

How Government Works: What are the purposes of government?

By USHistory.org, adapted by Newsela staff on 02.22.17

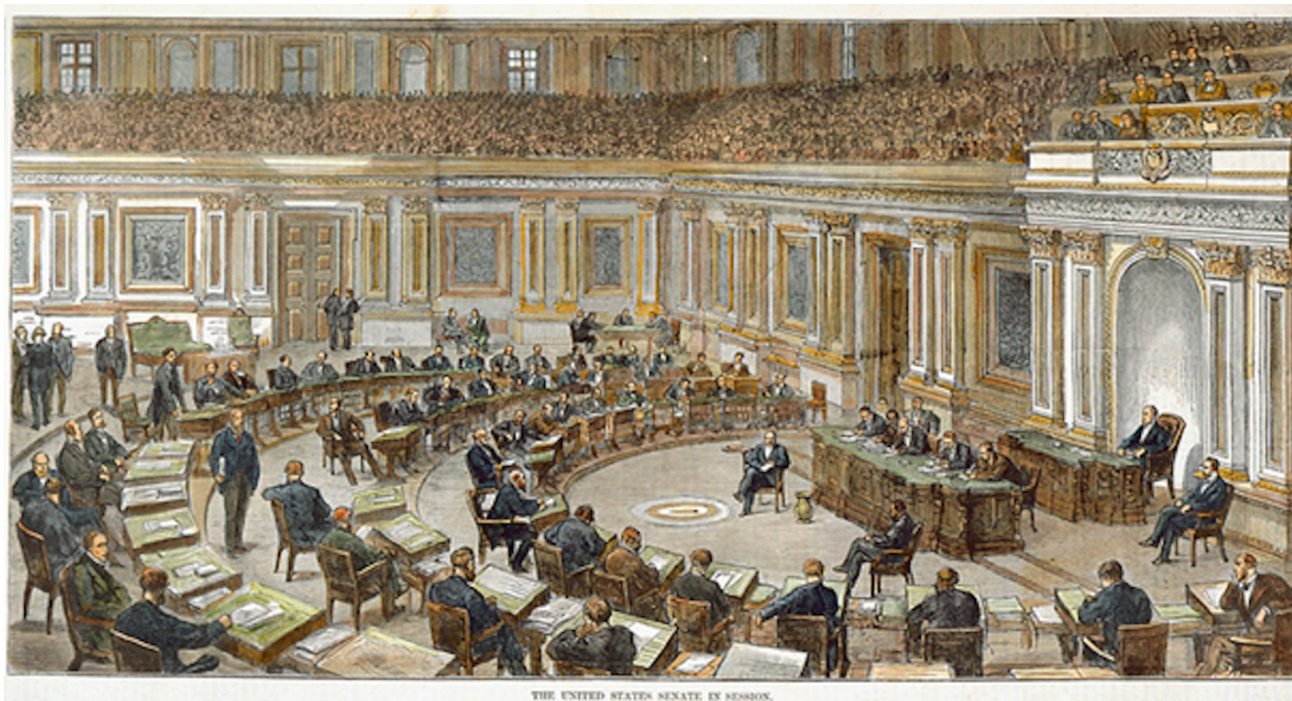
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Why do we have governments? One important reason is that governments make rules. But what rules are necessary or wanted? That question has many different answers. Different types of governments have created a wide variety of rules over time.

Governments were first created because there was a need to protect people from conflicts, and to provide law and order. Conflicts among people have happened throughout history. Many people have tried to answer the question of why people fight with one another. Perhaps it is just human nature, some say. This idea means that all people are naturally selfish, so they can't help but fight over who gets what. Or maybe it is because the idea of owning something makes people act selfishly. This is what Karl Marx thought. He is a famous scientist and thinker from the 1800s who studied human behavior and political ideas.



THE UNITED STATES SENATE IN SESSION.

Armies And Partnerships Between Countries Defend The People

The idea of government first emerged as people discovered that a government could help keep them safe. Protection was easier if people stayed together in groups, and if they all agreed that one person, or a few people, should have more power than others.

Governments did not only have to protect their people from one another. They also needed to prevent outside attacks. Some countries, like China, went to great lengths for this purpose. China built the Great Wall and guarded it carefully from invaders. Other governments have led people to safe areas protected by high mountains, wide rivers or large deserts. Throughout history, governments have raised armies, too. The most successful governments have trained groups that defend the other people. Governments have also formed partnerships and fought great world wars to protect themselves and keep order.

Government Duties Now Extend To The Economy

In recent years, government duties have extended to the economy. An economy is the wealth and resources that an area has. Some countries have economies based on capitalism. In a capitalistic society, the government does not control businesses. However, governments will often step in to help when needed.

For example, the United States' economy sank into a Great Depression in the 1930s. Many people lost their jobs and homes. The U.S government got involved in the economy then. It took steps to keep the situation from getting worse.

Programs To Lift People Out Of Poverty

Some governments also provide social programs to their people. During the Great Depression, President Franklin Roosevelt came up with the New Deal programs. These were created to lift people out of poverty and grow the economy again. In the 1960s, President Lyndon Johnson unveiled his "Great Society" programs to help eliminate poverty in the country. Today, many countries in Europe pay for people's health care and other benefits.



Some people don't like these programs. They argue that the programs cost the government too much money. Further, they say, the programs prevent people from taking steps to help themselves. Others disagree. They say it is the responsibility of the government to help its people. That is what government is for, they say. The debate over the duties of governments is still alive and well today.

The rules and responsibilities of government vary greatly depending on the time and place. Still, it has always been the job of governments to set rules and address these questions. Governments provide guidelines for everyday behavior for citizens. They protect individuals from outside harm, and they often provide for people's well-being and happiness, too.

Quiz

- 1 Read the summary below. Choose the answer that BEST fits into the blank to complete the summary.

The government is in charge of making laws to keep order in a country. It is also there to protect its people from each other and from outsiders by resolving conflicts and creating partnerships. _____. However, people disagree about what the government should and should not do.

(A) The Great Wall, for example, was built to protect people in China from invaders.
(B) Some governments are also involved with the economy and with providing social programs.
(C) During times of economic depression, governments must pay for people's health care.
(D) Today, people debate the responsibilities and duties of the government.
- 2 Which section of the article BEST explains HOW government leaders tried to help people in the United States?

(A) the introduction [paragraphs 1-2]
(B) "Armies And Partnerships Between Countries Defend The People"
(C) "Government Duties Now Extend To The Economy"
(D) "Programs To Lift People Out of Poverty"
- 3 Which paragraph from the first two sections of the article describes how governments have worked to keep their people safe from other groups of people?
- 4 Which selection from the article BEST describes the current relationship between the United States and its economy?

(A) In a capitalistic society, the government does not control businesses. However, governments will often step in to help when needed.
(B) Many people lost their jobs and homes. The U.S government got involved in the economy then. It took steps to keep the situation from getting worse.
(C) During the Great Depression, President Franklin Roosevelt came up with the New Deal programs. These were created to lift people out of poverty and grow the economy again.
(D) In the 1960s, President Lyndon Johnson unveiled his "Great Society" programs to help eliminate poverty in the country. Today, many countries in Europe pay for people's health care and other benefits.