

## Why Government?



National Archives



National Archives



National Archives

### Key concepts

#### I. The basis for creating government

People create government through a social contract to resolve conflicts, protect the weak, and to set rules for behavior.

#### II. Agreement on the core roles of government

Most Americans agree that government should maintain order, provide for national defense, and promote the general welfare.

#### III. Disagreements about promoting the general welfare

Americans disagree about whether government should redistribute income or the extent that individual liberties should be restricted.

#### IV. Government is needed

Government may be a necessary evil, but it provides necessary services.

#### I. The basis for creating government

Thomas Hobbes, a 17th-century English philosopher, believed that without government people would be in perpetual conflict.

“During the time men live without a common Power to keep them all in awe, they are in that condition which is called War; and such a war as is of every man against every man.”

*Thomas Hobbes, Leviathan (Ch. XIII), 1651*

Hobbes also thought that without government people’s lives would be little better than animals’.

“[N]o knowledge of the face of the earth; no account of time; no arts; no letters; no society; and which is worst of all, continual fear, and danger of violent death; and the life of man, solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short.”

*Thomas Hobbes, Leviathan (Ch. XIII), 1651*

All societies have formed governments, but some people have thought government unnecessary.

“I heartily accept the motto, ‘That government is best which governs least’ . . . Carried out, it finally amounts to this, which I also believe,—‘That government is best which governs not at all.’ ”

*Henry David Thoreau, “Civil Disobedience,” 1849*

“Nobody's wallet is safe when the legislature is in session.”

*“Murphy”*

A. People create government because:

1. they do not always get along
2. the strong may abuse the weak
3. some of them may be irresponsible
4. conflicts need to be resolved

a) Hobbes (1588–1679) advocated a master ruler he called Leviathan.

b) John Locke (1632–1704) and Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712–1778) argued for a “social contract.”

**social contract:** A hypothetical agreement among members of a society (or between a society and its ruler) regarding the rights and duties of each.

B. A social contract asks citizens to exchange some freedom for governmental protection.

1. The U.S. Constitution is a social contract.
2. The framers spelled out the terms of the contract in the preamble:

“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.”

## II. Agreement on the core roles of government

Government has three primary tasks:

### A. Maintaining order and security

1. People generally do not want
  - a) anarchy – Hobbes’ “war of every man against every man.”
  - b) vigilante justice – people taking the law into their own hands.
2. Locke claimed that governments should protect “life, liberty, and property.”
3. His words became part of the Constitution in the 5th and 14th amendments.

“No person shall . . . be deprived of life, liberty, or property, without due process of law”

*U.S. Constitution, Amendment V*

“[N]or shall any State deprive any person of life, liberty, or property, without due process of law”

*U.S. Constitution, Amendment XIV, Section 1*

### B. Providing for the common defense

1. National defense is the responsibility of the federal government—not the people themselves or the states.  
*Example:* In the 1970s, Governor Meldrim Thomson of New Hampshire requested nuclear weapons for the state National Guard to use against potential encroachment from Maine or Quebec. His request was denied.  
In the same spirit, Governor Thomson urged residents of Nantucket to secede from Massachusetts and join New Hampshire.

### C. Promoting the general welfare

1. Governments:
  - a) provide public goods

**public good:** Goods or services available to all citizens and which are unlikely to be produced by the market. Examples include highways, national defense, public health, and air-traffic control.

- b) solve the “free rider” problem.

**free rider:** The ability of an individual to enjoy the benefits from a collective action without having to pay for the benefit.

*Example:* Everyone wants clean air.

- (1) Cars with expensive pollution-control equipment pollute the air much less than cars without it.
  - (2) If everyone takes a “free ride”—avoids buying less-polluting cars—expecting others to pay the price, no one will have clean air.
2. The government may provide some public goods.  
*Examples:* Electric utilities, public transportation, interstate highways, airports
    - a) Some governments run airlines, telephone companies, railroads, television and radio networks, and medical care.
    - b) The government plays a role in the economy through taxing, spending, and regulating the money supply.

**sidebar:** Approximately one-third of the U.S. GDP is attributable to government expenditures.

## III. Disagreements about promoting the general welfare

### A. Should governments regulate business?

1. Advocates believe that government may
  - a) prevent monopoly power
  - b) be able to resolve disputes between businesses

2. Opponents believe that regulation
  - a) is inefficient and counterproductive
  - b) creates red tape and bureaucracy
- B. Should governments redistribute income?

Note: Governments redistribute income through

  - a) progressive income taxes

**progressive income tax:** A tax system in which the tax rate rises as income rises.

- b) Social Security and Medicare
    - c) tax credits to business
    - d) welfare.
  2. Advocates believe that redistribution
    - a) provides for the common good
    - b) helps poor people live better lives
  3. Opponents believe
    - a) redistribution leads to inefficiency and dependency.
- C. Should governments promote equality over individual freedom?
  1. Americans believe in the rule of law and in treating people equally.
  2. Citizens in other countries emphasize collective welfare over individual freedom.
- D. How should governments protect individual freedom?
  1. People disagree about
    - a) drug laws
    - b) safety belts in cars
    - c) the right to an abortion
    - d) hate speech
- E. Should governments guarantee equality of opportunity or equality of results?

#### IV. Government is needed

- A. Is government a necessary evil?
  1. It is necessary and may, at times, be evil.
  2. Government provides many of the goods and services necessary for a modern society.
  3. Government protects citizens' rights.
  4. Government stabilizes the economy.