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Game Theory and Democracy

The Beginning of the American Way of Democracy

Throughout the evolution of America and our democratic government, the ideals and values of what a true democracy are have changed, shaped by certain events which had monumental impacts on the government, public policy, and the people. Although democratic governments have been around for thousands of years, starting with the Greeks in 500 BC, politicians and electorates still struggle with defining the rules and limitations of what their government should do and how they should execute their right of power. There typically tends to be a certain issue or action that leads to changes in government and how people define the “new role” of government in their democracy and their own role in the democracy. For the United States, some of the defining moments which led to changes in our democracy and affected government actions were the creation of the constitution with President Washington, the era of Jacksonian democracy, and the Emancipation Proclamation with President Lincoln. These pivotal events had shaped the peoples’ perception of what a democratic government does, how they should operate, and the role they wish to have in the government. With this, we can see advancements made in favor of the peoples’ voice in government since our creation in 1775 and an evolution in the way which American citizens express their opinions and fight for certain acts or freedoms. From the time of President Washington to our current state with President Trump, we see clear development in strengthening our democracy and how we try to demonstrate to other nations what a true democracy should encompass. Since the creation of the constitution in 1775 to the end of slavery, the definition and execution of democracy in the United States has developed and progressed greatly, leading to advances in our version of democracy and platforms of major political parties, and this then causes a change to the peoples’ definition of what a democracy should do.

Originally a British colony in the 18th centuries, pilgrims who came to America were citizens of the Great British Colonel empire and were ruled under their monarchy style of government, but the people who lived on American soil saw no need to be ruled by people thousands of miles away and decided to revolt and start their own nation. This uphill battle would last for many years, as the creation of the democratic style government we have today wouldn’t come for another 19 years, according to many historians, when President Washington would give his farewell address and start the process of the “first peaceful transfer of power in American history and cementing the country’s status as a stable, democratic state,” (Stromberg 1). Although the “high-minded standards of the Constitution haven’t always been universally achieved,” President Washington stated we have initiated a republican style of governing and completed many transitions of power between people and parties (1). Following Washington’s time as president, we move into the establishment of political parties and into attempts to create this government that is based on the power of the people, which is the original meaning of democracy by the Greeks. But, this goal was not achieved, given how the original founders saw a majority of Americans as uneducated farmers who didn’t understand the purpose of government and who would only think about themselves instead of what is best for the nations, which is why America was actually founded as a constitutional republic rather than a democratic one (Loflin 8). The Founding Fathers wanted do what they saw was best for the “good of the nation” and what was best for the majority, but with having the people contribute too much to government, they believed this would actually hurt the government and decided to limit the peoples’ voice. According to Josiah Ober, a researcher at Stanford University, democracy has a root meaning of “the power of the people,” but when you look at each root by itself and the multiple meanings of the individual root, you can find regime-terms to be interpreted differently. This could mean the Greeks saw democracy as “the original meaning of democracy is “capacity to do things” not “majority rule.” The system we live in has changed and developed as the definition and peoples’ perception of what a democracy is, which is why we have eras in our history and see major changes come with monumental moments in our history.

To initiate the American method for democracy and start our democratic empire, we had the American Revolution, which begin in 1765, and the creation of the Declaration of Independence, both of which stemmed from efforts from the Enlightenment that was occurring in Europe at that time. The new governmental ideals that came from the key activists and events of the Enlightenment lead to the “Patriot Movement” that occurred in the colonies in America, “which were efforts to protest Britain's rule and to secure more freedoms for the colonists”; But, it is important to note that “the colonists' original goal was to fight for the rights to which they felt they were already entitled,” not independence or establishing a democratic affiliation with Great Britain (Dugger 3-5). The “compromise presented by the federalists asserted the legitimating and authorizing role of the people while establishing a self-regulating system of checks and balances at both the state and national levels,” and was a key component in driving the Founding Fathers to constitutional building and making that step towards democracy (Cartman 2). This was the first stage in the process and lead to the people wanting to establish their own form of government where, as coming from the Greeks definition of democracy, the power rest with the people and they do what is for “the good of the nation.” This war against Great Britain began the process of creating a new and free nation for the colonists, sealed by the drafting of the Declaration of Independence by Thomas Jefferson in June of 1776. All of these events were based off of how theorists from the Enlightenment aimed to reflect the rights of the individual of the citizens and the general will of the people. From this we are able to see the goal of democratic rule rather than a full-blown democracy during the Washington Era and initial stages of the formation of our government.

Stemming from the elementary stages of democratic rule that began with our independence from Great Britain came the creation of the Constitution of the United States and Bill of Rights, both of which are the primary components that developed our country’s government and its democratic values. As the people wanted to disconnect from Great Britain and have more say in legislation, there was the drafting and creation of these constitutional documents. These two documents are called “remarkable blueprints for self-government” and became the law of the land, as Thomas Jefferson argued that they are “what the people are entitled to against every government on earth, general or particular, and what no just government should refuse, or rest on inference," (The Bill 5). This idea by Jefferson encompasses the Greek democratic ideology in how the people in charge are doing what they believe is best for the good of the nation and its people, but it is not giving as much control to the people as a true democracy would. This was a crucial step in our development as a democratic government, as it touches on the “power of the people” aspect of the definition in how the people are entitled to certain powers of expression and freedom and rights but they are not the ones deciding on what they are and the limitations that they are bounded by. At this point in time, we haven’t yet seen official political parties form within our own government, given that the Federalist and Anti-federalists aren’t political parties. We were warmed against them in Washington’s Farewell address at the end of his presidency, but this will come to have a greater impact later on in our development. Given how the original creators of our government weren’t aiming for a complete democracy but rather a democratic republic, they intended to have an "indirect" or "representative" democracy and to establish a system of chosen representatives who were/are chosen by the people. The “founders preferred the term “republic" to "democracy" because it described a system they generally preferred: the interests of the peopled were represented by more knowledgeable or wealthier citizens who were responsible to those that elected them,” (What is 4). So, without these foundational documents which created our government, which still are the guiding principles we have today, we wouldn’t have reached the level of democratic involvement that the people have today.

Under the watch of the President George Washington, or the American Fabius as some call him, America experienced the institutionalizing of democracy as he facilitated “the formation of the culture and institutions needed for a stable, legitimate, and effective democratic system,” (Lipset 6). As the first president of the United States, Washington’s time in power set the standard for the presidents to come and began the American way of democracy. By formatting the culture of government intended by the Founding Father’s with a democratic republic instead of a full-blown democracy, it would become easier to work in all the aspects of it later on. Throughout his time as president, the people still didn't have the strongest voice in terms of the political aspects of the nation, but we did have more of a say than under British colonial rule. After Washington’s time in power, we see certain “charismatic aspects of his appeal were consciously being used by U.S. political leaders to create a character, an identity for the young nation,” such as how “he set a precedent exemplifying a proper republican approach to the problem of succession,” (Lipset 27-28). There was such a veneration for President Washington and not only how much he did for the country during his time in power but the precedent he set for the forthcoming presidents. The democratic value of his time in power was monumental, for not only our democracy for any government, especially the impact that was left by his farewell address. In this address, we see the primary stages of political parties forming and his opinion on them, as well as his advice in trying to maintain a government that is unlike the British rule they just broke away from and does more for the people, by the people. The key pieces of advice that our first president had advised were to give allegiance to our government and the constitution, beware of political parties and consolidation of power, and international affairs/alliances. He aimed to provide this paternal guidance in leading our administration and this would later be utilized by future presidents, such as Thomas Jefferson and James Madison.

Throughout the presidency of Washington to President Jackson, there was the strengthening of certain democratic aspects of our first president’s farewell address and also the establishment of political parties and a weak civilian representation in government. Four years after President Washington resigned from office, we have President Thomas Jefferson come into power, and he was a strong advocate both liberty and democracy for the American people, as he was one of the original writers of the Bill of Rights. During the era of Jefferson, we see the rise of Jeffersonian democracy, which “focused on the impracticableness of a “pure republic” for a great nation” that could sustain life by itself and saw a warning against the issue of tyranny in government that was caused by factions within the citizenry, similar to Washington’s perspective, (Coates 16). According to the writings of Thomas Jefferson, the definition of what American democracy should be was “a government by the people and have rule of the majority in government, in which the supreme power is vested in the people and exercised by them directly or indirectly through a system of representation usually involving periodically held free elections”, (Coates 2). He aimed at achieving democracy for the “common man” and developing a system in our government that incorporated the ideals of Washington but modernizing it as he believed the ideal form of government was where ordinary citizens had an adequate amount of power. The goal was to have “elites” or people of higher education and who understand the roles of government to run the legislation and affairs but also have a balance of civilian involvement as the normal people could oversee the government’s action and have a say on if it’s what they want. That was the entire purpose of the American Revolution and their departure from the constraint of British rule. Directly after Jefferson we had President Madison who was in office from 1809-1817 and who was also a Founding Father and writer of the famous Federalist Papers. He chose to focus more on the function of democracy rather than the role the people had in it, which is one of the reasons he worked so well with Jefferson, as they could fill the gaps in each the other’s outlook. In the big picture of democratic authority, President Madison tried to warn against factions in government and that a representative government with a small voice for the people is what is best for an efficient government. Twenty years later we have the rise of President Andrew Jackson, moving into a new era of democracy called Jacksonian Democracy, and we see a crucial political movement occur in American government.

From the reign Jackson to the election of Lincoln, we saw how the people became more involved in the government with expressing their opinions, freedom of speech, and fighting for certain rights and laws, such as the abolition of slavery. During the presidency of Andrew Jackson, Jacksonian democracy rose in popularity in America, as nearly 70% of Americans who were eligible to vote voted for him. He also had advocated for majority rule in the American political structure. Andrew Jackson portrayed himself to be the “champion of the common man” and this led an “authentic democratic movement that contained a principled egalitarian thrust, but this powerful social critique was always cast for the benefit of white men,” (Jacksonian 3). A large component of Jackson’s political campaign was to fix the issue of special privilege that arose in government and democratized the public related institutions and gave a stronger voice to the people, which eventually led to the creation of the new Democratic Party. Less than thirty years later came the presidency of Abraham Lincoln, and this brings the American Civil War into the picture. This event demonstrated how Lincoln’s incorporated Jacksonian democracy into his administration and how he gave more of a voice to a new section of people. The civil war and abolition of slavery under Lincoln was one of the first major issues which arose in the United States that divided the country internally, and it led to major changes in the democratic values of the government. Lincoln and his actions had affected the laws and showed the progression we were making to become a better, stronger democracy. Lincoln lived through a unique time in the White House, as he went from being a Whig to being Conservative, meaning he was then “affected by democratic ideas and practices that shaped the mainstream of both of the major parties of the 1830s and 1840s, and with his conversion to the Republicans, he declared himself an inveterate foe of the Slave Power,” (Wilentz 11). The changed democratic standards in the 1830s and 40s greatly shaped not only Lincoln’s administration but the entire organization of the American government, and it also significantly changed the involvement Americans had/would have in government. The actions done by Lincoln during his presidential term would continue to impact the democratic values of the United States from then until the present and really helped to promote to the people how much the government values their involvement in policy, legislation, and the process of governing.

We see the United States as a nation trying to demonstrate what a democracy should be and connecting back to the Greek’s intentions of having "our government [as one that] does not copy our neighbors but is an example for them. It is true that “we are called a democracy, for the administration is in the hands of the many and not of the few," (Loflin 10). In relation to today, it is true that the current government is trying to extend on certain democratic ideals, such as fair elections, majority rule, and rights entitled to the people, just as they did in the initial stages of forming our executive authorities. As people who live in a democratic regime, it is easy for us to take the liberties we have for granted and people tend to forget the struggles we went through to establish our government. The trial and error we underwent shouldn’t be forgotten, as it is what stemmed from the ideals of our Founding Fathers and is what guides our government’s actions today. According to a group of professors at ACLU, the leaders of government have, and are currently, getting democracy and liberty confused. They say that “ democracy means that people ought to be able to vote for public officials in fair elections, and make most political decisions by majority rule” whereas liberty is where ‘individuals have rights that no majority should be able to take away,” (The Bill 11). Both of these words are meant to describe our previous and current state of government but they're not interchangeable; they each encompass a different ideology that people believe the American branches of government should have. We are presently seen as the strongest democracy in the world. But, to maintain this, we need to revisit the ideals that were set by our Founding Fathers over 200 years ago and see if we can strength our democratic values and form of government to better represent the people.

Within the original definition of what the purpose of a democracy is, we find a connection to today’s interpretation of the subject: a government where the people are heard and have an impact on legislation but the ultimate decision is decided by majority rule of elected officials. In today’s government, we see the people have more of an impact on issues through their use of freedom of speech, of the press, of expression by petitioning the government for a redress of certain issues. When looking at how we try to establish a government that gives power to the people, we see the pathway in which the government has been operating to become developed over time and allow for the “farmers” we once were to become more involved in legislation. “Nowhere is the word "democracy" mentioned in the Declaration of Independence or the U.S. Constitution” but the actions and aspirations of our government implied the democratic principles (Jacksonian 1). Liberty and equality are the main goals of a democracy, and without the first phases we had under the presidencies of George Washington, James Madison, or Abraham Lincoln, we wouldn’t have progressed to become the great democracy we are today.

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