

1.1 Government: Purpose & Type

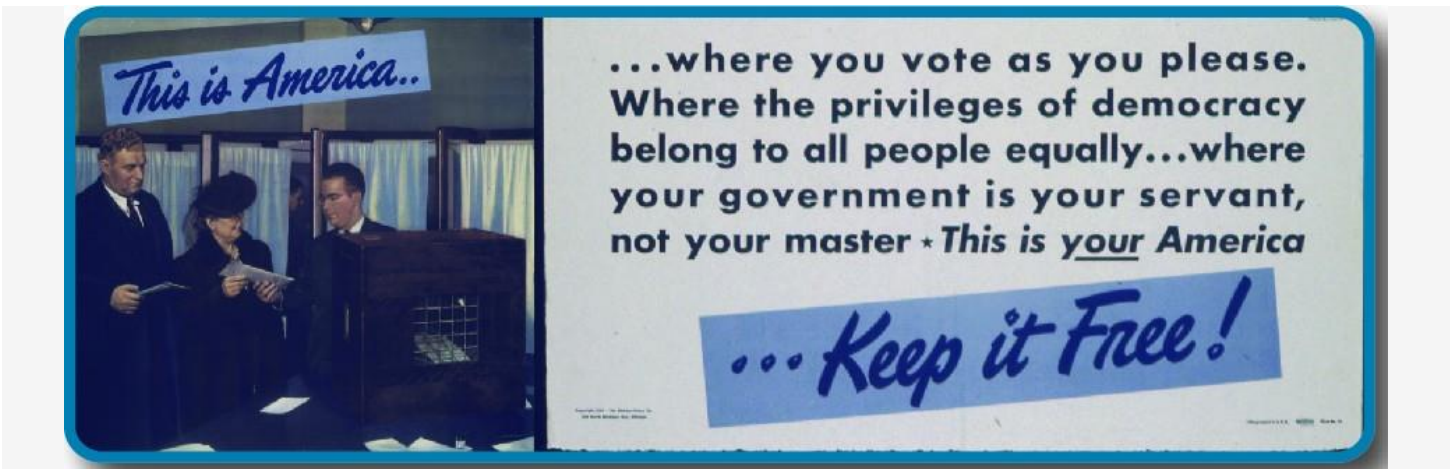


Image 1.1 Photo of Citizens Voting

The right to vote is an important feature of the nation's system of government; and, over the years, many people have fought and sacrificed to obtain or maintain this right. Why do people often ignore this means of civic participation?
(Credit: modification of work–National Archives and Records Administration)

Learning Objectives

- Explore the purpose of government.
- Examine the functions of government and understand the relationship between government and economic systems.
- Define and examine various forms/types of government as well as various structures of government.
- Consider the level of order/control exerted over citizens by various forms and structures of government.

Chart 1.1 Learning Objectives: government purpose, structure, and functions

Government of some form is necessary when people cease to live in isolation. Government can provide protection for individual life and individual liberties. Government by consent of the people rather than by force or coercion is a core idea of governing in the United States of America. Under this concept, government can be characterized by its purpose of protecting not only the lives and property of individual citizens but also the protection of individual liberties. The people give their consent to governmental functions designed to achieve these purposes of securing life, liberty and property while maintaining the maximum level of freedom. The United States of America have relied on citizen consent and participation to govern at the local, state, and national level--as a **representative republic** where voters elect representatives to make decisions and pass laws on their behalf. The right to participate in government is an important pillar of this republic. The people have known and valued that right enough to fight for and then defend it over nearly two and a half centuries. Active citizen participation is at once foundational to a free society, yet it is taken for granted by too many.

The World War II poster shown above depicts voting as an important part of the fight to keep the United States free. Voting is a right worth protecting and a key means for citizen involvement, which ensures that the government serves the people rather than the reverse.

The founders of the United States originally focused on freedom from the **tyranny** that is excessive and oppressive control of a remote and imperious monarchy (rule of one) denying basic political rights and civil liberties. While forming a new independent government, they realized an opportunity to draw on the wisdom of revered political philosophers and centuries of experience with governance. Perhaps most importantly, the resulting representative republic is centered on **civic participation** and control of government through the consent of the governed, meaning citizens influence governmental policy decisions through the exercising of rights (vote, assembly, petition, etc.) without government interference.

Consider the issue of civic participation. At the founding, only free white males participated in voting. In fact, some states further restricted voting participation by requiring ownership of property. Over time, these voting restrictions gradually gave way to full political equality of participation for all citizens. Only a government structured for ultimate control by the people, would be able to evolve the very definition of the people governing themselves. The definition of the people has changed over time. The struggle, to include more groups of people able to participate on equal footing, has been long and difficult. The fact that each disenfranchised group continued the struggle is evidence of the value placed on our representative republic and the opportunities equal participation affords.

Thomas Jefferson writes in the ***Declaration of Independence*** that “political bands” of government connect citizens of a nation and that governments are formed for the purpose of securing citizens’ rights of “[...] Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.”¹¹ He states that people agree to give power and authority to a government and to abide by agreed upon rules in order to achieve these objectives of protecting rights. While people hope the government will provide the proper balance between protecting their liberties, providing for their personal security and safety, and promoting opportunities to achieve personal happiness, no government is perfect. The balance between governmental purposes is constantly debated and discussed. Debate is ongoing over what government should do to assist citizens in pursuing happiness while at the same time treating citizens equally in such pursuits. Government sometimes regulates what we eat, where we go to school, what kind of education we receive, how our tax money is spent, and what we do in our free time. Americans are often *unaware* of the extent of government intervention in their lives.

What is government and why would we even want one?

Government is how a society organizes itself to allocate and exercise authority in order to accomplish purposes, goals and functions. These government functions typically include defense, education, law enforcement, a judiciary, and an infrastructure for transportation and trade for their citizens. They may include additional functions such as healthcare and possibly a broad range of social welfare services. Countries provide such benefits via different governmental types/forms and structures.

The form and structure of governmental organization a country chooses should not be confused with politics. **Politics** is a competitive struggle for gaining and exercising control over the governmental processes or organizational structures that carry out the goals, purposes, or functions of the country.

Government	Politics
Organization to Accomplish Purposes, Goals & Functions	Competitive Struggle for Power To Influence Policy and Government Actions
EXAMPLES... Congress Supreme Court Presidency U.S. Department of State Texas Department of Transportation Local Police Department Local Public Schools... etc.	EXAMPLES... Political Parties Elections Interest Groups Protests Petitions Mass Media Social Media... etc.

Chart 1.2 Examples of Government and Politics

John Locke, a 17th century political philosopher, put forward as an argument, that all people have natural rights of life, liberty, and property that are viewed as inseparable or unalienable freedoms that cannot be taken away. Thus, people have natural rights of self-determination or control of their own life and property. According to Locke, people sacrifice some portion of freedom in exchange for government protection of life, liberty, and property based upon their own consent.

Does it then follow that all governments should involve individual consent from the people? By the time of the American revolution, this political thought had developed into the idea that people should govern themselves through elected representatives; and, only representatives chosen by the people should make laws and institute control over citizens' lives.

Where did this idea arise? Why would we want any other individual or government to have any type of control over our lives or property? Individuals would not need to band together for order or control if everyone respected each other's lives, liberty and property 100% of the time.

As James Madison stated, "If men were angels, no government would be necessary."¹²¹ Unfortunately, this is not the case with some individuals who will seek to take away others' lives, curtail others' liberty, or deprive others of property; therefore, governments are established to protect against such unrestrained breakdowns of order in society.

Consider the Original

From James Madison, *Federalist No. 51*

The Structure of Government Must Furnish the Proper Checks and Balances Between the Different Departments
From the New York Packet, Friday, February 8, 1788

"[...] but what is government itself, but the greatest of all reflections on human nature? If men were angels, no government would be necessary. If angels were to govern men, neither external nor internal controls on government would be necessary. In framing a government which is to be administered by men over men, the great difficulty lies in this: you must first enable the government to control the governed; and in the next place oblige it to control itself."

Credit: Congress.gov, Resources, The Federalist Papers; www.congress.gov

Chart 1.3 Excerpt from *Federalist No. 51*

The individuals organizing governmental authority and powers for the new United States of America clearly stated the goals of good government in the *Preamble* to the U.S. Constitution for a new republic based on consent of the governed. They sought balance in government between maintaining order while preserving and not abusing the liberty of citizens. While most governments want to establish order and control, not all seek to protect liberty or property. Throughout history, the most common form of government—**monarchy** (one person rule, typically hereditary; or one family in control; power concentrated at the top)—saw order and control as the highest priority. Several hundred years before the U. S. *Constitution* was written and before John Locke wrote about people governing themselves through representatives, Thomas Hobbes wrote a political thesis titled *Leviathan*. He argues in *Leviathan* that a strong ruler is necessary to prevent a constant state of war of people among themselves.^[3] Imagine there is no government, no police, no court, no rules—a state known as **anarchy**. Hobbes concludes such a situation would make life "[...] poore, nasty, brutish, and short."^[4] He believed a strong ruler would keep people physically safe from attack. While Hobbes argued in his time for **absolute monarchy**, similar arguments for an extremely powerful ruler or dictator have been made in more recent times under a form of government known as **authoritarianism**. Under these forms of government, the ruler has unrestricted power and citizens have limited opportunity to participate in government decisions since there is significant limitation on political rights and civil liberties.

Consider the Original

Excerpt from *Leviathan* by Thomas Hobbes (1651)

Out Of Civil States, "[...] it is manifest, that during the time men live without a common Power to keep them all in awe, they are in that condition which is called Warre; and such a warre, as is of every man, against every man... the nature of War, consisteth not in actuall fighting; but in the known disposition thereto, during all the time there is no assurance to the contrary [...]."
The Incommodities Of Such A War, "Whatsoever therefore is consequent to a time of Warre, where every man is Enemy to every man... wherein men live without other security, than what their own strength, and their own invention shall furnish them... In such condition, there is no place for Industry; because the fruit thereof is uncertain; and consequently... no Society; and which is worst of all, continuall feare, and danger of violent death; And the life of man, solitary, poore, nasty, brutish, and short [...]"^[6]

Chart 1.4 Excerpt from Thomas Hobbes' *Leviathan*

The power of most of today's monarchs is limited by law or constitution; and, kings and queens, in such countries as Great Britain, Sweden, or the Netherlands are classified as ceremonial "heads of State" only, with the real governing authority and power in a democratically elected legislature or Parliament. With citizens having strong opportunities to freely participate in electing representatives, these countries are known as **parliamentary democracies** despite having monarchs. However, this is not always the case. Kingdoms such as Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates have absolute monarchs with unrestricted powers with significant limitation on a citizen's political rights or civil liberties. Also, many cases of very strong authoritarian non-democratic governments still exist—with virtually dictatorial leaders where citizens have very limited opportunity to participate in governmental decisions.^[7] Some non-democratic countries are also totalitarian and tyrannical in nature. Under **totalitarianism**, the government controls all aspects of citizens' lives—including social and private matters such as the number of children a family may have. Citizens' rights are limited, and the government does not allow political criticism or opposition. North Korea is an example of a totalitarian government. Another nondemocratic form of government is **oligarchy** (power concentrated in a handful of elite members of society). This identifiable, permanent elite group of rulers frequently shares characteristics of wealth, social status, military might, business, or political connections. For example, in countries such as Paraguay, Ecuador, or the Ukraine, a wealth and social status elite exists. In China, only members of the Communist Party can vote or hold public office, and the party's most influential members make all governmental decisions, virtually characteristic of an authoritarian political system.

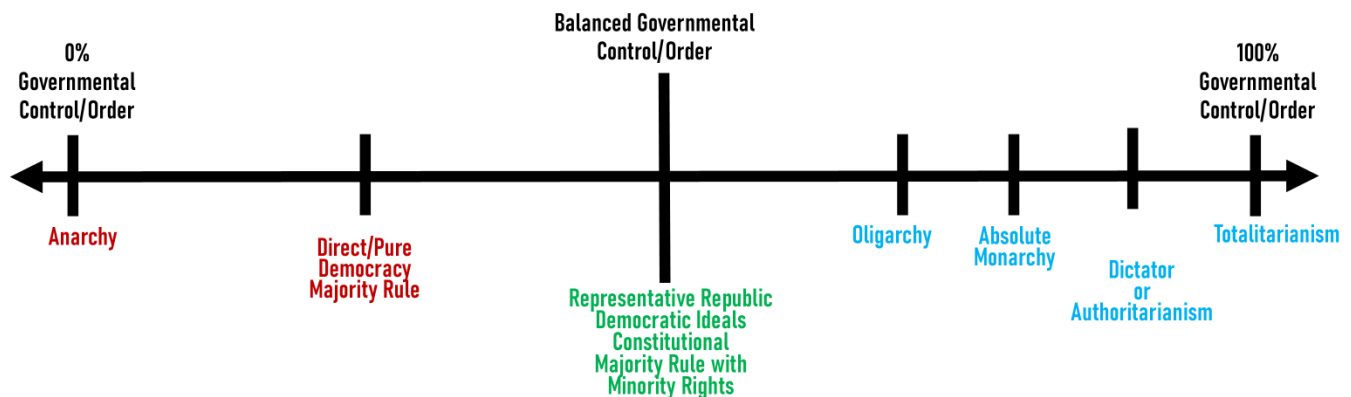


Chart 1.5 Scale of Governmental Order and Control



The Freedom House Annual Survey of political rights and civil liberties shares information on the political form of government of some 154 countries ranking countries as "Free," "Partially Free," and "Not Free," based upon the level of political rights and civil liberties protected in those countries.

Check it out at <https://freedomhouse.org/countries/freedom-world/scores>. Also, the CIA website provides information about the types of government across the world in a section called "World Factbook." <https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries>.

A **representative government** (either in the form of a **republic**, **representative democracy**, or parliament-dominated, constitutionally limited monarchy) is indirect rule of citizens through representatives and the rule of law.

U.S. citizens vote for members of Congress, the president and vice president, members of state legislatures, governors, mayors, and members of town councils and school boards to act on their behalf. Most representative governments favor **majority rule**: the opinions of the majority of the people have more influence with government than those of the minority. If the number of elected representatives who favor a proposed law is greater than those who oppose it, the law will be enacted. However, in representative governments like the United States, **minority rights** are protected--people cannot be deprived of certain rights even if an overwhelming number of people think that they should be deprived. For example, even though the numbers of Americans who believe in the authority of a Higher Power far outweigh the number who do not, the minority is still protected, and no imposition of religious belief or practice is forced on this minority group. Because decisions are mainly made through majority rule, making your opinions known and voting (for individuals who make decisions affecting all citizens) are influential forms of civic engagement in a republic.

Form of Government	Description of Governmental Form
totalitarianism	total governmental control including over private lives and social relationships
authoritarianism	strong ruler with unrestricted power; citizens lack political rights and civil liberties
monarchy	rule of one; typically hereditary rule; backed by oligarchical power (aristocracy)
Oligarchy	rule of few (well-connected, socially, financially, politically powerful)
representative republic or democracy	rule of law; rule of citizens is indirect through representatives
direct democracy	citizen decision makers; simple majority rule; no restraint on majority
anarchy	no order/control; no government structure; power vacuum

Chart 1.6 Forms of Government and Their Descriptions

In a **direct democracy**, unlike a republic or representative democracy, people participate directly in government decisions. In ancient Athens, the most famous example of a direct democracy, all male citizens could attend meetings of the Assembly. Here they debated and voted for or against all proposed laws. Americans vote for people to represent them and make laws on their behalf. They may sometimes vote directly on issues.

For example, a referendum or proposed law may be placed on the ballot for citizens to vote on directly, taking the matter out of the hands of the state legislature. At New England town meetings, all residents can debate decisions affecting the town. Such occasions provide additional opportunities for civic engagement. Direct control is often more effective at local levels of government, becoming unmanageable as populations increase. Accordingly, there are no direct democracy referenda at the U.S. national level.



Image 1.2 Photo of Town Meeting Venue

Residents of Boxborough, Massachusetts, gather in a local hotel to discuss issues affecting their town. New England town meetings provide an opportunity for people to experience direct democracy. This tradition has lasted for hundreds of years.
(Credit: OpenStax; modification of work by Liz West)

Consider the Original

“Society in every state is a blessing, but Government, even in its best state, is but a necessary evil; in its worst state an intolerable one: for when we suffer, or are exposed to the same miseries BY A GOVERNMENT, which we might expect in a country WITHOUT GOVERNMENT, our calamity is heightened by reflecting that we furnish the means by which we suffer.”

Thomas Paine^[8]

Chart 1.7 Excerpt from Thomas Paine

Form of Government	The Good Thing About...	The Bad Thing About...	The Ugly Thing About...
totalitarianism	decisiveness	people have no say in the government and usually in their own lives	ruler or rulers may take everything away from the people
authoritarianism or monarchy	one person in charge means quick decisions	one person in charge means the ruler has power & people do not	a really bad ruler can hurt the people because of their power
oligarchy elite	a group of people are less likely to be exploited by a single bad ruler	various leaders may not agree; indecisiveness may leave the people vulnerable	a bad group of rulers may take advantage of the people for their own benefit
representative republic or democracy	government exists because people choose and replace representatives themselves	if the people do not pay attention to leaders, bad ones may take power	representatives may become corrupt and hurt the people; may try to overthrow the rule of law
direct democracy	people are completely in control of their government	people can be divided and indecisive or take advantage of minority groups	majority always gets its way and may oppress some of the people
anarchy	everyone can do whatever they want whenever they want	people have no protection from each other or other nations	people can be hurt by whichever person or group has power

Chart 1.8 Forms of Government with Good, Bad, and Ugly Points for Each

Basic Purposes, Goals, and Functions of Government

The framers of government in the new United States of America understood the dangers of **anarchy** (absence of government order), the problems of **monarchy**, the oppression of a distant aristocratic elite and the impracticality of **direct democracy**. Not only did they believe the new country was already too large and diverse for direct democracy, but they were also concerned that in direct democracies, minority views and rights might be poorly protected from majority rule. A **representative republic** was their choice—citizen control via elected representatives. They also had a clear understanding of the functions they wished the republic’s representatives to implement on behalf of citizens as stated in the Preamble to the written Constitution.

Consider the Original

The preamble to the *Constitution* clearly outlines the basic purposes of government expected to be achieved with the *Constitution* stating, “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.”^[9]

Chart 1.9 Preamble to the U.S. Constitution

What are these six (6) purposes or goals of the United States’ government?

1. **(form a union)** unify to maintain order and liberty; strengthen and provide enough power to the government to carry out listed goals
2. **(establish justice)** formulate rules to establish order; a fair and impartial justice system to ensure equality before the law
3. **(domestic tranquility)** make sure the new rules and punishments provide an environment of law and order to preserve physical security for citizens and their property
4. **(common defense)** make sure the union protects its citizens from foreign invasion & threats—military, political, and economic—through creation of a national military force
5. **(general welfare)** promote social, political, and economic prosperity for the entire nation
6. **(secure liberty)** maintain individual liberties against excessive government encroachment (intrusion)

These goals, listed in the *Constitution’s* preamble, outline difficult tasks requiring delicate balance. Tension exists between the government’s responsibilities to maintain order while upholding the commitment to protect liberties, such as freedom of speech and the right to assemble to protest governmental actions. Moreover, we continue to debate and redefine what is meant by each of these purposes. For example, debate exists over the extent to which the government, in promoting the general welfare, may obligate taxpayers to provide a safety net for those unable to provide for themselves. Debate over the role of the national government, in facilitating an environment of equal opportunity versus a commitment to equal outcome through various fiscal and economic policies, is one of the most hotly contested issues of modern U.S. politics.

Politics is a competitive power struggle for gaining and exercising control over the governmental processes or organizational structures that set or carry-out social, political, and economic policy of the country. **Representative governments** provide a means for citizens to participate and make their opinions known to those in positions of power to make policy decisions. Moreover, in a representative government, voting allows citizens to decide who will be in those positions of power. In addition, representative governments like the United States, Britain, France, and others protect citizens' **civil liberties** including freedom of speech, a free press, and the citizens' right to join organized groups or political parties. These civil liberties provide an essential operating environment for the exercise of civic participation in a representative government. **Civic participation** or engagement that connects citizens to their **representative government** is a vital ingredient of politics. In the United States, citizens play an important role in influencing what policies are pursued, what values the government chooses to support, what initiatives are granted funding, and who gets to make the final decisions. Civic participation can take many forms besides voting such as reading about politics, listening to news reports, discussing politics, attending (or watching televised) political debates, donating money to political campaigns or favored interest groups, handing out flyers promoting a candidate, voting, joining protest marches, and writing letters to or meeting with elected representatives. Politics is the process of who gets what and how; that is, what policy or benefits and how it is carried out. These policy decisions involve trade-offs. If government policy chose to support an ideal such as individualism, the policy may involve loosening regulations on business and industry or cutting taxes so that people have more money to invest in business.

If government policy supports an ideal such as egalitarianism or equality, it may raise taxes in order to be able to spend more on public education, public transportation, housing for the poor, and care for the elderly. If, for example, the government policy is more concerned with national security than with individual liberty, the policy may authorize the tapping of people's phones. If liberty is more important, then government will place greater restrictions on the extent that law enforcement agencies can intrude upon citizens' private communications. The political process and the input of citizens through their civic participation thus helps determine the answers when protection of liberty and provision of security conflict or for other policy questions.

Government and the Economic Framework

Governments work to achieve their goals and purposes while balancing governing tasks within specific but differing economic frameworks. The United States government has long worked primarily in a capitalist, free-market system. In fact, representative democracy and the free-market capitalism framework developed together in the U.S. from the early days of the republic. Under this framework, the market—through privately owned and operated businesses and companies—provides many needed goods and services to those living within a society.



Image 1.3 Photo of Hoover Dam

A rainbow hovers in the distance above Hoover Dam, which is an example of a critical infrastructure project to provide water to 23 million people in the southwestern U.S. as well as irrigation for 2.5 million acres of agriculture—a public sector service. (Credit: Richard Stewart, Hoover Dam Visitor Services; WhiteHouse.gov.)

Profit is earned in return for products and services. Under this system, a majority supply of food, clothing, housing, and other goods and services are provided by what may be called **private sector goods and services**. Economists have formally labeled these goods and services as “**private goods**.”^[5]

However, the market cannot provide everything (in enough quantity or at low enough prices) to meet everyone’s needs or to meet all the goals and purposes of government. Therefore, some goods, services, and activities are provided by the government itself, or what may be called **public sector**

goods and services or “**public goods**.”^[6] Two such goods are public roads and education. Some representative democracies—such as Sweden and Denmark--use more public sector goods and services than the United States. These countries tend toward **socialism**, an economic system with a much higher expectation of goods, services, and activities being provided by the government and are known as social democracies. Socialism is typically viewed as an economic system and may be associated with social democracies such as Sweden and Denmark as well as authoritarian regimes such as Venezuela and Cuba. The economic system does not necessarily equate directly to a governmental form.

Private vs. Public Sector: Goods and Services

Economic Sector	Description of Types of Goods and Services
Private	goods and services provided by private businesses & companies, used by those who pay for them (cars, internet service, air travel, computers, food, clothing, etc.)
Public & Common Goods	goods and services provided by government—paid for by taxpayers, available to designated groups or individuals based on public policy goals (public highways, education, social welfare programs, etc.) and goods that all people may use but that are of limited supply (ocean fish, fresh water, air, natural resources, etc.)

Chart 1.10 Public and Private Goods and Descriptions

At federal, state, and local levels, government provides stability and security as well as goods and services. Security and safety require some form of military establishment, police, fire departments, and other first responders. Government provides other valuable goods and services such as public transportation, mail service, as well as food, housing, and health care for the poor. If a house catches on fire, the fire department does not demand payment before they put the fire out. If someone breaks into a

house and tries to harm the occupants, the police will try to protect them and arrest the intruder, but the police department will not request payment for services rendered.



Image 1.4 Chicago Ambulance on the Street at Night

A fire department ambulance rushes to the rescue in Chicago. Emergency medical services, fire departments, and police departments are all paid for by government through the tax base, and they provide their services without an additional charge.

(Credit: OpenStax, Tony Webster)

The provision of these goods and services is funded by citizens paying into the general tax base. **Public goods** are funded by all taxpayers and available based either on need or entitlement. NO public sector goods and services are free. Public sector activities are funded by ALL taxpayers and available based either on need or entitlement—or to meet some basic public purpose, such as national defense.

Yet not all public sector goods and services are fully funded by taxpayers. For example, if you wish to avoid traffic in a large metropolitan area, you may

choose to pay a fee (toll) to drive on a less congested toll road, constructed under a government approved contract. Some government administered program benefits include subsidies for goods and services provided through the private sector.

Some goods and services include activities that involve protection of what economists call “**common goods**,” such as air, water, or fish in the sea—which all people may use, free of charge but are in limited supply.^[7] Because everyone can use these goods, they must be protected or regulated so a few people do not take everything that is available and leave others with nothing. Government performs the important job of protecting these common goods through regulations.



Image 1.5 Fishing Boat on the Water

Fishing provides income, as well as food, for many Americans. Without government restrictions on the kinds and number of fishes that can be caught, the fish population might decline, and certain species might become extinct. (Credit: Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division, Washington, D.C. at <http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.pnp.pp.print; fsa.8a30588>)

Interesting Information

Governments regulate public access to common goods like natural resources, which may be of limited supply. Public lands and wildlife, however, are not goods the government can simply multiply if supply falls due to demand. If some people take too freely from the supply of common goods, there will not be enough left for others to use.

Government currently regulates access to fish (a common good of limited supply) in order to ensure against extinction and improve sustainability. Environmentalists want to set strict fishing limits. Commercial fishers resist limits. Fishing limits are set by a combination of scientists, politicians, local resource managers, and groups representing the interests of fishers.^[8]

Chart 1.11 Some Goods Government Regulates

Government: Questions to Consider

1. Why are governments necessary to society?
2. What forms of government exist?
3. What form of government exerts almost 100% control over citizens?
4. What term describes a lack of government, order, or control?
5. What are the six functions of government laid out by the *Preamble* to the *Constitution*?
6. What is the difference between a public good and a private good?
7. What is the difference between a representative democracy and a direct democracy?

1. *at a minimum the protection of life from bodily harm from others is considered necessary for society to exist and is a fundamental purpose of government*
2. *many different forms of government exist; each form of government allows for a different level of freedom for the people and control by the government; some forms include authoritarianism, communism, monarchy, republic, etc.*
3. *tyranny; totalitarianism*
4. *anarchy*
5. *form a union, set up a system of justice, keep the peace at home/domestically, provide for defense, promote the welfare of all citizens equally, and protect the maximum amount of personal liberty while achieving the previously stated goals*
6. *private goods are provided by private businesses and individuals for private purchase and use; public goods are provided by taxpayers*
7. *direct democracy ensures the majority always wins and all citizens are allowed to participate in all decision making; representative democracy allows for citizens choosing who will make decisions for all*

Terms to Remember

absolute monarchy—a political system with a hereditary, very strong or authoritarian ruler with unrestricted power and significant limitation on political rights and civil liberties

anarchy—absence of government, order, control

authoritarianism—a political system with political leaders with virtually dictatorial or unrestricted powers where citizens have very limited opportunity to participate in governmental decisions; and may have little personal rights respected by the government

civil liberties—personal or individual freedoms retained by every human being; liberties place limitations or restrains on the power of government; basic freedoms not subject to governmental interference (speech, press, religious liberty, etc.); unalienable liberties government should not take away

common goods—generally natural resources that all people may use but that are of limited supply and are protected and regulated by government, that is, by the public sector

Declaration of Independence—declares government is established by consent of the people/governed to secure unalienable/inseparable rights of life, liberty and pursuit of happiness; states reason for political, economic separation between colonies in America and Great Britain

dictatorship—very strong or authoritarian ruler of a government with excessive regulation and control over public and private lives of individuals

direct democracy—a form of government where people participate directly in making government decisions, such as through the use of referenda, instead of choosing representatives to do this for them

government—the means by which a society organizes itself and allocates and exercises authority and decision-making in order to accomplish its purposes, goals, and provisions of benefits

majority rule—a fundamental principle of democracy; the majority should have the power to make decisions binding upon the whole

minority rights—protections for those who are not part of the majority

monarchy—a form of government where one ruler, usually a hereditary one, holds political power

oligarchy—a form of government where a handful of elite society members hold political power

parliamentary democracy—political system of representative government; legislature/parliament selects the government which exercises policy leadership of the country; monarch are not actively involved in policy formation or implementation, retaining only ceremonial functions

political power—influence over a government's institutions, leadership, or policies

politics—competitive power struggle for gaining and exercising control over the governmental processes or organizational structures that set or carry-out social, political, and economic policy of the country

preamble—beginning statement; introductory paragraph of the U.S. *Constitution*, which states the purposes of the government formed by that contractual document

private sector goods and services—goods and services through the free market economy system by businesses and companies to those who pay for them; private goods

public sector goods and services—goods and services including regulation provided by government, paid for by taxpayer's dollars, public goods

representative democracy—a form of government where voters elect representatives to make decisions and pass laws on behalf of all the people instead of allowing people to vote directly on laws

republic—indirect rule by citizens' representatives; also known as representative democracy

socialism—an economic system (not governmental form) characterized by a high level of public sector goods and services provided through government and paid for by taxpayers; may result in high levels of regulation and control by government

totalitarianism—a political system where government is all-powerful and citizens have no political rights and civil liberties; government controls all aspects of citizens' lives including social and private matters

tyranny—excessive control over public and private lives of individuals by an individual ruler, group, or government, including a significant denial of political rights and civil liberties

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1.2 Government: Who governs?



Image 1.6 Migrant Worker Family in Tent

This migrant agricultural worker's family might find participating with government difficult when daily life is a struggle. Does socioeconomic status affect civic participation? (Credit: Dorothea Lange; Library of Congress Collection)

Learning Objectives

- Understand relationship between the *Declaration of Independence* and the concepts of unalienable rights and consent of the governed
- Understand which three democratic ideals are related to voting for representatives
- Understand basic theories of government—elitism and pluralism
- Understand how pluralism and elitism differ from the democratic ideals of majoritarianism

Chart 1.12 Learning Objectives of Democratic Ideals and Unalienable Rights

The United States *Constitution* guarantees its citizens the right to participate in government. In fact, the representative republic is based upon the ideas of **consent** by those who are governed and through individual participation. The Declaration of Independence states a governing creed that each individual, regardless of birth or circumstances, has value and possesses **unalienable rights** of life, liberty and pursuit of happiness. It states government is established to protect and defend these rights.

If individuals believe these rights are unalienable (inseparable) from the human condition, then no government should separate them from their rights *without their consent*.

Individuals in the new republic formed a representative government based upon the principle of consent; unfortunately, consent was not expanded to all individuals living within the borders of the new nation at the time of formation. It was only achieved over time.

Civic Participation, Political Equality, and Majoritarianism



Image 1.7 Woman Voting for the First Time

Margaret V. Lally is pictured here at the door of a voting booth during the first election where women could vote. (Credit: Bain News Service, LOC.)

If citizens wish to form a representative government, participation in choosing representatives that will make the laws is necessary. This democratic ideal of civic participation is characterized by consent of the majority through citizen voting for these representatives. Moreover, in voting booths, each person has politically equal influence—one person/one vote. Thus, voting for representatives manifests three democratic ideals—civic participation, majority rule, and political equality. This conception of representative government has been called **majoritarian** and places its reliance on individual civic participation in the electoral process to achieve consent of the governed.¹¹

Elitism and Pluralism: The Alternative to Majoritarianism

Many people believe evidence indicates U.S. citizens, especially as represented by competing groups, can influence government actions. This viewpoint is called the **pluralist theory** of government, which states political power rests with competing interest groups sharing influence over governmental decisions.

The founders of the U.S. *Constitution* understood that citizens might band together in organized groups to attempt to influence elected representatives as they develop rules and laws. This form of civic participation is guaranteed in the *Bill of Rights* through the First Amendment's right to petition the government to address your concerns and the right to assemble or organize political meetings or groups.

The United States has many different levels and branches of government that any citizen or group might approach with concerns about protection of liberty and property or maintenance of order and security. Who is really in control of the government?

Some political theorists, however, argue that a minority of citizens, economic and political elite, control the government and others have no influence. This belief is called the **elite theory** of government

or **elitism**. According to this theory, the United States is, in fact, an **oligarchy** where power is concentrated in the hands of the few.



Image 1.8 Rally in Philadelphia 1917

Rally of the citizens of Philadelphia for the Home Defense Committee, March 31, 1917
(Credit: Library of Congress Panoramic Photographs Collection)

Competing Theories of Government	Descriptions
Majoritarian	⇒ a democratic model which relies on the majority of citizens <i>through elections</i> to exercise political power to achieve consent of the governed
Pluralist	⇒ a democratic model which relies on many competing interest groups to influence government decisions to be responsive to the general public
Elitist	⇒ a non-democratic model which suggests that a concentrated and distinct minority (an oligarchy) exercises power of governmental decision making

Chart 1.13 Competing Theories of Government and Descriptions

Pluralists argue, political power is distributed throughout society. Rather than resting in the hands of individuals, a variety of organized groups hold power, with some groups having more influence on certain issues than others. Thousands of interest groups exist in the United States.^[2] Approximately 70–90



Image 1.9 Interest Group Organized Protest

A veterans' interest group protests bonus bill delay. Protesting Congress' delay in considering the soldiers' cash bonus proposal, scores of Washington veterans paraded to the Capitol in a demonstration to seek immediate action. They were met on the Capitol steps by members of the House who are war veterans, where the photograph shows them being addressed by Rep. Patman of Texas. (Credit: Library of Congress Collection)

percent of Americans report belonging to at least one group.^[43] According to pluralist theory, people with shared interests will form groups to make their desires known to politicians. These groups include environmental advocates, unions, and organizations representing various business interests. Because most people lack the inclination, time, or expertise necessary to actively advocate for their interests in Washington, D.C., these groups assume this role. As groups compete with one another and find themselves opposed on important issues, government policy forms. In this way, government policy is shaped from the bottom up and not from the top down, as in elitist theory.

Robert Dahl, author of *Who Governs?* was one of the first to advance the pluralist theory and argued that politicians seeking an “electoral payoff” are attentive to the concerns of politically active citizens and through them become acquainted with the needs of ordinary people. They will attempt to give people what they want in exchange for their votes.^[44] The foremost supporter of elite theory was C. Wright Mills. In his book, *The Power Elite*, Mills argued that government was controlled by a combination of business, military, and political elites.^[45] Most political elites are highly educated, often graduating from prestigious universities. According to elite theory, the wealthy use their power to control the nation's economy such that those with little influence cannot advance economically. Wealth or political connections allow the elite to secure for themselves the politically important positions used to make decisions and allocate resources in ways that benefit this group. Politicians do the bidding of the wealthy instead of attending to the needs of ordinary people. Those who favor government by the elite believe the elite are better fit to govern and that average citizens are content to allow them to do so.^[46] In apparent support of the elite perspective, one-third of U.S. presidents have attended Ivy League schools, a much higher percentage than the rest of the U.S. population.^[47] All six of the most recent U.S. presidents attended prestigious East Coast or Ivy League schools such as Harvard, Yale, Columbia or University of Pennsylvania.



Portrait of G. H. W. Bush by Herbert E. Abrams, 1994; Portrait of W. J. Clinton by Simmi Knox, 2001; Portrait of G. W. Bush by John Howard Sanden, 2012 at “Official Portraits of the U.S. Presidents”; photos of B. H. Obama and D. J. Trump from WhiteHouse.gov photo archive; D. Myles Cullen photo of Trump 30 March 2017. The last five U.S. Presidents have all attended prestigious East Coast or Ivy League universities.

Image 1.10 Portraits of Past Presidents from Bush to Trump



Image 1.11 Photo of President Joe Biden

Joseph Biden
University of Syracuse
Credit: whitehouse.gov, 10
January 2013

Currently, more than half of the members of Congress are millionaires; their median net worth is just over \$1 million, and some have much more.^[8] There is considerable dispute over the validity of **elite theory**. While a clearly differentiated socio-economic group appears to exist in positions of power, members of this group often do not have the same political viewpoints. For example, while Presidents Bush, Obama and Trump all attended prestigious east coast universities, they do not share similar political views on many issues. Outside government, extremely wealthy billionaires can often be found on different sides of the issues, such as George Soros or Tom Steyer supporting Democrats and Sheldon Adelson or the Koch brothers (Charles and David) supporting Republicans. At a minimum, there seems to be at least competing elites within this high-level socio-economic group.

Representative Government: Pluralism and Elitism

Do pluralist interest groups and lobbying efforts fulfill the original concept of representative government? Pluralism can undermine some of the basic democratic ideals of representative government. Since not all groups are equally powerful—they do not fulfill precisely the principle of political equality or one person/one vote. Moreover, lobbying influence is not the same as majority rule.

Governmental responsiveness to interest groups, even when all are combined, do not represent the true majority view of the people—only the view of those organized individuals. Clearly, elitism does not fulfill the democratic principles of political equality or majority rule either. An elite is not a majority of the population—it is then the opposite of political equality.



The Center for Responsive Politics is a non-partisan research group that provides data on who gives to whom in elections. Visit [OpenSecrets.org: Center for Responsive Politics](https://www.opensecrets.org) to track campaign contributions, congressional bills and committees, and interest groups and lobbyists.

Government: Questions to Consider

1. Can you describe unalienable rights?
2. What is the difference between elite and pluralist theory?
3. From what/who/where do unalienable rights arise or originate?
4. What three democratic ideals does voting for representatives demonstrate?
5. Which of the three democratic ideals are not fulfilled by pluralist theory?

1. *rights you have as a human being including life, liberty, and property*
2. *government is controlled by a small group of powerful or well-connected individuals versus government is controlled by competing groups of individuals*
3. *right reason, because you are a human being; because a higher power gives you the rights; individual choice*
4. *civic participation, political equality, majority rule (consent of the governed)*
5. *two of the ideals are not fulfilled—political equality since not all groups are equal and majority rule since each group does not represent the majority of citizens*

Terms to Remember

consent—individual citizens of a government recognize governmental authority; individual citizens vote or give consent to be ruled by a particular elected group of representatives

elite theory (elitism)—claims political power rests in the hands of a small, elite group of people

majoritarian theory (majoritarianism)—claims the majority of citizens exercise political power and achieve consent of the governed through elections

pluralist theory (pluralism)—claims political power rests in the hands of groups of people; competing groups

unalienable rights—rights possessed by every person/human; rights not conferred by the government; individual rights to life, liberty and property

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2. "The Non-Governmental Order: Will NGOs Democratise, or Merely Disrupt, Global Governance?" *The Economist*, 9 December 1999. [\[1\]](#)
3. Ronald J. Hrebenar. 1997. *Interest Group Politics in America*, 3rd ed. New York: Routledge, 14; Clive S. Thomas. 2004. *Research Guide to U.S. and International Interest Groups*. Westport, CT: Praeger, 106. [\[2\]](#)
4. Dahl, *Who Governs?* 91–93. [\[3\]](#)
5. C. Wright Mills. 1956. *The Power Elite*. New York: Oxford University Press. [\[4\]](#)
6. Jack L. Walker. 1966. "A Critique of the Elitist Theory of Democracy," *The American Political Science Review* 60, No. 2: 295. [\[5\]](#)
7. The Ivy League is technically an athletic conference in the Northeast comprised of sports teams from eight institutions of higher education—Brown University, Columbia University, Cornell University, Dartmouth College, Harvard University, University of Pennsylvania, Princeton University, and Yale University—however, the term is also used to connote academic excellence or social elitism. [\[6\]](#)
8. Alan Rappeport, "Making it Rain: Members of Congress Are Mostly Millionaires," *New York Times*, 12 January 2016. [\[7\]](#)

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1.3 Government:

Civic Participation in a Democratic Representative Republic



Image 1.12 Women's Suffrage Protest

Picket line in 1917 for women's suffrage (vote) from the National Woman's Party Records with the Library of Congress
(Credit: Harris & Ewing, Washington, D.C.; Library of Congress Collection)

Learning Objectives

- Explain the importance of citizen engagement in a representative republic.
- Describe the primary ways Americans can influence and become engaged in a representative government.
- Understand the debate about the decline of social capital.

Chart 1.14 Learning Objectives for Citizen Engagement and Social Capital

Citizen participation in a representative republic matters. As stated earlier, the right of citizens to participate in government is an important principle of representative democratic government. The purpose of voting—and other forms of civic participation—is to ensure that the government serves the people and not the other way around. Both majoritarian and pluralist theories assert a republic cannot function without active participation by at least some citizens. No matter who we believe makes important political decisions—the majority of voters or special interest groups—participation through voting changes those who are in powerful positions of authority to make policy choices.

Government based upon the consent of the people presupposes citizen participation in the political process. One of the hallmarks of this participation is voting in elections. In fact, voting is clearly a

necessary condition—that is, you cannot have a representative republic without voting. However, voting is not sufficient for a government to be called a representative republic or representative democracy. Authoritarian governments frequently allow citizens to vote but without real and meaningful participation in governing. For example, without real opportunity for citizens to express their opinions in an open environment or to join a political party or an organization that opposes the government leaders in power, votes have no impact on the direction of governmental policy. Voting must be coupled with civil rights and protected liberties that permit meaningful participation through a broad range of opportunities.

PATHWAYS TO PARTICIPATION: How do people get involved?

People can become civically engaged in many ways, either as individuals or as members of groups. Some forms of individual engagement require little effort.

Civic Participation—Individual Opportunity and Responsibility

One of the simplest ways to participate is to stay informed about issues facing the nation. Awareness is the first step toward civic participation. Information is available from a variety of reputable media sources, such as newspapers like the *Wall Street Journal*, *The Washington Post*, and the *New York Times*; national news shows, including those offered by the Public Broadcasting Service and National Public Radio; and reputable internet sites. While the internet and social media have provided an explosion of information about political issues, the varying quality of these sites has created a challenge to achieving the awareness needed to become an informed citizen.

Representative government cannot work effectively without the participation of *informed* citizens. Engaged citizens familiarize themselves with the most important issues confronting the country and with plans different candidates have for dealing with these issues. They vote for the candidates they believe will be best suited to the job, and they may join others to raise funds or campaign for those they support. They inform their representatives how they feel about important issues by direct contact or by writing or emailing them. Through these efforts and others, engaged citizens let their representatives know what they want and thus influence policy. Only then can policy decisions of these elected representatives be responsive and accurately reflect the interests and concerns of the people.

Voting is a fundamental way to engage with government and according to majoritarian theory is a primary means for citizens to exercise political power to achieve consent of the governed. Individual votes do matter. City council members, local judges, some local law enforcement officials, mayors, state legislators, governors, and members of Congress are all chosen by popular vote. Although the president of the United States is not chosen directly by popular vote but by a group of presidential electors (informally called the Electoral College), the votes of individuals in their home states determine how these electors ultimately vote. In 2016, a change of only 78,000 votes in three states would have elected Hillary Clinton rather than Donald Trump as president.^[1] In 2020, the change of 44,000 votes in three states would have reelected Donald Trump president rather than Joe Biden.^[2]



Image 1.13 Voters Waiting in Line in Ohio

Voters line up to vote early outside an Ohio polling station in 2008. (Credit: OpenStax; photography by Dean Beeler)

Voting, however, is not the only form of political engagement in which individuals may participate. Besides voting, individuals may engage by attending political rallies, donating money to campaigns, responding to public opinion polls,

signing petitions, actively contributing through social media, or commenting on political issues on Facebook, Twitter or other social media platforms. People who wish to be more active often work for political campaigns. Helping people register to vote, making campaign phone calls, and driving voters to the polls on Election Day are all important activities for citizen engagement.

Civic Participation Through Groups

Some people prefer to work with groups when participating in political activities whether these are organized or informal. Group activities can be as simple as hosting a book club or a discussion group to talk about politics, while organized groups include political parties and interest groups.



Image 1.14 Dr. King Marching in Alabama

Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. led the civil rights marchers from Selma to Montgomery, Alabama. (Credit: Prints and Photographs Division, Library of Congress. Reproduction Number LC-USZ62-111234. at http://www.americaslibrary.gov/jb/mode/rn/jb_modern_selma_3_e.html)

Local Democrat and Republican organizations offer many opportunities for participation including active political campaigning, extensive education programs on public policy and opportunities to meet elected officials to discuss political issues.

Individual citizens can also join interest groups promoting causes they favor. Civic engagement through organized group activity may increase the power of ordinary people to influence government actions.

For example, some website connected to various causes and interest groups encourage involvement and provide petitions that can be circulated through email to encourage elected officials to take a policy choice. These organizations also alert their members to take action in a coordinated fashion to contact policy makers at critical moments in the development of public policy to maximize the impact to influence public policy. Of course, interest group pool financial contributions from their members to make contributions to political candidate or engage in public education efforts.

Thus, even those without significant wealth or individual connections to influential people may influence the policies affecting their lives and change the direction of government through active participation in organized groups or movements.

U.S. history is filled with examples of people actively challenging the existing structure of power, gaining rights for themselves and others, and protecting their interests by mutually working together to advance the causes they believe in.

Organized groups can also utilize more active and direct forms of engagement including protest marches, demonstrations, and civil disobedience. Such tactics were used successfully in the African American civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s and remain in use today as the protest marches during the summer of 2020 concerning the killing of George Floyd demonstrate. Other tactics, such as boycotting businesses of whose policies the activists disapproved, are also still common practice of many interest groups.

Civic Participation: Rights and Responsibilities of Citizenship

Rights of Citizenship	Responsibilities of Citizenship
govt. will protect your right to worship as you wish as long as you do not put others in danger	support and defend the <i>Constitution</i>
govt. will protect your rights of expressing yourself as long as you do not put others in danger	inform yourself on issues affecting your community, your state, and your nation
you have the right to apply for a job that requires U.S. citizenship	participate in the democratic processes in place in the U.S. constitutional republic
govt. will protect your freedom to live your life and maintain your liberty and individualism as long as you do not put others in danger	respect and obey local, state and national laws
govt. will treat you equally to other citizens	respect the rights, opinions, and beliefs of others in your community, your state, and your nation
you have the right to run for elected office	participate at the local level
govt. will protect your right to pursue what makes you happy as long as your actions do not infringe on the rights of other	pay your taxes on time and according to local, state, and federal rules
govt. will protect your rights if you are accused of a crime—providing a fair and equitable judicial process	serve on petit or grand juries if called upon
govt. will protect your right to vote for individuals to represent you in the government	defend your country if the need arises
Remixed from U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services; "Citizenship Rights & Responsibilities"	https://www.uscis.gov/citizenship/learners/citizenship-rights-and-responsibilities

Chart 1.15 Rights and Responsibilities of Citizenship

Government: Questions to Consider

1. Are you engaged in or at least informed about actions of the federal or local government?
2. Are you registered to vote?
3. Have you considered joining some organized group to support and advance a public policy you favor?

1. *personal answer*
2. *personal opinion*
3. *personal opinion*

Government: Works Consulted

1. National Public Radio, NPR, 8 Nov. 2016, "Election 2016."
2. National Public Radio, NPR, 2 Dec. 2020, "Narrow Wins in These Key States Powered Biden to the Presidency."

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