

Principles and Virtues

Student Glossary

Founding Principles

Introduction:

The United States was established on a set of principles and ideals that have guided and shaped the public life of the country since its founding. The American people continue to strive to realize more fully these principles and ideals. Drawn from an examination of human nature and the purposes of government, these principles and virtues form the framework of the American republican government of ordered liberty. Together with essential civic virtues, they help form the conscience of the nation against which Americans judge the justice of their laws. These civic virtues bind a self-governing people together in communities that facilitate a healthy civil society. As Americans, we believe it is essential to understand and implement these fundamental or founding principles and civic virtues.

The American System of Government

In modern times, the terms “democracy” and “republic” are commonly used interchangeably, especially in reference to the expansion of citizenship and rights to previously disfranchised groups. However, the distinction between a democracy and a republic is significant.

- **Democracy:** a form of government in which ultimate authority is based on the will of the majority. In a pure democracy (from the Greek demos, meaning “people”), the citizens participate in government directly, rather than by electing representatives. One of the challenges in a direct democracy is that there is no protection for the inalienable rights of minorities, leading to the possibility of tyranny by the majority. Moreover, direct democracy is susceptible to changing passions that can lead to mob rule, as well as demagoguery that can lead to tyranny. The form of government established in the U.S. Constitution is sometimes called a representative or indirect democracy.
- **Republic:** a form of government in which the people are sovereign (ultimate source of power) and give their consent to representatives to make laws. The term republic comes from the Latin *res publicae*, meaning “thing of the people.” In a republic, the will of the people is filtered through several steps, making it less likely that a majority faction can endanger the rights of particular individuals or groups. In Federalist No.10, Madison explained why a republic, or system of representation, is the form of government best suited to protecting the rights of all. Madison noted that the Constitution’s structure and limitations on power created a republic that would “refine and enlarge the public views, by passing them through the medium of a chosen body of citizens, whose wisdom may best discern the true interest of their country, and whose patriotism and love of justice will be least likely to sacrifice it to temporary or partial considerations.”

Principles of Government

This list of principles and virtues is not meant to be comprehensive but instead to be a starting place for the investigation of the American experiment in self-government.

- **Checks and Balances:** Constitutional powers are distributed among the branches of government, allowing each to limit the application of power of the other branches and to prevent expansion of power of any branch.

- **Consent of the Governed/Popular Sovereignty:** The power of government comes from the people.
- **Due Process:** The government must interact with all people according to the duly enacted laws and apply these rules equally with respect to all people.
- **Equality:** All individuals have the same status regarding their claim as human beings to natural rights and treatment under the law.
- **Federalism:** The people delegate certain powers to the national government, while the states retain other powers; and the people, who authorize both the states and national government, retain all freedoms not delegated to the governing bodies.
- **Freedom of contract:** Freedom of individuals and corporations to make legally binding mutual agreements without arbitrary or unreasonable legal restrictions
- **Freedom of religion:** The right to choose one's religion or form of worship, if any, without interference; freedom of conscience
- **Freedom of speech, press, and assembly:** The legal right to express one's opinions freely, orally or in writing, and the right to gather with others in groups of one's choice without arbitrary or unreasonable restrictions.
- **Liberty:** Except where authorized by citizens through the Constitution, government does not have the authority to limit freedom.
- **Limited Government:** Citizens are best able to pursue happiness when government is confined to those powers that protect their life, liberty, and property.
- **Majority Rule/Minority Rights:** Laws may be made with the consent of the majority, subject to the limitation that those laws do not infringe on the inalienable rights of the minority.
- **Natural/Inalienable Rights:** Rights that belong to us by nature and can only be justly abridged through due process. Examples are life, liberty, property, and the pursuit of happiness.
- **Private Property:** The natural rights of all individuals to create, obtain, and control their possessions, beliefs, faculties, and opinions, as well as the fruits of their labor.
- **Rule of Law:** Government and citizens all abide by the same laws regardless of political power. Those laws are justly applied, consistent with an ethos of liberty, and stable.
- **Separation of Powers:** A system of distinct powers built into the Constitution to prevent an accumulation of power in one branch.

Vices and Virtues

- **Virtue** is conduct that reflects universal principles of moral and ethical excellence essential to living a worthwhile life and to effective self-government. For many thinkers throughout the ages, attributes of character such as justice, responsibility, perseverance, respect, and others were thought to flow from an understanding of the rights and obligations of human beings. Virtue is compatible with, but does not require, religious belief. One's thoughts and words alone do not make a person virtuous. According to Aristotle, virtue must be based on a just objective; it requires action, and it must become a habit.
- **Private Virtue:** The idea that to sustain liberty, individuals must be knowledgeable and must conduct themselves according to principles of moral and ethical excellence, consistent with their rights and obligations.
- **Civic Virtue:** A set of actions and habits necessary for the safe, effective, and mutually beneficial participation in a society.
- **Vice:** Immoral or wicked behavior.

Virtues

- **Civil Discourse:** Reasoned and respectful sharing of ideas between individuals is the primary way people influence change in society or government; essential to maintain self-government.
- **Contribution:** To discover one's passions and talents and use them to create what is beautiful and needed. To work hard to take care of oneself, one's family, and one's community.
- **Courage:** The ability to take constructive action in the face of fear or danger. To stand firm as a person of character and do what is right, especially when it is unpopular or puts one at risk.
- **Honor:** Demonstrating good character, integrity, and thinking and acting honestly.
- **Humility:** To remember that one's ignorance is far greater than one's knowledge. To give praise to those who earn it.
- **Integrity:** To tell the truth, expose untruths, and keep one's promises.
- **Initiative:** Exercising the power, energy, or ability to lead, organize, or accomplish something.
- **Justice:** Upholding of what is fair, just, and right. To stand for equally applied rules that respect the rights and dignity of all, and make sure everyone obeys them.
- **Moderation:** The avoidance of excesses or extremes.
- **Perseverance:** To continue in a task or course of action or hold to a belief or commitment, despite obstacles or difficulty; choosing to take the right path rather than the easy path, and to stay the course.
- **Respect:** Honor or admiration of someone or something. To protect one's mind and body as precious aspects of identity. To extend that protection to all other individuals.
- **Responsibility:** Acting on good judgment about what is right or wrong, or deserving the trust of others. To strive to know and do what is best, not what is most popular. To be trustworthy for making decisions in the best long-term interests of the people and tasks of which they are in charge. Individuals must take care of themselves and their families and be vigilant to preserve their liberty and the liberty of others.
- **Resourcefulness:** Taking constructive action in difficult situations quickly and imaginatively.
- **Self-Governance:** To be self-controlled, avoiding extremes, and to reject unwise influence or control by others.
- **Vigilance:** Being alert and attentive; acting to remedy possible injustices or evils.

Vices

- **Ambition:** To be driven by self-interest while pursuing power and fame for oneself rather than serving the republic or the good of others.
- **Avarice:** To allow the love of wealth to lead one to do wrong in acquiring it.
- **Deception:** To lie to oneself and/or others, thinking and behaving as though something is right when it is wrong and unjust.
- **Demagoguery:** To lead others astray because one controls or manipulates their emotions through moving words or a deceptive vision.
- **Hubris:** To have excessive pride, vanity, and arrogance that usually lead to a tragic fall.
- **Injustice:** To harm others by applying unequal rules and damaging another's inalienable rights and dignity.
- **Political Intolerance:** Disrespect for the different political views of others, leading one to violate their inalienable rights.