

Comparing Democracy and Authoritarianism

No two governments, past or present, are exactly the same. However, it is possible to examine the similarities and differences among political systems and categorize different forms of government. One simple way to categorize governments is to analyze the power of the people versus the control of the government in order to divide them into democratic and authoritarian political systems.

Democracies

Many countries today claim to be democracies, but if the citizens are not involved in government and politics, they are democratic in name only. Some governments are more democratic than others, but systems cannot be considered truly democratic unless they meet certain criteria:

- Democracies in general respect basic individual liberties such as freedom of speech and religion. No government allows absolute freedom, but democracies do not heavily censor newspapers and public expression of opinions.
- In democracies, people usually accept decisions made by the majority of voters in a free election. However, democracies try to avoid the "tyranny of the majority" by providing ways for minorities all kinds to have their voices heard as well.
- The presence of elections alone is not enough to call a country a democracy. The elections must be fair and competitive, and the government or political leaders cannot control the results.
- Democracies are not controlled by the whims of a leader, but they are governed by laws that apply to leaders and citizens equally – this is referred to as “rule of law” in which everyone, even the leaders, are under (have to follow) the law.
- By itself, a citizen's right to vote is not a good measure of democracy. The government must respond in some way to citizen demands. If they vote, the candidate they choose must actually take office. If they contact government in other ways — writing, protesting, phoning — officials must respond.

Authoritarian Regimes

One ruler or a small group of leaders have the real power in authoritarian political systems. Authoritarian governments may hold elections and they may have contact with their citizens, but citizens do not have any voice in how they are ruled. Their leaders do not give their subjects free choice. Instead, they decide what the people can or cannot have. Citizens, then, are subjects who must obey, and not participants in government decisions. Kings, military leaders, emperors, a small group of aristocrats, dictators, and even presidents or prime ministers may rule authoritarian governments. The leader's title does not automatically indicate a particular type of government.

Authoritarian systems do not allow freedoms of speech, press, and religion, and they do not follow majority rule nor protect minority rights. Their leaders often come from one small group, such as top military officials, or from a small group of aristocratic families.