

Thinking About Government



1. What should be the role of the United States government in the world today and why?

In recent years, many Americans have questioned the role that the United States has undertaken in the Middle East. Others have advocated an expansion of the military role of the United States with respect to Afghanistan, Pakistan, Sudan, Iran, North Korea and other trouble spots around the world. Still others advocate that the United States government undertake and expand programs to address poverty, AIDS, ethnic and religious intolerance, and the suppression of political freedom around the world. What should be the role of the United States government in the world today and why?

2. What, if any, limits should there be on the power of government to regulate, prohibit and tax the behavior of individual Americans? What factors should govern these limits and why?

State and local governments regulate conduct that some people think should be matters of personal preference; the use of trans-fats in food, cigarette smoking, gambling, the use of cell phones, the sale and use of alcohol, and gun ownership. Some governments penalize individuals who do not use an automobile seat belt or wear a helmet when they ride a bicycle or motor scooter. Governments also impose "sin" taxes on the sale of things that they want to discourage. What, if any, limits should there be on the power of government to regulate, prohibit and tax the behavior of individual Americans? What factors should govern these limits and why?

3. What does freedom/liberty mean to you and why?

"Freedom" is a word that is venerated in American society. We have a statue dedicated to freedom (Statue of Liberty). We have a bell named for freedom (Liberty Bell). We have a day that celebrates freedom (Independence Day). We have many laws that are named for freedom (e.g. Freedom to Farm Act). We have trains, festivals, magazines, buildings, foundations and gardens named for freedom. We use freedom to describe social movements and we even have lifestyles that are described as freedom. However, "freedom" is a word that is often used by people who mean very different things by it. Some people use "freedom" to mean the reduction of government restrictions to the minimum that is necessary for an organized society, so that people are "free" to pursue happiness as they each define it. Others contend that people are not free as long as they do not have "freedom from want" and that government must enable its citizens to be free by meeting their needs for food, housing, medical care and other necessities of life. What does freedom/liberty mean to you and why?

4. What factors should govern how the cost of government is paid for, what form or forms of taxation should be used to pay the cost of government and why?

Public opinion polls show that a large percentage of the American people are critical of the taxes that are imposed to pay the cost of government. Many Americans complain that the income tax laws are too complicated and are not fair. Even politicians who have created the income tax laws criticize them as "---impossibly complex, outrageously expensive, overly intrusive, economically destructive, and manifestly unfair." Others have written that there are too many different taxes imposed on virtually every form of economic activity in which the American people engage. What factors should govern how the cost of government is paid for, what form or forms of taxation should be used to pay the cost of government and why?

5. What should be the correct balance between the right to individual privacy of the American people and the responsibility of the government to combat the covert activities of its enemies and why?

During past wars and ever since September 11, 2001, the United States government has been accused by organizations of civil libertarians and by individual Americans of invading the privacy of the American people. For instance, government has been accused of wiretapping telephones, monitoring Internet transmissions, screening mail, and spying on individual citizens. Government officials defend their scrutiny of individual Americans by saying that it is necessary in order to protect the national security of the country from its enemies. What should be the correct balance between the right to individual privacy of the American people and the responsibility of the government to combat the covert activities of its enemies and why?