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# Ideas Influencing American Government

Lead in to *Declaration*

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# Interpreting Primary Sources

- Primary sources are documents that are contemporary (or current) to the event in question.
- The documents you will examine are from the time period just before the American Revolution. Our goal is to try to figure out what ideas the Founding Fathers borrowed from these famous documents.
- While your group is examining the documents look for:
  - Key ideas – the wording might be weird, but what is the document trying to “tell” you? Why was it written?
  - Influence – what ideas about American life and government do you think this document helped us create? You don’t have to know the specific term, just write it out in your own words!

# Common Law - after c.1000 CE

- Why it was written:
  - Body of law created since the Middle Ages that relies on judges using precedent (similar previous cases) when deciding a case
- How it influenced American government:
  - Colonists used English common law to help establish justice in the colonies; this system is the foundation for American laws



# Magna Carta - 1215

- Why it was written:
  - King John of England was forced by his barons (nobles) in 1215 to meet their demands for rights as free men
- How it influenced American government:
  - No one is above the law, even those who rule (remember, President Nixon was forced to resign when he broke the law)



# Great Councils/Parliament of England - 1200-1600s

## Description:

Legislative and sometimes judicial assembly,  
began as clergy and landed nobility.  
Eventually expanded to represent the  
common people.

## Importance:

King seeks advice and consent before making  
decisions, such as raising taxes.

# Virginia House of Burgesses - 1619

- Why it was written:
  - To try to get people to travel to Virginia, the joint-stock company made an effort to make local government more responsive to the people by granting a charter → a written document granting land and the authority to set up a colonial government
  
- How it influenced American government:
  - This represents the first example of representative democracy in the American colonies



# Mayflower Compact - 1620

- Why it was written:

- The Pilgrims were heading for the New World, and they decided they needed a government, even without the authority to create one. So they set up a compact → an agreement, or contract, among a group of people



- How it influenced American government:

- This represents the first example of direct democracy in the American colonies; town hall meetings are still popular in New England

# Fundamental Orders of Connecticut - 1639

Description:

Massachusetts settlers left to start a new colony.

They called for an assembly of elected reps from each town to make laws.

Importance: Popular election of governor and judges.



# Enlightenment - 1600s

Description:

Laws of the universe could be discovered through use of human reason.

Importance:

Laws that govern human nature apply to life and society.



# Glorious Revolution - 1688

Description:

Parliamentarians overthrow James II and replace with William and Mary!

Importance:

Limits placed on power of monarchy thus giving more power to legislature.

# English Bill of Rights - 1689

- Why it was written:
  - Act of Parliament passed after the Glorious Revolution to establish that the monarch could not suspend Parliament's laws
- How it influenced American government:
  - Was the basis for the Bill of Rights added to the Constitution; contains ideas like no cruel and unusual punishment

Monarch →  
king or queen

Parliament →  
legislature or  
law-making  
body



# John Locke - 1689

- Why it was written:
  - Also written during the Glorious Revolution, Locke's "2<sup>nd</sup> Treatise on Government" supported the overthrow of rulers who do not respect the peoples' rights; he proposed a social contract instead
- How it influenced American government:
  - Locke argued that government should protect "life, liberty, and property"; if they didn't the people had a duty to overthrow it

Social Contract → a political theory where individuals give up certain liberties to a ruler in exchange for protection of property



# Think About It

- How did geography impact the development of government in the colonies? Look at New England...then the Southern colonies. What connections can we make between the size of the colonies and the types of government they established (direct democracy versus representative democracy)?

