

# WHAT IS GOVERNMENT?

Government is the term used to describe:

- the system of rules used to run a community
- the people who make and administer those rules.

Communities can be very large or very small, ranging from countries with hundreds of millions of people (such as China, India, USA, and Brazil) to tiny townships such as Naseby in central Otago, with a population of fewer than 100, or Pukekura on the West Coast of the South Island with an official population of only two. Generally speaking, the larger the community, the more complex a government it requires.

In most modern democracies, people are debating the extent to which a government should involve itself in the lives of its people. More involvement ('big' government) often means more regulations and restrictions; it often costs more money as well. People who support 'little' government (government that is less involved in people's lives) generally tend to favour fewer taxes and less government support.

Human beings are social animals. We tend to congregate together and form societies. In the earliest days of history, society was usually based around the family. Clans and tribes were extended families, where people were connected by a common ancestral link.

Even today, members of tribes share a common **lineage** (line of descent). In New Zealand, many Māori identify their whānau (family) with certain hapū (sub-tribes), which belong to particular iwi (tribes), each of which can trace its descent back to the crew of a particular waka (canoe) on which Māori first arrived in New Zealand.

As populations grew, societies became more complex. People were no longer linked by family, but by social or economic necessity. Leaders were required to ensure people were working together for the common good, and to divide tasks to ensure everything needed was done. Over time, leaders developed into tribal chiefs.



Humans are social animals

**Wordlist**

**lineage:** direct descent from an ancestor; ancestry or pedigree

**anarchy:** a society without leadership; a state of disorder where authority is not recognised

An absence of government is called **anarchy**, like most other words describing types of government, this comes from the Greek language. Some modern anarchists believe everything wrong with the world can be solved by getting rid of government altogether and allowing people to live without rules or regulations. Unfortunately, whenever governments disappear people will try to take power for themselves. Countries with weak governments, such as Somalia, have to contend with various warlords who carve out territory for themselves and use intimidation and force to get people to do what they are told. Anarchy often leads to conflict as strong leaders try to seize power, and laws are ignored.

**Activity: What is government?**

1. Why do you think larger communities need a more complex government than smaller ones need?

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2. Explain the difference between 'big' government and 'little' government.

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3. What benefit(s) do you think people gain from being in a group? How can having a leader add to the effectiveness of a group?

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4. What does 'anarchy' mean? Why do you think some people prefer anarchy to government?

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# WHAT DO GOVERNMENTS DO?

## Powers

Governments exercise **authority** over their communities by using various powers to **control** or **coerce** people. In a democratic government such as New Zealand's, the people give this power voluntarily to the government; it can be revoked (taken back) every three years in an **election**. This can be described as government by **consent**; the government has a **mandate** (the support of the majority of voters) to govern. Governing often involves **legislation** (creating new laws) as well as the observance and/or modification of existing laws. Governments are responsible for running a country, and gather **revenue** (money which is earned or collected) through duties, fees, fines, and taxes.

Less-democratic governments often govern without much consent; they tend to govern by coercion, forcing the people to accept their mandate, usually by using police or armed forces to maintain control.

States or territories that are not independent may have limited control over part of their government, or no control at all. Sometimes, a number of states agree to work together as one nation, with different powers for the state and national governments. This is called a **federation**, and is used in many countries including Australia, Canada, and the USA.

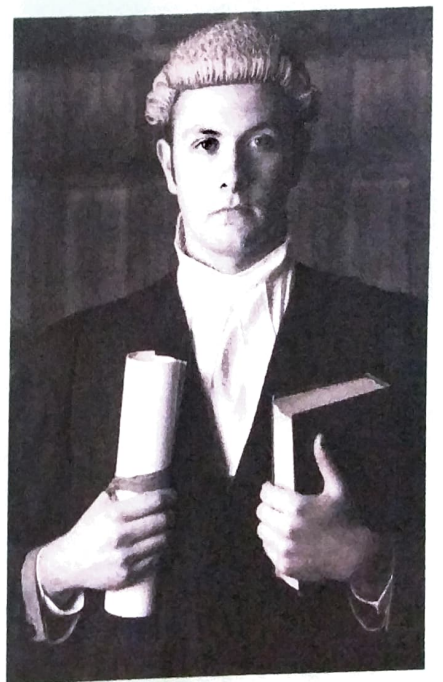
Governments have three key powers:

- **executive** – the power to make decisions
- **legislative** – the power to make laws
- **judicial** – the power to interpret laws (to decide what they mean and how they are intended to work).

When examining any government, you can get a sense of how fair that government is by looking at how the three key powers are divided. A government where one person holds all three



North Korean leaders



Judicial powers

**Wordlist**

**common law:** law developed by judges through decisions of courts (also called case law); distinct from laws made by parliament

powers is much less fair than a government where all power is shared by different groups of people. Generally speaking, most democratic nations have rules in place, called **constitutions**, which protect the separation of power. In some countries, such as the USA, the constitution is a formal, written document; in others, such as New Zealand and the United Kingdom, rules are based on **common law** and tradition rather than on one specific document.

**Activity: Key terms**

Use a dictionary to help add definitions for the following words in the space provided.

Answers – see **RESOURCES**

authority: \_\_\_\_\_

coerce / coercion: \_\_\_\_\_

consent: \_\_\_\_\_

constitution: \_\_\_\_\_

control: \_\_\_\_\_

election: \_\_\_\_\_

federation: \_\_\_\_\_

independent: \_\_\_\_\_

legislation: \_\_\_\_\_

mandate: \_\_\_\_\_

revenue: \_\_\_\_\_



# DIFFERENT TYPES OF GOVERNMENT

Because human beings are so different, there is no one form of government that everyone can agree upon. The United Nations (UN) includes almost all the countries in the world – but makes no laws and has little real power.

The European Union (EU) is similar to the UN in that it is a group of independent countries, but unlike the UN the members of the European Union elect representatives to a common parliament, which passes laws affecting all nations within the union. Over time, the EU hopes to create one unified, federal government in charge of Europe, although many people living in those countries remain sceptical.

While there are too many different forms of government to mention them all, the main ones follow. Many countries today have a blend of governments – e.g. New Zealand is a blend of democracy and monarchy.



Flag of United Nations – white on light blue background



Flag of Europe – yellow stars on dark blue background

**Democracy:** Rule by the people, or by representatives chosen by the people

**Despotism:** Rule by one person who treats all citizens/subjects as slaves

**Dictatorship:** Rule by one person who holds complete power over the country, usually with the support of a political party or armed force

**Monarchy:** Rule by one person (usually a king or queen); monarchs usually inherit their position of power and pass it on to a designated heir

**Oligarchy:** Rule by a small group of people who are united either by family connections or a common ideology or interest

**Plutocracy:** Rule by the wealthy

**Theocracy:** Rule by religious leaders

Governments may take different shapes – e.g. a monarchy may be **absolute**, which makes it more like a dictatorship, or **constitutional**, which makes it more of a democracy. Many democracies are also **republics**, meaning that the head of state is appointed or elected rather than born to that position. Most plutocracies and theocracies are also oligarchic, while



An absolute monarch – King Salman of Saudi Arabia



Tanks of the Thai army, 2014

most dictatorships tend to be **totalitarian**, which means that everything in the country comes under the complete control of the leader (often supported by a political party). There are also **military dictatorships**, such as in Myanmar/Burma or Thailand at the moment (or in England during the 1650s), where the army is in charge and has appointed its own leaders to run the country.

### Activity: Different types of government

1. Draw lines to match the form of government on the left with its definition on the right. You might need to consult a dictionary.

Answers - see RESOURCE

Form of government
Absolute
Constitutional
Military
Republic
Totalitarian

Definition
All power is held and used by the people or their chosen representatives
All power and control over people's lives is held by one person or party
All power is held by one person
Power is held by the armed forces
The use of power is controlled by a set of rules or customs

2. Find examples of countries that have or have had the following types of government. Try to get at least two for each type.

- Democracy: \_\_\_\_\_
- Despotism: \_\_\_\_\_
- Dictatorship: \_\_\_\_\_
- Monarchy: \_\_\_\_\_
- Oligarchy: \_\_\_\_\_
- Plutocracy: \_\_\_\_\_
- Theocracy: \_\_\_\_\_