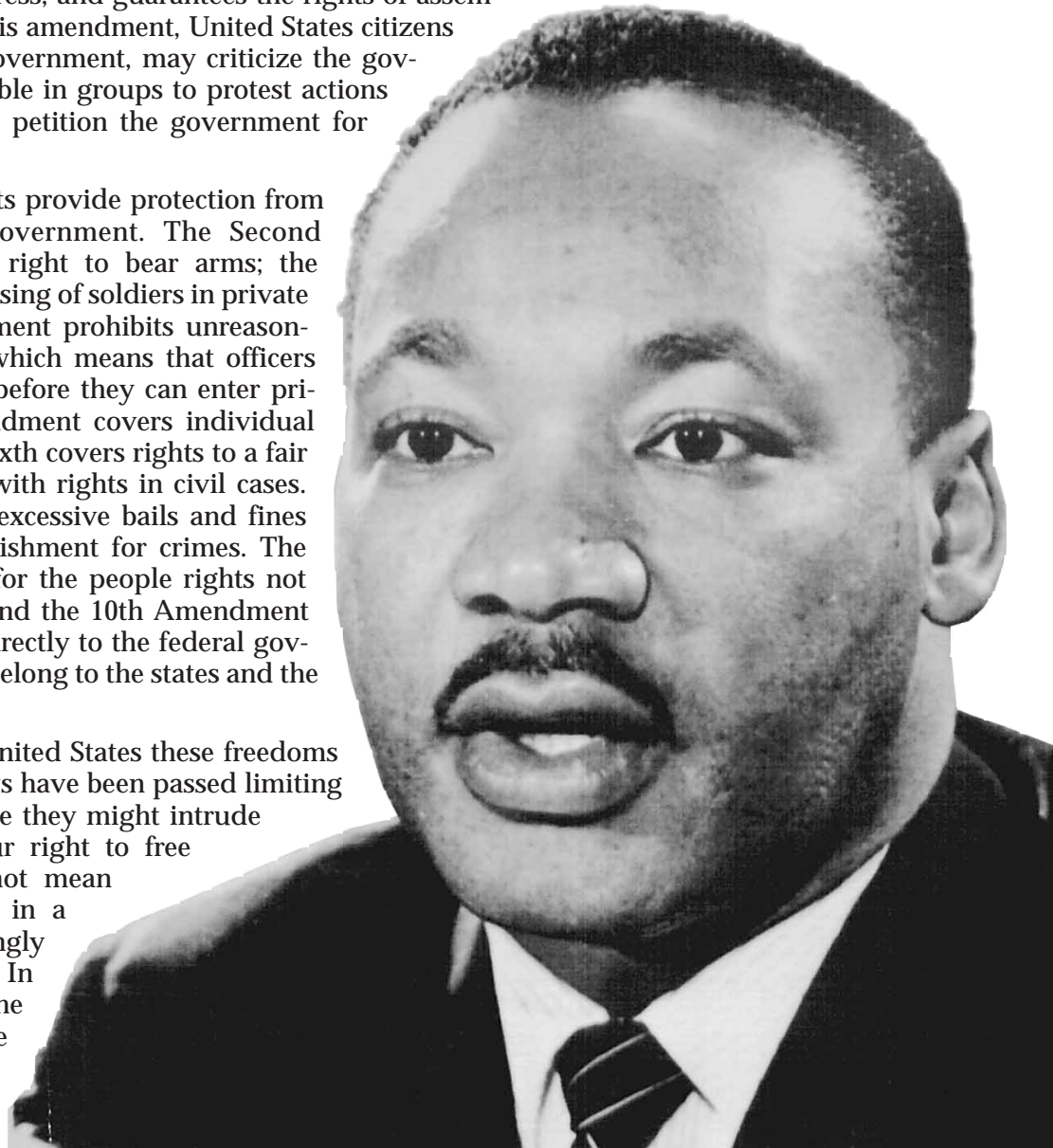
In the early days of the United States these freedoms were absolute. Over time, laws have been passed limiting personal rights in cases where they might intrude on the rights of others. Your right to free speech, for instance, does not mean you are free to yell “Fire!” in a crowded building or knowingly print lies about someone. In those cases, the rights of the people you would affect take precedence over your right to speak as you choose.

The Civil Rights Movement
of the 1950s and '60s,
led by the Reverend
Martin Luther King Jr. (below),
used First Amendment rights
to win better treatment
for African Americans.



ACTIVITIES

20. Using your newspaper, look for articles that illustrate personal freedoms that are guaranteed in the Bill of Rights. Identify which freedoms are illustrated and in what amendment you find them. Collect evidence of as many rights as you can.
21. Now look for an article that illustrates limitations placed by the law on personal freedom. What right is being limited and in what way? What is the reasoning behind the legal limitation of freedom in this situation (you might have to make your own inferences)? Do you agree or disagree with that limitation? Put your thoughts in writing.
22. Make a collection of articles from today's newspaper that would not have been printed if there were no freedom of the press.



the free press: GUARDIAN OF DEMOCRACY

Many forms of Government have been tried, and will be tried in this world of sin and woe.

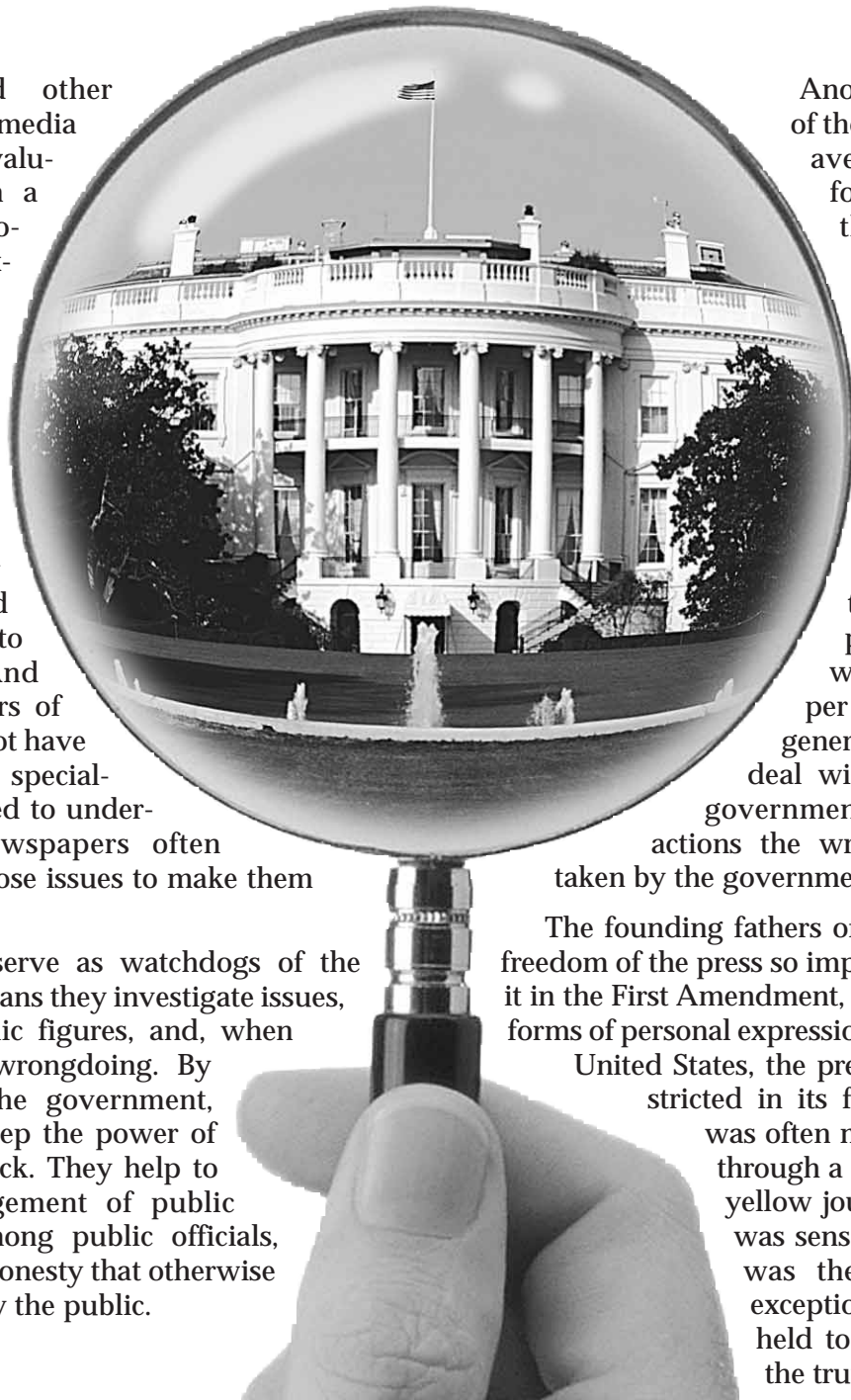
No one pretends that democracy is perfect or all-wise. It has been said that democracy is the worst form of Government, except all those other forms that have been tried from time to time.

– WINSTON CHURCHILL (1874-1965)



Newspapers and other forms of news media perform an invaluable service in a democracy: They provide a forum for the exchange of information, for the voicing of public and individual opinion, and for criticism of the government. Without factual, complete information on the issues, the citizens of a democracy cannot make sound decisions with regard to the government. And because many members of the general public do not have the knowledge or the specialized information needed to understand the issues, newspapers often explain and analyze those issues to make them easier to understand.

Newspapers also serve as watchdogs of the public interest. That means they investigate issues, events, and even public figures, and, when they find it, expose wrongdoing. By keeping an eye on the government, newspapers help to keep the power of the government in check. They help to expose the mismanagement of public money, corruption among public officials, and other forms of dishonesty that otherwise might go undetected by the public.



Another democratic function of the newspaper is providing average citizens with a forum in which to make their own opinions known. Virtually all newspapers print letters to the editor alongside their own opinion-based articles known as editorials. Letters to the editor can be on any subject and are usually only restricted by the amount of space the newspaper has to print them. Editorials are written by the newspaper's staff, although they are generally unsigned. Both often deal with actions taken by the government – at all levels – or actions the writer believes should be taken by the government.

The founding fathers of this country considered freedom of the press so important that they included it in the First Amendment, which also protects other forms of personal expression. In the early days of the United States, the press was completely unrestricted in its freedom, but that power was often misused. The nation went through a period in which so-called yellow journalism, journalism that was sensational and often untrue, was the rule rather than the exception. Today, newspapers are held to higher standards where the truth is concerned.

ACTIVITIES

23. In your newspaper, find an article or editorial that illustrates the news media's role as government watchdog. What is the issue under discussion? What problems does the writer expose? In your opinion, is the criticism valid? Discuss.
24. Count the total number of letters to the editor that appear in your newspaper in the course of one week. How many of those deal with the government, with an issue being considered by the government, or with elected officials? What percentage of the total, then, are government related? What conclusions can you draw? Discuss.
25. Next, do the same for editorials written by the newspaper's staff. How many appear in a week? How many of those involve the government?
26. Choose one editorial on a government-related subject. Does the editorial agree or disagree with the government on the issue? Considering the reasons the writer gives, do you think the argument is fair and responsible? Do you agree or disagree with the editorial? Set up a classroom debate.
27. Look for a letter to the editor that is critical of the government and one that is complimentary. Discuss how the arguments differ and how they are alike.

the power of **ONE**

John F. Kennedy
won the 1960
presidential election
by less than
one vote
per precinct.

As the population of the United States has grown – to more than 260 million at 1990 Census – the government has become increasingly complex. And the average citizen has become increasingly alienated from it. Many people, often even those who are part of some facet of the government, feel like they have no influence or control over what the government as a whole does and how those government actions affect their lives.

While the government of the United States *is* extremely complex, it remains a government of the people. The people – as individuals or in groups – can still influence the decisions and actions of that government. The essence of democracy is participation, and only through the interest and active participation of its citizens can a democracy thrive – or even survive.

If you feel like you as an individual are powerless to influence such a vast and mysterious creature as the government, you aren't alone. But history offers many examples to show that the opinions and actions of individuals do matter.



For instance: John F. Kennedy won the 1960 presidential election by less than one vote per precinct. Had one more person voted for Kennedy's opponent or simply chosen to not vote at all, a different man would have been in the White House during such important events as the Cuban Missile Crisis and the critical years of the civil rights movement.

Rosa Parks was just a tired woman riding a bus home from work in Montgomery, Ala., in 1955. And when she refused to follow a city law that required her to give up her seat to a white passenger, Parks, who was African American, set off the American civil rights movement, which eventually won better treatment for all African Americans.

Candy Lightner also made a difference. On May 3, 1980, Lightner's 13-year-old daughter, Cari, had been walking down a quiet street in Fair Oaks, Calif., when she was hit from behind by a drunken driver. She was killed instantly. But Lightner didn't grieve alone. When she learned that the man who had killed her daughter had previous drunken driving convictions and that he was likely to do little jail time, she formed the now-well-known organization called Mothers Against Drunk Driving. Thanks to her individual efforts, drinking ages were raised to 21 in every state, drunken driving penalties became stiffer, and public awareness of the dangers of driving while intoxicated increased dramatically. Between 1980 and 1992, the number of deaths caused by drunken drivers fell from 25,000 to 17,700, and it's still falling. Today Candy Lightner, once just an average citizen, can be credited with saving thousands of lives every year.

Participation is what makes democracy work. Although all governments use force at times, the emphasis in democracies is on voluntary rather than coerced involvement. Among the freedoms the people possess is the freedom to choose *not* to participate in the workings of their government.

Unfortunately, many people do choose to neglect their duties as citizens. Typically, fewer than 60 percent vote in presidential elections, and even fewer vote in state and local elections. And voting is easy.

Writing letters and making phone calls to your congressmen, writing letters to the editor of your newspaper, staging protests, and making other efforts to make your opinions known take more effort. But those efforts can pay off in the form of proposed laws or other changes that support your ideas, as well as the votes of others you have influenced.

In short, the more effort you put forth, the more effective that effort will be. And there's an added bonus: Although you might not yet be old enough to vote, there is no age restriction on activism. You can use your influence now to win the support of others who *are* old enough to vote.



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ACTIVITIES

28. As a class, brainstorm reasons you think people should choose to vote and otherwise actively participate in the government. Why do you think so many people choose not to participate? Individually or in small groups, create an advertising campaign to persuade people to get more involved.
29. Choose an issue that you think is important. Write a letter or send an e-mail message to your senator or representative (or other lawmaker, if appropriate) explaining why you think the issue is important and what you think should be done about it. (Your teacher will give you the address.)
30. As a class, discuss the issues each of you chose and select one from among them. Now, plan a public awareness campaign promoting your ideas. Be sure to include your own newspaper advertisements, letters to the editor, and letters to your congressmen.
31. In your newspaper, look for articles about individuals working to make a difference. What issues are they working on? What are they doing to change the status quo? Do you agree with their opinion on the issue? Do you think their tactics are effective. Discuss in small groups, then share your opinions with the class.

what the survey

SAYS



Politicians use public opinion polls to find out how the public feels about certain issues, as well as how the public feels about their performance.

In order to represent their constituents accurately, lawmakers must know what issues are important to them and how they feel about those issues.

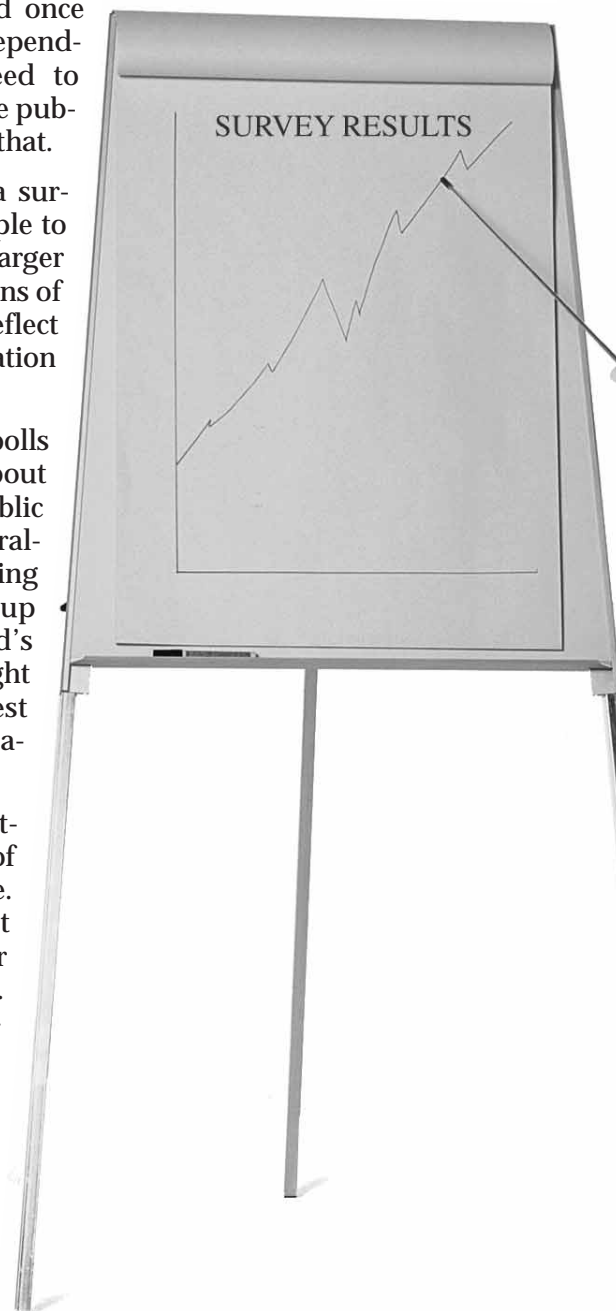
The ultimate poll on how well an elected official is doing his or her job is, of course, the vote. Re-election is the people's stamp of approval, a sign that they think the official is doing a good job of representing them. Re-election by a large margin is considered a mandate – a sign that the people are overwhelmingly behind their representative. The people's failure to re-elect an official, on the other hand, says they would rather have someone else in the job. Their failure to re-elect is much like firing the official and hiring someone new.

But elections only come around once every two years – or four, or six, depending on the office. Lawmakers need to gauge their progress and find out the public's opinion much more often than that.

Enter the public opinion poll, a survey taken of a large number of people to gauge the opinions of an even larger number. If done correctly, the opinions of those surveyed should accurately reflect the opinions of the entire population being considered.

Politicians use public opinion polls to find out how the public feels about certain issues, as well as how the public feels about them. The polls are generally conducted by professional polling organizations, such as The Gallup Organization, probably the world's most famous pollster. They also might be conducted by special interest groups, businesses, news organizations, or the politicians themselves.

There is no rule that says an elected official must act as the majority of his or her constituents would like. Sometimes officials vote or act according to their own conscience or with a broader picture in mind. What might be good for a congressman's district, for instance, might not be good for the nation as a whole, and the congressman might act in favor of the broader good. But elected officials must always keep their constituents in mind, because if they displease the majority too frequently, they probably will not be re-elected.



ACTIVITIES

32. Choose three controversial issues discussed in your newspaper. Now conduct a classroom public opinion poll on these issues. How does the class divide up on the issues, i.e., how many are in favor vs. how many opposed?
33. Using the same questions, each member of the class should survey five people of voting age. Combine all your survey answers, then, as a class, figure the percentage in favor and the percentage opposed to each issue. How do these percentages compare with those of the class? Using the results of your polls, write a newspaper article for your student newspaper.
34. In your newspaper, watch for an article based on the results of a public opinion poll. Who conducted the poll and what was the issue(s) under consideration? Does your opinion agree with the majority answers in the poll? Why or why not? Discuss in a short essay.

making your voice HEARD



If you have an opinion on an issue, you don't have to wait around hoping a pollster will call and ask. Active citizens take the initiative to make their voices heard. You can do this, too, simply by calling, writing, or e-mailing the office of your senator, your representative, or any other elected official. Clerks keep track of the calls and letters and the opinions they express.

In his first few weeks as president, Bill Clinton received more than 1,500 telephone calls an hour. Today, Clinton is the most-contacted official in history: He gets about 20,000 letters a day, 1,000 to 2,000 of those via e-mail. His predecessor, George Bush, received about 8,000 a day.

Particularly when an important piece of legislation is being considered, lawmakers' telephones

may ring off the hook as their constituents work to make their opinions known.

Citizens may also write letters to the editors of their newspapers, stage protests, or form organizations that combine the resources of individuals to have a more influential effect. Such organizations are called lobbies, and some of them, such as the National Rifle Association, the American Association for Retired Persons, and Mothers Against Drunk Driving are very powerful. Besides working to influence lawmakers, lobbies stage campaigns to influence public opinion, which in turn may have an even greater influence on lawmakers.

Together, individual voices are more likely to make a difference.

(Illustration by Camille Weber)

ACTIVITIES

- From your newspaper, choose an article that discusses an action taken on an issue by your representative to Congress, your senator, or your state legislative representative. Did that action reflect the opinion of the leader's constituents? Discuss why you think he or she made that particular decision.
- Scan your newspaper and make a note of any references to lobbying organizations, otherwise known as special-interest groups. How many did you find in a day? In a week? How are these organizations different? How are they similar? Explain your ideas in writing.

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The White House
www.whitehouse.gov/WH/Welcome.html

U.S. House of Representatives
www.house.gov/

U.S. Senate
www.senate.gov/

U.S. Department of Agriculture
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U.S. Department of Commerce
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