

The Enlightenment

A Time of New Ideas

The **Enlightenment** was a period of time when people developed new ideas about human existence, including peoples' basic rights and the level of control they should have over their government and their futures. The Enlightenment began in Europe around 1715. People in cities like Paris gathered in **salons** to discuss philosophy and ways to improve the human experience. Many of their ideas were based in science and reason, which is why this time was also called the Age of Reason.



Locke

Natural Rights

Enlightenment thinkers believed that human beings are born with fundamental, basic rights. These **natural rights** included the right to life, liberty, property, and the freedom to find happiness. In order for people to enjoy these natural rights, other rights needed to be protected. Enlightenment thinkers believed people should have the right to express themselves, to move around freely, and to petition the government.

The Social Contract

If there was no government at all, people would live in a **state of nature** with no rules and complete freedom—but without any protection from each other. One Enlightenment idea was the **social contract**: citizens give up some freedom they would have in a state of nature (like the freedom to rob and kill people), and in exchange the government protects citizens' right to life, liberty, and property. To Enlightenment thinkers, the relationship between a government and its citizens was like an agreement. Citizens agree to obey a set of rules, and the government agrees to protect citizens' rights.



Rousseau

Consent of the Governed



Enlightenment thinkers believed that governments had a responsibility to hold up their end of the social contract. If a government failed, then citizens would no longer agree to be governed and they would have the right to revolt. This idea is known as **consent of the governed**. Traditionally, a government protected citizens from foreign invaders, but the government also had absolute authority over the people. A king ruled his citizens whether they consented or not. To Enlightenment thinkers, this was unacceptable.

Republicanism

Since the Middle Ages, European leaders had gained power through heredity, or family ties. Kings and queens took the throne after another family member died. The people had no say in this process. Many Enlightenment thinkers believed in **republicanism** – the idea that a country's leader should be chosen by the citizens in a general election. Even so, some Enlightenment thinkers frowned on the idea of a democracy. They feared what would happen if a mob of uneducated people had the power to vote.



Montesquieu

Influence on America

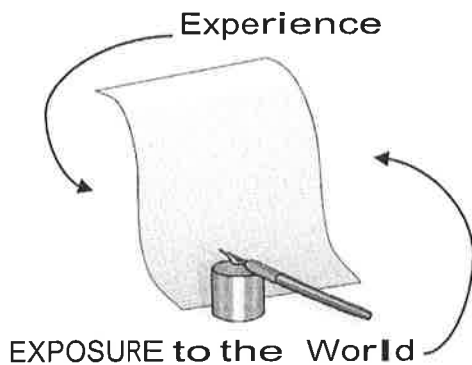
The brightest Enlightenment thinkers, with names like Rousseau, Montesquieu, and Locke, became very famous. They influenced leaders in Europe, and became popular with Americans who wanted independence. When our Founding Fathers created a government for the new United States, they embraced many Enlightenment ideas. America's Constitution recognized that citizens were born with basic rights. And even though some of the Founders agreed with those concerned about democracy, the Constitution gave citizens the power to vote. The Enlightenment ended around 1789, about the same time the Constitution was born.



John Locke

A Man with Many Hats

John Locke was born in England in 1632. Locke considered becoming a minister, started his career as a doctor, but ended up as a philosopher and political scientist. He had many interests and produced a number of writings that influenced future leaders. One of those leaders was Thomas Jefferson, who helped America gain independence from Britain nearly 150 years after Locke was born. Jefferson studied Locke's writings, and Locke's ideas show up in our own Constitution.



The Blank Slate

One of Locke's books, called *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, took over 18 years to write! In it, he says that people are born with a mind like a **tabula rasa**, which means a blank slate or page. During life, that blank slate gets filled up with the things a person experiences with the five senses. He said people learn and develop differently because they are exposed to different things. The one thing people have in common is that they are human and share a human nature that is the same for all people everywhere.

Natural Rights

Locke imagined a set of **natural rights** that human beings share. These are the right to life, liberty, and property. **Life** refers to the fact that people want to live and will fight to survive. **Liberty** means that people want to be as free as possible to make their own decisions. **Property** represents the fact that people want to own things that help them survive, such as land, food, and tools. Locke believed these rights aren't given to people—people are born with them.

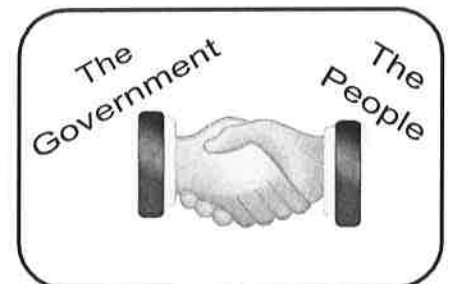


Why do we need a government?

Locke also wondered what life would be like if people didn't have a government. In this **state of nature** there would be no rules, no one in charge, and no way for people to protect their natural rights. He believed the purpose of government is to end the state of nature and give people certain protections. Most importantly, Locke believed governments should protect people's natural rights.

Social Contract

Locke believed a government can only be legitimate, or valid, if it is based on a social contract with citizens. A contract is an agreement between people in which both sides agree to something in order to reach a shared goal. A **social contract** happens between a government and its people. The people agree to give up some freedoms if the government agrees to protect everyone's rights. If the government fails to deliver, the people revolt—like the colonists did during the American Revolution.



A Baron is Born

Charles Louis de Secondat was born in 1689 in the city of Bordeaux, France. At age 27, he became Baron de Montesquieu (MON-teh-skew) when he inherited his uncle's fortune and title. Montesquieu was one of the great thinkers of the 17th and 18th centuries. He spent a lot of time thinking about how governments should be created and maintained. His ideas guided the Founding Fathers when they wrote the United States Constitution. Even today, Montesquieu's thinking influences the way people think about government around the world.



Baron de Montesquieu



How do the laws in our society keep us safe?

Follow the Rules

The term liberty means different things to different people. Some think liberty means being able to speak and act without being held back by laws and rules—in other words, being able to do whatever you want. But Montesquieu believed that **liberty** is the peace of mind that comes from being safe. He believed safety can only exist if everyone follows the law. If governments could provide and enforce clear laws that everyone would follow, it would increase liberty, reduce the problems of society, and improve human life.

Separate...

Montesquieu studied the laws, customs, and governments of European countries to see how they created and enforced laws. He admired the government of England. The English government had three parts: a king to enforce laws, Parliament to create laws, and courts to interpret laws. The government was divided into parts, and each part had its own purpose. Montesquieu called this the **separation of powers**.



← King George III



House of Commons ↓



Sir William Blackstone, an →
18th century English judge

...but Equal

Dividing the powers of government was just the first step. Each part of the government needed to be balanced with the other parts. Montesquieu thought that each of the parts, or branches, of government should be equal. He worried that if one branch had more power than the others, people would suffer and lose their liberty. To avoid this, he suggested that each branch have the ability to limit the power of the other two branches. In England, if the king tried to take too much control, the Parliament or the courts could act to stop him. Today, we call this the system of **checks and balances**.



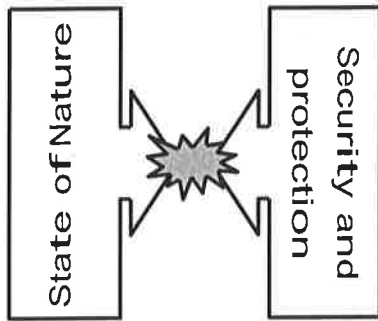
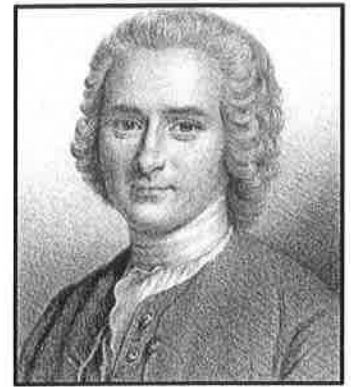
Sound Familiar?

James Madison, the "Father of the Constitution," liked the idea that each branch of government should have a clear role. As a result, the U.S. Constitution clearly explains what each branch is supposed to do: **Congress** makes laws, the **President** enforces laws, and the **Courts** interpret laws. Each branch has the power to check, or limit, the other branches. This keeps all branches of government balanced and equal.



A Man of Many Talents

Jean-Jacques Rousseau was born in Geneva, Switzerland in 1712. At age 30 he moved to Paris to become a musician and composer. However he is better known for his writings on human behavior and government. Rousseau believed that a government's purpose is to protect liberty, or freedom, and to help people get along. Rousseau believed that the best form of government was a democracy. His writings influenced how people think about government and how a democracy should work.



Freedom for All

What does freedom mean to you? Rousseau talked about two different types of freedom. **Natural freedom** happens when people live in a state of nature. In a state of nature there are no rules or governments. People are free to follow their instincts and selfish desires without considering the needs of others. But in a state of nature, people are not secure. **Social freedom** happens when people sacrifice some natural freedoms so they can have the freedom that comes with security and protection. To accomplish this, they establish rules and set up governments.

A Social Contract

In his book *The Social Contract*, written in 1762, Rousseau talks about what makes an effective government. In order to have real authority, government must be based on an agreement, or contract, people make with society. People agree to give up some natural freedoms in exchange for protection. The government then follows the **general will**—those things that are in the best interest of society as a whole. If people disagree about what's best, the government follows **majority rule**, or what more than half the people want. What kind of government does this sound like?



What is the relationship between natural rights and the general will?

DIRECT DEMOCRACY	REPRESENTATIVE DEMOCRACY
Everyone meets to discuss and create laws	A few people meet and create laws for everyone
All citizens get a direct say in every decision	Citizens hope representatives will make good decisions
Difficult to do in a very large society	More practical for very large societies

Two Types of Democracy

There are two main types of democracies. In a **representative democracy**, citizens vote for a small number of people to represent the public in government. Only the representatives are directly involved in the government. In a **direct democracy**, all citizens are directly involved in making laws and running the government. This was the kind of participation Rousseau believed citizens should have, so he was in favor of direct democracy.

Of the People, By the People, For the People

Rousseau's work inspired many to think about the kind of government they wanted. This included the Founding Fathers of the United States, who wrote the United States Constitution. The Constitution created a democracy and guaranteed citizens a voice in government. Rousseau's ideas can also be seen in one of Abraham Lincoln's famous quotes, "a government of the people, by the people, for the people."



Enlightenment Thinkers iCivics Graphic Organizer

THE ENLIGHTENMENT

- (1) What are the natural rights?
- (2) What is the main idea of the social contract?
- (3) According to the consent of the governed, when do citizens have the right to revolt?
- (4) Why did Enlightenment thinkers frown on the idea of democracy?

JOHN LOCKE

- (5) What is the main idea in Locke's book *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*?
- (6) What did Locke say were the two purposes for government?
- (7) Why did Locke believe that a social contract must be in place for a government to be effective?

BARON DE MONTESQUIEU

- (8) What was Montesquieu's definition of liberty?
- (9) Why did Montesquieu admire the government of England? What did it have?
- (10) Why did Montesquieu believe that each part of the government needed to be balanced with the others?
- (11) Which "Founding Father" took Montesquieu's ideas into writing the Constitution?

JEAN-JACQUES ROUSSEAU

- (12) Define Rousseau's two types of freedom.
Natural freedom:

Social freedom:
- (13) What type of democracy was Rousseau in favor of? Why?
- (14) What famous quote did Abraham Lincoln say that is modeled after Rousseau's ideas?