Enlightenment’s Influence on the American and French Revolutions

Enduring Understanding: The relationship between citizens and their government is a fundamental component of political rule. To understand the role of constitutions, the characteristics of shared powers, the protection of individual rights, and the promotion of the common good by government you will explain how the Enlightenment influenced the American and French Revolutions leading to the formation of limited forms of government. This will include the relationship between the people and their government, the role of constitutions, the characteristics of shared powers, the protection of individual rights, and the promotion of the common good.
Standard 7-2.5: The Enlightenment’s Influence on the American and French Revolutions

The American Revolution was inspired by the Enlightenment. The French Revolution, in turn, was inspired by the Enlightenment as well as the success of the American Revolution.

These two revolutions, utilizing the ideas of the Enlightenment, led to the formation of limited governments and served as models for future limited governments and constitutions around the world. The Enlightenment presented new beliefs about authority and the role of the individual in government. John Locke presented ideas of natural rights (life, liberty, and property) and declared that it is the purpose of governments to protect these natural rights. Furthermore, he stated that if a government fails to protect citizens’ rights, it is the duty of the people to overthrow the government. This is called a social contract.

The ideas of Montesquieu, Rousseau, and Voltaire can also be seen in the formation of limited government. Based on these Enlightenment ideas, many of these limited governments became representative democracies, where the citizens choose other citizens to represent them in the decision-making processes of government. These Enlightenment ideas inspired the leaders of the American Revolution, and the ideals and success of the American Revolution served as a model for the French and many other revolutions that followed such as those in Latin America.

Section Review:
1) How did the Enlightenment lead to changes in government worldwide?

2) What three natural rights did John Locke believe all men are born with?

3) What are representative democracies?

The American Revolution drew upon Locke’s beliefs in the writing of the Declaration of Independence. Thomas Jefferson made specific references to Locke’s ideas to argue that the colonists were rebelling because their rights had been violated and that they had the right to alter or abolish their government. After gaining independence, the writers of the United States Constitution used Enlightenment ideas to provide the framework for their new, limited government. The American Revolution
demonstrated that it was possible for Enlightenment ideas to actually be put into practice.

Some American diplomats, like Benjamin Franklin and Thomas Jefferson, had lived in Paris where they associated with members of the French intellectual class. A growing number of French citizens believed in the ideas of "equality" and "freedom of the individual" as presented by Voltaire and other Enlightenment philosophers. Furthermore, contact between American revolutionaries and the French troops who supported them in the American Revolution helped spread revolutionary ideals to the French people.

After the American Revolution, many French citizens began to attack the undemocratic nature of their own government, leading to the French Revolution. Following these revolutions, the ideas of the Enlightenment were used to develop limited governments and constitutions.

Section Review:
4) How did Thomas Jefferson use Locke’s ideas?
5) What ideas did the French people take from Enlightenment philosophers?
6) How were ideas spread from the American Revolution to the French?

A constitution creates a limited government. It defines the relationship between the people and their government and embodies Locke’s idea of a social contract. According to this agreement, the role of constitutions is to place limits on the government’s power by specifically outlining what powers the government does or does not have, or what the government can or cannot do. A constitution is the “law” which establishes the structure and operation of government and details the relationship of the people to their government. Constitutions define the government’s role and gives them the power to rule.

While constitutions can and do address many issues, they generally have provisions pertaining to several key components: they provide the framework for the operation of the legislative, executive, and judicial branches; they establish the relationship between the national government and the regional/provincial governments; and they define the relationship of government to the citizens and the rights of citizens. The characteristics of shared powers are evident in the creation of the three branches. These three branches clearly come from Montesquieu’s idea of separation of powers.
Section Review:
7) What are the key components of a constitution?

8) How does a constitution prevent a government from becoming unlimited?

9) What are the three branches of government?

The concept of shared powers is also established by the system of federalism. This means duties are divided between the federal and state governments. The protection of individual rights is established by the Bill of Rights, which is influenced by John Locke’s idea of natural rights Voltaire’s ideas of freedom of speech and religion. To promote the common good of the nation, and not just a ruler or the government, the Constitution requires citizen responsibility in electing representatives as well as in becoming representatives.

Citizens are held accountable to one another through the guidelines of the Constitution. This promotion of the common good comes from Rousseau’s idea of a nation having to do what is best for the majority of people, or ruling by general will. This concept is also known as popular sovereignty.

Section Review:
10) How is the US Bill of Rights influenced by John Locke?

11) How does a constitution promote the common good of a nation?

12) How is Rousseau’s idea of popular sovereignty demonstrated in the Constitution?

Constitutions can be a single written document like in the United States, or a collection of traditions, precedents, legal rulings and documents that together comprise what is known as an unwritten constitution like in England. Both forms of government are legitimate. The United States had the first written constitution and helped set the foundation for what national constitutions generally address. Many of the ideas and principles of the United States Constitution were based upon the traditions and heritage of the unwritten English constitution.

Constitutions are often classified as either “positive” or “negative”. A “positive” constitution centers on the roles and responsibilities that a government is to perform, for example, providing universal education for all citizens. A “negative” constitution focuses on the limitations placed upon the government. The US has a “negative” constitution.
The tradition of a government being responsive to the will of the people first occurred when King John signed the Magna Carta (Great Charter) in 1215, acknowledging that the king was no longer above the law. Not all constitutions are legitimate however. It is possible for a government to have a written constitution but not to follow the principles or guidelines set forth in it. The former Soviet Union is an example of this.

**Section Review:**

13) What is a written constitution?

14) What is an unwritten constitution?

15) What is the difference between a positive and negative constitution?

16) What type of constitution does the US have?

17) How did the Magna Carta change the way government was structured?
Sources


