

Roots of American Government

Lesson Overview

Learning Objectives

1. Define politics.
2. Identify the basic functions of government.
3. List the characteristics of democracy as a political system.
4. Contrast democracy with alternative political systems.
5. Describe the comparative method and explain its value for the evaluation of US government.

Introduction

Most Americans know surprisingly little about their government even though it profoundly impacts their lives in innumerable ways. Yet government performs several vital functions in sustaining a humane society, from the maintenance of order to the provision of national security to the supply of various public goods that have come to characterize the modern welfare state. If government is the name we give to those rules and institutions that regulate society, politics, famously described by Harold Lasswell as "who gets what, when, and how," is how actors within society struggle for power within that system of rules and institutions. Americans are fortunate to live in a country where politics takes place within a democracy: a system of government that bases its legitimacy on the participation of the people. What are the primary functions of government and why can we, broadly speaking, define American government as a democracy?

Study Questions

1. What is government and what are its origins? Why should citizens obey its rules? Compare and contrast the perspectives of:
 - a. Thomas Hobbes
 - b. Jean Jacques Rousseau
 - c. John Locke
2. What basic functions does government provide? Describe how these functions can conflict.

3. What is a "collective good" and what is the relevance of the "tragedy of the commons"?
4. Define politics.
5. Define legitimacy. Why is legitimacy so important for governments?
6. How is democracy defined? Contrast it with other political systems with which it has historically competed:
 - a. Monarchy
 - b. Oligarchy
 - c. Theocracy
 - d. Authoritarianism
 - e. Totalitarianism
7. What are the characteristics of a democracy? More specifically, what are the characteristics of American democracy?
8. Identify variants of democracy, including:
 - a. Direct democracy
 - b. Representative democracy (republic)
 - c. Constitutional democracy
 - d. Federal democracy
 - e. Unitary democracy
 - f. Presidential democracy
 - g. Parliamentary democracy
9. If democracy is a system of government that bases its legitimacy on the participation of the people, is it correct to characterize the United States government as democratic?
10. What is the comparative method of studying politics? How does it help us to evaluate the health and efficacy of American democracy?