

# Core Values of American Constitutional Democracy

## Junior High High School

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 writings of the nation. Below are definitions of some core democratic values.

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### *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 life or the lives of others.

**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 United States 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 holds ultimate authority over public officials and their policies.

**Patriotism** Virtuous citizens display a devotion to their country, including devotion to the fundamental values and principles upon which it depends. They should exhibit a reasoned commitment to the core democratic values in their words and deeds.

### *Constitutional Principles*

**Rule of Law** Both government and the governed should be subject to the law.

**Separation of Powers** Legislative, executive, and judicial powers should be exercised by different institutions in order to maintain the limitations placed upon them.

**Representative Government** The republican form of government established under the Constitution is one in which citizens elect others to represent their interests.

**Checks and Balances** The powers given to the different branches of government should be balanced, that is roughly equal, so that no branch can completely dominate the others. Branches of government are also given powers to check the power of other branches.

**Individual Rights** Fundamental to American constitutional democracy is the belief that individuals have certain basic rights that are not created by government but which government should protect. These are the right to life, liberty, economic freedom, and the “pursuit of happiness.” It is the purpose of government to protect these rights, and it may not place unfair or unreasonable restraints on their exercise. Many of these rights are enumerated in the Bill of Rights.

**Freedom of Religion** There shall be full freedom of conscience for people of all faiths or none. Religious liberty is considered to be a natural inalienable right that must always be beyond the power of the state to confer or remove. Religious liberty includes the right to freely practice any religion or no religion without government coercion or control.

**Federalism** Power is shared between two sets of governmental institutions, those of the states and those of the central of federal authorities, as stipulated by the Constitution.

**Civilian Control of the Military** Civilian authority should control the military in order to preserve constitutional government.