

Topic 1.1

Ideals of Democracy

You Will Learn To:

- Explain how the founders incorporated Enlightenment ideas in creating their own government.

Democratic Ideals of the Declaration of Independence

Thomas Jefferson, John Adams, and Benjamin Franklin justified independence from Great Britain with Enlightenment ideas. Writings of 17th- and 18th-century political philosophers anchored the founders' case for rebellion in the Declaration of Independence and the government they eventually designed in the Constitution.



Drafting of the Declaration of Independence, June 28th, 1776;
approved July 4th, 1776

Natural Rights

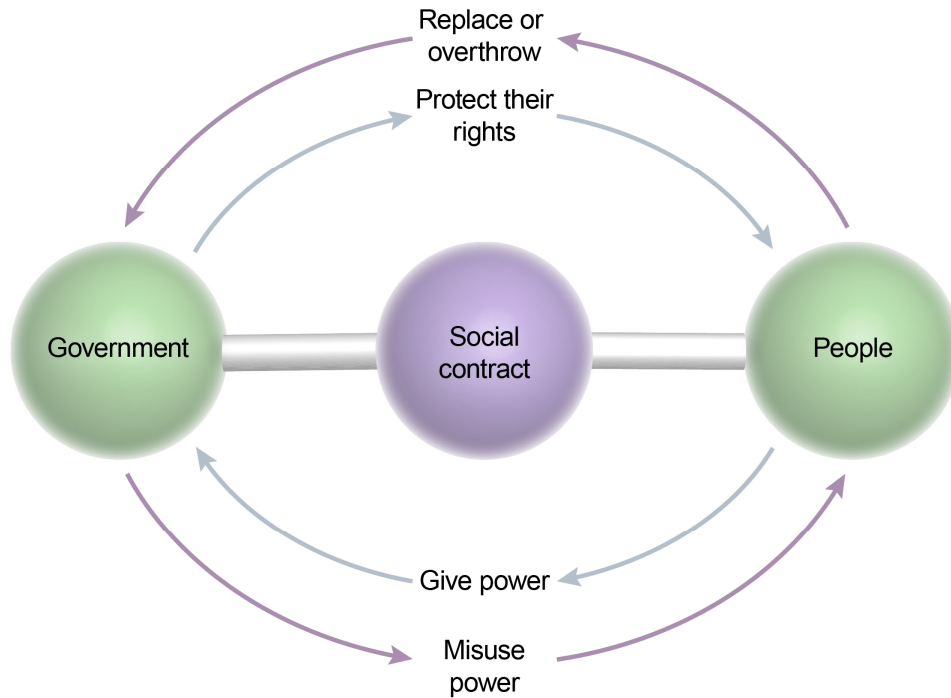
The English philosopher John Locke's writings on natural law theory shaped the founders' belief that a government's main purpose is to secure natural (inherent) rights. The Declaration of Independence asserts that people are "endowed by their creator" with such rights, including "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness."

Popular Sovereignty

The founders largely based their revolution on the principle of popular sovereignty, that people should create their own governments. The Declaration of Independence's premise that "governments...[receive their]...powers from the consent of the governed" means that in a democracy, the people—not a monarch—possess sovereign power.

Social Contract

In addition to Locke, social contract theorists Thomas Hobbes and Jean-Jacques Rousseau also influenced the founders' belief that legitimate government stems from the consent of the governed.



Social contract theory holds that the people and their government understand that each must follow obligations to the other. People give authority to their government in exchange for laws establishing social order and protecting natural rights.

Limited Government

Reinforced by Enlightenment principles, the founders insisted that the people should change a government that fails to protect their rights, even by revolution if necessary. Consequently, the Declaration of Independence holds that "whenever any form of government becomes destructive of [liberty], it is the right of the people to alter or abolish it."

The Declaration's defense of constraints on government authority would later be formalized in the US Constitution, which outlines the US government's powers and limitations.

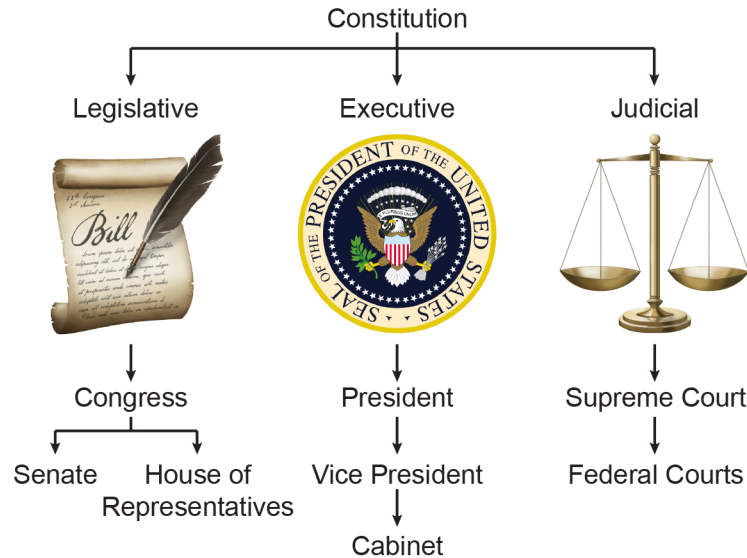
The Constitution's Limited Government

The founders created an original blueprint for limited government in the Articles of Confederation. However, this document created a government that many founders considered *too* limited, especially compared to the more powerful state governments. After six years under the Articles, the founders met in Philadelphia in 1787 to fashion a more centralized government.

There, George Washington presided over the Constitutional Convention, with James Madison, Alexander Hamilton, the Grand Committee, and other framers drafting a new constitution. This document was designed to protect the rights described in the Declaration of Independence while creating a stronger national government.

Separation of Powers

The French philosopher Montesquieu argued people's rights are best secured if a government's powers are distributed rather than concentrated.



Embodying Montesquieu's idea, the Constitution's first three Articles structured a limited government by establishing the legislative, executive, and judicial branches.

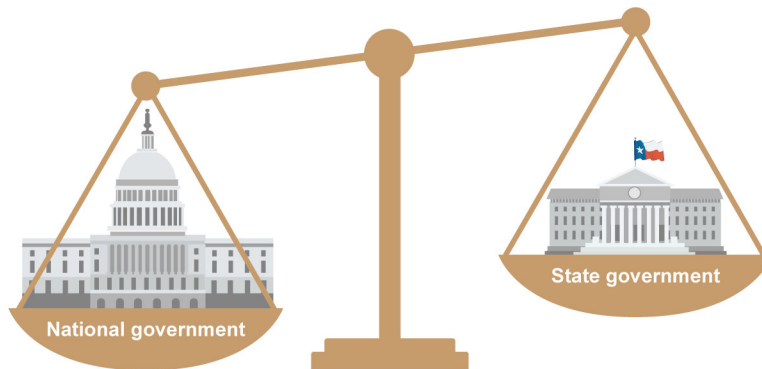
Checks and Balances

With power divided among three branches, no branch possesses all power, and each branch has powers that limit, or check, the extent of the other two branches' powers. These checks promote a balance of power across the branches, restricting the possibility of tyranny by any branch.

For example, the executive branch checks the legislative branch when the president vetoes a bill Congress has passed. On the other hand, the legislative branch checks the executive branch when the Senate approves or rejects a president's nominees for federal office.

Federalism

The Constitution also established a federalist system, one that designates certain powers to the national government while reserving other powers to state governments.



This arrangement enables the federal government to administer areas of national importance, such as the armed forces, while allowing local authorities to manage narrower concerns, such as community policing.

Republicanism

Although the founders wanted self-rule through democracy, they were aware that a direct democracy could inspire mob rule through tyranny of the majority. Guarding against this, the framers established an indirect form of democracy, called republicanism, as the basic form of US government. Republicanism ensures that the public will is filtered through elected representatives, who can be replaced for violating that will.

Things to Remember

The Declaration of Independence and US Constitution formed a blueprint for limited government with ideas that the founders inherited from Enlightenment thinkers.	
Declaration of Independence's Democratic Ideals	US Constitution's Principles of Limited Government
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Natural rights • Popular sovereignty • Social contract theory • Limited government 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Separation of powers • Checks and balances • Federalism • Republicanism

1.1 Vocabulary

Democracy	Government based on the principle that political power comes from the people, and typically involves free elections of representatives.
Direct democracy	A form of democracy in which the people create and administer public policy themselves, without representatives.
Federalism	The arrangement of a government with a central authority possessing certain powers and secondary authorities that possess other powers.
Founders, or founding fathers	American revolutionaries who played a significant role in creating the Declaration of Independence and the US Constitution.
Framers	Delegates to the Constitutional Convention who helped author the US Constitution.
Grand Committee	The group of Constitutional Convention delegates, with one from each attending state, that shaped the Constitution's apportionment of legislators in Congress.
Natural law theory	The philosophical view, adopted by the founders, that nature follows principles which exist regardless of manmade laws and are understood through human reason.
Republicanism	A form of democracy in which representatives rule on behalf of the people.