

DBQ 2: Absolutism and Democracy Europe

(Adapted from *Document-Based Assessment for Global History*, Walch Education)

Historical Context: Various forms of political systems have been used throughout world history. As nation-states were built in Europe, absolute monarchs with vast power and wealth ruled countries such as France and Russia. At the same time in England attempts were made to limit royal power and to protect the rights of some of the people. There was tension between absolutism and democracy. In studies of absolutism and democracy advantages and disadvantages for each governmental system can be identified. What form of government was most effective for this period of history?

Part A: The following documents relate to different types of government. Examine each document carefully, and answer the questions that follow.

Document 1. This is an excerpt from the *Prince*, written by Machiavelli (fifteenth century). For all men in general this observation may be made: they are ungrateful, fickle, and deceitful, eager to avoid dangers, and avid for gain, and while you are useful to them they are all with you, but when it [danger] approaches they turn on you. Any prince, trusting only in their works and having no other preparations made, will fall to ruin, for friendships that are bought at a price and not by greatness and nobility of soul are paid for indeed, but they are not owned and cannot be called upon in time of need. Men have less hesitation in offending a man who is loved than one who is feared, for love is held by a bond of obligation which, as men are wicked, is broken whenever personal advantage suggests it, but fear is accompanied by the dread of punishment, which never relaxes.

Question: What type of ruler must the prince be, and why is it necessary for him to rule in this manner?

Document 2. These ideas were expressed by King James I of England in 1609. The state of monarchy is the supremest thing upon earth; for kings are not only God's lieutenants upon earth, and sit upon God's throne, but even by God Himself they are called gods . . . Kings are justly called gods, for that they exercise a . . . divine power upon earth . . . God hath power to create or destroy, make or unmake at His pleasure, to give life or sent death, to judge all and to be judged nor accountable to none, to raise low things and to make high things low at His pleasure . . . And the like power have kings.

Question: What type of government does King James describe, and why does he believe it should be organized in this way?

Document 3. These ideas were expressed by King Louis XIV of France in 1660. The head alone has the right to deliberate and decide, and the functions of all the other members consist only in carrying out the commands given to them... The more you grant . . . [to the assembled people], the more it claims . . . The interest of the state must come first.

Question: What types of government does King Louis describe and why does he recommend this type of government?

Document 4. The following is an excerpt from Voltaire's writings.

I may disapprove of what you say, but I will defend to the death your right to say it The best government seems to be that in which all ranks of men are equally protected by the laws.

Question: What type of government does Voltaire recommend? What specific freedom does he feel is essential?

Document 5. This excerpt is from John Locke's *Two Treatises on Government*, written in 1690. Men being . . . by nature all free, equal, and independent, no one can be . . . subjected to the political power of another without his own consent. . . . To protect natural rights governments are established. . . . Since men hope to preserve their property by establishing a government, they will not want that government to destroy their objectives. When legislators try to destroy or take away the property of the people, or try to reduce them to slavery, they put themselves in to a state of war with the people who can then refuse to obey the laws.

Question: Why is government established? What type of government is described by Locke? Under what circumstance can the people revolt?

Document 6. The following is an excerpt from *The Spirit of the Laws*, written by Montesquieu in 1748.

Although the forms of state—monarchy, aristocracy, and democracy—were united in English government, the powers of government were separated from one another. There can be no liberty where the executive, legislative, and judicial powers are united in one person or body of persons, because such concentration is bound to result in arbitrary despotism.

Question: What type of government does Montesquieu describe and why does he believe it should be organized in this way?

Part B—Essay

What form of government was most effective — democracy or absolutism — for the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries?