

Representation and Self-Governance

The core idea of self-government is that people should have a say in the terms by which we live our lives. Self-government contains the idea that people should be free from unjust control over their lives, but it also means that people are responsible for their own actions.

This idea of self-government, which lies at the heart of a republic, gives the people and their representatives many responsibilities and duties. A healthy, functioning republican government requires that citizens engage in civil conversation while deliberating and debating as they seek to create just laws for the common good. As a result, politics in a republic can be a little messy, and it can sometimes take a long time to compromise and agree. Because of human nature, each of us brings differing perspectives and interests to every conversation. But listening to each other and engaging in those conversations—whether while writing laws in a legislature or solving problems in civic organizations—are critical in a self-governing society.

Self-government in a constitutional republic is based upon the consent of the people. In a republic, the people are sovereign, meaning they have supreme authority, and representatives are elected or appointed for a duration of time to govern for them. Because people can be led astray by their self-interest, passions, and vices, the goal of representation is to guide public discussion by reason and calm deliberation. When they are doing their best work, representatives of the people filter popular views to ensure just government. They also represent the views of their constituents in their districts. Representation is meant to encourage just majority rule that protects the rights of the minority.

In the 1760s and 1770s, the American colonists argued for “no taxation without representation.” While they enjoyed representation in their colonial legislatures, colonists were not represented in the British Parliament. As a result, they argued that they could not be taxed by Great Britain.

In 1776, the Declaration of Independence expressed the colonists’ commitment to the principles of representation and government by consent. The purpose of government, according to the Declaration, is to secure the natural rights of the people—and “that to secure these rights,

Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed.” The Founders then endeavored to create a government based on the principle of representation.

In 1781, the states agreed upon the first plan for American government: the Articles of Confederation. Within the framework of the Articles, each state had only one vote in the national congress, regardless of its size. That is, the Articles supported state sovereignty over popular sovereignty—state governments, not the people, were directly represented at the national level. The government also lacked proportional representation of the population. The states violated rights, made unjust laws, and impeded the workings of the national government. These factors and other weaknesses in the design of the Articles created several practical challenges that led James Madison and others to question the effectiveness of the document. As a result, they planned to revise the Articles at a convention in Philadelphia.

During the Constitutional Convention of the summer of 1787, Madison and others introduced the Virginia Plan, which proposed a bicameral (two-house) national congress with proportional representation in both houses. The competing New Jersey Plan proposed to keep the unicameral (one-house) Confederation Congress with state equality. Eventually, the Convention delegates agreed upon a bicameral congress with proportional representation in the House of Representatives and equality of the states in the Senate.

The Constitutional Convention was controversial at first. Delegates held the sessions of the Convention in secret. They did this to ensure honest and open debate among themselves. While many thought this was an abuse of power, the delegates were trying to model representative governance: calm and thoughtful discussion of difficult matters in the public interest. They broadened this deliberative process by submitting the Constitution to popular ratifying conventions at the state level.

The legal process of ratifying the new constitution by the people’s representatives took place in conventions called in each state. However, debate also raged among the people in newspapers, pamphlets, churches, and taverns. In fact, the well-known writings of the Federalists

(those who supported the Constitution) and the Anti-Federalists (those who were opposed to the Constitution) first appeared as a series of letters in newspapers. The principle of representation was central to these debates.

The Anti-Federalists were concerned that the representatives were too distant from the people. An Anti-Federalist writing under the pseudonym Brutus argued that the Constitution consolidated too much power at the national level. He was concerned that representatives would lose touch with the people they were supposed to represent.

Another Anti-Federalist writer, using the pen name Federal Farmer, wanted representatives to come from the people and remain close with them to share their concerns. “A full and equal representation, is that which possesses the same interests, feelings, opinions, and views the people themselves would were they all assembled,” he wrote.

The Federalists countered that a popular government must balance the threat to liberty posed by a few ambitious leaders with the threat posed by mob rule of the many. Representatives are supposed to understand the will of the people and “refine and enlarge” those views by applying wisdom and prudence to “best discern the true interest of their country,” as James Madison wrote in *Federalist #10*. The views are passed “through the medium of a chosen body of citizens, whose wisdom may best discern the true interest of their country.” In a large republic, the Constitution spread representative power among different branches of the national government and between different levels of government to encourage deliberation rather than impulsive decision making.

The story of ratification is the story of self-government in action. Deliberation and debates not only took place in state legislatures and in Congress, but throughout communities.

Similar discussions and debates continue today, keeping American self-government alive. Civil society has many organizations, such as voluntary service clubs, businesses, and local institutions, that provide an arena for people to discuss and debate ways to govern themselves locally. Community members of different backgrounds are able to come together with a variety

of perspectives to find common solutions to problems. In working together, they learn to cooperate and compromise for the common good.

Representation is a core principle of American self-government. The dramatic and principled discussion and debate that occurred among representatives and among the people were critical in establishing the Constitution and republican government. Maintaining American self-government requires the same kind of healthy civil conversation today.