Government

People need rules in order to live together without conflict. Rules or laws are created by governments. Countries may have limited governments or unlimited governments. In a limited government, all citizens—including the country’s leaders—must obey the laws of the land as written in a constitution or statement of rights. A democracy is a form of limited government where power rests with the people of the nation. The United States has a representative democracy in which citizens vote to elect representatives who then make and enforce laws.

In unlimited governments, rulers have powers that are not limited by laws. One type of unlimited government is a dictatorship, where a dictator usually takes power by force. To stay in power, most dictators rely on the police and the military. Dictators are not responsible to the people, and they limit freedom of speech, assembly, and the press. In a monarchy, kings or queens are born into a ruling family and inherit their power to rule. Until about the 1600s, such rulers were absolute monarchs with unlimited power. Now, in most countries, absolute monarchy has given way to constitutional monarchy. The United Kingdom, for example, is both a constitutional monarchy and a democracy. The queen is the symbolic head of the country, but elected leaders hold the power to rule. The chart below summarizes forms of government.

The Economy

Culture includes economic activities, or how the people in a society earn a living. Some people farm or manufacture products. Others provide services, such as designing a Web page or preparing food. You will learn more about economic systems in Section 3.

Cultural Change

Cultures do not remain the same. Humans constantly invent new ideas and technologies and create new solutions to problems. Trade, the movement of people, and war can spread these changes to other cultures. The process of spreading new knowledge and skills to other cultures is called cultural diffusion. Today television and the Internet are making cultural diffusion take place more rapidly than ever before.

Culture Over Time

Historians have traced the tremendous changes that humans have made in their cultures. In the first human societies, people lived by hunting animals and gathering fruits and vegetables. They were nomadic, moving from place to place, to follow sources of food.

Starting about 10,000 years ago, people learned to grow food by planting seeds. This change brought about the Agricultural Revolution. Groups stayed in one place and built settlements. These societies became more complex. As a result, four civilizations, or highly developed cultures, arose in river valleys in present-day Iraq, Egypt, India, and China. These civilizations included cities,
roles of men and women. Social scientists also examine a country's different ethnic groups. An ethnic group is a group of people who share a common history, language, religion, and some physical characteristics. One particular ethnic group in a country may be the majority group. This group in society controls most of the wealth and power. The other ethnic groups in that country are minority groups—people whose race or ethnic origin is different from that of the majority group in the region. The largest ethnic minority groups in the United States are African Americans and Hispanic Americans.

Language Sharing a language is one of the strongest unifying forces for a culture. Even within a culture, though, there are language differences. Some people may speak a dialect, or a local form of a language that differs from the same language in other areas. The differences may include pronunciation and the meaning of words. For example, people in the northeastern United States say "soda," whereas people in the Midwest say "pop." Both groups are referring to soft drinks, however.
What is Culture?