Popular sovereignty, or sovereignty of the peoples' rule, is the principle that the authority of a state and its government are created and sustained by the consent of its people, through their elected representatives (Rule by the People), who is the source of all political power. It is closely associated with social contract philosophers such as Thomas Hobbes, John Locke and Jean-Jacques Rousseau. Popular sovereignty expresses a concept and does not necessarily reflect or describe a political reality. Hobbes' theory was that the people mutually agreed to create a state, giving it only enough power to provide protection of their well-being. However, in Hobbes' theory, once the power was given to the state, the people then relinquished any right to that power. In effect, that was the price of the protection they sought. John Locke also based his political writings on the idea of the social contract. He stressed the role of the individual and the idea that in the "State of Nature," people are essentially free. However, they might decide to form a government to punish any individuals who go against the laws of nature and harm others. Locke further posited that if this government no longer protected each individual's right to life, liberty, and property, then revolution was not just a right but an obligation. 

Because popular consent is the "pure, original fountain of all legitimate authority," Alexander Hamilton, in The Federalist #22, presents the ratification of the constitution by conventions specially elected by the people, a mode recently pioneered by the states, as crucial to its legitimacy. The Federalist both opens and closes remarking that for a whole people to choose their constitution by voluntary consent, far from being typical, is an unprecedented prodigy.