Theories, States, and Characteristics of Governments

Inquire: Why Do We Have Governments?

Overview

Government - noun, often attributive

1. the act or process of governing; specifically: authoritative direction or control
2. the office, authority, or function of governing
3. the continuous exercise of authority over and the performance of functions for a political unit
4. the organization, machinery, or agency through which a political unit exercises authority and performs functions and which is usually classified according to the distribution of power within it
5. the complex of political institutions, laws, and customs through which the function of governing is carried out
6. the body of persons that constitutes the governing authority of a political unit or organization

In this course we will study each of these attributes of the United States government. However, before we study government, we have to understand the origins and purpose of a government.

Where do governments come from? Why do they exist? Those are the questions we will answer in this lesson.

Big Question: What makes a government?

Watch: It Starts With A State

Political Science - noun (polˈidəkəl ˈsīəns): a social science concerned chiefly with the description and analysis of political and especially governmental institutions and processes.

The people who make a life and a career out of studying, identifying, and classifying governments — the political scientists — would say that “government” starts with what it governs: the state, a geopolitical entity controlled by a government. But, what defines a state? Four distinct and defining characteristics are necessary to have a state.

The first characteristic is population; someone must live there.

There are seven continents in our world: Africa, Antarctica, Asia, Australia, Europe, North America, and South America. However, one of these seven — Antartica — has no states and cannot be a state, because no one permanently lives there, except penguins of course.
So, even though it is a large landmass, Antarctica cannot be a state until it has a population.

The second characteristic of a state is territory — a defined geographic area.

All over the world, you can show people this outline and they will say, “Texas!”

Or, Italy. Everyone knows Italy; it is shaped like a boot!

For over 1,000 years, the Jewish people occupied some area of land we know today as Israel. However, between 70 C.E., 132 C.E., and 135 C.E., the Romans crushed two Jewish revolutions and completed the Diaspora — the dispersion of the Jewish people from their homeland. The Jews had lived in Israel — Judea — for over 1,000 years and now, their country was no more.

Even though there were millions of Jewish people in the world, they did not have a state until they were returned to that land, and on May 14, 1948, Israel was again proclaimed a state.

The third characteristic is government — over the people and their territory.

When the Spaniards conquered the Incas and the Aztecs, those communities were states. Meanwhile in North America, even with the millions of people living in its territory, there was not a state. They had no centralized government.

Lastly, the fourth characteristic is sovereignty — self control, or the ability to determine your own destiny.

As we discussed above, Texas has territory. In fact, Texas is larger than almost every country in Western Europe! Further, Texas has a population of over 25 million people, a government in the capital city of Austin, and a GDP that would rank it 50th in the world. Yet, Texas is not sovereign; it does not control its own destiny. Sovereignty lies with the United States, not Texas, so it is not a state by this definition.

Read: Government - “From Whence Does One Come?”

Overview

We have defined a government and determined what is required to be a “state” that can be governed, but where does a government come from? Where, and how, does a government gain the power and the authority to make and enforce laws? In essence, to control the state?

There are numerous ideas and theories, but the origin of a government’s authority mainly boils down to four basic theories.

The Four Theories of Government

1. **Force Theory**: The strongest power rules, whether in a group where the leader is the strongest or between two groups, such as when Germany conquered France in 1940. Government power is determined by force.

2. **Evolutionary Theory**: Some experts believe that government power evolved from the earliest human group: the family. From the beginning of time, the family usually had one person who was in control, most typically the male head of the family. When that “ruler” died, the oldest son (usually) became the next ruler or head of the family. As family units grouped together and
became tribes and villages and continued to grow, there was always — and had always been — a ruler. When he/she died, a family member followed — usually the oldest son or child.

3. Divine Right Theory: In Europe during the Middle Ages, and in many civilizations before and after, the right to rule was believed to come from God. As King James I of England stated to Parliament in 1610, “The state of monarchy is the supremest thing upon earth; for kings are not only God’s lieutenants upon earth, and sit upon God’s throne, but even by God himself they are called gods.”

4. Social Contract Theory: With regards to a study of American government, this is the most significant theory. According to Thomas Hobbes and John Locke, English philosophers and writers in the 1600s, “the source of all political power is the people”. It was upon this concept found in Hobbes’ Leviathan and Locke’s The Second Treatise on Civil Government that the forged the foundational understanding of the American theory of government. We hold the theory that a government is a social contract at the center of our Constitution and system of laws.

A Social Contract

In law, a contract requires an offer, acceptance, and consideration. In other words, both sides must agree to the terms, both sides must give something up, and both sides must receive something. In a contract to buy a car, the buyer and the seller agree on the car to be sold and the price to be paid. The buyer gives up money and receives a car. The seller gives up a car but receives money.

Hobbes tells us — and Locke later adds — that government as a social contract means that all power begins and ends with the people. In general, they write that people are born with all rights. They have the right to do anything — good or bad, positive or negative, wholesome or evil. When man exercises all those rights, it creates chaos and anarchy because there are no boundaries and no protection of life or property. However, generally man does not like chaos and anarchy.

So, we create a government. Governments have no inherent power, so the people must agree to give some of their rights to the government in return for the government providing certain services. The people give up rights — the right to steal, the right to kill, the right to speed, even the right to all of their money. In return, the government agrees to keep the individuals safe from people stealing, killing, or driving recklessly, and it uses the money it receives to provide those services.

The people give up something: rights, power, control, and money. The people receive something: peace and security. The government gives up something; it now has responsibilities and must provide the necessary services. The government receives something: power, authority, and money.

It is simply a contract. Each party receives something and each party gives something up, with both parties in agreement as to the structure of the arrangement. So, you have an offer, an acceptance, and consideration: a social contract.

Human societies are replete with social contracts. A marriage is a social contract with both parties agreeing to commit to each other. In marriage, both parties receive the benefit of the relationship and both parties agree to the restrictions imposed by the relationship.

Further, as in a commercial contract, when one party violates the contract, the other party wants relief from their obligations. If one person buys a car and it turns out not to be as it was represented, the buyer will want to return the car for a refund of their money. Similarly, in the social contract of a marriage, if one party violates the agreement, the other party may decide they want out. In the social contract of a government, if the government violates its obligations, the people may demand their rights, their authority, and their power back.
The story of the American government is the story of the development of government by social contract and the story of broken contracts. The Declaration of Independence gave notice to the government of Great Britain that the colonists were terminating their contract due to Great Britain’s actions in violation of the social contract.

The colonists formed their own government, looking for that balance between personal rights and freedoms and the governmental authority necessary:

“... to form a more perfect union, establish justice, insure domestic tranquility, provide for the common defense, promote the general welfare, and secure the blessings of liberty to ourselves and our posterity …”

Reflect

Poll: If Not A Social Contract, Then What?

Other than the Social Contract Theory, which is the basis for the government of the United States, which of the other three do you think is most prevalent in the world’s countries — or states — today?

- Force Theory
- Evolutionary Theory
- Divine Right Theory

Expand: Classifying Governments - Three Questions

Overview

Understanding foundational basics is just the beginning of the study — and understanding of — the United States government. Similarly, there are classifications of governments that will be introduced here, but will be discussed throughout the course in greater detail.

Classifying Governments

When we talk about classifying governments, there are three questions we ask:

1. Who gets to participate?
2. Where is government power located?
3. What is the relationship between the legislative and executive branches?

Who Participates?

Who gets to participate in the governmental process? There are only two basic answers to this question: either the people participate and have the ultimate authority, or they don’t. In which case, the government is the only one participating and the government has the ultimate authority.

If the answer is the people, no matter how the government is structured, it is a democracy. If the answer is, the government, no matter how the government is structured, it is a dictatorship.
There are a variety of democracies: pure democracy like ancient Athens where every decision was made by the people; republics like Rome and the U.S., where the people elect representatives to make the decisions; and variations on those two basic forms.

Dictatorships also have different forms. An oligarchy is a dictatorship with a small group of people in control. Ancient Sparta was an oligarchy, as is China. An autocracy is when a single person has absolute control — which is what most people think of when they think of a dictator.

Regardless of their form, the fundamental natures of each of these two types of government are the same. In democracies, the people are in control. In dictatorships, the government is in control.

Where is Government Power Located?
There are three possible answers to where the government power is located:

1. **Unitary system**: If the seat of government power is in one entity, it is unitary. The example here is Great Britain; Parliament is the focus of all British government. Parliament chooses the Chief Executive — their Prime Minister. Parliament is in control of the courts and all the judges. From Parliament flows the power for all subsections of government; cities, towns, villages, schools — all draw their authority and power from Parliament. However, Great Britain is still a democracy because the people elect Parliament, so the people have ultimate control.

2. **Federal system**: This is a system of divided government, with a central government and local governments — all of which draw their power and authority from the people. The United States was the first, and still the most successful, federal government in history. Our central government is the national government in Washington D.C., while our local governments are our fifty state governments. They have different roles, but both control the same people and both draw their power and authority from the people through a social contract: the Constitution.

3. **Confederation**: A confederation is a loose alliance of independent states. The power is with the states, and the central government (if there is one) draws its powers from its separate members. The Articles of Confederation set up a confederate government in the U.S., where the Original 13 colonies became separate, independent states (as defined in the Watch section). The states were sovereign, and the national government drew what little power it had from the states. As we will see, the Confederate States of America was intentionally designed as a confederation, and the U.N. is a modern example of a confederation.

The Legislative-Executive Relationship
What is the relationship between the legislative and executive branches in the government? There are only two possible answers to this question:

1. **A Parliamentary System**: In a Parliamentary System, the chief executive is controlled by the legislature. The example, again, is Great Britain where Parliament picks and discharges the Prime Minister at their discretion.

2. **A Presidential System**: In a Presidential System, the legislative branch and the executive branch are chosen separately, and each has its own designated powers, like the United States government with each branch being chosen separately and having designated powers under the Constitution.
Lesson Toolbox

Additional Resources and Readings

FLVS Civics: Going Global - Forms of Government
- A video explaining the basic forms of government
- https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vdh9xo47OWM

FLVS Civics: Going Global - Systems of Government
- A continuation of the basic forms of government video above, going into greater detail of the other systems of government
- https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SL6eGwP0JTg

Contractarianism: Crash Course Philosophy #37
- A Crash Course video covering the Social Contract Theory
- https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2Co6pNvd9mc

Lesson Glossary

government: the governing body of a nation, state, or community
Political Science: a social science concerned chiefly with the description and analysis of political and especially governmental institutions and processes
state: a geopolitical entity that has a population, territory, government, and sovereignty
Force Theory: a theory of government that states the strongest power rules; i.e. government power is determined by force
Evolutionary Theory: a theory of government that states government power evolved from the family groupings in which there was a "ruler" and when he/she died, a family member followed
Divine Right Theory: a theory of government that states the right to rule comes from God
Social Contract: a theory of government that states that political power is given to those who govern by the people it governs
democracy: a system of government in which the people participate
pure democracy: a democracy where every decision is made by the people
republics: democracies where the people elect representatives to make the decisions
dictatorship: systems of government in which the people do not participate
oligarchy: a dictatorship with a small group of people in control
autocracy: a dictatorship where a single person has absolute control
unitary system: a system of government where the seat of government power is in one entity
federal system: a system of divided government, with a central government and local government, all of which draw their power and authority from the people
confederation: a loose alliance of independent states in which the power is with the states and the central government, if there is one, draws it powers from the separate members
Parliamentary System: a government in which the chief executive is controlled by the legislature
Presidential System: a government in which the legislative branch and the executive branch are both chosen separately and each have their own designated powers
Check Your Knowledge

1. True or False: If a government is the only one participating in the governmental process, then no matter how the government is structured, it is a democracy.
   A. True
   B. False

2. True or False: Hobbes and Locke said government as a social contract means that all power begins and ends with the people.
   A. True
   B. False

3. True or False: Germany conquered France in 1940. This is an example of force theory.
   A. True
   B. False

Answer Key:

Citations

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