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**Civics 101**

**Episode 37- AUTOCRACIES OLIGARCHIES AND DEMOCRACIES OH MY!**

**Virginia Prescott:** [00:00:18] I'm Virginia Prescott and this is Civics 101. The podcast refresher course on some basics that you may have forgotten or slept through in school. Since starting this podcast we've gotten so many questions from you that our producer Logan Shannon started filing them into different categories. Perhaps our favorite category is the one we call What are We? Is the U.S. a republic,a constitutional democracy or a federation? Are those all the same thing? So today we are tackling all of the what are we questions with a glossary of familiar terms and a primer on different forms of government. Our guest is Seth Masket director of the new Center on American politics at the University of Denver. I think we may need an overhead projector for this one. This seems very basic civisc.

**Seth Masket:** [00:01:01] I always have one with me.

**Virginia Prescott:** [00:01:03] So it's hard to see the forest for the trees sometimes. Let's start with the big three basic umbrellas that cover pretty much all forms of government autocracy oligarchy democracy. What are these respectively?

**Seth Masket:** [00:01:15] OK So pretty straightforward autocracy simply means rule by one single person. An oligarchy means rule by the few. And democracy means rule by the many are rule by the people.

**Virginia Prescott:** [00:01:28] So did I get them all, do all governments fall under these categories?

**Seth Masket:** [00:01:32] More or less so are quite a few governments have some combination of those, there's very few that are that are purely one type of government or another.

**Virginia Prescott:** [00:01:40] What would be an example of a combination.

**Seth Masket:** [00:01:44] Well we might think of a monarchy as what is essentially an autocracy but a number of them actually have shared powers between a king or queen and a parliament of some sort.

**Virginia Prescott:** [00:01:58] All right let's start with what we are not what are some examples of autocracies.

**Seth Masket:** [00:02:03] So an autocracy might be a dictatorship like for example North Korea where you simply have one person who makes all the key decisions for the state.

**Virginia Prescott:** [00:02:13] And you mentioned monarchy like where the king or queen is head of state in England it's just symbolic.

**Seth Masket:** [00:02:19] Yeah so I mean there are certainly some monarchies where what the king or queen says is the rule for the land although the United Kingdom is somewhat different that's what we usually call a constitutional monarchy. There is a monarch currently Queen Elizabeth II there but she and her family don't really manage the day to day operations of the government. There's a democratically elected parliament that does that and forms a government although it does so with the Queen's permission. The United Kingdom and other governments like that are really more of a democracy than a monarchy.

**Virginia Prescott:** [00:02:51] Unlike something like Saudi Arabia where there is a king.

**Seth Masket:** [00:02:54] Exactly.

**Virginia Prescott:** [00:02:55] So here is a specific listener questions that seems relevant. Ok, they write; totalitarianism, dictatorship, despotism. I'm hearing these words but I'm not sure what they really mean or how they differ from each other. Are they the same thing?

**Seth Masket:** [00:03:12] It's a good question and I think it's important to distinguish here between -ocracys and -ism's. So if a word ends with ocracy that generally refers to a form of government such as democracy. Anything that ends with an ism like fascism or communism or capitalism is an ideology or some sort of governing philosophy. So you could have a capitalist democracy. You can also have a socialist democracy. To more directly answer that question a dictatorship is when a single politician or leader is concerned with maintaining his or her own political power. That sometimes also called authoritarianism or an authoritarian which is to say that that person is bent on maintaining their authority. A totalitarian regime goes beyond that. Totalitarianism is based on the idea of exerting control over every aspect of society including controlling the economy the arts, education, the media and so forth.

**Virginia Prescott:** [00:04:11] How about despotism?

**Seth Masket:** [00:04:12] So Despotism is kind of an insult really, it's, a despot is a pejorative term referring to a tyrant or a dictator. It's basically someone who wields absolute power and they often will use cruelty or violence in order to do so.

**Virginia Prescott:** [00:04:26] So what an example of those like totalitarianism or dictatorship in our contemporary world?

**Seth Masket:** [00:04:32] The example that comes up very often is of course Nazi Germany which really was a totalitarian system. Similarly the Soviet Union under Stalin. These were governments that really managed to mobilize the entirety of their country in service of their own rule and often relied on a great deal of violence and repression in order to do so.

**Virginia Prescott:** [00:04:55] Okay let's get to the next big umbrella you mentioned oligarchy. What are some examples types of oligarchies.

[00:05:02] Well let's see. An oligarchy can be any system where you have a small group of elites who seem to hold the power and make all the key decisions. You could describe religions, or some types of religions as oligarchies. Political parties have sometimes been described as oligarchies where a few key insiders are making all the key decisions about who to nominate and what the party stands for. And there are certainly some who maintain that the United States is in fact a form of oligarchy and that you have some smaller groups whether it's corporations, the wealthy, the 1 percent, who seem to have more power to influence elections than the rest of us do.

**Virginia Prescott:** [00:05:40] All right let's jump into democracies. Here's another bit from the what are we Section 1 listener says that the US is sometimes referred to as a constitutional democracy sometimes a republic. So what did these terms mean, and what's more accurate?

**Seth Masket:** [00:05:56] There are lots of types of democracy. It's not a really easy cut and dry answer that this is a democracy and this isn't. We often refer to a pure democracy as something that we might have seen in ancient Athens or even in modern New England township where essentially all adults can get together and make decisions for the community. More typically we'll see like a constitutional democracy which simply means that it's a democracy that has a constitution which has some set of written rules governing the behavior of the state that are very difficult to change. You could also describe the United States for example as a representational democracy because we elect representatives to make decisions on our behalf rather than just getting together as citizens to vote individually on everything.

**Virginia Prescott:** [00:06:43] So how about a republic?

**Seth Masket:** [00:06:46] A republic is very similar to a representational democracy. It's essentially we we select people to make decisions on our behalf and where there's usually an elected president or prime minister rather than a king or queen.

**Virginia Prescott:** [00:07:01] So if you say a democratic republic, that's it's a redundancy.

**Seth Masket:** [00:07:07] Um, yes and No. It's, I think that's actually a pretty apt description for the United States in that we have aspects of our democracy that are democratic where individuals do make direct decisions about about their lives and their government. And we also have aspects and where we've given control to our elected representatives who make decisions for us. So we really have aspects of both.

**Virginia Prescott:** [00:07:28] So it is accurate to say the United States is a constitutional democracy and the United States is a republic.

**Seth Masket:** [00:07:35] I think both of those are accurate.

**Virginia Prescott:** [00:07:37] Ok. Two More words. First something Star Trek fans will be familiar with Federation. What's that.

**Seth Masket:** [00:07:43] So a federation is really a group of states that each have their own sovereignty they have their own power to self govern but they also cede some power to a higher government to oversee them all kind of in some ways similar to the arrangement between the American states and the federal government in that each of them has some power to control events within their borders but also cede some authority to a national government.

**Virginia Prescott:** [00:08:11] So the United States is a federation.

**Seth Masket:** [00:08:13] We're many things. Yes. You can you describe us as a federation.

**Virginia Prescott:** [00:08:16] All right. How about number two which may be confusing because of its use in U.S. history Confederation.

**Seth Masket:** [00:08:22] Yeah Confederation is somewhat different it's usually described as a group of states or countries that will band together for some common interest but don't necessarily cede very much power to a central government. So in some ways like the Articles of Confederation which was the first form of government we had after independence from England could be described as a confederation. It was really just the banding together of the states. It was generally considered too weak of a national government to be very effective.

**Virginia Prescott:** [00:08:53] How about the Confederacy which of course was a motivating party in the civil war.

**Seth Masket:** [00:08:59] Yes it's difficult to know whether to describe the Confederacy as an actual confederation. I mean it's interesting that they chose that term which was in part to push back against the idea of a strong national government. They wanted to say that states maintained a lot of power. Of course, the main thing that the Confederacy was concerned with was fighting a war and unifying for that purpose. So had they ever existed in peace time we might have had a better idea of how that functioned but the organization didn't survive very long.

**Virginia Prescott:** [00:09:34] Any examples of contemporary confederations in the worl?

**Seth Masket:** [00:09:38] Well we might consider the the European Union a form of a confederation in which you have some authority ceded to the European Union but but not very much for the most part you have independent states that maintain that you can also consider the United Nations an example of a confederation.

**Virginia Prescott:** [00:09:55] So if somebody asks you What are We what would you say?

**Seth Masket:** [00:09:58] Well obviously there's a lot that in some ways apply. I prefer to think of the United States as a democratic republic in the sense that we have some democratic aspects of our system. A lot of states have initiative voting or referenda. But we also empower representatives to make decisions on our behalf.

**Virginia Prescott:** [00:10:18] Seth Masket, I think it's time to turn off the overhead projector. Thanks so much.

**Seth Masket:** [00:10:23] Thank you for having me on.

**Virginia Prescott:** [00:10:24] Seth Masket he's director of the new Center on American politics at the University of Denver. He says as a writer and contributor to 538 dot com and the Pacific Standard among many other publications that's it for a lesson today as we are new members of the canopy network. We would like to welcome everybody pose new to Civics 101. There are a couple things you should know. First off most of our syllabus comes from you as in us the questions and we track down the right people to answer them. So if you've got a civics Querrey or you hear something on the news that doesn't make sense to you. Go to Civic's 1 1 podcast dot org and you'll find directions on how to send us a message or leave us a voice memo thing number two you should know is that we've got a really fabulous weekly newsletter that doubles as a study guide or supplemental reading materials and links to helpful video explainers. And of course plenty of funny gifts. It's called extra credit and you can sign up at the Web site. Again Civics 101 podcast dot org. That is it. Thanks so much for coming to class. Today's episode was produced and edited by Taylor Quinby music from broke for free in Virginia Prescott and Civics 101 is a production of New Hampshire Public Radio.