

For thousands of years, people have been ruled by governments. These bodies of power make rules that organize society and are meant to protect it from danger.

Many different forms of government have taken shape, from structures where power is concentrated in the hands of one person to those where power is shared among many. These different systems—characterized by how many people are in charge, how they are chosen, and how they rule—have massive consequences for the relationship between governments and their people.

One system is democracy, where the people choose who will govern them. One of its earliest forms, dating back to ancient Greece, was direct democracy, meaning one person could cast one vote on a matter, like whether to go to war. Votes were decided by a simple majority.

Governments we describe today as democracies are for the most part republics, or representative democracies. In this form of government, people choose representatives, who make decisions for them, through elections.

The democracies found around the world today can generally be sorted into three categories: presidential, parliamentary, and presidential-parliamentary mixes. In presidential democracies, like the United States, people vote on who should be the leader of the country, the president. And they also separately vote on who should represent them in the legislature, Congress. Sometimes the president and the majority of the legislators in Congress belong to different political parties.

Meanwhile, in parliamentary democracies like the United Kingdom, people only vote for members of their legislature, called members of parliament. If a majority of the legislators belong to a single party, or if multiple parties join together to form a ruling coalition, then they appoint one member of parliament from within their party or coalition to become prime minister, the leader of the country.

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And there are countries with something in between. In the case of France, the people directly elect the president and most legislators. But then the president appoints a less powerful prime minister, who works with the legislature to make laws and help run the government.

These governments tend to have rules on what they can and cannot do. And in healthy democracies, there is typically an independent court system and a free press. These institutions provide checks on government power and can protect the rights of citizens. Also, many democracies, including the United States, operate with a system known as federalism, where certain powers, like providing schooling and safety, are designated to local governments, limiting the national government's power.

Today, nearly half of the world's countries, including many of the most powerful, are considered free and democratic. In contrast to democracy, many countries have authoritarian governments, with just one person or a small group of people in charge and few checks on their power. Authoritarian leaders might use titles like president and prime minister, but that doesn't mean they are democratic. If they hold elections, they probably aren't free, fair, or competitive, leaving ordinary people out of the political process. Authoritarian governments tend to ignore rules limiting their power, if there are any. And they often use violence and intimidation to restrict what people and the press say, so that leaders can impose the policies they want.

Nevertheless, some authoritarian governments are popular with their people. They might see their government's decisive leadership style as superior to that of slow-moving democracies and believe authoritarian governments can better promote economic growth and order at home or expand influence abroad, even if it means sacrificing some personal liberties.

Frequently, governments lie somewhere in the space between the two poles of democracy and authoritarianism. These governments may win real elections but ignore minority rights. Or they might manipulate elections but uphold some democratic values.

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Regardless of the system, a country's form of government is never set in stone. Even the most repressive authoritarian systems can be toppled or transformed by people taking to the streets and revolutions or gradually become more democratic through reforms. At the same time, strong democracies can drift toward authoritarianism, a process that is often referred to as democratic backsliding.

In our global era, government leaders make decisions on today's toughest challenges, like how to address climate change or terrorism or a pandemic. Where your government lies on the spectrum between democracy and authoritarianism determines whether your voice and the voices of your fellow citizens are amplified or minimized on these issues.