

## Foundations of American Government

Democracy is a word with which most of us are familiar. Where did this word come from? What does it mean? The word democracy comes from the Greek word *demos* meaning “the people” and *kratia* meaning “rule.” Therefore, democracy literally means the people rule. Between 750 B.C. and 500 B.C., Greeks developed different forms of government. In about 450 B.C., the **ancient Greeks** invented the word to describe their system of government. Our government today is founded upon earlier types of governments.

### Government of Ancient Greece

From 2000 B.C. to 323 B.C., ancient Greece was not a united country as it is today but a collection of lands and islands where Greek-speaking people lived. Compare the two maps below. The one on the left shows where Greece is located today. The map on the right shows the territories of ancient Greece.



*ancient Greece*



*Greece today*

The early Greeks established the *polis*. A polis is a Greek city-state and its surrounding countryside. (This is the root of such words as police, politics, and politician.) Athens is probably the most famous polis. This is because the citizens of Athens established a **direct democracy**. This meant all citizens participated directly in making decisions.

For instance, the decision to build a new road wasn't decided by a few members of the city council. Each citizen of Athens voted on whether or not they needed a new road. In contrast, present-day democratic **nations** such as the United States are **representative democracies**. This means we elect people to public offices to represent us and vote on government decisions. Therefore, the citizens of the United States do not vote on issues such as road construction. Can you imagine how many times people would have to go and vote every time someone wanted to build a new road? It would be impossible today! There are far too many decisions and people.



The ancient Greeks had a purer form of democracy, but it was not flawless. For example, in order to be a citizen in Athens, both of your parents had to be citizens. Women were granted citizenship, but they were not allowed to vote or hold office. Slaves were not permitted to vote because they were not citizens. Despite all of these

problems, the creation of a democratic government was revolutionary. The idea that citizens could have a voice in government was completely new. Although in time the Greeks were conquered, their culture spread to distant lands. Their ideas about democracy became part of Western civilization, the heritage of ideas that spread to Europe and America. This is why ancient Greece is a part of our culture today.

## Government of Ancient Rome

The **ancient Romans** were some of the greatest conquerors of the ancient world. The Romans ruled much of the ancient world for over 900 years and built a great empire during the years of 1000 B.C. to 27 B.C. in the country that is now called Italy. Italy is a country in Europe near Greece. About the year 700 B.C., the city of Rome was built in Italy, and the people of Rome were called Romans.



The Romans did not want a king or a queen for a ruler. Around 509 B.C., Rome became a *republic*, a form of government in which voters elect their leaders. Sound familiar? That's right! The system of government in the United States is a type of democracy called a republic. The people choose who will govern the United States through regular elections.

The Roman republic was not a democracy. Rich people had much more power than poor people did. The poor were not allowed to hold a political office. Only citizens were allowed to vote. As in Greece, most Romans were not citizens. After many years, some laws were changed, and poor Romans gained some power. They were allowed to help make laws, but the rich people still held most of the power.

Roman citizens elected men to make their laws and run their government. Three hundred men were elected representatives and made up what was called the **Senate (Roman)**. In the United States, we also have a Senate. The Senate is the upper House of **Congress** or of a state legislature. We elect senators to make and change laws. "Justice for all!" was an idea that came from the Senate. Many of our ideas about laws and courts came from the Romans.

In time, the Roman republic grew into an empire. The Roman Empire lasted from 27 B.C., when Augustus Caesar became Rome's first emperor, until the 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> centuries, when it collapsed. Rome tried to control the

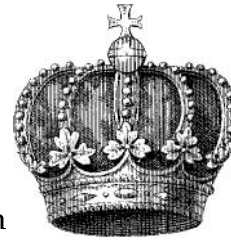


*Roman war chariot*

entire Mediterranean world with a government designed for a small city-state. The empire grew too fast and became too large for the kind of governmental organization the Romans had set up. Many people who study history think we can learn a great deal from the fall of Rome. It is important to learn from the mistakes of ancient civilizations, so we do not follow in their footsteps.

## Age of Monarchy in Europe

Another word for a king or queen is **monarch**. During the 1600s, Spain, France, and England had each become unified into nations. Nations are made up of people who have the same laws and leaders. Our nation is the United States. The leader of our country is the President of the United States. During the 1600s, the rulers of Spain and France were monarchs—kings and queens. This system of government is called an **absolute monarchy**. This meant the kings and queens ruled with absolute power. In an absolute monarchy, the ruler determines policy without consulting either the people or their representatives.



### France

One such ruler from 1643-1715 was the King of France, **Louis XIV**. Louis believed in the **divine right of kings**, meaning that God gave him the right to rule France. For example, if he decided to build an extravagant and unnecessary palace, it was his right. He believed God inspired any decision he made. Therefore, Louis built an enormous palace at Versailles. The elaborate palace cost the equivalent of about one billion dollars today. The common people of France were very upset about this waste of money. These were the kind of decisions made under absolutism. The wishes of the majority were ignored. Other European monarchies admired Louis XIV and copied his style of government.

### England

King Charles I ruled England from 1625 to 1649. He also thought he should rule with absolute power. In the past, a king or a queen in England could not make laws without consulting the **Parliament**. The Parliament was the national lawmaking body of England, consisting of the House of Lords and the House of Commons. This is similar to the Congress in the United States which is made up of the House of Representatives and the Senate.

King Charles did not want to share power with the Parliament. He disbanded the whole group and ignored the **Magna Carta**, England's constitution. Eventually, the people rebelled against King Charles. In 1649, he was captured and tried by Parliament. Charles I was found guilty and

eventually beheaded. For a time, England was without a king or queen. Instead, Parliament set up a republic. The republic, known as the Commonwealth of England lasted from 1649 to 1660. However, the people of England missed having a king. Therefore, they invited the son of King Charles to return to England.

## The Glorious Revolution

King Charles II learned from his father's mistakes. He became king in 1660. He restored Parliament and things went very well for a time. Problems began again when his son James II became king. King James II abused his power. Parliament decided they would have to remove James II from the throne. They decided to seek help from the daughter of King James. Her name was Mary, and she was married to William of Orange and living in Holland. Parliament asked them to come from Holland and take over James II's throne. Surprisingly, this didn't cause a war. Perhaps James remembered what happened to his grandfather, King Charles I. He probably didn't want to repeat history and lose his head! In 1688 James II left the throne quietly. Parliament persuaded William and Mary to give up many of their royal powers. This change came to be called the Bloodless Revolution or the **Glorious Revolution**. The reason it was glorious was because it was peaceful. No one lost his or her life. Also, the Glorious Revolution changed the government of England dramatically. The time of absolute monarchs was over.

## Revolution in America

In 1760 George III became king of England. Colonies had existed in the New World for almost 200 years. The New World was otherwise known as America. King George asked for loyalty from his subjects in America. In return, he offered protection from Native Americans and those foreign countries that wanted land in the New World. This protection was very expensive. For example, in 1763 the French and Indian War ended in America. The Americans and British defeated the French and Indian tribes. The war was costly. So King George asked the colonists for money in the form of

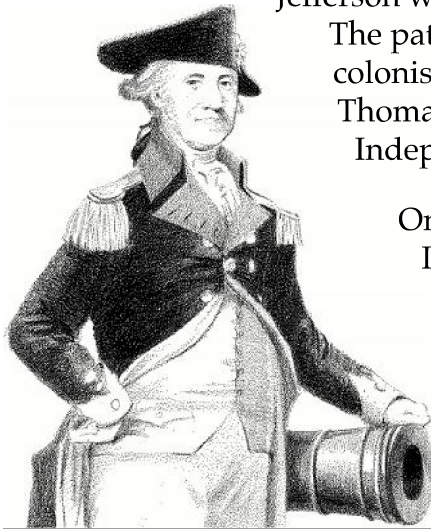


*Patriots like Samuel Adams and Thomas Jefferson wanted freedom.*

taxes. Many of the colonists were upset about paying taxes. "Taxation without representation!" was their complaint. If they paid taxes to King George, they wanted a voice in government. Many Americans wanted more than a voice in government. Men like Samuel Adams and Thomas

Jefferson wanted freedom. They were called **patriots**.

The patriots were very persuasive with many of the colonists. Freedom sounded good. They asked Thomas Jefferson to write the Declaration of Independence.



*General George Washington*

On July 4, 1776, the Declaration of Independence (see Appendix A) was approved. Basically, the Declaration of Independence was a letter to King George. King George responded to the letter by sending troops to the colonies. The colonists had to fight for their freedom.

General **George Washington** was more than happy to lead this fight to victory.

He later became the first President of the United States.

The rest of the world watched as Americans won their freedom. Many other countries were impressed by their struggle for freedom. They admired the promise of freedom of speech, of religion, and of the press. They watched and learned the value of having a voice in government, trial by jury, and the promise of equality.

## **The Age of Reason**

During the 1780s, the French people had witnessed the American Revolution, and were listening to new ideas. They saw the Glorious Revolution in England and the silent takeover of the monarchy by Parliament. Many writers began to point all of these things out to the French people. Some of the more famous writers were **Rousseau, Voltaire, and Montesquieu**.

Rousseau wrote a book on government called *The Social Contract*. It stated, "Man is born free, yet everywhere he is in chains," meaning freedom is something every one of us is born with, yet so many people are abused. Rousseau believed in the earliest of times, people had lived as free and equal individuals. He said people lived "in a state of nature." As people

moved into villages, and later on, cities, the strongest among them forced everyone else to obey unjust laws. Therefore, freedom and equality were destroyed. Rousseau argued the only correct government was one that ruled with the approval of the people.

Voltaire used his pen like a weapon. He wrote hundreds of pamphlets and essays denouncing the French monarchy. He was thrown into prison twice by the French monarchy for his outspoken ways. However, he never gave up. He devoted his life to the fight for freedom. His enemies were prejudice, superstition, and intolerance. In 1758 Voltaire wrote his most famous work, *Candide*. It is a short novel that pokes fun at the French monarchy. These types of novels are known as satires.

Montesquieu devoted his life to the fight for liberty as well. For years he studied the history of ancient Rome. He concluded that Rome's decline was the result of people's loss of freedom. Remember the importance of learning from the mistakes of past generations? Montesquieu also admired the Glorious Revolution in England. He thought England had the best form of government because of the system of **checks and balances** of power. The British king had executive power and carried out the laws of the state. He was the **executive branch** of the government. The members of Parliament were the **legislative branch** who made the laws of the state.

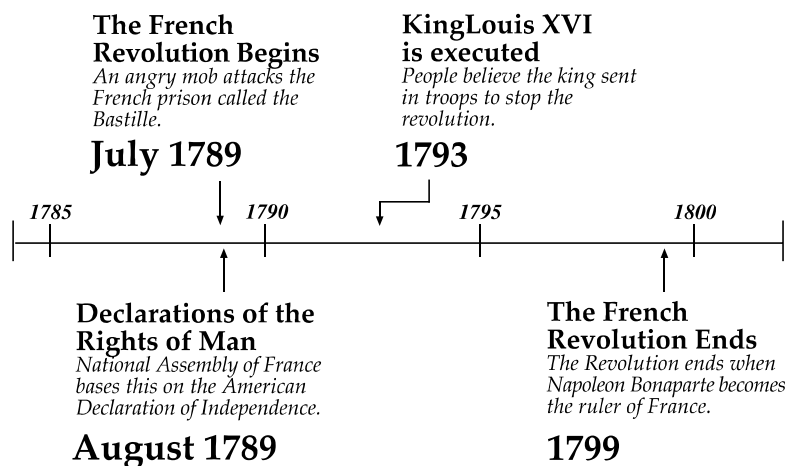
The judges of the English courts were the **judicial branch**. They looked at the laws and decided how to apply them in court cases. Montesquieu called this division of power into three branches **separation of powers**. Does any of this sound familiar? When we study the branches of government in the next section, you will see we learned a great deal from Montesquieu as well. The men who wrote the Constitution of the United States read Montesquieu's book called *On the Spirit of Laws*. In his book, he stated, "Power should be a check to power." This means that each branch of government should limit the power of the other two branches.

Words are very powerful. The words of political writers in France and England gave the people in England, France, and America the strength to protest absolute monarchies. People began to believe in a life with liberty.

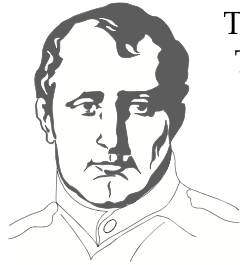
## The French Revolution

The French were very impressed by the colonists in America. The idea of freedom and a voice in government sounded wonderful to the millions of peasants who often went without enough food to eat. Remember that France started the idea of an absolute monarchy with Louis XIV. This type of government was still in place in 1789, even though Louis XIV was no longer alive. In his place was King Louis XVI. He also ruled by “divine right.” No matter how unfair the rule, French people had to accept it. Nobles lived in luxury. They had fine palaces paid for by taxes collected from the lower and middle classes.

On July 14, 1789, a riot broke out in Paris. An angry mob attacked the French prison called the Bastille. They murdered the governor of the prison and carried his head on a stick through the streets of Paris. The **French Revolution** had begun. Many noblemen did not feel safe in France. They left the country. The peasants and working class tried to attack the king in the palace at Versailles but the guards kept them away. During the next three years, 1789-1791, the revolutionaries wrote a new constitution. The nobles lost most of their rights, and the king lost much of his power. On August 26, 1789, the National Assembly of France wrote the Declaration of the Rights of Man. It was based on the American Declaration of Independence. Rulers throughout Europe were worried about what was going on in France. They did not want to lose their power. Therefore, they sent in troops to stop the revolution. The peasants and working class believed King Louis had sent for more troops. Therefore, they executed King Louis and his wife Marie Antoinette in 1793.







*Napoleon Bonaparte*

The French Revolution was not a Glorious Revolution. The new rulers of France could not keep peace in France. The angry people of France kept fighting in the streets. Anyone who disagreed with the people lost their heads. The French Revolution ended in 1799. The Revolution ended when Napoleon Bonaparte became the ruler of France. Napoleon became a **dictator**. A dictator does not claim divine right of rulership but has total power. This meant an end to the freedom once again.

### **The Effects of the French Revolution**

Despite the outcome of the French Revolution, people around the world began to realize the importance of having a voice in government. In fact, not long after the French Revolution, countries in Latin America began to fight for their freedom. All the countries to the south of the United States are called Latin America. By 1826, most of the Latin American colonies had won their freedom from Spain and France.