

## POLITICS and STATE

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Political themes in world history alternate between some apparent global coherence, and considerable jumble. Coherence includes: the fact that every civilization developed an organized state (though not all regions, until recent times, developed a civilization). It includes the prevalence of empire as a political form in the classical period (though some cautionary flag here particularly for the Indian subcontinent) It includes the renewed prevalence of empire in the early modern period, most definitely including the land-based gunpowder empires as well as the more famous colonial outreach. On the other hand defining common political themes for other periods, such as the postclassical, is a much greater challenge. In many periods, including the postclassical, different degrees of centralization were actually more important than precise political structure, including the fact that some empires were in fact rather loosely organized.

And the question for the contemporary period is just that: a question. Older political forms like monarchies and empires do decline; this provides some coherence. But choices of alternatives vary widely by region and time period, and we are still debating likely patterns for the future.

Political history is also complicated by a tendency arguably to spend undue time on forms: on whether societies were monarchical, whether they had democratic elements and so on. A thematic approach also allows attention to other, admittedly related features, such as the functions of government (which have a history partially separate from political system) and the nature of bureaucracy.

Thematic political history raises important questions about regional persistence. China, developing an unusually strong state from the Han dynasty onward (though with periods of intermittent collapse), seems to maintain this tradition even under contemporary communism. Historians of Russia has speculated about durable political characteristics in this society, beginning with early monarchical claims and a close relationship between church and state. But there is also a danger in positing too much continuity: both Russia and China had real revolutions, and while they did not change everything they certainly did not simply maintain political traditions.

Functions of government vary by region. They also respond to larger changes, such as the advent of industrialization. There's an obvious challenge in figuring out the appropriate balance between regional diversity and some common directions, in both the agricultural and industrial periods. Some historians have discussed a model of political "modernization" to help define state trends in contemporary societies, but they have been roundly criticized for paying too much attention to Western models, allowing too little for old or new regional differentiations. The same may apply to the history of bureaucracies, at least in modern times: there are some common impulses, but great variety depending on particular regional histories, levels of education and so on.

Some political issues, finally, cry out for more historical attention, though they are extremely challenging. Is it possible, for example, to envisage a history of political corruption? Would an effort here be fatally tainted by assumptions of Western superiority?

### **Questions to Consider:**

1. Were democracies or partial democracies indeed unusual before modern times, and if so why?
2. Why did newer political states, such as Japan, Russia and Western Europe, find it difficult to copy more established political models during the postclassical period?
3. What have been the most important results of industrialization on the leading political themes in world history?
4. What was new about nationalism? How does nationalism fit in a larger sense of global political history?