

the desire to create a radically different form of society.²⁹ In the words of the Declaration of Independence:

We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal; that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights; that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. That, to secure these rights, governments are instituted among men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed; that, whenever any form of government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the right of the people to alter or to abolish it, and to institute a new government, laying its foundation on such principles, and organizing its powers in such form, as to them shall seem most likely to effect their safety and happiness.

A decade later, in the drafting of the Constitution of the United States, some of these ideas were put into writing: Leaders would be required to govern within a set of rules designed to protect people's rights and interests.

Core Values: Liberty, Individualism, Equality, and Self-Government

An understanding of America's cultural ideals begins with recognition that the individual is paramount. Government is secondary. Its role is to serve the people, as opposed to a system where people are required to serve government. No clearer statement of this principle exists than the Declaration of Independence's reference to "unalienable rights"—freedoms that belong to each and every citizen and that cannot lawfully be taken away by government.

Liberty, individualism, equality, and self-government are widely regarded as America's core political ideals. **Liberty** is the principle that individuals should be free to act and think as they choose, provided they do not infringe unreasonably on the freedom and well-being of others.³⁰ Political liberty was nearly a birthright for early Americans. They did not have to accept the European system of absolute government when greater personal liberty was as close as the next area of unsettled land. Religious sentiments also entered into the thinking of the early Americans. Many of them had fled Europe to escape religious persecution and came to look upon religious freedom as part of a broader set of rights, including freedom of speech. Unsurprisingly, these early Americans were determined, when forming their own government, to protect their liberty. The Declaration of Independence rings with the proclamation that people are entitled to "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness." The preamble to the Constitution declares that the U.S. government was founded to secure "the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our Posterity."

Early Americans also enjoyed unprecedented economic opportunities. Unlike Europe, America had no hereditary nobility that owned virtually all the land. The New World's great distance from Europe and its vast stretches of open



THE PIONEER'S HOME.

ON THE WESTERN FRONTIER.

Americans' cultural beliefs have their roots in the nation's formative years. The challenges and opportunities of North America's vast wilderness helped foster in settlers a commitment to liberty, equality, self-reliance, and self-determination. This 19th-century portrayal of frontier life is a hand-painted Currier & Ives lithograph created by Frances Flora Bond Palmer. She was one of the era's leading lithographic artists. (Source: Yale University Art Gallery)

territory gave ordinary people the chance to own property, provided they were willing to work hard enough to make it a success. Out of this experience grew a sense of self-reliance and a culture of "rugged individualism." **Individualism** is a commitment to personal initiative and self-sufficiency. Observers from Tocqueville onward have seen fit to note that liberty in America, as in no other country, is tied to a desire for economic independence. Americans' chief aim, wrote Tocqueville, "is to remain their own masters."³¹

A third American political ideal is **equality**—the notion that all individuals are equal in their moral worth and thereby entitled to equal treatment under the law. Europe's rigid system of aristocratic privilege was unenforceable in frontier America. It was this natural sense of personal equality that Thomas Jefferson expressed so forcefully in the Declaration of Independence: "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal." However, equality has always been America's most elusive ideal. Even Jefferson professed not to know its exact meaning. A slave owner, Jefferson distinguished between free citizens, who were entitled to equal rights, and slaves, who were not. After

slavery was abolished, Americans continued to argue over the meaning of equality, and the debate continues today. Does equality require that wealth and opportunity be widely shared? Or does it merely require that artificial barriers to advancement be removed? Despite differing opinions about such questions, an insistence on equality is a distinctive feature of the American experience. Americans, said Bryce, reject “the very notion” that some people might be “better” than others merely because of birth or position.³²

America’s fourth great political ideal is **self-government**—the principle that the people are the ultimate source of governing authority and should have a voice in their governing. Americans’ belief in self-government formed in colonial America. The Old World was an ocean away, and European governments had no option but to give the American colonies a degree of self-determination. Out of this experience came the vision of a self-governing nation that led tens of thousands of ordinary farmers, merchants, and tradesmen to risk their lives fighting the British during the American Revolution. “Governments,” the Declaration of Independence proclaims, “deriv[e] their just powers from the consent of the governed.” The Constitution of the United States opens with the words “We the People.” Etched in a corridor of the Capitol in Washington, D.C., are the words Alexander Hamilton spoke when asked about the foundation of the nation’s government: “Here, sir, the people govern.”

The Limits and Power of Americans’ Ideals

America’s cultural beliefs are idealistic. They hold out the promise of a government of high purpose, in which power is widely shared and used for the common good, and where individuals are free, independent, and equal under the law.

Yet high ideals do not come with a guarantee that people will live up to them. The clearest proof in the American case is the human tragedy that began nearly four centuries ago and continues today. In 1619 the first black slaves were brought in chains to America. Slavery lasted 250 years. Slaves worked in the fields from dawn to dark (from “can see, ’til can’t”), in both the heat of summer and the cold of winter. The Civil War brought an end to slavery but not to racial oppression. Slavery was followed by the Jim Crow era of legal segregation: Black people in the South were forbidden by law to use the same schools, hospitals, restaurants, and restrooms as white people. Those who spoke out against this system were subjected to beatings, firebombings, rapes, and murder—hundreds of African Americans were lynched in the early 1900s by white vigilantes. Today, African Americans have equal rights under the law, but in fact they are far from equal. Compared with white children, black children are twice as likely to live in poverty and to die in infancy.³³ There have always been two Americas, one for whites and one for blacks.

CASH!

All persons that have SLAVES to dispose of, will do well by giving me a call, as I will give the **HIGHEST PRICE FOR**
Men, Women, &
CHILDREN.

Any person that wishes to sell, will call at Hill's tavern, or at Shannon Hill for me, and any information they want will be promptly attended to.

Thomas Griggs.

Charlestown, May 7, 1835.

PRINTED AT THE FREE PRESS OFFICE, CHARLESTOWN.

The largest stain on America's founding principles is the nation's treatment of its black citizens. For more than two centuries, they were bought and sold as slaves and, after being freed by the Civil War, were denied equal citizenship throughout the South. That legacy carries into today, as evidenced by the extraordinarily high levels of poverty and joblessness in the black community. For the nation's blacks, America's promise of equality has always been a hollow one. (Source: Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division [LC-USZ62-62799])

Despite the lofty claim that "all men are created equal," equality has never been an American birthright. In 1882, Congress suspended Chinese immigration on the assumption that the Chinese were an inferior people. Calvin Coolidge in 1923 asked Congress for a permanent ban on Chinese immigration, saying that people "who do not want to be partakers of the American spirit ought not to settle in America."³⁴ Not to be outdone, California enacted legislation prohibiting individuals of Japanese descent from purchasing property in the state. Not until 1965 was discrimination against the Chinese, Japanese, and other Asians eliminated from U.S. immigration laws. For more on America's conflicted relationship with immigrants (see "Fake or Fact? Do Immigrants Commit More Crimes?").

America's callous treatment of some groups is not among the stories that the American people like to tell about themselves. A University of Virginia



Detecting Misinformation

Do Immigrants Commit More Crimes?

America is portrayed as a nation that opens its arms to immigrants. At the base of the Statue of Liberty are the words of Emma Lazarus's oft-cited poem, "Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free."

Yet, many Americans have opposed the entry of immigrants, particularly those with different backgrounds. In the mid-1800s, Catholic immigrants from Ireland and Germany were widely reviled by Protestants already here. In the late 1800s and early 1900s, hostility was directed at new arrivals from southern and eastern Europe—Italians, Greeks, Poles, Hungarians, Jews, Russians, and others. Congress in 1924 passed a law that largely blocked further immigration from southern and eastern Europe. Congress had earlier closed the nation's shores to immigrants from Asia.

An argument that was heard in those earlier periods, and is heard again today, is that immigrants are undesirable because they pose a threat to public safety. A Pew Research Center poll found that Americans by a ratio of seven to one believe that immigrants are more likely than native-born Americans to commit crimes.³⁵

Is that claim fact, or is it fake?

Government in past times did not compile systematic statistics on crime, so there's no way to show conclusively whether earlier immigrants had unusually high crime rates. But we do know whether the claim is true today. There has been substantial research on the issue, including recent studies by the National Academy of Sciences and the conservative Cato Institute. The studies have found that immigrants are more law abiding than are native-born Americans. The 2017 Cato Institute study, for example, found that immigrants are 69 percent less likely to be incarcerated than are the native born. That's true also of illegal immigrants, who are 44 percent less likely than the native born to have been convicted of crime and imprisoned.³⁶



©Everett Historical/Shutterstock

survey found that American adults are far more likely to want children to be taught about the nation's achievements than its shortcomings. For example, more than four out of five of those surveyed said children should be taught that "with hard work and perseverance anyone can succeed in America," while less than three in five said the same about teaching children of the nation's "cruel mistreatment of blacks and American Indians." Selective memory can be found among all peoples, but the tendency to recast history is perhaps exaggerated in the American case because Americans' beliefs are so idealistic. How could a nation that claims to uphold the principle of equality have barred the Chinese, enslaved blacks, declared wives to be the "property" of their husbands,³⁷ and killed Indians in order to steal their lands?

Although America's ideals obviously do not determine exactly what people will do, they are far from empty promises. If racial, gender, ethnic, and other forms of intolerance constitute the nation's sorriest chapter, the centuries-old struggle of Americans to build a more equal society is among its finest. Few nations have battled so relentlessly against the insidious discrimination that stems from superficial human differences such as the color of one's skin. The abolition and suffrage movements of the 1800s and the more recent civil rights movements of black Americans, women, Hispanics, and the LGBTQ community testify to Americans' persistent effort to build a more equal society. In 1848, at the first-ever national convention on women's rights, the delegates issued the Declaration of Sentiments, which read in part: "We hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men and women are created equal." A century later, speaking at the Lincoln Memorial at the peak of the black civil rights movement, Martin Luther King Jr. said: "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal."³⁸

Americans' determination to build a more equal society can also be seen in its public education system. In the early 1800s, the United States pioneered the idea of a free public education for children—this at a time when education in Europe was reserved for children of the wealthy. Even today, the United States spends more heavily on public education than do European countries. Compared with Great Britain or France, for example, the United States spends about 30 percent more per pupil annually on its primary and secondary schools. The United States also has the world's most elaborate system of higher education, which includes roughly 4,000 two-year and four-year institutions. Although some of America's youth do not have a realistic chance of attending college, the nation's college system is a relatively open one. Nearly a third of Americans over the age of 25 have a college degree, which ranks second only to Canada worldwide. Even the American states with the lowest proportion of college graduates have a higher percentage of residents with a bachelor's degree than does the typical European country (see "How the 50 States Differ").

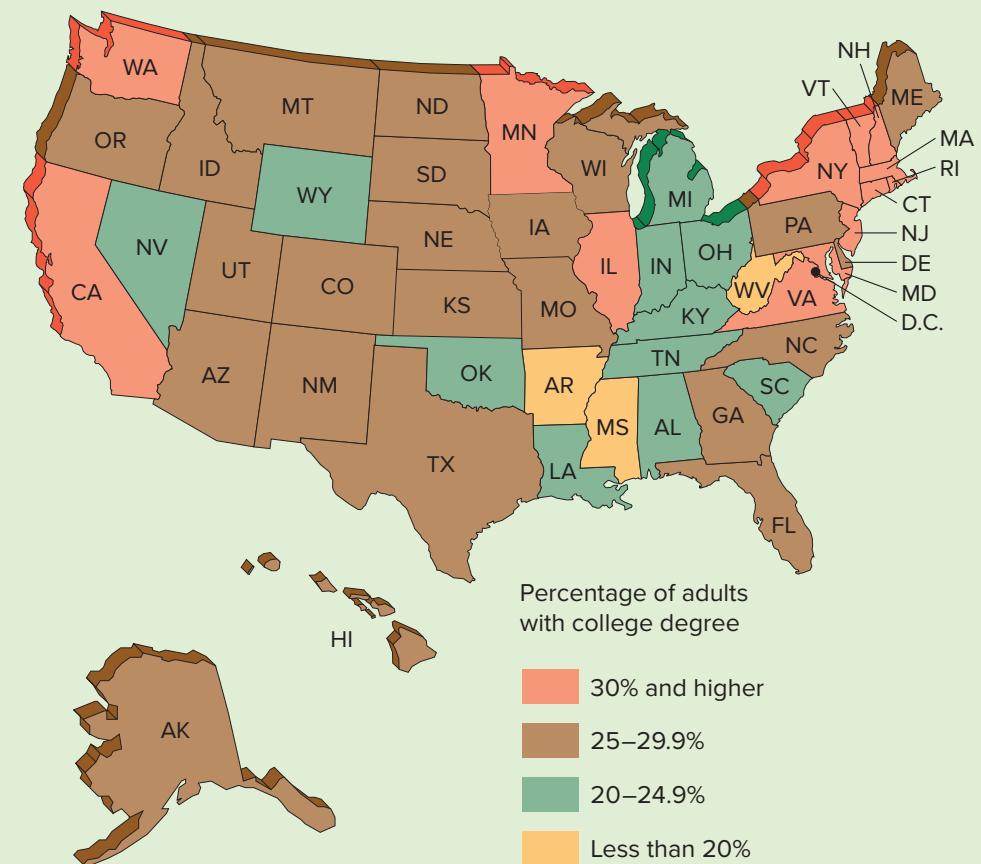


HOW THE 50 STATES DIFFER

CRITICAL THINKING THROUGH COMPARISONS

A College Education

Reflecting their belief in individualism and equality, Americans have developed the world's largest college system—comprising roughly 4,000 institutions. According to U.S. Census Bureau figures, nearly one in three Americans over the age of 25 is a college graduate. Even the lowest-ranking state—West Virginia with one in six—has a higher percentage of college graduates than do most European countries.



Q: Why do the northeastern and western coastal states have a higher percentage of adults with college degrees?

A: The northeastern and western coastal states are wealthier and more urbanized than most states. Accordingly, young people in these states can better afford the costs of college and are more likely to pursue careers that require a college degree.

The principle of self-government has also shaped American society. No country holds as many elections as does the United States, or has anywhere near as many publicly elected officials. There are roughly a half million American elected officials, everyone from the president of the United States to the local council member. The United States is also nearly the only country to use primary elections as the means of choosing party nominees.

The principles of liberty and individualism have also shaped American society. Few people have pursued their individual rights—ranging from freedom of expression to fair-trial protections—as relentlessly as have Americans. And there are few countries where individualism is as deeply ingrained as in the United States (see “Case Study: Social Welfare Policy”). Political analysts William Watts and Lloyd Free described the United States as “the country of individualism *par excellence*.³⁹

America’s distinctive cultural beliefs are only one of the elements that affect the nation’s politics, as subsequent chapters will show. The rest of this chapter introduces concepts and distinctions that are basic to an informed understanding of politics.

POLITICS AND POWER IN AMERICA

Political scientist Harold Lasswell described politics as a conflict over “who gets what, when, and how.”⁴⁰ Politics would be a simple matter if everyone thought alike and could have everything they pleased. But people do not think alike, and society’s resources are limited. Conflict is the inevitable result. **Politics** is the means by which society settles its conflicts and allocates the resulting benefits and costs.

Those who prevail in political conflicts are said to have **power**, a term that refers to the ability of persons, groups, or institutions to influence political developments.⁴¹ Power is basic to politics. The distribution of power in a society affects who wins and who loses when policy decisions are made. Those with enough power can raise or cut taxes, permit or prohibit abortions, impose or relax trade barriers, and make war or declare peace. With so much at stake, it is not surprising that Americans, like people elsewhere, seek political power.

French philosopher Michel Foucault called politics “war by other means,”⁴² a phrase that literally describes politics in some countries. An **authoritarian government** is one that openly represses its political opponents, mostly through intimidation and prohibitions on free expression but sometimes by brutalizing opposition leaders. Such regimes are backed by the country’s police and armed forces, forego free and fair elections, and exert tight control over the media. The authoritarian regime in China, for example, blocks Facebook, Twitter,

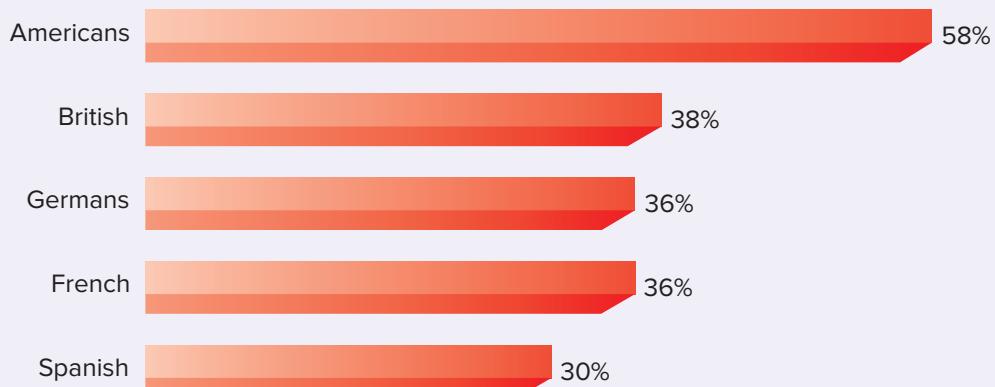


Politics in Action

Social Welfare Policy

Americans' cultural beliefs distinguish them from people of other nations. An example is Americans' commitment to individualism. Although individualism is also part of European culture, it takes exaggerated form in the United States, as can be seen from a Pew Research Center survey. Respondents in four European countries and the United States were asked whether they thought "freedom to pursue life's goals" or making sure that "nobody is in need" was the more important value. Americans were easily the most likely to say that "freedom to pursue life's goals" was the more important.

Percentage who said "freedom to pursue life's goals"



Source: Pew Research Center Global Attitudes & Trends survey, 2011.

The effect of these differences can be seen in welfare policy. The United States—though having a higher poverty rate than European countries—spends much less on programs for the poor. Americans are not necessarily less sympathetic with the poor. Compared with Europeans, they are twice as likely to donate to charities. But Americans are less inclined than Europeans to support welfare policies that could relieve people of the responsibility to care of themselves.

Q: Can you think of another major policy area where the United States and Europe differ as a result of the emphasis that their citizens place on individual achievement?

ASK YOURSELF: What activity gives you a monetary benefit? Which government policy affects how much of this benefit you get to keep and how much of it goes to the government?

YouTube, and other outlets—including those within the country—that convey messages contrary to what the Chinese government wants its people to hear.⁴³

The United States operates by a different standard. It has “rules” designed to keep government in check. These rules—democracy, constitutionalism, and a free market—determine which side will prevail when conflict occurs, as well as what is off limits to the winning side (see Table 1-1).

A Democratic System

The word *democracy* comes from the Greek words *demos*, meaning “the people,” and *kratis*, meaning “to rule.” In simple terms, **democracy** is a form of government in which the people govern, either directly or through elected representatives. A democracy is thus different from an *oligarchy* (in which control rests with a small group, such as top-ranking military officers or a few wealthy families) and from an *autocracy* (in which control rests with a single individual, such as a king or dictator).

In practice, democracy has come to mean majority rule through the free and open election of representatives. More direct forms of democracy exist, such as town meetings in which citizens vote directly on issues affecting them, but the impracticality of such an arrangement in a large society has made majority rule through elections the operative form of democratic government, including that of the United States (see Chapter 2).

When political leaders respond to the policy desires of the majority, the result is **majoritarianism**.⁴⁴ In the American case, majoritarianism occurs primarily through the competition between the Republican and Democratic Parties (see “Party Polarization: Conflict between the Political Parties Has Intensified in Recent Years”). In the 2016 presidential campaign, for instance, Republican

table 1-1 GOVERNING SYSTEMS AND POLITICAL POWER

System	Description and Implications
Democratic	A system of majority rule through elections; empowers majorities (majoritarianism), groups (pluralism), and officials (authority)
Constitutional	A system based on rule of law, including legal protections for individuals; empowers individuals by enabling them to claim their rights in court (legal action)
Free market	An economic system that centers on the transactions between private parties; empowers business firms (corporate power) and the wealthy (elitism)

nominee Donald Trump and Democratic nominee Hillary Clinton differed sharply in their positions on immigration, health care, the environment, and other major policy issues, giving voters a choice over the direction of national policy.

However, majoritarianism has its limits. The public as a whole takes an interest in only a few of the hundreds of policy decisions that officials make each year (see Chapter 6). Even if they wanted to, party leaders would have difficulty getting the majority to pay attention to most issues. Accordingly,

**P A R T Y
POLARIZATION**



Conflicting Ideas

Conflict between the Political Parties Has Intensified in Recent Years

Conflict between America's two major parties—the Republicans and the Democrats—has intensified in the past few decades. Partisan divisions have surfaced on nearly every major issue, and the fights have been bitter and prolonged, so much so that the term **party (partisan) polarization** is used to characterize today's party politics. Subsequent chapters will examine various aspects of this polarization, but two things should be noted at the outset: The situation is much different than it was a few decades ago but is not very different from what it was during much of the nation's history.

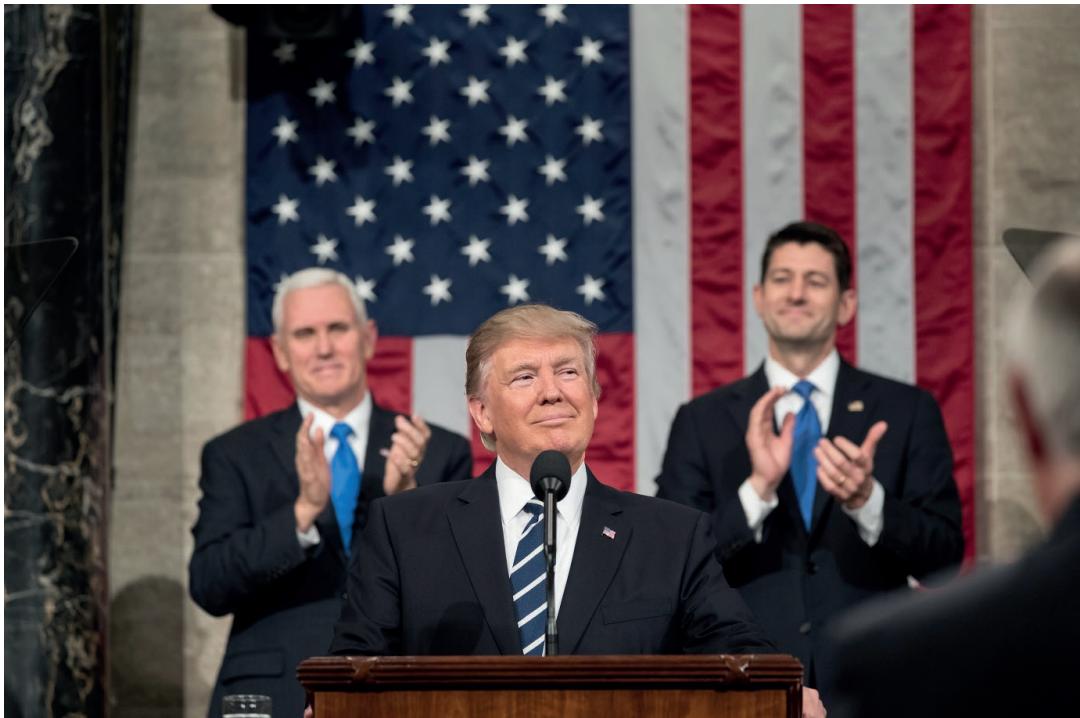
A high level of bipartisanship—cooperation between the parties—marked the period from the end of World War II in 1945 until the late 1960s. Leaders and voters of both parties agreed on the need to contain Soviet communism. In addition, Republican leaders had largely abandoned their effort to turn back the New Deal policies of Democratic president Franklin Roosevelt, which had given the federal government a larger role in economic security (for example, the Social Security program) and economic regulation (for example, oversight of the stock market).

During much of their previous history, however, Americans disagreed strongly over policy and, in the case of the Civil War, took their fight to the battlefield. In fact, periods of bipartisanship are the exception rather than the rule. President George Washington's first years in office, the so-called Era of Good Feeling in the early 1800s, and the World War I and World War II periods are among the few times Americans have put partisan differences largely aside.

Q: Do you see any contradiction in the fact that Americans share a common set of ideals and yet often find themselves on opposite sides when it comes to party politics?

most policies are formulated in response to the groups with a direct interest in the issue. Farmers, for example, have more influence over agricultural subsidies than do other groups, even though these subsidies have far-reaching effects, including the price that shoppers pay for food. Some political scientists, like Yale's Robert Dahl, argue that democracies more often operate as pluralistic (multi-interest) systems than as majoritarian systems.⁴⁵ **Pluralism** holds that, on most issues, the preference of the special interest largely determines what government does (see Chapter 9).

A democratic system also bestows another form of power. Although officials are empowered by the majority, they also exercise power in their own right as a result of the positions they hold. When President Trump decided in 2017 to withdraw the United States from the Paris Agreement on climate change, he did so despite polls that showed two-thirds of Americans wanted the United States to honor its commitment.⁴⁶ In making the decision, Trump was exercising his constitutional authority as chief executive. Such grants are a special kind of power. **Authority** is the recognized right of officials to exercise power. Members of Congress, judges, and bureaucrats, as well as the president, routinely make authoritative decisions, only some of which are a response to power asserted by the majority or special interests.



Authority is a term for the recognized right of officials to exercise power. The President of the United States, for example, exercises authority through the powers granted the office by the Constitution. That authority includes, for example, the power to implement the laws, to veto acts of Congress, and to appoint high-ranking executive officials. (Source: Official White House Photo by Shealah Craighead)

A Constitutional System

In a democracy, the votes of the majority prevail over those of the minority. If this principle were unlimited, the majority could treat the minority in any manner of its choosing, including depriving it of its liberty and property. As fanciful as this possibility might seem, it preoccupied the writers of the U.S. Constitution. The history of democracies was filled with examples of majority tyranny, and the nation's early experience was no exception. In 1786, debtors had gained control of Rhode Island's legislature and made paper money a legal means of paying debts, even though contracts called for payment in gold. Creditors were then hunted down and held captive in public places so that debtors could come and pay them in full with worthless paper money. A Boston newspaper wrote that Rhode Island ought to be renamed Rogue Island.

To guard against oppressive majorities, the writers of the Constitution devised an elaborate system of checks and balances, dividing authority among the legislative, executive, and judicial branches so that each branch could check the power of the others (see Chapter 2). The Bill of Rights was added to the Constitution a few years later as a further check on the majority. For example, Congress was prohibited from enacting laws that abridge freedom of speech, press, or religion. These limits reflect the principle of **constitutionalism**—the idea that there are lawful restrictions on government's power. Officials are obliged to act within the limits of the law, which include the protection of individual rights.

The Bill of Rights in combination with an independent judiciary and a firm attachment to private property have made **legal action**—the use of the courts as a means of asserting rights and interests—a channel through which ordinary citizens exercise power. Americans have an expansive view of their rights and turn more readily to the courts to make their claims than do people elsewhere (see Chapters 4 and 5).⁴⁷ A handwritten note by a penniless convict, for example, triggered the U.S. Supreme Court's landmark *Gideon v. Wainwright* ruling.⁴⁸ Clarence Gideon had been made to stand trial in Florida without the aid of a lawyer for breaking into a pool hall. When he appealed his conviction, the Supreme Court concluded that his constitutional right to counsel had been violated. The ruling established a new policy: If the accused is too poor to hire a lawyer, the government must provide one.

A Free-Market System

Politics is not confined to the halls of government. Many of society's costs and benefits are allocated through the private sector, although economic systems differ in the degree of government intervention. Under *communism*, which characterized the former Soviet Union and is practiced most fully today

in North Korea, the government owns most or all major industries and also takes responsibility for overall management of the economy, including production quotas, supply points, and pricing. Under *socialism*, as it is practiced today in Sweden and other countries, government does not attempt to manage the overall economy, but owns a number of major industries and guarantees every individual a minimal standard of living. In contrast, a **free-market system** operates mainly on private transactions. Firms are largely free to make their own production, distribution, and pricing decisions, and individuals depend largely on themselves for economic security.

The U.S. economy is chiefly a free-market system. It has millions of small businesses as well as a corporate sector that includes large firms like Google, Ford, and Bank of America. **Corporate power**—the influence of business firms on public policy—has been a defining feature of American politics since the late 1800s. Corporate power can be seen today in the fact that roughly two-thirds of all lobbyists in the nation's capital represent business firms, which also contribute heavily to political candidates. Corporate power can also be seen in the workplace, where U.S. firms have greater control over wages and working conditions than do firms in other Western democracies. The annual



As C. Wright Mills and other theorists have noted, corporate elites must be taken into account in assessing how power in America is distributed and used. The influence of the nation's major corporations goes beyond the workplace. Through advertising and public relations efforts, they seek to build public support for the private enterprise system. (*Source: Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division [LC-USF33-T01-001695-M4]*)

income of a minimum-wage worker, for instance, is roughly \$15,000 in the United States, compared with roughly \$18,000 in France and \$22,000 in Great Britain.⁴⁹

Wealth is also the foundation of **elitism**, which refers to the power exercised by well-positioned and highly influential individuals.⁵⁰ Sociologist C. Wright Mills concluded that corporate elites, operating behind the scenes, have greater control over economic policy than do elected officials.⁵¹ Some scholars contend that Mills overstated the power of elites, while overlooking the fact that some elites are motivated to serve society's interests as well as their own.⁵² Few scholars, however, dispute the claim that corporate elites have more political power in America than they do in most Western democracies.

Who Governs?

This text's perspective is that a full explanation of American politics requires an accounting of all these forms of power—as exercised by the majority, interest groups, elites, corporations, individuals through legal action, and those in positions of governing authority. In fact, a defining characteristic of American politics is the widespread sharing of power. Few nations have as many competing interests and institutions as does the United States.

THE TEXT'S ORGANIZATION

American politics operates within a constitutional system that defines how power is to be obtained and exercised. This system is the focus of the next few chapters, which examine how, in theory and practice, the Constitution defines the institutions of governments and the rights of individuals. The discussion then shifts to the political role of citizens and of the intermediaries that enable citizens to act together and connect them to government. These subjects are explored in chapters on public opinion, political participation, political parties, interest groups, and the news media. The functioning of governing officials is then addressed in chapters on the nation's elective institutions—the Congress and the presidency—and its appointive institutions—the federal bureaucracy and the federal courts. These chapters describe how these institutions are structured but aim chiefly to explain how their actions are affected by internal and external factors, as well as by the constitutional system in which they operate.

Throughout the text, but particularly in the concluding chapters, attention is given to **public policies**, which are the decisions of government to pursue particular courses of action. No aspect of a nation's politics is more revealing of how it is governed than are its policies—everything from how it chooses to educate its children to how it chooses to use its military power.

Underlying the text's discussion of American politics and policy is the recognition of how difficult it is to govern effectively and how important it is to try. It cannot be said too often that the issue of governing is the most difficult issue facing a democratic society. It also cannot be said too often that governing is a quest rather than a resolved issue. Political scientist E. E. Schattschneider said it clearly: "In the course of centuries, there has come a great deal of agreement about what democracy is, but nobody has a monopoly on it and the last word has not been spoken."⁵³

SUMMARY

Critical thinking is the careful gathering and sifting of information in the process of forming knowledgeable views of political developments. Critical thinking is a key to responsible citizenship, but many citizens avoid it by virtue of paying scant attention to politics. The tools of political science can contribute to the critical thinking process.

The United States is a nation that was formed on a set of ideals. Liberty, individualism, equality, and self-government are foremost among these ideals. These ideals became Americans' common bond and today are the basis of their political culture. Although imperfect in practice, these ideals have guided what generations of Americans have tried to achieve politically.

Politics is the process by which it is determined whose values will prevail in society. The basis of politics is conflict over scarce resources and competing values. Those who have power win out in this conflict and are able to control governing authority and policy choices. In the United States, no one faction controls all power and policy. Majorities govern on some issues, while other issues are dominated by groups, elites, corporations, individuals through legal action, or officials who hold public office.

Politics in the United States plays out through rules of the game that include democracy, constitutionalism, and free markets. Democracy is rule by the people, which in practice refers to a representative system of government in which the people rule through their elected officials. Constitutionalism refers to rules that limit the rightful power of government over citizens. A free-market system assigns private parties the dominant role in determining how economic costs and benefits are allocated.



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CRITICAL THINKING ZONE

KEY TERMS

- | | |
|----------------------------------|---------------------------------------|
| authoritarian government (p. 16) | legal action (p. 21) |
| authority (p. 20) | liberty (p. 9) |
| confirmation bias (p. 5) | majoritarianism (p. 18) |
| constitutionalism (p. 21) | party (partisan) polarization (p. 19) |
| corporate power (p. 22) | pluralism (p. 20) |
| critical thinking (p. 3) | political culture (p. 7) |
| democracy (p. 18) | political science (p. 6) |
| elitism (p. 23) | politics (p. 16) |
| equality (p. 10) | power (p. 16) |
| free-market system (p. 22) | public policies (p. 23) |
| individualism (p. 10) | self-government (p. 11) |

APPLYING THE ELEMENTS OF CRITICAL THINKING

Conceptualizing: Distinguish between political power (generally) and authority (as a special kind of political power).

Synthesizing: Contrast the American political culture with that of most Western democracies. What in the American experience has led its people to derive their national identity from a set of shared political ideals?

Analyzing: Explain the types of power that result from each of America's major systems of governing—democracy, constitutionalism, and a free market.

EXTRA CREDIT

A Book Worth Reading: Gordon S. Wood, *The Idea of America: Reflections on the Birth of the United States* (New York: Penguin Press, 2011). A perceptive book by a Pulitzer Prize-winning historian, it explores the ideals, such as liberty and equality, that were the driving force behind the American Revolution.