

How the concept of democracy has been perceived and implemented in america versus...

[Politics](#)



Natural Rights

“ When in the course of human events, it becomes necessary for one people to dissolve the political bands which have connected them with another, and to assume the...equal station to which the Laws of Nature and of Nature’s God entitle them...they should declare the causes which impel them to the separation.” The opening words of the Declaration of Independence lay out the colonists’ desire to be given the same rights of free Englishmen. The goal of their separation was to receive the natural rights – that of life, liberty, and property – that Englishmen enjoyed. Their struggle was a long one and it continues to this day; however, England went through a similar evolution to receive the same rights. Both England and America evolved into democracies, and the expansion of their rights has led to the assertion of rights over that of civic duty.

The beginning of representation and democracy in England was the Magna Carta, signed by King John in 1215 after he had been extending his monarchical power too far. The Magna Carta was a social contract between the governor, King John, and the governed. The king, according to the charter, was supposed to comply with the law. The Magna Carta also set up England’s parliamentary system. Although they originally were only granted to the feudal nobility, the rights of the English were protected under the Magna Carta like they never had been before. In the seventeenth century, the Petition of Right protected against monarchs raising taxes without Parliament’s consent or forcing people to quarter soldiers in their homes. It strengthened the Magna Carta by strengthening the rights of Englishmen.

Further in England's constitutional struggle was the Habeas Corpus Act. The Habeas Corpus Act gave Englishmen protection from being falsely imprisoned if the government cannot produce evidence that a citizen has broken the law. The Act protected the life and liberty of Englishmen; however, the struggle between the King and Parliament continued until the Glorious Revolution. When King James II was overthrown and replaced by King William, the English Bill of Rights was put into place. The English Bill of Rights protected the natural rights of British citizens, rights such as freedom of petition, no taxation or interference from a royal prerogative, and freedom from excessive bail or cruel and unusual punishment. The evolution of English democracy began with a social contract and continued by giving citizens their individual rights.

The American evolution of democracy was heavily influenced by England's, as well as the principle of natural rights. The early colonists first focused on establishing a legislative body, one that would protect the rights of its citizens. This was apparent in the Mayflower Contract, which established a civil body to make laws and appoint officers. The Fundamental Orders of Connecticut in 1639 were similar by establishing a central body for legislature. The Declaration of Independence, in protest to their unjust treatment by the British, highlighted the instances in which their life, liberty, and property were kept from them by blaming the King " for quartering large bodies of armed troops among us...for depriving us in many cases of trial by jury...[and] for abolishing the free system of English laws." The first document to guarantee and protect natural rights for Americans, however, was the American Constitution. Similar to the English Bill of Rights, the

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Constitution's Bill of Rights protected citizens from excessive bail, cruel and unusual punishment, quartering soldiers, and unlawful imprisonment.

Reflecting Britain, America's democratic evolution began with establishing representation before focusing on natural rights.

Do the rights of citizens, though, transcend their sense of civic duty?

Americans have been given many rights and freedoms since the nation's founding. Have laws protecting peoples' life, liberty, and property become more important than a citizens' involvement in government? One of the tenets of the American political tradition is serving in one's government.

Natural rights, however, are also a part of the tradition. John F. Kennedy said in his 1961 inaugural address: " Ask not what your country can do for you;

ask what you can do for your country." Do American citizens still believe in Kennedy's philosophy in the twenty-first century? The last half of the

twentieth into the twenty-first century have been years of progress for those seeking civil rights. Civic duty has become less of a priority to Americans, especially younger groups. Instead, people are fighting for rights such as gay marriage, protection against gun violence, and medical marijuana usage.

While they are getting involved by protesting, lobbying, and boycotting, they are not necessarily doing it for the common good, but for their own gain. The

republican view of striving for the common good, which includes civic duty,

has waned, and John Locke's natural rights principle has become more prominent. Many Americans today believe that natural rights are more

important than civic duty.

Although the evolution of natural rights has led to an over assertion of rights, it has not gone so far that it is irreversible. In America, citizens still have a sense of duty when it comes to serving in government. The concept goes along with the social contract philosophy: the government and the people serve each other and benefit from one another's work. Many Americans are engaged in political activities in order to receive things they believe they deserve, such as the rights to life, liberty, and property. Although rights may sometimes be more elevated than duty, the American desire for natural rights comes from its founding and the Declaration: " they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights...that to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed."