

University of Virginia Center for Politics



What Is Democracy?

Purpose: Fundamental to the understanding of American government and culture is the core concept of democracy. In this lesson, students will define democracy, its different forms and underlying principles. Students will also investigate what makes American democracy unique, and discover elements of it in political cartoons, music lyrics and a town meeting simulation.

Objectives:

1. Students will interpret and analyze political cartoons.
2. Students will define the concept of democracy.
3. Students will identify and evaluate the types of democracy.
4. Students will analyze the basic ideas and principles that underlie American democracy.
5. Students will evaluate apparent contradictions in American democracy.
6. Students will create an actual democracy in a town hall simulation.
7. Students will identify and discuss the pros and cons of a democratic form of government.
8. Students will interpret and analyze a song lyric related to the Bill of Rights.
9. Students will interpret and analyze several quotations related to democracy.
10. Students will create and present artwork portraying American democracy.

Key Words:

democracy
referendum

direct democracy
representative democracy

recall
town meeting

Materials:

1. Political Cartoons: *Democracy, Meaning of Democracy* and *The Democracy Shuttle*
2. Student handout: *Characteristics of Democracy*
3. Teacher key: *Characteristics of Democracy*
4. Overhead/Student handout: *Forms of Democracy*
5. Student handout: *American Democracy: Basic Ideals & Principles*
6. Student handout: *So...How Democratic Are We?*
7. Student handout: *Democracy in Quotes*
8. Student handouts: *School of Rock* lyrics for *Fortunate Son*, *Daylight Again/Find the Cost of Freedom* and *God Bless the USA*
9. Student handout: *You Decide: A Town Meeting Simulation*

Procedure:

1. **Warm Up: Political Cartoon** - Project the political cartoons *Democracy*, *Meaning of Democracy* and *The Democracy Shuttle* via overhead or PowerPoint. Ask students to interpret the cartoon:
 - Describe what's going on in the political cartoon (Who? What? When? Where?)
 - Identify any symbols (ex: an elephant to represent the Republican Party) portrayed in the cartoon and analyze what they represent.
 - What is the artist's message in the cartoon? What do you think is its purpose?
 - Do you agree or disagree with the cartoonist's message? Explain your answer.
 - What does this cartoon tell us about American politics and culture?
 - What does this cartoon say about democracy?
2. **Brainstorm: "Democracy is...."**
 - Pass out the *Characteristics of Democracy* handout and ask students to write down several characteristics of democracy.
 - Next, students should record their own definitions of *democracy*.
 - Then create a class definition for "democracy."
 - NOTE: See teacher key for sample answers.
3. **Forms of Democracy: Direct (pure) and Representative** – Write the terms "direct democracy" and "representative democracy" on the board or project the *Forms of Democracy* overhead. Define each term and ask students to provide examples.
 - Question for Discussion: *What form of democracy is used by the United States?* Of course, the U.S. has elements of both types of democracy. Ask students to provide further examples.
 - Optional: Project photos or brief news clips and ask students to identify what type of democracy they represent.
4. **American Democracy: Basic Ideals and Principles** – Give students the handout *American Democracy: Basic Ideals & Principles* and have them work with a partner to accomplish the following task: Using our definition of democracy, write a brief explanation of each ideal or principle, and provide an example. NOTE: you may also use the PowerPoint for this activity as well as a whole class activity.
 - *Popular Consent or Popular Sovereignty* - government derives its powers from the consent of the people it governs.
 - *Respect for the Individual* - every individual has the potential for common sense, rationality and fairness and are entitled to "certain unalienable rights."
 - *Equality of Opportunity* - "all men are created equal," but what kind of equality? Economic, political, legal, social?
 - *Personal Liberty* - "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness" and the right of individuals to self-determination.
 - *Rule of Law* – "a government of laws and not of men;" safeguard of liberty.
5. **Making Connections: So....How Democratic Are We?** – Pass out the *So....How Democratic Are We?* handout and ask the students to read each statement and decide if

it represents an example of the democratic process or not, and then write a brief rationale for their position. Then ask students to work with a partner and discuss their answers together. Then bring the class back together and discuss the following questions:

- Based upon these scenarios, what generalizations can you make about American democracy?
- Is it ok that democracy in the U.S. is sometimes inconsistent or messy? Defend your answer.

6. Exploring “Democracy” Through Quotations: Pass out the **“Democracy” in Quotes**. Students may work individually, in pairs or small groups to complete the following task:

- Interpret the quotation. What point is the author making about “democracy?”
- Do you agree or disagree with the writer? Defend your answer.

7. Wrap-up: Pros and Cons of Democracy

- Brainstorm pro list and con list.
- Is democracy for everyone i.e. does democracy work in every country (support answer with specifics)?

***Supporting Resource: Democracy PowerPoint** – a resource for teachers that includes many of the important content elements of the lesson.

Extension Activities:

1. School of Rock: Pass out the lyrics and play the songs *Fortunate Son* recorded by Creedence Clearwater Revival, *Daylight Again/Find the Cost of Freedom* recorded by Crosby, Stills and Nash and Young, and Lee Greenwood’s *God Bless the USA*. Ask students to respond to the following questions:

- What do you think this song is about, i.e. what’s going on? (Hint: you may to consider the year each song was recorded and put it in historical context).
- Analyze each stanza of the song, and discuss how it relates to “democracy.”
- What do you think is the overall message of the songwriter of each song?
- Identify how the songs are different and how they are similar in terms of their perspectives on American democracy.

2. You Decide: A Town Meeting Simulation: Teacher’s choice (class issue, school-wide, or community problem). Pass out the simulation directions, *You Decide: A Town Meeting Simulation*.

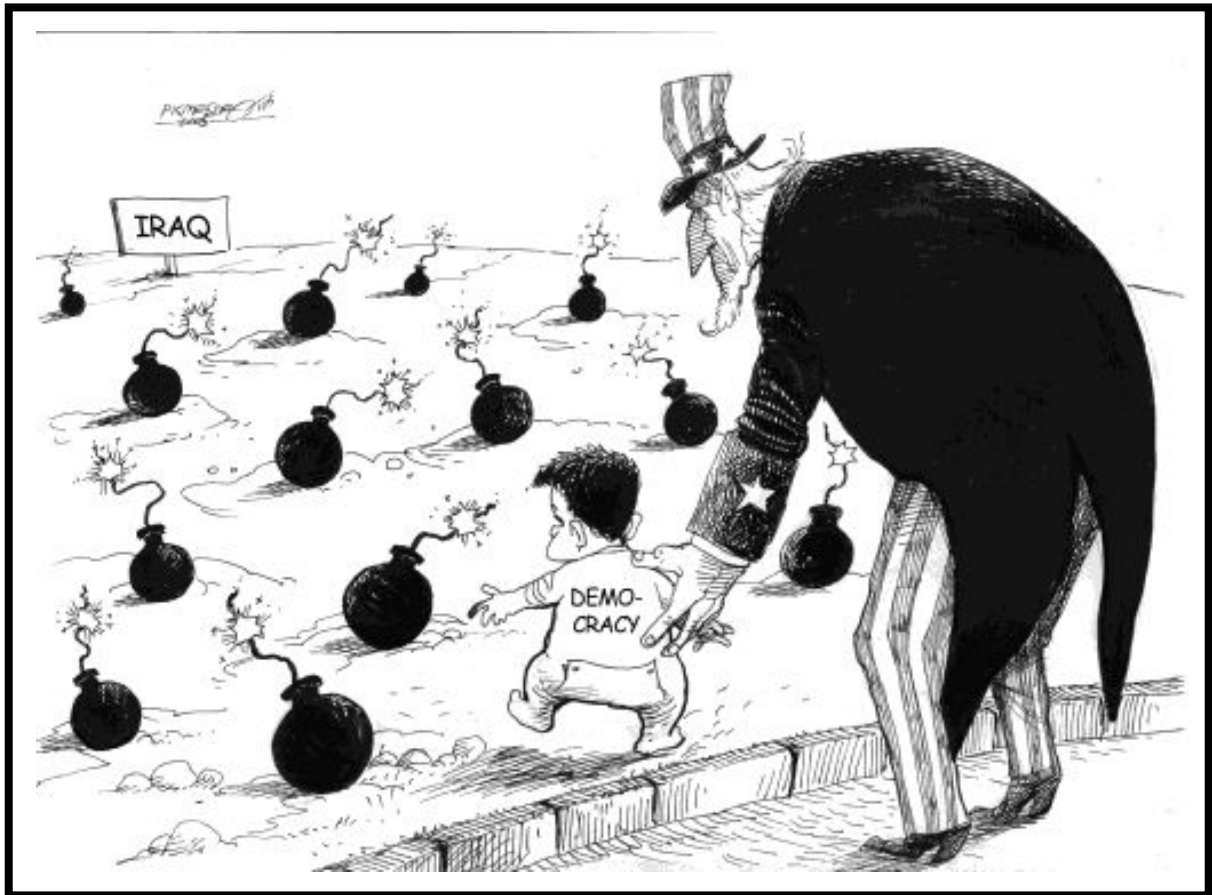
- Prep: ask students to write down on a note card the most important problem/issue facing their class, school or community.
- Class votes on issue or teacher decides.
- Class elects President or Moderator to lead the discussion.
- Brainstorm solutions to the problem.
- Vote on solution or course of action.
- Next step?



3. Democracy in Art: Ask students to draw or paint a picture, create a political cartoon, or produce a collage portraying American democracy. Students will then present their art to the class.

Political Cartoon #1

Title: *Democracy*



Artist: Petar Pismestrovic, Kleine Zeitung, Austria

Date: February 2, 2005

Source: <http://www.politicalcartoons.com>

1. Describe the context of the political cartoon (Who? What? When? Where?)
2. Identify and discuss the cartoonist's message. What bias(es) can you detect?
3. Do you agree or disagree with the cartoonist's message? Explain your answer.
4. What does this cartoon say about democracy?

Political Cartoon #2

Title: *Meaning of Democracy*



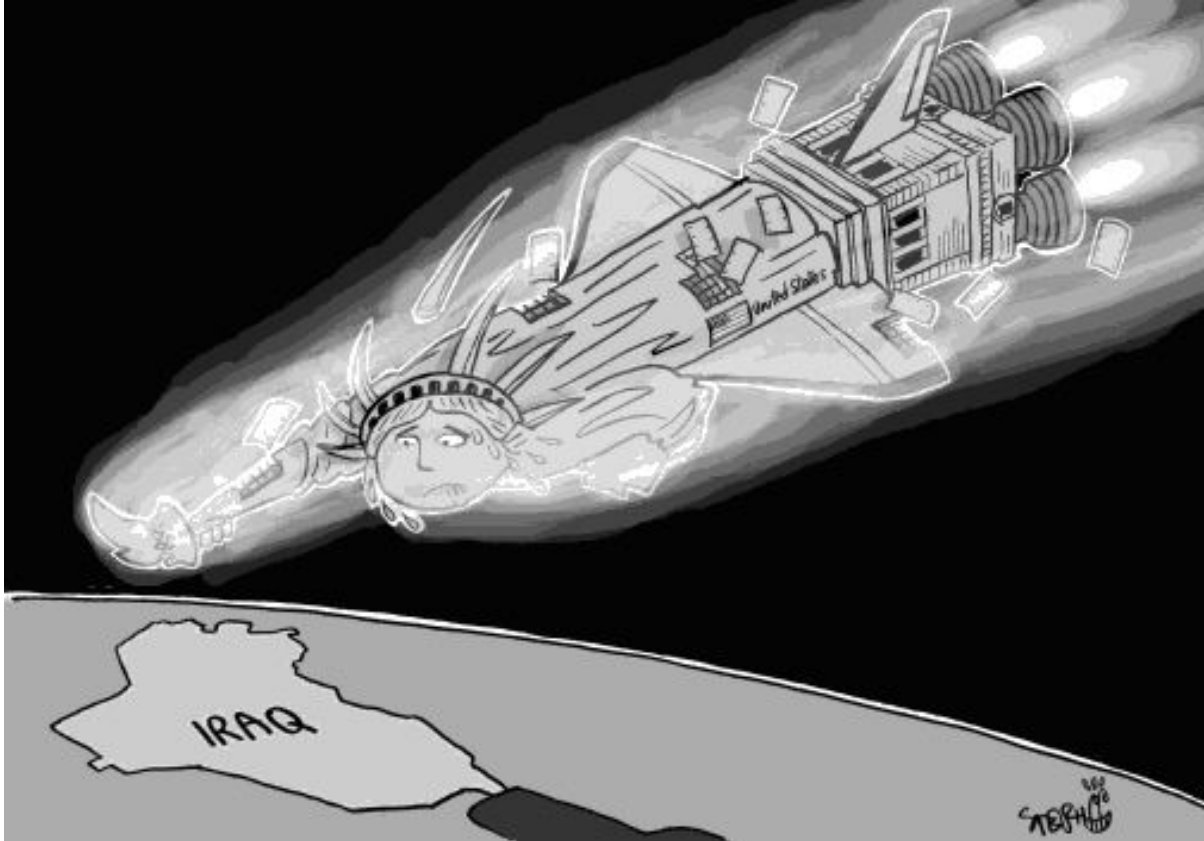
Artist: Larry Wright, The Detroit News

Date: February 1, 2005

Source: <http://www.politicalcartoons.com>

1. Describe the context of the political cartoon (Who? What? When? Where?)
2. Identify and discuss the cartoonist's message. What bias(es) can you detect?
3. Do you agree or disagree with the cartoonist's message? Explain your answer.
4. What does this cartoon say about democracy?

Political Cartoon #3
Title: *Democracy Shuttle*



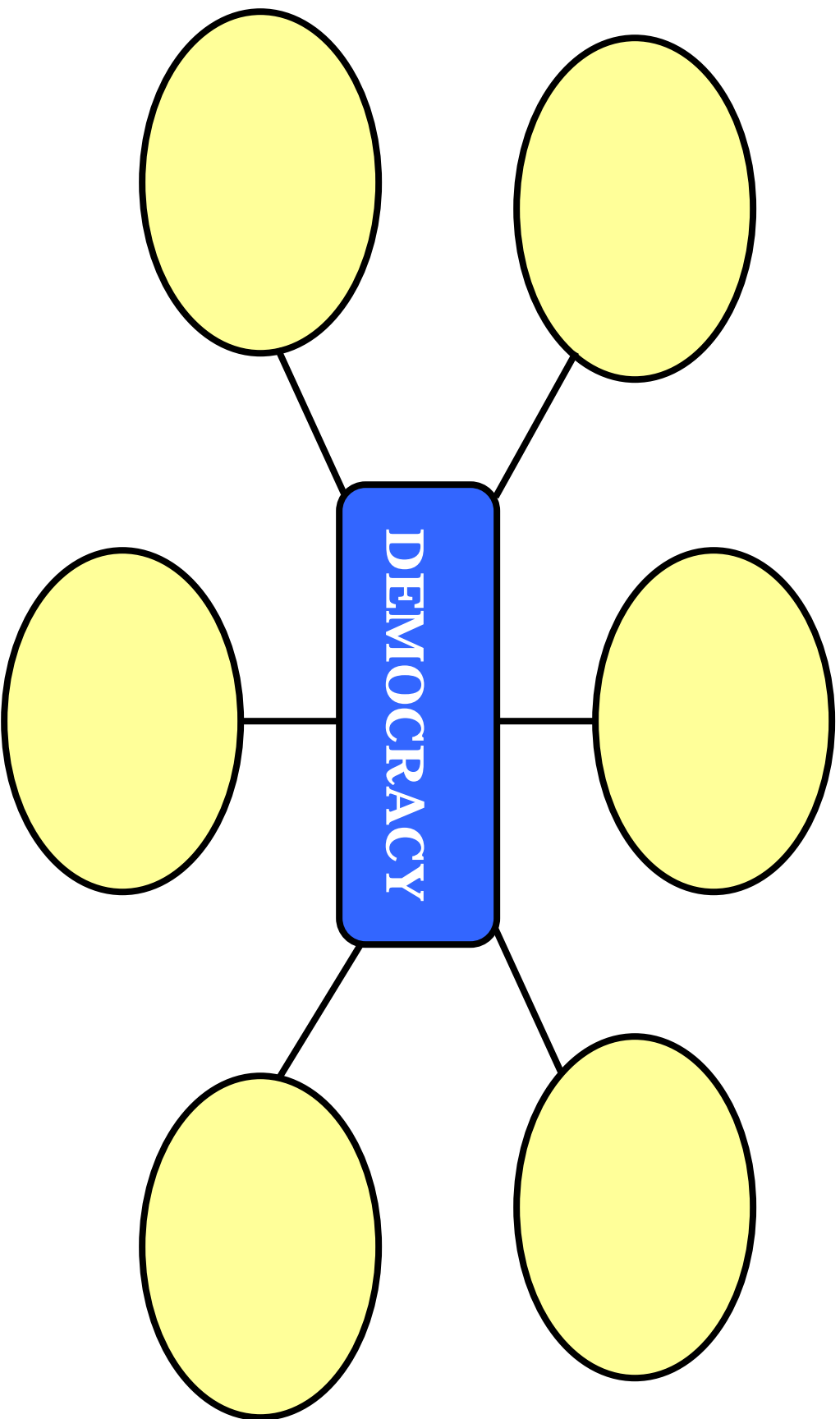
Artist: Larry Wright, The Detroit News

Date: February 1, 2005

Source: <http://www.politicalcartoons.com>

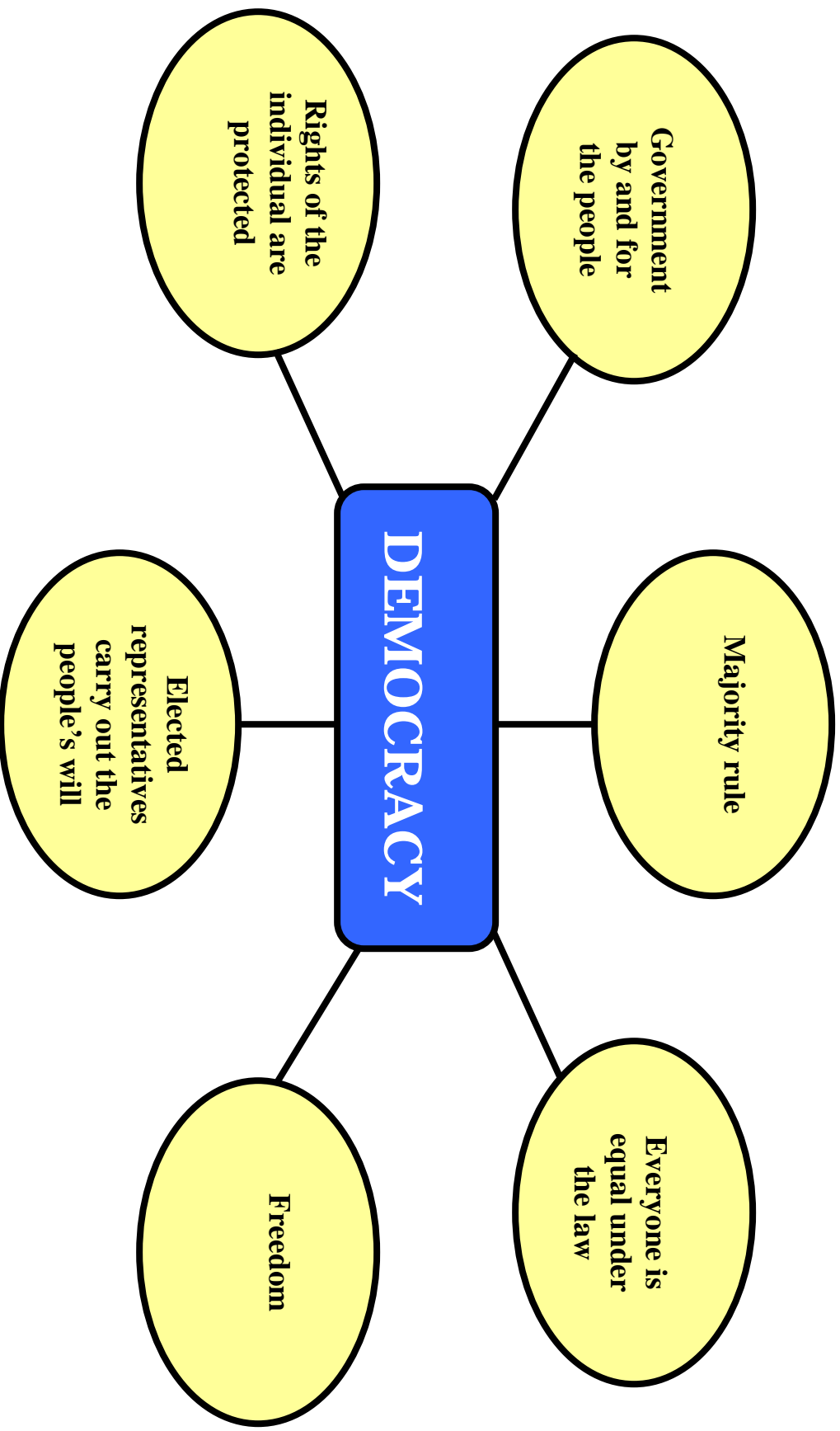
1. Describe the context of the political cartoon (Who? What? When? Where?)
2. Identify and discuss the cartoonist's message. What bias(es) can you detect?
3. Do you agree or disagree with the cartoonist's message? Explain your answer.
4. What does this cartoon say about democracy?

Characteristics of Democracy



Democracy -

Characteristics of Democracy



Democracy – a system of government in which the people rule either directly, or through elected representatives

Forms of Democracy

- I. ***direct or pure democracy*** - a form of democracy in which the people as a whole make direct decisions, rather than have those decisions made for them by elected representatives.

Examples of Direct Democracy:

- ***referendum*** - The practice of submitting a law to a popular vote at election time. The law may be proposed by a voter's initiative or by the legislature.
- ***recall*** - A procedure whereby the voters can vote to remove an elected official from office.

- II. ***representative democracy*** - A political system in which leaders and representatives acquire political power by means of a competitive struggle for the people's vote.

Critical Thinking: What kind of democracy is the United States?

Sources:

<http://dictionary.reference.com/>

Wilson, James Q. & John J. Dilulio, Jr. American Government: Institutions and Policies. 9th edition. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2004.

American Democracy: Basic Ideals & Principles

Basic Ideal/Principle	Explanation	Example
<i>Popular Consent or Popular Sovereignty</i>		
<i>Respect for the Individual</i>		
<i>Equality of Opportunity</i>		
<i>Personal Liberty</i>		
<i>Rule of Law</i>		

So.... How Democratic Are We?

Directions – America has a democratic form of government. But just how democratic are we? Read each of the scenarios below. For each, decide if the scenario is or is not democratic. Why or why not? On a separate sheet of paper, write a brief response to each scenario.

1. Elections in the United States are characterized by low voter turnout. State and local elections normally draw 30% of all registered voters (or fewer) to the polls. Presidential elections draw 50% (or fewer) to the polls. In the presidential election of 1992, Clinton won with 40% of the popular vote (less than a majority). Keep in mind that because not all Americans are registered, the number of Americans that actually voted for Clinton is even smaller.
2. Ninety-five percent of all members of Congress running for reelection will win their seat. Many times members of Congress face little or no opposition in political races. This has led to what some call a "permanent congress" with members serving as many as 30 years.
3. The cost of running for political office has skyrocketed in the last 20 years. An individual running a Senate campaign must spend a minimum of \$22 million to have a chance at winning. Presidential elections cost much more, leading some to claim that political leaders simply must "buy" their seat.
4. Political consultants are professionals who advise political candidates. They are experts on polling the public and giving advice to politicians based on what the polls say. Politicians often gain an advantage by following this advice.
5. Individuals who contribute large sums of money to political campaigns have access to government leaders that ordinary Americans do not. Money influences legislation, which often benefits those who contributed.
6. The president of the United States has the power to issue executive orders that have the effect of law. There is no immediate check on this power; in fact, this is an extra-constitutional power of the president. Examples of executive orders include Roosevelt's internment of Japanese-Americans during WWII and Truman's integration of the military.
7. In the 2000 presidential election, Al Gore won the popular vote by nearly a half million votes. However, George W. Bush won the election after the Florida recount controversy because he received a majority of Electoral College votes.
8. There are approximately 4 million children in America who lack basic health insurance.

Adapted from: Small, Rebecca. AP Government Institute, the College of William and Mary, August, 2000.

“Democracy” in Quotes

Quotation	Interpretation	What do you think?
<p><i>#1 - Democracy does not guarantee equality of conditions - it only guarantees equality of opportunity.</i></p> <p style="text-align: right;">Irving Kristol</p>		
<p><i>#2 – Democracy is only a dream: it should be put in the same category as Arcadia, Santa Claus, and Heaven.</i></p> <p style="text-align: right;">H.L. Mencken</p>		
<p><i>#3- Democracy is a process by which the people are free to choose the man who will get the blame.</i></p> <p style="text-align: right;">Laurence J. Peter</p>		
<p><i>#4- Everybody's for democracy in principle. It's only in practice that the thing gives rise to stiff objections.</i></p> <p style="text-align: right;">Meg Greenfield</p>		
<p><i>#5- In true democracy every man and women is taught to think for himself or herself.</i></p> <p style="text-align: right;">Mohandas K. Gandhi</p>		

<p><i>#6- The thing about democracy, beloveds, is that it is not neat, orderly, or quiet. It requires a certain relish for confusion.</i></p> <p>Molly Ivins</p>		
<p><i>#7- Democracy means not "I am as good as you are" but "You are as good as I am."</i></p> <p>Theodore Parker</p>		
<p><i>#8- In a democracy everybody has a right to be represented, including the jerks.</i></p> <p>Chris Patten</p>		
<p><i>#9- America's support for human rights and democracy is our noblest export to the world.</i></p> <p>William J. Bennett</p>		
<p><i>#10- Of course the people don't want war. But after all, it's the leaders of the country who determine the policy, and it's always a simple matter to drag the people along whether it's a democracy, a fascist dictatorship, or a parliament, or a communist dictatorship. Voice or no voice, the people can always be brought to the bidding of the leaders. That is easy. All you have to do is tell them they are being attacked, and denounce the pacifists for lack of patriotism, and exposing the country to greater danger.</i></p> <p>Herman Goering</p>		

FORTUNATE SON

Music and lyrics by J.C. Fogerty

Recorded by Creedence Clearwater Revival (1969)

Some folks are born made to wave the flag,
Ooh, they're red, white and blue.
And when the band plays "Hail to the chief",
Ooh, they point the cannon at you, Lord,

It ain't me, it ain't me, I ain't no senator's son, son.
It ain't me, it ain't me; I ain't no fortunate one, no,

Yeah!

Some folks are born silver spoon in hand,
Lord, don't they help themselves, oh.
But when the taxman comes to the door,
Lord, the house looks like a rummage sale, yes,

It ain't me, it ain't me, I ain't no millionaire's son, no.
It ain't me, it ain't me; I ain't no fortunate one, no.

Some folks inherit star spangled eyes,
Ooh, they send you down to war, Lord,
And when you ask them, "How much should we give?"
Ooh, they only answer more! More! More! Yo,

It ain't me, it ain't me, I ain't no military son, son.
It ain't me, it ain't me; I ain't no fortunate one, one.

It ain't me, it ain't me, I ain't no fortunate one, no no no,
It ain't me, it ain't me, I ain't no fortunate son, no no no,

DAYLIGHT AGAIN (1982)**FIND THE COST OF FREEDOM (1971)**

Music & Lyrics by Stephen Stills

Recorded by Crosby, Stills, Nash and Young

Daylight again
Following me to bed
I think about a hundred years ago
How my father's bled

I think I see a valley
Covered with bones in blue
All the brave soldiers that cannot get older
Been asking after you

Hear the past a' calling
From Armageddon's side
When everyone's talking and no one is listening
How can we decide?

[Instrumental (Banjo)]

Do we find the cost of freedom
Buried in the ground
Mother Earth will swallow you
Lay your body down

GOD BLESS THE USA

Music and lyrics by Lee Greenwood

Recorded by Lee Greenwood (1984)

If tomorrow all the things were gone I'd worked for all my life,
And I had to start again with just my children and my wife.
I'd thank my lucky stars to be living here today,
'Cause the flag still stands for freedom and they can't take that away.

And I'm proud to be an American where at least I know I'm free.
And I won't forget the men who died, who gave that right to me.
And I'd gladly stand up next to you and defend her still today.
'Cause there ain't no doubt I love this land God bless the U.S.A.

From the lakes of Minnesota, to the hills of Tennessee,
across the plains of Texas, from sea to shining sea,

From Detroit down to Houston and New York to LA,
Well, there's pride in every American heart,
and it's time to stand and say:

I'm proud to be an American where at least I know I'm free.
And I won't forget the men who died, who gave that right to me.
And I'd gladly stand up next to you and defend her still today.
'Cause there ain't no doubt I love this land God bless the U.S.A.

You Decide: A Town Meeting Simulation

Purpose: Going back to 17th century New England town meetings, direct democracy in the United States is an important political tradition. This lesson enables students to actively participate in a simulation in which they role play a class town meeting.

Simulation Situation: Students identify a significant issue or problem confronting their class, school or community to be addressed in the town meeting. The class will then brainstorm a solution to the problem, and decide on a course of action.

Simulation: Town Meeting

Stage 1: Clarifying the Problem

- Students write down on a note card the most important problem/issue facing their class, school or community.
- Class votes on issue or problem it wants to tackle in the simulation. (Note: The teacher may choose if needed.)

Stage 2: Electing a Leader

- The class elects a President or Moderator who will call the meeting to order, recognize members to speak, and call for a vote when necessary.

Stage 3: Brainstorming Solutions

- The class brainstorms solutions to the problem or issue.
- The class votes on a solution or course of action.

Stage 4: Committing to an Action Plan (optional)

- The class commits to a plan to carry out the action agreed upon by the group.
- The class works on the project during class time or outside of school.

Stage 5: Simulation Debriefing – full class discussion

- Ask students what was realistic about this simulation and what was not?
- What did you learn about direct democracy by doing this simulation?