

# The evolution of democracy: from colonization to reconstruction essay sample

[Politics](#), [Democracy](#)



Democracy is not a static entity. It is a constantly evolving concept. The uniqueness and diversity of America have allowed it to flourish. Democratic progress does not occur in a straight upward line, however.

A study of the young American democracy shows that democracy, at its core, is an ongoing argument about its very definition. The constant clash of competing interests is a fragility and strength of the Democratic concept. The period between colonization and reconstruction shows how democracy perpetuates itself and eventually forces its weaknesses to the surface so they can be dealt with.

### *Colonial Democracy: planting the seeds*

The English had no intention on starting an independent, representative democracy in the new world. By the very nature of settling a far away territory, however, the colonists experienced a taste of freedom they otherwise would not have experienced.

Early documents, such as the Mayflower Compact, expressed a desire for freedom while at the same time paying the necessary deference to the King of England.

Settlers had a variety of reasons for coming, but most resented what they saw as the oppressive rule of the king. As the colonies became more permanent and self-sustaining they formed a hodge-podge of local and state assemblies. Many settlers in the north were heavily influenced by philosophical and religious thought. The remoteness of the colonies allowed these thoughts to flourish. The same was true in the new western territories.

With no ruling force, democracy emerged by necessity. The southern agrarian colonies were more like an aristocracy.

A confederation was cobbled together gradually as the northern colonies convinced the others that British domination was no longer tolerable. Even after the war, democracy was not necessarily on the minds of all the founding fathers. Two camps emerged as the colonists debated over the new constitution. Southern factions, in particular, wanted a weak federal government with most rights reserved to the states. The federalists, in contrast, saw a strong national government as necessary for the survival of the nation. What emerged through the process of argument and compromise was a fledgling democratic nation.

### *Jeffersonian Democracy*

Thomas Jefferson is a key figure in limiting the scope of federal power. He insisted on including a bill of rights in the Constitution. In doing so, he ensured that the public debate essential to democracy would continue. Thomas Jefferson resisted the notion that the federal government should dominate the people. From *Measuring America* :

...what he [Jefferson] liked about the United States proposed Constitution was the separation it made between...executive, legislative and Judiciary; but he insisted that it needed a fourth side to balance it, a Bill of Rights...This shape ensured that forever afterward a debate would take place among the four parties. (Linklater, 2002)

Jefferson is himself evidence of many of the contradictions and conflicts of early American democracy. He spoke out against slavery, yet he himself owned slaves. He, like some of the other founding fathers, knew that slavery was not compatible with a true democratic society. It was an institution, however, that propped up the economy of the young nation, particularly in the south. Slavery and women's rights were not dealt with at the founding of the nation; therefore the democracy was far from complete. These issues were left for future generations. The conflict over slavery would eventually become the biggest test of the strength of our democracy.

### *Jacksonian Democracy*

Andrew Jackson rose to prominence in the mid-1800's with a vigorous anti-elitist message. He argued against the federalism of the post-Jefferson government. Jackson saw himself as a "man of the people". His vigorous campaign helped renew a populist sentiment among Americans. Jacksonian democracy is a continuation of the see-saw between Federalism and Populism that is a hallmark of our democracy.

Was Jacksonian democracy really more democratic? At first reading Jacksonian democracy would appear to dismiss Jefferson's idea that an elite professional class should control government. Some see it another way.

From *The Boisterous Sea of Liberty* :

Some historians argue that the egalitarian rhetoric of Jacksonian

Democracy simply cloaked the emergence of different kinds of

elites. (Davis, 1999)

There were still many inequities and flaws in Jacksonian democracy. It was, however, part of the process that defines democracy. By this time democracy was becoming ingrained in the minds of Americans. Its influence was also spreading throughout the world. Davis continues:

On the other hand, the rhetoric of democracy and the spread of democratic manners greatly reduced the arrogant disdain and fawning obeisance that unequals traditionally expressed toward each other. (Davis, 1999)

By the time of Jackson's presidency grass roots "army style" political campaigning was highly developed. Third, and Fourth party political candidates were as successful as at any time in history. In the coming years, the American democracy would suffer its greatest challenge.

### *The Civil War*

The Civil War was the most serious crisis for American democracy in its first 100 years. The issue of slavery and the corresponding issue of states rights challenged the young democracy to its core. During the war itself, it is fair to say that the institution of democracy suffered on both sides. In the south, slavery still existed, rights were restricted and thousands of men were drafted to fight and die in the war. In the north, rights were also restricted.

President Lincoln suspended the right of habeas corpus. War time governments on both sides were federally dominated.

The eventual victory of the north restarted the political debates that occurred before the war. Ground was gained slowly because Lincoln's populist ideas faced stiff resistance in the north as well as the south. The assassination of Lincoln could have dealt a fatal blow to democracy in America. It did not. The transfer of power was made peacefully and constitutionally.

### *Reconstruction*

The federal government took an extremely strong role during reconstruction. It mandated fundamental changes to southern society and enforced them militarily. In one sense this could be seen as undemocratic. In another, it could be seen as promoting the greater good, a core principle of democracy.

The Reconstruction era saw the beginnings of a fulfillment of Thomas Jefferson's "all men are created equal" creed. African-Americans were given the right to vote, although actually doing so could still be difficult. Their participation in the process eventually strengthened democracy. Early women's suffrage groups began to arise at this time, as well. Women would eventually gain the right to vote in the 1920's.

### *Conclusion*

The development of the American democracy has been a spotty, stop and start process that continues to this day. In the first 100 years survival of the

democracy was hardly a given. Its own contradictions nearly caused its collapse. Jeffersonian, Jacksonian democracy and reconstruction served to either stem the tide of overreaching federal power or ensure the rights of those previously dispossessed.

Democracy is founded in conflict. It is the ongoing self-reflection and debate over its very nature. In the first 100 years the American democracy suffered some severe growing pains. Yet, it survived and flourished because people participated in large numbers. The survival of this democracy has been challenged before and it will be again. American democracy has shown, though, that it is built to take on those challenges. It bends, shifts and adapts but does not break.

#### Sources

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