

## 20 Common Forms of Government — Study Starters

By David A. Tonar

### 1. Anarchy

Anarchism refers to the absence of government, a condition in which a nation or state operates without a central governing body. This denotes an absence of public utilities or services, a lack of regulatory control, limited diplomatic relations with other nation-states, and in most instances, a society divided into different, locally-ruled settlements (or fiefdoms).

#### Real World Example

Following the outbreak of civil war in 1991, and the toppling of dictator Said Barre, Somalia entered into a state of anarchy. The nation splintered into various autonomous regions, with tribal warlords claiming authority over territorial domains. Following years of involvement from the international community, the early 2000s saw the reestablishment of a transitional government, and in 2012, the passage of a constitution, which established Somalia as a “federation,” or a union of partially self-governing states.

### 2. Aristocracy

Aristocracy refers to a form of government in which wealthy nobles are given power over those in lower socioeconomic strata. Positions of leadership are reserved for those of an elite ruling class, a status which is typically hereditary. The privileged ruling class is viewed, in this system, as possessing the education, upbringing, and genetic traits required for rulership. Aristocracy promotes an inherent class system that connects wealth and ethnicity with both the ability and right to rule.

#### Real World Example

Ancient Greece gives us both the word aristocracy (*aristos*=excellent; *krato*=power) as well as the concept itself. In ancient Greece, a council of empowered leading citizens were viewed as offsetting the absolute power bestowed upon a monarchy. Plato viewed the concept positively, referring to the aristocracy as being comprised of “philosopher kings,” those with the knowledge and intellectual curiosity to rule as well as the requisite wealth and bloodline. But as the idea of aristocracy has become more distant from Ancient Greece, the dimensions of education and qualification have been stripped from its meaning. Today, it more largely refers to an inherently unequal form of government in which a small class of wealthy elites rules the majority population.

### 3. Bureaucracy

Bureaucracy refers to a form of government in which non-elected government officials carry out public responsibilities as dictated by administrative policy-making groups. In a bureaucracy, rules, regulations, procedures, and outcomes are formulated to maintain order, achieve efficiency, and prevent favoritism within the system. Bureaucracies rarely serve as forms of government on their own but are instead often used as mechanisms to underlie and strengthen overarching forms of government. Indeed, bureaucratic streamlining of policy implementation can take place under the rule of a dictator or a democracy.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7xNnRBksvOU>

### **Real World Example**

Bureaucracy played an essential role in formalizing and equalizing taxation in Great Britain. In the 18th century, as the United Kingdom engaged in an array of military campaigns around the world, it established an encompassing taxation administration designed to fund the war efforts. With a focus on using improved technology and more efficient collection methodologies, the United Kingdom established what would become the largest public administration network in the world to that date. The tax collection bureaucracy — the Department of Excise — served the interests of the British monarchy but would eventually give rise to the modern English bureaucracy, Her Majesty's Civil Service.

## **4. Capitalism**

Capitalism refers to a form of economy in which production is driven by private ownership. Capitalism promotes the idea of open competition and extends from the belief that a free market economy — one with limited regulatory control — is the most efficient form of economic organization. Its advocates argue that capitalism promotes economic growth, improved standards of living, higher productivity, and broader prosperity, whereas critics argue that capitalism inherently promotes inequality, exploitation of the labor class, and unsustainable use of resources and land.

### **Real World Example**

Capitalism takes various forms, from state and corporate capitalism to pure laissez-faire economy. Present-day United States may be referred to as a liberal market economy, in which firms engage in open competition within the context of existing hierarchies and market mechanisms. These hierarchies and mechanisms tend to promote greater opportunities, access, and wealth for those who already enjoy an ownership stake in the U.S. economy. It also limits opportunities for mobility and shapes participation among those who do not have an ownership stake. Political influence is also directly correlated to this ownership stake within the context of American capitalism.

## **5. Colonialism**

Colonialism is a form of governance in which a nation will seek to extend its sovereignty over other territories. In practical terms, colonialism involves the expansion of a nation's rule beyond its borders. This often entails occupation of indigenous populations and exploitation of resources to the benefit of the ruling nation. The colonizer will also often impose its own economy, culture, religious order, and form of government on an occupied people to strengthen its own authority.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lGYFRzf2Xww>

### **Real World Example**

In the 15th century, the European monarchies launched an age of nautical exploration. As merchants and conquerors voyaged in search of new lands, they found indigenous cultures whose technology and way of life they viewed as primitive. As was the tendency of European monarchies, British, French, Spanish and Dutch colonists spread their influence and authority throughout the New World, dismantling and sometimes eradicating entire cultures and peoples in the process. The most familiar case is the race for occupation of North America, the establishment of the original 13 Colonies, the systematic destruction of Native American

culture, and the slave trade that gave way to the eventual independence, prosperity, and cultural identity of the United States.

## **6. Communism**

In its purest form, Communism refers to the idea of common, public ownership of the economy, including infrastructure, utilities, and means of production. Communism, as idealized by thinkers Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, denotes an absence of class divisions, which inherently requires the subversion of the ruling class by the working class. As such, communism often incorporates the idea of revolutionary action against unequal rule. Communism often positions itself as a counterpoint to the economic stratification underlying capitalism. This resistance to stratification sometimes also takes the form of a single-state authority, one in which political opposition or dissidence may be restricted. This may manifest in some communist states as a more authoritarian form of governance, as typified by the Soviet brand of communism that swept the globe during the mid-20th century.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uDXtVIG2VW0>

### **Real World Example**

Modern communism manifests as a descendant from Soviet communism — both ideologically and materially — and is sometimes identified as the Marxist-Leninist variation on communism. Countries that retain a single-party, Marxist-Leninist rulership include Cuba, Laos, Vietnam, and the People’s Republic of China. Each of these nations adopted this form of government at the height of the Cold War — between the 1940s and 1960s — under the auspices of Russian influence. While the Soviet communist government crumbled in 1991, these nations remain committed to their own version of the Marxist-Leninist ideology. Though North Korea refers to itself as communist, the singularity of its rulership hews much closer to dictatorship.

## **7. Democracy**

Democracy refers to a form of government in which the people are given a direct role in choosing their leadership. Its primary goal is governance through fair representation, a system in which no single force or entity can exercise unchecked control or authority. The result is a system which requires discourse, debate, and compromise to satisfy the broadest possible number of public interests. Democracy is typified by fair and free elections, civic participation, protection of human rights, and the rule of law.

### **Real World Example**

While the notion of democracy finds its roots in Greek antiquity, its practice became the particular province of settlers in the colonies of the United States. In the years leading up to the U.S. War for Independence, the philosophical impetus of governance through representation played an important role in building the case for revolt. It was also essential, as the framers of the Constitution constructed a way of life around a concept called “representative democracy.” The colonists imported the racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic inequalities of their European predecessors. But in representative democracy and the Constitution, they also forged a framework for the marginalized to fight for their representation. Today, just over half of the world’s nations self-identify as constitutional democracies.

## 8. Federalism

Federalism is a form of government that both combines and divides powers between a centralized federal authority and an array of regional and local authorities. This is typically a system in which a set of states, territories, or provinces are both self-governing and beholden to the authority of a broad, unifying government structure. This is considered a balance in approach that provides roughly equal status of authority to two distinct levels of government.

### Real World Example

The United States was among the first true examples of a federation, a nation comprised from a set regions, each with its own unique set of customs, laws, and demographic compositions. Today, much philosophical debate exists over what level of independent authority states have versus the level of central control that the federal government has over state laws. This debate — and the never-ending stream of constitutional and judicial questions that arise from it — keep the state and federal authority in constant and dynamic flux.

## 9. Feudalism

Feudalism is a social structure revolving around land ownership, nobility, and military obligation. Though not a formal way of governing, feudalism refers to a way of life in which sharp, hierarchical divisions separate noble classes, clergy, and peasantry. Opportunities for movement between these hierarchies is largely impossible. In this system, peasants typically provided labor and military service in exchange for occupancy of land and protection from outside forces under the authority of a noble lord. In turn, lordships, or fiefdoms, often engaged one another politically, economically, and militarily. Feudalism was a highly decentralized and agrarian way of life supplanted when the European monarchies created the infrastructure to impose central rule over their various dominions.

### Real World Example

France of the 11th century is particularly noteworthy for the decentralization of power and the splintering of rulership into many smaller entities. During this period, travel through France would take one through a series of fiefdoms in which small, ruling families would charge various fees for passage, participation in trade, or use of the woodlands. Though feudalism would become largely extinct with the rise of the monarchy, this brief revolution in France would represent a moment of evolution for the ideas of private ownership and personal power.

## 10. Kleptocracy

Kleptocracy is a form of government in which the ruling party has either come to power, retained power, or both, through means of corruption and theft. This is not a form of government that a ruling class would ever self-apply but a pejorative term used to describe a group whose power rests on a foundation of embezzlement, misappropriation of funds, and the transfer of massive amounts of wealth from public to private interests. These private interests will typically overlap the ruling party's own economic interests.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=i-dJPoSIPfU>

### Real World Example

Vladimir Putin's post-Soviet Russia is a clear example of kleptocratic behavior by a ruling

class. In the early 1990s, as the former Soviet Union collapsed and confusion reigned, Putin and his allies from within the leadership of the KGB squirreled away billions of dollars in public money. They would ultimately use this money to fund a rise to power and, subsequently, the establishment of a quasi-authoritative regime that handed central banking authority over to cronies, awarded friends with enormous no-bid contracts to build the notoriously shoddy Sochi Olympic Village, and, in 2003, took control of a privately owned oil company. In the latter case, Putin demonstrated his absolute power by claiming fraud against oil magnate Mikhail Khodorkovsky. The charges led to the billionaire's imprisonment for a decade and parceling of his Yukos Oil Company to Putin's friends and allies. In spite of its democratic facade, Putin's Russia meets the basic qualifications of a true kleptocracy.

## **11. Meritocracy**

Meritocracy refers to a system in which authority is vested in those who have demonstrated the merits deemed pertinent to governing or public administration. Often, these merits are conferred through testing and academic credentials and are meant to create an order in which talents, abilities, and intellect determine who should hold positions of leadership and economic stewardship. The result is a social hierarchy based on achievement.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sGUNPMPrxvA>

### **Real World Example**

In a sense, America's educational tradition suggests a meritocracy in which higher degrees denote access to greater opportunity. However, because earning this degree does not itself confer any automatic authority upon a person, the U.S. is not a true meritocracy. Today, Singapore offers a modern example that aligns closest to the concept of meritocracy. Here, academic achievements play a deeply determinant role in opportunities for economic advancement, professional mobility, and civic leadership. Though this approach has helped Singapore to become a thriving economy, some express concern that its meritocracy enforces sharp hierarchical divisions between members of the public and a small population of intellectual elites.

## **12. Military Dictatorship**

A dictatorship is a nation ruled with absolute power, in the absence of a democratic process, and typically under the thumb of a single authority figure. In a military dictatorship, this authority usually heads the nation's armed forces. A military dictatorship often comes to power by subverting the existing seat of government — sometimes through claims of corruption, weakness, or ineffectiveness — and which subsequently uses the military to establish its own brand of law and order. Military dictatorships will frequently prioritize law and order over due process, civil liberties, or political freedoms. Dissent or political opposition can be dangerous or even deadly for those living under a military dictatorship.

### **Real World Example**

In 2014, Thailand's general election was disrupted by widespread protests against the government. The result was a nullified election and the subsequent dismantling of the civilian government. In the vacuum of power, General Prayut Chan-o-cha declared martial law, dissolved the senate, and placed himself in control of the nation. Since then, Thailand has persisted under dictatorial military rule. The military junta, called the National Council for Peace and Order, imposed nationwide curfews, forbids political gatherings, threatens arrest

for political opponents or activists, controls the media, and enforces widespread internet censorship.

### **13. Monarchy**

Monarchy refers to a form of rule in which absolute power and authority are held by a single member of a royal bloodline. In a monarchy, the individual in the seat of power is often believed to have been placed there by “divine right,” or the will of God. In a monarchical society, power is inherited within a line of succession that relates to one’s bloodline and birth-order within the ruling royal family. Though the monarchy has historically indicated absolute power, the concept has become increasingly diluted with the evolution of democratic principles. Today, some monarchies exist but are merely symbolic, whereas others coexist within constitutional structures. However, until the 19th century, monarchy was the most common form of government in the world.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sztf4hcGrB4>

#### **Real World Example**

Today, 45 nations in the world are governed by some form of monarchy. In many cases, this monarchy is largely symbolic and subservient to a constitution, as with the 16 commonwealth states recognizing Britain’s Queen Elizabeth II. By contrast, monarchies continue to enjoy far-reaching political authority in Brunei, Liechtenstein, Monaco, Morocco, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and Swaziland.

### **14. Oligarchy**

Oligarchy refers to a form of government in which a smattering of individuals rule over a nation. In many ways, oligarchy is a catch-all for any number of other forms of governance in which a specific set of qualities — wealth, heredity, race — are used to vest power in a small group of individuals. So, forms of government regarded as aristocratic, plutocratic, or totalitarian, for instance, can be referred to as oligarchic. Oligarchies are often characterized by tyrannical or authoritarian rule and an absence of democratic practices or individual rights.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DEabC9WzHck>

#### **Real World Example**

The apartheid government that ruled South Africa from 1948 to 1991 was a racially constructed oligarchy, one in which the minority white population exercised dominance and imposed segregation over the nation’s black population. The minority population controlled policy, public administration, and law enforcement, all to the explicit end of oppressing South Africa’s majority black population. The concentration of power in the hands of a minority population as a function of racial identity, as well as the resultant authoritarian rule vested in this minority population, qualifies South Africa’s now defunct apartheid government as an oligarch. Today, even with the Apartheid government dismantled, the vestiges of racial inequality remain in South Africa’s economy and political structures.

### **15. Plutocracy**

Plutocracy refers to a system of rule in which power is determined as a direct function of wealth. Plutocracy mirrors the economic hierarchy of aristocratic systems but lacks the

philosophical imperatives used to justify the latter. Whereas aristocratic forms of governance justified economic hierarchy by presuming an equivalence between wealth, heredity, and the qualification to lead, plutocracy refers in simpler terms to the ascendance of the wealthy to positions of power. Think of it as the difference between “old money” and “new money.” As with the phrase “new money” itself, plutocracy is rarely a term that a ruling class will self-apply. Rather, it is often used as a derogatory term meant to highlight the inequality inherent in capitalist societies.

### **Real World Example**

The label of plutocracy has been lobbed against a number of societies over the course of history and generally as a way of critiquing inequality. In both the United States and post-Soviet Russia — where a select group of billionaires possess 50% and 35%, respectively, of all national wealth — social critics have identified patterns of plutocracy. These critics would argue that the outsize power and influence of the wealthy in these societies tends to undermine equality and fair economic competition.

## **16. Republicanism**

Republicanism, the form of government — not to be conflated with the Republican political party specific to U.S. politics — refers to a system in which power is vested in the citizenry. In technical definition, a republic is a nation in which the people hold popular sovereignty through the electoral and legislative processes as well as through participation in public and civic life. In its earliest form, the republic was perceived as a counterbalance to monarchy, an approach which merged monarchy and aristocracy with some trappings of democracy.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IDQ1Lf3N1hk>

### **Real World Example**

Informed by the philosophical ideals of the enlightenment, particularly the writing of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, the revolutionaries who toppled the French monarchy in the 1790s established a new republic in their wake. Though the République française was short-lived — Napoleon’s rule transformed France into an aristocracy by the turn of the next century — its founding on the principles of Rousseau’s Social Contract would be particularly influential to the myriad nations soon to emerge from crumbling European monarchies and splintering colonial empires.

## **17. Socialism**

Socialism refers to a form of government in which the people own the primary means of production. A counterpoint to the competitive nature and unequal proclivities of capitalism, socialism has existed in many forms and to widely variant degrees of strictness throughout history and around the world. From small communal societies to state-level governments that provide encompassing public services such as universal healthcare, the concept of socialism permeates governments the world over. By contrast to the less compromising and often more authoritarian nature of communism, socialism tends to be a malleable concept. Some adherents view socialism as referring to a strict policy of shared ownership and equal distribution of resources, while others believe free market capitalism can coexist with socialist forms of public administration. To wit, the Social Security system of the declaratively capitalist United States is inherently socialist in nature.

### **Real World Example**

The Nordic model of social democracy represents perhaps the most effective real world implementation of socialist principles. The Scandinavian nations of Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, and Sweden adhere to policies that combine free market capitalism with extensive public works, including free healthcare, free education, a comprehensive welfare state, and high percentages of unionized workers. This approach essentially combines the social consciousness of socialism with the private ownership and competitive opportunity of capitalism.

## **18. Theocracy**

Theocracy refers to a form of government in which a specific religious ideology informs the leadership, laws, and customs of a nation. In many instances, there will be little to no distinction between scriptural laws and legal codes. Likewise, religious clergy will typically occupy roles of leadership, and in some instances, the highest office in the nation. Because religious law usually extends from writings and traditions that are many centuries old, and therefore impose practices that may not conform with present-day standards of ethical justice or constitutional law, theocracies frequently run afoul of organizations and agencies advocating for global human rights.

### **Real World Example**

Iran is perhaps the most important and powerful theocratic state in the world today. Since a 1979 Islamic student revolution toppled the Iranian monarchy, the ayatollahs have ruled the country. Here, a “supreme leader” serves as head of state and delegates authority to other religious leaders. In Iran, the elected president is subservient to this supreme Islamic scholar. Likewise, while Iran has developed some dimensions of a modern legal code, judiciary system, and administrative process, all of these must first be based on Islamic criteria. In essence, the Sharia — the primary legal doctrine of the Islamic faith — is the primary legal doctrine for the nation of Iran.

## **19. Totalitarianism**

Totalitarianism is an authoritarian form of government in which the ruling party recognizes no limitations whatsoever on its power, either in the public life or private rights of its citizens. Power is often vested in the hands of a single figure, an authority around whom significant propaganda is built as a way of extending and retaining uncontested authority. Totalitarian states often employ widespread surveillance, control over mass media, intimidating demonstrations of paramilitary or police power, and suppression — usually violent — of protest, activism, or political opposition.

### **Real World Example**

Though North Korea identifies itself as the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea, this is truly the clearest example of a totalitarian dictatorship in the modern world. Kim Jong-un rules with singular and unchallenged authority, commanding over his public without political opposition. With absolute control over the state-run media, an enormous military apparatus at his disposal, and an endless cycle of propaganda and misinformation helping to sustain his power, Kim Jong-un rules his state in a vacuum from world affairs. Criticism of the supreme leader or protest of his policies is a crime punishable by death, as are countless other crimes for which due process is not required. North Korea’s propensity toward human rights violations is said to be unparalleled in the modern world.



## 20. Tribalism

Tribalism refers to a form of governance in which there is an absence of central authority and where, instead, various regional tribes lay claim to different territories, resources, or domains. In this system, trade, commerce, and war may occur between different tribes without the involvement or oversight of a unifying structure. This was a particularly common way of life in the premodern world, where different families and clans would establish a set of common rules and rituals specific to their community. While many tribes have forms of internal leadership — from councils and chiefdoms to warlords and patriarchs — tribes are also distinct for having relatively limited role differentiation or role stratification within. In some regards, this can make the customs internal to some tribes particularly egalitarian. That said, tribalism as a way of life has been threatened, and in many parts of the world extinguished, by modernity, development, and the imposition of outside authority.

### Real World Example

Afghanistan is a nation naturally predisposed to tribalism. Centuries of interference from outside invaders — the Soviet Union and the United States chief among them — have created an ongoing state of disarray for the central government of Afghanistan. This — combined with a sprawling and treacherous geography — reduced Afghanistan to a state of regional tribes. In many instances, the authority of local warlords, drug cartels, or Islamic clergy take on far more immediate importance than the authority of a central government. Today, the tribal dynamics that permeate Afghanistan represent a more direct influence on the lives of local populations than any international or federal ruling structure.

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Of course, this is just a quick overview of a vast subject. Each of these forms of government carries an array of complex philosophical, ethical, and practical questions. May this summary serve as a starting point as you plunge into your research.

The deeper dive is up to you!

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