

Structure and Function of Government

Every nation or country in the world has some method of organization within that nation. All nations have some way of making **laws** or rules of behavior, and the people who live in those nations have to obey the laws. Each nation also has some way of making sure that all people who live there follow the laws. The **Constitution** is the written plan of government for the United States. (See Appendix A.)

Government Defined



The laws are made and enforced through **government**. Government is defined as the political organization through which laws and public policy are made and enforced. Let's look at that definition in two parts.

Political Organization

First of all, a government is a political organization. This political organization consists of all of the people who decide how the country should operate. In the United States, all people have the opportunity to be a part of this political organization because the system of government in the United States is a type of **democracy** called a **republic**. In a republic, the people choose who will govern the country through regular elections and, therefore, have the final power.

Public Policy

The second part of the definition of government states that a government makes and enforces **public policy**. Public policies are the plans that governments decide to follow. Government decisions are then based on public policies.

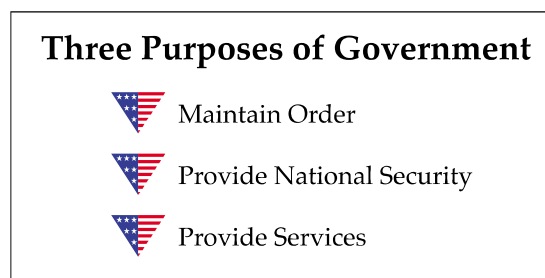


For example, if the people want the government to follow a policy to help older people get medical care, then the government makes decisions that will help older people get the medical care they need. People may also want the government to follow a policy to clean up polluted rivers. The government then makes decisions that will help clean up polluted rivers.

Because people's wishes may change over time, so may public policy change. At some points in our history, citizens have wanted the United States to keep to itself and not become involved in the problems of other countries. At these times the country has adopted a public policy of **isolationism** and stayed out of active involvement in the affairs of other countries. At other times during history, Americans have asked the government to become involved in world affairs, and the government has responded by adopting a policy of **global involvement**. These shifts in public policy will be further discussed in "Unit 8: Foreign Affairs and Domestic Policy."

Purposes of Government

Why do we need a government? We need a government for many reasons. In a nation where many people live—and life is complicated—a government is needed to do things for the people they can't do by themselves. Three of the essential purposes of government are listed below.



Maintain Order

The first purpose of government is to maintain order within a nation. If everyone were allowed to do as he or she pleased, with no restrictions, no one would feel safe. The government attempts to insure that people live and work together peacefully. This is accomplished by making and enforcing laws.



Provide National Security

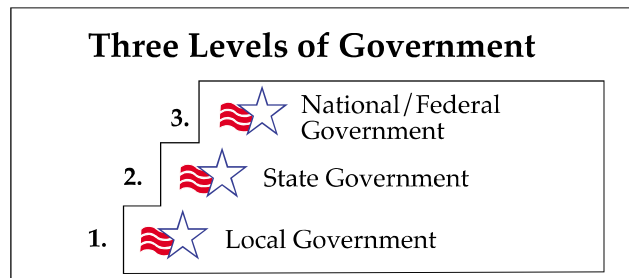
A second purpose of government is to provide national security. This means that our government has to make sure that no other nation takes over our nation. This is done primarily through the efforts of the United States military.

Provide Services

The third purpose of government is to provide services for its citizens. Generally, these are services—such as roads, schools, parks, or police departments—that would be too expensive for any one person to purchase. Governments provide these services to all citizens in order to help make sure that the people are educated, have a clean environment, and are generally safe from harm.

Levels of Government and Their Functions

In our country, there are three different levels of government. Try to picture these levels as steps. The lowest step is the *local* level of government. One step higher is the *state* level of government. The top step is the *national* (or federal) level of government.



Each of these levels of government is responsible for serving the people who live in the area under its control. There is, however, a lot of overlap among the three levels. For example, funding for schools may come from the national, state, and local governments.

Local Government

Local governments serve all people living in a county, city, town, or township. There are thousands of local governments across the country. Local governments have the power to manage their own affairs as long as they do not violate federal or state laws.

State Government

There are 50 different states in the United States. Each has its own constitution which sets up the plan for state government. The government of each state serves all of the people living within its borders. State governments also pass laws, but none of these laws may conflict with federal laws.

National Government/Federal Government

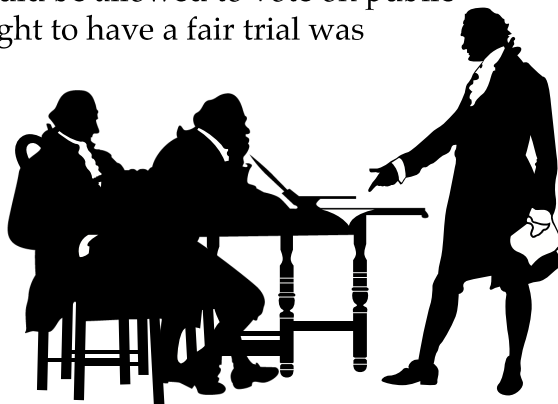
The national government is the highest level of government. It serves all of the people living in the United States. Its laws, which are called federal laws, must be obeyed by everyone living within the country. The United States Constitution sets up the plan for the national level of government.

Important Events in United States History

There are many important events in the history of the United States that led to the kind of government that we have today.

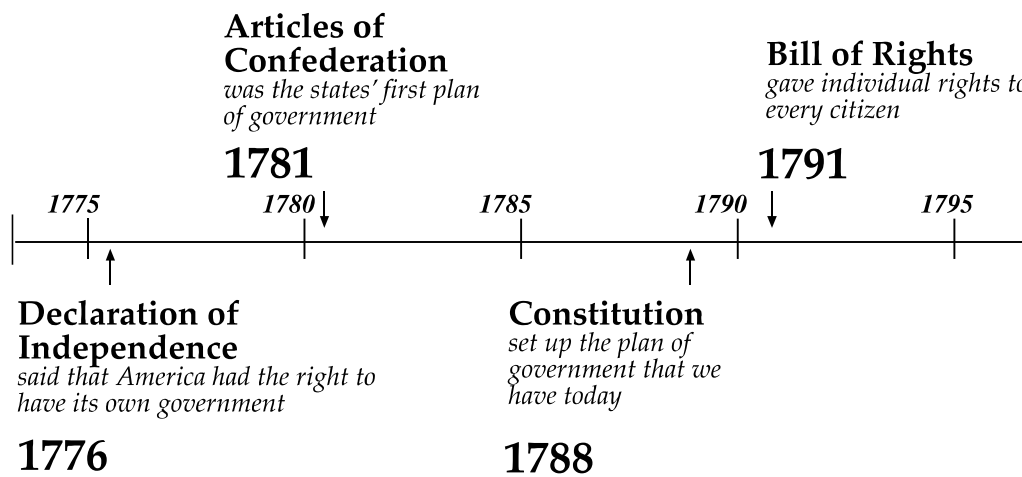
Beginning around 1600, English settlers began to set up colonies in the New World. Eventually, 13 colonies were formed. The English settlers brought with them some ideas about government that were important to them. The belief that the people should be allowed to vote on public policies was one central idea. The right to have a fair trial was another central idea.

The works of John Locke helped spread ideas of democracy in England and eventually to the New World. He wrote a book called *Two Treatises on Government*. He wrote that people should choose their



rulers. He also wrote that people have the right to make laws for themselves. Locke reasoned that all people were born free, equal, and independent. People possessed natural rights to life, liberty, and property before governments were formed. When people formed governments, they did so to protect their natural rights. Locke argued that if a government failed to protect these natural rights, the people could change that government. The people had the right to protect their rights. This idea is known as **popular sovereignty** and means rule by the people. All of the ideas about natural rights were in the hearts and minds of the people who established the colonies in the New World.

Before long, the English king and the government of England began to make decisions that hurt the people in the American colonies in many ways. Colonists were forced to pay taxes to England even though they were given no voice in how England governed the colonies. Colonists who did not pay the taxes were denied trial by jury. The colonists began to feel that they should have a government of their own to set policies and make decisions that would help instead of hurt them.



In 1776 Thomas Jefferson, leading member of a five-man committee, developed a statement to be sent to England, explaining the feelings of the colonists. This statement became known as the **Declaration of Independence**. (See Appendix B.) The document stated the reasons the 13 colonies wanted to become a new nation. The document also said that the people of America had the right to form their own government because the English government had taken away basic rights to which the colonists believed all citizens were entitled.



Thomas Jefferson

The government of England did not agree with the Declaration of Independence. Similarly not all Americans were in favor of breaking away from England and forming an independent nation. The **Revolutionary War** then began between the new government of America and the government of England. America defeated England, and the United States of America was formed. Even before England surrendered, some people in the new nation—the United States of America—wrote a plan in 1776 for government called the **Articles of Confederation**. (See Appendix C.) The Articles of Confederation were ratified in 1781. A limited national government was established under the Articles of Confederation. However, the states remained independent but cooperated with each other. While there was no President under this plan, a Congress was formed with delegates from all states. Each state had one vote, no matter how large or small. Though Congress was given some power under the Articles of Confederation, that power was severely limited. For example, while Congress could declare war, it could not maintain an army. Congress also had no power to tax its citizens or regulate trade.

Under this system, states operated almost as small, independent nations. Each state printed its own money, established its own taxes, and—in some cases—formed its own armies. It soon became obvious that the plan established under the Articles of Confederation was not going to work. While the states had wanted to keep their power, many of them did not have enough money to meet their needs, and many began to worry that they were not strong enough to protect themselves. Many people were afraid of **anarchy**, the absence of government.

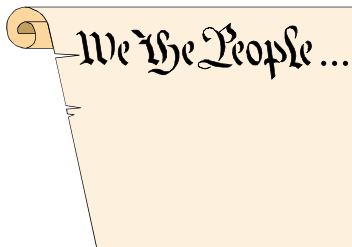
Finally, a meeting of the states' leaders was held in Philadelphia to find ways to revise the Articles of Confederation to solve the problems which were occurring. The meeting became known as the **Constitutional Convention**.

In 1787 when the convention began, the states' leaders decided that the Articles of Confederation caused too many problems that could not be resolved. A new plan of government would have to be written—one that would work better. The result of this meeting was the Constitution of the United States. Before Americans would accept the Constitution, 10 changes called **amendments**, had to be made. These 10 amendments were called the **Bill of Rights** (see Appendix D) and are still part of the Constitution today. (See "Unit 6: Civil Rights.")

Since 1791, 17 other changes have been made in the Constitution, making a total of 27. But, basically, it is the same plan of government that we use today—over 200 years later!

The Preamble to the Constitution

The Constitution of the United States is a plan of government that was written over 200 years ago. It is important that every person living in the United States knows and understands the ideas in the Constitution.



The people who wrote our Constitution understood the reason that a nation needs a strong government. The introduction, or **Preamble**, to the Constitution tells us the purpose of our government in just one sentence.

We the People of the United States, in Order to form a more perfect Union, establish Justice, insure domestic Tranquility, provide for the common defense, promote the general Welfare, and secure the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our Posterity, do ordain and establish this Constitution for the United States of America.

When we look closely at this very important sentence, we get a clear understanding of what it means.

"We the People of the United States" tells us and the world that the government of our nation belongs to the people and is run by the people.

"...to form a more perfect Union" means that our government under the Constitution will unite the states into a better nation.

"...establish Justice" means that the government will pass laws and set up courts to make sure all people are treated fairly.

"...insure domestic Tranquility" means the government will keep the country itself orderly and peaceful.

"...provide for the common defense" means that the government will keep other nations from taking over our country.

"...promote the general Welfare" means that the government will see to it that the citizens of our country enjoy good fortune, health, and happiness as much as possible. The government is supposed to do things that will benefit everyone, not just a few people.

"...secure the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our Posterity" means that the government will make sure that we, our children, and all future generations will have freedom.

"...ordain and establish this Constitution for the United States of America" means that we agree that the Constitution of the United States will be the plan of government for our nation.

These words form the Preamble to the Constitution of the United States and make it very clear to everyone that our government has a *purpose* and some goals to reach.