

Chapter One: An Introduction to Government

This Chapter will introduce us to the concepts necessary to understand government. We will start with the most basic question of all: why do we need government?

SECTION 1: WHY DO WE HAVE GOVERNMENT?

I am sure many of you at times have wished you didn't have to abide by the rules your parents, the schools or some authorities have set for you. Wouldn't that be the ultimate freedom? No rules or authority to force you to do things you don't want to do: clean your room, or be in the house by midnight, or go to school, or drive a certain speed, or pass your government class in order to graduate high school. An absence of rules and government is called **anarchy**. Some people believe strongly that no government or rules would be the perfect state of being, the ultimate freedom. Do you think they are right?

Let's explore this notion of no government or rules for a moment. What would that be like? You would have the freedom to do anything you want when you wanted to. That sounds appealing. However, what if someone else, more powerful than you, wanted to do something that harms you? What options would you have to protect yourself? Have a bigger gun than he has? Or a bigger army of friends? You can quickly imagine how unsafe it would be to walk the streets of Hastings if there were no rules to protect you from others who would do you harm. Unfortunately, we know that there are people who, given no rules, would harm others; our prisons are filled with many of these people.

Some nations have found themselves in a state of anarchy in the past, and the citizens of those countries have had their safety constantly threatened. We needn't look any further than parts of Iraq or Afghanistan to find what it would be like if there were no stable government to establish rules to protect us from those that would do us harm. Lebanon, in the 1980s, and Northern Ireland, for much of the late 20th century, were in a semi-state of anarchy where open gun battles were commonplace in the streets of Beirut

and Belfast. Citizens of those cities were afraid for their lives if they ventured into the wrong neighborhood at the wrong time.

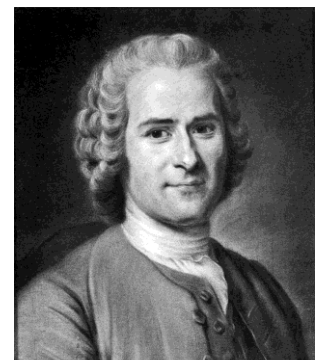
What Is the Nature of Man?

"If men were angels, no government would be necessary." - James Madison

Many philosophers have debated the nature of mankind. Are we self-interested beings that only concern ourselves with our own happiness as Adam Smith wrote in the *Wealth of Nations*? Or are we altruistic, interested in the well-being of others, as most of the world's religions teach? This is an important question; if we are indeed self-interested, then we must have a government to protect us from each person trying to advance his or her own greed at the expense of others. As we noted earlier, it would be quite dangerous if men and women were unchecked in their self-interest to do what they wanted.

Government is the mechanism or institution by which rules and public policies are established to create an ordered society. In other words, if we have a government, it will make rules that protect us from the excesses of one person over another. Of course, if we have government, then we have limits on our freedom because any form of government is going to make rules that you and I don't always like.

Jean-Jacques Rousseau, a French philosopher from the 17th Century, wrote that we have to give up some of our freedom to gain it back again through an ordered society. We call this the **social contract theory**. We enter into a social contract with our fellow citizens to surrender unlimited freedom to do what we want in return for a promise to follow rules established by a legitimate government.



Jean-Jacques Rousseau

Rousseau (and many others) argue that only when we

have the security of knowing we are reasonably safe, can we exercise true freedom.

“Government, even in its best state, is but a necessary evil...” – Thomas Paine

Of course, the great question and the center of our study of government in this chapter is what type of government we should establish and how far it should go in making rules to protect us from one another.

John Locke wrote that a natural state of being would consist of a society where everyone had a natural right to defend his “Life, Health, Liberty, or Possessions.” We will learn later that the framers of our government borrowed this notion from Locke when they wrote that every person has the right to “life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness” and it is the government’s responsibility to protect those rights.

SECTION 2: DEFINING THE STATE

How nations developed and selected their governments is the focus of this section. We can look at several aspects of a state or nation (we use the term state here to mean nation, not one of our fifty states).

All nations have four characteristics: 1) a population of people, 2) a geographical territory, 3) authority to rule themselves (**sovereignty**), and 4) a government to make the rules.

Let’s use the United States for an example; we have over 307 million people that live within the boundaries of the U.S. In our country the authority to rule, or sovereignty, rests with the people and we have an elected government comprised of a legislative, executive and judicial branch (although we don’t directly elect our federal judges).

Another important consideration is the question of how a state came to exist. There are several theories about the origin of nations. Some nations evolved over time, starting out as extended families while others were brought together by force. The origin of a nation and what brought its people together to form the nation are important in understanding its government.

What is Citizenship?

Citizenship is the sharing of rights and responsibilities that go with living with other people in a nation. Usually a common bond brings people together to form a nation. For example, what brings the people of Switzerland together? The Swiss speak four different languages yet feel a sense of nation. It is the shared alpine (mountain) environment that unites the Swiss people, a sense of Switzerland’s 26 Cantons common geography.



The Israeli people, on the other hand, are united by the search for a nation where they can practice their religion (Judaism) without persecution. The French have a sense of a superior culture and language that unites them into one nation. Many nations were formed as an alliance to protect themselves from marauders and other nations that would do the people harm. What do you think bonds Americans together? Most Americans would say we share a love of freedom. In fact, our nation was founded on a search for freedom: religious freedom for the pilgrims and others, economic freedom, political freedom and, for some, freedom from prosecution for crimes they had committed in other nations.

The bond that unites a country often dictates the type of government and rights its people enjoy. For example, the Swiss have a loose alliance of 26 different cantons, or states, and each has a great deal of sovereignty. It only makes sense, given their diverse languages, that the Swiss would have a more loosely aligned government.

On the other hand, since the Jewish state of Israel is most concerned with protecting itself from others, it has a very strong central government and every citizen must serve the state through military or some other service. Our government is designed to preserve our freedoms, and as we study American government, we will learn how our framers limited our government’s

authority so as to protect these freedoms we hold so dear.

How Do Governments Gain Authority To Rule?

Understanding how governments gain authority to rule helps us understand how they maintain that authority to rule. Governments can gain authority to rule through four methods: 1) from the people 2) through military might 3) from God or 4) from the government itself.

We call it **popular sovereignty** when the authority to rule comes from the people. Often we will also call this authority to rule by the people democracy. In order to maintain the authority to rule under this system governments must please the people. This approach is very appealing to Americans.

Another way governments gain authority to rule is through the barrel of a gun, or military might. When a group of military leaders takes power through force, this takeover is called a *coup d'état* (pronounced “coo day ta”), often just called a *coup*. In 1973, General Augusto Pinochet led the military and police in an overthrow of democratically-elected President Salvador Allende in Chile. Pinochet established **martial law**, where the police and military have complete authority to make rules and enforce those rules, and he had anyone killed who challenged his authority. Of course, Pinochet kept power for many years by keeping bigger and more guns than the opposition. Thousands of Chileans who challenged Pinochet were gathered up and placed in the sports stadium where most of them were executed. When a group of military leaders rule a country with force, we call those leaders the **junta** and the government an **oligarchy**; if it is just one leader that rules by force, we call that person a **dictator**.

The third way governments gain authority to rule is through **divine right**, or authority from God. The kings and queens that rule these nations are called **monarchs** and the country a **monarchy**. These leaders believe their power is ordained from God, and it is usually passed down from one generation to the next. Most European nations, like Great Britain, France and Spain, were monarchies for centuries. Over time these monarchs

have given up their power and those monarchies in Europe that do exist today are called a **constitutional monarchy**, meaning the kings or queens just have a ceremonial role in the government and have no real power to rule anymore.

Some countries, like Saudi Arabia, still have monarchs that truly do rule the nation. These kings stay in power by convincing the people that God has chosen them as the rightful rulers of these nations. All the government officials are members of the royal family.



President Obama and King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia

Usually, these countries don't have elections, or if they do, there is only one person on the ballot, the king.

The final way governments gain and maintain authority to rule is through extensive use of rules and a bureaucracy (the various parts of the government). For example, in order to move from one place to another, in the former Soviet Union, citizens had to get permission from the government. We call this **bureaucratic totalitarianism** when the government uses extensive rules to govern the people.

SECTION 3: CLASSIFYING GOVERNMENTS

We can classify types of governments along three standards: 1) who can participate in governing or choosing the leaders 2) the geographical distribution of power of different levels of government, and 3) the relationship between the legislative and executive branches of government.

If all the citizens are allowed to participate in the government, we call it a democracy. A **direct democracy** means everyone who is a citizen has a say in the decisions the government makes. For example, all the citizens of Athens in the ancient days had a vote on every issue the government considered. Of course, at that time it was thought only men were citizens; still, Athens is considered the cradle of democracy. We have examples of direct democracy in the United

States including: elections, town hall meetings in New England, **initiative** (when the citizens write a state law), **referendum** (when the citizens change or negate a law passed by the state legislature), and **recall** (when the citizens of a state vote to remove a state representative or government official).

However, the United States is primarily an **indirect democracy** or what we call a **representative democracy**. We elect representatives to make the laws for us. They represent us as they cast their votes on various issues of the day. We still say we have popular sovereignty as the ultimate power rests with the people to elect these leaders who are up for re-election every few years. It should be noted that many political scientists use the term **republic** synonymously (meaning the same as) with representative democracy. Others define republic and **republicanism** as strictly the absence of a monarch. We will use these terms to define a representative democracy.

Another type of democracy is called democratic centralism. **Democratic centralism**, as practiced by the former Soviet Union and China, allows all members of the Communist Party to have input into the decision-making process, but just a few leaders actually make the decisions and all citizens are to support the decision once it is made. Most Americans wouldn't call this democracy at all.

When the people have no input into the decision-making process, their government is called a totalitarian state. **Authoritarianism** is the absolute authority to rule without any checks against the power of the government. **Totalitarianism** is when the government has complete and absolute power over every part of a citizen's life. A government doesn't have to be totalitarian if it is authoritarian. Authoritarian just means the government has no limits on its power. Dictators, like Adolf Hitler in Germany during the 1930s and 40s, are totalitarian and authoritarian because they



Adolf Hitler of Germany

have complete authority to rule and do so in a very brutal way.

A government may have complete authority to rule without a constitution or other checks, but the leaders do not exercise that authority, which is rare indeed. Many people firmly believe there is no such thing as a benevolent dictator (someone who has absolute power but does good for the country). Lord John Acton of Great Britain once wrote "power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely."

Geographic Distribution of Power

When all the power rests in one central government, whether a democracy or not, it is called a **unitary** state. That means that all power is vested, or given, to the central government, and it may grant powers to the lower levels of government, like counties or cities. Great Britain has a unitary system where all the power is vested in Parliament.

When there is shared power between two levels of government, the central government and smaller geographical units, it is either a federation or confederation. A **federation** shares powers between the two levels of government but the central government is supreme *if* there is an overlap in power. The United States is a federation where both the fifty state governments and the federal government share power, but as long as it is within its powers given to it by the U.S. Constitution, the federal government is supreme.

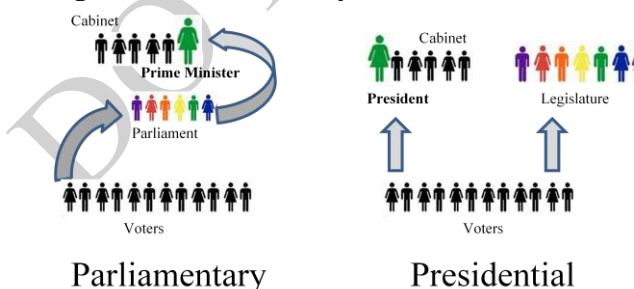
A **confederation** places most of the power in the lower level of government and the central government is quite weak. Switzerland, the United Nations, the Articles of Confederation, and the Confederate States of America (often called the Confederacy) during the Civil War are all examples of confederations. For example, the U.N. can't really force the nations to go along with any decisions the General Assembly makes. Switzerland has a much stronger central government than the U.N., but its central government, located in Bern, is still much weaker than the U.S. Federal Government.

Legislature versus Executive

In the United States we have three branches of government that share power. Some countries have but one branch of government, called a **parliament**, that has all the power. In a parliamentary system, the voters elect the representatives to parliament, called members of parliament or MPs. In turn, the MPs elect the leader of the parliament, called the **prime minister** or sometimes the **premier**. The prime minister is the executive leader of the country but is responsible to the parliament. She will pick other leaders to help her lead the country. These members are called the cabinet collectively, and ministers by each department. For example, the head of the department that conducts foreign relations is called the foreign minister in most countries with a parliament. In most countries with a parliamentary system, a parliament may remove the prime minister at any time through a **vote of no confidence**. If there is a vote of no confidence, usually the prime minister has to resign and call elections for the people to elect a new parliament to choose a new leader.

In a **presidential system**, the president is elected separately from the legislative body. The United States, France and many other countries have a president. The president is the executive of the country and will select the cabinet members to help him lead the country. In most countries, like France, the president is directly elected by the people and responsible to them. In the United States the president is elected by the Electoral College. We will return to this later in our specific study of American government.

Figure 1: Parliamentary vs. Presidential



Some political scientists prefer the parliamentary system because the prime minister is directly responsible to the legislature and is usually from the majority party, so she should be able to get all her ideas passed into law. In a presidential system, the president and the legislature may be from different political parties and not work together very well.

SECTION 4: CONCEPTS OF DEMOCRACY

In a democracy, the individual is very important; in fact, many would argue in American democracy the individual is more important than the state or the majority. Individualism, the belief that the individual should be free to act as he wants, within reason, usually defined as not harming others, is the foundation of American democracy.

Equality is another concept that we hold dear in the United States. Many make a distinction between equality and equality of opportunity. Regardless, the concept that all people are created equal and have the same rights is very important to American democracy. Each person's vote should be equal to another's, and each of us should be treated the same by the law of the land. These are ideals; we don't always meet these ideals, but a democracy should strive to change and adapt our system to be always working toward meeting these ideals.

Democracy relies on the concept of "the majority rules" to make decisions. If we want to determine whether we should raise taxes, or build a new school, or go to war, we determine the answer to these questions by a majority vote (50% + 1), whether in Congress or by all the people eligible to vote. Of course, sometimes the majority may misuse its power and hurt the minority, like making African-Americans ride in the back of the bus or use a separate washroom. We say in the United States that we have majority rule but with minority rights.

So how do we protect the rights of the minority? This has always been the great question posed by philosophers and others considering the merits of democracy. After all, if an individual can be corrupt

and misuse his power, couldn't a group of individuals? Of course, they could.

A French philosopher name Alexis de Tocqueville visited the United States in the early 19th Century to observe this new democracy in action. He expected to see mob rule, much like what happened during the French Revolution, where the majority got so out of control that they began guillotining innocent people¹. He called this misuse of power by the majority the “**tyranny of majority**.” Tocqueville was primarily concerned with the majority taking property from the minority, the wealthy aristocratic minority of which he was a member. Whether it is taking property from the minority or denying a member of the minority the right to use a public restroom, there is always a risk that the majority will misuse its power.



Alexis Tocqueville

So, how do we ensure the rights of the minority, and what are the rights of the minority? That is a difficult question with no simple answer. Our framers put some of these rights into the first ten amendments to the U.S. Constitution, what we call the Bill of Rights. Among these rights are the five basic freedoms of speech, press, religion, peaceable assembly, and the right to petition the government to redress grievances (solve problems). We will be revisiting these rights throughout this textbook.

Finally, one of the most important concepts of democracy is compromise. This is one of the biggest elements that fledgling (new) democracies forget or omit when building a nation. Many people new to a democratic form of government can't accept the fact

¹ Tocqueville had mixed reactions to American democracy in the 1830s. For one, he predicted the outbreak of the Civil War over the debate on slavery. Secondly, he was quite concerned with the suppression of opinions, not by the government, but by the pressures of conformity. However, he was impressed that the U.S. didn't fall into the failings of France's experiment with democracy during the French Revolution.

that neither side of a debate will win entirely. In fact, in order for democracy to flourish, each side must compromise. If there is no compromise, we are back to people arming themselves and fighting each time they don't get their way on an issue.

James Madison, the primary author of the U.S. Constitution, was once confronted by an opponent with a demand that Madison name the principles of the proposed government, “if they are any,” Madison paused and famously quipped the principles to this new government are: “compromise, compromise and compromise.”

What Should the Government Do For the People?

What is the proper role of the government. Some people believe in the philosophy that the government that “governs least, governs best” while others believe that the government should guarantee the basic needs for each citizen such as food, clothing and shelter. We are not going to make the determination as to what is the proper role of government; that determination is for each individual to decide.

Our framers did, however, list what they thought was the proper role of the government in our U.S. Constitution, specifically in the *Preamble*. Can you find the six functions of the government according to the authors of the Constitution?

PREAMBLE

“We the People of the United States, in Order to form a more perfect Union, establish Justice, insure domestic Tranquility, provide for the common defence, promote the general Welfare, and secure the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our Posterity, do ordain and establish this Constitution for the United States of America.”

First, the government must attempt to form a more perfect union; this statement implies that the government is not static, but constantly evolving. Think back to when our nation was first founded and only white male property owners were allowed to vote, the founders thought that was democracy. Today, of

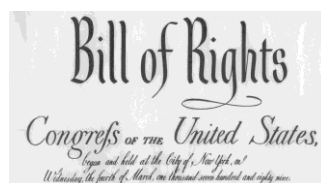
course, we know that definition of democracy would only cover about 20% of our population, and no one would consider that form of government the perfect democracy. So, allowing our nation to evolve was one of the functions the framers saw for our government.

To establish justice is another function. We have courts and a very extensive legal system to dispense justice in the U.S. To insure domestic tranquility means to create an atmosphere of peace and security within our nation's boundaries. We have police and a national guard to help us maintain peace on our streets and in our neighborhoods.

Providing for the common defense is a very important part of any government's duties. We have a rather large military that is charged with keeping us safe from other nations and persons from other nations that want to do us harm. In fact, our national defense budget, about \$600 billion, is tied as our largest federal expenditure, about the same as Social Security.

Promoting the general welfare is a very broad and loosely interpreted role for our federal government. There is great debate over just what this phrase means. For example, does this mean that the government should provide a job, food, clothing and a home for every family, or does it mean something more general, like using the government's authority to provide and maintain public roads and other public works to lay the foundation for individuals to provide for themselves? The interpretation of just how far the government should go in promoting the general welfare of the nation is the cornerstone of most of the debate between the two major political parties today.

Finally, the framers challenged the government to secure the blessings of liberty to current generations as well as to future generations. How do you suppose we have accomplished this lofty goal? Once again, many point to the development of the Bill of Rights and the freedoms found in our U.S. Constitution as a way for the government to secure the blessings of liberty



(which can loosely be described as freedom). Not only did the founders of our nation write the First Amendment and the five basic freedoms that we read about earlier, but they also included rights like trial by jury, freedom from unreasonable searches and seizures of our property, and many other rights we will learn about in later chapters. Writing these freedoms into our U.S. Constitution is just one step in securing the blessings of liberty to ourselves and our posterity.

Preserving Democracy to Ourselves and Our Posterity

How do U.S. citizens ensure that their democratically elected leaders will do what the people want and preserve our democracy for future generations?

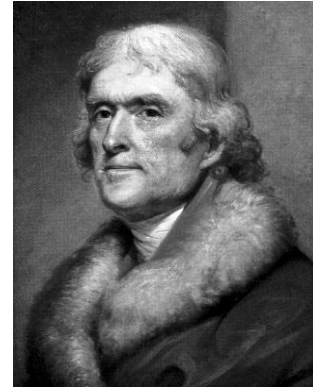
First, we must all participate in our democracy. That participation means, at the very least, voting. How many people who are eligible to vote do you think vote in most American elections? Far less than 50% of the eligible voters. The exception is presidential elections like 2008 when about 55% of the people who were old enough to vote voted, and about 60% of those registered to vote cast a vote for president. In non-presidential elections the turnout is much lower, in some areas as low as 10-15%. That is the lowest voter turnout in the industrialized democracies!

Besides voting we can participate in our democracy in other ways: writing letters to the editor in the newspaper or your favorite Internet blog, writing or emailing your representatives, working for a candidate, running for office yourself or joining a political party. Further, to ensure that our democracy thrives, we must obey and respect the laws. As we learned earlier, even though we may not agree with the laws we must all surrender to them or we will live in anarchy.

There are times when laws are so repressive or unjust that it may be proper to disobey the law, like the laws that required African-Americans to ride in the back of the bus in the 20th Century South. Rosa Parks disobeyed that law in 1955 in Montgomery, Alabama and helped mobilize thousands of protestors to change that unjust law. This is called **civil disobedience** when

a person or group of persons purposely disobeys the law because they believe it is unjust. Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King, Jr. used civil disobedience to fight injustices in India and the South. It is important to remember when disobeying the law that you must suffer the consequences of breaking the law and hope that a large number of citizens will join in your protest. Gandhi, Dr. King and Ms. Parks went to jail for their beliefs. You must be willing to go to jail also, and if the cause is not a just one, it is unlikely you will have much support to overturn the law. For example, driving through the downtown at 90 miles an hour and expecting people to join in your outrage that you were arrested isn't likely to happen.

“If a nation expects to be ignorant and free... it expects what never was and never will be.” – Thomas Jefferson



Thomas Jefferson

Finally, to ensure that our democracy flourishes, you must stay informed about the major issues of the day. This means learning about government and who your representatives are so you can communicate your desires to them. Many Americans don't even know who their representatives are; let alone how they voted on major issues that impact them. Can you name your mayor? State representative? State senator? Congressman/woman? U.S. Senator? Governor? The Vice President? The President?

Table 1: Selected Countries and Governmental Power

Country	Constitution	Democracy	Republic/Monarchy	Geographical Power	Leaders
USA	Written	Yes	Republic	Federation	President/Legislature
United Kingdom	Unwritten	Yes	Constitutional Monarchy	Unitary	Parliament
Switzerland	Written	Yes	Republic	Confederation	Parliament
Saudi Arabia	None	No	Monarchy	Unitary	Appointed by King
Germany	Written	Yes	Republic	Federation	Parliament
Costa Rica	Written	Yes	Republic	Unitary	President/Legislature
North Korea	Written	No	Republic	Unitary	President
Burma	Written	No	Republic	Unitary	Junta
Sweden	Written	Yes	Constitutional Monarchy	Unitary	Parliament

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