



The Founding: SS.7.C.1.1
The Enlightenment and
Its Influence
VIDEO SCRIPT



1. Let's begin with a question. Do you know where the ideas that influenced the development of the US Constitution and the Declaration of Independence came from? It came from something called the Enlightenment, and in this video, we are going to explore those very ideas.

2. After watching the video, you will be able to:

- Identify and describe the Enlightenment ideas of separation of powers, natural law, and social contract, and
- Evaluate how Enlightenment ideas influenced the Founding Fathers.

So let's dive in and start talking about the Enlightenment.

3. The Enlightenment began in Europe of the 1700s. During this period, people began writing about the importance of liberty, individual rights and reason. And they also wrote about the purpose of government and the idea that governments that honor liberty and individual rights provide more freedom for their people.

4. Let's dig deeper into specific ideas that the Founding Fathers used from the Enlightenment. We'll begin by learning about the concepts of natural law and natural rights.

5. Let's go ahead and define our terms. Natural law is the belief that people are born with certain rights that should be protected by government and society. And these rights are known as natural rights. And you're born with these, they can't be taken away by government, such as life, liberty, and property. Let's dive a little deeper and explore these ideas.

6. John Locke, an Enlightenment thinker, believed that government should be based on natural law. In his view, the purpose of government is to protect the natural rights of life, liberty and property. Natural law applies to everyone. So according to Enlightenment philosophers, natural rights apply to every person simply because they are born. No state or government can take away your life, liberty, or property without cause.

7. When Thomas Jefferson, a Founding Father, wrote the Declaration of Independence he included the idea of natural rights and natural law. In the beginning of the document, Jefferson writes - *We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights; that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.* Words you've probably heard before, and certainly our Founding Fathers were heavily influenced by the idea of natural law and natural rights. We see it in that very document.

8. Let's check in. Try to answer the following question in your own words.

9. How were the Founding Fathers influenced by the ideas of natural law and natural rights?

10. ANSWER TO QUESTION

11. Let's recap what we've learned so far. The Enlightenment was a movement that focused on individual rights, liberty, and reason, as well as the purpose of government. John Locke presented the idea of natural rights, which are provided by natural law. Natural rights include life, liberty, and property, and we find them in the Declaration of Independence.

12. Locke had another idea that influenced the Founding Fathers though, and this is the concept of social contract. Locke argued that a contract should exist between the government and the people, and he called this the social contract.

13. So let's take a second and define our term here. What do we mean by social contract? Well, a social contract is an implied agreement between the people and the government that defines the rights, duties, and limitations of both the people and the government. So let's explore this a little more.

14. So a social contract isn't something you sign like you might see sports players do. A social contract is created when the government and the people agree on their rights, their duties, their limits and their responsibilities.

15. In Locke's view, this contract must be in place in order for the government to be legitimate, or valid, in the eyes of the people. He argued that people formed a social contract with the government, voluntarily only on the condition that the government is structured in a way that protects natural rights.

16. The idea of the social contract is also incorporated into that old Declaration of Independence. Thomas Jefferson wrote "...*whenever any Form of Government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the Right of the People to alter or to abolish it...*". In other words, to leave the contract.

17. Jefferson's argument was that the British government was breaking this voluntary social contract, by not protecting the citizens' natural rights. So the Americans had the right to abolish that contract.

18. Let's check in. Try to answer the following question in your own words.

19. How were the Founding Fathers influenced by the idea of the social contract?

20. ANSWER TO QUESTION

21. Let's recap what we've learned so far. The idea of the social contract influenced the Founding Fathers. And this is the idea of a voluntary relationship between the people and the government. And the government has the responsibility to protect natural rights. The people have the right to abolish the social contract when the government does not keep to it. And we find mention of the social contract in the Declaration of Independence.

22. So we've talked about natural rights and natural law, and we've talked about the social contract, but there's another big idea that comes from the Enlightenment that influenced our Founding Fathers, and this is the separation of powers.
23. The idea of separation of powers comes from the French Enlightenment thinker, the Baron de Montesquieu. Montesquieu felt that government should be set up so that no one is afraid of anyone else. This meant that government should be structured in a way to limit the abuse of power.
24. Specifically, Montesquieu was talking about the three powers of the government – the power to legislate or make laws, the power to enforce laws, and the power to judge laws, and he said they should be separated into three different departments or branches in order to avoid the abuse of power by any one particular branch.
25. Montesquieu saw the dangers of a government ruled by one person with all the power. He wrote that power in government should be divided into legislative, executive, and judicial branches with each branch having its own roles and responsibilities. Does that sound familiar? It should!
26. Like the idea of the social contract and natural law, the idea of separation of powers greatly influenced the Founding Fathers. This was used when James Madison and other Founding Fathers wrote the U.S. Constitution, the guiding document for our government today. In the Constitution, the U.S. government is structured into three distinct branches of government.
27. The legislative branch, made up of the House of Representatives and the Senate, together known as Congress, make the laws that guide our country. The executive branch, with the President, Vice President, Cabinet and executive agencies, enforce the laws. The judicial branch, made up of the Supreme Court and lower courts, determine whether or not laws go against the Constitution.
28. Let's check in. Try to answer the following question in your own words.
29. How were the Founding Fathers influenced by the idea of separation of powers?
- 30 ANSWER TO QUESTION
31. Let's recap what we've learned so far. Montesquieu believed the government should be structured to limit the abuse of power. These powers are to make laws, enforce laws, and interpret laws, and he believed in separation of powers, split into executive, legislative, and judicial branches, and the Founding Fathers used this idea in the Constitution.
32. The big ideas of the Enlightenment certainly had a huge impact on our Founding Fathers. The ideas of the social contract, natural laws and natural rights, and separation of powers, are all found in our Founding Documents, like the US Constitution and the Declaration of Independence.
33. Learn more about some of the Enlightenment ideas we talked about around social contract, natural law and natural rights, and separation of powers in these topic areas on Civics360!