

Defining Government

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“What is ‘a government’?” I ask.

Blank faces stare at me. Whether this is the first lesson of a government course I am teaching, or a guest-speaker in another’s social studies class, I have only a few moments to engage these people in a subject that is going to affect them for the rest of their lives.

(Sometimes that opening question will elicit a raised hand and bright “Washington, DC” and the answer to that is “Yes, Washington DC is where the government that worries us most is, but I want to know what a government is – you know, if someone showed you a thing and said ‘this is a government’ how would you know it really was a government?” Sometimes I get lucky like that, but in most classes, they stare at me, expecting me to tell them, rather than participating themselves.)

“Well,” I offer, “can anyone tell me *where* a government is?” which gets the expected “Washington DC”.

“That’s right,” I say, adding the ‘worries us the most’ description. “Where else?”

(Someone might say the state capitol, or city hall but if they don’t, I’ll suggest it, and after we’ve gotten one or a few, go for the jugular, because this is a subject that is going to be with them for the rest of their lives.)

“How about this classroom? Is there a government here?”

There is a shuffling of feet and some yeses and some nos.

“Who is the government here?” I ask.

Someone bright answers, “the teacher!”

“Right!” I say, and quickly add, “When you go home, is there a ‘government’ at home?”

A discussion ensues if the boss at home is Mom or Dad or both.

There is usually someone, usually a guy, looking a bit surly, and he usually has a few others secretly looking to him to know what to think about all this. If he’s wearing a letter jacket it is going to be easy but if not he can still be asked his favorite sport. If he plays, ask who the government is on the field, and if he doesn’t



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play, ask for his favorite team and the government when they are on the field.

“The Coach,” he’ll say, or the quarterback or whatever.

(When the surly one is a girl, or a guy, the question “Who would rather be somewhere else right now?” will gain some agreement. Then asking, “what would you rather be doing?” and then “why are you here?” may lead to a realization that government has some affect on the surly one’s life and maybe she better listen up – but to *say* that yourself is perilous indeed!)

“Alright,” I say, “we have a teacher, and parents and a coach, these can be governments. What do they all have in common that makes them a government in their particular situations?”

The answers can be varied and if the class is taking an interest, all are shouted out at once. “They tell you what to do” is common, and very correct.

“Does Washington, and the state capitol,” I ask, “do they tell you what to do?”

Yes, they do.

“Okay,” I say, “a government tells you what to do, and,” aiming at a surly one, “does it tell you to do what you already want to do?”

“No,” is the answer.

“Now sometimes your coach, or your Mom,” I say, “tells you to do something and later you find out it was a good idea. Is that right?”

Most everyone agrees, but the surly one might not. “Not in your case, of course.”

“So a government tells you what to do that you don’t want to do, or that you didn’t think to do. Is that right?”

“Like send you to jail,” says someone who has not spoken up yet. “Or take away your money,” adds someone else.

“Exactly right,” I say, and repeat what we have so far for a definition. “Now, what else?”

(If the class is engaged, the ideas will come fast and furious. The trick is fielding them and fitting them into the final definition. If some points are missed, I suggest them. Rarely is

there argument, but if there is, the secret is to hear it out and the class itself will figure it out in the end.)

The class will word it to suit themselves but the points to ensure are in the final definition are that a government is:

1. A person or persons who
2. Tell you what to do,
3. Sometimes writes down the rules of what you should do, and
4. If you don’t want to do what they say, can force you to.

That’s enough work for one day.

Next lesson, we get into the different forms of government and what type of society thrives under each.