

3. Forms of Government in Today's World

With the exception of Antarctica, the landmasses on Earth are divided into nation-states. Some of these countries, such as Switzerland, have existed for hundreds of years. Others, like South Sudan, are new. Almost all have some form of functioning government. As Aristotle observed more than 2,000 years ago, these governments fall into three broad groups: rule by the one (monarchies and dictatorships), rule by the few (theocracies and single-party states), and rule by the many (parliamentary and presidential democracies).



Monarchy: Rule by the One Hereditary Ruler

Monarchies are one of the oldest forms of government still found in the world today. For monarchical government to have survived for thousands of years, it must have enduring attractions.

One of those attractions is efficiency. Traditionally, a ruling monarch has been able to make decisions and have them carried out on his or her word alone. As a result, new policies can be carried out without a lot of political bickering. A second advantage is a clear line of succession. Citizens living in a monarchy know who is next in line for the throne. A third is the unifying power of monarchy. Loyalty to a ruling family can be a strong bond holding a nation together.

At the same time, monarchical government has its drawbacks. One is the varying quality of hereditary leaders. An exemplary monarch in one generation may be followed by an incompetent one in the next. Also, the job of running a modern nation-state has become too big for any but the most exceptional monarchs to do well.

Today's monarchs go by many names, including king, queen, sultan, emperor, and emir. Most have inherited their power and expect to rule for life. But the modern monarch's power is rarely as great as in the days of Louis XIV and other absolute monarchs.

Most monarchs today face rigid legal restrictions on their power, often imposed by a constitution. The British monarch, for example, has the formal authority to call elections and appoint a new prime minister. These functions, however, are strictly ceremonial. Real power rests with Great Britain's democratically elected leaders.

In contrast, Saudi Arabia's king exercises broad powers. He inherits his position and has legislative, executive, and judicial powers. There are no recognized political parties or national elections in Saudi Arabia. The king may seek support from the royal family, religious leaders, and other important members of Saudi society. However, in theory, only Islamic law and Saudi traditions limit his powers.

In 2011, a series of uprisings known as the Arab Spring challenged monarchies in Southwest Asian countries. Several protests erupted in Saudi Arabia, but King Abdullah maintained his power.



Dictatorships: Rule by the One Powerful Leader

Whereas monarchs inherit their power, dictators take and hold power by force. Muammar al-Gaddafi, for example, took control of Libya in a military **coup d'état**, or coup, in 1969. The term coup d'état means “blow to the state” in French. A coup is the sudden overthrow of a government by a small group of military officers or political leaders. This often happens during a time of political unrest or a national emergency.

Dictatorships share some of the advantages of absolute monarchies. Power is centralized in the hands of a single military or political leader who can get things done efficiently. With control of the military and police, the leader can put an end to political unrest and maintain peace and order. That same power, however, can easily be used to abuse citizens who oppose the dictator's authoritarian regime.

Dictatorships face serious legitimacy problems. Over time, pressure often builds to return the government to control by elected leaders. When this happens, ruling becomes increasingly difficult. For example, in February 2011, growing discontent led to a wave of protests in Libya, calling for an end to Gaddafi's rule. Months later, he was overthrown.

Theocracy: Rule by the Few Religious Leaders

A **theocracy** is a government headed by religious leaders. In ancient city-states, theocracies were common, with government officials serving as religious leaders as well. Having a government based on one set of religious beliefs had clear benefits. A single, state-supported religion encouraged political and social unity. It also ensured that political decisions were in line with the people's moral values and beliefs.

As states grew larger, however, enforcing religious unity became increasingly difficult. Religious minorities were often marginalized or even persecuted. Religious warfare broke out as groups with differing beliefs fought for control of their governments.

By 2007, only two theocracies existed in the world: Vatican City and Iran. Vatican City is the governmental and spiritual center of the Catholic Church. Although located in the heart of Rome, Italy, it is an independent state headed by the Catholic pope.

Iran changed from a monarchy to a theocracy in 1979. That year, Iranians expelled their hereditary ruler and formed an Islamic republic headed by a religious leader known as the Ayatollah Khomeini. As Iran's supreme leader, the Ayatollah put into practice his belief that “in Islam, the legislative power and competence to establish laws belong exclusively to God Almighty.” The most influential body in Iran's theocracy is the 12-person Council of Guardians. Their job is to make sure that the laws of the country conform to Islamic religious law.



Single-Party State: Rule by the Political Elite

In a **single-party state**, the constitution allows only one political party to govern. Power is exercised by the leading members of the party, who form the nation's political **elite**, or a small group of people within a larger group who have more power, wealth, or talent than the others. The party elite nominate candidates for public office and make most policy decisions for the country.

Ideally, a single-party system avoids much of the political wrangling that is common in multiparty states, making it easier to pass laws and implement government policies. This party unity comes at a cost, however. The views of the party elite may be very different from the interests of the people as a whole, leading to social unrest. Also, people with differing political views or solutions to problems are often completely shut out of the political process.

The handful of single-party states today are mainly socialist republics, in which the Communist Party rules. In China, for example, the Communist Party is the only legal political party, and it has controlled the government since 1949. The legislature in China usually approves all legislation proposed by the Communist Party.



Direct Democracy: Rule by All Citizens

In the direct democracy of ancient Athens, several thousand citizens met regularly as an assembly to make decisions for their city-state. Each citizen had an equal voice in public affairs, and decisions, once made, had widespread support. Nonetheless, this form of government was time-consuming for citizens. That may be one reason why Athenian-style democracy was not widely copied in the ancient world.

In the modern world, no country is governed as a pure direct democracy. The country that comes closest is Switzerland. Swiss citizens regularly vote to approve laws passed by their legislature. This form of direct democracy is known as the **referendum process**. Citizens may also propose laws and submit them directly to voters in what is known as the **initiative process**. As much as the Swiss value their form of democracy, voter turnout is often low, because people tire of frequent elections.

Limited forms of direct democracy exist in the United States. One is the New England town meeting, where townspeople meet to discuss and solve local problems. In several states, voters help shape public policy through the initiative and referendum processes. They may also be able to vote an elected official out of office by means of a **recall election**. Arnold Schwarzenegger became governor of California in 2003 by winning a recall election.



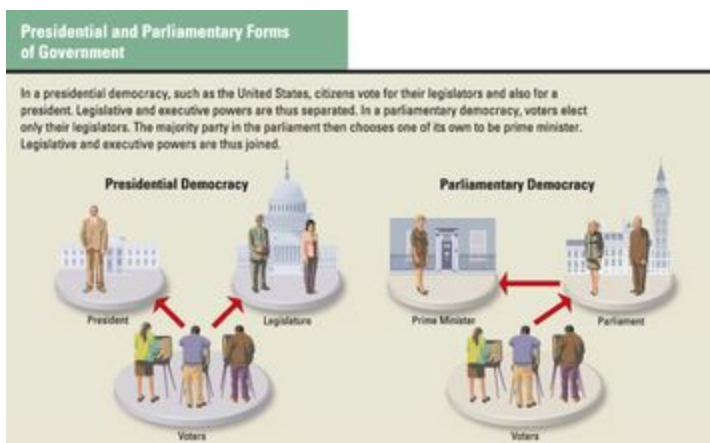
Parliamentary Democracy: Rule by a Legislative Majority

Most nations today have adopted one of two forms of representative democracy: parliamentary or presidential. Both forms use elections to choose national leaders. But they differ in other ways.

The United Kingdom, India, and Australia are examples of **parliamentary democracy**. In a parliamentary democracy, voters elect lawmakers to represent them in the nation's parliament. The party that wins a legislative majority forms a new administration. If no single party wins a majority, several parties join together to form a ruling coalition.

The legislative majority then selects a member of parliament to serve as the nation's **prime minister**, or chief executive. Usually the person chosen is the leader of the party with the most seats. The prime minister then chooses other members of parliament to head key government **ministries**, or executive branch departments.

In a parliamentary democracy, there is no clear-cut separation between the executive and legislative branches of government. Members of the legislative majority usually vote with the prime minister on key issues. This may make it easier to get legislation passed than in a presidential system. However, the lack of separation means there is no real check on the prime minister's power. Also, the prime minister may lack the legitimacy and public support of an elected president.



Prime ministers remain in power only so long as they have the support of parliament. Should parliament approve a **vote of no confidence**, the prime minister must resign. At that point, an election may be held to choose a new legislative majority. Although forcing an unpopular prime minister out of office in this way may seem democratic, it can also make parliamentary governments unstable.

Presidential Democracy: Rule by Representatives of the People

The United States, Russia, and most countries in Latin America are **presidential democracies**. Voters in these countries choose a president to lead the government as the head of the executive branch. They also elect lawmakers to represent them in a national legislature. Both the president and the legislators serve fixed terms of office.

This system has some advantages over a parliamentary democracy. Because presidents are directly elected by the people, they may be more responsive to the public than to their party. They may also enjoy more legitimacy and public support than does a prime minister chosen by a parliament. The presidential system also separates executive and legislative powers, which allows each branch to watch over the other to prevent abuses of power. Also, with fixed terms, a presidential system may be more stable than one in which the prime minister can be dismissed at any time.

This system does have several disadvantages when compared with a parliamentary one. First, it is almost impossible to remove presidents from power before their terms end, no matter how unpopular they might be. Also, when presidents are not from the political party that controls the legislature, the result can be gridlock—a situation in which little or no progress is made on pressing issues. Finally, in some countries, presidents have used their power to establish authoritarian regimes.