

Which characteristic(s) of political systems do you think are most important to a liberal democracy?

**Reprinted with the permission of Allison Kirchner**

I firmly believe that there are several major characteristics that are important to a liberal democracy. First, rule of law emphasizes equality and parity between individuals of all social classes and ethnic origins. It makes people follow rules and norms that benefit society. It follows the maxim that no one is above the law. Therefore, it emphasizes individual over corporate rights. Second, it is important to have separation of church and state because religious presuppositions have no place in the political decisions of the state. Religion and government functions should remain separate because they function indiscriminately from each other. Their emphasis and focus are very different because the church deals with the inanimate needs of people while the state deals with animate needs of the people. Finally, the right to vote is arguably one of the most important aspects of a liberal democracy. Universality within a liberal democracy substantiates the notion that suffrage gives the right for all individuals indiscriminately to have a say in political matters: one person, one vote. A nation-state operating under a liberal democracy ensures the rights of people, regardless of status, and ensures people have a voice; it is an effective system.

One of the most important characteristics of a liberal democracy is rule of law. This is because justice is applied equally to everyone. Individuals, whether rich or poor, are given the same degree of due process. Individuals share the same rights and privileges before the law as there are checks and balances to impede the possibility of coercion. Rule of law also motivates people to follow rules, norms, and mores because it is just by nature and is indiscriminate. Because of its just nature, it benefits society in that it corresponds with the notion that all persons are created equally. Rule of law deems no person is above the law, promoting the idea of legal equality under the system. This aspect of a liberal democracy works for the rights of people under the law, regardless of their status.

Allison Kirchner

Another important characteristic of a liberal democracy is separation of church and state. Separation of church and state is an imperative because the issues dealt with by both are exclusive to each other. The church deals with matters that are metaphysical in nature while the state has to deal with more substantive issues that are less spiritual in character. This is important in a liberal democracy because even though we dichotomize church from state as holistic beings, we need what both have to offer. This separation of church and state in a liberal democracy ensures the individual the freedom to worship and allows a variety of religious options to exist within a nation-state.

I believe that the most important characteristic of a liberal democracy is the right to vote. The right to vote is a privilege. It allows people to have a say in what goes on politically in their state. At the personal level, it draws upon the idea that we are all important fixtures within the political makeup of our nation-state because it is the people by their vote that promotes change within liberal democracies. Representation by population means that the majority of people determine the direction of the nation-state. This is a much more equitable form of government because majority rules. Suffrage implies the notion that regardless of race or religion, if you are a citizen, you are entitled to all of the privileges granted under our political system, most importantly the right to vote. The right to vote gives a voice to each individual. It is up to the individual, though, to assert his or her privilege to cast a ballot or become involved in political arenas.

These aspects of a liberal democracy are critical. When people recognize their rights are being protected and acknowledge their individual voices are important, they are more likely to become involved with the direction of their nation-state rather than sit passively and feel powerless. When the rulers of a nation-state respect their mandate under this political system and work for the quality of life for the people, they become a respected and influential body of leaders. An effective liberal democracy gives people rights – and honours them; it gives people a voice – and listens to it.