

[PDF File](#)

Course Description

This course guides students through the principles of American government and the responsibilities of citizenship on federal, state and local levels. The United States Constitution provides the structure for much of the course, along with several other significant documents including the Ohio State Constitution of 1851. Students are encouraged to address current issues and policies through public processes. Government's role in the economic realm will also be discussed.

GOVERNMENT OVERVIEW



Protest March: Washington D.C.

Unit Overview

Welcome to American Government! In this unit, you will review some of the various types of government and consider several basic principles that shape the rule of law in the United States. Significant documents such as the Mayflower Compact and the Articles of Confederation will also be discussed.

Forms of Government

Government can be defined as the institutions and people that have the power to establish and to enforce public policies. Countries rely on it to keep order, to provide public services and to maintain national defense. Almost everyone is critical of their nation's authority from time to time, but **anarchy** or the absence of government creates greed, chaos and confusion. Most forms of government fall into three broad categories: **monarchy**, **dictatorship** and **democracy**.

Major Forms of Government



The Prince and Princess of Norway greet the King and Queen of Thailand.

Monarchy

A **monarchy** is a government in which one family rules and passes power down from generation to generation. Monarchies are one of the oldest forms of government. Under this type of leadership, the ruler serves as a symbol of continuity and statehood. There are absolute monarchies where the king or queen has total power, and there are constitutional monarchies where the royal leader is just a figurehead. In a constitutional monarchy, a parliament or governing body holds the real power.



Augusto Pinochet
Dictator of Chile from 1973-1990

Dictatorship

A **dictatorship** is a government where either one person or a very small group of people hold absolute power. The leader has not been elected and may use force to keep control. It is usually authoritarian and totalitarian. Examples of dictatorships in history are Nazi Germany under Adolf Hitler, the Saddam Hussein regime in Iraq and the Chilean administration of Augusto Pinochet. In Nazi Germany, a picture of Adolf Hitler appeared in nearly every building. Under Saddam Hussein, every news broadcast in Iraq began with a reference to him.



Electronic Voting in India

Democracy

A **democracy** is also a type of government. In a true democracy, every citizen has a vote, and the government is elected by the people. Everyone who is eligible to vote has a stake in who runs the country. The United States operates under a representative democracy. This is also known as a republic. We elect representatives to speak for us in government.

For more information about specific forms of government click on the PDF File.

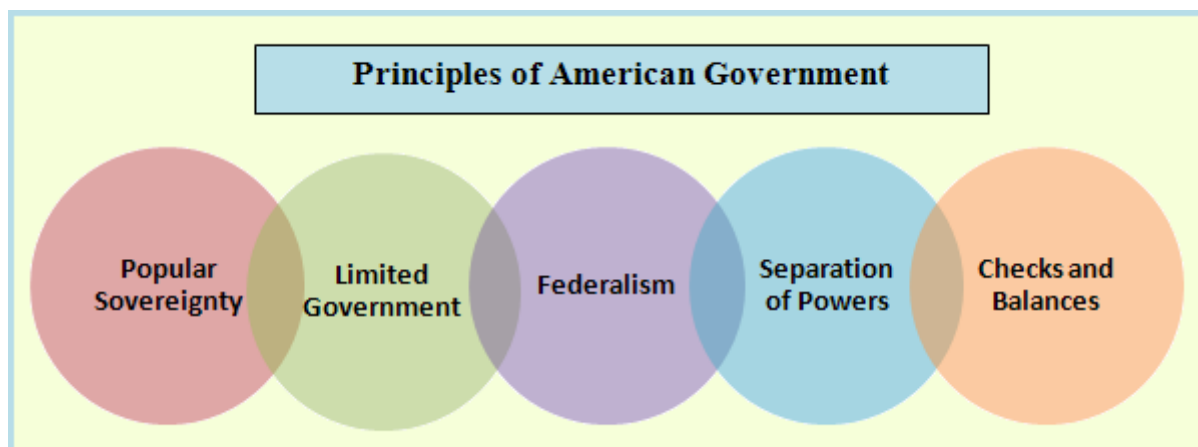
[Types of Governments.PDF](#)



Go to Questions 1-3.

Basic Principles of American Government

The United States fits in the broad category of democracy, but it has been shaped and molded by several basic principles. These terms have been analyzed, redefined and broadened by every generation of Americans since colonial times.



▪ Popular Sovereignty

Popular sovereignty is the idea that a government's power comes from the people that are being governed. It is based on the concept of a social contract between the leaders and the citizens. For Americans, it means that the political leadership is controlled by the people through their votes. This principle was established with a democratic document known as the Mayflower Compact. To read this document, click on the PDF file below.

[Mayflower Compact.PDF](#)



Signing of the Mayflower Compact (U.S. Public Domain)

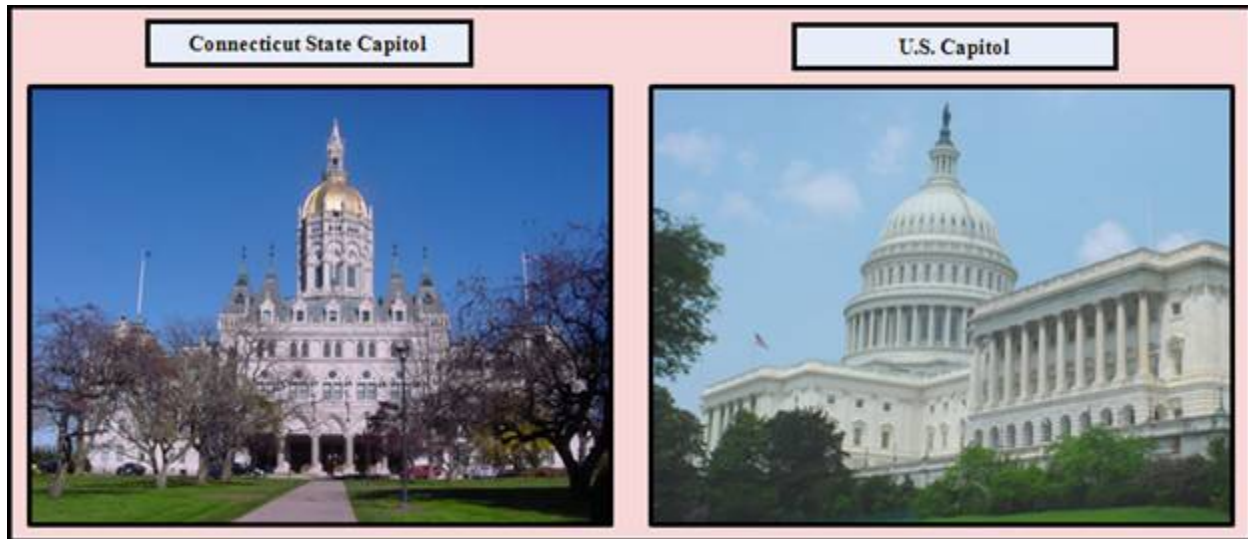
In 1620, the Pilgrims reached what they thought was northern Virginia. The Compact is often described as America's first constitution, but it is not a constitution in the sense of being a fundamental framework of government. Its importance lies in the belief that government is a form of covenant or contract; for an authority to be legitimate, it must originate from the consent of the governed. Popular sovereignty was often cited before the Civil War as a reason why individuals in newly organized territories had the right to decide the slavery question.

▪ Limited Government

When the United States developed its plan for government, the organizers wanted to avoid the massive size and power held by European leaders in the eighteenth century. With this in mind, they designed a central authority based on the principle of limited government. This means that the people are the only real source of the government's power. They state how much control they want the government to have through free elections and laws. This assures that leaders do not misuse their authority and that they respect the rights of individuals.

The principle of limited government is continuously being redefined on local, state and federal levels. Government regulations have increased over the past two hundred years as the United States has changed from a farming nation to a complex, technological society. This has also fueled concerns about the government's right to interfere in certain situations. Every political

issue, from healthcare to international trade, questions how far the government's power should extend.



▪ Federalism

The division of power between a central authority and a regional authority, such as a state, is known as federalism. This system was designed to solve the problem of the relationship between the national and states governments. Although a strong case was made for a very powerful, national government, states did not want to surrender control over their internal affairs to a centralized authority. As a result, some powers were given to the national government, and some powers were kept by the states.

Federalism permits states to have their own constitutions, laws, courts and officials. The protection of the country as a whole and the settlement of disputes between states are left to the federal government. In *The Federalist* (Number 46), James Madison described it this way: “The federal and state governments are in fact but different agents and trustees of the people, instituted with different powers, and designated for different purposes.” There are times, however, when national, state and local policies conflict. In these circumstances, state and local governments cannot challenge or contradict the constitutional authority of the national government.

Separation of Powers

The framers of American government recognized the need for a strong, central government. At the same time, they were concerned that certain groups or individuals might acquire too much authority or remain in office too long. As a result, a separation of powers became the basis for American government. This concept, adopted from the writings of a French political philosopher named Baron de Montesquieu, divided control among three branches: legislative, executive and judicial. Each branch has specific responsibilities, powers and restrictions. The legislative branch has the authority to enact laws and to establish policies for the national government. The role of the executive branch is to carry out, administer and enforce federal policies. The interpretation of the law is the domain of the Supreme Court.

Checks and Balances

American government relies on checks and balances to make sure that no single branch of government operates without restraint. Each branch of government exercises some control over the other two. This prevents the accumulation of too much power in the hands of a few people. For example, the President can veto a law passed by Congress, but Congress can override that veto with a 2/3 vote. The Supreme Court can also check the power of the President by declaring the law unconstitutional. To keep the Supreme Court in check, the Justices are appointed by the President and approved by Congress.



Independence Hall: Site of the signing of the Declaration of Independence



Visiting the Declaration of Independence
National Archives: Washington D.C.



Go the Questions 4-11.

The Establishment of an Independent Nation

When the French and Indian War ended in 1763, Britain took complete control of the American colonies. France had conceded land that it had formerly held in the Ohio Valley and east of the Mississippi River. Britain was a monarchy ruled by King George III and a Parliament with a Prime Minister. Because the colonies were so far away from Britain and the Parliament, each colonial government did pretty much as it pleased.

As with all wars, the French and Indian War was a costly one in both men and money. To help pay for war debts and for the protection of the colonials from Indian attacks, the British Parliament levied several taxes against the colonies. These taxes upset the British citizens in America because they felt

that they had no representation in Parliament. Cries of “taxation without representation” became a rallying point for the colonies to break away from Britain and to become independent from the mother country.



The document that the colonists wrote to explain their reasons for breaking away from England was the Declaration of Independence. The Declaration is an indictment of George III for willfully infringing upon the colonials' rights in order to establish an “absolute Tyranny” over the colonies. In this document, Thomas Jefferson, the primary writer, listed grievances that the colonies had with the government of King George III and that colonial patience had achieved nothing. He also added a remedy for that problem, independence from the mother country. Although a radical step, it was one that some of the Founding Fathers felt it was necessary. Who were the men that were brave enough to put their names on this document? Click on the link below to learn more about their life stories.

A complete list of the signers of the Declaration of Independence can be viewed in the [Declaration of Independence Signers.PDF](#).



Go to Questions 12-14

The First National Constitution

While Thomas Jefferson was writing the Declaration of Independence, another committee began working on a plan to form a confederation composed of the former British colonies. The result of their work was a document called the **Articles of Confederation**. Since Americans did not want to open the country up to the possibility of another monarchy, they created a three-man committee instead of a chief executive or President. Very limited powers were given to a Congress, which was the central authority in the new government. States appointed between two and seven representatives

to this legislature, but each state only had one vote, even if its population was very large. After months of debate, the Articles went into effect in March of 1781, but it soon became apparent that there were flaws in this plan.

Weaknesses of the Articles of Confederation

<p>Congress had no power to collect taxes</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Congress could only request money • The nation was 40 million dollars in debt 	<p>Congress was unable to finance an army or navy.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Settlers on the frontier had to defend themselves • American merchant ships were unprotected 	<p>Congress had no control over trade and commerce</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • States imposed their own taxes and trade rules on each other • American merchants were not protected by tariffs.
<p>Congress could not establish a stable economy</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • States coined their own money • Trade among states was difficult 	<p>Congress was unable to enforce its own laws</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • States negotiated with foreign nations • States conducted their own affairs with the Indians 	<p>Congress could not settle disputes between states</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • There was no national court system • Criminals could escape prosecution by crossing state lines

Successes under the Articles of Confederation

In spite of serious weaknesses, the Articles of Confederation did achieve some success. Under the guidance of this document, the United States managed to win the Revolutionary War and to negotiate a treaty with Great Britain. The new government also established committees to handle financial, military and foreign affairs. This set the precedent for the Departments of the Treasury, Defense and State.



States from the Northwest Territory www.dipity.com

One of the most impressive accomplishments of the Confederation was the passage of the **Northwest Ordinance**. This act provided the political structure for the land north of the Ohio River and west to the Mississippi River. The Ordinance established the process by which three to five new states would be formed from these lands. According to the Northwest Ordinance, the new states would enter the union on equal terms with the existing states. The settlers in the territories were guaranteed religious freedom, and slavery was outlawed. The Ordinance became the model for all territories that desired statehood.



Go to Questions 15-16.

What's Next?

Although government under the Articles of Confederation did achieve some success, many people soon realized that a stronger government was necessary. The new country's economic problems were rapidly becoming more serious. States issued their own money, but inflation soon made these currencies worthless. This hurt small businesses and lowered prices farmers received for their produce. Frustration put people in many states on the verge of rebellion.

In Massachusetts, for example, hundreds of angry farmers and workers, led by Revolutionary War veteran Daniel Shays, came together and marched on a number of county courthouses. The chaos made leaders in every state realize that changes needed to be made if the young nation was going to survive. Five states sent representatives to a meeting in Annapolis, Maryland in 1786. After much discussion, the delegates strongly recommended that all states send representatives to Philadelphia, Pennsylvania in May of 1787 for the purpose of revising the Articles of Confederation. Could the Articles be revised? Would the states overcome their fear of a strong, central government and agree to change? Continue your study of American Government to find the answers to these and other questions.



Go the Questions 17-24.



Below are additional educational resources and activities for this unit.

[Unit 1 Advance Organizer](#)

[Unit 1 Application Activity](#)