Introducing Government in America

Politics and Government Matter—that is the single most important message of this book. Consider, for example, the following list of ways that government and politics may have already impacted your life:

- Chances are pretty good that you or someone in your family has recently been the recipient of one of the 60 million payments made to individuals by the federal government every month. In 2014, nearly 20 percent of the money that went into Americans’ wallets was from government payments like food stamps, Social Security payments, veterans’ benefits, and so on.
- Any public schools you attended were prohibited by the federal government from discriminating against females and minorities and from holding prayer sessions led by school officials. Municipal school boards regulated your education, and the state certified and paid your teachers.
- The ages at which you could get your driver’s license, drink alcohol, and vote were all determined by state and federal governments.
- Before you could get a job, the federal government had to issue you a Social Security number, and you have been paying Social Security taxes every month that you have been employed. If you worked at a low-paying job, your starting wages were likely determined by state and federal minimum-wage laws.

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As a college student, you may be drawing student loans financed by the government. The government even dictates certain school holidays. Even though gasoline prices have risen substantially in recent years, federal policy continues to make it possible for you to drive long distances relatively cheaply compared to citizens in most other countries. In many other advanced industrialized nations, such as England and Japan, gasoline is twice as expensive as in the United States because of the high taxes their governments impose on fuel.

If you apply to rent an apartment, by federal law landlords cannot discriminate against you because of your race or religion.

This list could, of course, be greatly extended. And it helps explain the importance of politics and government. As Barack Obama said when he first ran for public office in 1992, "Politics does matter. It can make the difference in terms of a benefit check. It can make the difference in terms of school funding. Citizens can't just remove themselves from that process. They actually have to engage themselves and not just leave it to the professionals." More than any other recent presidential campaign, Obama’s 2008 run for the White House was widely viewed as having turned many young Americans on to politics. Time magazine even labeled 2008 as the “Year of the Youth Vote,” noting that Obama was “teaping into a broad audience of energized young voters hungry for change.”2 And young people did more than display enthusiasm at massive rallies for Obama. By supporting Obama by a two-to-one margin, they provided him with a key edge in the election. Many observers proclaimed that the stereotype of politically apathetic American youth should finally be put to rest. Stereotypes can be outdated or even off the mark, unfortunately, the perception that young Americans are less engaged in politics than older people has been and continues to be supported by solid evidence. Whether because they think that politicians don’t listen to them, that they can’t make a difference, that the political system is corrupt, or that they just don’t care, many young Americans are clearly apathetic about public affairs. And while political apathy isn’t restricted to young people, a tremendous gap has opened up between young adults and the elderly on measures of political interest, knowledge, and participation. It cannot be emphasized enough that such a gap has not always existed. Consider some data from the National Election Study, a nationally representative survey conducted each presidential election year since 1952.

In 2012, when the National Election Study asked a nationwide sample of people about their general level of interest in politics, roughly half of Americans under the age of 30 said they paid frequent attention to politics and elections compared to just 17 percent among those over the age of 65. One might think that this is a normal pattern, with young people always expressing less interest in politics than older people. But notice in Figure 1.1 that in the 1970s there was no generation gap in political interest. Something has happened in the years since that has resulted in young adults being substantially less interested in politics than the elderly.

Lack of interest often leads to lack of information. The National Election Study asks a number of political knowledge questions. Figure 1.2 shows the average percentage of correct answers for age groups in 1972 and 2012. In 2012 young people were correct only 37 percent of the time, whereas people over 65 were correct 57 percent of the time. Whether the question concerned identifying partisan control of the House and Senate, or accurately estimating the unemployment rate, or identifying prominent politicians, the result was the same in 2012: Young people were less knowledgeable than the elderly. This pattern of age differences in political knowledge has been found time and time again in surveys in recent years.4 By contrast, Figure 1.2 shows that in 1972 there was virtually no pattern by age, with those under 30 scoring 4 percent higher than those over 65.5

Thomas Jefferson once said that there has never been, nor ever will be, a people who are politically ignorant and free. If this is indeed the case, write Stephen Bennett and Eric Rednitz, then “we can legitimately wonder what the future holds” if young people “remain as uninformed as they are about government and public affairs.” While this may well be an overreaction, there definitely are important consequences when citizens lack political information. In What Americans Know About Politics and Why It Matters, Michael Delli Carpini and Scott Keeter make a strong case for the importance of staying informed about public affairs. Political knowledge, they argue, (1) fosters civic virtues, such as political tolerance; (2) helps citizens to identify what policies would truly benefit them and then incorporate this information in their voting behavior; and (3) promotes active participation in politics.6 If you’ve been reading about the debate on immigration reform, for example,
Of course, today’s youth have not had any policy impact them in the way that, say, the introduction of Medicare or the military draft and the Vietnam War affected previous generations. However, the causes of young people’s political apathy probably run deeper. Today’s young adults have grown up in an environment in which news about political events has been increasingly more available than in the past. When CBS, NBC, and ABC dominated the airwaves, in the 1960s and 1970s, their extensive coverage of presidential speeches, political conventions, and presidential debates frequently left little else to watch on TV. As channels proliferated over subsequent decades, it became much easier to avoid exposure to politics by switching the channel—and of course the Internet has exponentially broadened the choices. Major political events were once shared national experiences. But for many young adults today, September 11, 2001, represents the only time that they closely followed a major national event along with everyone else.

Consider some contrasting statistics about audiences for presidential speeches. Presidents Nixon, Ford, and Carter all got an average Nielsen rating of 50 for their televised addresses, meaning that half the population was watching. In contrast, President Obama averaged only about 23 for his nationally televised appearances from 2009 to 2014, despite the public’s anxiety about the economy.4 Political conventions, which once received more TV coverage than the Summer Olympics, have been relegated to an hour per night and drew dismal ratings. The 2008 and 2012 presidential debates averaged a respectable Nielsen rating of 37, but this was only about three-fifths of the size of the typical audience from 1960 to 1980.

In sum, young people today have never known a time when most citizens paid attention to major political events. As a result, most of them have yet to get into the habit of following and participating in politics. In a 2012 Pew Research Center survey, 24 percent of young adults said they enjoyed keeping up with the news, compared to 58 percent of senior citizens. And young people have grown up in a fragmented media environment in which hundreds of TV channels and millions of Internet sites have provided them with a rich and varied socialization experience but have also enabled them to easily avoid political events. It has become particularly difficult to convince a generation that has channel and Internet surfed all their lives that politics really does matter.

How will further expansion of channels and, especially, blogs and other Web sites, affect youth interest in and knowledge of politics? Political scientists see both opportunities and
Government

The institutions that make public policy decisions for a society are collectively known as government. In the case of our own national government, these institutions are Congress, the president, the courts, and federal administrative agencies (“the bureaucracy”). Thousands of state and local governments also decide on policies that influence our lives. There are about 500,000 elected officials in the United States. Thus, policies that affect you are being made almost constantly.

When elections result in a change of party control, power is transferred peacefully in the United States. In 2011, the outgoing Speaker of the House, Democrat Nancy Pelosi, symbolically passed the gavel to the incoming Speaker, Republican John Boehner.

Government shapes how we live, it is important to understand the process by which decisions are made as well as what is actually decided. Two fundamental questions about governing will serve as themes throughout this book:

1. How should we govern? Americans take great pride in calling their government democratic. This chapter examines the workings of democratic government; the chapters that follow will evaluate the way American government actually works compared to the standards of an “ideal” democracy. We will continually ask, “Who holds power and who influences the policies adopted by government?”

2. What should government do? This text explores the relationship between how American government works and what it does. In other words, it addresses the question, “Does our government do what we want it to do?” Debates over the scope of governmental power are among the most important in American political life today. Some people would like to see the government take on more responsibilities; others believe it already takes on too much.

While citizens often disagree about what their government should do for them, all governments have certain functions in common. National governments throughout the world perform the following functions:

- Maintain a national defense. A government protects its national sovereignty, usually by maintaining armed forces. In the nuclear age, some governments possess awesome power to make war through highly sophisticated weapons. The United States currently spends over $600 billion a year on national defense. Since September 11, 2001, the defense budget has been substantially increased in order to cope with the threat of terrorism on U.S. soil.

- Provide public goods and services. Governments in this country spend billions of dollars on schools, libraries, hospitals, highways, and many other public goods.
and services. These goods and services are of two types. Some are what is called collective goods, if they exist, by their very nature they cannot be denied to anyone and therefore must be shared by everyone. Access to highways, for example, cannot be denied. As the private sector would have no incentive to provide goods and services that everyone automatically has access to, these can be provided only by government. Other public goods and services, such as college or medical care, can be provided to some individuals without being provided to all; these are widely provided by the private sector as well as by government.

- **Preserve order.** Every government has some means of maintaining order. When people protest in large numbers, governments may resort to extreme measures to restore order. For example, the National Guard was called in to stop the looting and arson after rioting broke out in Los Angeles following the 1992 Rodney King verdict.

- **Socialize the young.** Governments politically socialize the young—that is, instill in children knowledge of and pride in the nation and its political system and values. Most modern governments pay for education, and school curricula typically include a course on the theory and practice of the country's government. Rituals like the daily Pledge of Allegiance seek to foster patriotism and love of country.

- **Collect taxes.** Approximately one out of every three dollars earned by American citizens goes to national, state, and local taxes—money that pays for the public goods and services the government provides.

All these governmental tasks add up to weighty decisions that our political leaders must make. For example, how much should we spend on national defense as opposed to education? How high should taxes for Medicare and Social Security be? We answer such questions through politics.

**Politics**

1.2 Define politics in the context of democratic government.

Politics determines whom we select as our governmental leaders and what policies these leaders pursue. Political scientists often cite Harold D. Lasswell's famous definition of politics: "Who gets what, when, and how."46 It is one of the briefest and most useful definitions of politics ever penned. Admittedly, this broad definition covers a lot of ground (office politics, sorority politics, and so on) in which political scientists are generally not interested. They are interested primarily in politics related to governmental decision making.

The media usually focus on the role of politicians. At a minimum, this includes voters, candidates, groups, and parties. What refers to the substance of politics and government—benefits, such as medical care for the elderly, and burdens, such as new taxes. How refers to the ways in which people participate in politics. People get what they want through voting, supporting, compromising, lobbying, and so forth. In this sense, government and politics involve winners and losers. Behind every arcane tax provision or item in an appropriations bill, there are real people getting something or getting something taken away.

The ways in which people get involved in politics make up their political participation. Many people judge the health of a government by how widespread political participation in America does quite poorly when judged by its voter turnout, which is one of the lowest in the world. Low voter turnout has an effect on who holds political power. Because so many people do not show up at the polls, voters are a distorted sample of the public as a whole. Groups with a high turnout rate, such as the elderly, benefit, whereas those with a low turnout rate, such as young people, lack political clout.

Voting is only one form of political participation, as you'll see in later chapters. For a few Americans, politics is a vocation: they run for office, and some even earn their livelihood holding political office. In addition, there are many Americans who treat politics as critical to their interests. Many of these people are members of single-issue groups—groups so concerned with one issue that members often cast their votes on the basis of that issue only, ignoring a politician’s stand on everything else. Groups of activists dedicated either to outlawing abortion or to preserving abortion rights are good examples of single-issue groups.

Individual citizens and organized groups get involved in politics because they understand that public policy choices made by governments affect them in significant ways. Will all those who need student loans receive them? Will everyone have access to medical care? Will people be taken care of in their old age? Is the water safe to drink? These and other questions tie politics to policymaking.

**The Policymaking System**

1.3 Assess how citizens can have an impact on public policy and how policies can impact people.

Americans frequently expect the government to do something about their problems. For example, the president and members of Congress are expected to keep the economy humming along; voters will Penalize them at the polls if they do not. Is it through the policymaking system that our government responds to the priorities of its people? Figure 1.4 shows a skeletal model of this system, in which people shape policies and in turn are impacted by them. The rest of this book will flesh out this model, but for now it will help you understand how government policy comes into being and evolves over time.
A government's policy agenda changes regularly. When jobs are scarce and business productivity is falling, economic problems occupy a high position on the government's agenda. If the economy is doing well and trouble spots around the world occupy the headlines, foreign policy questions are bound to dominate the agenda. In general, bad news—particularly about a crisis situation—is more likely than good news to draw sufficient media attention to put a subject on the policy agenda. As the old saying goes, "Good news is no news." When unemployment rises sharply, it leads the news; when jobs are plentiful, the latest unemployment report is much less of a news story. Thus, the policy agenda responds more to societal failures than successes. The question politicians constantly ask is, "How can we make people do better?"

People, of course, do not always agree on what government should do. Indeed, one group's positions and interests are often at odds with those of another group. A political issue is the result of people disagreeing about a problem or about the public policy needed to fix it. There is never a shortage of political issues; government, however, will not act on any issue until it is high on the policy agenda. Policymakers stand at the core of the system, working within the three policymaking institutions established by the U.S. Constitution: Congress, the presidency, and the courts. Policymakers scan the issues on the policy agenda, select those they consider important, and make policies to address them. Today, the power of the bureaucracy is so great that most political scientists consider it a fourth policymaking institution.

Very few policies are made by a single policymaking institution. Environmental policy is a good example. Some presidents have used their influence with Congress to urge clean-air and clean-water policies. When Congress responds by passing legislation to clean up the environment, bureaucrats have to implement the new policies. The bureaucracies, in turn, create extensive volumes of rules and regulations that define how policies are to be implemented. In addition, every law passed and every rule made can be challenged in the courts. Courts make decisions about what policies mean and whether they conflict with the Constitution.

**People Shape Policy**

The policymaking system begins with people. All Americans have interests, problems, and concerns that are touched on by public policy. Some people think the government should spend more to train people for jobs in today's increasingly technology-oriented economy; others think that the government is already spending too much, resulting in high taxes that discourage business investments. Some citizens expect government to do something to curb domestic violence; others are concerned about prospects that the government may make it much harder to buy a handgun.

What do people do to express their opinions in a democracy? As mentioned, people have numerous avenues for participation, such as voting for candidates who represent their opinions, joining political parties, posting messages to Internet chat groups, and forming interest groups—organized groups of people with a common interest. In this way, people's concerns enter the linkage institutions of the policymaking system. Linkage institutions—parties, elections, interest groups, and the media—transmit Americans' preferences to the policymakers in government. Parties and interest groups strive to ensure that their members' concerns receive appropriate political attention. The media investigate social problems and inform people about them. Elections provide citizens with the chance to make their opinions heard by choosing their public officials.

All these institutions help to shape the government's policy agenda, the issues that attract the serious attention of public officials and other people actively involved in politics at a given time. Some issues will be considered, and others will not. If politicians want to get elected, they must pay attention to the problems that concern voters. When you vote, you are partly looking at whether a candidate shares your agenda. If you are worried about rising health care costs and a certain candidate talks only about America's moral decay and ending legalized abortions, you will probably support another candidate.

**Policies Impact People**

Every decision that government makes—every law it passes, budget it establishes, and rolling it hands down—is public policy. Public policies are of various types, depending in part on which policymaking institution they originated with. Some of the most important types—statute, presidential action, court decision, budgetary choice, and regulation—are defined and exemplified in Table 1.1.

Once policies are made and implemented, they affect people. Policy impacts are the effects that a policy has on people and on society's problems. People want policy

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type</th>
<th>Definition</th>
<th>Example</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Congressional statute</td>
<td>Law passed by Congress</td>
<td>The $787 billion American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009 is enacted.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Presidential action</td>
<td>Decision by president</td>
<td>American jets bombs ISIS targets in Syria.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Court decision</td>
<td>Opinion by Supreme Court or other court</td>
<td>Supreme Court rules that individuals have a constitutional right to own a gun.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Budgetary choice</td>
<td>Legislative enactment of taxes and expenditures</td>
<td>The federal budget resolution is enacted.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Regulation</td>
<td>Agency adoption of regulation</td>
<td>The Department of Education issues guidelines for qualifying for the federal student loan forgiveness program.</td>
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</tbody>
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democracy

A system of selecting policymakers and of organizing government so that policy represents and responds to the public's preferences.

that effectively addresses their interests, problems, and concerns; clearly, a new law, executive order, bureaucratic regulation, or court judgment doesn't mean much if it doesn't work. Environmentalists want an industrial emissions policy that not only claims to prevent air pollution but also does so. Minority groups want a civil rights policy that not only promises them equal treatment but also ensures it.

Having a policy implies having a goal. Whether we want to reduce poverty, cut crime, lower the water, or hold down inflation, we have a goal in mind. Policy impact analysts ask whether a policy achieves its goal—and at what cost. The analysis of policy impacts carries the policymaking system back to its point of origin: the interests, problems, and concerns of the people. Translating people's desires into effective public policy is crucial to the workings of democracy.

Democracy in America

1.4 Identify the key principles of democracy and outline theories regarding how it works in practice and the challenges democracy faces today.

Democracy is a system of selecting policymakers and of organizing government so that policy reflects citizens' preferences. Today, the term democracy takes its place among terms like freedom, justice, and peace as a word that seemingly has only positive connotations; surveys around the world routinely show that most people in most democracies believe that democracy is the best form of government. Yet the writers of the U.S. Constitution had no fondness for democracy, as many of them doubted the ability of ordinary Americans to make informed judgments about what government should do. Roger Sherman, a delegate to the Constitutional Convention, said, "The people should have as little to do as may be about the government." Only much later did Americans come to cherish democracy and believe that all citizens should actively participate in choosing their leaders.

Most Americans would probably say that democracy is "government by the people." These words are, of course, part of the famous phrase by which Abraham Lincoln defined democracy in his Gettysburg Address: "government of the people, by the people, and for the people." The extent to which each of these three aspects of democracy holds true is a matter crucial to evaluating how well our government is working. Certainly, government has always been "of the people" in the United States, for the Constitution forbids the granting of titles of nobility—a status of privilege within the government, usually passed down from generation to generation. On the other hand, it is a physical impossibility for government to be "by the people" in a nation of over 300 million people. Therefore, our democracy involves choosing people from among our midst to govern. Where the serious debate begins is whether political leaders govern "for the people," or, as always are significant biases in how the system works. Democratic theorists have elaborated a set of goals to use in evaluating this crucial question.

Traditional Democratic Theory

Traditional democratic theory rests on a number of key principles that specify how governmental decisions are made in a democracy. Robert Dahl, one of America's leading theorists, suggests that an ideal democratic process should satisfy the following five criteria:

- Equality in voting: The principle of "one person, one vote" is basic to democracy. No one's vote should count more than anyone else's.
- Effective participation: Citizens must have adequate and equal opportunities to express their preferences throughout the decision-making process.
- Enlightenment: A democratic society must be a marketplace of ideas. A free press and free speech are essential to civic understanding. If one group monopolizes and distorts information, citizens cannot truly understand issues.
- Citizen control of the agenda: Citizens should have the collective right to control the government's policy agenda. If particular groups, such as the wealthy, have influence far exceeding what would be expected based on their numbers, then the agenda will be distorted—the government will not be addressing the issues that the public as a whole feels are most important.
- Inclusion: The government must include, and extend rights to, all those subject to its laws. Citizenship must be open to all within a nation if the nation is to call itself democratic. It is only if it satisfies these criteria can a political system be called democratic. Furthermore, democracies must practice majority rule, meaning that policies made should reflect the will of over half the voters. At the same time, most Americans would not want to give the majority free rein to do anything they can agree on. Restraints on the majority are built into the American system of government in order to protect the minority. Thus, the majority cannot infringe on minority rights; freedom of assembly, freedom of speech, and so on are freedoms for those in a minority as well as the majority. In a society too large to make its decisions in open meetings, a few must look after the concerns of the many. The relationship between the few leaders and the many citizens is one of representation. The literal meaning of representation is "to speak present once again." In politics, this means that the desires of the people should be replicated in government through the choices of elected officials. The closer the correspondence between representatives and their constituents, the closer the approximation to an ideal democracy. As might be expected for such a crucial question, theorists disagree widely about the extent to which this actually occurs in America.

Three Contemporary Theories of American Democracy

Theories of American democracy are essentially theories about who has power and influence. All, in one way or another, ask the question, "Who really governs in our nation?" Each focuses on a key aspect of politics and government, and each reaches a somewhat different conclusion about the state of American democracy.

PLURALISM One important theory of American democracy, pluralism, states that groups with shared interests influence public policy by pressuring their concerns through organized efforts. The National Rifle Association (NRA), the National Organization for Women (NOW), and the American Council on Education (ACE) are contemporary examples of such interest groups.

According to pluralist theory, because of open access to various institutions of government and public officials, organized groups can compete with one another for control over policy and no one group or set of groups dominates. Given that power is dispersed in the American form of government, groups that lose in one arena cannot take their case to another. For example, civil rights groups faced congressional roadblocks in the 1950s but were able to win the action they were seeking from the courts.

Pluralists are generally optimistic that the public interest will eventually prevail in the making of public policy through a complex process of bargaining and compromise. They believe that, rather than speaking of majoritarian rule, we should speak of groups of minorities working together. Robert Dahl expresses this view well when he writes that in America "all active and legitimate groups in the population can make themselves heard at some crucial stage in the process." Group politics is certainly as American as apple pie. Writing in the 1830s, Alexis de Tocqueville called us a "nation of joiners" and pointed to the high level of associational activities as one of the crucial reasons for the success of American democracy.