

# [The role of civil society in democracy essay sample](https://assignbuster.com/the-role-of-civil-society-in-democracy-essay-sample/)

As one looks at the history of democracy, it is common to detect an undertone, a rush of voices clamoring for purchase in the debate regarding how the country will be governed. It is my belief that this undertone is the footprint of civil society, a segment of democratic societies that often can be difficult to identify. Much has been said about how difficult civil society is to define. However, as I read the various definitions and came to my own conclusion, it seemed to me that we should look at civil society as the vital foundation on which democracy is built.

There are definitely challenges and civil society is not perfect, but democracy itself is a noisy business. We cannot invite millions of people to participate in self-governance and expect it to always go smoothly, or to be entirely predictable. Yet, as long as civil society is allowed to operate freely, democracy will remain strong and healthy. Origins of Civil Society The origins of civil society date back to the Greek Empire and the thinking of great teachers such as Socrates, Plato, and ultimately Aristotle (DeWeil, 1997).

At that time, there did not exist as concrete a separation between state and civil society. In fact, for all intents and purposes, at that time, the two arenas were considered one and the same. It occurs to me, that this lack of distinction is a direct illustration of the fact that what we currently think of as civil society gave rise to democracy. To some degree, it is my assertion that without the core concept of civil society, the association of people from different stratum of society into groups working for the good of society as a whole, we wouldn’t have democracy in its current form.

To be sure, in the days of the Greeks, the associations were much simpler and less varied, and yet without those basic associations, some based on political thought, some on philosophical thought, and some even based more on ideas of trade or science, the basic democracy that the Greeks bequeathed to modern society might have looked very different. Out of those humble beginnings, civil society began to play a larger role in the way democratic societies came into being.

Richard Hooker, Thomas Hobbes, and finally John Locke were highly influential in the evolution of the ideas which constituted civil society (DeWeil, 1997). These men constitute a continuum of thought that was developing in concert with the societies of the 17th century. With each successive re-organization of society, the concept of civil society became more fully formed, until, in the 18th century, it began to separate from the concept of the state (DeWeil, 1997). At this point, what philosophers thought of as civil society began to more closely resemble our own concept.

This is not to say that there were no differences, but the basic idea that civil society existed separately from the influence of the state had finally coalesced. My understanding of this period of development is not that Hooker, Hobbes, and Locke created civil society since, as I have previously stated, I believe democracy requires civil society to develop. Instead, my impression of this period in history is that philosophers were set upon the task of understanding the complex social interactions that create our societies.

Events that at first appeared to be the actual development of civil society, instead turned out to be illumination of civil society as the structure underlying democratic society. Civil society had been there from the beginning of democracy, but it took centuries of philosophical thought to truly reveal the concept. Civil Society’s Role in the Founding of the United States While democracy was not invented by the founders of the United States, their work most certainly did more to advance the development of a truly democratic society than many individuals before them, and once again, civil society played an integral role.

Much of the current consensus focuses on civil society as something that manifests itself within nations, but I will dissent and claim the view that nations and societies are something that manifests within the context of civil society. I believe that Brian O’Connell elucidates an important pre-condition for the strong civil society that developed in this country when it was simply a part of the British Empire (O’Connell, 1999). When British settlers first came to North America, it was a largely untamed wilderness, and to some degree the first settlers ere entirely on their own, since many of them were religious dissidents, seeking a place to practice the faith they deemed to be correct.

The colonies that were set up by the British largely came once they were made aware of the natural bounty that existed in North America. The first settlers’ isolation and the subsequent isolation that even the official British colonies experienced forced people to organize and to create associations; institutions such as churches, granges, unions, public services such as fire companies, sheriff’s offices, and militias (O’Connell, 1999).

These institutions began to represent the American experience, as our means of socialization and support. Therefore, as I see it, civil society came first and in truth created the framework upon which our founding fathers laid our representative democracy. The groups and institutions that were created during the settling of North America gave America the confidence to legally declare its separation from Great Britain. As I see it, the successful democratization of any nation, be it a new one such as the United States, or an existing one, requires the development of civil society, and the unification of purpose that is derived from it.

Without this unification, the society underlying a democracy will be too fragmented to weather the initial growing pains that seem to be indicative of a young democracy. Importance of Participation The difficulty of creating consensus is immediately visible from even a cursory study of a young democracy. The United States is a good example of this inherent difficulty, as the process of developing national consensus took nearly a century and one civil war to complete.

As we watch the events in the Middle East that have been declared the “ Arab Spring”, we must keep these difficulties in mind, and mitigate our short term expectations when it comes to these young democracies. In the end, the only way to find consensus, navigate the difficulties of establishing democracy, or simply maintain an existing democracy is for individual citizens to participate. Consensus is not authentic if it does not include input from all parties, and the natural consequence of civil society is a means for citizens to participate in building the consensus needed for democracy to be successful.

The argument could be made that not all organizations included in civil society are directly involved in creating democracy, but I believe that regardless of their purpose, all civil society organizations do support democracy. The core reason that civil society supports democracy is that it offers ordinary citizens the opportunity to participate in the democratic dialogue of the nation, whether it is a trade union, a charitable organization, or even a social organization. Examples of Participation

An excellent example of civil society directly affecting change within democracy, indeed improving it, is the movement to end child labor. The history of child labor in the United States is not an entirely admirable part of this nation’s history, but like other labor issues, it is one of the areas of our democracy’s history that was greatly improved by civil society. Throughout the second half of the 19th century, child labor was used as a means of advancing the industrial development of the United States (Child Labor Public Education Project, 2011).

Business owners took advantage of child labor because children were easier to handle, less likely to strike, and able to be paid less. As the Labor Movement grew in strength at the end of the 19th century and into the early years of the 20th century, it became increasingly concerned with the plight of children in industry. Often conditions were horrible, hours were long, and pay was next to nothing. In 1904, the National Child Labor Committee formed with the express purpose of setting minimum age standards at a federal level (Child Labor Education Project, 2011).

Over the next 24 years, multiple attempts were made to take federal action to end child labor, including two failed constitutional amendments. Finally, in 1938 the Fair Labor Standards Act is passed, setting minimum employment ages and hours of work for children at a federal level (Child Labor Education Project, 2011). There are many instances like this throughout American history, where civil society acts as a bulwark against exploitative business practices and the general apathy of government.

The organization I have chosen to shadow, Planned Parenthood, has a bit of a different story, but one that is just as important to the progress of this great democracy. Planned Parenthood began in 1916 when Margaret Sanger helped to open a birth control clinic in New York City (Planned Parenthood, 2013). The context of the time was incredibly different than what we enjoy today; women could not vote, sign for a loan, divorce an abusive husband, or control how many children they had.

In my eyes, Margaret Sanger and all of the other courageous women and men associated with Planned Parenthood did more for the Women’s Suffrage movement than almost any other organization. By working to free women from the confines of the traditional early 20th century home, Planned Parenthood was in fact helping women gain independence and eventually the right to vote. Birth control had been outlawed in the late 19th century by a set of measures known as the Comstock laws (Planned Parenthood, 2013).

The undeniable consequences of these laws were that women had very little control over their lives. There were little to no means available that would allow them to avoid unwanted pregnancies. Margaret Sanger understood these consequences very well, since her own mother had 18 pregnancies, gave birth to 11 children, and passed away at the age of 40 (Planned Parenthood, 2013). By the 1960s, Planned Parenthood had played a crucial role in the development of the birth control pill and the intrauterine device (IUD), and in 1962, under new president Alan Guttmacher M. D. it began to set its sights on creating legal access to abortion services (Planned Parenthood, 2013).

Public sentiment at the time was increasingly moving towards approval for legal access, due to increases in the number of birth defects, especially in response to the use of thalidomide for morning sickness in pregnant women and an outbreak of rubella in 1966. Planned Parenthood continued its push, all the while advocating for healthy and intelligent family planning decisions, clear and accurate information about women’s sexual health, and access to birth control.

Finally, in 1973, the Supreme Court handed down the Roe v. Wade decision recognizing a woman’s constitutional right to choose (Planned Parenthood, 2013). The organization’s work was not done, and it has continued to advocate for healthy family planning and a woman’s access to reproductive care. Unbelievably, the fight continues into the present day, and Planned Parenthood continues its advocacy, even as it weathers attacks from social conservatives.

It may seem strange that an organization like Planned Parenthood would contribute to democracy here in the United States, but we must remember that a true democracy, the ideal that the Founding Fathers set in front of us, must guarantee equality for everyone. We tend to think of the fight for racial equality as the only component of civil rights, however I would argue that a true civil rights movement must include not only all races, but both sexes and all sexual orientations. A true and just civil rights movement works for the equality of each and every single American citizen.

In this way, Planned Parenthood has indeed helped to democratize the United States, because while the goal set in 1776 was noble indeed, the white patriarchy that was initially created has needed to evolve to qualify as a modern democracy. Conclusion In my opinion, while civil society has an essential role in democratizing our societies, democracy was not what gave rise to civil society. Rather, civil society has always existed, all the way back to our tribal, nomadic beginnings.

We were only able to make progress by creating social connections and communities centered on the goal of providing benefit for the whole group. True, the term “ civil society” is a relatively recent development. However, the true importance lies with the connections that the term implies and these connections are what have led us to this point in history. As a species we have not always gotten things right, but as long as we continue to associate and socialize, to create connections and communities, all to work together for the benefit of humanity we will continue to democratize our existence here on the planet Earth.