Comparative Government

Inquire: How Does the United States Government Compare to the Rest of the World?

Overview

There are as many variations in governments as there are (and have been) countries in the world, as every society does government a little differently. Nevertheless, there are similarities and important differences that we can use to classify and compare governments across the globe and across time.

There are identifying questions to ask that will clearly separate and define the governments, and there are “clarifications” that illustrate the smaller differences between two similar governments.

Regardless, the U.S. government is unique in many ways and very similar to other governments in other ways.

Big Question: How do governments differ depending on who is in control?

Watch: The Evolution of Democracy

def·moc·ra·cy
1. a government by the people; especially : rule of the majority
2. a government in which the supreme power is vested in the people and exercised by them directly or indirectly through a system of representation usually involving periodically held free elections*

The city-state of Athens had the first widely recognized democracy. It was a direct democracy in that the people met to vote on all decisions. Only male citizens 18 years or older were allowed to participate in the discussions on any issue and then vote.

Rome was also an ancient democracy, but Rome was a republic, not a direct democracy. In a republic, the people vote on representatives who then meet together and make the laws and decisions for the people, or their constituents. As countries grow, a direct democracy becomes unworkable past a certain size of population. Rome set the idea of electing representatives, called senators, who met to discuss Rome’s problems and choose the emperor. At first, citizenship in Rome was limited to males who were at least 15 years old, but soon it grew to include other individuals, and even some women. However, only men could vote.

The founding fathers of the United States wanted a republic with the people’s representatives making the laws and decisions on public policy. The ability to vote has always been limited to citizens, but the
requirements beyond that were left to states under the Constitution. In the beginning, most states permitted only property-owning white males over 21 to vote. Gradually, the United States has expanded suffrage, or the right to vote, to non-property owners, women, and minorities. In 1970, Congress voted to lower the voter age requirement to 18 years of age.

Democracy is a form of government in which power rests with the people, not the leaders or the politicians. However, as Robert Kennedy, Jr. said, "Democracy is messy, and it's hard. It's never easy." However, it is the only form of government in which the people have control and can protect their rights.


Read: It’s a Small World After All

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

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

Purposes of Political Systems

Most governments are designed to provide their inhabitants with two important services: protection from outside invasion and protection of citizens from one another. How many different ways can a government protect from invasions? They can form large armies and navies, build fortified cities, provide border patrols, negotiate with potential enemies, threaten or punish "rogue" states, or join international organizations. The list goes on and on.

It makes sense, then, that every country has its own way of accomplishing these basic needs. Of course, some are more successful than others. But, some similarities between governments will surely exist as well. For example, more than one country has thought to build strong armies and navies. Likewise, try to think of different ways that countries can protect citizens from one another. Some commonalities will surely appear — police forces, crime prevention, putting criminals in jail, and passing laws that define what a crime is and what it is not.

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

Purposes of Economic Systems

Economic systems provide needs for citizens by answering several questions:

- What resources does the country have, and what can be produced from them?
- How should goods and services be produced from the available resources?
- How are goods and services distributed among the inhabitants?
How much control does the government have over the resources? Different economic systems around the world answer these questions in different ways.

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

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

In a command economy, the central government of the country controls all resources and is responsible for the allocation of those resources. In these countries, the government tells the population what they will do, and they determine how much of any item is produced. They also determine what resources, if any, are used for consumer goods as opposed to non-consumer goods (military spending, etc.). Further, there is little or no private ownership of the resources.

The other side of the coin is a market economy, which is the basis of a capitalist system. In these economies, the market drives the use of the resources. The resources are, for the most part, owned by private individuals. These individuals determine the best use of the resources — whether for consumer goods, private consumption, or public services. The market will determine which companies stay in business and which businesses fail. The market drives the economy, and the government has little or no involvement in a market economy.

Then, there are mixed economies. These economies have market influences and government involvement. The U.S. has a mixed economy. Taxes affect the price of goods, not just the market. Regulations, like seat belts and airbags in cars, affect the price of a car. It is not a pure marketplace economy.

A socialist system has even more government involvement, with government owning some of the resources and deciding on use, price, etc. But, some resources are privately owned also.

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

**Reflect Poll: Which is the Most Important?**

In the Expand section above, we listed six criteria that must be met for a country to be a democracy. Which of the following do you think is the most important in a democracy?

- Freedom of speech, press, and religion
- Majority rule with minority rights
- Free, competitive elections
- Meaningful political participation by citizens

**Expand: Democracy or Dictatorship?**

No two governments, past or present, are exactly the same.
However, it is possible to examine the similarities and differences among political and economic systems and to categorize different forms of government. One simple way to categorize governments is to divide them into democracies and dictatorships by asking the simple question: “Who has the power?” If the people have control, no matter how it is set up, it is a democracy. Great Britain and the United States have very different governments, but in both cases the people are ultimately in control. So, they are both democracies. If the government has the ultimate authority, it is a dictatorship. Regardless of how it is designed or set up, with kings, committees, or military despots, if the government is in control, it is a dictatorship.

Democracies

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

- **Freedom of speech, the press, and religion.** Democracies in general respect these basic individual liberties. No government allows absolute freedom, but democracies do not heavily censor newspapers and public expression of opinions.
- **Majority rule with minority rights.** In democracies, people usually accept decisions made by the majority of voters in a free election. However, democracies try to avoid the "tyranny of the majority" by providing ways for minorities of all kinds to have their voices heard as well.
- **Varied personal backgrounds of political leaders.** Democracies usually leave room for many different types of citizens to compete for leadership positions. In other words, presidents and legislators do not all come from a few elite families, the same part of the country, or the same social class.
- **Free, competitive elections.** The presence of elections alone is not enough to call a country a democracy. The elections must be fair and competitive, and the government or political leaders cannot control the results. Voters must have real choices among candidates who run for public office.
- **Rule by law.** Democracies are not controlled by the whims of a leader, but they are governed by laws that apply to leaders and citizens equally.
- **Meaningful political participation by citizens.** By itself, a citizen's right to vote is not a good measure of democracy. The government must respond in some way to citizen demands. If citizens vote, the candidate they choose must actually take office. If they contact government in other ways — writing, protesting, phoning — officials must respond.

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

Dictatorships

In authoritarian political systems, one ruler (autocracy) or a small group of leaders (oligarchy) have the real power. Authoritarian governments may hold elections, and they may have contact with their citizens, but citizens do not have any voice in how they are ruled. Their leaders do not give their subjects free choice. Instead, they decide what the people can or cannot have. Citizens, then, are subjects who must obey and not participants in government decisions. Kings, military leaders, emperors, a small group of aristocrats, dictators, and even presidents or prime ministers may rule authoritarian governments. The leader's title does not automatically indicate a particular type of government.
Authoritarian systems do not allow freedoms of speech, press, and religion, and they do not follow majority rule nor protect minority rights. Their leaders often come from one small group, such as top military officials, or from a small group of aristocratic families. Examples of such regimes include China, Myanmar, Cuba, and Iran.

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

Lesson Toolbox

Additional Resources and Readings

A video providing an overview of market economies
- Link to resource: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6yLY06tTQ1A

A Crash Course video covering different types of government around the world
- Link to resource: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=k7dTDjRnBqU

A video in which Dr. Fathali Moghaddam discusses the psychological conditions which can springboard a potential dictator to power
- Link to resource: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sHe7rfUwi8c

Lesson Glossary

None

Check Your Knowledge

1. In a market economy, the central government of the country controls all resources and is responsible for the allocation of those resources.
   a. True
   b. False

2. The U.S. has a command economy.
   a. True
   b. False

3. Authoritarian systems do not allow freedoms of speech, press, and religion, and they do not follow majority rule nor protect minority rights.
   a. True
   b. False

Answer Key:
1. B  2. B  3. A
Citations

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