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POLITICS: WHO GETS WHAT, AND HOW?

IN YOUR OWN WORDS

After you've read this chapter, you will be able to

- 1.1 Explain the importance of the democratic process and identify the challenges to our democracy today.
- 1.2 Describe the role that politics plays in determining how power and resources, including control of information, are distributed in a society.
- 1.3 Compare how power is distributed between citizens and government in different economic and political systems.
- 1.4 Explain the historical origins of American democracy and the ways that the available media controlled the political narrative.
- 1.5 Describe the enduring tension in the United States between self-interested human nature and public-spirited government and the way that has been shaped in a mediated world.
- 1.6 Apply the five steps of critical thinking to this book's themes of power and citizenship in American politics.

NOT YOUR USUAL TEXTBOOK INTRODUCTION

This textbook won't begin like any you have read, or any we have written, for that matter.

Why? Because on January 6, 2021, a mob of people, citizens of the world's longest-lived democracy, stormed the U.S. Capitol. In a frenzy of fury and disbelief over the results of the 2020 presidential election, they tried to subvert the U.S. Constitution by derailing the certification of a lawful and fair election. In the months since, millions of election-deniers have refused to accept the fact that Joe Biden won the U.S. presidency, his predecessor has been under multiple state and federal investigations for, among other things, trying to stage a coup that would keep him in power, and the country has seen multiple participants in the January 6th riots tried and sentenced. In the 2022 midterm elections, although history and political science told us that Democrats would lose many seats in the House of Representatives and even in the Senate, the results turned out to be a wash, as election deniers running for top posts in key states were defeated. For the moment, democracy seems to be winning, but there is a long struggle ahead.

How did this happen??? When we published the first edition of this textbook over twenty years ago—we chose the title *Keeping the Republic* to drive home a frequently forgotten point—that democracies need a lot of tending to stay vibrant and functional. And even though, in the year 2000, we could begin to see the erosion of democratic norms at the highest level of American politics, we never actually believed that a determined group of Americans, urged on by a disappointed office seeker who didn't like to lose, would be so . . . so what? So delusional? So confused? So enchanted by one candidate and so overwhelmed with disinformation—that they would risk throwing away our democracy?

And yet, here we are. Since that sixth of January, and all the ensuing events, we have begun our classroom teaching much as we are beginning this book—with a call to awareness that the foundations of our democracy are rocky, that the American commitment to the principles that underlay the Constitution—principles best described as a set of ideas called classical liberalism (and no, that has nothing, or very little, to do with the way the term *liberalism* is used in contemporary partisan politics) are fast being abandoned by some Americans with predictable and dire consequences. Our warnings that the democratic sky is falling have been met mostly with a mix of indifference and alarm on the part of our students.



Broken Glass

A member of a pro-Trump mob shatters a window with his fist from inside the Capitol Building after breaking into it on January 6, 2021, in Washington, D.C.

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Finally, one of our students said, with an air of weary tolerance for an older person who just didn't get it, "Professor, you keep talking about the threats to our great democracy but what you don't get is that for most of us, it's not all that great to begin with."

Aha! Lightbulb moment. Another reminder that the teachable moments in the classroom are not always for the student.

What we realized is that our experiences as Baby Boomers (we know, we know—cue the Boomer jokes) had led us to see American democracy as essentially a hopeful story of progress, the tale of the moral arc of the universe that truly does bend, slowly, toward justice. That same optimism that made us believe in the possibilities of American democracy contributed to our anguish on January 6.

For those of our students who have on some level lost their faith in the possibilities of that democracy, January 6 wasn't that much of a surprise, and not that much of a loss.

Don't get us wrong. Plenty of you think like we do. But for a significant number of younger Americans, American democracy, and the older generations who sing its praises, have let them down. Badly.

About that time, some polls came out that confirmed what our students had tried to tell us. Many young people, way more of you than of older generations, *are not optimistic about democracy*, not very, anyway. The Harvard Youth Poll of 18- to 29-year-old Americans—conducted in both English and Spanish—found, in the fall of 2021, that 52 percent of young people believe that democracy is in trouble or has failed. A scant 7 percent believe it is healthy. The partisan breakdown was especially interesting: while those identifying as Democrats were split roughly in half on the health of democracy, 70 percent of young Republicans reported that democracy had failed or was in trouble. In fact, half of the young Republicans, compared to less than a third of Democrats and just over a third of the unaffiliated believed that they might see a second American civil war in their lifetimes.¹

Interestingly, those numbers did not signal a collapse of the youth vote in 2022. While it wasn't as high as it had been in 2018—which set a record for midterm election turnout for all age groups—it was a very strong turnout in some areas—up to 31 percent in some battlegrounds. Yes, this is still low in an election where the overall turnout was 47 percent but, to be fair, in many places the laws intentionally make it harder for younger voters to get to the polls.

Some of the reasons why 18- to 29-year-olds are indifferent to the events of January 6, and to politics in general, make a lot of sense to us. Some make less sense. Here are the top three:

- American democracy is run mostly by old people who have bled the country and the planet dry of valuable resources to supply their comfort, leaving younger people, loaded with debt, to clean up the mess.
- American democracy just reinforces a power structure that fails marginalized communities and perpetuates economic and power inequities. Democracy is not such a great way to make decisions if it resists the big structural change that is necessary to establish a decent way of life for all Americans.
- And even this: American democracy was once great, but it is now suffering from an influx of immigrants who bring crime and drugs into the country. The “deep state” bureaucracy that really runs things needs to be purged of its pernicious influence before the country can return to its former glory. And if democracy can’t do the job, it should be done by whatever means can get it done.

Both the “America was never great but maybe could be someday—with a lot of change” and the “America was once great but can’t be great again without a lot of change” schools of thought have in common that they blame someone for why things aren’t great and mostly want to get the offenders out of the way so that things can be improved. And since the democratic politics of the day just seems to perpetuate the problems that all sides see, no side is particularly wedded to democratic decision making as a way to restore the country to its former state of health.

How the Politics of the Past Impacts Your Future

If you are reading this book, you are a college student or at least college bound, perhaps, a person making plans for your life. Those plans might be aspirational for humanity: to explore the world, see what it has to offer, change it, maybe even save it. Your plans might be ambitious for yourself and your family: to get a job, build a business, raise some kids, get rich, and, if it all pays off, leave a legacy behind for the next generations. Maybe you have less acquisitive intentions. Maybe you want to get a job and pay your bills and enjoy yourself and your friends as much as possible in the time outside your nine-to-five job.

There are as many ways to design the future as there are people to live it. But whichever way you plan to go, you will need to conjure up a few things that the generations before you took for granted, a luxury that will, for the most part, be denied to you.

You will need a way to guarantee the stability of the political system, to maintain the conditions for economic prosperity, to defend America from threats around the world. And, oh yeah, you’ll have to preserve the health and survival of the planet as well.

Americans in the past century and a half have typically felt confident looking to government to provide those things although they have argued vigorously about just how much or what kinds of those things they need. Your parents’ generation, even your grandparents’ generation, didn’t worry too much about those fundamentals. If there was one issue a majority of Americans felt confident about in the 1900s, and even in the opening years of the 2000s, it was the strength of their democracy and the power of the American ideal around the world to help keep other countries from flexing their muscles at our expense. Sure, the economy had growth spurts and slowdowns, but the experience of the New Deal gave Americans the reassuring illusion that while the government could not control economic cycles, it could lessen the drama of the ups and downs and buffer their impact.

That doesn’t mean that earlier generations didn’t have worries, even big, huge, terrifying worries over the fighting of world wars, the Great Depression, the war in Vietnam, and the attack on the World Trade Center. But underneath, for the most part, was faith in American democracy, both in the value of it—that it was a good thing—and in the survival of it—that it would endure, regardless of what history threw at it.

And history threw a great deal. Catch some black-and-white reruns of television in mid-twentieth century America and you might get the impression that Americans had figured out the good life. But that sitcom *Happy Land* was not everyone's experience of American life, nor was it an experience to which everyone aspired. The people who thought that the TV life shown on *Leave It to Beaver*, *Father Knows Best*, and *Make Room for Daddy* (yes, those were real, popular shows; check them out!) was a good thing were content with a world that was largely white, in which dads went off to work in the morning and moms stayed home with the kids, where dads had the financial power and called the shots and people of color, if they appeared in a white world, were usually there as servants. African Americans were not equal citizens with whites; they didn't effectively get their right to vote protected and enforced until 1965. And while women got the vote in 1920, they were not independent financial beings; women were not even guaranteed the right to obtain a credit card in their own name in the United States until 1974.

Behind the happy façade of midcentury life forces were brewing that would turn the country upside down over the next seventy-five years. People of color would demand and receive their constitutional rights to attend nonsegregated schools, to vote, and to live, work, and travel where they wanted without interference. Women got their credit cards, the right to keep their jobs if they got pregnant, control of their reproductive and family planning decisions, and the right to divorce their husbands and to retain custody of their kids. LGBTQ+ people won the right to marry, to adopt children, to live their authentic lives without legally sanctioned restraint.

All sounds good, right?

Not so fast. You may have heard of Newton's third law, that for every action in nature there is an equal and opposite reaction. The laws of physics don't apply to social culture and political power, but sometimes they describe it pretty well.

The changes in American life between 1950 and 2010 freed many people from a life of powerlessness and second-class citizenship and welcomed them into the world they had seen on TV screens. But power is zero sum—if some people gain it, others lose. If nothing else, they lose the power to control the ones who have newly gained it. The liberation experienced in the latter part of the twentieth century by women and people of color and LGBTQ+ people and people with disabilities—and all the other groups who had been marginalized through much of American history—was not seen as a step forward by everyone. It was not “progress” at all for a large group of people—largely middle- to working-class white people living in rural areas and/or the South who were unlikely to be college educated, who lived according to the rules they had been brought up with, who had fought world wars to preserve those rules, and who enjoyed the privileges those rules conferred on them.

Understood through the lens that defined their world, the new century felt like a step back. The screen of the TV set no longer implied that their lives constituted the be-all-end-all desirable lifestyle for all Americans but instead laughed at them while it celebrated the lives of working moms, unmarried women, and Black families living the American dream. TV shows began to depict the exploits of families with single moms and families of color as they had once portrayed white nuclear families.

From the perspective of many white, Christian, rural, southern, working-class Americans, those who would dethrone them or at least require that they share their thrones, seemed to be telling them that they had been demoted, that *they* were now the marginalized ones because they weren't any longer the ones who defined what it means to be “American.” Many of them, especially those who didn't have any power elsewhere in their lives, felt this change in their guts as the deepest of injustices. And they saw the agents of change—feminists, Black activists, “liberals,” the government—especially a bureaucracy that seemed too secretive and, even more especially, the courts that seemed too activist—as enemies of their way of life, a way of life that they felt had been guaranteed to them by the U.S. Constitution and was now under existential threat.

You can see how that restructuring of power among groups in the population that became enforced by law in the second half of the twentieth century set up tensions that still frame the battles in American politics. For some Americans, life in the mid-twentieth century was good in ways that mattered to them. And when they think about their goal for the United States, it is to go back there, to make America great *again*. Clearly, for those who were disenfranchised and unable to even keep their own wages, control their bodies, or get a credit card and the independent life that comes with those things, that time was *not* great, and their political goal is to never return to that state of powerlessness.

So that's one truth about the political world in which you are coming of age. It is fraught with stress and animosity between people who feel that they are losing power when others are gaining it and who do not want to cede any of it. And the power they are fighting over is not just the power to vote or to charge their college tuition on a credit card. It's the power to define what it means to be American: on the one side the vision is largely white, Christian, older, patriarchal, rural, and working class; and on the other, it is racially, ethnically, and religiously diverse, younger, urban, college educated, and professional.

Among other things, that tension has rendered the federal government unable to solve problems. Because Republicans (representing the white, rural, Christian constituency) and Democrats (representing diverse, urban, nonreligious people) are carrying their fight about who we are into the halls of Congress, a victory for one side is seen as a loss for the other and, possibly, something that might enhance the winner's chance to appeal to more voters. So Congress has a hard time acting; both sides want to win, a compromise position often doesn't exist, and, anyway, a compromise that lets both sides claim victory might still feel like a loss to the side that feels itself to be in existential danger.

And this is where your generation comes in. Many of the things that young people look to government to provide in order to make their own lives more livable—cheaper college, forgiven student loans, guaranteed health care, affordable housing, legalized weed, and safe communities—can't be addressed because Congress is deadlocked in struggles about who the "real" Americans are.

The Promise of, and Alternatives to, Democratic Politics

The things that worry young voters—a planet whose melting poles, rising seas, and parched deserts constitute a literal existential threat to global food supplies, housing, and disease-free lives; and runaway national debt that consumes our tax revenue and prevents spending on new priorities—cannot be addressed by a Congress whose members have a death grip on power and see their own survival as imperative. Young voters don't give a fig about the political survival of leaders of political parties that they see as irrelevant to their lives.

No wonder, if you are mad and beyond skeptical that the government will ever do your bidding. No wonder if you are uninterested and uninformed about what is happening in Washington or even in your state capital. No wonder, if you look at the names on the ballot and see no one you want to vote for. No wonder, if you look askance at your political science professor who tries to interest you in the political process. Your alienation makes perfect sense, except for one thing: in a democratic polity (which we still are, at the moment), your disengagement guarantees that the government will *never* reflect your wishes. Our students, hearing in our voices enthusiasm and respect for the constitutional order, tend to miss that what gets us excited about American politics is not what *is*, right this second. It's not what *was* in 1950 or in 1865 or in 1776. It's not what it has ever been in any one moment in time. It's the promise that circumstances can get better without inevitable bloodshed. It's the promise that, when politics is executed properly, we can have freedoms that people in most of the world cannot dream of and that we can work to expand those freedoms to more and more people. It's the promise that if we do get involved and pay attention and stay focused, we can create a country one day that *will* be good in a particular moment of time. What makes us optimistic is *the promise* of American politics.

But that promise is not a guarantee. It's a commitment that good things are possible, not that they will come. The world today is remembering more vividly than it has since the end of World War II that dictatorship and repression, not democracy and freedom, are the default setting for human society. We see the deep attraction held by dictators who foster grievances and fear among their followers and who promise revenge on the enemies they amplify and dwell on. And in response, those followers ignore the grift and corruption of their leaders that bankrupts a nation for the benefit of a few. We see it in Turkey, in Hungary, in Venezuela, and, until just recently, in Brazil. We see it, grimly, in Russia, which, as we are writing this, has decided to gobble up its democratic neighbor Ukraine. But so thoroughly have Vladimir Putin and his oligarch cronies stolen everything of value from the Russians that even their army is underfunded and ill-equipped.

That is the alternative to democracy. Not a government where you get things your way, done efficiently because you have legitimately seized the reins of power, not a country where good values prevail because you

are a good person and you impose good values. The alternative to democracy, as we will see more than once in this book, is, sooner or later, autocracy and the death of any freedom worth having. In Russia, journalists are poisoned or shot, protesters are jailed, and people stand in grocery lines to buy whatever foodstuffs they can get their hands on. Other countries where the people turn control over to leaders who do not value democracy, who don't honor its norms, and who mock its freedoms become Russia in their turn. That is the alternative to democracy. And as soon as you stop saving democracy, you begin the march to autocracy.

A Question of Bias

So we have never actually said this in a textbook before. We didn't think we had to. But this textbook has a bias. That shouldn't surprise you after everything we have just said, but it is worth being transparent about it in this political climate.

Our bias is pro-democracy, and pro all the classical liberal ideas that go along with democracy, about which you will learn shortly. They include being pro-science, pro-empirical testing of the truth, pro-critical thinking, pro-limited government, pro-individual freedom, pro-rule of law and process (as opposed to adhering to the ideas and preferences of one person), pro-elections, and pro-markets. We will go to the mat on this one. Democracy is not something on which we can agree to be neutral.

Neutrality is where we often get hung up in political discourse—whether it takes place in academia, in journalism, or in education. We expect political parties to be partisan, to take sides, but we want all the sources we depend on for information to be fair, and being fair means not putting your thumb on the scale for one side, not privately betting on one team while pretending to be an objective referee.

In most cases, we agree with that 100 percent. We have always told our students that our job is not to teach them *what* to think; it is to teach them *how* to think. Be a strong critical thinker, master the tools of analysis, and focus those skills on any argument that attracts you. If the argument survives the scrutiny, then adopt it, advocate for it, vote for it, or support it in any way you want. We don't take sides. In teaching, that is how it generally works.

When you see this emphasis on neutrality or objectivity in the mainstream media, it often takes the form of something its critics call “both-sidesism,” or false equivalency. In an effort not to appear biased, journalists often insist on countering an example of a fault on one side with an example of a fault on another. Most commonly we see this in reporting on political parties. If a reporter notes an instance of corruption in one party, she will immediately reach for an example in the other party to maintain “balance,” so that no one will think she is picking on one side or favoring the other.

This practice is fine and even admirable as long as both sides are equally guilty. It is *not* fine if only one side has committed a crime, or made a mistake, or exercised an error in judgment. In fact, in those cases, both-sidesism has the effect of watering down the charge, of trivializing it, of creating a narrative of cynicism, an attitude that says “everyone does it.” And it's often not accurate. It just fulfills an ingrained sense that fairness demands being critical of everyone.

But the fact is, in teaching and in journalism—in all instances of education and informing people about the real world, including the political world—there are not always two equal sides. If one of us looks out the window and says, “It's raining,” and the other of us, looking out the same window, says, “No, it isn't,” then reporting on both of those findings isn't balanced. It's confusing, because one of us is *wrong*. The teacher or the journalist needs to explain that.

A rainy day may be trivial, but consider if one side says, “Science finds that vaccines prevent severe cases of COVID-19,” and that statement is countered with “although some people don't believe those findings.” If journalists treat the two sides as though both are worth a hearing, that just confuses the issue and leads people to think that the scientific finding is one of two competing beliefs rather than an empirical discipline that is true or false. Those are the only two sides that empirical findings have.

But because, by its nature, science depends on open inquiry, freedom to dispute and replicate findings, and correction of earlier errors to advance our understanding, it leaves itself open to the charge that it is wrong or that it doesn't know what it is talking about. *In fact, science is the best method we have of understanding how the world works, but it achieves that understanding by leaving itself vulnerable to the claim that it isn't.* And those who seek to profit by claiming that science is a scam exploit that vulnerability.

Journalists and educators can't afford to both-sides science and the scientific method that produces it because their very jobs depend on the idea that there is truth and there is falsity. That's behind the entire enterprise of disseminating information. When the distinction is lost, disinformation travels as freely as the real thing.

The same imperative that obtains for holding information accountable to the standard of truth applies to classical liberalism as well. Classical liberalism is a political philosophy that holds that freedom is best preserved when government is limited, liberties are protected, discourse is open, differences of opinion are tolerated, and laws are made democratically, by polling all people who will be held accountable under those laws.

Classical liberalism, which underpins both modern liberalism and modern conservative thought, owes its existence to the free exchange of ideas and, like science, carries within itself, by definition, the obligation to entertain threats to its own existence. Put simply, the openness and transparency of classical liberalism renders it peculiarly fragile to threats from without. When one side is open, tolerant of dissent, and encouraging of scrutiny, it invites in and welcomes the airing of the precise views that would do it in. The only way it can survive being drowned in the bathtub of its own tolerance and openness is for its defenders to stand up for it and to say no.

Which brings us to our bias. We are pro-truth, pro-science, pro-classical liberalism, and pro-democracy. Those are the values that make possible the world of education. Academic freedom, freedom in the classroom, and the accrual of knowledge demand that we defend the things that make it possible, and that we not both-sides them.

Some journalists, usually the first group to jump on the both-sides train, are coming to similar conclusions, in the current, dangerous climate defined by our partisan tensions and the seething aftermath of the 2020 presidential election. Andrew Donohue has predicted the rise of a new perspective for reporters that will center less on the machinations of parties and politics, and more on democracy, a so-called democracy beat. According to Donohue, the democracy beat is distinct from the typical political or government assignment, with reporters using the lens of honesty, fairness, and transparency to “focus exclusively on the modern threats to our democracy. . . . These reporters will cover something that is, at its heart, a local story. It will unfold far from the spotlights of Washington. And it will do the most basic and vital things that journalism is supposed to do: Safeguard democracy. Tell the truth.”²

Our bias means that we, too, will stand up and say no to people who want to spread disinformation and call it truth, to people who want to control what schools teach according to their personal values and not the dictates of advancing science, to march on the Capitol and subvert U.S. elections, and to replace the Constitution with a regime that decides what is true and what is false instead of relying on science and empirical testing to do that.

IN YOUR OWN WORDS

Explain the importance of the democratic process and identify the challenges to our democracy today.

WHAT IS POLITICS?

A peaceful means to determine who gets power and influence in society

And now, back to our regularly scheduled textbook. Over two thousand years ago, the Greek philosopher Aristotle said that we are political animals, and political animals we seem destined to remain. The truth is that politics is a fundamental and complex human activity. In some ways it is our capacity to be political—to cooperate, bargain, and compromise—that helps distinguish us from all the other animals out there. Politics may have its baser moments (it definitely does), but it also allows us

to reach more exalted heights than we could ever achieve alone, from dedicating a new public library or building a national highway system, to curing deadly diseases or exploring the stars, to forming a global alliance of unlikely partners to supporting a fledgling democracy in the face of a rich and powerful threat.

Since this book is about politics, in all its glory as well as its degradation, we need to begin with a clear understanding of the word. One of the most famous definitions, put forth by the well-known late political scientist Harold Lasswell, is still one of the best, and we use it to frame our discussion throughout this book. Lasswell defined **politics** as “who gets what when and how.”³ Politics is a way of determining, without recourse to violence, who gets power and resources in society, and how they get them. **Power** is the ability to get other people to do what you want them to do. The resources in question here might be government jobs, tax revenues, laws that help you get your way, or public policies that work to your advantage. A major political resource that helps people to gain and maintain power is the ability to control the **media**, not just the press and television but also the multiple channels created by companies like Google, Meta, and Apple through which people get information about politics. These days we live in a world of so many complex information networks that sorting out and keeping track of what is happening around us is a task in itself. Anyone who can influence the stories that are told has a big advantage.

Politics provides a process through which we can try to arrange our collective lives in some kind of **social order** so that we can live without crashing into each other at every turn, and to provide ourselves with goods and services we could not obtain alone. But politics is also about getting our own way. The way we choose may be a noble goal for society or pure self-interest, but the struggle we engage in is a political struggle. Because politics is about power and other scarce resources, there will always be winners and losers in politics. If we could always get our own way, politics would disappear. It is because we cannot always get what we want that politics exists.

Our capacity to be political gives us tools with which to settle disputes about the social order and to allocate scarce resources. The tools of politics are compromise and cooperation; discussion and debate; deal making, bargaining, storytelling; even, sometimes, bribery and deceit. We use those tools to agree on the principles that should guide our handling of power and other scarce resources and to live our collective lives according to those principles. Because there are many competing narratives about how to manage power—who should have it, how it should be used, how it should be transferred—agreement on those principles can break down.

The tools of politics do not include violence. When people shoot up a church, a synagogue, or a supermarket, or when they blow themselves up, fly airplanes into buildings, or storm a legislature to halt the political process, they have tried to impose their ideas about the social order through nonpolitical means. That may be because the channels of politics have failed, because they cannot agree on basic principles, because they don't share a common understanding of what counts as negotiation and so cannot craft compromises, because they are unwilling to compromise, or because they don't really care about deal making at all—they just want to impose their will or make a point. The threat of violence may be a political tool used as leverage to get a deal, but when violence is employed, politics has broken down. Indeed, the human history of warfare attests to the fragility of political life.

It is easy to imagine what a world without politics would be like. There would be no resolution or compromise between conflicting interests, because those are political activities. There would be no agreements struck, bargains made, or alliances formed. Unless there were enough of every valued resource to go around, or unless the world were big enough that we could live our lives without coming into contact with other human beings, life would be constant conflict—what the philosopher Thomas Hobbes called in the seventeenth century a “war of all against all.” Individuals, unable to cooperate with one another (because cooperation is essentially political), would have no option but to resort to brute force to settle disputes and allocate resources. Politics is essential to our living a civilized life.



Not Going Peacefully

Political parties and their leaders frequently clash on issues and ideology—but President Donald Trump took things to a new level in 2020, when he lost his bid for reelection to Joe Biden. Speaking at the “Save America” rally near the White House on Wednesday, January 6, 2021, Trump seemed unable to give up on his months-long attempts to toss out the 2020 election results and extend his presidency. His efforts were unsuccessful, and exposed rifts in the Republican Party that continue to shake up the party today, even as he has announced his candidacy for the 2024 presidential election.

Shawn Thew/EPA/Bloomberg via Getty Images

Politics and Government

Although the words *politics* and *government* are sometimes used interchangeably, they refer to different things. Politics, we know, is a process or an activity through which power and resources are gained and lost. **Government**, by contrast, is a system or organization for exercising authority over a body of people.

American politics is what happens in the halls of Congress, on the campaign trail, at Washington cocktail parties, and in neighborhood association and school board meetings. It is the making of promises, deals, and laws. American government is the Constitution and the institutions set up by the Constitution for the exercise of authority by the American people, over the American people.

Authority is power that citizens view as **legitimate**, or “right”—power to which we have given our implicit consent. Think of it this way: as children, we probably did as our parents told us, or submitted to their punishment if we didn’t, because we recognized their authority over us. As we became adults, we started to claim that our parents had less authority over us, that we could do what we wanted. We no longer saw their power as wholly legitimate or appropriate. Governments exercise authority because people recognize them as legitimate even if they often do not like doing what they are told (paying taxes, for instance). When governments cease to be regarded as legitimate, the result may be revolution or civil war, unless the state is powerful enough to suppress all opposition. When angry citizens marched on the U.S. Capitol on January 6, 2021, they were declaring that the actions the government was about to take were illegitimate in their eyes. It is easy to see that that fury could be harnessed by those fomenting civil war if a political solution cannot be found.

Rules and Institutions

Government is shaped by the process of politics, but it in turn provides the rules and institutions that shape the way politics continues to operate. The rules and institutions of government have a profound effect on how power is distributed and who wins and who loses in the political arena. Life is different for people in other countries not only because they speak different languages and eat different foods but also because their governments establish rules that cause life to be lived in different ways.

Rules can be thought of as the *how* in the definition “who gets what . . . and how.” They are directives that determine how resources are allocated and how collective action takes place—that is, they determine how we try to get the things we want. The point of the rules is to provide some framework for us to solve without violence the problems that our collective lives generate.

Because the rules we choose can influence which people will get what they want most often, understanding the rules is crucial to understanding politics. Consider for a moment the impact a change of rules would have on the outcome of the sport of basketball, for instance. What if the average height of the players could be no more than 5’10”? What if the baskets were lowered? What if foul shots counted for two points rather than one? Basketball would be a very different game, and the teams recruited would look quite unlike the teams for which we now cheer. So it is with governments and politics: change the people who are allowed to vote or the length of time a person can serve in office, and the political process and the potential winners and losers change drastically.

Rules can be official—laws that are passed, signed, and entered into the books; amendments that are ratified; decisions made by bureaucrats; or judgments handed down by the courts. Less visible but no less important are **norms**, the tacitly understood rules about acceptable political behavior, ways of doing things, boundaries between the branches, and traditional practices that grease the wheels of politics and keep them running smoothly. Because norms are understood but not explicitly written down, we often don’t even recognize them until they are broken.

Let’s take an example close to home. Say it’s Thanksgiving dinner time and your brother decides he wants the mashed potatoes on the other side of the table. Imagine that, instead of asking to have them passed, he climbs up on the table and walks across the top of it with his big, dirty feet, retrieves the potatoes, clomps back across the table, jumps down, takes his seat, and serves himself some potatoes. Everyone is aghast, right? What he has just done just isn’t done. But when you challenge him, he says, “What, there’s a rule against doing that? I got what I wanted, didn’t I?” and you have to admit there isn’t and he did. But the reason there is no broken rule is because nobody ever thought one would be necessary. You never imagined that someone would walk across the table because everyone knows there is a norm against doing that, and until your brother broke that norm, no one ever bothered to articulate it. And getting what you want is not generally an acceptable justification for bad behavior.

Just because norms are not written down doesn’t mean they are not essential for the survival of a government or the process of politics. In some cases, they are far more essential than written laws. A family of people who routinely stomp across the table to get the food they want would not long want to share meals; eating alone would be far more comfortable.

We can think of **institutions** as the *where* of the political struggle, though Lasswell didn’t include a “where” in his definition. They are the organizations where government power is exercised. In the United States, our rules provide for the institutions of a representative democracy—that is, rule by the elected representatives of the people, and for a federal political system. Our Constitution lays the foundation for the institutions of Congress, the presidency, the courts, and the bureaucracy as a stage on which the drama of politics plays itself out. Other systems might call for different institutions—perhaps an all-powerful parliament, or a monarch, or even a committee of rulers.

These complicated systems of rules and institutions do not appear out of thin air. They are carefully designed by the founders of different systems to create the kinds of society they think will be stable and prosperous, but also where people like themselves are likely to be winners. Remember that not only the rules but also the institutions we choose influence who most easily and most often get their own way.

Power, Narratives, and Media

From the start of human existence, an essential function of communication has been recording events, giving meaning to them and creating a story, or narrative, about how they fit into the past and stretch into the future. It is human nature to tell stories, to capture our experiential knowledge and beliefs and weave them together in ways that give larger meaning to our lives. Native peoples of many lands do it with their legends; the Greeks and Romans did it with their myths; Jews, Christians, Muslims, and other major religious groups do it with their holy texts; enslaved Americans did it with their folktales; and the Brothers Grimm did it with their fairy tales. Human beings tell stories. It’s what we do, and it gives us our history and a way of passing that history down to new generations.

A major part of politics is about competing to have your narrative accepted as the authoritative account. Control of political information has always been a crucial resource when it comes to making and upholding a claim that one should be able to tell other people how to live their lives, but it used to be a power reserved for a few. Creation and dissemination of a **political narrative**—the story that people believe about who has power, who wants power, who deserves power, and what someone has done to get and maintain power—was the prerogative of authoritative sources like priests, kings, and their agents.

Through much of our common history, the storytellers of those narratives were given special status. They were wise men or women, shamans, prophets, oracles, priests, and rabbis. And they were frequently in the service of chiefs, kings, emperors, and other people of enormous power. It's no accident that the storytellers frequently told narratives that bolstered the status quo and kept the power structure in place. The storytellers and the power holders had a monopoly on control for so much of human history because books were in scarce supply and few people could read, in any case, or had the leisure to amass facts to challenge the prevailing narratives. The **gatekeepers** of information—those who determined what news got reported and how—were very few.

Before the seventeenth-century era known as the Enlightenment, there may have been competing narratives about who had claims to power, but they were not that hard to figure out. People's allegiance to power was based on tribal loyalties, religious faith, or conquest. Governments were legitimate through the authority of God or the sword, and that was that. Because most people then were illiterate, that narrative was *mediated*, that is, passed to people through channels that could shape and influence it. Information flowed mostly through medieval clergy and monarchs, *the very people who had a vested interest in getting people to believe it*.

Even when those theories of legitimacy changed, information was still easily controlled because literacy rates were low and horses and wind determined the speed of communication until the advent of steam engines and radios. Early newspapers were read aloud, shared, and reshared, and a good deal of the news of the day was delivered from the pulpit. As we will see when we discuss the American founding, there were lively debates about whether independence was a good idea and what kind of political system should replace the colonial power structure, but by the time information reached citizens, it had been largely processed and filtered by those higher up the power ladder. Even the American rebels were elite and powerful men who could control their own narratives. Remember the importance of this when you read the story behind the Declaration of Independence in Chapter 3.

These days, we take for granted the ease with which we can communicate ideas to others all over the globe. Just a hundred years ago, radio was state of the art and television had yet to be invented. Today many of us carry access to a world of information and instant communication in our pockets.

When we talk about the channels through which information flows, and the ways that the channel itself might alter or control the narrative, we are referring to media. Just like a medium is a person through whom some people try to communicate with those who have died, media (the plural of *medium*) are channels of communication, as mentioned earlier. The integrity of the medium is critical. A scam artist might make money off the desire of grieving people to contact a lost loved one by making up the information she passes on. The monarch and clergy who channeled the narrative of the Holy Roman Empire were motivated by their wish to hold on to power. Think about water running through a pipe. Maybe the pipe is made of lead, or is rusty, or has leaks. Depending on the integrity of the pipe, the water we get will be toxic or rust-colored or limited. *In the same way, the narratives and information we get can be altered by the way they*



Marty Bucella via Cartoonstock.com

are mediated—that is, by the channels, or the media, through which we receive them. And if the medium is truly corrupted, the information that we get won't be information at all but **disinformation**—false information deliberately disseminated to deceive people.

Politics and Economics

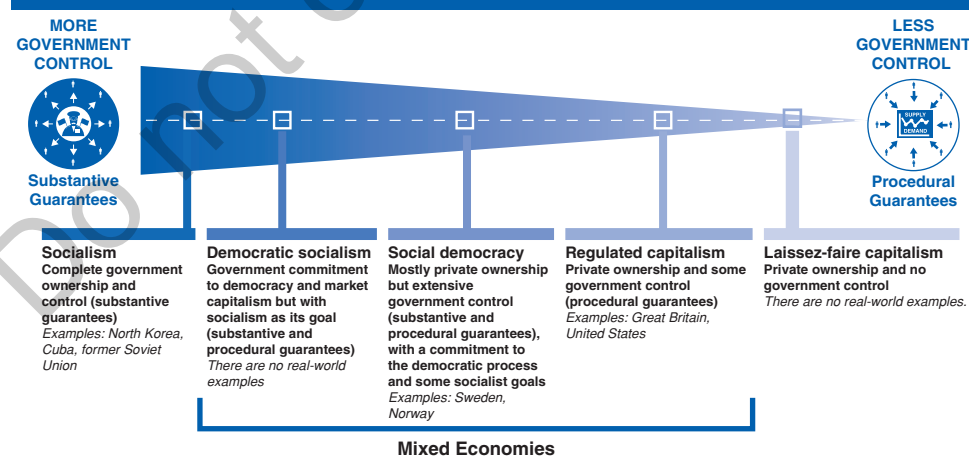
Whereas politics is concerned with the distribution of power and resources and the control of information in society, **economics** is concerned specifically with the production and distribution of society's wealth—material goods such as bread, toothpaste, and housing, and services such as medical care, education, and entertainment. Because both politics and economics focus on the distribution of society's resources, political and economic questions often get confused in contemporary life. Questions about how to pay for government, about government's role in the economy, and about whether government or the private sector should provide certain services have political and economic dimensions. Because there are no clear-cut distinctions here, it can be difficult to keep these terms straight. The various forms of possible economic systems are shown in Figure 1.1, with complete government control (pure socialism) to the far left and no government control (pure capitalism) to the far right.

The processes of politics and economics can be engaged in procedurally or substantively. In procedural political and economic systems, the legitimacy of the outcome is based on the legitimacy of the process that produced it—in other words, that the rules treat everyone fairly. In substantive political and economic systems, the legitimacy of the outcome depends on how widely accepted is the narrative the government tells about who should have what. The outcome is based on the decision of a powerful person or people, not a process that people believe is impartial. In procedural systems, the means (process) justifies the ends; in substantive systems, the ends justify the means.

Socialism. In a **socialist economy** like that of the former Soviet Union, economic decisions are made not by individuals through the market but rather by politicians, based on their judgment of what society needs. In these systems the state often owns the factories, land, and other resources necessary to produce wealth. Rather than trusting the market process to determine the proper distribution of material resources among individuals, politicians decide what the distribution ought to be—according to some principle like equality, need, or political reward—and then create economic policy to bring about that outcome. In other words, they emphasize **substantive guarantees** of what they believe to be fair outcomes, rather than **procedural guarantees** of fair rules and process.

The societies that have tried to put these theories into practice have ended up with repressive political systems, even though Karl Marx, the most famous of the theorists associated with socialism, hoped that

FIGURE 1.1 ■ A Comparison of Economic Systems



Economic systems are defined largely by the degree to which government owns the means by which material resources are produced (for example, factories and industry) and controls economic decision making. On a scale ranging from socialism—complete government ownership and control of the economy (on the left)—to laissez-faire capitalism—complete individual ownership and control of the economy (on the right)—social democracies would be located in the center. These hybrid systems are characterized by mostly private ownership of the means of production but considerable government control over economic decisions.

eventually humankind would evolve to a point where each individual had control over their own life—a radical form of democracy. Since the socialist economies of the former Soviet Union and Eastern Europe have fallen apart, socialism has been left with few supporters, although some nations, such as China, North Korea, and Cuba, still claim allegiance to it. Even China, however, introduced market-based reforms in the 1970s and by 2010 ranked as the world's second largest economy, after the United States.

Capitalism. Capitalism is a procedural economic system based on the working of the *market*—the process of supply and demand. In a pure **capitalist economy**, all the means used to produce material resources (industry, business, and land, for instance) are owned privately, and decisions about production and distribution are left to individuals operating through the free-market process. Capitalist economies rely on the market to decide how much of a given item to produce or how much to charge for it. In capitalist countries, people do not believe that the government is capable of making such judgments (like how much toothpaste to produce), so they want to keep such decisions out of the hands of government and in the hands of individuals who they believe know best what they want. The most extreme philosophy that corresponds with this belief is called **laissez-faire capitalism**, from a French term that, loosely translated, means “let people do as they wish.” The government has no economic role at all in such a system, except perhaps to provide the national security in which the market forces can play out.



Building a Better Rocket?

Internet entrepreneur and Amazon founder Jeff Bezos is also the owner of Blue Origin, an aerospace company. On July, 20, 2021, the Blue Origin New Shepard space vehicle launched into suborbital space with Bezos and three others—a landmark moment for the space tourist industry. Here the crew—Oliver Daemen, Mark Bezos, Jeff Bezos, and eighty-three-year-old Mary Wallace (“Wally”) Funk—hold a post-flight press conference.

Joe Raedle/Getty Images

Mixed Economies. Most real-world economies fall somewhere in between the idealized points of socialism and pure or laissez-faire capitalism, because most real-world countries have some substantive political goals that they want their economies to serve. The economies that fall in between the extremes are called mixed economies. **Mixed economies** are based on modified forms of capitalism, tempered by substantive values about how the market should work. In mixed economies, the fundamental economic decision-makers are individuals rather than the government. In addition, individuals may decide they want the government to step in and regulate behaviors that they think are not in the public interest. It is the type and degree of regulation that determines what kind of mixed economy it is.

Democratic socialism and **social democracy** are, as their names suggest, mixed economies that are a hybrid of democracy and socialism; they fall to the right of socialism in Figure 1.1.

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They are different from the pure socialist economy we discussed because they combine socialist ideals that empower government with a commitment to the *political* democratic principle of popular sovereignty and the *economic* principle of market capitalism that empowers individuals. The difference between them is that democratic socialists keep socialism as their end goal and social democrats are happy to keep the capitalist economy as long as they use the democratic process to attain some of the goals a socialist economy is supposed to produce (like more equality).

Socialism hybrids in theory, and often in practice, try to keep checks on government power to avoid the descent into authoritarianism that plagues most socialist experiments. They generally hold that there is a preferred distribution of stuff that requires prioritizing political goals over the market but that democracy is worth preserving as well.

When people claim to endorse a hybrid of democracy and socialism, note which word is the noun and which is the modifier. The noun will tell you where the true commitment lies. Democratic socialists (that is, “socialists”) prioritize the results of a socialist economy; social democrats (that is, “democrats”) prioritize the democratic process over economic outcomes.

Since World War II, the citizens of many Western European nations have elected social democrats to office, where they have enacted policies to bring about more equality—for instance, better housing, adequate health care for all, and the elimination of poverty and unemployment. Even where social democratic governments are voted out of office, such programs have proved so popular that it is often difficult for new leaders to alter them. Few people in the United States would identify themselves with social democracy, as presidential candidate Bernie Sanders found out in 2016 and 2020, although his campaign did help people understand that some versions of socialism did not require a wholesale elimination of capitalism and some of his proposals found their way into the Democratic Party platform.

Regulated capitalism is also a hybrid system, but, unlike the socialist hybrids, it does not often prioritize political and social goals—like reducing inequality or redressing power inequities—as much



Presidents for Life?

In July 2020, Russian authorities announced that after a week-long national vote on a series of constitutional reforms, voters had approved an amendment allowing President Vladimir Putin to six term limits and remain president until 2036. China's legislature, the National People's Congress, voted in March 2018 to change the country's constitution to eliminate the existing ten-year presidential term limit, also setting up President Xi Jinping as president for life. Narendra Modi has been serving as prime minister of India since May 2014 and is expected to be reelected in 2024. His tenure has been marked by a crackdown on political dissent. Here, the three rulers pose after their trilateral meeting at the Group of 20 summit in Osaka, Japan, on June 28, 2019.

Mikhail Svetlov/Getty Images

as it does economic health. Although in theory the market ought to provide everything that people need and want—and should regulate itself as well—sometimes it fails. The notion that the market, an impartial process, has “failed” is a somewhat substantive one: it is the decision of a government that the outcome is not acceptable and should be replaced or altered to fit a political vision of what the outcome should be. When markets have ups and downs—periods of growth followed by periods of slowdown or recession—individuals and businesses look to government for economic security. If the market fails to produce some goods and services, like schools or highways, individuals expect the government to step in to produce them (using taxpayer funds). It is not very substantive—the market process still largely makes all the distributional decisions—but it is not laissez-faire capitalism, either.

The dividing line between some of the socialism hybrids and regulated capitalism is not always crisp, as one may seem to blend into the other. The distinction to pay attention to is how much political control of the economy the system supports, and to what end. The judgment about what regulations are a legitimate use of government can be the subject of major political debates in democratic countries with mixed economies.

Like most other developed countries today, the United States has a system of regulated capitalism, which lies farther to the right on the spectrum, closer to pure capitalism in Figure 1.1. It maintains a capitalist economy and individual freedom from government interference remains the norm. But it allows government to step in and regulate the economy to guarantee individual rights and to provide procedural guarantees that the rules will work smoothly and fairly.

IN YOUR OWN WORDS

Describe the role that politics plays in determining how power and resources, including control of information, are distributed in a society.

POLITICAL SYSTEMS AND THE CONCEPT OF CITIZENSHIP

Competing ideas about power and the social order

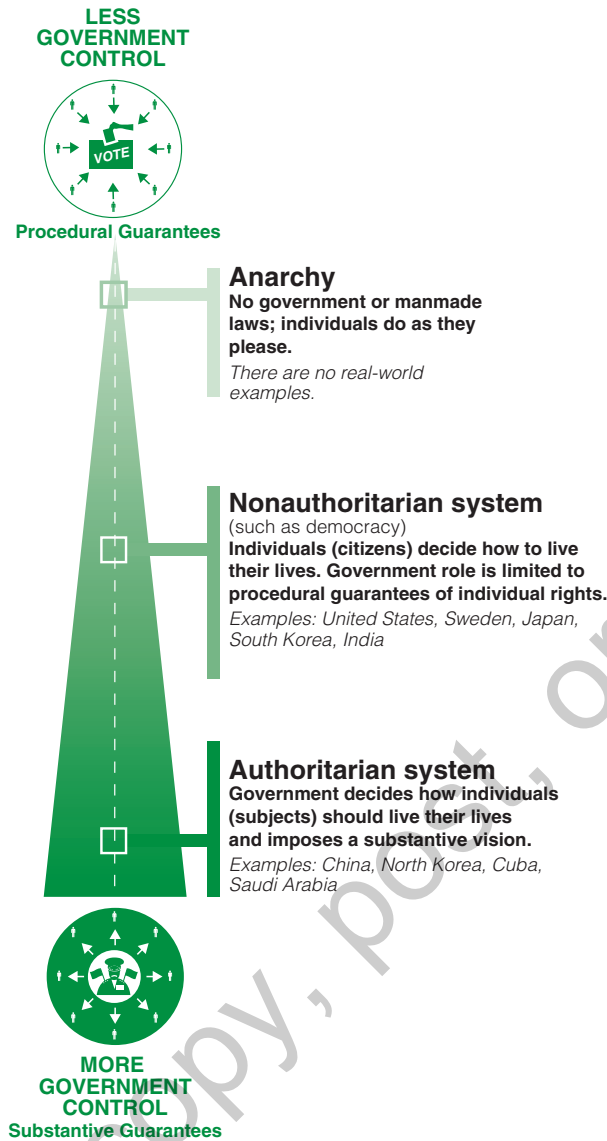
Just as there are different kinds of economic systems on the substantive to procedural scale, there are many sorts of political systems, based on competing ideas about who should have power and what the social order should be—that is, how much substantive regulation there should be over individual decision-making. For our purposes, we can divide political systems into two types: those in which the government has the substantive power to impose a particular social order, deciding how individuals ought to behave, and those procedural systems in which individuals exercise personal power over most of their own behavior and ultimately over government as well. These two types of systems are different not just in a theoretical sense. The differences have very real implications for the people who live in them; the notion of citizenship (or the lack of it) is tied closely to the kind of political system a nation has.

Figure 1.2 compares these systems, ranging from the more substantive authoritarian governments that potentially have total power over their subjects to more procedural nonauthoritarian governments that permit citizens to limit the state’s power by claiming rights that the government must protect. Figure 1.3 shows what happens when we overlay our economic and political figures, giving us a model of most of the world’s political/economic systems. Note that when we say *model*, we are talking about abstractions from reality used as a tool to help us understand. We don’t pretend that all the details of the world are captured in a single two-dimensional figure, but we can get a better idea of the similarities and differences by looking at them this way.

Authoritarian Systems

Authoritarian governments give ultimate power to the state rather than to the people to decide how they ought to live their lives. By “authoritarian governments,” we usually mean those in which the people cannot effectively claim rights against the state; where the state chooses to exercise its power, the people have no choice but to submit to its will.

FIGURE 1.2 ■ A Comparison of Political Systems

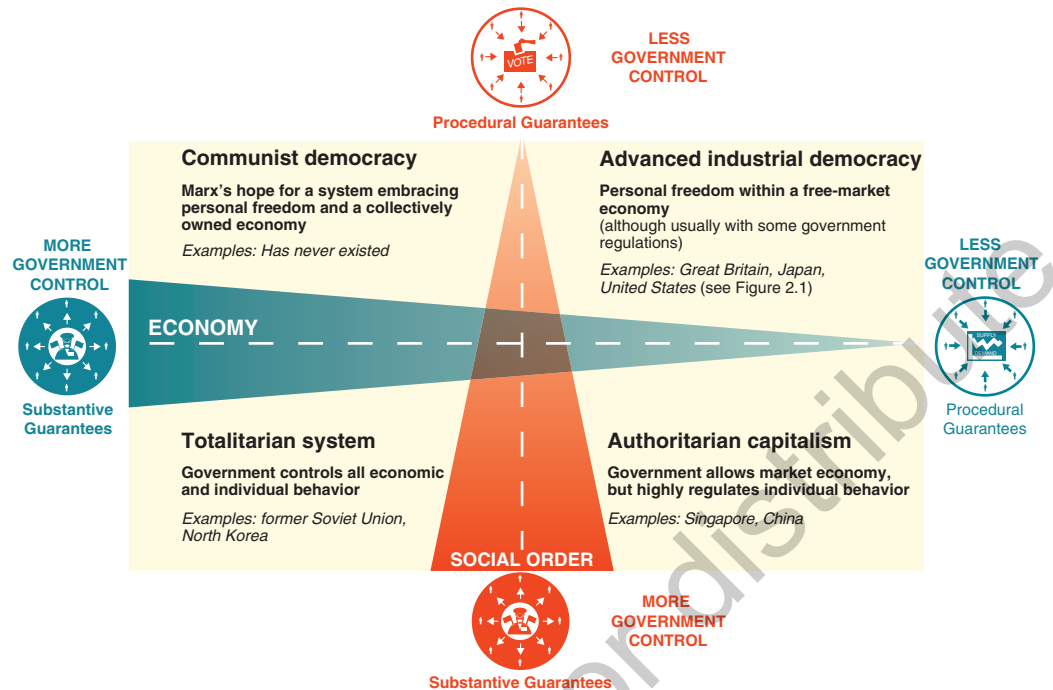


Political systems are defined by the extent to which individual citizens or governments decide what the social order should look like—that is, how people should live their collective, noneconomic lives. Except for anarchies, every system allots a role to government to regulate individual behavior—for example, to prohibit murder, rape, and theft. But beyond such basic regulation, systems differ radically on who gets to determine how individuals live their lives, and whether government’s role is simply to provide procedural guarantees that protect individuals’ rights to make their own decisions or to provide a much more substantive view of how individuals should behave.

Authoritarian governments can take various forms: sovereignty can be vested in an individual (dictatorship or monarchy), in God (theocracy), in the state itself (fascism), or in a ruling class (oligarchy). When a system combines an authoritarian government with a socialist economy, we say that the system is **totalitarian** (in the lower-left quadrant of Figure 1.3). As in the earlier example of the former Soviet Union, a totalitarian system exercises its power over every part of society—economic, social, political, and moral—leaving little or no private realm for individuals.

But an authoritarian state may also limit its own power. In such cases, it may deny individuals rights in those spheres where it chooses to act, but it may leave large areas of society, such as a capitalist economy, free from government interference. China and Singapore are examples of this type of **authoritarian capitalism**, in the lower-right quadrant of Figure 1.3. In these systems, people have considerable economic freedom, but stringent social regulations limit their noneconomic behavior.

FIGURE 1.3 ■ Political and Economic Systems



Political systems work in conjunction with economic systems, but government control over the economy does not necessarily translate into tight control over the social order. We have identified four possible combinations of these systems, signified by the labeled points in each quadrant. These points are approximate, however, and some nations cannot be classified so easily. Sweden is an advanced industrial democracy by most measures, for instance, but because of its commitment to substantive economic values, it would be located much closer to the vertical axis.

Authoritarian governments often pay lip service to the people, but when push comes to shove, as it usually does in such states, the people have no effective power against the government. Again, to use the terminology we introduced earlier, government does not provide guarantees of fair processes for individuals; it guarantees a substantive vision of what life will be like—what individuals will believe, how they will act, what they will choose. Consequently, in authoritarian governments, the narrative is not up for debate. The rulers set the narrative and control the flow of information so that it supports their version of why they should have power. They do not tolerate any criticism of their government, and they use their power to stifle those who do try to criticize them. Subjects of these governments accept the narrative for a variety of reasons: there is no free media, communication with the outside world is limited, or they may be afraid to do otherwise. Authoritarian rulers often use punishment to coerce uncooperative subjects into obedience.

Nonauthoritarian Systems

In nonauthoritarian systems, ultimate power rests with individuals to make decisions concerning their lives. The most extreme form of nonauthoritarianism is called **anarchy**. Anarchists would do away with government and laws altogether. People advocate anarchy because they value the freedom to do whatever they want more than they value the order and security that governments provide by forbidding or regulating certain kinds of behavior. Few people are true anarchists, however. Anarchy may sound attractive in theory, but the inherent difficulties of the position make it hard to practice. For instance, how could you even organize a revolution to get rid of government without some rules about who is to do what and how decisions are to be made?

Democracy. A less extreme form of nonauthoritarian government, and one much more familiar to us, is **democracy** (from the Greek *demos*, meaning “people”). In democracies, government is not external to the people, as it is in authoritarian systems; in a fundamental sense, government *is* the people.

Democracies are based on the principle of **popular sovereignty**; that is, there is no power higher than the people and, in the United States, the document establishing their authority, the Constitution. The central idea here is that no government is considered legitimate unless the governed consent to it, and people are not truly free unless they live under a law of their own making. People and their power act as a limiting restraint on the power of government, in a rebuke to the claims of authoritarians.

Recognizing that collective life usually calls for some restrictions on what individuals may do (laws forbidding murder or theft, for instance), democracies nevertheless try to maximize freedom for the individuals who live under them. Although they generally make decisions through some sort of majority rule, democracies still provide procedural guarantees to preserve individual rights—usually protections of due process and minority rights. This means that if individuals living in a democracy feel their rights have been violated, they have the right to ask government to remedy the situation (although there are no guaranteed results).

There are many institutional variations on democracy. Some democracies make the legislature (the representatives of the people) the most important authority; some retain a monarch with limited powers; and some hold referenda at the national level to get direct feedback on how the people want the government to act on specific issues.

Most democratic forms of government, because of their commitment to procedural values, practice a capitalist form of economics. Fledgling democracies may rely on a high degree of government economic regulation, but **advanced industrial democracies** (in the upper-right quadrant of Figure 1.3) combine a considerable amount of personal freedom with a free-market (though still usually regulated) economy.

The people of many Western countries have found the idea of democracy persuasive enough to found their governments on it. Especially after the mid-1980s, democracy began spreading rapidly through the rest of the world as the preferred form of government. No longer the primary province of industrialized Western nations, attempts at democratic governance now extend into Asia, Latin America, Africa, Eastern Europe, and the republics of the former Soviet Union. This trend is a fragile one, however. The move to democracy is not a one-way street. Some governments that had begun the trek to democratization have halted or reversed their progress. At the beginning of this chapter we noted the move from democracy to authoritarianism in Turkey, Hungary, Russia, and other erstwhile popular governments, and we warned that even the United States is not immune to this trend.

It is rare to find a country that is truly committed to democratic freedom that also tries to regulate the economy heavily. The philosopher Karl Marx believed that radical democracy would coexist with communally owned property, in a form of **communist democracy** (in the upper-left quadrant of Figure 1.3), but such a system has never existed, and most real-world systems fall elsewhere in Figure 1.3.

Democratic Narratives. Generally, the narrative of democracy is based on the idea that power comes from the people. This is misleadingly simple, however. Some democratic narratives hold that all the people should agree on political decisions. This rule of unanimity makes decision making very slow, and sometimes impossible, since everyone has to be persuaded to agree. Even when majority rule is the norm, there are many ways of calculating the majority. Is it 50 percent plus one? Two-thirds? Three-fourths? Decision making becomes increasingly difficult as the number of people who are required to agree grows. And, of course, majority rule brings with it the problem of minority rights. If the majority gets its way, what happens to the rights of those who disagree?

Not surprisingly, there are multiple narratives about how much and in what ways popular power should be exercised in a democracy. They argue for power at the top, in groups, and for individuals. For instance, *elite democracy* is a narrative that sees democracy merely as a process of choosing among competing leaders; for the average citizen, input ends after the leader is chosen.⁴ Advocates of the narrative of *pluralist democracy* argue that what is important is not so much individual participation but rather membership in groups that participate in government decision making on their members' behalf.⁵ Supporters of the narrative of *participatory democracy* claim that individuals have the right to control *all* the circumstances of their lives, and direct democratic participation should take place not only in government but in industry, education, and community affairs as well.⁶ For advocates of this view, democracy is more than a way to make decisions: it is a way of life, an end in itself. In practice, those

who argue for democratic government probably include elements of more than one of these democratic narratives; they are not mutually exclusive.

Ironically, some present-day democracies are now experiencing backlashes of **populism**—social movements that promote the narrative that democracy has concentrated power at an elite level and neglected the concerns of ordinary people. Because populism is a narrative based on the grievances of people who believe they are getting less than they deserve, it is relatively easy for an authoritarian figure to exploit. Often these movements backfire on the people who support them and result in the seizing of authoritarian power by an individual or group who claims to wield power in the name of the people but does not. This is the mechanism behind the loss of democratic power in Turkey, Hungary, and Venezuela, and behind the challenges to popular governance in longtime democratic countries like France and the United States.

The Role of the People

What is important about the political and economic systems we have been sorting out here is that they have a direct impact on the lives of the people who live in them. So far we have given a good deal of attention to the latter parts of Lasswell's definition of politics. But equally as important as the *what* and the *how* in Lasswell's formulation is the *who*. Underlying the different political theories we have looked at are fundamental differences in the powers and opportunities possessed by everyday people.

The People as Subjects. In authoritarian systems, the people are **subjects** of their government. They possess no rights that protect them from that government; they must do whatever the government says or face the consequences, without any other recourse. They have obligations to the state but no rights or privileges to offset those obligations. They may be winners or losers in government decisions, but they have very little control over which it may be.

Do subjects enjoy any advantages that citizens don't have?

The People as Citizens. Everyday people in democratic systems have a potentially powerful role to play. They are more than mere subjects; they are **citizens**, or members of a political community with rights as well as obligations. Democratic theory says that power is drawn from the people, that the people are sovereign, that they must consent to be governed, and that their government must respond to their will. In practical terms, this may not seem to mean much, since not consenting doesn't necessarily give us the right to disobey government. It does give us the option of leaving, however, and seeking a more congenial set of rules elsewhere.

Theoretically, democracies are ruled by "the people," but different democracies have at times been very selective about whom they count as citizens. Just because a system is called a democracy is no guarantee that all or even most of its residents possess the status of citizen.

In democratic systems, the rules of government can provide for all sorts of different roles for those they designate as citizens. At a minimum, citizens possess certain rights, or powers to act, that government cannot limit, although these rights vary in different democracies. Citizens of democracies also possess obligations or responsibilities to the public realm. They have the obligation to obey the law, for instance, once they have consented to the government (even if that consent amounts only to not leaving); they may also have the obligation to pay taxes, serve in the military, or sit on juries. Some theorists argue that truly virtuous citizens should put community interests ahead of personal interests.

IN YOUR OWN WORDS

Compare how power is distributed between citizens and government in different economic and political systems.

THE CLASSICAL LIBERAL ROOTS OF AMERICAN DEMOCRACY

From divine right to social contract

Government in the United States is the product of particular decisions the founders made about the who, what, and how of American politics. But there was nothing inevitable about those decisions, and had the founders decided otherwise, our system would look very different indeed.

Given the world in which the founders lived, democracy was not an obvious choice for them, and many scholars argue that in some respects the system they created is not very democratic. We can see this more clearly if we understand the intellectual heritage of the early Americans, their historical experience, and the theories about government that informed them.

European Sources of Democratic Thought and Practice

The heyday of democracy, of course, was ancient Athens, from about 500 to 300 BCE. Even Athenian democracy was a pretty selective business. To be sure, it was rule by “the people,” but “the people” was defined narrowly to exclude women, enslaved people, youth, and resident aliens. Athenian democracy was not built on values of equality, even of opportunity, except for the 10 percent of the population defined as citizens. We can see parallels here to early colonial American democracy, which restricted participation in political affairs to a relatively small number of white men with wealth and particular religious beliefs.

Limited as Athenian democracy was, it was positively wide open compared to most forms of government that existed during the Middle Ages, from roughly AD 600 to 1500. During this period, monarchs gradually consolidated their power over their subjects, and some even challenged the greatest political power of the time, the Catholic Church. Authoritarianism was a lot easier to pull off when few people could read; maintaining a single narrative about power that enforced authoritarian rule was relatively simple. For instance, as you will see in Chapter 3, the narrative of the **divine right of kings** kept monarchs in Europe on their thrones by insisting that those rulers were God’s representatives on earth and that to say otherwise was not just a crime but a sin.

Following the development of the printing press in 1439, more people gained literacy. Information could be mediated independently of those in power, and competing narratives could grab a foothold. Martin Luther promoted the narrative behind the Protestant Reformation (1517–1648) to weaken the power of the



Whose Hong Kong Is It, Anyway?

Millions of Hongkongers took to the streets in June 2019, in opposition to a later-abandoned proposal to allow extraditions to mainland China. The protest movement morphed into demands for greater democratic freedoms and police accountability, resulting in a clash of culture with China’s authoritarian leadership. The COVID-19 pandemic and Beijing’s subsequent imposition of a sweeping National Security Law in 2020 suppressed the uprising, and many activists left the city or were arrested. Previously an English colony, Hong Kong was turned over to the Chinese in 1997, and China cannot afford to let the international financial hub call its own shots.

Anthony Kwan/Getty Images

Catholic Church. Luther's ideas spread and were embraced by a number of European monarchs, leading to a split between Catholic and Protestant countries. Where the Catholic Church was seen as unnecessary, it lost political as well as religious clout, and its decline paved the way for new ideas about the world.

Those new ideas came with the Enlightenment period of the late 1600s and 1700s, when ideas about science and the possibilities of harnessing human knowledge to control the world around them began to blow away the shadows and cobwebs of medieval superstition. Enlightenment philosophy said that human beings were not at the mercy of a world they could not understand, but rather, as rational human beings, they could learn the secrets of nature and compel the world to do their bidding. The political narratives of **classical liberalism** that emerged from the Enlightenment emphasized science and rational thought, government limited by individual rights and democratic citizenship. We discussed classical liberalism earlier in this chapter. It provides a powerful theoretical foundation for the modern nonauthoritarian views of government we looked at earlier (see the upper right quadrant of Figure 1.3).

The Social Contract and the American Founding Narrative

One of the key elements of classical liberal theory that justified limited government was the **social contract**, a story that said power is derived not from God but from the consent of the governed. Philosopher John Locke argued that *before* government comes into being, people have natural rights. They give up some of those rights in order to have the convenience of government but retain enough of them to rebel against that government if it fails to protect their rights. For it to work, the social contract requires that people have freedom to criticize the government (that is, to create counternarratives) and that information and narratives flow through channels that are protected from the influence of those in power. Key here is the idea that since rights predate government, governments cannot take away those rights. It will become evident in Chapter 3 that Thomas Jefferson was influenced by Locke's work in the writing of the Declaration of Independence. That document is itself a founding narrative of the rights of Americans: it tells a story about how the British violated those rights and was designed to combat the British narrative that America should remain part of its colonial empire.

While philosophers in Europe were beginning to explore the idea of individual rights and democratic governance, there had long been democratic stirrings on the founders' home continent. The Iroquois Confederacy was an alliance of five (and eventually six) East Coast Native American nations whose constitution, the "Great Law of Peace," impressed American leaders such as Benjamin Franklin with its suggestions of federalism, separation of powers, checks and balances, and consensus building. Although historians are not sure that these ideas had any direct influence on the founders' thinking about American governance, they were clearly part of the stew of ideas that the founders could dip into, and some scholars make the case that their influence was significant.⁷

But despite the prevalence of democratic theories of governance at the time of the founding, the average citizen was illiterate and dependent on political elites to mediate their information. New "channels" also began to play a part. Newspapers had limited direct readership, but pastors, who wove news into their sermons, and publicans, who read newspapers aloud and interpreted them for patrons in their drinking establishments, all began to shape narratives. For our purposes, the most important thing about these ideas about politics is that they were prevalent at the same time the American founders were thinking about how to build a new government. Locke particularly influenced the writings of James Madison, a major author of the U.S. Constitution. Like Locke, Madison thought government had a duty to protect property. At first he was hopeful that, with a fresh start in a new country, citizens would be driven by innate notions of "republican virtue" to put the interests of the public over their own self-interests.

Public behavior after the Revolution disillusioned him, however, and Madison ended up rejecting notions of "pure democracy," in which all citizens would have direct power to control government, opting instead for what he called a "republic." A **republic**, according to Madison, would differ from a democracy by relying on representation and would be more appropriate in a large polity where there would be a lot of citizens to be heard. It also limited the involvement of those citizens to choosing their representatives, not doing any actual governing.

IN YOUR OWN WORDS

Explain the historical origins of American democracy and the ways that the available media controlled the political narrative.

THE EVOLUTION OF AMERICAN CITIZENSHIP

From the founding era to the digital age

Unlike the founders, certainly, but even unlike most of the people currently running this country (who are, let's face it, kind of old), people born in this century are almost all **digital natives**. They have been born in an era in which not only are most people hooked up to electronic media, but they also live their lives partly in cyberspace as well as in “real space.” For many of us, the lives we live are often mediated—that is, with much, if not most, of our relationships, our education, our news, our travel, our sustenance, our purchases, our daily activities, our job seeking, and our very sense of ourselves being influenced by, experienced through, or shared via electronic media. That reality was brought home thanks to the COVID-19 pandemic, which *required* our classes, relationships, worship, work, medical consultations, commerce, and even social gatherings to take place in a mediated form. When direct, one-on-one connections become impossible or dangerous, some form of mediation is the only way to carry them out. COVID-19 taught us how valuable and yet dispensable face-to-face communication can be in a digital age.

Essentially, in a digital age we conduct our lives through channels that, like that water pipe we talked about earlier, may be made of lead, may be rusty, or may be full of holes. When we search online, certain links are offered first according to the calculations made by the search engine we use. When we shop online, we are urged to buy certain products that an algorithm thinks we will like or that people like us have purchased. When we travel, certain flights and hotels are flagged, and when we use social media, certain posts appear while others don't. Most of us don't check very hard to ensure that the information on which we base our choices isn't emerging from the cyberequivalent of lead or leaky pipes.

A mediated world has all kinds of implications for everyday living and loving and working. The implications we care about here are the political implications for our roles as citizens—the ones to do with how we exercise power and are impacted by. We will turn to these implications again and again throughout this book.



Citizens Stepping Up

Americans may be individualists, but that doesn't mean they don't pitch in to help others in need—at least some of the time. When Hurricane Maria struck Puerto Rico in 2017, Washington, D.C.-based chef José Andrés jumped into action via his organization World Central Kitchen to provide meals to people across the islands who had lost power, or even their homes.

World Central Kitchen

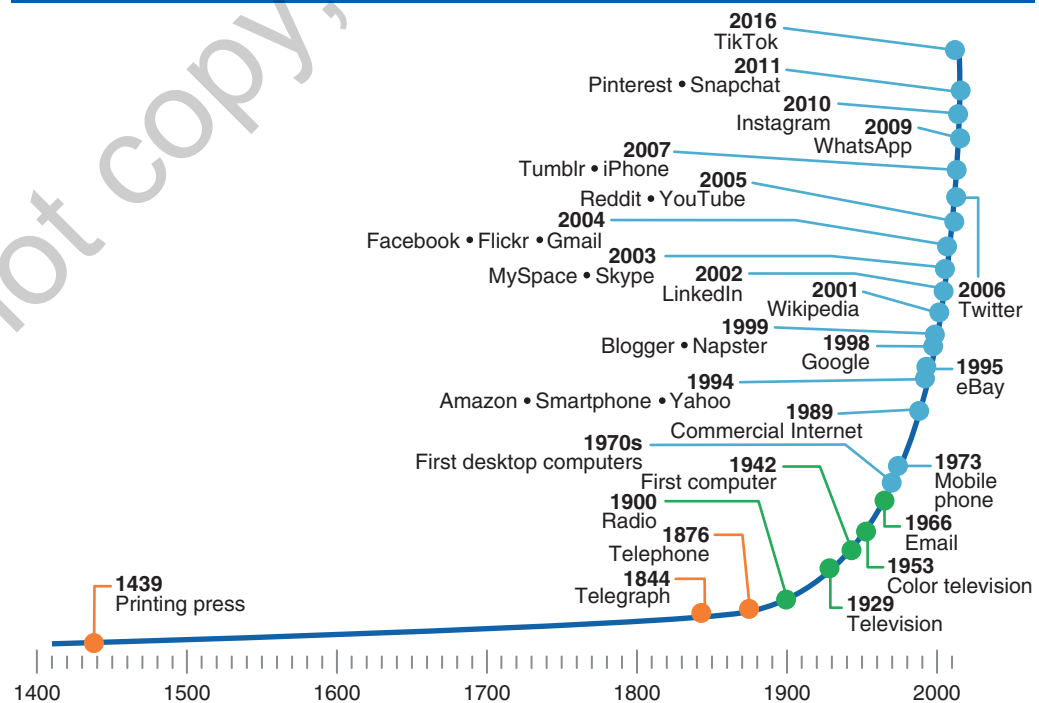
Even though Americans today still largely adhere to the basic governing narrative the founders promoted, the country is now light years removed from the founding era, when communication was limited by illiteracy and the scarcity of channels through which it could pass. Consider the timeline in Figure 1.4. It follows the development of the media through which we get information, receive narratives, and send out our own information (see also *Snapshot of America: How Do We Engage Politically Online?*). Being a citizen in a mediated world is just night-and-day different from being one in the world in which James Madison helped write the Constitution. It’s the genius of the Constitution that it has been able to navigate the transition successfully, so far. The mediated world we live in gives us myriad new ways to keep the republic and some pretty high-tech ways to lose it. That puts a huge burden on us as **mediated citizens**, and it also opens up a world of opportunity.

Among the things we disagree on in this country is what it means to be a citizen. James Madison obviously had some thoughts on that subject. As we mentioned earlier, he hoped people would be so filled with what he called republican virtue that they would readily sacrifice their self-interest to advance the public interest. As we will see in Chapter 3, this **public-interested citizenship** proved not to be the rule, much to Madison’s disappointment. Instead, early Americans demonstrated **self-interested citizenship**, trying to use the system to get the most they could for themselves. This was a dilemma for Madison because he was designing a constitution that depended on the nature of the people being governed. He believed he had solved that dilemma by creating a political system that would check our self-interested nature and produce laws that would support the public interest.

When, if ever, should individuals be asked to sacrifice their own good for that of their country?

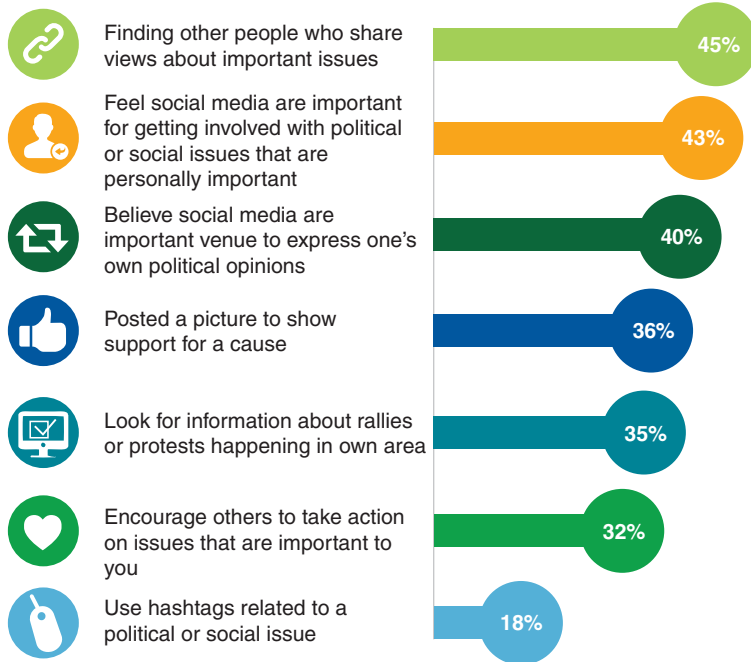
Still, the Constitution has not put that conflict to rest. Today there are plenty of people who put country first—who enlist in the armed services, sometimes giving their lives for their nation, or who go into law enforcement or teaching or other lower paying careers because they want to serve. There are people who cheerfully pay their taxes because it’s a privilege to live in a free democracy where you

FIGURE 1.4 ■ Media Timeline



It is notable that over the long history of humankind’s relationship with the printed word, a majority of the most significant technological developments, other than the 1439 invention of the printing press, have taken place over the past hundred years.

Snapshot of America: How Do We Engage Politically Online?



Believe Social Media Are Important for



Behind the Numbers

Social media enable citizens to engage with their government, the news media, and each other much more efficiently than in previous decades. But widespread and easy access to political information comes to us with few quality checks. Did you engage politically during the 2020 presidential election in any of the ways listed above? In what ways might social media affect political outcomes?

Sources: Pew Research Center, "Activism on Social Media Varies by Race and Ethnicity, Age, Political Party," July 13, 2020, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2020/07/13/activism-on-social-media-varies-by-race-and-ethnicity-age-political-party/>; and Pew Research Center, "Americans Think Social Media Can Help Build Movements, but Can Also Be a Distraction," September 9, 2020, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2020/09/09/americans-think-social-media-can-help-build-movements-but-can-also-be-a-distraction/>.

can climb the ladder of opportunity. Especially in moments of national trouble—after the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon in September 2001, for instance, or during the COVID-19 pandemic—Americans willingly rush to help their fellow citizens.

At the same time, the day-to-day business of life turns most people inward. Many people care about self and family and friends, but most don't have the energy or inclination to get beyond that. President John Kennedy challenged his "fellow Americans" in 1961 to "ask not what your country can do for you—ask what you can do for your country," but only a rare few have the time or motivation to take up that challenge.

Unlike the citizens Madison and his colleagues designed a constitution for, mediated citizens experience the world through multiple channels of information and interaction. That doesn't change whether citizens are self-interested or public-interested, but it does give them more opportunities and raise more potential hazards for being both.

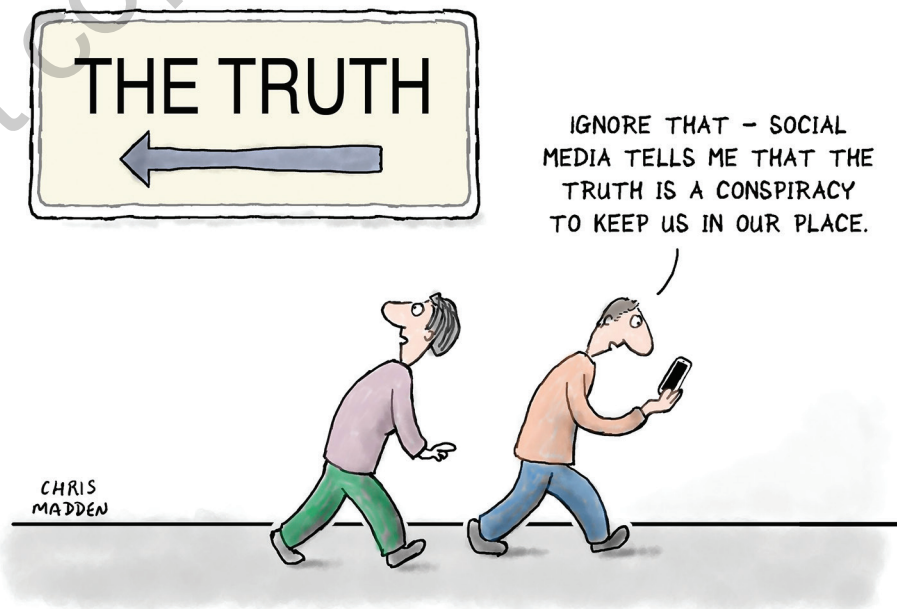
Many older Americans who are not digital natives nonetheless experience political life through television or through web surfing and commenting, usually anonymously and often rudely. This is not always a positive addition to our civil discourse, but they are trying to adapt. You may have grandparents who fit this description. They probably want to know why you are not on Facebook.

But more media-savvy millennials, Gen Xers, and even some tech-savvy Baby Boomers not only have access to traditional media if they choose but also are accustomed to interacting, conducting friendships and family relationships, and generally attending to the details of their lives through electronic channels. Their digital selves exist in networks of friends and acquaintances who take for granted that they can communicate in seconds. They certainly get their news digitally and increasingly organize, register to vote, enlist in campaigns, and call each other to action that way.

In fact, a phenomenon called **hashtag activism**, the forming of social movements through viral calls to act politically—whether to march, to boycott, to contact politicians, or to vote—has become common enough that organizers warn that action has to go beyond cyberspace to reach the real world or it will have limited impact. #BlackLivesMatter, #ItGetsBetter, and #NeverAgain are just three very different, very viral, very successful ways of using all the channels available to us to call attention to a problem and propose solutions.

Although living an intensely mediated life has the potential to broaden our horizons and expose us to multiple views and cultures, it does not automatically produce public-interested citizens. People can easily remain self-interested in this digital world. We can customize our social media to give us only news and information that confirms what we already think. We can live in an **information bubble** where everything we see and hear reinforces our preferred narratives. That makes us more or less sitting ducks for whoever's political agenda is injected into our bubble, whether from inside an online media source or from a foreign power that weaponizes social media to influence an election, as the Russians did in both 2016 and 2020. Without opening ourselves up to multiple information and action channels, we can live an unexamined mediated life.

But mediated citizenship also creates enormous opportunities that the founders never dreamed of. Truth to tell, Madison wouldn't have been all that thrilled about the multiple ways to be political that the mediated citizen possesses. He thought citizens should be seen on Election Day, but not heard most of the time,



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precisely because he thought we would push our own interests and destabilize the system. He was reassured by the fact that it would take days for an express letter trying to create a dissenting political organization to reach Georgia from Maine. Our mediated world has blown that reassuring prospect to smithereens.

Mediated citizens are not only the receivers and distributors of narratives from powerful people; we can also be the creators and disseminators of our own narratives, a prospect that would have terrified the old monarchs comfortably ensconced in their divine right narrative. Even the founders would have been extremely nervous about what the masses might get up to.

As mediated citizens, we have unprecedented access to power, but we are also targets of the use of unprecedented power—attempts to shape our views and control our experiences. That means it is up to us to pay critical attention to what is happening in the world around us.

IN YOUR OWN WORDS

Describe the enduring tension in the United States between self-interested human nature and public-spirited government and the way that has been shaped in a mediated world.

THINKING CRITICALLY ABOUT AMERICAN POLITICS

How to use the themes and features in this book

Our primary goal in this book is to get you thinking critically about American politics, especially about the political narratives that you encounter every day. Critical thinking is the analysis and evaluation of ideas and arguments based on reason and evidence—it means digging deep into what you read and what you hear and asking tough questions. Critical thinking is what all good scholars do, and it is also what savvy citizens do.

Our analytic and evaluative tasks in this book focus on the twin themes of power and citizenship. We have adopted the classic definition of politics proposed by the late political scientist Harold Lasswell that politics is “who gets what when and how.” We simplify his understanding by dropping the “when” and focusing on politics as the struggle by citizens over who gets power and resources in society and how they get them, but we also consider how the struggle for power and resources can change dramatically over time.

Analysis

Lasswell’s definition of politics gives us a framework of analysis for this book; that is, it outlines how we break down politics into its component parts in order to understand it. Analysis helps us understand how something works, much like taking apart a car and putting it back together again helps us understand how it runs. Lasswell’s definition provides a strong analytic framework because it focuses our attention on questions we can ask to figure out what is going on in politics.

THINKING LIKE A POLITICAL SCIENTIST: THE CRITICAL IMPORTANCE OF CRITICAL THINKING

This book is an introduction to American politics, and in a way it is also an introduction to political science. Political science is not exactly the same kind of science as biology or geology. Not only is it difficult to put our subjects (people and political systems) under a microscope to observe their behavior, but we are also somewhat limited in our ability to test our theories. We cannot replay World War II to test our ideas about what caused it, for example. A further problem is our subjectivity; we are the phenomena under investigation, and so we may have stronger feelings about our research and our findings than we would about, say, cells and rocks.

These difficulties do not make a science of politics impossible, but they do mean we must proceed with caution. Even among political scientists, disagreement exists about whether a rigorous science of the political world is a reasonable goal. We can agree, however, that it is possible to advance our understanding of politics beyond mere guessing or debates about political preferences.

Although we use many methods in our work (statistical analysis, mathematical modeling, case studies, and philosophical reasoning, to name only a few), what political scientists have in common is an emphasis on critical thinking about politics. And in that sense, it is based on the same Enlightenment-era values that make all science possible: open inquiry, fearless debate, empirical testing, and academic freedom.

Critical thinking means challenging the conclusions of others, asking why or why not, and exploring alternative interpretations. It means considering the sources of information—not accepting an explanation just because someone in authority offers it, or because you have always been told that it is the true explanation, but because you have discovered independently that there are good reasons for accepting it. You may emerge from reading this textbook with the same ideas about politics that you have always had; it is not our goal to change your mind. But as a critical thinker, you will be able to back up your old ideas with new and persuasive arguments of your own, or to move beyond your current ideas to see politics in a new light.

Becoming adept at critical thinking has a number of benefits:

- We learn to be good democratic citizens and defenders of the democratic process. Critical thinking helps us sort through the barrage of information that regularly assails us, and it teaches us to process this information thoughtfully. Critical awareness of what our leaders are doing and the ability to understand and evaluate what they tell us is the lifeblood of democratic government. We are far less likely to believe in conspiracies or to be manipulated by disinformation.
- We are better able to hold our own in political (or other) arguments. We think more logically and clearly, we are more persuasive, and we impress people with our grasp of reason and fact. There is not a career in the world that is not enhanced by critical thinking skills.
- We become much better students. The skills of the critical thinker are the skills of the scholar. When we read critically, we figure out what is important quickly and easily, we know what questions to ask to tease out more meaning, we can decide whether what we are reading is worth our time, and we know what to take with us and what to discard.

It may sound a little dull and dusty, but critical thinking can be a vital and enjoyable activity. When we are good at it, it empowers and liberates us. We are not at the mercy of others' conclusions and decisions. We can evaluate facts and arguments for ourselves, turning conventional wisdom upside down and exploring the world of ideas with confidence.

How Does One Learn to Think Critically?

The trick to learning how to think critically is to do it. It helps to have a model to follow, however, and we provide one in *The Big Picture*, which traces this process. The focus of critical thinking here is on understanding political argument. Argument in this case refers not to a confrontation or a fight, but rather to a contention, based on a set of assumptions, supported by evidence, and leading to a clear, well-developed conclusion with consequences for how we understand the world.

Critical thinking involves constantly asking questions about the arguments we read: Who has created it, what is the basic case and what values underlie it, what evidence is used to back it up, what conclusions are drawn, and what difference does the whole thing make? To help you remember the questions to ask, we have used a mnemonic device that creates an acronym from the five major steps of critical thinking. Until asking these questions becomes second nature, thinking of them as CLUES to critical thinking about American politics will help you keep them in mind. To help you develop the critical thinking habit, readings featured in each chapter of this book will provide a CLUES model for you to follow.

This is what CLUES stands for:

- Consider the source and the audience
- Lay out the argument and the underlying values and assumptions
- Uncover the evidence
- Evaluate the conclusion
- Sort out the political significance

When you read each of the *CLUES to Critical Thinking* features in the book, keep in mind *The Big Picture*.

Source: Adapted from the authors' "Preface to the Student," in Christine Barbour and Matthew J. Streb, eds., *Clued in to Politics: A Critical Thinking Reader in American Government*, 3rd ed. (Washington, DC: CQ Press, 2010).

Accordingly, in this book, we analyze American politics in terms of three sets of questions:

- Who are the parties involved? What resources, powers, and rights do they bring to the struggle? Do they support or restrict the extension of rights and the democratic process?
- What do they have at stake? What do they stand to win or lose? Is it power, influence, position, policy, or values?
- How do the rules shape the outcome? Where do the rules come from? What strategies or tactics do the political actors employ to use the rules to get what they want? Do the rules promote a political resolution of differences or do they seek to impose a resolution contrary to majority will?

If you know who is involved in a political situation, what is at stake, and how (under what rules) the conflict over resources will eventually be resolved, you will have a pretty good grasp of what is going on, and you will probably be able to figure out new situations, even when your days of taking a course in American government are far behind you. To get you in the habit of asking those questions, we have designed several features in this text explicitly to reinforce them.

As you found at the start of your reading, each chapter opens with key tasks that we expect you to be able to perform, *In Your Own Words*, which will help you to set goals for your reading and evaluate whether or not you've accomplished them. They appear again, individually, after each main section of each chapter. Starting with Chapter 2, each chapter begins with a *What's at Stake . . . ?* feature that analyzes a political situation in terms of what various groups of citizens stand to win or lose and ends with a *Let's Revisit: What's at Stake . . . ?* feature . . . in which we reconsider those issues once you have the substantive material of the chapter under your belt. We also focus our analysis along the way by closing each major chapter section, beginning in Chapter 2, with a *Pause and Review* feature that explicitly addresses the questions of who gets what, and how they get it. This feature concisely summarizes what you have learned; and asks you to put your understanding in your own words.

We reinforce the task of analysis with a *CLUES to Critical Thinking* feature in each chapter that provides a text that is central to the material you are learning. CLUES questions at the end of the reading give you some practice in using the critical thinking model we described in *The Big Picture*.

In addition to focusing on analysis of what you read, we offer graphics that will help you visualize processes and data that affect and are affected by politics. *The Big Picture* infographics relate the book's themes to the big concepts, big processes, and big data that will help you make sense of American politics. *Snapshots of America* provide you with a lot more data to help you understand who the American people are and to help you dig into the question of what challenges our diversity poses for the task of governance. Finally, we highlight key questions throughout each chapter, challenging you to take the analysis one step further: What if the rules or the actors or the stakes were different? What would be the impact on American politics? How would it work differently?

Evaluation

As political scientists, however, we want not only to understand how the system works but also to assess how well it works. A second task of critical thinking is evaluation, or seeing how well something measures up according to a standard or principle. We could choose any number of standards by which to evaluate American politics, but the most relevant, in this political moment, are the preservation of the democratic system, freedom of speech, and the role of citizens.

We can draw on the traditions of self-interested and public-interested citizenship and the opportunities offered by digital citizenship to evaluate the powers, opportunities, and challenges presented to American citizens by the system of government under which they live. In addition to the two competing threads of citizenship in America, we can also look at the kinds of action that citizens engage in and whether they take advantage of the options available to them. For instance, citizen action might be restricted by the rules, or by popular interest, to merely choosing between competing candidates for office, as in the model of elite democracy described earlier.

THE BIG PICTURE:

How to Think Critically

Follow the CLUES
to Critical Thinking



START
Your Comfort Zone

CONSIDER THE SOURCE

ASK YOURSELF

- Where does this information come from?
- Who is the author?
- Who are they talking to?
- How do the source and the audience shape the author's perspective?

*I read it on the Internet.
It must be true.*

*My parents always
watch this TV
station. Of course
it's reliable.*

LAY OUT THE ARGUMENT

ASK YOURSELF

- What argument is the author asking you to accept?
- If you accept the argument, what values are you also buying?
- Does the argument hold together logically?

*Arguments sound
like conflict.
I hate conflict.*

OCEAN OF EXCUSES

*Values are private.
It's rude to pry.*

*Logic gives
me hives!*

*Data mean numbers.
Numbers freak me out.*

UNCOVER THE EVIDENCE

ASK YOURSELF

- Did the author do research to back up the conclusions?
- Is there any evidence or data that is not provided that should be there?
- If there is no evidence provided, does there need to be?

BRIDGE to ENLIGHTENMENT

*What, do I look like some
kind of detective?*

Who cares? What do I need to know for the test?

SEA OF CONFUSION

There is no way to know what conclusions are right.

Ouch! Thinking is hard work. Wake me up when it's over.

How would I know?

These ideas make me really uncomfortable. They don't click with anything I think I know. Time for a beer!

I don't like this person's values. Why should I care about their conclusions?

ASK YOURSELF

- What difference does this argument make to your understanding of the political world?
- How does it affect who gets what and how they get it?
- Was getting this information valuable to you or did it waste your time?

SORT OUT THE POLITICAL SIGNIFICANCE

ASK YOURSELF

- What's the punch line here?
- Did the author convince you that they are correct?
- Does accepting the conclusion to this argument require you to change any of your ideas about the world?

EVALUATE THE CONCLUSIONS

WISDOM HAPPINESS
GOAL
SUCCESS BIG BUCKS

Alternatively, the rules of the system might encourage citizens to band together in groups to get what they want, as they do in pluralist democracy. Or the system might be open and offer highly motivated citizens a variety of opportunities to get involved, as they do in participatory democracy. American democracy has elements of all three of these models, and one way to evaluate citizenship in America is to look at what opportunities for each type of participation exist and whether citizens take advantage of them.

Why does critical thinking feel like so much more work than “regular thinking”?

To evaluate how democratic the United States is, we include in most chapters a section called *The Citizens and . . .*, which looks at the changing concept and practice of citizenship in this country with respect to the chapter’s subject matter. That feature looks at citizenship from many angles, considering the following types of questions: What role do “the people” have in American politics? How has that role expanded or diminished over time? What kinds of political participation do the rules of American politics (formal and informal) allow, encourage, or require citizens to take? What kinds of political participation are discouraged, limited, or forbidden? Do citizens take advantage of the opportunities for political action that the rules provide them? How do they react to the rules that limit their participation? How have citizens in different times exercised their rights and responsibilities? What do citizens need to do to keep the republic? How democratic is the United States?

We have outlined several features that recur throughout this book. Remember that each is designed to help you to think critically about American politics, either by analyzing power in terms of who gets what, and how, or by evaluating citizenship to determine how well we are following Benjamin Franklin’s mandate to keep the republic.

IN YOUR OWN WORDS

Apply the five steps of critical thinking to this book’s themes of power and citizenship in American politics.

WRAPPING IT UP

As we explained earlier, the chapters in this book will typically conclude with “*Let’s Revisit: What’s at Stake . . . ?*” features where we return to the power conundrum we introduced at the beginning and look at that issue in the light of what we learned in the chapter. This chapter, however didn’t begin with a *What’s at Stake . . . ?* conundrum because we wanted to have a direct word with you about what we believe are the challenges and pitfalls of trying to be a responsible, data-driven, classical liberal defender of the concept of democratic governance. We argued in the introduction that taking a neutral, “both-sides” position on this topic—which, as textbook authors, we feel honor-bound to do on controversial issues—is not really an option for us today because there don’t exist two good sides to the truth, to free inquiry, to science, to self-governance that still allows us the freedom to be good teachers and good democratic citizens.

We cannot say, “Oh, sure, the Enlightenment legacy—a worldview founded on fact-based empirical inquiry and a political system based on democratic process, limited government and the freedom to challenge anything, even the value of that democratic process—has its strong points. But so does its opposite—a Russian-style authoritarian government run by oligarchs out to line their own pockets at their subjects’ expense, who stay in power by eliminating a free media and freedom of speech and

assembly.” If we did that, we would be failing the obligations of that very worldview that has made human progress so possible since the 1600s.

Another way to look at it is, how can we depend on and enjoy the benefits of free speech and empirical inquiry if we refuse to defend those hallmarks of a democratic system when they are being challenged or undermined?

We don’t propose censoring those who circulate disinformation under the guise of free speech, or silencing those who argue that the democratic process should be restricted to certain people, but we won’t both-sides the issue, either. If we, whose life advantages and livelihoods have depended on the Enlightenment legacy of classical liberalism do not take a stand in favor of it, we will have again failed all the generations who come after us, just as surely as we have failed them by not addressing the climate crisis or the unmanageable cost of higher education.

CLUES TO CRITICAL THINKING: EXCERPTS FROM PRESIDENT BARACK OBAMA’S HOWARD UNIVERSITY COMMENCEMENT ADDRESS

May 7, 2016

President Obama gave a moving address at Howard University his final spring in office, calling for the class of 2016 to be aware of how much the world had changed, how “if you had to choose one moment in history in which you could be born, and you didn’t know ahead of time who you were going to be—what nationality, what gender, what race, whether you’d be rich or poor, gay or straight, what faith you’d be born into—you wouldn’t choose 100 years ago. You wouldn’t choose the fifties, or the sixties, or the seventies. You’d choose right now. If you had to choose a time to be, in the words of Lorraine Hansberry, ‘young, gifted, and Black’ in America, you would choose right now.” He offered graduates three pieces of advice: to be confident in the many ways there were to be Black today, to be aware of the struggle that came before them and the structural racism that still pervades the system, and finally, this call for action.

You have to go through life with more than just passion for change; you need a strategy. I’ll repeat that. I want you to have passion, but you have to have a strategy. Not just awareness, but action. Not just hashtags, but votes.

You see, change requires more than righteous anger. . . . And I’m so proud of the new guard of Black civil rights leaders who understand this. It’s thanks in large part to the activism of young people like many of you, from Black Twitter to Black Lives Matter, that America’s eyes have been opened—white, Black, Democrat, Republican—to the real problems, for example, in our criminal justice system.

But to bring about structural change, lasting change, awareness is not enough. It requires changes in law, changes in custom. If you care about mass incarceration, let me ask you: How are you pressuring members of Congress to pass the criminal justice reform bill now pending before them? If you care about better policing, do you know who your district attorney is? Do you know who your state’s attorney general is? Do you know the difference? Do you know who appoints the police chief and who writes the police training manual? Find out who they are, what their responsibilities are. Mobilize the community, present them with a plan, work with them to bring about change, hold them accountable if they do not deliver. Passion is vital, but you’ve got to have a strategy.

And your plan better include voting—not just some of the time, but all the time. It is absolutely true that 50 years after the Voting Rights Act, there are still too many barriers in this country to vote. There are too many people trying to erect new barriers to voting. This is the only advanced democracy on Earth that goes out of its way to make it difficult for people to vote. And there’s a reason for that. There’s a legacy to that.

But let me say this: Even if we dismantled every barrier to voting, that alone would not change the fact that America has some of the lowest voting rates in the free world. In 2014, only 36 percent of Americans turned out to vote in the midterms—the second lowest participation rate on record. Youth turnout—that would be you—was less than 20 percent. Less than 20 percent. Four out of five

did not vote. In 2012, nearly two in three African Americans turned out. And then, in 2014, only two in five turned out. You don't think that made a difference in terms of the Congress I've got to deal with? And then people are wondering, well, how come Obama hasn't gotten this done? How come he didn't get that done? You don't think that made a difference? What would have happened if you had turned out at 50, 60, 70 percent, all across this country? People try to make this political thing really complicated. Like, what kind of reforms do we need? And how do we need to do that? You know what, just vote. It's math. If you have more votes than the other guy, you get to do what you want. It's not that complicated.

And you don't have excuses. You don't have to guess the number of jellybeans in a jar or bubbles on a bar of soap to register to vote. You don't have to risk your life to cast a ballot. Other people already did that for you. Your grandparents, your great grandparents might be here today if they were working on it. What's your excuse? When we don't vote, we give away our power, disenfranchise ourselves—right when we need to use the power that we have; right when we need your power to stop others from taking away the vote and rights of those more vulnerable than you are—the elderly and the poor, the formerly incarcerated trying to earn their second chance.

So you've got to vote all the time, not just when it's cool, not just when it's time to elect a President, not just when you're inspired. It's your duty. When it's time to elect a member of Congress or a city councilman, or a school board member, or a sheriff. That's how we change our politics—by electing people at every level who are representative of and accountable to us. It is not that complicated. Don't make it complicated.

And, finally, change requires more than just speaking out—it requires listening, as well. In particular, it requires listening to those with whom you disagree, and being prepared to compromise. When I was a state senator, I helped pass Illinois's first racial profiling law, and one of the first laws in the nation requiring the videotaping of confessions in capital cases. And we were successful because, early on, I engaged law enforcement. I didn't say to them, oh, you guys are so racist, you need to do something. I understood, as many of you do, that the overwhelming majority of police officers are good, and honest, and courageous, and fair, and love the communities they serve. . . .

And I can say this unequivocally: Without at least the acceptance of the police organizations in Illinois, I could never have gotten those bills passed. Very simple. They would have blocked them.

The point is, you need allies in a democracy . . . —democracy requires compromise, even when you are 100 percent right. This is hard to explain sometimes. You can be completely right, and you still are going to have to engage folks who disagree with you. If you think that the only way forward is to be as uncompromising as possible, you will feel good about yourself, you will enjoy a certain moral purity, but you're not going to get what you want. And if you don't get what you want long enough, you will eventually think the whole system is rigged. And that will lead to more cynicism, and less participation, and a downward spiral of more injustice and more anger and more despair. And that's never been the source of our progress. That's how we cheat ourselves of progress. . . .

So don't try to shut folks out, don't try to shut them down, no matter how much you might disagree with them. There's been a trend around the country of trying to get colleges to disinvite speakers with a different point of view, or disrupt a politician's rally. Don't do that—no matter how ridiculous or offensive you might find the things that come out of their mouths. Because as my grandmother used to tell me, every time a fool speaks, they are just advertising their own ignorance. Let them talk. Let them talk. If you don't, you just make them a victim, and then they can avoid accountability.

That doesn't mean you shouldn't challenge them. Have the confidence to challenge them, the confidence in the rightness of your position. There will be times when you shouldn't compromise your core values, your integrity, and you will have the responsibility to speak up in the face of injustice. But listen. Engage. If the other side has a point, learn from them. If they're wrong, rebut them. Teach them. Beat them on the battlefield of ideas. And you might as well start practicing now, because one thing I can guarantee you—you will have to deal with ignorance, hatred, racism, foolishness, trifling folks. I promise you, you will have to deal with all that at every stage of your life. That may not seem fair, but life has never been completely fair. Nobody promised you a crystal stair. And if you want to make life fair, then you've got to start with the world as it is.

So that's my advice. That's how you change things. Change isn't something that happens every four years or eight years; change is not placing your faith in any particular politician and then just putting your feet up and saying, okay, go. Change is the effort of committed citizens who hitch their wagons to something bigger than themselves and fight for it every single day.

Consider the source and the audience: In the last year of his presidency, Obama is speaking to an audience at a historically Black university that has graduated some notable political figures. He is tailoring his remarks to an African American audience. Is that the only audience he is speaking to? Who else might he expect to be listening?

Lay out the argument and the underlying values and assumptions: The part of the speech we focus on here is about the importance of taking action, going beyond the kind of hashtag activism we talked about early in this chapter. "Not just hashtags, but votes," says Obama. What kind of democracy is he advocating here? What are the values that support democracy?

Uncover the evidence: In parts of the speech we had to cut for length, Obama gives many examples of people, primarily Howard grads, who were able to change the world they lived in by practicing the principles he calls for. Would that kind of anecdotal evidence be sufficient to persuade you that he is right? He also draws on his own personal experience. Is that persuasive?

Evaluate the conclusion: Obama wants the class of 2016 to understand that they won't get the change they seek in the world without taking action, especially voting and working with others. Are you persuaded? What alternatives might there be to effecting political change?

Sort out the political significance: What is the historical context in which Obama is writing? Did the Republicans he had to deal with in Congress practice democracy as he defines it? What would have been the political results if they had? What fate does he worry will befall movements like Black Lives Matter if they are not backed by action, hard work, and votes?

REVIEW

Introduction

A book called *Keeping the Republic* has an obvious, pro-republic bias. This book, like much of modern education, grows out of the free-thinking, free-speaking, empirically grounded, scientifically based, limited government, classical liberal tradition that began with the European Enlightenment, and from which both modern liberalism and modern conservatism have grown. Our bias means we don't treat every issue as if it has two equally good sides. Issues may have classically liberal, empirically verified, democratic sides, and classically illiberal, factually inaccurate, authoritarian sides. And from the standpoint of keeping the republic and reinforcing the values of education and free speech, we can't afford not to be clear about which is which.

What Is Politics?

Politics may appear to be a grubby, greedy pursuit, filled with scandal and backroom dealing. In fact, despite its shortcomings and sometimes shabby reputation, politics is an essential means for resolving differences and determining how power and resources, including control of information through the creation of political narratives, are distributed in society. Politics is about who gets power and resources in society—and how they get them. Increasingly we get them through channels that are mediated, or controlled, by forces external to us.

Government, by contrast, is the system established for exercising authority over a group of people. In the United States, the government is embodied in the Constitution and the institutions set up by the Constitution. Government is shaped not only by politics but also by economics, which is concerned specifically with the distribution of wealth and society's resources.

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Political Systems and the Concept of Citizenship

Political systems dictate how power is distributed among leaders and citizens, and these systems take many forms. Authoritarian governments give ultimate power to the state. Nonauthoritarian systems, like democracy, place power largely in the hands of the people. Democracy is based on the principle of popular sovereignty, giving the people the ultimate power to govern. The meaning of citizenship is key to the definition of democracy. Citizens are believed to have rights protecting them from government as well as responsibilities to the public realm.

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The Classical Liberal Roots of American Democracy

Democracy was not an obvious choice for the founders—their decisions were based on their own intellectual heritage, their historical experience, and the theories about government that informed them.

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The Evolution of American Citizenship

At the time of our nation's founding, two competing views of citizenship emerged. The first view, articulated by James Madison, sees the citizen as fundamentally self-interested; this view led the founders to fear too much citizen participation in government. The second view puts faith in citizens' ability to act for the common good, to put their obligation to the public ahead of their own self-interest. Both views are still alive and well today, and we can see evidence of both sentiments at work in the mediated era, where citizenship is experienced not so much directly as through channels controlled by others. Ironically, this both limits our freedom and enhances our opportunities to take control.

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[mediated citizens](#) (p. 24)
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[self-interested citizenship](#) (p. 24)
[hashtag activism](#) (p. 26)
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Thinking Critically About American Politics

In this textbook, we rely on two underlying themes to analyze how our American political system works, and to evaluate how well it works. The first theme is power, and how it functions in our system: we look at political events in terms of who the actors are, what they have to win or lose, and how the rules shape the way these actors engage in their struggle. The second theme is citizenship, specifically, how diverse citizens participate in political life to improve their own individual situations and to promote the interests of the community at large. Throughout this book, we will evaluate citizenship carefully as a means to determine how well the American system is working.

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