

# Government Basics 1: What is government?

*“If men were angels, no government would be necessary.”*

– James Madison, “Father of the Constitution”

But we aren’t, so it is.

People need controlling, the thought goes. Do you agree? We’ll talk and think about that in class. Right now, however, we need to get some terms under our belts:

## **government:**

- a. controlling people’s behavior; and/or
- b. a specific system of jobs and institutions that do the controlling (like the US Congress and Agriculture Dept.)
- c. the people presently doing the controlling (President Obama, Chief Justice Roberts, etc.)

**power:** the ability to get something done

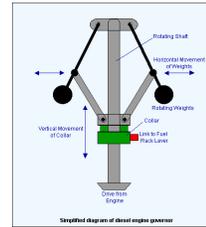
**authority:** someone’s justification for using power; e.g., I am a teacher, thus I can tell you what to do in school.

**legitimate:** based on a law, rule, or well-accepted custom. For centuries, teachers have told kids what to do in school, we all know this, plus it’s in the handbook, so my authority is legitimate.

**sovereignty:** freedom from anyone else’s control. E.g., the US has sovereignty; no one else can tell it what to do. Michigan is not sovereign, since it must obey federal laws.

Humans in groups almost always have some form of government (rules and enforcement). It is in our nature, like other social (group-living) animals. Government is something that allowed groups to function well, defeat less organized groups, and pass

on their genes, including that instinct to do government.



Over the millennia, people have believed in different specific purposes that government should serve. Here are some.

## **Some Purposes of Government**

1. Keep the people safe from outside attack; this is called “defense.”
2. Keep the people safe from one another within the group and punish wrongdoers (“justice”)
3. Keep things orderly and peaceful
4. Protect people’s “rights” (help people be as free as possible)
5. Promote the general welfare (well-being) of people
6. Promote equality; there are two different versions of this (that people argue a lot about):
  - a. Equal opportunity (Everyone legally has the same chances.)
  - b. Equal outcome (Everyone ends up about equal in health or wealth.)

**Practice** Use your  first; then look back if you must.

---

**Write the letter of the function of government next to the example. You might use a letter more than once. There might be more than one right answer for an item, too. The point is to think.**

Write **D** for defense against foreign attack  
**J** for justice (keep you and your stuff safe from evil fellow citizens)  
**O** for order  
**R** for protecting people's basic human rights  
**W** for promoting people's welfare (well-being)  
**Q** for promoting equality

- \_\_\_\_\_ 1. Police come when I call them about loud neighbors at night
- \_\_\_\_\_ 2. The US Marines capture a terrorist leader.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 3. Escanaba has speed limits on city streets.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 4. The state legislature makes a law outlawing a type of pollution from factories.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 5. Tax money is spent on community centers for poorer neighborhoods, so kids will have a better chance of not being poor when they grow up.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 6. Someone who stole the subs from my minivan goes to jail for 12 months.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 7. The Constitution says there cannot be a law prohibiting you from exercising your religion.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 8. The United States monitors elections in some states to make sure no one is prevented from voting.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 9. NASA sends robots to Mars.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 10. If police do an "improper" search, the evidence is not admitted in court.

**Write the general word from the choices below.**

- 11. the ability to get things done or get people to do things:
- 12. If the authority someone gives for issuing an order is based on a known law or principle, it's . . .
- 13. truly having control or power over oneself:
- 14. things like health, not being in poverty, even having good roads and parks
- 15. controlling people's and companies' behavior:

**power   legitimate   welfare   sovereignty   government**