Task One Essay

What is American Democracy?

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American democracy at its core was illustrated in this past presidential election. The basis of democracy is when the majority of a constituent decide the established rules by which they will live by; when they lose trust or do not agree with the current government in office, they allow their voices to be heard by voting to remove those in power. The democratic system represents a trusted “contract between the governed and the governors” (Updike, 2007). When I refer to democracy, I often think of the political system and how our elected officials that run the courtrooms, legislatures and major public offices become our representative bodies. By using our legal right to vote, we elect officials who we believe will make the choices that we agree with and will establish rules, policies and laws accordingly that are in our best interests as individuals and as a society. Democracy is demonstrated by a majority rule as opposed to a rule by all of the people, because very seldom do an entire population (be it as big as a country or as small as a classroom) agree on a topic or law. As noted in Pericles’ *Funeral Oration*, “Our constitution... favors the many instead of the few; this is why it is called a democracy” (Adler, 1996).

Democracy has many facets that we often take for granted or overlook, but at its core, democracy represents freedom. The Declaration of Independence made many democratic ideals sacred--equality; inalienable rights; life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness (and property); government ruled by consent of governed; laws for public good; and principles of freedom (Beach, 2007). Freedom can be difficult to define because it has a different meaning for everyone, depending on one’s life experience, situation, economic or personal stability. Freedom represents one’s ability to pursue individual natural rights of life, civil liberties and happiness without infringing on the rights of other citizens. Freedom might be different for individuals who aren’t naturalized citizens or who are members of ethnic minorities, races, religions or genders because they might have incurred struggles or injustices in their pursuit of happiness.

Democracy to me represents the ability for us to have choices about our own lives and to become voices in the society that helps shape how others (the government, the educational system, etc.) will in turn shape our lives. I have the ability to choose where I want to live, what career I want to pursue and the ability to express my opinion peacefully at anytime. Democracy is the route by which our country was founded on and began with the writing of the Constitution. The first amendment states that Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the government for a redress of grievances. The freedom that resonates with these words is democracy to many Americans, including me, and we carry these principles throughout all aspects of our lives.

The balance in a democratic society is to keep a balance between the rights of the individual, the rights of the group as a whole and the ideology of the state (Wiley). Our democratic freedom and our right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness as stated in our Declaration of Independence will end or must concede when it interferes with other citizens in our democratic state. As citizens of our democratic country, our individual freedom ends where the safety of the government or country begins. Alexander Hamilton, one of the founding fathers of our constitution, declared that “there must be a perpetual accommodation and sacrifice of local advantages to general expediency” (Wiley, 2003). The whole country is greater than the parts that make up that country. A democratic government will restrict the random freedom of individuals by establishing laws that protect its citizens as a whole.

Mortimer Adler examines man’s basic natural rights and discusses how a just democratic government will secure every man his natural rights. The democratic society does not allow one man to pursue his happiness at the expense of others and believes that all men are truly created equal and have the same naturalized rights; this is expressed in the Declaration, the Constitution, and laws being established daily in this country. The authors of the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution did not mention four major second-class segments of American society: slaves, indentured servants, women, and men without property (not to mention the precarious position of a fifth segment, Native Americans, who, as a persecuted minority, were largely ignored by the country’s founding documents (Beach,2007). Amendments have been written to clarify that the same rights exist for the left out minorities. There are still injustices that exist today, however, that do not allow all American citizens to enjoy civil liberties afforded to them. Our democratic society is not perfect, but it is the government’s function to maintain that the injustices be righted so that all men have the ability to pursue the “good life” that Adler discusses. I believe that a fair and just democratic country is one that is constantly evolving so that its citizens’ freedoms, rights and civil liberties continue to be protected. For example, many Americans began to recognize that the promises made in the Declaration of Independence were not being realized by all citizens in the latter part of the 20th Century, so progressive legislative initiatives and court cases were used to help address inequality and equal access to opportunity. Examples of these progressive measures were the Civil Rights Act of 1964, Brown v Board of Education in 1954, and the Elementary and Secondary Education Act in 1965 (Bogin, 1995).

If the sphere of politics (government) is a good society, Adler ponders “what institutions should be devised and how they should be organized and operated in order to produce a good society” (Adler, 1996). Our governments (local, state, national) constantly strive to meet these challenges. I believe that our government was founded with the intent of recognizing that all humans have the potential for a good ethical, moral life and that institutions were established to promote that goal. Therefore, if we create educational facilities, community organizations, and corporations with the intent of creating environments for individuals in our society to obtain their full potential good and happiness, then the “perfect” democratic system can be established. John Dewey had an idealized notion of democracy and believed that democracy was to be actualized primarily as a means, lived and practiced through daily experience, which eventually, through the development of already present human capacities, through a new pattern of human relationships, and through cooperative action, would affect the ends of progressive social and political change (Beach, 2007). Of course nothing can ever become ideal or perfect because by “aiding and abetting the individual’s pursuit of happiness, a good society prevents one individual or one group of individuals from injuring others by violating their natural rights” (Adler, 1996). A democratic society to me is one that protects the majority of its people for the betterment of its society.

American democracy has transformed, changed, and evolved since its government’s formation. It is my belief that our society has become more inclusive and tolerant with more involvement in the democratic process than ever in our nation’s history. American pride and democracy is illustrated in the vast differences that we share and in our ability to work and live together with a commitment to the First Amendment which we share in common as American citizens. Our future of realizing full happiness and good is in jeopardy if we lack action, passion or knowledge about our rights and the founding of our democratic society and freedom. “The success of a democracy depends upon the willingness and ability of its citizens to accept responsibilities as well as exercise rights (Beach, 2007). If we wish to promote change or equality, we as citizens must make the changes necessary to establish a government strong and just enough to protect the good of society. Beach states that “conflict and debate are vital to democracy” (Beach, 2007). Debating our rights and liberties strengthens our bond and pride in our country and our democratic system.

Adler presents the notion that a society can aid its citizens in the pursuit of happiness by establishing the educational system and facilities that will cultivate a liberal education. Schools can represent the promise of a democratic future and opportunities to provide the knowledge and skills for students to become critically engaged citizens. Gioux argues in *Education and the Crisis of Youth* that there is a need to insist on the role of the university as a public sphere committed to deepening and expanding the possibilities of democratic identities, values and relations (Giroux, 2009). Higher Education could be the best venue where students learn the knowledge and skills that enable them to distinguish between democratic values and the demands of corporate power; they can also distinguish between the identities founded on democratic principles and those that are infused with self-interest and greed and don’t promote the common good of society (Giroux, 2009). Higher education should encourage students to become engaged in the democratic process because of the impact students will have on future generations. Democracy requires an educated population to make the informed decisions for society, and through education, individuals can transcend their environment**.** Education in another type of governance (such as a dictatorship) is always limited by any knowledge or skill that would threaten the form of government. Democracy is less threatened by education. Democracy provides freedom and true education requires freedom – freedom of thought, freedom to question established ideas and freedom to explore. Democracy and education provide choices and allow for change.

Democracy represents the individuals in a society who pursue happiness and freedom free from persecution or deprivation from the government so long as they do not intercede with the happiness and freedom of the fellow members of their society. Democracy represents a choice by society’s members to have involvement in the laws that govern aspects of their life that are integral to their pursuit of happiness and other civil liberties. A just and progressive democratic society strives to allow all of its citizens equal rights while establishing institutions that promote its citizens achieving their full potential and all the “goods of life” ( Adler, 1996). Education is one of the vital institutions that can help individuals achieve their full potential in democracy and become fully happy. Adler states that the “goodness of an organized society is measured by the degree to which it secures the natural rights of its members”, but the best society is the one that secures all the natural rights for all its members (Adler, 1996). Therefore, democracy to me is a system that allows its members the freedom to have a voice in its policies and laws that seek the best interests of its individual citizens for the betterment of the entire society; and, education is an important venue that provides experience and knowledge to help members of a society make those choices.

**References**

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