

The State

Politics has been traditionally concerned with the state. The term 'politics' is in fact derived from the Greek word polis, which means city-state or organized community. The state is a legal entity which is equivalent to a country. We can define a state as a political entity which possesses people, territory, a government, and sovereignty.

A. People. Every country possesses people, who may vary in religion, race, language, and ethnic composition. When people identify with others who live within the state, they constitute a nation.

B. Territory. Every state contains a specific piece of territory which distinguishes it from other states. That bounded geographical area may be in one continuous land unit, or it may be separated by other states or large bodies of water. The United States contains among its regional units Alaska and Hawaii-both of which are separated by vast distances from their continental base. States vary in size as they do in population. Some states are so small-either in area or population-that they are known as microstates.

C. Government. Government, however, is different from other social organizations, such as a tribe, a family or a group. A government makes laws which affect all the people within its territory and are binding upon everyone. A government has the authority to rule the state. One of the most important features of government is that it is the only social organization which has the legal authority to use force.

D. Sovereignty. The term 'sovereignty' means total legitimate power. It originated in the sixteenth century and was first used by the French political philosopher Jean Bodin. As originally conceived, the term meant that the monarch had total authority to make rules for all the people within the kingdom. In more recent centuries, however, the term has been applied to the government's authority rather than the monarch's authority.

Today, students of politics are very much concerned with the concept of state. Many are interested in the principal institutions of the state, such as the legislature, the executive and bureaucracy', and the judiciary.