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What Is the Purpose of Government?



By The Editors Updated on March 19, 2021

We asked professionals to explain the importance and purpose of the government, and here's what they have to say.



Paul Lachelier, Ph.D.
Political Sociologist | Founder, Learning Life

The government serves the interests of the ruling classes.

For thousands of years of human history, the implicit or explicit purpose of government was to serve the interests of its rulers, be they monarchs, dictators, aristocracies, or ruling classes.

Only with the birth of democracy in ancient Greece around 500 B.C. does the idea of the government of, by and for the people arise. Since then, that idea has spread worldwide, but even the most developed democracies still disproportionately serve the purposes and interests of privileged groups.

Moreover, the popular notions that “government is best that governs least” or that government is best that just protects individual rights to “life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness” make it easier for privileged groups to use government for their purposes.

Why? Because citizens busily pursuing their own happiness are too distracted or disinterested to notice when privileged groups (usually quietly) shape the government to serve their purposes.



Rob Moore

Principal, [Scioto Analysis](#) | Master of Public Policy, University of California, Berkeley Goldman School of Public Policy

The government balances the goals and decides the mixture of policies for society.

When I think of the purpose of government, I always go back to the preamble to the United States Constitution, which succinctly puts forth the framers' idea of what government is about:

*We the people of the United States, in order to form a more perfect union, establish **justice**, insure **domestic tranquility**, provide for the **common defence**, promote the **general welfare**, and secure the blessings of **liberty** to ourselves and our posterity, do ordain and establish this Constitution for the United States of America.*

But what does this look like in practice? As an analyst, my job is to help policymakers conceptualize the tradeoffs between competing goals. Most people would agree that the government should work to grow the economy, reduce poverty and inequality, and help its citizens live more free, meaningful lives.

That being said, each tax, program, or regulation government puts in place impacts economic growth, the distribution of resources, and the health, education, and fulfillment of citizens in different ways.

Policymakers in a democracy are tasked with balancing these goals against each other and deciding what mixture of policies to adopt to achieve the above outcomes in ratios that its citizens support.



Dr. Heather L. Katz

Assistant Professor of Political Science,
Southwestern Oklahoma State University

The government seeks to balance the interests of the individual with the interests of the community.

Even at its barest—the libertarian’s “night-watchman state”—government pits the safety of the community against individuals’ liberty. Individuals must give up something, like taxes, to gain the state’s protection.

Disputes about the purpose of government stem from arguments about how far the government’s role in protecting and shaping the community should extend.

In Western democracies, we disagree about whether the state should provide things like healthcare and higher education, and whether the state should take an active role in shielding individuals from undesirable behavior ranging from not wearing seatbelts to drug use.

One of the most demonstrative policy disputes today is the debate over vaccinations. To what degree should the government mandate individual behavior it believes is in society’s best interest over the protests from individual citizens it claims to protect?

Na'ilah Amaru



Advocacy and Policy Strategist

The government is rooted in the power of the people.

As such, the purpose of government is to reflect the public will and govern in the public interest. The question becomes, how does government as an institution determine who represents the "public?"

America's diversity is its greatest strength and the deepest source for tension. The battles that are birthed from that conflict are reflected in the process of government decision-making for budgets, policies, and programs. The challenge of government and the citizenry is achieving a meaningful system of grassroots governance.

Our tiered system of democracy fails a majority of the public and the consequence has been dire: eroded trust of government from the public it's supposed to serve. By providing equitable access to influence government decisions, there is an opportunity for the government to fulfill its purpose of truly serving "*We, the People.*"

Tina Willis



Lawyer | Owner, [Tina Willis Law](#)

The government's most important purpose is protection.

As a lawyer, my view of the government is probably more complicated than most would have.

Overall, I think the most important purpose of government is protection, which includes national security, personal security (i.e., laws that prevent harm & crime), safe infrastructure, care for the sick and elderly, and corporate regulation so that things like airplanes, semi-trucks, medications, and products & premises are safe.

Our government should also give us the best foundation for achieving freedom and happiness, but that requires equal opportunity and safety.

As a Florida accident lawyer, I am regularly appalled by the government's failure to pass laws needed to protect us from unsafe conditions or products because, again, I think the government's main function should be to protect us from harm.

Jason Patel



Founder, [Transizion](#)

The government deals with essential services.

The purpose of government is to provide essential services, fulfill the fundamental duties of safety, prosperity, and justice, ensure the rights of each human and protect the country so that its citizens, businesses, and organizations have the ability to pursue happiness, live a healthy life, and chase opportunities.

The government needs to ensure that the essentials run smoothly and that our populations are connected, which ensures that the country can grow. With growth comes more opportunities. And more opportunities equal great outcomes for our communities.

Finally, the government should ensure the existence and improvement of the conditions that will help citizens build a nation.