

Roots of American Government

Types of Government

Government can be defined as the institution or institutions that possess the basic authority to rule a society. In theory, and frequently in practice, governments possess a monopoly on the use of violence. Politics describes the struggle for power that takes place within government, or in Harold Lasswell's famous phrase "who gets what, when, and where?" This course assumes that all governments seek to bolster their authority to govern by seeking legitimacy. Why? Although governments can, and do, exercise authority by the threat of armed violence, violence is an extremely expensive way to maintain power. A government can't place a policeman on every corner or rule by military might alone if it wants to be sustainable (although the long life of dictatorships often challenges this assertion). It is much easier for governments when citizens obey their authority voluntarily. To this end all governments, even nondemocratic governments, seek legitimacy in the eyes of its citizens. Legitimacy is the belief that a government is just and deserves obedience.

The American form of government is democracy. Although democracy is the most prevalent form of government in recent decades, it has no shortage of competitors. Among them:

1. *Monarchy* - Rule of one. Traditionally a king or emperor, but in modern times this usually describes a dictator.
2. *Oligarchy* - Rule of the few. Traditionally, this described a group of aristocrats, men of noble blood, but it just as easily describes a group of warlords or a military junta.
3. *Theocracy* - Technically, rule by God. In practice, since God rarely shows up to manage the day-to-day affairs of government, this involves rule by a religious leader or group of religious officials who interpret God's will. The country of Iran has many aspects of a theocratic state.
4. *Authoritarianism* - Monopoly of political power by an individual or small group that otherwise allows people to go about their private lives as they wish.
5. *Totalitarianism* - Rule by an elite that exercises unlimited power over individuals in all aspects of life.

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Most societies agree that the existence of government is morally justified. What they disagree about is the purpose of government and its scope. As a result, societies create different government structures based on their political ideology of what a government should do. This activity examines different types of government.

Interactive Activity: Types of Government

Examines different types of government. Government types include anarchy, direct democracy, military dictatorship, monarchy, oligarchy, representative democracy, and theocracy. Looks at who governs, the authority to govern, and an example for each government type.

Additional Resources

Websites

[The World Factbook](https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/fields/2128.html)

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The Central Intelligence Agency maintains a list of over thirty forms of government, including a database of every country's government type.