



# A Democracy Minute

A Life Stories Learning Resource

Democracy comes from the Greek words “demos,” meaning people, and “kratos” meaning power. Democracy as a governing system originated more than 2,400 years ago in ancient Greece to protect and promote the rights, interests, and welfare of the people. It can be thought of as the “power of the people” and a way of governing which depends on the people’s will.

A *Democracy Minute* is a Life Stories Learning initiative reminding us of this tradition by sharing diverse points of view on democratic values, principles, and ideals. (11) 60-second thought-provoking segments available on the Life Stories’ [Instagram](#) channel and on Life Stories [Learning](#) will keep conversations about democracy alive and current for use in classrooms, professional spaces, or even shared with friends and family.



## TOPICS AND THEMES

- ★ PATRIOTISM with [Sherrilyn Ifill](#), Lawyer
- ★ A FREE PRESS with [Jim Lehrer](#), Journalist and Co-Founder of PBS News Hour
- ★ A PEOPLE’S DEMOCRACY with [George Takei](#), Actor and Activist
- ★ THE PEACEFUL TRANSFER OF POWER with [Martin Nesbitt](#), American Businessman
- ★ AMERICAN OPTIMISM with [Mitt Romney](#), Politician
- ★ THE STORY OF OUR COUNTRY with [Jon Meacham](#), Historian and Author
- ★ WHAT THE NATION CAN BE with [Edna Greene Medford](#), Historian
- ★ SHIFTING PERCEPTIONS OF RACE with [Michele Norris](#), Journalist
- ★ CIVIC PARTICIPATION with [Dale Minami](#), Civil Rights Lawyer
- ★ NONVIOLENCE IN AMERICA with [John Lewis](#), Politician and Activist
- ★ VOTING with [Lisa Tetrault](#), Historian



## FOR CLASSROOMS

A *Democracy Minute* can be used to introduce a new theme or topic related to democratic ideas and ideals. The short clips can be a fantastic bell-ringer activity to begin a lesson, or provide a new or different point of view to supplement an existing lesson in courses such as Civics or U.S. History. These topics and voices remind us of the breadth, depth, and complexity of our modern democracy and can inspire students to be active, thoughtful, and engaged citizens.

Through *A Democracy Minute*, students can:

- Discuss the rights, privileges, and responsibilities of citizenship
- Explore different expressions and experiences of democratic participation
- Reflect on their values, feelings, and beliefs surrounding our democracy today



## WATCH

Access the clips on [Life Stories Instagram](#) or watch the full collection on the Life Stories Learning [Resources](#) page.



**Life Stories**  
Individual Lives. Collective Impact.

## DISCUSS AND EXPLORE

Connect with *A Democracy Minute* thought leader by linking to their biography on the Life Stories [Interview Archive](#) page, and reflect on a quote that reinforces the segment's title, before discussing a topic-specific question.



### [Sherrilyn Ifill](#) on Patriotism

According to Sherrilyn Ifill, "To demand that your country be what it says it is, is actually the height of patriotism. It is the willingness to fight for your country".

- *How do you define patriotism?*



### [Jim Lehrer](#) on A Free Press

Jim Lehrer shares, "Without a free press, according to Jefferson, you are not going to have a democracy."

- *What do you think is the role of a free press in a democracy?*



### [George Takei](#) on A People's Democracy

George Takei's father passed on the belief that "Our democracy is dependent on people who cherish those shining ideals and actively participate in the process."

- *What shining ideals of democracy do you carry?*



### [Martin Nesbitt](#) on the Peaceful Transfer of Power

When Martin Nesbitt attended Barack Obama's inauguration in 2009, he recalls, "When I walked out and looked out on the mall [in Washington D.C.] and saw two million people, standing there, celebrating the peaceful transition of power in this country, it gave you a sense of what made America great."

- *Why is the peaceful transfer of power important in a democracy?*



### [Mitt Romney](#) on American Optimism

"The elixir of freedom" is the metaphor Mitt Romney uses to express his American optimism, connecting it to examples such as economic competition, the rule of law, and our education system.

- *Do you share Romney's optimism? What gives you optimism about America?*



### [Jon Meacham](#) on The Story of Our Country

American history, Jon Meacham argues, is riddled with examples when decisions were made that steered the country on what he calls "the wrong path" including slavery, Japanese incarceration, and Cold War policies. The story of the country, he contends, is about "finding a way to the right path and bringing enough people along with you so we are on it."

- *How would you describe the story of our country and what ensures we choose the right path rather than the wrong path in a democracy?*



### [Edna Greene Medford](#) on What the Nation Can Be

Edna Greene Medford explains that while President Lincoln was a man of the South, he overcame some of his prejudices long enough to do the right thing. As a result, he becomes "so much more important to the nation as a symbol of what the nation can be and can do when we look at him that way.

- *How do you think Lincoln's evolution on issues such as slavery and emancipation reflect what the nation can be and can do?*



### [Michele Norris](#) on Shifting Perceptions of Race

Michele Norris believes that the Obama presidency was "one of the most important hallmarks on race," occurring at a time when the country was moving towards a majority-minority culture and definitions of Americanness were being redefined.

- *What do you believe are the factors that shift cultural norms? How do you define Americanness?*



### [Dale Minami](#) on Civic Participation

Dale Minami believes "Everyday people, all of us as Americans, can contribute to the movement of social justice forward, that arch of history that Martin Luther King Jr. talks about."

- *Do you share Dale Minami's idealism? In what ways do you think his family history and professional work (see his biography) contribute to his belief in the capacity for justice?*



### [John Lewis](#) on Nonviolence in America

"The power of the forces of nonviolence," according to Congressman John Lewis, "was to say to elected officials and to say to the larger American community, we can change, we can help create what Dr. King and Jim Lawson called the beloved community."

- *How do you understand the relationship between the philosophy and practices of nonviolence and democracy?*



### [Lisa Tetrault](#) on Voting

Lisa Tetrault reminds us that while many assume differently, "Voting is considered a privilege and not a right." Tetrault expands on this distinction in "[Winning the Vote](#)," an article published by the National Endowment for the Humanities celebrating the hundredth anniversary of the 19th amendment.

- *Do you believe voting is a fundamental right that should be accessible to all citizens, or is it a privilege that can be earned or restricted?*