



Student Handout 2: CORE VALUES OF AMERICAN CONSTITUTIONAL DEMOCRACY

Core democratic values are the fundamental beliefs and constitutional principles of American society, which unite all Americans. These values are expressed in the Declaration of Independence, the United States constitution and other significant documents, speeches, and writing of the nation. Below are definitions of some core democratic values.

FUNDAMENTAL BELIEFS

LIFE: The individual's right to life should be considered inviolable except in certain highly restricted and extreme circumstances, such as the use of deadly force to protect one's own or others' lives.

LIBERTY: The right to liberty is considered an unalterable aspect of the human condition. Central to this idea of liberty is the understanding that the political or personal obligations of parents or ancestors cannot be legitimately forced on people. The right to liberty includes personal freedom: the private realm in which the individual is free to act, to think and to believe, and which the government cannot legitimately invade; political freedom: the right to participate freely in the political process, choose and remove public officials, to be governed under a rule of law; the right to a free flow of information and ideas, open debate and right of assembly; and economic freedom: the right to acquire, use, transfer and dispose of private property without unreasonable governmental interference; the right to seek employment wherever one pleases; to change employment at will; and to engage in any lawful economic activity.

THE PURSUIT OF HAPPINESS: It is the right of citizens in the American constitutional democracy to attempt to attain - "pursue" - happiness in their own way, so long as they do not infringe upon the rights of others.

COMMON GOOD: The public or common good requires that individual citizens have the commitment and motivation - that they accept their obligation - to promote the welfare of the community and to work together with other members for the greater benefit of all.

JUSTICE: People should be treated fairly in the distribution of the benefits and burdens of society, the correction of wrongs and injuries, and in the gathering of information and making of decisions.

EQUALITY: All citizens have: political equality and are not denied these rights unless by due process of law; legal equality and should be treated as equals before the law; social equality so as there should be no class hierarchy sanctioned by law; economic equality which tends to strengthen political and social equality for extreme economic inequality tends to undermine all other forms of equality and should therefore be avoided.

DIVERSITY: Variety in culture and ethnic background, race, lifestyle, and belief is not only permissible but desirable and beneficial in a pluralist society.

TRUTH: Citizens can legitimately demand that truth-telling as refraining from lying and full disclosure by government be the rule, since trust in the veracity of government constitutes an essential element of the bond between governors and governed.

POPULAR SOVEREIGNTY: The citizenry is collectively the sovereign of the state and hold ultimate authority over public officials and their policies.

PATRIOTISM: Virtuous citizens display a devotion to their country, including devotion to the fundamental values upon which it depends.

Source: CIVITAS: A Framework for Civic Education, a collaborative project of the Center for Civic Education and the Council for the Advancement of Citizenship, National Council for the Social Studies Bulletin No. 86, 1991. You can obtain a copy of "Civitas" by calling 1-800-350-4223.

Discussion Questions:

1. Take out a copy of the Declaration of Independence and review the document for its main ideas. How are the core values of American democracy incorporated into the Declaration?
2. Throughout these core values, the relationship between citizen and government is described. What responsibilities does the government have to honoring these core values? What responsibilities do individual citizens have to preserve these core values?
3. How might some or all of these core values be important to the preservation of a free and independent press?
4. Identify the core values of American constitutional democracy that allow private citizens to collect, edit and further distribute information to others and how the values help drive these actions.
5. What responsibilities do producers of information have to these core values and their fellow citizens when distributing information?