Rights Before Rulers

Trace Enlightenment ideas from philosophy to the Declaration of Independence

USG.C.2.1.D "Describe how Enlightenment philosophy contributed to the concept of a social contract, the existence of natural, inalienable rights (e.g., life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness)."

NAME _____ DATE _____

1 READ AND MARK

Read it twice

YOUR JOB As you read, underline claims about rights people have before government exists, circle statements about where government gets its power, and number the steps that explain when people may change a government.

What Gives Government Its Power?

1. Imagine a reader in 1776 opening the Declaration of Independence in a crowded print shop. Its claims about government did not appear from nowhere. Enlightenment writers asked whether rulers had authority simply because they inherited a crown. John Locke argued that people possess natural rights before any government exists. He named life, liberty, and property among those rights. Because rulers do not create these rights, rulers cannot rightly treat them as gifts to take back at will. This reasoning challenged the idea that subjects must obey a king no matter what he does.

2. Locke also described political authority as resting on an agreement, often called a social contract. People form a government to protect their rights and settle disputes under common laws. In return, they agree to follow those laws, while the government must act for the public good. Its power is legitimate because it comes from the consent of the governed, not from a ruler's birth. If a government repeatedly violates rights instead of protecting them, Locke argued, the people may replace it. The agreement therefore sets a limit on government power rather than giving rulers unlimited control.

3. The Declaration of Independence turned this line of thought into an argument for separation from Britain. It called rights "unalienable" and listed "Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness." It said governments are created to secure these rights and gain their just powers from the consent of the governed. The Declaration then charged the British king with repeated abuses, using those claims to justify changing the government. Its words did not mean everyone actually enjoyed equal protection in 1776. Enslaved people, women, and many others were denied political rights. That gap made the Declaration's principles a basis for later demands for change.

2 ANSWER WITH EVIDENCE

Use the passage

1. How does Locke's claim that rights exist before government place a limit on rulers?

2. In Locke's social contract, what do people agree to do, and what must government do in return?

3. How did the Declaration use the social contract idea to justify separation from Britain?

4. How could people denied political rights in 1776 use the Declaration's principles to argue for change?

3 YOUR TURN

Your own words

Imagine a town council bans residents from publicly criticizing its decisions. Write 5 to 6 sentences addressed to the council. Explain why the ban conflicts with a natural right, how the social contract limits council power, and one specific peaceful change residents should demand.

ANSWER KEY

Rights Before Rulers

HIGH SCHOOL · USG.C.2.1.D

PART 1 · READ AND MARK

As you read, underline claims about rights people have before government exists, circle statements about where government gets its power, and number the steps that explain when people may change a government. Accept any marking that follows this job and points at the right text.

PART 2 · ANSWERS

#	QUESTION	ANSWER
1	How does Locke's claim that rights exist before government place a limit on rulers?	**Because rulers do not give people their natural rights, they cannot rightly take those rights away at will.**
2	In Locke's social contract, what do people agree to do, and what must government do in return?	**People agree to follow common laws. Government must protect their rights and act for the public good.**
3	How did the Declaration use the social contract idea to justify separation from Britain?	**It said government exists to secure rights and draws power from the people's consent. It cited the king's repeated abuses as a reason to change the government.**
4	How could people denied political rights in 1776 use the Declaration's principles to argue for change?	**They could argue that rights belong to people even when a government denies them protection, and demand that government secure those rights.**

PART 3 · YOUR TURN (SAMPLE ANSWER)

Council members, your rule against public criticism threatens our liberty to speak about decisions that affect us. Liberty is not a gift from the council, so the council cannot simply take it away. Residents accept common rules so that government will protect their rights, not silence them. Your authority depends on the consent of the people you serve. Repeal the ban and allow residents to speak at public meetings. If you refuse, residents can organize and vote for council members who will protect that right.

Accept explanations that connect rights people possess before government to limits on government authority. For the open task, the proposed peaceful change may differ, but it should address the ban and follow from the social contract reasoning.