

# FOUNDING PRINCIPLES

+ VIRTUES & VICES

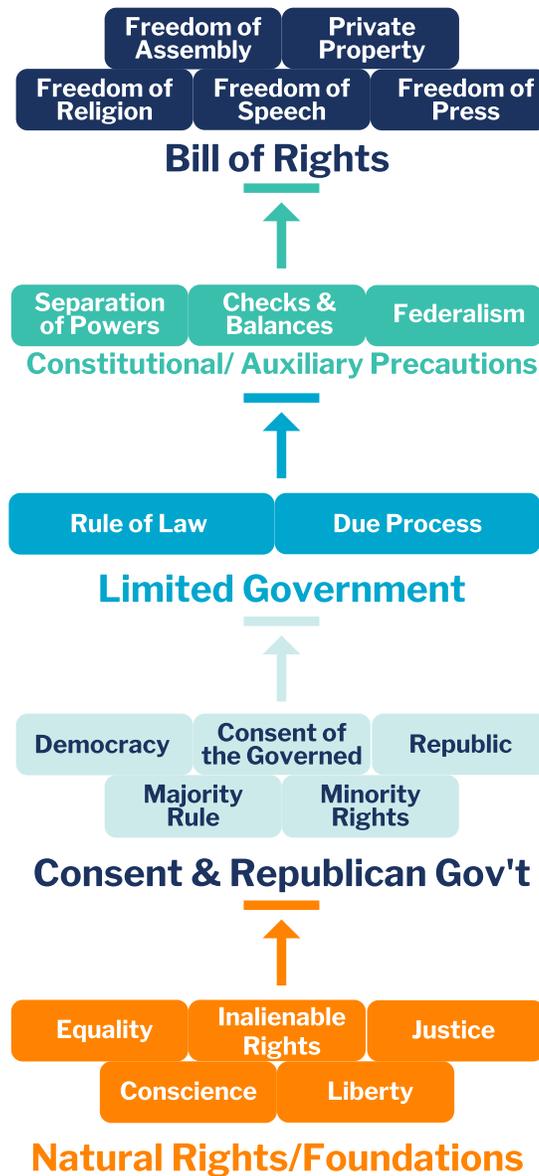
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## INTRODUCTION

In 1776, the Second Continental Congress declared the United States' independence from the Empire of Great Britain with a statement of principles. These principles, rooted in an understanding of natural rights and the experience of self-rule, outlined the foundations of a new nation. This set of principles and ideals have guided and shaped the public life and the American character. The American people continue to strive to realize more fully these principles and ideals. Drawn from an examination of human nature and the purposes of government, these principles and virtues define the framework of American republican government of ordered liberty, but they are also universal principles for all humans. Together with essential civic virtues, they help form the conscience of the nation against which Americans judge the justice of their laws. These civic virtues bind a self-governing people together in communities that facilitate a healthy civil society and are necessary to the enduring survival of the republic. As Americans we believe it is essential to understand and implement these fundamental or founding principles and civic virtues.

## UNDERSTANDING THE PRINCIPLES

The foundations of the government of the United States are oriented around the ideas of liberty and equality as articulated in the natural rights tradition of John Locke and others. This tradition holds that, by nature of their existence, human beings possess rights, independent of any governing or societal power. In the maintenance of these rights natural rights thinkers saw the greatest possibility for individuals to flourish through the freedom to direct their own lives. The people maintain their freedom and rights through formal institutions of government and informal community traditions and institutions. This maintenance requires the people to be vigilant and informed in order to ensure that these institutions are directed towards their right ends. It was an understanding of these fundamental principles that informed the design of the United States Constitution and Bill of Rights. The principles contained below define the protections built into the Constitution for this purpose. In understanding these principles, We the People are better able to protect and advance freedom and opportunity for all.



## FOUNDING PRINCIPLES: DEFINITIONS

*This list of principles and virtues is not meant to be comprehensive but instead to be a starting place for the investigation of the American experiment in self-government.*

### NATURAL RIGHTS FOUNDATION

These are the philosophical principles which provide the focus for the governing structure of the United States.

#### Natural/Inalienable Rights

Rights which belong to us by nature and can only be justly abridged through due process. Examples are life, liberty, property, and the pursuit of happiness.

#### Liberty

Except where authorized by citizens through the Constitution, government does not have the authority to limit freedom.

### Equality

All individuals have the same status regarding their claim as human beings to natural rights and treatment under the law.

### CONSENT & REPUBLICAN GOVERNMENT

These principles of republicanism provide the foundations upon which the sovereignty of the people within government is maintained

#### Majority Rule/Minority Rights:

Laws may be made with the consent of the majority, subject to the limitation that those laws do not infringe on the inalienable rights of the minority.

#### Consent of the Governed/Popular Sovereignty:

The power of government comes from the people.

### LIMITED GOVERNMENT

To keep the governing power to its proper scope, government must be limited and provide recourse for citizens to be protected from arbitrary power.

#### Limited Government

Citizens are best able to pursue happiness when government is confined to those powers which protect their life, liberty, and property.

#### Due Process

The government must interact with all people according to the duly-enacted laws and apply these rules equally with respect to all people.

### CONSTITUTIONAL/AUXILIARY PRECAUTIONS

To keep government within these limited bounds, there must be rules that bind both individual citizens and government action.

#### Rule of Law

Government and citizens all abide by the same laws regardless of political power. Those laws are justly applied, consistent with an ethos of liberty, and stable.

#### Checks and Balances

Constitutional powers are distributed among the branches of government allowing each to limit the application of power of the other branches and to prevent expansion of power of any branch.

#### Federalism

The people delegate certain powers to the national government, while the states retain other powers; and the people, who authorize both the states and national government, retain all freedoms not delegated to the governing bodies.

#### Separation of Powers

A system of distinct powers built into the Constitution, to prevent an accumulation of power in one branch.

### BILL OF RIGHTS

As a final recourse against government abuse, the Founding generation codified a list of rights that they believed were essential to the maintenance of their constitutional governing structure.

#### Freedom of Religion

The right to choose one's religion or form of worship, if any, without interference; freedom of conscience

#### Freedom of Speech, Press, and Assembly

The legal right to express one's opinions freely, orally or in writing, and the right to gather with others in groups of one's choice without arbitrary or unreasonable restrictions.

#### Private Property

The natural right of all individuals to create, obtain, and control their possessions, beliefs, faculties, and opinions, as well as the fruits of their labor.

# VIRTUES

# & VICES

Popular sovereignty and self-government are built on the assumption that we can be self-governing. This means politically but it also means in our economic and private social lives. The habits that promote this self-governing are what we refer to as Virtues.

## **Civil Discourse**

Reasoned and respectful sharing of ideas between individuals is the primary way people influence change in society/ government, and is essential to maintain self-government.

## **Contribution**

To discover one's passions and talents, and use them to create what is beautiful and needed. To work hard to take care of oneself, one's family, and one's community.

## **Courage**

The ability to take constructive action in the face of fear or danger. To stand firm as a person of character and do what is right, especially when it is unpopular or puts one at risk.

## **Honor**

Demonstrating good character, integrity, and thinking and acting honestly.

## **Humility**

To remember that one's ignorance is far greater than one's knowledge. To give praise to those who earn it.

## **Integrity**

To tell the truth, expose untruths, and keep one's promises.

## **Initiative**

Exercising the power, energy, or ability to lead, organize, or accomplish something.

## **Justice**

Upholding of what is fair, just, and right. To stand for equally applied rules that respect the rights and dignity of all, and make sure everyone obeys them.

## **Moderation**

The avoidance of excesses or extremes.

## **Perseverance**

To continue in a task or course of action or hold to a belief or commitment, in spite of obstacles or difficulty; choosing to take the right path rather than the easy path, and to stay the course.

## **Respect**

Honor or admiration of someone or something. To protect one's mind and body as precious aspects of identity. To extend that protection to all other individuals.

## **Responsibility**

Acting on good judgment about what is right or wrong, or deserving the trust of others. Knowing and doing what is best, not what is most popular. Demonstrating trustworthiness by making decisions in the best long-term interests of the people. Individuals must take care of themselves and their families, and be vigilant to preserve their liberty and the liberty of others.

## **Prudence**

Practical wisdom that applies reason and other virtues to discern right courses of action in specific situations.

## **Resourcefulness**

Taking constructive action in difficult situations quickly and imaginatively.

## **Self-Governance**

To be self-controlled, avoiding extremes, and to reject unwise influence or control by others.

## **Vigilance**

Being alert and attentive, taking action to remedy possible injustices or evils.

## **Ambition**

To be driven by self-interest while pursuing power and fame for oneself rather than serving the republic or the good of others.

## **Avarice**

To allow the love of wealth to lead one to do wrong in acquiring it.

## **Deception**

To lie to oneself and/or others, thinking and behaving as though something is right when it is wrong and unjust.

## **Demagoguery**

To lead others astray because one controls or manipulates their emotions through moving words or a deceptive vision.

## **Hubris**

To have excessive pride, vanity, and arrogance that usually leads to a tragic fall.

## **Injustice**

To harm others by applying unequal rules and damaging another's inalienable rights and dignity.

## **Political Intolerance**

Disrespect for the different political views of others, leading one to violate their inalienable rights

## *Virtue is...*

Virtue is conduct that reflects universal principles of moral and ethical excellence essential to living a worthwhile life and to effective self-government. For many thinkers throughout the ages, attributes of character such as justice, responsibility, perseverance, respect, and others were thought to flow from an understanding of the rights and obligations of human beings. Virtue is compatible with, but does not require, religious belief. One's thoughts and words alone do not make a person virtuous. According to Aristotle, virtue must be based on a just objective, it requires action, and it must become a habit.

## **Private Virtue**

The idea that, in order to sustain liberty, individuals must be knowledgeable and must conduct themselves according to principles of moral and ethical excellence, consistent with their rights and obligations.

## **Civic Virtue**

A set of actions and habits necessary for the safe, effective, and mutually beneficial participation in a society.

## **Vice**

Immoral or wicked behavior.

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