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Does Democracy Favor Oral Culture or Written Culture?

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Democracy refers to a type of government whereby the citizens of a country have the right of an equal say in the decisions that will influence their lives. The term *democracy* has its origin in the Greek language and literally means, “rule of the people.” Culture is passed down from generation-to-generation and can either be transmitted orally or through writing. Democracy tends to favor oral culture over written culture.

Lecturer Mark Federman at the University of Toronto spent a significant amount of time studying the influences on how society has been organized in its progression in his thesis and specifically in the starting chapter of *A Brief, 3,000-Year History of the Future of Organization*. His view is that in a society that is primarily oral, happenings and occurrences are expressed in a way that is concrete and subjective instead of abstract and objective. Learning in an oral fashion is communal in nature and includes those who work together to make it a learning environment based on experience. An oral culture is also one that is centered around community and needs constant repetition and engagement in order to have a lasting impact. Democracy is participatory in nature and encourages freedom of expression and perspectives. In this way, a democracy favors oral culture, as it aims to involve every citizen and places great emphasis on community, engagement and experience.

Through writing, information can be spread effectively, making it unnecessary for people to be physically present at the time of communication. In this sense, democracy could be seen to favor written culture because all types of governments (including democracies) have to rely on written communication to deliver policies, procedures and reports. However, all forms of organizations which have a social purpose (as do democratic governments) place a great value

on oral culture and as a result are able to express themselves well and are engaging to the public.

Great democracies tend to have charismatic leaders. When a tale is spoken, it is felt in a way that cannot be compared to a written story. A great example of an engaging democratic leader is the President of the United States, Barack Obama. The human voice shapes a story using language, tone and subtle nuances. The story comes to life and enlivens the audience for their support.

Federman also shares that over time an emphasis on written culture would lead to the development of distinctly undemocratic groupings. There would be a focus on a delegated authority which would lead to a central bureaucracy among those persons who are literate. On the other hand, the illiterate would be under the control of those who have mastered the power of written culture. Further, with the advent of the printed word, it is easy to see how an organizational structure can become fragmented with a focus on functionality and objectives. However, with the current greater emphasis on instantaneous wide-scale electronic communication methods, there is a possibility of greater participatory and collaborative forms, such as democracies.

On the whole, the characteristics of an oral culture are similar to those of a democracy. They share the similarities of being participatory in nature, collaborative, engaging and experiential. Therefore, democracy tends to favor oral culture over written culture. With a democracy, the emphasis is on the people; a democratic country's principles state that the government is ruled by the people and for the people. In that sense, a democracy favors oral culture to a larger extent than its written counterpart.

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