

## What Is Democracy Made Of? Using the *New York Times* Learning Network’s “Identifying Essential Elements in a Democracy” worksheet in the Introductory American Politics Classroom

Shamira Gelbman, Wabash College

### **Overview:**

Understanding American politics nowadays entails some consideration of democratic fragility – i.e., that democracy in the United States (or anywhere) cannot be taken for granted, and that it has many parameters that can be simultaneously strengthened and/or weakened to affect the overall performance of democracy. This brief course module helps students shift from a habit of translating democracy – that is, defining democracy by reciting that it means “rule by the people” – to appreciating it as a multidimensional concept. It also encourages students to develop and reflect on their own democratic priorities.

### **Materials:**

The module uses a version of the *New York Times* Learning Network’s “Identifying Essential Elements in a Democracy” worksheet that I have adapted by modifying the instructions, revising the definitions, and swapping out some elements to better serve the purposes of my course:

- Original NYT Learning Network worksheet:  
<https://int.nyt.com/data/documenthelper/476-identifying-essential-elements/fdb7620f42a7c76af5f2/optimized/full.pdf>
- My adapted version (which can be further modified): see attached Word file

The attached PowerPoint file contains the basic module slide deck with implementation notes.

### ***A basic version of the module has four steps that can be completed in as little as two 50-minute class sessions:***

1. At the start of class session #1:
  - a. Give students a very brief introduction to the module; essentially: *Translated literally from its Greek roots, “democracy” means “rule by the people.” But what does this mean in practice?* Then give students a moment of silence to ponder the question and start thinking about how they might answer it.
  - b. Hand out the worksheet and ask students to complete the first column by ranking the 5 elements in the list that they feel are most essential to democracy, identifying anything on the list that they find hard to understand, and identifying anything they think should be on the list but isn’t there.
  - c. Collect the worksheets – you’ll need the students’ responses to prepare for the next class
2. For the remainder of class session #1:
  - a. Have students read or watch a brief news story that illuminates several different democratic principles or concerns, prompting them to note which parts of the story seem most and least democratic.

- b. Create small discussion groups and have students compare answers, consider whether/how their answers correspond to the elements listed in the worksheet (provide a screenshot of the list on PowerPoint for their reference), and discuss their reactions to the news story.
    - c. At the end of class, prompt students to write a few sentences about how the group discussion contributed to their own thinking about what democracy entails.
3. First half of class session #2:
  - a. Return the students' worksheets
  - b. Based on the students' worksheet answers, clarify listed elements; add additional elements to the list; and discuss their reactions to the class's top-5 rankings (the attached slide deck contains a bar graph template for this purpose).
4. Second half of class session #2:
  - a. Ask students to complete the right-hand column on the worksheet by giving a 1-5 rating of their current sense of the US's performance of all 14 elements on the list.
  - b. Tabulate their responses for selected elements (the ones most students in the class had ranked in their "most essential" top 5 in class session #1) and lead a full-class discussion of the results.

***Add-ons and extensions:***

- A homework assignment between the two class sessions: Students can practice recognizing, naming, and reflecting on elements of democracy in a different news story – either one you provide, or one they find on their own.
- Post-module reflection: At the end of the second class session or for homework afterwards prompt students to write a reflection on how the module contributed to their democratic sensibilities.
- For a longer module: compare the worksheet elements list and the students' rating of the United States' performance to the criteria and scores provided by expert-based democracy ratings (e.g., the Economist Intelligence Unit's Democracy Index or Freedom House's Freedom Map)