



Elements of Government

SECTION A: ELEMENTS OF GOVERNMENT

Welcome to your guide on the fundamental "Elements of Government"! In this note, we will explore what government is, how it works, and the different forms it can take. Understanding these elements is crucial for every responsible citizen.

1. Basic Concepts in Government

To understand the government, we first need to grasp some core ideas.

- **Power:** This is the ability to influence or control the behavior of others. In government, it's the authority to make and enforce laws, and to ensure order.
- **Authority:** This is legitimate power. It means that the power held by the government is recognized and accepted by the people it governs. Authority gives the government the right to rule.
- **Legitimacy:** This refers to the popular acceptance of a government's authority. A legitimate government is seen by its people as having a rightful claim to power. Without legitimacy, it's hard for a government to govern effectively.
- **Sovereignty:** This is the supreme and independent power of a state to govern itself without external interference. A sovereign state has full control over its own affairs within its borders.
- **Society:** A group of people living together in a more or less ordered community. Government exists to organize and serve a society.
- **State:** This is a political community that occupies a definite territory, has an organized government, and has sovereignty. A "country" is often referred to as a state in political science.
- **Nation:** A large group of people united by common descent, history, culture, or language, inhabiting a particular country or territory.
- **Nation-State:** A sovereign state where the majority of citizens are united by shared culture and identity, forming a nation. Nigeria, for example, is a nation-state, though it is home to many different ethnic groups.
- **Political Processes:** These are the methods and activities by which society determines who gets what, when, and how. They include elections, law-making, policy implementation, and conflict resolution.
- **Political Socialization:** This is the process by which individuals learn and internalize political values, beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors. It occurs through family, schools, media, and peer groups.

- **Political Participation:** This refers to the activities by which citizens try to influence government. Examples include voting, protesting, joining political parties, and discussing politics.
- **Political Culture:** This is the set of shared beliefs, values, and attitudes about how government should function and what its role should be. It shapes how politics is practiced in a society.

2. Forms of Government

Governments come in many shapes and sizes. Here are some common forms:

- **Monarchy:** A system where a single person, the monarch (King or Queen), is the head of state. Rule is often hereditary, meaning power passes down through the family.
 - *Absolute Monarchy:* The monarch has unlimited power. (e.g., Saudi Arabia).
 - *Constitutional Monarchy:* The monarch's power is limited by a constitution, and real power often lies with an elected parliament (e.g., United Kingdom, Japan).
- **Aristocracy:** Rule by a small, privileged class, often based on inherited wealth, noble birth, or high social status.
- **Oligarchy:** Rule by a small group of people who hold power through wealth, military strength, or political influence, often for their own benefit.
- **Autocracy:** A system of government by one person with absolute power. There are no limits to the ruler's power.
- **Republicanism:** A form of government where the head of state is not a monarch but a representative of the people (usually a president), and power is exercised by elected representatives rather than directly by the people.
- **Democracy:** A system of government where supreme power is vested in the people and exercised by them directly or indirectly through a system of representation, usually involving periodically held free elections.
 - *Definitions:* Rule by the people.
 - *Features:* Rule of law, protection of human rights, free and fair elections, separation of powers, accountability, citizen participation.
 - *Merits (Advantages):* Promotes freedom and equality, encourages participation, protects rights, allows for peaceful change, promotes stability.
 - *Demerits (Disadvantages):* Can be slow due to debates, risk of "tyranny of the majority," can be expensive, sometimes unstable.

3. Arms of Government

Most modern governments are divided into three main arms, each with distinct functions to prevent too much power from being concentrated in one place. This is known as the **Separation of Powers**.

- **The Legislature (Law-making Body):**
 - *Types:* Can be unicameral (one house, e.g., Ghana's Parliament) or bicameral (two houses, e.g., Nigeria's National Assembly with the Senate and House of Representatives).
 - *Structure:* Usually composed of elected representatives.
 - *Functions:* Makes laws, amends laws, approves the budget, scrutinizes the Executive, represents the people, conducts investigations.
 - *Powers:* Power to legislate, power to impeach, power to approve appointments.

- **The Executive (Law-implementing Body):**
 - *Types:* Can be a President (Presidential system), Prime Minister and Cabinet (Parliamentary system), or a mix.
 - *Functions:* Implements laws, manages the day-to-day affairs of government, formulates policies, conducts foreign relations, commands the armed forces.
 - *Powers:* Power to sign bills into law, appoint officials, issue executive orders, negotiate treaties.
- **The Judiciary (Law-interpreting Body):**
 - *Types:* Supreme Court, Appeal Courts, High Courts, lower courts.
 - *Functions:* Interprets laws, administers justice, settles disputes, protects rights, acts as a watchdog over the other two arms (Judicial Review).
 - *Powers:* Power to declare laws unconstitutional, power to issue judgments, power to interpret the constitution.
- **Their Relationships:** The three arms are designed to work together but also to check and balance each other.
 - *Checks and Balances:* For example, the Legislature makes laws, but the Executive can veto them. The Judiciary can declare laws made by the Legislature or actions taken by the Executive unconstitutional. This system ensures no single arm becomes too powerful.

4. Structures of Governance

How a country's power is distributed between central and regional governments defines its structure of governance.

- **Unitary System:**
 - *Features:* Central government holds most of the power; local governments derive their authority from the central government.
 - *Reasons for Adoption:* Suitable for smaller countries, promotes national unity, and is efficient in decision-making.
 - *Merits:* Strong central control, uniformity in laws and policies, less duplication of services, potentially more efficient.
 - *Demerits:* Can be unresponsive to local needs, may lead to regional neglect, risk of central government becoming too powerful.
 - *Example:* France, Japan.
- **Federal System:**
 - *Features:* Power is divided and shared between a central (federal) government and regional (state or provincial) governments. Both levels have their own distinct powers defined by a constitution.
 - *Reasons for Adoption:* Suitable for large, diverse countries, accommodates regional differences, prevents concentration of power.
 - *Merits:* Allows for local autonomy, better response to diverse needs, prevents tyranny, encourages participation.
 - *Demerits:* Can lead to duplication of services, potential for conflicts between levels of government, slower decision-making.
 - *Example:* Nigeria, USA, India.
- **Confederal System:**
 - *Features:* Independent states form a loose alliance and delegate limited powers to a weak central organization. The states retain most of their sovereignty.

- *Reasons for Adoption:* States want to cooperate on certain issues without losing significant autonomy.
- *Merits:* States maintain a high degree of independence.
- *Demerits:* Central government is very weak and often ineffective, prone to disunity, difficult to enforce decisions.
- *Example:* Historically, the Articles of Confederation in the US; contemporary examples are rare and often resemble international organizations more than traditional governments.

5. Systems of Governance

This refers to the specific roles and relationships between the Executive and Legislative arms of government.

- **Presidential System:**
 - *Features:* The President (head of executive) is directly elected by the people and is separate from the legislature. The President serves a fixed term and appoints their cabinet members.
 - *Example:* Nigeria, USA.
- **Parliamentary System:**
 - *Features:* The head of government (Prime Minister) is chosen from the legislative body (parliament) and is accountable to it. The head of state may be a monarch or a ceremonial president.
 - *Example:* United Kingdom, India, Canada.
- **Monarchical (as a system of governance):**
 - *Features:* While also a "form" of government, it can also describe the system where a monarch holds real executive and/or legislative power, or acts as a ceremonial head of state in a constitutional monarchy.

6. Political Ideologies

Political ideologies are sets of beliefs and ideas that guide individuals or groups on how society should be organized and governed.

- **Communism:** A political and economic ideology that advocates for a classless society in which all property and resources are communally owned and controlled, and the means of production are controlled by the state.
- **Feudalism:** A historical social and political system in which land was exchanged for service and loyalty, primarily in medieval Europe. Power was decentralized, with lords and vassals.
- **Capitalism:** An economic system characterized by private ownership of the means of production, free markets, and the pursuit of profit. The government's role is typically limited to protecting private property and enforcing contracts.
- **Socialism:** A political and economic theory that advocates for public or collective ownership and control of the means of production and distribution, aiming for greater social and economic equality.
- **Communism (as a specific political system):** Often refers to states where a single communist party holds absolute power, aiming to implement communist ideals.
- **Totalitarianism:** A form of government in which the state holds absolute control over all aspects of public and private life, suppressing all opposition and individual freedom. (e.g.,

Nazi Germany, Stalin's Soviet Union).

- **Fascism:** A far-right, authoritarian ultranationalist political ideology characterized by dictatorial power, forcible suppression of opposition, and strong regimentation of society and economy. (e.g., Mussolini's Italy, Hitler's Germany).
- **Nazism:** A specific form of fascism based on the ideologies and practices associated with the Nazi Party in Germany, led by Adolf Hitler. It was characterized by extreme racism, antisemitism, and totalitarian control.

7. Constitution

The constitution is the supreme law of a land, providing the framework for how a country is governed.

- **Meaning:** A body of fundamental principles or established precedents according to which a state or other organization is acknowledged to be governed.
- **Sources:** Can be drawn from statutes, judicial precedents, customs, conventions, and historical documents.
- **Functions:** Defines the powers of the government, protects citizens' rights, establishes the structure of government, provides for amendment procedures, and outlines national goals.
- **Types:**
 - **Written:** Codified in a single document (e.g., Nigeria, USA).
 - **Unwritten:** Not contained in a single document, but derived from various sources like statutes, common law, and conventions (e.g., United Kingdom).
 - **Rigid:** Difficult to amend, requiring special procedures (e.g., Nigeria, USA).
 - **Flexible:** Easy to amend, often requiring only a simple majority vote in the legislature (e.g., United Kingdom).

8. Principles of Democratic Government

Democracy is built on certain core principles that ensure fairness, freedom, and effective governance.

- **Ethics and Accountability in Public Office:** Public officials should act with integrity, honesty, and transparency. They must be held responsible for their actions and decisions.
- **Separation of Power:** As discussed earlier, dividing governmental powers among the Executive, Legislative, and Judiciary to prevent concentration of power.
- **Checks and Balances:** A system that allows each branch of government to limit the powers of the other branches to prevent abuse of power.
- **Individual and Collective Responsibility:**
 - *Individual Responsibility:* Ministers and public officials are responsible for their own actions and decisions.
 - *Collective Responsibility:* In a cabinet system, all members of the cabinet are jointly responsible for government decisions and must publicly support them.
- **Constitutionalism:** The idea that government power is limited by a constitution, and that all actions of government must comply with the constitution.
- **Rule of Law:** The principle that everyone, including those in power, is subject to and accountable under the law. No one is above the law.
- **Representative Government:** A system where citizens elect representatives to make decisions on their behalf in the legislature.

9. Processes of Legislation

Legislation is the process of making laws.

- **Legislative Enactments:** These are formal laws passed by the legislature.
 - **Acts:** Primary laws passed by the National Assembly (e.g., the Electoral Act).
 - **Edicts:** Laws promulgated by military governments (in periods of military rule).
 - **Decrees:** Similar to edicts, laws issued by the Head of State during military rule.
- **Bye-laws:** Laws made by local government authorities for their specific areas, often related to local issues like sanitation, markets, and land use. They must not contradict national or state laws.
- **Delegated Legislation:** Laws made by bodies other than the legislature, to whom power has been specifically delegated by an Act of Parliament. This allows government departments or agencies to create detailed rules and regulations without the need for a full parliamentary debate for every single detail. Examples include regulations, orders, and rules.

This note provides a solid foundation for understanding the Elements of Government.

Remember to engage with these topics by discussing them with your teachers and classmates, and by observing how these concepts play out in real-world governance.

Glossary of Terms (Quick Reference):

- **Power:** Ability to control or influence.
- **Authority:** Legitimate power.
- **Sovereignty:** Supreme self-governing power.
- **State:** A political community with territory, government, and sovereignty.
- **Democracy:** Rule by the people.
- **Legislature:** Law-making body.
- **Executive:** Law-implementing body.
- **Judiciary:** Law-interpreting body.
- **Unitary System:** Strong central government.
- **Federal System:** Power shared between central and regional governments.
- **Constitution:** Supreme law of the land.
- **Rule of Law:** Everyone is subject to the law.