**An Enlightened Government**

Enlightenment Roots in American Government

From: Nicole Gilbertson, 2015

**History Standards: Government 12.1.1**   
Analyze the influence of ancient Greek, Roman, English, and leading European political thinkers such as John Locke, Charles-Louis Montesquieu, Niccolò Machiavelli, and William Blackstone on the development of American government.

**CCSS Standards: Reading, Grades 11-12**

1. Cite specific textual evidence to support analysis of primary and secondary sources, connecting insights gained from specific details to an understanding of the text as a whole.

2. Determine the central ideas or information of a primary or secondary source; provide an accurate summary that makes clear the relationships among the key details and ideas.

3. Evaluate various explanations for actions or events and determine which explanation best accords with textual evidence, acknowledging where the text leaves matters uncertain.

4. Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in a text, including analyzing how an author uses and refines the meaning of a key term over the course of a text (e.g., how Madison defines faction in Federalist No. 10).

6. Evaluate authors’ differing points of view on the same historical event or issue by assessing the authors’ claims, reasoning, and evidence.

7. Integrate and evaluate multiple sources of information presented in diverse formats and media (e.g., visually, quantitatively, as well as in words) in order to address a question or solve a problem.

9. Integrate information from diverse sources, both primary and secondary, into a coherent understanding of an idea or event, noting discrepancies among sources.

**Guiding Question:** How did Enlightenment ideas shape American political thought? What can we infer about the perspective of the John Locke based on the *Second Treatise*? What evidence of the Enlightenment worldview does the set of sources provide? What similarities and differences between the Enlightenment period and your time suggest to us?

**Overview of Lesson:**

As a warm up, have students generate a random bullet list of what they remember about the Enlightenment. Briefly review the period and its effects. Then have students, ideally by themselves but in partners if necessary, read through the sources below and pull the “big ideas” from each one, setting a timer for 20 minutes. De-brief as a class. Once they have agreed on the meaning for each, have them attempt to answer the guiding questions using the sources (properly cited) as evidence.

Source 1

*Charles de Secondat, Baron de Montesquieu*, The Spirit of the Laws, 1748

*Montesquieu (1689-­1755), was a nobleman, a judge in a French court, and one of the most influential political thinkers. Based on his research he developed a number of political theories presented in* The Spirit of the Laws *(1748).*

In every government there are three sorts of power; the legislative; the executive, in respect to things dependent on the law of nations; and the executive, in regard to things that depend on the civil law.

By virtue of the first, the prince or magistrate enacts … laws…. By the second, he makes peace or war, sends or receives embassies; establishes the public security, and provides against invasions. By the third, he punishes criminals, or determines the disputes that arise between individuals. The latter we shall call the judiciary power, and the other simply the executive power of the state.

The political liberty of the subject is a tranquillity of mind, arising from the opinion each person has of his safety. In order to have this liberty, it is requisite the government be so constituted as one man need not be afraid of` another.

When the legislative and executive powers are united in the same person, … there can be no liberty; …

Again, there is no liberty, if the power of judging be not separated from the legislative and executive powers. Were it joined with the legislative, the life and liberty of the subject would be exposed to arbitrary control, for the judge would then be the legislator. Were it joined to the executive power, the judge might behave with all the violence of an oppressor.

There would be an end of every thing were the same man, or the same body, whether of the nobles or of the people to exercise those three powers that of enacting laws, that of executing the public resolutions, and that of judging the crimes or differences of individuals.

Most kingdoms in Europe enjoy a moderate government, because the prince, who is invested with the two first powers, leaves the third to his subjects.

From the Modern History Sourcebook

<http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/mod/montesquieu-spirit.asp>

Source 2

**John Locke, Second Treatise, 1689**

Men being, as has been said, by Nature, all free, equal and independent, no one can be put out of this Estate, and subjected to the Political Power of another, without his own *Consent*. The only way whereby any one devests himself of his Natural Liberty, and *puts on the bonds of Civil Society* is by agreeing with other Men to joyn and unite into a Community, for their comfortable, safe, and peaceable living one amongst another, in a secure Enjoyment of their Properties, and a greater Security against any that are not of it. … When any number of Men have so *consented to make one Community* or Government, … wherein the *Majority* have a Right to act and conclude the rest.

For when any number of Men have, by the consent of every individual, made a *Community,* they have thereby made that *Community* one Body, with a Power to Act as one Body, which is only by the will and determination of the *majority*. …

And thus every Man, by consenting with others to make one Body Politick under one Government, puts himself under an Obligation to every one of that Society, to submit to the determination of the *majority,* and to be concluded by it;

The Founder’s Constitution

<http://press-pubs.uchicago.edu/founders/documents/v1ch4s1.html>

Source 3

“Enlightenment and Human Rights”

Until Locke, the English tradition of rights had been just that, English. The various English parliamentary documents on rights had been specifically limited to freeborn Englishmen. They made no larger claims. The Enlightenment helped broaden the claims, and its effects can be seen in the American offshoots of the English parliamentary tradition of rights. Thomas Jefferson's *Declaration of Independence* of 1776 claimed that "inalienable" rights were the foundation of all government, and he justified American resistance to English rule in these terms. Jefferson's "declaration" is especially important because it argued that rights had only to be "declared" to be effective…

Enlightenment writers had paved the way for the reception of these ideas on the European continent and helped transform English rights into more universally applicable ones. They complained that in France these rights were being violated by despotic, absurd, superstitious, and fanatical institutions. Voltaire, in particular, held out English religious toleration as a model. In their criticism, Montesquieu and Rousseau moved beyond existing institutions, proposing new principles of government based on reason and comparative study.

Beginning in the last years of the reign of Louis XIV and intensifying thereafter, writers both within and outside France began strongly decrying the despotism of the French monarchy.… One of the most influential works of this nature was Montesquieu's *Spirit of Laws* (1748), which developed a comparative political analysis of the conditions most favorable to liberty. The American Founding Fathers studied this work closely …

Despite the strong efforts of the French monarchy and the Catholic Church to ban the works of Montesquieu, Voltaire, and Rousseau, their influence soon spread, even to the highest echelons of the state that originally opposed them. Other monarchs in Europe eagerly sought the friendship and advice of Enlightenment writers, and it was only a matter of time before leading French bureaucrats also took up their ideas.

From Liberty, Equality, Fraternity: Exploring the French Revolution

<http://chnm.gmu.edu/revolution/chap3a.html>