

CASE STUDY

Roots of Indigenous Democracy

We often view democracy as a Greek tradition. However, ancient Greece was not the only society in our past that gave people a say in how they were governed. Early democratic structures can be found across the world, from India to China to Iceland to Africa.

Closer to home, many nations in the land we now call North and South America embraced democratic concepts. A good example is the Haudenosaunee, also known as the Iroquois Confederacy. This collection of five (and later six) nations built their decision-making processes around the democratic principle of everyone having a say.

Government of the Iroquois Confederacy

The Iroquois Confederacy was an alliance of the Mohawks, Oneidas, Onondagas, Cayugas, and Senecas. In the 1700s, a sixth nation was added when the Tuscaroras migrated into Haudenosaunee territory.



Traditional lands of the original five nations of the Haudenosaunee, around 1500.

The Confederacy formed in 1142 with the guidance of Dekanawidah, The Peacemaker. Dekanawidah persuaded the five nations to accept the Great Law of Peace. The Great Law ended the nations' battles and created a new system of governance that would allow them to coexist in peace.

Confederacy government was a bottom-up structure. Decision-making began in the community, and worked its way upwards through the Haudenosaunee leadership.





CONSENSUS

Consensus is not unanimity. If a decision is unanimous, everyone agrees. If a decision is reached by consensus, some people will accept that they cannot get their way.

Understanding how the Confederacy's governance worked requires an understanding of the bottom-up nature of Haudenosaunee communities.

The Haudenosaunee lived in settlements made of longhouses. Each longhouse was home to a clan of 30 or 40 people, consisting of families and extended families. The men and women of each clan would meet separately in their own councils. At these meetings, they would discuss day-to-day issues and come to a consensus on what the clan should do. The councils then advised the clan mother of their decision.



A reconstructed 15th century Haudenosaunee longhouse at Crawford Lake Ontario.

Clan mothers were the oldest and most respected women of each clan. In addition to overseeing their clan, it was their job to select and advise the Hoyaneh. The Hoyaneh was the male leader (chief) of each settlement. Hoyaneh served at the will of the clan mothers: if they did not fulfill their role of preserving peace and carefully considering the advice of each clan, the clan mothers had the authority to replace the Hoyaneh with another person. Because the Hoyaneh served at the will of the clan mothers, and because the clan mothers took the advice of their clan, community governance of the Haudenosaunee was truly a bottom-up system.

Consensus Building and Peacekeeping across Nations

When it came to issues of importance to the Five Nations as a whole, the Grand Council would meet. The Grand Council was made up of the Hoyaneh from each of the 50 smaller communities of the Haudenosaunee, split into five distinct councils, one for each nation.

Decisions by the Grand Council of the five nations followed an orderly process to build consensus in decision-making.

The Older Brothers

The first step in coming to a consensus was having the Hoyaneh from the Seneca and Mohawk arrive at a decision. They were called The Older Brothers. When the Older Brothers made a decision, they would pass the decision forward to the Cayuga and Oneida.

The Younger Brothers

The Cayuga and Oneida were called The Younger Brothers. They would consider the decision made by the Older Brothers. If the Younger Brothers did not agree with the Older Brothers, they would ask the Older Brothers to reconsider their decision. If the Younger Brothers agreed with the Older Brothers, they would pass the decision forward to the Onondaga.

The Keepers of the Council Fire

The Onondaga were known as the Keepers of the Council Fire. If the Onondaga agreed with the decision of the Older and Younger Brothers, then a final decision was made. If they disagreed, the issue would be sent back to the Older Brothers, and the process would start all over again.

This system of passing decisions forward and back allowed the Confederacy to be governed by consensus. Everyone had to consider their own interests and the interests of others.

DISCUSS

1. Hoyaneh means “Caretaker of the Peace.” Why is it important that our leaders are caretakers of the peace?
2. Western democracy rests upon the idea that the majority should get its way. Haudenosaunee governance relied upon building consensus across several communities: a simple majority was not necessarily enough to make a decision.
 - a) What could happen if the majority does not fully consider the impact of their decision on the minority?
 - b) Would Canada be better-governed if we took more time to build consensus?

LESSON TWO: What are Plebiscites and Referendums?

OBJECTIVE

Students will learn about plebiscites and referendums. This lesson will expand pathways to consider if the majority is always right.

PROCEDURES

1. According to Plato's *Laches*, Socrates said:

It seems to me that to decide things well it is necessary to decide them on the basis of knowledge and not by the majority.

Lead classroom discussion of this statement. When the majority makes a decision, is it necessarily made on the basis of knowledge?

2. Reconsider the Haudenosaunee system of using back-and-forth decision-making processes. How does slowing down our decision-making processes and interacting amongst communities allow for better use of knowledge?

3. Read "What are Plebiscites and Referendums?"

KEY QUESTION

- **Direct democracy in ancient Athens helped keep the powerful in check. How does (even the threat of) a plebiscite or referendum keep the powerful in check?**

CASE STUDY: SASKATCHEWAN'S HISTORY OF DIRECT DEMOCRACY

4. Use case study to explore early demands for direct democracy in Saskatchewan.

FURTHER EXPLORATION

5. To consider the influence of the wealthy and the elites on our laws, check out the background information Progressive Personal Taxation in Lesson 1.4: Paying for Government Services in *Our Government Our Election*. Find it at teachers.plea.org.

