



America's Founding Fathers didn't simply create our form of government out of thin air. They were men of the **Enlightenment**, a time period in Europe lasting from 1715 to 1789 when European thinkers called **philosophers** (who were called *philosophes* back then) began to question traditional ideas about political power and government structure. The main government structure they questioned: *Monarchy*. Except for a short and very ancient experiment in democracy in Greece and Rome, monarchy had existed as the dominant form of government in Europe (and other areas of the world) for thousands of years. So if monarchy was so long-lasting, so widespread, and so, well, normal, why were philosophers bothering to question it at all?

Turn on the Light of Knowledge

A main reason is that the Enlightenment philosophers were students of the **Scientific Revolution**, a period of thinking and discoveries that started in 1543 and ended in 1688. The thinkers of the Scientific Revolution were using reason instead of superstition to explain and describe all sorts of things about the natural world, such as how blood circulated through the body and how the planets orbited the sun. The Enlightenment philosophers wanted to apply the same ideas about reason to the study of the political world. (That's why we call the study of government and politics *political science* today.) Philosophers thought tradition and religious myths—which were the very foundations of monarchy—weren't good enough explanations for a king holding power. But the revolutionary ideas that helped to shape our government today go even further back than the Scientific Revolution. They have their beginnings in the **Renaissance**, a time from 1300-1600 when new ideas about almost everything were starting to take shape!



The Rebirth of...EVERYTHING!

When most people think of the Renaissance, they picture great masters of painting and sculpture. But there were great thinkers in all areas that made names for themselves, including government. One of the best known is **Niccolò Machiavelli**. Machiavelli wrote *The Prince* in 1513-1514. (It wasn't published until 1532). His thoughts on power and leadership were very different from others writing about government at the same time. Many philosophers were writing about

how princes and monarchs should govern by having strong moral character and modeling good behavior. Machiavelli was saying, "Get real!"



This statue of Niccolò Machiavelli is located in Florence, Italy.

Machiavelli focused on what he saw. And in the real world leaders weren't successful because they were good or kind. Machiavelli felt that a leader should focus on gaining *and* keeping power. If that meant striking fear into their subjects to do it, that was perfectly fine. Machiavelli said people who fear their leader will do what their leader says because they're afraid of being punished. For Machiavelli, if a ruler needed to get and keep power in order to rule government effectively, then a monarchy would be the best choice because a monarch had total power and could punish people how and when he needed to. What would this mean for the people? Well, they would have to be careful to live their lives the way they thought the monarch wanted. This likely meant paying their taxes without complaining, working to improve their society and economy, and fighting in wars when they were needed.

Love or Fear?

Machiavelli said that if a leader can't be both loved and feared, then it's better to be feared. Of course, his ideas are open to interpretation. What do you think?

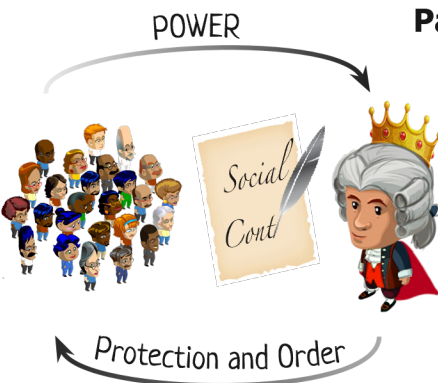


Part I: Hobbes and the State

Born near the end of the Renaissance, and linking the ideas of that time period with the Enlightenment, was **Thomas Hobbes**. His book, *Leviathan*, was published in 1651. Hobbes wrote about the “ultimate sovereign” (aka the king) as a powerful being that could both protect and govern all of humanity. According to Hobbes, human beings lived in a **state of nature** where every day was survival of the fittest. Think of it this way: If you and a group of friends were dropped onto a deserted island, what would your life be like after a week? Would the strongest or smartest kids take over and make the other kids work for them? What would happen if someone disagreed with the leader? He or she would probably keep order through fear and threats. In Hobbes’ words, life would be a war of “every man against every man.” In this state of nature, people were so busy just trying to survive that they didn’t have any time for literature, arts, or any other work that might make life more enjoyable. Instead, they lived in constant fear of having their work stolen from them or being killed before they could accomplish anything enjoyable or worthwhile. Hobbes described human life as “solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short.”

Living in a State of Nature

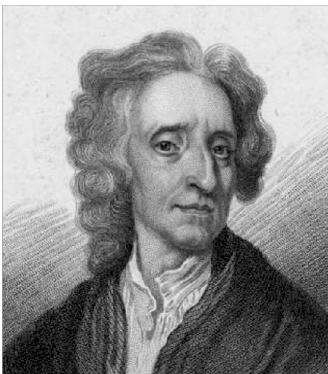
What did life look like for humans before government existed? Many philosophers theorize about exactly that, a concept called state of nature.



Part II: Hobbes and the Escape

Hobbes’ state of nature was a pretty terrible place, so to escape it, he said human beings entered into a **social contract** where they agree to give up some of their freedoms for protection and order and choose a person to be their leader. Hobbes said there were many different ways people could choose a leader and different ways the leader could lead. But Hobbes thought that the best leader would be a powerful king with the authority to punish those who didn’t follow the rules. (Sounds a bit Machiavellian, no?) Even if the ruler was really terrible and did things that harmed the people, the people didn’t have a right to resist because the king was the only thing that stood between them and a return to the state of nature. So, like Machiavelli, the ruler didn’t have to be a good person, just a strong person with a lot of power to keep the people in line. And Hobbes believed that any rights the people had were because their leader granted them. If you’ve ever played *Simon Says* or *Mother May I?*—where you can only do what “Simon” or “Mother” tells you—it’s basically the same idea, but on an everyday, whole-life scale.

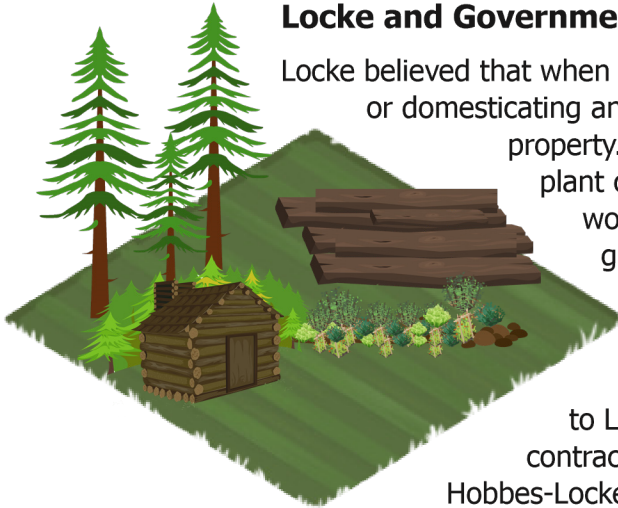
Un-Locke-ing a Different Take



John Locke

Hobbes’ ideas about rights differed significantly from the ideas of our next philosopher. **John Locke** took a different view of the state of nature in his 1690 book *Second Treatise of Government*. Instead of a terrible place, Locke’s state of nature was a peaceful place where everyone is equal and people could do what they wanted as long as they didn’t bother others’ “life, health, liberty, or possessions.” Locke considered these rights—equality, life, liberty, property, and others—to be **natural rights** that humans have simply because they are human. Natural rights are not given by any leader, so they can’t be taken away or denied by a leader or the government. In other words, natural rights are rights that are **unalienable**.

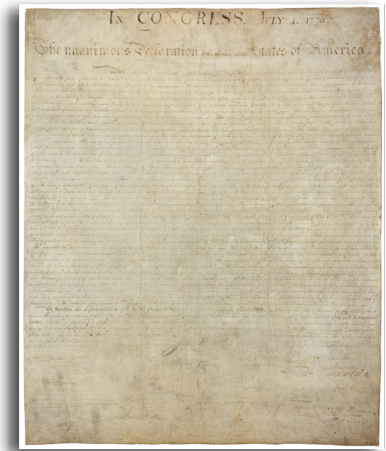
Locke and Government



Locke believed that when people mixed their efforts with nature (by farming or domesticating animals), they created property and had a right to that property. If you cut down the trees in a forest to make a field then plant crops in that field, you own anything you build out of the wood from the trees, the field you cleared, and the crops you grow. Locke wrote that the government's job is to protect your property (including your life and health) from being taken by others.

So how do the people get a government, according to Locke? The same way Hobbes said: through the social contract. But that is where the Hobbes-Locke bromance ends. Hobbes wanted a strong leader, like a king,

that the people had to follow no matter what. But Locke believed that the people had to continue to agree to follow their leader, a concept called **consent of the governed**. This is pretty important. But even more important is what Locke said could happen if the leader stopped protecting the people and their property. (Or worse, became a tyrant!) Locke felt that it was the people's right and even their responsibility to overthrow bad leaders and start over by building a better government. Does this idea ring a bell? That's right, the Revolutionary War. In 1776, when Thomas Jefferson and America's Founding Fathers accused King George III of being a tyrant in the Declaration of Independence, they took back their consent to be governed. They asserted their right to become independent because the king broke the social contract.



The Declaration of Independence echoes Locke's ideas.

Longest. Name. Ever. Montesq-Who?

Charles-Louis de Secondat, Baron de La Bréde et de Montesquieu (we'll just call him Montesquieu from here), was another political philosopher of the Enlightenment. In his book *The Spirit of the Laws* (1748), he wrote about many different kinds of governments, including monarchies and despotism, but it was what he said about republics that had major influence later in America.

Despotism, What's That?

Despotism is a kind of government where the leader holds total power, and usually uses that power in a cruel or unjust way to hold back the people.

Absolute Power

Montesquieu said there could be two kinds of republics: *democratic* and *aristocratic*. In an **aristocratic republic**, one part of the people—usually those considered better than the rest for some reason like having more money or being born into the “right” family—govern everyone else. In a **democratic republic**, the people choose their representatives through election. In a democratic republic, the people themselves are the source of all political power, an idea better known as **popular sovereignty**. Montesquieu believed that citizens in a democratic republic needed to be educated in civic virtue and learn to identify their own interests with the interests of their nation. What exactly does that mean? Well, you might not want to pay tax every time you make a purchase or have taxes taken out of your

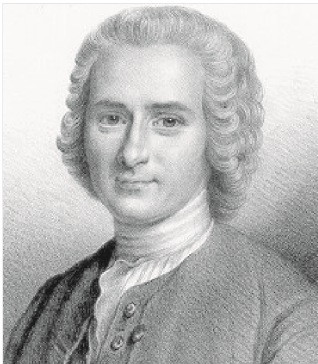
paycheck because you like having control over how to spend your money, but you agree to pay taxes because you know the money will be used to make schools and roads (among other things) better for you and everyone in your community.

Cue Montesquieu's Influences

Both democratic and aristocratic republics are examples of **limited government**, where there are rules and laws to ensure that those in charge cannot take advantage of those who are not in charge. The government controls what we do so that we don't harm others, but we are still free to live our lives mostly as we choose. Another idea in Montesquieu's writings is that the government is bound to follow the laws just like everyone else. This idea is called **rule of law**. So just like you can't break the law or commit a crime without consequences, neither can your representative in Congress, the governor of your state, or the president.



You're probably noticing that many of Montesquieu's ideas are present in our government today. Montesquieu also described protecting the people from government by splitting government power among a legislative, executive, and judicial branch. In the U.S., the president can't pass a law all by himself, and a judge can't give orders to the military because those powers belong to another branch. This **separation of powers** ensures that no branch has enough power to abuse the rights of the people. It also makes **checks and balances** possible, where each branch can stop ("check") the other branches from overstepping their power (and thus maintain government "balance"). Checks and balances happen when the president vetoes a law passed by Congress or when the Supreme Court declares a law unconstitutional.



Jean Jacques Rousseau

Last Up: Rousseau, Let's Go!

Another thinker of the Enlightenment was **Jean-Jacques Rousseau**. In his 1755 book *Second Discourse*, he wrote about how he believed the state of nature was a peaceful time where people could get everything they needed from nature. But as the population increased, competition for limited resources grew. So people created the idea of division of labor to make sure that all of their needs were met. Think of division of labor like when you work on a school project with your friends—you do the research, one friend writes the speech, and the last person talks in front of class on the due date. People also developed the concept of private property and needed a government to protect their property.

In Rousseau's second book, *The Social Contract* (1762), he argued that when people come together in societies, some inevitably become more powerful because they have more money, respect, or an army. His solution for this imbalance: **Direct democracy**, where all citizens vote on all decisions that affect the society. He explained that direct democracy was a way to get back to the freedom of the state of nature because direct democracy gives everyone the same amount of political power. Unlike Montesquieu, Rousseau argued that electing representatives to govern a group properly was impossible because a person could never give another person their will. Rousseau said the society needed to come together and decide how they wanted to live and what laws they needed to create. If the decision couldn't be unanimous, the outcome would at least represent **majority rule**, what most people wanted. Rousseau did not, however, believe in the idea that we have in our society today that while the majority rules, they must protect **minority rights**. These are rights such as equality, liberty, and property that all people have no matter who is in charge.

Democracy for the...

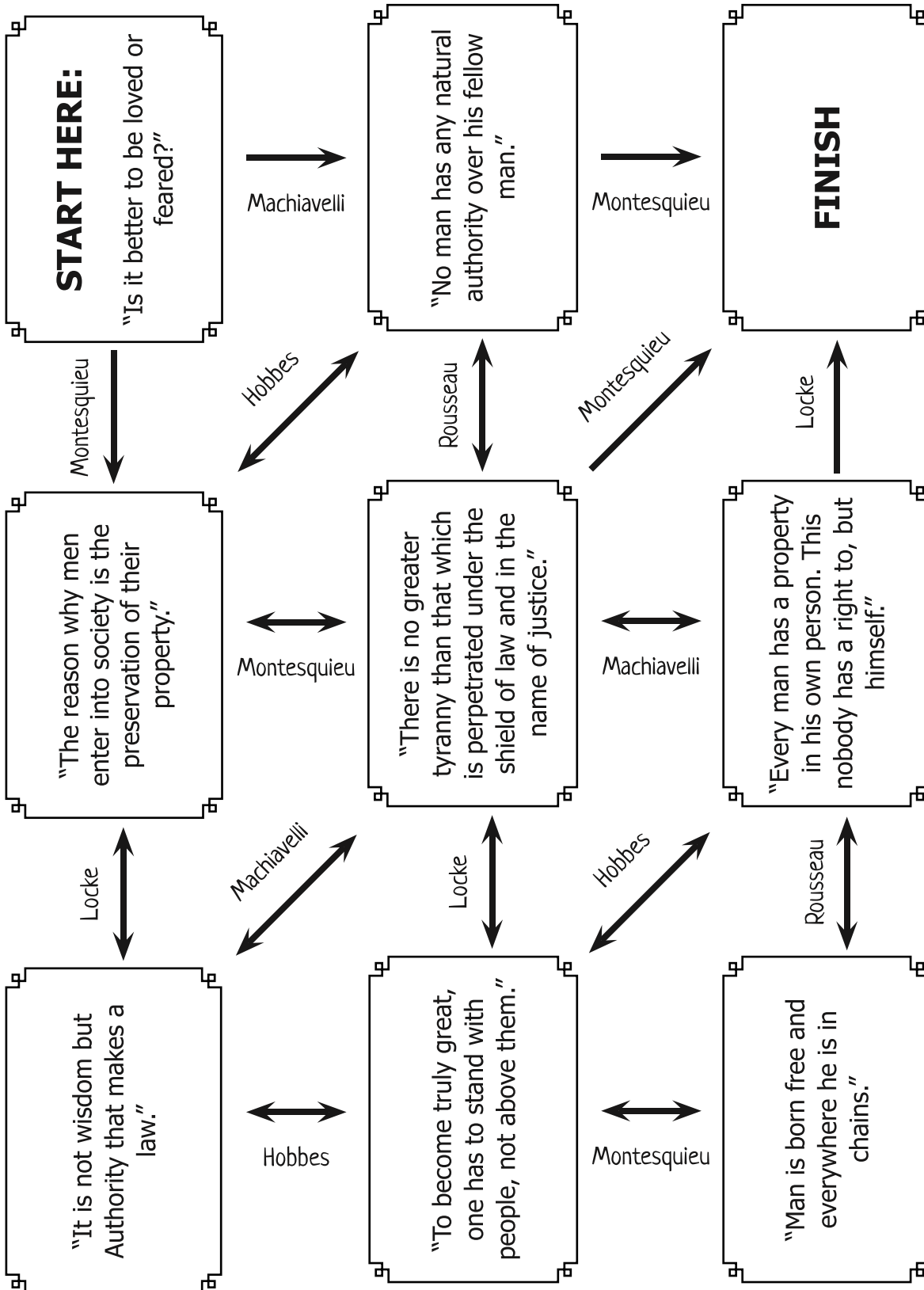
SMALL?

In a direct democracy, there are no representatives. Since the people are called to participate directly, Rousseau felt that it would be hard for any state with a large population to maintain direct democracy.

Philosophically Correct

Name: _____

A. A-maze-ing Philosophers. Weave your way through notable words from our philosophers themselves! Complete the maze by matching each of the quotes with the philosopher who wrote it.



Philosophically Correct

Name: _____

B. Whose Idea Is It Anyway? Read each of the excerpts below. Determine which philosopher's thoughts influenced the passage. Then identify the governmental concept from the reading that the passage reflects.

1. "Every Bill which shall have passed the House of Representatives and the Senate, shall, before it become a Law, be presented to the President of the United States; If he approve he shall sign it, but if not he shall return it . . . in which Case it shall not be a Law."

— *Constitution, Article I, Section 7, Clause 2*

This idea belongs to: _____

Concept: _____

2. "All... will bear in mind this sacred principle, that though the will of the majority is in all cases to prevail . . . the minority possess their equal rights."

— Thomas Jefferson, *First Inaugural Address, 1801*

This idea belongs to: _____

Concept: _____

3. "He [the President] shall have Power, by and with the Advice and Consent of the Senate, to make Treaties, provided two thirds of the Senators present concur . . ."

— *Constitution, Article II, Section 2, Clause 2*

This idea belongs to: _____

Concept: _____

4. "That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men..."

— *Declaration of Independence*

This idea belongs to: _____

Concept: _____

5. "... this Constitution, is really in its formation a government of the people; that is to say, a government in which all power is derived from, and at stated period reverts to them -- and that, in its operation, it is purely, a government of Laws made & executed by the fair substitutes of the people alone."

— George Washington, fragment from discarded *Inaugural Address, 1789*

This idea belongs to: _____

Concept: _____

Philosophically Correct

Name: _____

C. What Would the Philosophers Think? Read each scenario. Choose one philosopher who would agree with the scenario and one who would disagree. Explain why you think they would agree or disagree.

1. The President should be able to make any laws that he or she thinks is a good idea.





2. The people should have the right to say whatever they want, whenever they want.





3. People don't need to have a say in who governs them.





4. Some people are better than others.





5. If I don't like what you're doing, it's my right to stop you.





6. The leader's religion should be the religion of the nation.





7. Whatever the majority decides should be enforced on everyone.





8. If the leader is abusing his or her power, the people should just deal with it.





Philosophically Correct

Name: _____

Declaration of Independence. Read the excerpt from the Declaration of Independence. As you read, note phrases or sentences that illustrate each of the ideas listed below. Create an annotation key to mark where each idea is found. Then answer the questions on the next page.

When in the Course of human events, it becomes necessary for one people to dissolve the political bands which have connected them with another, and to assume among the powers of the earth, the separate and equal station to which the Laws of Nature and of Nature's God entitle them, a decent respect to the opinions of mankind requires that they should declare the causes which impel them to the separation.

We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.--That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed, --That whenever any Form of Government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the Right of the People to alter or to abolish it, and to institute new Government, laying its foundation on such principles and organizing its powers in such form, as to them shall seem most likely to effect their Safety and Happiness. Prudence, indeed, will dictate that Governments long established should not be changed for light and transient causes; and accordingly all experience hath shewn, that mankind are more disposed to suffer, while evils are sufferable, than to right themselves by abolishing the forms to which they are accustomed. But when a long train of abuses and usurpations, pursuing invariably the same Object evinces a design to reduce them under absolute Despotism, it is their right, it is their duty, to throw off such Government, and to provide new Guards for their future security.--Such has been the patient sufferance of these Colonies; and such is now the necessity which constrains them to alter their former Systems of Government. The history of the present King of Great Britain is a history of repeated injuries and usurpations, all having in direct object the establishment of an absolute Tyranny over these States.

Annotation Key:

(Use colors or symbols to indicate where each of these ideas are found in the reading. Fill out your key here.)

_____ Equality

_____ Consent of the Governed

_____ Social Contract

_____ Natural Rights

_____ Rule of Law

_____ Right to Revolution

_____ Popular Sovereignty

Philosophically Correct

Name: _____

Declaration of Independence. Use your annotated excerpt of the Declaration of Independence and the student reading to answer the questions below.

1. According to the Declaration of Independence, why are governments created? Which idea does this reflect? Explain.

2. The Declaration says that power comes “from the consent of the governed”. What does this mean?

3. According to the Declaration, when do people have a right to revolution? Why do they have this right?

4. Which philosopher’s ideas contributed most to the ideas found in this excerpt from the Declaration of Independence? Explain your choice.

5. Do you agree with the ideas expressed here in the Declaration of Independence? Why or why not?
