

How Government Works: Comparing governments

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Governments are like snowflakes; no two are exactly alike. Image by: Newsela staff

No two governments, past or present, are exactly the same.

However, it is possible to examine the similarities and differences among political and economic systems. Then we can categorize different forms of government. One simple way to categorize governments is to divide them into two political systems: democratic or authoritarian.

Democracies

Many countries today claim to be democracies. But if the citizens are not involved in government and politics, these countries are democratic in name only. Some governments are more democratic than others. Systems cannot be considered truly democratic unless they meet certain criteria:

1. Freedom of speech, the press and religion

Democracies respect these basic individual liberties. No government allows absolute freedom, but democracies do not heavily censor newspapers or public expression of opinions.

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." They provide ways for minorities of all kinds to have their voices heard as well.

3. Varied personal backgrounds of political leaders

Democracies usually leave room for many different types of citizens to compete for leadership positions. In other words, presidents and legislators do not all come from a few elite families. Nor should they come from the same part of the country, or the same social class.

4. Free, competitive elections

The presence of elections alone is not enough to call a country a democracy. The elections must be fair and competitive, and the government or political leaders cannot control the results. Voters must have real choices among candidates who run for public office.

5. Rule by law

Democracies are not controlled by the whims of a leader. They are governed by laws that apply to leaders and citizens equally.

6. Meaningful political participation by citizens

By itself, a citizen's right to vote is not a good measure of democracy. The government must respond in some way to citizen demands. If they vote, the candidate they choose must actually take office. If they contact government in other ways — writing, protesting phoning — officials must respond.

The degree to which a government meets these criteria is the degree to which it can be considered democratic. Examples of such governments include Great Britain, France, Switzerland, Japan and the United States.

Authoritarian Regimes

One ruler or a small group of leaders have the real power in authoritarian political systems. Authoritarian governments may hold elections. They may even have contact with their citizens. Yet the citizens do not have any voice in how they are ruled. Their leaders do not give their subjects free choice.

Instead, the leaders decide what the people can or cannot have. Citizens, then, are subjects who must obey. They are not participants in government decisions. Kings, military leaders, emperors, a small group of aristocrats, dictators and even presidents or prime ministers may rule authoritarian governments. The leader's title does not automatically indicate a particular type of government.



Authoritarian systems do not allow freedoms of speech, press and religion. They do not follow majority rule or protect minority rights. Their leaders often come from one small group. This might be a group of top military officials or a small group of aristocratic families.

No nation falls entirely into either category. It is dangerous to categorize a nation simply by the moment in time during which they were examined. Governments can change quickly. And both democratic and authoritarian governments change over time. This can make the global stage feel uncertain and complex.

