Politics and Government Matter—that is the single most important message of this book. Consider, for example, the following list of ways that government and politics may have already impacted your life:

- Any public schools you attended were prohibited by the federal government from discriminating against females and minorities and from
holding prayer sessions led by school officials. Municipal school boards regulated your education, and the state certified and paid your teachers.

- The ages at which you could get your driver’s license, drink alcohol, and vote were all determined by state and federal governments.
- Before you could get a job, the federal government had to issue you a Social Security number, and you have been paying Social Security taxes every month that you have been employed. If you worked at a relatively low-paying job, your starting wages were determined by state and federal minimum-wage laws.
- As a college student, you may be drawing student loans financed by the government. The government even dictates certain school holidays.
- Even though gasoline prices have recently risen quite a lot, federal policy continues to make it possible for you to drive long distances relatively cheaply compared to citizens in most other countries. In many other advanced industrialized nations, such as England and Japan, gasoline is twice as expensive as in the United States because of the high taxes their governments impose on fuel.
- If you apply to rent an apartment, federal law prohibits landlords from discriminating against you because of your race or religion.

Yet, many Americans—especially young people—are apathetic about politics and government. For example, before his historic return to space, former U.S. Senator John Glenn remarked that he worried “about the future when we have so many young people who feel apathetic and critical and cynical about anything having to do with politics. They don’t want to touch it. And yet politics is literally the personnel system for democracy.”

Stereotypes can be mistaken; unfortunately this is one case where widely held impressions are overwhelmingly supported by solid evidence. This is not to say that young people are inactive in American society. As Harvard students Ganesh Sitaraman and Previn Warren write in *Invisible Citizens: Youth Politics After September 11*: “Young people are some of the most active members of their communities and are devoting increasing amounts of their time to direct service work and volunteerism.” It is only when it comes to politics that young people seem to express indifference about getting involved. Whether because they think they can’t make a difference, the political system is corrupt, or they just don’t care, many young Americans are clearly apathetic about public affairs. And while political apathy isn’t restricted to young people, a tremendous gap has opened up between the young (defined as under age 25) and the elderly (defined as over age 65) on measures of political interest, knowledge, and participation.

An annual nationwide study of college freshmen in 2007 found that only 37 percent said that “keeping up with politics” was an important priority for them. As shown in Figure 1.1, since the terrorist attacks of September 11, there has been some resurgence of political interest among college students, but nevertheless it remains far below the level researchers found in the 1960s. Furthermore, political interest among young people as a whole is quite low. In 2004, the National Election Study asked a nationwide sample about their general level of interest in politics. Only 52 percent of young people...
interviewed said they followed politics most or some of the time compared to 86 percent of senior citizens. Yet there was no generation gap in terms of political interest when 18- to 20-year-olds first became eligible to vote in the early 1970s. Back then, 69 percent of young people expressed at least some interest in politics compared to 65 percent of the elderly.

Because they pay so little attention to public affairs, American youth are less likely to be well informed about politics and government compared to senior citizens. The current pattern of political knowledge increasing with age has been well documented in recent years. But it was not always that way. The 1964 and 2004 National Election Studies each contain a substantial battery of political knowledge questions that enable this point to be clearly demonstrated. Figure 1.2 shows the percentage of correct answers to eight questions in 1964 and six questions in 2004 by age category. In 1964, there was virtually no pattern by age, with those under 30 actually scoring 5 percent higher than senior citizens. By contrast, in 2004 young people provided the correct answer to only one out of every three questions, whereas people over 65 were correct more than half the time. Regardless of whether the question concerned identifying current U.S. or foreign political leaders or partisan control of Congress, the result was the same: Young people were clearly less knowledgeable than the elderly.

Thomas Jefferson once said that there has never been, nor ever will be, a people who are politically ignorant and free. If this is indeed the case, write Stephen Bennett and Eric Rademacher, then “we can legitimately wonder what the future holds” if young people “remain as uninformed as they are about government and public affairs.” While this may well be an overreaction, there definitely are important consequences when citizens lack political information. In *What Americans Know About Politics and Why It Matters*, Michael Delli Carpini and Scott Keeter make a strong case for
Chapter 1 Introducing Government in America

the importance of staying informed about public affairs. Political knowledge, they argue: (1) fosters civic virtues, such as political tolerance; (2) helps citizens to identify what policies would truly benefit them and then incorporate this information in their voting behavior; and (3) promotes active participation in politics. If you’ve been reading about the debate on health care reform, for example, you’ll be able to understand proposed legislation on managed care and patient’s rights. This knowledge will then help you identify and vote for candidates whose views agree with yours.

Lacking such information about political issues, however, fewer young Americans are heading to the polls compared to previous generations. This development has pulled the nationwide voter turnout rate down in recent years. In 1996, presidential election turnout fell below the 50 percent mark for the first time since the early 1920s—when women had just been granted suffrage and had not yet begun to use it as frequently as men. Young people have always had the lowest turnout rates, perhaps the reason why there was relatively little opposition in 1971 to lowering the voting age to 18. But even the most pessimistic analysts could not have foreseen the record-low participation rates of young people in recent years.

Why does voter turnout matter? As you will see throughout this book, those who participate in the political process are more likely to benefit from government programs and policies. Young people often complain that the elderly have far more political clout than they do—turnout statistics make it clear why this is the case. As shown in Figure 1.3, in recent years the voter turnout rate for people under 25 has consistently been much lower than the corresponding rate for senior citizens. Whereas turnout

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**FIGURE 1.2**

Age and Political Knowledge: 1964 and 2004 Compared

![Graph showing age and political knowledge comparison between 1964 and 2004.](image)

Source: Authors’ analysis of 1964 and 2004 National Election Studies.
rates for the young have generally been going down, turnout among people over 65 years of age has actually gone up slightly over the same period. Political scientists used to write that the frailties of old age led to a decline in turnout after age 60; now such a decline occurs only after 80 years of age. Greater access to medical care because of the passage of Medicare in 1965 must surely be given some of the credit for this change. Who says politics doesn’t make a difference?

Of course, today’s youth have not had any policy impact them the way that Medicare has benefited their grandparents or the way that the draft and the Vietnam War affected their parents. However, the cause of young people’s political apathy probably runs deeper. A broader reason is that today’s youth have grown up in an environment in which public affairs news has not been as readily visible as it was in the past. It has become particularly difficult to convince a generation that has channel surfed all their lives that politics really does matter.

Major political events were once shared national experiences. Consider how nearly everyone in America was glued to their television to follow the events of September 11, 2001. For many young people, this was the first time in their lives that they closely followed a major national event along with everyone else. With this lone exception, the current generation of young people has been the first to grow up in a media environment in which there

**FIGURE 1.3**

Presidential Election Turnout Rates by Age, 1972–2004

are few such shared experiences. Growing up in a fragmented media environment with hundreds of TV channels and millions of Internet sites has offered today’s youth a rich and varied socialization experience but also one that has enabled them to easily avoid political events.

In contrast, when CBS, NBC, and ABC dominated the airwaves, their blanket coverage of presidential speeches, political conventions, and presidential debates sometimes left little else to watch on TV. As channels have proliferated over the past two decades, though, it has become much easier to avoid exposure to politics altogether by simply grabbing the remote control. While President Nixon got an average rating of 50 for his televised addresses to the nation (meaning that half the population was watching), President George W. Bush averaged only about 30 between 2001 and 2006. Political conventions, which once received more TV coverage than the Summer Olympics, have been relegated to an hour per night and draw abysmal ratings. The 2004 presidential debates drew a respectable average rating of 33, but this was only about three-fifths of the size of the typical debate audience from 1960 to 1980. In sum, young people have never known a time when most citizens paid attention to major political events. As a result, most of them have yet to get into the habit of following and participating in politics. Initially, there was some hope that September 11 might get more young people to follow national affairs. But to date there has been little evidence of this taking place. For example, a May 2006 Pew Research Center survey revealed that 38 percent of young adults said they enjoyed keeping up with the news compared to 59 percent of senior citizens.

The revolutionary expansion of channels and Web sites presents both opportunities and challenges for political involvement in the future, especially for today’s youth. Some optimistic observers see these developments as offering “the prospect of a revitalized democracy characterized by a more active and informed citizenry.” Political junkies will certainly find more political information available than ever before, and electronic communications will make it easier for people to express their political views in various forums.
and directly to public officials. However, with so many media choices for so many specific interests, it will also be extraordinarily easy to avoid the subject of public affairs. Thus, groups that are concerned about low youth turnout are focusing on innovative ways of reaching out to young people to make them more aware of politics. You can read about various efforts that were made to get young people interested in the 2008 presidential campaign in “Issues of the Times: How Can Young People’s Interest in Politics Be Increased?” which is printed in the *Times Reader* at the back of this book (see pp. XXX–XXX).

It is our hope that after reading this book, you will be persuaded that paying attention to politics and government is important. Government has a substantial impact on all our lives. But it is also true that we have the opportunity to have a substantial impact on government. Involvement in public affairs can take many forms, ranging from simply becoming better informed by browsing through political Web sites to running for elected office. In between are countless opportunities for everyone to make a difference.

**GOVERNMENT**

The institutions that make authoritative decisions for any given society are collectively known as government. In our own national government, these institutions are Congress, the president, the courts, and federal administrative agencies (“the bureaucracy”). Thousands of state and local governments also make policies that influence our lives. There are roughly 500,000 elected officials in the United States, which means that policies that affect you are being made almost constantly.

Because government shapes how we live it is important to understand the process by which decisions are made as well as what is actually decided. Two fundamental questions about governing will serve as themes throughout this book:

*How should we govern?* Americans take great pride in calling their government democratic. This chapter examines the workings of democratic government; the chapters that follow will evaluate the way American government actually works compared to the standards of an “ideal” democracy. We will continually ask, “Who holds power and who influences the policies adopted by government?”

*What should government do?* This text explores the relationship between how American government works and what it does. In other words, “Does our government do what we want it to do?” Debates over this question concerning the scope of government are among the most important in American political life today. Some people would like to see the government take on more responsibilities; others believe it already takes on too much and that America needs to promote individual responsibility instead. While citizens often disagree about what their government should do for them, all governments have certain functions in common.
National governments throughout the world perform the following functions:

*Maintain a national defense.* A government protects its national sovereignty, usually by maintaining armed forces. In the nuclear age, some governments possess awesome power to make war through highly sophisticated weapons. The United States currently spends over $500 billion a year on national defense. Since September 11, the defense budget has increased substantially, in part to cope with the threat of terrorism on U.S. soil.

*Provide public services.* Governments in this country spend billions of dollars on schools, libraries, hospitals, and dozens of other public institutions. Some of these services, like highways and public parks, can be shared by everyone and cannot be denied to anyone. These kinds of services are called **public goods**. Other services, such as a college education or medical care, can be restricted to individuals who meet certain criteria but may be provided by the private sector as well. Governments typically provide these services to make them accessible to people who may not be able to afford privately available services.

*Preserve order.* Every government has some means of maintaining order. When people protest in large numbers, governments may resort to extreme measures to restore order. For example, the National Guard was called in to stop the looting and arson after rioting broke out in Los Angeles after the 1992 Rodney King verdict.

*Socialize the young.* Most modern governments pay for education and use it to instill national values among the young. School curricula typically offer a course on the theory and practice of the country's government. Rituals like the daily Pledge of Allegiance seek to foster patriotism and love of country.

*Collect taxes.* Approximately one out of every three dollars earned by an American citizen is used to pay national, state, and local taxes—money that pays for the public goods and services the government provides.

All these governmental tasks add up to weighty decisions that our political leaders must make. For example, how much should we spend on national defense as opposed to education? How high should taxes for Medicare and Social Security be? We answer such questions through politics.

**Politics**

*Politics* determines whom we select as our governmental leaders and what policies these leaders pursue. Political scientists often cite Harold D. Lasswell’s famous definition of politics: “Who gets what, when, and how.” It is one of the briefest and most useful definitions of politics ever penned. Admittedly, this broad definition covers a lot of ground (office politics, sorority politics, and so on) in which political scientists are generally not interested. They are interested primarily in politics related to governmental decision making.
The media usually focus on the **who** of politics. At a minimum, this includes voters, candidates, groups, and parties. **What** refers to the substance of politics and government—benefits, such as medical care for the elderly, and burdens, such as new taxes. In this sense, government and politics involve winners and losers. **How** people participate in politics is important, too. They get what they want through voting, supporting, compromising, lobbying, and so forth.

**THE POLICYMAKING SYSTEM**

Americans frequently expect government to do something about their problems. For example, the president and members of Congress are expected to keep the economy humming along; voters will penalize them at the polls if they do not. The **policymaking system** reveals the way our government responds to the priorities of its people. Figure 1.4 shows a

**policymaking system**

The process by which policy comes into being and evolves over time. People’s interests, problems, and concerns create political issues for government policymakers. These issues shape policy, which in turn impacts people, generating more interests, problems, and concerns.

**FIGURE 1.4**

The Policymaking System
Chapter 1  Introducing Government in America

skeletal model of this system. The rest of this book will flesh out this model, but for now it will help you understand how government policy comes into being and evolves over time.

**PEOPLE SHAPE POLICY**

The policymaking system begins with people. All Americans have interests, problems, and concerns that are touched on by public policy. Some people may think the government should help train people for jobs in today’s new technological environment; others may think that their taxes are too high and that the country would be best served by a large tax cut. Some people may expect government to do something to curb domestic violence; others may be concerned about prospects that the government may make it much harder to buy a handgun.

What do people do to express their opinions in a democracy? There are numerous avenues for action, such as voting for candidates who represent their opinions, joining political parties, posting messages to Internet chat groups, and forming interest groups. In this way, people’s concerns enter the *linkage institutions* of the policymaking system. Linkage institutions transmit Americans’ preferences to the policymakers in government. Parties and interest groups strive to ensure that their members’ concerns receive appropriate political attention. The media investigate social problems and inform people about them. Elections provide citizens with the chance to make their opinions heard by choosing their public officials.

All these institutions help to shape the government’s *policy agenda*, the issues that attract the serious attention of public officials and other people actively involved in politics at any given time. Some issues will be considered, and others will not. If politicians want to get elected, they must pay attention to the problems that concern voters. When you vote, you are partly looking at whether a candidate shares your agenda. If you are worried about rising health care costs and unemployment, and a certain candidate talks only about America’s moral decay and ending legalized abortions, you will probably support another candidate.

A government’s policy agenda changes regularly. When jobs are scarce and business productivity is falling, economic problems occupy a high position on the government’s agenda. If the economy is doing well and trouble spots around the world occupy the headlines, foreign policy questions are bound to dominate the agenda. In general, bad news—particularly about a crisis situation—is more likely than good news to draw sufficient media attention to put a subject on the policy agenda. As they say in journalism schools, “Good news is no news.” When unemployment rises sharply it leads the news; when jobs are plentiful, the latest unemployment report is much less of a news story. Thus, the policy agenda responds more to societal failures than successes. The question politicians constantly ask is, “How can we as a people do better?”

People, of course, do not always agree on what government should do. Indeed, one group’s concerns and interests are often at odds with those of
another group. A political issue is the result of people disagreeing about a problem or about the public policy needed to fix it. There is never a shortage of political issues; government, however, will not act on any issue until it is high on the policy agenda.

Policymakers stand at the core of the political system, working within the three policymaking institutions established by the U.S. Constitution: Congress, the presidency, and the courts. Policymakers scan the issues on the policy agenda, select those that they consider important, and make policies to address them. Today, the power of the bureaucracy is so great that most political scientists consider it a fourth policymaking institution.

Very few policies are made by a single policymaking institution. Environmental policy is a good example. Some presidents have used their influence with Congress to urge clean-air and clean-water policies. When Congress responds by passing legislation to clean up the environment, bureaucracies have to implement the new policies. The bureaucracies, in turn, create extensive volumes of rules and regulations that define how policies are to be implemented. In addition, every law passed and every rule made can be challenged in the courts. Courts make decisions about what policies mean and whether they conflict with the Constitution.

**POLICIES IMPACT PEOPLE**

Every decision that government makes—every law it passes, budget it establishes, and ruling it hands down—is public policy. There are many types of public policies. Table 1.1 lists some of the most important types.

Policies can also be established through inaction as well as action. Doing nothing—or nothing different—can prove to be a very consequential governmental decision. Reporter Randy Shilts’s book traces the staggering growth in the number of people with AIDS and reveals how governments in Washington and elsewhere did little or debated quietly about what to do.

**TABLE 1.1**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TYPE</th>
<th>DEFINITION</th>
<th>EXAMPLE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Congressional statute</td>
<td>Law passed by Congress</td>
<td>No Child Left Behind Act</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Presidential action</td>
<td>Decision by president</td>
<td>American troops invade Iraq</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Court decision</td>
<td>Opinion by Supreme Court or other court</td>
<td>Supreme Court ruling that individuals have a constitutional right to own a gun.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Budgetary choices</td>
<td>Legislative enactment of taxes and expenditures</td>
<td>The federal budget resolution</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Regulation</td>
<td>Agency adoption of regulation</td>
<td>Food and Drug Administration’s approval of a new drug</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Shilts claims that because politicians initially viewed AIDS as a gay person’s disease in the 1980s, they were reluctant to support measures to deal with it, fearful of losing the votes of antigay constituents. The issue thus remained a low priority on the government’s policy agenda until infections started to spread to the general population, including celebrities like basketball star Earvin “Magic” Johnson.

Once policies are made and implemented, they affect people. Policy impacts are the effects that a policy has on people and on society’s problems. People want policy that addresses their interests, problems, and concerns. A new law, executive order, bureaucratic regulation, or court judgment doesn’t mean much if it doesn’t work. Environmentalists want an industrial emissions policy that not only claims to prevent air pollution but also does so. Minority groups want a civil rights policy that not only promises them equal treatment but also ensures it.

Having a policy implies a goal. Whether we want to reduce poverty, cut crime, clean the water, or hold down inflation, we have a goal in mind. Policy impact analysts ask how well a policy achieves its goal—and at what cost. The analysis of policy impacts carries the political system back to its point of origin: the concerns of the people. Translating people’s desires into effective public policy is crucial to the workings of democracy.

**DEMOCRACY**

In 1848, Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels published *The Communist Manifesto*, one of the most famous political documents ever written. It began with these words: “A specter is haunting Europe. It is the specter of communism.” Today one could write, “A specter is haunting the world. It is the specter of democracy.” In recent years, democratic forms of governments have emerged in Eastern European countries that were formerly communist, in Latin American countries that were controlled by military dictatorships, and in South Africa, where apartheid denied basic rights to the Black majority. Yet despite this global move toward democracy, not everyone defines democracy the way Americans do—or think they do.

**DEFINING DEMOCRACY**

Democracy is a means of selecting policymakers and of organizing government so that policy reflects citizens’ preferences. Today, the term democracy takes its place among terms like freedom, justice, and peace as a word that seemingly has only positive connotations. Yet the writers of the U.S. Constitution had no fondness for democracy, as many of them doubted the ability of ordinary Americans to make informed judgments about what government should do. Roger Sherman, a delegate to the Constitutional Convention, said the people “should have as little to do as may be with the government.” Only much later did Americans come to cherish democracy and believe that all citizens should actively participate in choosing their leaders.
Most Americans would probably say that democracy is “government by the people.” This phrase, of course, is part of Abraham Lincoln’s famous definition of democracy from his Gettysburg Address: “Government of the people, by the people, and for the people.” How well each of these aspects of democracy is being met is a matter crucial to evaluating how well our government is working. Certainly, government has always been “of the people” in the United States, for the Constitution forbids granting titles of nobility. On the other hand, it is a physical impossibility for government to be “by the people” in a society of over 300 million people. Therefore, our democracy involves choosing people from among our midst to govern. Where the serious debate begins is whether political leaders govern “for the people,” as there always are significant biases in how the system works. Democratic theorists have elaborated a set of more specific goals for evaluating this crucial question.

TRADITIONAL DEMOCRATIC THEORY

Traditional democratic theory rests on a number of key principles that specify how governmental decisions are arrived at in a democracy. Robert Dahl, one of America’s leading theorists, suggests that an ideal democratic process should satisfy the following five criteria:

Equality in voting. The principle of “one person, one vote” is basic to democracy. Voting need not be universal, but it must be representative.

Effective participation. Citizens must have adequate and equal opportunities to express their preferences throughout the decision-making process.

Enlightened understanding. A democratic society must be a marketplace of ideas. A free press and free speech are essential to civic understanding. If one group monopolizes and distorts information, citizens cannot truly understand issues.

Citizen control of the agenda. Citizens should have the collective right to control the government’s policy agenda. If particular groups, such as the wealthy, have influence far exceeding what would be expected based on their numbers, then the agenda will be distorted. Thus, the government will not be addressing the issues that the public as a whole feels are most important.

Inclusion. The government must include, and extend rights to, all those subject to its laws. Citizenship must be open to all within a nation if the nation is to call itself democratic.10
Only by following these principles can a political system be called “democratic.” Furthermore, democracies must practice majority rule, meaning that in choosing among alternatives, the will of more than half the voters should be followed. At the same time, most Americans would not want to give the majority free rein to do anything they can agree on. Restraints on the majority are built into the American system of government in order to protect the minority. Basic principles such as freedom of speech and assembly are inviolable minority rights that the majority cannot infringe on.

In a society too large to make its decisions in open meetings, a few must look after the concerns of many. The relationship between the few leaders and the many citizens is one of representation. The literal meaning of representation is to “make present once again.” In politics, this means that the desires of the people should be replicated in government through the choices of elected officials. The closer the correspondence between representatives and their constituents, the closer the approximation to an ideal democracy. As might be expected for such a crucial question, theorists disagree widely about the extent to which this actually occurs in America.

THREE CONTEMPORARY THEORIES OF AMERICAN DEMOCRACY

Theories of American democracy are essentially theories about who has power and influence. All, in one way or another, ask the question “Who really governs our nation?” Each focuses on a key aspect of politics and government, and each reaches a somewhat different conclusion.

Pluralist Theory One important theory of American democracy, pluralist theory, states that groups with shared interests influence public policy by pressing their concerns through organized efforts.

The National Rifle Association (NRA), the National Organization for Women (NOW), and the United Auto Workers (UAW) are examples of groups of people who share a common interest. Because of open access to various institutions of government and public officials, organized groups can compete with one another for control over policy, and yet no one group or set of groups dominates. Given that power is dispersed in the American form of government, groups that lose in one arena can take their case to another. For example, civil rights groups faced congressional roadblocks in the 1950s but were able to win the action they were seeking from the courts.

Pluralists are generally optimistic that the public interest will eventually prevail in creating public policy through a complex process of bargaining and compromise. They believe that rather than speaking of majority rule we should speak of groups of minorities working together. Robert Dahl expresses this view well when he writes that in America “all active and legitimate groups in the population can make themselves heard at some crucial stage in the process.”

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**majority rule**
A fundamental principle of traditional democratic theory. In a democracy, choosing among alternatives requires that the majority’s desire be respected.

**minority rights**
A principle of traditional democratic theory that guarantees rights to those who do not belong to majorities and allows that they might join majorities through persuasion and reasoned argument.

**representation**
A basic principle of traditional democratic theory that describes the relationship between the few leaders and the many followers.

**pluralist theory**
A theory of government and politics emphasizing that politics is mainly a competition among groups, each one pressing for its own preferred policies.
Elite and Class Theory  Critics of pluralism believe that it paints too rosy a picture of American political life. By arguing that almost every group can get a piece of the pie, they say that pluralists miss the larger question of how the pie is distributed. Elite and class theory contends that our society, like all societies, is divided along class lines and that an upper-class elite pulls the strings of government. Wealth—the holding of assets such as property, stocks, and bonds—is the basis of this power. Over a third of the nation’s wealth is currently held by just 1 percent of the population. Elite and class theorists believe that this 1 percent of Americans controls most policy decisions because they can afford to finance election campaigns and control key institutions such as large corporations. According to elite and class theory, a few powerful Americans do not merely influence policymakers—they are the policymakers.

Since George W. Bush assumed the presidency, many scholars have argued that the political deck has become increasingly stacked in favor of the superrich. For example, political scientists Jacob Hacker and Paul Pierson wrote in 2005 that “America’s political market no longer looks like the effectively functioning market that economics textbooks laud. Rather, it increasingly resembles the sort of market that gave us the Enron scandal, in which corporate bigwigs with privileged information got rich at the expense of ordinary shareholders, workers, and consumers.”

A report on rising inequality issued by the American Political Science Association in 2004 concluded, “Citizens with lower or moderate incomes speak with a whisper that is lost on the ears of inattentive government officials, while the advantaged roar with a clarity and consistency that policymakers readily hear and routinely follow.”

Hyperpluralism  A third theory, hyperpluralism, offers a different critique of pluralism. Hyperpluralism is pluralism gone sour. In this view, groups are so strong that government is weakened, as the influence of many groups cripples government’s ability to make policy. Hyperpluralism states many groups—not just the elite ones—are so strong that government is unable to act. These powerful groups divide the government and its authority. Hyperpluralist theory holds that government gives in to every conceivable interest and single-issue group. When politicians try to placate every group, the result is confusing, contradictory, and muddled policy—if politicians manage to make policy at all. Like elite and class theorists, hyperpluralist theorists suggest that the public interest is rarely translated into public policy.

CHALLENGES TO DEMOCRACY

Regardless of which theory is most convincing, there are a number of continuing challenges to democracy. Many of these challenges apply to American democracy as well as to fledgling democracies around the world.

Increased Technical Expertise  Traditional democratic theory holds that ordinary citizens have the good sense to reach political judgments and
that government has the capacity to act on those judgments. Today, however, we live in a society of experts whose technical knowledge overshadows the knowledge of the general population. What, after all, does the average citizen—however conscientious—know about eligibility criteria for welfare, agricultural price supports, foreign competition, and the hundreds of other issues that confront government each year? Years ago, the power of the few—the elite—might have been based on property holdings. Today, the elite are likely to be those who command knowledge, the experts. Even the most rigorous democratic theory does not demand that citizens be experts on everything; but as human knowledge has expanded, it has become increasingly difficult for individual citizens to make well-informed decisions.

**Limited Participation in Government** When citizens do not seem to take their citizenship seriously, democracy’s defenders worry. There is plenty of evidence that Americans know little about who their leaders are, much less about their policy decisions, as we will discuss at length in Chapter 6. Furthermore, Americans do not take full advantage of their opportunities to shape government or select its leaders. Limited participation in government challenges the foundation of democracy. In particular, because young people represent the country’s future, their abysmal voting turnout rates point to an even more serious challenge to democracy on the horizon.

**Escalating Campaign Costs** Many political observers worry about the close connection between money and politics, especially in congressional elections. Winning a House seat these days usually requires a campaign war chest of at least half a million dollars, and Senate races are even more costly. Candidates have become increasingly dependent on Political Action Committees (PACs) to fund their campaigns because of the escalation of campaign costs. These PACs often represent specific economic interests, and they care little about how members of Congress vote on most issues—just the issues that particularly affect them. Critics charge that when it comes to the issues PACs care about, the members of Congress listen, lest they be denied the money they need for their reelection. When democracy confronts the might of money, the gap between democratic theory and reality widens further.

**Diverse Political Interests** The diversity of the American people is reflected in the diversity of interests represented in the political system. As will be shown in this book, this system is so open that interests find it easy to gain access to policymakers. Moreover, the distribution of power within the government is so decentralized that access to a few policymakers may be enough to determine the outcome of public policy battles.

When interests conflict, which they often do, no coalition may be strong enough to form a majority and establish policy. But each interest may use its influence to thwart those whose policy proposals they oppose. In effect, they have a veto over policy, creating what is often referred to as **policy gridlock**. In a big city, gridlock occurs when there are so many cars on the road that no one can move. In politics, it occurs when each policy
coalition finds its way blocked by others. This political problem is magnified when a president of one party has to deal with congressional majorities of the other party, as has often been the case in recent years.

Thus, a major challenge to democracy in America is to overcome the diversity of interests and fragmentation of power in order to deliver policies that are responsive to citizens’ needs.

**AMERICAN POLITICAL CULTURE AND DEMOCRACY**

The key factor that holds American democracy together in the view of many scholars is its *political culture*—the overall set of values widely shared within American society. As Ronald Inglehart and Christian Welzel argue in their book on cultural change and democracy, “Democracy is not simply the result of clever elite bargaining and constitutional engineering. It depends on deep-rooted orientations among the people themselves. These orientations motivate them to demand freedom and responsive government. . . . Genuine democracy is not simply a machine that, once set up, functions by itself. It depends on the people.”

Far more than most countries, the political culture of the United States is crucial to understanding its government, as Americans are so diverse in terms of ancestries, religions, and heritages. What unites Americans more than anything else is a set of shared beliefs and values. As G. K. Chesterton, the noted British observer of American politics, wrote in 1922, “America is the only nation in the world that is founded on a creed. That creed is set forth with dogmatic and even theological lucidity in the Declaration of Independence.” Arguing along the same lines, Seymour Martin Lipset writes that “the United States is a country organized around an ideology which includes a set of dogmas about the nature of good society.” Lipset argues that the American creed can be summarized by five elements: liberty, egalitarianism, individualism, laissez-faire, and populism. We will review each of these aspects of American political culture briefly below.

**Liberty** One of the most famous statements of the American Revolution was Patrick Henry’s “Give me liberty or give me death.” During the Cold War, a common bumper sticker was “Better Dead Than Red,” reflecting many Americans’ view that they would prefer to fight to the bitter end than submit to the oppression of communist rule. To this day, New Hampshire’s official state motto is “Live Free or Die.” When immigrants are asked why they came to America, by far the most common response is to live in freedom.

Freedom of speech and religion are fundamental to the American way of life. In the Declaration of Independence, Thomas Jefferson placed liberty right along with life and the pursuit of happiness as an “unalienable right” (that is, a right not awarded by human power, not transferable to another power, and which cannot be revoked).
Egalitarianism  The most famous phrase in the history of democracy is the Declaration of Independence's statement “We hold these truths to be self-evident that all men are created equal.” As the French observer Alexis de Tocqueville noted long ago, egalitarianism in the United States involves equality of opportunity and respect in the absence of a monarchy and aristocracy. Americans have never been equal in terms of condition. What is most critical to this part of the American creed is that everyone has a chance to succeed in life.

Tocqueville accurately saw into the American future that the social equality he observed in American life in the 1830s would eventually lead to political equality. Although relatively few Americans then had the right to vote, he predicted that all Americans would be given these rights because, in order to guarantee equality of opportunity, everyone must have an equal opportunity to participate in democratic governance. Thus, another key aspect of egalitarianism is political equality, which involves equal voting rights for all adult American citizens.

Today, about three out of four Americans say they are proud of the fair and equal treatment of all groups in the United States. As you can see in Figure 1.5, this level of pride in the country’s egalitarianism is extremely high compared to other democracies.

**FIGURE 1.5**

Americans rank very highly in terms of being proud of their country’s fair and equal treatment of all groups

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Percent Proud</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Canada</td>
<td>74</td>
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<tr>
<td>USA</td>
<td>72</td>
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<tr>
<td>Spain</td>
<td>67</td>
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<td>S. Africa</td>
<td>63</td>
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<td>Switzerland</td>
<td>62</td>
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<tr>
<td>Australia</td>
<td>58</td>
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<tr>
<td>Britain</td>
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<tr>
<td>Philippines</td>
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<tr>
<td>Hungary</td>
<td>43</td>
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<tr>
<td>Japan</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Taiwan</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Germany</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>France</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sweden</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S. Korea</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Russia</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Percent proud of equal treatment of all groups in their country

Source: Authors' analysis 2003 International Social Survey Program surveys.


**Individualism** One of the aspects of American political culture that has shaped the development of American democracy has been individualism—the belief that people can and should get ahead on their own. The immigrants who founded American society may have been diverse, but many shared a common dream of America as a place where one could make it on one’s own without interference from government. Louis Hartz’s *The Liberal Tradition in America* is a classic analysis of the dominant political beliefs during America’s formative years. Hartz argues that the major force behind limited government in America is that it was settled by people who fled from the feudal and clerical oppressions of the Old World. Once in the New World, they wanted little from government other than for it to leave them alone.18

Another explanation for American individualism is the existence of a bountiful frontier—at least up until the start of the twentieth century. Not only did many people come to America to escape from governmental interference, but the frontier allowed them to get away from government almost entirely once they arrived. Frederick Jackson Turner’s famous work on the significance of the frontier in American history argues that “the frontier is productive of individualism.”19 According to Turner, being in the wilderness and having to survive on one’s own left settlers with an aversion to any control from the outside world—particularly from the government.

**Laissez-faire** An important result of American individualism has been a clear tendency to prefer laissez-faire economic policies, which promote free markets and limited government. As John Kingdon writes in his book *America the Unusual*, “Government in the United States is much more limited and much smaller than government in virtually every other advanced industrialized country on earth.”20 Compared to most other economically developed nations, the United States devotes a smaller percentage of its resources to government. As we will see in Chapter 15, the tax burden on Americans is small compared to other democratic nations.

Further, most advanced industrial democracies have a system of national insurance that provides most health care; the United States does not, though Bill Clinton unsuccessfully tried to establish such a system. In other countries, national governments have taken it on themselves to start up airline, telephone, and communications companies. Governments have built much of the housing in most Western nations, compared to only a small fraction of the housing in America. Thus, in terms of its impact on citizens’ everyday lives, government in the United States actually does less than the governments of similar countries.

**Populism** Abraham Lincoln summarized American democracy as a “government of the people, for the people, and by the people.” Such an emphasis on the people is at the heart of populism, which can best be defined as a political philosophy supporting the rights of average citizens in their struggle against privileged elites. As Lipset writes, American populist thought holds that the people at large “are possessed of some kind of
Chapter 1  Introducing Government in America

sacred mystique, and proximity to them endows the politician with esteem—and with legitimacy.”

In America, being on the side of the ordinary people against big interests is so valued that liberal and conservative politicians alike frequently claim this mantle. Liberals are inclined to argue that they will stand up to big multinational corporations and protect the interests of ordinary Americans. Conservatives, on the other hand, are likely to repeat Ronald Reagan’s famous promise to get big government off the backs of the American people. A populist pledge to “put the people first” is always a safe strategy in the American political culture.

A CULTURE WAR?

Although Americans are widely supportive of cultural values like liberty and egalitarianism, some scholars are concerned that a sharp polarization into rival political camps with different political cultures has taken place in recent years. James Q. Wilson defines such a polarization as “an intense commitment to a candidate, a culture, or an ideology that sets people in one group definitively apart from people in another, rival group.” Wilson believes that America is a more polarized nation today than at any time in living memory. He argues that the intensity of political divisions in twenty-first-century America is a major problem, writing that “a divided America encourages our enemies, disheartens our allies, and saps our resolve—potentially to fatal effect.”

Other scholars, however, believe that there is relatively little evidence of a so-called culture war going on among ordinary American citizens. Morris Fiorina concludes, “There is little indication that voters are polarized now or that they are becoming more polarized—even when we look specifically at issues such as abortion that supposedly are touchstone issues in the culture war. If anything, public opinion has grown more centrist on such issues and more tolerant of the divergent views, values, and behavior of other Americans.” Wayne Baker outlines three ways in which America might be experiencing a crisis of cultural values: (1) a loss over time of traditional values, such as the importance of religion and family life; (2) an unfavorable comparison with the citizens of other countries in terms of values such as patriotism or support for moral principles; and (3) the division of society into opposed groups with irreconcilable moral differences. Baker tests each of these three possibilities thoroughly with recent survey data from the United States and other countries and finds little evidence of an ongoing crisis of values in America.

PREVIEW QUESTIONS ABOUT DEMOCRACY

Throughout Government in America you will be asked to evaluate American democracy. The chapters that follow will acquaint you with the development of democracy in the United States. For example, the next chapter will
show that the U.S. Constitution was not originally designed to promote democracy but has slowly evolved to its current form. Much of America’s move toward greater democracy has centered on the extension of civil liberties and civil rights we review in Chapters 4 and 5. Probably the most important civil right is the right to vote. Upcoming chapters will examine voting behavior and elections and ask the following questions about how people form their opinions and to what extent they express these opinions via elections:

- Are people knowledgeable about matters of public policy?
- Do they apply what knowledge they have to their voting choices?
- Are American elections designed to facilitate public participation?

Linkage institutions, such as interest groups, political parties, and the media, help translate input from the public into output from the policymakers. When you explore these institutions, consider the extent to which they either help or hinder democracy.

- Does the interest group system allow for all points of view to be heard, or do significant biases give advantages to particular groups?
- Do political parties provide voters with clear choices, or do they intentionally obscure their stands on issues in order to get as many votes as possible?
- If there are choices, do the media help citizens understand them?

It is up to public officials actually to make policy choices because American government is a representative democracy. For democracy to work well, elected officials must be responsive to public opinion.

- Is Congress representative of American society, and is it capable of reacting to changing times?
- Does the president look after the general welfare of the public, or has the office become too focused on the interests of the elite?

These are some of the crucial questions you will address in discussing the executive and legislative branches of government. In
addition, the way our nonelected institutions—the bureaucracy and the courts—function is crucial to evaluating how well American democracy works. These institutions are designed to implement and interpret the law, but bureaucrats and judges often cannot avoid making public policy as well. When they do so, are they violating democratic principles for policy decisions, given that neither institution can be held accountable at the ballot box?

All these questions concerning democracy in America have more than one answer. A goal of Government in America is to offer different ways to evaluate and answer these questions. One way to approach the preceding questions is to address one of the most important questions facing modern American democracy: Is the scope of government responsibilities too vast, just about right, or not comprehensive enough?

**THE SCOPE OF GOVERNMENT IN AMERICA**

In his first presidential address to Congress in 1993, Bill Clinton stated, “I want to talk to you about what government can do because I believe government must do more.” Toward this end, President Clinton put his wife Hillary in charge of developing a comprehensive government program to require businesses to provide a basic level of health insurance for their employees. Congressional Republicans lined up solidly against Bill and Hillary Clinton’s plan for national health insurance, arguing that government intervention in the affairs of individual citizens and businesses does more harm than good.

Those who are inclined to support government involvement in matters such as health care argue that intervention is the only means of achieving important goals in American society. How else, they ask, can we ensure that everyone has enough to eat, clean air and water, and affordable housing? How else can we ensure that the disadvantaged are given opportunities for education and jobs and are not discriminated against? Opponents of widening the scope of government agree that these are worthwhile goals but challenge whether involving the federal government is an effective way to pursue them. Dick Armey, who served as the Republicans’ majority leader in the House from 1995 to 2002, expressed this view well when he wrote, “There is more wisdom in millions of individuals making decisions in their own self-interest than there is in even the most enlightened bureaucrat (or congressman) making decisions on their behalf.” Or, as President George W. Bush regularly told supporters during the 2000 presidential campaign, “Our opponents trust the government; we trust the people.”

To understand the dimensions of this debate, it is important first to get some sense of the current scope of the federal government’s activities.
HOW ACTIVE IS AMERICAN GOVERNMENT?

In terms of dollars spent, government in America is vast. Altogether, our governments—national, state, and local—spend about 29 percent of our gross domestic product, the total value of all goods and services produced annually by the United States. Government not only spends large sums of money but also employs large numbers of people. About 18 million Americans work for our government, mostly at the state and local level as teachers, police officers, university professors, and so on. Consider some facts about the size of our national government:

• It spends about $3.1 trillion annually (printed as a number, that’s $3,100,000,000,000 a year).
• It employs over 2.2 million people.
• It owns one-third of the land in the United States.
• It occupies 2.6 billion square feet of office space, more than four times the office space located in the nation’s 10 largest cities.
• It owns and operates more than 400,000 nonmilitary vehicles.

How does the American national government spend $3.1 trillion a year? National defense takes about one-sixth of the federal budget, a much smaller percentage than it did three decades ago. Social Security consumes more than one-fifth of the budget. Medicare is another big-ticket item, requiring a little over one-tenth of the budget. State and local governments also get important parts of the federal government’s budget. The federal government helps fund highway and airport construction, police departments, school districts, and other state and local functions.

When expenditures grow, tax revenues must grow to pay the additional costs. When taxes do not grow as fast as spending, a budget deficit results. The federal government ran a budget deficit every year from 1969 through 1997. The last few Clinton budgets showed surpluses, but soon after George W. Bush took over the government was running a deficit once again. In fiscal year 2009, the deficit for the year was over $400 billion. No doubt the events of September 11 contributed to the reappearance of deficit spending due to the negative impact they had on the U.S. economy as well as the added security expenses the government suddenly encountered. But opponents of President Bush have put much of the blame on the large tax cut the president proposed in the 2000 campaign and then delivered early in his presidency. In any event, years of deficits have left the country with a national debt of over $8 trillion, which will continue to pose a problem for policymakers for decades to come.

Whatever the national problem—pollution, AIDS, hurricane relief, homelessness, hunger, sexism—many people expect Congress to solve it with legislation. Thus, American government certainly matters tremendously in terms of dollars spent, persons employed, and laws passed. Our concern, however, is less about the absolute size of government and more about whether government activity is what we want it to be.
PREVIEW QUESTIONS ABOUT THE SCOPE OF GOVERNMENT

Debate over the scope of government is central to contemporary American politics, and it is a theme this text will examine in each chapter. Our goal is not to determine for you the proper role of the national government. Instead, you will explore the implications of the way politics, institutions, and policy in America affect the scope of government. By raising questions such as those listed in the next few paragraphs, you may draw your own conclusions about the appropriate role of government in America. Part One of Government in America examines the constitutional foundations of American government. A concern with the proper scope of government leads to a series of questions regarding the constitutional structure of American politics, including the following:

• What role did the Constitution’s authors foresee for the federal government?
• Does the Constitution favor a government with a broad scope, or is it neutral on this issue?
• Why did the functions of government increase, and why did they increase most at the national rather than the state level?
• Has bigger, more active government constrained freedom, or does the increased scope of government serve to protect civil liberties and civil rights?

Part Two focuses on those who make demands on government, including the public, political parties, interest groups, and the media. Here you will seek answers to questions such as the following:

• Does the public favor a large, active government?
• Do competing political parties predispose the government to provide more public services?
• Do elections help control the scope of government, or do they legitimize an increasing role for the public sector?
• Are pressures from interest groups necessarily translated into more governmental regulations, bigger budgets, and the like?
• Has media coverage of government enhanced government’s status and growth, or have the media been an instrument for controlling government?

Governmental institutions themselves obviously deserve close examination. Part Three discusses these institutions and asks the following:

• Has the presidency been a driving force behind increasing the scope and power of government (and thus of the president)?
• Can the president control a government with so many programs and responsibilities?
• Is Congress, because it is subject to constant elections, predisposed toward big government?
• Is Congress too responsive to the demands of the public and organized interests?

The nonelected branches of government, which are also discussed in these chapters, are especially interesting when we consider the issue of the scope of government. For instance:

• Are the federal courts too active in policymaking, intruding on the authority and responsibility of other branches and levels of government?
• Is the bureaucracy too acquisitive, constantly seeking to expand its budgets and authority, or does it simply reflect the desires of elected officials?
• Is the bureaucracy too large and thus a wasteful menace to efficient and fair implementation of public policies?

The next 16 chapters will search for answers to these and many other questions regarding the scope of government and why it matters. You will undoubtedly add a few questions of your own as you seek to resolve the issue of the proper scope of government involvement.

**SUMMARY**

Evidence abounds that young people today are politically apathetic. They shouldn't be. Politics and government matter a great deal to everyone and affect many aspects of life. If nothing else, we hope this text will convince you of this.

Government consists of those institutions that make authoritative public policies for society as a whole. In the United States, four key institutions make policy at the national level: Congress, the presidency, the courts, and the bureaucracy. Politics is, very simply, who gets what, when, and how. The result of government and politics is public policy.

The first question central to governing is, “How should we govern?” Americans are fond of calling their government democratic. Democratic government includes, above all else, a commitment to majority rule and minority rights. American political culture can be characterized by five key concepts: liberty, egalitarianism, individualism, laissez-faire, and populism. This text will help you compare the way American government works with the standards of democracy and will continually address questions about who holds power and who influences the policies adopted by government.

The second fundamental question regarding governing is, “What should government do?” One of the most important issues about government in America has to do with its scope. Conservatives often talk about the evils of intrusive government; liberals see the national government as rather modest in comparison both to what it could do and to the functions governments perform in other democratic nations.
Chapter Test

Multiple Choice

1. Currently, there are roughly __________ elected officials in the United States.
   a. 50,000
   b. 100,000
   c. 200,000
   d. 500,000
   e. 700,000

2. Most political scientists consider __________ a fourth policy-making institution.
   a. The media
   b. The bureaucracy
   c. Political parties
   d. Public opinion
   e. Lobbyists

3. According to Robert Dahl’s traditional democratic theory, an ideal democratic process should satisfy all BUT which of the following criteria?
   a. Equality in voting
   b. Effective participation
   c. Enlightened understanding
   d. Citizen control of the agenda
   e. Equal participation

4. Seymour Martin Lipset argued that all of the following are elements of America’s creed EXCEPT:
   a. Egalitarianism
   b. Traditionalism
   c. Populism
   d. Laissez-faire
   e. Individualism

5. Roughly how much of the United States’ gross domestic product (GDP) is spent on national, state, and local government?
   a. One-tenth
   b. One-fourth
   c. One-third
   d. One-half
   e. Two-thirds

6. Which of the following is NOT an example of a single-issue group?
   a. The National Rifle Association (NRA)
   b. People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA)
   c. Mothers Against Drunk Driving (MADD)
   d. American Association of Retired Persons (AARP)
   e. National Right to Life Committee (NRLC)

7. Which of the following are NOT considered linkage institutions?
   a. Political parties
   b. Interest groups
   c. The courts
   d. The media
   e. Political elections

True/False

8. A public good is a service that is provided by the government and is available to individuals who meet certain criteria.
   True __________ False __________

9. The theory of hyperpluralism is based on the assumption that input from interest groups is a good thing for the political decision-making process.
   True __________ False __________

Short Answer

12. Please name and explain at least three of the functions that national government perform, according to this textbook.

13. What are the three policymaking institutions established by the U.S. Constitution?
14. Explain in your own words three of the four types of public policies introduced in this textbook. What is an example of each?

15. What are the three ways in which Wayne Baker argues that America might be experiencing a crisis of cultural values? Do you agree or disagree, and why?

Essay Questions

16. Imagine that you are the campaign manager for one of the candidates in an upcoming presidential election. The candidate you are working for is hoping to draw the younger voters, in particular. What strategy would you use in order to reach your target audience and get young people interested in your candidate’s campaign?

17. Please interpret the data shown in Figure 1.1. What are possible factors that explain these results? How are the numbers shown in this figure related to the results summarized in Figure 1.3?

18. What are the four continuing challenges to democracy mentioned in this textbook? Of those, which do you believe is currently the most significant challenge to American democracy, and why? How would you attempt to resolve this problem?

19. The data in Figure 1.5 indicate that only Canadians rank more highly than Americans in terms of being proud of their country’s fair and equal treatment of all groups. What are some of the factors that explain why this is so important to Americans? Why do you think this is not the case in some of the other countries listed?

20. Please compare and contrast the basic assumptions of pluralist theory, elite and class theory, and hyperpluralism. Based on what you know about American government, which of these three theories best explains politics in this country, and why?

21. In your opinion, does the expansion of TV channels and Internet sites offering political information positively or negatively affect the political involvement of young people? Why?

Answer Key


Internet Resources

www.policyalmanac.org
Contains a discussion of major policy issues of the day and links to resources about them.

http://thomas.loc.gov/home/histdoox/fedpapers.html
The complete collection of the Federalist Papers

www.tocqueville.org
Information and discussion about Tocqueville’s classic work Democracy in America.

www.bowlingalone.com
A site designed to accompany Robert Putnam’s work, which contains information concerning the data he used and projects he is working on to reinvigorate American communities.

www.yahoo.com/government
A good place to go to search for information about government and politics.
Get Connected

The Policymaking System

Americans frequently want government to enact specific policies in order to address various problems. However, not all problems are the same. In addition, not all Americans agree on which problems government should solve or on how government should solve them. As Figure 1.4 illustrates, the policymaking system in the United States is complex, involving many actors and institutions. Political parties—one of the many linkage institutions within the policymaking system—play a key role because they bring the people's concerns to the policy agenda. In order to examine this part of the policymaking system up close, let us take a look at a concern shared by many Americans—Social Security insurance and its continued availability—and the proposed policies of key political parties to address this concern.

Search the Web


Questions to Ask

• Based on what you have read, do you think the different political parties have different views on Social Security insurance?

• Which party appears to propose the least significant changes in the Social Security program?

• Which party appears to propose the most significant changes in the Social Security program?

• After reading each party's position, which do you most agree with?

Why It Matters

Everyone who works pays Social Security taxes and it is hoped that we will all have a chance to collect it when the time comes. However, there are many proposals to change the Social Security system. Some of the proposals might make it more difficult to collect. Others might make it more costly. Still others might make it possible for citizens to invest part of their Social Security in the stock market. It is important to understand these proposals and to support the party that best reflects your view on what should happen to Social Security insurance.

Get Involved

Go to the Web and try to find your major state political party Web sites. See how each of the parties proposes solving the problems you think are most pressing in your state. For instance, how do the parties propose paying for education or roads? Or, what are their positions on the environment and declining population in rural areas? If you find that you agree with one of them, you might want to consider sending an e-mail asking about how you can become involved with that party. For more exercises, go to www.longmanamericangovernment.com.

For Further Reading


Bok, Derek. The State of the Nation: Government and the Quest for a Better Society. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996. An excellent analysis of how America is doing, compared to other major democracies, on a wide variety of policy aspects.


