

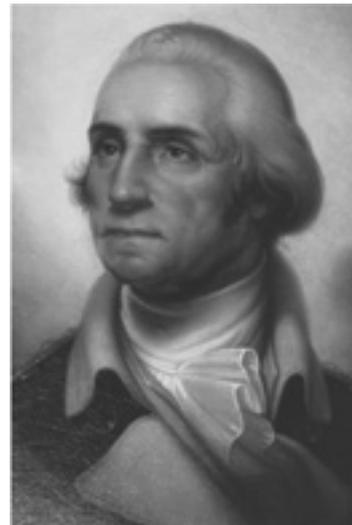
2 The design of today's democracy

Democracy is the idea that people should have control over their government. This is the opposite of government having control of the people. In societies where there is one absolute ruler – a king, or a dictator – all power is held by one person. In a democracy, all power is held by the people.

In a democracy, people control government by voting. When our country was founded, the idea that all people should be able to vote was considered quite radical. The people who wrote the constitution thought they were going pretty far just by giving the right to vote to all white men who owned land. This was a huge change for a people who had been ruled by a king who lived far across the ocean.

Over the years, the right to vote has been expanded to include people who don't own land, African-Americans, women, Native Americans, and immigrants of all races who choose to become citizens. Today, it seems obvious to us that everyone is equal, and that everyone should have the right to vote. But we need to remember

Lord Acton, a British historian, wrote in 1887 that “Power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely.”



portrait of George Washington by Rembrandt Peale, in the Governor's Mansion Olympia, WA

courtesy Governor's Mansion Foundation

that this was not always so, and that the right to vote is something that many generations of Americans struggled hard to create for us.

Universal suffrage – the right of everyone to vote – is the foundation of democracy, but in a complex society like ours, people cannot vote on everything. We have to choose people to do the work of governing for us. That's why we elect people to represent us. This is called **representative democracy**. (When people vote on everything, it's called **direct democracy**.)

The basic principles of our system of government are spelled out in our nation's constitution, which was adopted when our country was founded over 200 years ago. The constitution sets the basic rules for how government should work. A series of amendments to the constitution called the **Bill of Rights** defines the rights of citizens.

“. . .we here resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain — that this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom — and that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth.”

ABRAHAM LINCOLN'S
GETTYSBURG ADDRESS, 1863

Different kinds of government

We have three basic levels of government: national, state, and local.



Our national government deals with issues that affect our whole nation. This includes managing our relationships with other countries, protecting the U. S. from attack, making national laws, and providing programs and services for all Americans.



Our 50 state governments – and the governments of territories governed by the U. S., like Puerto Rico, Guam and American Samoa – deal with issues that affect the people of their state or territory.



Our local governments make laws and provide services to people within counties, cities and towns.

Tribal governments are also an important part of the United States. In every state, including Washington, tribes govern the native people who live on the reservations created when their ancestors signed treaties with the federal government.

State and local governments are based on the same democratic ideas as our national government. Tribal governments are usually based partly on the national model described in our constitution, and partly on the traditional ways tribes governed themselves before settlers came.



art courtesy of Northwest Indian Fisheries Commission

American democracy has three branches of government – the legislative branch, the executive branch, and the judicial branch. By balancing power among three branches of government, we assure that power is shared, and that no one person or branch of government has absolute authority.

Our constitution is the foundation of our democracy. It represents a very careful balance between *individual liberty* and the *common good*. Our constitution protects our freedom to pursue our own dreams and choose our own beliefs, but, at the same time, it calls on citizens and elected leaders to put the common good – the welfare of everyone – ahead of our own interests.

Separation of powers

Human beings are far from perfect, and we often have a hard time resisting the temptation to abuse power. We also need stability in our government so that people and businesses can plan for the future. That's why American democracy *spreads power around* rather than giving a lot of power to one elected leader.

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- **At the federal or national level, the legislative branch makes laws,** and decides how to spend the federal taxes that all of us pay. The legislative branch consists of the Senate and the House of Representatives. (Together, the House and Senate are called the **Congress**.) The people of each state elect two Senators, no matter how big or small the state is. But the number of representatives each state elects to the House of Representatives depends on how many people live there. (For example, Washington currently has ten representatives; California has 52.)
- **The president, who is the head of the executive branch,** can approve or reject (*veto*) the laws Congress makes. If the President vetoes a law, the Congress can cancel (*override*) the veto by passing the law again, but this time two-thirds of them (not just a *simple majority* of half plus one) have to vote for it.

The president is also the boss for most national government agencies, and is the Commander in Chief of the military.

- **The most important part of the judicial branch is the Supreme Court.** There are nine Justices on the Supreme Court. They are appointed for life by the President, but the Senate has to vote to approve of the President's appointments. Because Supreme Court Justices are appointed for life, they don't have to worry about losing their jobs if they make decisions that someone doesn't like. Their primary duty is to make sure that the laws passed by Congress, states, and local governments respect the basic principles laid out in our nation's constitution. If the Supreme Court decides a law is unconstitutional, it can throw the law out. The Supreme Court can also rule on cases about whether police and other government agencies – including the president – respect the constitutional rights of citizens.

This system of government is not designed to be efficient and fast; it is designed to be careful and slow. A new law has to be debated and voted on by the legislative branch, approved by the executive branch, and, if anyone challenges it, upheld by our judicial branch.

There is often tension and conflict between the three branches of government. Presidents sometimes get angry when the Senate doesn't approve their appointments to the Supreme Court. Congress doesn't like it when a President vetoes a law they've passed. But because everyone agrees with the basic rules set out in the constitution, these conflicts don't get out of hand.



Mt. Rushmore features four presidents carved into a mountainside. Can you name all four?

This basic idea – the idea of *separation of powers* into the three branches of government – is reflected in the way state and local governments are organized, too. But state and local governments vary in the way they do this. Nebraska, for instance, has only one legislative body instead of two. And in our state, we elect the members of our state Supreme Court rather than letting the Governor (the head of our executive branch) appoint them.

Many local governments combine some of the functions of the legislative and executive branches because they are just too small to maintain three separate branches. But the basic principle of spreading power around is a universal feature of American governance. It is often called a system of *checks and balances*.

The rule of law

A cornerstone of American government is the idea of having a “government of laws rather than a government of men.” This means that our government is guided by the law, not by what one person – or one group of people – wants to do. Our laws are intended to apply to everyone equally. No one is supposed to get special treatment, no matter how rich or powerful they may be. And the power of all government officials is limited to what the law says they can do.

Majority rule, minority rights

When our nation was founded, the people who wrote our constitution worked hard to balance two ideas. The first – majority rule – is the idea that the ultimate power in a democracy is vested in the people. When we elect leaders, the majority of the people – that is, 50% plus one or more – determines who wins.

The second idea relates to “the rule of law.” The idea is that the majority shouldn’t be able to violate the rights of a minority. Like the idea of the separation of powers, this idea recognizes that people are imperfect. Sometimes the majority of people are prejudiced against a certain group of people – people of a different race or religion, or people who have different political beliefs, for instance. Our political system is designed

to protect minorities by providing all citizens with the same rights, and by giving the Supreme Court the power to strike down any law, no matter how popular, if it violates the rights of even one person. These ideas are reflected in the U. S. Constitution’s Bill of Rights.

Federalism

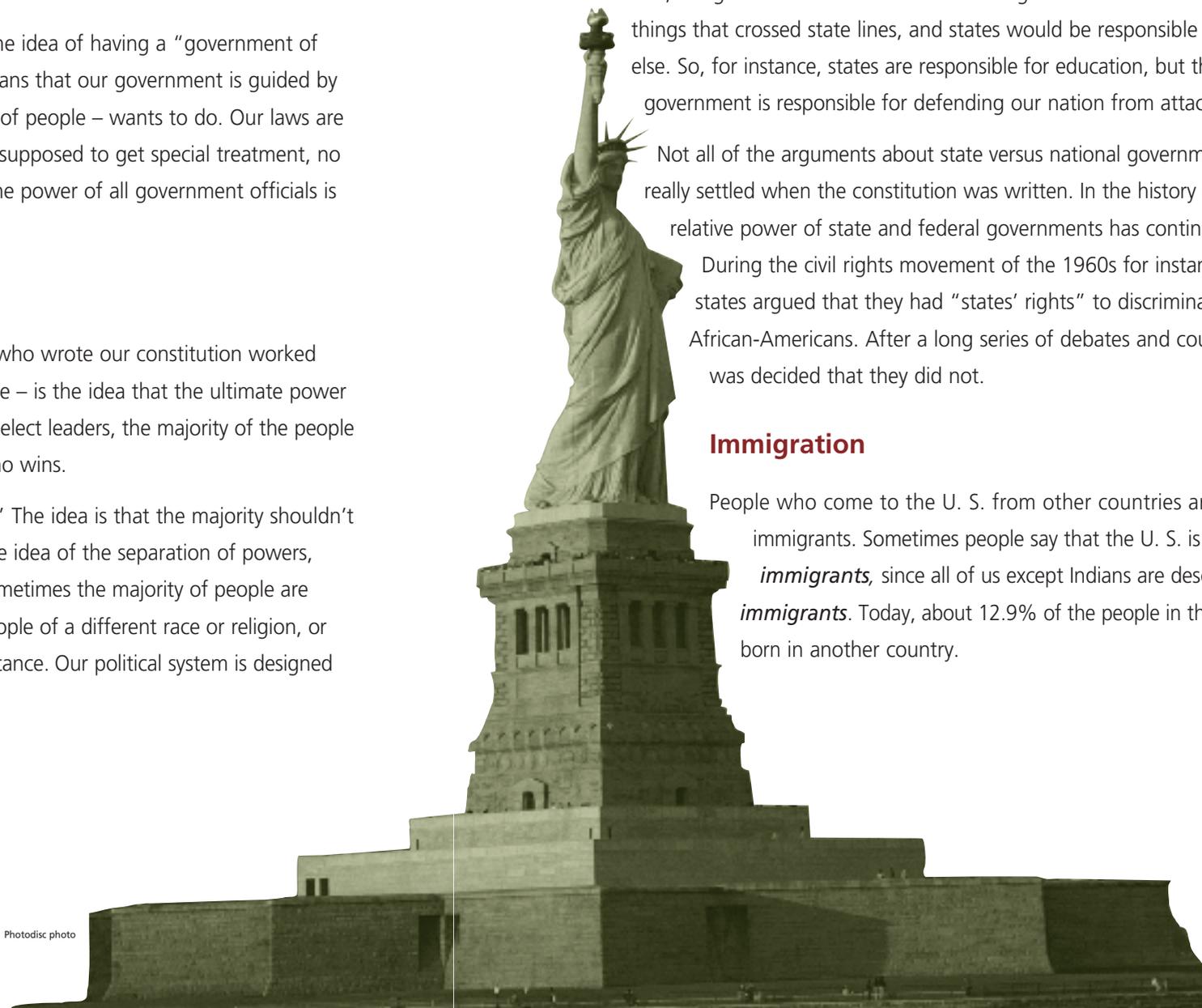
The word *federalism* describes the division of responsibility between state governments and our national government. When our country was founded, it was made up of 13 colonies that had been created by England. As our national constitution was being written, there were lots of arguments about how much power they would have when they became states, and how much power the national government would have. In the end, the general idea was that the federal government would make rules about things that crossed state lines, and states would be responsible for everything else. So, for instance, states are responsible for education, but the national government is responsible for defending our nation from attack.

Not all of the arguments about state versus national government power were really settled when the constitution was written. In the history of the U. S., the relative power of state and federal governments has continued to change.

During the civil rights movement of the 1960s for instance, southern states argued that they had “states’ rights” to discriminate against African-Americans. After a long series of debates and court cases, it was decided that they did not.

Immigration

People who come to the U. S. from other countries are called immigrants. Sometimes people say that the U. S. is a *nation of immigrants*, since all of us except Indians are descendants of immigrants. Today, about 12.9% of the people in the U. S. were born in another country.



Some immigrants come to this country because they are fleeing from war in their home country. Some come because they might be jailed or even killed for their political or religious beliefs or their race. These people are called *refugees*, because they are seeking *refuge* – a safe place. But most immigrants come to join family members who are already here, or because they want better jobs and more opportunities for their children. Sometimes immigrants come because there is a shortage of people for certain jobs or professions – nurses, for instance, or computer professionals, or farm workers.

The federal government sets the number of immigrants that can come to the U. S. every year. Often when people in other countries apply to come here, they have to wait many years before they get permission from the federal government. Many never get permission. If they come to the U. S. without getting permission first, or if they stay longer than they have permission to, they are considered *illegal immigrants*. There are probably several million illegal immigrants in the U. S. today. (No one knows the exact number.)

Most illegal immigrants come to this country because they are poor and they need jobs. And lots of American employers hire them, even though it is against the law to do so. There is a constant conflict about this. Some people think all illegal immigrants should be rounded up and sent back to their home countries. Other people think that some or all the illegal immigrants in the country should be given *amnesty* – meaning they should be given permission to stay, and be made *legal* immigrants, because employers need them, and because they make an important contribution to the American economy

by working and paying taxes.

Only legal immigrants can apply to become American citizens. To become a citizen, an immigrant has to live in this country for at least five years. Then they have to fill out an application form, pay a fee, be interviewed by a U. S. official, and pass a test to show that they have learned to read, write

Women immigrating from Japan



photo courtesy Seattle Betanin Archives

and speak English; that they know some U. S. history; and that they understand how American government works.

All children born in the U. S. are citizens by birth. If adults come to this country illegally and then have children while they are here, the children are U. S. citizens because they were born in this country. If their parents are here illegally, or if the parents commit a crime, they can be *deported* (sent back to the country they came from). But what happens to the children? Legally, they have a right to stay here – but to exercise that right, they might have to be separated from their own mom and dad.

Immigration also gets complicated when it comes to deciding what government services people get. Illegal immigrants pay taxes, but they don't get the same benefits as other taxpayers. They can't get welfare, government-paid health insurance, or help if they get hurt and can't work. (Even legal immigrants can't get most welfare benefits.)

People argue about this a lot. If a woman is a poor illegal immigrant, and she's going to have a baby, should the government pay for her medical care? Some people say no, because she broke the law by coming here illegally. Other people say yes, because the baby will be a U. S. citizen, and we want that child to be born healthy.

People have similar arguments about whether kids who are illegal immigrants should be able to go to school. Some people say that U. S. citizens shouldn't have to pay to educate kids who are here illegally. But the U. S. Supreme Court has said that the kids shouldn't be punished for something their parents did. They say that educating all kids is the best and only way to make sure that they can get jobs and pay taxes when they grow up. (Washington's state constitution says we should educate all children "residing" in our state, not just those who are citizens.)



photo by Jai Schrof, courtesy of the Ethnic Heritage Council

The 20th Annual Naturalization Ceremony on July 4th, 2004 at the Seattle Center, where many people became U. S. citizens.



photo courtesy the collection of the Nordic Heritage Museum, Seattle, Washington

The passport of a Swedish family, 1923.



Who came when, and where did they come from?

Before 1846, when the Oregon Territory officially became part of the United States, the only immigrants were fur traders and trappers, a few missionaries, and people who worked for the trading companies that bought and sold furs. Nearly all were single men. Some were French-speaking Canadians; a few were from Hawaii; others were British or American. A few married native women and lived with local tribes, but most left eventually.

When the railroad finally reached Washington in 1887, it cut the time to travel across the country from four to six months to six days. Washington’s population exploded once the railroads connected us to the rest of the country. Most of the people who came were European immigrants who had already lived for some time in the East and Midwest, but people also came directly from other countries.

White settlers came to Washington beginning in the 1840s. Most came from the American Midwest or the Northeast. Their migration to Oregon and Washington started as a trickle, but grew larger with every passing year – especially after 1846, when the federal government encouraged people to settle here.



African-Americans were among the earliest settlers, but the number of African-Americans was very small until the 1880s when railroads reached Washington. The population grew a lot during World War II, when many came to work at Boeing, Hanford, and in other wartime jobs. In 1880, there were 180 African-Americans in Washington; in 1890, there were just over 1,000; in 1940, there were 7,000. In 1950, after World War II, there were 30,000.



Image courtesy Tacoma Public Library

Chinese workers were recruited to help build the railroads during the 1870s. But in the 1880s, white workers who needed jobs blamed the Chinese workers for high unemployment, and there were anti-Chinese riots and killings. Many Chinese left or were driven out of the state.



Scandinavians (people from Sweden, Norway, Denmark and Finland) began to immigrate to Washington in the 1880s, and their numbers increased rapidly for the next twenty five years. Most came to the Puget Sound region, but there were also clusters of various nationalities in Spokane and in other cities and farming areas. In 1910, the population of Kitsap County was 25% Scandinavian immigrants. Some Scandinavians settled in the Puget Sound area because it reminded them of home and they could find jobs in the woods.



National immigration policy didn’t exist until 1882. That was the first time the federal government passed a law to control who could come to this country – and the law was the Chinese Exclusion Act, which forbade any more Chinese laborers from coming to the U. S. In the 1920s, more immigration laws were passed to limit the immigration of Eastern and Southern Europeans and to exclude people from Asia and the Pacific Islands. Immigration policy was based on race for a long time, and it favored Northern Europeans. This didn’t change until the Immigration Reform and Nationality Act of 1965, which allowed people to immigrate if they have family members already here, or if they have skills needed by U. S. employers.

Japanese, Koreans, and other Asian and Pacific Island nationalities arrived in Washington during times when federal immigration policy allowed it, but there were long periods during which the U. S. government excluded them. Japanese, Chinese, Filipino and Korean immigrants were recruited to come here for jobs when their labor was needed to build railroads, work in mines, canneries, farms or logging camps, but Asian and Pacific Island immigrants were not allowed to become citizens or to own land until after World War II. After the Vietnam war, many refugees and immigrants from Southeast Asia came to Washington.



Italians, Greeks, Croatians, Basques, Irish, Germans, Dutch, and people from many other European countries settled in Washington singly or in groups in the late 1800s and early 1900s. We can still see their legacies, in small towns that celebrate their immigrants’ history. For instance the town of Lynden is known for its Dutch roots, and Leavenworth is famous for its German-themed celebration of Christmas. In Eastern Washington, Odessa and Endicott are known for their Russian/German heritage.

Mexicans were actually among the very earliest immigrants to Washington. When Spanish explorers came here in the 1770s, the crews on their ships were mostly Mexican. One Mexican crew member collected and catalogued over 200 species of plants, animals and birds. Another was a renowned artist who drew pictures of the Olympic Peninsula. And for many years before the railroads came to Washington, skilled Mexicans provided transportation services of “mule trains” to miners, fur traders, settlers and merchants. During World War II, Mexicans and other Latinos began to come to Washington in larger numbers, mostly as farm workers. Many settled in the Yakima Valley, but they soon spread to other agricultural areas, such as the Skagit Valley. Today, Latinos (including Mexicans, people from other Latin American countries, and Latinos from Texas, California and other states) are the fastest-growing and largest minority in Washington.

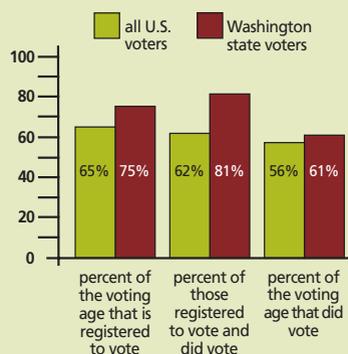
VOTING

In the presidential election of November 2012, 133 million people, or 57%, of the voting-age population voted. That means that more than 40% of the eligible voters let someone else make important decisions for them. Only about 65% of people eligible to vote are registered to vote. Women, married people, and older people are more likely to vote.

In Washington, 75% of people eligible to vote were registered in 2012, and 81% of all of those registered to vote actually did vote. So in our state, 61% of people eligible to vote did. Washinton was ranked 13th in the country in voting rates.

Some reasons given by registered non-voters for not voting in the 2012 election include: too busy (19%), not interested (16%), illness or disability (14%), did not like candidates or campaign issues (13%), forgot (4%). Yikes!

Voters in the 2012 election



source: WA Secretary of State's Voter Participation Statistics and U.S. Census Bureau

Becoming a citizen is important because only citizens are allowed to vote, and only citizens have the absolute right to stay in this country, no matter what. Even legal immigrants who have lived here for many years can be deported if they have not become citizens. Some young people have been deported for drug charges or stealing, even though they lived legally in the U. S. since they were babies.

The role of citizens

Elections

The most basic way people in a democracy exercise political power is by voting in elections. We elect the people who represent us – the members of city or tribal councils, county commissioners, state governors and legislators, and the President and the Congress of the United States. And if we don't like what they do, we can vote them out of office.

We also vote on specific issues. For instance, in Washington, local communities vote on how much we are willing to pay in taxes to support public schools. We also vote sometimes on special issues, like whether we want to pay extra taxes to build sports stadiums. And we vote on amendments to our state constitution.

Initiatives and referenda

In the early 20th century, people wanted to make sure that citizens kept control over our government. So even though our state government has the same checks and balances as our national government, Washington voters amended the state constitution to build in an extra check – the power of citizens to bypass the legislature, write a proposed law and have the people vote on it. This is called an *initiative*.

To pass an initiative, a citizen or group of citizens must get a large number of people to sign petitions asking for a proposed law to be put on the ballot. If enough people sign,

the proposed law can go to the legislature, or directly to the ballot. (The number of people who have to sign an initiative is 8% of the number who voted in the last election for governor.)

If an initiative goes to the legislature, the legislature can pass it, and it becomes law. The legislature can also write an alternative measure, and put both the original initiative and their proposed alternative on the ballot of the next election. If the legislature doesn't do anything, the initiative still goes to the voters at the next election. If a majority of people vote for it, it becomes law. (Even if an initiative passes, the State Supreme Court can throw it out if it violates the state constitution. And if it violates the U. S. Constitution, the U. S. Supreme Court can throw it out.)

People in Washington also vote on referenda. A *referendum* is a law passed by the state legislature, but *referred* to the voters. Sometimes the legislature itself refers a measure to the ballot to see if the majority of voters agrees that it should become law. But sometimes a citizen or group of citizens doesn't like a law passed by the legislature. If they can get enough people to sign a petition, they can get the law put on the ballot. (The number of people who have to sign the petition is 4% of the number of people who voted in the last election for governor.) Then if the majority of people vote against it, the new law is thrown out.



photo courtesy of the Washington State Senate

Tim Eyman, who lives in Mukilteo, thought that taxes in Washington were too high, so he organized several initiative campaigns. He raised money, made petitions, persuaded

thousands of people to sign them, and got measures on the ballot to reduce taxes.

Other examples of successful initiatives

- In 1977, voters passed an initiative that removed

One person's opinion makes a difference

the sales tax on food. This was an initiative directly to the people.

- In 1988, voters passed an initiative to clean up dangerous toxic waste sites. It was an initiative to the legislature. The legislature drafted an alternative, so both the legislature's version

and the original version were on the ballot. Voters chose the original version.

photo courtesy of Gayle Rieber Photography





photo by Ron Soliman, February 3, 2004, reprinted courtesy *The Olympian*

Local communities vote on how much they are willing to pay in taxes to support public schools

Running for office

Another important way citizens participate in government is by running for public office. Most people who decide to do this start by running for a local office, such as being a school board member, or a city council member. When they are more experienced, and more people know them and support them, they run for higher offices. But this is not always true; sometimes a person who has never been involved in government decides to run for governor or the U. S. Congress.

People who run for office need money to finance their campaigns. They have to buy campaign signs, publish brochures to let people know what they stand for, and sometimes buy advertising in newspapers or on radio or TV. If they are running for a statewide office, they also need money to travel around the state to campaign.

Candidates for public office usually ask the people who support them to donate money for their campaigns, although sometimes rich people finance their own campaigns.

(There's more information about running for office in Chapter 5.)

The role of money in election campaigns is very controversial. In a democracy, we want everyone to have an equal chance to be heard. And we don't want individuals, unions or corporations that have a lot of money to have more than their share of influence in an election. We don't want our elected officials to feel that they have to vote the way their campaign contributors want them to. So we have rules about who can give, and how much they can give. And every few years, we pass more rules. But hardly anyone believes that we have found the perfect solution to this problem.

The most important safeguard we have come up with is the principle of *transparency*, or openness. This means that everyone should be able to find out who gave money to a political campaign, and how much. We have very strict laws that require every candidate and every campaign organization to report their contributions. A special government agency, the Public Disclosure Commission, makes this information available to the public and to reporters. (There's more information about this on page 68.)

Still, campaign financing will always be a subject we debate, both in elections for public office, and in campaigns to pass initiatives and other ballot measures.

Jury Duty

Citizens also serve on juries. A jury is a group of people – usually 12 – who sit in judgment when someone is brought to court and accused of a crime. A judge conducts the trial, but members of the jury have to decide whether the accused person is guilty or innocent. (In civil cases, where one person or business is suing another person or business, juries usually have only six members.)

This is called “jury duty” because it is a duty that comes with being an American citizen.

Advocacy

Having a democracy doesn't mean that our government is perfect. But democracy's flaws are not in the ideas that are the basis for our government; its flaws come from our failure to live up to those ideas.

American history is, in many ways, the story of the struggle of the American people to live up to the ideals set out in the U. S. Constitution. Over many years, voting rights have been extended to all citizens 18 and older, and discrimination against people because of their race or religion has been made illegal. These changes didn't come easily. But these changes were possible because our constitution established the idea of equality as the foundation of our society.

Today, there are still ways in which we fail to live up to the ideas in our constitution. For instance, in today's society, equality depends on everyone getting a good education. But we haven't yet succeeded in reaching this goal. In communities where people don't have very much money, they can't afford to pay enough in taxes to have schools as good as those in richer communities. The result is that kids in poorer communities may not have the same opportunities to learn and succeed.

The important thing to remember, though, is that in a democracy, *people have the power to change these things*. It isn't easy, and it often takes a very long time. But the history of our country – and our state – shows that progress is possible.

This progress is possible because we have the right to say what we think, to band together to push for change, and to support or oppose candidates for public office.

We are so used to having these rights that we often forget how important they are. Many Americans don't bother to vote, and don't make their voices heard. But our democratic rights are a lot like our muscles: the more we use them, the stronger they become. If we don't exercise our rights, our democracy becomes weaker.

So, to sum up, American democracy is built on the belief that *we govern ourselves*. This is both our right and our responsibility. That's why it's so important to learn about how our government works.

Advocacy:

Promoting a point of view or belief, or working to help a certain group of people. (For instance, someone who tries to get laws passed to help people with disabilities would be advocating for them. The person who does this would be an advocate.)

An example of advocacy

The Arc of Washington State is one example of people using their rights. The Arc is a private, non-profit organization started by the parents of people who have developmental disabilities. (A developmental disability is a condition such as mental retardation that occurs before age 18.) By banding together, the parents of people with these disabilities have persuaded the government to give them more help, so they can choose whether to live in their own houses

or apartments. The Arc of Washington State also helps educate all people about what it's like to have a developmental disability, and why it's important to accept and include people with these disabilities in our schools and communities. Visit their website at: www.arcwa.org



Advocates rally to support the Fircrest Bill, which would help use funds for more community-based services for people with developmental disabilities.

Now people with developmental disabilities are more active in their communities, thanks to hard work by citizen advocates.



all photos courtesy The Arc of Washington State unless otherwise noted

Photo by Clara Link, courtesy of The Down Syndrome Community 2004 Calendar, Living it Up! www.downsyndromecommunity.org