

Main Idea

Understanding major political ideas and classic forms of government will help you understand the purposes of government.

Reading Focus

1. What is government?
2. Which major characteristics do all states share?
3. What are the major functions of government?
4. What theories of rule have been put forth to explain government?

Key Terms

government
power
policy
state
sovereignty
politics
legitimacy
divine right of kings
social contract theory

What Is Government?

(pg. 7)

Government is made up of the formal institutions and processes through which decisions are made for a group of people. Most governments have three main parts: people, powers, and policies. In terms of people, government includes both elected officials as well as public servants—people who carry out the day-to-day business of government.

Another component, or part, of government, **power**, refers to the government’s authority and ability to get things done. There are three basic types of power. Legislative power is the power to make laws. Executive power is the power to carry out and enforce the laws. Judicial power involves the interpretation of the laws and the power to settle disputes among people in the society.

Governments also carry out policies. A **policy** is any decision made by government in pursuit of a particular goal.

Reading Check Summarizing

Describe the three main parts of most governments.

Characteristics of a State (pg. 7–8)

Today most governments exercise power as a state. A **state** is a political unit with the power to make and enforce laws over a group of people living within a clearly defined territory. In this sense, the term *state* is closer to the term *country*. All states have a population, territory with clearly defined borders, and the power to act independently. They have governments that make and enforce rules. Every state is said to have **sovereignty**, or the supreme power to act within its territory and to control its external affairs. States are governed by a set of rules

usually outlined in a constitution, or written plan of government.

Reading Check Identifying the Main Idea What are the characteristics of a state?

Functions of Government (pg. 8–10)

Most governments perform a number of key functions. These include ensuring national security, maintaining order, resolving conflict, providing services, and providing for the public good.

Ensure National Security A government must guard its territory and its people against outside threats. Most states devote many of their resources toward defense forces and maintaining good relations with other nations.

Maintain Order One of the main tasks of government is to keep order within its territory. To do this, governments establish laws and a means to enforce these laws. Ideas about lawful behavior and punishment for breaking the law differ from country to country.

Resolve Conflict Some governments keep order through the use of force. Most governments, however, rely on other means—such as politics and the judicial system—for solve conflicts. **Politics** is the process by which government makes and carries out decisions. By participating in the political process, groups try to influence the decisions that government makes. Groups with different interests frequently must compromise with their opponents so that government can make decisions. In this way, the political process helps solve conflicts over what laws government makes, what programs it creates, and what policies it pursues. The courts also help resolve conflicts—they can determine if a law has been broken, and what should happen as a result.

Providing Services The U.S. government spends billions of dollars a year on public policies and projects, such as road building, providing parks, delivering mail, and educating young people. Some of these services are for everyone’s use. They are called public goods. Other services, such as medical care, may be provided to certain groups of people.

Provide for the Public Good The term *public good* refers to the needs and interests of the people as a whole. People generally agree that some things are in the public good, such as building roads. But what about the person whose land is taken away to build the road? Defining the public good involves making tough choices that often do not benefit everyone equally. The definition of what is good may change over time. The definition of *public* has changed over history as well. For example, African Americans did not become citizens until 1868. Women did not gain voting rights until 1920.

Reading Check Summarizing What are the functions of a government?

Theories of Rule (pg. 10–12)

To explain why people accept some forms of rule and not others, political philosophers have developed the idea that rulers often have **legitimacy**. That is, rulers are seen as right and proper by important segments of a nation’s population. As a result, people accept governance from those they see as their rightful rulers.

Divine Right Throughout history, the belief that a ruler is chosen by God or the gods has been a powerful source of legitimacy. In the mid-1600s a French religious leader named Jacques-Bénigne Bossuet put forth a political and religious theory based on this idea. Bossuet argued that the French king Louis XIV possessed the **divine right of kings**. This made the

king answerable only to God, not to the people he ruled. To disagree with the king was to disagree with God.

Natural Law and Natural Rights

Another theory of rule rests on the idea of natural law, a system of rules that comes from the natural world. As a system, natural law is said to provide a just and rational order to all things in the world, including human behavior. All people have natural rights. Today these rights are commonly understood as human rights. According to many philosophers, a legitimate government, or one that rightfully holds power, does not violate natural law. Citizens are not required to follow a leader who acts against natural law.

The Social Contract Beginning in the 1600s, a number of influential European thinkers contributed to a new theory of rule. **Social contract theory** holds that the first governments formed as a result of people agreeing among themselves to submit to the authority of a state. In return, the state would provide people with protection and support. A government is legitimate only so long as the people agree to give it power. The theory dates back to English philosopher Thomas Hobbes's work *Leviathan*. Hobbes believed that people originally lived in a "state of nature" without government or laws. Life was violent, and people decided to

cooperate, enter into a social contract, and form a government.

English philosopher John Locke also saw government as the product of a social contract. Locke, however, believed that people had natural rights and that they are governed by natural law. They allow themselves to be governed only because they wish to protect their natural rights, including life, liberty, and property. To protect people's rights, government power had to be limited. Any violation of people's rights provided grounds for rebellion.

French philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau introduced a third view of the state of nature and the social contract. Rousseau believed that in the state of nature, people were happy, good, and free. It was the creation of societies and government that created corruption and inequality. Rousseau argued that to regain their freedom, people had to create governments that were based on the social contract and responsive to the "general will" of the people. These ideas and Locke's influenced early American political leaders.

Reading Check Identifying the Main Idea What are some of the theories of legitimacy of rule?

SECTION 1 ASSESSMENT

1. **Describe** What is **government**?
2. **Identify** What are the four characteristics of a state?
3. **Summarize** What are the major functions of government?
4. **Explain** How is natural law related to natural rights?