Origins of American Government

Section 1

**MAIN IDEA**
American democracy was shaped by our English political heritage, colonial experiments in self-government, as well as a range of intellectual influences.

**Key Terms**

**bicameral** two-chamber

**Magna Carta** an English document signed by King John in 1215 that instituted that “rule of law” and protected certain individual rights

**Petition of Right** an English document signed by King Charles in 1628 that required monarchs to obtain Parliament’s approval before levying new taxes and said that monarchs could not unlawfully imprison people, force citizens to house soldiers, or establish military rule during times of peace

**English Bill of Rights** an English document passed by Parliament in 1689 that limited monarchs’ power to enact laws, raise taxes, or keep an army without Parliament’s consent; guaranteed Parliament the privilege of free speech; and gave all people protection from cruel and unusual punishment

**Fundamental Orders of Connecticut** a 1639 set of laws that limited the power of the government and gave all free men the right to choose the people to serve as judges

**proprietary colony** a colony based on a grant of land by the English monarch to a proprietor

**royal colonies** colonies directly controlled by the king through an appointed governor

**charter colonies** colonies operated under charters agreed to by the colony and the king

**Taking Notes**

As you read, take notes on the political ideas and historical events that shaped government in the English colonies. Record your notes in the graphic organizer below.

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<th>Ideas</th>
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Section Summary

ENGLISH POLITICAL HERITAGE

When the first English settlers arrived in North America, they brought their political heritage with them, ready to adjust it as necessary for their new home. This heritage included the idea of representative government, which in England had evolved from a king’s advisory council to a **bicameral**, or two-house, legislature called Parliament. This legislature was made up of the noble-dominated House of Lords and the less prestigious House of Commons who worked to limit the power of English monarchs. One of the first efforts toward limited government was **Magna Carta**. This English document signed by King John in 1215 instituted the “rule of law” and eventually protected the individual rights of most citizens.

England’s focus on protecting individual rights further developed with the creation of the 1628 **Petition of Right**. This document, which was signed by King Charles, required monarchs to obtain Parliament’s approval before levying new taxes and banned monarchs from unlawfully imprisoning people, forcing citizens to house soldiers, or establishing military rule during times of peace. In the years that followed, Parliament’s power grew and the monarchy’s authority weakened, circumstances that eventually led to a constitutional monarchy. The **English Bill of Rights** greatly contributed to this, forbidding monarchs to enact laws, raise taxes, or keep an army without Parliament’s consent; guaranteeing Parliament the privilege of free speech; and giving all people protection from cruel and unusual punishment.

THE ENGLISH COLONIES

As they settled the colonies, the English settlers drew on their political heritage to establish societies and laws. The Jamestown House of Burgesses, established in 1619, was an experiment in representative democracy, and the Mayflower Compact was an agreement to govern according to majority rule and the consent of the people. In 1639 the **Fundamental Orders of Connecticut**, a set of laws that limited the
power of the government and gave all free men the right to choose the people to serve as judges, was approved by Connecticut colonists. Laws adopted within the Massachusetts Bay Colony also protected several individual rights.

However, all of these laws and practices were created within colonies that existed under charters, or agreements by which the English king gave settlers the right to establish a colony and promised them “the rights of Englishmen.” There were three types of colonies. A proprietary colony was based on a grant of land by the English monarch to a proprietor, who could appoint all officials and make all laws. A royal colony was directly controlled by the king through an appointed governor. Royal colonies had two-house legislatures, in which members of the lower house were elected but members of the upper house were appointed by the king. Finally, a charter colony operated under charters agreed to by the colony and the king and therefore had the most independence. Colonists elected a legislature that made laws and appointed a governor.

By the time the American Revolution began, there were only two charter colonies, and the king’s attempts to control royal colonies—which most other colonies were at that time—greatly angered colonists.

**INTELLECTUAL INFLUENCES**
The developing American democracy also drew on intellectual influences outside of Great Britain. The Framers of the U.S. Constitution would turn to ancient Greek and Roman scholars, Renaissance scholar Niccolò Machiavelli, and French philosopher Charles de Montesquieu for ideas about republicanism, or representative government, and the role the people should play within a republic. The Framers would also incorporate Judeo-Christian beliefs in human equality and the divine origin of rights into their design for a new American government. Finally, the Framers reviewed the thoughts of Enlightenment thinkers like John Locke and Jean-Jacques Rousseau in order to best understand ideas such as natural rights and economic and civil liberties.