

# Enlightenment Political Thought and Experience

## Did You KNOW?

The Enlightenment received its name from the people who lived through it. Other historical periods received their names after the era had passed.

## Introduction

The Enlightenment was a period of great changes in worldviews in Europe, England, and the colonies. It lasted from the 1650s to the 1750s. During the Enlightenment, people began to believe that learning came from experience. People observed and wrote about the world. It was an age of science.

The American colonists considered the ideas of Enlightenment thinkers. Like the ancient Greeks, Enlightenment thinkers wrote about the best types of government. The ideas of these Enlightenment thinkers can be seen in our constitutional principles.

## Absolute and Limited Monarchy

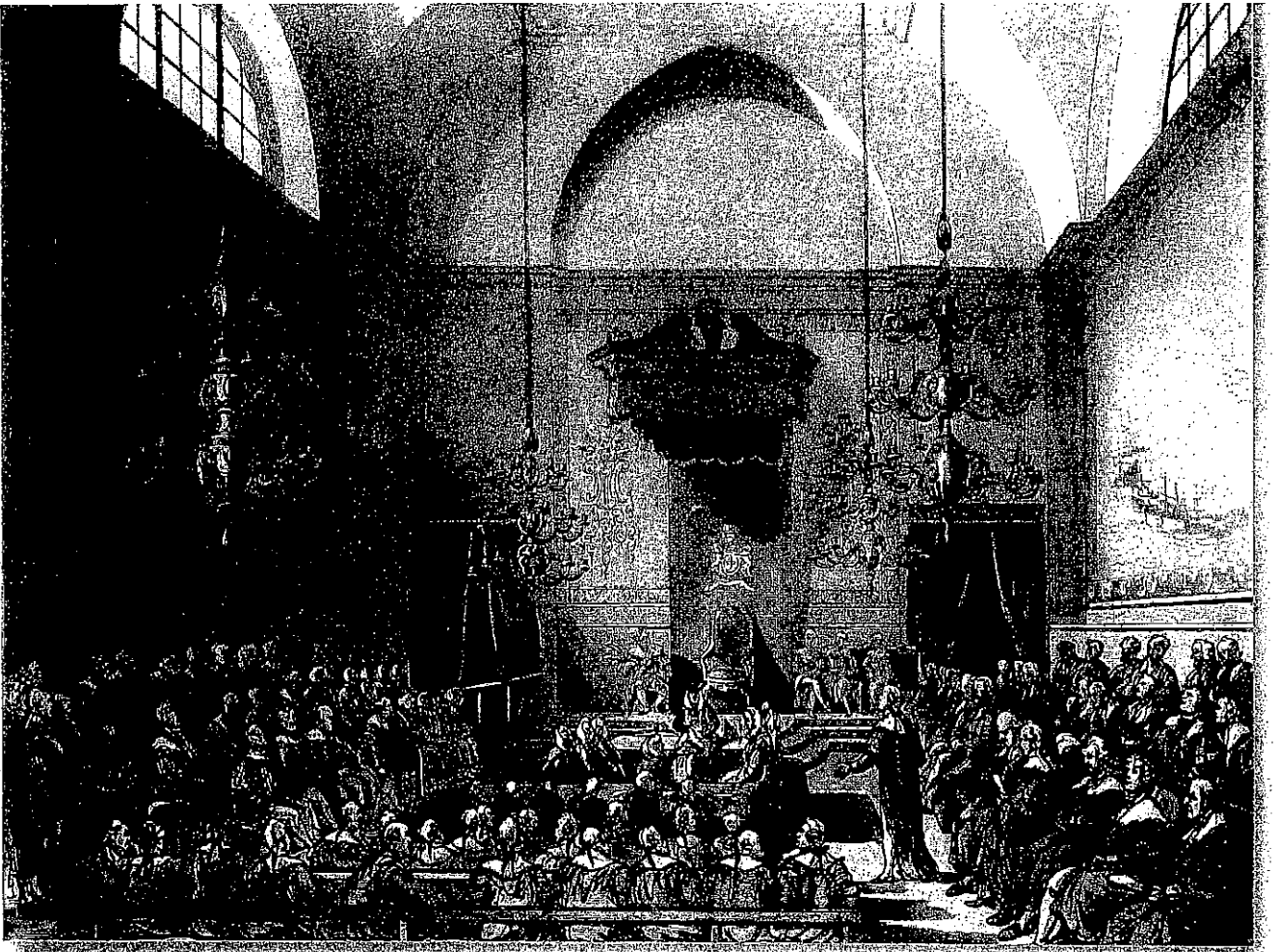
Enlightenment thinkers wrote about two trends of their age. These trends influenced their theories about governments and politics. They wrote about the development of

1. Absolute monarchies in Europe from 1660–1789
2. A limited monarchy in England between 1642–1688.

Before 1660, monarchs and aristocrats shared governing in Europe. Then the monarchs took important jobs from the aristocrats. Aristocrats lost the jobs of overseeing the military, collecting taxes, and running the courts.

Jacob Leisler led a revolt in 1689 against colonial officials in New York who supported King James II, and headed the provisional government until 1691.





Without responsibilities important to the monarch, aristocrats had no way to influence a king. Monarchs then held absolute governing power. Aristocrats could not check the monarch's power. For example, aristocrats could no longer threaten to keep tax money from a king if a monarch abused his power. These monarchies existed from 1660–1798.

England followed a different path. Today, the English Parliament is the representative assembly of England. It has two chambers—the House of Lords and the House of Commons. The modern Parliament makes laws. Before 1642, the Parliament's job was to collect taxes. Sometimes Parliament advised the king. It was not a representative assembly. Before 1642, the aristocrats belonging to Parliament did not make laws, but they wanted a greater role in government. After 1642, they fought for power with the monarch.

Finally, in 1688 in a bloodless struggle called the Glorious Revolution, Parliament won. King James II left the country. Then Parliament invited William and Mary of Orange to become the English monarchs. They agreed to terms listed in a bill of rights. Under the English Bill of Rights (1689), a monarch could no longer make or end laws without Parliamentary approval. Without permission from Parliament, a monarch could not collect taxes. Also, the king could not keep an army during peacetime.

The Glorious Revolution permanently limited the monarch's power. In the 50 years after the Glorious Revolution, the prime minister, the leader of Parliament, and Parliament shared governing with the monarch. They checked the power of the crown. Most important, England became a limited government.

✦ Through the Glorious Revolution, the English Parliament secured a greater role in government. Today, Parliament makes laws and is the representative assembly of England.

## Did You KNOW?

The period of world history from 1660–1789 is called the Age of Absolutism because European monarchs held absolute governing power.

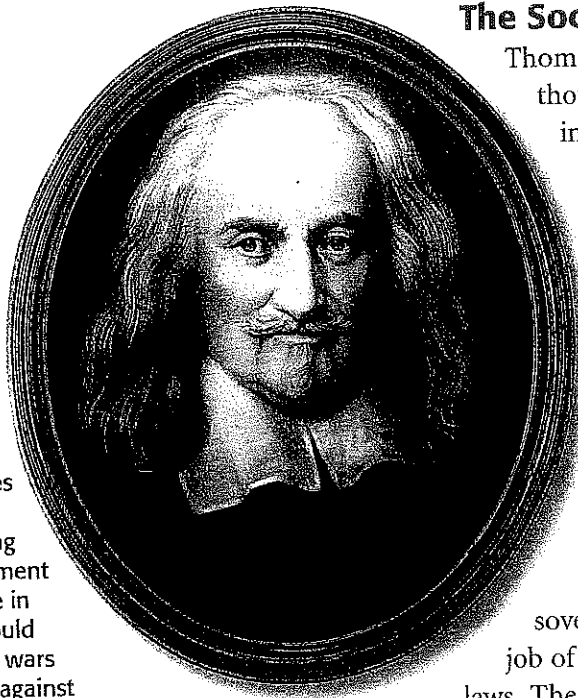
# The Social Contract, Natural Rights, and Popular Sovereignty

## Did You Know?

*Leviathan* is a word that comes from Hebrew. It can mean something unusually large or overawing. Why do you think Thomas Hobbes chose the word *leviathan* as the name of his book?

Enlightenment thinkers sought explanations for the world that were not religious or centered around God. Before the Enlightenment, people thought God or religion could explain everything. They believed in the divine right of kings. The **divine right of kings** meant that God chose a monarch. Likewise, God gave the monarch authority to rule. The monarch then was only answerable to God. During the Enlightenment, writers questioned the idea that a king's sovereignty came from God. **Sovereignty** means "supreme," or the *highest degree of political authority*. No longer believing in the divine right of kings freed thinkers to express new theories about the origin or source of sovereignty. Two of these thinkers included the Englishmen Thomas Hobbes (1588–1679) and John Locke (1632–1704). Hobbes and Locke also wrote about their opinions on the best relationship between people and their government.

## The Social Contract



Thomas Hobbes thought that without a strong central government to keep people in check, they would wage constant wars "of every man against every man."

Thomas Hobbes thought that people were selfish. He thought they would always place their own private interests before common, public interests. In his book *Leviathan* (1651), Hobbes wrote that in nature, before people formed a society, pre-existing principles arose. He called the principles **natural laws**. According to Hobbes, because of the conflicts that resulted when people pursued their own interests, people formed a society. They also agreed to follow laws and rules for behavior. Hobbes called the agreement a **social contract**. People agreed to the social contract because otherwise wars would be constant.

To enforce the social contract, people granted sovereignty to a political authority. It was the job of a political authority or ruler to enforce natural laws. The ruler needed to keep peace. Hobbes believed since people were selfish, only a strong ruler could keep peace. Hobbes viewed human nature negatively.

In contrast, John Locke viewed human nature positively. He believed that people were essentially fair and unselfish. In his nonfiction essay, *Two Treatises of Civil Government* (1690), Locke wrote that people were sometimes able to act for a common good. He thought that people should have great individual freedom to act. Locke also believed in a social contract between people and their government. But Locke believed that the purpose of a social contract was mostly to resolve occasional conflicts. Because people were fair, Locke thought government should be limited. He thought no one in government should have absolute power. Locke believed people could usually govern themselves.

## Natural Rights

Locke thought natural law gave people natural rights. **Natural rights** are rights bestowed on people by birth. One of Locke's natural laws was that all men were equal. By equal, Locke meant that no man meeting citizenship qualifications was entitled to greater privileges than another man by birth. In England, aristocrats had hereditary privileges. Aristocrats inherited their right to serve in Parliament. For Locke, equality gave all male citizens the natural rights to life, liberty, health, and property.

## Popular Sovereignty

Most important, Locke wrote that government received its sovereignty from the people. **Popular sovereignty** is the phrase for the idea that people created their government and agreed or consented to be governed by it. As part of the social contract, people expected government to protect natural rights if conflicts occurred. Locke also believed if government failed to protect natural rights, it broke the social contract. If government broke the social contract, Locke thought that people should overthrow those who governed.

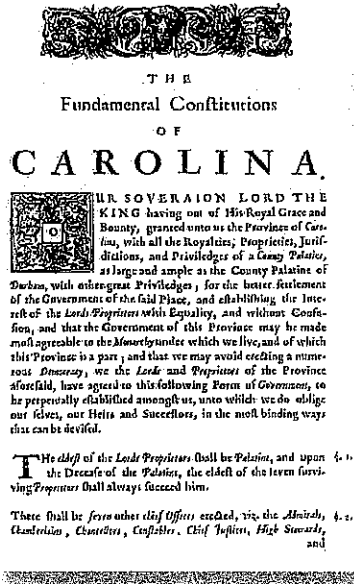
Locke's ideas greatly influenced American constitutional principles. For example, when the colonists declared independence, they argued that revolution was their right because England broke its part of the social contract. England failed to preserve the colonists' natural rights.

## Separation of Powers

Like Hobbes and Locke, Frenchman Baron de Montesquieu (1689–1755) also wrote about the most desirable relationship between people and their government. He expressed ideas about how to prevent government and its leaders from abusing power.

In his book *The Spirit of the Laws* (1748), Montesquieu wrote that a republic needed three separate branches of government. Otherwise, he thought power would be abused. The branches are the executive, legislative, and judicial.

The executive branch of government is the head or leader of government. The executive's job is usually to enforce laws. Examples include a monarch, a prime minister and his cabinet, or an elected president and his cabinet. The legislative branch of government is the branch that makes laws. Examples include the U.S. Congress and the two chambers of the British legislature, the House of Commons and the House of Lords. The judicial branch, or court system, interprets laws and settles disputes.



Initially, the *Fundamental Constitutions of Carolina* guaranteed religious freedom. However, a revision in 1670 established the Church of England as the official religion of the Carolina Colony.

### FUNDAMENTAL CONSTITUTIONS OF CAROLINA

For many years John Locke served as the secretary and doctor to Sir Anthony Ashley Cooper, Earl of Shaftesbury, who was one of the aristocrats granted land from King Charles II in the Carolina Colony. Locke drafted the *Fundamental Constitutions of Carolina* (1669) as one of his secretarial duties, but he is not credited with the principles for governing established by that document. The Fundamentals gave the power to pass colony laws to the aristocracy.

Montesquieu advocated for a **separation of powers** among the three branches. By separation of powers, he meant that each branch should have different responsibilities. With different responsibilities, each branch could check the power of the others. For example, he suggested that the legislature collect and set levels of taxes. Then it could refuse to give money to the executive if it abused its power. He believed that the legislature should be divided into two bodies. More important, both bodies should approve all laws. Then one body could prevent passage of a law proposed by the other. Also, Montesquieu thought that the executive should be able to veto laws. He thought that the executive veto kept the legislature from passing a poor law. Likewise, he thought the approval of two legislative bodies kept lawmakers from creating poor laws.

Montesquieu's ideas about the separation of powers became important in the development of the American Constitution. Americans themselves can be credited with expanding and refining his ideas over time. In the colonial experience, the executive had too much influence over the business of the other branches. You will learn more in Section 3 about the rising influence of the colonial governors. When Americans first thought about applying the concept of the separation of powers to the Constitution, they particularly wanted to keep the legislature free from the power and influence of the executive.

✦ Known for his ideas on separation of government powers, in addition to publishing *The Spirit of the Laws* (1748), the lawyer and philosopher Montesquieu published a famous novel in 1721 called *The Persian Letters*.

## Enlightenment Ideas for the American Government



Before they wrote the Constitution, Americans argued about the qualities of a desirable government. Some Americans believed only a strong central government could keep order and peace in the new country. Some believed the new country required a strong executive branch.

Other Americans believed that people could govern themselves. They thought that government should only step in to settle conflicts. They believed that most power should belong to individuals. Likewise, they believed that most power should be left to the states.

Eventually, when the Constitution was written, it created a mixed and balanced government. Americans embraced the constitutional principle of separation of powers. You will learn more about this in Chapter Two. Most important, they embraced the principle of shared power.

**IMPORTANT TERMS***Write Out - Term: definition*

- 1 Match the terms in the right column with the definition in the left column.

- A. The representative assembly of the English government  
 B. A word meaning "supreme," or the highest degree of political authority  
 C. Hobbes' term for pre-existing principles that arose from nature  
 D. Locke's term for rights bestowed on people at birth  
 E. Locke's term for an agreement between people and their government

Natural rights  
 Natural laws  
 Sovereignty  
 Social contract  
 Parliament

**REVIEWING FACTS**

- 2 List three responsibilities the monarchs in Europe took from the aristocrats during the Age of Absolutism.  
 3 The English Bill of Rights kept the monarch from doing certain things. List three.  
 4 Montesquieu thought a republic needed three branches of government. List the branches.

**REVIEWING MAIN IDEAS**

Use complete sentences to answer the following questions.

- 5 Define the divine right of kings.  
 6 Why did Hobbes believe that people formed a society and agreed to the social contract?  
 7 What was the purpose of the social contract for Locke?  
 8 What is popular sovereignty?  
 9 What does separation of powers mean?

**UNDERSTANDING CONCEPTS**

- 10 In our society people usually agree to behave in certain ways and expect others to behave in certain ways, often for mutual benefit. Hobbes and Locke called the agreement between people and their government a social contract. Using complete sentences, describe the social contract (agreement) in the relationships below.

- The relationship between a parent and a child
- The relationship between a school and a student
- The relationship between a hospital and a patient

Pick two of the relationships you just wrote about and describe what might happen if people broke their end of the bargain in the social contract. How are the consequences of a broken social contract in these two sets of relationships similar and/or different? How do the consequences differ from those resulting from a broken social contract between citizens and their government?