

# WebMemo



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## Government for the Good of the People: Ten Questions about Freedom, Virtue, and the Role of Government

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Today's political debates are often muddled by misconceptions of the role of government and its responsibility to American citizens. What are the limits of good government? How can the virtues necessary for freedom flourish? Sustaining ordered liberty depends on good answers to these questions.

### 1. What should government do?

Government plays an indispensable role in a healthy community, but this does not mean that everything a community needs to be healthy is government's responsibility. Government expresses society's understanding of justice and enacts judgment in light of that understanding. Government's task is to articulate the rights and duties of citizens and protect them from threats. This is very different from the belief that government should create rights or exercise people's duties for them through programs that replace individual and community initiatives.

### 2. Does morality have anything to do with government?

The government, acting on behalf of the people, declares certain actions to be just and unjust. This is a *moral* distinction between right and wrong. Whenever government debates whether or not certain actions and institutions are lawful, it takes moral considerations into account. Put another way, by formulating and upholding laws, government encourages and expresses a society's fundamental moral principles.

### 3. What should limit government's authority?

"If angels were to govern men," wrote James Madison, "neither external nor internal controls on government would be necessary." But even if political authorities were angels, there would still be limits on what government should and should not do.

In this sense, government power is inherently limited by the role of other social institutions, such as families, religious congregations, schools, and businesses. The rightful authority of these institutions helps to check the authority of the state.

Government's formal authority is restrained by its primary purpose (see question #1). Government is supposed to protect the ability of individuals and social institutions to exercise legitimate authority within their own particular areas of influence without unjust interference from other institutions. If the government is supposed to protect this freedom for citizens, its power to intrude must be subject to clearly defined limits. Such limits are defined in the United States Constitution and individual state constitutions.

This paper, in its entirety, can be found at:  
[www.heritage.org/Research/Religion/wm1620.cfm](http://www.heritage.org/Research/Religion/wm1620.cfm)

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#### 4. Does big government pose moral problems?

When government oversteps its bounds and begins to assume more authority, it weakens other important social institutions, including those, like the family and religious congregations, that are particularly capable of encouraging moral virtue among citizens. Big-government programs and policies also tend to confuse the lines between citizen responsibility and government responsibility. As a result, they erode our understanding of the ethical obligations we have to one another—especially in regard to issues such as poverty and economic justice—and encourage us to assume and to expect that government will provide for our neighbors' needs.

#### 5. What is the relationship between freedom and virtue?

Freedom relies on virtue for its survival. Government protects ordered liberty, but it is virtuous citizens taking personal responsibility for their actions and exercising mutual responsibility for the welfare of others who make ordered liberty possible. As Benjamin Franklin declared, "Only a virtuous people are capable of freedom."

All political communities are held together by common civic bonds. As the motto of the United States—*e pluribus unum*, or "out of many, one"—implies, the bonds that unite the nation's many individual citizens into one people are of critical importance. These bonds often take the form of moral obligations that we owe to one another as members of the same community. To fulfill these obligations, citizens need to exercise certain virtues. A virtuous citizen is someone who is enabled by character to act in a way that promotes the common good within the community.

Americans tend to see freedom, prosperity, and security as necessary elements of the common good. The habits needed to achieve these ends include trust, cooperation, self-sacrifice, hard work, and a sense of responsibility for others. These are key virtues for members of the American community and essential to the preservation of ordered liberty.

#### 6. If virtue is necessary for freedom, what institutions are best equipped to promote virtuous behavior?

America's founders recognized that local forms of association are the best way for citizens to fulfill their moral obligations to one another. They believed that families, religious congregations, and other institutions of civil society are most effective in uniting their members in cooperative pursuit of the common good and thereby cultivating the indispensable virtues that are the foundation of a healthy democracy.

The founders especially emphasized the role of religion in moral formation. The belief in a "God All Powerful wise and good," claimed James Madison, is "essential to the moral order of the world." George Washington declared that "reason and experience both forbid us to expect that National morality can prevail in exclusion of religious principle." Religious communities bind people vertically to God and horizontally to one another. These social bonds not only depend upon, but actually help to generate, trust, cooperation, respect for authority, self-sacrifice, and a shared pursuit of and participation in the common good.

The family is also crucial to the cultivation of virtue and moral sense. In the family, continual character training and moral authority are exercised by those who love and desire the best for each member.

In addition, sports teams, orchestras, schools, professional guilds, neighborhoods, theatre troupes, and other voluntary associations can function as local communities that cultivate moral development in similar ways. On a basketball team, for example, players learn what it means to trust others, work together, train hard, respect authority, identify and coordinate different personal skills, accommodate the errors of others, and rely on others to accommodate their own errors. Team members are trained not to consider just themselves, but to act in the best interest of the whole team.

#### 7. How does big government weaken smaller, virtue-producing communities?

As government claims responsibility for more tasks, it absorbs the allegiance that citizens once placed in other relationships and forms of association. When the federal government assumes more responsibility for fulfilling the moral obligations among citizens, it tends to undermine the

perceived significance and authority of local institutions and communities.

This encourages citizens, instead of looking to their families, churches, or local communities for guidance and assistance, to depend on the government for education, welfare, and various other services. As individuals begin to look more consistently to the government for support, the institutions that are able to generate virtues like trust and responsibility begin to lose their sway in the community. Excessive bureaucratic centralization thus sets in motion a dangerous cycle of dependence and social decay.

### **8. Does government have a role in the moral formation of its citizens?**

Smaller institutions can encourage virtue among their members because of the strong social bonds and personal contact they share, but government is more dependent on fear of punishment to motivate good behavior. Government can promote political goods such as justice and equality and can contribute to habits such as self-restraint and moderation. However, it is not as equipped as other institutions to cultivate the virtues necessary for many other important ends. As Martin Luther King, Jr., explained, laws can restrain the heartless; they cannot change the heart.

But while government is not equipped to cultivate some virtues in citizens, it does have a role to play in their moral formation: It articulates a sense of justice, impartial judgment, and equality before the law. Government also protects those institutions that, through their strong social bonds and personal contact, *are* equipped to encourage other virtues among citizens. By protecting virtue-forming institutions such as the family or religious congregations against unjust interference from other institutions—including the state—government can influence the cultivation of virtue and the strength of social bonds. Government officials should work to provide the social and legal conditions that help local associations to exercise the authority that rightly belongs to them.

### **9. How does government influence public opinion and values?**

Government actions subtly shape how citizens think, speak, and act, thereby influencing where we tend to place our trust, hope, and expectations.

The authority to enforce laws carries certain implicit powers: the power to promote certain causes, prioritize certain risks, endorse certain values and beliefs, uphold certain standards, encourage certain expectations, and define and interpret certain terms. For example, government policy dictates that American taxpayers must contribute to Social Security, and that shapes how we think about addressing need in our society (regardless of one's opinion of the current Social Security program).

Government also has the power to influence our expectations and outlook on important social questions, such as where to seek assistance for material needs (the welfare state); whom to blame in times of crisis (FEMA, the President, the Federal Reserve); and what people are entitled to by right (privacy, cheap prescription drugs, same-sex marriage).

The powers to pass laws and collect taxes therefore entail the power to set social priorities and to define, to some extent, the terms of public understanding, involvement, and debate.

### **10. How much should we trust government?**

We should be able to trust our government to perform its appropriate tasks of promoting justice and punishing injustice. Without this protection, communities would not be as free to strengthen social bonds, encourage pursuit of the common good, or cultivate virtue. Therefore, the government deserves a certain degree of trust, hope, and loyalty. But a healthy democracy is one in which citizens give government only the loyalty it deserves without diminishing their trust in or allegiance to other institutions and authorities.

Cultural allegiances to family, church, and local associations are some of “the most powerful resources of democracy,” according to Robert Nisbet. By not placing complete trust in the government, citizens can help to prevent any one institution from becoming too powerful. For this reason, the diversification of authority and allegiance among various social institutions actually *strengthens* democracy.

**Conclusion.** The power of government carries significant moral implications. The amount of responsibility yielded to or claimed by government can shape attitudes, motivations, expectations, and even the terms of public debate.

Government can also influence the cultivation of character and the strength of social bonds by protecting institutions that help to encourage virtue in society, such as the family or religious congregations,

against unjust interference from other institutions, including the state. In other words, there is a strong moral case to be made for limited government authority.

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