Hey, I’m Jason. Today we’re gonna find out more about the basic tenets of American government. Oh and by the way, tenets can be thought of as principles. So we’re going to investigate the underlying principles of American government. Let’s do this.

Video 1 - Introduction

I bet you’ve heard our U.S. government described as being a democracy a bunch of times. Ever wonder exactly what that meant—what is a democracy?

Here are five basic concepts of democracy.

This terminology will make more sense once you hear the explanations and some real life examples in this video.

Video 1-

What is a democracy? In a democracy, the people have a say in how they are governed. But the meaning of democracy has changed over time, and even today, it means different things in different countries. Our democracy in the United States is based on five main concepts. The fundamental worth of every person, the equality of all
persons, majority rule of minority rights, the necessity of compromise and individual freedom. Democracy is about letting people help decide how they will be governed and inherent in the concept of a democracy is the idea that every person is worthy to take part in government.

Historically, complete inclusiveness hasn’t been true of most democracies, including the U.S. version, where the right to vote or participate in government was limited to certain groups of people. Closely related to the idea that every person has a fundamental worth is the idea that people should be treated as ends in themselves and not as means to other’s ends. For example, we have laws against performing medical or scientific experiments on people without their consent. Such laws recognize a persons fundamental worth.

A democracy stresses two forms of equality; the equality of opportunity and legal equality. With equality of opportunity, no arbitrary barriers, such as those based on sex, religion or race should be placed in the way of a person’s chance to succeed. For example, laws tracking down college admission practices that discriminate on the base of race are justified, because they promote equality of opportunity. Legal equality means all persons should be treated equally in basic political matters, like having the right to vote and being equal under the law. For example, anyone who’s arrested has the same rights. They have to be told things, like the reason why they were arrested and that they are allowed to speak with an attorney.
Now, let’s talk about majority rule, the minority rights. The word democracy comes from the Greek word demos, meaning people and krateo, meaning rule. The rule of the people means majority rule and is assumed to result in the most satisfactory decision most of the time. For example, generally, in an election, the candidate who receives the most votes wins the election and is the choice of the majority of the voters. Also, in an American democracy, majorities are not supposed to be allowed to destroy minorities or strip away their rights and our judicial system often protects minority rights. Thomas Jefferson spoke about the will of the majority and writes of minorities in his first inaugural address in 1801. Remember, in a democracy, all persons are considered equal. When groups of equal status persons disagree in good faith, the peaceful way to settle their differences is through compromise. In other words, there is a necessity of compromise. Compromise involves give and take where each side in an argument gets some of what it wants and gives up some of what it wants.

Okay, suppose two neighbors disagree about how loud is too loud for music to be played. A possible compromise would be for one favoring really loud music to agree to lower the volume a little and for the other one to accept a little more volume than he really wanted. But there aren’t always just two sides to an issue. Many political problems have more than two sides or involve more than two sets of competing interests. In those cases, compromise is the only way to reach a conclusion, but not all compromises are good and not all are necessary. Individual freedom is also key in a democracy. Of course, freedom can’t be unlimited and it can’t include the freedom to hurt other people.
The English philosopher, John Stuart Mill wrote about individual freedom in 1859. He said, “The only purpose for which power can be rightfully exercised over any member of a civilized community against his will is to prevent harm to others.” One of the most important tasks of a democracy is to maximize citizen’s freedom while safeguarding their security. So remember, the five basic concepts of our U.S. democracy are fundamental worth of every person, equality of all persons, majority rule and minority rights, necessity of compromise and individual freedom. All of these principles are key to maintaining a democratic system of government in our country that functions as it’s supposed to.

**Video 1 – Recap**

Let’s think about this again…

Ok, let’s revisit the five concepts of democracy. Take a minute to think about each one so you get a good handle on them- y’know, really understand ‘em.

These concepts come up in every day life.

In a democracy it is really important that freedoms for everyone are protected. BUT, your freedoms can’t infringe (or violate) on the rights of anyone else, no matter who that person is.

You might want to take a minute to think about those five concepts again, so you’re sure you’ve got ‘em.
Reading Passage 1 Intro-

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Reading Passage 1 Outro-

So, with that material in mind…

Generic Activity Exit-

Okay, so it looks like you’ve got all you need to know for now. Good luck, and thanks for stopping by.