

The Philosophy of US Government

Activity # GV122

Activity Introduction

Hey, I'm Kimberly and today we're gonna find out where the ideas and philosophy for our US Government came from. For starters, when we say "philosophy", we're talking about the truths or beliefs at the basis of our US Governmental System.

Reading Passage 1 Introduction-

Now, to really understand the philosophy of U.S. government we've gotta look at what was going on in the rest of the world. Especially England. There were lots of changes happening in England, including a Civil War, The Glorious Revolution, English Bill of Rights, and even an execution of a king! The American founders took notice of these events and it influenced the ideas put forth in the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution. In this reading you'll learn more about some pretty exciting times across the pond.

Reading Passage 1 Outro-

Now that is what I call a "good read"...

Video 1 – Introduction

You know that feeling you get when you have a new idea? It's kind of exciting right?

Well, imagine a time when everybody around you it seems is also coming up with new ideas, and that feeling spread throughout 18th eighteenth-century Europe and the world. America's Founding Fathers were inspired by the new ideas and that helped them come up with a new system of government. In this video you'll see what some of those new ideas were and who the key political thinkers were.

Video 1

To grasp the philosophical and political atmosphere that existed when the U.S. was being created, we have to understand the Age of Enlightenment. The Enlightenment was not a specific movement or unified effort, but rather a period of scientific and philosophical development. The ideas of the Enlightenment had their roots in the 16th and 17th century as people tried to explain why the world was the way it was.

The writers of the Enlightenment were not so much inventors as they were explainers. They had the ability to take big ideas and clarify them in a way that more people could understand them. They thought about law, religion and society and how those could be grouped to explain how and why we could all live together. For the most part, the Enlightenment occurred in England, France and Germany; however, there were also Enlightenment thinkers in the American colonies as well. These ideas were so important that they even impacted the rulers and the common people of Europe.

There are two main ideas, or tenets, of the Enlightenment, that by understanding these, we'll understand how they impact other historical events including the Declaration of Independence and the U.S. Constitution. The first of these ideas is natural law. This is the concept that certain laws and rights exist simply because we're human. The Enlightenment thinkers also felt that natural law could be understood by reason, that we all have the ability to understand and a desire to protect the natural laws. Now these weren't the kind of laws that people had to vote on or debated about, but basic rights that we need to live together as a society.

Along the same lines, the Enlightenment put forward the idea of natural religion. This is the belief that there is a supreme creator, but that he created the world and leaves it alone to take care of itself. The creator also made man to have reason, tolerance and brotherly love. Natural religion is also known as Deism. It had no specific dogma or belief in the afterlife. Together, natural law and natural religion are the two fundamental ideas of the Enlightenment. These implied several things, that material wellbeing was a positive value, social justice was a proper goal of government, and worldly happiness is a common goal of mankind.

There were many writers and philosophers of the Enlightenment, but three of the most famous are Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Voltaire and Thomas Paine. Rousseau was a French philosopher whose major political work was called *Du Contrat Sociale*, or Social Contract, written in 1762. The main idea was that people in society are bound to one another in an implicit social contract, and that there should be tolerance for all religious beliefs. Voltaire was a French playwright, a poet, historian and philosopher. He had a lot

going on in his head. His major political work was *Le Lettres Philosophiques*, published in English as *Letter Concerning the English Nation* written in 1734. He had a serious crush on the English system of government and, in *Philosophique*, he explained and celebrated the British political system of representative government, restated the necessity of religious toleration, and felt that science was a way to secure people's happiness.

Now don't think that the French were the only ones thinking about how the world works. Thomas Paine was an American political philosopher who was born in England. His major political work was *Common Sense*, written in the rather significant year of 1776. His central ideas in *Common Sense* were that the Americans should become independent of England. This was the first publication making an argument for independence. Next, Paine thought that the government was necessary, because people cannot be trusted to do the right thing on their own. He goes on to state that the purpose of government is to ensure freedom and security and that the republican or representative government is the best.

So we can see that the thinkers we've talked about, along with many others like John Locke, Charles de Montesquieu and Benjamin Franklin, clarified the ideas that found their way into the writing of the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution.

Specifically, these ideas are religious toleration for all people, and the idea that happiness is a proper goal for people, the principle that government can and should be dissolved when they're not serving their purpose and they can be recreated, and that

the government should be separated into three branches. Enlightenment thinkers also felt slavery and tyranny were evil, and the goal of government was to ensure freedom, security, and that ultimately natural rights were self-evident truths. In the long run, we will see how the ideas of the Enlightenment influenced political thinkers around the world.

Video 1 – Recap

So, one more time...

You can see the Age of Enlightenment was a very creative time that influenced the Founding Fathers as they designed our system of government.

Some of the new ideas were natural law and natural religion. People started thinking that material well-being was a good thing, social justice was important for the government to consider, and worldly happiness was a common goal of mankind.

These new ideas came from key political thinkers like Rousseau, Voltaire, and Paine. The Founding Fathers thought individuals should have the right to pursue happiness and practice the religion of their choice. They also believed that government can be dissolved, powers should be separated, and despotism and slavery were inherently evil. The main purpose of government was to provide freedom and security for the people and it was important to recognize natural rights.

Video 2 - Introduction

So we've been talking a lot about the Founding Fathers, it's about time to meet these fine gentlemen.

Video 2

As the United States declared its independence in 1776, a special group of leading American political thinkers played a major role in the development of our country's government. Collectively, these men are known as the Founding Fathers. They believed in popular sovereignty, representative government, personal freedom, natural rights, religious toleration, separation of powers, and that government should maintain security and safeguard freedom. Wow!

Let's meet the guys known as the Founding Fathers. We'll start with John Adams. Born in the Massachusetts Bay Colony in 1735, Adams was a lawyer and great mind of the day. He believed in the need of breaking with England, but also in the rule of law. He was given the very challenging task of defending the soldiers accused of murder in the Boston Massacre. This was not a popular job, but he thought it was important to show that the law must be followed, even when it was unpopular. One of his loudest critics was the patriot Samuel Adams, who just happened to be his cousin. John Adams served in the Continental Congress, represented America and Europe during the Revolution, and he, along with John Jay and Benjamin Franklin, negotiated the Peace Treaty with England that ended the Revolutionary War. While George Washington was

the first President of the United States, Adams was the first vice president and became the second President in 1797.

Next is Alexander Hamilton. He was born in the British West Indies, but lived most of his life in New York. Hamilton was an assistant to Washington during the American Revolution. He believed in a strong, central government, and although he was very political, his main interest was financial matters. He pushed for the formation of a national bank, funding of the national debt, increasing trade, urbanization and industrialization in order for the U.S. economy to grow and be stable. During the period of the Articles of Confederation, Hamilton was one of the leading voices for calling for the Constitutional Convention. In support of the new Constitution, he wrote 50 of the 85 federalist papers. He used the pen name Publius, kind of Latin for John Doe, to write the essays so that people could debate the ideas in the essays, not about him. He became the Secretary of Treasury under Washington, and even though he was a Founding Father, he was a political opponent with Thomas Jefferson and James Madison. Unfortunately for Hamilton, he was killed in a duel with Aaron Burr, Thomas Jefferson's vice president.

Thomas Jefferson was a native of Virginia and a true student of the Enlightenment. He drafted the Declaration of Independence. He served as vice president under John Adams and was the third President of the United States. As President, he purchased the Louisiana Territory from French Emperor Napoleon, and Jefferson had a wide-ranging intellectual curiosity. Beside politics, his interests included music, agriculture, architecture, science and the classics. His ideas for the nation differed from people like

Hamilton, because Jefferson believed that the country should be made up of small independent farmers, instead of an urban citizenry.

James Madison was also from Virginia. Not only was he a Founding Father, he was called the Father of the Constitution. His notes from the convention provide the fullest records of the deliberation. He was also another Publius, a coauthor of the federalist papers, writing 26 of the essays. He also drafted the Bill of Rights. He was the vice president under Jefferson and the fourth President.

Benjamin Franklin was the premiere example of an American Enlightenment thinker. He was born in Massachusetts, but ran away and considered Philadelphia his home. He was an author, political thinker, scientist, inventor, diplomat, and a successful printer. Franklin wrote the Albany Plan of Union, which was an early proposal to create a loose union of the colonies. He helped draft the Declaration of Independence, and was only one of six men to sign both the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution. He was an abolitionist, served as the first postmaster general, and of all the Founding Fathers, Franklin seems to be the most human. Think about it. How many of the Founders do we call by a nickname like we do Ben Franklin?

George Washington, like many of the Founders, was also from Virginia. He was the general in charge of the American troops during the Revolution, was president of the Constitutional Convention and the first President of the United States. As first President, he also set many precedents for the Presidency. That means he set the standard or expectation for all of the Presidents that have followed him. An example of

this is the idea that the President only serves two terms. That lasted until the 1930s when Franklin Roosevelt was elected a total of four times. Washington also made careful use of executive power and helped develop the idea of calling the President, Mr. President, instead of His Excellency.

The Founding Fathers played a significant role in establishing the ideas upon which our country is founded. We can thank them for the system of government that provides us the freedoms we enjoy today.

Video 2 – Recap

As I mentioned before...

You see how the Age of Enlightenment impacted the philosophies and ideas of The Founding Fathers. They felt it was important to secure people's rights and set up a system of representative government with popular sovereignty, where powers were separated and security and freedom were provided.

So the Age of Enlightenment not only influenced our Founding Fathers, but we continue to feel its effect with many of the rights we enjoy today. Pretty cool, huh?

What the Class Thinks-

Okay, time for another episode of "After Class."

Student 1

I'm trying to remember all the stuff I need to study for the quiz tomorrow. I had heard the term Founding Fathers before, but had forgotten who they were and what they did.

Student 2

Ok, remember the Founding Fathers founded our system of government, which is based on the Constitution.

Student 2

They also based their ideas on the Age of Enlightenment. Lots of cool new ideas were happening then. It's good for us that they became enlightened.

We wouldn't have a lot of our freedoms if they didn't.

Student 1

Wait, I almost forgot another big topic I need to remember to study before the quiz. The English Civil War.

Student 1

What was the cause? And the result?

Student 2

Parliament and the people didn't want an absolute monarchy anymore. The people on the side of parliament won.

Student 2

Ok. We've talked about the English Civil War, the Age of Enlightenment, and the Founding Fathers. I think that's the main stuff to study for the quiz tomorrow.

Student 1

Yep. Just be sure to review all the details. Good luck.

Student 2

Thanks. You too.

That's it for this episode. Thanks for tuning in.

Generic Activity Exit-

Alright, looks like we're done here. Until next time, see ya.