# JOHN LOCKE’S INFLUENCES: RIGHTS TO LIFE, FREEDOM, AND PROPERTY

John Locke was one of the most prominent philosophers of the Enlightenment. Locke upheld the belief that a government could only be deemed legitimate if the people it governed agreed to its authority. The philosopher also believed that the government bears the responsibility of protecting citizens’ natural rights and that all people are equal under law. These principles had considerable impact on numerous movements such as the American Revolt that further inspired the French Revolution. In addition, documents like the U.S. Declaration of Independence, U.S. Bill of Rights and France’s Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen depict the influence of the philosopher’s ideas.

One of Locke’s primary influences is his identification of a legitimate government. Locke argued that leaders gain authority via consent of the people they govern. As a result, the mandate of such a government is to safeguard people’s natural rights. This notion is deeply entrenched in the Declaration of Independence. For instance, the preface to this document references the “Laws of Nature”, thus mirroring Enlightenment views perpetuated by Locke that, the universe operates in accordance with natural laws that are not only scientific, but also logical. The second paragraph of the Declaration of Independence further asserts “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their creator with certain unalienable Rights that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of happiness.”[[1]](#footnote-0) This passage is traceable to ideas laid out by Locke in his controversial essay, “Two Treatises of Government”.   In the latter article, Locke delineates man’s three natural rights namely life, liberty and property.[[2]](#footnote-1)

In addition, Locke stipulates that the government is obliged to uphold the mentioned natural rights for its citizens, failure to which the people wield the right to remove it from power by insurgency if necessary. This idea is evident in the Declaration of Independence, as is discernible from the phrase “whenever any form of government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the right of the people to alter or to abolish it, and to institute new Government”.[[3]](#footnote-2)  It is, therefore, apparent that Thomas Jefferson drew inspiration from Locke’s beliefs, when he indicated that colonials were within their rights to rebel against British rule and effectively declare their autonomy.[[4]](#footnote-3) The document even lists ways in which the British monarchy had disregarded their natural rights thus warranting them the right to revolt. It is clear that these enlightenment ideas influenced British colonies’ revolt against their colonial rulers hence the American Revolution. Overall, connections to Locke’s ideas are evident in the Declaration of Independence in provisions such as right to life, liberty and pursuit of happiness, equality of all men, citizens’ right to overthrow government.

The preceding ideas are also apparent in the U.S Bill of Rights, exemplifying protection of the right to free speech, assembly, press, and religion. One notable aspect is that the first ten alterations to the Constitution constitute this bill. Influences from Enlightenment philosophers like Locke are inescapable, since it highlights detailed natural rights of individuals. For example, the First Amendment guarantees people’s freedom of speech and religion, while the Sixth guarantees accused persons right to a speedy and fair trial. These provisions place emphasis on the importance of safeguarding individuals’ rights in case of an overbearing government; a notion of significant importance to Locke.

Locke’s ideas and their influence surpassed the United States’ administrative realm, as proven by the French Revolution. In the late 18th century, French citizens, repulsed by the Bourbon family’s absolute authority and lack of taxation of people in upper social classes, opted for a rebellion. The revolution was partly motivated by the American Revolution and can also be linked to Enlightenment beliefs like equality of all men and right to revolt against a government if it fails to meet its obligations to protect their citizens’ natural rights.[[5]](#footnote-4) It is this uprising against King Louis XVI that paved way for the Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen. Written during the revolution, the document proclaimed citizens’ right to life, equality of all the citizens of France, right to liberty, and the right to resist administrative oppression. As a result, the document established civil freedoms and attempted to protect the rights and liberties of all people.

In conclusion, Locke’s ideas of equality are predominant in documents like the U.S. Declaration of Independence, U.S. Bill of Rights and France’s Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen, as well as, in the American and French Revolutions. These principles are evident in contemporary administration, where governments are obliged to safeguard their citizens’ natural rights to life, liberty, and property. Most importantly, citizens enter a social contract with those governing them and failure of the latter warrants citizens’ uprising.

## Bibliography

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1. Jerry Holmes. Thomas Jefferson A Chronology of his Thoughts. New York: Rowman and Littlefield, Inc., 2002. [↑](#footnote-ref-0)
2. John Locke. "Second Treatise on Government." *Project Gutenberg*, July-Aug. 2003. Web. 17 Sept. 2017. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
3. John Locke. The Works of John Locke. London: Arthur Bettesworth, John Pemberton, and Edward Simon. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
4. Jerry Holmes. Thomas Jefferson A Chronology of his Thoughts. New York: Rowman and Littlefield, Inc., 2002. p.23 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
5. John Locke. The Works of John Locke. London: Arthur Bettesworth, John Pemberton, and Edward Simon [↑](#footnote-ref-4)