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1 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 we are writing about American politics at the beginning of the second administration of Donald Trump. Trump presents some unique challenges for the way political scientists do their job, and a couple of those challenges will impact you because they influence the way we write this book. In the interests of transparency and academic integrity we want to clear the air about what that means before we dive into the nuts and bolts of how our government works.

Trump poses a challenge for political scientists because he is not like any of the other 45 people who have served as president of the United States. Most of the ways he is different don't really matter to us. Trump is colorful. He loves the spotlight and takes up a lot of the available oxygen in the political media world. He's rich and he flaunts it. He boasts about himself *a lot*: how great he

is, how smart, how successful. He's abrasive and bullying to people he dislikes; he's bafflingly obsequious and fawning to people he admires.

None of that is exactly "normal," but it's not illegal or disqualifying either. His defiance of the norms is exactly why some people love him. But all the flashy flamboyance of the president is irrelevant to political scientists, except that it serves as a distraction from what really matters to us—how Trump operates within the constitutional framework of American politics. And here Trump's "idiosyncrasies" begin to matter. Because behind all the color and drama and outrage and adoration is a central fact about how Donald Trump did the job of president the first time and how he promises to do it a second: Donald Trump doesn't like to be bound by rules, even the ones written in the Constitution.

And for political scientists, the rules are everything.

Trump's disinclination to see the rules of American politics as constraining his actions makes it hard for us to write this textbook in two ways. First, his refusal to acknowledge and follow the rules of American politics challenges our ability to explain to you how politics works and, second, it also makes it impossible for us to present politics to you without making value judgments about the impact of the president's actions. This runs deeply counter to the way we have been taught to do our work and we are intensely uncomfortable with the role we find it necessary to take (hence this explanatory introduction). It is interesting that in grappling with the norm-busting behavior of Trump, we have had to break some norms of our own.

THE NON-NEGOTIABLE ROLE OF RULES

American politics, like any political system but, most explicitly, like any democratic, constitutional system, runs on rules. The core definition of this book, as you will soon learn, is a classic: *politics is who gets what and how they get it*. In that famous description of politics, the "who" are the citizens, the "what" is power and influence, and the "how" is the bundle of rules and norms that structure the struggle over power and influence and, ultimately, that help determine who will win and who will lose. It's a pretty simple and powerful formulation and it will take you far in your quest to understand most political situations.

In political science, another name for rules is "laws." Understanding laws—how they are crafted, executed, enforced and how they impact people's lives—is central to what we do. In the democratic systems where the defining principle is called *the rule of law*, the idea that we are governed by laws, not men and women, and that no person is ever above the law. Commitment to the rule of law, instead of rule by an individual, is the signature political invention that led us from the darkness of the Middle Ages to the brilliant light of the modern world. It is what distinguishes democracies from dictatorships, and it is what keep us free as human beings.

That period of European history after the Middle Ages is called "the Age of Enlightenment" and among the other things the Enlightenment is known for—the beginnings of science and technology, industry and capitalism—is the political philosophy known as *classical liberalism*. Until very recently, as we will see in Chapter 2, both liberals and conservatives in American politics shared the core values of a classical liberal view of the world. (Classical liberalism really needs a different name because the word "liberalism" there is confusing.) Chief among those values is the commitment to the rule of law we just mentioned, and all the political ideals that it makes possible: equality before the law, individual rights, limited government, separation of powers, checks and balances, individualism and capitalism. It is the core principle behind the U.S. Constitution.

The commitment to the rule of law has enabled the advances and prosperity of modern life. The promise of classical liberalism is that it provides a framework within which progress—and the solving of problems—is possible. That's because while classical liberalism rejects the socialist vision that there is a public good that is greater than the well-being of individuals, it also rejects the idea that the well-being of any one of those individuals is greater than that of any other. We are all equal before the law.

Do you see where we are going with this? Donald Trump accepts the idea that no individual is above the law the way oil accepts vinegar. If you know anything about him at all, you know that Trump is a free-wheeling guy who likes to operate without constraint. No matter how you feel about him, you know he likes to do whatever he wants to do, whenever he wants to do it, and he really doesn't like being told "no."

If you think about it, though, the whole point of rules and laws is to tell people "no." No, don't run the traffic light; no, don't steal the money; no, don't limit people's freedom of speech; no, don't betray the public trust; just to name a random few of the "no's" that shape our collective lives. The First Amendment to the Constitution imposes a big "no" on the U.S. Congress about establishing a religion or prohibiting free speech or abridging freedom of the press, and it's pretty much all "no's" through the rest of the Bill of Rights.

Donald Trump is okay with rules that constrain other people's behavior, but he chafes under rules that apply to him. There is a reason why, when he left office in 2021, he faced a barrage of lawsuits and criminal indictments at the state and federal level, and that reason was not that his political enemies wanted to go after him. It's because he broke or ignored multiple laws he didn't want to follow or that he decided didn't apply to him, and some of the consequences caught up with him.

If you admire Trump, that may very well be the reason why—there is something exciting, even validating about the idea of a guy who can go through life knocking impediments out of his way. Especially if we are feeling disempowered in our own lives, seeing someone tell "the man"—in fact *all* the men and women public servants we don't trust—to go to hell, that they are "fired," might be deeply satisfying. Trump is president the way he runs his business—if something he wants is outside institutional constraints and legal norms, he does it anyway and essentially dares anyone to stop him.

Of course, if you dislike Trump, it's likely for the very same reason. One person's swashbuckling hero is another's lawbreaking menace. Trump's insistence on being above any law he doesn't like is galling to those who think he already benefits from many privileges denied to the average American. They are infuriated by his insistence that he is the victim of unfair laws when they think he has already been the beneficiary of special treatment most Americans can't benefit from.

From a political scientist's point of view, whether we admire or dislike Trump is beside the point—Donald Trump's rejection of the rule of law is what matters. It means the rejection of the central value of classical liberalism and threatens the whole package of values supporting the U.S. Constitution. If you respect what the rule of law has made possible and if you think that the laws, not the actions of an individual avenger, are the key to citizen empowerment, then he not only cannot make America great, but he's also likely to bring the whole enterprise of self-government down on our heads. This presents us with two challenges—how to talk about the rule of law when our chief executive doesn't think it applies to him, and how do we maintain our objectivity in the face of such unprecedented disregard for the foundations of our system?

CHALLENGE #1—HOW TO TALK ABOUT THE RULE OF LAW AND THE RULE BREAKER IN CHIEF

So, for all political scientists, but especially, perhaps, for those of us writing books about how American politics works, the first challenge is this: How do we tell the story of Trump's presidency? Do we explain the rules and norms (the unwritten principles that underlie the rules and laws that make our system work) of the executive branch as the founders planned it and as 45 presidents not named Trump have engaged with it? And then do we treat his version of the presidency as a blip, after which things will go back to "normal?" Or do we assume that if he can blow through the rules and norms, so will all the presidents who follow him, and that we should write about American politics as if the founders' shrewd political experiment has finally failed? Do we focus on the rules as they always have been, treat the way they are twisted and manipulated by Trump as just a "Trump-thing," or assume that he is changing the rules in significant ways for future presidents as well? Without making any value judgements about it—how do we just describe it in factual terms?

Different textbook writers choose different ways of responding to the challenge. We have tried treating him as a blip or an anomaly, the exception that proves the rule of the founder's genius, but that is not very satisfying, and it became less so when he was elected a second time. Do blips come back? And even if Trump *is* a blip and things go back more or less to normal after he leaves office again, that only means "normal" for those of us old enough to have seen a lot of different presidents who mostly obey the law. Most of you students reading this book, however, have grown up in Trump's America. He is your normal. Treating him as a blip fundamentally ignores your experience of what politics is like. Why would you ever believe or trust in what we might call "normal?"

Another problem with the blip strategy is that no president can be truly just a blip. Even if the next president who follows Trump comes at the job from a totally different perspective, the politics of the day—the relationship of the executive with other branches of government, the degree to which the media holds officeholders accountable, and the citizens' understanding of their own role and their expectations of what their leaders owe them—have been shaped by what came before. Some of the problems Joe Biden faced as president, for instance, came from assuming that he could bring the country "back to normal" by sheer force of doing things like they had been done before without recognizing that some of those things had changed during the first Trump administration and were never going back.

A very minor example of changes Trump has made: it used to be unthinkable that a candidate would not show up for a presidential or primary debate. Or not reveal their tax returns. Or not share their medical records. Trump has made refusing to do all that normal. Will any candidate ever do it again? How do we explain the process of running for president? What about the norm that the president should not lie to the public? A more serious example: it used to be that getting caught in a lie was a grave threat to a person's political career. That didn't mean that politicians never made stuff up or embellished their resumes or refused to take responsibility for something they did, but there used to be a cost attached, and so they tried not to lie. And if they lied, they tried not to get caught. Trump hasn't felt those scruples and since his supporters don't seem to much care if he lies—that is, they don't exact any political price—the media doesn't dwell on it either. Will all future presidents be brazen liars? Or does Trump get away with what others might not?

Treating the Trump presidency as a blip or ignoring the impact of the significant difference in the way he wields power is not satisfactory. Ignoring almost 250 years of American history to focus primarily on the Trump show isn't either. Sounding an alarm and declaring that Trump spells the beginning of the end of the long American experiment of self-government is to jump to a conclusion that overlooks the myriad checks and balances that remain in place, even for a president who hates being checked or balanced.

Simply put, deciding how to explain and teach American politics as a story about the rules, when you have a president who delights in breaking them, is one challenge Trump presents to political scientists. The office of the presidency we discuss in the 12th edition of this textbook is very different from the office we described in earlier versions. The Constitution hasn't been amended but how it works seems to have changed under the force of one man's will and actions. We just don't know what the long run-impact of that will be.

CHALLENGE #2—THE MEANING OF OBJECTIVITY WHEN WE HOLD AN EXISTENTIAL STAKE IN HOW THIS TURNS OUT

The other way Trump's presidency challenges the way we do our job as textbook authors is: how to stay politically neutral and refuse to take sides in the partisan battle of American politics—an imperative of the job of teaching—while still calling out Trump's lawless behavior and noting that his party has been largely complicit in enabling him.

Objectivity is big in academia. Stereotypes of "woke" university administrators and "radical" profs aside, almost all of us believe that professors should teach their students the facts of their subject matter, and *how* to think critically about those facts. We should teach you how to ask tough questions about American politics and gather the data necessary to answer them. Professional ethics tell us it is not our job to tell you *what* to think. Reaching your own conclusions is your responsibility and, frankly, it is your right. Academic freedom—the idea that no one should stop us from pursuing knowledge where it takes us—is not just for professors, it protects students too.

That means it would be a gross dereliction of our obligation as your professors or your textbook authors to teach you *what* to think politically. We shouldn't try to persuade you to be Democrats or Republicans. That we remain neutral on questions of partisanship is important not just because it protects your academic freedom, but because you need to be able to trust us to give you unbiased information without wondering if we have a partisan motive. It's good intellectual hygiene, as well as pedagogical hygiene, for us to do our best to be objective about these issues.

But while it's our job to be objective about partisan values, part of what you come to college for is to learn the values that undergird our system of education, that support free inquiry and critical thinking and reaching independent conclusions. Shared values of academic freedom, reliance on the scientific method, and having the intellectual courage to subject our conclusions to the scrutiny of our critics, all make the acquisition of knowledge possible and enable us all to engage in the "give and take" that is higher education. Our job isn't to turn you into Democrats and Republicans, but in a real sense it *is* to turn you into classical liberals. That is the training you come to us for—to learn the values that will make you successful scholars, successful democratic citizens, successful human beings.

Being a classical liberal used to be nonpartisan. But now that one party seems to be veering away from its classical liberal roots in order to engage in culture wars that involve taking positions contrary to scientific understanding, and in order to support a president who refutes the rule of law as it applies to him, it takes on partisan overtones. It may look like we are taking sides with the Democrats, but that's only because they are the party that has stuck with the classical liberal paradigm—the reliance on procedural values (which we discuss later in this chapter), the emphasis on individual freedom, and the refusal to put particular interests over the rules that make the system fair or everyone. Many, many Republicans have left their party recently for precisely that reason and the two parties seem to be realigning around commitment to the rule of law and procedural democracy, as much they were along the old fault lines of political regulation of the economy. Conservative academics, who used to proudly cast votes for Republicans, are in a particular bind because of the tension between the classical liberal values of their training and the partisan identity they still value. Almost all academics are pro-truth, pro-science, pro–classical liberalism, and, incidentally, pro-democracy. Those are the values that make possible the world of education.

Those same values support another profession, journalism, whose practitioners share similar angst about their changing role in Trump's America. The plight of journalists has instructive lessons for those of us in education. Just as in academia, objectivity is the gold standard of good journalism, which makes perfect sense in a world where we are all committed to classical liberal values. It runs into trouble when it must report on a world where those values are rejected. Journalists want to be seen as fair in a culture where "fair" is interpreted as not taking sides. But what should journalists do when the phenomenon they are reporting on is *not* engaged in by both sides. What does "fair" look like in that case? This is a glimmer of the challenge we academics face as well.

This professional emphasis on objectivity, or neutrality, in the mainstream media, the confusion about what true "fairness" entails, often pushes those in the mainstream media to engage in 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, they will immediately reach for an example in the other party to maintain "balance," so that no one will think they are picking on one side or favoring the other.

This practice is fine and even admirable if both sides are equally guilty. It is *not* fine if only one side has committed a crime, or said something offensive 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 empirically, or factually accurate. It just fulfills an ingrained sense that fairness demands treating everyone the same, which in the case of being critical of someone, means being critical of everyone.

The same things that tempt a journalist to "both-sides" their reporting are at work on academics as well. No professor wants to fulfill the stereotype of the liberal college professor when we work very hard to keep our political preferences out of our professional judgments in the classroom. But both-sidesing seems like a cowardly way out when so much is at stake.

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, 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 there is empirical, real-world evidence that one side is wrong or they are misleading their audience.

A rainy day may be trivial, but consider if one side says, "Science finds that mandatory vaccine programs prevent severe cases of COVID-19 and saves lives," and the other counters with "We don't believe those findings." If we treat the two sides as though both are reasonable, without providing context about why science is more reliable than personal feelings, that just confuses the issue and leads people to think that the scientific finding is one of two competing but equally valid beliefs, rather than the product of an empirical discipline that can be tested and judged as true or false. Truth and falsity 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 is willing in theory to entertain the possibility that its results are incomplete or can be improved. If people come in with dry shoes and no umbrella, or other plausible, verifiable evidence that the rain has stopped, the scientist is going to look out the window again. Scientists believe what their eyes tell them.

Open-mindedness makes science more reliable to those who understand the scientific method, but those who seek to profit by claiming that science is a scam can exploit what looks like a vulnerability. Hence, we have vaccine deniers, climate deniers, election deniers, along with a host of other political claimants and conspiracy theorists who prosper by offering "proof" of narratives that deny empirical truths. Many of these fake "controversies" are the flashpoints of today's culture wars. There is money and power in keeping people stirred up, angry, fearful and resentful and it's easy to do that if you can convince them that the institutions they should trust are lying to them.

Journalists and academics have a critical role to play here in promoting the truth. Those who engage in both-sidesism don't just betray their audiences, they betray the values that give their work meaning. Their very jobs depend on the idea that there is truth and there is falsity. When the distinction is lost, disinformation travels as freely as the real thing. No surprise that disinformation entrepreneurs are seizing on this moment to sow ever more fanciful narratives and that a frustrated public chooses its media sources by what feels good rather than what tells them the sometimes uncomfortable or unpalatable truths that they need to know to navigate the world.

Being honest about scientific matters, even when it means calling out one side for promoting lies, is not the only obligation that the fraying consensus on classical liberal values places on academics (and journalists) in the Trump years. Science is not the only liberal process that lives by surviving external scrutiny and criticism, and which academics are bound to support by the values of their profession. Democracy is another such process, and its future is also at stake in this perilous moment.

Political scientists don't have social rules as clear cut and easily verified as the Law of Gravity is in physics, but we know that for democracies to exist, certain conditions have to be met. Without those conditions, democracies die. Because it is clear that democratic governance and all the values that go along with it have been a positive thing for humankind, allowing people *on the whole* to live longer, better, richer, healthier, more satisfying lives, the prospect of losing that is a scary one indeed. One of the main conditions that political scientists, historians, philosophers, and economists have determined can cause democracies to topple into autocracies, or authoritarian governments, is a loss of commitment to the rule of law, precisely what we see in Donald Trump's refusal to play by the rules.

It is not that political scientists are out to get Donald Trump or his Republican supporters, or want to put their thumb on the scale for the Democratic Party. They might dislike him, but they might equally be people who would like to vote for him. And many political scientists are long-term conservative Republicans. But Democrat, Republican or whatever, most academics recognize that Trump's rejection of classical liberal values means that he is a threat to American democracy and here our temptation to both-sides things is particularly dangerous.

Why does it matter? Here's the thing. Democracy, classical liberalism, the whole paradigm of modern thought that was born in the Age of Reason is the only belief system that invites its critics right into the living room, to kick off their shoes and tell them what they think they are doing wrong. 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 loudly and clearly.

Our classical values say we have to entertain any one's criticism of the system that makes our world possible—free speech and academic freedom are as fundamental to that world as values can be—but if we tolerate the attacks without even piping up in its defense, then we are betraying our world in a very real way.

Science invites criticism, but science is not a belief system. It's an empirical way of understanding the world and its claims can be tested by subjecting them to empirical analysis—putting them to the test against evidence in the real world. Democracy isn't an empirical theory, it is a normative concept. It's not validated by testing; it is promoted by the attractiveness of its values and the best cases that its supporters can make for it. But that means supporters *must* make the case, defending it even as they turn the light of critical thinking on it, asking hard questions about its own viability, about equity and freedom and atrocities committed on its watch. It provides a climate in which its critics can tear it apart, and that is a good thing, as long as the strengths of democracy get to have their defenders too. If those defenders have to be

"objective," in the "not taking sides" sense, then classical liberal values, on which so much depends, will have people tearing it down but no one touting its successes and building it up.

What does any of this have to do with the price of beans and Donald Trump, you wonder? Concerning Trump in his capacity as a Republican leader, a U.S. president and a partisan actor, we are agnostic. We have no partisan bone to pick with anyone. But in his capacity as norm breaker, challenger of the rule of law, and science skeptic we can't default to a both-sides version of fair treatment. Others with commitments to objectivity—ex-military officials and others who served in Trump's first administration grappled with the same issues, and they decided their obligation to truth-telling and democracy merited the risk that their honest assessment of Trump would be seen as unfair.

Many of the people who worked for Trump 1.0 have since disavowed him and left his circle, some vigorously calling him out for his refusal to respect the law. He's a "fascist to the core," says retired four-star General Mark Milley, the man that Trump himself appointed to be the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, the nation's highest ranking military officer, who advises the president and the members of his cabinet on military affairs. One of his former chiefs of staff, John Kelly, another former four-star general himself, said "So he certainly falls into the general definition of fascist, for sure." An alarming number of people who knew Trump the best during the first administration have almost all repudiated him in some version of this kind of language: "he doesn't recognize any limits on his power." The second time around they warn, he'll be careful to surround himself with people who won't apply the brakes.

Other theories about Trump's presidency hold that the people worried about Trump turning the United States into an authoritarian playground for billionaire "tech bros" or Christian nationalists are overreacting, taking every possible thing Trump says literally when he only means a few of them. He is "just being Donald Trump," an iconoclastic leader making his base happy by feeding their fantasies of political revenge and mayhem. He's a performer as much as a politician.

Perhaps. Still, only one side is doing what he is doing and our obligation to "objectivity as truth" means we need to be clear about the stakes and the accountability. Writing about Donald Trump is a challenge, one we have to meet seriously and wisely. In the course of this book, we will work to tell the story of this president, not as a blip or a destroyer, but as a participant in a new stage in American history, one in which we are unapologetically rooting for democracy to survive, stronger than ever. Perhaps Trump will even prove to be a democratic blessing, teaching us where the political, constitutional, and cultural weak spots are that we need to shore up. (We've already noted one, in the widespread practice of both-sidesing.) We will bring the same approach to assessing conflicts over science and civil liberties, democracy and the rule of law—a clear-sighted recognition that academic roles change with circumstance, but that all of us in the truth-telling business, grateful for the Enlightenment culture that makes our work possible, also have an obligation to defend it lest we find our world suspended in air, resting on mere memories of a remarkable value system that gave human beings more freedom than even the founders anticipated.

In Your Own Words 1.1 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, or **political narratives**, about who should hold power and how they should wield it that are accepted by large swathes of the population has a huge advantage.

Remember these four concepts—politics, power, media, and narratives—we will return to them over and over throughout this book.

POLITICS AND THE SOCIAL ORDER

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.

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.

Bloomberg/Getty Images

Our capacity to be political gives us the tools—if we choose to use them—with which to settle disputes about the social order and to allocate scarce resources. These 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. 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 and does 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 think they will win if they follow the rules, 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.

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 how 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. **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.

Norms. 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.

Institutions. 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

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.

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.

The Power of Words. 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 the political narratives we mentioned earlier—the stories that people believe about who has power, who wants power, who deserves power, and what someone has done to get and maintain power—was once the sole prerogative of authoritative sources like priests, kings, and their agents. In many parts of the world, it still is.

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*. Stop and think for a moment about what that means for the ways most people would be able to live their lives.

Control of Information. 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.

Marty Bucella, Cartoon Stock

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 most of us carry access to a world of information and instant communication in our pockets.

How Mediation Impacts Information. 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 they pass 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 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

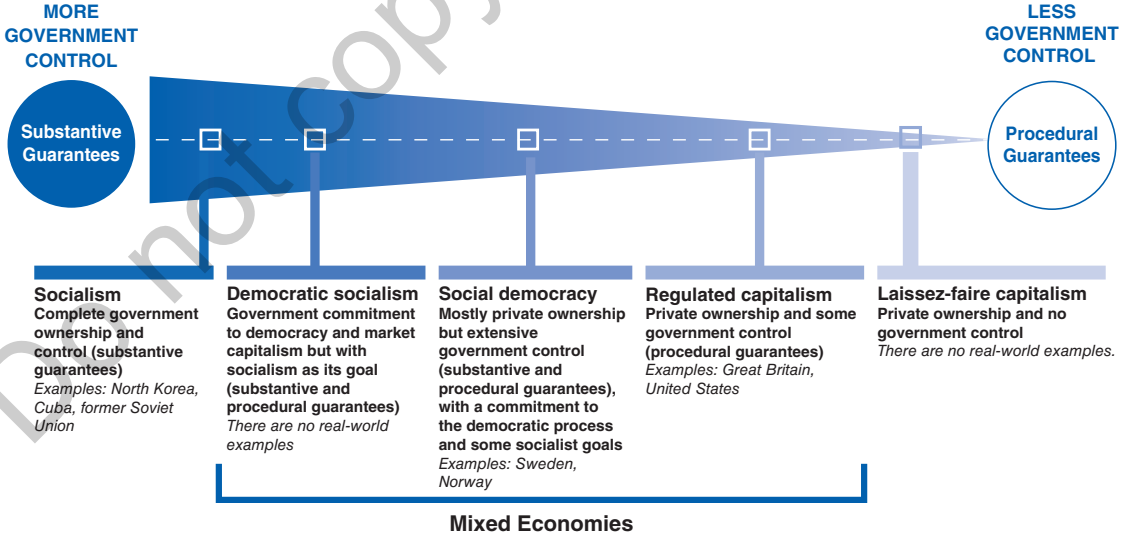
Whereas politics is concerned with the distribution of power and resources and the control of information in society, **economics** is concerned specifically with the production and distribution of society's wealth—material goods such as bread, toothpaste, and housing, and services such as medical care, 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

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.

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 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.

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. 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).

Maybe Money Can't Buy You Love, But it Sure Can Buy You Global Power!

Elon Musk speaks about the Starlink project at the Mobile World Congress in Barcelona, Spain, in 2021. Musk owns Starlink, a satellite internet service provider that is a major contractor for the U.S. government and other countries. Two years into Ukraine's efforts to repel the 2022 Russian invasion, the Ukrainian military reported difficulties getting consistent satellite service and claimed that Russians appeared to be using the service in apparent violation of U.S. sanctions. Musk denied that he was doing business with Russia, and Democrats in Congress attempted to address what they called the "serious national-security liability issues" created by a private company with its own agenda serving as a major government contractor. In Musk's case, the political role of a private entrepreneur became even murkier when he endorsed former president Donald Trump in the 2024 election and freely used his control over his social media platform, X, to support and advance Trump's campaign.

NurPhoto/Getty Images

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

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 zero-out the number of terms he had already served 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 won a third term in 2024, though with a reduced mandate, leaving him dependent on coalition allies to stay in power. 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

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 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 1.2 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 overlie 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.

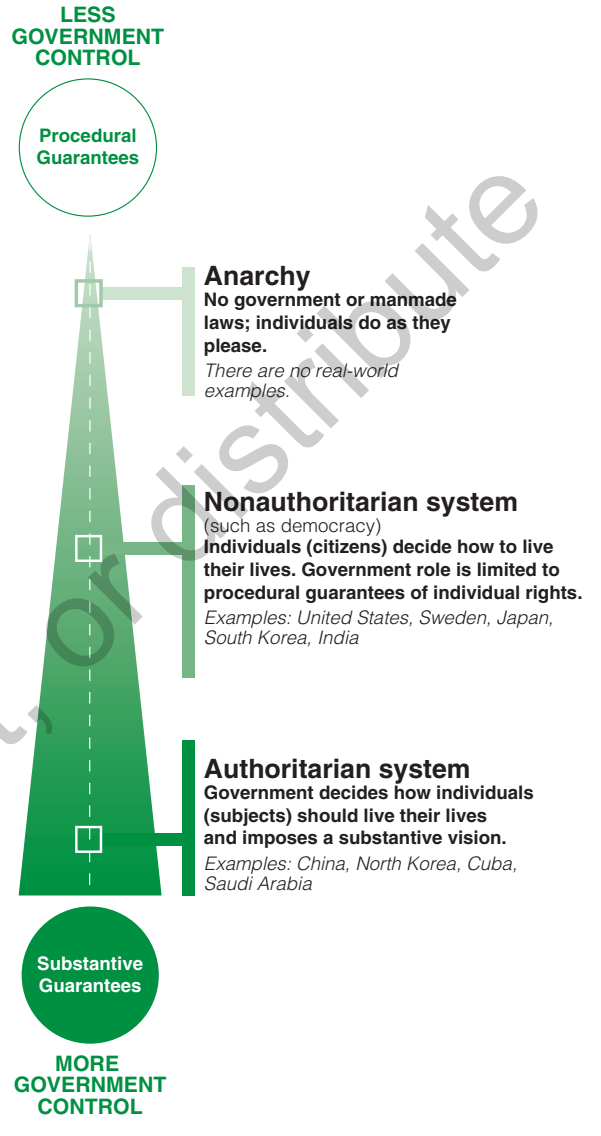
Authoritarian governments can take various forms: sovereignty can be vested in an individual (dictatorship or monarchy), in God (theocracy), in the state itself (fascism), or in a ruling class (oligarchy). When a system combines an authoritarian government with a socialist economy, we say that the system 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.

Authoritarian Capitalism. 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.

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. 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.

FIGURE 1.2

A Comparison of Political Systems

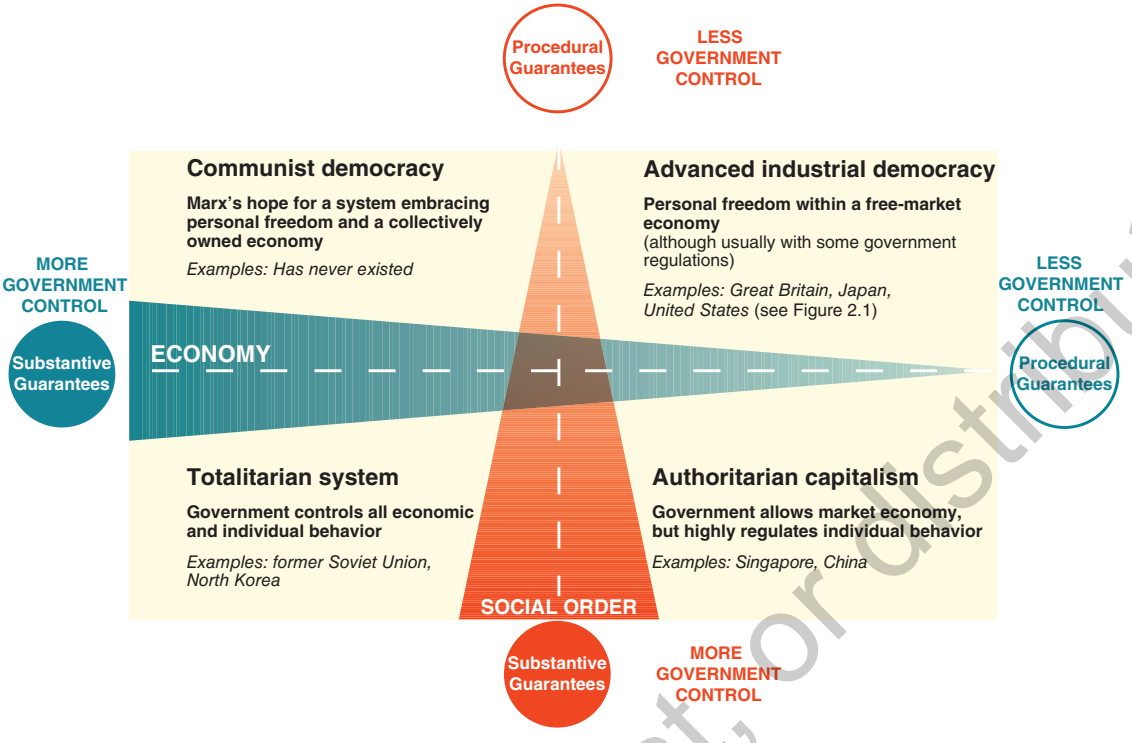


Political systems are defined by the extent to which individual citizens or governments decide what the social order should look like—that is, how people should live their collective, noneconomic lives. Except for anarchies, every system allots a role to government to regulate individual behavior—for 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.

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

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.

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 an **advanced industrial democracy** (in the upper-right quadrant of Figure 1.3) combines 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.

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.

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

Democratic Narratives. Clearly, 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.

It's important to pay attention to how the narratives of power treat the people and how much genuine power they give them. Easily as fundamental as the *what* and the *how* to Lasswell's definition of politics that we discussed, is the *who*. The powers and opportunities afforded to everyday people are central to understanding political and economic systems.

In Your Own Words 1.3 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 profound respects the system they created was 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 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, as we said in the chapter opener, emphasized science and rational thought, government limited by the rule of law, 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-rightquadrant 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

Liberty, Leading the People

This iconic painting by French artist Eugène Delacroix depicts The Goddess of Liberty, a symbol of France and the French Republic, leading a group of people forward over a barricade. It was painted to commemorate the July Revolution of 1830 and has since become famous for representing the values of the 1789 French Revolution, the Declaration of the Rights of Man, and the classical liberal values that eventually propelled the French from monarchy to democracy.

Photo12/Getty Images

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 1.4 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 **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, our relationships, our education, our news, our travel, our sustenance, our purchases, our daily activities, our job seeking, and our very sense of ourselves are influenced by, experienced through, or shared via electronic media. That reality was brought home thanks to the COVID-19 pandemic, which

Citizens Stepping Up

Palestinians gather on May 1, 2024, to receive meals prepared by World Central Kitchen at a school sheltering displaced people in the central Gaza Strip. The charity resumed operations just a month after an Israeli Defense Forces attack in Gaza killed seven members of the World Central Kitchen team during the Israel-Hamas conflict. World Central Kitchen, founded in 2010 by Washington, D.C., chef and restaurateur José Andrés to feed people displaced by a devastating earthquake in Haiti has since fed many thousands of people following natural and human-made disasters around the globe.

NurPhoto/Getty Images

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 those by which we are impacted. We will turn to these implications again and again throughout this book.

MEDIATED CITIZENSHIP

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 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.

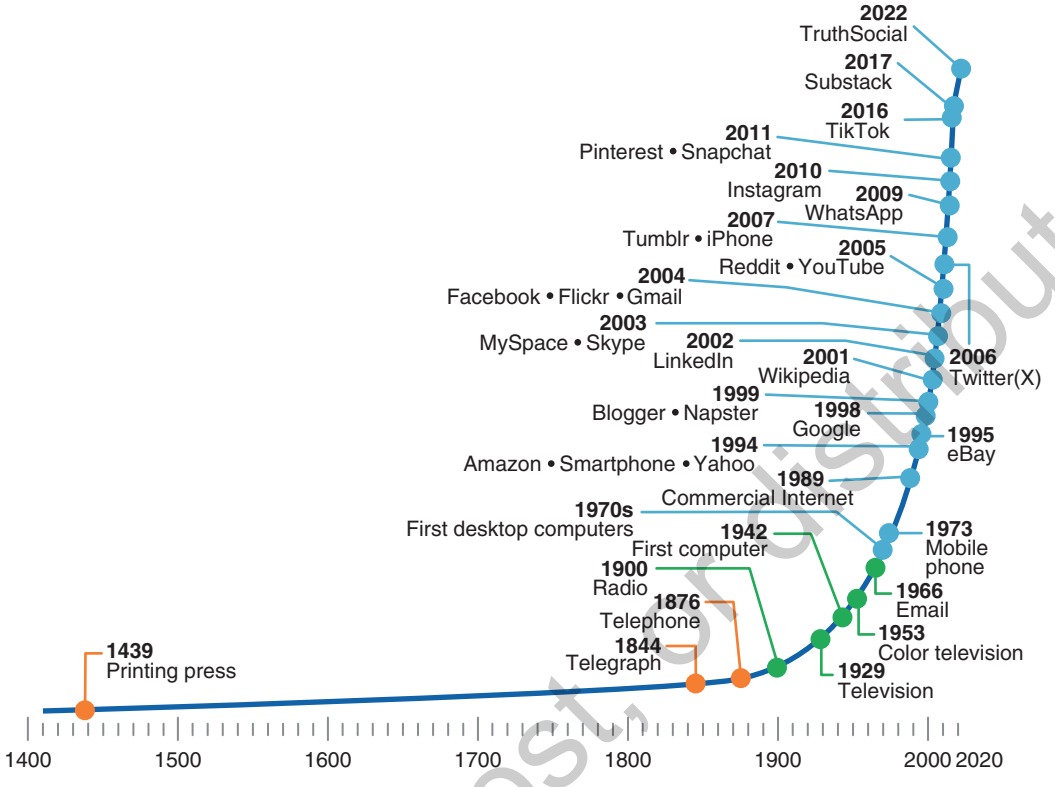
Among the things we disagree on in this country is what it means to be a citizen. Madison obviously had some thoughts on that subject. As we mentioned earlier, he hoped people would be so filled with what he called republican virtue that they would readily sacrifice their self-interest to advance the 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 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

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.

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 F. 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.

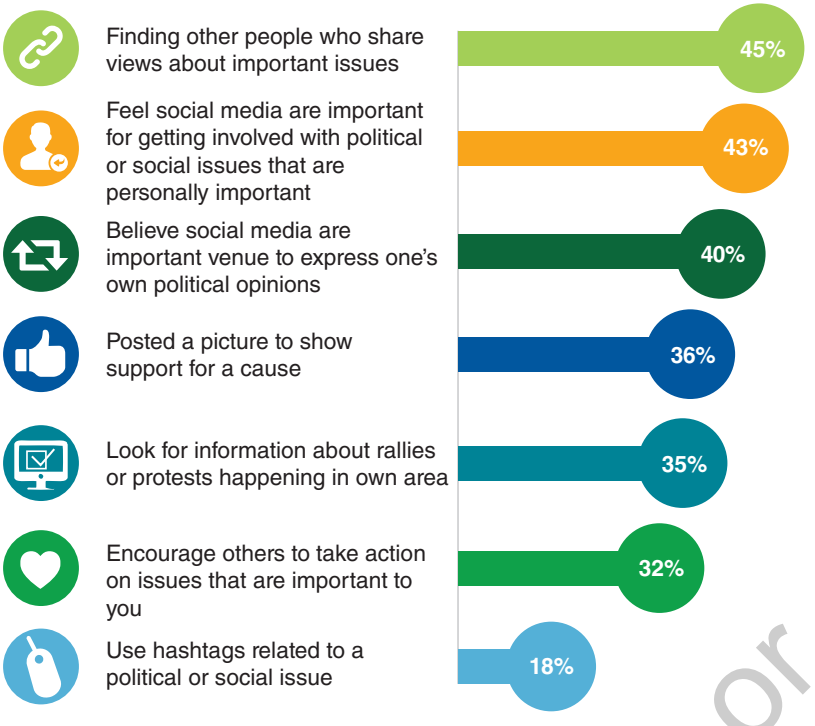
Many older Americans who are not digital natives nonetheless experience political life through television or through web surfing and commenting, usually anonymously and often rudely. This is not always a positive addition to our civil discourse, but they are trying to adapt. You may have grandparents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

ENGAGING POLITICALLY AS MEDIATED CITIZENS

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.

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: Brooke Auxier, "Activism on Social Media Varies by Race and Ethnicity, Age, Political Party," Pew Research Center, 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 Brooke Auxier and Colleen McClain, "Americans Think Social Media Can Help Build Movements, but Can Also Be a Distraction," Pew Research Center, 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/.

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, 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.

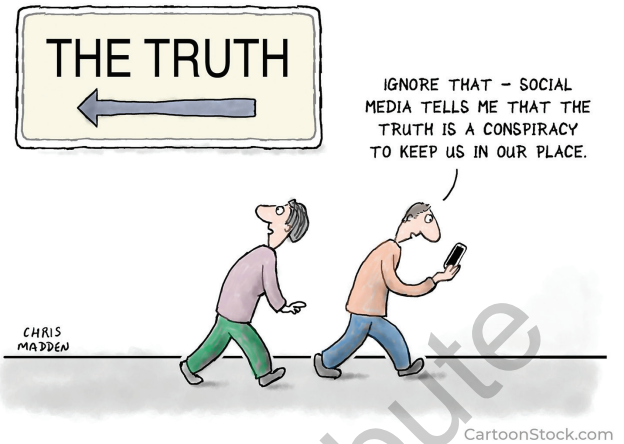
In Your Own Words 1.5 Describe the enduring tension in the United States between self-interested human nature and public-spirited government and the way that has been shaped in a mediated world.

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 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.



Chris Madden, Cartoon Stock

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.

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

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, D.C.: CQ Press, 2010).

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. 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 Franklin's mandate to keep the republic.

In Your Own Words 1.6 Apply the five steps of critical thinking to this book's themes of power and citizenship in American politics.

THE BIG PICTURE:

How to Think Critically

Follow the CLUES to Critical Thinking

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?*

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?*

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?*

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

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

OCEAN OF EXCUSES

Arguments sound like conflict. I hate conflict.

Values are private. It's rude to pry.

Logic gives me hives!

Data mean numbers. Numbers freak me out.

BRIDGE to ENLIGHTENMENT

What, do I look like some kind of detective?

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 the challenges that Donald Trump poses to how political scientists do their jobs. We argued in the introduction that taking a neutral, "both-sides" position on this topic—which, as classical liberal academics and 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; 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: 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 Americans—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, why—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, well, what kinds of reforms do we need? And how do we need to do that, and what? 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—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, there's—you guys are so racist, I—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. It's very simple. They would have blocked them.

The point is, you need allies in a democracy . . . democracy requires compromise, even when you are a hundred-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: 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 4 years or 8 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.

C***onsider 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 a Black audience. Is that the only audience he is speaking to? Who else might he expect to be listening?

L***ay 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?

U***ncover 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?

E***valuate 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?

S***ort 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.

politics
power
media
political narratives
social order
government
authority
legitimate
rules
norms
institutions
gatekeepers
disinformation
economics
socialist economy
substantive guarantees
procedural guarantees
capitalist economy
laissez-faire capitalism
mixed economies
democratic socialism
social democracy
regulated capitalism

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.

authoritarian governments
totalitarian
authoritarian capitalism
subjects
anarchy
democracy
popular sovereignty
advanced industrial democracy
communist democracy
citizens
populism

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.

divine right of kings
classical liberalism
social contract
republic

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.

digital natives
mediated citizens
public-interested citizenship
self-interested citizenship
hashtag activism
information bubble

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.

Mario Tama/Getty Images

In Your Own Words

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

- 2.1 Identify the two conflicting origin narratives of the United States as a nation.
- 2.2 Analyze the role of immigration and the meaning of citizenship in U.S. politics.
- 2.3 Explain how shared core values define the United States as a country and a culture.
- 2.4 Describe the competing narratives that drive partisan divisions in American politics.

2 AMERICAN CITIZENS AND POLITICAL CULTURE

What's at Stake . . . in Solving Our Border Crisis?

BIPARTISANSHIP. Compromise. Being responsive to public opinion. Giving in on your top priorities but living to fight for a better deal another day. It was a textbook picture of the way American democratic politics is supposed to work, until it didn't work at all.

In February 2024, during the run-up to a presidential election that was turning out to be, at least in part, a referendum on his handling of the southern U.S. border, President Joe Biden had given up on trying to pass the Democrats' preferred immigration policies. He was anxious to get a handle on a problem that had long resisted a political solution: he had proposed his own wish list legislation in 2021 but it went nowhere in a divided Congress. Polls showed that Americans were concerned about the border and Republicans had waged a relentless and effective campaign to keep it at the top of their minds. Biden wanted to solve a crisis that was getting completely out of hand, he wanted to

Dave Whamond, Cartoon Stock

respond to the growing public concern, and he *really* wanted the issue off the agenda before the campaign heated up.

The people charged with handling immigration at the source—everyone from border patrol agents to those who run the immigration courts that hear the many pleas for political asylum that are overwhelming the system—were severely underfunded. Biden couldn't solve the problems with an executive order even if he wanted to without shaking some money loose. The only way to get the money he needed was through an act of Congress. Republicans in Congress vowed to block every effort to pass an immigration bill unless their stringent requirements for border reform were fully met, but those reforms would essentially force the closing of the border with only a trickle of immigrants allowed through—the very opposite of what the diversity-loving Democrats stood for. Republicans accused Democrats of wanting an open border and while virtually no mainstream Democrats endorsed such a plan, they definitely wanted more immigration than the Republicans wanted, along with a more generous asylum policy—and a path to citizenship for young people who'd been brought to the United States as infants. Republicans were having none of that, and while their majority in the House was whisper-thin, it was still a majority.

Biden looked reality in the eye and conceded to it. In exchange for the emergency funds he needed to act, he would give the Republicans everything they had been asking for. Even more remarkably, he was willing to take the Democrats' demands off the table. It was as pure a win for the Republicans as you get in politics. Some progressive Democrats howled—loudly—but Biden was firm in his support of what he called "the toughest, fairest deal" on immigration that had been agreed to in years. Observers were stunned at the Republicans winning their long-held wish list without any serious conditions and pointed out that if they were serious about the border, this was a deal they should jump on. Even if Donald Trump were to win the presidency in November, he would never be able to get such a restrictive bill passed, because post-election Democrats, having no incentive to cooperate as they had in the pre-election spring, would use the filibuster to block it in the Senate, something they could do even if Republicans succeeded in getting a majority in both houses.

Well. If you were paying any attention to politics in the spring of 2024 you know no such amazing compromise bill ever got passed. With every legislative pathway closed off, Biden ended up trying to patch together border policy with a string of executive orders for stopgap solutions. And candidate Trump, when warned that the best chance of a Republican immigration bill had just slipped away, bragged that he didn't need such a bill because he was willing to be a "dictator on Day One" when the first thing he would do was to shut down the border completely.

In a nutshell, Trump, sidelined from American politics by having lost his bid for the presidency in 2020 and waiting in the wings for a second bite at the apple in November 2024, was functioning as something of a shadow president, lobbying Senate and House Republicans to do his bidding, even when it flew in the face of their own best interests. And when it came to an immigration bill, even one that gave the party most of the things that Trump had long been arguing for, it was his clear wish that the bill be shot down. In the end, it wasn't even close, as most of the party closed ranks to grant his wish; in the process they left out in the cold one of their own, Sen. Jim Lankford, the person tasked by Senate minority leader Mitch McConnell to negotiate the bill on his behalf. Lankford was alone in defending a bill that he had triumphantly won for his party, only to see his party's support evaporate.

What the heck happened here? What was at stake in the issue of immigration that made the Democrats willing to give up almost everything they wanted in order to get a bill passed? What was at stake for the Republicans that made them willing to trade away a triumphant win on an issue they had made, if not their signature policy, at least one of their top priorities, in order to satisfy a presidential candidate who, behind the scenes, most of them disliked? Why were Democrats taking a victory lap, claiming a win not just in the substantive sense that they didn't have to swallow a border policy they didn't want, but in a political sense that they thought would help rather than hurt them in the November election? And why were mainstream Republicans like Mitt Romney furious with their party, calling Trump's action in killing the bill "appalling"?[1] What on earth is at stake with an immigration policy that makes the political world seem to turn upside down, with everyone behaving the opposite of what you would predict? Immigration is a loaded topic for many Americans—all wrapped up with our visions about who we are as a country and whose visions should count. We will return to this intriguing question after we take a closer look at the strange and contentious context of American immigration policy. «

INTRODUCTION

OVER the years, American schoolchildren have grown up hearing two conflicting narratives about who we are as a nation. Neither narrative disputes that we are a nation of immigrants, but they tell very different stories about the consequences of immigration. The first, that we are a melting pot, implies that the United States is a vast cauldron into which go many cultures and ethnicities, all of which are boiled down into some sort of homogenized American stew, with each bite tasting more or less the same as the next. The other origin story, so to speak, is that we are a multicultural nation, a crazy salad, to preserve the food metaphor, of separate ingredients, in which each individual ethnic and religious identity should be preserved and honored, lest its distinctive nature and flavor be lost. The first vision sees diversity, the effect of immigration, as something that should ideally disappear, leaving only generic "Americans"; the other sees diversity as worthy of recognition and celebration, the role of immigrant a status to be proud of and preserved. We learned in Chapter 1 that "winning the narrative battle," getting one's preferred narrative accepted as the "true" story, is a form of political power, and that is certainly the case with the American struggle over immigration and diversity. Not surprisingly, as typically happens, neither of the contested narratives provides a single portrait of reality—rather, each captures some aspect of the real world and emphasizes the interpretation that is consistent with its values, somewhere between the two extremes.

The perspective of this textbook, with its focus on the *who*, what, and how of American politics, considers the rich diversity of its people to be one of the United States' greatest strengths, combining talents, tradition, culture, and custom from every corner of the world. Just to take one example, almost half of the current *Fortune* 500 (*Fortune* magazine's list of the nation's richest companies) were founded by immigrants or their kids. But our diversity has also contributed to some of the nation's deepest conflicts. We cannot possibly understand the drama that is American politics without an in-depth look at *who* the actors are that in many ways shape the *what* and *how* of politics.

Politics—what we want from government and how we try to get it—stems from who we are. Understanding where American citizens have come from and what they have brought with them, what their lives look like and how they spend their time and money, and what they believe and how they act on those beliefs is critically important to understanding what they choose to fight for politically and how they elect to carry out the fight. As a nation, we have a choice to include those groups with their own stories as valued parts of the national narrative, or to face the tumult of **identity politics**—political conflicts based on the claims of groups who feel their interests are being ignored or undervalued because of who they are. Identity politics includes not just new immigrant groups but also white Americans whose families have long been here and who see the waves of new immigrants, especially immigrants of color, as threats to their status. In a mediated world, every one of those groups has a chance to speak out and try to create a compelling narrative.

Since we cannot, of course, meet all the Americans out there, we settle for the next best thing: statistics, which provide us with relevant details about a large and complex population. Throughout this book we use statistics, in the form of charts and graphs, to examine the demographic trends that shape our national culture—political and otherwise. We'll use this information not only to understand better who we are but also to consider how the characteristics, habits, and lives of real people relate to the political issues that shape our society.

In this chapter's *Snapshot of America*, you will see that our population is changing. Older people, whose pensions and nursing home care must be funded, compete for scarce resources with younger families, who want better schools and health care for children, and with college students, who want cheaper educations and better terms for their loans and who have a longer term investment in how we care for the environment. The white population in the United States will soon be outnumbered by ethnic and racial minority populations that traditionally support affirmative action, changes in law enforcement, immigration reform, and other social policies (less popular with white people) designed to protect them and raise them up from the lower end of the socioeconomic scale (see *Snapshot of America: Who Are We and Who Will We Be by 2060?*). As a result of these demographic changes, the prospect of becoming a minority population has some white people feeling threatened and fearful about the future of the country, sometimes feeling like strangers in their own towns.[2] Our population is in constant flux, and every change in the makeup of the people brings a change in what we try to get from government and how we try to get it.

As you look at these depictions of the American people and American life, try to imagine the political complexities that arise from such incredible diversity. How can a single government represent the interests of people with such varied backgrounds, needs, and preferences? How does who we are affect what we want and how we go about getting it?

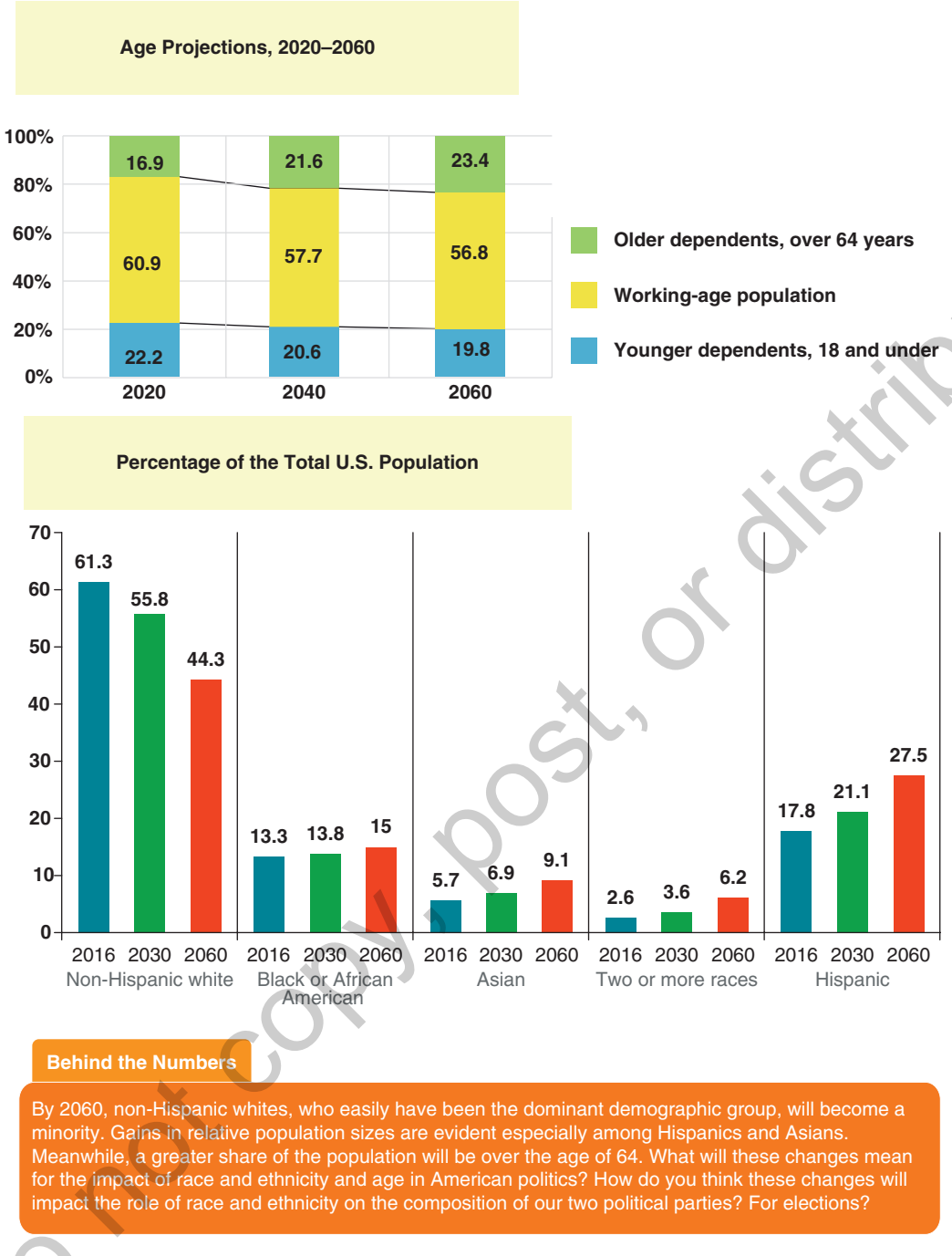
In Your Own Words 2.1 Identify the two conflicting origin narratives of the United States as a nation.

WHO IS AN AMERICAN?

Native-born and naturalized citizens

In Chapter 1, we said that citizenship exacts obligations from individuals and also confers rights on them. We saw that the American concept of citizenship contains both self-interested and public-spirited elements and is challenged in new ways by the mediated lives we live. But citizenship is not only a

Snapshot of America: *Who Are We and Who Will We Be by 2060?*



Behind the Numbers

By 2060, non-Hispanic whites, who easily have been the dominant demographic group, will become a minority. Gains in relative population sizes are evident especially among Hispanics and Asians. Meanwhile, a greater share of the population will be over the age of 64. What will these changes mean for the impact of race and ethnicity and age in American politics? How do you think these changes will impact the role of race and ethnicity on the composition of our two political parties? For elections?

Sources: Jonathan Vespa, Lauren Medina, and David M. Armstrong, "Demographic Turning Points for the United States: Population Projections for 2020 to 2060," Tables 1 and 3, U.S. Census Bureau, https://www.census.gov/content/dam/Census/library/publications/2020/demo/p25-1144.pdf.

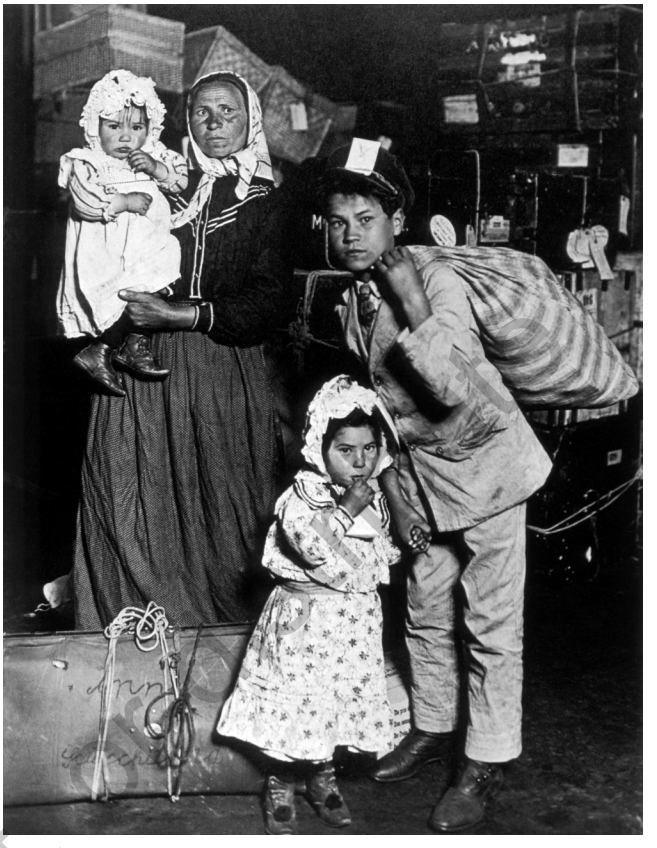
prescription for how governments ought to treat residents and how those residents ought to act; it is also a very precise legal status. A fundamental element of democracy is not just the careful specification of the rights and obligations of citizenship but also an equally careful legal description of just who is a citizen and how that status can be acquired by immigrants who choose to switch their allegiance to a new country. In this section we look at the legal definition of American citizenship and at the long history of immigration that has shaped our body politic.

Should it be possible to lose one's citizenship under any circumstances?

AMERICAN CITIZENSHIP

American citizens are usually born, not made. If you are born in any of the fifty states or in most overseas U.S. territories, such as Puerto Rico or Guam, you are an American citizen, whether your parents are Americans or not and whether they are here legally or not. This follows the principle of international law called *jus soli*, which means literally "the right of the soil." According to another legal principle, *jus sanguinis* ("the right by blood"), if you are born outside the United States to American parents, you are also an American citizen (or you can become one if you are adopted by American parents). Interestingly, if you are born in the United States but one of your parents holds citizenship in another country, you may be able to hold dual citizenship, depending on that country's laws. Requirements for U.S. citizenship, particularly as they affect people born outside the country, have changed frequently over time.

Since before its birth America has been attractive to **immigrants**, who are citizens or subjects of another country who come here to live and work. If these immigrants come here legally on permanent resident visas—that is, if they follow the rules and regulations of the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS)—they may be eligible to apply for citizenship through a process called **naturalization**. Although almost all American citizens have descended from immigrants or were themselves immigrants, they have, ironically, clamored for strict limits on who else can come in behind them (see this chapter's *The Big Picture*).



Seeking the American Dream

Anna Schiacchitano arrives at Ellis Island from Sicily in 1908 with her children Paolo, Mary, and infant Domenico, intending to join Anna's husband, Giovanni Gustozzo, in Scranton, Pennsylvania. Stories similar to theirs fill the family trees of many Americans.

Universal History Archive/Getty Images

NONIMMIGRANTS

Many people who come to the United States do not come as legal permanent residents. The USCIS refers to these people as nonimmigrants. Some arrive seeking **asylum**, or protection. These are political **refugees**, who are allowed into the United States if they face or are threatened with persecution because of their race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group, or political opinions. As we see in the continuing debate about whether Syrian and other Muslim refugees from Middle Eastern strife should be allowed into the United States, who can be considered a refugee is very much a political decision, and one that can raise security concerns. The USCIS requires that the fear of persecution be "well founded," and the agency itself the final judge of a well-founded fear. Refugees may become legal permanent residents after they have lived here continuously for one year (although there are annual limits on the number who may do so). At that time, they can begin accumulating the in-residence time required to become a citizen, if they wish to do so.

Other people who may come to the United States legally but without official permanent resident status include visitors, foreign government officials, students, international representatives, temporary workers, members of foreign media, and exchange visitors. These people are expected to return to their home countries and not take up permanent residence in the United States.

Undocumented immigrants have arrived here by avoiding the USCIS regulations, usually because they would not qualify for one reason or another. Many come as children and may not even know they do not have the proper papers. American laws have become increasingly harsh with respect to undocumented immigrants, but for years that did not stop them from coming in search of a better life. Even before the 2016 election of President Trump, with his harsh anti-immigrant rhetoric, levels of undocumented immigration had actually fallen off, although this fact does not fit well with one of the prevailing narratives about the issue that says we are being overrun by unsavory people crossing the border illegally.[3] In particular, more Mexicans have been leaving the United States, generally to reunite with their families, than have been seeking to enter it.[4] The COVID pandemic took the issue of immigration out of partisan politics to some extent as health concerns about immigration overrode political agendas. For a while it wasn't safe for anyone to travel anywhere.

Even people who are not legal permanent residents of the United States have rights and responsibilities here, just as

Americans do when they travel in other countries. The rights that immigrants enjoy are primarily legal protections; they are entitled to due process in the courts (guarantee of a fair trial, right to a lawyer, and so on), and the U.S. Supreme Court has ruled that it is illegal to discriminate against immigrants in the United States.[5] Nevertheless, their rights are limited. They cannot, for instance, vote in our national elections (although some communities allow them to vote in local elections[6]) or decide to live here permanently without permission. In addition, immigrants, even legal ones, are subject to the decisions of the USCIS, which is empowered by Congress to exercise authority in immigration matters.

Harley Schwadron, Cartoon Stock

U.S. IMMIGRATION POLICY

Immigration law is generally made by Congress with the approval of the president. In the wake of September 11, 2001, security issues came to play a central role in deciding who may enter the country, and new legislation took the federal agency tasked with implementing immigration law out of the Department of Justice, where it was located at the time. The new agency, named the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, was placed under the jurisdiction of the newly formed Department of Homeland Security. But still, it is Congress' job to make the laws, and the executive department's to enforce them. One side can't really act very effectively without the other.

Whom to Admit. No country, not even the huge United States, can manage to absorb every impoverished or threatened global resident who wants a better or safer life. Deciding whom to admit is a political decision—like all political decisions, it results in winners and losers. Especially when times are tough, **nativism**, or the belief that the needs of a nation's own citizens ought to be met before those of immigrants, can take on political force, as it did in Trump's presidential campaign in 2016.

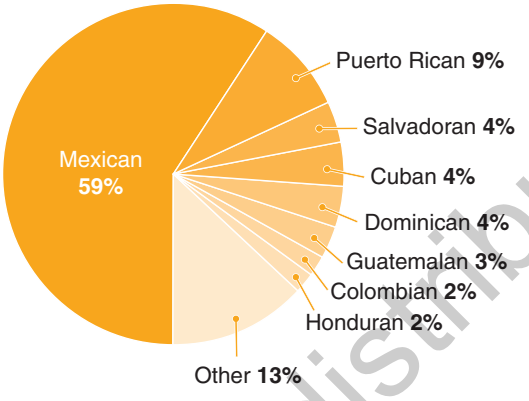
For instance, jobs are just the sort of scarce resource over which political battles are fought. If times are good and unemployment is low, newcomers, who are often willing to do jobs Americans reject in prosperous times, may be welcomed with open arms. When the economy hits hard times, immigration can become a bitter issue among jobless Americans. It's also the case that immigrants, especially the very young and the very old, are large consumers of social services and community resources. Immigrants do contribute to the economy through their labor and their taxes, but because immigrants are distributed disproportionately throughout the population, some areas find their social service systems more burdened than others, and immigration can be a much more controversial issue in places where immigrants settle. In addition, large numbers of immigrants can change the demographic balance, as we have already seen by the fact that white people will be a minority group in this country by 2050. (See *Snapshot of America: What Do Our Two Largest Immigrant Groups Look Like?*) For some people, being a part of the majority is a status and a source of political power worth fighting for. We will see how all these ideas play out in immigration politics and, especially, how they provide the context for the strange political choices that played out in our *What's at Stake . . . in Solving Our Border Crisis?*

Nations typically want to admit immigrants who can do things the country's citizens are unable or unwilling to do. During and after World War II, when the United States wanted to develop a rocket program, German scientists with the necessary expertise were desirable immigrants. At times in our history when our labor force was insufficient for the demands of industrialization and railroad building and when western states wanted larger populations, immigrants were welcomed. Today, immigration law allows for temporary workers to come to work in agriculture when our own labor force falls short or is unwilling to work for low wages. As a rule, however, our official immigration policy expects immigrants to be skilled and financially stable so that they do not become a burden on the American social services system. Remember that politics is about how power and resources are distributed in society; who gets to consume government services is a hotly contested issue.

Snapshot of America: *What Do Our Two Largest Immigrant Groups Look Like?*

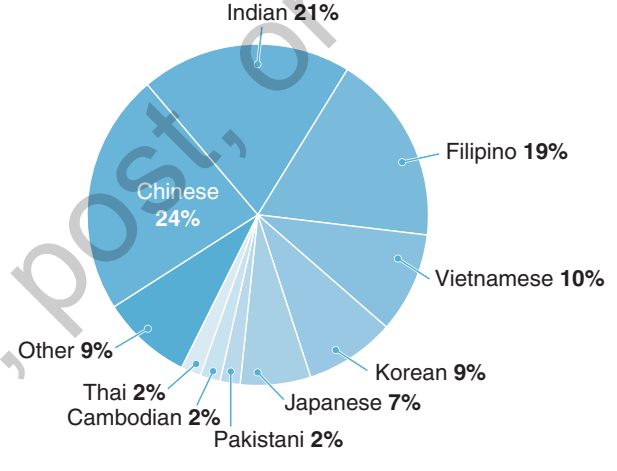
Latino Immigrants

The majority (67%) of Latinos living in the U.S. were born here. **33% are foreign born.**



Asian Immigrants

49% of Asians living in the U.S. were born here. **The majority (51%) are foreign born.**



Behind the Numbers

America is changing. Looking toward the future, we will see growth in the numbers of Asians and Latinos. Will diversity within these groups affect their political cohesion? How will whites, the traditional majority, adapt to their coming minority status?

Sources: Jens Manuel Krogstad, Jeffrey S. Passel, Mohamad Moslimani, and Luis Noe-Bustamante, "Key Facts About U.S. Latinos for National Hispanic Heritage Month," Pew Research Center, September 22, 2023, https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2023/09/22/key-facts-about-us-latinos-for-national-hispanic-heritage-month/; and Abby Budiman and Neil G. Ruiz, "Key Facts About Asian Origin Groups in the U.S.," Pew Research Center, April 29, 2021, https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2021/04/29/key-facts-about-asian-origin-groups-in-the-u-s/.

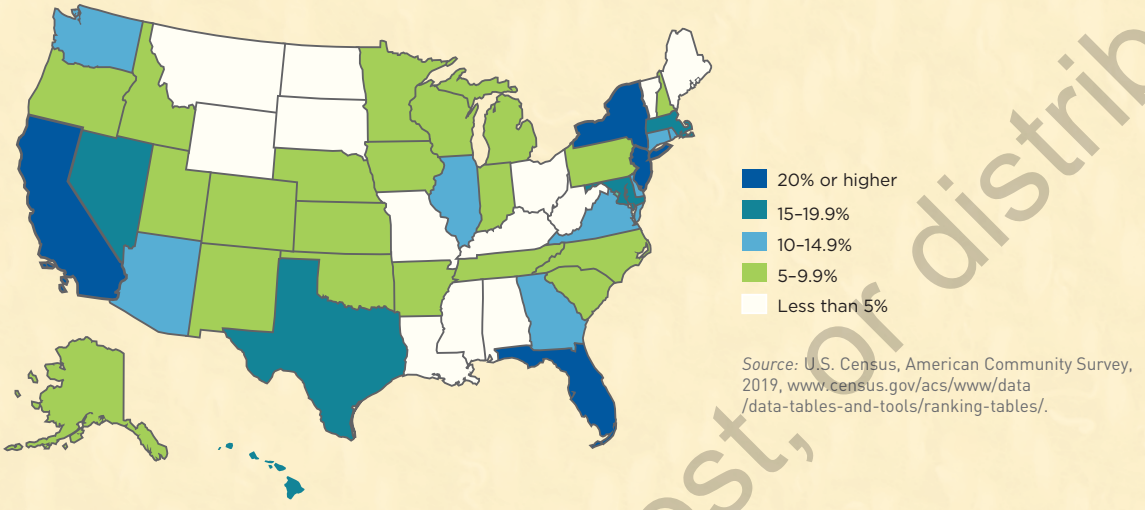
Regulating the Border. Some areas of the country, particularly those near the Mexico–U.S. border, like Texas and California, have had serious problems brought on by unregulated immigration. This is one reason undocumented immigration is a hot-button issue, and one of the reasons why, starting in 2022, Governors Greg Abbott (Texas) and Ron DeSantis (Florida) staged some dramatic transfers of immigrants, newly arrived in Texas, up to northern cities like Martha's Vineyard, New York, Washington D.C., and Denver. As we note, immigration doesn't affect all areas of the country the same, and it is also true that most regions are pretty ignorant about what the others go through. In border areas, communities can find themselves swamped with new residents, often poor

THE BIG PICTURE:

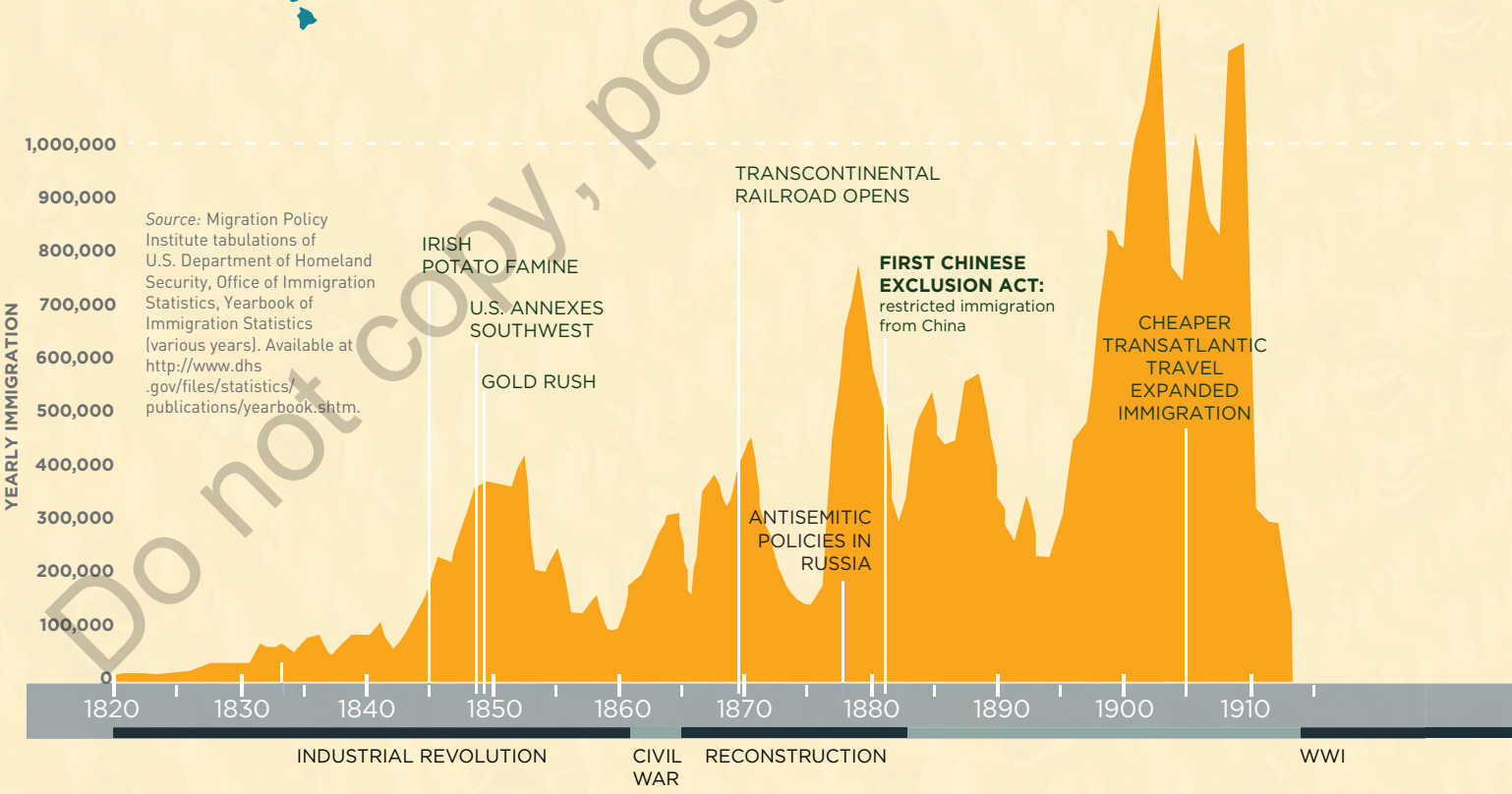
How Immigration Has Changed the Face of America

Immigration to the United States reflects both historical events outside our borders and policy decisions made within them. Each wave of arrivals triggered public anxiety about changing demographics, prompting policies that limited the number of incoming immigrants and often targeted specific ethnic or racial groups. We may be a nation of immigrants, but immigrants assimilate quickly, often closing the door behind them.

Foreign-Born Population as a Percentage of State Population: 2019

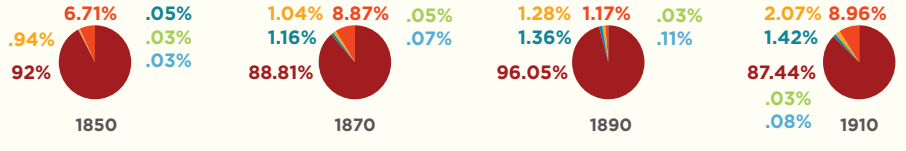


Source: U.S. Census, American Community Survey, 2019, www.census.gov/acs/www/data/data-tables-and-tools/ranking-tables/.

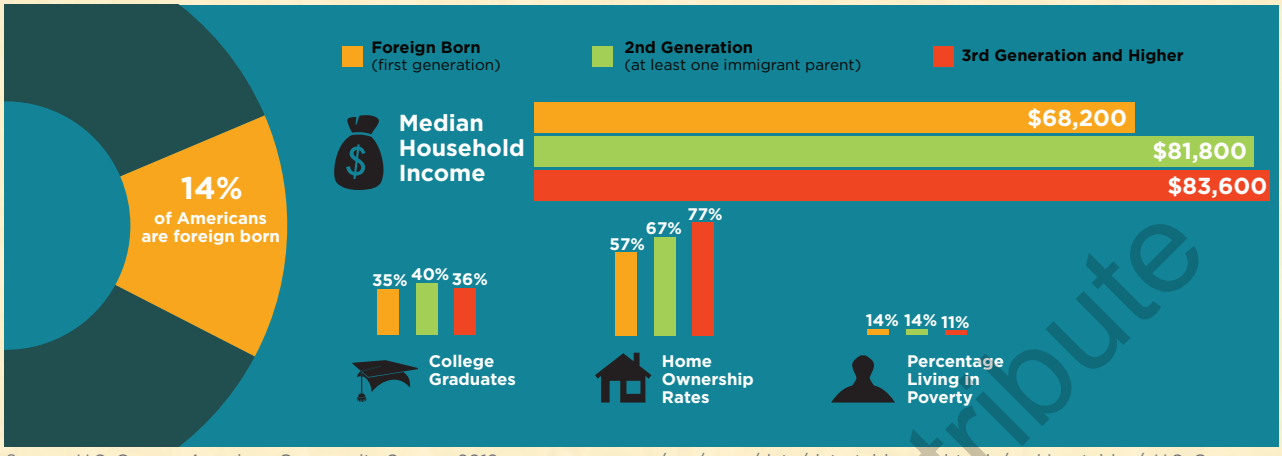


Source: Migration Policy Institute tabulations of U.S. Department of Homeland Security, Office of Immigration Statistics, Yearbook of Immigration Statistics (various years). Available at http://www.dhs.gov/files/statistics/publications/yearbook.shtm.

Where Have Immigrants Come From?



How Immigrants Fare in Successive Generations

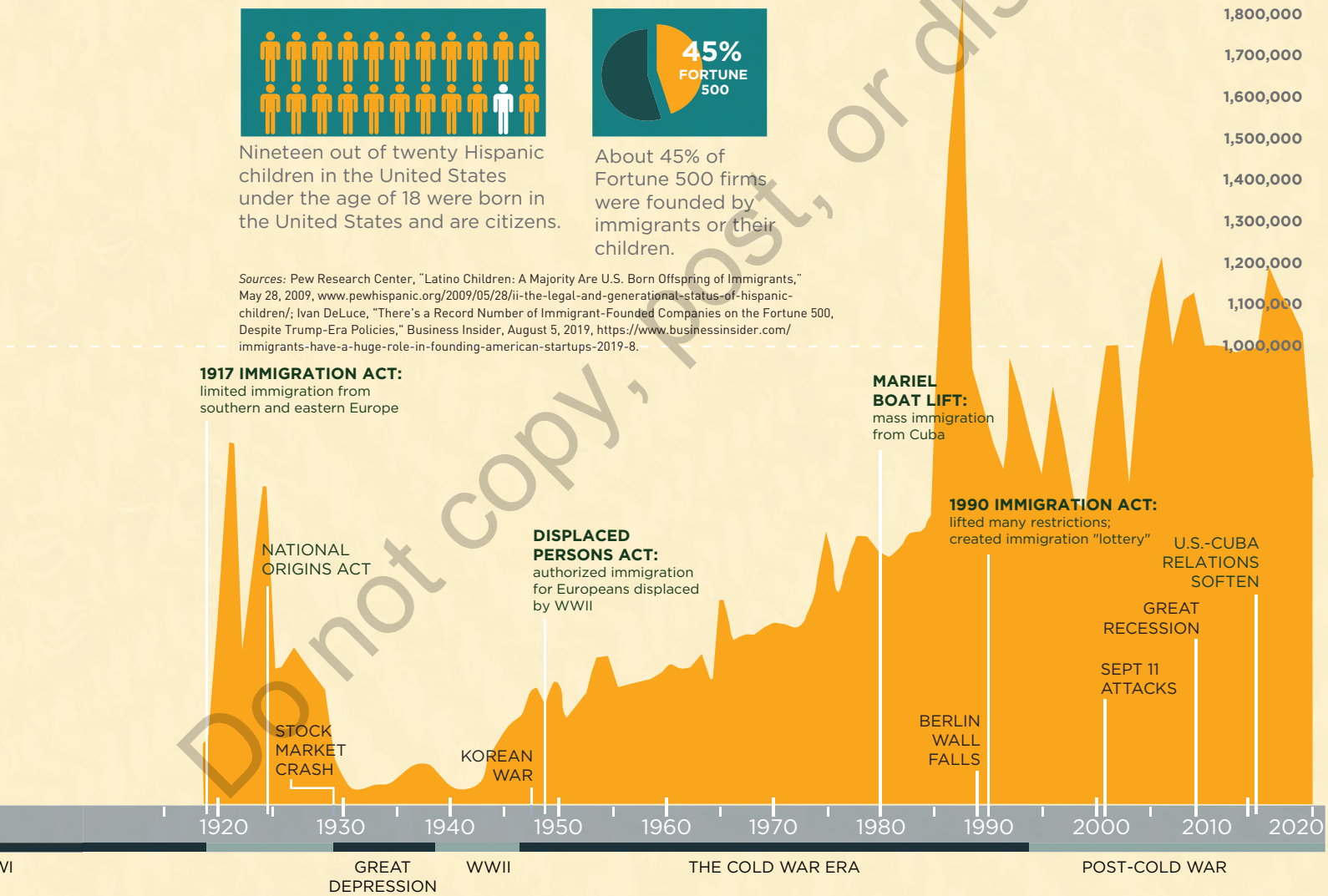


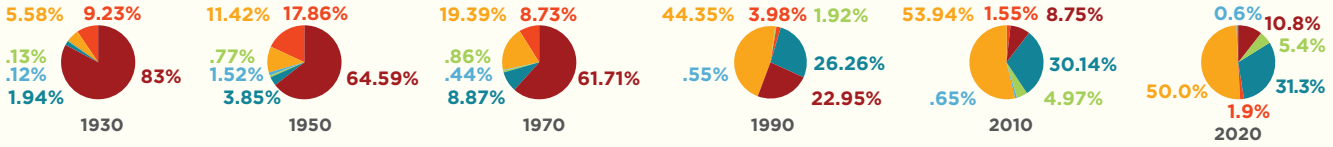
Sources: U.S. Census, American Community Survey, 2019, www.census.gov/acs/www/data/data-tables-and-tools/ranking-tables/; U.S. Census Bureau, Foreign Born: 2019 Current Population Survey, https://www.census.gov/data/tables/2019/demo/foreign-born/cps-2019.html

Nineteen out of twenty Hispanic children in the United States under the age of 18 were born in the United States and are citizens.

About 45% of Fortune 500 firms were founded by immigrants or their children.

Sources: Pew Research Center, "Latino Children: A Majority Are U.S. Born Offspring of Immigrants," May 28, 2009, www.pewhispanic.org/2009/05/28/ii-the-legal-and-generational-status-of-hispanic-children/; Ivan DeLuce, "There's a Record Number of Immigrant-Founded Companies on the Fortune 500, Despite Trump-Era Policies," Business Insider, August 5, 2019, https://www.businessinsider.com/immigrants-have-a-huge-role-in-founding-american-startups-2019-8.





and unskilled. Because their children must be educated and they themselves may be entitled to receive social services, they can pose a significant financial burden on those communities. Some undocumented immigrants work off the books, meaning they do not contribute to the tax base. Furthermore, most federal taxes are distributed back to states and localities to fund social services based on the population count in the U.S. Census. Since undocumented immigrants are understandably reluctant to come forward to be counted in the Census, their communities are typically underfunded in that respect as well, with more people needing services than the official population count would entitle them to.

At the same time, a good many undocumented immigrants act just like citizens, obeying laws, paying taxes, and sending their children to school. Some have lived here for decades, perhaps since they were children themselves, and their own children and grandchildren may be citizens. They have built lives and they are well integrated into their communities, which makes the prospect and challenge of finding and repatriating them a formidable one for those who believe that is the best political solution. The sheer magnitude of the job is also why many others think providing some sort of amnesty or path to citizenship is a more practical solution to their existence here.

Whether motivated by cultural stereotypes, global events, or domestic economic circumstances, Americans have decided at times that we have allowed "enough" immigrants to settle here, or that we are admitting too many of the "wrong" kind of immigrants, and we have encouraged politicians to enact restrictions. When this happens, narratives emerge in which immigrants are scapegoated for the nation's problems and demonized as a threat to American culture. This occurred from 1882 to 1943 with Chinese immigrants and in the late 1800s and early 1900s with southern and eastern Europeans. Legislation in the 1920s limited immigration by creating a quota system that favored the northern and western nationalities, seen as more desirable immigrants.[7] Today's debate over undocumented immigration taps into some of the same emotions and passions as earlier efforts to limit legal immigration.

Congress abolished the existing immigration quota system in 1965 with the Immigration and Nationality Act. This act doubled the number of people allowed to enter the country, set limits on immigration from the Western Hemisphere, and made it easier for families to join members who had already immigrated. More open borders meant immigration was increasingly hard to control. Reacting to the waves of undocumented immigrants who entered the country in the 1970s and 1980s, Congress passed the Immigration Reform and Control Act in 1986, granting amnesty to undocumented immigrants who had entered before 1982 and attempting to tighten controls on those who came after. Although this law included sanctions for those who hired undocumented immigrants, people continued to cross the border illegally from Mexico looking for work. The 1965 act was reformed with the Immigration Act of 1990, which, among other things, admitted even more immigrants. In the 1990s, legislation under President Bill Clinton strengthened the power of the Immigration and Naturalization Service (the precursor to the USCIS).

Immigration Law Today. As we saw in this chapter's *What's at Stake . . . ?* feature, the immigration debate has in recent years come to be defined by the tension between two opposing political camps. On the one hand are those who seek to grapple with the issue of the estimated 10.5 million undocumented immigrants already in this country as of 2021 (at 3 percent, the lowest share of the entire U.S. population since the 1990s[8]), and the demands of American business for the cheap labor that immigrants provide; on the other hand are those who prioritize the rule of law, at least on this matter, and believe undocumented immigrants should be sent home and the borders tightened against the arrival of any more. Although under Barack Obama's administration, deportations of undocumented workers, especially those with criminal backgrounds, rose sharply, Obama tried hard to get Congress to pass immigration reform, especially the Development, Relief, and Education for Alien Minors (DREAM) Act. This policy would have granted relief to young adults who were brought here without documentation as children. Unwilling to leave the job unfinished, Obama decided to take executive action. In 2012, he announced the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) policy that allowed children brought in without documentation to apply for a two-year, renewable exemption from deportation during which time they would be eligible for work permits.

Republicans have long been less friendly to immigration, especially of people from south of the border, than the Democrats, partly from their conviction that, if they become citizens and acquire the vote, they are going to vote for Democrats and so allowing them in is to lead to their own immigration out-numbering. Perhaps because of this, many Republicans were receptive to Trump's harsh views about immigrants when he forced his way on to the political stage in the run-up to the 2016 election.

In fact, Trump opened his campaign for the presidency in 2015 with a dramatic descent down an escalator in Trump Tower, followed by a speech best remembered for the words denouncing immigration: "When Mexico sends its people, they're not sending their best. . . . They're sending people that have lots of problems, and they're bringing those problems with us. They're bringing drugs. They're bringing crime. They're rapists. And some, I assume, are good people." He followed that up by vowing to build a "huge, beautiful wall" between the United States and Mexico, and forcing Mexico to pay for it. By the 2018 midterm elections, he was warning that foreign caravans filled with terrorists and murderers were coming north to "invade our borders." And when he ran for office again in 2024, he was prepared to go even harsher. Talking of a young woman who had been murdered by an immigrant who had broken the law to come here,

Trump was prepared to dehumanize an entire group of people. He said, "The Democrats say, 'Please don't call them animals. They're humans.' I said, 'No, they're not humans, they're not humans, they're animals."[9] At other times he has said they are poisoning the blood of our country and used other phrases that sound like they come straight from a Nazi playbook.

Opposition to undocumented immigration was a cornerstone of all three of Trump's campaigns for office and of his presidential rhetoric. For many of his supporters, the building of a wall along the southern border was meant to be a visual sign that the United States was serious about cracking down on undocumented entrants, even though it was not clear that a wall had more than symbolic value. Still, Trump made funding the wall and stricter laws on *legal* as well as illegal immigration the price of his support for immigration reform. He said he wanted to limit the number of family members legal immigrants could bring in with them (so-called chain migration) and limit the number of immigrants from what he called "shithole" countries, referring to Haiti and the nations of Africa. Although he initially said he would support the DREAM Act, as we noted in *What's at Stake . . . ?* he tried to end DACA in 2017. In 2018, the District Court in Washington, D.C., said that the program had to resume taking applications and that ruling was upheld in November 2020.[10] As of this writing, DACA stays in place. In June 2020, the Supreme Court held in *Trump v. NAACP* that the reasoning behind the administration's efforts to eliminate DACA were arbitrary. Under the ruling, DACA was allowed to stand, a policy the Biden administration favors.

Many people on the fringe right of this country subscribed to a conspiracy theory that Democrats were encouraging immigration from Spanish-speaking countries south of our border in order to create more Democratic voters and win elections; Trump gladly became a proponent of this theory, often called the "Great Replacement Theory," which white supremacists around the world, reacting to large numbers of mostly brown-skinned immigrants migrating from underdeveloped regions had fostered for some time. But while the Great Replacement Theory thrived in the fringes, under Trump it had edged into his party's mainstream, where it found a receptive audience among people fed a steady diet of immigration horror stories by right-wing media. Right-wing commentators like Tucker Carlson, who eventually proved too controversial even for his Fox News employers, reveled in trash-talking immigration, saying that "it makes our own country poorer, and dirtier, and more divided."[11]

In fact, it was not unusual in the 2024 presidential campaign to hear Trump claim that "illegals" were being allowed into the country and immediately signed up to vote by Democrats, echoing a claim he had made in 2016 that if five million undocumented immigrant had not voted in the election, he would have won the popular vote—not Hillary Clinton. **Fact check**: five million undocumented immigrants did not vote in the 2016 election, and there is no evidence that even *five* undocumented immigrants had done so. Nonetheless, in 2024, at Trump's urging, Speaker of the House Mike Johnson introduced a bill to prevent noncitizens from voting in federal elections—something that is already illegal and which, again, there is no evidence of actually happening anywhere. Asked about it, Johnson said "We all know—intuitively—that a lot of illegals are voting in federal elections. But it's not been something that is easily provable."[12] **Fact check**: it's not provable because it isn't true. In the wake of the 2020 presidential election, every claim of voting impropriety was scrutinized and efforts were made to confirm them. The few isolated incidents of voter fraud were by U.S. citizens and were as likely to be committed by Republicans as Democrats.

You can see why the debate about immigration resonates so viscerally with Americans. For those who support immigration, the rhetoric reduces immigrants to subhuman status and sounds like the language that has been used to justify genocide in other countries. For those who oppose

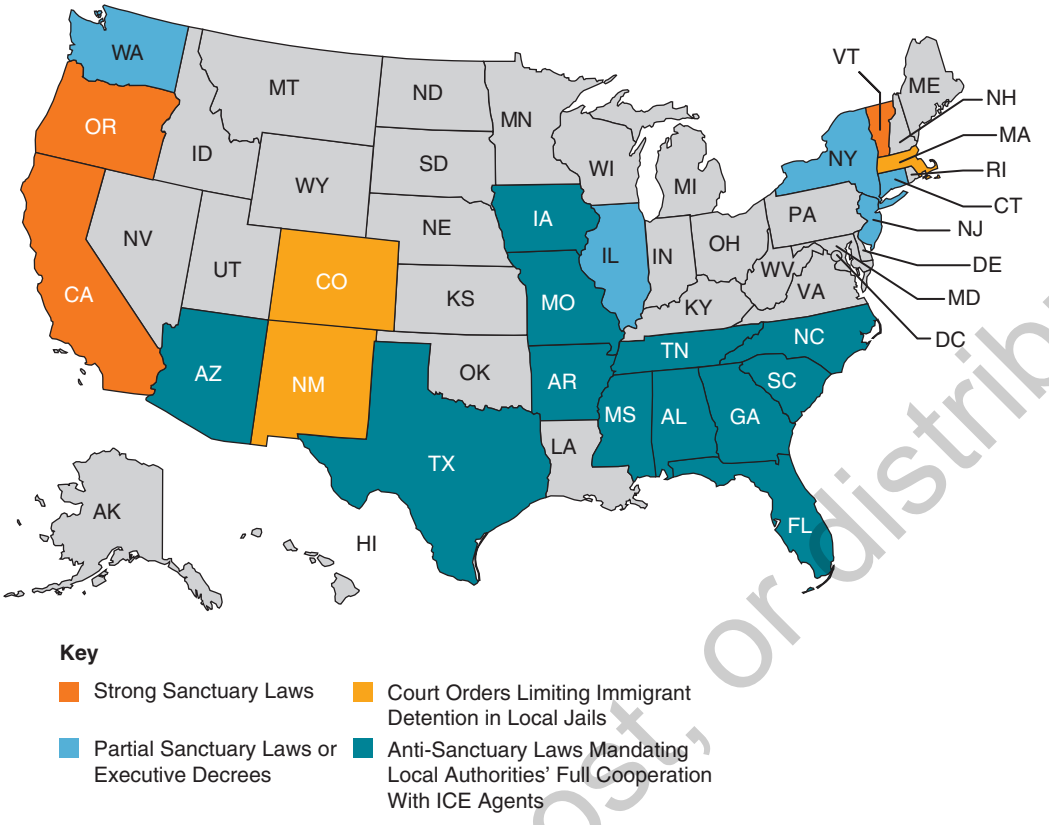
Support and Defend

An immigrant from Haiti, Alix Schoelcher Idrache earned his citizenship while serving in the Maryland National Guard before being accepted into the nation's most prestigious military school. This photo, capturing his intense emotion during commencement at West Point in 2016, quickly went viral.

U.S. Army Photo by Staff Sgt. Vito T Bryant (West Point)

MAP 2.1

Sanctuary and Anti-Sanctuary States



Over the objections of the federal government, some states, and many cities and counties, have passed laws limiting local authorities' obligation to cooperate with immigration officials (Immigration and Customs Enforcement, or ICE). In reaction, other jurisdictions have passed laws making cooperation with ICE mandatory. The legality of these strong differences among the states and localities will be decided by the courts, or perhaps by Congress if it can manage to put together a comprehensive immigration policy.

Source: Adapted from Jack Herrera, "No One Agrees on the Map of Sanctuary States. We Made One Anyway," *Pacific Standard,* May 3, 2019, https://psmag.com/social-justice/no-one-agrees-on-the-map-of-sanctuary-states-we-made-one-anyway.

immigration, it feels like a dark and hostile threat to their own status as part of the majority group in society, making it easy to believe that people who look different and speak a different language might be harboring the same ill will to Americans that these Americans harbor toward them.

Some state and local governments resisted the Trump administration's efforts by creating sanctuary cities where local officials do not have to comply with the federal effort to deport undocumented workers. Approximately three hundred states, cities, and local governments have declared themselves to be sanctuaries (see Map 2.1). The Supreme Court made clear in a 2012 Arizona case that although a state was within its rights to require police officers to verify the status of people they had reason to believe were here illegally, it could not infringe on the federal right to set immigration policy.[13] When Trump tried to defund sanctuary cities by executive order, however, several federal judges said such action was unconstitutional.

Under the Biden administration, those federal issues got flipped on their head. Although Republicans refused to cooperate with Biden in tightening up the border by legislative means, there were several state and local efforts to take immigration matters into their own hands. Here, too, courts have weighed in, pointing out where federal and state responsibility lie. As we will see in Chapter 4, federalism issues can be very complicated, even when politicians are not being disingenuous about their beliefs.

Although the reasons for declaring a locality to be a sanctuary city are generally humanitarian, there can be an awareness of economic consequences as well. One Alabama study, for instance, found that in the wake of the passage of a strict immigration bill, 40,000 to 80,000 workers had left the state, reducing demand for goods and services and costing the state between 70,000 and 140,000 jobs.[14] But the economic effects of immigration often get lost in the debate over what America should look like and who should decide. Economic data

shows that in the years since the pandemic, immigration has helped fill gaps in employment, keeping jobs filled that would have otherwise been vacant and fueling high levels of economic growth. Although the effects of inflation still linger, they are lower in the United States than elsewhere in the world, and the U.S. economy has recovered more quickly than other countries. Had efforts to restrain immigration here been in effect after the pandemic, it's likely that our economy would still be facing the challenges that are being felt around the globe.[15]

Pause and Review

Who, What, How 2.1 There are competing narratives about how immigrants are assimilated into American society—one sees them blending into a melting pot, the other sees a crazy salad of diversity. Which narrative you accept has real implications for your stance on immigration issues, and those issues have high political and humanitarian stakes.

For non-Americans who are threatened or impoverished in their native countries, the stakes are sanctuary, prosperity, and an improved quality of life, which they seek to gain through acquiring asylum or by becoming legal or undocumented immigrants. People who are already American citizens have a stake here as well. At issue is the desire to be sensitive to humanitarian concerns, as well as to fill gaps in the nation's pool of workers and skills, and to meet the needs of current citizens. These often-conflicting goals are turned into law by policymakers in Congress and the White House, and their solutions are implemented by the bureaucracy of the USCIS.

In Your Own Words 2.2 Analyze the role of immigration and the meaning of citizenship in U.S. politics.

THE IDEAS THAT UNITE US

A common culture based on shared values

Making a single nation out of such a diverse people is no easy feat. It has been possible only because, despite all our differences, most Americans have shared some fundamental attitudes and beliefs about how the world works and how it should work. These ideas, our political culture, pull us together and, indeed, provide a framework in which we can also disagree politically without resorting to violence and civil war.

Of course, that statement overlooks the fact that, from 1861 to 1865, the United States was *not* united, as we fought a war that tore the nation apart. The American Civil War happened, in part, because the issue of slavery revealed a fissure in American political culture that had been papered over with the compromises that initially made the republic possible. In the more than one hundred years since the war, we succeeded in repapering over those cracks and acting as a nation but many of the ideas that tore us apart then are becoming visible again as we continue to battle for control over core national narratives.

Political culture refers to the general political orientation or disposition of a nation—the shared values and beliefs about the nature of the political world that give us a common language with which to discuss and debate political ideas. **Values** are ideals or principles that most people agree are important, even if they disagree on exactly how the value—such as "equality" or "freedom"—ought to be defined.

Statements about values and beliefs are not descriptive of how the world actually is, that is, they are not true or false or able to be fact-checked—but rather are prescriptive, or **normative**, statements about how the value-holders believe the world ought to be. Our culture consists of deep-seated, collectively held ideas about how life *should* be lived, and these ideas are handed down through the generations—through the process of *political socialization*, which you will read about in Chapter 11. Normative statements, because they aren't true or false, depend for their worth on the arguments that are made to back them up.

We often take our own culture (that is, our common beliefs about how the world should work) so much for granted that we aren't even aware that we have one. We just think we have the correct outlook and those who live elsewhere are simply mistaken about how things should be done. It's like the philosophical conundrum about whether fish can know they are in water, when water is all that they know. For that reason, it is often easier to see our own political culture by doing what the fish cannot—by getting out of the water of our own certainty that our values are right and natural and comparing our culture to others.

THE FRAGILITY OF POLITICAL CULTURE

Political culture, like the fishes' water, is a shared phenomenon, although, and this is where the fish metaphor falls apart; unlike fish, some individuals certainly find themselves at odds with our political culture. When we say, "Americans think . . . ," we mean that *most* Americans hold those views, not that there is unanimous agreement on them. To the extent that we as Americans get more polarized—that is, to the extent that our political differences get further apart and the channels through which we get information become more easily manipulated—more and more of us may find ourselves at odds with the "accepted" views, and the political culture itself may begin to break down. As the cultural consensus splinters, we risk losing the common language within which we can express disagreements and which allows us to settle our differences through conventional political means (compromise, cooperation, negotiation, etc.).

You may have heard the phrase "culture wars" used to describe the political battles that Americans engage in. **Culture wars** are battles not just over how to solve a problem but also over whether and how to define something as a problem in the first place. They are battles about what kind of people we are and what kind of country we live in; they are battles about the fundamental narratives we tell about what it means to be an American. For example, do we prioritize our Second Amendment rights to own guns at almost all costs or do we put a premium on the protection of schoolchildren and the victims of domestic abuse, even if that means limits on gun rights? Do we value the introduction of Christian values into elementary and secondary educational materials, or do we emphasize instead the importance of separating church and state, a concept that has long been viewed as a cornerstone of American democracy. Is an influx of undocumented immigrants an existential problem that must be solved at any cost, even if it means closing of the border to all immigrants? Or is some undocumented immigration an acceptable price to pay for the economic and cultural benefits that come from a robust immigration policy? Do we value adherence to traditional gender roles and behavior or do we emphasize respect for families with same-sex parents or for those who feel that the gender they were assigned at birth is not the right fit? Do we believe that true Americans should try to minimize their differences with their neighbors in the name of community or do we believe that being American means celebrating those differences? Our responses to these questions say a lot not just about what we think is important but also about who we think "we" are They are called culture wars for many reasons, but the reason we are discussing them here is that they have the same potential seismic impact on political culture that it might have in the fish pond if one group of fish insisted to another "Real fish hate being wet."

For all its potential to tear the fabric of our national cohesion, we toss around the phrase "culture war" awfully casually in political discourse. For some politicians, culture war issues are political winners—they help rally people in defense of whatever it is they are selling, by assuring their supporters that they are the "real" Americans and that they are under threat from those who want to pervert what this country is about. The cost in increased polarization is not a bug of the political manipulation they engage in, it's a feature. If you can make your supporters more likely to vote for you or the things you care about by keeping them in a constant state of fury, then the fact that they hate their fellow Americans is a small price to pay.

Presidents used to run for office in a very predictable way—they ran to their party's ideological base to be nominated, then they ran toward the center of the country to win the general election. Trump threw out that playbook, calculating that if he kept his base frothy enough with anger and resentment, he wouldn't need to appeal to the center to win an election. The narrowness of Donald Trump's 2016 and 2024 victories and of his 2020 loss, and his insistence that all three of his campaigns were landslides of historic proportions, help show us how evenly split (and how far apart) we are, and demonstrate the fragility of the cultural ties that bind us. Each side would like to believe that it is a majority, that the whole country agrees with it, and the truth is we are a 50/50 nation. Our differences may always be present, but when they are stoked and the legitimacy of our system is challenged, we are forcefully reminded that political cultures are neither inevitable nor eternal. If the United States cannot find its way back to shared values, it may instead find its way back to a civil war.

Let's take a look at the American political culture that is currently under stress, and then we can better understand the ideas that are driving us apart.

Scenes from the Culture Wars, Take 1

This photo and the one right after come straight from the front lines of America's culture wars and show people with very different stories to tell. The people here are telling a story that prizes diversity, nonconformity, and an individual's right to author their own narrative. For them, there is no one single way that all people should live their lives, and the American Dream is the freedom to live their lives as they want and not as others dictate. How do the people who see the world defined by this narrative live peacefully with the people who see the world defined in the next photo?

Daniel Knighton/Getty Images

FAITH IN RULES AND INDIVIDUALS

In Chapter 1, we suggested that the American founders were immersed in a philosophical theory called classical liberalism while they were debating and building the foundations of American politics. Designed in part to

Scenes from the Culture Wars, Take 2

This photo like the one before, comes straight from the front lines of America's culture wars and shows people with very different stories to tell. The people in this photo are telling a story focused on the belief that there is one right way to live one's life, raise one's children, and organize society. If there is a correct way to live—a way that almost always focuses on a religious narrative—then any ways of life that deviate from that way are, well, deviant. How do the people who see the world defined by this narrative, live peacefully with the people who see the world defined in the previous photo?

David McNew/Getty Images

undermine and replace the paradigm of the divine right of kings that claimed that people must obey government because it was indistinguishable from the word of God, classical liberalism provided for the opposite. Although the rights and freedoms that citizens possessed were derived from nature, the laws that those rights entitled them to make for themselves were explicitly the product of human beings who could make them because they were rational beings. The determination that people were rational and therefore not dependent on the divine for an understanding of how the world works was the hallmark of Enlightenment thinking, and it opened the door to the scientific method, industrialization, capitalism, democratic self-rule—all so essential to establishing carefully calibrated and defined decision-making processes.

In American political culture, our expectations of government have traditionally focused on rules and processes rather than on results, what we called in Chapter 1 an insistence on **procedural guarantees** rather than substantive outcomes. For example, we think government should guarantee a fair playing field but not guarantee equal results for all the players. We also tend to believe that individuals are responsible for their own choices and welfare and that what is good for them is good for society as a whole, a perspective called **individualism**. American culture is not wholly procedural and individualistic—indeed, differences on these matters constitute some of the major partisan divisions in American politics—but these characteristics are more prominent in the United States than they are in most other nations in the upper-right quadrant of Figure 1.3, we would be located much farther rightward than many other advanced industrial democracies

To illustrate this point, we can compare American culture to some other advanced democracies in that quadrant who might be located farther to the left than we are, the more social democratic cultures of Scandinavia, such as Sweden, Denmark, and Norway. This comparative perspective is our effort to get out of the all-encompassing "water" of our own political culture. In many ways, the United States and the countries in Scandinavia are more similar than they are different: they are all capitalist democracies, and they essentially agree that individuals ought to make most of the decisions about their own lives. We are all in that upper-right quadrant, which rejects substantial government control of both the social order and the economy.

These countries do differ in some important ways, however. All advanced industrial democracies repudiate the wholehearted substantive guarantees of communism, but the Scandinavian countries have a greater tolerance for substantive economic policy than does the more procedural United States. We explore these differences here in more detail so that we can better understand what American culture supports and what it does not.

Procedural Guarantees. As we have noted, when we say that American political culture is procedural, we mean that Americans generally think government should guarantee fair processes—such as a free market to distribute goods, majority rule to make decisions, and due process to determine guilt and innocence—rather than specific outcomes. The social democratic countries of Sweden, Denmark, and Norway, however, as we saw in Chapter 1, believe that government should actively seek to realize the values of equality—perhaps to guarantee a certain quality of life (shelter, jobs, and health) to all citizens or to increase equality of income. Government can then be evaluated by how well it produces those substantive outcomes, not just by how well it guarantees fair processes.

American politics does set some substantive goals for public policy, but Americans are generally more comfortable ensuring that things are done in a fair and proper way, and trusting that the outcomes will be good ones because the rules are fair. Although the American government is involved in social programs and welfare, and it took a small step in a substantive direction with passage of the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act in 2010, it aims more at helping individuals get on their feet so that they can participate in the market

(fair procedures) than at cleaning up slums or eliminating poverty (substantive goals).

Individualism. The individualistic nature of American political culture means that individuals are seen as responsible for their own well-being. This contrasts with a collectivist point of view, which gives government or society some responsibility for individual welfare, and holds that what is good for society may not be the same as what is in the interest of individuals. When Americans are asked by the government to make economic sacrifices, like paying taxes, such requests tend to be unpopular and more modest than in most other countries (even though Americans often give privately, generously, and voluntarily to causes in which they believe). A collective interest that supersedes individual interests is generally invoked in the United States only in times of war or national crisis. People initially responded to the COVID-19 crisis by staying home and trying to protect each other by wearing masks. But the issue of masks and, soon, vaccinations became politicized by media figures and politicians appealing to our individualistic values (our right to not be told what to do with our bodies), and we soon left our homes, maskless and unvaccinated, in sufficient numbers to cause multiple waves of illness. This echoes the two American notions of self-interested and public-interested citizenship we discussed in Chapter 1.

For contrast, let's look again at the Scandinavian countries, which tend to have more collectivist political cultures. In fact, one reason Scandinavians have more substantive social policies than are found in the United States is because they have a sense of themselves as a collective whole: to help one is to help all. They value *solidarity*, a sense of group identification and unity that allows them to entertain policies we would not consider. For example, at one time, Sweden used pension funds to help equalize the wages of workers so that more profitable and less profitable industries would be more equal, and society, according to the Swedish view, would be better off. Americans would reject this policy as violating their belief in individualism (and proceduralism, as well). Interestingly, Sweden flew in the face of conventional scientific wisdom during the pandemic and emphasized individual freedom and voluntary compliance over government enforcement of safety measures (except for vulnerable populations like nursing homes). Mask mandates were not imposed, schools did not shut down completely and many businesses were open. Surprising most international observers, the number of COVID-related deaths in Sweden were smaller than in other similar European countries. The difference in approach was driven not by cultural dictates as much as by really superior understanding of public health policy.

CORE AMERICAN VALUES: DEMOCRACY, FREEDOM, AND EQUALITY

We can see our American procedural and individualistic perspective when we examine the different meanings of three core American values: democracy, freedom, and equality.

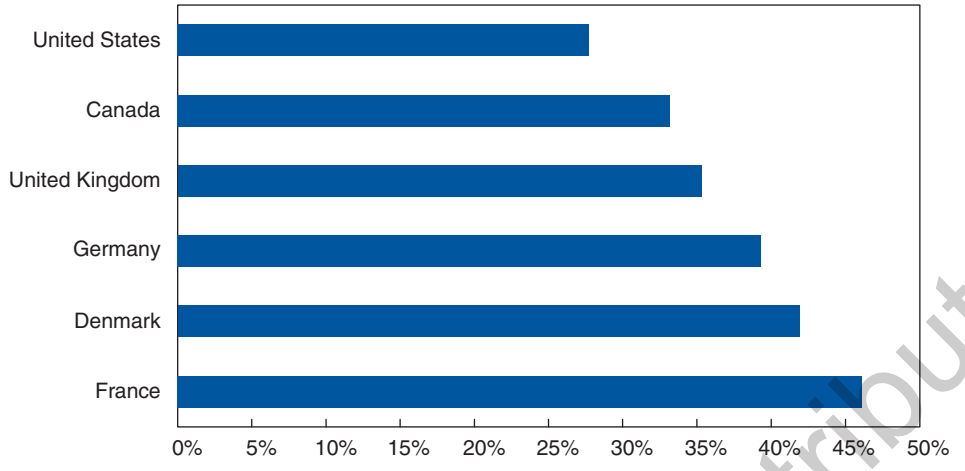
Democracy. Democracy in America, as we have seen, means representative democracy, based on consent and majority rule. Basically, Americans believe democracy should be a procedure to make political decisions, to choose political leaders, and to select policies for the nation. It is seen as a fundamentally just or fair way of making decisions because every individual who cares to participate is heard in the process, and all interests are considered. We don't reject a democratically made decision because it is not fair; it is fair precisely because it is democratically made. In procedural democracies, the various players all participate because they know that according to the rules, even if they don't win today, they can try again and win further on down the road. When people stop feeling that they can win in a democratic system, they either try to change the rules, a procedural solution, or call the legitimacy of the whole thing into question because it didn't produce the result they wanted. When that happens, we are moving from a procedural to a substantive system where people make decisions to achieve specific outcomes they believe to be valuable. This is one of the areas where American culture is weakening. President Trump's insistence—in the face of all the facts to the contrary—that he won elections he lost has played into a frustration among some groups of people that "majority rule" systems are rigged against them and that it is righteous to challenge the results or to ignore the procedures.

Freedom. Americans also put a high premium on the value of freedom, defined as freedom for the individual from restraint by the state. This view of freedom is procedural in the sense that it provides that no unfair restrictions should be put in the way of your pursuit of what you want, but it does not guarantee you any help in achieving those things. For instance, when Americans say, "We are all free to get a job," we mean that no discriminatory laws or other legal barriers are stopping us from applying for any particular position. A substantive view of freedom would ensure us the training to get a job so that our freedom meant a positive opportunity, not just the absence of restraint.

Americans' commitment to procedural freedom can be seen nowhere so clearly as in the Bill of Rights, the first ten amendments to the U.S. Constitution, which guarantees our basic civil liberties, the areas where government cannot interfere with individual action. Those civil liberties include freedom of speech and expression, freedom of belief, freedom of the press, and the right to assemble, just to name a few. (See Chapter 5, "Fundamental American Liberties," for a complete discussion of these rights.)

But Americans also believe in economic freedom, the freedom to participate in the marketplace, to acquire money and property, and to do with those resources pretty much as we please. Americans believe that government should protect our property, not take it away or regulate our use of it too heavily. Our commitment to individualism is apparent here too. Even if society as a whole would benefit if we paid off the federal

Snapshot of America: *How Much Do We Pay in Taxes?**



Behind the Numbers

No one, anywhere, likes taxes, and most Americans feel their taxes are too high. But notice that our average tax rate is lower than that in most other industrialized countries. What are the tradeoffs in people keeping more of their income versus government having funds to deal with national problems?

Source: "Revenue Statistics—OECD Countries," Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, accessed August 13, 2024, https://stats.oecd.org/Index.aspx?DataSetCode=REV.

*Taxes as a percentage of GDP, 2022.

debt (the amount our government owes from spending more than it brings in), our individualistic view of economic freedom means that Americans have one of the lowest tax rates in the industrialized world (for a comparison, see *Snapshot of America: How Much Do We Pay in Taxes?*).

Equality. Another central value in American political culture is equality. Of all the values we hold dear, equality is probably the one we cast most clearly in procedural versus substantive terms. Equality in America means government should guarantee equality of treatment, of access, of opportunity, but not equality of result. People should have equal access to run the race, but we don't expect everyone to finish in the same place or indeed to start from the same place. Thus we believe in political equality (one person, one vote) and equality before the law—that the law shouldn't make unreasonable distinctions among people the basis for treating them differently, and that all people should have equal access to the legal system.

One problem the courts have faced is deciding what counts as a reasonable distinction. Can the law justifiably discriminate between—that is, treat differently—men and women, minorities and white Protestants, rich and poor, young and old? When the rules treat people differently, even if the goal is to make them more equal in the long run, many Americans get very upset. Witness the controversy surrounding affirmative action policies in this country. The point of such policies is to allow special opportunities to members of groups that have been discriminated against in the past, to remedy the long-term effects of that discrimination. For many Americans, such policies violate our commitment to procedural solutions. They wonder how treating people unequally can be fair.

Pause and Review

Who, What, How 2.2 To live as a nation, citizens need to share a view of who they are, how they should live, and what their world should be like. If they have no common culture, they fragment and break apart, like the divided peoples of Ireland and the former Yugoslavia. Political cultures provide coherence and national unity to citizens who may be very different in other ways. Americans achieve national unity through a political culture based on procedural and individualistic visions of democracy, freedom, and equality.

In Your Own Words 2.3 Explain how shared core values define the United States as a country and a culture.

THE IDEAS THAT DIVIDE US

Differences over how much government control there should be in our lives

Most Americans believe—and say—that they are united in their commitment at some level to a political culture based on proceduralism and individualism and to the key values of democracy, freedom, and equality. As we have indicated, however, their commitment on some of these points has begun to waiver under intense polarization. Ideally, this shared political culture can give us a common political language, a way to talk about politics that keeps us united even though we may use that common language to tell different narratives about who we are, what's important to us, and what direction we feel the country should move in. That we do that is not surprising. Although Americans have much in common, there are about 350 million of us, and the *Snapshots of America* throughout this book demonstrate graphically how dramatically different we are in terms of our religious, educational, geographic, and professional backgrounds. We have different interests, different beliefs, different prejudices, and different hopes and dreams.

With all that diversity, we are bound to have a variety of beliefs and opinions about politics, the economy, and society that help us make sense of our world but that can divide us into opposing camps. These camps, or different belief systems, are called **ideologies**. Again, like the values and beliefs that underlie our culture, our ideologies are based on normative prescriptions—they depend for their force on the arguments we make to defend them. We cannot even pretend to live in a Norman Rockwell world where we learn our values face to face at our parents' dinner table. In a mediated age there are more and more arguments from more and more channels that are harder and harder to sort out. It might seem crystal clear to us that our values are right and true, but to a person who disagrees with our prescriptions, we are as wrong as they think we are. So we debate and argue. In fact, anyone who pays attention to American politics knows that we disagree about many specific political ideas and issues, and that our differences have gotten more passionate and polarized (that is, further apart) in recent years.

But because we still for the most part share a political culture, our range of debate in the United States is relatively narrow, compared with the ideological spectrum of many countries. We have no successful communist or socialist parties here, for instance, because the ideologies on which those parties are founded seem to most Americans to push the limits of procedural and individualistic culture too far, especially in the economic realm. The two main ideological camps in the United States are the liberals (associated, since the 1930s, with the Democratic Party) and the conservatives (associated with the Republicans), with many Americans falling somewhere in between. Even though Sen. Bernie Sanders, a self-identified democratic socialist, ran for president in 2016 and 2020, he did it as a Democrat (a party he had joined only briefly, to run), and he lost the nomination both times. (Note that both the liberals and conservatives in American politics have their roots in the classical liberalism of the European Enlightenment that we have mentioned multiple times. It is beyond confusing that the word "liberal" applies to half a contentious divide, because it makes "classical liberalism" seem suspect to conservatives when many, many conservatives wear the label "classical liberal" as a badge of honor.)

There are many different ways to characterize American ideologies. It is conventional to say that **conservatives** tend to promote a political narrative based on traditional social values, distrust of government action except in matters of national security, resistance to change, and the maintenance of a prescribed social order. **Liberals**, in contrast, are understood to tell a narrative based on the potential for progress and change, trust in government, innovations as answers to social problems, and the expansion of individual rights and expression. For a more nuanced understanding of ideology in America, however, we focus on the two main ideological dimensions of economics and social order issues that we discussed in global terms in Chapter 1.

THE ECONOMIC DIMENSION

Since the Great Depression in the 1930s and Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal (a set of government policies designed to get the economy moving and to protect citizens from the worst effects of the Depression), American conservatives and liberals have diverged on how much they trust government to regulate a market that had demonstrated a marked inability to regulate itself. Conservatives believe that government is not to be trusted with too much power and is not a competent economic actor. Liberals, in contrast, have been willing to trust government more to regulate the economy, arguing that some of the effects of an unregulated market (poverty, hunger, etc.) are substantively unacceptable in a rich, advanced industrial nation. American economic ideological differences are much like those located on our economic continuum in Chapter 1 (see Figure 1.1), although none get anywhere as substantive as those do. Consequently, we say that liberals who advocate a larger role for government in regulating the economy are on the left, and conservatives who think government control should be minimal are on the right.

THE SOCIAL ORDER DIMENSION

In the 1980s and 1990s, another ideological dimension became prominent in the United States. Perhaps because, as some researchers have argued, most people are able to meet their basic economic needs and more people than ever before are identifying themselves as middle class, many Americans began to focus less on economic questions and more on issues of morality and quality of life. The new ideological dimension, which is analogous to the social order dimension we discussed in Chapter 1 (see Figure 1.2), divides people on the question of how much government control there should be over the moral and social order—whether government's

role should be limited to protecting individual rights and providing procedural guarantees of equality and due process, or whether the government should be involved in making more substantive judgments about how people should live their lives.

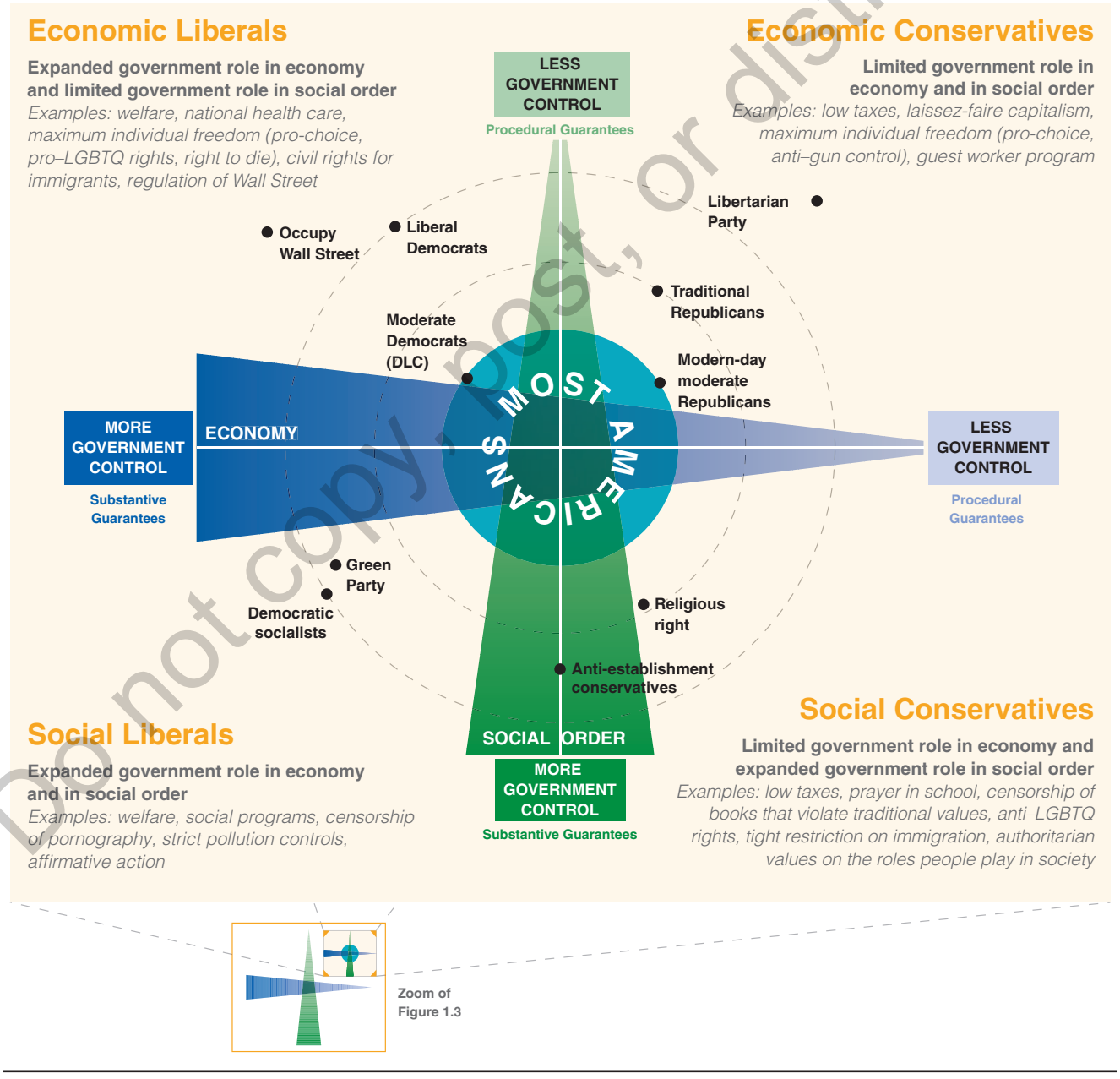
Even though few people in the United States want to go so far as to create a social order that makes *all* moral and political decisions for its subjects, as we will see, some people hold that it is the government's job to create and protect some version of a preferred social order. *It is once we get below the line distinguishing substantive social values that we get into the territory that starts to fracture the American cultural consensus on a procedural political culture.*

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE TWO IDEOLOGICAL DIMENSIONS

Clearly this social order ideological dimension does not dovetail neatly with the more traditional liberal and conservative orientations toward government action. Figure 1.3 focused on a small part of the upper-right quadrant we called *advanced industrial democracy*. When you look at the quadrants produced by examining those same dimensions within the United States' procedural and individualistic political culture, you get four distinct American ideological positions that are more explanatory than simply saying "left" and "right." Figure 2.1 lays out these positions graphically.

FIGURE 2.1

Ideological Beliefs in the United States



Economic Conservatives. Located in the upper-right quadrant of the figure, **economic conservatives** are reluctant to allow government interference in people's private lives or in the economy. With respect to social order issues, they are willing to let government regulate such behaviors as murder, rape, and theft, but they generally believe that social order issues such as reproductive choices, marijuana usage, LGBTQ+ rights, and physician aid in dying are not matters for government regulation. These economic conservatives also prefer government to limit its role in economic decision making to regulation of the market (like changing interest rates and cutting taxes to end recessions), elimination of "unfair" trade practices (like monopolies), and provision of some public goods (like highways and national defense). Economic conservatism is often summed up with the catch phrase: "get government out of the boardroom (economic decisions) and out of the bedroom (decisions concerning personal morality)," or "the government that governs best, governs least." When it comes to immigration, economic conservatives favor more open border policies since immigrants often work more cheaply and help keep the labor market competitive for business. The most extreme holders of economic conservative views are called **libertarians**, people who believe that only minimal government action in any sphere is acceptable. Consequently, economic conservatives also hold the government accountable for sticking to the constitutional checks and balances that limit its own power.

Economic conservatives generally don't love government, but they do embrace procedural rules that allow individual lives the maximum amount of freedom. Practically speaking, that means they are committed to the protections in the Constitution and the democratic process that check government power. They often believe that American rights are even more extensive than the ones written down in the Bill of Rights, they endorse checks and balances as a way of limiting government power, and if they fail to win an election, they subscribe to "good-loserism"—waiting to fight again another day rather than trying to change the rules or discredit or subvert the process in order to create a more favorable political environment for themselves. Democracies require that people be good losers sometimes, having confidence that a loss today does not mean a loss forever. Trust in the rules of the game and a willingness to accept the loss is essential to the compromise and cooperation valued by the founders and required by the Constitution. Since the rules of the game in the United States tend to favor the wealthy and powerful even when they lose an election, good-loserism doesn't entail a lot of sacrifice or risk for many economic conservatives, but it still has stabilizing implications for American democracy.

Economic Liberals. While **economic liberals** hold views that fall into the upper-left quadrant of the figure, indicating they are willing to allow government to make substantive decisions about the economy, they share their

"We've created a safe, nonjudgmental environment that will leave your child ill-prepared for real life."

William Haefeli, Cartoon Stock

conservative counterparts' maximum procedural commitment to individual freedom in determining how to live their lives. Some economic policies they favor are job training and housing subsidies for the poor, taxation to support social programs, and affirmative action to ensure that opportunities for economic success (but not necessarily outcomes) are truly equal. As far as government regulation of individuals' private lives goes, however, these liberals favor a hands-off stance, preferring individuals to have maximum freedom over their noneconomic affairs. They value diversity, expanding rights for people who have historically been left out of the power structure in the American social order—women, minorities, LGBTQ+ people, and immigrants. Their love for their country is tempered by the view that the government should be held to the same strict procedural standard to which individuals are held—laws must be followed, checks and balances adhered to in order to limit government power, and individual rights protected, even when the individuals are citizens of another country. They are committed to the idea that no one is above the law and that laws should apply to everyone equally.

Even though economic liberals embrace government action to further their goals, they, like economic conservatives, believe that good-loserism is fundamental to a functioning democracy, prioritizing the Constitution and the democratic process over their policy preferences. That can result in a "two-steps-forward, one-step-back" type of incremental policy change, as the founders had hoped, rather than revolutionary change that could be a shock to the system. Accepting that sometimes they will lose means also accepting that it may take them several runs through the electoral cycle to accomplish their policy goals.

Social Conservatives. Occupying the lower-right quadrant in our ideological scheme, **social conservatives** share economic conservatives' views on limited government involvement in the economy, but with less force and commitment and perhaps for different reasons (in fact,

following the Great Depression, social conservatives, many of whom were members of the working class, were likely to be New Deal liberals). They may very well support government social programs like Social Security or Medicaid or educational support for those they consider deserving. But their primary concern is with their vision of the moral tone of life, including an emphasis on fundamentalist religious values. Some social conservatives believe in principles of **Christian nationalism**, an ideology that says that the United States is a Christian nation, deliberately established on Christian principles by the American founders, and that its defenders must wage a righteous spiritual war against those who would remove God from affairs of state. Some variations hold that Christian principles must rule not only government but also family, religion, education, culture, entertainment, business, and even science. These values are demonstrated, for instance, by an insistence on government control of reproductive choices, including the elimination of a woman's right to end a pregnancy, often without exceptions for rape, incest, or the woman's health; restrictions on such family planning treatments as in vitro fertilization (IVF); restrictions on access to contraception; opposition to LGBTQ+ rights, including the right to marry, to adopt kids, and to be protected at the workplace; and the promotion of religious values and narratives, through public prayer, the public display of religious icons, the censorship of books, media, and art that isn't consistent with Christian values, and the insertion of religious considerations into public education. Social conservatives endorse traditional patriarchal family roles (some Christian wedding services include the phrases like or similar to "[t]he husband is the head of his wife as Christ is the head of the church") and reject change or diversity that they see as destructive to the preferred social order.

As we saw in the *What's at Stake . . . ?* feature on the divisive ideas behind the battle over border policy, immigration is alarming to social conservatives because it brings into the system people who are different, and it threatens to dilute the majority that keeps the social order in place, something that many social conservatives believe is being intentionally encouraged by their political opponents in order to replace them in the electorate. Many resent what they view as condemnation by liberal elites of the way they talk about race, gender, ethnicity, and sexual orientation and many believe that they are labeled as racist or sexist, or are accused of not practicing **political correctness** or being "woke" by overly sensitive liberal "snowflakes." Many social conservatives say that the argument made by some liberals that deep-seated and damaging racism against Black and Native peoples is built into American political culture and the political system, unfairly blames them for something (enslavement) that they had nothing to do with, and that they themselves are the ones being discriminated against for refusing to be politically correct and in some cases for being white and Christian. Even the December practice of business owners choosing to say "Happy Holidays" to those customers whose religious affiliation they may not know has been billed, in media outlets that cater to social conservatives, as a "war on Christmas."

Since limited government is not prized by this group, a large and powerful state is valued if it is an agent of restoring American greatness (seen as the days in the middle of the last century when traditional values prevailed)—that is, it is valued if it achieves the correct substantive goals. Democracy is valued when it produces the results they like, but it is discredited and mocked when it doesn't. Since social conservatives believe they know the correct social order government should strive to attain, they really don't think voting for it is all that relevant. In this sense, as in several others, social conservatives are closer to authoritarians than the "small d democrats" of procedural political culture. Especially since they feel they have truth on their side, they may feel obligated to refuse to compromise with their opponents, which is also not conducive to democracy. Another reason that social conservatives may be less committed to democratic processes over their policy goals is that they are usually considered to be a shrinking demographic in this country. As their numbers decline, they fear that they face the real possibility that they will lose in a majority-rule decision. As such, good-loserism may be costly for them because they are not at all sure that a loss today will be followed by a win tomorrow.

Social Liberals. In the lower-left corner of Figure 2.1, **social liberals**, or **progressives** (although some economic liberals also refer to themselves as progressive, just to keep you confused) believe not only in a stronger role for government to create social change but also in restructuring the system so that there is no advantage to those who have wealth. This is not the gradual, step-by-step change economic liberals believe can improve the system for everyone, but a more revolutionary philosophy that says that incremental change will never be enough and that those who advocate it are part of the problem for supporting a classist, unfair system. They often see their political enemies in all three of the other ideologies we have discussed.

Social liberals want climate change addressed immediately, regardless of the cost to business or taxpayers. They believe that solving the climate crisis is a top priority and that, without action on this front, nothing else will ultimately matter. They see objections from corporate interests who oppose the costs of regulation, and from climate deniers who refuse to acknowledge the science of climate change, as efforts to maintain a status quo that is very profitable in the short run but disastrous in the long run. They want to see private health insurance eliminated and preferably the private health care system as well, replaced with a government-run system that holds costs down and prevents what they see as unacceptable profiteering by insurance companies and many health care providers. They want college tuition to be free for all Americans, regardless of income, which requires drastic reform of the higher education system.

The essential tenet of social liberals is that the system is rigged to produce unfair economic and thus political outcomes. For many progressives, the other inequities that liberals want to address—along gender, racial, and other lines—are ultimately economic in nature, and if the economic restructuring takes place, those other inequities will disappear.

Fixing the rigged system requires radical system change—sometimes social liberals even use the language of revolution, which does not bode well for the Constitution. Like social conservatives, social liberals have concrete ideas about what they think is right, but they are aware that they face considerable democratic opposition to making those things happen. Because their numbers are small, and they are not particularly wedded to procedural norms, good-loserism is less important to them. Consequently they might blame losses on a rigged electoral system or unfair behavior on the part of their opponents rather than on their inability to attract majority support. But in rejecting democratic outcomes, they are closing in on authoritarian impulses that, like those of social conservatives, run counter to the classical liberal roots of American political culture.

Social liberals also believe that language shapes behavior and action and that care should be taken to ensure that no one is made uncomfortable or hurt or damaged by the language used by others. Not only do social liberals endorse prohibitions against hate speech, but they tend to want to regulate speech in other ways as well, censoring material they perceive as racist or misogynistic or homophobic or that otherwise treats groups of people as unequal or inferior. People who enforce these speech codes are accused by opponents of engaging in authoritarian "wokeness." The term *woke* was originally used by Black people to identify people who were aware of the systemic nature of racism, something we will discuss in Chapter 6. It was appropriated by (mostly white) social liberals to refer to people who were in tune with their values generally and has become so overused that it now appears mostly in conservative criticism. But conservatives are not wrong when they argue that policing speech to ensure that it does no social harm runs directly counter to the classical liberalism that has helped shape American political culture. The irony, of course, is that social conservatives are often guilty of the same illiberal efforts to control the content of speech, something that only ideologies in the lower two quadrants of Figure 2.1 can tolerate.

Because they can be very vocal and because they are concentrated among younger Americans and in university settings where they get a lot of attention, this group can seem larger than it is. In reality, those in the social liberal ideological quadrant are a relatively small slice of Americans overall, If you think about it, a country whose culture is in the upper-right quadrant of Figure 1.3 (the group of capitalist democracies defined in the previous chapter as committed to limited government over individual lives and the economy) is less likely to have a lot of ideological commitment to a narrative that endorses stronger government responsibility for both. The social liberal quadrant doesn't grab a lot of adherents because it pushes the limits of Americans' limited government, individualistic political culture. Many economic liberals, however, pick up some of the policy prescriptions of social liberals, such as environmentalism, gun regulation, and political correctness.

WHO FITS WHERE? IDEOLOGICAL DIVISIONS IN CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN POLITICS

Many people, indeed most of us, might find it difficult to identify ourselves as simply "liberal" or "conservative," because we consider ourselves liberal on some issues, conservative on others. In fact, many Americans fall somewhere in the circle in the middle of Figure 2.1—leaning in one direction or another but not too extreme in any of our beliefs.

Others of us have more pronounced views, and the framework in Figure 2.1 allows us to see how major groups in society might line up if we distinguish between economic and social-moral values. We can see, for instance, the real spatial distances that lie among (1) the religious right, who are very conservative on political and moral issues but who were once part of the coalition of southern blue-collar workers who supported Roosevelt on the New Deal; (2) traditional Republicans, who are very conservative on economic issues but often more libertarian on political and moral issues, wanting government to guarantee procedural fairness and keep the peace, but otherwise to leave them alone; and (3) moderate Republicans, who are far less conservative economically and morally. As we have seen, it can be difficult or impossible for a Republican candidate on the national stage to hold together such an unwieldy coalition. Similarly, the gaps among Democratic Socialists and the Green Party and the Democratic Party show why those on the left have such a hard time coming together.

Rise of the Tea Party/Freedom Caucus on the Right. In the summer of 2009, with the nation in economic crisis and the new Black president struggling to pass his signature health care reform in Washington, a wave of populist anger swept the nation. The so-called Tea Party movement (named after the Boston Tea Party rebellion against taxation in 1773) crafted a narrative that was pro-American, anti-corporation, and anti-government (except for programs like Social Security and Medicare, which benefit the Tea Partiers, who tended to be older Americans). While the movement mostly targeted Obamacare—the Affordable Care Act that fifteen years later is supported by 60 percent of Americans—the Tea Party rallies were more diffuse, with posters and chants underscoring the participants' determination to "take our country back!" From whom or from what was left unsaid, but beginning primarily in 2011 (although grumblings had been heard earlier), Birther movement adherents began to

"And then there is the 'authoritarian' form of governing, which we'll be using in this class."

Dave Carpenter, Cartoon Stock

claim that Obama was unqualified to be president; they claimed that despite evidence to the contrary, Obama had not been born in the United States and thus was not a citizen. Multiple falsehoods got tied up in the narrative but it was racist and ugly and picked up by a public figure, a well-known New York businessman who had become known to most Americans because he hosted a reality TV show. Trump kept the Birther narrative pumped up with such lies and ill will that the White House took the unusual step of releasing a copy of Obama's birth certificate, which made no difference to Trump or the angry members of the Tea Party movement. Fed by the emotional, culture war appeals of conservative talk show hosts and media figures like Carlson, then on Fox, the narratives took political debate out of the range of logic and analysis and into the world of drama and angry invective. A *New York Times* poll found that Americans who identified as Tea Party supporters were more likely to be Republican, white, married, male, and over forty-five, and to hold views that were more conservative than Republicans generally.[16] In fact, they succeeded in shaking up the Republican Party from 2010 onward, as they supported primary challenges to office-holders who did not share their anti-government ideology. Once in Congress, the new members eventually formed the Freedom Caucus, which is sympathetic to many of the Tea Party values.

As we will see, this shakeup culminated in a rejection of the party establishment in 2016. The election that year signaled a moment of reckoning for a party that had been teetering on the edge of crisis for more than a decade. As establishment candidates fell in the primaries, so too did Tea Party favorites. The split in the party left an opening for the unconventional candidacy of Trump, who was ready to step into it. Much to the dismay of party leaders like Speaker of the House Paul Ryan and Senate Majority Leader McConnell, Trump's candidacy proved to be more about his personality and the anger of his followers than it did about the Republican Party, although in the end most party members fell in line to vote for him.

Even before the rise of the Tea Party, Republican leaders had determined that they would not cede any political victories to President Obama. In an effort that goes beyond ideology and approaches tribalism—or the pure desire to see one's own team win at the expense of the other—Republicans simply aimed to block everything Obama tried to do. In 2010, then–Senate minority leader McConnell said that the highest priority the party had was to make Obama a one-term president by denying him any achievements.[17] The members of Congress elected by the Tea Party wave in 2010 enthusiastically committed to this no-compromise stance toward policy-making, demanding the fulfillment of their wish list and refusing to negotiate with the Democrats or President Obama to get things done. That is, rather than participate in the give-and-take, compromise-oriented procedural narrative of American politics, they held out for substantive policy ends. The Freedom Caucus presented then–Speaker of the House John Boehner with serious challenges to his leadership, bringing the country to the brink of economic disaster over their refusal to raise the debt ceiling so that the United States could pay its bills in the summer of 2011. In October 2013, they even shut down the federal government for more than two weeks. Eventually their threats to unseat Boehner succeeded. In 2015, with visible relief, he turned over the Speaker's gavel to a reluctant Rep. Ryan and resigned from Congress. Weary from the same battle, Ryan decided to resign the office in 2018.

What has become clear is that many social conservatives are outside the circle that defines mainstream American beliefs, posing a challenge to Republicans who run statewide or nationally because they need to satisfy two divergent constituencies. The late Sen. John McCain discovered this as the party's presidential nominee in 2008, when he found himself upstaged by his charismatic vice-presidential running mate, Sarah Palin, and her strong social conservative ideas. Romney rediscovered it during the Republican primary season in 2012, when Tea Party members supported first Rick Perry, then Newt Gingrich, and then Rick Santorum in their effort to pick anybody but (the too moderate) Romney. And Kevin McCarthy discovered it once again in 2022 and 2023 when he was forced to bargain away to the Freedom Caucus most of the power of the House speakership he coveted, and then when he lost that speakership to the previously almost unknown Congressman Johnson.

Trump's Appeal to Anti-Establishment Conservatives. The escalating anger of social conservatives who felt inadequately represented by the Republican Party's mainstream was evident in the anti-establishment fury displayed in 2016 that resulted in the unexpected defeat of Democrat Hillary Clinton—a former First Lady, senator, and secretary of state who was an establishment

figure if ever there was one. During that primary season, both Trump and Sen. Ted Cruz competed to address the anger that drove that group. Those voters felt used and betrayed, especially by a party that had promised and failed to defeat Obama, a president they viewed as illegitimate, in large part because of Trump's relentless challenge to the president's birth certificate. A mix of populist anger against the economic elite who profited at their expense, nativist anger at the perception that white people seemed to be falling behind while government was reaching out to help people of color, and partisan anger that economic conservative Republicans had been promising them socially conservative accomplishments since the days of President Richard Nixon without delivering, the rage of social conservatives moved them in the direction of a kind of **authoritarian populism** that was erupting around the world. Illustrated by the withdrawal of the United Kingdom from the European Union and the rise of domestic populism in countries like Poland, Hungary, Turkey, and Israel, authoritarian populism is a right-wing uprising that looks democratic on its face, but it is not in support of democratic values. In fact, it is a rebuke to precisely the values of classical liberalism that supported so many of the democracies that fill up the upper-right quadrant of Figure 1.3: limited government, procedural over substantive values, the rule of law, capitalism, and representative democracy (with the implied good-loserism that supports it). In fact, authoritarian populism looks a lot like the values of social conservatives as we describe them—and a rejection of the values of economic conservatives who used to define the beliefs of the Republican Party.

Indeed, social scientists trying to understand the surprising phenomenon of the Trump vote found that one particular characteristic predicted it: a commitment to "authoritarian values."[18] These social scientists have found that some social conservatives, when they feel that proper order and power hierarchy is threatened, either physically or existentially, are attracted to authoritarian narratives that seek to secure the old order by excluding the perceived danger. In the words of one scholar who studies this, the response is, "In case of moral threat, lock down the borders, kick out those who are different, and punish those who are morally deviant."[19] Those who score higher on the authoritarianism scale hold the kind of ideas one would expect from social conservatives seeking to keep faith with a familiar and traditional order—anti-LGBTQ+ sentiment, anti-immigration views, even white supremacy and overt racism. Interestingly, most recently it has also corresponded to narratives that reject the idea of political correctness itself, a reaction to the sense that the expression of their fear and anger is not socially acceptable.[20]

These values were on full display in the public rejection of "good loserism" we all saw in the nation's capital on January 6, 2021, the day that President Biden's victory over Trump was to be certified by Congress. For weeks, as we have seen, Trump had been insisting that the election was stolen, backing various plots to have the votes decertified, and urging his supporters to come to D.C. on January 6 to "Stop the Steal," promising, via tweet, "will be wild." As the Congressional Select Committee to Investigate the January 6th Attack on the United States Capitol later showed in detail, Trump was aware that he lost and was determined to stay in office despite the dozens of court cases that rejected his claims that Biden had somehow cheated him of his rightful election. His supporters bought the unlikely story because he had been preparing them for it for weeks, telling them over and over that the only way he could lose was if the election were rigged, and because they wanted to believe it—it fit with the social conservative narrative that the rules were stacked against them, that there was a proper, even Godly, social order that they had to fight to keep. As Theda Skocpol, a Harvard sociologist, noted in an interview a couple of years later, "'Stop the Steal' is a metaphor . . . for the country being taken away from the people who think they should rightfully be setting the tone. . . . Doug Mastriano [the Republican nominee for governor of Pennsylvania who lost in 2022] said it in so many words: *'It's a Christian country. That doesn't mean we'll throw out everybody else, but they've got to accept that we're the ones setting the tone.*'"[21]

In 2024, Trump began laying the groundwork once again to claim that the election was stolen if he lost a second time.[22] It's important that we be very clear about the impact of this kind of lying on the integrity of elections. The extensive trafficking in disinformation about the so-called "steal" has undermined people's faith in democracy and the electoral process. Trump never stopped claiming the election was stolen, and, eventually, most of his party agreed. The "win at any cost" attitude is part of Trump's brand, but for the American public it is costly, as it violates the procedural norms that are at the heart of our political culture. Not only does it weaken the political culture that allows American democracy to function, but it also legitimates efforts to regulate the electorate—through tightening voting restrictions and reducing alternatives to in-person voting. In combination with practices like redrawing congressional districts, prioritizing the appointment of judges sympathetic to their cause, and eliminating immigration of people who will not support their views, these anti-majoritarian efforts can help social conservatives win in the policy arena even if they don't have the numbers behind them to form a majority. When you institutionalize making an end-run around democracy to achieve goals that you believe are justified you have left the realm of classical liberalism.

In the years since the January 6 insurrection, political investigators and analysts have scoured the data and behavior to better understand where the threat to American democracy lies. Trump and his supporters often label any criticism of their movement as a partisan attack. However, the fact that a large part of one of the two major parties in the United States has left behind its commitment to classical liberalism, supported an insurrection,

and changed voting rules in several states to make it easier to undermine democracy, means that those who support American democracy need to be clear-sighted about where the threat to it really lies. While the Republican Party still has the support of roughly half the country, this overlooks some of the movement of people between the parties. The party has undergone considerable change, with many of the economic conservatives and the still-procedural social conservatives refusing to support a convicted individual who openly promised to reject democratic governance from the start of their second term. Whether those changes are Trump-specific or will endure into the long term will take some time to figure out.

The Democrats. The Democratic Party is not immune to pressure from an illiberal contingent who would swing the party in an anti-democratic direction, but so far they have done a better job than Republicans of containing it, being responsive to some of their policy demands but not putting adherents into positions of power in the party and policing any movement in an authoritarian direction. The majority of the party is ideologically moderate, and candidates who profess progressive views cannot count on replacing their less radical colleagues. As some economic conservatives have exited the Republican Party, they are voting with Democrats, trying to anchor the party in the middle of the spectrum, giving moderates in the party more weight but potentially angering progressives.

There have been major splits in the Democratic coalition throughout its modern history. The Democrats have to satisfy the party's economic liberals, who are very procedural on most political and moral issues but relatively substantive on economic concerns; the social liberals, substantive on both economic and social issues; and the more middle-of-the-road Democratic groups that are fairly procedural on political and moral issues but not very substantive on economic matters at all. In the late 1960s, the party almost shattered under the weight of anti–Vietnam War sentiment, and in 1972, it moved sharply left, putting it out of the American mainstream. It was President Clinton, as a founder of the now-defunct Democratic Leadership Council (DLC), who in the 1990s helped move his party of liberal Democrats closer to the mainstream from a position that, as we can see in Figure 2.1, was clearly out of alignment with the position taken by most Americans. Compared to those earlier divisions, the Democrats' current intraparty disputes are relatively minor, as the quick resolution to the 2020 Democratic Party nomination showed.

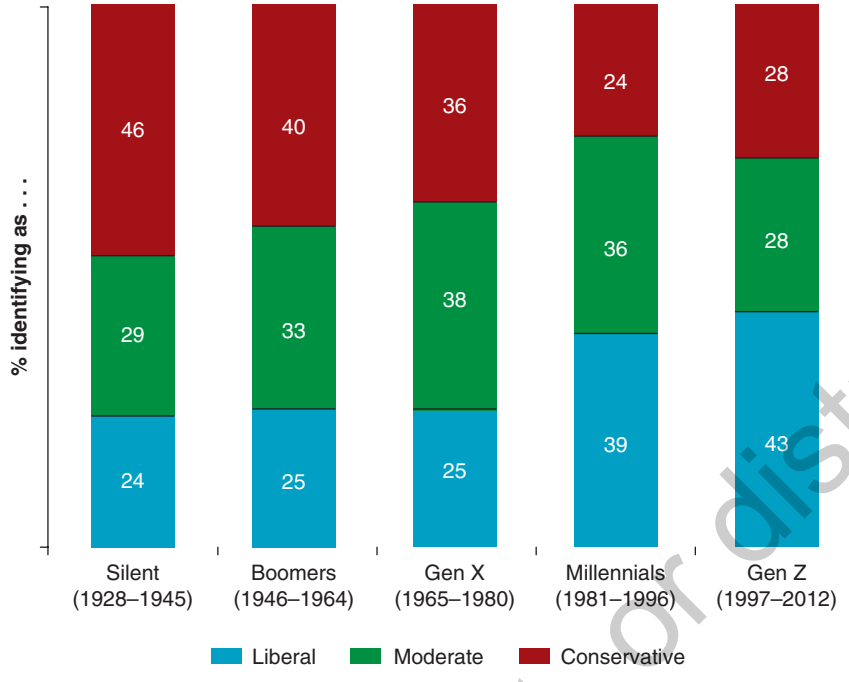
Ironically, in the 2000 election, Al Gore's commitment to the DLC position left him vulnerable to attack from Ralph Nader, who, as a representative of the Green Party, came from the lower-left quadrant. This position does not draw huge numbers of supporters, but in an election as close as the one in 2000, it probably drew sufficient support from Gore to cost him the election. In 2004, Democratic candidate John Kerry did not have to worry as much about appealing to voters in that lower-left quadrant since many of them disliked George W. Bush so much that they were willing to vote for a candidate with whom they did not completely agree in order to try to oust Bush from office. Democrat Obama had the same advantage in 2008, drawing support from across his party's ideological spectrum in large part because of Bush's deep unpopularity. When the Occupy movement rose on the president's left flank in 2011, Obama was quick to adopt some of the movement's anti–Wall Street, anti-inequality rhetoric and made it a central part of his campaign, helping to ensure that he would not face an intraparty challenge from the left. Similarly, in response to the primary challenge from democratic socialist Sanders, Clinton and Biden, in turn, moved to adopt more substantive economic positions. The Democrats have been able to manage the ideological dissension in their ranks more easily than have Republicans, for whom the challenge is more fundamental. Still, President Biden has had his hands full balancing the demands of the progressive wing of the party with his own less radical preferences and those of his party's moderates. As Biden's popularity declined in the wake of the withdrawal of U.S. troops from Afghanistan, the continued impact of a pandemic that would not quit, rising inflation, and product scarcities caused by pandemic supply chain issues and the war in Ukraine, progressives tried to argue that Biden was unpopular because voters want more radical policies. Between Biden's own political skills, however, and the unparalleled political talents of then-Speaker Nancy Pelosi, the Democrats held together and effected a leadership transfer in 2023 which, if not perfect, lacked much of the usual drama that accompanies the Washington stereotype of "Democrats in Disarray."

Biden faced a greater threat in his last year in office, when Israel's response to the massacre and capture of their citizens by the Palestinian terrorist group Hamas was seen as brutal and disproportionate. Students on campuses across the country, appalled by the horrific photos and fed by an online flood of disinformation about the origins of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, turned on the U.S. government, demanding that it stop its financial support for its longtime ally Israel. Biden, dubbed "Genocide Joe" for what they saw as his direct complicity in the Israeli response, was stuck in a precarious position.

Where Do You Fit? One of the notable aspects of American ideology is that it often shows generational effects (see Figure 2.2). Although we have to be careful when we say that a given generation begins definitively in a certain year (there is much overlap and evolution between generations), it can be helpful to look for patterns in where people stand in order to understand political trends. We know, for instance, that older white Americans tend to be more ideologically conservative, and because they are reliable voters, they get a lot of media attention. But with researchers gathering public opinion data on younger voters, and with those

FIGURE 2.2

Political Ideology, by Generation



Source: "A Political and Cultural Glimpse Into America's Future: Generation Z's Views on Generational Change and the Challenges and Opportunities Ahead," PRRI, January 22, 2024, https://www.prri.org/research/generation-zs-views-on-generational-change-and-the-challenges-and-opportunities-ahead-a-political-and-cultural-glimpse-into-americas-future/.

voters promising to turn out on issues they care about, it's a good idea to look at where millennials and post-millennials fall on the ideological spectrum in Figure 2.2.

Keep in mind that all we can do is talk about generalities here—obviously there will be many, many exceptions to the rule, and you may very well be one of them. But as a group, younger voters, especially the *youngest* voters, tend to be economically and socially liberal—that is, they fall in the left-hand side of Figure 2.2.

Does it matter to the success of a democracy if relatively few people take an active political role (by paying attention, voting, exchanging political views, and the like)?

and reinforced by the media, can remain about whose view of government should prevail and who should benefit from its actions. These differences have traditionally centered on government's economic role but increasingly also involve views on establishing a preferred social order, and on what the preferred social order should be. In the United States, ideologies generally go by the umbrella labels *liberalism* and *conservatism*, although many differences exist even within these broad perspectives. Ideological conflict can be contentious since what is at stake are fundamental views of what the political world ought to look like and control of the channels that publicize those views. It can be difficult for all the ideological conflict to be contained in a two-party system like ours.

Pause and Review

Who, What, How 2.3 Although most Americans share a political culture, deep political differences, underscored

In Your Own Words 2.4 Describe the competing narratives that drive partisan divisions in American politics.

Wrapping It Up

Let's Revisit: What's at Stake . . . ?

We began this chapter with a look at the political circus surrounding the issue of American immigration reform in 2024. We asked, "What on earth is at stake in immigration policy that makes the political world seem to turn upside down, with everyone behaving the opposite of what you would predict?" Part of the problem is that, for some in the Republican Party, the stakes of immigration are mixed. For business leaders, a guest worker program means affordable labor for jobs Americans were not always willing to do. They argue that undocumented workers came here because there were jobs for them and that policies that punished employers for hiring them benefited no one and damaged the economy.

For Republican Party leaders, passing reform meant getting a difficult issue off the agenda, one that portrayed the party in a divisive, unflattering light and sent a negative message to an important and growing voting bloc. They knew that Latino people were key to carrying the vote in battleground states like Colorado, Nevada, and Florida. Furthermore, they believed that the policies of economic individualism and social conservatism they advocated should be attractive to Latino voters but that, until immigration was off the table, they would not get a hearing. Those leaders were all behind the compromise bill that Biden was willing to sign in the spring of 2024.

But many conservatives in the party, particularly the supporters of Trump and the former president himself, were convinced that immigration reform meant giving a pass to law-breakers who would be rewarded for coming here illegally. If you think back to the ideological authoritarianism we discussed earlier, tough economic times and a dwindling white majority are exactly the kinds of threats to the social order that would trigger the slamming of the immigration door and the rejection of outsiders. At its worst, the rhetoric on this side of the argument, with its references to an "illegal invasion," "the great replacement," and "poisoned blood," sounds like xenophobia and racism,[23] part of the reason why the party leadership want to get it behind them. Trump was promising to deport all "illegal immigrants" in the country on the first day of his new administration if he won the election. His supporters loved it. He wanted to run on that issue. If, instead, the Senate passed the Biden compromise, not only would it be a victory for the current president, but it would deprive him of his applause lines. It may seem irrational for Republicans to reject a bill that gave them everything they wanted on immigration, and for some it was, but for others it was much more valuable as an ongoing crisis than as a deal finally done.

For the Democrats, passing immigration reform meant being responsive to one of their core constituencies. For President Biden, in particular, the failure to act meant leaving undone one of his central campaign promises, the major reason he finally used executive actions to address the issue after the deal with Republicans fell through. When the Democrats took back control of the White House in 2020, immigration reform was near the top of their list. With the COVID-19 pandemic to deal with and Republicans determined not to let go of a valuable campaign issue, it wasn't clear how that part of the party's agenda could be successful.

CLUES to Critical Thinking

"The New Colossus"

By Emma Lazarus, 1883

Anyone who has ever taken a literature course knows it is just as important to think critically about elegant prose and poetry as the stories in the daily news. At least a part of this poem is familiar to most Americans—it appears on a plaque on the Statue of Liberty, one of the first glimpses of America for millions of immigrants to the United States arriving at Ellis Island. A gift from France celebrating American freedom (the statue holds a torch and a tablet inscribed "July 4, 1776"), the Statue of Liberty itself was not intended to be a symbol of immigration. Yet it has become so, especially because of the words put in her mouth by this poem. Given the decision to associate this poem with a national monument, we should think about it not only as a work of art but also as a political statement.

Not like the brazen giant of Greek fame,
With conquering limbs astride from land to land;
Here at our sea-washed, sunset gates shall stand

A mighty woman with a torch, whose flame
Is the imprisoned lightning, and her name
Mother of Exiles. From her beacon-hand
Glows world-wide welcome; her mild eyes command
The air-bridged harbor that twin cities frame.
"Keep, ancient lands, your storied pomp!" cries she
With silent lips. "Give me your tired, your poor,
Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,
The wretched refuse of your teeming shore.
Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me,
I lift my lamp beside the golden door!"

Consider the source and the audience: The poem was written by Emma Lazarus (1849–1887), a Jewish American poet who became particularly interested in immigration after Russian anti-Semitism drove thousands of refugees to America in the late 1880s. She submitted the poem to an auction to fund the building of a pedestal for the Statue of Liberty, a gift from France to the United States, and it was later placed on a plaque inside the pedestal. How might Lazarus's own feelings have shaped her message? Why would future immigrants seize on those words as a symbol of hope?

Lay out the argument and the underlying values and assumptions: What is Lazarus's vision of Lady Liberty—does she see her as a symbol of national freedom from oppressive governance by England (signified by the date on the statue's tablet) or as a symbol of freedom for individuals from repression by other countries? What does she mean by naming the statue "Mother of Exiles"? What "ancient lands" is the statue talking to when she says, "Give me your tired, your poor"? What role of the United States to those displaced from their homelands is suggested by the poem's words?

Uncover the evidence: Lazarus does not create a political argument here but uses literary techniques to imply that the State of Liberty is a symbol of individual as well as national freedom. By calling her "Mother of Exiles" and having her utter comforting words of compassion and succor, she implies not only that the purpose of the statue is to welcome immigrants but also that such welcome is the policy of the United States. Does she offer anything other than literary skill to back up the claim that this is what the statue symbolizes?

Evaluate the conclusion: Lazarus is clearly offering a glowing "world-wide welcome" to victimized or suffering refugees to come to "the golden door" of America. From what you know about U.S. immigration history, is that an accurate representation of American immigration policy?

Sort out the political significance: Regardless of the political purpose of the French in giving the Statue of Liberty to the United States, or the intention of the American government in accepting it, it has become a near-universal symbol of an open-door immigration policy whereby the United States stands to welcome those immigrants fleeing inhospitable shores. That is due in large part to Lazarus's words. How has this generous and humane poem created a narrative about how the United States receives immigrants, and how has that narrative shaped expectations and public policy? How does it compare to the reality of Americans' sentiments about immigration over time?

Review

Introduction

Politics—what we want from government and how we try to get it—stems from who we are. Understanding where American citizens have come from and what they have brought with them is crucial to understanding what they choose to fight for politically and how they elect to carry out the fight.

identity politics

Who Is an American?

Citizenship in the United States is both a concept promising certain rights and responsibilities, and a precise legal status. U.S. immigrants are citizens or subjects of another country who come here to live and work. To become full citizens, they must undergo naturalization by fulfilling requirements designated by the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services.

Some people come to the United States for other reasons and do not seek permanent residency. In recent years the influx of undocumented immigrants, particularly in the southwestern states, has occupied national debate. Advocates of strict immigration policy complain that undocumented immigrants consume government services without paying taxes. Opponents of these policies support the provision of basic services for people who, like our ancestors, are escaping hardship and hoping for a better future. Congress, with the president's approval, makes immigration law, but these rules change frequently.

immigrants
naturalization
asylum
refugees
nativism

The Ideas That Unite Us

Americans share common values and beliefs about how the world should work that allow us to be a nation despite our diversity. The American political culture is described as both procedural and individualistic. Because we focus more on fair rules than on the outcomes of those rules, our culture has a procedural nature. In addition, our individualistic nature means that we assume that individuals know what is best for them and that individuals, not government or society, are responsible for their own well-being.

Democracy, freedom, and equality are three central American values. Generally, Americans acknowledge democracy as the most appropriate way to make public decisions. We value freedom for the individual from government restraint, and we value equality of opportunity rather than equality of result.

political culture
values
normative
culture wars
procedural guarantees
individualism

The Ideas That Divide Us

Although the range of ideological debate is fairly narrow in America when compared to other countries, there exists an ideological division among economic liberals, social liberals, economic conservatives, and social conservatives based largely on attitudes toward government control of the economy and of the social order.

America's growing political apathy is well documented, but the country continues to function. Still, many people claim that such apathy may indeed signal a crisis of democracy.

ideologies
conservatives
liberals
economic conservatives
libertarians
economic liberals
social conservatives
Christian nationalism
political correctness
social liberals
progressives
authoritarian populism