

Forms of Government

Government comprises the set of legal and political institutions that regulate the relationships among members of a society and between the society and outsiders. These institutions have the authority to make decisions for the society on policies affecting the maintenance of order and the achievement of certain societal goals. This article provides an overview of the types of government, the ways authority can be distributed, the divisions of government, and the functions of government. Separate articles deal with the origins and development of the concept of the state, the theoretical and practical development of representation, law, and the study of government (see political science).

The power of a government over its own citizens varies, depending on the degree to which it is free of limitations and restraints. The power of a government abroad also varies, depending on the human and material resources with which it can support its foreign policy. Governments range in size and scope from clans, tribes, and the shires of early times to the superpowers and international governments of today. Until recent times some governments were strong enough to establish empires that ruled not only their own people but other peoples and states across national, ethnic, and language boundaries. The present-day counterpart of the empire is the superpower that is able to lead or dominate other countries through its superior military and economic strength. Within the modern nation-state, government operates at many different levels, ranging from villages to cities, counties, provinces, and states.

Types of Government

Aristotle, a Greek political philosopher of the 4th century B.C., distinguished three principal kinds of government: monarchy, aristocracy, and polity (a kind of enlightened democracy). The differences among them chiefly concerned whether power were held by one, by a few, or by many. Aristotle thought that the selfish abuse of power caused each type to become perverted, respectively, into tyranny, oligarchy, and a lower form of democracy characterized by mob rule. Monarchy tended to become tyrannical because it vested authority in a single ruler. Aristocracy, a government based on birth and privilege, in which the rulers governed for the good of the whole society, tended to become oligarchy as a consequence of restricting political power to a special social and economic class; only a few members of the class would have enough drive and ability to acquire the power to govern. The polity, likewise, would deteriorate into ochlocracy, or mob rule, if the citizens pursued only their selfish interests.

Aristotle's classifications suited the societies of ancient times, but they do not correspond to the power structure of later societies. Modern writers have developed a variety of schemes for classifying governments, based on the nature of the ruling class, the economic system, the government's political institutions, the principles of authority, the acquisition and exercise of power, and other factors. Some influential writers on government include Thomas Hobbes, Baron de Montesquieu, Jean Jacques Rousseau, Karl Marx, Gaetano Mosca, Vilfredo Pareto, and the sociologist Max Weber.

Monarchy

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The most common form of government from ancient times to the early part of the 20th century was monarchy, or rule by a hereditary king or queen. Monarchy passed through three basic stages, varying according to the nation and the political and economic climate. The first stage was that of the absolute monarch. In the Christian part of the world during the Middle Ages, a conflict developed between the pope and the kings who recognized his spiritual authority. The pope wanted to expand the power of the church beyond spiritual matters to include the temporal realm. But some kings proclaimed that God had given them the right to rule, and by proclaiming this divine right they were able to give legitimacy to their reigns and limit the pope's power. (See church and state; investiture controversy.)

Limited monarchy was the second stage. Kings depended on the support of the most powerful members of the nobility to retain their thrones. In England and some other Western European countries, the nobility placed limits on the power of the ruler to govern. This was done in England, for example, through the Magna Carta. Threatened with the loss of political and financial support, even the strongest kings and emperors had to accept a system of laws that protected the rights and privileges of powerful social and economic classes.

The third stage in the evolution of monarchy was the constitutional monarchy. Present-day monarchs are nearly all symbolic rather than actual rulers of their countries. (A few exceptions can be found in Africa and Asia.) In such monarchies as Great Britain, the Netherlands, Sweden, and Spain, governing power is now in the hands of the national parliaments.

Constitutional Government

Today most governments derive their legitimacy from national constitutions that provide a legal framework for their rule and specify how power is to be exercised and controlled. Even one-party states, such as the traditional Communist countries and other nations in Africa, Asia, and South America, have found it necessary to establish formal constitutions. In democratic countries the constitution can be amended or replaced by popular vote, either directly or through a system of elected representatives. In authoritarian one-party systems, however, all political power, including that of revising the constitution, resides with the leaders of the party. The constitution may thus be only a paper facade, and in order to understand how the country is governed one must examine the actual political process.

Democracy

Representative government in the modern world is based not only on a constitution that provides for it but on the actual rule of law—the assurance that provisions of the constitution will be enforced. It requires that citizens be free to organize competing political parties, engage in political campaigns, and hold elections according to agreed-upon rules. Democratic governments vary in structure. Two common forms are the parliamentary and the presidential. In the parliamentary form of government, as in Australia, Britain, Canada, or India, all political power is concentrated in the parliament or legislature. The prime minister or premier and the officers of the cabinet are members of the parliament. They continue in office only as long as parliament supports—or has "confidence" in—their policies. In the presidential form of government, as in France and the United States, the voters elect a powerful chief executive

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who is independent of the legislature but whose actions are delimited by constitutional and other legal restraints.

Dictatorship

As a form of government, dictatorship is principally a 20th-century phenomenon. The dictator, often a military leader, concentrates political power in himself and his clique. There is no effective rule of law. The regime may or may not have a distinctive political ideology and may or may not allow token opposition. The main function of a dictatorship is to maintain control of all governmental operations. There have been some cases—Indira Gandhi in India and several military dictatorships in Latin America—in which authoritarian rulers have relaxed their control and have even allowed open elections. In certain Soviet-bloc countries of Eastern Europe dictators were forced from power in bloodless coups or voluntarily relinquished their authority to popularly elected officials as Soviet power declined.

The totalitarian dictatorship, as in Nazi Germany, Communist China, and the former USSR, is much more thoroughgoing. It seeks to control all aspects of national life, including the beliefs and attitudes of its people. It has a set of ideas that everyone is expected to embrace, such as revolutionary Marxism or counterrevolutionary fascism. At its most extreme, as during the leadership of Joseph Stalin in the USSR, the power of the dictator may become more absolute than in any of the earlier forms of tyranny. Such gross power in the hands of one person results inevitably in the development of what has been called a cult of personality. The leader is credited with almost infallible wisdom, because to admit that he or she may be wrong would deprive the regime of its authority. In some Communist countries the cult of personality appears to have given way to the dominance of a group of party leaders—a ruling oligarchy. The administrative complexities of managing a modern industrial state are too great to be monopolized by an individual leader such as Stalin or Mao Zedong (Mao Tse-tung). The successor regime in China, for example, continues to claim infallibility for its policies and doctrines but not for the leaders. Examples of 20th-century dictators in addition to those already mentioned include Idi Amin Dada (Uganda), Kemal Atatürk (Turkey), Fulgencio Batista and Fidel Castro (Cuba), Francisco Franco (Spain), Saddam Hussein (Iraq), Ferdinand Marcos (Philippines), Benito Mussolini (Italy), Juan Peron (Argentina), and António Salazar (Portugal).

Distribution of Authority

Effective government in any form requires a workable method for distributing authority within the country. The larger and more diverse the jurisdiction of the government, the stronger the tendency toward a federal system in which authority is "layered" or distributed among different levels. In countries with a relatively homogeneous population and with a common tradition, language, and sense of national history, the central governments may not be federal but unitary—that is, they may retain most of the administrative power at the center. Loosely allied autonomous states sometimes join together to create a type of central government known as a confederation, in which the central government exists only at the pleasure of the sovereign members.