

Main Idea

Different forms of governments are categorized based on who exercises authority and how power is organized.

Reading Focus

1. What are the classic forms of government?
2. How is national power organized differently in unitary, federal, and confederal systems?
3. In what ways do presidential and parliamentary systems differ?

Key Terms

monarchy
dictatorship
oligarchy
direct democracy
republic
unitary system
federal system
confederal system
presidential system
parliamentary system

The Classic Forms (pg. 7)

There are several different forms of government. One way to understand how different forms of government affect people's lives is to ask: Who has the authority to rule?

Monarchy In a **monarchy** the government is headed by one person, such as a king or queen, who exercises supreme, or complete, authority. Monarchs inherit their position and their power through birth into the royal family. In an absolute monarchy, monarchs' powers are unlimited and unchecked. Today there are few actual monarchies—the monarch is mostly a ceremonial head of state for a constitutional monarchy. Real power lies in another part of government, such as a legislature. A true monarchy is an example of autocracy. An autocracy is any form of government in which a single individual—an autocrat—controls most governing decisions.

Dictatorship In some nations, the autocrat is called a dictator. A **dictatorship** is a system of rule in which one person, a dictator, or a small group of people can hold unlimited power over government. Dictators often achieve power by violently overthrowing a government and maintaining control through force.

Most dictators head authoritarian regimes—or governments where people are subject to various forms of state control. At its most extreme, authoritarianism becomes totalitarianism. Totalitarian governments control all aspects of the society—the government, the economy, and even people's personal actions.

Some dictatorships may be led by small groups of people, usually members of the military or the economic elite, or upper class. This state of affairs is sometimes called an **oligarchy**, meaning rule by a few, or an aristocracy. Some governments, called

theocracies, are under the rule of a small group of religious leaders.

Democracy The term *democracy* means “rule by the people.” In a pure democracy, the people make major government decisions through a process of majority rule. Such was the state of affairs in Athens and other ancient Greek city-states. Athenian democracy was a **direct democracy**. Citizens—a small fraction of the male population—met regularly in a popular assembly to discuss issues and vote for leaders.

Direct democracy works best in small communities. For this reason, most of the world’s democracies—the United States included—are republics. A **republic** is an indirect form of democracy that places political decision making at least one step away from the people. In a republic, the people elect representatives to make decisions on their behalf.

Reading Check Identifying the Main Idea What are the classic forms of government?

Organizing National Power (pg. 17–18)

Most national governments are made up of a number of small administrative, or governing units. There are several different ways in which power can be organized across these units.

Unitary Systems The vast majority of the world’s nations have unitary systems of government. In a **unitary system**, sovereignty, or ultimate authority, rests in a single, national government. In unitary systems, local government may be important, but the national government has the ultimate authority.

Federal Systems A **federal system** of government divides power over people and

territory between a national government and smaller, regional levels of government. As it exists today, the federal system is largely an American invention. The U.S. federal system is made up of two levels—a central national government and 50 state governments. Both levels can make laws, elect officials, and create agencies.

Confederal Systems In a **confederal system** independent states join forces by forming a central government, called a confederation. The states keep full control over their own territories and people. The states delegate limited powers to a central government to pursue common areas of interest.

Reading Check Comparing How is power divided in federal, unitary, and confederal systems?

Presidents and Parliaments (pg. 18–19)

Today most governments have adopted some form of democratic government. These democracies fall into two types of political systems—presidential and parliamentary.

Presidential Systems Many of the world’s governments are modeled after the presidential system of the United States. In general, a **presidential system** is distinguished by having a president that is elected by the people for a limited term of office. The president is in charge of the executive branch of the government. He or she may appoint cabinet members to oversee other government functions. The president’s powers are balanced by a legislature that is popularly elected and independent of the president. Drawbacks of such a system include when the president and Congress hold opposing views, causing a situation in which little is accomplished.

Parliamentary Systems Most of the world's democracies, by contrast, are modeled after the British parliamentary system. In a **parliamentary system**, the executive and legislative branches of government are combined. Instead of a president, parliamentary systems have a prime minister, who is chosen by and from an elected legislature called parliament. Combining the executive and legislative

branches make it easier to pass laws, but prime ministers are not elected by the people nor are they able to take a stand against parliament.

Reading Check Contrasting How does electing a president differ from electing a prime minister?

SECTION 2 ASSESSMENT

1. **Describe** What is a **monarchy**?
2. **Identify** How is power organized in a unitary system?
3. **Describe** What are the possible disadvantages of a **presidential system**?