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Contact: Lynne Bradley, leb@alawash.org
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Libraries: the Cornerstone of Democracy
By Nancy Kranich, President of the American Library Association
(adapted from an earlier article in *American Libraries*)

*Libraries are . . . essential to the functioning of a democratic society . . .
libraries are the great symbols of the freedom of the mind.*
Franklin D. Roosevelt

Democracies need libraries. An informed public constitutes the very foundation of a democracy; after all, democracies are about discourse—discourse among the people. If a and open access to this information to all its citizens. It must ensure that citizens have the resources to develop the information literacy skills necessary to participate in the democratic process. It must allow unfettered dialogue and guarantee freedom of expression.

All of this is done in our libraries, the cornerstone of democracy in our communities. Libraries are for everyone, everywhere. They provide safe spaces for public dialogue. They disseminate information so the public can participate in the processes of governance. They provide access to government information so that the public can monitor the work of its elected officials and benefit from the data collected and disseminated by public policy makers. They serve as gathering places for the community to share interests and concerns. They provide opportunities for citizens to develop the skills needed to gain access to information of all kinds and to put information to effective use.

Ultimately, discourse among informed citizens assures civil society. In the United States, libraries have greeted the self-determination of succeeding waves of immigrants by offering safe havens and equal access to learning. They continue this mission today. Indeed, libraries ensure the freedom to read, to view, to speak and to participate. They are the cornerstone of democracy.

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