

Democracy: Not a New Idea

After the defeat of the British in the Revolutionary War, Americans established a democratic republic. The idea of democracy was not a new one. In fact, the Founders were influenced by the democratic experiments of the Greek city-states and the Roman Republic. The US Constitution also divided the government into three parts, based on Montesquieu's idea of the separation of powers. The Declaration of Independence, written by Jefferson, drew upon the natural rights philosophy of British Enlightenment thinker John Locke. Finally, the US Bill of Rights was directly influenced by the ideas in the Magna Carta and the English Bill of Rights.

The American revolutionaries chose a democratic form of government, without a king or queen. They were influenced by the Greek city-states, which created a democracy in the 4th century BC. Pericles, a Greek politician, described Athens' system of government, "Our constitution is called a democracy, because power rests in the hands not of the few but of the many" (*Thucydides*). This speech suggests the pride that Pericles felt towards Greece's direct democracy, in which all citizens could vote on laws before the Assembly. The American revolutionaries not only learned from Greek democracy, but also adopted the Roman model of a republic, in which the people elect representatives to carry out the day to day work of the government. The Romans established two law making bodies, the Senate and the Assembly, while the American Founders created a two house legislature with a Senate and a House of Representatives.

Many of the American revolutionaries were intellectuals, influenced by the philosophes of the Enlightenment. For example, the United States adopted the ideas of the French

philosopher, Montesquieu, who argued that power should be divided within a government to prevent the abuse of power. The US Constitution contains his idea of the separation of powers, in which the national government is divided into three parts: the Legislative Branch, the Judicial Branch, and the Executive Branch. Each branch has specific powers and also has checks over the other branches of government. Thomas Jefferson, in the Declaration of Independence, argued that citizens should be guaranteed rights and “that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness. That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed” (*Jefferson*). He echoed the words of English Enlightenment thinker, John Locke, who also wrote that all people are born with natural rights, and that the purpose of government should be to protect these rights.

The American revolutionaries were Englishmen before they won independence and therefore, England’s democratic traditions had a large influence on the new US system of government. For example, the Magna Carta limited the power of the English King and established basic legal rights for English citizens (*Baxter*). The US still contends that no single person should have too much power. Additionally the US Bill of Rights contained similar guarantees, including a fair trial by jury. The US Bill of Rights, which guaranteed freedom of speech, religion, and press for citizens, is modeled after the English Bill of Rights, written a century before.

The US revolutionaries created a new government without a king or queen. Establishing a democratic republic was a radical choice in a world dominated by monarchies. However, the democratic ideas of our Founding Fathers were not new. The sources of our democratic tradition came from the Greeks and the Romans many centuries ago, from the Enlightenment thinkers, and from mother England, whom we fought a revolution against.