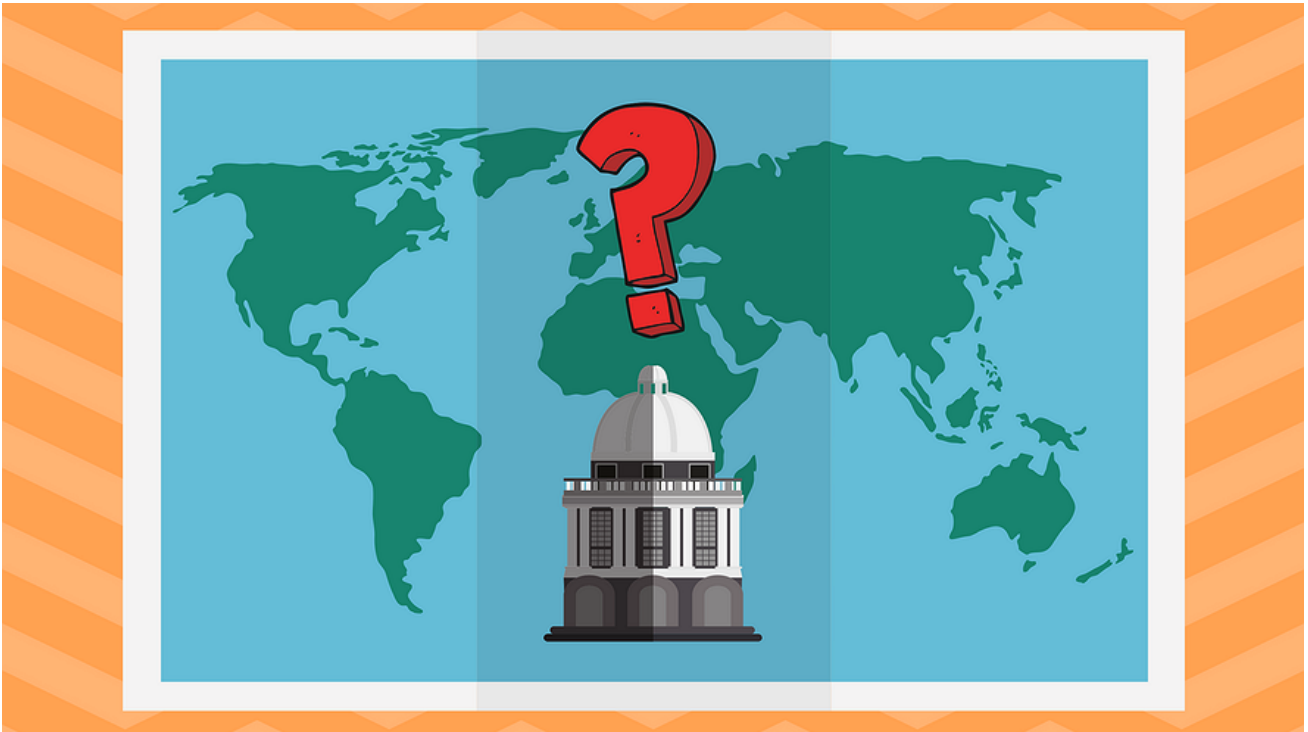


How Government Works: Comparing governments

By USHistory.org, adapted by Newsela staff on 05.01.17

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There are many ways that countries run their governments. They're like snowflakes -- no two are alike! Image by: Newsela staff.

No two governments, past or present, are exactly the same. However, it is possible to study similarities and differences between political systems. Governments can then be categorized into different groups. One basic distinction is between two types of governments: democratic or authoritarian.



Democracies

Many countries today claim to be democracies, but some are democratic in name only. Their citizens must be involved in government and politics. If this is not the case, the government is not a democracy.

Some governments are more democratic than others. A government can only be considered truly democratic if it offers the following:

1. Freedom of speech, press and religion

Democracies respect these basic individual liberties. No government allows absolute freedom. Democracies, though, do not heavily censor newspapers. They do not censor the public expression of opinions, either.

2. Majority rule with minority rights

In democracies, people usually accept decisions made by the majority of voters in a free election. However, democracies try to avoid the "tyranny of the majority." In other words, majority groups must respect the rights of minority groups. For example, one religion cannot legally discriminate against members of a smaller religious group. Democracies guarantee minorities the right to have their voices heard.

3. Political leaders from different backgrounds

True democracies make it possible for different types of citizens to compete for leadership positions. Their lawmakers do not all belong to the same race, religion or social class.

4. Free, competitive elections

Holding elections is important in a democracy, but that act alone is not enough to call a country a democracy. The elections must be fair and competitive, and the government cannot control the results. Voters must also have real choices among candidates. The candidates should hold a range of different views. Groups cannot be prevented from running based on their views.

5. Rule by law

Democracies are not controlled by the whims of leaders. This means democratic leaders cannot just do whatever they want. Democracies are governed by laws. These laws apply to leaders and citizens equally.

6. Meaningful political participation

By itself, a citizen's right to vote is not a good measure of democracy. The government must respond to its citizens and take their demands into account. If citizens vote, the candidate they choose must actually take office. If citizens contact government officials, those officials should respond.

When a government fulfills these principles it can be considered democratic. Such governments include Canada, France, Japan, Switzerland and Great Britain. The United States is also considered a democracy.



Authoritarian Regimes

Authoritarian political systems operate differently than true democracies. Authoritarian systems demand strict obedience from their people. In these governments, one ruler or a small group of leaders have the real power. They may hold elections. They may even meet with their citizens. However, citizens have little if any voice in how they are ruled.

Their leaders do not give their subjects free choice. Instead, they decide what the people can or cannot do or have. Citizens are really subjects. They must obey. They do not participate in government decisions.

Kings, military generals and emperors often rule authoritarian regimes. These systems can also be controlled by dictators, religious figures or powerful families. Even presidents or prime ministers may rule authoritarian governments. The leader's title does not automatically reveal what kind of government he or she leads.

Authoritarian systems do not allow freedoms of speech, press or religion. They tightly control what their people can say or hear. They do not follow majority rule. Nor do they protect minority rights. The rule of law is limited, if it exists at all. The leaders have final say in all political, legal and economic decisions.

No country falls entirely into one category or the other. Governments can change quickly, too. Both kinds of governments change over time. This can make the global mix of the world's governments feel uncertain.

Quiz

- 1 Based on the information in the article, which of these statements is TRUE?
- (A) In an authoritarian government, the leader cannot be called president.
 - (B) Most countries are neither totally democratic nor totally authoritarian.
 - (C) In a democracy, every decision made by the majority must be followed.
 - (D) Democratic lawmakers always belong to the same social class.
- 2 Which sentence from the article best supports the idea that citizens in a democracy have many freedoms?
- (A) Democracies respect these basic individual liberties.
 - (B) Democracies try to avoid the "tyranny of the majority."
 - (C) Some governments are more democratic than others.
 - (D) Many countries today claim to be democracies.
- 3 What are the main ideas of this article?
- (A) Even some governments with presidents or prime ministers are not true democracies.
 - (B) In any government system citizens must be allowed to practice freedom of speech, press and religion.
 - (C) Both political systems require citizens to obey every decision that their leaders make.
 - (D) Democratic governments offer more freedoms to their citizens than authoritarian governments do.
- 4 Which sentence from the article best reflects the main characteristic of democratic governments?
- (A) Their citizens must be involved in government and politics.
 - (B) Democracies, though, do not heavily censor newspapers.
 - (C) However, democracies try to avoid the "tyranny of the majority."
 - (D) For example, one religion cannot legally discriminate against members of a smaller religious group.