

CONSENT OF THE GOVERNED

by Dr. Gordon Wood

In *The Consent of the Governed*, historian Gordon S. Wood examines how one of the Declaration of Independence's famous ideas, government by consent, took shape in the revolutionary era. He traces the shift from Britain's idea of "virtual representation" to America's insistence on actual representation through voting, and shows how debates over state constitutions, fears of "excess democracy," and the U.S. Constitution transformed ideas about sovereignty, public opinion, and the people's role in government.

Use the questions below to guide your reading.

Defining the Idea of Consent

1. What does "consent of the governed" mean?
2. What is sovereignty and how did it make the United States' republican form of government different from British political systems?

Representation in the Revolutionary Era

1. Why did colonists reject the idea of "virtual" representation?
2. What did "actual" representation look like in practice for colonists?
3. How did state governments mirror the traditional mixed government of monarchy, aristocracy, and democracy? How were they different?

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From Revolution to Public Opinion

1. To what extent does public opinion reflect the consent of the governed?
2. In what ways is public opinion an effective way for the people to show consent? In what ways could it be limited?

Reflect and Discuss

The Declaration of Independence states that the government derives its power from the consent of the governed. Besides voting, what are different ways people can express their consent of government actions? Share additional insight about your answer.