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Sarah Palin and the 2008 Election

On the night of September 3rd, 2008, an unknown governor from the lesser known state of Alaska saved the Republican Convention for John McCain. Forty-four-year-old Sarah Palin electrified the convention hall in St. Paul along with tens of millions of people watching across the country, as the attractive mother of five single-handedly appeared to rescue the large gathering with her charm, folksiness, and a frankness unusual in politics. Indeed, just 48 hours earlier, the convention seemed dead on arrival—the first night had been cancelled and the incumbent president and

vice president from the same party didn't even set foot in the hall because they were so unpopular. Palin was a breath of fresh air.

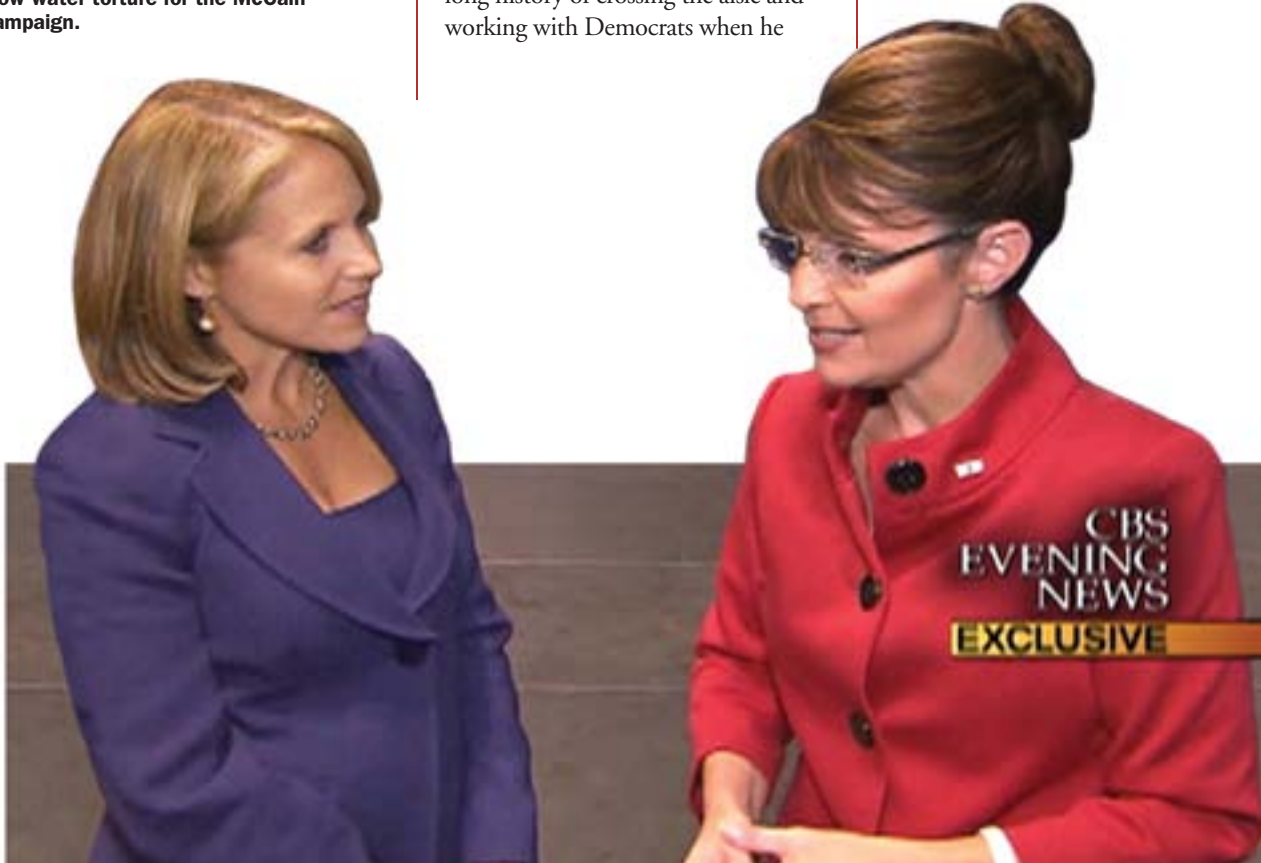
Suddenly, the pundits told us, Navy pilot John McCain, trained in his youth to make split-second, life-and-death decisions, appeared to have come up with another last-minute call that saved the ticket. With Palin as his vice presidential running mate, he brought back the base of the party who had been slow to warm to the Arizona senator. Perhaps even more important, Palin seemed to intrigue undecided voters and even women who had supported Hillary Clinton. These would be the voters who would ultimately decide the winner of the 2008 presidential election. Now, at a time when Americans were calling for change, here were two proven mavericks who would change the status quo in Washington. McCain already had a long history of crossing the aisle and working with Democrats when he

thought it was in the interest of his country. And Palin had taken on her own entrenched Republican party officials, whom she accused of corruption. In the end, this young woman from a very ordinary background prevailed, defeating a powerful incumbent governor and enjoying an approval rating of 90 percent in her home state (numbers the sitting president, and McCain for that matter, could not even imagine). The McCain-Palin ticket drew enormous and enthusiastic crowds as they traveled together in the week after the Republican convention. The polls tightened and the Republican ticket even pulled ahead by some accounts. Democrats were nervous.

However, just two months later, the McCain-Palin ticket lay in ruins, swamped by an Obama tsunami that swept across the nation on election

▼ PALIN FACES COURIC

The interview of Palin by Katie Couric aired on CBS Evening News over the course of a week in late September. Palin's performance was not strong and the nightly airing of different clips was a slow water torture for the McCain campaign.





night, far exceeding any earlier predictions. And in the aftermath of such a defeat, when finger-pointing is often part of the political terrain, many of the fingers pointed to Sarah Palin and John McCain for choosing her as his running mate. Anonymous McCain aids sniped at her—accusing her of “going rogue,” being a “diva,” and not knowing that Africa was a continent. Late-night comedian Conan O’Brien, on his November 6 show, summed up the conventional wisdom: “President-elect Barack Obama spent the day thanking the people who helped him win the election.... Yeah, and actually, Obama’s first phone call was to Sarah Palin. He sent her flowers.”

What happened in just two months—from September 3 to November 4—that would have caused this dramatic reversal from Republican savior to national joke?

Too inexperienced, was one popular criticism. Not ready for the Oval Office. No foreign policy expertise. Palin’s handlers didn’t help. They sequestered her from most of the press at the start; and when they finally allowed interviews, it was with two of the biggest and most seasoned journalists, Charlie Gibson of ABC and Katie Couric of CBS. In these primetime broadcasts, the McCain team didn’t even set up all important ground rules and gave the networks discretionary power to air clips of the interviews. So, when the Alaska Governor

demonstrated gaffs on foreign policy, those clips were played over and over, not just on network television but on YouTube, which only gave the gaffs more power. Perhaps the most damage was done by her uncanny resemblance to popular comedian Tina Fey, who picked up on Sarah Palin’s poor performance on CBS and ABC and gave *Saturday Night Live* its highest ratings in decades. Added to the mix was “clothing-gate,” where it was discovered that the Republican National Committee had spent over \$150,000 on clothes for Palin and her family. Governor Sarah Palin had been reduced to a joke and became a drag on the ticket. But was she? Palin clearly had a tough campaign and did not perform well. In Election Day polls, 60 percent of voters said she was not prepared to be vice president. That said, as many McCain staffers insinuated, did Sarah Palin cause the defeat of the Republican ticket just 62 days after her electrifying convention speech?

As we will see in politics, rarely does one single factor decide a presidential election, especially in a year when so many other factors are at play. The McCain-Palin ticket was actually even with Obama-Biden and ahead in important battleground states up to September 15. But on that critical date, Lehman Brothers, one of the oldest and most venerable financial institutions on

Wall Street, failed. For the first time since the Great Depression, Americans worried about the solvency of their bank accounts. For one week, it was unclear whether the entire financial system would topple—not just in the United States but throughout the world.

Sarah Palin did not cause this unprecedented financial crisis. Nor did she cause the approval rating of the sitting Republican president to fall lower than Richard Nixon’s numbers just before he resigned. Palin did not cause Republican Party identification to fall an astounding 8 points in just four years. She did not send troops into Iraq looking for weapons of mass destruction, and she was not the reason that Barack Obama put together the most astounding fundraising machine in modern times, allowing him to outspend McCain in some states by 5 to 1. Finally, Sarah Palin did not tell John McCain to announce the suspension of his campaign to go to Washington to deal with the financial crisis, thus drawing more attention to the charge that the problem was caused solely by the Republicans (in truth, there is enough blame to go around for both parties). Could she have had an impact on the race in other ways? Did she make it difficult for McCain to talk about experience? Did she cause Democrats to come home to their nominee?

IN THIS CHAPTER WE WILL EXAMINE:

- ▶ challenges that researchers face when trying to study politics and answer causal questions
- ▶ American government in comparative and historical context and how unique aspects of American culture determine what is possible in American politics
- ▶ some general characteristics of government and why government is necessary

causal question a question regarding the factors responsible for a particular outcome in the political world.

Thinking About Politics

As indicated previously, **causal questions** are concerned with “what *causes* what.” Such questions address the roots or origins of particular events or behaviors. They attempt to explain which factor or factors made a particular outcome occur. You deal with causal questions every day: Did I get a “C” on that exam because I didn’t study hard enough, or because I didn’t study the right material? Which major gives me the best chance of getting into law school—political science or economics? Which will improve my job prospects more—taking extra classes during the summer, or working in an unpaid internship? In all of these cases, you are trying to understand an actual or potential outcome—getting a “C,” getting into law school, getting a good job—in terms of factors that may bring it about. In this sense, you are always asking causal questions, and coming up with answers, as you seek to understand your world.

Answering causal questions—in the realm of politics and government—is what political science is all about and is what this book is all about. The question of gay marriage and its impact on the 2004 election is a particular causal question. However, before we are able to tackle this sort of question and identify what factors determine different sorts of political behaviors or outcomes, we must first be able to describe and measure the basic characteristics and organization of American government and society. Furthermore, the particular case of gay marriage also leads to larger questions of why government should be involved in some areas and not others. Why is government involved in marriage at all? Why are there certain tax benefits and legal advantages for married couples?

Public officials, political activists, journalists, and pundits often have simple answers to such questions. Sorting out fact from fiction in the hurly-burly of political debate can be difficult and can make citizens wary about getting involved in political arguments or political activity. While you do not need to run for office or get involved in every political campaign, knowing the fundamentals of your political

system and the fundamentals of good thinking allows you to keep your leaders—not to mention your friends and family—accountable. How health care will be funded, what sorts of taxes you will pay, and the shape of your retirement are all major issues that will surely be debated in the coming

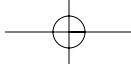
years. The war in Iraq will surely not be the last war debated by public officials and political activists.

This book provides you with the tools to see through simplistic answers that often get put forward in political debates, cable talk shows, and dinner-table conversations and to help you become a more informed and active citizen. This book will talk a lot about power and how it is wielded. The authors of this book want to give you the confidence to be able to take part in politics and influence how power is wielded in America’s democracy. As you study each topic, pay close attention to the different ways researchers gather and analyze evidence as they try to understand politics and political decisions.

In this introduction to American politics, we will concentrate on five main aspects: (1) the political, cultural, and historical background of American government; (2) politics at the level of the individual citizen; (3) mechanisms and groups that link citizens to their leaders; (4) political institutions and the ways in which they generate policies; and (5) how all of these factors come together in the making of public policy.

Throughout this text, we will present political scientists’ answers to important questions in American politics in each of these areas. Whatever the topic, we will encourage you to take a critical view of how arguments are framed and made. This

“You are always asking causal questions, and coming up with answers, as you seek to understand your world.”



will not only enable you to make sense of class material, but also it can give you the confidence to evaluate research and make arguments in other settings—academic, political, professional, or even social.

We will certainly discuss topics like which factors influence presidential election outcomes—the questions that concluded the vignette about gay marriage and the 2004 election. Other examples of causal questions we will tackle include

- Why do some people become Democrats, others Republicans, and others Independents?
- Why does the United States have low rates of voter turnout?
- Do the major media in this country give preferential treatment to one political party or the other?
- Why are members of Congress reelected at such high rates?
- Why do views of the president fluctuate so much over the course of a term in office?

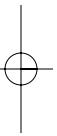
All of these questions have outcomes that political scientists try to explain: party attachments, voter turnout, media bias, congressional election outcomes, and presidential approval. In addressing these questions and explaining these outcomes, the first step for researchers is identifying which factors could influence or cause change in the particular outcome they are studying. So, if the president's approval rating is the outcome to be studied, one of the explanatory causes would be the state of the national economy. This is just another way of saying that the performance of the U.S. economy is one factor that affects presidential job approval.

There are rarely simple solutions.

Most good studies, however, associate more than one causal or explanatory factor with each outcome. Political scientists tend to believe, for example, that while the state of the economy has an important influence on presidential approval, it is not the *only* relevant factor. The percentage of the electorate that has an attachment to the political party of the president (Republican or Democrat) is another factor that influences presidential approval. Another would be whether the nation is at war or at peace or whether the president is perceived as responding well to a natural disaster like Hurricane Katrina.

Where political scientists see a world in which more than one factor contributes to an outcome, journalists and politicians often focus on one major cause, even claiming it is *the* sole cause of something. If the economy is bad, it is because taxes are too high. If a candidate loses an election, it is because he ran a poor campaign. If the president suffers a legislative defeat, it is because the media covered his proposal in negative ways. If a political protest evolves into a riot, it is because the police failed to keep order. Simple answers make the journalist's job and the politician's job much easier.

Often these single-cause explanations flow from a particular viewpoint or partisan posture, or even the need to explain something in a quick sound bite. Generally, they do not represent good theory or good social science research, or even the whole story. Political scientists see the world as complex, with most conditions having not just one but a variety of causes. One of our goals in this book is to help you get beyond the tiring shouting matches on cable television news shows and give you the tools to make, interpret, and evaluate arguments on your own and thus to be a critical and informed citizen, one who can question the black-and-white world of sound bites and television talk shows and see the world in more realistic, more complex terms.



correlation a relationship between two or more factors such that change in one is accompanied by change in the other(s).

causation a relationship between two or more variables such that change in the value of one variable is directly responsible for change in the value of the other(s).

spurious relationship a relationship between two or more variables that reflects correlation but not causation.

Correlation does not equal causation.

Challenges arise when conducting research on politics. One challenge occurs with such frequency that it needs special attention as you learn about others' research and possibly come up with your own answers: Correlation is not the same as causation. Consider a fairly silly example from outside the world of politics. Imagine that when ice cream sales went up, so too did residential burglaries. Likewise, when ice cream sales went down, residential burglaries went down as well. What would you conclude from this? One conclusion would be that the increase in ice cream sales was somehow causing the rise in burglaries. Perhaps when criminals eat ice cream, they get a sudden rush of carbohydrate energy and break into the nearest house they can find. Or, maybe it works the other way. Criminals who have just broken into a home have more money to spend. With more money to spend, they buy more of all the things they normally buy—including ice cream. Most likely, however, neither of these scenarios is correct. Instead, it is probably the case that during the summer, ice cream sales go up, and so do home burglaries. Why? In summertime, people buy more ice cream in order to cool down. Also during the summer, people tend to go on vacation, leaving their homes empty. These homes then become attractive targets for burglars.

Thus, ice cream sales and residential burglaries move up and down together; they are **correlated** and therefore are associated with one another. But, in this case, correlation does not necessarily mean **causation**; that is, increased ice cream sales do not *cause* increased burglary; they are not *responsible for* increased burglary.

Consider another example. It is a fact that the more firefighters who respond to a fire, the worse the damage and the injuries. Again, stop and think for a moment. First, what possibly could be happening here? More firefighters get in the way of each other and cause injuries? Not likely. A more likely explanation is that this is another case of two factors that occur together—they are related but their relationship is not causal. Political scientists call this a **spurious relationship**. The more serious the fire, the more firefighters that respond. Of course, the more serious the fire, the more likely it





is that damage and injuries will occur. The same factor that is influencing the number of firemen sent is also influencing the amount of damages and injuries that result.

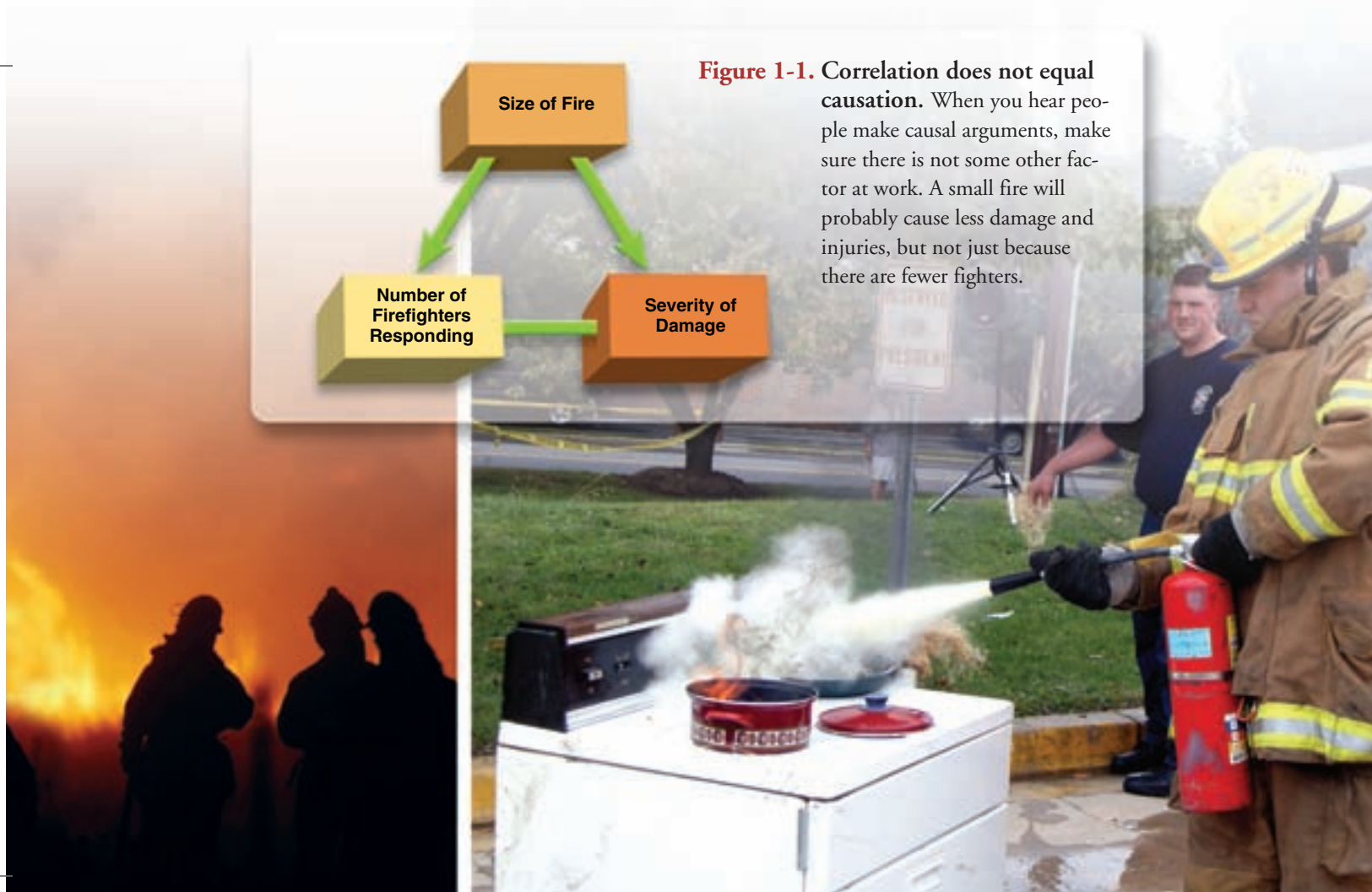
The concept of a relationship that is correlated but not causal is illustrated in the simple “inverted V” diagram in Figure 1-1. It illustrates how a third factor is influencing both of the other two outcomes. In this case, the seriousness of the fire influences both the number of firefighters who are called to the fire and the amount of damage from the fire.

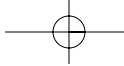
Now, consider an example from the world of politics. Congressional studies show that politicians tend to vote in ways consistent with the preferences of the interest groups that contribute to their campaigns. Politicians who receive funds from the National Rifle Association (NRA), for example, reliably vote against gun control legislation and in support of an expansive interpretation of the Second Amendment to the Constitution, which guarantees citizens the right to bear arms.

You could conclude from this that the NRA is buying votes—that the correlation between their campaign contributions and the votes of members of Congress is actually evidence of causation. This is precisely the sort of case, however, in which one must exercise caution. Perhaps causation is working in reverse here. Maybe the NRA supports those candidates who vote in favor of its issue positions. Rather than the NRA buying votes with its contributions, maybe members of Congress are attracting NRA contributions with their votes. Again, what at first appears to be a case of correlation *and* causation is not so straightforward. Something else may be happening. There may be another more complex, more realistic explanation.



Figure 1-1. Correlation does not equal causation. When you hear people make causal arguments, make sure there is not some other factor at work. A small fire will probably cause less damage and injuries, but not just because there are fewer fighters.





▼ PLAYING SPORTS DOES NOT LEAD TO CRIMINAL BEHAVIOR

Riots among the youth in France began in the suburbs of Paris in October 2005. While many of the rioters played sports, their criminal behavior was not caused by playing sports. Other factors may have caused both of these behaviors, such as not having jobs, and thus having more time for both sports and criminal activity.

Figure 1-2.
Correlation
does not equal
causation.



8

So, how do you sort through such issues? First, for a change in a particular factor or situation to cause a change in an outcome, the situation must precede the outcome. World War II could not have caused World War I. If you want to assert a causal relationship between two factors, make sure that any change in the value of the one precedes a change in the value of the other. Second, try to rule out the possibility of outside factors that may be responsible for the movement or change. For example, a researcher in France found a strong, positive correlation between young men who play sports and those who took part in riots in the suburbs of France's biggest cities. The argument was that playing sports made young men more aggressive and prone to violence. Still, this finding seems surprising since conventional wisdom and the rationale behind the funding of many sports programs is that they instill discipline and keep kids off the streets—helping to decrease crime. The positive correlation between playing sports and violent behavior could be driven by a third factor. We know that those without jobs are more likely to engage in crime. Perhaps those without jobs also have more time to play sports (Figure 1-2)?

This example reinforces a point made earlier: the world is complex, and there is rarely a single cause for any observed effect. One should always be careful, therefore, to consider *all* variables that might be driving a relationship they have observed. Throughout this text we will be examining causal relationships. Such discussions will be highlighted by a marginal causation flag like the one in the margin here.

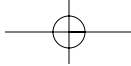
THINKING ABOUT
CAUSALITY



Causality flags in subsequent chapters provide a question that highlights the causal question being explored.

How do we know we got it right?

So how do political scientists arrive at answers that they can be confident are better than the simple, single-cause answers? What techniques do they use and what



techniques can you use to be a more informed citizen and make better arguments? The explanations in this book are based on the findings of the most recent research in our field. But, instead of just presenting you with the results of that research and expecting you to accept it, we want to help you understand how such research is done and how you can employ good research and good thinking both in and out of the classroom. First of all, it's interesting stuff, but, more importantly, it will help you see beyond the simplistic explanations about government and politics that you see and hear in the media. Hence, each chapter contains a feature that we have called "How Do We Know?"

The "How Do We Know?" features begin with an important research question, puzzle, or serious methodological challenge relevant to the material in the chapter and to being a good citizen. For example, when we study political participation we will examine how we know how to calculate voter turnout, and when we study elections we will examine the challenges involved in determining the effect of campaign money on election outcomes. We describe each question, puzzle, or challenge in some detail, and tell you why political scientists consider it important. We then explain how scholars have tried to answer the question, solve the puzzle, or meet the challenge—often using the methods and principles discussed in this chapter. Through the "How Do We Know?" features, we hope you will see how political scientists approach their work, and begin to use some of those methods as you observe the activities of American government and the coverage of those events in the media.

We also want you to see how many of the concepts we discuss in the book have tangible, real-world consequences. We study politics and tackle causal questions because we find issues revolving around elections, presidential power, congressional decisions, and public policy debates to be interesting and important. Put another way, we enjoy following current politics and political battles. Accordingly, throughout this book we will illustrate important concepts and arguments with up-to-date and—we think—exciting examples of politics and political decision making. Every chapter will begin with a short story that illustrates a key puzzle for the subject at hand. In addition, each chapter will have a Case Study section that will examine in more depth how citizens or our leaders went about making political decisions or how a particular political event played itself out.

Contexts for Studying American Government and Politics

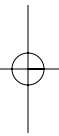
Understanding the answers to—and how to answer—fundamental questions in American politics and government is a main goal of this book. That said, we also want to help you begin to think logically and carefully in investigating important causal questions related to American government. In addition, you will learn about American politics in light of two important contexts: the comparative context and the cultural context.

The presidential system and rights are central to American government.

Democracy, a word derived from ancient Greek, means "rule by the many" (in contrast to its opposite, **autocracy**, which means "rule by a single person," such as a king or emperor). The defining principle in a democracy is that government is based on the consent of the governed. In other words, democratic government operates at the pleasure or will of the people.

democracy a form of government in which the people rule. This can take place directly, through participation by the people in actual law-making, or indirectly, through free elections in which the people choose representatives to make laws on their behalf.

autocracy a form of government in which a single person rules with effectively unlimited power.



direct democracy a form of democracy in which the people themselves make the laws and set the policies adopted by the government.

representative democracy a form of democracy in which the people, through free elections, select representatives to make laws on their behalf and set policies adopted by the government.

Democracy in its purest form is known as **direct democracy**. In a direct democracy, the people vote directly on laws. Many U.S. states have a form of direct democracy, in which citizens can both initiate and vote on ballot measures to change state law. (Examples are the state initiatives to amend their constitutions to ban gay marriage, referred to at the beginning of the chapter.)

The U.S. federal government, however, has no such mechanism. It is organized entirely as a **representative democracy**. In a representative democracy, people vote for their leaders through elections. But those leaders, not the people themselves, make the laws. Whether direct or representative, democracy implies more than just providing avenues for individuals to influence government. American democracy, for example, is also characterized by the following principles:

- *Political equality.* All adult Americans (with some narrow exceptions) have the right to vote, and each American's vote counts equally. Furthermore, all adult Americans have an equal right to participate in politics at every level.
- *Plurality rule and minority rights.* Plurality rule means that whoever or whatever gets the most votes wins, and in American politics the will of the plurality of people usually prevails. Whoever gets the most votes wins elective office; bills pass with a plurality vote in the legislature; Supreme Court decisions must command a plurality in order to have the force of law. In any of these settings, however, pluralities may not use their dominant status to trample the rights of those in the minority. Specific minority rights are guaranteed in state and federal law, in state and federal constitutions, in state and federal court decisions, and in the operating rules at various levels of government. Thus, even if one group could muster a winning margin for the proposition that a smaller group be denied the right to vote, state and federal constitutions would prevent this from happening.
- *Equality before the law.* With only a few exceptions, every American has the same legal rights and obligations as all other Americans. Every American is subject to the same laws as every other. And every American must be treated the same by government. In other words, American government is not permitted to discriminate arbitrarily among groups or individuals.

Of course, in reality, this is a principle or goal that has not been fully accomplished in American democracy. Certain individuals or groups can have advantages over their fellow citizens (such instances of unequal power will be identified throughout this text).

◀ **ONE PERSON, ONE VOTE**
Representative democracy is the fundamental element of the American political system. While people may have more or less resources, all votes, cast in secret, are equal.



America is a **constitutional democracy**. This means that there is a document with the force of law that defines and constrains government's exercise of power. The U.S. Constitution, for example, expressly identifies the responsibilities of each branch of government, ensuring that the president, Congress, or the courts will not overreach. The Constitution also makes clear, through the Bill of Rights, that the government must do certain things and may not do certain things. For example, it must ensure that criminal defendants receive a speedy and fair trial. And it must not limit freedom of speech, religion, or assembly.

Politics in America is not the only model for politics or democracy.

America is one among a number of the world's democracies. It shares some common features with all of them, such as a commitment to majority rule through elections. It also differs in many respects as well. The U.S. Constitution, for example, is rightly seen as a limiting document, one intended by the founders as a bulwark against the possibility of governmental tyranny. Not all democracies set such limits on themselves at their founding, however. For example, when Israel became a state, major political interests there were unable to agree on a constitution. In place of a single constitutional document, therefore, Israel has a series of "basic laws" and court decisions that have accumulated over the years. These define the contours of government responsibility. Similarly, the United Kingdom has no single, limiting document like the U.S. Constitution. Instead, it has an evolving set of laws, judicial decisions, customs, and practices that are the rough equivalent of American constitutional law.

American democracy also differs from others in that it is a federal system. This means that there is a national government with responsibility for the affairs of the nation as a whole, and 50 separate state governments, each with responsibility for affairs within state borders. Thus, as we will discuss in Chapter 4, much of the federal governing apparatus—a president, a Congress, and federal courts—is duplicated at the state level, with governors, state legislatures, and state courts.

Federalism is not the only structure by which a democracy can be organized. France, Japan, and Uruguay, for example, have only one layer of decision-making authority—at the national level. In these countries, there are no equivalents to American governors or state legislatures. Canada, Germany, and India, on the other hand, are organized as federal systems—with a national government and regional governments, just as in the United States.¹

Finally, the United States differs from most other democracies in being a presidential system rather than a parliamentary one. In a **presidential system**, the voters select separately their chief executive and their legislators. (In 2004, for example, a voter living in North Carolina could have "split their ticket," casting one vote for Republican presidential candidate George W. Bush, and a separate vote for Democratic senatorial candidate Erskine Bowles.)

In a **parliamentary system**, this kind of split-ticket voting in which one votes for one party for president and another for Congress would be impossible. In fact, in the United Kingdom, voters do not cast a ballot for the chief executive at all. Instead, they vote for representatives to the national legislative assembly (the

constitutional democracy a form of democracy in which there is a foundational document (such as the U.S. Constitution) that describes the structure, powers, and limits of government.



Some countries rely on an evolving set of laws or customs to preserve democratic features of government, while others, like the United States, do this through a constitution.



Comparing Executive Branches

presidential system a political system in which the head of the executive branch is selected by some form of popular vote and serves a fixed term of office. The United States has a presidential system.

parliamentary system a political system in which the head of the executive branch is selected by members of the legislature rather than by popular vote.

political culture the values and beliefs of citizens toward the political system and toward themselves as actors in it.

House of Commons). The House of Commons then chooses the chief executive from among their ranks, typically referred to as the prime minister.

On occasion, this book will make these sorts of comparisons, contrasting American politics and government with the corresponding processes and institutions in other countries. These sorts of comparisons will clarify the unique features of American government. These comparative or cross-national comparisons can also shed light on underlying causal processes here in the United States. In other words, cross-national comparisons can help us make causal arguments about the roles of parties, elections, culture, and other aspects of American politics. As with discussions of causation, discussions of comparisons will be indicated by a marginal flag, as this one was.

Unique values and attitudes define politics in America.

American politics and government are continually shaped by the uniquely American **political culture**. Political culture refers to the orientation of citizens toward the political system and toward themselves as actors in it—the basic values, beliefs, attitudes, predispositions, and expectations that citizens bring to political life.

The United States has a dominant political culture, sometimes referred to as the American Creed. Chapter 2 will explain the American political culture in detail. The main ideas and values that make up the creed are individualism, democracy, equality, and liberty, as well as respect for private property and religion. Most Americans strongly embrace these concepts in the abstract, and often in specific cases as well. Often these values, however, can clash with one another. For example, doesn't equality dictate that everyone in America should have equal access to health care? Not necessarily. When Americans express their belief in the value of equality, they generally mean equality of opportunity—everyone having an equal chance to rise as high as their talents will carry them. This is not the same, however, as everyone enjoying equal outcomes. That is an idea that most Americans do *not* embrace.

American political culture gives a sense of what is politically possible in this country: what the American people demand, expect, and will tolerate from government; which public policy undertakings are likely to be viewed favorably, and which negatively; which political messages are consistent winners and losers with American voters; and which social, political, and demographic trends are likely to put pressure on government.

The American political culture is not a perfectly harmonious set of beliefs. When it comes to specific cases, some values and ideas in the culture clash, and others give way to more practical considerations. Although it establishes some clear boundaries for American political discourse and governmental action, those boundaries are fairly expansive. Chapter 2 will explain the American political culture in comparative and historical contexts, and this text throughout will periodically invoke American political culture as a useful lens through which to view U.S. politics and government.

▲ THE ROLE OF GOVERNMENT

Debates about the role of government in issues like health care continue to rage in American politics. While many other industrialized democracies provide health care for their citizens, health care and health insurance are generally in private hands in America. How might this result from the political culture of the United States?



Government and Why It Is Necessary

When this book refers to **government**, it means the institutions that create and enforce rules for a specific territory and people. As we noted previously, there are many governments in the United States. Although this book focuses almost exclusively on the central or national government based in Washington, D.C., a citizen of the United States is also subject to the authority of many other governments. These include state government; county government; city and town councils; local school boards; and special entities that cross the boundaries of local governments, such as water, tourism, and transportation authorities. Although each of these governments is distinctive, all are related in that, as the definition states, they consist of institutions that create and administer public policies for a particular territory and the people within it. All may have particular direct relevance to you and your family as they determine the amount of local taxes you pay, the quality of your schools, and the size of your community's police force.

government the institutions that have the authority and capacity to create and enforce public policies (rules) for a specific territory and people.



◀ EQUAL AT THE STARTING LINE, BUT A WINNER EMERGES

Most Americans hold that citizens should have equal opportunities, but—like runners in a race—understand that our society, economy, and politics will generate both winners and losers. Are there any areas where you think there should be an equal outcome?



Citizens in a democracy make a fundamental bargain with their government.

Government is distinct from other institutions in society in that it has a broad right to use force. To put the matter bluntly, government can make citizens do things that they otherwise might not do (such as pay taxes, educate their children, carry car insurance, and pay for lost library books). If citizens refuse to do these things, or insist on doing things that are prohibited by law, government can take action against them—imposing financial or other penalties, including extreme penalties, such as life imprisonment or death.

No other segment of society has such wide-ranging authority or ability to enforce its rules. Even corporations and wealthy individuals, which many Americans think of as very powerful, ultimately must use the court system—i.e., the government—to get others to do what they want.

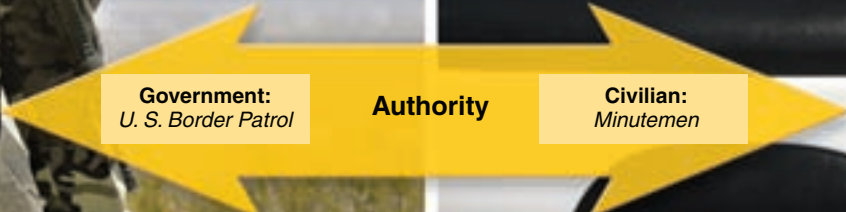
Why do people willingly grant government this monopoly on force and compulsion? Because, as people often say about getting older, it beats the alternative. The alternative to a government monopoly on force is a collection of individuals trying to impose their will on each other. Imagine, for example, that you and

your neighbor enter into a dispute over where your property ends and hers begins. Without a government available to mediate the dispute, you would be left to resolve it on your own. If you could not resolve it on peaceful, mutually agreeable terms, one or both of you might seek to enforce your will through force or even violence.

Or imagine that your neighbor was hungry, while you had abundant food. If you did not wish to share, your neighbor might attempt to steal some of your food

▼ WHOSE JOB IS IT?

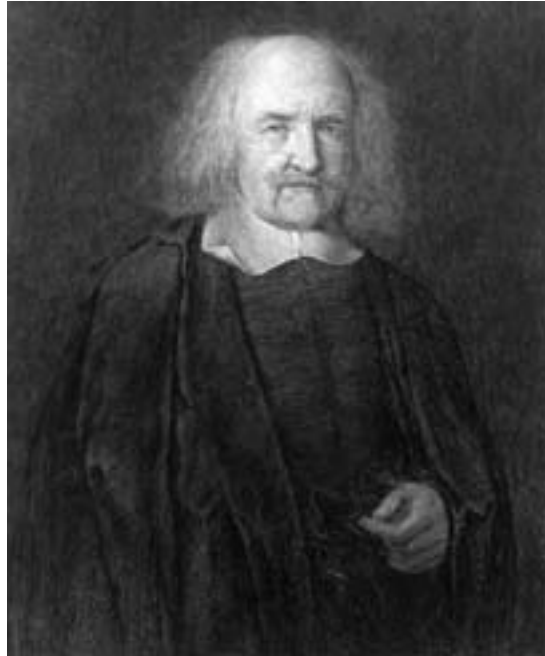
One of the core definitions of government is that it has the sole authority to enforce laws. On the U.S.-Mexican border, some citizens and groups like the Minutemen are taking the law into their own hands to discourage illegal immigration. What should citizens do if they feel the government is not providing essential services?





◀ A WAR OF ALL AGAINST ALL

Thomas Hobbes, shown here with the cover of his famous treatise *Leviathan*, popularized the idea of a social contract which people enter into with one another to create and give authority to government.



in order to feed his family. Without government, the only way to stop this would be to take matters into your own hands. You would have to forcibly prevent your neighbor from stealing and probably leave him with a lump on his head as a token of your displeasure. He, of course, would try to resist all of this, perhaps resulting in a lump on your head. Now imagine these scenarios multiplied tens of thousands of times per day, as men and women pursued their own self-interest without any restrictions, regulations, or protection provided by a governing authority. This sort of arrangement would obviously be unacceptable. In the words of Thomas Hobbes, a famous political thinker writing during the English Civil War in the 1600s in his treatise *Leviathan*, it would soon lead to “a war of all against all,” and a world in which life was “solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short.”²

Governments arise or must arise because individuals do not wish to live in such a world. Accordingly, they enter into a **social contract** with one another to create, and give authority to, a governing body with a legal monopoly on power or force. Under this arrangement, individuals give up any claim to use force to get what they want. They give the instruments of compulsion—laws, courts, police, prosecutors, and prisons, for example—to the arms of government. In exchange for this, individuals get to enjoy life, liberty, and property without constant fear of outside interference. In the United States, the social contract is the Constitution. In Chapter 3, we will discuss in great depth the nature and logic behind this document that has defined the relationship between the people and their leaders in the United States for over two hundred years.

social contract an agreement among members of a society to form and recognize the authority of a centralized government that is empowered to make and enforce laws governing the members of that society.



▲ WHO'S GOING TO CLEAR THE ROAD?

Although it is certainly in every motorist's best interest to have the road cleared, there is no incentive for any car owner to clear the road on their own. This is one such public good that government can provide to all residents.

authoritarian (or totalitarian) system a political system in which a single individual or political party has absolute control over the apparatus of government, and in which popular input in government is minimal or non-existent.

public goods goods (and services) that are enjoyed by all citizens and unlikely to be provided by any organization other than government.

This is the essence of the idea that government is a social contract, an idea popularized by its main proponents—the political thinkers Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, and Jean-Jacques Rousseau.³ Notice that in this idea government receives its authority from the people. It is decidedly *not* the case that government grants rights. Rather, the reverse is true—the people decide, through their contract with one another, which rights and authorities they will give over to government, and which they will retain for themselves.

Because in a democracy governmental authority rests on an agreement among the governed, that authority can be modified. In the United States, for example, the people can change government's authority by changing or amending the Constitution. Or if they wish, the people can revoke the authority of government altogether. This is one check against the possibility of government overstepping its bounds in the social-contract agreement. In **authoritarian systems**, where one person or group enjoys total power, there are no such checks.

Government provides public goods and services.

Government is not only about protecting us from each other. Government also provides its citizens with **public goods**. Public goods are products or services that are enjoyed by all citizens and unlikely to be provided by anything other than government. Non-governmental institutions generally cannot, or will not, provide public goods because

- it would be too difficult for them to marshal sufficient resources to provide the good; and
- it is difficult, if not impossible, to exclude non-payers from receiving the good.

The best example of a public good is national defense. The United States currently spends more than \$400 billion per year on various elements of its national defense. This kind of investment, year in and year out, is simply beyond the reach of any private sector institution.

National defense is also difficult to exclude from those unwilling to pay for it. Imagine that U.S. national defense was provided by a private company, and that individual consumers could choose whether they wished to pay to be defended. Now imagine that only half of the homeowners in a particular neighborhood decided to pay for this service. If a missile were headed toward this neighborhood,

there would be no way for the defense company to protect only those homeowners who had paid its services. Instead, the company would have to defend all of the neighborhood's residents.

Such a scenario is problematic in two respects. First, the company is providing a service and not being compensated by everyone benefiting from it. Why would the company want to stay in this business? Second, homeowners who *did* pay for the service would quickly begin to feel like they were being taken advantage of. Why should they continue to pay for the service if others will receive the service for free? Obviously, either the company will get out of the business, or individuals who are currently paying for defense will stop doing so. Either way, national defense will not be provided.

Government overcomes such problems by providing the service itself and then compelling everyone to contribute by paying taxes. Any situation that has the characteristics of a public good will be a prime area for government involvement.

Although government's primary responsibilities are to keep order, protect individual rights, and provide public goods, in practice, government's activities extend well beyond these areas. One of the federal government's largest areas of responsibility, for example, is providing retirement security for workers and their families through the Social Security system. The government does this even though provision of Social Security is unrelated to ensuring public order or preserving individual rights. Furthermore, government provides Social Security even though it is not a public good—private companies *do* sell retirement securities, and it is a simple matter to provide them only to those willing to pay.

▼ BILLIONS OF DOLLARS IN MILITARY HARDWARE

The funding of the military is a classic example of a public good. Everyone shares in the benefits of advanced national defense. No single citizen could fund it, and those who might choose to not contribute to it cannot be excluded from its benefits.



politics individual and collective efforts to influence the workings of government.

Politics is about influencing decisions.

Of course, exactly which goods and services are public and how they are provided can vary significantly depending on who gets to decide how and which public goods and services are provided. In the context of this book, **politics** refers to individual and collective efforts to influence the workings of government. Engaging in politics, therefore, means trying to influence

- who will lead government;
- how government will operate and make decisions;
- what the nature and substance of government decisions will be; and
- how government enforces its decisions.

To consider specific examples, politics means working to elect a particular person as mayor, or state senator, or judge, or president. Politics means collecting signatures to put on the ballot a requirement that raising taxes would need more than a majority in the state legislature. Politics means testifying at a public hearing to voice concerns about proposed federal regulations. Politics means forming a group to demonstrate outside of a prison as a way to protest the death penalty. And politics means participating in an organized effort for higher minimum wage, increased student loan programs, bringing American troops home from a war, job training, small business assistance, and agricultural subsidies.

Often, politics is referred to in a negative manner—“it was all about politics,” or so and so “was just playing politics.” But there is nothing inherently negative in the definition of politics. Certainly, politics can in some ways be distasteful to people. But efforts to influence the workings of government can also be noble and high-minded.

Furthermore, although one might cringe at times at the way politics is conducted—petty partisanship, shrill language, naked appeals to selfish interests, broken promises, and so on—again, it is surely better than the alternative. Without politics, many differences would be settled violently, outside of the accepted processes of government. Americans experienced that most clearly in the Civil War, when differences over slavery were settled on the battlefield and at the cost of hundreds of thousands of lives.

One of the differences Americans have with each other is over which issues are appropriate for government consideration. For example, is the content of movies, music, and video games a purely private matter, or is it a public concern? Some would say that this matter can be dealt with appropriately by individual businesses and consumers. Others say that government should have the right to require that movies, music, and video games come with a rating label.

And, finally, consider as another example the case of gay marriage. We began this chapter with a discussion of the debate over gay marriage in the 2004 elections. The debate was really about whether marriage would be a purely private concern or a public concern. Should the decision to marry and the enjoyment of certain benefits be a public matter decided by the government? Or should it be a private matter to be decided by consenting adults, their families, and their community and religious leaders?

Clearly, then, politics “starts” even before an issue makes it to the governmental agenda. As this book will frequently note, much of the substance of politics is devoted to wrangling over which issues belong on that agenda in the first place.



▲ MAKING YOUR VOICE HEARD

Protests are one of the many ways you have of influencing policy and politics.

SUMMARY

- ▶ **Political science focuses on politics and government and how government leaders and citizens behave. Political scientists typically try to determine what factor, or combination of factors, produce a particular outcome.** Political scientists strive to be rigorous, thorough, and scientific researchers. To be good citizens and understand how your government and society work, students of American politics should also understand some basic rules of rigorous thinking. One important rule, often violated by politicians and pundits alike, is the fact that correlation does not equal causation. Just because two factors may move together—ice cream sales and burglaries, firefighters and fire damage—does not mean that one is causing the other.
- ▶ **The American model of government is one sort among many. By studying models and practices in other countries, we can learn a great deal about our own.** America is a democracy and like all democracies is committed to majority rule through elections. Differences in governmental structure and the core values of citizens influence the path of politics in different democracies. Understanding the major features of American politics, and the major factors that drive political decisions and outcomes, can be made easier by comparing our system to government systems in other countries. Decisions made throughout our history also influence the path of politics today. We can learn much about how American leaders and citizens behave today by looking at how previous situations were dealt with and how that affects decisions and outcomes in today's politics. American politics and government are influenced by the uniquely

American, dominant political culture, sometimes referred to as the American Creed. The main ideas and values that make up the creed are individualism, democracy, equality, and liberty as well as respect for private property and religion.

- ▶ **Government is necessary because only government has the broad right to force citizens to do things that they otherwise might not do.** Citizens grant government this monopoly on force and coercion in order to gain public goods such as roads, military defense, clean water, and education and to protect themselves against fellow citizens trying to enforce their wills through coercion or violence. Individuals give up any claim to use force to get what they want, and, in return, get security for themselves, their families, and their property. Still, in a democracy, government receives its power from the people—citizens decide, through a social contract with their leaders, which rights and authorities they will relinquish to government, and which they will retain for themselves. Politics in America is a competition about which rights and authorities are best handled by government and what government will do with its authority. America is a constitutional democracy in which the U.S. Constitution identifies the responsibilities of each branch of government, executive, legislative, and judicial. The Constitution also makes clear, through the Bill of Rights, that the government may not do certain things—abridge freedom of speech, religion, or assembly, for example—and that it must do certain things, such as ensure that criminal defendants receive a speedy and fair trial.

KEY TERMS

authoritarian (or totalitarian) system, p. 16
 autocracy, p. 9
 causal question, p. 4
 causation, p. 6
 constitutional democracy, p. 11
 correlation, p. 6
 democracy, p. 9
 direct democracy, p. 10
 government, p. 13

parliamentary system, p. 11
 political culture, p. 12
 politics, p. 18
 presidential system, p. 11
 public goods, p. 16
 representative democracy, p. 10
 social contract, p. 15
 spurious relationship, p. 6

SUGGESTED READINGS

David Friedman. *Hidden Order: The Economics of Everyday Life*. Friedman uses everyday examples to describe complex concepts and argues that economics can explain

everything from general wants, choices and values, to consumer preferences, street crimes, financial speculations and political campaign spending.

John Gerring. *Social Science Methodology: A Critical Framework*. This book offers an introduction to social science methodology. Gerring suggests that task and criteria, not fixed rules of procedure, lead to methodological adequacy.

Gary King, Robert O. Keohane, and Sidney Verba. *Designing Social Inquiry: Scientific Inference in Qualitative Research*. King, Keohane, and Verba work to develop a unified approach to developing valid descriptive and causal inference and argue that qualitative and quantitative researchers face similar difficulties that can be overcome in similar ways.

SUGGESTED WEBSITES

Freakonomics Blog: www.freakonomics.blogs.nytimes.com

This blog began in 2005 as a means to involve readers in identifying and solving interesting new patterns and puzzles.

United Kingdom Parliament: www.parliament.uk

This website provides information on the workings of the British government as well as links to the House of Lords and House of Commons.

Constitution for Israel: www.cfisrael.org//home.html

This site was designed to inform the public of the continuous work of the Constitution, Law, and Justice Committee of the Knesset towards drafting a constitution for the State of Israel.

Steven Levitt and Stephen Dubner. *Freakonomics: A Rogue Economist Explores the Hidden Side of Everything*. An economist and a journalist team up to examine a number of different puzzles in current American society, providing a good illustration of how one social science method can help us understand vexing social issues.

Michael M. Lewis. *Moneyball: The Art of Winning an Unfair Game*. Lewis describes how Billy Bean, manager of the Major League Baseball team Oakland Athletics, took a modernized, statistics-heavy approach to running an organization and successfully identified and recruited valuable plays overlooked by better-resourced teams.

Robert Wood Johnson Foundation: Coverage for the Uninsured: www.rwjf.org/coverage/index.jsp

This website provides information on state health care coverage solutions.

Initiative and Referendum Institute at the University of Southern California:

www.iandrinstute.org/statewide_i&r.htm

This website contains information on government processes for placing issues on the ballot in each of the 50 states.