

Dunman High School
H1 General Paper
Governments – Part 1: What, why, how, and how far? [T1W10]



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Organisation of these notes:

- A. **What are they?** What are the types and elements of governments?
- B. **Why? What for?** What essential purposes and roles do governments serve? What duties and responsibilities do we expect them to fulfil?
- C. **How?** Through what tools and attributes do governments fulfil these roles?
- D. **However...** What are the risks of governments having power? How far should governments be trusted with power?
- E. **How far?** How far should governments be checked and constrained? What are the risks of checking and constraining a government too much?
- F. **Conclusion:** How may we judge governments? What does good governance depend on?
- G. **A-Level exam questions related to governments**, grouped into sub-topics, from 2004 to 2023

A. What are they? What are the types and elements of governments?

Prominent types of governments today:

<p>More top-down control</p> 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Military junta (eg. Myanmar): Military generals govern the country, usually after seizing power in a coup. 2. Absolute monarchy (eg. Saudi Arabia, Brunei): A monarch, such as a king or sultan, governs the country. This monarch is usually from a distinguished family that has been in power for decades or centuries, and the people have developed a long tradition of respect for that family or at least acceptance of its dominant position. The monarchy may govern with the help of advisors or alliances with other powerful families in the country. (A country with a monarchy is a <i>kingdom</i>. A country without any monarchy is a <i>republic</i>, meaning the country belongs to the public i.e. the people, and not to any king.)
<p>More checks and participation from the ground up</p> 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 3. One-party state (eg. China): A political party governs the country, with little or no opposition from any other party. Unlike a monarchy or junta, a one-party state's ruling party can contain a much larger number of members from across society. This large size of the ruling party can enable it to make more connections with people across society. A one-party state's ruling party can let the people influence policy, such as by surveying the people for their opinions and allowing people to submit petitions to the government. But the party cannot be voted out of power. It loses power only if it is overthrown or collapses. 4. Mixed government – constitutional monarchy and democracy (eg. the UK): This political system combines different types of government. A constitutional monarch is a monarch whose powers are limited; they usually just play a ceremonial and symbolic role, and leave the actual governing to the people's democratic representatives. Such a country is usually simply referred to as a 'democracy', since the democratic part is usually the most active part of that government. 5. Representative democracy (eg. the US): The people's elected representatives govern the country. The people on the ground (the masses, the public) do not make the policies, but they indirectly influence the governing by electing representatives every few years. 6. Direct/Participative democracy (eg. Switzerland to some extent, ancient Athens): The people on the ground do not just elect representatives; the people directly participate in the governing of the country by frequently voting for or against specific policies through referendums. Such a system is rare; people on the ground may not fully understand complex policy, and having so many people participate directly in policy-making may make governing inefficient.

Note on Singapore's political system: Singapore can be characterised as a *representative democracy*, with *some elements of a one-party state*.

Singapore is a representative democracy because citizens elect representatives into Parliament every few years, and opposition parties are allowed. In every election since 1981, there have been a small number of opposition Members of Parliament (MPs) elected, and the number has gradually increased over the decades. Currently there are nine elected opposition MPs.

But Singapore also arguably has some elements of a one-party state. Members or former members of the ruling party are often put in charge of major organisations that govern many areas of life in Singapore. These include the People's Association, which organises community events in neighbourhoods; and the National Trades Union Congress, which represents workers' interests. Moreover, the ruling party can easily change the constitution, because changing the constitution only requires a two-third vote in Parliament, and the ruling party currently holds about 90% of the Parliament's seats.

Thus, Singapore's ruling party has a wide-ranging and heavy influence on life in Singapore and our political system. This extensive power makes it easier for the ruling party to implement its policies and maintain support among the people, and very difficult (but not impossible) for opposition parties to defeat the ruling party. Whether this is a good system or not may depend on how much you support the ruling party or are opposed to it.

Common elements of a modern government

1. **Legislature:** the organisation that debates and makes laws (legislation), usually consisting of many politicians representing many parts of the country.
 - Eg. the Singapore Parliament, the UK House of Commons, the US Congress (divided into the US House of Representatives and the US Senate), China's National People's Congress
2. **Head of state:** the individual with the highest authority in the country, usually the one who signs legislation into effect, i.e. their signature turns the legislation into official law.
 - Eg. the British King, the US President
3. **Cabinet:** the group of high-ranking government officials who are each in charge of governing a particular aspect of the country, usually called ministers. Their leader (usually the Prime Minister) is the **head of government**, in charge of selecting and overseeing the ministers. In some countries such as the US, the cabinet's leader is the President, who is thus both head of state and head of government.
4. **Ministries, or executive departments:** departments that each focus on governing a particular aspect of the country. They are overseen by ministers. They are staffed by civil servants hired to administer laws and analyse data, usually hired on the basis of their technical expertise.
 - Eg. Singapore's Ministry of Education, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, etc.; the US' Defence Department, Justice Department, etc.; China's State Council, divided into the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Ministry of Science and Technology, etc.
5. **State agencies:** organisations set up by the legislature to make and enforce rules to regulate a specific aspect of society.
 - Eg. the Housing Development Board (HDB) in Singapore, created to manage public housing; the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) in the US, created to protect the environment; the National Supervision Commission (NSC) in China, created to investigate corruption
6. **Judiciary:** the legal system that administers justice through courts and legal rulings.
 - Judges, court officials
7. **Different levels of government:** a large country is often divided into multiple territories that each have their own government, resulting in higher and lower levels of government in that country.
 - The **national or federal government** is a country's highest level of government, in charge of the whole country. Eg. the Chinese national government
 - A **provincial or state government** is a government in charge of a particular territory within the country. Eg. the Hubei provincial government
 - A **municipal government** is the government in charge of a city. Eg. the Wuhan city government

The term '**local government**' is sometimes used to refer to a government at a level lower than the national level, i.e. the government of a province, a city or a village.

Note on the meaning of 'government':

The word 'government' can be used in a broader sense or a narrower sense.

- In the broader sense, 'government' refers to all the above elements.
- In the narrow sense, 'government' refers to just the ruling party or the cabinet.

When you read the word 'government' in an article, you need to infer which sense it's being used in, based on the way it's being used.

Note on the meaning of 'state':

The word 'state' has several possible meanings.

- 'State' can mean the government in the broadest sense; for instance: "What an individual eats or drinks should not be the concern of the state."
- 'State' could also refer to a self-governing territory within a large federation; for instance: "The US has 50 states, including Texas, California and Florida."
- 'State' could also refer to a country; for instance: "Singapore is an independent, sovereign state."

So when you read the word 'state' in an article, you must infer which sense it's being used in, based on the way it's being used.

What are the benefits of a government being divided into these elements?

- Efficiency: The many different parts can work on many different problems all at the same time. This enables a government to efficiently work on many different problems of society.
- Checks and balances: If one part makes a mistake, other parts can detect the mistake and mitigate the damage.

Eg. In the Chinese village of Wukan in 2011, residents protested against the village government officials selling farm land to real estate developers without properly compensating the villagers. After the government of Guangdong province intervened, negotiated with the villagers and allowed them to elect representatives to oversee the village's governing committee, the protests were resolved. This is an example of one level of government (a provincial government) checking another level of government (village government), addressing a mistake (abuse of power) and resolving it.

Eg. Singapore's former Minister for Transport S. Iswaran has been investigated by the state agency the Corrupt Practices Investigation Bureau (CPIB) and charged by the judicial system for corruption, awaiting trial. This is an example of some parts of the government (a state agency, the judiciary) checking another part (a cabinet member), to detect a mistake (corruption) and prevent it from spreading. Each part is limited in its power and role. No one part is so powerful that it is beyond scrutiny.

(For further elaboration, see section E of these notes, points 1 and 2, on page 11.)

What are the pitfalls of dividing a government into these elements?

- Different parts that are supposed to work with one another may instead clash with one another. Eg. In the US, the Republican Party in Congress (the legislature) has been preventing President Joe Biden (the head of state) from passing laws on border-control and military aid for Ukraine and Israel. The Republicans in Congress have expressed agreement with such policies in the past, and so should be working with the President to pass these laws. But because their party is different from the President's, they seem to be trying to prevent the President from claiming a legislative victory during an election year, and so are obstructing the legislation, thus resulting in a divided and dysfunctional government.

(For further elaboration, see section E of these notes, points 1 and 2, on page 11.)

B. Why? What for? What essential purposes do governments serve?

Roles and duties of governments today (not an exhaustive list)

1. Security and protection

- Security against foreign threats, such as aggressive states
- Security against internal threats, such as domestic criminals
- Safety from environmental threats, such as natural disasters
- Safety from unwarranted actions by state authorities, such as government infringement upon individual rights and abuse of police power
- The difficulty for a government is that in its attempt to protect its people from severe threats, it sometimes itself becomes a threat to people's safety, due to draconian security measures and unchecked power of armed forces.

2. Social stability

- Promoting tolerance between social groups: even if the groups do not agree with one another's beliefs and lifestyles, they still put up with and live peacefully alongside one another, and avoid attacking or aggravating one another
- Promoting harmony between social groups: the groups appreciate one another and embrace the diversity among them
- Curbing conflicts between groups
- Addressing discontent from groups to curb social tension
- The difficulty for a government is that social stability is not simply based on peaceful, civil behaviour, but is also rooted in groups' feelings and perceptions, which are hard to address due to their intangibility. A seemingly stable social order may appear harmonious on the surface but may have tension festering beneath the surface due to certain groups' hidden feelings of dissatisfaction or hidden bigoted views.
- Another difficulty is that groups that disrupt social stability may have fair and genuine grievances, and the government must decide how fair to sympathise with them, without appearing to be neglecting its role of maintaining stability.

3. Health

- Healthcare: Funding and providing health services, subsidising health insurance, funding elderly care
- Shelter: Provide safe, hygienic living conditions by building affordable public housing
- Environment: curbing pollution, and maintaining natural environments for fitness activities
- The difficulty for a government is how to fund such a wide range of public goods and services in a fiscally sustainable way. This is especially so when society is ageing and more people live longer lives with more age-related health problems, resulting in the need for more and more healthcare spending.

4. Economic management

- Fostering a business-friendly economy: allowing businesses to operate efficiently without unnecessary bureaucratic red tape; signing free trade agreements to give business access to overseas markets
- Helping workers by promoting job creation and rising wages
- Developing a well-educated, highly skilled workforce through the education system
- Ensuring affordability and choice for consumers: curbing inflation, preventing monopolies
- The difficulty for a government is that it is hard to balance the sometimes conflicting interests of the three key stakeholders of the economy: businesses, workers and consumers.

5. Fairness and justice

- Fairness in the legal system: ensuring everyone has equal access to legal justice, and ensuring punishments are proportionate to crimes
- Social justice: establishing rights for the vulnerable and disadvantaged (workers' rights, women's rights), a social safety net (assistance for the poor)
- Intergenerational justice: sustainable development so that future generations do not suffer from the current generations' irresponsible actions (not causing environmental damage that future generations will have to live with the longest, not racking up excessive national debt that future generations may have to pay off)
- The difficulty for a government is that different people may have different ideas about what is fair.

6. National identity

- Preserving the country's national heritage: cultural heritage (historical arts, architecture, languages, traditional practices) and natural heritage (national parks and nature reserves)
- Inspiring the people's identification with the nation: crafting a national narrative, promoting national values and civic-mindedness, and inspiring national unity despite differences between groups
- The difficulty for a government is how to balance past and future; a nation's identity needs to be anchored in its history, but to progress it may also need to evolve with changing circumstances.
- Another difficulty is how to envision a unifying national identity that many different groups can embrace, given sometimes deep differences between cultural groups, socio-economic groups and age groups.

7. Respect for the law

- Upholding laws and the constitution
- Respecting laws that restrain the government, such as individual rights, and the constitutional system of checks and balances
- The difficulty for the government is how to deal with laws that are deemed unfair, ineffective and/or outdated.

C. How? How do governments fulfil these roles?

Attributes and tools used by governments

1. Power

A government's powers includes:

- Legislative power: legislatures' power to make laws
- Regulatory power: state agencies' power to use rules to influence people's actions
- Police action: the power to direct the police to enforce laws
- Military power: the power to direct the military to defend or attack

2. Financial resources

Public funds may come from:

- Tax revenue: a government can raise revenue from the goods and service tax (aka value-added tax), individual income tax, corporate tax, property tax, carbon tax, etc.
- Borrowing or bond-issuing: a government can borrow huge amounts of money because lenders trust the government's ability to generate huge amounts of revenue to pay them back
- Money-printing: the country's central bank (a state institution) controls the country's currency, so it can print more money for the government to spend, though this can cause inflation if done excessively
- Returns from state investments: governments sometimes use sovereign wealth funds (i.e. state-controlled investment funds) to invest in assets, in the hopes these investments generate profitable returns that add to public funds

3. Knowledge

A government's sources of knowledge may include:

- Statistical data: public opinion surveys, census data, economic data, etc.
- Technical experts employed in the civil service: government economists, researchers, data analysts, scientific advisers, etc.

Such extensive knowledge and expertise ideally gives the government:

- Rational, evidence-based decision-making
- The ability to adopt a bird's eye view of much of society and see the big picture
- The data to make detailed cost-benefit analyses and thus utilitarian calculations of the actions that would produce the greatest overall benefit for society

4. Public attention

The position of politicians to command public attention is sometimes called the 'bully pulpit'.

- Since the government's thinking and decisions affect so much of society, important government officials' public statements attract widespread public interest.
- Due to this widespread interest from the public, the media provides the government with heavy media attention and coverage.
 - Media-savvy politicians use this media spotlight to spread their ideas to the masses through speeches and slogans. These speeches and slogans are used to shape the masses' thinking, such as by:
 - reassuring public confidence
 - communicating a narrative of national progress
 - explaining the need for sacrifice
 - advocating policies
 - promoting values
 - Charismatic leaders use the media spotlight to showcase their inspiring, magnetic personalities and stir up the masses' emotions, thus galvanising support and loyalty.

5. Legitimacy

Political legitimacy is the widespread belief that a particular government is the country's rightful authority and deserves to rule the country. Sources of legitimacy may include:

- A popular mandate: gaining power through democratic elections reflecting mass support and the people's will.
- Lawfulness: following the lawful process and formally required procedures of gaining power, and adhering to the law when in power.
- Competence: demonstrating effective governing ability by growing the economy, improving living standards, and maintaining stability and security.

With legitimacy, a government gains:

- Respect from citizens for the laws: even when citizens don't like certain laws, they respect the government's authority enough to still abide by the laws the government makes and enforces.
- Loyalty of the armed forces: the police and military obey orders from the government, help to enforce the government's will and do not use their armed power to mutiny against the government.
- Recognition by the international community: other governments are willing to establish diplomatic relations.

D. However... what are the risks of giving them too much power?

Dangers and limitations of governments

1. Abuse of power

- Corrupt government officials may use their power to make decisions favouring their friends (cronyism) or favouring people who offer bribes, rather than making decisions in the interest of society.
- Draconian governments' heavy-handed policies may infringe on the rights of individuals and groups.

2. Bias

- Governments may prioritise the interests of larger groups whose votes are more likely to deliver it electoral victory, such as the ethnic majority and the older generations in an ageing society, and ignore strategically less important groups such as minorities and the young. Governments may also ignore peripheral areas such as rural areas which tend to be more thinly populated and less economically central than urban centres.
- Politicians of a particular background may sympathise more with people of that background, and be more interested in helping that group at the expense of other groups. For instance, politicians
- Corporate lobbyists may seek to persuade politicians to make policies favouring the interests of the corporations they represent. In exchange, these corporate lobbyists may offer generous donations to the politicians' campaigns, or may provide cushy corporate jobs for politicians after they leave politics. This goes against the interests of less well-off citizens, who lack the resources of corporations.

3. Blind spots

- A government's agenda may be narrow focused on prioritised goals such as GDP and economic growth, while ignoring a broader range of goals such as equity and wage growth.
- Even with access to expert data, governments can misinterpret the data or make faulty assumptions. For instance, they may assume that large rises in job numbers implies much greater worker satisfaction, without considering that many of these jobs may be temporary and unstable and unsatisfying to workers.
- When governments fixate on a bird's eye view of society as a whole, they may overlook the perspectives of individuals on the ground, whose interests may be insensitively sacrificed for the greater good.

E. How far? How far should governments be checked and constrained? What are the risks of checking and constraining them too much?

Democratic safeguards against dangers of governments – and how each safeguard can backfire

1. Separation of powers

- The constitution often place limits on government power. These constitutional constraints are enforced by the judiciary, which has the power to strike down the government's unconstitutional legislation and executive actions.
 - The judicial branch of the government thus prevents the rest of the government from infringing on constitutionally protected rights of individuals and groups. To perform this role, the judiciary operates independently from the rest of the government; the judges must not take orders from the head of state, cabinet or legislature. Instead, they must be guided by the law and their interpretations of it.
- The head of state (the monarch or President who signs laws into effect) is often separated from the legislative branch (the Parliament or Congress that represents the people and votes for laws).
 - This means the country's top-ranking individual can only pass laws approved by representatives if various sections of society. This prevents the head of state from becoming an autocratic dictator who makes laws at a whim. Meanwhile, the head of state can veto the legislature's intended laws to prevent the legislature from enacting harmful policies.

How the separation of powers can backfire: gridlock and inefficiency

When different branches of a government are controlled by different parties that are unwilling to work together, they may obstruct each other's work.

- Instead of constructively checking and balancing one another to prevent mistakes, they may reduce one another to impotence and dysfunctionality.

2. Division of the legislature into 'The Government' (i.e. ruling party) and 'The Opposition'

- Parliamentary opposition can critically question the ruling party.
 - This can push the ruling party to justify its actions to the public, making it more transparent and accountable.
- While the ruling party in a democracy often represents the majority of the country, the presence of an opposition party in the legislature can ensure that the rest of the country are still represented and have a voice.
 - This makes political representation more inclusive.

How division of the legislature can backfire: polarisation

When rival parties are fiercely competing for control of the legislature, there risks being extreme polarisation of rival parties and their supporters. Each side may resort to extreme demonisation and distorted characterisations of the other side to rally opposition against it. Since emotion is a powerful motivator, attacks may become more emotionally-driven, rather than based on rational and balanced deliberation.

- This undermines civility and cooperation between people of different ideologies, with little room for compromise and moderation.
- It also encourages increasingly radical dirty tricks, such as questioning the very legitimacy of the other party's rule, which undermines basic respect for the government and laws.

3. Politically engaged citizenry

- As members of the electorate (i.e. voters), citizens of a democracy can vote to replace an incompetent government, or send it a critical message by reducing its number of seats in the legislature or its proportion of votes.
- In between elections they can also debate policies and national issues, and express themselves through polling and public forums.

How having politically engaged citizenry can backfire: short-termism

Governments' thinking may be geared towards the election cycle, instead of the longer-term future. They may design policies to pander to voters in the immediate term to win their votes in the next election, instead of policies that are unpopular in the short term but rewarding in the long term.

- Hence they may fail to address problems such as environmental problems and fiscal balance that require long-term solutions.

4. Vigilant media watchdog

- The mass media can inform citizens about government-related issues and perspectives.
- It can investigate and publish potential wrongdoings by the government.
- It can challenge the government to justify its actions.

How a vigilant media watchdog can backfire: the media dumbing down politics

The media may have oversimplification and sensationalistic reporting of complex issues to appeal to masses' attraction to emotionally-stimulating content, simple narratives, bite-sized explanations and catchy soundbites.

- This may result in unhealthy and excessive political influence by unelected journalists, social media users (the 'Twitterati') and news corporations whose priority may be to increase clicks and hook audiences rather than to educate and balance perspectives.
- Media misrepresentation of policies may fuel opposition to good policies and support for bad policies.
- With public sentiment swayed by a superficial media, politicians may then prioritise superficial charisma more than policy substance and expertise.

F. Conclusion

What makes a well-governed society, and a good, trustworthy government?

A well-governed society may require not only on good politicians, but also:

- A system of checks and balances that is well-functioning, not dysfunctional
- Political opponents who exercise moderation and civility, not extremity and radicalisation
- Citizens who are well-informed and able to think beyond their own interests and beyond the short term, not self-interested and myopic
- Media that is fair and truthful, not distortive
- Good fortune and lucky circumstances

These conditions may not all exist in every society.

Different societies with different conditions may require different kinds of governments.

On the part of the government, good governance is about balancing between:

- Different duties
- Different stakeholders' interests
- Top-down and bottom-up perspectives
- Tangible and intangible aspects of a country
- The short-term and the long-term
- Continuity and change
- Power and constraints

Before judging governments, we need to first understand these factors and tensions, and the difficulties of balancing between them.

In theory, a good, trustworthy government considers all these factors and can strike the right balance between all of them.

But in reality, where exactly the 'right' balance lies between these factors will always be a matter for debate. And so it is our civic duty as politically engaged citizens to participate in this debate in a well-informed, balanced, rational manner.

G. A-Level exam questions related to governments, grouped into sub-topics, from 2004 to 2023

By what criteria do we judge the quality of a government? (Success? Morality? Efficiency? Economic management? Popularity? Circumstances?)

As long as people in the public eye do their job well, does it matter what they do in private? (2009)
[Note: 'People in the public eye' may include people in politics, entertainment, media or sports.]

'No politician's reputation can survive the judgement of time.' How true is this? (2010)

Consider the view that efficient government is more important than democracy. (2011)

'The key criterion for good government is how well the economy is managed.' Is this a fair assessment? (2012)

What should influence a government's decisions? (Religion? Popularity? Leaders' views?)

'The view of the majority is always right.' Do you agree? (2007)

How far should religion influence political decisions? (2009)

Should politicians pursue the popular view or their own convictions, if they conflict? (2020)

How should a government spend and manage public money?

In your society, to what extent is it acceptable for public money to be used for the acquisition of works of art? (2017)

How far is the government responsible for people's well-being?

Consider the view that we do not take enough responsibility for our own well-being. (2018)

How much influence do leaders really have, and what influence do they lack?

Do events, rather than politicians, shape the future? (2017)

Consider the view that social media has more influence than politicians. (2019)

'Power these days lies more with the people than the politicians.' To what extent is this true? (2021)

How far should a government's powers extend?

'People, not the government, should decide how to organise their lives.' Is this a fair comment? (2004)

To what extent should the State involve itself in the world of business? (2005)

How far should a state have a right to monitor the actions of people within its borders? (2007)

'What an individual eats or drinks should not be the concern of the state.' What is your view? (2021)

What should be the extent of people's rights and liberties (to vote, to express themselves, etc.)?

'Only the educated people should have the right to vote in elections.' What is your view? (2009)

How far, in your society, should unpopular views be open to discussion? (2013)

Is regulation of the press desirable? (2017)

'In a free society, there should be no restrictions on freedom of speech.' Discuss. (2020)

Consider the argument that there should be no censorship of the arts in modern society. (2023)

What affects democracy?

Is modern technology a benefit or a threat to democracy? (2020)

What political attitudes *do* people have, and what attitudes *should* they have?

To what extent do young people in your society take an interest in politics? (2006)

Should a love for one's country be encouraged? (2009)

How much should a government or leader care about other countries' needs?

'A good leader must always look beyond the needs of his or her country.' Do you agree? (2003)

In times of economic hardship, should a country still be expected to provide financial or material aid to others? (2014)

'A leader's responsibility should always be to his or her own country, not other nations.' Discuss. (2019)

2018 Paper 2 passage topic: Young people not voting due to political disillusionment and disinterest