American Democracy

The Nature of Governments

Governments consist of the institutions that make and enact policies to govern people within a society or nation. The United States government is comprised of the executive, judicial, and legislative branches, as well as federal and state administrative agencies.

By making policies and carrying out those policies, a government fulfills several essential needs of a society. One is to protect citizens from foreign threats. Organizing armed forces, developing weapons, and making strategic alliances with other countries are three ways a government might try to protect its citizens.

A similar purpose of government is to maintain order in society by enforcing laws, preventing crime, and responding to emergency situations. In the United States, cities have a police force and fire department, and every state has a National Guard unit. These are just a few of the entities created to maintain order.

Regulating the economy is another important government function, since a strong economy is needed for growth and prosperity. To promote economic health, a government might lower taxes to encourage spending and put tariffs on imports to encourage people to buy products made in their own country. The Federal Reserve, or the Fed, is one government agency that plays a major role in regulating the U.S. economy. In addition to setting interest rates, it implements U.S. monetary policy and makes sure banks are honest and fair in their dealings with consumers.

A government also has a duty to provide public goods and services for its citizens. Examples of public goods include schools, highways, and libraries. Typically, public goods are available to everyone, and it is illegal to exclude people from their use. Medicare, federal education loans, and welfare are all public services. These services are available to people who qualify for them based on need.

Socializing young people is the fifth purpose of government. The goal of socialization is to encourage youths to accept, understand, and perpetuate the government. In the United States, many children begin their school day by reciting the Pledge of Allegiance, and the curricula for most schools require students to take U.S. government. Some citizens argue that these socialization methods are tantamount to brainwashing. However, in order for a government to function effectively, children and young adults need to know how their government works and how they can participate in it.

Protecting citizens, maintaining order, regulating the economy, providing public goods and services, socializing the nation's youth—these are huge undertakings, and a government needs billions of dollars to make them happen. To raise this money, both federal and state governments must fulfill a sixth purpose: levying taxes. The Internal Revenue Service (IRS) and United States Treasury operate the federal tax system, making sure individuals and companies pay their taxes according to the law. Each state has a treasury department to operate its tax system. Although federal taxes are applicable in all states, not all states have the same taxes. For example, Kansas has a state income tax, but Florida does not.

The area in which a national government operates is called a nation state. Four characteristics mark the
existence of a nation state: territory, population, sovereignty, and legitimate government. A nation state's territory must have defined borders that are recognized by other nations. The size of the territory varies. Some nation states are very small, such as Monaco, which covers approximately one square mile. Others are much larger, such as Russia, spanning more than 6 million square miles, and the United States, covering close to 3.8 million square miles.

A people can have a government but lack an independent territory to make it legitimate. This is the case today with the Palestinian people in the West Bank and Gaza, the Kurds in Northern Iraq, and the Basques in Spain among others. As populations grow within the inhabitable places of earth, it is inevitable that there will be more conflict over territory.

In a nation state, the population can be large or small, and it typically shares a common culture. However, as in the United States, the people do not have to come from the same ethnic background or speak the same language. Nations having a diverse population need a government that can help lead the people to compromise and reach consensus on social, political, and economic issues. Without cohesion, the population becomes divided and difficult to govern. Nations with a high level of homogeneity tend to find compromise and cohesion easier. Japan, France, and England are prime examples. Some African nations with diverse tribal populations find consensus much more difficult and struggle to maintain legitimate governments.

To be sovereign, a nation state must have the authority to govern its territory and population without interference from other nations. This authority also includes determining domestic and international policies. The colonies in America during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries are examples of people who had territory but not sovereignty. These colonies were protectorates governed by England. Several protectorates exist throughout the world today, including Puerto Rico, which is a protectorate of the United States. Many peoples believe that they should be given sovereignty from national powers that have traditionally ruled them. The Basques in Spain are an example of a people that have a regional government but desire the sovereignty to exist as an independent nation. To this end, separatists have resorted to extreme means to achieve independence.

For a nation state's government to qualify as legitimate, its population and other nations must recognize its authority. The government must respect the rights of individuals and allow some degree of popular sovereignty, so individuals can participate in their governance. Some governments are not considered legitimate because of how they came to exist and how they operate—in other words, for diplomatic reasons. For example, from the late 1940s to the mid-1970s, the United States recognized the non-communist Taiwanese government as the official government of China. The United Nations decided in the early 1970s that the People's Republic of China, a communist-led government, was instead the legitimate authority. In 1979, President Jimmy Carter changed the United State's foreign policy to agree with the U.N. by recognizing the People's Republic of China as the legitimate government.

Another government not recognized as legitimate is the military rule in Myanmar, which overthrew the former regime. The pro-democracy movement in that nation does not recognize the authority of the military rule. In turn, free nations in the world are pushing for free elections and a return to democracy for the former Burma.

Whether or not governments are considered legitimate, they can be identified by who holds power and who can participate. Five types of government can be found throughout history and in present times. One type is the dictatorship, in which one person controls the government. The general population has little or no political participation, and their rights are restricted. Two infamous dictators were Adolf Hitler in Germany and Pol Pot in Cambodia.
Similar to dictatorships, oligarchies, sometimes called dictatorship of the party, allow limited participation in government and grant people few rights. Instead of power being held by only one person, it is shared among an exclusive group. Before his removal from power, Saddam Hussein and the Baath Party in Iraq functioned as an oligarchy.

A third type of government is a monarchy, in which one person has control. This person's power is claimed from "divine rights" and is passed from one generation of the royal class to the next. Historically, people ruled by a monarch did not have rights, and they were at the mercy of the monarch's will. This form of government existed in England before the signing of the Magna Carta.

In a representative monarchy, the monarch is more of a figurehead than a dictator. Under this type of governance, people have political and civil rights and can participate in parliamentary government. Representative monarchies, such as Denmark, Great Britain, Spain, and Japan, are democracies that evolved out of the feudal systems.

A democracy is a fifth type of government and derives its power from the people it governs. For this reason, the people can influence not only who holds office but also what policies are implemented. Democracies exist throughout the world, but no two democratic governments are exactly alike. For example, the Parliamentary system of the United Kingdom and the Presidential system used by the United States are quite different in their organization, where the seat of power is located, and in their traditions, and yet both are democratic governments.

There are two main types of democracies. The first and oldest is a pure, or direct democracy. In a pure democracy, the people being governed gather to discuss and vote directly on decisions made by the government. This style of democracy was used by the ancient Athenians and is still used today by a few small communities in New England.

The other type is a representative, or indirect democracy. In this system, the people elect representatives to run the government and express their sentiments. The power in this type of democracy remains with the people. State governments are examples of representative democracies in that elected officials act on behalf of their constituents. For example in different state governments, people retain power via initiatives, referendums, and recalls. However, the U.S. National Government is a republic, meaning that the power rests with elected officials rather than with the people.

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