

# 1

## Introducing Government in America

**P**OLITICS 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 80 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 jobless benefits, 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.

1.1

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1.2

Define politics in the context of democratic government, p. 10.

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Our political leaders play a symbolic role in representing our nation—one that transcends partisan affiliation. Here, Democrats Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton and Republicans George W. and Laura Bush are shown arriving in South Africa to represent the United States at Nelson Mandela's funeral in December 2013.

- 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 1993, "Politics does matter. It can make the difference in terms of a benefits 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."<sup>1</sup>

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 "tapping into a broad audience of energized young voters hungry for change."<sup>2</sup> 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 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.

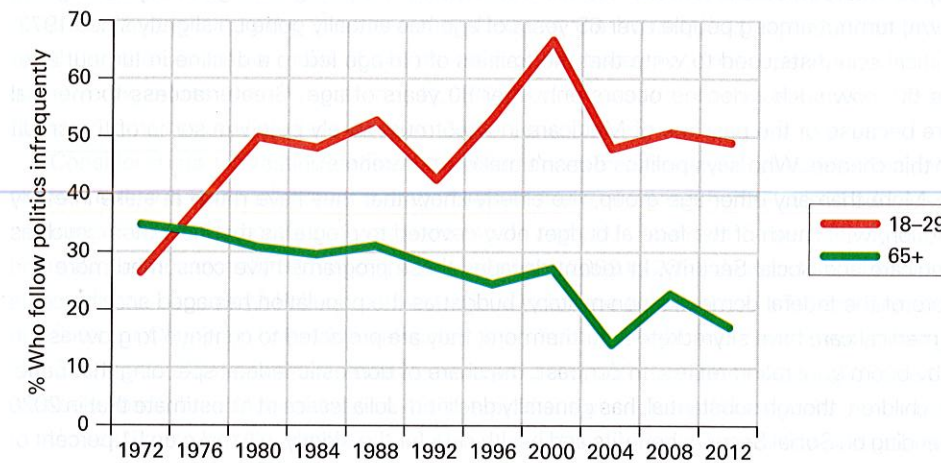
In 2012, when the National Election Study asked a nationwide sample of people about their general level of interest in politics, roughly half of Americans under the age of 30 said they paid infrequent attention to politics and elections compared to just 17 percent among those over the age of 65. One 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.<sup>3</sup> 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.<sup>4</sup>

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 Rademacher, then "we can legitimately wonder what the future holds" if young people "remain as uninformed as they are about government and public affairs."<sup>5</sup> While this may well be an overreaction, there definitely are important consequences when citizens lack

**FIGURE 1.1 POLITICAL APATHY AMONG YOUNG AND OLD AMERICANS, 1972–2012**

In every presidential election from 1972 to 2012, the American National Election Studies has asked a cross-section of the public how often they follow what's going on in government and public affairs. Below we have graphed the percentage who said they followed politics on an infrequent basis. Lack of political interest among young people hit a record high during the 2000 campaign between Bush and Gore, when over two-thirds said they rarely followed public affairs. Since then, political interest among young people has recovered somewhat; however, compared to senior citizens, they are still much more likely to report low political interest.

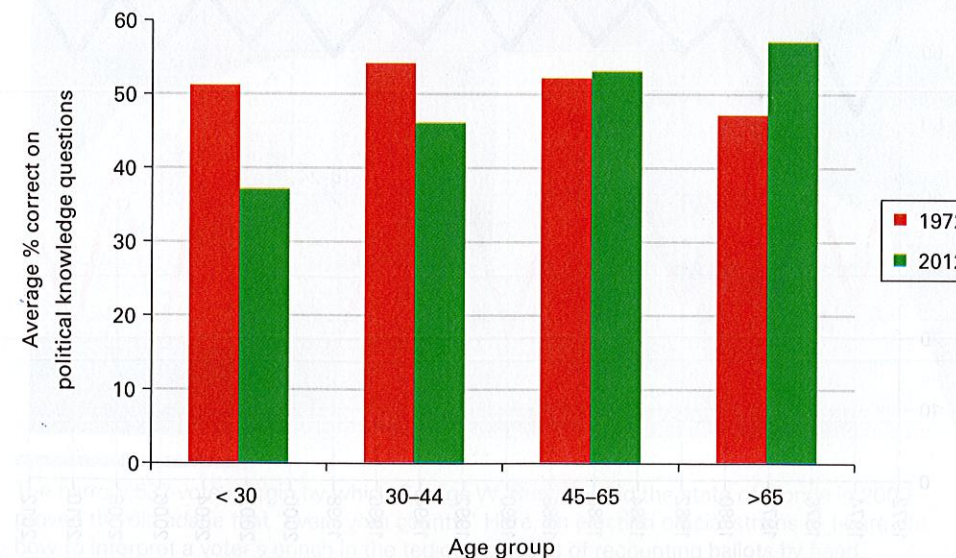


SOURCE: Authors' analysis of 1972–2012 American National Election Studies data.

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.<sup>6</sup> If you've been reading about the debate on immigration reform, for example,

**FIGURE 1.2 AGE AND POLITICAL KNOWLEDGE, 1972 AND 2012**

This figure shows the percentage of correct answers to five questions in 1972 and twelve questions in 2012 by age group. In 1972, the relationship between age and political knowledge was basically flat: each age group displayed roughly the same level of information about basic political facts, such as which party currently had more seats in the House of Representatives. By 2012, the picture had changed quite dramatically, with young people being substantially less likely to know the answer to such questions than older people.



SOURCE: Authors' analysis of 1972 and 2012 National Election Studies data.

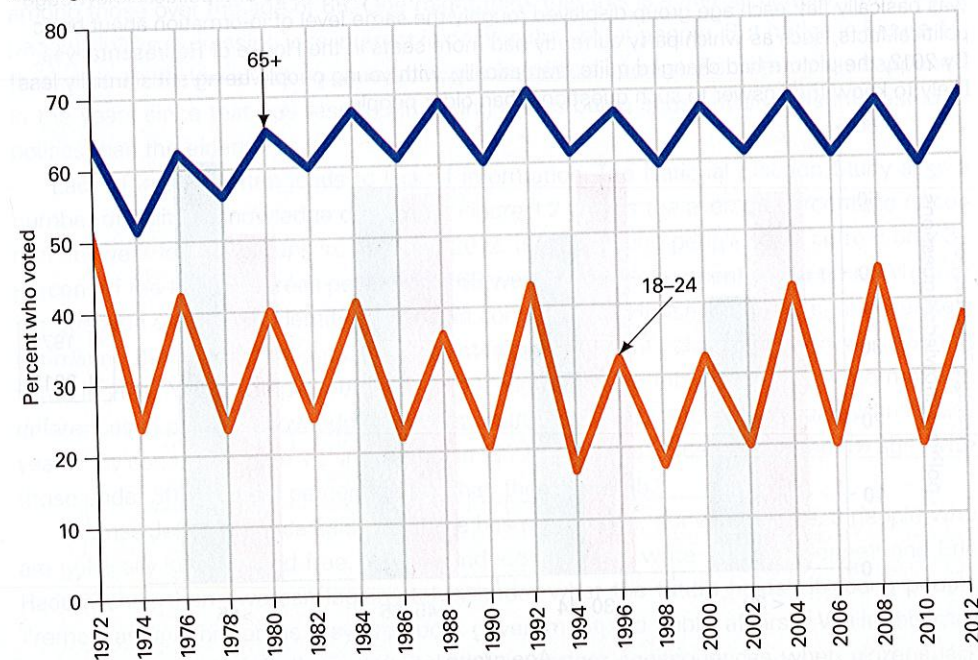
you'll be able to understand the proposed legislation, and that knowledge will then help you identify and vote for candidates whose views agree with yours.

As you will see throughout this book, those who participate in the political process are more likely to benefit from government programs and policies. Young people often complain that the elderly have far more political clout than they do—turnout statistics make clear why this is the case. As shown in Figure 1.3, in recent decades the voter turnout rate for people under 25 has consistently been much lower than that for senior citizens, particularly for midterm elections. Whereas turnout rates for the young have generally been going down, turnout among people over 65 years of age has actually gone up slightly since 1972. Political scientists used to write that the frailties of old age led to a decline in turnout after age 60; now such a decline occurs only after 80 years of age. Greater access to medical care because of the passage of Medicare in 1965 must surely be given some of the credit for this change. Who says politics doesn't make a difference?

More than any other age group, the elderly know that they have much at stake in every election, with much of the federal budget now devoted to programs that help them, such as Medicare and Social Security. In recent decades these programs have consumed more and more of the federal domestic (non-military) budget as the population has aged and the costs of medical care have skyrocketed. Furthermore, they are projected to continue to grow as the baby boom generation retires. In contrast, the share of domestic federal spending that benefits children, though substantial, has generally declined. Julia Isaacs et al. estimate that in 2020 spending on Social Security benefits and health care for the elderly will make up 51 percent of domestic federal spending, as compared to just 11 percent for programs that benefit children.<sup>7</sup>

**FIGURE 1.3 ELECTION TURNOUT RATES OF YOUNG AND OLD AMERICANS, 1972–2012**

This graph shows the turnout gap between young and old Americans in all presidential and midterm elections from 1972 through 2012. The sawtooth pattern of both lines illustrates how turnout always drops off between a presidential election and a midterm congressional election (e.g., from 2008 to 2010). The ups and downs in the graph are much more evident among young people because they are less interested in politics and hence less likely to be regular voters. In 2008, turnout among young people rose to the highest level since 1972, spurred by a surge of participation by minority youth. Record rates of turnout were set by young African Americans, who for the first time had a higher turnout rate than young whites, and by young Hispanics and Asian Americans. The 2010 election, however, saw a sharp drop-off in youth turnout. Some, but not all, of these young voters came back to the polls in 2012. If the normal pattern holds, young people's turnout in 2014 will be quite low—probably only about 20 percent—whereas turnout among senior citizens is likely to be roughly three times that high.



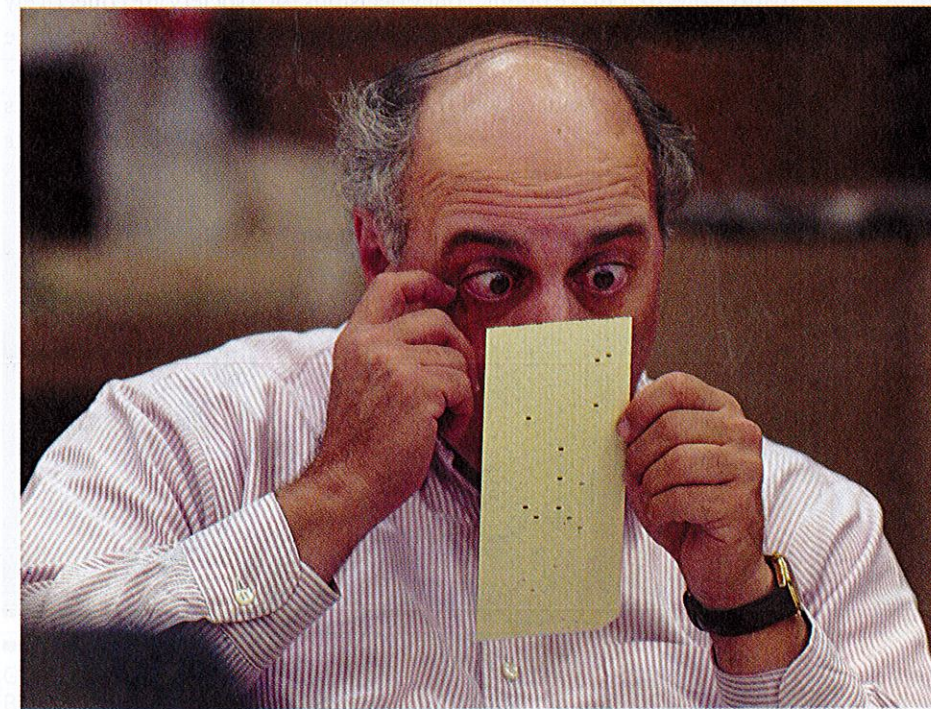
SOURCE: U.S. Census Bureau Current Population Surveys.

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 avoidable 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.<sup>8</sup> Political conventions, which once received more TV coverage than the Summer Olympics, have been relegated to an hour per night and draw abysmal 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



The narrow 537-vote margin by which George W. Bush carried the state of Florida in 2000 proved the old adage that "every vote counts." Here, an election official strains to figure out how to interpret a voter's punch in the tedious process of recounting ballots by hand.

**government**

The institutions through which public policies are made for a society.

challenges. Some optimistic observers see these developments as offering “the prospect of a revitalized democracy characterized by a more active and informed citizenry.”<sup>9</sup> Political junkies will certainly find more political information available than ever before, and electronic communications will make it easier for people to express their political views in various forums and directly to public officials. However, with so many media choices for so many specific interests, it will also be easy to avoid the subject of public affairs. It may also be easier to avoid a range of opinions. Political scientist Jeremy Mayer argues that “if we all get to select exactly how much campaign news we will receive, and the depth of that coverage, it may be that too many Americans will choose shallow, biased sources of news on the Internet.”<sup>10</sup>

Groups that are concerned about low youth turnout are focusing on innovative ways of reaching out to young people via new technologies, such as social networking sites like Facebook, to make them more aware of politics. In doing so, they are encouraged and spurred by the fact that young people are far from inactive in American society and in recent years have been doing volunteer community service at record rates. As Harvard students Ganesh Sitaraman and Previn Warren write in *Invisible Citizens: Youth Politics After September 11*, “Young people are some of the most active members of their communities and are devoting increasing amounts of their time to direct service work and volunteerism.”<sup>11</sup> It is only when it comes to politics that young people seem to express indifference about getting involved.

It is our hope that after reading this book, you will be persuaded that paying attention to politics and government is important. Government has a substantial impact on all our lives. But it is also true that we have the opportunity to have a substantial impact on government. Involvement in public affairs can take many forms, ranging from simply becoming better informed by browsing through political Web sites to running for elected office. In between are countless opportunities for *everyone* to make a difference.

## Government

## 1.1

Identify the key functions of government and explain why they matter.



he 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.



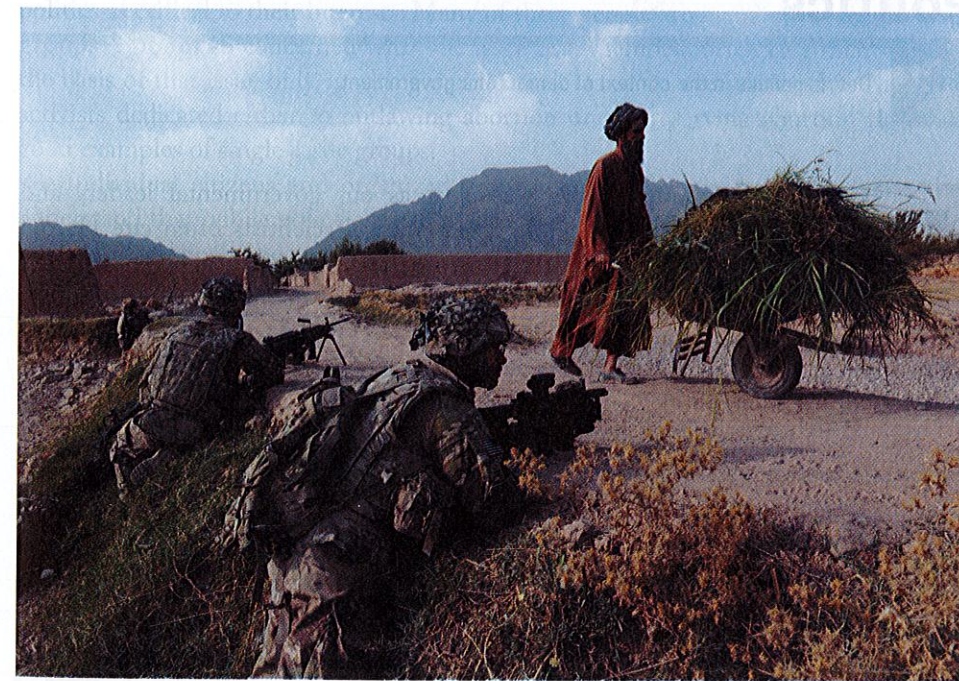
When elections result in a change of party control, power is transferred peacefully in the United States. In 2011, the outgoing Speaker of the House, Democrat Nancy Pelosi, symbolically passed the gavel to the incoming Speaker, Republican John Boehner.

Because 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:

- **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?”
- **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



Governments provide a wide range of public services, including providing a national defense. Because of the threat from Al Qaeda, U.S. troops have been in Afghanistan since 2001. Here, an Afghan farmer walks by while U.S. troops work to secure the road against improvised explosive devices planted by Taliban insurgents.

## collective goods

Goods and services, such as clean air and clean water, that by their nature cannot be denied to anyone.

## politics

The process determining the leaders we select and the policies they pursue. Politics produces authoritative decisions about public issues.

## political participation

All the activities by which citizens attempt to influence the selection of political leaders and the policies they pursue. Voting is the most common means of political participation in a democracy. Other means include contacting public officials, protest, and civil disobedience.

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.

**P**olitics 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."<sup>12</sup> 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 *who* of politics. 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 is. 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



Pro-life and pro-choice groups are single-minded and usually uncompromising. Few issues stir up as much passion as whether abortion should be permitted and, if so, under what conditions.

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 from 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.

**A**mericans 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. It is 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.

## single-issue groups

Groups that have a narrow interest on which their members tend to take an uncompromising stance.

## policymaking system

The process by which policy comes into being and evolves. People's interests, problems, and concerns create political issues for government policymakers. These issues shape policy, which in turn impacts people, generating more interests, problems, and concerns.

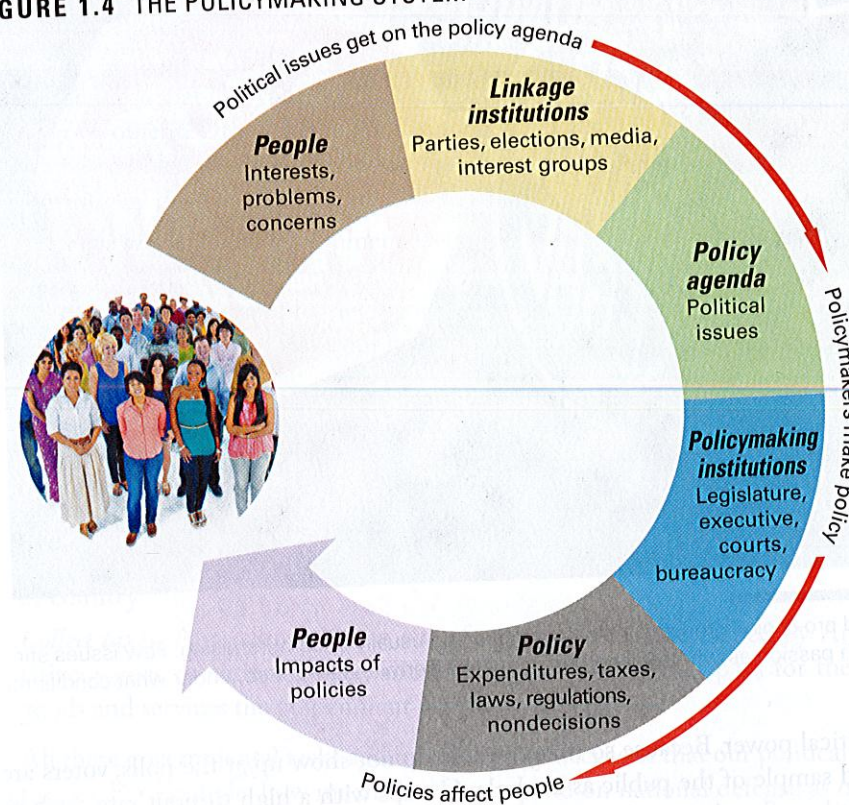
### 1.1 linkage institutions

The political channels through which people's concerns become political issues on the policy agenda. In the United States, linkage institutions include elections, political parties, interest groups, and the media.

### 1.3 policy agenda

The issues that attract the serious attention of public officials and other people involved in politics at a point in time.

FIGURE 1.4 THE POLICYMAKING SYSTEM



### 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.

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 as a 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, bureaucracies 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.

### Policies Impact People

Every decision that government makes—every law it passes, budget it establishes, and ruling 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

### political issue

An issue that arises when people disagree about a problem and how to fix it.

### policymaking institutions

The branches of government charged with taking action on political issues. The U.S. Constitution established three policymaking institutions—Congress, the presidency, and the courts. Today, the power of the bureaucracy is so great that most political scientists consider it a fourth policymaking institution.

### public policy

A choice that government makes in response to a political issue. A policy is a course of action taken with regard to some problem.

### policy impacts

The effects a policy has on people and problems. Impacts are analyzed to see how well a policy has met its goal and at what cost.

TABLE 1.1 TYPES OF PUBLIC POLICIES

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

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, clean the water, or hold down inflation, we have a goal in mind. Policy impact analysts ask how well 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.