

The
American
Democracy

Foundations



*T*he United States has the world's oldest constitution still in force. France has had fourteen constitutions during the same period in which the United States has had one. The British statesman William Gladstone in 1878 declared the U.S. Constitution to be "the most wonderful work ever struck off at a given time by the brain and purpose of man."

A reason why this remarkable system has endured is that the United States was founded on a set of common ideals that continue to serve as Americans' bond. Chapter 1 describes these ideals and their lasting influence on the nation's politics.

Chapters 2 and 3 examine how the writers of the Constitution resolved fundamental issues—liberty, self-government, and union. A central theme of these chapters is that basic constitutional issues are never fully settled. They are recurring sources of debate, and each generation is forced to find new answers.

Constitutional government is also a matter of individual rights, of a system in which people have basic freedoms that are constitutionally protected from infringement by government. Although these rights are rooted in principle,

they are achieved through politics. Chapter 4 discusses how civil liberties—for example, free speech—are protected both from and through political action. Chapter 5 examines the degree to which Americans' rights are affected by characteristics such as gender and race. ★

CHAPTER 1

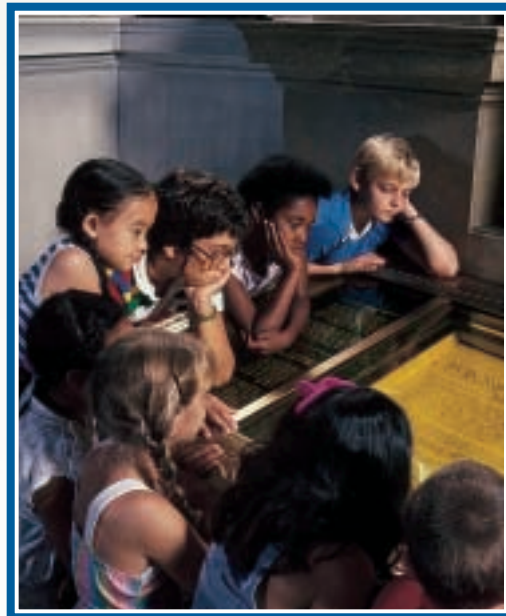
The American Heritage: Seeking a More Perfect Union



One hears people say that it is inherent in the habits and nature of democracies to change feelings and thoughts at every moment. . . .

But I have never seen anything like that happening in the great democracy on the other side of the ocean. What struck me most in the United States was the difficulty experienced in getting an idea, once conceived, out of the head of the majority.

—Alexis de Tocqueville¹



It was the closest presidential race in history. A small percentage of votes in a single state, Florida, were all that separated the winner from the loser. Who would be the next president? As the uncertainty mounted, Al Gore and George W. Bush sought to assure Americans that the nation and the presidency would avert a constitutional collapse. Their statements were at times deeply partisan but, sprinkled throughout, were allusions to time-honored American ideals: the will of the people, justice, fairness, rule by law.

The high-sounding ideals embedded in Bush and Gore's statements would have been familiar to any generation of Americans. The same ideals had been used to take America to war, to declare peace, to celebrate national holidays, to declare major policies, and to assert new rights. The same ideals expressed by Bush and Gore had punctuated the speeches of George Washington and Abraham Lincoln, Susan B. Anthony and Franklin D. Roosevelt, Dr. Martin Luther King and Ronald Reagan.

The ideals were also there at the nation's beginning, when they were put into words in the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution. Of course, the practical meaning of these words has changed greatly during the more than two centuries that the United States has been a sovereign nation. When the writers of the Constitution began the document with the words, "We, the People," they did not have all Americans equally in mind. Black slaves, women, and men without property did not have the same constitutional status as propertied white men.

Yet America's ideals have been remarkably enduring. Throughout their history Americans have embraced the same set of core values. They have quarreled over the meaning, practice, and fulfillment of these ideals, but they have never seriously questioned the principles themselves. As the historian Clinton Rossiter concluded, "There has been in a doctrinal sense, only one America."²

This book is about contemporary American politics, not U.S. history or culture. Yet American politics today cannot be understood apart from the nation's heritage. Government does not begin anew with each generation; it builds on the past. In the case of the United States, the most significant link between past and present lies in the nation's founding ideals. This chapter briefly examines the principles that have helped shape American politics since the country's earliest years.

The chapter also explains basic concepts, such as power and pluralism, that are important in the study of government and politics, and describes the underlying rules of the American governing system, such as constitutionalism and capitalism. The main points made in this chapter are the following:

- ★ *The American political culture centers on a set of core ideals—liberty, equality, self-government, individualism, diversity, and unity—that serve as the people’s common bond.* These mythic principles have a substantial influence on what Americans will regard as reasonable and acceptable and on what they will try to achieve.
- ★ *Politics is the process that determines how a society will be governed.* The play of politics in the United States takes place in the context of democratic procedures, constitutionalism, and capitalism, and involves elements of majority, pluralist, and elite rule.
- ★ *Politics in the United States is characterized by a number of major patterns, including a highly fragmented governing system, a high degree of pluralism, an extraordinary emphasis on individual rights, and a pronounced separation of the political and economic spheres.*

Political Culture: The Core Principles of American Government

The people of every nation have a few great ideals that characterize their political life, but, as James Bryce observed, Americans are a special case.³ Their ideals are the basis of their national identity. Other people take their identity from the common ancestry that led them gradually to gather under one flag. Thus, long before there was a France or a Japan, there were French and Japanese people, each a kinship group united through blood.⁴ Even today, it is kinship that links them. There is no way to become Japanese, except to be born of Japanese parents. Not so for Americans. They are a multitude of immigrant peoples linked by a political tradition. The United States is a nation that was founded abruptly in 1776 on a set of principles that became its people’s common bond.⁵

A strong bond of some kind was a necessity. Nationalities that warred constantly in Europe had to find a way to live together in the New World. Their search for common ground has been replayed many times during America’s history. The United States is, and always has been, a nation of immigrants and of people struggling for a greater measure of respect and opportunity (see Figure 1-1). Yet they are also one people, brought together through allegiance to a set of commonly held ideals.

America’s principles are habits of mind, a customary way of thinking about the world. They are part of what social scientists call **political culture**, a term that refers to the characteristic and deep-seated beliefs of a particular people.⁶

The American political culture is said to include the following beliefs in idealized form:

- **Liberty** is the principle that individuals should be free to act and think as they choose, provided they do not infringe unreasonably on the freedom and well-being of others.
- **Self-government** is the principle that the people are the ultimate source of governing authority and that their general welfare is the only legitimate purpose of government.
- **Equality** holds that all individuals have moral worth, are entitled to fair treatment under the law, and should have equal opportunity for material gain and political influence.

political culture The characteristic and deep-seated beliefs of a particular people.



U.S. politics is remarkable for its historical continuity, which is celebrated here in a ceremony at the Capitol in Washington, D.C.

- **Individualism** is a commitment to personal initiative, self-sufficiency, and material accumulation. This principle upholds the superiority of a private-enterprise economic system and includes the idea of the individual as the foundation of society.
- **Diversity** holds that individual differences should be respected and that these differences are a source of strength and a legitimate basis of self-interest.
- **Unity** is the principle that Americans are one people and form an indivisible union.

These ideals, taken together, are sometimes called “the American Creed.” In practice, they mean different things to different people, and it is not useful to provide more elaborate definitions of these values at this point in the book. Few observers would argue, however, with the proposition that *a defining characteristic of the American political system is its enduring and powerful set of cultural ideals*. The Frenchman Alexis de Tocqueville was among the first to see that the main tendencies of American politics cannot be explained without taking into account the country’s core beliefs. “Habits of the heart” was de Tocqueville’s description of Americans’ ideals.⁷

THE POWER OF IDEALS

America’s ideals have had a strong impact on its politics. Ideals serve to define the boundaries of action. They do not determine exactly what people will do, but they affect what people will regard as reasonable and desirable. If people believe, as Americans do, that politics exists to promote liberty and equality, they will attempt to realize these values through their political actions.

Why, for example, does the United States spend relatively less money on government programs for the poor and disadvantaged than do other fully industrialized democracies, including Germany, France, Switzerland, the Netherlands, Spain, Britain, Sweden, Italy, and Japan? Are Americans so much better off than these other people that they have less need for welfare programs? The answer is no. Of all these countries, the United States has in both relative and

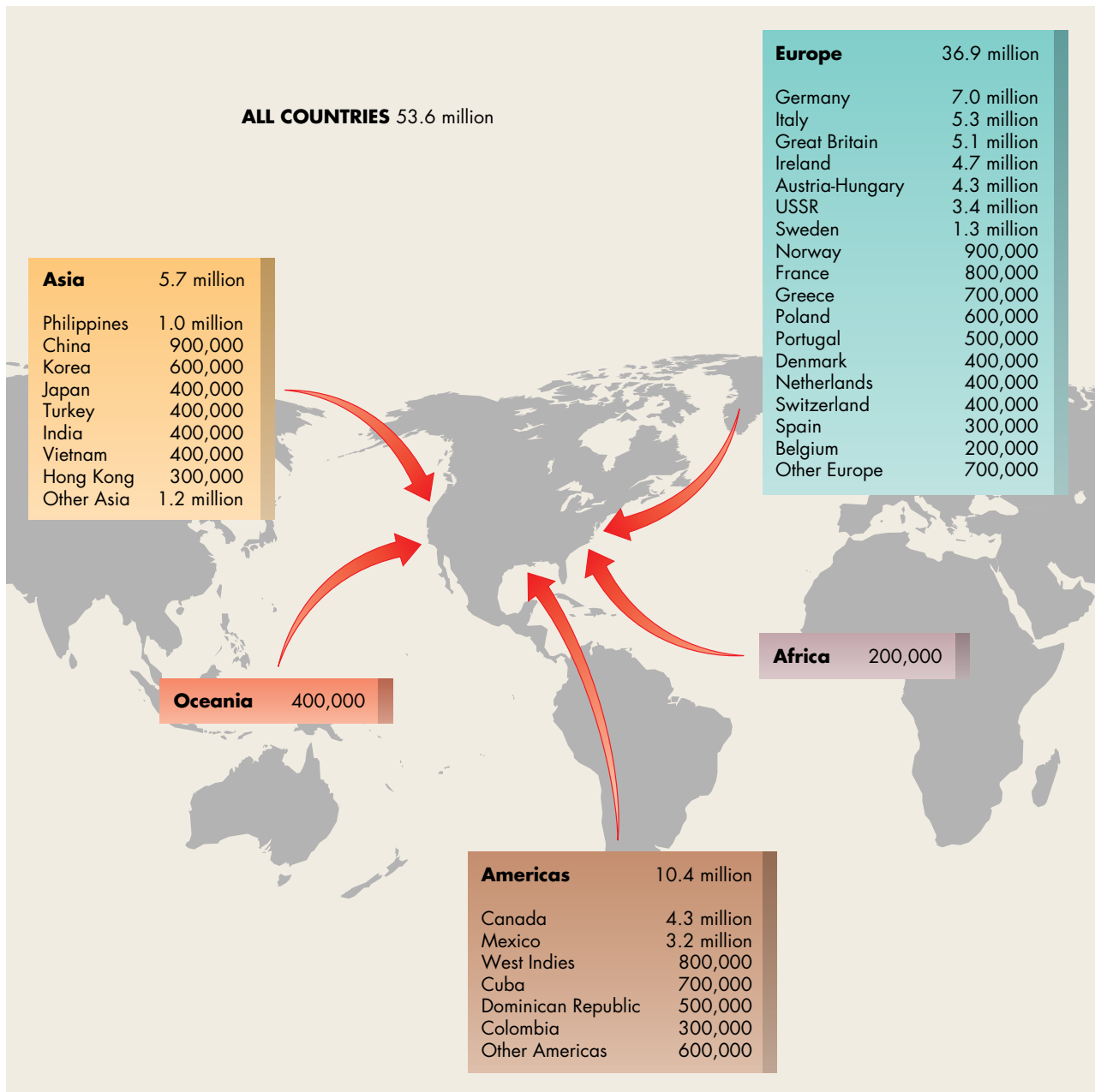


FIGURE 1-1 Total Immigration to the United States, 1820–1990, by Continent and Country of Origin. Source: U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service.

absolute terms the greatest number of hungry, homeless, and poor people. The reason the United States spends less on social welfare lies chiefly in the emphasis that American culture places on *individualism*. Americans have resisted giving government a larger social welfare role because of their deep-seated cultural belief that able-bodied individuals should take responsibility for themselves (see Figure 1-2).

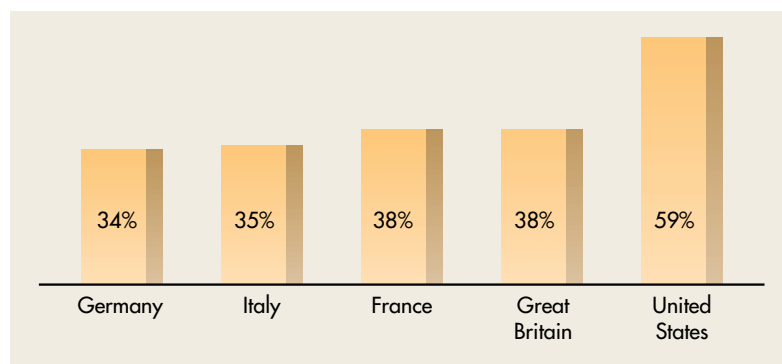


FIGURE 1-2 Opinions About the Source of Personal Success Americans are more likely than Europeans to believe that personal effort is the key to success. Figures are the percentage of respondents who agreed with the statement “In the long run, hard work usually brings a better life.” Source: *World Values Surveys, 1990–1997.*

Of course, social welfare policy is not simply an issue of cultural differences. The welfare issue, like all other issues, is part of the rough and tumble of everyday politics everywhere. There are always powerful interests aligned on both sides of important issues. In the United States, the Republican party, business groups, antitax groups, and others have resisted the expansion of the government’s social welfare role, while liberal Democrats, unions, minority groups, and others have from time to time argued for greater intervention. Nevertheless, Americans’ belief in individualism, which has no exact equivalent in European society, has played a defining role in shaping U.S. welfare policy.

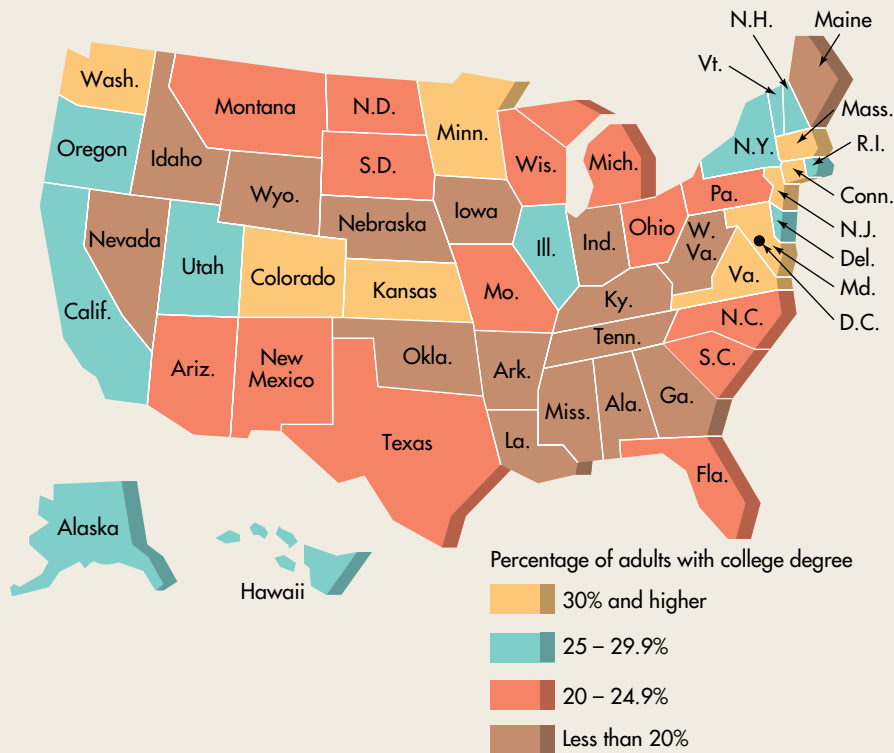
American *individualism* has its roots in the country’s origins as a wilderness society. Land was plentiful, and there was no aristocracy to stifle the ambitions of ordinary people. The early Americans developed a pride in their hardy independence and from this experience grew the idea that people ought to make it on their own. It was a very different outlook than the one that prevailed in Europe, where one’s place in life was determined by whether one was born into the tiny aristocracy, the small middle class, or the huge peasant mass. The European experience created a belief that one’s place in society was largely beyond personal control, which, when democracy emerged centuries later, spawned the belief that government has a responsibility for the material well-being of the less fortunate. The enduring nature of these differences is evident in a *Times Mirror Center* survey of European and American opinions. When asked whether it is the responsibility of the government “to take care of very poor people who can’t take care of themselves,” only 23 percent of Americans said they completely agreed. The Germans were the closest to the Americans in their response to this question, but twice as many of them, 50 percent, claimed that the state was obliged to take care of the very poor. More than 60 percent of the British, French, and Italians held the same opinion. Americans do not necessarily have less sympathy for the poor; rather, they place more emphasis on personal responsibility than Europeans do.⁸

This belief includes an emphasis on equal opportunity. If individuals are to be entrusted with their own welfare, they must be given a fair chance to succeed on their own. Nowhere is this philosophy more evident than in the American education system. The United States spends more on education at all levels than nearly any other country. The nation’s college system, for example, is open virtually to any high school graduate who wants to attend. This elaborate system

★ STATES IN THE NATION

PERCENTAGE OF ADULTS WITH COLLEGE DEGREES

Reflecting their culture beliefs of individualism and equality, Americans have developed the world's largest system of college education. Every state has at least eight colleges and universities within its boundaries and eleven states have more than 100. California with 322 colleges and New York with 320 are the highest ranking states by this measure. No European democracy has as many institutions of higher education as these two states. As a result of their cultural commitment to equal opportunity through education, many Americans have college degrees. On a state-by-state basis, the range is 16.2 percent in Arkansas to 34.0 percent in Colorado. The European average is less than 10 percent. American college graduates are concentrated in the urbanized and affluent states. Young people in these states can better afford the costs of college and are more likely to need a college degree for the work they seek.



SOURCE: U.S. Bureau of Census, 1999. Based on percentage of adults twenty-five years of age or older with a college degree.

includes nearly three thousand two-year and four-year institutions. The democracies of Europe have nothing remotely comparable to this system. College in some of these countries is so restricted that barely a tenth of the young people attend. In contrast, a third of young Americans enter college. The difference is reflected in the number of citizens with college degrees (see box: States in the Nation). Even the American state that ranks lowest by this indicator—Arkansas



The old slave prison on Goree Island in Senegal was the last stopping place for many slaves before they were placed on ships and sent in chains to America.

with its 16.2 percent college graduates—has a higher percentage of residents with a bachelor’s degree than the European average.

THE LIMITS OF IDEALS

Cultural beliefs originate in a country’s political and social practices, but they are not perfect representatives of these practices. They are mythic ideas—symbolic positions taken by a people to justify and give meaning to their way of life.⁹ Myths contain elements of truth, but they are far from the full truth.

High ideals do not come with a guarantee that a people will live up to them. The clearest proof of this failing in the American case is the human tragedy that began nearly four centuries ago and continues today. In 1619 the first black slaves were brought in chains to America. Slavery lasted 250 years. Slaves in the field worked from dawn to dark (from “can see, ’til can’t”), whether in the heat of summer or the cold of winter. They could be bought and sold, and could be beaten, mutilated, and sexually abused with impunity. The Civil War changed the future of African Americans but did not ensure their equality. Slavery was followed by the Jim Crow era of legal segregation: black people in the South were forbidden by law to use the same schools, hospitals, restaurants, and restrooms as white people. Those blacks who got uppish with their white superiors endured beatings, firebombings, castrations, rapes, and worse—hundreds of African Americans were lynched by white vigilantes in the early 1900s. Today African Americans have equal rights under the law, but in fact they are far from equal. Compared with whites, blacks are three times as likely to live in poverty, twice as likely to be unable to find a job, twice as likely to die in infancy, seven times as likely to be sentenced to death if convicted of an interracial murder.¹⁰ There have always been at least two Americas, one for whites and one for blacks.

Despite the lofty claim that “all men are created equal,” equality has never been an American birthright. In 1882 Congress suspended Chinese immigration

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Graphic

TABLE 1-1 Telling the American Story to Children Americans' values and myths are reflected in their preferences in teaching children about the nation's history.

<i>In teaching the American story to children, how important is the following theme?</i>	<i>Essential/Very Important</i>	<i>Somewhat Important</i>	<i>Somewhat Unimportant/Very Unimportant/Leave it out of the story</i>
With hard work and perseverance, anyone can succeed in America.	83%	14%	4%
Our founders limited the power of government, so government would not intrude too much into the lives of its citizens.	74	19	8
America is the world's greatest melting pot in which people from different countries are united into one nation.	73	21	5
America's contribution is one of expanding freedom for more and more people.	71	22	6
Our nation betrayed its founding principles by cruel mistreatment of blacks and American Indians.	59	24	17
Our founders were part of a male-dominated culture that gave important roles to men while keeping women in the background.	38	28	35

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★ CRITICAL THINKING ★

WHAT'S YOUR OPINION?

Cultural Beliefs as Myth and Reality

Cultural beliefs are mythical in that they are combinations of fact and wishful thinking. This mythical dimension can have far-reaching consequences. Consider the Harris poll in which two-thirds of white Americans said they believed that black Americans “get equal pay for equal work.” The reality is otherwise: statistics indicate that, on average, blacks are paid less than whites in every job category. In your opinion, does the mythical aspect of belief in equality allow white Americans to deceive themselves about how well off black Americans are? If not, what else might account for the misperception? To what degree do such misconceptions lessen the concern of white Americans with racial equality? Conversely, how does equality as myth promote progress in racial relations?

on the assumption that the Chinese were an inferior people. Calvin Coolidge in 1923 asked Congress for a permanent ban on Chinese immigration, saying that people “who do not want to be partakers of the American spirit ought not to settle in America.”¹¹ Not until 1965 was discrimination against the Chinese and other Asian peoples effectively eliminated from U.S. immigration laws.

The discrimination against the Chinese is not among the stories that Americans like to tell about themselves. Such lapses of historical memory can be found among all peoples, but the tendency to recast history is perhaps exaggerated in the case of Americans because their beliefs are so idealistic (see Table 1-1). How could a people that upholds the ideal of human equality have barred the Chinese, enslaved the blacks, stolen the Indians' lands, subordinated women, and interned the Japanese?

Cultural beliefs can even lull a people into a false sense of what they have accomplished. Some Americans think that by saying they believe in equality, they have achieved it. A Harris poll showed that two-thirds of white people believe that blacks “get equal pay for equal work.” In fact, as U.S. Department of Labor statistics show, blacks in every occupational category are paid less than whites.

One reason America's ideals do not match reality is that they are general principles, not fixed rules of conduct. They derive from somewhat different experiences and philosophical traditions, and there are points at which they conflict. Equality and diversity, for instance, emphasize fairness and a full opportunity for all to partake of society's benefits, whereas liberty and individualism emphasize personal freedom and threats posed to it by political power. Conflict between these sets of beliefs is inevitable. Both are commendable, but the advancement of one set comes only at some cost to the other. One example is the issue of affirmative action. Proponents say that only through aggressive affirmative action programs will women and minorities receive the equal treatment in the job market to which they are entitled. Opponents say that aggressive affirmative action infringes unreasonably on the liberty of the employer



This Thomas Nast cartoon from 1882 mocks restrictions on Chinese immigration, reflecting the fact that Americans' cultural beliefs have always been somewhat mythical.

and the initiative of the work force. Each side can say that it has America's ideals on its side, and no resort to logic can persuade either side that the opposing viewpoint should prevail.

Despite their inexact meanings, conflicting implications, and unfulfilled promise, the ideals of Americans have had a strong impact on the nation's politics, and they still do. If racial, gender, ethnic, and other forms of intolerance constitute the sorriest chapter in the nation's history, the centuries-old struggle of Americans to create a more equal society is among the finest chapters. Few nations have battled so relentlessly against the insidious hatreds that stem from superficial human differences such as the color of one's skin. High ideals are more than mere abstractions. They are a source of human aspiration and, ultimately, of political and social change.

Politics: The Process of Deciding on Society's Goals

Cultural ideals help shape what people expect from politics and how they conduct their politics. However, politics is more than the pursuit of shared ideals; it is also about getting one's own way. Commenting on the competitive nature of politics, Harold Lasswell described politics as the struggle over "who gets what, when, and how."¹²

CONFLICT AND CONSENSUS

Political conflict is rooted in two general conditions of society. One is scarcity. Society's resources are finite, but people's appetites are not. There is not enough

wealth in even the richest of countries to satisfy everyone's desires. Conflict over the distribution of resources is the inevitable result. This conflict is perhaps clearest on issues regarding how taxes will be spread among various income groups and who will be eligible for welfare benefits and how much aid those eligible will receive.

Differences in values are the other main source of political conflict. People see things in different ways. The right of abortion is freedom of choice to some and murder to others. People bring to politics a wide range of conflicting values—about abortion, about the environment, about the level of defense spending, about crime and punishment, about the poor, about the economy, about almost everything imaginable.

Politics in the United States is not the life-and-death struggle between opposing groups that typifies some countries, but there are many sources of contention. Perhaps no country has more competing interests than does the United States. Its settlement by people of many lands and religions, its enormous size and geographical diversity, and its economic complexity have made the United States a pluralistic nation. *This feature—competition for power among a great many interests of all kinds—is a major characteristic of American politics.*

It is a mistake to assume, however, that competition and conflict are the sum of politics. People must find agreeable ways of living together. Politics is not only a means of settling disputes; it is also a way of promoting collective interests. Politics is not solely about winners and losers; it is also about problem solving. Public safety and national defense are prime examples of people working together for an agreed-upon purpose. Public education is another. It reflects the older generation's willingness to tax itself for the benefit of the younger generation and ultimately for the benefit of society as a whole.

In sum, politics is a process that includes conflict and consensus, competition and cooperation. Accordingly, **politics** can be defined as, simply, the process through which a society makes its governing decisions.

politics The process through which society makes its governing decisions.

Politics includes conflict and consensus. Women have had to struggle to be treated as equals in the workplace, but their efforts have been supported by public opinion and public policies.



GOVERNMENT, POWER, AUTHORITY, AND POLICY

What is government? What is its purpose? It might be thought that the answer to these age-old questions is that government is a means by which people work together to solve their common problems. To be sure, government can serve the collective good. But it can also serve the naked interests of a few, as in the case of Stalin's Russia, Hitler's Germany, or Saddam Hussein's Iraq.

Government can be defined as consisting of the institutions, processes, and rules that are specifically designed to facilitate control of a particular area and its inhabitants.¹³ There are only two things that all governments have in common. One is a capacity to raise revenues, usually in the form of taxation, to support governing activities. The other is coercion—the ability to compel inhabitants to abide by the government's rules. Without these capacities, a government would be unable to exercise control over the territory and inhabitants it claims to rule.

Those individuals who exercise this control are said to have **power**, a term that refers to the ability of persons or institutions to decide society's allocation of benefits and costs.¹⁴ Power is perhaps the most basic concept of politics. Those who have sufficient power can decide how society will be governed. With so much at stake, it is not surprising that power is widely sought and often tightly held.

When power is exercised through the laws and institutions of government, the concept of authority applies. **Authority** can be defined as the recognized right of an individual, organization, or institution to make binding decisions. By this definition, government is not the only source of authority: parents have authority over their children; professors have authority over their students; firms have authority over their employees. However, government is a special case in that its authority is more encompassing in scope and more final in nature. Government's authority extends to all within its geographical boundaries. It can be used to redefine the authority of the parent, the professor, or the firm. Government's authority is also the most coercive. It includes the power to arrest and imprison, even to punish by death those who violate its rules.

Government needs coercive power to ensure that its laws will be obeyed. Without this power, lawlessness would prevail, as it does in Colombia, where drug lords control large areas of the country. But government power itself can be abused. In a perfect world, political power would be used in evenhanded ways for the benefit of all citizens. But the world is imperfect, and those with government power can use it for selfish ends, whether to enrich themselves or to deprive others of liberty. "Power tends to corrupt, and absolute power tends to corrupt absolutely," was how Lord Acton described the problem.

Although no governing system can ensure that power will be applied fairly, the U.S. system strengthens this prospect through an elaborate system of *checks and balances*. This system, which is designed to protect against abuses of power (see Chapter 2), includes the division of authority among the executive, legislative, and judicial branches of government. Each branch acts as a check on the power of the others and balances their power by exercising power of its own. Many other democratic countries have no comparable fragmentation of power. *Extreme fragmentation of governing authority is a major characteristic of the American political system. This fact, as will be seen in subsequent chapters, has profound implications for how politics is conducted, who wins out, and what policies result.*

government The institutions, processes, and rules that are specifically designed to facilitate control of a particular area and its inhabitants.

power The ability of persons or institutions to control policy.

authority The recognized right of an individual or institution to exercise power.



HOW THE UNITED STATES COMPARES

AMERICANS AS A POLITICAL PEOPLE

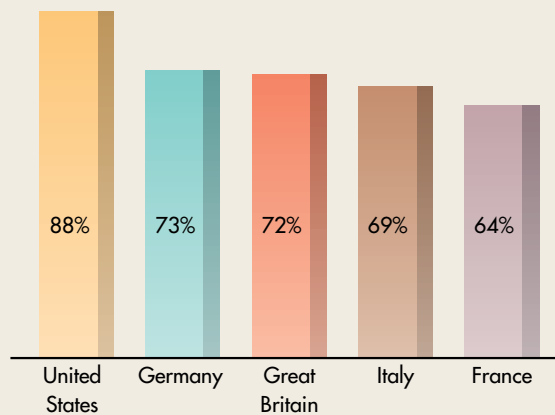
By some standards, Americans are not a very political people. The United States ranks near the bottom, for example, in voter turnout. Barely half of Americans go to the polls in a presidential election, compared with 70 to 90 percent of adults in many democratic countries. Typically, in France, Italy, and Belgium turnout, for example, exceeds 80 percent.

In other ways, however, Americans are a highly political people. Americans have long believed in the exceptionalism of their political system. They have tended to believe that what works for them will also work for others and indeed that what works for Americans would be better for others than what they already have. In his book *World Politics and Personal Insecurity*, the political scientist Harold Lasswell wrote that “Americans who think about the problem of unifying the world tend to follow the precedent set in their own history.” Presented after World War I with President Woodrow Wilson’s plan for world peace based on American principles, the French premier Georges Clemenceau exclaimed, “This man Wilson with his Fourteen Points! The good Lord had only ten.”

Given Americans’ pride in their political system, it is not surprising that they attach great importance to political symbols. In Europe, national flags are not routinely displayed in public. In America, the flag is flown daily on government buildings and even on many private homes. The Pledge of Allegiance to the flag that is recited daily by American school children and the playing of the “Star-Spangled Banner” at public events have no equivalents in European nations.

The distinctiveness of Americans’ beliefs was evident in a five-nation Times Mirror survey that asked respondents whether they agreed with the statement, “I am very patriotic.” As the accompanying graph shows, Americans ranked at the top; nearly 90 percent claimed to be highly patriotic. The disparity between the United States and Europe was particularly apparent among young adults. In Europe, young adults were substantially less likely to say they were patriotic than were older people. In the United States, the proportion of eighteen- to twenty-four-year-olds who said they were patriotic, 82 percent, was nearly as high as in other age groups.

Percentage of people who say they are patriotic



policy Generally, any broad course of governmental action; more narrowly, a specific government program or initiative.

Governments exercise authority through policy. In its most general sense, **policy** refers to any broad course of action undertaken by government. U.S. policy toward Japan, for example, consists of a wide range of activities, from trade relations to diplomatic overtures. But policy is also used more narrowly to refer to specific programs or initiatives. The Head Start program for improving the educational prospects of poor children, for example, is a policy of government. The general view of policy is the more evocative, because it acknowledges that government exercises authority by not making decisions as well as by making them. In choosing not to decide, a government accepts the existing situation as well as the distribution of benefits and costs embedded in it.

THE RULES OF THE POLITICAL GAME

The play of politics takes place according to rules that the participants accept. The rules establish the process by which power is exercised, define the legitimate uses of power, and establish the basis for allocating costs and benefits among the participants. In the American case, the rules of the game of politics include democracy, constitutionalism, and capitalism.

Democracy

Democracy is a set of rules designed to promote *self-government*. Democracy comes from the Greek words *demos*, which means “the people,” and *kratis*, meaning “to rule.” In simple terms, **democracy** is a form of government in which the people govern, either directly or through elected representatives (see Chapter 2).

Democratic government is based on the idea of the consent of the governed, which in practice has come to mean majority rule. The principle of majority rule, in turn, is based on the notion that the view of the many should prevail over the opinion of the few. The principle also represents a form of *equality* in that the vote of each citizen counts equally, a principle expressed by the phrase “one person, one vote.” In practice, democracy in America works primarily through elections. There are other, more direct forms of democracy, such as the town meeting and the initiative, but American democracy is mainly a representative system of government in which the people rule indirectly, through the officials they elect.

Democratic procedures, such as free and open elections, are intended to promote democratic principles, such as self-government and equality. Elections are a means by which a people can attempt to achieve a greater degree of self-government and equality. Other rules for allocating governing authority, such as a hereditary monarchy, a theocracy, or a dictatorship, are not compatible with democratic principles. Democratic procedures are not, however, a guarantee that democratic values will flourish. Mexico is a case in point. Although Mexico in theory has a freely elected president and legislature, the system in practice has often been rigged. Ballot fraud has been widespread at times, and key policy and leadership decisions have been made outside the legislative and electoral processes and then rubber-stamped. Only recently has the Mexican system begun to operate in a more fair and open way, but many analysts believe that it will not operate in a fully democratic manner for years to come.

Constitutionalism

For many Americans, *democracy* has the same meaning as *liberty*—the freedom to think, talk, and act as one chooses. However, the terms are not synonymous. The concept of democracy implies that the will of the majority should prevail over the wishes of the minority, whereas the concept of liberty implies that the minority has rights and freedoms that cannot be taken away by the majority. The democratic model of government has long been accompanied by a fear of tyranny by the majority—the concern that a majority might ruthlessly impose its will on the minority. A more general concern about all government is the possibility of abuse of power. James Madison said that the possession of all

democracy A form of government in which the people govern, either directly or through elected representatives.

constitutionalism The idea that there are definable limits on the rightful power of a government over its citizens.

power in the “same hands, whether of the many or the few, is the path to tyranny.”¹⁵

Constitutionalism is a set of rules that restricts the lawful uses of power. In its original sense, constitutionalism in western society referred to a government based on laws and constitutional powers. **Constitutionalism** has since come to refer specifically to the idea that there are limits to the rightful power of government over citizens. In a constitutional system, officials govern according to law, and citizens have basic rights that government cannot take away or deny.¹⁶ An example of constitutionalism in the United States is freedom of speech. Government is prohibited from interfering with the lawful exercise of free speech. No right is absolute, which means that some restrictions are permissible. For example, a person could be forcibly removed from the visitors’ gallery overlooking the floor of the U.S. Senate for shouting at the lawmakers during debate. Nevertheless, free speech is broadly protected by the courts. During the Vietnam war, for example, there were thousands of demonstrations against U.S. policy without a single arrest and conviction for spoken words alone. In some instances protesters were harassed by officials or other citizens, but those who opposed the war had the opportunity to express their views publicly.

The constitutional tradition in America is at least as strong as the democratic tradition. In fact, *a major characteristic of the American political system is its extraordinary emphasis on individual rights.* Issues that in other democratic countries would be resolved through elections and in legislatures are, in the United States, worked out through court action as well. As Tocqueville noted, there is hardly a political issue in America that does not sooner or later become a judicial issue.¹⁷ Abortion rights, nuclear power, busing, toxic waste disposal, and welfare services are among the scores of issues that in recent years have been played out in part as questions of rights to be settled through judicial action.



Free speech is a familiar aspect of constitutionalism. This anti-gun control rally took place in Austin, Texas.

This tradition reflects the strong influence of cultural beliefs about liberty, individualism, equality, and diversity. Through claims to rights, Americans find protection against majorities and governmental authority, assert their individuality, and strive for equality, both as individuals and as groups. (Constitutionalism is discussed further in Chapters 2–5.)

Capitalism

Just as democracy and constitutionalism are each a set of rules governing the process by which society's costs and benefits are allocated, so too is capitalism. Societies have adopted alternative ways of organizing their economies. One way is socialism, which assigns government a large role in the ownership of the means of production, in regulating economic decisions, and in providing for the economic security of the individual. Under the form of socialism practiced in democratic countries such as Sweden, the government does not attempt to manage the overall economy. In communist-style socialism, the government does take responsibility for overall management.

Capitalism is an alternative method for distributing economic costs and benefits. **Capitalism** holds that the government should interfere with the economy as little as possible. Free enterprise and *individualism* are the principles of capitalism. Firms are allowed to operate in a free and open marketplace, and individuals are expected to rely on their own initiative to establish their economic security.

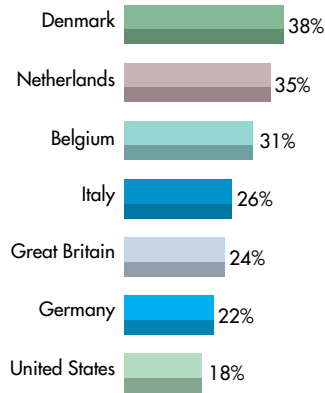
As is the case with the rules of democracy and constitutionalism, the rules of capitalism are not neutral. If democracy responds to numbers and constitutionalism responds to individual rights, capitalism responds to wealth. Economic power is largely a function of accumulated wealth, whether in the hands of the individual or the firm. "Money talks" in a capitalist system, which means, among other things, that wealthier people will have by far the greater say in the distribution of costs and benefits through the economic system.

capitalism An economic system based on the idea that government should interfere with economic transactions as little as possible. Free enterprise and self-reliance are the collective and individual principles that underpin capitalism.



Capitalism, the organizing principle of the American economic system, emphasizes marketplace competition and self-initiative. In recent years, this competition has centered on the challenges posed by new technologies and global markets.

FIGURE 1-3 Average Amount of Income Taxes Paid by Citizens Americans pay less taxes than Europeans do. Source: OECD, 1999. Percentages based on taxes paid by average worker with two children.



The United States does not have a purely capitalist system, in that the government plays a role in regulating and stimulating the economy (see Chapter 18). The term *mixed economy* is used to define this hybrid form of economic system, with its combination of socialist and capitalist elements. The United States has more elements of the capitalist model and fewer elements of the socialist model than do the countries of Europe. Because of their strong tradition of *individualism*, Americans tend to restrict the scope of governmental action in the area of the economy. *A major characteristic of the American system is a relatively sharp distinction between what is political and therefore to be decided in the public arena, and what is economic and therefore to be settled in the private realm.*

For all practical purposes, this outlook places many kinds of choices, which in other countries are decided collectively, beyond the reach of political majorities in the United States. Although Americans complain that their taxes are too high, they actually pay few taxes compared with Europeans (see Figure 1-3). This situation testifies to the extent to which Americans believe that wealth is more properly allocated through the economic marketplace than through government policy.

The past decade has witnessed the triumph throughout most of the world of the capitalist, free-market economy. Its chief rival, Soviet-style communism with its system of central planning, collapsed from within. As the former Soviet Union and the eastern European countries within its orbit shifted toward market-based economic systems, they also moved toward a greater degree of democracy and constitutionalism in their political systems. These different forms of allocating costs and benefits in a society do not necessarily have to go together. However, as the American experience suggests, democracy, constitutionalism, and a free-market economy do reinforce one another in practice. Each is based on the free choices of free individuals.

Who Governs America?

The rules of the political game help decide who will exercise power and to what ends. The ultimate question about any political system is the issue of who governs. Is power widely shared and used for the benefit of the many? Or is power narrowly held and used to the advantage of the few? Although this entire book is in some respects an answer to these questions, it is useful here to consider what analysts have concluded about the American political system. Three broad theories predominate (see Table 1-2). None of them describes every aspect of American politics, but each has some validity.

RULE BY THE PEOPLE: MAJORITARIANISM

A basic principle of democracy, as discussed previously, is the idea of majority rule. **Majoritarianism** is the notion that the majority prevails not only in the counting of votes but also in the determination of public policy.

Majorities do sometimes rule in America. Their power is perhaps most evident in those states that offer voters the opportunity to decide directly on policy initiatives, which then become law if they receive a majority vote. The majority's influence is also felt indirectly through the decisions of elected

majoritarianism The idea that the majority prevails not only in elections but also in determining policy.

TABLE 1-2 Theories of Power: Who Governs America? There are three theories of power in America, each of which must be taken into account in any full explanation of the nation's policies.

Theory	Description
Majoritarianism	Holds that numerical majorities determine issues of policy
Pluralism	Holds that policies are effectively decided through power wielded by special interests that dominate particular policy areas
Elitism	Holds that policy is controlled by a small number of well-positioned, highly influential individuals

representatives. When Congress in 1996 passed a welfare reform bill that included provisions requiring able-bodied welfare recipients to accept a job or job training after a two-year period or face a loss of their welfare benefits, it was acting in accord with the thinking of the majority of Americans, who believe that employable individuals should be self-reliant. A more systematic assessment of the power of majorities is provided by Benjamin Page and Robert Shapiro's study of the relationship between majority opinions and more than three hundred policy issues in the period from 1935 to 1979. On major issues particularly, they found that policy tended to change in the direction of change in majority opinion.¹⁸

Majorities do not always rule, however. There are many policy areas in which majority opinion is nonexistent or is ignored by policy makers. In these cases, other explanations of power and policy are necessary.

RULE BY GROUPS: PLURALISM

One of these explanations is provided by the theory of **pluralism**, which focuses on group activity and holds that many policies are effectively decided through power wielded by diverse (plural) interests.

Many policies are in fact more responsive to the interests of particular groups than to majority opinion. Agricultural subsidies, broadcast regulations, and corporate tax incentives are examples. In many cases, the general public has no real knowledge or opinion of issues that concern particular groups. For pluralists, the issue of whether interest-group politics serves the public good centers on whether it serves a *diversity* of interests. Pluralists contend that it is misleading to view society only in terms of majorities that may or may not form around given issues. They see society as primarily a collection of separate interests. Farmers, broadcasters, and multinational corporations have different needs and desires and, according to the pluralist view, should have a disproportionate say in policies directly affecting them. Thus, as long as many groups have influence in their own area of interest, government is responding to the interests of most Americans. Pluralists such as Robert Dahl have argued that this is in fact the way the American political system operates most of the time.¹⁹

Some critics argue that pluralists wrongly assume that nearly all of society's interests are able to compete effectively through group politics. They see a system

★ CRITICAL THINKING ★

WHAT'S YOUR OPINION?

Natural Advantages

In 1940, Senator Kenneth Wherry soberly exclaimed, "With God's help, we will lift Shanghai up and up, ever up, until it is just like Kansas City." Like many Americans before and since, Wherry assumed that our form of government could work as well nearly anywhere else in the world.

Some analysts believe that with the collapse of global communism the world has entered an age when democracy could be extended throughout most of the globe.

What's your opinion on the likelihood that democracy will take root in the countries of Asia, Africa, and the Middle East that currently have other forms of government? What conditions in these countries might foster or inhibit the process of democratization? You might ask yourself such questions as: Does democracy flourish only in relatively wealthy societies? Only in countries that do not have a tradition of authoritarian rule? Only in countries that are not threatened by hostile neighbors?

pluralism A theory of American politics that holds society's interests are substantially represented through the activities of groups.

The Federal Reserve Board of Governors is a government body that through its interest-rate policies exerts a substantial influence on the American economy. The Board meets in secrecy and is an example of the influence of political elites.



biased toward a small number of powerful groups. These critics are proponents of elite theory.

elitism The view that the United States is run essentially by a tiny elite (composed of wealthy or well-connected individuals) who control public policy through both direct and indirect means.

RULE BY A FEW: ELITISM

Elite theory offers a pessimistic view of the U.S. political system. **Elitism** holds that power in America is held by a small number of well-positioned, highly influential individuals who control policy for their own purposes. A leading proponent of elite theory was the sociologist C. Wright Mills, who argued that key policies are decided by an overlapping coalition of select leaders, including corporate executives, top military officers, and centrally placed public officials.²⁰ Other proponents of elite theory have defined the core group somewhat differently, but their contention is the same: America is essentially run, not by majorities or a plurality of groups, but by a small number of well-placed and privileged individuals.

Some theorists, including G. William Domhoff, hold a conspiratorial view of elites, contending that they consciously operate behind the scenes in order to manipulate government for their selfish purposes.²¹ Other theorists argue that elite influence is a result of complexity. Nearly a century ago, Roberto Michels articulated an “iron law of oligarchy,” concluding that power inevitably gravitates toward a few people at the top, even in societies and organizations that aim to be governed more democratically.²²

Although some of the claims about a “power elite” are exaggerated, there is no question that certain policy areas are effectively controlled by a tiny circle of influential people. The nation’s monetary policy, for example, is set by the decisions of the Federal Reserve Board, which meets in secrecy and is highly responsive to the concerns of bankers and financiers (see Chapter 18).

A PERSPECTIVE ON WHO GOVERNS

The perspective of this book is that each of these theories—majoritarianism, pluralism, and elitism—must be taken into account in any full explanation of

CURRENT CONTROVERSIES

SHOULD ENGLISH BE MADE AMERICA'S OFFICIAL LANGUAGE?

America's ideals are broad principles that include conflicting elements. The principle of diversity extols Americans' differences. The principle of unity proclaims that Americans are one people and one nation. These principles have clashed whenever newly arrived immigrants have been at issue. Should immigrants be allowed to maintain their distinctive characteristics? Or should their assimilation be accelerated? Which principle should govern—unity or diversity? The issue has emerged recently with the arrival of record numbers of Hispanic and Asian immigrants. A point of contention has been whether they should be required to use English as the first language in school and in the conduct of government-related business.

YES: We are one nation even though each of us may have ancestors who fought against each other in generations past. This has been made possible by our . . . common language. . . . The English language was both the language of opportunity and the language of unity. . . . Government multilingualism is divisive. . . . Michigan offers its driver test in 20 languages. There are 100 languages spoken in the Chicago school system. . . . Preserving national unity through making English this Nation's official language is . . . a critical issue. Look around the world. . . . Linguistic divisions swiftly lead to other divisions. . . . I submit that the time has indeed come for the English Language Amendment and I urge its adoption.

—U.S. Representative John Doolittle (R-Calif.)

NO: Whereas, several bills have been introduced in the U.S. Congress to make English the official language of the United States; and whereas, the issue often has a divisive effect on the public and does not meet with the inclusive spirit and vision of a democratic and diverse society; and whereas, the passage and implementation of such legislation could restrict the program options that local school systems have for limited English proficient children; therefore, let it be resolved that the Council of the Great City Schools opposes federal legislation that mandates that English is the official U.S. language; and . . . opposes such legislation that may appear in state legislatures and on state ballots.

—Council of the Great City Schools

politics and power in America. Some policies are decided by majority influence, whereas others reflect the influence of special interests and elites. The challenge is to distinguish the situations where each of these influence patterns predominates. Although subsequent chapters will attempt that task, a brief look ahead will provide an indication of what can be expected.

Although it is common in America to say that “the people govern,” most citizens have only a limited appetite for politics. There are only a few issues at any moment that have the general public's attention and an even smaller number that it really cares about. If these are the issues where majority influence is most likely to occur, there is still the question of how popular influence works its way into public policy. The fact is, the lone individual is nearly powerless in a nation of 275 million people. Self-government requires institutions strong enough and effective enough to enable people to express a collective voice. Elections are one of these institutions. Another is political parties, which are organized to mobilize majorities behind particular candidates and issues. In the modern era, the mass media and opinion polls are other mechanisms through which popular opinion affects governmental decisions. And, of course, the public's views are also registered through the nation's two majoritarian institutions—Congress and the presidency. If these institutions are also responsive to group and elite influence, they are, through elections, a locus of majority sentiment.

Democracy—the idea of a government of, for, and by the people—is an organizing principle of the American political system. In practice, democracy—and its accompanying feature, majoritarianism—is most clearly evident in elections when Americans through their votes choose their representatives. Shown is a scene from the first televised general election debate of the 2000 race between presidential candidates Al Gore (left) and George W. Bush (right). In the center is debate moderator Jim Lehrer of the Public Broadcasting System (PBS).



The bureaucracy and the courts are relatively insulated from popular opinion. Elections and politicians come and go, but the bureaucrats who staff executive agencies and the judges who run the courts stay on and on. Government could not function without them, but in most instances, they are not instruments of the majority. Bureaucrats are more closely linked to narrower constituencies, such as farmers, broadcasters, or defense firms. These lobbying groups are also connected to Congress through its committees and subcommittees. In these arenas, a form of pluralist politics usually prevails. The courts are harder to characterize. They deal with individual cases but increasingly have also been a means by which groups try to influence broad issues of policy. Environmental and civil rights policies are among the areas in which groups through the court system have affected the way America is governed. Groups also play an increasingly large role in elections, mainly through the money they give to candidates for public office. If elections are primarily an arena of majority politics, they are also, and increasingly, a stage for group influence.

Elite influence is the most difficult of all to locate, which is a reason why analysts disagree on the degree to which elites affect policy. Elites have an uncommon degree of access to top officials, the media, and other sources of influence. What is less clear is the type of influence that this access provides. Do elites pursue their own agenda, or are their efforts tied to popular or group agendas? This book will identify instances of both patterns, but in general, the separate influence of elites is most pronounced in the areas of economic and foreign policy.

The Concept of a Political System and this Book's Organization

As the foregoing discussion suggests, American government is based on a great many related parts, including the voters, institutions, interest groups, and the political culture. It is useful in some respects to regard these components as con-

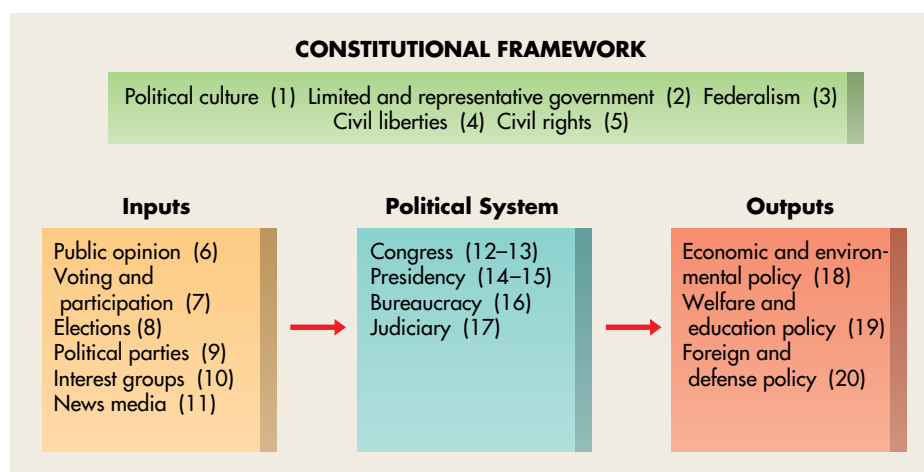


FIGURE 1-4 The American Political System
The book's chapters are organized within a political system's framework.

stituting a **political system**. The parts are separate but they connect with each other, affecting how each performs. The political scientist David Easton, who was a pioneer in this conception of politics, said that it makes little sense to study political relations piecemeal when they are, in reality, “interrelated.”²³

The complexity of government has kept political scientists from developing a dynamic explanatory model of the full political system, but the concept of politics as a system is useful for instructional purposes. The concept emphasizes the actual workings of government rather than its institutional structures alone. This approach characterizes this book, beginning with its organizational sequence.

As Figure 1-4 indicates, the political system operates against the backdrop of a constitutional framework that defines how power is to be obtained and exercised. This framework is the focus of Part One (Chapters 1–5), which examines the governmental structure and individual rights. *Inputs* are another part of the political system; these are the demands that people and groups place on government and the supports they provide for its institutions, leaders, and policies. These inputs are the subject of Part Two (Chapters 6–11), which examines public opinion, political participation, voting, political parties, interest groups, and the news media. Part Three (Chapters 12–17), examines the nation's elective and appointive institutions—Congress, the presidency, the courts, and the bureaucracy. Some of the discussion in Part Three is devoted simply to describing these institutions, but most of it explores their relationships and how their actions are affected by inputs and the constitutional framework. Part Four (Chapters 18–20) examines major areas of public policy: the economy and environment, social welfare and education, and foreign affairs and national defense. These are the system's *outputs*: its binding decisions on society. Part Five (Chapter 21) examines state and local governments. They play a vital political and policy role in the American governing system.

The chapters are collectively designed to convey a reliable body of knowledge that will enable the reader to think broadly and systematically about the nature of the American political system. To assist in this process, this chapter has identified five encompassing tendencies of American politics that will be examined more closely in later chapters. The United States has:

political system The various components of American government. The parts are separate, but they connect with each other, affecting how each performs.

- Enduring cultural ideals that are its people's common bond and a source of their political goals
- Extreme fragmentation of governing authority that is based on an elaborate system of checks and balances
- Many competing interests that are the result of the nation's great size, diverse population, and complex economic structure
- Strong emphasis on individual rights that is a consequence of the nation's political traditions
- Relatively sharp separation of the political and economic spheres that has the effect of placing many economic issues outside the reach of political majorities

Underlying this book's concern with the broad patterns of the American political system is a question that must be asked of any democracy: what is the relationship of the people to their government? The answer to this question is the foundation not only of a reasonable assessment of the state of American democracy but also of good citizenship. Responsible citizenship depends ultimately on an informed perspective, on a recognition of how difficult it is to govern effectively and yet how important it is to try. It cannot be said too often that the issue of governing is the most difficult issue facing any society. Nor can it be said too often that governing is a quest, not a resolved issue. The Constitution's opening phrase, "We, the People," is a call to Americans to join that quest. E. E. Schattschneider said it clearly: "In the course of centuries, there has come a great deal of agreement about what democracy is, but nobody has a monopoly on it and the last word has not been spoken."²⁴

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Self-Quiz

Summary

The United States is a nation that was formed on a set of ideals that include liberty, equality, self-government, individualism, diversity, and unity. These ideals were rooted in the country's European heritage, and early America's vast open lands and abundant natural resources influenced their growth. They became Americans' common bond and today are the basis of their political culture. Although they are mythic, inexact, and conflicting, these ideals have had a powerful effect on what generation after generation of Americans has tried to achieve politically for themselves and others.

Politics is the process by which it is determined whose values will prevail in society. The basis of politics is conflict over scarce resources and competing values. Those who have power win out in this conflict and are able to

control governing authority and policy choices. In the case of the United States, no one faction controls all power and policy. Majorities govern on some issues, while groups and elites each govern on other issues.

The play of politics in the United States takes place through rules of the game that include democracy, constitutionalism, and capitalism. Democracy is rule by the people, which, in practice, refers to a representative system of government in which the people rule through their elected officials. Constitutionalism refers to rules that limit the rightful power of government over citizens. Capitalism is an economic system based on a free-market principle that allows the government only a limited role in determining how economic costs and benefits will be allocated.

Key Terms

authority
capitalism
constitutionalism
democracy

diversity
elitism
equality
government

individualism
 liberty
 majoritarianism
 pluralism
 policy
 political culture

political system
 politics
 power
 self-government
 unity

Suggested Readings

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