

# American Government

Since the advent of civilization, humans have had an impulse to form governments. It is an experiment thousands of years in the making.

This course asks a lot of fundamental questions about the nature of government and society. Among them:

- What is the purpose of government?
- What types of governments are there? What is a democracy?
- Where is the center of governmental power? Is it national or local?
- Is America's government too big? Too small? Constantly shifting with the times?
- What are the rights and responsibilities of each American citizen?

We do not answer these questions; that is up to you. Defining the role of government has been thousands of years in the making. Welcome to the laboratory of democracy.

This document has been assembled from the online version of [American Government from US History.org](#). This document is abridged to contain only those portions of the book that are used in Unit 1 of the Puyallup School District Civics course. Sections in this unit have been rearranged from the online version.



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# American Government

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# The Nature of Government

## The Nature of Government



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*Is government to be feared or loved? Thomas Hobbes set out to discover that in his book *Leviathan*, which spawned this famous title page that depicts government as a giant towering over the land. Is the king protecting or threatening his country?*

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Do you believe in government "BY THE PEOPLE, FOR THE PEOPLE, AND OF THE PEOPLE"? Few Americans would say no, especially since these words spoken by Abraham Lincoln in his 1863 Gettysburg Address are firmly imbedded in the American political system. Yet governments over the centuries have not always accepted this belief in popularly elected rule.



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*Jacques-Louis David painted *The Death of Socrates* as a metaphor for the French government during the revolution. Socrates represents the revolutionaries that martyred themselves for their principles, while the Athenian government represents the corrupt French nobility.*

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Even in the modern United States many skeptics criticize government as being controlled by greedy, corrupt people who are only interested in lining their own pockets. So which view is correct? Is government an instrument of its citizens, an entity that represents and protects a beloved country, or an oppressive, self-serving monster that deserves no one's respect?

If we look to the past for an answer, we find comments like these:

*"Behold my sons, with how little wisdom the world is governed." -Axel Oxenstiern (1583-1654)*

*"The government that governs least governs best." -Thomas Jefferson*

# The Nature of Government



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*Governments are everywhere. From the earliest tribe through the most recent nation to find its place on the map, government in some form has been necessary to ensure safety and order. In the 1600s, Rembrandt painted the government of the local clothmaker's guild.*

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The conflict, alive and well today, is solidly based in the past. Governments are sometimes idealized and often criticized. Yet virtually every society in history has had some form of government, either as simple as the established leadership of a band of prehistoric people, or as complex as the government of the United States today.

Do varying opinions of political power rise from the fact that some governments are good, and others are bad? Does power corrupt leaders, or is it possible for them to administer governments fairly? The American political system is rooted in the ideal that a just government can exist, and that its citizens can experience a good measure of liberty and equality in their personal lives.

We will begin by considering reasons why governments exist, and some types of government including democracy, particularly as it is practiced in the modern United States.

## Foreign Policy: What Now?



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*The United States exercises its foreign policy through economic aid. For example, famine relief in North Korea provides not only humanitarian assistance but also a foothold for the development of democratic ideals and institutions.*

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George Washington's Farewell Address in 1789 contained one major piece of advice to the country regarding relations with other nations: "avoid entangling alliances." Those words shaped United States foreign policy for more than a century.

Today some Americans think that Washington's words are still wise ones, and that the United States should withdraw from world affairs whenever possible. In truth, however, the United States has been embroiled in world politics throughout the 20th century, and as a result, foreign policy takes up a great deal of government's time, energy, and money.

If isolationism has become outdated, what kind of foreign policy does the United States follow? In the years after World War II, the United States was guided generally by containment — the policy of keeping communism from spreading beyond the countries already under its influence. The policy applied to a world divided by the Cold War, a struggle between the United States and the Soviet Union.

With the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, containment no longer made sense, so in the past ten years, the United States has been redefining its foreign policy. What are its responsibilities, if any, to the rest of the world, now that it has no incentive of luring them to the American "side" in the Cold War? Do the United States still need allies? What action should be taken, if any, when a "hot spot" erupts, causing misery to the people who live in the nations involved? The answers are not easy.



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*The economic side of containment: the Marshall Plan was devised to prevent communist takeover of European nations by pumping American aid into the ailing economies and infrastructures of Western Europe.*

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## Foreign Policy Goals

To investigate the nature of current United States foreign policy, the logical source is the State Department, whose job it is to define and direct it. Foreign policy goals include the following:

- Preserving the national security of the United States
- Promoting world peace and a secure global environment
- Maintaining a balance of power among nations
- Working with allies to solve international problems
- Promoting democratic values and human rights
- Furthering cooperative foreign trade and global involvement in international trade organizations

Examining these goals closely reveals that they are based on cooperation with other nations, although "preserving the national security of the United States" implies possible competition and conflict.



## Who Makes Foreign Policy?



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*Henry Kissinger served as National Security Adviser and Secretary of State under Presidents Nixon and Ford. He was a key figure in articulating U.S. foreign policy during the Cold War and remains one of the foremost authorities on international relations and diplomacy.*

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As with all policy making, many people and organizations have a hand in setting United States foreign policy. The main objective of foreign policy is to use diplomacy — or talking, meeting, and making agreements — to solve international problems. They try to keep problems from developing into conflicts that require military settlements.

The President almost always has the primary responsibility for shaping foreign policy. Presidents, or their representatives, meet with leaders of other nations to try to resolve international problems peacefully. According to the Constitution, Presidents sign treaties with other nations with the "advice and consent" of the Senate. So, the Senate, and to a lesser extent, the House of Representatives, also participate in shaping foreign policy.

The Secretary of State and many other officials of the State Department play major roles in setting foreign policy. The Secretary of State is usually the President's principal foreign policy adviser, and he or she is the chief coordinator of all governmental actions that affect relations with other countries.

The Foreign Service consists of ambassadors and other official representatives to more than 160 countries. Ambassadors and their staffs set up embassies in the countries recognized by the United States and serve as an American presence abroad. The embassies are part of the State Department, and they protect Americans overseas and are responsible for harmonious relationships with other countries.



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*Presidents can play a prominent role in the formation of foreign policy by brokering negotiations between disputing parties. Here, President Clinton meets with Palestinian President Yasser Arafat and Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin.*

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The National Security Council, as part of the Executive Office of the President, helps the President deal with foreign, military, and economic policies that affect national security. It consists of the President, the Vice President, the Secretary of State, the Secretary of Defense, and others that the President designates. The National Security Adviser — who coordinates the Council — sometimes has as much influence as the Secretary of State, depending on his or her relationship with the President.

The Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), one of the best-known agencies that sets foreign policy, gathers, analyzes, and transmits information from other countries that might be important to the security of the nation. Although the CIA is notorious for its participation in "spy" work and "top secret" investigations, much of its work is public and routine. The CIA Director is appointed by the President and confirmed by the Senate.

United States foreign policy has changed dramatically from George Washington's day. Although Americans always pay attention to the advice of their revered founder, the world is of course not the same. The many people that shape American foreign policy today accept the fact that the United States is a member of a world community that cannot afford to ignore the importance of getting along.



## Defense Policy



*The Pentagon, one of the largest office buildings in the world, houses the Department of Defense and the different branches of the armed forces.*

The United States used to have a War Department.

Until 1947 one of the President's cabinet-level positions was the Secretary of War, who headed the War Department.

President Harry Truman renamed them the Secretary of

Defense" and the Department of Defense, a telltale sign of changing times. The most destructive war of modern times — World War II — had ended only two years before, and nuclear weapons were introduced at its conclusion. The hope was that countries would "beat their swords into plowshares," according to the famous biblical statement that was to be engraved into a wall of the United Nations building in New York City. Still, a United States defense policy is necessary as a second level of protection in case diplomacy fails to solve international problems.

## Who Makes Defense Policy?



*UN economic sanctions have been in effect in Iraq since the end of the Gulf War. Iraqis regard then U.S. President George Bush as a criminal who has brought suffering to the innocent civilian population.*

The President takes the lead in defense policy. This initiative is based on the constitutional powers as "Commander in Chief" of the armed forces. The Constitution grants Congress the power to declare war, a power with much less meaning in today's world. The last time that the United States officially declared war was December 8, 1941, the day after the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor. Yet America has fought full-scale wars in Korea, Vietnam, and the Persian Gulf without declaring war.

Today the President is able to order covert — or secret — operations to avoid full-scale military involvement. If that option fails, the

President, sometimes with the vote of Congress, can try coercion, or tactics that force countries to "behave." Examples are economic boycotts, breaking diplomatic relations, and restricting tourist and business travel between countries. The United States has applied all of these tactics to Cuba since Communist leader Fidel Castro took over in 1959. The President may also avoid congressional



involvement in decision-making by endorsing limited military "interventions" without asking for a war declaration.

The Department of Defense is the President's main source of advice on military policy. Its headquarters is the Pentagon, which houses about 25,000 military and civilian personnel. True to the wishes of the founders, the Secretary of Defense — who heads the department — is always a civilian. However, all three military departments — the Army, the Navy, and the Air Force — are under the general supervision of the Secretary of Defense.

The Joint Chiefs of Staff is a five-member advisory body to the President, the National Security Council, and the Secretary of Defense. It includes the Chiefs of Staff of the three military departments and the commandant of the Marines. The President, with the consent of the Senate appoints all the service chiefs, as well as the chair.

## Threats to National Security

In a 1993 review of the mission and needs of the Defense Department, Secretary of Defense Les Aspin identified four major threats to U.S. national security:

1. The rapid growth of weapons of mass destruction, such as nuclear bombs
2. Regional conflicts in the Middle East, Korea, and elsewhere
3. The emergence of anti-democratic forces in Russia
4. The erosion of American economic strength



*Courtesy of the United Nations*

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*In addition to nuclear weapons, the threat of chemical or biological warfare is a central issue in the formulation of post-Cold War defense policy.*

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Even though the United States economy is considerably stronger than it was in 1993, all four threats remain important today. Since the Cold War ended in the early 1990s, Defense Department expenditures have come under closer scrutiny, with many people demanding that less be spent for defense programs. However, the Defense

Department concluded that the United States needs sufficient military forces to conduct military operations against two "rogue nations" — such as Iraq, Iran, Libya, and North Korea — at the same time. The Department also sees a number of other states, such as China or India, as potential problem states.



Just as developing a coherent foreign policy is problematic in these post-Cold War days, so is the question of defending the country against possible danger from outside its borders. The avoidance of war, as indicated by the 1947 name change from "Department of War" to "Department of Defense" today holds the highest priority, and the hope that the United States can play a role in limiting violent upheavals around the world is reflected in both its foreign and military policies.

# Comparative Political and Economic Systems

## A Small, Small, World?



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*Delegates from the 185-member states of the United Nations convene in the General Assembly Hall to discuss the pressing global issues of our time.*

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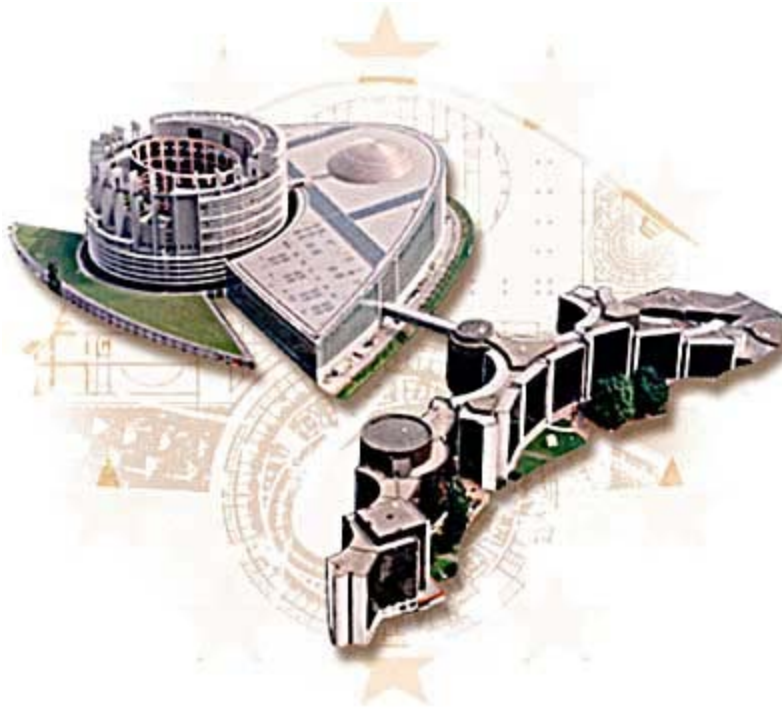
*"What happens in the farthest corner of the world now touches us almost instantly...The world has become a more crowded, more interconnected, more volatile and unstable place." -Ernest Boyer, "The Globe, the Nation, and our Schools," Kettering Review, 1984*

The world is separated politically into countries. But does it always have to be? Checking a map from a few years ago reveals many changes in political boundaries. Looking at a map from 100 years ago shows almost total change. That fact is hard for Americans to realize because the borders of the United States have changed only twice over the past 150 years — to include the new states of Hawaii and Alaska. Is it possible that in the near future borderlines between countries will have little meaning?

## Globalization

Ernest Boyer's quote above is a comment on globalization — the increasing tendency for many interests and issues to be shared by nations. Many globalists warn that the very future of the earth depends on countries cooperating to solve major problems like instability in the world economy, pollution, overpopulation, loss of natural resources, hunger, international conflict, and climate changes.





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*The European Parliament, the legislative branch of the European Union, holds plenary sessions once a month in Strasbourg, France. It also meets in Brussels and Luxembourg to exercise its three fundamental powers: the power to legislate, the power of the purse, and the power to supervise the executive branch (the European Council).*

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Revolutions in communications, travel, and technology make instant contact among nations possible. Many treaties and international agreements now bind countries together to address concerns over the economy, security, and the environment. Does this all mean that nations and governments as we know them today will disappear? Some observers think so. Some early signs include the following:

- International organizations. The 20th century saw new experiments with international peace organizations designed to solve disputes diplomatically rather than through war. The League of Nations, established just after World War I, was generally a failure since it could not prevent the advent of World War II. The United Nations replaced the League and has had a very mixed record as a referee in international conflicts. However, about 160 nations belong to the UN, and the organization is still alive and well after more than half a century.
- Regional organizations. Regional organizations have existed for many years, but some experts are seeing a blurring of national borderlines in many recent ones. An example is the European Union, which started as an effort to create a common marketplace among European nations with trade restrictions totally removed. But now nations are electing representatives to a European Parliament. Will shared political powers follow? NAFTA (North American Free Trade



Agreement) binds Canada, the United States, and Mexico in a free trade zone. Many other regional organizations exist around the globe.

## A Case for Independent Governments



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*While you're at school, children as young as five years old are working in factories to make the clothes and shoes that you and your classmates wear every day. Although globalization might mean freer trade and more rapid economic development, it has caused serious problems like sweatshops and child labor.*

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Most people cannot imagine nations ever entirely disappearing, even though the nation-state did not emerge in world history until the 18th century. There are many reasons why governments for individual countries still exist. Different people have different needs. Governments must vary according to the needs of the people they serve. Could the globe function under one world government, or even under tough restrictions from an international peace organization? People across the globe still have plenty of differences.

According to this point of view, independent governments that are adapted to their citizens still make the most sense.

Competition among nations is a well-established pattern. How could the countries of Europe who have been at war for centuries agree to submit to a single government? How could and why should the United States compromise with other governments if it remains the world's largest military superpower? The citizens of these nations have difficulty yielding their sovereignty — the right to determine their own affairs — to supranational organizations.

Will globalization be the answer to current world dilemmas? Or does globalization ignore the need for the continuation of nation-states? Whatever the future holds, governments will be a part of the attempt to address issues and solve problems. The systems may change, but the goals of maintaining order, creating prosperity, and protecting rights are unlikely to change.



# Comparative Political and Economic Systems

## Comparative Political and Economic Systems



*Is there such a thing as a perfect government? One "answer" was the utopian society established by the Shakers. In order to make their society perfect, the Shakers adhered to a strict policy of communal living, religious devotion, (pictured above in their distinctively animated form of worship) celibacy, rigorous labor, and equality.*

The last two decades of the 20th century were great for democratic governments. The Cold War ended with the collapse of communist dictatorships throughout Eastern Europe, including the Soviet Union itself. South Korea and Taiwan moved out of their authoritarian pasts toward greater democracy. Apartheid was ended in South Africa.

But democracy is still not the only form of government in the world today. Despite differences in form and function, most of the world's governments still try to fulfill similar primary objectives.

## Purposes of Political Systems



*A government can use propaganda to reinforce its image as defender of the nation. This American poster from World War II shows how scare tactics can drum up support (as well as fresh recruits) for the military.*

Most governments are designed to provide their inhabitants with two important services: protection from outside invasion and protection of citizens from one another. How many different ways can a government protect from invasions? They can form large armies and navies, build fortified cities, provide border patrols, negotiate with potential enemies, threaten or punish "rogue" states, or join international organizations. The list goes on and on. It makes sense, then, that every country has its own way of accomplishing these basic needs. Of course, some are more successful than others. But some similarities between governments will surely exist as well. For example, more than one country has thought to build strong armies and navies.

Likewise, try to think of different ways that countries can protect citizens from one another. Some commonalities will surely appear — police forces, crime prevention, putting criminals in jail, passing laws that define what is a crime and what is not. Again, governments have different ways to



accomplish this end. Some allow more individual freedoms than others, some will have national police forces, and others will organize protection on the local level. As modern governments have taken on more responsibilities, such as regulating the economy and providing social services, the possibilities for different government structures and functions increase.

## Purposes of Economic Systems

Economic systems provide needs for citizens by answering several questions:

- What resources does the country have, and what can be produced from them?
- How should goods and services be produced from the available resources?
- How are goods and services distributed among the inhabitants?

Different economic systems around the world answer these questions in different ways.

The resources of an economic system are called factors of production because the economy needs them to produce goods and services. They may be grouped into four categories:



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*Governments must consider how their citizens use (and replenish) natural resources. Forests, for example, are being depleted at an alarming rate because of human activities like logging. But which is more important: wildlife, or the thousands of families that depend on the income that the logging industry provides?*

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- Land. This category includes all natural resources, such as soil, water, air, and minerals.
- Labor. Every economy needs human resources — people who produce goods and services.
- Capital. Capital includes money, factories, heavy machinery — anything used to produce products and goods.
- Management. Managers organize and direct the other three factors of production.

The world at the turn of the 21st century was becoming smaller, as global interconnections made distant places seem close. At the same time, bloody nationalist conflicts turning neighbor against neighbor still raged. Government leaders around the world examined their own systems and each others to chart a course for the new millennium.

# The Nature of Government

## Democratic Values — Liberty, Equality, Justice

Liberty and equality.

These words represent basic values of democratic political systems, including that of the United States. Rule by absolute monarchs and emperors has often brought peace and order, but at the cost of personal freedoms. Democratic values support the belief that an orderly society can exist in which freedom is preserved. But order and freedom must be balanced.



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*In the early days of the French revolution, the members of the third estate agreed to stick together in the face of opposition from the king and nobles. The "Tennis Court Oath" became the first step towards representative democracy in France.*

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## The Influence of the Enlightenment

The American government has its roots in the seventeenth and eighteenth-century ENLIGHTENMENT in Europe, a movement that questioned the traditional authority of the monarch to rule. What gives one person the right to rule another? Enlightenment philosophes answered the question by

acknowledging the importance of establishing order. They were influenced by the chaos of medieval times, when a lack of CENTRALIZED GOVERNMENT brought widespread death and destruction. Havens from invaders and attackers were necessary for survival, so weaker people allied themselves with stronger ones, and kings came to rule who provided protection in return for work and allegiance from their subjects.



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*John Locke was the English philosopher who theorized that government was the manifestation of a general will of "the governed" that allowed the governed to change their governors at will. His book, *Treatises on Civil Government*, was very influential in the American revolution.*

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As order was established and new economic patterns emerged, people began to question the king's right to rule. For example, JOHN LOCKE, an eighteenth-century English philosopher, theorized that the right to rule came from



# The Nature of Government

the "CONSENT OF THE GOVERNED." MONTESQUIEU wrote with admiration about three "branches" of government that checked one another's power. ROUSSEAU believed that communities were most justly governed by the "GENERAL WILL" or MAJORITY RULE of their citizens. Though the philosophes believed that rulers were important for maintaining order, they questioned the sacrifice of individual freedom that they saw under European monarchs.

## Two Kinds of Balance

Imagine a society in which everyone was perfectly free to do as he or she pleased. How long would it take for chaos to set in? Order implies a necessary loss of freedom if people are to survive. However, how far can order go? Democratic countries cherish INDIVIDUAL FREEDOM and generally believe that laws should not be REPRESSIVE; a little order can be sacrificed in the name of LIBERTY. So, one kind of balance is between order and liberty.

Democratic societies also expect another kind of balance: a compromise between liberty and equality. Complete liberty logically leads to inequality. A strong or ambitious person might acquire more goods and property than another, and someone is bound to dominate. But the line must be drawn before an individual seizes power that greatly restricts the liberties of others.



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*The ideals of the first French revolution also inspired the 1830 revolution in Paris. The ideas of "Liberty, Equality, and Fraternity" were immortalized in the three colors of the French flag. In Delacroix's painting, Liberty is seen leading the people toward these ideals.*

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Shouldn't governments help preserve some degree of equality for their citizens? But if they overemphasize equality, won't they restrict their citizens' liberty? For example, governments can bring about more equality by taxing rich citizens more

than the poor, but if they carry their policies too far, won't they restrict the individual's freedom to strive for economic success? The balance between liberty and equality is an important cornerstone of democratic government.

In the late 18th century the Founders created the blueprints for the United States government in an effort to achieve these delicate balances — between liberty and order, and between liberty and equality. Their success is reflected in the continuing efforts to refine them. The formula has changed with time, but the framework provided by the Constitution and the values expressed by the Declaration of Independence remain the same.

# The Nature of Government

## Types of Government



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*Louis XIV, the King of France from 1643 until 1715, is the definition of an absolute monarch. His famous phrase, "I am the State," is an illustration of the power he wielded in France. Louis ruled through a mixture of fear and admiration, but in every case the law extended from himself.*

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*"Off with his head!"*

This is a favorite story line to show how cruel a king (or a sultan or emperor) can be. The rules in this type of government are pretty clear. Whatever the ruler says, goes. Of course, many people have had different ideas about how the ruler should govern, and those beliefs support totally different types of government. The rules shape the government's LEGITIMACY, or the degree to which the people accept the authority of the government.

## Rule by Man

Countries whose CITIZENS are governed by the absolute decisions of the ruler have not necessarily been unhappy. A government whose king or queen rules justly and wisely may enjoy a great deal of legitimacy as long as the ruler's AUTHORITY is accepted. Sometimes people may accept their leader because they are afraid of the consequences if they don't. In the words of MACHIAVELLI, "It is better to be feared than loved." As long as the feared ruler is seen as bringing about prosperity or protecting the lives of his subjects, it is entirely possible that his people will be happy.



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*Niccolo Machiavelli wrote political works during the Renaissance. In *The Prince*, Machiavelli advised his audience that in a system of Rule by Man it was "better to be feared than loved."*

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An absolute ruler may be accepted because the people believe or accept the idea that God gave him/her the right to rule. This belief is known as divine right, which often has been associated with a MONARCHY, a form of government in which the power of the king or queen is hereditary. A similar idea legitimized the Chinese emperor, whose rule was threatened if his subjects perceived that he had lost the "mandate of heaven."

Rule by man can also take the shape of an OLIGARCHY, or rule by a few elites whose right to rule is based on possession of wealth, social status, military position or achievement. A little more broadly-

# The Nature of Government

based rule is by ARISTOCRACY (literally, "rule of the highest"), but if the type of government is "rule by man", their decisions are still ARBITRARY and absolute.

## Rule by Law

RULE BY LAW exists in any political system in which those with power cannot make up all their own rules but must follow an established CODE OF LAW. In ancient times a Byzantine emperor established JUSTINIAN'S CODE, a set of laws named after him that lived on long after he died. We still follow parts of that code today. The Romans were also known for codifying laws, as was NAPOLEON, Emperor of France, many centuries later.



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*Napoleon revised the French laws into a single unified code, known as the Code Napoleon. Under the French Empire, the code was implemented throughout Europe. Napoleon is seen in this painting standing next to a copy of the Code written on a scroll.*

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Today most governments at least claim to be ruled by law. The most common indication is the existence of a written constitution, but the most important question to ask is whether the constitution is the "blueprint" that determines how and what policies are made. For example, Nigeria officially is a democracy with a written constitution that one dictator after another has ignored. On the other hand, Great Britain has never had a constitution as a single written document but has for centuries been governed by law. For much of their history, the English had a limited monarchy, or a king or queen who has followed rule of law.

So, whether a king can order "off with his head!" depends on the type of government that is accepted in his country. If he sets the rules (rule by man), or if the accepted outside rules allow (rule by law), the victim doesn't have a chance.



# Comparative Political and Economic Systems

## Comparing Governments



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*The Statue of Liberty is a symbol of freedom and democracy for people around the world.*

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No two governments, past or present, are exactly the same.

However, it is possible to examine the similarities and differences among political and economic systems and categorize different forms of government. One simple way to categorize governments is to divide them into democratic and authoritarian political systems.

## Democracies

Many countries today claim to be democracies, but if the citizens are not involved in government and politics, they are democratic in name only. Some governments are more democratic than others, but systems cannot be considered truly democratic unless they meet certain criteria:



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*Whither democracy? It was not until 1920 — after decades of tireless protest and campaigning — that women were granted suffrage by the ratification of the 19th Amendment.*

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- Freedom of speech, the press, and religion. Democracies in general respect these basic individual liberties. No government allows absolute freedom, but democracies do not heavily censor newspapers and public expression of opinions.
- Majority rule with minority rights. In democracies, people usually accept decisions made by the majority of voters in a free election. However, democracies try to avoid the "tyranny of the majority" by providing ways for minorities all kinds to have their voices heard as well.
- Varied personal backgrounds of political leaders. Democracies usually leave room for many different types of citizens to compete for leadership positions. In other words, presidents and

# Comparative Political and Economic Systems

legislators do not all come from a few elite families, the same part of the country, or the same social class.

- Free, competitive elections. The presence of elections alone is not enough to call a country a democracy. The elections must be fair and competitive, and the government or political leaders cannot control the results. Voters must have real choices among candidates who run for public office.
- Rule by law. Democracies are not controlled by the whims of a leader, but they are governed by laws that apply to leaders and citizens equally.
- Meaningful political participation by citizens. By itself, a citizen's right to vote is not a good measure of democracy. The government must respond in some way to citizen demands. If they vote, the candidate they choose must actually take office. If they contact government in other ways — writing, protesting, phoning — officials must respond.

The degree to which a government fulfills these criteria is the degree to which it can be considered democratic. Examples of such governments include Great Britain, France, Japan, and the United States.

## Authoritarian Regimes



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*Mao Zedong's position as authoritarian ruler of the People's Republic of China is glorified in this propaganda poster from the Cultural Revolution. The poster reads: "The light of Mao Zedong Thought illuminates the path of the Great Cultural Revolution of the Proletariat."*

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One ruler or a small group of leaders have the real power in authoritarian political systems. Authoritarian governments may hold elections and they may have contact with their citizens, but citizens do not have any voice in how they are ruled. Their leaders do not give their subjects free choice. Instead, they decide what the people can or cannot have. Citizens, then, are subjects who must obey, and not participants in government decisions. Kings, military leaders, emperors, a small group of aristocrats, dictators, and even presidents or prime ministers may rule authoritarian governments. The leader's title does not automatically indicate a particular type of government.

Authoritarian systems do not allow freedoms of speech, press, and religion, and they do not follow majority rule nor protect minority rights. Their leaders often come from one small group, such as top military officials, or from a small group of aristocratic families. Examples of such regimes include China, Myanmar, Cuba, and Iran.

No nation falls entirely into either category. It is also dangerous to categorize a nation simply by the moment in time during which they were examined. The Russia of 1992 was very different from the Russia of 1990. Both democratic and authoritarian governments change over time, rendering the global mosaic uncertain and complex.

# The Nature of Government

## What Is a Democracy?



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*The ancient Romans had a working democracy for the early part of their history. The Forum in Rome is where political meetings and votes were held. The Forum can still be seen today, but most of its buildings are in ruins.*

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Nowhere is the word "democracy" mentioned in the Declaration of Independence or the U.S. Constitution. How could that be? Our government is a democracy!

Well, for one, as we'll discuss later, the Founders actually feared democratic rule. JAMES MADISON expressed this attitude in FEDERALIST #10: "...instability, injustice, and confusion ...have in truth been the mortal disease under which popular governments everywhere perished..." In the late 18th-century, rule by the people was thought to lead to disorder and disruption. Yet a democratically-based government was seen as superior to the monarchies of Europe.

Democracies did not originate with the founding of the United States. The term "democracy" comes from two Greek words: "demos" (the people) and "kratia" (power or authority). So of course, DEMOCRACY is a form of government that gives power to the people. But how, when, and to which people? The answer to those questions changes through history.



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*In present-day New England, many small towns hold town meetings in which issues important to the citizens are decided by vote. These meetings are one of the few instances of direct democracy that still operate today. These New Englanders check in at a town meeting.*

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Democracies are based on "rule of law." The ANCIENT GREEKS (particularly ARISTOTLE) valued NATURAL LAW, the notion that human societies should be governed by ethical principles found in nature. The Greeks are famous for practicing DIRECT DEMOCRACY, a system in which citizens meet to discuss all policy, and then make decisions by majority rule. However, only free males were considered to be citizens. So, their democracy was certainly limited. Today direct democracy is practiced in New England town meetings, where all citizens of voting age meet to decide important political decisions.

But how could direct democracy work in a large, diverse population spread over a geographical distance? Generally, the answer has been that it can't. In its place, the AMERICAN FOUNDERS put "indirect" or "representative" democracy. In this system, REPRESENTATIVES are chosen by the people to make decisions for them. The representative body, then, becomes a manageable size for doing the business of government. The Founders preferred the term "REPUBLIC" to "democracy" because it

# The Nature of Government

described a system they generally preferred: the interests of the people were represented by more knowledgeable or wealthier citizens who were responsible to those that elected them. Today we tend to use the terms "republic" and "democracy" interchangeably. A widespread criticism of representative democracy is that the representatives become the "elites" that seldom consult ordinary citizens, so even though they are elected, a truly representative government doesn't really exist.



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*Britain has had a representative democracy since the seventeenth century. Members of the British Parliament are elected from across Britain and represent the interests of their constituents to the government.*

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Another modern version of democracy is called "DEMOCRATIC CENTRALISM," a term made famous by VLADIMIR ULYINOV LENIN. As the leader of the RUSSIAN REVOLUTION in 1917, he established a communist government that allowed no private property to exist. All members of society were theoretically equal. However, Lenin considered a small "vanguard of the revolution" necessary to guide the people and establish order. So, a small group of leaders make decisions in the name of the people, based on their perceptions of what the people want and need.

Democracies have come in many shapes and sizes as reflected by the different answers to questions of how, when, and to which people power is given. And although it is not mentioned in the Declaration of Independence nor the Constitution, democracy clearly links to "rule of law" to form a basic principle that profoundly shapes American government.





## Policy Making: Political Interactions

Congress, the President, the Cabinet, advisers, agency bureaucrats, federal and state courts, political parties, interest groups, the media...All of these groups interact to make political decisions in the United States.

Public policy is a goal-oriented course of action that the government follows in dealing with a problem or issue in the country. Public policies are based on law, but many people other than legislators set them. Individuals, groups, and even government agencies that do not comply with policies can be penalized. This complicated process goes through a predictable series of steps:



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*The power to formulate and implement policy is often divided between several entities. Defense policy is a good example: after the bombing of Pearl Harbor, shown here, President Franklin Roosevelt addressed a joint session of Congress to ask the body to declare war against Japan.*

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### 1. Recognizing the problem.

At any given time, many conditions disturb or distress people, such as unsafe workplaces, natural disasters like tornadoes and earthquakes, crime, pollution, or the cost of

medical care. But all disturbing conditions do not automatically become problems. People have to recognize that government can and should do something about them. For example, most citizens probably do not expect government to prevent hurricanes. However, they may expect government to help hurricane victims through quick relief actions.

### 2. Agenda setting.

An agenda is a set of problems that government wants to solve. Usually there are so many of them that they must be prioritized, with some problems getting earlier and more attention than others. Agenda setting may respond to pressure from interest groups, political parties, the media, and other branches of government. Agendas usually are reshaped when a new president takes office or when the majority party in Congress changes after an election. A crisis such as war, depression, natural disasters, or a tragic accident, almost always re-prioritizes issues.

### 3. Formulating the policy.

At this stage, usually several conflicting plans from various political interests take shape. Various players — the president and White House aides, agency officials, specially appointed task forces, interest groups, private research organizations, and legislators — may take part in formulating new policy.



Around the turn of the 20th century, muckrakers and concerned citizens brought to light the unethical practices rampant in the food and medicine industries and pressed the government to take action. The result was legislation such as the Pure Food and Drug Act of 1906, and eventually the creation of regulatory agencies like the Food and Drug Administration.

#### 4. Adopting the policy.

Once various plans are presented; one policy is accepted by the decision-makers. In many cases, a policy is adopted when Congress passes a law. Policy adoption may also take place when the president signs an executive order or when the Supreme Court rules on an important case. Policy is often built in a series of small steps passed over time by different players, and eventually, a complex policy emerges.

#### 5. Implementing the policy.

Most public policies are carried out by administrative agencies in the executive branch, although sometimes the courts get involved in implementing decisions they make. Agencies use many techniques to see that policy is carried out. Sometimes they punish people and organizations who do not comply with policy. For example, a state can take a driver's license away from a bad driver. Or the government may offer incentives, like tax breaks for contributing to the presidential election campaign. They even appeal to people's better instincts, such as using the slogan, "Only you can prevent forest fires."



Formulating policy involves weighing options, leading to dilemmas. This cartoon pokes fun at Teddy Roosevelt: Roosevelt was called a "trust buster" because of his strict antitrust policies, but he stays the hand of Attorney General Knox because he needs business contributions for his presidential campaign.

#### 6. Evaluating the policy.

Policy makers often try to determine what a policy is accomplishing or whether or not it is being carried out efficiently. Often the evaluation process takes place over time with contributions from many of the interacting players. Most evaluations call for some degree of change and correction, and inevitably, at least some of the players will disagree. The whole process then begins again, starting with re-recognition of the problem.





Decision-making, then, is a continuous process with numerous people participating. At any given time, government is at various stages of policy-making in a never-ending quest to provide solutions to countless societal problems.



## Economic Policy



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*With the New Deal, President Franklin D. Roosevelt aimed to reverse the effects of the Great Depression through heavy government spending. The Works Progress Administration (WPA) was one of many federal agencies he created to generate jobs and stimulate the stagnant economy.*

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Does the government direct the economy, or does the economy direct itself?

Until the 20th century the country abided by the laissez-faire policy, which required a free market with little intervention from government. With the Great Depression came Keynesian economics, or the opposite belief that the government should manage the economy. Today, United States economic policy lies somewhere in between — government should regulate and sometimes manage but should allow a free market whenever possible. Political and business leaders disagree on how much control is enough.

## Monetary Policy

Monetary policy is the government's control of the money supply. The government can control how much or how little money is in circulation by the amount that they print and coin. If too much money is out there, it tends to cause inflation, or the devaluation of the dollar. Too little money causes deflation, which can lead to a recession. The powerful arm of government that controls the money supply is the Federal Reserve System, which is headed by the Federal Reserve Board. The most important way that the "Fed" controls the money supply is by adjusting interest rates — high rates discourage borrowing money, which causes less inflation. The "Fed" can lower interest rates to stimulate borrowing, which encourages consumer spending.



*Taxation has long been a sensitive subject in American politics. In colonial times, tax collectors were often vilified and subjected to verbal and even physical abuse.*

The Federal Reserve Board's seven members are appointed by the President and are approved by the Senate for 14-year, nonrenewable terms. The President may not remove them from office, so they function quite independently from any controls from the executive branch. The chair is elected by the Board for four years, and may be reelected. The Board heads the Federal Reserve System, which was created by Congress in 1913 to regulate the lending practices of banks. It consists of 12 regional banks, which in turn supervise a total of about 5,000 banks across the United States.

## Fiscal Policy

Fiscal policy affects the economy by making changes in government's methods of raising money and spending it.



*Janet Yellen, chairman of the Federal Reserve Board, is the most visible figure in the sphere of monetary policy. Her reports and recommendations help shape the financial lives of millions of people in the United States and abroad.*



- Raising money. The most important way that the United States raises money is through taxation. About 40 percent of the government's total tax collections come from income taxes from individuals and businesses. Another 32% come from social insurance taxes, such as Social Security, Medicare, and unemployment compensation. Other sources of income are excise taxes on goods such as liquor, tobacco, and gasoline, estate and gift taxes, and tariffs. The government also may borrow money to finance its expenses. For example, it borrows money when it sells treasury bonds to citizens.
- Spending money. The government now spends more than \$1.5 trillion a year, as provided in the federal budget. Each year, the President submits a federal budget for approval by Congress for money to be spent starting in October of that year. More money is spent in three categories than in any others. The largest amount of money goes to entitlement programs, such as Social Security pensions for older Americans, unemployment insurance, Medicare, and federal retirement pensions. The second largest amount goes for national defense. Today about 16 percent of the total budget goes for defense, in contrast to 28 percent in 1987, when the Cold War was still on. The third largest amount — about 15 percent — pays interest on the national debt. Other expenditures are highway construction, education, housing, and foreign aid.

Fiscal policy also can affect the money supply and can be used to stimulate spending or curb inflation. Tax cuts tend to stimulate consumer spending by leaving more money in the hands of American citizens. Tax hikes could be used to slow inflation by removing money from the hands of consumers. The government can also curb inflation by cutting government expenditures.

Within these two broad categories — monetary and fiscal policies — lies a great deal of room for disagreement. Some argue that government should be more "hands off" than it is and that taxes should be reduced. Others believe that the government should more actively control the economy and that taxes should be used to pay down the national debt. Many disagree on the amount of control that government should have, but no one questions the importance of government's setting a strong, effective economic policy.