The Road to Revolution

Britain's King George III and Parliament passed laws that restricted the colonists' freedoms and taxed them to help finance the Crown's empire. With plentiful land and resources, the North American colonies were among Britain's most financially successful properties in an otherwise financially challenging time. Decades of wars and imperial endeavors had ravaged the British treasury. The British empire controlled colonies throughout the world, and maintaining such a far-flung empire required revenue. The Sugar Act was Britain's first attempt at increasing revenue. Soon the Stamp Act, which taxed colonists who transacted legal documents, the Tea Act, and other acts followed.

The colonists organized to oppose the acts. Some colonists opposed the taxes on a practical, economic basis, but most outspoken American leaders took a principled position against the laws because Parliament created these without any colonial representation. No colonist expected the democratic representation Americans value today. At the time only white men with property could cast votes in English and in American elections, but colonists felt the Crown's complete disregard for any representation at all violated the Enlightenment philosophies they so revered.

"No taxation without representation!" demanded the colonists. The British government responded unapologetically and declared the colonists were "virtually represented." They reminded colonists that most citizens residing throughout the British Isles, about 90 percent, could not vote. Members of Parliament insisted they still considered the colonists' best interests.

Tensions increased as protesters refused to abide by the new laws and the British government doubled down to enforce them. Royal courts tried and convicted protesters unfairly. The British government violated the ideas of free speech, free assembly, and free press by exacting punishments when colonists spoke, gathered, or published in opposition. Colonial leaders attempted at first to negotiate a peaceful relationship through the Olive Branch Petition to King George, a symbolic act of peace in which they pledged loyalty but also made clear their grievances. The King rejected that petition, and the colonies mobilized for revolt.

Influence of Enlightenment Thought

The Sons of Liberty and other advocates for freedom drew on Enlightenment political theory. It had been developed when the principles of rationalism that had unlocked doors to the natural world during the Scientific Revolution were applied to the social world as well. Especially influential were the writings of English philosopher John Locke (1632–1704) and Swiss-born philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712–1778).

John Locke and Natural Law Locke argued that natural law is the law of God and that this law is acknowledged through human sense and reason. He proposed that under natural law—in a state of nature—people were born free and equal. According to this law, Locke reasoned, "No one can be ... subjected to the political power of another, without his own consent." Locke argued further that natural law not only entitled but obligated people to rebel when the rule of kings did not respect the consent of the governed.

Jean-Jacques Rousseau and the Social Contract Rousseau was much influenced by Locke. He spoke for those "intending their minds" away from an irrational and oppressive political order, away from a governmental theory that rested in divine right of kings and clergy to rule and misrule. The opening sentence of his influential treatise, The Social Contract, dramatically lays out a key human problem: "Man was born free, and he is everywhere in chains." The social contract Rousseau describes is the agreement of free and equal people to abandon certain natural rights in order to find secure protections for society and to find freedom in a single body politic committed to the general good. He envisioned popular sovereignty—the people as the ultimate ruling authority—and a government of officials to carry out the laws.

French philosopher Montesquieu (1689–1755), like Rousseau, recognized both the sovereign and administrative aspects of governmental power. He argued for the separation of powers in the administrative government, comprised of the executive, legislative, and judicial branches.

Enlightenment thought was well known among English colonists in North America. According to historian Carl Becker, "Most Americans had absorbed Locke's works as a kind of political gospel." The American revolutionaries believed that men were entitled to "life, liberty, and property" and that these cannot be taken away except under laws created through the consent of the governed. These beliefs formed the bedrock of the political ideology known as republicanism. The lack of colonial representation in Parliament, taxation without consent, and subsequent infringements of liberty violated fundamental rights and the values of republicanism and would, in time, be remedied by an independent, limited, and representative government based on the ideas of natural rights, popular sovereignty, republicanism, and social contract.

Three Kinds of Representative Democracies

Representative democracies based on the values of republicanism can take at least three forms.

Participatory Democracy This form of democracy depends on direct participation of many, if not most, people in a society, not only in government but in public life as well. In a participatory democracy, people vote directly for laws and other matters that affect them instead of voting for people to represent their interests. The democracy in 5th-century Athens was participatory, though only adult male citizens could vote. More recently, a group of college students in the 1960s started a movement in participatory democracy. Protesting wars abroad and inequality at home, they formed Students for a Democratic Society. In 1962 some of the members met in Port Huron, Michigan. They modeled participatory decision-making as they collaboratively drafted their beliefs in the "Port Huron Statement." This document calls for the direct involvement of ordinary citizens, especially through civil disobedience. One of the founders
of the organization and drafter of the statement, Tom Hayden, explained years later that "the concept arose ... in response to the severe limitations of an undemocratic system that we saw as representing an oligarchy [a system in which a small number of people hold most of the power]."

In the 21st century, participants in the Occupy Wall Street movement, which spread to many locations in the United States partly through social media sharing, camped out in financial districts to protest wealth inequality, the corporate influence on government, and political corruption. Occupy Wall Street designed itself along the guidelines of participatory democracy, using a bottom-up rather than top-down approach to formalizing policy, encouraging each member to participate both in person and on social media. However, its participatory nature made decision-making difficult and slow and action agendas hard to develop.

A number of states use a form of participatory democracy when citizens who gather sufficient signatures place issues on the ballot for the people to decide. Twenty-six states allow some form of ballot measures. On Election Day 2016, some of the issues voters were deciding through ballot measures related to gun control, the death penalty, a minimum wage, and bilingual education. (See pages 487–488 for more on ballot measures.)

**Pluralist Democracy** In a pluralist democracy, nongovernmental groups organize to try to exert influence on political decision-making. Interest groups, as these groups are called, such as organized labor unions or gun advocates, are one of the most influential types of groups. They interact with government officials searching for consensus among competing interests. They raise and spend money in elections to ensure that people friendly to their ideas are elected. These groups send professional researchers and experts to testify at congressional committee hearings in hopes of shaping or stopping a bill. They monitor the government as it enforces existing law, and they buy advertisements and other media products to influence public opinion. (See Chapter 15 for more on interest groups.)

Pluralist theorists believe that the ideas and viewpoints in the United States are so scattered and so varied that no single view can control the shaping and administration of policy. We live in a world of so many policymakers putting into effect so many rules and procedures at the local, state, and federal levels that no single input shapes our body of law. We are a nation of immigrants, both ethnically and ideologically diverse, and the large variety of viewpoints results in public policy that is usually established and accepted by a consensus.

**Elite Democracy** In an elite democracy, elected representatives make decisions and act as trustees for the people who elected them. Elite democracy recognizes an inequity in the spread of power among the populace and that the elites—people with resources and influence—dominate. Dominating influence by the elites, a trait of the United States when it was founded, weakened somewhat in the Progressive Era (1890–1920) when the masses became more involved in politics. Yet in many ways, elite-dominated politics prevail today.

Individuals with the most time, education, money, and access to government will take more action than the less privileged, and because of their resources, they will be heard. People who serve in the leadership of a political party, whether on the local or national level, are usually of a higher socioeconomic level, better known, and better educated than the rank and file, the many members of a group who constitute the group's body.

**Declaring Independence**

Before Americans knew exactly what their representative democracy would look like, American-British tensions rose to new heights. By the summer of 1776, the Continental Congress commissioned a committee of five men—Thomas Jefferson, John Adams, Benjamin Franklin, Roger Sherman, and Robert Livingston—to draft an official statement to summarize the colonists' views. In that document, which became the **Declaration of Independence**, these men justified the break from Britain and proclaimed to the world the reasons for independence. The declaration, signed on July 4, 1776, created a moral and legal justification for the rebellion.

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**THE 13 ORIGINAL COLONIES**

[Map of the 13 original colonies]
The Declaration of Independence drew from Locke and other Enlightenment philosophers, upholding popular sovereignty. It explained how abuses by the too powerful British Crown violated individual rights, justified the colonists’ separation from Britain, and defined the newly independent states’ relationship. Following are key excerpts from the declaration.

When in the Course of human events, it becomes necessary for one people to dissolve the political bands which have connected them with another... 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. . . .

The history of the present King of Great Britain is a history of repeated injuries and usurpations... He has refused his Assent to Laws, the most wholesome and necessary for the public good... He has called together legislative bodies at places unusual, uncomfortable, and distant... He has dissolved Representative Houses repeatedly, for opposing with manly firmness his invasions on the rights of the people... He has plundered our seas, ravaged our Coasts, burnt our towns, and destroyed the lives of our people...

[For these reasons], these United Colonies are, and of Right ought to be Free and Independent States... And for the support of this Declaration, with a firm reliance on the protection of divine Providence, we mutually pledge to each other our Lives, our Fortunes and our sacred Honor.

Political Science Disciplinary Practices: Analyze the Declaration of Independence as Argument

The Declaration of Independence is widely regarded as an outstanding example of classic argument—a written or spoken effort to persuade people to adopt a certain point of view or take a certain action. When you analyze an argument, you take it apart to understand its elements. You identify the author’s claims—statements asserted to be true—and the reasoning the author uses to support those claims. For example, the declaration asserts that governments derive their power from the consent of the governed, establishing the basis for popular sovereignty. The declaration also claims that people have the right to alter or abolish a government that is destructive to people’s rights.

Apply: Explain how these claims relate to Enlightenment thought and republican ideals. Then read the full Declaration of Independence on pages 619–622, and answer the questions that follow it for an in-depth analysis of the argument in this founding document. You may also read it online.

During the war, Americans instituted the Continental Congress to govern the American states collectively, and they began to formalize their ideas for a permanent government. The war raged on until General George Washington’s army defeated the British at Yorktown, Virginia, in 1781. An official peace was negotiated in 1783 with the Treaty of Paris.

The Articles of Confederation

As soon as the states declared independence, they realized a more formal relationship among them could only assist their cause. The Continental Congress created a committee of 13 men to draft the Articles of Confederation, a series of statements that defined the initial national government and redefined the former colonies as states. Though the Articles of Confederation were not officially ratified by the states until 1781, the Continental Congress legislated during wartime with a wide array of powers to adopt commercial codes, establish and maintain an army, define crimes against the United States, and negotiate foreign affairs abroad. This document defined “the firm league of friendship” that existed among the states, which had delegated a few powers to the national government.

How to apportion states’ representation in the newly designed Confederation Congress was beset with controversy. Some leaders recognized the merits of giving greater representation to the more populous states, something the Virginia delegation advocated. Leaders from smaller states opposed representation based on population. After a furious debate, the authors of the Articles created an equal representation system—each state received one vote in the Congress.

The Confederation Congress continued to meet in New York. States appointed delegations of up to seven men that voted as a unit. National legislation required the votes of at least nine states to pass. A unanimous vote was required to alter or amend the Articles of Confederation. The Articles entitled the Congress to engage in international diplomacy, declare war, and acquire territory. They provided protection of religion and speech. They provided for extradition—that is, states were expected to extradite, or return, fugitives to states where they had committed crimes and runaway slaves to states they had fled. The document encouraged a free flow of commerce among the states. It required that states provide a public, fair government and that Congress could sit as a court in disputes between states.