

## **Signposts of Democracy**

(adapted from “Signposts of Democracy,” Streetlaw, Inc.

<http://www.streetlaw.org/democlesson.html>)

### **Introduction:**

Freedom House, an international organization that monitors political rights and civil liberties around the world has called the 20<sup>th</sup> Century the “Democratic Century.” Promoting democracy in other parts of the world has become the centerpiece of the foreign policy of the current administration. Given this objective, studying the principles on which democracies are based is especially relevant to today’s students.

There are a number of democratic principles that are considered essential for democracy as a process to thrive. In this lesson, students will examine 13 principles or signposts of democracy generally accepted as necessary for a democracy and they will consider the degree to which their own nation demonstrates these principles in practice.

**Objectives:** At the conclusion of this activity students will be able to:

- Explain the core principles of democracy;
- Provide evidence of how core principles are applied in their country by researching core principles and citing current events as evidence.

### **Materials:**

Transparency: Principles of Democracy

Handout 1: Principles (Signposts) of Democracy

Handout 2: Researching Principles of Democracy

### **Teaching Time:**

Depending on nature of your course, this lesson can be used as a two-day (with homework) lesson plan; a 2-week lesson plan; and/or an on-going lesson on comparing democracies throughout the course.

### **Procedure:**

1. Show transparency of the list of 13 core principles (signposts) of democracy. Briefly ask which ones are unfamiliar to them. Distribute handout, Signposts of Democracy. Political scientists use these principles to assess how a country is progressing toward or away from democracy. We can refer to these principles as the "signposts" of democracy because to us they can represent signs that a nation is on the road to democracy. Many of these principles are overlapping and interdependent and vary from country to country. Establishing a democracy is not a linear process—that is, it is not achieved in 13 steps representing these 13 principles. It is a multi-faceted and dynamic complex process that includes moving forward and backward as people aspire towards a functioning democracy.
2. Explain to students that to develop an understanding of these terms as a class we will begin with something familiar—examining these principles within our own democracy.

As students examine the list of principles, ask them which terms are new to them. What information or evidence do students need in order to determine if a certain principle is, in fact, embedded in our own democracy?

3. Select one or two principles for analysis by the whole class: i.e., citizen participation. How do students think that participation in a democratic country differs from a non-democratic one? Students will probably cite voting as a form of participation. Ask them about nations in which voting is compulsory. Several countries that we consider to be “democratic” have some form of compulsory voting requiring citizens to register to vote and to vote on election day. One of the most well-known compulsory voting systems is Australia. Other nations with compulsory voting are Belgium, Chile and Luxembourg. Another way to examine this principle might be to examine our own nation’s turnout on election day.

4. Explain that students will conduct research to better understand how these principles of democracy work in our own country. Assign several principles to small groups of students: i.e., group #1 will research signposts #1-#3; group #2 will research signposts #4-#6, and so on. Individually, students will conduct research to answer the questions below and to deliberate with classmates on how to rate their own democracy on several core principles. Distribute handout #2, “Researching the Principles of Democracy.” Research will address the following questions.

- Why do people consider this an important principle for democracy? You will need to search newspapers, magazines to find evidence to support your answer.
- How would you rate our country on this principle? Support your opinion.  
*Outstanding    Acceptable    Needs Work    Unacceptable*
- Within your small group, compare findings among group members. List and discuss areas of agreement and disagreement within your group. Can the group reach consensus on the ratings for the principles you examined?

5. Next, each group should prepare a 5 minute presentation on the principles of democracy that they researched as well as the agreed upon ratings they assigned to each principle. Which principles did students find were the most difficult to find evidence about? Which principles caused the most disagreement among group members? Are there any principles that the class could agree upon that are most essential for democracy to thrive?

5. Options for on-going activity to be used throughout the year: Teachers may choose to assign additional countries for students to research. For teachers of world cultures, this research assignment can be adapted for the cultures the class will study in a semester or year-long course. .

## **Additional Resources**

Internet sites for student research:

- Freedom House, a non-profit, nonpartisan organization works to advance worldwide expansion of political and economic freedom. <http://www.freedomhouse.org/>
- Listings of political sites available on the Internet sorted by country, with links to parties, organizations, governments, media and more from all around the world <http://www.politicalresources.net/>
- International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (IDEA), an intergovernmental organization with member states from all continents, has a mandate to support sustainable democracy worldwide. [http://www.idea.int/news/assessing\\_dem.cfm](http://www.idea.int/news/assessing_dem.cfm)
- International Foundation for Election Systems (IFES,) a non-partisan organization dedicated to election assistance and democracy promotion worldwide. <http://www.ifes.org/mission.htm>
- The Democracy Project of the Carter Center at Emory University monitors elections, works with civic organizations and promotes the rule of law in emerging democracies around the world. <http://www.cartercenter.org/peaceprograms/program10.htm>
- Partners for Democratic Change, an international organization committed to advancing civil societies. <http://www.partnersglobal.org/index-flash.html>
- CIA Factbook: <http://www.cia.gov/cia/publications/factbook/>
- National Democratic Institute for International Affairs. A US-based non-governmental organization that promotes democratic government and monitors elections around the world. <http://www.ndi.org/worldwide/worldwide.asp>
- Radio Free Europe website: <http://www.rferl.org/>
- Essay by University of Virginia Professor in which the importance of a nation's history and culture in emerging democracies are discussed. <http://usinfo.state.gov/journals/itdhr/0304/ijde/howard.htm>

**Transparency:  
Signposts/Principles of Democracy**

1. Citizen Participation
2. Equality
3. Political Tolerance
4. Accountability
5. Transparency
6. Regular Free & Fair Elections
7. Economic Freedom
8. Control of the Abuse of Power
9. Accepting the Results of Elections
10. Human Rights
11. Multi-Party Systems
12. The Rule of Law
13. Bill of Rights

**Student Handout 1:**  
**Signposts/Principles of Democracy**  
( <http://www.streetlaw.org/democlesson.html>)

People from around the world have identified the basic principles, which must exist in order to have a democratic government. These principles often become a part of the constitution or bill of rights in a democratic society. Though no two democratic countries are exactly alike, people in democracies support many of the same basic principles and desire the same benefits from their government. The following are examples of the principles referred to as signposts of democracy, which will be used throughout this lesson:

**1. *Citizen Participation***

One of the most basic signposts of a democracy is citizen participation in government. Participation is the key role of citizens in democracy. It is not only their right, but it is their duty. Citizen participation may take many forms including standing for election, voting in elections, becoming informed, debating issues, attending community or civic meetings, being members of private voluntary organizations, paying taxes, and even protesting. Participation builds a better democracy.

**2. *Equality***

Democratic societies emphasize the principle that all people are equal. Equality means that all individuals are valued equally, have equal opportunities, and may not be discriminated against because of their race, religion, ethnic group, gender or sexual orientation. In a democracy, individuals and groups still maintain their right to have different cultures, personalities, languages and beliefs.

**3. *Political Tolerance***

Democratic societies are politically tolerant. This means that while the majority of the people rule in a democracy, the rights of the minority must be protected. People who are not in power must be allowed to organize and speak out. Minorities are sometimes referred to as the opposition because they may have ideas which are different from the majority. Individual citizens must also learn to be tolerant of each other. A democratic society is often composed of people from different cultures, racial, religious and ethnic groups who have viewpoints different from the majority of the population. A democratic society is enriched by diversity. If the majority deny rights to and destroy their opposition, then they also destroy democracy. One goal of democracy is to make the best possible decision for the society. To achieve this, respect for all people and their points of view is needed. Decisions are more likely to be accepted, even by those who oppose them, if all citizens have been allowed to discuss, debate and question them.

**4. *Accountability***

In a democracy, elected and appointed officials have to be accountable to the people. They are responsible for their actions. Officials must make decisions and perform their duties according to the will and wishes of the people, not for themselves.

### ***5. Transparency***

For government to be accountable the people must be aware of what is happening in the country. This is referred to as transparency in government. A transparent government holds public meetings and allows citizens to attend. In a democracy, the press and the people are able to get information about what decisions are being made, by whom and why.

### ***6. Regular, Free and Fair Elections***

One way citizens of the country express their will is by electing officials to represent them in government. Democracy insists that these elected officials are chosen and peacefully removed from office in a free and fair manner. Intimidation, corruption and threats to citizens during or before an election are against the principles of democracy. In a democracy, elections are held regularly every so many years. Participation in elections should not be based on a citizen's wealth. For free and fair elections to occur, most adult citizens should have the right to stand for government office. Additionally, obstacles should not exist which make it difficult for people to vote.

### ***7. Economic Freedom***

People in a democracy must have some form of economic freedom. This means that the government allows some private ownership of property and businesses, and that the people are allowed to choose their own work and labor unions. The role the government should play in the economy is open to debate, but it is generally accepted that free markets should exist in a democracy and the state should not totally control the economy. Some argue that the state should play a stronger role in countries where great inequality of wealth exists due to past discrimination or other unfair practices.

### ***8. Control of the Abuse of Power***

Democratic societies try to prevent any elected official or group of people from misusing or abusing their power. One of the most common abuses of power is corruption. Corruption occurs when government officials use public funds for their own benefit or exercise power in an illegal manner. Various methods have been used in different countries to protect against these abuses. Frequently the government is structured to limit the powers of the branches of government: to have independent courts and agencies with power to act against any illegal action by an elected official or branch of government; to allow for citizen participation and elections; and to check for police abuse of power.

### ***9. Bill of Rights***

Many democratic countries also choose to have a bill of rights to protect people against abuse of power. A bill of rights is a list of rights and freedoms guaranteed to all people in the country. When a bill of rights becomes part of a country's constitution, the courts have the power to enforce these rights. A bill of rights limits the power of government and may also impose duties on individuals and organizations.

### ***10. Accepting the Results of Elections***

In democratic elections, there are winners and losers. Often the losers in an election believe so strongly that their party or candidate is the best one, that they refuse to accept

the results of the election. This is against democratic principles. The consequences of not accepting the result of an election may be a government that is ineffective and cannot make decisions. It may even result in violence which is also against democracy.

### ***11. Human Rights***

All democracies strive to respect and protect the human rights of citizens. Human rights mean those values that reflect respect for human life and human dignity. Democracy emphasizes the value of every human being. Examples of human rights include freedom of expression, freedom of association, freedom of assembly, the right to equality and the right to education.

### ***12. Multi-Party System***

In order to have a multi-party system, more than one political party must participate in elections and play a role in government. A multi-party system allows for opposition to the party, which wins the election. This helps provide the government with different viewpoints on issues. Additionally, a multi-party system provides voters with a choice of candidates, parties and policies to vote for. Historically, when a country only has one party, the result has been a dictatorship.

### ***13. The Rule of Law***

In a democracy no one is above the law, not even a king or an elected President. This is called the rule of law. It means that everyone must obey the law and be held accountable if they violate it. Democracy also insists that the law be equally, fairly and consistently enforced. This is sometimes referred to as "due process of law."

**Student Handout 2:  
Researching the Principles of Democracy**

Signpost: \_\_\_\_\_

1. What problems do you think might arise if this principle (signpost) is not in place?
2. Rating for the U.S.:
3. Relevant current events that provide evidence of the presence or absence of this principle or signpost of democracy:
4. Actual evidence: Attach 3 news stories or editorial and underline evidence and summarize in one paragraph.
5. Develop your own statement that explains your reasoning for your rating.
6. Bibliography: