

Government

What would happen without government? Would there be any laws? Governments make laws. Even if there were laws, who would enforce them, without government? Governments hire police and set up courts. These are only a few of the things that government does. Many groups have governments—people who are in charge. Schools and clubs are two examples. Usually, however, the word government refers to the people in charge of a country, a state, or a city. The people in charge have a system for governing (ruling). This system for governing is also referred to as a government.

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Democracy

Democracy is a ruling system where the citizens have a great deal of control over the actions of the government, either directly or through elected representatives. Democratic governments can be traced back to the city-states of ancient Greece and Rome. Citizens would gather in a public forum, and each one would have the opportunity to speak and vote on issues affecting the community. This direct democracy system was possible due to the relatively small populations of the city-states. Starting in the 17th century, the monarchs of Europe began to be stripped of their absolute power, and by the end of the 19th century the citizens had a strong voice in government in many European nations. Large populations made public forums impractical, so the people elected groups of representatives to carry their views to the ruling powers. Strictly speaking, this type of system more closely resembles a republican system rather than a true democracy. This type of representative democracy is considered the best governing system in the modern world because of the personal and economic freedom enjoyed by the citizens.

Despotism

Despotism is a form of government characterized by a ruler who wields absolute power over his people. Despite the word's negative connotations, a leader doesn't necessarily have to be a corrupt, evil megalomaniac to be a despot; it is possible to be a benevolent despot, though history records few cases of such. The strength of this form of government is that the ruler can easily implement his decisions; he does not need to compromise, cajole, or bribe anyone to get the job done. The weakness of this form of government is that the ruler can implement bad decisions just as easily as good ones; with no checks and balances, how can he be stopped? Also, there is a lot of truth in the old saying, "Power corrupts; absolute power corrupts absolutely." And though as said before, despots don't need to be corrupt, evil megalomaniacs, many of them end up that way.

Feudalism

In the unsettled times following the collapse of Charlemagne's Frankish empire, a new social and political system arose in Europe called feudalism. Derived from the concept of monarchy, feudalism was a hierarchical system in which each descending stratum owed allegiance to those above. The king, whose authority was second only to God, granted tracts

of land, or fiefs, to his barons. The barons might then grant smaller estates to knights, who swore to protect and serve the baron. The knights, in turn, might then grant fractions of their fiefs to subordinates who would serve the knights. At the bottom of the feudal pyramid were the serfs, who could not own land, and acted essentially as slave laborers who worked the land for their masters. Feudalism began to decline in the 13th century, when standing armies and mercenaries began to fulfill the protective role once served by the vassals and knights.

Hereditary Rule

Hereditary Rule is a form of government wherein the rulership is passed down from one member of the family to the next. This kind of succession is most often associated with monarchical rulers, but it occasionally appears in despotisms or even purportedly communist regimes - North Korea, for example. There is often a religious justification for hereditary rule; kings are said to rule by "divine right" or "the mandate of Heaven." The strength of hereditary rule is that there is usually a clear line of succession, and thus perhaps less squabbling for power when the current monarch dies. (There are plenty of exceptions to this rule throughout history, of course.) Further, there may be a certain amount of familial pressure on the ruler to not mess things up too badly for the next generation. However, hereditary rule suffers the same kind of weaknesses as do all unelected rulers; the leader is not answerable to the people, and it can be extremely difficult to get rid of a bad one.

Monarchy

Rule by monarchy developed as a logical extension of the absolute rule of tribal chieftains. Many of the earliest monarchs, such as those in ancient Egypt, claimed that they ruled by divine right. In the spread of European monarchy during the Middle Ages, however, rulership was generally conveyed upon a leader who could most effectively raise and command an army. Monarchies are dynastic, with rule of the country passing to the eldest son when the king dies or retires. Monarchs had absolute rule over their subjects, severely limiting the personal and economic freedom of all citizens except for nobility and the rich upper class. Although monarchies ruled most of Europe for centuries, the unhappiness of lower-class citizens eventually grew intolerable, causing several major revolutions. By the mid-18th century, the power of the European monarchs had been severely limited, paving the way for participatory systems of government.

Representation

In a representative government the population elects a number of "representatives" to run the government on their behalf. The representatives serve for a limited time and then must stand for reelection. These representatives form a group (council, parliament, senate, etc.) that determines and implements government policy. In some cases the government may have a monarch at its head, while in other cases there may be a separately elected ruler (as in the United States), or the representatives themselves may elect one or more of their members to be the executive power.