

About Civics in World History

WHAT IS GOVERNMENT?

Governments across history have served several fundamental functions: establishing and maintaining order, supplying public services, promoting safety, and providing leadership. As people began to live in permanent settlements, increasingly complex societies arose, along with the frequency of conflict. Governments helped prevent conflict between members of a society and eventually assumed other roles, like defending against external threats. Modern governments generally play an active role in the lives of citizens, including managing the economy, setting public policy, protecting individual freedoms and civil rights, and providing public services.

Governments come in all shapes and sizes and frequently reflect the social and historical context and belief systems of the people they govern:

Authoritarian—In authoritarian countries, one person, often called a dictator, has absolute control over the government.

Monarchy—Monarchies were among the first forms of government. In an absolute monarchy, a hereditary leader, often a king or a queen, holds absolute power while citizens have little to no say in the governments. This differs from a constitutional monarchy, in which a hereditary leader serves as the ceremonial head of state, and citizens elect representatives to an independent, democratic legislature.

Democracy—Democracies receive power from the people they govern. The ancient Athenians developed the first direct democracy, in which citizens voted directly on laws and public policy. The United States, like the Roman Republic, has a representative democracy, in which citizens elect representatives to make laws and public policy on their behalf.

Communism—Communism is an economic system based on the theories of German philosopher Karl Marx in which private property does not exist and the means of production are publicly owned and under communal control. In practice, this has typically manifested as the government owning all property and making most economic choices. Proponents of communism such as Leon Trotsky and Vladimir Lenin argued that it would eliminate the class divisions created by capitalism. Communism eventually spread from the Soviet Union to other countries like China, Vietnam, and Cuba. In the Soviet Union and other communist countries, communist leaders corrupted Marx's idea of a classless society by controlling all aspects of citizens' lives in frequently brutal ways.

Fascism—Fascism is an authoritarian system of government that emerged during the 1920s and 1930s in Italy, Germany, and Spain. Fascists reject individual rights, use force for political gain, and exploit nationalism to expand their power. Fascist regimes are generally led by dictators who encourage hatred against minority groups and spread disinformation.

Confederation—A confederation is a group of independent kingdoms or states that work together. In its early days, before the U.S. Constitution, the United States was a confederation.

Theocracy—A theocracy is a government in which a religious institution and its leaders are in control. Today, the country of Iran is a theocracy, as is Afghanistan under Taliban rule.

GOVERNMENT IN ANCIENT SOCIETIES

The first governments emerged with the formation of societies and civilizations. For thousands of years before that, nomadic bands were organized around family units led by elders. They relied on cooperation for survival. Over time, these bands formed semipermanent and permanent settlements. As these societies grew larger and more complex, their agricultural capacity increased, and so did the need for more organization. Rulers appointed officials to collect taxes, enforce the laws, defend against invaders, and coordinate public works projects.

Because early governments played a key role in organizing society, the need for a more organized government emerged. Leaders in Mesopotamia used their power to respond to flooding and droughts to ease hardship and encourage civic responsibility. When Sargon the Great of Akkad conquered Sumer's city-states, he used bureaucrats to run the day-to-day affairs of his empire. Ancient Egypt took a similar approach, relying on a central government run by governors, priests, and mayors to enforce order and collect taxes in the form of crops, which would be traded to other civilizations or reserved for use during a drought.

Highly organized governments also emerged in Asia. China's first dynasty, the Shang, centered around a divine-right ruler and his bureaucrats, creating a precedent for governance through centralized authority. The subsequent Zhou dynasty created a feudal system that encouraged loyalty to the king through land distribution. Shihuangdi (ruled 221–210 BCE), the "First Emperor," laid the groundwork for later Chinese imperialism. He systematized and centralized the government by instituting a common currency, a legal system, and standardized weights and measures. The Han dynasty established the civil service exam that enabled hiring bureaucrats based on ability.

Japan, like China, was a feudal society. The emperor became a symbolic figurehead, while military dictators called shoguns held most of the power. Beneath the shoguns were vassal lords called daimyo, and beneath them a class of warriors called samurai.

Beyond providing social order, early governments made laws and provided services and protections. One of the best-known examples of early laws is the Code of Hammurabi. Hammurabi ruled Babylon from about 1792 to 1750 BCE. He compiled existing Sumerian laws and codified and promulgated them to reduce chaos and provide stability. Early governments frequently provided services through public works projects, such as the construction of wells, irrigation systems, roads, and canals. They also organized large construction projects to erect religious buildings. Public works projects benefited citizens by improving agriculture, communication, and trade. Early governments were also responsible for protecting their citizens from invasion. This was generally done by maintaining a military. In other instances, governments could resolve conflicts by signing treaties or joining international agreements.

The Birth of Democracy

Athenian Democracy

Athens is located on the eastern side of the Greek mainland, toward the center of the peninsula of Attica.

Originally, the Athenian government seems to have consisted of a king and nobles who owned much of the land. The nobles eventually displaced the king and dominated the government, choosing the three

archons, or officials, who oversaw the government. Although there was a general assembly made up of all adult male citizens, the only power was in the hands of the landowning nobles.

Poor harvests created hard economic times that increased feelings of powerlessness among ordinary people. Independent farmers lost their lands and became tenant farmers on estates of wealthy nobles. Some farmers sold themselves into slavery to pay off their debts. The economic problems added to the political discontent. Merchants clamored for their rights, and foreign craftspeople—those from other Greek city-states—resented their lack of citizenship.

In 594 BCE, Solon was appointed as the chief officer. A wise and thoughtful leader, he made many reforms that not only eased problems in Athens but also began its evolution to democracy. Solon outlawed debt slavery and freed those who were already enslaved for debt. The status of citizen was granted to some foreign craftspeople. Rather than have birth be the criterion for political participation, Solon made wealth the deciding factor. He then divided the assembly into four levels based on four levels of wealth. The general assembly was given the right to approve government decisions.

After Solon, leaders with varying degrees of interest in maintaining and expanding the rights of Athenian citizens came to power. Some attempted to restrict those rights, while others, such as Cleisthenes, furthered democracy. Under Cleisthenes, the people of Athens were divided into ten tribes based on place of residence, replacing the four tribes based on aristocratic descent and controlled by traditional aristocrats. The Athenian assembly became the legislative, or lawmaking, branch of the government. All citizens, whether property owners or not, were eligible to attend and debate. A council of five hundred proposed laws for the general assembly. Any citizen over thirty was eligible to serve on the council, whose members were drawn by lottery.

The council of five hundred proved to be too large and unwieldy to function effectively as an administrative branch, so it was divided into ten committees of fifty men each, which were further divided into smaller units. The Athenians referred to one of these smaller subdivisions as a *deme*, from the Greek word for people. This is the root of the English word *democracy*. The word *democracy* comes from the Greek word *demokratia*, meaning rule by the demos, or people.

Unlike the representative democracy of the United States, in which citizens elect representatives to speak and act for them in government, Athenian democracy was direct democracy. Citizens discussed, debated, and voted on laws themselves. In order to decide on issues, at least six thousand citizens had to be present in the assembly, which met several times a month.

Although Athens pioneered democratic government, its institutions differed in some key ways from modern American democracy. Citizenship did not extend to women, enslaved people, or most non-native residents. This was true even during the greatest age of Athenian democracy, which occurred under the rule of Pericles, from 461 to 429 BCE. Pericles extended the ability of poor men to serve in public office by paying a small salary to public officeholders. He also saw to it that jurors were paid for the time they spent in jury duty.

The Roman Republic

For many years, Rome was ruled by Etruscan kings, but in 509 BCE, the people rose up against a particularly cruel king named Tarquin and drove him out. In that same year, the Romans set up a republican government, a government in which the people chose their own rulers to serve for fixed periods of time. At the time, this was a new type of government. It would later be imitated by many other countries, including the United States.

In these early years, Roman society was divided into two classes, patricians and plebeians. The former were rich property owners; the latter, who were the majority of Romans, were farmers, craftworkers, merchants, and traders. Enslaved people were outside the social structure—lower even than the plebeians.

Two officials, called consuls, headed the republic; one managed the civil administration, and the other the military. Both consuls could issue edicts, or commands, that had the force of law; however, one consul could override the other's edict by stating, "Veto," which is Latin for "I forbid." Thus the two consuls functioned as checks and balances on each other. The ideas of the veto and of checks and balances are two of the many Roman political ideas that are part of American government today.

The co-consuls were elected to one-year terms by the Senate, a body of three hundred male citizens who, like the consuls, were patricians. All lesser officials, including judges, were patricians. The plebeians had no say in the early republic.

Over time, the plebeians broke the patrician hold on power. In 450 BCE, the plebeians succeeded in getting the government to codify Roman law and inscribe it on twelve tablets placed in the Roman Forum. Plebeians were then able to know if patrician judges were administering the laws that affected them correctly and fairly. A little later, the government established the *Comitia Tributa*, or Tribal Assembly, from which ten tribunes were chosen to protect the rights of the plebeians. The tribunes were representatives and protectors of the plebeians. They could veto any law that they believed was not in the best interest of the plebeians. Eventually, plebeians also won the right to be consuls, to sit in the Senate next to the patricians, and to be elected to all other offices. In this way, the plebeians gradually secured a role for themselves in the political affairs of the Roman Republic. The republic officially ended when the Senate voted to install Octavius as the Emperor Augustus in 27 BCE.

FROM FEUDALISM TO REFORMATION

The Roman Empire dominated and united much of western Europe. Its collapse in 476 CE disrupted Europe's political, social, and economic systems. The time period that followed, which lasted until about 1500 CE, is often referred to as the Middle Ages.

For much of the Middle Ages, Europe's governments and economies were shaped by feudalism. Under this system, hereditary rulers sat at the top of a feudal hierarchy, above powerful lords. Through a vassalage, medieval nobles called knights provided loyalty and military service to a lord in exchange for the lord's protection and a piece of land called a fief. Peasants worked the fiefs, including building structures and planting crops. Peasants were generally tenants of the land who paid a share of their crops to the lord. A small number of peasants were landowners, while some were serfs, a type of tenant farmer who was bound to the land and to their lord. Feudalism and the divine right of kings gave European monarchs absolute power. Some ruled benevolently, while others, like King John of England, used terror and intimidation. His brutal rule led angry nobles to force him to sign the Magna Carta in 1215 CE. This document curbed the power of the monarch and gave rights to the nobility that would later extend to all British citizens.

The Catholic Church, like the feudal monarchs, wielded massive power during the Middle Ages, as the center of social, economic, and spiritual life in Europe. The power of the Church began to wane in the early 1500s as people began to question corrupt church practices, such as the selling of indulgences. In 1517, Martin Luther, a monk, nailed his ninety-five theses to the door of a German church, setting

off the Protestant Reformation. This event split Christianity between Catholicism and Protestantism. It also had numerous social and political effects, including shaping the idea of federalism and laying the groundwork for the Enlightenment.

THE ENLIGHTENMENT

The Enlightenment was a European philosophical movement of the 1600s and 1700s that inspired changes in art, politics, and society. The foundation of the Enlightenment was a belief in the importance and use of reason. Enlightenment philosophy as applied to politics led to a critique of authoritarian governments and a call for revolutions.

John Locke

Born in 1632, John Locke was an English philosopher who formulated theories that fundamentally changed how we think of modern government. Locke studied medicine and science at Oxford and began his professional life as a physician. After England's Glorious Revolution (1688–89), he accepted a government post as commissioner of appeals, a position he held for the rest of his life.

In 1690, Locke published the first of his two masterworks, *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*. In this book, which Locke spent more than twenty years writing, he presented his theory of knowledge. Locke believed that the mind began life as a *tabula rasa*, or blank slate. Over time, the mind learned, or acquired ideas, through experience and sensory impressions.

Locke's second masterwork, *Two Treatises of Government*, was also published in 1690 in the wake of the Glorious Revolution. It aimed to celebrate the fact that England's King James II had been deposed because he had violated the rights and liberties of the English people. England's Houses of Lords and Commons had offered the crown instead to James's daughter Mary and her Protestant husband, William III of Orange, but with the expectation that they would not violate the people's rights as James II had. In *Two Treatises*, Locke espoused the doctrine of natural rights, which he identified as life, liberty, and property, and the concept of a social contract—that a ruler's or government's authority was limited and conditional on service of the public good, specifically the protection of citizens' natural rights. These ideas later helped shape the American Declaration of Independence.

The Philosophes

The French word *philosophe* means philosopher, and it is the title given to French thinkers of the Enlightenment, such as Voltaire, Montesquieu, and Rousseau.

Voltaire was the pseudonym of François-Marie Arouet, a writer of philosophy and theater. In his philosophical writings, Voltaire argued for religious freedom, freedom of thought, and freedom of speech. His ideas ran afoul of the authoritarian French government, and he was jailed twice and then exiled to England (though he did return to France before ultimately settling in Switzerland). Among his most famous works is the satirical novel *Candide*, in which the son of a German noble clings to unbreakable optimism as the world falls apart around him.

Charles-Louis de Secondat, better known as Baron de Montesquieu, served in public office before embarking on extensive travels to study political and social institutions. The result of his studies was his

book *The Spirit of Laws*, in which he categorized governments according to their conduct of policy and argued for a system of separation of powers in government. Montesquieu's ideas later helped form the foundation of the U.S. Constitution.

Jean-Jacques Rousseau was a prolific writer who found much to criticize in society. Fundamental to Rousseau's philosophy was the idea that people were born good but became corrupted by society and civilization, particularly by the idea of private property. According to Rousseau, the purpose of society was to ensure peace and protect property. Because not everyone owned property, the contract that governed society reinforced inequality. Rousseau called for a new social contract guided by the "general will," or public good, instead of property and wealth.

The Enlightenment in America

The Enlightenment was born in Europe, but it spread to and influenced Britain's North American colonies. This influence is particularly evident in the works of Benjamin Franklin and Thomas Jefferson.

Thomas Jefferson was one of the architects of American independence. A gifted writer, Jefferson became the chief author of the Declaration of Independence. In writing the Declaration, he drew on the ideas of Enlightenment philosophers, especially John Locke's ideas of natural rights and the social contract. This is seen in the Declaration's claim that all people are born with the inalienable rights of "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness" and in the argument that people are required to establish a new government when the current one stops protecting their natural rights.

THE INFLUENCE OF ENLIGHTENMENT IDEAS

The Age of Revolutions

The Enlightenment had a profound impact on the Age of Revolutions, starting with the American Revolution. The inclusion of John Locke's ideas of natural rights and the social contract influenced the American colonists' decision to break with Great Britain and factored prominently in the Declaration of Independence. It should be noted that the line "all men are created equal" originally only applied to white, landowning males. This notion would become more inclusive over time as the nation evolved. The U.S. Constitution was also the product of Enlightenment ideas, including popular sovereignty, the separation of powers, federalism, and individual rights as codified in a bill of rights.

The French Revolution was inspired by Enlightenment ideas and the American Revolution. French society was divided into three estates. The first estate was made up of wealthy and influential clergy. The second estate was made up of nobles who held top government jobs and competed for royal appointments. The third estate, the most diverse of the three, was made up of commoners, with the bourgeoisie at the top and peasants, day laborers, tenant farmers, and the urban poor at the bottom. Several factors contributed to the French Revolution, including resentment by the third estate for shouldering the bulk of the country's taxes, a nationwide financial crisis, and food shortages. In 1789, the third estate formed a National Assembly and issued the Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen, a document written by the Marquis de Lafayette and influenced by the Declaration of Independence. France's absolute monarchy collapsed in 1791, giving way to a constitutional monarchy and France's first constitution.

France's revolution inspired similar action in Haiti, a key French colony. Toussaint Louverture, a formerly enslaved man, advocated for Haitian independence and eventually led free and enslaved Black people in revolution on the island. Although European forces attempted to quell the rebellion, Haiti declared itself free in 1804, making it the first independent Black republic in the world.

Revolution also spread to Latin America during the 1800s, as countries like Bolivia (1825), Uruguay (1828), and Venezuela (1830) secured their independence from Spain. Latin American leaders were influenced by the Enlightenment ideas of individual rights and freedoms, popular sovereignty, and the concept of the nation-state.

The Era of Self-Determination

Self-determination is the ability of the people in a country to decide their own government. Some countries in Europe became self-determining after the dissolution of traditional empires following World War I, resulting in the creation of states such as Czechoslovakia, Yugoslavia, Austria, and Hungary.

Self-determination would not be realized for many people in Africa and Asia until several decades later. During the Age of Imperialism (mid-1800s to 1914), European powers, the United States, and Japan exerted political, social, and economic influence on regions in Asia and Africa, generally at the expense of the people they colonized. Traditional economies and governments were disrupted, and local populations were devastated. After World War I, many Indigenous populations hoped for self-rule and self-determination. Instead, countries such as Germany and the Ottoman Empire were stripped of their colonial holdings, and control over their colonies in Africa, Southwest Asia, and Southeast Asia were given to Great Britain and France through the mandate system.

Following World War II, France and Great Britain struggled with the financial burden of maintaining their once-great global empires. At the same time, local populations in Asia and Africa demanded more autonomy and self-rule. One example of this was in Vietnam, where Ho Chi Minh drafted the Vietnam Declaration of Independence in 1945. Similar independence movements also took place in Africa beginning in 1945. Ghana became the first "liberated zone" in 1957. In 1960, seventeen African countries gained their independence.

The World Today

The ideas of the Enlightenment continue to influence peoples and movements today. Some might argue that a fairly recent example is the Arab Spring, a series of pro-democracy protests and uprisings that took place in 2010 and 2011. The protests and uprisings were in response to authoritarian policies in Southwest Asia and North Africa and began with the toppling of regimes in Tunisia and Egypt. Through social media, the movement quickly spread to Bahrain, Libya, Syria, and Yemen, although protestors in these countries did not always succeed in regime change.

Another example, some would say, is the Green Movement in Iran following the disputed Iranian presidential election in 2009. The movement was inspired by lack of representation, human rights abuses, and lack of election transparency. Despite a heavy-handed response from the government, the social-media-fueled movement allowed protestors to organize and mobilize.

Today, Enlightenment ideas, including individual rights and freedom of expression, are accepted as fundamental human rights and are protected by many modern legal systems.